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RUKEYSER BIENNIAL

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MURIEL RUKEYSER LIVING ARCHIVE

No. 3

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From the Archives: The Four Fears, by Elisabeth Däumer

In the winter of 2023, Rowena Kennedy-Epstein shared with me a drawing by Rukeyser that would be featured on the cover of *The Rukeyser Era: Selected Prose*, published later that year. The drawing depicts four massive figures surrounded by a wall of red. In the front, dwarfed by the gigantic figures, is a miniature version of Rukeyser herself, clad in a blue dress. In the lower right, if you look closely, you see the penciled words in Rukeyser's distinctive handwriting, "The Four Fears, March 1955."



Rukeyser, *The Four Fears*. Drawing. Library of Congress. Shown with permission of the Rukeyser Estate.

Strangely, as soon as I looked at the drawing, I felt that I knew it, even though I had never seen it before. How could that be?

At the time, I was deep into researching Rukeyser's analysis with Frances G. Wickes, a Jungian analyst whom she began to consult after the death of her mother Myra in 1953. Wickes was by then a well-known analyst, renowned for helping artists work through creative blocks and release new creative energies. The analysis fell into a period that Kate Daniels described as the years of interception—a fallow period, when Rukeyser, preoccupied with raising a young child, her son Bill (as well as cancelled by publishers and hounded by the FBI), published significantly less than she had before. As I sorted through the rich archive of materials Rukeyser had assembled about Wickes and read Wickes's three books* focusing particularly on her last, *The Inner World of Choice*, I sensed that her analyst played a crucial role in helping Rukeyser through these years of creative impasse, which culminated in the publication of *Body of Waking* in 1958, dedicated to Frances Wickes.

Reading *Body of Waking* and *The Inner World of Choice* side by side, I began to notice intertextual links. These were especially conspicuous in one chapter, entitled “The X in the Calculation,” which follows the case of an unnamed woman, “almost forty years old,” who suffered from debilitating childhood fears that threatened her adult life with exhausting alternations of rebellion and inertia. Aspects of this woman immediately reminded me of Rukeyser—her wealthy upbringing, her creativity and rebelliousness—while other things, like her preoccupation with sacrifice personified in the figure of Jesus and a “victim complex,” did not tally easily with my image of Rukeyser. The drawing, however, confirmed beyond a doubt that the chapter concerned Rukeyser herself. Wickes, like C. G. Jung, prompted her patients to draw the images they encountered in their dreams. Using their “active imagination,” they were asked to reengage with such images creatively, in a wakeful state, by drawing them. After I saw Rukeyser's drawing of The Four Fears, it dawned on me that I had first encountered it, vividly captured in words, in precisely that chapter of *The Inner World of Choice*, when the patient describes a dream of hers:

Before me is a wall of molten stones that glow with a sullen orange light. Four giants, born of this same molten stone, tower up from the center of the wall where the stone reddens into a gateway of wicked sullen flame. As I look at the giants, a voice says, “Challenge them!” I shout aloud. At the sound of my voice, the wall, the four giants who are the towers and pillars of the wall, fall as ash that dissolves into air. (143)

As the patient revisits her dream upon awaking, she associates the giants with the obverse of Roosevelt's four freedoms and names them “Fear of Speech, Fear of Worship, Fear of Want, Fear of Fear” (144).

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* *The Inner World of Childhood* (1927, rev. ed. 1966); *The Inner World of Man* (1938); *The Inner World of Choice* (1963).

Teaching Rukeyser and Visual Culture, by Michael Ford

I teach undergraduate literature and composition courses at the University of Georgia, and this semester, I taught Muriel Rukeyser's poetry through analysis of its relationship to visual culture. In one of the more successful activities this semester, I used early twentieth-century postcards to help students in two classes, a literature-based first-year writing course and an American literature course, slow down and analyze Rukeyser's presentation of place and engagement with visual culture in *The Book of the Dead*. Over the past few years, I have collected about fifty postcards produced between 1900 and the early 1940s that depict Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, Hawk's Nest Rock, the New River Gorge, and other sites described or mentioned in *The Book of the Dead*.[†] Some are colorful chromolithograph postcards, while others are black and white photos printed on a postcard backing rather than on typical photo paper. I hoped that viewing and handling these original postcards would lead my students to a deeper understanding of not only Rukeyser's poetry, but also the circulation of visual materials in the early twentieth century. This activity also asked students to step outside of the habitual modes of literary analysis they developed in high school and see poetry as part of a larger cultural world.[‡]



