

1981

For Ethel Rosenberg

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For Ethel Rosenberg · *Adrienne Rich*

convicted, with her husband, of "conspiracy to commit espionage"; killed in the electric chair June 19, 1953

I

Europe 1953:
throughout my random sleepwalk
the words

scratched on walls, on pavements
painted over railway arches
Liberez les Rosenberg!

Escaping from home I found
home everywhere:
the Jewish question, Communism

marriage itself
a question of loyalty
or punishment

my Jewish father writing me
letters of seventeen pages
finely inscribed harangues

questions of loyalty
and punishment
One week before my wedding

that couple gets the chair
the volts grapple her, don't
kill her fast enough

Liberez les Rosenberg!
I hadn't realized
our family arguments were so important

my narrow understanding
of crime of punishment
no language for this torment

so painful so unfathomable
they must be pushed aside
ignored for years

III

Her mother testifies against her
Her brother testifies against her
After her death

she becomes a natural prey for pornographers
her death itself a scene
her body *sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail*

She becomes the extremest victim
described nonetheless as *rigid of will*
what are her politics by then no one knows

Her figure sinks into my soul
a drowned statue
sealed in lead

For years it has lain there unabsorbed
first as part of that dead couple
on the front pages of the world the week

I gave myself in marriage
then slowly severing drifting apart
a separate death a life unto itself

no longer *the Rosenbergs*
no longer the chosen scapegoat
the family monster

till I hear how she sang
a prostitute to sleep
in the Women's House of Detention

Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg would you
have marched to take back the night
collected signatures

for battered women who kill
What would you have to tell us
would you have burst the net

IV

Why do I even want to call her up
to console my pain (she feels no pain at all)
why do I wish to put such questions

to ease myself (she feels no pain at all
she finally burned to death like so many)
why all this exercise of hindsight?

since if I imagine her at all
I have to imagine first
the pain inflicted on her by women

her mother testifies against her
her sister-in-law testifies against her
and how she sees it

not the impersonal forces
not the historical reasons
why they might have hated her strength

If I have held her at arm's length till now
if I have still believed it was
my loyalty, my punishment at stake

if I dare imagine her surviving
I must be fair to what she must have lived through
I must allow her to be at last

political in her ways not in mine
her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine
defining revolution as she defines it

or, bored to the marrow of her bones
with “politics”
bored with the vast boredom of long pain

small; tiny in fact; in her late sixties
liking her room her private life
living alone perhaps

no one you could interview
maybe filling a notebook herself
with secrets she has never sold