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## MURIEL RUKESYER

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(1913–1980)

Born to wealthy Jewish parents in New York City, Muriel Rukesyer led a privileged childhood that included elite schools, summer homes, and country clubs. She joked that, "I was expected to grow up and become a golfer." Instead, she broke from her parents to pursue poetry, political activism, journalism, and biography. She attended Vassar College for two years but left in 1932, already sure of her dedication to writing. Along with other intellectuals of her generation, she joined the Communist Party, and during the Depression years of the 1930s she worked as a journalist for leftist publications such as *New Masses*. Her assignments took her to Decatur, Alabama, in 1933, where she witnessed the trial of the Scottsboro boys, and in 1936 to Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, to help expose the life-threatening working conditions countenanced by a silica mining conglomerate. She also traveled to Spain, where her assignment to cover the antifascist Olympics coincided with the start of the Spanish Civil War. By the end of the decade she had left the Party, in part because she refused to conform to its expectations that she write narrow, propagandistic poetry. For the rest of her life, however, she remained committed to political activism and leftist ideals.

By the time she was thirty, she had published extensively journalism, reviews, poetry, and an ambitious biography. *Theory of Flight* (1935), which won the Yale Younger Poets' Prize, was inspired in part by her experiences as an amateur pilot and is notable for presenting socially concerned poetry with a Whitmanesque expansiveness and Modernist techniques derived from Hart Crane. Her next book, *U. S. 1* (1938), continues these juxtapositions; her long poem, "Book of the Dead," blends documentary realism with Modernist collage through her portraits of workers and their families and her quotations from sources such as congressional subcommittee testimony on the corporate cover-up of the miners' deaths from silicosis. "Book of the Dead" caused controversy because Rukesyer refused to limit herself to only one perspective on poetry. Critics on the right attacked her for being overly political, while critics on the left complained that her Modernist techniques were obscurantist. Rukesyer continued her independent path in *A Turning Wind* (1939) and *Wake Island* (1942). She never wavered from what she

saw as the democratic inclusiveness of her poetry and her goal of crossing boundaries—whether between disciplines or between types of poetry. In a series of lectures that she eventually published as *The Life of Poetry* (1949), she argued against divisions—between human beings, disciplines, modes of poetry, even between poets and readers. Writing out of her own individual consciousness as a woman and a Jew, Rukesyer aimed to expand outward to reach readers everywhere, even though she recognized the obstacles that often impede such exchanges.

An openness to change characterized not only Rukesyer's poetry, but her life as well. By the end of the 1940s she had published four more books of poetry, including *Beast in View* (1944), with a long poem that contained the sonnet, "To Be a Jew in the Twentieth Century." This sonnet would eventually be made part of the Reform Liturgy. In 1945 she moved to California, taught at the California Labor School, and married a painter. But the marriage lasted only two months, and in 1947 she gave birth to a son by another man, whose identity she never made public. Single motherhood sapped some of her writing energy, and her publication rate slowed during the years that she raised her son and worked to support him by teaching at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, where she had returned in 1954. Nevertheless, she was able to complete two books of poetry, *Body of Waking* (1958) and *Waterlily Fire: Poems 1935–1962* (1962).

In the late 1960s she returned full force to poetry writing and political activism, buoyed by the renewed climate for socially responsive poetry and the burgeoning feminist movement. She participated in demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and in 1972 traveled to South Vietnam to lobby for peace. Her books included *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), *Breaking Open* (1973), *The Gates* (1976), *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukesyer* (1979), as well as an experimental novel, *The Oryx* (1966).

Although Rukesyer had always emphasized the female perspective, her later work became more explicitly feminist, and women poets found inspiration in both her writing and her uncompromising life. Because of her stubborn independence from the various schools that dominated American poetry, her strong political content, and her identity as "a she-poet," Rukesyer was often omitted from anthologies and critical surveys. After her death in 1980 her books fell out of print. But the publication of *Out of Silence: Selected Poems* (1992) and *A Muriel Rukesyer Reader* (1994) with an introduction by Adrienne Rich, eventually helped to reestablish her reputation as a twentieth-century innovator.

In the following excerpt from *The Life of Poetry*, Rukesyer condemns the "static mechanics" of the New Critics and advocates a poetry based on a notion of a relationship that shatters boundaries between disciplines, such as literature and science, and also between individuals, especially the poet and the reader. Arguing that "the poem is a process," she defines readers as "witnesses," whose active experience of the poem may spur a change in consciousness.

