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An Interview with Ruth Whitman

Jane Gentry Vance

Ruth Whitman became my teacher and friend in the summer of 1978. A grant from the University of Kentucky enabled me to spend several weeks in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I worked with her and learned about her extraordinary methods of teaching poetry-writing. She demonstrated her pedagogy by assisting me with my own poems. Those helpful sessions were the beginning of my deep appreciation of her as poet and as master teacher.

Ruth Whitman has taught at a number of institutions, including Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Centre College, and participated in the first and third University of Kentucky Women Writers Conferences. As a teacher she stresses that the faculty for poetry resides in us all: "... that common source of poetic imagery, that tender muscle of the brain which in children lies close to the surface and in the adult recedes with the years, but which seldom becomes wholly inaccessible." She elicits from students, whether in grade school, high school, college, or continuing education classes, remarkably self-revealing and perceptive poetic responses. At present she is working on a textbook about the writing of poetry.

She has published poetry regularly for almost thirty years, and with each successive volume has developed as a poet and increased her critical following. Her first book, Blood and Milk, published in 1963, contains poems of emotion so intense that the feeling sometimes overloads the strong images. The Marriage Wig of 1968 reveals a sureness of form which better carries the weight of emotion and idea. With The Passion of Lizzie Borden, published in 1973, an increased technical mastery enables her to carefully control a more direct perception of human, especially female, pain. In writing the title poem of this volume, she discovered the potential of the long narrative persona poem for handling her vision of the relentlessness of suffering.

In 1977, with Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey, she hones the persona poem to a new sharpness. The volume comprises a single long poem, a re-creation of the lost journal which Tamsen
Donner, wife of George Donner, leader of the Donner Party, kept as their wagon train crossed the continent in 1846, headed for California. Through alternating passages of prose-poetry and lyric, she makes palpable the sense of Tamsen’s unthinkable losses (possessions, friends, family, and, finally, life) and her ultimate transcendence of these losses. This volume, with its coherence, fully realized character, and immediate imagery that re-creates the sensations of the cross-continental passage, still sells briskly for Alice James Brooks, its publisher. Over five thousand copies are in circulation, a remarkable number for serious poetry in this day. *Permanent Address*, new this year, is a collection of short, more conventional lyrics, written from 1973 to 1980.

In addition to her poems, Ms. Whitman has written numerous critical essays; she has also translated from Yiddish the poetry of Jacob Glatstein and the fiction of I. B. Singer. Among her many awards and honors, are a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Grant, the Guiness International Poetry Award, and the N. Chanin Foundation Award for Translation. In 1968–70 she was a Radcliffe Institute Fellow in Poetry and Translation, and in 1974 was Visiting Poet in Israel, as a guest of the Israeli government. For seven years she has held residential fellowships at the MacDowell Colony.

Ruth Whitman was interviewed for the *Kentucky Review* 12 April 1981 during her visit to Lexington for the third Women Writers Conference.

JGV: During a period like our own, when poetry is not a popular art, probably more widely written than it is read, what in your opinion is the use of poetry?

RW: Well, poetry is not ever utilitarian for anyone, except possibly other poets. But I do feel that the poet has a kind of sacred obligation to record the inner pulse of the times. And I believe with Shelley that poets are the legislators of the world, that people read poetry to find out how to think about life, how to think about their human experience. I read other people's poetry to see how they think about human experience.

JGV: That's a pretty utilitarian function in a sense.

RW: Maybe it is, perhaps as utilitarian as religion, since there is really very little religion left. Not many people come to
religion to find out how to live. I think poetry is actually a much more existential and true way of finding out how to live.

JGV: A way to get your cultural, moral, aesthetic bearings?

RW: Yes.

JGV: In an *American Poetry Review* piece, "Poetry in the Classroom," you write: "If the poet’s view of the world and his way of dealing with the world is to be handed on in education, there has to be a real living poet at the beginning of each chain of inheritance." Your idea in the article is that the poet’s way of looking at the world does have a strong value.

RW: A strong moral value. I’m not afraid anymore to use that word.

JGV: What do you mean by that word exactly?

