

Hologram

Homage to P.K. Page
edited by Yvonne Blomer & DC Reid

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*Though sickness and death take their terrible toll
and they did and they do—one's astonishing heart
almost sings through its grief like a bird—water bird—
in the wind and waves of some vast salty sea.
Explain it? I can't. But it's true I'm in love
with some point beyond sight, with some singular star
for which words won't suffice, which reduce it, in fact.*

P.K. Page, *Hand Luggage*

*Our feet barely touched the earth, and memory
erased at birth, but gradually reassembling
coalesced and formed a whole, as single birds
gathering for migration form a flock.*

P.K. Page, "Presences"

Jacaranda Doors

1958, PRIVATE COLLECTION, VICTORIA, BC. FELT PEN AND GOUACHE.

Jacaranda Doors is one of a number of paintings in felt pen and gouache that P.K. painted of her palacette in Brazil. The domestic pieces are predominantly realistic renderings of the house's architectural features, and the gouache helped P.K. capture the bright, exotic colours of the interior space she was mostly confined to as the wife of the Canadian Ambassador in the 1950s.



Michèle Rackham Hall and Zailig Pollock

Portrait of the Poet as Artist: P.K. Irwin

P.K. Page is known as one of Canada's finest poets, but under her married name P.K. Irwin, she was also a gifted painter. Her paintings and drawings belong to collections of some of Canada's most prestigious art galleries, including the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada, and have featured in numerous international exhibitions. Moreover, she studied and exhibited with high profile modernist artists both in Canada and abroad. Although she mostly kept her writing and artist identities separate in name, she used "the same pen" for poetry and painting, as she herself put it.

P.K. always had a keen interest in the visual arts, and throughout her life she counted a number of artists among her closest friends, such as Maxwell Bates, Jori Smith, Leonora Carrington and Pat Martin Bates. Even from a very early age she showed great artistic promise, as in a set of crayon drawings she did at the age of four: *Birthday Card for Daddie* (1920, see page 51), which appears on the cover of *Metamorphosis*, the recent edition of her writings for children. Sandra Djwa notes in *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page* (2012) that P.K. spent countless hours at the library as a young girl discovering "the strange world of Cubist painting, pointillism..." and modern sculpture. In her early twenties, she befriended a group of painters in New Brunswick, which included now prominent Canadian artists Jack Humphrey, Miller Brittain, and Ted Campbell, and in her thirties, her creative circle in Montreal included the painters Philip Surrey, Goodridge Roberts, Peggy Anderson, and Jori Smith (the latter two for whom P.K. occasionally served as model). She clearly had ample exposure to the visual arts throughout her young adult life, so the fact that P.K. did not seriously take up painting until she was almost in her forties is indeed a mystery.

However, visual art always played a prominent role in P.K.'s poetics. She frequently describes works of art in her poetry, as in "Ecce Homo," but other examples include an imaginary tapestry in "Arras," and a series of her own *Yellow People* paintings (1958, see page 24) in "The Yellow People in *Metamorphosis*." At the same time, P.K. illustrated at least one poem, "Images of Angels" in her painting "Angels" (1957), and in a couple cases paintings and poems share the same or similar titles—the painting (1964,

see page 144) and the poem “Planet Earth,” and the painting *Evening Dance* and the poem “Evening Dance of the Grey Flies.” Moreover, her poems were always intensely visual. She is the most painterly of poets. For example, in “After Rain” she describes a rain-soaked clothesline:

hung from one thin rib
 a silver web—
 its infant, skeletal, diminutive,
 now sagged with sequins, pulled ellipsoid,
 glistening

Interestingly, “After Rain” ends with P.K. expressing her dissatisfaction with her role as a poet: and not long afterwards, in Brazil, she abandoned poetry altogether for painting.

Although her pen ceased to write poetry in Brazil, P.K.’s time there was her most prolific as an artist—about a quarter of her paintings date from a period of about two years in Brazil. As her diaries show, P.K. was obsessed with drawing and painting during this time. At first she was entirely self-taught, using whatever materials came to hand—felt pens, as in *Fowl Yard* (1959, see page 97) and packing paper—but she soon began to seek out instruction and to explore different media (gouache in particular) and aesthetics.

