

# Letter to the Front

Muriel Rukeyser

1

Women and poets see the truth arrive.  
Then it is acted out,  
The lives are lost, and all the newsboys shout.

Horror of cities follows, and the maze  
Of compromise and grief.  
The feeble cry Defeat be my belief.

All the strong agonized men  
Wear the hard clothes of war,  
Try to remember what they are fighting for.

But in dark weeping helpless moments of peace  
Women and poets believe and resist forever:  
The blind inventor finds the underground river.

2

Even during war, moments of delicate peace  
Arrive; ceaseless the water ripples, love  
Speaks through the river in its human voices.  
Through every power to affirm and heal  
The unknown world suggests the air and golden  
Familiar flowers, and the brief glitter of waves,  
And dreams, and leads me always to the real.  
Even among these calendars of fire.

Sings: There is much to fear, but not our power.  
The stars turn over us; let us not fear the many.  
All mortal intricacies tremble upon this flower.  
Let us not fear the hidden. Or each other.  
We are alive in an hour whose burning face  
Looks into our death, death of our flesh  
Gives us this moment when blue settles on rose  
And evening suddenly seems limitless silver.  
The cold wind streaming over the cold hill-grasses  
Remembers and remembers. Mountains lift into night.  
And I am remembering the face of peace.

I have seen a ship lying upon the water  
Rise like a great bird, like a lifted promise.

3

They called us to a change of heart  
But it was not enough.  
Not half enough, not half enough  
For all their bargaining and their art.

After the change of heart there comes  
The savage waste of battlefield;  
The flame of that wild battlefield  
Rushes in fire through our rooms.

The heart that comes to know its war  
When gambling powers try for place  
Must live to wrestle for a place  
For every burning human care:

To know a war begins the day  
Ideas of peace are bargained for.  
Surrender and death are bargained for—  
Peace and belief must fight their way.

Begin the day we change and so  
Open the spirit to the world.  
Wars of the spirit in the world  
Make us continually know  
We fight continually to grow.

4 Sestina

Coming to Spain on the first day of the fighting,  
Flame in the mountains, and the exotic soldiers,  
I gave up ideas of strangeness, but now, keeping  
All I profoundly hoped for, I saw fearing  
Travellers and the unprepared and the fast-changing  
Foothills. The train stopped in a silver country.

Coast-water lit the valleys of this country—  
All mysteries stood human in the fighting.  
We came from far. We wondered, were they changing,  
Our mild companions, turning into soldiers?  
But the cowards were persistent in their fearing,  
Each of us narrowed to one wish he was keeping.

There was no change of heart here; we were keeping  
Our deepest wish, meeting with hope this country.  
The enemies among us went on fearing  
The frontier was too far behind. This fighting  
Was clear to us all at last. The belted soldiers  
Vanished into white hills that dark was changing.

The train stood naked in flowery midnight changing  
All complex marvelous hope to war, and keeping  
Among us only the main wish, and the soldiers.  
We loved each other, believed in the war; the country  
Meant to us the arrival of the fighting  
At home; we began to know what we were fearing.

As continents broke apart, we saw our fearing  
Reflect our nations' fears; we acted as changing  
Cities at home would act, with one wish, fighting  
This threat or falling under it; we were keeping  
The knowledge of fiery promises; this country  
Struck at our lives, struck deeper than its soldiers.

Those who among us were sure became our soldiers.  
The dreams of peace resolved our subtle fearing.  
This was the first day of war in a strange country.  
Free Catalonia offered that day our changing  
Age's hope and resistance, held in its keeping  
The war this age must win in love and fighting.  
This first day of fighting showed us all men as soldiers.  
It offered one wish for keeping. Hope. Deep fearing.  
Our changing spirits awake in the soul's country.

5

Much later, I lie in a white seaport night  
Of gongs and mystery and bewildered mist  
Giving me a strange harbor in these white  
Scenes, white rivers, my white dreams of peace.  
And a ship lifted up on a sign of freedom.  
Peace sharp and immediate as our winter stars.  
A blue sailor with a cargo of guitars.

I saw a white ship rise as a peace was made  
In Spain, the first peace the world would not keep.  
The ship pulled away from the harbor where Columbus  
Standing on his black pillar sees new worlds;

And suddenly all the people at all the rails  
Lifted their hands in a gesture of belief  
That climbs among my dreams like a bird flying.  
Until the world is lifted by one bird flying  
An instant drawing to itself the world.

6

Home thoughts from home; we read you every day,  
Soldiers of distances. You wish most to be here.  
In the strange lands of war, I woke and thought of home.  
Remembering how war came, I wake and think of you,  
In the city of water and stone where I was born,  
My home of complex light. What we were fighting for,  
In the beginning, in Spain, was not to be defined.  
More human than abstract, more direction than end.  
Terror arrived intact, lit with the tragic fire  
Of hope before its time, tore us from lover and friend.  
We came to the violent act with all that we had learned.

But now we are that home you dream across war.  
You fight; and we must go in poetry and hope  
Moving into the future that no one can escape.  
Peace will in time arrive, but war defined our years.  
We are like that young saint at the spring who bent  
Her face over dry earth the vision told her flowed,  
Miring herself. She knew it was water. But for  
Herself, it was filth. Later, for all to come  
Following her faith, miraculous crystal ran.

O saint, O poet, O wounded of these wars  
To find life flowing from the heart of man.  
We hold belief. You fight and are maimed and mad.  
We believe, though all you want be bed with one  
Whose mouth is bread and wine, whose flesh is home.