RW: Insofar as teaching is concerned (and I made that statement about teaching rather than about writing, but I think I would be willing to apply it to writing also), I think every teacher, no matter what she’s teaching, is really teaching morality, performing a service for students to show them how to value human experience.

JGV: I agree with you strongly, but I think most university teaching is not predicated on that at all.

RW: But the best teaching is and the best teachers do this. And it’s not confined to poetry; you can teach anything and make it a vehicle for teaching moral values. There isn’t anything more important. So though I always realize that I’m functioning in a very, very small proportion of the world and that poetry, the audience of poetry, is a tiny drop in the ocean, nevertheless it’s the only way I can do that larger task.

JGV: Thinking about your work in general, and about your long poem *Tamsen Donner* in particular, in what ways do you see *Tamsen Donner* as illuminating values?

RW: Oh I would say in a much more conscious way than a lot of my other work. As I’ve told in other places, and as you know, the poem was given to me, Tamsen Donner’s experience came to me. But I knew before I started writing the poem that the subject that interested me most in the world was the subject of survival in the face of either natural or man-made disaster. And being a child of many wars, as I
am, I believe that is a natural subject for our time. How do you survive? What would you do in the face of inexorable disaster? The fact that the poem took that form was part of my subconscious decision, but had nothing to do with my conscious decision that I was to write about a woman pioneer in 1846. But survival certainly was my conscious theme.

JGV: So if morality as you mean it has to do with right-valuing, then part, at least, of what you’re doing in Tamsen Donner is revealing the kind of valuing that Tamsen had to come to in order to survive?

RW: Right, to use a very non-poetic word, the mechanics of survival, that is, how one must respond to the lives around one, how one must take one’s responsibility for other people, and ultimately for one’s self, and how one transcends the anti-human elements that can come at one in life.

JGV: Right. And so we see her going through that process of stripping away what is superficially valuable and getting down to what is at the heart of the matter.

RW: Yes, it’s important to feel that one will survive, that one can encounter these things and survive, because most of us are not that courageous and not that strong. Although no one knows really how one would react in a situation of ultimate danger.

JGV: Right. Have you read John Gardner’s On Moral Fiction?

RW: No, I did not. Should I?

JGV: Well, yes. I think you would be interested in it. One of his theses is that a lot of contemporary art is not valuable because it has abandoned this function of talking values, and that contemporary fiction particularly has tried to make a value of valuelessness. And so when art becomes just a depiction of chaos, we’re not interested in it ultimately because it doesn’t tell us anything about our natures.

RW: Since the Second World War, there’s been a strong tendency towards nihilism. First, beginning in France, I’m sure partly because of the despicable behavior of the French government in the Second World War. The heroism of the French Resistance was not strong enough to keep nihilism from developing as almost a national view of life. That attitude has certainly spread all over the world, and I think that many, many young people in America are nihilists.
JGV: Many people who have never heard of existentialism or nihilism have adopted that perspective essentially.

RW: I fought very hard to prevent my own children and my students from being nihilists; sometimes they have a strong tendency to go in that direction. I think that attitude is death for the human race.

JGV: Yes. If there's no point in life there is essentially no point to culture. So it's all empty. Let's shift from thinking about how you see the poem functioning for an audience to thinking about how the poem functions for you as the poet. How does a poem, a typical poem (if there is such a thing), happen in your psyche and what's in it for you?

RW: A lot of it is involuntary. I knew a very wise man, a poet in fact, Jacob Glatstein the great Yiddish poet with whom I spent five years working and translating. He said to me, when he was about seventy-four, "I can feel it when the poem is warming up inside me."

JGV: Warming up inside?

RW: Warming up. And he said "I feel that way almost all the time." He was always writing and in a state of elation. All I can do is give a subjective report to that question: it is a state of elation that comes by itself and you can feel it coming from far off; then it comes closer and you know something's going to happen. Since I was a child I've had a very strong image-making, metaphor-making way of looking at life. If I see something that strikes me strongly like a tree in flower or the figurehead of a ship, I know it's got something for me, something is going to grow out of that organically which will be a poem. And I don't even necessarily know the exact moment when it's going to begin, I just find myself with a pencil in my hand. This happens to me over and over again—I feel that rumbling from far off, that warming up. Everything goes black and there I am with a pencil in my hand and a piece of blank paper, writing notes, or the poem, or something that's going to lead to a poem. Then the conscious work begins.

