

In April 2013, Anis Shivani interviewed poet Amanda J. Bradley. Part of the interview appeared in *The Huffington Post* on April 29, 2013. Below is the interview in its entirety.

SHIVANI: I enjoyed your new book tremendously, in large part because of the sense of playfulness, the sheer joy at being alive that comes across without being maudlin or sentimental. It's something very rare in poetry these days, where the default mode is grief, often unearned, often disproportionate to the level of one's individual suffering. Was your poetry always like this? Why is it difficult to write poetry that's proportionate and balanced and measured? To what aesthetic tradition do you feel you most strongly belong?

BRADLEY: Perhaps there is a tendency in some circles today toward overwrought seriousness, but there's a long, rich tradition in poetry of playfulness and comedy. Even just in the Anglo-American tradition, think of Chaucer whose *Canterbury Tales* are at times a riot, and, of course, in Shakespeare's sonnets, we find the playfulness of "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." Marvell is highly amusing as he satirizes Charles II's courtiers, and this strain continues right into twentieth-century America with Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara and so on. Life dealt me some rough blows in my twenties and early thirties, and my poetry from that era reflects that. I have a strong melancholic streak, but I also do love being alive. The former was the stronger impulse in my young adult years, though, I must admit. Actually, my favorite thing about aging so far has been the emotional maturity that comes with it. I recognize now that obstacles and setbacks don't mean the end of the world. In my opinion, that's what makes one's poetry more proportionate to one's reality, more balanced – an emotional and intellectual maturity that most people simply do not have at a young age. On the other hand, I adore some poetry by certain young poets such as Rimbaud and Thomas Chatterton, who only wrote as young men, and Percy Shelley I enjoy precisely for his disproportionate emotional response to the world. He was over the top in many respects, and there's a place for that in poetry, too, in my opinion. It is difficult to locate myself within a particular aesthetic tradition. It would have to be a distinctively American tradition, I would think, and it would have to include Emily Dickinson, maybe Wallace Stevens, Plath. It would have something to do with a poetry of ideas and occasional humor, perhaps, whomever all that may include.

SHIVANI: Why did you choose *Oz at Night* as the title of the book? Was it to emphasize the strange combination of innocence and fantasy that lends the book its quirkiness? I love these lines of whimsy from the title poem: "Would Kandinsky love the colors of Oz / or would he find them banal, scattered, suffused?" The poem "Growing Up with Star Wars" conveys to me the same desire to hold on to innocence.

BRADLEY: "Oz at Night" is far from my favorite poem in the collection, but I felt the title best captured the flavor of the book overall. Oz to me connotes fantasy, as you say, yes, and a sense of wonder or awe at life. I never cease to be amazed by how I never cease to be amazed by life! There's always something unpredictable about the way life unravels, always something new and exciting lurking around the bend. I repeatedly try to control the directions my life will go, but then I'm amused by how I never really can. The night of the title to me lends the darkness and fear that run throughout the book. For example, I'm fascinated by why, from a philosophical stance, bad things have to happen. That is to say, if I were to create the world, why would I choose to make bad things happen? We're all, I think, at some point, posed the notion that we couldn't understand good if there were no bad to contrast it. This idea fascinates me, as well as the questions surrounding to what extent we have free will which requires decision-making which requires diachronic time or history. There's a dark side to probing these kinds of questions; these kinds of questions can lead people to scary places. But then in those dark corners we

are startled by a new idea or we experience *déjà vu* from encountering an old idea at the end of a new path, and the awe kicks in again. Living in the world of ideas is sort of like living in the fantastical Oz – at night.

SHIVANI: Who taught you the most about poetry? Also were there influences or teachings you had to shed in order to emerge into your true poetic self? What was your best preparation in terms of allowing yourself to express your unique voice?

