

## *In Memoriam* Patricia Goedicke (1931–2006)

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On July 14, 2006, poet Patricia Goedicke died of complications from cancer at the age of seventy-five. The day before, her hospital bed in Missoula was strewn with a copy of Dante's *Inferno*, the latest *New York Times Book Review*, and several printouts from *Drumlummon Views*. Novelists, poets, friends, and former students came in and out, singing, reading, discussing the news of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, an event she was particularly concerned with because her sister Jeane-Marie Cook was living in Beirut. She was, as we say, *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, action which was always emotionally engaged, passionately intellectual, and literary.

Patricia's many friends will miss how she would answer her door, high heels clacking in excitement, all dressed up, red lipstick on. She loved company! She knew how to take delight: in the yellow summer dress in a shop window on Higgins, sauvignon blanc and her backyard swing at dusk, music—she was a member of two choirs her last winter—and talk of poetry, more delightful than anything, what she could do for hours. (Patricia told a friend that ink fresh off the printer smelled like forsythia.) She kept a round table in her living room piled with hundreds of books of poetry she had recently acquired, a treasure trove that often functioned as a lending library. For years, her graduate workshops met in her home with its books and art, flowers and piano, the photograph of a young, black-haired Patricia talking to Robert Frost.

She was born Patricia Ann McKenna in Boston on June 21, 1931, and grew up in Hanover, New Hampshire, where her father was a neurologist and a professor at Dartmouth. She was educated



at Middlebury College and Ohio University. In 1957, she married Victor Goedicke, whom she divorced twelve years later. In between, she met her lifelong friend Pat Grean and began to publish. *Between Oceans*, her first book of poems, appeared in 1968, the year she married Leonard Wallace Robinson, *Esquire* fiction editor and writer for the

*New Yorker*, whom she met playing ping-pong at the MacDowell Colony. The couple moved to San Miguel de Allende in Mexico during the 1970s and returned in 1981 when Patricia took a teaching position at The University of Montana, where she taught until her death. She was the recipient of a National Endowment of the Arts fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation Residency in Bellagio, Italy, the William Carlos Williams Prize, and the H. G. Merriam Award for contributions to literature in Montana, among many honors.

How does one speak of the work—because it is the work, in addition to her great love for Leonard and her tireless, generous, inspired teaching, that was central to Patricia's life—in a career that spans thirty-eight years, or one that is this prolific—twelve books,

including *Crossing the Same River*, *The Wind of Our Going*, *The Tongues We Speak* (a *New York Times* Notable Book in 1990), *Invisible Horses*, and *When Earth Begins to End* (selected by the American Library Association as one of the top ten books of poetry in 2000). Revising furiously through the once-a-week chemotherapy treatments, she finished her thirteenth manuscript, *The Baseball Field at Night*, weeks before entering the hospital. In addition, there seemed to be no subject Patricia was uninterested in—cats, classical music, politics, string theory, skiing (she was a downhill racer) or anything she would flinch from—illness, aging, grief, death, marital arguments. Many of the books are over a hundred pages long and many poems five or six pages. Still, there are certain currents in her writing one can trace across the many books: her deep love for her second husband Leonard, “the one man / I always meant to love and now can,” the body’s indignities and triumphs, death. Love and loss, the two great themes of poetry, are ones she tackled with originality, grit, unflinching courage, and amplitude.



The day after Deirdre McNamer gave me word of Patricia’s death, I asked to read a poem of hers, “What Rushes Past Us,” at dinner at the writer’s colony on Whidbey Island where I was staying:

Every newspaper headline, every last quarrel  
 We ever had, each hangover, each miraculous glass  
 of the deep bourbon of love, even the pure silence of prayer  
 Is pouring past us like rain

The writers at the table with me were surprised, because it seemed so prescient, to hear she had written it in 1985.

The wind roars in our ears, in the dizzy whirl of the blood  
 There’s no turning back, on parallel tracks shooting  
 From the cliff of our birth we keep falling  
 First you, then me, then me rushing by you.