JGV: That conscious work is what you do in a disciplined way when you get up every morning? You have a poem to revise, you do that and then you move on to the next poem?

RW: Yes, yes. You want to type it after it's hand-written, and then you go over that typed version, and then you type it
again. And then you go over it by hand until it's right. And very seldom is it—we're talking about lyric poetry right now. It's a different process when you write a long poem like Tamsen Donner or like my new book Hanna about a woman in the Jewish Resistance in the Second World War. There, you get warmed up and it starts happening and you keep it happening. And that is some of the most frightening and exhilarating experience I've ever had. It is exhilaration. My husband, who is a painter, says that when you're putting the paint on a canvas, and something is happening and you're really creating, it makes you feel higher than any drug you could possibly take. It really is high. You start hyperventilating, and I feel myself hyperventilating talking about it right now! It is very strong. I know some writers drink or smoke pot in order to reach that state, but it happens to me without a thing, except a pen or a typewriter!

JGV: And a tree in bloom.

RW: And a tree in bloom. With a work that is going to be long and consecutive, it takes this kind of heightened creativity every day for weeks in succession. I frighten myself, I actually start getting scared because there's no way to resist it. But it's wonderful and exhilarating.

JGV: Because you feel possessed? Possessed by the mind of the poem?

RW: Yes. Right. And I think that a lot of people who write, true writers, sometimes resist that possession. My young son is a real writer, I think. I don't know whether that's going to be his profession or not, it's much too early to tell, but he's written a novel. That's what he did this year on his year off. And he said to me, "I don't know if I want to be a writer. It is so absorbing. When I'm working on that every day, at my typewriter every day, I become so isolated from the rest of the world, and so absolutely possessed by what I'm doing, that it's terrifying." That's the other side of the experience.

JGV: It's like another life in the mind.

RW: Yes, it is.

JGV: Do you have any ideas about where the capacity for living that other life comes from? You talk about the way that the tree in flower or the figure on the prow of a ship, images from the physical world, make you know there are reverberations behind them. What peculiar quality of your
mind makes this the central experience of your life? What is the difference between your mind and the mind of somebody for whom this is not true? Where does it come from? Is it genes, or the way you were reared . . .

RW: I don't know. That's a mystery to me.

JGV: What makes a poet's mind?

RW: That's a mystery to me, exactly how it happened. You're about the fourth person this month who's asked me what made me a poet. And I truly don't know the answer to that because I have no writers in my family. But when I start thinking about it, I realize that my grandfather, whom I adored—I was his first and favorite grandchild—used to sing to me. He used to take me on his lap and sing to me in his deep, beautiful, basso, Russian and Yiddish lullabies, and the sound of his singing voice certainly has something to do with my poetry. Also, all of my family talked a mile a minute, all the time, had excellent vocabularies.

JGV: Telling stories?

RW: Yes, telling stories and emoting, mostly emoting, I would say. They all read a lot, and my mother and father had extensive vocabularies, and have, they're alive yet. There was always the sound of voices and language and words. So that's the environmental influence, obviously. But if you're asking me where does it come from in the human make-up, I feel that this ability to make metaphor and to concentrate on a segment of human experience and make it transcendent is something that everyone has to a degree. It's not that some people have it and others don't at all. I think that everyone does. It's like hearing or sight, but the poet or writer has it to a much more developed degree, to a greater degree. It's like someone who has perfect pitch and becomes a musician. Other people can hear and can sing, but they're not musicians. So I think it's just a matter of much greater development of that faculty of the human mind and psyche. And why it developed in me I have no idea. I just know that as a very young child I knew I had it.

JGV: That's interesting. I've asked the question of novelists and it seems to me it works a little differently for them. In them, it takes the form of another life, in a panorama or on a stage, that they can see, and even to some extent consciously
participate in, but that they can look upon and describe both from outside and from inside.

RW: Yes. But some of this must be true of them also.