7

To be a Jew in the twentieth century  
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,  
Wishing to be invisible, you choose  
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.  
Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:  
Your evening deep in the labyrinthine blood  
Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God  
Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

The gift is torment. Not alone the still  
Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.  
That may come also. But the accepting wish,  
The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee  
For every human freedom, suffering to be free,  
Daring to live for the impossible.

8

Evening bringing me out of the government building,  
Spills her blue air, her great Atlantic clouds  
Over my hair, reminds me of my land.  
My back to high stone and that man's golden bands  
Who said of our time which has only its freedom,  
"I will not ever say 'for a free world,'  
'A better world' or whatever it is;  
A man fights to win a war,  
To hang on to what is his—"  
Consider this man in the clothes of a commander.  
Remember that his fields is bottled fizz.

O the blue air and the nightsound of heartbeats—  
Planes or poems or dreams direct as prayer.  
The belief in the world, and we can stand with them,  
whoever clearly fights the order of despair.  
In spite of the fascist, Malicioso King,  
Contractor, business man and publisher,  
Who will hire a man to hire another man  
To hire someone to murder the man of strong belief.  
Look at him at the Radio City bar;  
Remember that he functions best as thief.

O the clouds and the towers are not enough to hide  
The little sneer at freedom, the whisper that art died.  
Here is the man who changed his name, the man who dyed his hair;  
One praises only his own birth; one only his own whore.  
Unable to create or fight or commit suicide,  
Will make a job of weakness, be the impotent editor,  
The sad and pathetic bull always wishing he were  
The bullfighter. But we remember the changes that he made,  
Screaming "Betrayed!" He forever betrays. He alone is betrayed.

They are all here in this divided time:  
Dies the inquisitor against the truth,  
Wheeler, Nye, Pegler, Hearst, each with his crews,  
McCormick, the Representatives whose crime

is against history, the state, and love.  
I hold their dead skulls in my hand; this death  
Worked against labor, women, Jews,  
Reds, Negroes. But our freedom lives  
To fight the war the world must win.  
The fevers of confusion's touch  
Leap to confusion in the land.  
We shall grow and fight again.  
The sickness of our divided state  
Calls to the anger and the great  
Imaginative gifts of man.  
The enemy does his rigid work.  
We live fighting in that dark.  
Let all the living fight in proof  
They start the world this war must win.

9

Among all the waste there are the intense stories  
And tellers of stories. One saw a peasant die.  
One guarded a soldier through disease. And one  
Saw all the women look at each other in hope.  
And came back, saying, "All things must be known."

They come home to the rat-faced investigator  
Who sneers and asks, "Who is your favorite poet?"  
Voices of scissors and grinders asking their questions:  
"How did you ever happen to be against fascism?"  
And they remember the general's white hair,  
The food-administrator, alone and full of tears.

They come home to the powder-plant at twilight,  
The girls emerging like discolored shadows.  
But this is a land where there is time, and time;  
This is the country where there is time for thinking.  
"Is he a 'fellow-traveler'?— No. —Are you sure? —No."  
The fear. Voices of clawhammers and spikes clinking.

If they bomb the cities, they must offer the choice.  
Taking away the sons, they must create a reason.  
The cities and women cry in a frightful voice,  
"I care not who makes the laws, let me make the sons."  
But look at their eyes, like drinking animals'  
Full of assurance and flowing with reward.  
The seeds of answering are in their voice.  
The spirit lives, against the time's disease.

You little children, come down out of your mothers  
And tell us about peace.

I hear the singing of the lives of women,  
The clear mystery, the offering and pride.  
But here also the orange lights of a bar, and an  
Old biddy singing inside:

Rain and tomorrow more  
They say there will be rain  
They lean together and tell  
The sorrow of the loin.

Telling each other, saying  
“But can you understand?”  
They recount separate sorrows.  
Throat. Forehead. Hand.

On the bars and walls of buildings  
They passed when they were young  
They vomit out their pain,  
The sorrow of the lung.

Who would suspect it of women?  
They have not any rest.  
Sad dreams of the belly, of the lip,  
Of the deep warm breast.

All sorrows have their place in flesh,  
All flesh will with its sorrow die—  
All but the patch of sunlight over,  
Over the sorrowful sunlit eye.

10

Surely it is time for the true grace of women  
Emerging, in their lives' colors, from the rooms, from the harvests,  
From the delicate prisons, to speak their promises.  
The spirit's dreaming delight and the fluid senses'  
Involvement in the world. Surely the day's beginning  
In midnight, in time of war, flickers upon the wind.

O on the wasted midnight of our pain  
Remember the wasted ones, lost as surely as soldiers  
Surrendered to the barbarians, gone down under centuries  
Of the starved spirit, in desperate mortal midnight

With the pure throats and cries of blessing, the clearest  
Fountains of mercy and continual love.

These years know the separation. O the future shining  
In far countries or suddenly at home in a look, in a season,  
In music freeing a new myth among the male  
Steep landscapes, the familiar cliffs, trees, towers  
That stand and assert the earth, saying: "Come here, come to me.  
Here are your children." Not as traditional man  
But love's great insight—"your children and your song."

Coming close to the source of belief, these have created  
Resistance, the flowering fire of memory,  
Given the bread and the dance and the breathing midnight.  
Nothing has been begun. No peace, no word of marvellous  
Possible hillsides, the warm lips of the living  
Who fought for the spirit's grace among despair,  
Beginning with signs of belief, offered in time of war,  
As I now send you, for a beginning, praise.