BRADLEY: Mary Kinzie taught me the most about poetry hands down. She headed up the undergraduate creative writing program at Northwestern University when I was there in the 1990s, and she was one tough cookie. In the first course I took with her, half the class dropped by the end of the first week because they were terrified of her. I recall one student hiding in the bushes to get away from her. She truly inspired fear and among a high caliber of students. Everyone was the high school valedictorian or close to it at Northwestern, and they didn't balk at challenges. But they did balk at Kinzie's class. I recall being reduced to tears in one of her classes, but I stuck it out. It was well worth every ounce of flesh. She taught us everything there is to know about prosody. She taught us scores of literary terms, and she made damn sure we understood them completely and could demonstrate lucidly that we did. I learned how important the literary tradition is from her and how important precision and clarity are in every type of writing, including poetry. To find my true poetic voice, I think I had to shed the sense that I could only write when I was feeling down. My journal is full of entries about all the little tragedies along the way because I tended to write in my journal and to write poetry when I was morose, but somewhere along the way, really only a few years ago, I realized I could write poems on command and that I could write poems when I was seeing life in a positive light. I could write poems in response to things I was reading, and I could write poems when I was just bored or had the time. With prose writing, that's always been more clear to me, but less so with poetry.

SHIVANI: You write in "Art Lessons": "Today, my faith / in the importance of art is slipping." Why do you have this feeling, and how do you overcome it? I'm thinking of another poem later in the book, "Commodity Trading," where you seem to comment on the way so much poetry these days shamelessly (capitalistically) trades on the essentials of personhood.

BRADLEY: I question art's relevance quite simply because it does little to end human suffering on a large scale. Sure, art affects its readers or viewers or listeners and improves their lives and sensibilities, but those are very first world, very privileged lives. I actually feel quite guilty that I do not do more for the causes of education and women's rights, for example. Along with the issue that we're destroying the planet, these two issues seem to me extremely important for striking at the root of many evils. Educated countries that treat their women well do a lot of other things right, too. These things seem to go hand in hand. So in a way, I guess art maintains its importance because it is one of the things we become educated about, one of the things that broadens our intellectual horizons enough to feel the empathy that is so very crucial to living together well and with kindness. The poem "Commodity Trading" addresses another, but related problem which is capitalism's habit of eating away at our kindness and our very identity. We care so much about commodifying and selling ourselves as media-packaged products these days -- on Facebook, on Instagram, on Twitter, and so on, that we risk losing sight of what truly matters. But I think that writing for readers inherently has the same problem. As writers, we mine our lives and our friends' and family members' lives for content and substance that we are essentially selling to readers in order to move them. The writer-reader relationship is both very intimate and emotional and very much a matter of persuasion or selling. We all have other ways to spend our time, so we have to be convinced to keep reading. There is a cynical and an idealistic way to look at the

writer-reader relationship, but today's market culture hyper-realizes the cynical way of seeing it, in my opinion.

SHIVANI: I love the design and subversion of "Upon Reading Berryman's Sonnets." It is here I note the beginning of what I find to be a very appealing feminist sensibility: not ideologically distorted in any way, but a frank awareness of reality, in both its positive and negative dimensions, and a cheerful willingness to learn and move forward. I find this extremely rare in today's poetry. Would you comment? I find "Home" particularly moving in the same vein.

BRADLEY: I feel like subversion is a central part of the core essence of who I am. I like to question and poke and criticize and very rarely do I just accept – well, anything – advice, ideas, a helping hand. When my father tried to teach me to ride a bike, I just couldn't get the hang of it, but then I took the bike out by myself and off I went. I tend to think of that tableau as a metaphor for how I learn, for how I am in the world: I'm always listening, observing, taking in very intently, but it will be alone on my own damn time and in my idiosyncratic way that I apply what I've taken in. So I guess what I'm getting at is that subversion comes very naturally to me. I think it must for most artists because an artist has to be an independent thinker, a bit of a lone wolf. As for my feminist sensibility, it used to be more pronounced, or perhaps, to borrow your word, more distorted. I used to wield my feminism like a sword, and it would be rare for anyone to have a conversation with me of any length in which it would not become abundantly apparent I was a hard core feminist. I fought with friends over it, lectured students about it. I think my stridence stemmed from two places: on the one hand, I wanted to be taken seriously for my mind and secondly, I was angry that I did not have as much freedom as men do in the world. I used to go for long walks by myself at four in the morning just to feel free, which was dangerous and stupid for a young woman. I was lucky nothing ever happened to me. Today, my feminism is more downplayed and subtle. I no longer doubt that people are spending time with me for my mind or spirit, and I no longer desire freedom as much as I used to. If anything, connection has become the more pressing need. We take for granted in our youth how fortunate we are to be surrounded by friends because eventually work and family get in the way, and it becomes more difficult to have the kinds of friends we had in high school or college. So I'm not surprised you see subversion and feminism working in tandem in my poetry because they are very big parts of me.

