

Classic Poetry Series

Grace Paley

- 13 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Grace Paley (11 December 1922 – 22 August 2007)

Grace Paley was an American-Jewish short story writer, poet, and political activist.

Biography

Grace Paley (née Goodside) was born in the Bronx to Isaac and Manya Ridnyik Goodside, who anglicized the family name from Gutseit on immigrating from Ukraine. Her father was a doctor. The family spoke Russian and Yiddish along with English. The youngest of the three Goodside children (sixteen and fourteen years younger than brother and sister Victor and Jeanne, respectively), Paley was a tomboy as a child.

In 1938 and 1939, Paley attended Hunter College, then, briefly New York University, but never received a degree. In the early 1940s, Paley studied with W. H. Auden at the New School for Social Research. Auden's social concern and his heavy use of irony is often cited as an important influence on her early work, particularly her poetry. On June 20, 1942, Grace Goodside married cinematographer Jess Paley, and had two children, Nora (1949-) and Danny (1951-). They later divorced. In 1972 Paley married fellow poet (and author of the Nghsi-Altai series) Robert Nichols.

She taught at Sarah Lawrence College. In 1980, she was elected to the National Academy of Arts and Letters and in 1989, Governor Mario Cuomo made her the first official New York State Writer. She was the Vermont State Poet Laureate from March 5, 2003 until July 25, 2007. She died at home in Thetford, Vermont at the age of 84 of breast cancer. In a May 2007 interview with Vermont Woman newspaper – one of her last – Paley said of her dreams for her grandchildren: "It would be a world without militarism and racism and greed – and where women don't have to fight for their place in the world."

Academic Career

Paley taught writing at Sarah Lawrence College from 1966 to 1989, and helped to found the Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York in 1967. She also taught at Columbia University, Syracuse University and the City College of New York. Paley summarized her view of teaching during a symposium on "Educating the Imagination" sponsored by the Teachers & Writers Collaborative in 1996:

"Our idea," Paley said, "was that children—by writing, by putting down words, by reading, by beginning to love literature, by the inventiveness of listening to one another—could begin to understand the world better and to make a better world for themselves. That always seemed to me such a

natural idea that I've never understood why it took so much aggressiveness and so much time to get it started!"

Political Activism

Paley was known for pacifism and for political activism. She wrote about the complexities of women's and men's lives and advocated for what she said was the betterment of life for everyone. In the 1950s, Paley joined friends in protesting nuclear proliferation and American militarization. She also worked with the American Friends Service Committee to establish neighborhood peace groups, through which she met her husband Robert Nichols.

With the escalation of the Vietnam War, Paley joined the War Resisters League. In 1968, she signed the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War, and in 1969 she came to national prominence as an activist when she accompanied a peace mission to Hanoi to negotiate the release of prisoners of war. She served as a delegate to the 1974 World Peace Conference in Moscow and, in 1978, was arrested as one of "The White House Eleven" for unfurling an anti-nuclear banner (that read "No Nuclear Weapons—No Nuclear Power—USA and USSR") on the White House lawn.

Writings

After a number of rejections, Paley published her first collection, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959) with Doubleday. The collection features eleven stories of New York life, several of which have since been widely anthologized, particularly "Goodbye and Good Luck" and "The Used-Boy Raisers." The collection introduces the semi-autobiographical character "Faith Darwin" (in "The Used-Boy Raisers" and "A Subject of Childhood"), who later appears in six stories of *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* and ten of *Later the Same Day*. Though as a story collection by an unknown author, the book was not widely reviewed, those who did review it (including Philip Roth and *The New Yorker* book page) tended to rate the stories highly. Despite its initial lack of publicity, *The Little Disturbances of Man* went on to build a sufficient following for it to be reissued by Viking Press in 1968.

Goodbye and Good Luck was adapted as a musical by Mabel Thomas (book), Muriel Robinson (lyrics) and David Friedman (music) in 1989 and is currently being reworked.

Following the success of *Little Disturbances of Man*, Paley's publisher encouraged her to write a novel. After several years of tinkering with drafts, Paley went back to short fiction. With the aid of Donald Barthelme, she assembled a second collection of fiction in 1974, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. This collection of seventeen stories features several recurring characters from *Little Disturbances of Man* (most notably the narrator "Faith," but also including Johnny Raferty and his mother), while continuing Paley's exploration of racial, gender, and class issues. The long story, "Faith in a Tree," positioned roughly at the center of the collection, brings a number of characters and themes from the stories together on a Saturday afternoon at the park. Faith, the narrator, climbs a tree to get a broader perspective on both her neighbors and the "man-wide world" and, after encountering several war protesters, declares a new social and political commitment. The collection's shifting narrative voice, metafictional qualities, and fragmented, incomplete plots have led most critics to classify it as a postmodernist work.