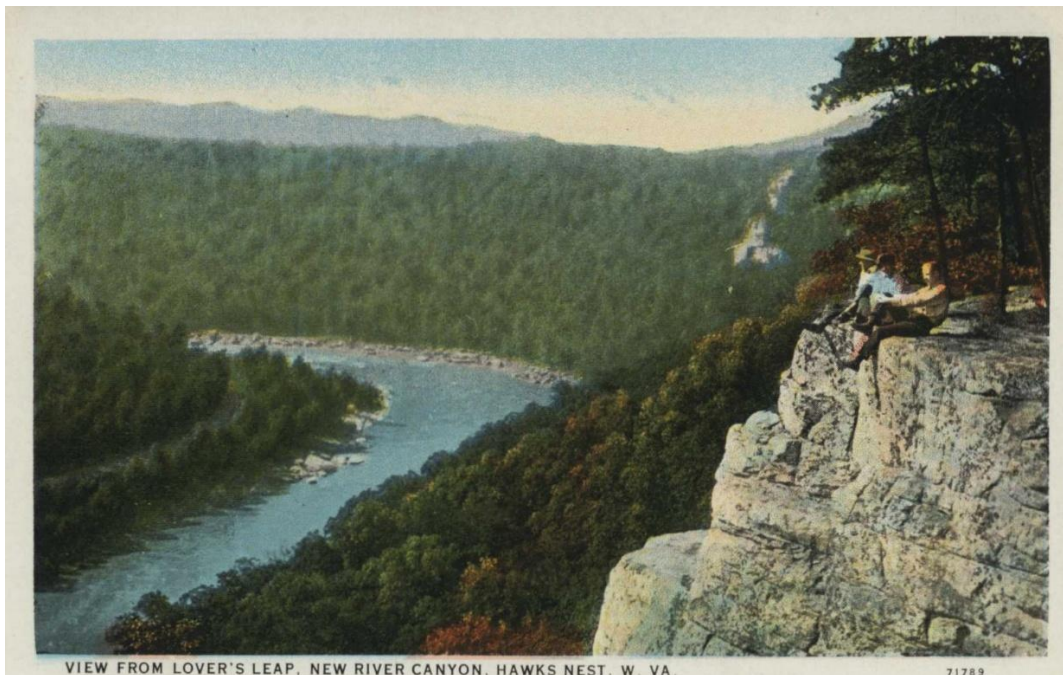
Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, and the junction of the New River and Gauley River, ca. 1930s.

[†] I purchased most of these postcards on ebay.com, and a few on etsy.com. The white captions on the black and white cards were scratched into the negatives by the photographer. Captions such as those were common on real photo postcards, as that kind of card was called. All references to *The Book of the Dead* are from *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, edited by Janet Kaufman and Anne Herzog (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

[‡] The mode of analysis of the relationship between history, poetry and visual culture that I asked my students to practice might be described as an introductory exercise in the mode of investigating history and culture that Raymond Thompson engages in in *Appalachian Ghosts: A Photographic Reimagining of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster* (University Press of Kentucky, 2024).

In class, I divided students into groups of two or three and distributed a list of discussion questions to guide the groups' conversation. After re-reading the poem "Gauley Bridge" with the class, I handed each group a postcard depicting the town of Gauley Bridge. Some of these cards show the town from above—a line of buildings with the junction of the Gauley River and the New River in the background. Others are promotional cards for Conley Hotel that were likely distributed for free to hotel guests. My discussion questions asked students to view the card together, paying attention to titles, marks, and messages as well as the postcard image. While some students were very familiar with postcards, others had no experience with them, and I overheard several students explaining seemingly obvious features such as the placement of the stamp and of the address to their classmates.

After examining the cards, students discussed parallels between the postcard images and Rukeyser's depictions of the same places. My discussion questions asked them to work together to find lines in "Gauley Bridge" that echoed the postcards in some way or lines that they read differently after seeing the images. Some students pointed to the line "any town looks like this one street town" (78) and discussed the accuracy of Rukeyser's description of Gauley Bridge as it appears in the images. Others noted the proximity of the town to the river and pointed to the lines "The little boy runs with his dog / up the street to the bridge over the river" (77). Students with postcards depicting the Conley Hotel were surprised to see printed beneath the cards' image a phrase they first encountered in the poem: "Switzerland of America." We had already discussed some of the documentary collage sources Rukeyser used to compose the poem, and students were excited to see—and hold—what appears to be another of those sources.