JGV: I'm sure it is. But it just seems to me a difference is, characteristically, not universally at all, that there are kinds of universes for novelists. Sort of like your son, I had a student not long ago who brought me a stack of papers a foot tall. She had written an epic science fiction novel. It wasn't great, but it wasn't horrible either. And it was a whole other universe, with its own laws, and characters which were developed through three different book-length pieces. And this world she could enter and come out of at will—so far.

RW: Fantastic.

JGV: For the Radcliffe Quarterly, in writing about the genesis of Tamsen Donner, you describe what you see as the limitations of the short lyric poem for doing the things that you like to get done in poetry. Now this is the form in which most contemporary poetry is written. What do you see as the main limitations of that short form and what are the advantages of a longer narrative poem written in the voice of a specific persona?

RW: I don't want it to be thought for a minute that I've given up the short lyric poem. I haven't. It's just that I wanted something more than that. The limitation was partly that the lyric poem lends itself almost solely to subjective, personal observations and emotions. I think, partly as a result of too much confessional poetry being written, I wanted to get beyond the personal subject matter. I wanted to know about other lives as well as my own. I think every writer starts exploring her own life to begin with, and you must, that's where you learn everything, that's the starting point. I said in a poem somewhere that the "I" is a starting point, never the arrival. I'm not sure what the arrival is, but I think it's beyond the "I". I wanted to stop being so concentrated and so subjective, I wanted to move beyond the short personal lyric. Now the advantage of a longer poem, or a longer form, is that it's so much more expansive, you can get into another mind, and into another time, and it's that linear aspect that you've just been talking about that I craved.

JGV: And in that more expansive form you can develop a
context in which more complexity of this process of valuing that we were talking about earlier can be developed. Whereas in the short form, about all you can do is give a flash of insight, which, no matter how brilliant, is still a flash.

RW: Exactly.

JGV: Do you think that this tendency toward confession in contemporary English and American poetry since the fifties is important in the complaint that contemporary poetry is obscure and inaccessible to the non-English major, or the nonpoet?

RW: All human experience is universal. Nobody ever really experiences something for the first time that has never been experienced before.

JGV: Right.

RW: On the other hand, how it is expressed depends on the maker. I mean, the maker can have the experience begin and end with herself, and then it really doesn't go very far or mean very much.

JGV: If the poem is like a letter to your best friend . . .

RW: Or a letter to yourself, or just simple exposure. I have nothing against subjective poetry. It's time-honored, since the Greek lyric poets in the sixth century B.C. invented it, as far as we know, for Western literature. Sappho told how she loved, and who she loved. But it was done in such a way that it was transcendent. It was personal, but it also reflected the universal, so the reader could say, "Ah yes, I've felt that, I know how that is." One of the faults of modern confessional poetry is that it has been too untransformed.

JGV: Just raw, emotional material.

RW: And the poet feels that just to put down a document of her own experience is adequate, but it isn't really adequate. Also, there has been a lot of carelessness about form. I mean, about whether there is any shape to the poem, or why it is the way it is.

JGV: But where does that shape come from in a free verse lyric poem? What is the principle of form, in your opinion, in a poem like this?

RW: The principle of form is really to give it strength. Otherwise, it's just a very loose, spineless statement, without form.
JGV: All right, but what I'm trying to ask is, what kind? By form you don't mean it has to rhyme or have certain kinds of stanzas. Where does the shaping of it come from? In the relative weight of the parts of the content?

RW: Yes. I truly believe in organic form. And by that I mean, together with the poets of the twentieth century, beginning with Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and now Denise Levertov, that the content dictates the form, that every poem by its nature, by the nature of its content, has its inevitable and only form. You must discover what the form is, and there are various principles by which you can discover it. That would take me too long to go into now. That's very technical.

JGV: Could you name me just a few of these principles?

RW: Well, where the line breaks, what kind of shape, the length of the line, the breath, the way it's said—this has everything to do with poetry as an oral art, which I also believe in very strongly. Now there are other poets who don't believe in organic form. To get back to your question about obscurity, take a poet like John Ashberry. I saw that you brought the *New Yorker*, which I've read carefully, because I have great arguments with both John Ashberry and Helen Vendler, because they both worship a very heavily philosophical kind of poetry, where the philosophy is so personal, and so private, and based on such random images, that it really communicates very little to the reader.

