

Randall Jarrell:
The Mirror and the Nest

The American poet, critic, essayist and children's-book writer Randall Jarrell (1914-1965) is now neither wholly neglected, nor fundamentally misunderstood: he is, instead, *underappreciated*—readers tend to know him for just a few poems, and for essays on other poets. Jarrell's pieces on Frost, on Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, furnish routine starting points for commentators on those poets. Jarrell gets invoked as the author of some of the century's funniest, and saddest, defenses of *reading* against Research, Interpretation and Theory: it would do some good to see, nailed to the walls of many Departments of English, Jarrell's summary declaration from "The Age of Criticism" (1952):

We become good critics by reading poems and stories and by living; it is reading criticism which is secondary—if it often helps us a great deal, it often hinders us more: even a good critic or reader has a hard time recovering from the taste of the age which has produced him. Many bad critics are bad, I think, because they have spent their life in card indexes; or, if they have not, no one can tell.

These are truths all critics need to remember, and no one has put them across with more charm, more force. But the antitechnical, personal force of Jarrell's essays—wonderful essays like "The Age of Criticism"—has controlled his own poems' reception almost too thoroughly: readers who know his critical acuity admire the pathos in his poetry, while they overlook that poetry's conscious artistry. I mean here to give that artistry some of its due.

Jarrell's best-known poems are poems about the Second World War, poems about his bookish childhood, and (most of all) poems in the voices of aging women. A personal essay from the *New York Times* and a recent bestselling psychology book both cite Jarrell's moving, accomplished "Next Day" (1965) to illustrate middle age:

the poem begins in a supermarket, where its lonely shopper puns on brand names:

Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All,
I take a box
And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens.
The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical
Food-gathering flocks
Are selves I overlook. Wisdom, said William James

Is learning what to overlook. And I am wise
If that is wisdom.

If the henlike shoppers with their baskets amount to “selves [she] overlook[s],” she too must feel overlooked, indistinguishable, and in fact, she complains, no one distinguishes her—looks at her—anymore:

Now that I’m old, my wish
Is womanish:
That the boy putting groceries in my car

See me. It bewilders me he doesn’t see me.

Jarrell’s woman feels anonymous, interchangeable, overlooked in her supermarket because (she says) she is aging, because bagboys no longer see her; because (we infer) nobody around her listens to her (or to William James); and because (she later reveals) her best, perhaps only, friend was buried yesterday (hence the title). Jarrell closes with a resigned deliberateness almost drained of affect:

And yet I’m afraid, as I was at the funeral
I went to yesterday.
My friend’s cold made-up face, granite among its flowers,
Her undressed, operated-on, dressed body
Were my face and body.
As I think of her I hear her telling me

How young I seem; I *am* exceptional;
I think of all I have.
But really no one is exceptional,
No one has anything, I’m anybody,
I stand beside my grave,
Confused with my life, that is commonplace and solitary.

Like Jarrell's other protagonists—the "Woman at the Washington Zoo" in her "dull, null" uniform; the dead American bomber crews of "Losses"—the woman in "Next Day" seems confined by circumstance and fate into a generic and deeply inadequate social role; that role obscures, or even seems to nullify, the inner life which individuates her.

This is the plot many, even most, of Jarrell's poems describe, the story his characters suffer. But when one has seen—as many readers have seen—how Jarrell's poems focus on isolation, loneliness, the fate of the overlooked individual and her unacknowledged inner life, one has seen not how the poems work, but simply what they're *about*. Everyone who reads "Next Day" has some idea what sort of person is speaking, how she feels: it takes longer to see how Jarrell's stanzas, with their frustrated, muffled, half- or identical-rhymes, contribute to our sense of this woman's frustrations. The rhyming of stressed with unstressed syllables (compare Auden's couplet "The conquerors come/And are handsome"), the build-up of repeated words ("wisdom," "wish," "afraid," "body"), help make the poem as affecting as it is. And surely part of the sadness in that ending comes from the awful joke of rhyming "exceptional" with "exceptional," as if to clinch this woman's denial of her own claims to uniqueness?