## FROM THE LIFE OF POETRY

FORM, TIME, TENSION

The form of a poem is much more organic, closer to other organic form, than has been supposed. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, whose book *On Growth and Form* is a source and a monument, says that organic form is, mathematically, a function of time. There is, in the growth of a tree, the story of those years which saw the rings being made: between those wooden rippled rings, we can read the wetness or dryness of the years before the charts were kept. But the tree is in itself an image of adjustment to its surroundings. There are many kinds of growth: the inorganic shell or horn presents its past and present in the spiral; the crocus grows through minute pulsations, each at an interval of twenty seconds or so, each followed by a partial recoil.

A poem moves through its sounds set in motion, and the reaction to these sounds, their rhymes and repetitions and contrast, has a demonstrable physical basis which can be traced as the wavelength of the sounds themselves can be traced. The wavelength is measurable; the reaction, if you wish such measurements, could be traced through heartbeat and breath, although I myself do not place much value on such measurement.

The impact of the images, and the tension and attraction between meanings, these are the clues to the flow of contemporary poetry. Baudelaire, Lawrence, Eliot have been masters here, and well have known the effects and the essences they offered. But to go on, to recognize the energies that are transferred between people when a poem is given and taken, to know the relationships in modern life that can make the next step, to see the tendencies in science which can indicate it, that is for the new poets.

In the exchange, the human energy that is transferred is to be considered.

### THE EXCHANGE

Exchange is creation; and the human energy involved is consciousness, the capacity to produce change from the existing conditions.

Into the present is flung naked life. Life is flung into the present language. The new forms emerge, with their intensive properties, or potentials—their words and images; and their extensive properties, existing in time: sound, forms, subjects, content, and that last includes all the relations between the words and images of the poem.

When the poem arrives with the impact of crucial experience, when it becomes one of the turnings which we living may at any moment approach and enter, then we become more of our age and more primitive. Not primitive as the aesthetes have used the term, but complicated, fresh, full of dark meanings, insisting on discovery, as the experience of a woman giving birth to a child is primitive.

From *The Life of Poetry* (New York: Current Books, 1949).

I cannot say what poetry is: I know that our sufferings and our concentrated joy, our states of plunging far and dark and turning to come back to the world—so that the moment of intense turning seems still and universal—all are here, in a music like the music of our time, like the hero and like the anonymous forgotten; and there is an exchange here in which our lives are met, and created.

### A LIGHTNING FLASH

Exchange is creation.

In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader. Human energy, which is consciousness, the capacity to produce change in existing conditions.

But the manner of exchange, the gift that is offered and received—these must be seen according to their own nature.

Fenollosa, writing of the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry, says this: "All truth is the transference of power. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning. It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth."

This is the threshold, now the symbols are themselves in motion. Now we have the charge, flaming along the path from its reservoir to the receptive target. Even that is not enough to describe the movement of reaching a work of art.

One of our difficulties is that, accepting a science that was static and seeing the world about us according to the vision it afforded, we have tried to freeze everything, including living functions, and the motions of the imaginative arts.

We have used the term "mind" and allowed ourselves to be trapped into believing there was such a *thing*, such a *place*, such a locus of forces. We have used the word "poem" and now the people who live by division quarrel about "the poem as object." They pull it away from their own lives, from the life of the poet, and they attempt to pull it away from its meaning, from itself; finally, in a trance of shattering, they deny qualities and forms and all significance. Then, cut off from its life, they see the dead Beauty: they know what remorse is, they begin to look for some single cause of their self-hatred and contempt. There is, of course, no single cause. We are not so mechanical as that. But there was a symptom: these specialists in dying, they were prepared to believe there was such a thing as Still Life. For all things change in time; some are made of change itself, and the poem is of these. It is not an object; the poem is a process.

### POET, POEM, AND WITNESS

Charles Peirce takes Fenollosa's lightning flash, sets it away from the giving. Peirce writes: "All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects . . . or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs." It is important here to understand what Peirce means by *semiosis*. "By semiosis I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant; this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs. . . ."

The giving and taking of a poem is, then, a triadic relation. It can never be reduced to a pair: we are always confronted by the poet, the poem, and the audience.

The poet, at the moment of his life at which he finished the poem.

The poem, as it is available, heard once, or in a book always at hand.