SHIVANI: "Dropping You Off at the Train Station" is a poem that permits its fear -- everyday fear, often unreasonable, often sourceless —into the interstices of desire. Can you talk about the nature of fear in ordinary life and how poetry combats or transcends it? I sense something of the same fear — or fear of inexplicable fear —in "Drinking Water," which doesn't bend, however, in an apocalyptic direction.

BRADLEY: "Dropping You Off at the Train Station" discusses a particular moment in a past relationship in which I realized what would ultimately not work about that relationship. In that moment of realizing he wasn't going to turn around effusively as he boarded the train, I felt my hopes dash a bit. Something in me clicked as I understood he didn't need me enough for my own expectations for a rewarding relationship. It took many years past that moment for the relationship to actually end, but it's good to look back and remember that I knew then that something wasn't right, even if just momentarily. I think writing poetry can help us work through emotions as we distill moments and ideas in metaphor and imagery, as we make the moments loom through vivid language. In a way, that writing process does indeed combat everyday fears. Any time you can untangle something that was once mysterious to you and explain it better for yourself, I think you combat personal fears. It makes you a little wiser. Similarly, reading poetry, which requires time and patience to do well, can help calm you down and reach an

almost meditative state of awareness. I don't meditate, but reading for me is a form of meditation, a time to be quiet and still and calm myself.

SHIVANI: At times you become exuberant as in "Fluorescence," where you write: "I am deliberately impaired. I could be / coming up with fabulous ideas: iPods, / digital cameras, in vitro fertilization, / screenplays, wireless, the slogan / 'Secret: strong enough for a woman.'" Slightly more subdued, but I think in the same vein, is the very playful "A Description of Kant's Categorical Imperative in a Women's Clothing Catalogue." What makes such poems appealing to you? Why don't we encounter such poems more frequently?

BRADLEY: When I think of exuberance in poetry, I think of Walt Whitman or William Blake or Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Maybe Sylvia Plath to some extent, but hers is a terrifying exuberance:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Yikes. I adore those lines, but they are truly horrific. My poems that you reference above are, I think, goofier almost. There's a slapstick element to them. I like some silliness in poetry, though. Why not? "Fluorescence" has a serious aspect to it in that I question my young-twenties tendency to combine caffeine, alcohol, ephedrine, and so on to feel different, out of body, super alive. I used to impair my abilities to function normally, and the poem asks how wise this was, questions how much time did I waste. But the poem also embraces that state of mind by enacting it through exuberant listing. "A Description of Kant's Categorical Imperative in a Women's Clothing Catalogue" is funny because it combines a central ethical philosophical tenet with the banal language of fashion catalogues. But it's serious in that, I hope at least, it questions the absurdity of these catalogues that come through the mail and urge women to get on the internet and order clothes. Kant's imperative asks us to question the ethical ramifications of everything we do, and of course we should be questioning whether we send money to that television evangelist or buy some doo-dad from QVC or order clothes from a catalogue. I think we encounter poems like this less than more staid poems because poets feel pressure to say something important. I honestly feel we do have a responsibility to say something meaningful, but it's entirely possible to be silly as we do. And it's more fun that way. I think poets can limit themselves, and I'm guilty of this too, to staid tones and serious ideas, when there's plenty of fun to be had in poetry. I was fortunate enough to work with Elaine Equi at The New School in recent years, and she does a wonderful job in her poetry of being elegant and outright funny as she also says something important. She was a big influence on me in this respect.

SHIVANI: You write, in "The Source," after discussing Pound: "Our strongest spirits / are also our most evil, / so why do we turn / to them for answers?" Do you believe we sometimes go too far in trying to make things new? Can poetry thrive without trespassing into the dark unknown?

