

Jen Benka

For Muriel

One of the first books of poetry I owned was a paperback edition of *Immortal Poems of the English Language*. The promotional copy in the front of the book read:

TO LOVE,
TO SUFFER,
TO THINK...
is to seek poetry.

I imagine the lines spoken slowly in a deep man's voice over a public address system. I am Winston.

I bought the book in 1984 for a high school English class taught by an intimidating woman, Dr. D. It was widely whispered that Dr. D, with her cashmere sweater sets and perfectly pressed A-line skirts, was a lesbian and the companion of Dr. S, the guidance counselor, who was a dead-ringer for Gertrude Stein.

"Lift up your face, my love, lift up your mouth/ Kiss me and come to bed."¹

I didn't fully understand the whispering, only that Dr. D and Dr. S had each other instead of men, which was deviant. Not living in a city, there wasn't much information about gay and lesbian life beyond some mentions in newspapers at the time about a "gay disease." By 1984, 1,800 people had died of AIDS. The majority of information back then about homosexuality was contained in the library, and accessing it required the card catalog and the courage to potentially be caught and labeled a pervert.

Big Brother is watching you.

"...Never to despise/ the homosexual who goes building another/ with touch with touch (not to despise any touch)/ each like himself, like herself each./ You are this."²

Dr. S passed away recently and in her obituary Dr. D described how they loved to travel, spending several summers in Africa, and others touring the U.S in their motor home.

¹ "Drunken Girl," *Beast in View*, Muriel Rukseyser, 1944

² "Despisals," *Breaking Open*, Rukeyser, 1973

Immortal Poems of the English Language was originally published in 1952 and reprinted in 1983. The book claimed to be “the most inclusive anthology of verse ever published at so low a price.” Of the 150 “British and American masters” represented in the book, only ten were women, and by 1984, only six or seven of the poets were still living.

I didn’t know how to look for you until I learned I was looking.

“Nobody suspects that there are living artists and living poets. All are dead: the musicians, the poets, the sculptors. This is a world of business. Reality is the city. Real men go to The Office.”³

We studied Keats’ poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” I drew little stars by the line, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” but in the margin I wrote, “The urn is cold and has no emotion. Is this really a vessel for beauty?”

Ode to a Moment that Reveals Ugliness

Reading himself for his weekly radio address and not realizing the microphone was on, President Reagan said, “My fellow Americans, I’m pleased to tell you today that I’ve signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.”

Ode to Never Better Late

For years, President Reagan refused to address the AIDS epidemic. When he finally did in 1987, close to 21,000 people had died from the disease.

“Flower flower flower flower/ Today for the sake of all the dead Burst into Flower.”⁴

There is one history that is offered to us. It is not our history.

In 1988, I cut off all my hair and bought steel-toe boots. At a reception after a reading by Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, I asked Burroughs if he would sign my copy of *Naked Lunch*. He looked me in the eye and slurred, “You should get out of this shit-hole, boy.”

To be found out.

I asked my college English professor when we might read some women poets who weren’t gassed and missing. He recommended that I read Adrienne Rich’s work. I

³ *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser, (Reprinted by Paris Press, 1996)

⁴ “The Power of Suicide,” *The Speed of Darkness*, Rukeyser, 1968

don't remember where in Rich's work it was that she mentioned the poet Muriel Rukeyser, but I wrote the name down.

Yes, our eyes saw each other's eyes
Yes, our mouths saw each other's mouths
Yes, our breasts saw each other's breasts
Yes, our bodies entire saw each other
Yes, it was beginning in each
Yes, it threw waves across our lives⁵

To find.

If we were not isolated, if we could recognize each other, if we knew the stories of our successes, if we refused their lies, we might know our power.

I touch her cheek. You are this. Kiss me. Flower flower. Come to bed.

"They fear it. They turn away, hand up palm out/ fending off moment of proof, the straight look, poem."⁶

Lying in the middle of Fifth Avenue in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Bill started yelling SHAME and soon we were all yelling SHAME SHAME SHAME. It was the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Christopher was sick. And the sand was pouring out. And we were the sand and you were not the sand. SHAME.

"You will enter the world which eats itself"⁷

And it was and it is. Feeding on its own flesh. This is what it feels like to suffocate. To collapse from the inside out. Where is the glass to break. The stop to pull. Cut Cut.

If communication has broken down, then it is time to tap the roots of communication. Poetry is written from these depths; in great poetry you feel a source speaking to another source. And it is deep at these levels that the questions lie. They come up again and again during these years, when under all the surface shouting, there is silence about those things we need to hear.⁸

On February 21, 1995, Christopher Fons died at the age of 27. His brother Dan said, "When Christopher was in the room, I felt ten times stronger—stronger in my ability and in my determination to fight injustice. Christopher... lived true to his convictions every minute of every day, whether that meant passing out

⁵ "Looking at Each Other," *Breaking Open*, Rukeyser, 1973

⁶ "Reading Time : 1 Minute 26 Seconds," *A Turning Wind*, Rukeyser, 1939

⁷ "Nine Poems: for the unborn child," *The Green Wave*, Rukeyser, 1948

⁸ *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser, (Reprinted by Paris Press, 1996)

condoms to high school students in front of irate parents or the simple and profound act of holding hands with his boyfriend at a bus stop.”⁹

The faces of the sufferers
in the street, in dailiness,
their lives showing
through their bodies
a look as of music
the revolutionary look
that says I am in the world
to change the world
my lifetime
is to love to endure to suffer the music
to set its portrait
up as a sheet of the world
the most moving the most alive¹⁰

At Christopher’s funeral, and at his, at his, at his, at his and his. Circling around women with our arms linked, escorting them into the abortion clinic. Collecting knives from the men waiting to get into the shelter for the night. Watching the crack house burn. The bombing begins in five minutes.

Choose your poet here. Or, rather, do not choose. But remember what happened to you when you came to your poem, any poem whose truth overcame all inertia in you at that moment, so that your slow mortality took its proper place, and before it the light of a new awareness was not something new, but something you *recognized*.¹¹

⁹ “History of Gay and Lesbian Life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin,”
http://www.mkelgbthist.org/people/peo-f/fons_christopher.htm

¹⁰ “Kathe Kollwitz,” *The Speed of Darkness*, Rukeyser, 1968

¹¹ *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser, (Reprinted by Paris Press, 1996)