Jarrell's lifelong interest in loneliness—in how isolated, confined individuals seek, wish for, and deserve recognition—gave him his emotional repertoire: expectation, disappointment, pathos, sympathy, nostalgia, half-believed fantasy, mourning and melancholia. It lent him, too, a set of distinctive subjects: soldiers, airmen, lonely children, children as readers, girls and girlhood, fairy-tales, the postal service, housewives, hospitals, office-workers, illness and old age. The same preoccupation formed his style, which sought to depict, and sometimes to counter, loneliness with the tactics and devices of interpersonal speech.

Jarrell wrote that Frost's "real people with their real speech and real thoughts and real emotions... make the reader feel that he is not in a book but in a world." Jarrell consistently evokes, then violates, formal expectations about poems in books—expectations about rhythmic consistency, or unity, or verbal density—in order to seem closer to real-world speech. To his early mentor Allen Tate, Jarrell wrote that his 1941 poem "The Christmas Roses" "is supposed to be *said* (like a speech from a play) with expression, emotion and long pauses." Its speaker's desperate garrulity belies her loneliness; the terminal patient speaks to her *absent* friend (or romantic partner), whose absence has made her feel unreal (and made her want to die):

Why don't you write to me?... The day nurse sits and holds
The glass for me, but yesterday I cried
I looked so white. I looked like paper.
Whiter. I dreamt about the pole and bears
And I see snow and sheets and my two nurses and the chart...

The end leaves the hospital settings behind entirely, becoming a protest and plea to the absent beloved: "Touch me and I won't die, I'll look at you/ And I won't die, I'll look at you, I'll look at you."

That closure amounts to a tonal gamble, a bawl: either we react almost as if to a real acquaintance dying, or we dismiss her pleas as sentimental, as failures of craft. Jarrell's craft—so involved in troping speech—required that he risk such failures of craft, meant risking the sentimentality and the formlessness all Jarrell's detractors detect: these risks turn up, often, in his endings, which can rely on tone, inflection, the force of a speech-act, almost to the exclusion of images. If the poems begin (like "Next Day") in concrete situations, they are often situations from which the recognized speakers wish to escape, so that the poems can end in illocution stripped of all concrete detail—in a plea, or in abstract adjectives, as "Next Day" does, or with the bizarre and affecting closure of "The Venetian Blind," whose waking speaker finds that in or around him "something calls, as it has called,/ 'But where am I? But where am I?'"

Early in his career Jarrell began a lengthy essay called "Why Particulars Are So Much More Effective Than Generalities." (The unfinished, handwritten essay remains in Jarrell's notebooks at the New York Public Library.) In choosing generalities for his endings so often, Jarrell knew what he was doing. And what he was doing was choosing speech, persona, tone—aspects of poems which make them like speech—over consistent symbols, proportions, and descriptions, the aspects of poems which make them like paintings. Jarrell's biographer William Pritchard considers the poems Jarrell wrote during World War II "short on 'real speech,'" since they lack the Frost-inspired dramatic devices Pritchard (a scholar of Frost) admires. But the war poems strive to include speech—soldiers' slang, children's restricted vocabulary: the awkwardness of real speech became their main stylistic goal. The child who speaks "The Truth" (Jarrell's note tells us) "has had his father, his sister and his dog killed in one of the early fire-raids on London":

I used to live in London till they burnt it.
What was it like? It was just like here.
No, that's the truth.
My mother would come here, some, but she would cry.

She said to Miss Elise, "He's not himself";
 She said, "Don't you love me any more at all?"
 I was *myself*.
 Finally she wouldn't come at all.
 She never said one thing my father did, or Sister.
 Sometimes she did,
 Sometimes she was the same, but that was when I dreamt it.
 I could tell I was dreaming, she was just the same.

What matters in lines like these cannot just be raw verisimilitude. (We do not go to poetry for actual talk, or novelistic dialogue; for that we have transcripts, and novels.) What matters instead is the *sense* of speaking and listening—the interpersonal nexus wished or hoped into being—for which realism in speech serves Jarrell as a proxy. In this case it is the nexus between the mother and the shellshocked child, who feels abandoned: he will feel so until she returns at the end, when “she put her arms around me and we cried.”

