

## Remembering Mary: An Interview With Mary Jarrell, Widow of Poet and Critic Randall Jarrell

By Lisa A. Flowers



Mary Jarrell, left, with her husband, Flannery O Connor, Peter Taylor, & Robert Humphrey. Courtesy of UNC, Greensboro

Mary Jarrell's late husband, Randall Jarrell, is well known to literary people for his wonderful satirical novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, for his ingenious criticism, for his translations of Rilke and Chekhov, for his endearing children's books, and, of course, for his poetry.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of interviewing Mrs Jarrell for a proposed documentary on the World War II air war, and the literature that had defined it. Though the project never came to fruition, the interview was, of course, invaluable in its own way, and took on a life of its own. Though in many ways Mrs Jarrell—from the POV of anecdotes alone—didn't truly reveal anything that hadn't already

been exhaustively covered in various biographies (including her own memoir, *Remembering Randall*) being in her vibrant presence, and in the presence of her husband's memorabilia, was a rich enough experience.

The following interview took place in Greensboro, North Carolina, at Wellspring, Mrs Jarrell's assisted living community.

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Mary Jarrell has survived almost all of her scholarly contemporaries. In person, she is tall and slim, with a face (as was said of Zelda Fitzgerald's) that is far more beautiful and enigmatic than one would gather from viewing her photographs. It's apparent that she must have been quite something in her youth, but, as seems to be the phenomenon of old age, all that beauty has migrated to the eyes, and it is through them that one can see her as she must have looked at the time she shared her life with her husband. She lives alone in a retirement community, closely surrounded by neighbors, with a dachshund as devoted to her as a child.

Moments after Mrs. Jarrell ("Mary please") welcomes me inside, we are joined by a tiny black and tan dachshund that is not a puppy, she says, "but a full grown mini who weighs seven pounds." She lifts the creature in her arms.

"Meet Schatzi," she says. "It's the diminutive for Schatzel; means 'little treasure.' Half the dogs In Germany are called Schatzi."

I've already noticed that she seems a little hard of hearing, and as I check the sound level on my recorder, she says, "I'll just get closer to you...some people have a gentle voice that I don't pick up very well." By now I'm ready to start asking her questions, but something tells me not to lead off the discussion of her husband's work with *The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner*, and I remark instead on my liking for his treatment of the surrealism of the passing of time in his poem *The Face*.

"Oh yes.... 'I haven't changed/you haven't looked.' Randall dreaded it, getting old. He didn't want it to happen; so the passing of time was very real to him...and he was sorry to have to live through it", she

says.

Though I'm glad my remark has stirred such easy and immediate candor, her response also sets off a tremor of alarm: it seems to steer us in a direction I'd resolved to avoid (or at least not to broach this early in the interview): the lingering speculation that Randall's death in a traffic accident at age fifty-one had been semi-suicidal.

In her memoir, and in many interviews, she'd of course dealt summarily with this conjecture (it wasn't so, according to the coroner's report), and I reassure myself that by now any resentment she may once have felt toward those still perpetuating the rumor in literary circles might have settled into the almost dispassionate objectivity she'd consistently shown on the subject in her writings.

So I decide to start out with *Ball Turret*, after all.

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.  
*(The Death Of The Ball Turret Gunner)*

In *Remembering Randall*, Mary had elaborated on the fact that the poem was for Jarrell both a triumph and source of consternation, as it was the relentless public demand for the piece that inspired him to worry that he might become a one hit wonder.

"At present, you know, it goes for \$250.00 a shot, and is in steady demand for TV as well as the printed page," she says, gently touching the dachshund's nose.

"Randall's poem can be interpreted as being both anti-war and anti-state. But I presume he didn't question the necessity of the second World War?"

Her answer is immediate and somewhat surprising. “He did ... he really did. I was just dealing with that in one of his letters in which takes that up. He was very critical, especially of the Army, because to him in a way ... it was an institution, sort of like Academia. And it had certain routines and inescapable requirements. Instead of looking at his past ... you know, they knew he had been a teacher ... they sent him to interviewing candidates and finally decided to train him to instruct cadets ... and when they saw his teaching ability, they trained him for celestial navigation.”