Published by the S. Spencer Moore Co. showing the New River prior to the construction of the Hawk's Nest dam and tunnel, ca. 1910s.

Students not only identified those parallels but also discussed Rukeyser's interrogation of visual aesthetics and image-making. Students assigned to analyze brightly colored chromolithograph postcards, for instance, discussed the ways the lines "What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to the sea and overgrown with roses?" object to the kind of aestheticizing of place evident in the postcard images (78). Students assigned black and white photo-postcards discussed the presentation of the photographer in "Gauley Bridge."

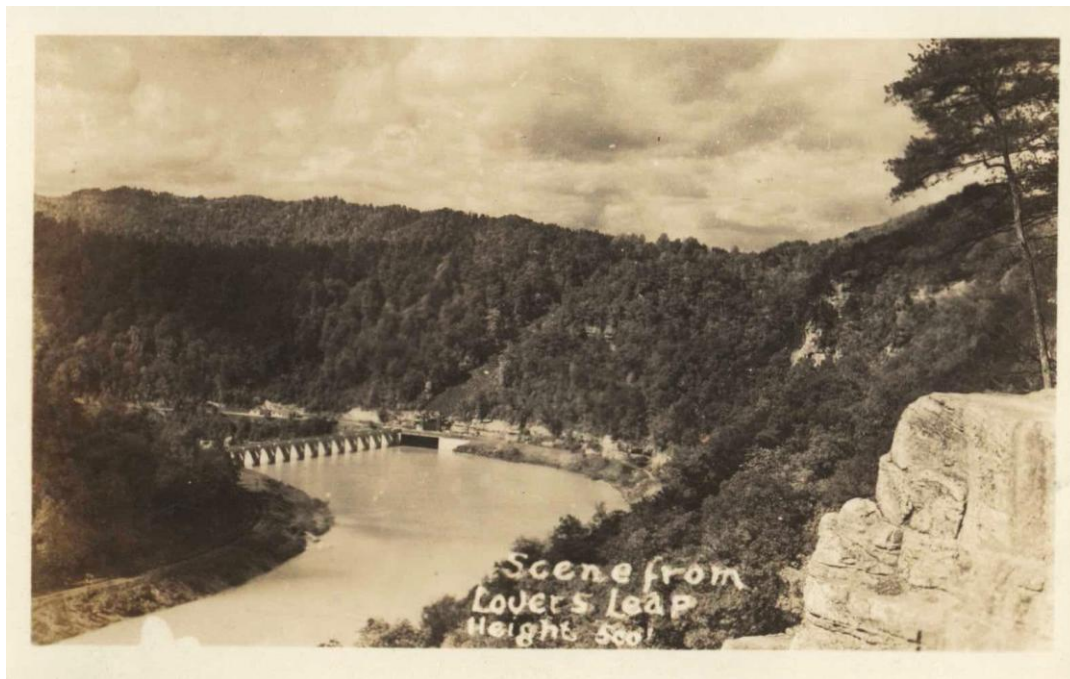


Photo postcard showing the New River following the construction of the Hawk's Nest dam and tunnel, ca. 1930s.

For the second part of the postcard activity, we read "The Dam" together, and I distributed two cards depicting the site of the New Kanawha power plant dam—one depicting the New River site prior to the construction project whose consequences *The Book of the Dead* chronicles, and one later card depicting the completed dam in the river, with the intake of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel at the right of the dam. The site is visible from a popular tourist overlook of the New River Gorge and was represented in numerous postcards throughout the twentieth century. I asked students to discuss both cards, focusing on the depiction of the river, the surrounding landscape, the flowing river water, and the dam. Students compared the images, identifying ways the scene was changed by the addition of the dam and noting that the cards produced after the construction project make no mention of the disaster. Students again drew contrasts between the aesthetics of postcards, which are designed to appeal to tourists with a benign, unchallenging depiction of place, and Rukeyser's depiction of place, which they found more challenging, though not necessarily more appealing. Some students preferred the pretty picture.

Students' discussion of other parallels between "The Dam" and the postcard images led in several directions, in part due to the length of the poem. I again asked students to find lines that

echoed or diverged from the postcards' presentation of place, and students often found lines that matched their own interests. Some students focused on nature imagery, including the flowing water and the rocky cliffs of the New River Gorge. I was glad that some students focused on the poem's presentation of the science of flowing water and hydroelectric power generation. Both courses are general education classes, and students in the sciences found Rukeyser's engagement with physics in "The Dam" fascinating.

