

## Rosanne Cash on How Science Saved Her Life, the Source of Every Artist's Power

by Maria Popova

Most know Marie Curie (November 7, 1867–July 4, 1934) as a trailblazing scientist — a pioneer of radioactivity, the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize, and to this day the only person to win two Nobels in two different sciences, chemistry and physics. But unbeknownst to most, she was also a woman of tremendous humanitarian heroism and courage: When WWI swept Europe, Curie, a vehement pacifist, invented and operated mobile X-ray units known as “Little Curies” — ambulances which she herself drove, treating an estimated one million wounded soldiers and civilians, using the technology her own discoveries had made possible to save innumerable lives.

It fell on another extraordinary woman, the great poet and feminist Adrienne Rich (May 16, 1929–March 27, 2012), to eulogize Curie exactly forty years after the trailblazing scientist’s death in the 1974 poem “Power,” which opens Rich’s 1977 masterwork *The Dream of a Common Language* (public library).

Another forty years later, another remarkable woman animated this double legacy of greatness — multiple Grammy winner Rosanne Cash, a musician of enormous poetic potency, a beautiful memoirist, and one of very few women inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Cash brought Rich’s masterpiece to life at *The Universe in Verse* — the celebration of science through poetry, which gave us Neil Gaiman’s feminist poem about science, Sarah Jones’s chorus-of-humanity tribute to Jane Goodall, and astrophysicist Janna Levin’s sublime performance of Adrienne Rich’s tribute to women in astronomy.

Prefacing her reading, Cash offered the greatest testimonial to the power of science there is — one attested to with her very life, which science saved after pseudo-science and today’s fossils of superstition imperiled it — and reflected on how Rich’s poem, while celebrating a scientist, also speaks to the deepest source of every artist’s power.

Persist and verify... The power that we abdicate to others out of our insecurity — to others who insult us with their faux-intuition or their authoritarian smugness — that comes back to hurt us so deeply... But the power we wrest from our own certitude — that saves us.

And here is the isolated poem:

## POWER

Living in the earth-deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth  
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old  
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic  
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:  
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness  
her body bombarded for years by the element  
she had purified  
It seems she denied to the end  
the source of the cataracts on her eyes  
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends  
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

She died a famous woman denying  
her wounds  
denying  
her wounds came from the same source as her power

Rich was the only poet with two poems represented in *The Universe in Verse*. Devour the other one — her tribute to Caroline Herschel, the first professional woman astronomer — here, then revisit Rich herself reading her increasingly timely poem “What Kind of Times Are These?”