

Anne Bradstreet c.1612-1672

Ten years after the Pilgrims had found a refuge at Plymouth, Anne Bradstreet arrived in Massachusetts with the thousands of Puritans who composed the Great Migration. As a child in England she had had a more careful education than girls commonly received at that time. At sixteen she married a young graduate of Cambridge University, Simon Bradstreet, and two years later, in 1630, made the long voyage westward at his side.

Puritan housewives as a rule worked hard, finding little time for other than the household arts; Anne Bradstreet was the outstanding exception. Her poems first appeared in *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, published in London in 1650. A second and larger collection, for which she herself made some revisions, was printed in Boston in 1678.

Many of her verses are bookish, but a handful are personal, revealing both a charmingly feminine mind and the firm faith which sustained the Puritans through dislocation, illness, and bereavement. Such a poem is that which describes her eight children. It was written about 1658, after her eldest son had gone to England to study medicine. Samuel was the "chief of the brood." The "second bird" was Dorothy, who married the Reverend Seaborn Cotton in 1654 and lived first in Connecticut and later in New Hampshire. Sarah, the "third, of color white," had married Richard Hubbard of Ipswich. Simon was at Harvard College, "the academy." The "fifth," actually the seventh, was probably her third son, Dudley. Hannah, Mercy, and John were still at home. Despite the triteness of the chief metaphor, the birds in the nest, and of the "literary" diction and allusions, the poem conveys the warmth of a large family with a remarkable and loving mother. Puritanism has seldom been more attractively fused with universal human emotion.

In Reference to Her Children

I had eight birds hatched in one nest;
Four cocks there were, and hens the rest.
I nursed them up with pain and care,
Nor cost nor labor did I spare,
Till at the last they felt their wing,
Mounted the trees, and learned to sing.
Chief of the brood then took his flight
To regions far, and left me quite;
My mournful chirps I after send
Till he return or I do end:
Leave not thy nest, thy dam, and sire;
Fly back and sing amidst this choir.
My second bird did take her flight,
And with her mate flew out of sight;
Southward they both their course did bend,
And seasons twain they there did spend,
Till after, blown by southern gales,
They northward steered with fillèd sails.
A prettier bird was nowhere seen
Along the beach, among the trees.
I have a third, of color white,
On whom I placed no small delight;
Coupled with mate loving and true,
Hath also bid her dam adieu,
And where Aurora first appears
She now hath perched, to spend her years.
One to the academy flew
To chat among that learnèd crew;
Ambition moves still in his breast
That he might chant above the rest,

Striving for more than to do well—
That nightingales he might excel.
My fifth, whose down is yet scarce gone,
Is 'mongst the shrubs and bushes flown,
And as his wings increase in strength
On higher boughs he'll perch at length.
My other three still with me nest
Until they're grown; then, as the rest,
Or here or there they'll take their flight;
As is ordained, so shall they light.
If birds could weep, then would my tears
Let others know what are my fears
Lest this my brood some harm should catch
And be surprised for want of watch:
Whilst pecking corn, and void of care,
They fall unawares in fowler's snare;
Or whilst on trees they sit and sing,
Some untoward boy at them do fling;
Or whilst allured with bell and glass,
The net be spread, and caught, alas!
Or lest by lime twigs they be foiled,
Or by some greedy hawks be spoiled.
Oh, would, my young, ye saw my breast,
And knew what thoughts there sadly rest.
Great was my pain when I you bred,
Great was my care when I you fed;
Long did I keep you soft and warm,
And with my wings kept off all harm.
My cares are more, and fears, than ever,
My throbs such now as 'fore were never.

Alas, my birds, you wisdom want;
Of perils you are ignorant—
Ofttimes in grass, on trees, in flight,
Sore accidents on you may light.
Oh, to your safety have an eye;
So happy may you live and die.
Meanwhile my days in tunes I'll spend
Till my weak lays with me shall end;
In shady woods I'll sit and sing,
Things that are past to mind I'll bring—
Once young and pleasant, as are you.
But former toys—no joys—adieu!
My age I will not once lament,
But sing my time so near is spent,
And from the top bough take my flight
Into a country beyond sight,
Where old ones instantly grow young,
And there with seraphims set song.
No seasons cold nor storms they see,
But spring lasts to eternity.
When each of you shall in your nest
Among your young ones take your rest,
In chirping language oft them tell
You had a dam that loved you well,
That did what could be done for young,
And nursed you up till you were strong;
And 'fore she once would let you fly
She showed you joy and misery,
Taught what was good, and what was ill,
What would save life, and what would kill.
Thus gone, amongst you I may live,
And dead, yet speak, and counsel give.
Farewell, my birds, farewell, adieu!
I happy am if well with you.