JGV: The reason I brought this was to ask you about that. Ashberry says that the way he writes his long poems is the way he would write in a diary. He gets up every morning and writes for two or three hours on this long poem.

RW: That's a very private, self-indulgent way to create literature. I believe it has very little to do with caring about the world outside his own body and his own circle of friends. And I don't know why Helen Vendler prefers this kind of poetry and worships it; I respect her as a critic, I think she's a brilliant woman. But she has very, very strange tastes. And I realize that instead of being more and more indifferent to that kind of opinion, I'm more and more angry about it as time goes on.

JGV: That's the reason I brought this other *New Yorker* piece, too. Did you see it, "The Second Life of Art" by the Italian...
poet Eugenio Montale? He first published it in 1949. And what he says essentially is that art has not achieved a transcendent status, which in his opinion is what makes it art, until it is capable of living a second life in its audience. By that he means that the mind is able to come back to it, and through the relations created, the relations among the parts of experience created by the form, is able to reenter the insights which illuminate the perceiving mind's experience of the art. He says that much contemporary art is so random that it doesn't do this.

RW: Yes, it's a problem, and one has to take one's stand on one side or the other. Most modern music is so difficult because it reflects the randomness, the chaos of our lives, the fragmentation of our lives. And that fragmentation I believe is part of our decadence. One either wants to reflect it or work against it.

JGV: It isn't enough, it seems to me, to imitate it. We see it about us, and there is a certain value in demonstrating that it is about us, but that can't be the whole object of art.

RW: No, no.

JGV: After the intensive involvement with a persona when you write a long narrative poem in the first person, like Tamsen Donner, or your Lizzie Borden poem, and particularly when the poem is in the form of a journal, as in Tamsen Donner, does your involvement with the character end when the poem is completed, or does her mind stay with yours? Do you ever still hear her voice, or is she an easy ghost to exorcise?

RW: No, I don't hear her voice anymore and that may be because I'm involved with somebody else's voice.

JGV: Hanna's?

RW: Hanna's. It's almost like a love affair.

JGV: Interesting analogy.

RW: She and I had a very emotional relationship in which I knew she wanted something from me, she needed something from me, needed my testimony, and I needed something from her. I needed her life and her presence, in order to do it. There were times when I was writing the book that I lost her, and I felt absolutely devastated. I said, "Tamsen, are you never going to come back to me, am I never going to
hear you again?” And then she would come back. I mean, this is just a way of talking about it.

JGV: I understand.

RW: But I did truly feel her presence for long periods of time, especially on the trip itself, when I followed the pioneer trail from Illinois to California. In the beginning of the trip I didn’t feel her, though I was doing this for her sake. Along about Kansas I said, “Tamsen, where are you? Aren’t you going to come along? Why am I doing this?” And then she was there, she was really there. I wept at Donner Pass, I felt it so strongly.

JGV: Did you do much actual writing while you were on the trip?

RW: Yes, all the time. I deliberately wrote every day or every time I knew it was a part of the trail that would be in the book.

JGV: How much material had you written by the end of the process? That you worked with and culled into shape for Tamsen Donner.

RW: The book is one-third of all that I wrote. Oh, it’s hard to throw some of that away. But I was saying to someone recently that I don’t regret anything that I had to throw away. Oh, Lucy Massie Phenix and I were talking about editing, and how you do a lot of research and get a tremendous amount of documentary material, and then the form of the work itself demands that you throw away two-thirds of it. Now I feel that our active relationship is, of course, over. I mean we accomplished what we wanted to do.

JGV: And I guess the analogy of a love relationship holds there.

RW: Of course, I think of her fondly and am crazy to read anything to do with the period. I’m happy that the book has turned out to be as well received as it has—happy for us both. I do feel that there is another living entity there that’s sharing the satisfaction with me.

JGV: The women with whom I was discussing it last week in a study group in Versailles felt so strongly that what you had done was re-create the reality of the experience, which is all the more remarkable because her experience has been sentimentalized and sensationalized in movies and other books, and that you managed to burrow around and under all of that.
Yes. I do think I understood her.

