

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Amanda J. Bradley: Three Poems

Amanda J. Bradley · Sunday, November 16th, 2025

How It All Started

At fifteen, Leah and I tagged along with her older sister to my first house party. No adults. A girl answered the door in a bra. Kids mingled with fruity Bartles & Jaymes coolers in their hands. *Licensed to Ill* blared from a stereo somewhere. I found myself situated at a table in the kitchen playing my first ever round of Quarters with some goodlooking guys. The longer we played, the more a new warmth crept through my body. I tossed my hair back, made sassy remarks, laughed loudly – unlike me around boys. Curious to move in this new body, I wandered into a room down the hall, plopped in an easy chair, tilted my head back, and noticed a ceiling fan. Its whirl-whir-whir mesmerized me. Lit up inside but calm, I felt gloriously apathetic. I didn't care about much of anything. I didn't realize then this would be the feeling I would chase for the rest of my life, reaching and passing it over and over again until pieces of me disintegrated, comforting whirl a distant memory.

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“Am I beaten or proud?”

~Steve Henn, from “The Deer”

With belts, switches from trees, school paddles,
children are beaten. In the news on the radio,
one child found locked in a closet in a wheelchair,
skin of arms and legs covered in cigarette burns.

Teaching Roethke's poem “My Papa's Waltz”
for decades demonstrated how beating has changed
in our time. Twenty years ago, students understood
the poem's happy childhood memory of waltzing

recklessly on his father's feet about the house,
 annoying Mom in the wake. Now, students prove
 more interested in the undertones of abuse
 and alcoholism implied in the diction: whiskey
 on breath, battered, scraped, beat, like death.

Freud discussed how "a child is being beaten"
 percolates as a rampant fantasy in humans.
 How troubling. And yet, it does strike at a crux
 of things, no? Innocence and violence against it.

I knew I would do it all wrong, could not bear
 to bring life into this society, all its weird pressures
 to do ridiculous things. I might have waltzed
 recklessly with my child, too, might have hung
 like death on her words, scraped advice from
 a battered corner of my mind. I did not want
 to find out the ways I'd harm my child by chance.

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A Toast to Dylan Thomas

I thought of you and your death so young, thirty-nine,
 when they tore down St. Vincent's Hospital. Everyone
 thinks of you at Whitehorse Tavern, famously your
 favorite watering hole. You fed the image of yourself
 as a drunken, condemned poet, wearing that mantle
 like a royal robe. Biographers squabble over whether
 you drank yourself to death. Tiffs aside, it contributed.
 I used to teach your villanelle, asking students if the son
 addressing his dying father gives sound advice when
 he urges "Do not go gentle into that good night /
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Some
 found the advice exactly right, to go down fighting
 the only way to go. Others suggested it was selfish,
 more for grieving son than dying father. Berryman
 was at your side as you were dying. If anyone could
 understand your draw to alcohol, it was him.
 So depressed and sick of his demons, he jumped
 off a bridge in Minneapolis. My suicide attempt
 would have worked had I lived alone, had my husband
 not worked as a paramedic earlier in life. What is it
 with us drunk poets who sometimes want to die?
 Sylvia Plath gassed herself in the kitchen. Anne Sexton
 with carbon monoxide in a car. Randall Jarrell stepped
 in front of a car. Hart Crane jumped off a ship.
 Vladimir Mayakovsky shot himself. Sara Teasdale

took sleeping pills. Are we going gentle or raging against
when we take death in our hands? I had a professor
who claimed to admire the poets for their ambition.
I do, too. Perhaps you got it right in your other
famous poem: "Though lovers be lost love shall not /
And death shall have no dominion." Perhaps our
realizations take root, and we must pluck them free.

(Featured image from [Pexels](#))

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