BRADLEY: No. I do not at all believe poetry can thrive without trespassing into the dark unknown. Poetry must push the envelope and make it new. I believe that wholeheartedly. Mining the irrational and unconscious is a huge part of what poetry does. I try to uncover what I genuinely think and feel

deep down when I write poetry, to get beneath surface considerations. Delving through a mystical process into what we are barely aware we know is a huge point of the process of writing poetry for me. Because the world is always changing, we necessarily “make it new” when we probe the unconscious. But the world is always staying the same, too, and in that respect we find things in the unconscious that resonate. In “The Source,” I was hoping to address the dangers of actions taken in the name of progress in a more political sense. I think sometimes we push forward politically without considering the long term consequences of doing so, or there’s not enough reaction when our leaders make decisions we disagree with. The poem attempts to interrogate how extreme ideas regarding how to “make progress” often come from evil men. So why do we listen to them or allow them to make such enormous decisions?

SHIVANI: Many of your poems, such as “Raccoon,” are unafraid to show your intellectual side. So much of American poetry — and certainly poets’ self-representation — is decidedly anti-intellectual, despite the deep academic origins of most poets’ inspiration and environment. At the same time, as in “Raccoon,” you often connect intellectuality with moral choice, narrating the emergence of a dilemma. How has your poetry evolved in these respects?

BRADLEY: I don’t see the point in wasting time pretending I’m something I’m not. I’ve spent the bulk of my adult life in academia reading and writing, and to suggest in my poetry that that’s not the case would be absurd. I’m not sure precisely where the anti-intellectual strain comes from in our country, but I agree with you that it’s decidedly there — in our entertainment, in our attitudes, and in our poetry. To me, it is profoundly important to have an awareness of the tradition you, as a poet, are a part of. What came before you? Why is Shakespeare so good? It comes back to not just receiving notions you’ve been taught with a knee-jerk acceptance. Learn why those precepts you’ve been taught are considered true and learn why you agree or disagree and in what ways, why. I think many young poets only read contemporary poetry when they should also be studying literature of the past. You are automatically in dialogue with the past as a writer, so you should be aware of what inheres in that past. It’s not very fashionable or sexy to pose moral dilemmas in poetry, I think. But I can’t help but consider ethics extremely important. We should always be thinking about why we do the things we do and if the decisions we make are rationally sound. This is not to say the unconscious, irrational, mystical, and ecstatic aspects of human life are irrelevant because they have been extremely relevant for me. But as I get older, I find myself wishing the adult world made more sense than it does and wanting to work toward that goal now that my generation is slowly but surely taking over the driver’s seat.

SHIVANI: I find your response to Carl Andre’s Equivalent V one of the most interesting poems in the book, partly because it’s experimental and minimalistic in the same way Andre’s sculptures are. Is this kind of experimentalism appealing to you?

BRADLEY: Experimentalism is very appealing to me. I think poetry is sometimes falsely divided into two camps — experimental (language poets, OULIPO, Black Mountain, etc.) and lyrical (the rest of us) when in fact many poets like myself experiment in small scale ways. My entire poetic project is not as experimental (at least so far) as Susan Howe’s or Lyn Hejinian’s, but I do toy with experimentalism in, say, “The Nicene Creed Meets the Jabberwocky” or in the Carl Andre poem you mention. If posing moral dilemmas in poetry isn’t particularly sexy, experimentalism is. I think there’s something inherently sexy about conceptual art and experimental writing, but I’m not sure why. I guess it suggests an intellectual rebelliousness at the center of its aims, which has sex appeal. As I love to go to a museum to see Cindy Sherman or George Condo, so I love to read Fernando Pessoa or John Ashbery. But that will never detract from my love of, say, Carl Phillips’ poetry or Wislawa Szymborska’s.

SHIVANI: From your first book, *Hints and Allegations*, to your new book, what is the greatest difference you've noticed in your poetry? Have your habits of writing poetry changed? What is the greatest difference in style and content? I personally find more narrative complexity, more philosophical depth, more joy. What do you think?

BRADLEY: I've already stumbled upon addressing some of this above accidentally, but there does seem to be more philosophical depth and more joy in the second collection. That is quite simply because I was happier in general writing *Oz at Night* and I learned to write poems in various moods, not just when I was down. And gosh, I hope my philosophical understanding continues to deepen as I age. That's what we hope to gain by living, right? Wisdom? Humor? Peace? I hope I continue to grow as a person, and that my poetry reflects that growth in successful ways.