

Diving into the wreck: myths: 1971-1972

Business



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When her husband of nearly twenty years committed suicide in 1970, Adrienne Rich did what any sane poet would do: she spent the following two years writing a book of myths. Winner of the National Book Award, *Diving into the Wreck* is the collective and progressive product of Rich's changing disposition after her husband's death. The book is more than simply "Poems: 1971-1972" – it is a series of changing myths, from the ancient, to the shared, to the developing and personal. It is important that each poem is dated.

The evolution of poems throughout the years not only represents a series of changing myths, but a series of individual insights in time to be modified by later insights in time. In this way, the book leads the reader through a storyline of ideas, reactions, and emotions. Still, the journey is less of a "line" and more of a plunge, a dive, into deep self-examination. Although not the first of the poems along Rich's journey, "Diving into the Wreck" should be the first to be examined, as it not only lends its title to the book as a whole, but lays out the overarching ideas of introspection into the remnants of the past and movement toward a future. The poem, taken literally, is a transcription of the speaker's experience while diving into the ocean to explore a shipwreck.

Once the speaker – the diver – reaches the wreck, however, the poem becomes much more than a transcription of a singular experience. The diver and the poem transform into disembodied and yet unified observers. They are equally objective and subjective; the victims of the wreck they are discovering. "Diving into the Wreck" begins with the speaker donning her diving gear after making a final check of the equipment she will take down

with her: a book of myths, a camera, and a knife-blade. The knife is useful for escaping from any life-threatening situations above or below the surface.

The camera, useful for ensuring that a memory remains true to sight, and for truthfully sharing memories.

The book of myths: the text on which the diver not only grounds her expectations of the wreck, but from which she learns its supposed importance. Myth works as a message, a system of communication chosen by history. It is an embellished and slightly fabricated story of a true account, retold again and again in order to be used as a means of teaching a lesson, or as means of giving to a single person or group a common background from which they may move ahead as one. Such is the function of the diver's book of myths. It gives her a point of reference, an idea of the wreck she will herself come upon soon enough.

That idea, however, has become so mythologized, has been so far elevated from the true condition of the wreck, that the diver gains no real knowledge of what she is about to experience. Indeed, she comments on this when, after climbing “ rung after rung” down the ladder “ hanging innocently / close to the side of the schooner” and submerging herself in the black of the ocean, the light of her lamp falls on “ something more permanent / than fish or weed.” She calls it “ the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth.” It is “ the drowned face,” the “ evidence of damage,” the “ ribs of disaster,” but of what? For Rich, the wreck is the remaining damage and disaster of the recesses of the mind, that which is left after her husband's destruction and her attempt to rebuild. What the diver acknowledges – and what Rich supposedly realizes through this poem –

<https://assignbuster.com/diving-into-the-wreck-myths-1971-1972/>

is that the wreck and the myth cannot remain unexamined, or else they will lose their comprehensibility.

The wreck of the mind and the myth created for it must be faced directly if any treasure is to prevail from either one. When the wreck is finally confronted, however, the diver loses her individuality – or, at least, she loses the singular personality with which she began the dive. That is the treasure she takes back to the surface: a larger sense of how the diver and her wreck fit into the greater, all-encompassing picture in the book of myths. Or, perhaps, the treasure is that she does not fit into the book of myths. While previously, the diver was no one more than herself, experiencing the wreck for the first time, now the diver is both “mermaid” and “merman.” Rich writes “we circle silently / about the wreck.

” Having become familiar with the “threadbare beauty,” the diver transforms into one “among so many who have always / lived here / swaying their crenellated fans / between the reefs.” She is –we, they are – no longer from the world above, but of the world of the wreck itself. We are, in fact the wreck: “I am she: / I am he / whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes.” What this transformation implies for Rich is that she is no longer separating herself from the myth that the wreck in her mind has become. She acknowledges that the account she trusted in the book of myths is not the account of the wreck that her camera will capture, and certainly not the account of the wreck with which she herself will come away.

