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On Ruth Stone

Authors

Sandra M. Gilbert, Wendy Barker, Dorothy Gilbert, Diana Ó. Hehir, Josephine Miles, Tillie Olsen, Charlotte Painter, and Susan Gubar

On Ruth Stone

WHEN THE EDITORS of this special issue of *The Iowa Review* asked me if I knew of any “lost” women writers in contemporary America, I thought at once of the poet Ruth Stone. Ruth has published three superb collections (*In an Iridescent Time*, *Topography*, and *Cheap*, all Harcourt Brace), and her work has often been highly praised. Yet she is largely unknown outside a few towns in a few states where she has read and taught at one time or another.

I first met Ruth at Indiana University in 1973. We were both teaching creative writing classes and courses in modern poetry. But I had a regular tenure-track position while Ruth was on a visitorship, one of a series of temporary jobs that have kept her busing around the country from one campus to another during the last ten years. In her mid-sixties now, Ruth started teaching too late to establish herself in tenured comfort at any one school. By the time she was in her late fifties, that fall at Indiana, most department chairmen thought of her as a bad business deal, too near retirement to be worth an investment of tenure and all its attendant “perks.” Besides, Ruth was too vivid, too shabby, too frank, too mysterious, too much—I have to say it!—too much a poet and thus too *strange* for tenure. Although, as Wendy Barker testifies, students flocked enthusiastically to her classes, she alarmed her colleagues and unnerved administrators. Looking sybilline, she would tell deans her visions of their secret wishes—and she would be right. Plainly, therefore, she was “wrong” for academia. Because of this “wrongness,” indeed, she seems to me to have become, besides a woman I love and admire, a paradigm of the “lost” woman writer.

Ruth had always been a vivid and brilliant poet, but the lucidly articulated pain, the grievous clarity and the bitter music that now mark her work and that are, for me, associated with both her losses and her loss, were born in 1960, when her husband died and she was left with three young children, no job, little money. At first she tried to raise her family in the old farmhouse on a Vermont mountain that was her only remaining asset, but the winters were deadly and besides she needed a salary, so there followed the exhausting round of visitorships I mentioned earlier. As Dorothy Gilbert points out, however, Ruth was “always

writing” through all that confusion of travel and children, of bills and tickets. Yet she “disdains advantage,” as Charlotte Painter wonderfully observes, and like so many of our mothers, she hesitates to put herself forward. So although, as Dorothy Gilbert also notes, she has an attic full of poems, she sent few of them away, failed to press her case with editors and publishers, did not (as it so often seems one must) play the game of “Po Biz.” Every once in a while somebody one knows—somebody who seems always to have been safe, lucky, middle-class—slips through a gap in the net of business and friendship over which we all warily tread, and that is what happened to Ruth. By the time I met her in 1973, the small reputation she had begun to make in the early sixties had faded; when she wasn’t “visiting” somewhere she was literally out in the cold, wintering alone on her mountain. From the point of view of the literary-academic Establishment, she had become a “lost” writer.

As I tell this story, I realize that it must seem increasingly hyperbolic, like a Victorian melodrama, so I hasten to note that it is not, finally, a tale of catastrophe. For Ruth *was* “always writing,” even if she wasn’t publishing—writing on buses, writing in sub-zero winters, writing in strange offices and rented rooms, never silenced. As the women’s movement gains in power and popularity, and gains, often, through the attention given a few stars whose names we can all count on the fingers of one hand, we must remember Ruth and the others like her, women who make their art in obscurity and discomfort, as so many great artists always have. Indeed, we may well ask ourselves if it is not these “lost” women who constitute precisely the matrilineal literary tradition we feminist critics have been seeking for the last decade. For, preserving her poems in a New England attic while disdaining advantage, Ruth inevitably reminds us of the stubborn integrity of Emily Dickinson, who left *her* poems in neat unread packets in a New England bureau at least partly because she suspected that “Publication is the Auction of the mind of Man.” Writing alone in the cold, Ruth evokes the powerful solitude of Emily Brontë, who elected to stay both literally and figuratively far from London’s literary salons, and follow where her “own nature would be leading.” Forgotten or ignored by academic critics, Ruth recalls the triumphant obscurity of her great near-contemporary H.D., whose major poems, until quite recently, were neither analyzed nor anthologized. If we are *feminist* critics, we must find and cherish these “lost” artists even while we

honor those who live more publicly successful lives.

At the same time, however, we must also remember that Ruth and the other women writers she represents don't need us the way we need them. For in her isolation, Ruth preserves and enacts our vulnerability, our tenderness, our fear of heights. Still a sort of contemporary sybil, she is rarely sensible but almost always right. In obscurity, even in poverty, she is simultaneously grieving and joyful, anxious and exuberant, keeping continually at the heart of her work what Gerard Manley Hopkins, another "lost" writer, called "the dearest freshness." That is why, when we set the cozy geometry of our comforts—our lucky tenure, our little critical successes—against the terrible clarity of her vision, we must ask ourselves to reconsider our definitions of "lost" and "found." To herself, we must remember, Ruth has never been lost. If we have not yet found the meaning of her life and work, perhaps that is because it is we who are sometimes in danger of losing our way.