Margaret Atwood, the Canadian poet, has written a small volume of poems, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, that is in some ways similar to *Tamsen Donner*. Did her book help shape your own ideas?

I discovered Margaret Atwood’s volume when I was about halfway through with the writing of *Tamsen Donner*. I was tremendously moved that we had both, quite separately, been thinking along similar lines, and I wrote to her immediately telling her about my book. She was interested and answered with a kind note. As you know, her book is much shorter, confined to poetry only, and spans, in an impressionistic way, a much longer part of Susanna’s life. Also, in Atwood’s work, the poet is present; in my book, in contrast, I submerged myself completely behind the person of Tamsen Donner. The really interesting fact is that the subject came to Atwood in a sort of vision, similar to my sudden and unexpected taking on of Tamsen’s voice when I was coming out of ether. Adrienne Rich, as I may have mentioned to you, speculated that the boundaries of time and space were shrinking before the force of these women’s voices.

I want to ask you about being a woman poet at this particular time. Do you think it means something different at this juncture to be a woman poet as opposed to being a man poet? Do you consider yourself a feminist? How do questions of sexual roles, equality, etc. fit into what you’re doing in poetry?

Well, my experience has changed in the course of time. Don’t forget that I began as a woman poet at a very early age. I went to Harvard during the nineteen-forties, which was a time of tremendously rigid condescension and patriarchal contempt for women trying to be anything more than part of the domestic circle. I was expected, though, to be a scholar. The prejudice wasn’t so great there. But I was really an early feminist. I started writing about women’s experience, and the experiences of being a young married woman in the late forties and early fifties. You know Marilyn French’s novel *The Women’s Room*, is very much a reflection of my experience, both as a subservient wife and as a woman student looked down upon by the Harvard community. When I showed my poems to a Harvard
professor, love poems, rather intimate poems, he said, "But those poems are for milady's boudoir." Meaning, keep them in the bedroom where they belong; don't bother me anymore. I felt very blighted by that dismissal and I never showed any more of my poems for about ten years. Let's see, I came out again in 1956, when I started to publish in the Atlantic Monthly. I decided that he was wrong.

JGV: Yet the subjects of the new poems were the same as those you had shown him?
RW: Yes. In fact the first poem I published that received any recognition was a poem about being pregnant. It is called "The Phoenix" and it was in the Atlantic Monthly. I really had to fight very hard for my female subject matter in those days.

JGV: There was very little precedent.
RW: Very little. Muriel Rukeyser had the same problem, at the same time. And when she did succeed in publishing, she was called shrill and hysterical and full of irrelevant subject matter—which happened to be the subject matter of a woman.

JGV: The experience "of one-half of humanity," as Caroline Kizer says in her long poem Pro Femina.
RW: Right. For some reason though, I knew that this was right for me to do, that I was a poet, that I did want to write about these things, and not only that, but that I did want to have children and live a full domestic life. My generation is really the first generation of women poets who have been able to combine a committed writing career with having a husband and children. There truly have not been women poets before this age who were able to do it.

JGV: Do you think it's becoming easier for poets of the next generation after you?
RW: I think so. Now I've complained a lot, but in reality I think it's a marvelous time to be a woman, and to be alive. I'd rather be a woman than a man.

JGV: Why?
RW: Because of the sense of change, and the sense of increasing power. The sense of new possibility is so strong that it's very exciting and very enabling.

JGV: What are the specific changes that you think are making it
possible for a woman who wants to be a writer, or have a literary career of some sort, to do that and have a family?

RW: I think that women now understand themselves and each other better than they ever have and this sense of community has given them a voice, so they can say what they want, and say what they need, and say how things have been unfairly wielded against them, and ask men to change. And many men have been willing to do this. In the generation of my children I see different relationships between men and women. This is probably true only of a small segment of the population, but nevertheless, it's coming.

JGV: Fathers being willing and able to mother the children?