The audience, the individual reader or listener, with all his life, and whatever capacity he has to summon up his life appropriately to receive more life. At this point, I should like to use another word: "audience" or "reader" or "listener" seems inadequate. I suggest the old word "witness," which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the law makes a climate here which is that climate of excitement and revelation giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self.

These three terms of relationship—poet, poem, and witness—are none of them static. We are changing, living beings, experiencing the inner change of poetry.

The relationships are the meanings, and we have very few of the words for them. Even our tests, the personality tests of which we presently are so proud, present the static forms of Rohrschach blotches. Any change must be seen as specifically in the examinee. Tests are to be made for the perception of change. We need tests in time, moving images on film, moving sounds and syllables on records; or both on sound film. Then we could begin to see how changing beings react to changing signs—how the witness receives the poem.

In a test of recognition, hardly a person knew his own hands, or his face in profile, or his body from behind. It was only when the group was shown films in which they could see themselves walking—face blanked out—that empathy arrived, and with it, recognition.

We know our own rhythms. Our rhythms are more recognizably our selves than any of our forms. Sometimes in nature, form and rhythm are very close: the shape of a tree, for example, is the diagram of its relation to every force which has acted on it and in it; the "shape" of our consciousness—but you see to what folly use of models may lead.

The laws of exchange of consciousness are only suspected. Einstein says, "Now I believe that events in nature are controlled by a much stricter and more closely binding law than we recognize today; when we speak of one event being the *cause* of another. We are like a child who judges a poem by the rhymes and knows nothing of the rhythmic pattern. Or we are like a juvenile learner at the piano, *just* relating one note to that which immediately precedes or follows. To an extent this may be very well when one is dealing with very simple and primitive compositions; but it will not do for an interpretation of a Bach fugue."

I believe that one suggestion of such law is to be found in the process of poetry. It is the process and the arrangement that give us our clues. Here the links between the scientist and the poet are strong and apparent.

The links between poetry and science are a different matter. For, in recent poetry, there is to be seen a repetition of old fallacies. The by-products, the half-understood findings of science have been taken over, with the results of tragedy.

You may see these results in fashionable poetry: in the poetry of the sense of annihilation, of the smallness of things, of aversion, guilt, and the compulsion toward forgiveness. This is strong magic here: if they want smallness, they will have their smallness; if they want it, they will at last have their forgiveness. But these artists go blaming, blaming. Let us look at what has happened. With the exploration of time and the newer notions of the universe, we have a generation who

half-read the findings as they are popularized, and who emerge with little but self-pity. A characteristic title is *The World Has Shrunk in the Wash*.

ADAM WHO DARES

What has really happened? What does this "smallness" mean to us?

It means that in ourselves we go on from the world of primitive man, a "small" world surrounded by the unknown—whether that unknown be the jungle or curved infinity. Again, the "large" things are human capacities and the beliefs they live among. Our relation to each other and to ourselves are the only things with survival value, once again. We can go on from a source in ourselves which we had almost lost. We can go on with almost forgotten strengths which are—according to your bias—profoundly religious, profoundly human. We can understand the primitive—not as the clumsy, groping naif of a corrupted definition, or even the unskilled "unsophisticate" of modern aesthetic usage—for what he was and what we have to be: the newborn of an age, the pioneer, Adam who dares.

The century has only half-prepared us to be primitives. The time requires our full consciousness, humble, audacious, clear; but we have nightmares of contradiction. For all its symptoms of liberation, its revolutionary stirrings in persons and peoples, the Victorian period was also one of swollen dreams. Behind us overhang the projections of giantism, the inflated powers over all things, according to which nature became some colony of imperial and scientific man, and Fact and Logic his throne and sceptre. He forgot that that sceptre and that throne were signs. Fact is a symbol, Logic is a symbol: they are symbols of the real.

#### THE COMPLETION OF EXPERIENCE

And reality may be seen as the completion of experience.

Experience itself cannot be seen as a point in time, a fact. The experience with which we deal, in speaking of art and human growth, is not only the event, but the event *and the entire past of the individual*. There is a series in any event, and the definition of the event is the last unit of the series. You read the poem: the poem you now have, the poem that exists in your imagination, is the poem and all the past to which you refer it.

The poet, by the same token, is the man (is the woman) with all the poet's past life, at the moment the poem is finished; that is, at the moment of reaching a conclusion, of understanding further what it means to feel these relationships.