Students also drew connections between the histories that *The Book of the Dead* documents, the postcard images, and the history of dam-building and electrification here in the Southeastern United States. The University of Georgia's Athens campus is just south of the Appalachian Mountains, and many students shared stories of the towns lost beneath the lakes that formed upriver from TVA dams; other students shared stories of vacationing on those same lakes. In particular, students discussed Lake Lanier and Oscarville, Georgia, a predominantly Black town that not only was submerged as a result of a dam project in the 1950s but also was the site of a violent racial purge in the 1910s in which more than a thousand Black residents were driven from their homes. Our conversation about the history of dam-building in the Southeast helped students identify ways in which the kinds of racial and class injustices that Rukeyser presents in *The Book of the Dead* have shaped the places they have lived and visited in significant ways.

Following our class discussion, students wrote a brief reflective response to the postcard activity. The assignment asked them to discuss their reaction to the postcards and the ways viewing the cards in class helped them notice or understand aspects of the poems. Students' responses largely echoed their classroom discussion; they highlighted the same lines they pointed to in class and discussed the value of analyzing the poems with their classmates. They also discussed their fascination with postcards themselves; despite their immersion in a wide range of digital visual media, many of my students have less experience with material visual culture, and they enjoyed working with images they could hold and touch and exploring connections between those images and *The Book of the Dead*.

Michael Ford[§]

The Four Fears, cont'd from page 2

The patient's subsequent discussion of these fears is most instructive and opens much room for biographical speculation. I embark on some of that in my recent essay "Muriel Rukeyser in Analysis: Body of Waking."^{**} Reading the giants personifying the four fears from left to right, I

[§] Michael Ford is lecturer in the English Department of the University of Georgia. This essay is part of a longer one that will be published on the Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive soon.

^{**} Published on Digital Commons@EMU 2025: https://commons.emich.edu/rukeyser_essays/1/

associate the first with Rukeyser's mother Myra, whose closed eyes and open mouth convey a fearful passivity and, it occurred to me later, the mask of death. The two figures in the middle, training their gaze on the diminutive figure of Rukeyser, could be those of her father (fear of worship), endowed with a scepter of authority, and her once favorite aunt Flora (fear of want), elegant and emaciated looking, whom Rukeyser's father married shortly after the death of her mother.

I read the fourth giant as a personification of Rukeyser herself and her complicated fear of fear. She had, of course, much to fear at the time; she was an anti-fascist activist, a radical democrat, an unmarried "deviant" mother raising a young child and involved in an intimate relationship with another woman, her literary agent Monica McCall. Fearing such fears points to the ways in which an oppressive political climate can make us participants in our own oppression—fear of being exposed as homosexual induces or reinforces internalized homophobia; fears of shaming are not relieved when we fear such fears but multiplied. The analysis with Wickes, I argue in my essay, helped Rukeyser to reclaim the power of the erotic while freeing her from fears and inhibitions that, as she mourns in a group of poems in *Body of Waking*, had stunted her mother's life and led to the suicide of three male friends (F. O. Matthiessen, Charles Naginski, and Reeves McCullers) hounded by heteronormative social and sexual pressures.

As I spent more time making sense of the Wickes archive, I became convinced that Rukeyser herself was the author of this chapter focused on her analysis. In one of several proposals for a book on Wickes, Rukeyser wrote:

One chapter of this book is on the author's work with Frances Wickes, what happened to poetry and to people—to Frances Wickes—through it. For the first time, I think, a story is told of how part of the therapy turned out to be the painful and victorious work of re-writing with Mrs. Wickes the chapter on my own therapy, six times, understanding the work more fully each time, and seeing it through the press.

Is this case study of Rukeyser, hidden in plain sight in *The Inner World of Choice*, "the painful and victorious work of re-writing with Mrs. Wickes the chapter on my own therapy"? I believe so. It's unfortunate that Rukeyser did not get around to composing the additional story of how writing and revision became part of the therapy and affected patient, analyst, and poetry. There is certainly a lot in this chapter that begs for explanation: Rukeyser wove the case study of her analysis seamlessly into *The Inner World of Choice*, never indicating that the chapter was written by anyone but Wickes. Instead, assuming her analyst's perspective, she excoriates her "victim complex," her rages, her fears. Could it be that Wickes had encouraged such pitiless distancing as a kind of depersonalization designed to help Rukeyser see clearly the part she played in the psychodramas that plagued her life?