Paley continues the stories of Faith and her neighbors in the *Later the Same Day* (1985). All three volumes were gathered in her *1994 Collected Stories*, which was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Awards and Recognition

Paley's honors include a 1961 Guggenheim Fellowship for Fiction, the Edith Wharton Award (1983), the Rea Award for the Short Story (1993), the Vermont Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts (1993), and the Jewish Cultural Achievement Award for Literary Arts (1994). In 1988, American

composer Christian Wolff set eight poems from *Leaning Forward* (1985) for soprano, bass-baritone, clarinet/bass-clarinet, and cello.

Documentary

A documentary film entitled "*Grace Paley: Collected Shorts*" (2009), directed by Lily Rivlin, was presented at the Woodstock International Film Festival and other festivals in 2010. The film contains interviews with Paley and friends, footage of her political activities, and readings from her fiction and poetry.

Works:

The Little Disturbances of Man (short stories, 1959)
A Subject of Childhood and a conversation with the author in *New sounds in American fiction* editor Gordon Lish (1969)
Enormous Changes at the Last Minute (short stories, 1974)
Later the Same Day (short stories, 1985)
Leaning Forward (poetry, 1985)
365 Reasons Not to Have Another War (with Vera Williams, nonfiction, War Resisters League 1989 Peace Calendar 1989)
Long Walks and Intimate Talks (stories and poems, 1991)
New and Collected Poems (1992)
The Collected Stories (1994)
Just As I Thought (semiautobiographical collection of articles, reports, and talks, 1998)
Begin Again: Collected Poems (2000)
Fidelity (2008), posthumous

Autumn

1

What is sometimes called a
tongue of flame
or an arm extended burning
is only the long
red and orange branch of
a green maple
in early September reaching
into the greenest field
out of the green woods at the
edge of which the birch trees
appear a little tattered tired
of sustaining delicacy
all through the hot summer re-
minding everyone (in
our family) of a Russian
song a story
by Chekhov or my father

2

What is sometimes called a
tongue of flame
or an arm extended burning
is only the long
red and orange branch of
a green maple
in early September reaching
into the greenest field
out of the green woods at the
edge of which the birch trees
appear a little tattered tired
of sustaining delicacy
all through the hot summer re-
minding everyone (in
our family) of a Russian
song a story by
Chekhov or my father on
his own lawn standing
beside his own wood in
the United States of
America saying (in Russian)
this birch is a lovely
tree but among the others
somehow superficial

from Long Walks and Intimate Talks by Grace Paley and Vera B. Williams. © 1991

Grace Paley

Hand Me Downs

My love rests on the couch
in the sweater and bones of old age

I have stopped reading to look at him I take
his hand I am shawled in my own somewhat
wrinkled still serviceable skin

No one knows what to do with these
hand-me-downs love them I suppose

weren't they born in and out of
dignity by our mothers and
fathers even our children in
the grip of merciless genes will
wear these garments

may their old lovers greet and
touch them then in the bare light
of that last beauty

Grace Paley

Here

Here I am in the garden laughing
an old woman with heavy breasts
and a nicely mapped face

how did this happen
well that's who I wanted to be

at last a woman
in the old style sitting
stout thighs apart under
a big skirt grandchild sliding
on off my lap a pleasant
summer perspiration

that's my old man across the yard
he's talking to the meter reader
he's telling him the world's sad story
how electricity is oil or uranium
and so forth I tell my grandson
run over to your grandpa ask him
to sit beside me for a minute I
am suddenly exhausted by my desire
to kiss his sweet explaining lips.

Grace Paley

One Day

One day lying on my stomach in the afternoon trying to sleep

I suffered penis envy (much to

my surprise

and with no belief in Freud for years

in fact extreme

antipathy) what could I do but turn around

and close my eyes and dream of summer

in those days I

was a boy I whistled

at the gate for Tom.

Then I woke up

then I slept

and dreamed another dream

in my drowned father's empty pocket

there were nine dollars and the salty sea

he said I know you my darling girl

you're the one that's me

Grace Paley

One Day I Decided

One day I decided to not grow any older
lots of luck I said to myself
(my joking self) then I looked up at the sky
which is wide its blueness its whiteness

low on my left the steamy sun rose moved

I placed my hand against it my whole hand
which is broad from pinky to thumb
my two hands I bared my teeth to it my teeth
are strong secure on their gold posts
I breathed deeply I held my breath
I stood on my toes

then I was taller still the clouds sailed
through me around me it's true I'm just
like them summertime water that the sun
sips and spits into this guzzling earth

Grace Paley

People in my Family

In my family
people who were eighty-two were very different
from people who were ninety-two

The eighty-two-year-old people grew up
it was 1914
this is what they knew
WarWorld WarWar

That's why when they speak to the child
they say
poor little one . . .

