Reading notes for Woodstock Poetry Festival 2001

Patricia Goedicke

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Thanks for intro — and thanks to Janice and Susan for two terrific readings. It’s so nice to here in Woodstock once again — to see so many dear relatives, so many friends and now new friends, too. I’m looking forward to seeing all of you at the rest of the festival.

But for now, since I understand the inception of this wonderful new Woodstock Poetry Festival is so very strongly connected to music, I thought I’d begin and perhaps even end my reading this afternoon with a couple of poems about music.

The first of them comes from my next to last book, INVISIBLE HORSES, and what it’s mostly concerned with is the extraordinarily close parallels I keep seeing between the processes of music and the processes of the mind. The way the mind talks back to itself, for instance. Reminds me of birds, late night jazz, even string quartets! So this is a poem called ............. forgot to mention that some sports remind me of music too! It’s one of those poems where the title is part of the first sentence, and it goes

BIRDS LIKE BASKETBALL PLAYERS – IH 114

Actually that whole book is devoted to what goes on in the mind, to “what it feels like to think.” “What it feels like to think,” to trying to evoke what’s going on up here, so much of it, all the time, every minute, every single second. I mean just listen to what’s really going on in your head right now! This poem’s called

WHIRLING DERVISHES – IH 24
The title of INVISIBLE HORSES comes from a poem called IN THESE BURNING STABLES, which is based on the fact that no matter how firmly some of us are convinced that the mind is made up of nothing but matter, a series of chemical and neurobiological interactions, no one has ever actually seen -- hence the title. I mean, what is the mind, anyway? What are these strange entities we produce out of this dying body/mind complex, these "burning stables" up here? And what does it mean that however hard we try, using all the imagination we can muster, to express, our ideas and feelings, so far no one has ever been able to see, let alone hear or taste or smell or touch an idea as such.

IN THESE BURNING STABLES – IH 15

And now I'd like to switch gears and read to you from my most recent book, AS EARTH BEGINS TO END, which was published in January 2000. As some of you may know, it springs from the long illness which preceded the death of Leonard Wallace Robinson -- the late Henry Morton Robinson's youngest brother, Gertrude Robinson's brother in law, Robin Raymond Robinson and Tony Robinson's Uncle, and Laurie Ylvisaker's Grand Uncle. A New Yorker writer, a Professor at Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, and besides many short stories, the author of two novels and a wonderful book of poems, he is also the man I was totally in love with all the thirty years of our marriage.

However, even though AS EARTH BEGINS TO END may seem to focus on the disintegration of a single, I hope fairly representative couple, what I'm also after in it is not just their death and deterioration, but the way the sadness we feel over the dissolution of even a single entity mirrors a tendancy we see in earth itself, that sad, entropically generated loss of energy which, as matter inevitably changes shape, deteriorates into smaller and smaller particles, seems to be a constant of the entire universe, an environment in which each one of us -- animal, plant, human being, earth itself -- is quite naturally, "ending".
But you know, as hugely compassionate as Leonard was, he was also a man of fierce courage, no matter what circumstances he found himself in. So here’s a poem with a computer in it, the one called Deep Blue, which, you remember, was the computer one of our giant billionai- corporations programmed to play chess, the one which actually DEFEATED the great Russian grandmaster Kasparov. It’s called HARD-WIRED, and the Auden poem of its epigraph is from that lovely ballad of his, the one where, you may remember, “the crack in the teacup opens/ a lane to the land of the dead”.

HARD WIRED – AEBTE 23

Well the storms were coming — and both of us knew it — but even so, what else can one do but go with the daily life. Nobody ever knows exactly WHEN death will come knocking. So so this is just a little love poem, called

ALMA DE CASA – AEBTE – 112

Nevertheless, the landscapes of old age, those paths which lead inevitably towards death, can be very strange. So many of trusted landmarks turn out to be simply missing. Here’s

WHERE THERE WERE ONCE TRAILS – AEBTE 91
Okay now, I PROMISE I'm going to stop talking so much in a few minutes here, but I wanted to say that the first poem in AS EARTH BEGINS TO END is rather larger in scope than many of the others. Because what it's addressing is a sense of PLOTLESSNESS in the entire contemporary world. (EVERYTHING seems to be breaking down.) We seem not to know the meaning of anything, not even the beginning of a story nor the end of one. Yet we keep looking for some cause for it all, some reason, someone to blame. In spite of the fact that the universe, that "Mother Nature" from which we sprang, is so immensely larger than we can ever imagine. The poem's one of those in which the title is part of the first line, and it goes

THE DREAMS WE WAKE FROM – AEBTE 5

And this one's just a little poem, another of those whose titles are part of the first line.

WHAT HOLDS US TOGETHER – AEBTE 7

And here's a poem I love to read, especially for those people who think that after a "certain age" the erotic component of living just disappears. Well, I'm here to tell you, not quite!

OLD HANDS – AEBTE 36
If we could only fit, fit into
    each other. If just
    one of us could -- smooth as grease slide
    into another and stay there --

Vitreous green
    pitcher. Foot.
And cup: the exact cradle
    shadow evaporates out of, wavering
    stretched sail going nowhere.