None of these questions would have occurred to me had it not been for the fortuitous conversation with Rowena and her willingness to share with me a stunning find that she knew I would be interested in. This has not been the first time that a Rukeyser cohort shared with me a hunch or archival discovery that fundamentally affected my understanding of Rukeyser, enriching my inquiry or opening entirely new lines of thought. Such spontaneous acts of

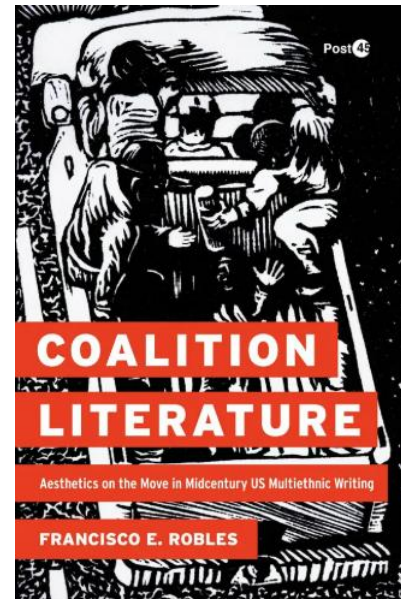
scholarly generosity create a climate favoring the sort of coincidental discoveries that might be called synchronicities, C. G. Jung's term for meaningful coincidences that are not logically or causally connected--chance happenings, fortuitous insights that can flourish among freely communicating human beings.

Rukeyser News

Eric Keenaghan's essay "Out of Alignment: Queer Modernism's Anarchist Legacy" has just been published in the open access book *Contemporary Queer Modernism* (2025), edited by Melanie Micir and published by Routledge. The essay, which features a discussion of the politics of Rukeyser's work, is available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781351234306-21/alignment-eric-keenaghan>

Francisco Robles's *Coalition Literature: Aesthetics on the Move in Midcentury US Multiethnic Writing* is now available from Stanford University Press. It includes a chapter on Rukeyser and Zora Neale Hurston. <https://www.sup.org/books/literary-studies-and-literature/coalition-literature>

Eleanor Careless's *Incarceration in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn: Serve Your Own Sentence* (Bloomsbury Press, 2025) includes chapters on the poetry of the Spanish Civil War, the lyric legacy of the Holocaust, the dramatic transformation of Holloway prison in the 1970s, Mendelssohn's complex relationship with the Women's Liberation Movement, and her "poetics of abolition." Nancy Cunard, Muriel Rukeyser, and Denise Riley all play leading roles.



Since its inception, the Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive has served as a platform for the work of emergent scholars. **Lara Lee Meintjes's** essay "'this word, this power': Deixis and Muriel Rukeyser's Poetics of Witness in The Book of the Dead" is a recent addition. You can read it at: <https://murielrukeyser.org/2025/06/01/lara-meintjes-this-word-this-power-deixis-and-muriel-rukeyser-poetics-of-witness-in-the-book-of-the-dead/>

The Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive is looking for **guest bloggers**. Guest bloggers can do much to increase awareness of the website and of Rukeyser's work, which, in light of current events, is speaking with new urgency. Most of us, I imagine, find ourselves in exactly the position Rukeyser evokes in "Poem," "more or less insane" in the mornings when "The news ... pour[s] out of various devices / Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen." Blogs offer wonderfully capacious modes of mulling over difficult topics. They can raise questions without providing answers, be tentative, explorative, contentious. They can serve as springboard to other more formal writing. Please let us know if you are interested in writing a series of blogs on topics loosely related to Rukeyser.

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Blogs, etc.

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Photo Finds from Bill Rukeyser

Bill tells me he took these photos of his mother, with a newly purchased camera, sometime around 1969, “give or take a year,” while she visited him in Berkeley. Rukeyser would have been around 55 years of age at the time. Bill was elated to find these photos because he had thought them lost. “Since they weren’t for immediate publication, I don’t think there was any posing going on. She was her natural self (or as natural as possible with a camera so close.) The downside is that she didn’t get to choose her favored shots....”



William L. Rukeyser, c.1969

The *Rukeyser Biennial* is produced by the Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive at Eastern Michigan University. For contributions, corrections, questions, or suggestions, contact us at

<https://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/contact/>.

We thank Casey Hale for the design.