Sandra M. Gilbert

ONCE in a great while during graduate school you meet a guardian angel. They don't appear often. Ruth Stone is one: she tells the truth. She doesn't ask unimportant questions, she asks the big ones. And she reacts. Reacts to those truths so far down you're amazed she sees, knows.

She takes your poems as if accepting a valuable gift, holds the rough ditto copies as if they were made of Venetian glass, and reads your words as if they were holy. Hearing Ruth read her poems is amazing and wonderful. Hearing Ruth read your own work can change your life. Her daddy was a drummer; Ruth's sense of sound and rhythm is perfection. Listening to her read your clumsily revised third draft magically transports you to the country where your own poem might be finished, might someday grow to be as good as hers.

When you've felt your borders hedged by cynical, tired faculty, finding Ruth is finding yourself in new countries, countries of alpine meadows and high peaks, countries of black oceans seething with white whales, and finding ultimately that, because of Ruth, you can fly there anytime now, by yourself.

Wendy Barker

RUTH STONE lives in an eighteenth-century farmhouse near Brandon, Vermont. Just north of the house, across the road, is a long high spur of the Green Mountains; south of it, beyond the kitchen with its big black stove, the screened porch, and the backyard full of old fruit trees, is a distant view of the Adirondacks. In one second-story room of the house are chests of drawers, file cabinets, and high stacks of papers; they contain mostly poems that Ruth has written over the years but not typed up, poems she has typed up but not sent out, poems she has been wrestling with and mulling over for years and years, stuffed in among old bills and letters. Ruth is always writing. People stop by to see her—they are her three daughters, her former students, her friends—and she cooks dinner or entertains in front of the living room fireplace. People staying overnight may be put up in her own bedroom (the warmest), or in one of the tiny guestrooms. After they are in bed, she is working. Her pad is on her lap, her long auburn hair falls about her shoulders, and she looks intently out at something as if she saw her poems forming, hanging, in the air of the room. The poems are “a kind of physical rush coming through,” she says; they have always felt that way to her. She lives in the farmhouse the year around, unless she has a teaching position or a poetry reading in some other part of the country. It can be forty below in the Brandon area in late winter, but she has often defied the climate.

Ruth has stayed with me in my apartment in Berkeley. When she comes we read each other our new work. She is the kind of literary friend who sees another’s writing on its own terms, understands completely its intentions, and, if the work is at all successful, it takes on a new substance and vitality for its author after Ruth has seen it. Then it is real, it is born. On any visit, Ruth is still working. If we drive north to see friends who live right on the Pacific Coast, Ruth sits in the window looking out at the meadows and the windrows and the ocean, and again, one thinks she is seeing her poems materialize in the air. When we put her on the Greyhound bus on her return trip to Vermont (Ruth boycotts airplanes and can’t afford a car) she seems to be in a sort of trance. We wave, we shout, but her eyes are closed this time, and she seems sealed in, not only by tinted glass and the stuffy bus atmosphere, but by that intensity, that determination, that will take her across California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, up into Tennessee and Virginia, on her seven-day journey home.

Dorothy Gilbert

RUTH STONE'S tough, specific, evocative poems stick in the mind, come back to you late at night. They seem to have arisen in that special place all poets try to batter a way into—the one where secret meaningful associations occur. Combine that Orphic voice with balladic cynicism, and you have Ruth's poetry. Any example seems too short:

The quick brown poem jumped over the lazy woman.
There it goes flapping like an orange with peeling wings.
Like an old dried orange with hard peel wings.
The thick brown poem jumped over the desperate woman.
There you go my segments, my divided fruit, escaping.
The thick woman jumped over the lousy poem. It's Brown,
she sighed.
Watch it, the poem cried . . .

“Orange Poem, Praising Brown”

from *California Quarterly*, no. 16-17, Summer-Fall, 1980

Diana Ó Hehir

TO HEAR Ruth Stone read her poems in a group is a special experience in itself—and one especially true to poetry; the sound takes over the meaning and the hearers' sense of meaning. This is “reader response,” hearer response, as it needs to be, established in the most direct relation possible. Every syllable matters. Listen!

Josephine Miles

I LOVE Ruth's work and consider her one of the major poets of her time. She has been sadly underestimated, yet there she is: clear, pure, fierce. What is distinguished and unique about her work, too, is what she writes about as well as how she writes it.

Tillie Olsen

I FIRST came upon Ruth Stone's work at the Radcliffe Institute where as a Fellow she won admirers among a small, dedicated group of colleagues. She wrote of what it was to be a woman in love, a wife, a mother, a widow, with a lyricism so naked, so completely womanly that we felt confident women everywhere would recognize it. That was more than fifteen years ago; the world did not immediately respond as we expected to that work, a reminder of the sad distance that may lie between the creative act and those for whom it was done.

