

JULIA CONRAD

For Adrienne

I LOVE TO PLAY THE VIOLIN but have never liked performing, especially for people I know. It's tough to tell how long you can continue before boring them. Afterward, if you played badly, they say, "Wow . . . that sounds . . . so hard!"

I don't really remember playing violin for my grandmother, because every time she visited, my parents had me play for her, and those occasions were so similar to other times when I had to perform for family. Once I played her a Bach partita, I think.

BACH'S PARTITA NO. 3 in E major starts on a high-note phrase that's critical to get right if you're going to fall smoothly into its flowing lines. At the time, my violin teacher was showing me, during my weekly lessons, how hard Bach is to read and perform, since the violinist's responsibility is to draw emotions from the density of notes. "Make up a sentence describing the feeling of a section," she said. "Write down the sentence, and then play it."

If I really did play the Bach for my grandmother, it would have been in the same dining room where, when I was six, I slipped on the hardwood floor in my socks while showing her a pirouette. The skin below my chin burst open when it slammed against the wood. I picture the moment as being somewhat exciting for her, because she lived across the country and only saw me twice a year, receiving updates by phone or e-mail. The accident was a searing memory we really shared.

I REMEMBER MORE clearly the things I joked to my friends about, because they seemed like comically abnormal grandma behavior: "My grandma only lets me call her by her first name." "Oh my god, guess what Adrienne sent me for my birthday? A purple, lacy thong." "We had vodka gimlets at the Warwick Hotel. No one cards you if you're with an eighty-year-old."

MY GRANDMOTHER SAT in on one of my violin lessons when I was eight, in my violin teacher Carmit's living room. My parents came to my lessons until I was ten, but Carmit and I always pretended there was no

one else in the room. I played scales, études, and my recital piece, with Carmit interjecting every few seconds that my notes were sharp, or that my bow-hand pinky wasn't curled enough. During the lesson Adrienne sat on the couch, listening quietly.

Her father had played the violin as a hobby. Her mother had been a trained concert pianist—won competitions, studied with top teachers in America and Europe—until she married and had children. During her husband's lifetime she only played accompaniment, and also tried to teach Adrienne piano when she was a child. The lessons were so frustrating for both that they stopped. I imagine my choice to study violin was fraught with symbolic meaning that no one mentioned out loud—a feminist's first female offspring after three sons, carrying on her mother's art.

At a sleepover in high school, my friends stayed up late talking about whether there could be symbolism in real life, or if it was just reading into coincidence. I didn't say anything.

I VISITED my great-grandmother, the former pianist, in Cambridge twice. On her grand piano were framed portraits of her late husband and of Brahms. She had a delicate nineteenth-century canopy bed, smooth, light-brown wood. When she died two years later I inherited the bed, and felt close to her, even though we never had a real relationship.

On her visits, Adrienne was terrifyingly short with me if I was too rowdy or silly. My mother said that, since Adrienne had had three sons, she didn't feel as comfortable with a girl. I didn't totally buy it, because she had been a girl herself and that seemed like it should have been enough.

I didn't understand her. But she was a famous poet, though in middle school I had also made a silent pact with myself to not read her work. I imagined I was saving it for when she died: so I could continue our relationship, but with her published self. Delayed gratification. The sort of idea that seems rational until you actually try to explain it out loud.

I always thought about her death coolly, the way you do about something far in the future, or about a piece of music you know you can replay.

ONCE, WHEN I WAS thirteen and no one was in the house, I opened our copy of one of her most famous books, *Of Woman Born*. I didn't pause long enough to see what larger idea it was pointing to—I just saw that everyone in my family was indicted there in print. I missed the point she was making entirely, and felt indignant at the critique of them—they were just keeping with their times. I closed the book.

SHE AND I usually talked about music. It felt safely precocious, and she knew most of the pieces and composers I was listening to. We both got excited over Bach.

Sometimes my father would secretly tape me practicing and send it to her. I was annoyed because the long, protracted pauses and short vacations to the fridge were all recorded too. Whenever someone called the house while I was practicing, I always made sure to put on a big show—louder, more passionate, more care in every note. So I had been doubly betrayed.

The recordings were low quality. He sent her an MP3 of my recital when I was fourteen. She e-mailed me, saying the recording sounded weak. “Anyway, I love hearing you, even thinly.” In a well-rounded review she commented on my tone, expressiveness, and range. Reading it now, I see it is strikingly complimentary, but at the time I didn’t want an analysis of my playing. I just wanted to be told I was good. Why couldn’t she ever just say directly what she meant?

WHEN I READ a score, it looks expansive and perfect. Every note could go the way I want it, with every gesture registering. When music is played out loud, it is fixed. And usually out of tune.

You can read things over and over, but you only get one chance to perform them.

WHEN I GOT OLDER I played for her when we were alone. She would sit at the kitchen table and watch closely. I would prepare the instrument with dramatic seriousness, to look professional: tightening the hair of the bow, rubbing it with resin, putting the shoulder rest on the violin, banging the pitchfork on my knee and setting it on the violin bridge, so that the true A would reverberate against the wood. Tuning every string to minute perfection.

