

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Grace Paley**  
**- poems -**

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# 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!"

### <b>Political Activism</b>

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.

### <b>Writings</b>

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.

### **<b>Awards and Recognition</b>**

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.

### **<b>Documentary</b>**

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.

# 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  
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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



# On Mother's Day

I went out walking  
in the old neighborhood

Look! more trees on the block  
forget-me-nots all around them  
ivy   lantana shining  
and geraniums in the window

Twenty years ago  
it was believed that the roots of trees  
would insert themselves into gas lines  
then fall   poisoned   on houses and children

or tap the city's water pipes   starved  
for nitrogen   obstruct the sewers

In those days in the afternoon I floated  
by ferry to Hoboken or Staten Island  
then pushed the babies in their carriages  
along the river wall   observing Manhattan  
See Manhattan I cried   New York!  
even at sunset it doesn't shine  
but stands in fire   charcoal to the waist

But this Sunday afternoon on Mother's Day  
I walked west   and came to Hudson Street   tricolored flags  
were flying over old oak furniture for sale  
brass bedsteads   copper pots and vases  
by the pound from India

Suddenly before my eyes   twenty-two transvestites  
in joyous parade stuffed pillows under  
their lovely gowns  
and entered a restaurant  
under a sign which said   All Pregnant Mothers Free

I watched them place napkins over their bellies  
and accept coffee and zabaglione

I am especially open to sadness and hilarity  
since my father died as a child  
one week ago in this his ninetieth year

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 no 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 ah

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 dropp 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