



Sunday Life: On Poetry

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal

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On poetry: These women blazed trails in a sky filled with peril

In November of 1942, Nancy Parrish volunteered for what she called "a very important experiment." She and 25 other women went to Sweetwater, Texas, to train to fly an airplane nicknamed the Widowmaker. (The planes had crashed too many times during training.)

Although officials said these planes were safe "if flown correctly," some male pilots would not fly them. Fortunately, says Parrish, "The women were all very good pilots."

Nancy Parrish and a thousand or so other women were WASPs -- Women Airforce Service Pilots -- of World War II. The WASP program began early in the war to address a shortage of pilots.

Out of an original 25,000 applicants, 1,800 women were chosen, and about 1,000 completed the pilot training. The women flew fighters, bombers and transport aircraft to move troops, supplies, and eventually, parts of the atomic bomb.

Although they saw no active combat, by the end of the program in 1944, these women pilots had flown over 96 million kilometers in support of the U.S. war effort. They were trailblazers.

They make me remember a favorite poem, "Waiting for Icarus" by Muriel Rukeyser.

The speaker has waited on the beach all day for Icarus, of the wax wings, to come back to her. He has told her the buckles are tight, the wax is the best, and when he gets back they'll drink wine together.

He said Wait for me here on the beach

He said Just don't cry

The poem ends:

I have been waiting all day, or perhaps longer.

I would have liked to try those wings myself.

It would have been better than this.

Muriel Rukeyser was a trailblazing American woman poet. She was born in 1913, two years after the first International Women's Day was held. I was introduced to her work at the 1987 Kentucky Women Writers Conference where poets Marilyn Hacker, Sharon Olds and Sandra Gilbert -- trailblazing poets themselves -- declared Rukeyser's poetry made their own poems possible.

Rukeyser's personal and political visions were inseparable. She was 7 when the U.S. Congress granted women the right to vote. She grew up in volatile times for women, and was sometimes scorned for the subjects of her poems. She wrote "from the body" about sexual longings and pregnancy and night feedings at a time when it was brave to insist on these topics.

She said poetry was "an exchange of energy, a system of relationships." I think the last line of "Waiting for Icarus" does not mourn the loss of the lover so much as it does the speaker's lost opportunity to fly, to do what he did.

I knew nothing about these WWII women flyers. A Women's History Month press release about an author's talk got me interested in their story. Delaware author Jan Churchill's book, "On Wings to War," tells the story of Teresa James and WAFS (Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron) who trained at New Castle Army Base during World War II. James gave a talk in Dover this month about the women pilot program that was based in Delaware.

I had heard much more about the Tuskegee Airmen, celebrated most recently in George Lucas' film "Red Tails." The African-American Tuskegee Airmen waited a long time for official recognition. So did the WASPs and WAFS. In 2010, surviving women flyers of WWII were given the Congressional Gold Medal to honor them for their service. It took 66 years!

At least the black airmen were members of the military. The women flyers of World War II were never officially recognized as members of the military until 1977, more than 30 years after their service. In 1977, they became U.S. veterans.

Before that, a woman could not be a member of the military. But she could fly a U.S. military aircraft.

Some facts about the WASP training program struck me:

- » The women were required to take their own flying lessons before admission to the program.
- » The women had to pay their own way to get to the training base, and pay their own way home.
- » The women who died received no honors and their families paid for their burials.

We have to use our imaginations to understand the determination and courage of these women who chose to fly and become part of aviation history during an era when most men believed women were too frail or lacked the intellect to succeed in occupations outside the home.

I believe these WWII-era women leapt at the chance to fly because they were living a sort of imposed widowhood -- they were being left behind by the world.

The image of a sailor's wife high upon a widow's walk comes to me. She's looking out to sea. She yearns for her husband's return and fears for his life.

But I believe what she craves most of all is to be out there with him at sea, seeing the stars, doing what he is doing, whaling, exploring, experiencing the world.

Here is the entire Rukeyser poem, excerpted from *Breaking Open* (Random House, 1973) by Muriel Rukeyser.

Waiting for Icarus

by Muriel Rukeyser

He said he would be back and we'd drink wine together
He said that everything would be better than before
He said we were on the edge of a new relation
He said he would never again cringe before his father
He said that he was going to invent full-time
He said he loved me that going into me
He said was going into the world and the sky
He said all the buckles were very firm
He said the wax was the best wax
He said Wait for me here on the beach
He said Just don't cry

I remember the gulls and the waves
I remember the islands going dark on the sea
I remember the girls laughing
I remember they said he only wanted to get away from me
I remember mother saying : Inventors are like poets, a trashy lot
I remember she told me those who try out inventions are worse
I remember she added : Women who love such are the worst of all
I have been waiting all day, or perhaps longer.
I would have liked to try those wings myself.
It would have been better than this.

Written by

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IF YOU GO

"A Celebration of Women Poets"

For Women's History Month, JoAnn Balingit will moderate a reading and open mic to celebrate inspiring women poets. Delmarva poets will share a favorite poem by a woman poet and read one of their own. Audience participation is encouraged. The free program is at 2 p.m. today at the Newark Free Library, 750 Library Ave., Newark. 731-7550

JoAnn Balingit, Delaware's poet laureate, is the author of "Forage" (Wings Press, 2011), winner of the Whitebird Chapbook Prize. She writes On Poetry to celebrate National Poetry Month. For more information on her readings and workshops, go to <http://joannbalingit.org>. To enroll in her summer poetry camps at Cab Calloway Summer School of the Arts, go to www.cabsummer.org/blog/category/interest/literary-arts.