

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Amanda J. Bradley: Four Poems

Amanda J. Bradley · Thursday, November 9th, 2023

Mina Loy in the Bowery, 1950

While much of the country started nuclear families under nuclear threat, buying ranch houses in the suburbs and towns, bouncing about in poodle skirts and pony tails, listening to Elvis rob black culture, you found objects to deify, purple flourishes to spring words from prisons of page, of mind, of grief.

Before Blondie, David Byrne, and Joey Ramone smacked out their punk rock anthems at CBGB's, way before piles of po mo architecture displayed hip art at the New Museum, you crunched out poems about your neighbors: drunk mystics, derelict angels. You made trash art on the Bowery, deemed Mama Mina by your erratic neighbors whose empties you stepped over – soon to become baggies of the strung out and tattooed, eventually to be swept up by sidewalk cafes with biscotti, macchiatos.

You were kind, but it was your savagery they admired, your relentless living on, making art in the thick of anonymity, making poems in the gutter, adoring the scenery.

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At a Hotel in Scranton, Sunday in December

I made my commute from New York early,
to beat the snowstorm and assure I am
in class tomorrow morning. The agenda?
Remind rural students why
reading matters – one of a few

things I believe. I have been alone
with my students' thoughts all day, grading,
the heater kicking on and off, heavy
socks and sweater, nibbling cheese
and crackers in silence, alone.

I realize I have spent much of my life
this way – alone with students' thoughts,
reading in silence, commenting in ways
I hope will help the world.

I step outside for a smoke. The air
assaults my lungs. I adjust
to the temperature, the ambiance
of giant snowflakes falling, deepening
the silence. I see an orange goldfish
miraculously skittering across the ice
at my feet. Before I can wonder how,
where, I realize it's only a fallen leaf.
Still, how beautiful, how orange.

*

Grandma's Realization

The first time Grandma told me the story,
it was a drunken escapade like the one
I had just rattled myself out of – boys and girls
sneaking off to drain bottles of illicit booze
in the woods, under the stars.
I imagined them twirling, arms wide,
falling on leaves in upheavals of laughter.

The next time she told the story,
it was a cautionary tale about trouble-making
girlfriends like Stella, my grandma's
mischievous pal who always landed her
in danger. A shadow swept her eyes as she
recalled this time the part where the boys
had abandoned her drunk on the doorstep.
Her mother had been furious.

Years later, my grandma agreed, yes, siblings do
forge special relationships, like the time
her sister Violet helped her get inside and cleaned up,
helped her calm their hysterical mother when she
came home late and drunk, left on the doorstep
by her friends, Stella and some boys.

By the time she was eighty, Grandma found
the words for what happened that night:
“I was raped,” she said. “Stella and I had gone
out with some boys to the woods. We had
whiskey from a bottle. I came to on the doorstep
of my house, blood on my underpants and dress.
Violet helped me in. Mom was beside herself.
They cleaned me and nursed me and said,
so that someone would still marry me, we will
pretend this never happened. We won’t speak of this.”

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K-Mart Reveries

Working as a cashier at K-Mart in my late teens,
I spent most of my shifts worrying that the manager,
twenty years my senior, from my other job
would show up again with a dozen roses for me.
I also worried that my co-workers would think
me a snob because I sat in the orange cafeteria booths
and read novels during my breaks or because this was
a summer job for me, before college, where many
of them had not had the fortune to go. And maybe
I was a snob because I imagined them as characters
in the novels I would write someday about the plight
of the working stiff, but then I also imagined my mom
as the suburban housewife of my novels, my friends
as the quirky teens I would understand from a lofty
perspective in ten years and say poignant things about
in my bildungsroman. One day, I called the manager
to my register to correct my mistake. I needed her
to delete an item I had rung up twice. Throwing my voice
over the din of bips and boops of scanned items in
nearby aisles, over the snaps of pages of *Vogue* being
flipped violently by women with vacant eyes in line,
waiting their turns, their kids hitting each other in the carts.
“Void!” I cried over it all so my manager could hear me.
The man in line to buy deodorant, a pack of gum,
some cigarettes raised his head from its concentrated
focus on the floor to say, “I have a void in my life, too,
but I don’t have to yell about it.”

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