As with “The Christmas Roses,” the apparent artlessness of “The Truth,” Jarrell’s elimination from it of most kinds of specifically poetic organization, makes the devices peculiar to his work—the devices which beg us to imagine the speaker’s need for others—clearer. Among those devices are the swerves—in “The Truth” so extreme as to be jarring—into and out of five-beat lines; rhetorical questions; incorporated quotation; and multiple speakers. To this list we might add Jarrell’s own *précis* of the qualities in his 1948 long poem “The Night Before the Night Before Christmas,” in a letter to William Carlos Williams: “irregular line lengths, a good deal of irregularity of scansion, and lots of rhyming, not just perfect regular rhymes, musical forms, repetitions, ‘paragraphing,’ speech-like effects, and so on.” These features—learned from listening to conversation, and from Frost, and Williams, and Auden, and Browning, and Wordsworth—made possible the range in Jarrell’s more complex late work. They made possible, for example, the depth and pity of “Next Day,” and also the acidly comic misunderstandings that open “A Well-to-Do Invalid” (1963):

When you first introduced me to your nurse
 I thought: “She’s like your wife.” I mean, I thought:
 “She’s like your nurse—” it was your wife.

The same tonal range let Jarrell modulate among attitudes within poems: angry whimsy grows into sheepish resignation, and then into warmth, at the start of “Hope” (1963), whose speaker is an intensely self-conscious father:

To prefer the nest in the linden
By Apartment Eleven, the Shoreham
Arms, to Apartment Eleven
Would be childish. But we are children.

If the squirrel's nest has no doorman
To help us out of the taxi, up the tree,
Still, even the Shoreham has no squirrel
To meet us with blazing eyes, the sound of rocks knocked together,
At the glass door under the marquee.

[...] We get off at four,
Walk up the corridor, unlock the door,
And go down stone steps, past a statue
To the nest where the father squirrel, and the mother squirrel,
and the baby squirrel
Would live, if the baby squirrel could have his way.

Just now he has his way.

That fictive nest gets odder—and more disturbing—later in this eight-page poem; here, though, it's the fiction a son needs, and a father accepts.

Jarrell not only imitates speech, but incorporates speech by *several* speakers, in subgenres of poetry (like the meditative or scenic lyric) which normally take only one. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that nearly every person (and every squirrel) in a Jarrell poem either speaks, or listens, or *ought* to be able to speak, and deserves to be heard. When Jarrell observes people with nothing to say their anonymous silence becomes the poem's subject: the silent soldier in "Mail Call" "simply wishes for his name." Happier figures in Jarrell's war poems hear, and find themselves amid, some sort of verbal interchange, an interchange which the poem represents. "Transient Barracks," a 1949 poem about a World War II airman's relieved return, sets itself to make several overheard speakers contribute to the creation of one lyric subject. Here's the first half:

Summer. Sunset. Someone is playing
The ocarina in the latrine:
You Are My Sunshine. A man shaving
Sees—past the day-room, past the night K.P.'s
Bent over a G.I. can of beers
In the yard of the mess—the red and green
Lights of a runway full of '24's.
The first night flight goes over with a roar
And disappears, a star, among mountains.

The day-room radio, switched on next door,
 Says, "The thing about you is, you're real."
 The man sees his own face, black against lather,
 In the steamed, starred mirror: it is real.
 And the others—the boy in underwear
 Hunting for something in his barracks-bags
 With a money-belt around his middle—
 The voice from the doorway: "Where's the C.Q.?"
 "Who wants to know?" "He's gone to the movies."
 "Tell him Red wants him to sign his clearance."
 These are. Are what? Are.

"Transient Barracks" mimics the crowd, and the crisscrossing chit-chat, we might overhear in an actual barracks. The lines owe much to the dispatches of the war reporter Ernie Pyle, with their quick scene-setting, self-deprecating narrator, and reliance on the soldiers they quote. Pyle, Jarrell wrote, "looked [at the soldiers, at the war] only to *see*"; the speaking soldiers' "scraps—jobs, families and states... are a bridge pushed back shakily to their real lives; and [Pyle] understands and puts down what they tell him, always; and the foolish think it a silly habit of his."

