

Classic Poetry Series

George Bradley

- poems -

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George Bradley (1953)

George Bradley is an American poet, editor, and fiction writer whose work is characterized by formal structure, humor, and satirical narrative.

Life

He attended the Hill School, Yale University, and the University of Virginia. His poems have appeared in the New Yorker, Poetry Magazine, New England Review, The New Republic, the Paris Review. In 1998 he edited The Yale Younger Poets Anthology, which traced the history of the first poetry series in America from its inception in 1919 to 1997. The critic Peter Davison praised this anthology in the Atlantic Monthly for uncovering an important chapter of American literary history: Bradley "introduces each selection with a brief identification of its author, and prefaces his anthology with introductory matter amounting to nearly a hundred pages of graceful, witty, and discriminating prose that combines aesthetic perception, historical understanding, and publishing shrewdness. The result is a book that illuminates the recesses between artists, audiences, public taste, and the history of American publication."

Awards

1985 Yale Younger Poets Series, selected by James Merrill
The Witter Bynner Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters
The Peter I. B. Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets

Works:

"The Fire Fetched Down", Poetry Foundation
Terms To Be Met. Yale University Press. 1986. ISBN 9780300035995.
Of the Knowledge of Good and Evil Knopf (1991)
The Fire Fetched Down Knopf (1996) ISBN 978-0-679-44620-0
Some Assembly Required. A.A. Knopf. 2001. ISBN 9780375411953.
A Few of Her Secrets. Waywiser Press (U.K. and U.S.A.). 2011. ISBN 9781904130420.

<I>Anthologies</I>

James Tate, David Lehman, ed. (1997). The Best American Poetry 1997. Simon and Schuster. ISBN 9780684814520.
Billy Collins, ed. (2003). Poetry 180: a turning back to poetry. Random House Trade Paperbacks. ISBN 9780812968873.
George Bradley, ed. (1998). The Yale younger poets anthology. Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300074734.
Laura Furman, ed. (2010)., ed. (2010). The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories, The

Best Stories of the Year.. Anchor Books/Random House.. ISBN
9780307472366.

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

Electrocuting an Elephant

Her handlers, dressed in vests and flannel pants,
Step forward in the weak winter light
Leading a behemoth among elephants,
Topsy, to another exhibition site;
Caparisoned with leather bridle,
Six impassive tons of carnival delight
Shambles on among spectators who sidle
Nervously off, for the brute has killed
At least three men, most recently an idle
Hanger-on at shows, who, given to distilled
Diversions, fed her a live cigar.
Since become a beast of burden, Topsy thrilled
The crowds in her palmy days, and soon will star
Once more, in an electrocution,
Which incident, though it someday seem bizarre,
Is now a new idea in execution.

Topsy has been fed an unaccustomed treat,
A few carrots laced with cyanide,
And copper plates have been fastened to her feet,
Wired to cables running off on either side;
She stamps two times in irritation,
Then waits, for elephants, having a thick hide,
Know how to be patient. The situation
Seems dreamlike, till someone throws a switch,
And the huge body shakes for the duration
Of five or six unending seconds, in which
Smoke rises and Topsy's trunk contracts
And twelve thousand mammoth pounds finally pitch
To earth, as the current breaks and all relax.
It is a scene shot with shades of grey—
The smoke, the animal, the reported facts—
On a seasonably grey and gloomy day.

Would you care to see any of that again?
See it as many times as you please,
For an electrician, Thomas Edison,
Has had a bright idea we call the movies,
And called on for monitory spark,
Has preserved it all in framed transparencies
That are clear as day, for all the day is dark.
You might be amused on second glance
To note the background—it's an amusement park!—
A site on Coney Island where elephants
Are being used in the construction,
And where Topsy, through a keeper's negligence,
Got loose, causing some property destruction,
And so is shown to posterity,
A study in images and conduction,
Sunday, January 4th, 1903.

George Bradley

The Sound of the Sun

It makes one all right, though you hadn't thought of it,
A sound like the sound of the sky on fire, like Armageddon,
Whistling and crackling, the explosions of sunlight booming
As the huge mass of gas rages into the emptiness around it.
It isn't a sound you are often aware of, though the light speeds
To us in seconds, each dawn leaping easily across a chasm
Of space that swallows the sound of that sphere, but
If you listen closely some morning, when the sun swells
Over the horizon and the world is still and still asleep,
You might hear it, a faint noise so far inside your mind
That it must come from somewhere, from light rushing to darkness,
Energy burning towards entropy, towards a peaceful solution,
Burning brilliantly, spontaneously, in the middle of nowhere,
And you, too, must make a sound that is somewhat like it,
Though that, of course, you have no way of hearing at all.

George Bradley

Where the Blue Begins

In the southern Adriatic, where the blue begins,
We came to rest awhile and play
On sun-drenched islands known as Tremiti,
Where the breeze blows fresh
And pine trees shiver and the salt sea
Washes the likes of you and me,
In the southern Adriatic, in the wind-blown spray.
In the bluest water, just where it begins,
We came to play awhile, came to rest
On rocky shores of barren coves,
As the swells arrived and water splashed
And reflected sunlight jumped and shimmered
Among the cliffs and overhangs and grottoes,
In the Adriatic, where that sort of thing begins.
In the clear blue water that the swells bring by
Out of the sunny Adriatic Sea,
We came to rest and play and bathe ourselves,
As the pine trees swayed on the bluffs above
And wind dispersed the salt sea spray,
In the sunny Adriatic, where a way of life begins.
We came seeking an immersion, to find ourselves
In waters clear enough to fathom
A bottom profoundly blue, to see it seemed
All the way to Greece or any other site
That water washed as well or sun could so ignite,
Came to see ourselves in a world of dreams,
That words might furnish what place implies,
That place might finish what a word begins.
We came seeking clearest water, sunniest sky,
Came, you and I, to see what would be seen
Immersed in waters consummately blue,
In sunlit swells that carried their dark secret,
Tiny hosts known as meduse, whose fragile arms
Glanced and stung and burned all day
And raised the blush that blossomed on our skins,
Aggravated by the sun and spray,
By our own attempts to hold each other,
As we swam out of ourselves and were swept away,
In the southern Adriatic, where the blue begins.

George Bradley