On My Dear Grandchild, Simon Bradstreet, Who Died on 16 November, 1669, Being but a Month, and One Day Old.

No sooner came, but gone, and fall'n asleep,
Acquaintance short, yet parting caused us weep;
Three flowers, two scarcely blown, the last I' th' bud,
Cropt by th' Almighty's hand; **yet** is He good.
With dreadful awe before Him let's be mute,
Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute,
With humble hearts and moths put in the dust,
Let's say He's merciful as well as just.
He will return and make up all our losses,
And smile again after our bitter crosses
Go pretty babe, go rest with sisters twain;
Among the blest in endless joys remain.

Analysis:

Anne Bradstreet wrote this short, sad poem to mark the death of her grandson, Simon. It was published posthumously in 1678. As is common with Bradstreet's poems, this poem was based upon a true event; Simon died after only 32 days of life. Two of his sisters preceded him, but they were a bit older.

Infant mortality rates were high in colonial New England, with 10% to 30% of all children dying before completing their first year and less than 2/3 of children surviving to age 10. For example, Samuel Sewall, whose diary is a valuable resource about life during this era, writes that 7 out of his 14 children died before reaching the age of 2, and only 3 of them managed to outlive their father. Cotton Mather, the famous Puritan preacher, lost 8 of his 15 children before they reached the age of 2. It is no wonder that Bradstreet chose to write about such a common experience in colonial New England, especially because it touched her personally.

Bradstreet starts "Simon Bradstreet" by writing that Simon had barely come before he was gone. Even though he was on Earth for such a short time, his grandmother is still grieving for him. She personifies God as a gardener, who crops Simon and his two sisters while they are still "i'th' bud."

Rather than become angry at God, though, as Bradstreet does in some of her poems, she finds a way to understand the situation and remain true to her faith. Bradstreet writes that God is still good and that humans, even after losing something they love, should remain mute with awe before Him. Human beings do not know His plans and therefore, should humbly submit to His will. The family should lay Simon to rest and never forget God's mercy and justness. Simon will eventually return to them after the Day of Judgment and at that time, he will "smile, and make up all our losses." The idea that the living will be reunited with the dead one day is an important tenet of Christianity, and it must have been overwhelmingly comforting for colonists like Anne Bradstreet who experienced so much loss in their lives.

"Simon Bradstreet" is one of Anne Bradstreet's later poems, and scholars have frequently singled it out for praise. Deeply personal and moving, it demonstrates Bradstreet's profound Puritan faith in addition to her deep attachment to the people in her life. Bradstreet's poems, particularly those which she addresses to her husband, reveal the fullness of her familial relationships. Just because she was a devout Christian did not preclude her from grieving after losing someone important (see "Letter...absent upon Publick Employment," "Another," and "In Reference to Her Children"). Anne Bradstreet is an extremely *human* example of Puritanism, a religion that often garnered public criticism for its putative coldness, sternness, and self-abnegation.

As Weary Pilgrim

As weary pilgrim, now at rest,
Hugs with delight his silent nest
His wasted limbes, now lye full soft
That myrie* steps, have troden oft
Blesses himself, to think upon
his dangers past, and travailes* done
The burning sun no more shall heat
Nor stormy raines, on him shall beat.
The bryars and thornes no more shall scratch
nor hungry wolues at him shall catch

He erring pathes no more shall tread
nor wild fruits eate, in stead of bread,
for waters cold he doth not long
for thirst no more shall parch his tongue
No rugged stones his feet shall gaule* 15
nor stumps nor rocks cause him to fall
All cares and feares, he bids farwell
and meanes in safity now to dwell.
A pilgrim I, on earth, perplext
wth sinns wth cares and sorrows vext 20
By age and paines brought to decay
and my Clay house mouldring away
Oh how I long to be at rest
and soare on high among the blest.
This body shall in silence sleep 25
Mine eyes no more shall ever weep
No fainting fits shall me assaile*
nor grinding paines my body fraile
Wth cares and fears ne'r cumbred* be
Nor losses know, nor sorrowes see 30
What tho my flesh shall there* consume
it is the bed Christ did perfume
And when a few yeares shall be gone
this mortall shall be cloth'd upon
A Corrupt Carcasse downe it lyes 35
a glorious body it shall rise
In weaknes and dishonour sowne
in power 'tis rais'd by Christ alone*
Then soule and body shall vnite 40
and of their maker haue the sight
Such lasting ioyes shall there behold
as eare ne'r heard nor tongue e'er told
Lord make me ready for that day
then Come deare bridgrome Come away.

Myrie: miry
Travailes: labors, hardships
Gaule: gall: injure, make sore
Assaile: attack violently
Cumbred: troubled, hindered
There: in the grave
Tis...alone: I Corinthians 15:52-55