Rich creates a new myth by diving down to examine the original. She concludes, We are, I am, you are by cowardice or courage the one who find

our way back to this scene carrying a knife, a camera a book of myths in which our names do not appear. Recognizing that she and the wreck are not separate, for they both dwell in the black depths of her mind, Rich is able to move forward from a myth to which she is supposed to be able to connect but cannot. The old book of myths to which she held so closely before her dive is no longer relevant; it no longer contains her story. Rich moves toward a personal myth from which she can build a new mindset and new insights; but it is also a myth that connects to numerous others who are unified in self-examination of the mind.

Diving into the Wreck is Rich's method of diving into her wreck and starting to climb out again. Understanding the book's overarching theme, it is now possible to turn back to the first poem and look at it in light of the changing insights and myths that are presented in the book overall. "Trying to Talk with a Man" opens the journey as Rich's first farewell to marriage. She intertwines political and interpersonal commentary in the "condemned scenery" of the Nevada desert, where bombs were tested, and in the barren landscape of a troubled consciousness. The poem begins plainly enough: "Out in this desert we are testing bombs / that's why we came here." Rich speaks of "what we've had to give up to get here," detailing shared moments of daily culture that are left behind in the desert, such as "whole LP collections," cookies, "the language of love-letters, ... / afternoons on the riverbank pretending to be children.

"She takes a turn and places emphasis on the private life when she mentions letting go of even "suicide notes." Such a personalized stroke of communication, so filled with desperate and final emotion, is intended to be

<https://assignbuster.com/diving-into-the-wreck-myths-1971-1972/>

left behind in the desert. Indeed, leaving behind the personal is precisely what Rich tries to do by “ coming out to this desert.” It is as though walking into a desolate landscape is meant to be a sort of therapeutic escape from both the pleasures and the troubles of the populated world. But “ out in this desert we are testing bombs.

” The problems of the personal and the internal are precisely what Rich realizes she needs to confront. She speaks of walking at noon in the ghost town surrounded by a silence that sounds like the silence of the place except that it came with us and is familiar and everything we were saying until now was an effort to blot it out- Coming out here we are up against it By “ it,” Rich implies not only the silence, but the real problem, that which is internal. The silence itself indicates, perhaps even aggravates, the real problem. To be “ surrounded by a silence” suggests that the silence is thick, pressing. There is very rarely ever a silence so tangible that is not also accompanied by a dread of its tangibility, as though being able to touch the absence of sound is in itself a sign of a penetratingly dismal moment.

The silence adds to the constricting dread of “ it” – of the internal problem yet to be brought to full light and worked through. Whether that problem is unconsciously repressed or consciously suppressed remains undetermined. Rich further intertwines the severe physical setting of the poem with her agitated inner landscape when she writes of preparing for any possible emergency of another person at the testing site, “ but you look at me like an emergency.” There is something desperate shared between her eyes and those of the man to whom she is trying to speak – something desperate and

unresolved. Before this something can be resolved, however, it must first be recognized and given a true label.

Rich must first admit that the scene inside her is the remnant of a married life. What once was full and living now amounts to a desert that serves no purpose other than the testing of volatile ideas. Yet by the end of the poem, Rich never quite comes to a conclusion of what this internal problem is. She mentions sensing a “ power” from the man, looking into his eyes, which “ reflect lights that spell out: EXIT.” He gets up and paces the floor, “ talking of the danger / as if it were not ourselves / as if we were testing anything else.

” Here, “ it” finally gets a moderate definition: the danger. The danger of what, though, is left unresolved. At this moment in time, the only insight that Rich can make is that there is a danger related to the internal problem left her when her husband did. The lack of resolution creates in itself a sort of myth, a sort of treacherous enigma that will live on as a Sphinx’s riddle: a puzzle that seems so obvious and close to the surface of the mind that it is maddening to not immediately recognize its solution. Rich leaves this beginning of her journey of changing insights and myths with a silence that penetrates the mind until she realizes she must confront the bombs being tested in the desert – being tested in the wreck of her mind.