I’m not sure I understand her answer, and rephrase the question. But she frames her reply in terms of her own feelings about the war (Hitler had to be stopped, etc), not Randall’s; and I drop the topic and remark that Jarrell’s brilliant criticism could eviscerate the loftiest reputations. (“Auden is like a man who keeps showing how well he can hold his liquor until he becomes a drunk.”)

“He finally moved away from that sort of thing”, Mary tells me, “He said, I’m not going to write any more severe criticism...it’s not worth it. It happened with his teaching, too. He only taught people that he really admired. Never mind the bad poetry. He didn’t teach bad poets.”

Abruptly, she laughs, relaxing. “You got this on tape?”

I tell her that I do, and ask her if she believes that Randall would have viewed the poetry of this day and age as being in a state of decline.

“Ohhhh, I’m afraid he would,” she answers quickly. “I have a friend that I often see ... he’s retired, and divorced and teaches poetry at the Shepherd’s Center. And he likes poetry. But just this past weekend he told me that nobody, even the faculty over there, was interested in poetry. It’s always been a small minority, but it’s marvelous to see those who have lived on.”

Some modern poets (like Jarrell’s good friend Robert Lowell) who have done so, I observe, were surely helped by Randall’s honest praise.

“After some of his [Lowell’s] breakdowns... and after some time had elapsed...he wrote more and more of that ‘my life confessional’ sort of thing... Randall would’ve hated that. But the public liked it.

Randall wanted it lyric and he wanted it visionary, and he wished that Cal had stayed with his marvelous historical poems like *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket*.”

“What about the Beats? In your book you discuss a visit by Kerouac and Gregory Corso to your home, but it would seem unlikely that Randall would embrace the Beats as a legitimate literary movement, judging from his tastes. Can you expand on this?”

She adjusts the dachshund on her lap. “Randall wrote about that better than I could, and he acknowledged that they did have a part in those years; but he never liked the fact that they wouldn’t revise. We met Corso out in San Francisco, and liked him a great deal. But again, he was constantly submitting poems to Randall, but he wouldn’t revise. He’d quit, and start another until he had ten half-written poems, and Randall couldn’t stand that.” We both laugh.

“There’s a quote you might like... just this morning, on the cover of... well, it’ll be on the cover of the book that’s coming out. It deals with Randall’s...high demand on others.” She rises quickly to look for the excerpt and is gone for several minutes, but returns empty handed. “Well...it’s somewhere. But it’s a quote by Robert Penn Warren, and he acknowledged Randall as a very great critic, said that he was generous with his criticism, but that he had such high standards for other poets, and himself; and of course the critic Helen Vendler said that ‘Jarrell put his talent into his poetry and his genius into his criticism.’ And I think he just thought people didn’t spend enough time; he knew how much time it took. He would use the Army phrase ‘wash out’ to describe something in a manuscript that needed to be removed. He’d tell somebody, ‘I think I’d just wash that out’ And he told Eleanor Taylor [poet and wife of writer Peter Taylor] that about her own poems a couple of times”

-Tutu all the ~~rosy~~ ~~blot~~ ~~seen~~ ~~through~~ ~~pleasure~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~color~~ ~~wild~~ ~~and~~ ~~ear~~ ~~natural~~ ~~leg~~ ~~yellow~~ ~~cloud~~ ~~rose~~ ~~cloud~~ ~~rose~~ ~~gliding~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

-Tutu all the ~~rosy~~ ~~blot~~ ~~seen~~ ~~through~~ ~~pleasure~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~color~~ ~~wild~~ ~~and~~ ~~ear~~ ~~natural~~ ~~leg~~ ~~yellow~~ ~~cloud~~ ~~rose~~ ~~cloud~~ ~~rose~~ ~~gliding~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Rosy and yellow as ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

