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Unfinished Dialogues: Adrienne Rich's Poetic Exploration of Alfred Conrad's Death

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Written years apart, Adrienne Rich's poems "Shattered Head" (1997-1997) and "Winterface" (2009) provide two perspectives on her husband Alfred's suicide.

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Adrienne Rich is a poet known for being personal and honest, often navigating the intersections of love, loss, and identity. Her poems "Shattered Head" (from 1996-97) and "Winterface" (from 2009) explore the aftermath of her husband Alfred Conrad's suicide in 1970 as she grapples with the emotional fallout and complex questions of responsibility, memory, and grief. Written years apart, these works reflect Rich's evolving process of mourning, with "Shattered Head" portraying the immediacy of guilt and anguish and "Winterface" offering a more contemplative approach to their shared history and the lingering questions surrounding his death. Together, these poems create a fragmented yet profound dialogue.

By exploring the imagery of a shattered head and an icy mirror, Rich externalizes the violence of Conrad's death as well as her own internal struggles, ultimately revealing how mourning becomes a process of self-analysis and eventual, though incomplete, acceptance. "Shattered Head" embodies the visceral disintegration that comes with guilt and grief. The poem includes graphic imagery of a "bloodshot mind" (816) no doubt a reference to her husband's suicide caused by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. This was written years after his death, showing she never healthily processed her grief. Her description of this head: "porridge of skull-splinters, brain tissue mouth and throat membrane, cranial fluid" (816) conveys a sense of obliteration that is literal as well as emotional. Rich uses this imagery to evoke the violence of suicide, suggesting her deep unease with the abrupt and irreversible nature of Conrad's death. Conrad's suicide occurred during a chaotic period in Adrienne Rich's life, during which her work was grappling with her marriage and her place in greater society; however, the exact reasons for his decision remain complex and speculative. Rich came out as a lesbian in the years following Conrad's death, and some biographical interpretations have linked his suicide to the tensions in their marriage, including her emerging sexual identity.

The "bloodshot mind" has moments when it speaks to Rich about what it is thinking. She finds herself asking, "What is the last thought?" (816) Once again, despite this poem being written years after his death, Rich finds herself wondering what Conrad was thinking in his final moments; she wants to figure out his motivations for suicide. And with that, does he blame Rich in any way? The head answers back, "*Now I will let you know?* or, *Now I know*?" (816) The first response, "*Now I will let you know?*" feels vengeful, as though Conrad's decision to end his life was his way of showing her the extent of the pain she caused him. The second response, "*Now I know?*" feels more understanding, as though

the skull, in death, has the answers it struggled to understand in life.

The sense of self-blame amplifies the unease in the poem; we can see this when we focus on the italicized lines at the end. This stylistic choice draws attention to the shattered head's final declaration, emphasizing its emotional weight and signaling a moment of confrontation with Rich's feelings of guilt and accountability. The shattered head says, "*I believed I was loved, I believed I loved, who did this to us?*" (817). These words acknowledge the love that existed between Rich and Conrad, with Rich highlighting that Conrad felt both loved and loving to her. The poem ends with a question laced with betrayal: "*Who did this to us?"* The "this" may perhaps also be the end of their marriage, with Rich speculating that it could be related to her queerness, whether that is a lover or the acknowledgment of her lesbianism (even if not public yet) as a whole. This shows her interpretation of Conrad's emotions about their relationship and its ultimate conclusion.

The fragmented structure of the poem mirrors Rich's fractured feelings, torn between mourning and the guilt of possibly contributing to Conrad's despair. The disjointed structure is evident in the jagged arrangement of lines, with sudden breaks and uneven spacing reflecting the chaos of grief. For instance, the lines

revenge on the eyes

green -gray and restless

revenge on the big and searching lips

the tender tongue (817)

emphasize disorder, as though Rich's thoughts are scattered and struggling. The indentations and uneven pacing create a visual and rhythmic fragmentation that parallels her emotional state, highlighting the rupture caused by Conrad's death. Through this structure, the poem itself becomes a representation of her fractured thoughts, expressing her mourning and unresolved guilt.

The phrase "revenge on the mouth / packed with its inarticulate confessions" (817) takes on a double meaning. It suggests both the silencing of Conrad in death and Rich's inability to articulate her guilt and grief. By presenting the head, which is a symbol of intellect and identity, as shattered, Rich externalizes her feelings of responsibility. The thought that her actions, or inactions, may have driven Conrad to his tragic decision haunts her. We are shown a violently graphic skull and body that are in the process of being taken over by the Earth, with "worm-borings, spurts of silt / volumes of sporic changes" (817) covering the human form. This depicts death as both a violent but gradual absorption into the natural world and Rich's use of imagery suggests her attempt to reconcile the permanence of loss with the inevitability of change. However, the poem's concluding question, "*Who did this to us?*" underscores the unresolved nature of her grief and the shared tragedy she perceives in Conrad's death.

If "Shattered Head" is a raw expression of guilt, written almost thirty years after Alfred Conrad's death, "Winterface" offers a more reflective and introspective response to the incident, now just three years before Rich's own death. The poem is divided into two sections: "i. hers" and " ii. his."

The central metaphor on the "hers" side of the poem is an icy mirror, which encapsulates Rich's struggle to reconcile her feelings about Conrad's death and their shared history. The question

Was ice a mirror well the mirror was icy (1087)

suggests the duality of memory: it can both reveal truths and distort them. We are told of a "girl moving too fast," a girl who "was moving fast across an icy web" (1087). The girl crossing the icy web becomes a symbol of Rich herself, navigating the dangerous terrain of grief and self-reflection. The phrase "And did she see herself in there" (1087) underscores the poem's central question: how does one confront their own role in the tragedy of a loved one's death? In this context, the icy mirror represents both self-awareness and the cold detachment necessary to process such immense loss.

