

Adrienne Rich, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (New York: Norton, 1981)

THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

FOR MICHELLE CLIFF

I.

Over the hills in Shutesbury, Leverett
driving with you in spring road
like a streambed unwinding downhill
fiddlehead ferns uncurling
spring peepers ringing sweet and cold

while we talk yet again
of dark and light, of blackness, whiteness, numbness
rammed through the heart like a stake
trying to pull apart the threads
from the dried blood of the old murderous uncaring

halting on bridges in bloodlight
where the freshets call out freedom
to frog-thrilling swamp, skunk-cabbage
trying to sense the conscience of these hills

knowing how the single-minded, pure
solutions bleached and dessicated
within their perfect flasks

for it was not enough to be New England
as every event since has testified:
New England's a shadow-country, always was

it was not enough to be for abolition
while the spirit of the masters
flickered in the abolitionist's heart

it was not enough to name ourselves anew
while the spirit of the masters
calls the freedwoman to forget the slave

With whom do you believe your lot is cast?
If there's a conscience in these hills
it hurls that question

unquenched, relentless, to our ears
wild and witchlike
ringing every swamp

II.

The mountain laurel in bloom
constructed like needlework
tiny half-pulled stitches piercing
flushed and stippled petals

here in these woods it grows wild
midsummer moonrise turns it opal
the night breathes with its clusters
protected species

meaning endangered
Here in these hills
this valley we have felt
a kind of freedom

planting the soil have known
hours of a calm, intense and mutual solitude
reading and writing
trying to clarify connect

past and present near and far
the Alabama quilt
the Botswana basket
history the dark crumble

of last year's compost
filtering softly through your living hand

but here as well we face
instantaneous violence ambush male

dominion on a back road
to escape in a locked car windows shut
skimming the ditch your split-second
survival reflex taking on the world

as it is not as we wish it
as it is not as we work for it
to be

III.

Strangers are an endangered species

In Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst
cocktails are served the scholars
gather in celebration
their pious or clinical legends
festoon the walls like imitations
of period patterns

(. . . and, as I feared, my "life" was made a "victim")

The remnants pawed the relics
the cult assembled in the bedroom

and you whose teeth were set on edge by churches
resist your shrine

escape

are found

nowhere

unless in words (your own)

*All we are strangers—dear—The world is not
acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted
with her. And Pilgrims!—Do you hesitate? and
Soldiers oft—some of us victors, but those I do
not see tonight owing to the smoke.—We are hungry,
and thirsty, sometimes—We are barefoot—and cold—*

This place is large enough for both of us
the river-fog will do for privacy
this is my third and last address to you

with the hands of a daughter I would cover you
from all intrusion even my own
saying rest to your ghost

with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands
open or closed as they prefer to lie
and ask no more of who or why or wherefore

with the hands of a mother I would close the door
on the rooms you've left behind
and silently pick up my fallen work

IV.

The river-fog will do for privacy
on the low road a breath
here, there, a cloudiness floating on the blacktop

sunflower heads turned black and bowed
the seas of corn a stubble
the old routes flowing north, if not to freedom

no human figure now in sight
(with whom do you believe your lot is cast?)
only the functional figure of the scarecrow

the cut corn, ground to shreds, heaped in a shape
like an Indian burial mound
a haunted-looking, ordinary thing

The work of winter starts fermenting in my head
how with the hands of a lover or a midwife
to hold back till the time is right

force nothing, be unforced
accept no giant miracles of growth
by counterfeit light

trust roots, allow the days to shrink
give credence to these slender means
wait without sadness and with grave impatience

here in the north where winter has a meaning
where the heaped colors suddenly go ashen
where nothing is promised

learn what an underground journey
has been, might have to be; speak in a winter code
let fog, sleet, translate; wind, carry them.

V.
Orion plunges like a drunken hunter
over the Mohawk Trail a parallelogram
slashed with two cuts of steel

A night so clear that every constellation
stands out from an undifferentiated cloud
of stars, a kind of aura

All the figures up there look violent to me
as a pogrom on Christmas Eve in some old country
I want our own earth not the satellites, our

world as it is if not as it might be
then as it is: male dominion, gangrape, lynching, pogrom
the Mohawk wraiths in their tracts of leafless birch

watching: will we do better?
The tests I need to pass are prescribed by the spirits
of place who understand travel but not amnesia

The world as it is: not as her users boast
damaged beyond reclamation by their using
Ourselves as we are in these painful motions

of staying cognizant: some part of us always
out beyond ourselves
knowing knowing knowing

Are we all in training for something we don't name?
to exact reparation for things
done long ago to us and to those who did not

survive what was done to them whom we ought to honor
with grief with fury with action
On a pure night on a night when pollution

seems absurdity when the undamaged planet seems to turn
like a bowl of crystal in black ether
they are the piece of us that lies out there
knowing knowing knowing