

SAN MATEO COUNTY POET LAUREATE



Poetry Reading *by*

San Mateo County Poet Laureate Caroline Goodwin

Tuesday, April 22, 2014

About this reading:

Christopher Smart was an English poet who was born in Kent on April 11, 1722. He was a colorful character who was involved in a large “paper war” that involved many of London’s writers in the mid-1700s, in which poets and other writers attacked one another’s work in print, mocking and writing satires. In 1757, a Commission of Lunacy was taken out against Smart, and he was admitted to St. Luke’s Hospital for Lunatics as a “Curable Patient”. He spent six years in the institution, was released in 1763, and died in Debtor’s Prison in 1771.

While in the asylum he wrote one of his most famous poems “Jubilate Agno” -- Rejoice in the Lamb -- which has a long sequence about his cat, Jeoffrey. This poem *Rana Draytonii (California Red-Legged Frog)* is written in the style of Smart’s poem.

RANA DRAYTONII (California Red-Legged Frog)

For I will consider my Cat Jeffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving Him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his Way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

-- Christopher Smart (1722-1771), *Jubilate Agno*

for my hands also held him
for he was dry and tiny at the edge of the pond
 where the mud shone
for the rain arrived with the tides and it filled my dreams
 and in my dreams we gazed into our own skulls
for the poem rose up the tree trunk
for paint held the dust motes and pigment
 and the young man painted an owl on the bricks
 and it was good
for there were the torn clouds
 and sea lavender the purple stems
for behind the white latticework the weeds glowed
 and a light arrived from the coast
 and the hissing was high in the cypress
for he also held me in his hands
for the end of life is nothing
for a fragrant sage blew in from the desert
 and the hummingbird and woodpecker made
 their sounds in the lane
for the man on the corner in the twilight
for the bluish smoke
for he called to my beloved on the other side
 and i nearly sensed her
for the turtle in the ocean filled with eggs
for the burrs and the weeds
for the shape of feathers
 and the ways in which they feel
 against the skin
for their fine hooks and barbs
for he dies every day of starvation
 and of thirst and of abandonment
for the ways in which we take our leave are manifold and growing
for the sound of his voice was like nothing
 and was like everything
for the soil held it all rotting
for the flame and the bowl of fresh water
for the music of the pearly throat
 and the pond that finally
 called us all by name