Indeed, she does just that a year later when she dives down to examine the wreckage: one insight in time modified by a later insight in time. One myth built from the riddle of an older one. Though certainly not the final poem in the book – or the final point in Rich’s journey to a completely new personal myth and disposition – “ Living in the Cave” illustrates a crucial step in this

journey. The poem is a philosophically-abundant turning point at which Rich realizes that she must break from the stereotypes and storylines into which she was supposed to mold herself as a woman and a wife. She sees that her personal story, myth, must be – will be – apart from any myth that someone else can create for her. From suppressing an ancient myth that revealed inherent challenges, to examining the old myth, Rich finally moves toward making her own.

The opening lines set the scene of Rich's mind more fully than any others before: " Reading the Parable of the Cave / while living in the cave...." She alludes to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, an important note that must be addressed before the poem can fully be understood. The Allegory of the Cave describes three people who have, since birth, been bound to rocks at the back of a cave, given the ability only to face away from the cave entrance and from each other, and watch the stone wall in front of them. Behind the prisoners is a great fire, with a raised walkway between it and the prisoners. People from outside the cave pass along the walkway carrying various objects on their heads, such as animals, plants, or stones.

The prisoners can observe only the shadows of these objects that the fire casts on the wall in front of them. The shadow is the only form of an object that the prisoners know or can know. Therefore, the shadows are, for the prisoners, what they know to be ' real' objects. One day, however, one of the prisoners escapes his bindings and races out the entrance of the cave. He experiences a moment of shock when he enters into the world outside the cave – that which to every person but him and the other two prisoners is the ' real' world. Initially, the escapee does not want to accept that a flower can

<https://assignbuster.com/diving-into-the-wreck-myths-1971-1972/>

have a much fuller form than the shadow of a flower with which he was familiar.

More importantly, however, the Sun becomes known to him as the true source of light and life – not the artificial light and warmth of the fire in the cave. Once he recognizes and understands these differences, the escapee can never turn back to his old worldview. He returns to the cave in an attempt to enlighten the other two prisoners but, disbelieving him, they threaten his life if he tries to free them. And so we find Rich, sitting in the cave, reading this allegory. However, she calls it not an allegory, but a parable, a difference that illuminates the importance of Plato's theory on her own rationale.

An allegory implies equivalence. The shadows of forms are representative of mere shades of complete understanding; the Sun and the fire represent true and inauthentic sources of knowledge, respectively. A parable, on the other hand, is a simple story that is used to teach a lesson. It has a literal meaning, and it has a spiritual meaning that differs from listener to listener, according to her spiritual needs. It wants to encourage learning rather than project ideas.

Thus, Rich learns of her figurative placement in the cave through reading the Parable of the Cave. The insight she gains from the parable is not one that other people in the cave can also gain. She becomes Plato's escapee and distances herself from the other ignorant creatures in the cave who continue to attempt to mold her into their expectations for wife and mother. These things [surround] me, with their daily requirements: fill me, empty me talk to

me, warm me, let me suck on you Every one of them has a plan that depends on me [...] Not one of them, not one sees me as I see them. Rich leaves the poem and the cave as a conventional woman no longer. She separates herself from the bats and the stalactites and stalagmites and all other prisoners in the cave that think in shades and that threaten to suck away her life, liberty, and happiness because it is not theirs.

They cannot comprehend it. They want her to exist as the shadow – constricted by silence and wrecked by the constitution of marriage – that they have come to know. Society's prisoners of ignorance cannot see Rich in the full form that she has acquired. She has freed herself from a man who only looked at her “ like an emergency” and has broken away from the “ book of myths” that failed to contain hers. Rich is full of the new insights of the world beyond the old myths and finally ready to climb out of the wreck and start anew.

The remainder of *Diving into the Wreck*, and of Rich's succeeding works, illustrates the completion of the journey begun when living in the cave. The book is the treasure that she pulls from the wreck. It is the new book of myths, her book of myths, and will be used as such for years to come – as “ an embellished and slightly fabricated story of a true account, retold again and again in order to be used as a means of teaching a lesson” to herself and her readers who might discover themselves on a similar dive.