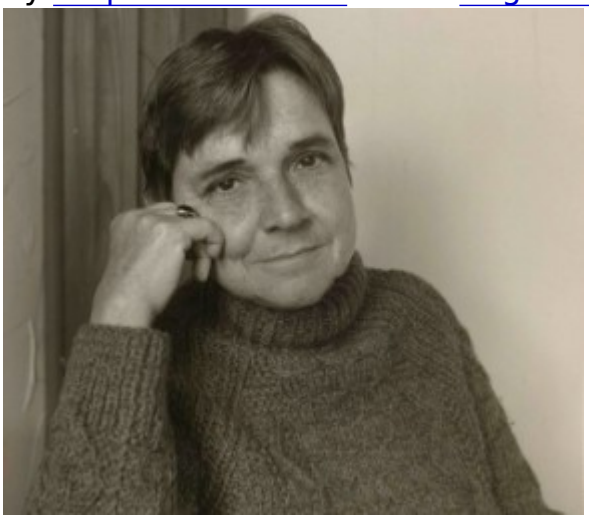
Politics into poetry

by Stephanie Paulsell in the August 31, 2016 issue



Adrienne Rich in Santa Cruz, California, in 1989. Photo from the New York Public Library Digital Collections.

There's nothing like a long campaign season to weaken our faith in language. Transformative political speech is so rare that we weep to hear it—as many did when Michelle Obama spoke at the Democratic National Convention. Her account of waking up in a house built by slaves and watching her daughters play outside on the White House lawn was unforgettable. It left an image in our minds that has the potential to change us by reshaping our perspective.

Much of what we hear during political campaigns does not stir our imaginations. At best, many of the phrases we hear lack potency, and at worst, they leave our ears ringing with a high-pitched whistle meant to awaken old fears and hatreds. Unkeepable campaign promises tilt into magical thinking: "I alone can fix this." The words are as empty as soap bubbles, but they have real consequences.

As we move into the campaigns' last months, we need an antidote to the weightless, reckless words crowding the atmosphere. The beach books of summer, with their solvable mysteries, won't do. We need language that anchors us in more difficult mysteries.

If you're looking for a book to replenish your political and spiritual imagination, I recommend *Collected Poems 1950–2012*, by Adrienne Rich, with an introduction by

poet Claudia Rankine. At more than 1,100 pages, this is a book that can accompany you to Election Day and beyond.

Rich, who died in 2012, published her first poems during the Truman administration and her last during the presidency of Barack Obama. Her body of work stretches from the Korean War to the war on terror, from her marriage to economist Alfred Conrad through her partnership with Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff. She was a poet when Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Kennedy brothers were murdered, and she wrote her last published poems shortly before 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was killed. To read from one end of her collected poems to the other is to experience history with someone whose engaged imagination not only longed for change but worked for it.

Start your morning with a few of her early poems; her rhymes and rhythms will echo in your mind all day and suggest your own thoughts and questions. Her early poetry is marked by a mastery of traditional poetic forms and her conviction that form offers us a way to bear our sorrows and our desires together.

As she made her way as a poet, woman, mother, lesbian, and activist, she began to write in freer, more open forms. She looked for a “liberative language” that could assemble the fragments of experience and bring us into communion with “others like and unlike ourselves.” As she cultivated new forms, she also opened her poetry to new subject matter: the violence of poverty, of war, of language itself; the body as the place where change is born; the power of intimacy to undo and remake us; the radical possibilities of love and friendship. Her friendships with Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and other African-American writers made her question the seductive and destructive power of white American dreams of innocence. Over and over, in poem after poem, she asked, “How do we keep from dreaming the old dreams?”

How indeed? The old dreams rise up in new guises, cloaked in false promises and dangerous explanations for the problems we face. For Rich, writing poetry was a way to resist being beguiled by the old dreams. Poetry required everything of her, and she offered everything she had: her poems brim with her reading and loving, her anger and sorrow, her struggles and the struggles of others. Rankine describes the collection as “a chronicle of over a half century of what it means to risk the self in order to give the self.”

As Rankine suggests, there’s a lot to learn from Rich’s poetic vocation about the religious vocation. Her devotion to her art was a spiritual exercise, keeping her

awake and alert, drawing her deeper and deeper into the life of the world, creating in her a rare capacity for solidarity. As she changed, her forms changed, making more and more room for voices that had not been heard and experiences that had not been made into poetry in the traditions of her poetic inheritance. As she filled poetry with new possibilities, she also felt along its edges for its limits. She knew that “language cannot do everything.” But as she wrote her way through half of the last century and the early years of this one, she sought among “the damage that was done” and “the treasures that prevail” for a language that could lead us into new ways of living. Her poems are a challenge, a blessing, and an urgent alarm.