And now you have jumped ship, soundless, glimmering,
    the remaining passengers lie in the hot nights
    grappling in each other’s arms

or pin only themselves, wrinkled
    frail tissue paper patterns over the faint troughs,
    the hollows of the bed you lay in --

    the buttocks, where they were;
    the shoulders, how they feel
    without you --

And the absent head, in the squashed pillow’s
    dented cupola, its once intricate
    hum even as you slept, where has it all --

    Untouchable.

Atomic jukebox of bee stings, when is nothingness
    not, and where --

    That the glass bowl of space.
    That the infinite’s envelope seal in itself
    at least one of our scribbles --

let us inhabit each other however
    untranslatably we can:

    Je (can be) l’espace ou tu etais,
    et je (will become) nous:

(stanza break)
cargo and hold, swift cutter,
    flying vanquisher over grief's
heaving wallows, its leaky scatter and ooze —

    Mientras, amor mio,
    las lagrimas se vuelven gaviotas,

over strewn garbage,
    over picnickers on the beach wheeling, O
    Well turned, Tern!
    -- a joke only you could have shouted, grinning

for the sport of it, pleased
    as if you'd done it yourself, at the doubling
swift shadow above you, the wings
    scissoring over you where you had leapt up
and were, and were not
the bird itself; in hand

or already loosening, from thumb and clutched fingers
    the spirit slipping away among high
    teetering white sheets over the horizon, you

whose bed we would lie in forever,
    who once stood tall in yourself as a building,
sunk deep in your own
    blocks-long footprint --

    if I were you (si yo fuera tu)
    if I were really you (si vraiment j'étais toi)

then soon we'd be back together, tucked into the same
    checkered lightning of the cab you took yourself off on

    -- Καλῶ Ταξίδι, (safe journey) querido --

and left us weeping, by the oil-soaked harbor calling
    like sad tankers groaning, in broken animal Morse

(stanza break)
but still the clustering gulls hover,
rasping on gritty decks
or perched on teetering antennae, in every courant d'air
winged neurons, garbled angelic axons
still making identity's raucous, near unintelligibly
coded secret connections —

Mais qui es ce qui s'appelle je, moi
ou toi?

In every feathered hollow,
in yours, where you once rested and were
and are still; in wing, petal, fishtail,
in every ear-waxed and honeyed
echo chamber hidden, each articulates in its own
blood and chlorophyll and bones the dear, uncrackable,
many-in-one-tongue you have vanished
and not vanished from.
And now here's the title poem of AS EARTH BEGINS TO END, which goes

AS EARTH BEGINS TO END – AEBTE 113

---- How greedily we cling to earth, to the people we love, even though we
know we'll have to lose them eventually –

But wait, says the human spirit – “the world hasn’t ended yet” – and maybe some
things never really end anyway. This is another of those poems that begins with the
title –

AND YET – AEBTE 107

And now I only have ___ more poems for you, and the first one I'm
reading with a great deal of trepidation because it's an entirely new poem.
Fortunately SENECA REVIEW is going to publish it in its next issue, I believe, and
that's some comfort. But I'm afraid it's really a true POLYGLOT of a poem. The
title itself, KALO TAXIDI, FUERA Y MAINTENANT, is in three languages, the
Greek -- Kalo Taxidi, which means Good Trip, Safe Journey (and notice, there, the
wonderful origins of our own taxi cab) -- then the Spanish Fuera, which means
Far, and finally the French Maintenant, which means “Now”.

And not only that, there are various other phrases in Greek, Spanish, and
French scattered throughout the poem. I know it must sound pretty excessive,
but it seemed necessary to me, and most of the phrases are either translated in
the text itself or are really easy to understand, I think... Though maybe -- because
my pronunciation is really atrocious -- I should first remind you that
“L'espace ou tu etais” means the space where you were

“las lagrimas se vuelvan gaviotas” means -- “tears turn into seagulls”

“Ecoute”, of course, is Listen in French, “Oiga” is also listen, and in Greek it's “Sta-ma-TEE-steh”.

And finally, “Mais qui es ce qui s'appelle je” means “But who IS it that calls himself, or herself, ‘I’?”
And now as I promised, I want to read the other music poem, this one called **Mahler in the Living Room**. I'm sure you all know how enormously, almost unbearably romantic Mahler's work sometimes was. Such great, glorious ecstasies of passion one can sometimes be totally overwhelmed by them, almost drown in them – but then not. Because, of course, they are not just pure emotion, they are art, and therefore in Mahler's music those ecstasies are emotion channeled, shaped and framed into something, however painful, that helps us to understand and face our own deepest feelings. The poem was written long ago when we were living in a house in Cornell, right directly on the shores of Lake Cayuga, so that when we played the Mahler it often seemed that not only the whole enormous lake but the whole enormous Mahler were both framed in the big glass windows that looked out on it. And I should say also that the poem's in three "movements" itself, and -- but you'll see in a minute.. Prepare for some pretty loud stuff!

**MAHLER IN THE LIVING ROOM – WIND 11**, from The Wind of Our Going