RW: Yes. Also, while women are better able to see their strengths, men are, at the same time, more able to confess their weakness and their fragility, which is very important. For a man to be able to say, "I need. I am not the big inexorable, always-right boss," is very important. The whole idea of the androgyny of men and women is central to my view. It's important to understand that every human being is both male and female, that men should not despise the female in themselves, the need to cry, and the need to be needy, and women should not be afraid to be strong.

JGV: And a lot of the difficulty with men doing that comes in turn from women, mothers, who have been so effectively utilized in the patriarchal system to believe they have to teach their sons to be that way.

RW: Exactly. I have tried to bring up my son to be a feminist.

JGV: It would be terrible to feel that you could never cry, never be wrong without losing face.

RW: There was a time when my husband was furious at me because I went off to the library to do some translations instead of cleaning the house, which was filthy. Now in contrast to that, though he still won't admit he was wrong about that experience, which was very traumatic for him, it becomes apparent that he loves to clean and I hate to. So now he willingly cleans, and does the dishes, and sometimes the wash. That's really not my skill and I haven't the least interest in developing it.

JGV: That's a fine arrangement. One last thing I want to ask you about is the work you have in progress. You've
mentioned two things that I’d like to know more about. One is your long Hanna poem.

RW: Yes. Hanna Senesh. She’s a real woman. She is, in fact, a national hero in Israel. She was a parachutist who joined the British National Intelligence Corps in 1944 to go with a group of young people who had fled from the middle European countries, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania. They jumped back into these countries to join the resistance movement and help Allied prisoners in those countries, as well as Jews who had survived, to come to safety, either in neutral countries or in Palestine. And she fascinates me.

JGV: Has she taken possession of you in the same way that Tamsen Donner did?

RW: Not in the same way, because she was twenty-three. Tamsen was my age, a little older than me. So I’m writing in the voice of a twenty-three-year old girl, which is difficult.

JGV: Does your poem take her through a long period of time?

RW: Yes. She kept a diary and wrote poetry up until the time that she went into secret intelligence, and then she stopped. And so I pick up at that point, and I’m writing about the last nine months of her life.

JGV: You’re continuing her diary.

RW: Although it isn’t a diary. It really has turned out to be fiction.

JGV: Is it written as a poem?

RW: No. It’s written in prose with poems interspersed. It’s in her voice.

JGV: And how did she die?

RW: She was captured by the Nazis and shot just as the Russians were at the gates of Budapest, about to liberate the city. They took her out and shot her because they didn’t want any witnesses. But she behaved in an extraordinary manner in prison, and it’s a fascinating story. She grew from a rather soft, middle-class, assimilated Hungarian woman to a fighter, to someone really possessed by a kind of survival, and a transmission of hope to people around her to enable them to survive.

JGV: And she kept that up in prison?

RW: Yes, oh yes. And her mother survived.

JGV: You’re also writing a textbook on poetry-writing. How are you going about that?
Well, it happened actually when someone came to me who publishes textbooks, a woman who has heard me speak and who has followed my career for the past few years. She said, "I need a book on writing poetry, and I'd like you to write it." And I said, "Well, I have to think about that." I had never thought of myself as writing a textbook. I don't even especially like writing prose, I thought. But having stopped writing, having stopped teaching, I realized that it's a wonderful point in my life to talk about how I do teach, and how I work. She thinks of it as a textbook for beginners and intermediate poets who have no access to help, to workshops, or other sources. So it's very simple, it's not something that professional poets would want to use. It's personal, as though I were talking to my class. It's based on exploring the sources of poetry, a course that I've taught over and over again to various levels of children and adults.

And have you divided it into chapters and approached it chapter by chapter?

Yes. I've written three chapters, not in sequence. I've written a chapter called "Starting with the Image," and a chapter called "Finding the Organic Form," and while I'm here in Kentucky I want to write a chapter on digging into memory.

Each of those sounds like a good starting spot.

You're such a marvelous teacher of writing, that I know this will be a helpful book.

I'm trying to do in the book what I do with my classes. It's hard because now I have an invisible audience.

You don't have an exchange.

Or the stimulation. But some of it has gone very well.
When I go back, I'll have a contract and an advance, which will be nice.

JGV: An incentive.
RW: Yes.