The ninety-two-year-old people remember
it was the year 1905
they went to prison
they went into exile
they saidahsoon

When they speak to the grandchild
they say
yesthere will be revolution
then there will be revolutionthen
once morethen the earth itself
will turn and turn and cry outoh I
have been made sick

then youmy little bud
must flower and save it

Grace Paley

Reading the Newspapers at the Village Store

this morning
the hills rolled over
in mist the hot
watermaking sun
steamed into
the tight wet elbows of
the valley daily dutiful sun
mocking my pessimism in
this world's year
and one man spoke

cyclones earthquakes landslides floods
what nature doesn't do
to those poor countries in the
places where those people live
and look at this aren't they
always warring on each other
murdering and maiming one
another without mercy?

the other man replied
it was in the morning paper
a couple of months ago
we came upon those very people
and slaughtered them from up high
and maimed them in their hills
and valleys and their dry desert
places caught them morning and
night whether the sun was
blessing or burning the green skin
off their farms outside
we caught them those people
in their dangerous
geographical places

No No the first man cried
above them the sun as usual
stood still the other man
said Ah! then holding tight
to earth's thin coat they fell
toward night the little death
of mild habitual murderers

Grace Paley

The Boy His Mother

she said
you were a wonderful boy this evening
at a dinner among friends so attentive so
grown up the boy's heart oh his ribs
may crack with happiness he runs dangerously
out into the street calling come come every-
body it's this way we're going this way he turns
wants to look up into her face come Mother she
laughs and follows but there's no help his eyes
are tipped with tears

in only
a few birthdays love will find his whole body
beat at his skin to get out out his knees
weakened he bows his head kneels
before the other a girl love-threaded
as he has been begging relief

Grace Paley

The Poet's Occasional Alternative

I was going to write a poem
I made a pie instead it took
about the same amount of time
of course the pie was a final
draft a poem would have some
distance to go days and weeks and
much crumpled paper

the pie already had a talking
tumbling audience among small
trucks and a fire engine on
the kitchen floor

everybody will like this pie
it will have apples and cranberries
dried apricots in it many friends
will say why in the world did you
make only one

this does not happen with poems

because of unreportable
sadnesses I decided to
settle this morning for a re-
sponsive eatership I do not
want to wait a week a year a
generation for the right
consumer to come along

Grace Paley

This Life

My friend tells me
a man in my house jumped off the roof
the roof is the eighth floor of this building
the roof door was locked how did he manage?
his girlfriend had said goodbye I'm leaving
he was 22
his mother and father were hurrying
at that very moment
from upstate to help him move out of Brooklyn
they had heard about the girl

the people who usually look up
and call jump jump did not see him
the life savers who creep around the back staircases
and reach the roof's edge just in time
never got their chance he meant it he wanted
only one person to know

did he imagine that she would grieve
all her young life away tell everyone
this boy I kind of lived with last year
he died on account of me

my friend was not interested he said you're always
inventing stuff what I want to know how could he throw
his life away how do these guys do it
just like that and here I am fighting this
ferocious insane vindictive virus day and
night day and night and for what? for only
one thing this life this life

Grace Paley

Walking in the Woods

That's when I saw the old maple
a couple of its thick arms cracked
one arm reclining half rotted
into earth black with the delicious
hospitality of rot to the
littlest creatures

the tree not really dying living
less widely green head high
above the other leaf-crowded
trees a terrible stretch to sun
just to stay alive but if you've
liked life you do it

Grace Paley

When I Was Asked How I Could Leave Vermont in the Middle of October

I did not want to be dependent on autumn
I wanted to miss it for once drop into
another latitude where it wasn't so
well known I wanted to show that beauty
can be held in the breath just as we breathe
grief and betrayal they don't always
have to be happening in the living minute

Look there it is now our own golden
wine-colored world-famous Vermont fall green
as summer to begin with and then the sunny
morning draws mist out of the cold night river
the maples are sweetened there's a certain
skipped beat a scalding as you live that
loyal countryside ablaze trembling
toward its long winter nobody should have
to bear all that death-determined beauty
every single year this aging body knows
it can't be borne

Grace Paley

Words

What has happened?
language eludes me
the nice specifying
words of my life fail
when I call

Ah says a friend
dried up no doubt
on the desiccated
twigs in the swamp
of the skull like
a lake where the
water level has been
shifted by highways
a couple of miles off

Another friend says
No no my dear perhaps
you are only meant to
speak more plainly

Grace Paley