Pyle presents himself, in his work, as a listener—the same role Jarrell takes on in "Transient Barracks": the soldiers and flyers' lives, their continued being, matter more than any point an observer-author could make *about* them. It is in this populated, talky, milieu that the shaving soldier knows and claims himself—the poem began when he looked at his face, and can end when, answering somebody else's question, he realizes that he is "home for good":

The man
 Puts down his razor, leans to the window
 And looks out into the pattern of the field,
 Of light and of darkness. His throat tightens,
 His lips stretch into a blinded smile.
 He thinks, *The times I've dreamed that I was back...*
 The hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight.

He only yawns, and finishes shaving.
 When the gunner asks him, "When you leaving?"
 He says, "I just got in. This is my field."
 And thinks: *I'm back for good. The States, the States!*
 He puts out his hand to touch it—
 And the thing about it is, it's real.

The final line echoes, and endorses, the shaving man's thoughts, which in turn echo the radio. The sick woman of "The Christmas

Roses” dreamt of being listened to, of being heard: the populousness, the ease, and the conversation of the Stateside dayroom represent, and confirm, the returned flyer’s new safety, which seems to him a dream come true.

The shaving man recognizes himself in the mirror, because he is surrounded by others who might recognize him, who have shared his wartime experience. More usually people in Jarrell’s poems fail to recognize themselves in mirrors, to claim their faces as theirs. With no other people, and no books, to which they can turn, their isolation alienates them from themselves, from the “something” in them which asks “But where am I?”. The fourteen-year-old girl in “The Night Before the Night Before Christmas”—a reader of Marx, Brecht, science-fiction, the Pink and Blue Fairy Books—“looks at herself in the mirror/ And thinks; ‘Do I really look like *that*?’” Later, in a hypnopompic vision, she sees herself as a kind of astronomical proletariat, happier because her being overlaps with others’:

the universe
Is a mirror backed with black
Out of which her face shines back
In the midst of hundreds of millions of suns.

They are all there together.

The woman in “Next Day” is “afraid, this morning, of my face,” which “Repeats to me, ‘You’re old.’” Unseen or unnoticed after her friend’s funeral, her countenances stands only for isolation and death. The isolated persona of “A Ghost, a Real Ghost”—perhaps dead, perhaps hallucinating, perhaps a new widow or a widower—equates his or her loneliness with disappearance:

The first night I looked into the mirror
And saw the room empty, I could not believe

That it was possible to keep existing
In such pain: I have existed.[...]

—Am I dead? A ghost, a real ghost
Has no need to die: what is he except
A being without access to the universe
That he has not yet managed to forget?

Is this speaker absent from his or her mirror, or has he, has she, conflated her own felt emptiness with the absence of somebody else? The poem leaves us no way to know; without “access” to anyone who can respond or remember, Jarrell’s speaker might as well be dead.

Decades ago M.H. Abrams entitled his famous study of Romantic poetics *The Mirror and the Lamp*. If we had to come up with central symbols for this poet so attentive to persons, so distrustful of governing symbols, we could do worse than the mirror and the nest. In mirrors Jarrell's characters see themselves—normally, they see themselves alone—and then look anxiously or sadly for someone, anyone, else. But in Jarrell's fictional nests, the home bases, adopted homes, and fictive, shared refuges of poems like "Hope" and "The Night Before..." and "Transient Barracks," people come to live with others who can hear and attend to them, and thus—however tentatively, or hypothetically—come to feel secure in themselves. (It's important that the nests be found or fictive, the homes and families chosen or adoptive: Jarrellian characters, of either gender, who face their actual mothers often behave as if frightened by mirrors.) Fictions of multiple speakers, of imagined or real companions, of listeners answering and being answered, console Jarrell and his characters whenever anything can. And these fictions explain why the poems insist on their "speech-like effects"—why the good ones end up so affecting (and why the bad seem diffuse).