But Patricia wrote about death always, its imminence and immanence. It is a dominant theme through all her work, not surprisingly so, given her life. Her mother died of breast cancer when Patricia was thirty-nine. Her father suffered from lung cancer and multiple sclerosis. Patricia was first diagnosed with breast cancer when she was living in Mexico. She would battle cancer all her life, surviving two mastectomies, and finally succumbing to cancer which had spread to her lungs, spine, and liver. Leonard was twenty years her senior and would die before her, in 1999. Death was indeed “her home light,” as she writes in “Trompe L’Oeil.”

The poetry, paradoxically, is not morbid nor falsely transcendent. It is fiercely honest, clear-headed, tough-minded, audacious. It is also incredibly moving. Patricia might spit at death, as she did many other tragedies of the body—cancer, hot flashes, aging, chemo, bad sex—but she also acknowledged them as deeply human and shared. She protested, stamped her diminutive foot, cried out, and she fought against the odds, as she advises us to do in “For All the Sad Rain”:

There are dogs who keep their skinny tails  
 Permanently between their legs

But also there are sleek horses, as easily as there are curs  
 There are squash blossoms that flower around fountains  
 Like white butterflies, there is courage everywhere

There is not a subject she shied away from. In “Like Animals,” she writes about sex: “Over her like a dog / Muscular, tricky, neat.” In “All the Princes of Heaven,” she conflates the dawning of a new day with the various limbs and organs of a body waking to a tremendous erection: “Shooting stars and colored streamers / And twenty-one gun salutes / All the princes of heaven come / Leaping onto the land.” In her last manuscript, she writes of a widow’s aging body: “stiff thicket, scratched / sex the lie between the legs / prune dry and / curled / as if to open were possible / ever again.” Her metaphors of the body are earthy, *defiantly* mixed, demonstrating in their wild leaps the body’s own metamorphoses. She could mix her metaphors (her husband returned to her “a sense of balance / With water under my arms like wings”) because she knew the body’s betrayals. She could name it goat, horse, pig, dog. She could call it house, boat, glove. What was the self? What was the body that it could so often transform itself?

Most powerful are the series of cancer poems found in *Crossing the Same River*, beginning with “Illness as Metaphor,” a poem dedicated to Susan Sontag, a writer who also died of cancer last year. “I know this is not really Ravensbrück,” she writes. Yet, cancer *is* a holocaust:

And though I agree, in this century it is certainly  
 irresponsible  
 Even to suggest that cancer is anything but superficially

similar to a world  
 So sick it may not ever be able to cure itself.

In an early poem “In the Waiting Room,” she speaks of “Carrying my illness to the hospital / Every day, carefully / As if it were a rare gift.” The emotional honesty is breath-taking as she speaks of the narcissism that grave illness can evoke in us until we realize the other sick people around us: “I think I am something special but I am also numerous.” She can be honest *and* funny. In the poem “In the Hospital,” “robber/ doctors . . . crawl out from under / lowering intestines / like mechanics wiping their foreheads / with soiled gloves.” In poem after poem—“Princess,” “The Same Slow Growth,” “Hot Flash,” and later in her poems about Leonard’s decline in metal prowess, published in *When Earth Begins to End*, she confronts that which lesser poets would ignore or be embarrassed by:

I would like to speak to you  
 the way we used to,  
 humming into each other’s necks, close  
 as tango dancers, step, glide  
 embrace

before you were dropped behind bars  
 I can’t get through.

What sustains courage and compassion in the face of such loss? The poems are not falsely transcendent, but transcendent, in any case. Love sustains her during the first bout of breast

cancer in Mexico: “Though the life that pretends to float me / Is honeycombed with emptiness, great pits / The first hollowings of the disease. . .” she writes, “Because he says so it is easy / Simply to go right on bailing.” Love reminds her that we are all in this grief-business together, that we are each left, at various points in our lives, to speak our unbearable grief “in this that was love’s room.” Whether it is the love she felt for her husband, Leonard, to whom all the books are dedicated after their marriage in 1968, or the love she felt for students, friends, the other people in the waiting room, it occurs and reoccurs in poem after poem, wedged right up against the cruelest facts of our human existence.