#### THE POEM SEEN AS SYSTEM

The role of memory is not explored. We know the memory of the unfinished act, or story, or joke, is stronger than that of the finished. These symbols are never finished; they continue to grow; perhaps that is their power. We know that the poetic strategy, if one may call it that, consists in leading the memory of an unknown witness, by means of rhythm and meaning and image and coursing sound and always-unfinished symbol, until in a blaze of discovery and love, the poem is taken. This is the music of the images of relationship, its memory, and its information.

Functions of information and memory have been related in Norbert Wiener's book of many sides and many excitements, *Cybernetics*. Here, among a hundred

suggestions, we hear the "philosophical echoes" of "the transition from a Newtonian, reversible time to a Gibbsian, irreversible time." We are shown the necessity to be dynamically minded, and the line of one philosopher is traced, from Leibniz' continuum of monads to the post-Gibbsian dynamic interpretations. We meet again that hero of our century, Clerk Maxwell's demon, and, confronted as he is with his problems of entropy and equilibrium, we see something about the information which the sorting demon may receive from particles approaching the gate he guards in his container. We see that information here represents negative entropy.

Now a poem, like anything separable and existing in time, may be considered as a system, and the changes taking place in the system may be investigated. The notion of feedback, as it is used in calculating machines and such linked structures as the locks of the Panama Canal, is set forth. The relations of information and feedback in computing machines and the nervous system, as stated here, raise other problems. What are imaginative information and imaginative feedback in poetry? What are the emotional equivalents for these relationships? How far do these truths of control and communication apply to art?

The questions are raised, even with the older questions, like Proust's *madeleine*, still setting challenges to the sciences.

We know that the relationships in poetry are clearer when we think in terms of a dynamic system, whose tendencies toward equilibrium, and even toward entropy, are the same as other systems? (Even Orpheus approached maximum entropy before he became a god.)

We know that poetry is not isolated here, any more than any phenomena can be isolated. Now again we see that all is unbegun.

The only danger is in not going far enough. The usable truth here deals with change. But we are speaking of the human spirit. If we go deep enough, we reach the common life, the shared experience of man, the world of possibility.

If we do not go deep, if we live and write half-way, there are obscurity, vulgarity, the slang of fashion, and several kinds of death.

All we can be sure of is that our art has life in time, it serves human meaning, it blazes on the night of the spirit; all we can be sure of is that at our most subjective we are universal; all we can be sure of is the profound flow of our living tides of meaning, the river meeting the sea in eternal relationship, in a dance of power, in a dance of love.

For this is the world of light and change: the real world; and the reality of the artist is the reality of the witnesses.

1949

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## RANDALL JARRELL

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(1914-1965)

In a letter to a college sweetheart, Randall Jarrell once wrote, "I've lived all over, and always been separated from at least half of a very small family, and been alone as children ever are." Childhood and loneliness would become two of his most important subjects. He was born in Nashville, Tennessee, to Owen and Anna Jarrell. When his parents separated, he was shuttled back and forth between his mother in Nashville and his father and grandparents in Southern California. He would remember his grandparents' home in Hollywood as a childhood Eden lost to him through forces beyond his control. As a boy in Nashville, he was befriended by sculptors Belle Kinney and Leopold Scholz, who nearly adopted him. They had been at work on the concrete replica of the Parthenon in Centennial Park, and Jarrell posed for the figure of Ganymede, cupbearer to the gods.

While at Vanderbilt University (B.A. 1936, M.A. 1939), Jarrell was quickly recognized as a brilliant and somewhat overbearing student. His teachers included men who were then becoming powerful literary figures—John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, the Southern Agrarian poets who had helped edit the *Fugitive*, an influential Modernist journal published in Nashville from 1922 to 1925. Ransom and Warren were also key figures in New Criticism, a revisionist movement only beginning to exert what would soon become a decisive influence on the academic study of literature. Although Jarrell's politics were left of center (and his contemporary favorite poet was the Marx- and Freud-inspired early Auden), he was influenced by the *Fugitive* poets who were mostly very conservative in their political views. His literary connections helped him secure early and prestigious publication. Allen Tate, an early mentor, took five of Jarrell's undergraduate poems for a supplement to the *American Review*, and when Warren established the *Southern Review* at Louisiana State University, Jarrell appeared in the premiere issue. He was invited to review books for the magazine and immediately displayed a prodigious talent for succinctness and wit.

When Ransom moved to Kenyon College, founding the *Kenyon Review* and establishing his "school" of New Critical writers, Jarrell followed him there as instructor and tennis coach. At Kenyon he befriended Robert Lowell