Ruth Stone may not have been the first among us to understand that grief is a never-ending process, but she has showed us an unflinching willingness to return to the dark moments of her life as a creative source of an ever-deepening poetic expression. She has persevered under duress, even in poverty (as poets used to do), without benefit of the university tenure system that keeps most of our important poets in middle-class comfort. On those occasions when younger poets do meet with her in a teaching situation, they respond hungrily to those qualities she shares with the young, qualities others seek to rediscover in themselves and which she has apparently never lost, idealism and naiveté, freshness of response. There's something else special she shares with many young people—she disdains advantage, as Willa Cather put it, a perversity that nourishes her work and enhances its integrity and will at last find its reward.

Charlotte Painter

I REMEMBER encountering Ruth Stone for the first time at Sandra Gilbert's house in 1973. At a Thanksgiving dinner, over Elliot Gilbert's fine rendition of the family's heirloom recipe for spinach stuffing, my husband and 6-month-old baby and I met this disarmingly radiant woman in the mausoleum-like mansion the Gilberts were subletting. It had not been a simple year, moving to a small town from a big city with a little child. And, as wonderfully efficient at suckling and burping as young Molly was then, she had been difficult in other respects, as the dark smudges under her gray-green eyes testified. Or was it I who read pain in those smudges, motivated by my own discomfort at being her food source? The La Leche people, supportive though they were, had neglected to tell

me about some of the by-products of nursing: nightmares about the baby crawling over my dead body in search of the source of sustenance, an unremitting low-grade fever, dehydration, bone-wearying exhaustion. Ruth looked at us in her shy, sly way, and said simply, about Molly, to Molly really, or maybe also to me, to my husband, "How amazing you are." We all cracked up.

What I value about Ruth Stone's poetry are the voices of a woman who has experienced herself as daughter, wife, mother, widow, understanding all the while how these roles define her without containing her. She has three daughters herself, and when I turned to her poetry, I learned from it about my own confusions. On the one hand, I overheard her telling her girls to try to speak when they are in need: "Don't confuse hunger with greed," she encouraged them in "Advice." On the other hand, she realized that their hazards were not hers, and hers would not be theirs. A poem like "I Have Three Daughters" implies that she understood even their impatience with her:

I have three daughters
Like greengage plums.
They sat all day
Sucking their thumbs.
And more's the pity,
They cried all day,
Why doesn't our mother's brown hair
Turn gray?

Here was a woman poet who wrote about mothers and daughters with the confidence of one who survived all the complexities and complicities of a relationship where the boundaries between selves become blurred, where each self threatens to digest the other or where it feels invaded by the other in the ache of knowing how the "I" is really part of "you."

Reading Ruth Stone's poetry reminds us that "Being a Woman" means "You can talk to yourself all you want to," for "You were the only one who ever heard / What you were saying." In the freedom of talking to herself, Ruth manages to explore the relationship between men, women, and children with lucidity and levity. There have got to be perfect readers

for certain poems and sometimes I like to think of D. H. Lawrence reading Ruth's "Cocks and Mares": "Every man wants to be a stud," she begins, explaining that "He wants to bring forth God." The problem is that "He can't tell his cock / From a rooster's." Prancing up and down like a horse, he wonders what he is doing in the hen house, and the contrast between his stud-ied crowing and the wild mares in the night fields, "whistling through their nostrils," neither "fowl" nor "foul," is typical of Ruth's subversive wit.

Ruth's last volume of poetry, *Cheap*, contains a number of poems that point to the ways in which necessity mother her invention. But even in the face of poverty, the exuberance of her spirit refuses to spend itself. Some of her humor is an exasperated snort at inevitable failure: whispering to an unwanted older body that may be her own, the poet admonishes it to "Behave . . . / You have a wart on your cheek / And every one knows you drink" ("Periphery"). Sometimes it is the irony that grows out of her sense of commonality in the cutting room, the kitchen, with the silent, smooth head of an eggplant: "Which of us will it be?" ("Vegetables II"). No wonder she imagines her poetry as a necrophilic "habit," each poem a "joke," exhumed like a decaying corpse. At the same time, in some of her poems hilarity results from the pure and simple release of rage: "'It's a good life, it's a good wife,'" says the self-satisfied husband in "The Song of Absinthe Granny"; his good wife's quiet response is unequivocal: "So I got the rifle out / To shoot him through the head." Happily he goes on smiling, watching as she and her children endure amidst the stubborn reversals and the rhythmic poundings that are her and Ruth Stone's passion. Like wary Absinthe Granny, Ruth Stone teaches us how to be chary with what's left. We can be sustained by this fine poet whose fantasies feed the heart, for even at their most ferocious, her visions of survival lend more substance to our loves than to our enmities.

Susan Gubar