These fictions of shared space, response, interchange, recognition extend outside the frame of Jarrell's own poems, into their relations with other texts. When the American poet Mark Jarman writes that "Jarrell's characters seem to speak in quotations," he means not that they quote one another—though they do—but that they quote or allude to books they have read. Thus the squirrels in "The Night Before the Night Before Christmas" "have nothing to lose but their lives" because the girl in the poem has read the Communist Manifesto, and the snow-loaded boughs near the end of the poem seem to read "*To End Hopefully/ Is a Better Thing—/ A Far, Far Better Thing*" because the girl, falling asleep, has conflated Sydney Carton's words with a motto from her father's office. The woman in "Next Day" takes refuge in William James; the hermitlike painter of "The End of the Rainbow" (1954), living alone on a California beach, quotes Goethe and Beddoes to her dog, and rehearses, to herself,

Proverbs of the night
 With the night's inconsequence, or consequence.
 Sufficient unto the night... *Every maid her own*
Merman—and she has left lonely forever,
 Lonely forever, the kings of the marsh.

These chains of quotations and allusions might remind us of the chains of speakers in poems like "Transient Barracks"—they trope them, in a sense. Alfred Kazin remembered that in person "Randall

was as full of quotations as a Unitarian minister—they were his theology, too.” The characters in Jarrell’s poems who quote so copiously use their quotations almost salvifically: their quotes confirm connections to a world of words larger and more hospitable than one beach cottage or apartment or bedroom. In the logic of Jarrell’s quotations, the more we can use or reuse others’ words, the more we feel our world is theirs too, and the less lonely we become.

And this is how Jarrell’s whole style works: the resources of quotation, of repetition, of interruption, of talk and conversation, with all its irregularities and approximations, try to alleviate the loneliness they specify, and to which they react. As a reviewer—and as a reader of Wordsworth—Jarrell recognized the inevitable indifference most of the world presents to most of what all writers do, and to all of what most people do: his poems stand against this indifference, and try to acknowledge it. In “Next Day,” something about loneliness (being solitary) creates and is created by indistinguishability (being commonplace). It is the paradoxical (and Wordsworthian) goal of “Next Day” to pick out this commonplace woman, whose tragedy, as George Eliot once put it, “lies in the very fact of frequency,” and alleviate her loneliness by individuating her to *us*, making for her a responsive poem (even a stanza form) of her own.

If this is what Jarrellian poems do for the characters in them, it is also what Jarrellian essays do for poems: the poet who makes this lonely woman vividly particular is also the critic who saves neglected works, and neglected readers, from the interchangeability of a card-index. Jarrell said in an essay on Frost that he, Jarrell, wrote for “‘the friends of things in the spirit,’ even when the things are difficult, even when the things are in the flesh”: this sense in which his readers become not just allies but friends, is one mostly denied to readers of Frost himself, or Bishop, or Ashbery, or any twentieth-century poet I’d want to call better or greater. Readers are invited to feel, and do feel, a *solidarity* with the appealing, energetic, sensitive, lonely author the poems and essays invite us to imagine—almost the same solidarity he feels with his most-developed characters, with the conflicted father in “Hope,” the girl in “The Night Before The Night Before Christmas,” the woman of “Next Day.”

Jarrell’s conversational insistences thus help his poems address their characters’ loneliness—and our own. Robert Lowell wrote that Jarrell’s gifts were “pathos, wit, and brilliance of intelligence”: readers who have recognized the pathos in the poems, the brilliance in the criticism, might do well to notice the wit allied to them—and the technique. Let stand for that achievement, here, not one of Jarrell’s poems about aging women, or students, or soldiers and pilots—poems it is my purpose to get you to seek. Instead, I end at the start of

one of Jarrell's poems about writing and reading, a 1952 poem—three pages long, baroquely allusive, and terribly funny—called "A Conversation with the Devil." I quote only the opening:

Indulgent, or candid, or uncommon reader
—I've some: a wife, a nun, a ghost of two—
If I write for anyone, I wrote for you:
So whisper, when I die, *We was too few*;
Write over me (if you can write; I hardly knew)
That I—that I—but anything will do,
I'm satisfied... And yet—
and yet, you *were* too few:
Should I perhaps have written for your brothers,
Those artful, common, unindulgent others?

Is it worth pointing out how the self-interruptions nail down a speaking voice? how adroitly Jarrell suggests that *bad* readers are “artful,” good ones “candid”? how the hammered-on rhymes, and the disyllabically-rhymed closing couplet, give *Don Juan* its due, even as the expressed content stands Byron on his head? Or does it matter whether we notice the craft, so long as we cherish the poems?