THE WOMAN AT THE WASHINGTON ZOO

This print, that has kept the memory of color ~~2020~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Through ~~so~~ ~~many~~ ~~cleanings~~; this dull null ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Navy I wear to work, and wear from work, and so ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

To bed--with no complaints, no comment: neither from my chief, ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

The Deputy Chief Assistant, nor his chief, ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Nor his, nor Congressmen, nor their constituents ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Only I complain... this ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Body that no sunlight eyes, no ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

But, dome-shadowed, withering among columns, ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Wavy beneath fountains-- small, far-off, shining ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

In the eyes of animals, these beings trapped ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap, ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Aging, but without knowledge of their age, ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

Kept safe here, knowing not of death, for death ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

--Oh, ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard's~~ ~~head~~ ~~at~~ ~~their~~ ~~weavers~~ ~~the~~ ~~woman~~ ~~look~~ ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~leopard~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~poet~~ ~~eye~~ ~~the~~ ~~wings~~ ~~Black~~ ~~above~~ ~~my~~ ~~and~~ ~~step~~ ~~to~~ ~~me~~ ~~as~~ ~~man~~

the leopard's head look at their weavers  
 Black above me, and step to me  
 as man

Draft page from *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*, by Randall Jarrell

My research in preparing for the meeting had given me the impression that for some literary historians, Randall Jarrell's place in modern American letters had been secured as much through his criticism as his poetry; so if I had true journalistic instincts I'd try to keep Mary talking about that aspect of his career.

But I was afraid (perhaps groundlessly) that she was becoming tired, and I'd promised myself that I

wouldn't leave without asking about what, aside from his criticism and one novel, I personally liked best of all her husbands creations...his children's books.

"Randall's lovely poem *The Lost Children* deals not only, like Peter Pan, with the inevitable loss of childhood from itself, but with a parent's loss of a vicarious childhood through the children that grow up and away from them into adulthood. I get the feeling from some other of his poems that romantic love, for Randall, was maybe also somewhat a vicarious childhood... and this certainly seems to be the case in *The Gingerbread Rabbit*. Do you feel that's true?"

"Yes," she smiles, and looks out into the garden for a bit.

Two little girls, one fair, one dark

one alive, one dead,

are running hand in hand through

a sunny house...

They run away from me...

But I am happy...

When I wake I feel no sadness, only delight.

I've seen them again, and I am comforted

that, somewhere, they still are

*(The Lost Children)*

Surely this is Mary's voice, the voice of his beloved speaking through Jarrell (dubbed "Child Randall" by Robert Lowell in an elegy) and it is this that gives the poem its empathetic tenderness. When, in *The Animal Family*, the hunter brings a "baby" home, the family unit, so coveted by Randall Jarrell, comes full circle:

In two days he was sitting on the floor  
by the table when they ate, eating with them...

in a week it was as if he had lived with them always.

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We walk out into the sunshine toward the awning where we are to board the vehicle that's to take us to the resident's dining room (I had been expecting a minivan driven by a retirement home employee) and I get a kick out of the fact that Mary Jarrell, a woman of a certain age, not only drives, but drives a svelte, compact sports car, flaming red, bearing the personalized license plate, "POEMS".

Since long before writing *Remembering Randall*, Mary von Schrader Jarrell has, emphatically, been herself. And her answer to my final question strikes me with the realization that maybe it's her story that I've mostly missed.

It had been arranged that we part company after lunch, "not so much for a nap, but to rest my eyes and lie prone with one arm over Schatzi at my side and practice my yoga deep breathing." As we wait for my cab outside, I apologize for tiring her.

"I'm tired, yes. But happy," she replies. "It links me to once again quote Benjamin Franklin's observation to the signers of the Constitution, 'I'm so old I am intruding in posterity'." She smiles, and her remarkable eyes are as bright as a child's in the sun.

"How do you think Randall would have felt about 9/11?" I ask her impulsively.

"Oh, he'd feel it", she says, "but I can't presume to say what his feelings would be. I mean, one's opinions do change, and he didn't live to see that. He died at fifty-one. But I didn't."