The mention of "January moon-mouth / phosphorescence" (1087) evokes a stark, wintry landscape, reflecting the emotional desolation Rich associates with Conrad's final moments and the ending of their relationship. That mouth will "Swallow up the gone" (1087), a line which captures the irrevocable nature of his act. The next line, "Too soon" (1087), shows Rich's grief over his loss all of these years later, even after discovering and embracing her lesbianism. As she did in "Shattered Head," Rich uses fragmented phrases that mirror the disjointedness of reflection, suggesting that her understanding of Conrad's death remains incomplete and elusive after all this time. The "his" section of "Winterface" shifts the focus from Rich to a meditation on Conrad's experience and the remnants of his presence after death. She makes direct reference to her husband, Alfred Conrad, by evoking his work as a Professor of Economics. The lines "Someone writes asking about your use / of Bayesian inference/ in the history of slavery," allude to Conrad's essays "Economic Theory, Statistical Inference, and Economic History" (*The Journal of Economic History,* 1957) and "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South," (*The Journal of Political Economy*, 1958; for more on Conrad's importance as an intellectual, see Diebolt and Haupert). This personal element of Conrad centers his intellectual pursuits, showing his engagement with history and complex systems of thought. These lines contrast his intellectual depth with the mystery of his inner struggles, emphasizing that his death remains deeply personal and hard to understand.

Rich's description of what remains after Conrad's death - "burnt-up furniture" and a "stricken briefcase" - evokes a sense of physical and emotional devastation. (1087-1088). These objects serve as images of a life interrupted, with the briefcase having "no annotations," symbolizing Conrad's unfinished work and intellectual legacy. The lack of annotations further emphasizes a literal and symbolic silence, suggesting an absence of explanations or closure. In contrast to "Shattered Head," where Rich remains stuck on her feelings of guilt and accountability, "Winterface" shifts to acknowledge the isolation and Conrad's ownership of his final moments. The lines "phantom frequencies stammer / trying to fathom / how it was inside alone where you were dying" (1088) highlight the barrier between Rich and Conrad, even in their intimacy. Here, Rich confronts the impossibility of fully understanding his pain or motivations, presenting his death as a solitary act, removed from herself.

When read together, "Shattered Head" and "Winterface" form a dialogue. "Shattered Head" represents the initial shock and guilt following Conrad's suicide, while "Winterface" offers a more contemplative response. In this way, "Winterface" can be seen as a counterpoint or even a resolution to the anguish expressed in "Shattered Head." By imagining Conrad's perspective, Rich shifts the focus from her guilt to a broader exploration of their relationship and the forces that shaped it.

In "Shattered Head," the act of interrogation is shown when the shattered head becomes a representation of Conrad as she struggles to make sense of her role in his death, ultimately believing herself to be the cause. In "Winterface," self-interrogation takes on a more reflective tone. The question, "Did she see herself in there?" captures the difficulty of confronting one's reflection in the icy mirror of grief . The poem's imagery highlights the duality of grief: it is both an inward journey and a confrontation with external realities. In the poem, Rich grapples with the enduring echoes of loss and the impossibility of fully understanding the motivations and emotions of another.

While "Shattered Head" externalizes the violence of suicide through visceral and graphic imagery, "Winterface" takes a more subdued and introspective tone. The "his" section of "Winterface" focuses on the intellectual and material remains of Conrad's life, which contrasts with the violence to his head and the physical decaying of his body in "Shattered Head." This shift underscores Rich's evolving engagement with his death—from an overwhelming sense of guilt to an acknowledgment of the distance and mystery surrounding his inner world.

The two poems also differ in their treatment of agency and their roles in the relationship. In "Shattered Head," Conrad's question, *"Who did this to us?"* implies a shared victimhood and demands that Rich and society both take responsibility. This question underscores the complexity of their relationship, which was marked by both deep affection and unresolved tensions. In "Winterface," however, the focus on Conrad's intellectual pursuits and solitude frames his death as an act shaped by his own unknowable internal struggles, which are independent of Rich's influence. The icy mirror becomes a space where past and present converge, allowing Rich to confront the lingering memories of their relationship. The poem's fragmented structure mirrors the nature of grief and the difficulty of reconciling conflicting emotions, suggesting that healing is a continuous and incomplete process.

In "Shattered Head," the phrase "You feel no ghost, only a sporic chorus" (817) suggests an attempt to find peace while dealing with the chaos of grief. However, this peace is not possible due to the head's constant interruptions, especially in the final declaration, "*I believed I was loved, I believed I loved / who did this to us?"* (817), which leaves the reader and Rich with an accusation and a question that demands responsibility. In contrast, "Winterface" acknowledges the inevitability of loss and the impossibility of fully understanding another person's pain. The fragmented structure of the poem being split into "hers" and "his" sections underscores this tension of the fragmented nature of memory and the distinctness of two people who, no matter how close they were, were still separate beings. Together, the poems highlight Rich's dual perspective on grief. While "Shattered Head" is consumed with guilt and self-recrimination, "Winterface" seeks understanding and closure. Ultimately, Rich confronts her image and the memory of Conrad and moves toward an acceptance of their shared tragedy.

References

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