I wasn’t a good enough student of violin to keep everything I’d learned memorized; I only had one piece to play by heart at a given time. Or else I could hide behind the music stand and play her something other than my current piece, but it was hard for me to return to finished concertos and sonatas. These were signs of my less advanced self. I wasn’t steeped in their phrases anymore.

If you know a piece really well, you can start thinking about something else for long stretches of time and then suddenly realize you are still playing, with no idea what part you’ve reached in the music.

It's hard to tell if you're truer in your inattention, or if the carelessness hurts you in the end. You weren't paying attention, so you'll never know.

I don't remember her reactions there in the kitchen. She was not always effusive in person. In her e-mails she wrote that I made her very proud.

MY PARENTS AND I visited Adrienne the winter I was fifteen. While I was washing dishes after dinner she told me about the musicality of poetry. This resonated with me and explained why sometimes I would get phrases of poems stuck in my head, as if they were songs. Poetry as music made a deep-rooted sort of sense. And if the two were connected, then she understood me more than I thought.

WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER we talked through e-mails. Short ones. I was very busy, and she didn't ask the right questions — only what I was doing, the weather, my life's current events. Her sense of me was in paragraphs from specific moments. I don't know what I wanted her to ask, but something was lost in my list of daily facts. I felt like the answers I gave weren't what she'd hoped for, so I stopped wanting to give any. After she died I read all our e-mails at once: my brusque selfishness.

I once wrote a poem in high school about my violin, and my dad insisted I send it to her. She replied that it wasn't finished. "But there's so much here already . . . the indirect and direct sensuality, the sense of the violin as semiotic."

I hadn't done any of this intentionally, and I didn't know what "semiotic" was, but I took the compliment to heart. Particularly since the other time I sent her a poem she'd replied, "Clearly you have no conception of meter."

I WENT TO HEAR her read at the 92nd Street Y my last year of high school. In the front there was a row reserved for family, and the auditorium was otherwise very crowded. About six years before I had been backstage with her at the Y and had gotten excited about the famous signatures in the guest book and the complimentary mints, but this was the first time I'd sat in the audience, a listener.

The word people often use to describe her and her readings is "fierce." Fierce because there is a wildness to her words — a jaggedness, unapologetic and strong. She was unwavering. She spoke with an ineffable rightness, and the words that resounded through the hall were full of fury and the most personal tenderness, a uniquely soothing emphasis on each

syllable: the sighing exhales of “wh” and the gentle shutting of the box of each “k”; the fast beckoning depth of the ideas and the promise that they’d still be there, written, later.

I had always found her Baltimore drawl slightly too slow and tuneful to seem completely genuine. The “wh” belabored the point. But the experience of hearing her read, when I was finally really listening, fully explained all those times we had been approached by a stammering woman, wide-eyed, “Are . . . Are you? Adrienne Rich?”

WHEN I WAS in college she grew increasingly frail. She sent me an e-mail, saying that she had been reading W. H. Auden’s poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and recommended it. I read: “By mourning tongues / the death of the poet was kept from his poems.”

I found out by phone that she was about to die while I was visiting a friend in Poughkeepsie. I didn’t tell the friend. When I got on the Metro North to go home to Brooklyn, I listened to the third movement of the Franck Violin Sonata again and again. It’s a passionate piece, but it’s not really death music. Just wandering in a minor key, pitch-black sound to get lost in. On the subway platform at Jay Street my eyes burned. While walking down the long Brooklyn blocks with my headphones on I finally let tears fall. A block from home, by coincidence I ran into Carmit. She asked if I was okay. I said I was having trouble with my contact lenses. It was easier to say how I felt out loud on the violin.

WHEN ADRIENNE DIED I was in my college library. I was expecting the phone call, and there it was, on the caller ID. It made sense that I was surrounded by books; books, I had always told myself, were what would remain for me of her. When I got to the lobby, my dad said the words, and I went back to my dorm room. I was afraid to run into people I knew when I went out to pee.

“How are you?”

I didn’t want to enunciate it, but I also didn’t want to lie and hold up a smile on my cheekbones. My forehead was continually aching, because I actively had to keep it from crumpling. One night I practiced violin, the Bach G minor Sonata’s adagio, until I was exhausted, and then started crying in the practice room. The doors had large glass windows so I turned off the lights so no one could see in. I pictured what I looked like, sitting in the dark alone, and my tears turned to sobs. I had my violin in my lap, because I still thought I would pull it together and return to

practicing. I pressed my forehead against the cool wooden scroll.

All of the things I didn't voice roiled in my head until they felt exaggeratedly complex. How do you explain it? The out-loud sound of "I'm so sad" falls flat. In my head "I'm so sad" feels like a gorge. The words echo in it.

THE LAST TIME Adrienne heard me play it must have been a Saint-Saëns concerto, but I'm not sure. I was practicing with the door closed, so it wasn't a performance. I really liked the Saint-Saëns. The beginning had a power I had never experienced before.

When I came out of the room, she said, "That was wonderful."