

DIVING INTO THE WRECK

Adrienne Rich

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
 what I came for
 among so many who have always
 lived here
 swaying their crenellated fans
 between the reefs
 and besides
 you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
 The words are purposes.
 The words are maps.
 I came to see the damage that was done
 and the treasures that prevail.
 I stroke the beam of my lamp
 slowly along the flank
 of something more permanent
 than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
 the wreck and not the story of the wreck
 the thing itself and not the myth
 the drowned face always staring
 toward the sun
 the evidence of damage
 worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
 the ribs of the disaster
 curving their assertion
 among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
 And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
 streams black, the merman in his armored body.
 We circle silently
 about the wreck
 we dive into the hold.
 I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
 whose breasts still bear the stress
 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
 obscurely inside barrels
 half-wedged and left to rot
 we are the half-destroyed instruments
 that once held to a course
 the water-eaten log
 the fouled compass

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.