The dual nature of her seeing—the great themes of love and loss—also reveal themselves formally, in short lines that place fragments and stutterings, end-stopped and stressed, as in the way one thinks in grief—

And this hill in the throat. To be walked over:  
all you ever wanted.  
Lie down, unseemly one. Would be too easy.  
 (“Northern Willow”)

—and, alternately, in her long, loopy, indented, Whitmanesque lines and lists with their exclamations of praise, voices from the street, deer under the spruce, the path of neurons sparking, the multiplicity she celebrates. (As one critic wrote, she is a poet who believes in saying more, not less.) Hers is a poetry of “dis-

equilibrium,” in the sense the poet Robert Duncan speaks of it, as that which all living organisms strive to maintain. Evading equilibrium one evades death. Patricia’s poetry, thus, is a poetry mapping the dis-equilibrium of being alive. Images, when not exactly careening, connect and divide and spark, much like the activity of the neurons she studied, the paths of perception which became the theme of her book *Invisible Horses*. It is a method which speaks to her life, as well. Her obituary, which appeared in newspapers across the country, claims, “She seemed sometimes to ski her own life, as if it were the most tantalizing and difficult slalom course imaginable; one that demanded (and rewarded) alertness and engagement at every turn.” Peter Schjeldahl in a *New York Times Book Review*, states, “she has discipline and the nerves of a racing driver.”

It can be exhausting to read. I imagine the trajectory of each book, as well as each poem, as the path of a bee or hummingbird, all zigzag, all contradiction, a-linear, impatient, a brilliant and yet *sown* order. The crazy, mixed metaphors she loved, like sharp turns down a slope, attach and detach at dizzying speed, as in “The Three Tortoise Secret of the World Power Plant” where the medulla oblongata that is at first found in the “cold, choppy” ocean inside us, becomes, in short order a “rainwater polished / shimmering sculpted block of marble,” a sperm whale, “a solitary godhead, ticking,” and soon is “chewing its underwater lips like a full moon caught in a trap.” All in a stanza and a half!

Patricia loved conjunctions, the beautiful *and* of connection, connecting one thought to another, one image to another, one person to another. Many poems begin with the words *for*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *and*, as if all experience was a conversation continuing, a meaning being made and continuously revised, even after the death

of those with whom we were talking. Where does thought come from and where does it go? That thought was now discovered to be tangible, part of the body, fascinated her. She loved string theory, quantum physics. “I have spent most of my life trying to learn how to accept the fact that, as physics tells us, where there’s a positive charge, contingent upon it there’s ‘always already’ a negative charge,” she writes in a statement for *Evensong*, a soon-to-be published anthology of poems on spirituality. “And vice versa. Trying to understand how to live in such a world, a world full of pain and suffering, I look to science, to string theory, to the implications of Mandelbrot’s dazzling ‘sets.’”

The new physics gave her a language—even a theology—to speak of the self that suffers, that loves, that dies. It gave her a paradigm in which to ask the questions she was increasingly most concerned with: What is the self that is born from this swarm of origins and dies again into it? If with each moment everything is changing into something else, what can we hold onto? What is the individual self against such numerousness, such change?

Because living  
or dead no one’s home  
anyway, just left

seconds ago, out the door to the beach,  
among the dunes glittering

beyond all scatter as vast  
diamond pitted flakes scratch against each other.  
 (“Aftermath: Pinpoint and Torrent”)

In her last published book, *As Earth Begins to End*, an elegiac meditation on grief and loss and a scathing protest against it, Patricia writes about losing Leonard first to the senility that claimed his lucidity and eventually to death. She writes of how it felt to wake to him gone, the depression still in the pillow. Where did he go? Where did they all go, the dead popping up like “black umbrellas” all over town? The scholar Robert Pogue Harrison, in his book *Dominion of the Dead* (a book Patricia was reading in the last months before her own death), writes that “The dead speak . . . as long as we lend them the means of locution; they take up their abode in books, dreams, houses, portraits, legends, monuments, and graves as long as we keep open the places of their indwelling.” As this most amazing loss settles into the lives of the many people who knew and loved Patricia Goedicke, I like to think of her poems as places of indwelling, and that they will remind us not only of her but of “the beautiful names of all those / Who eventually will but must not / Entirely disappear.”

*Contributions to the Patricia Goedicke Scholarship Fund may be sent and made payable to the UM Foundation, PO Box 7159, Missoula, MT 59807-7159. Please note “in memory of Patricia Goedicke” on all donations.*