

Classic Poetry Series

George Bradley

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

A Poet in the Kitchen

West Fifty-third was still Hell's Kitchen
the summer I first came to town,
Eleventh Avenue was boarded up,
the West Side Drive was falling down;
Jimmy Carter was still President,
though he'd become a running joke;
Abe Beame had recently been Mayor,
and New York City was flat broke.
I, too, was broke, the flat was free,
and so I landed in that place,
a walk-up three-room shotgun which
a gallery used for storage space
and where I could stay as long as I liked,
provided I kept an eye on the art . . .
but truth be told, it was hard to tell
where art might end and garbage start.
The premises hadn't been cleaned in years,
and clarity was not what the art was about--
there was clutter right up to the ceiling,
and I didn't dare throw anything out.
The bowl of pasta off in a corner,
the wall stuck here and there with pins,
might be a mural by Dike Blair
or an "installation" of Mel Chin's;
ink spilled across come binder paper,
pencil hashmarks by the phone,
might be a Vollmer, or a Tuttle,
or just a doodle by no one known;
a length of two-by-four was art;
and empty carton was art, too;
so was a hole in the plaster, where
an embalmed cockroach was on view.
There wasn't any inventory
and no way not to be impressed
with the thought that passing judgment
would be trickier than I'd guessed.
The entryway was the room in the back,
where a bathtub clogged the floor,
and a toilet filled an adjacent closet
left unencumbered by a door.
The entrance also served as the kitchen,
with no space, but with a range
on which I cooked whatever fare
I'd scraped together with spare change:
mashed potatoes drowned in ketchup,
kidney beans boiled in the can,
onions, pizza crust, and lettuce
chopped up with Crisco in a pan.
The middle room, which had no windows,
held a mattress, though no bed,
and what I hoped were only scattered
books I took a chance and read.

The room up front looked out on a lot,
and I used to sit for hours and stare
at days of 1979
from a Day-Glo painted chair,
contemplating a state of affairs
that appeared to be falling apart,
acquiring the taste for odd interiors
it takes to dwell in the House of Art.
I see myself then, learning to view
this world with a noncommittal eye:
the Russians are in Afghanistan,
stagflation is at an all-time high;
outside, the Iranian revolution
is in its first chaotic year;
inside, a poet's in the kitchen
washing won-tons down with beer.

George Bradley

At The Other End Of The Telescope

the people are very small and shrink,
dwarves on the way to netsuke hell
bound for a flea circus in full
retreat toward sub-atomic particles--
 difficult to keep in focus, the figures
at that end are nearly indistinguishable,
generals at the heads of minute armies
differing little from fishwives,
emperors the same as eskimos
huddled under improvisations of snow--
 eskimos, though, now have the advantage,
for it seems to be freezing there, a climate
which might explain the population's
outré dress, their period costumes
of felt and silk and eiderdown,
their fur concoctions stuffed with straw
held in place with flexible strips of bark,
and all to no avail, the midgets forever
stamping their match-stick feet,
blowing on the numb flagella of their fingers--
 but wait, bring a light, clean the lens....
can it be those shivering arms are waving,
are trying to attract attention, hailing you?
seen from the other end of the telescope,
your eye must appear enormous,
must fill the sky like a sun,
and as you occupy their tiny heads
naturally they wish to communicate,
to tell you of their diminishing perspective--
 yes, look again, their hands are cupped
around the pinholes of their mouths,
their faces are swollen, red with effort;
why, they're screaming fit to burst,
though what they say is anybody's guess,
it is next to impossible to hear them,
and most of them speak languages
for which no Rosetta stone can be found--
 but listen harder, use your imagination....
the people at the other end of the telescope,
are they trying to tell you their names?
yes, surely that must be it, their names
and those of those they love, and possibly
something else, some of them.... listen....
the largest are struggling to explain
what befell them, how it happened
that they woke one morning as if adrift,
their moorings cut in the night,
and were swept out over the horizon,
borne on an ebbing tide and soon
to be discernible only as distance,
collapsed into mirage, made to become
legendary creatures now off every map.

George Bradley