

NY 1979 POETRY DAY Award

to
Muriel Rukeyser

WHAT KIND OF WOMAN GOES SEARCHING AND SEARCHING?

THOMAS LASK DESCRIBES HER IN HIS NEW YORK TIMES REVIEW OF HER 1979 COLLECTED POEMS AS SOMEONE WHO HAS ALWAYS BEEN ON THE SIDE OF THE UNDERDOG, THE DEFENSELESS, THOSE WHOM LIFE OUTMANEUVERED. YET SHE HAS ALSO BEEN A WOMAN WHO IS AS LOYAL TO HER CRAFT AS TO HER SOCIAL VISION, A WOMAN FOR WHOM THE WRITING OF THE POEM IS THE VERBAL EQUIVALENT OF THE POLITICAL GESTURE.

WHAT KIND OF WOMAN GOES SEARCHING AND SEARCHING?

LOUISE BERNIKOW DESCRIBES HER AS POET, BIOGRAPHER, TEACHER, PROTESTER, PRISON INMATE, SINGLE MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, LOVER—SOMEONE WHO NEVER TALKS ABOUT POETRY, SHE WRITES IT AND SHE READS IT BUT SHE NEVER TALKS ABOUT IT—AND SHE WRITES A POEM TO COUNTERACT SILENCE AND TO HEAR THINGS SHE WANTS TO HEAR—SOMETIMES SHE CAN HEAR IT FROM OTHER PEOPLE AND SOMETIMES ONLY FROM HERSELF.

WHAT KIND OF WOMAN GOES SEARCHING AND SEARCHING?

WE WOULD DESCRIBE HER AS A BRAVE FREE HEART WHO HAS WRITTEN HER POETRY ABOUT ALL THE GREAT SOCIAL REALITIES OF OUR TIME—THE DEPRESSION, THE TERRIBLE WORLD WARS, THE OMINOUS RISE OF FASCISM, THE BRUTE FACT OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, THE EVIL OF OUR INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM, THE INJUSTICE OF THE IMPRISONMENT OF KIM CHI HA IN KOREA—AND SOMETIMES THE INTUITIVE MOVEMENT OF HER POETRY COMES RIGHT OUT OF THE IMPACT OF THESE GREAT SOCIAL REALITIES AS EXPERIENCES DEEPLY FELT, AS THEY WERE DEEPLY FELT BY HER FELLOW POETS KENNETH FEARING AND KENNETH PATCHEN. IN SUCH BOOKS AS THEORY OF FLIGHT, U.S.1, THE GREEN WAVE, BODY OF WAKING, WATERLILY FIRE, THE SPEED OF DARKNESS, BREAKING OPEN, THE GATES, AND MANY OTHER VOLUMES CULMINATING IN THE COLLECTED POEMS OF 1979—ALSO IN HER BIOGRAPHIES SUCH AS TRACES OF THOMAS HARRIOT, ALSO IN HER TRANSLATIONS SUCH AS THE SELECTED POEMS OF OCTAVIO PAZ, ALSO IN HER STRONG EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF POETRY AT SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE, N.Y.U., CITY COLLEGE AND SAN FRANCISCO STATE COLLEGE, ALSO IN HER SERVICE TO HER BROTHER AND SISTER WRITERS AS RECENT PAST PRESIDENT OF P.E.N.

BUT ALWAYS AND ESPECIALLY THIS WOMAN HAS WRITTEN HER VERY STRONGEST POETRY OUT OF AND ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF LOVE—FROM HER EARLIEST WORK, "EFFORT AT SPEECH BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE,"—THROUGH HER LATEST WORK, "LOOKING AT EACH OTHER," THIS WOMAN HAS ALWAYS INSISTED ON THE MYSTERY AND THE ISOLATION AND THE GRANDEUR OF OUR HUMAN SEXUALITY AND HOW IT MUST ALWAYS ENFORCE THE NOBILITY OF A BRAVE FREE HEART.

THIS IS THE KIND OF WOMAN WHO GOES SEARCHING AND SEARCHING—
MURIEL RUKEYSER.



William Packard
for THE NEW YORK QUARTERLY

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