P.K. started out primarily as a figurative artist in Brazil—painting the domestic space of the *palacete* where she resided, such as *Jacaranda Doors* (c. 1958, see page 19), still lifes, such as *Flowers and Phone* (c. 1958, see page 91), which appears on the cover of the recent edition of *Brazilian Journal*, and the exotic geography and architecture of her new surroundings. It was not long, however, before she began to find her way to abstraction, and the modernism so prominent in her poetry. First, she tried her hand at figurative abstraction, as in her *Yellow People* series. In one painting from this series, yellow faceless figures congregate around two separate cages containing a red bird and a blue bird, considerably more defined in their features than their human observers. The setting and context of the scene are obscure, but the figures’ relative abstraction (when compared with the birds) and similar colouration to the cages suggest an ironic play on the issue of captivity depicted in the piece. Eventually, P.K. began to experiment with non-iconic abstraction, though mostly through sketches rather than fully worked up compositions. The mood of P.K.’s work in Brazil is predominantly celebratory. P.K. herself drew comparisons with Matisse and,

especially, Dufy; the overall impression is of joyous spontaneity.

Given P.K.'s new-found artistic talent and interest in abstraction, the timing of her and Arthur's brief move in 1959 to New York City, where Arthur represented Canada at the United Nations, was nothing short of auspicious. The city had recently taken over from Paris as an art mecca, with artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Charles Seliger of the "New York School," as well as Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, leading the abstract expressionist movement there. P.K. not only admired their works on display at the city's various galleries—the Museum of Modern Art and the recently opened Guggenheim, for example—but also met Tobey, whose work impressed her greatly, and Charles Seliger at gallery parties that she attended. Eventually, Seliger became her teacher, and his impact on her art is evident in the intricate, biomorphic details layered into her works of this period and beyond. For example, her *Bright Fish* (1960, see page 134) etching (a medium she learned from Harry Sternberg at the Arts Student League that fall) exhibits the gestural and calligraphic lines of automatism, and a focus on the detailed complexity of the internal being, qualities characteristic of Seliger's own work. Although P.K. abandoned etching, preferring the spontaneity of drawing and painting instead, this expressive and detailed lineation persisted in her paintings and drawings for many years. The whimsy and experimentation so prominent in her work from Brazil and New York, however, all but faded from focus once P.K. moved to Mexico in 1960.

Although P.K. produced considerably fewer works in Mexico, they tended to be on a larger scale, technically more ambitious and often, though not always, quite dark, even frightening, such as *By the Wave Rising, by the Wave Breaking* (1961, see page 43). Under the influence and mentorship of Leonora Carrington, who was one of P.K.'s closest friends in Mexico, she experimented with media such as egg tempera, gesso, and gold leaf; and Carrington, a leading surrealist, encouraged P.K. in her own surrealist tendencies, which had often been evident in her poetry but were almost entirely absent from her predominantly representative work in Brazil. One of the most impressive examples is the exuberant *The Dance* (1963, see page 164), inspired by a performance of Chinese opera. This painting in egg tempera was P.K.'s favourite, and until her death it hung over the fireplace in her home in Victoria. It now hangs over the fireplace in the Page-Irwin Colloquium room at Trent University. The emotional, as well as technical range of P.K.'s painting in the Mexico years went far beyond anything she had attempted before or would ever attempt again.

Mexico was a period of spiritual turmoil for P.K., eventually leading to her discovery of Sufism, which was to become the center of her spiritual and artistic life in the years to come.

Not long after returning to Canada, P.K. returned to poetry as well, a new kind of poetry influenced by Sufi masters, such as Rumi; and she turned to a new kind of painting, influenced by the abstract, geometric patterning characteristic of Islamic art. In stark contrast to the dynamism of her surrealistic work in Mexico, these essentially static works seem to be intended as objects of contemplation, as aids to spiritual exploration rather than as a form of personal expression. Examples are *Votive Tablet* (1972, see page 56) in the medium of egg tempera and gold leaf, which P.K. had learned from Leonora Carrington, and *Excalibur's Handle* (c. 1973, see page 156), which consists of a hole-punched gouache, a medium with which she experimented at the time.

Until the end of her life, P.K. continued with non-iconic abstraction, creating serene, mandala-like works of great beauty and serenity, such as an untitled pen and ink drawing from 2005. Once she returned to poetry, however, her visual art no longer played the same central role in her career as it had in Brazil and Mexico. Instead, art became complementary to her poetics, serving to illustrate and illuminate her verse in publications, such as *Cry Ararat!* (1967), and *The Glass Air* (1985), as P.K.'s two identities merged into her creative practice as poet-artist.

Untitled

2005, PRIVATE COLLECTION, VICTORIA, BC. PEN AND COLOURED INKS.

This untitled sketch displays P.K.'s propensity for experimentation, as her scribbles suggest an automatic and gestural approach to composition, recalling her surrealist tendencies as a younger poet. The sketch resembles her Star Burst series, created in the early 2000s, done in gel ink, a relatively new medium at the time.



Rebecca Anne Banks

Untitled, 2005

“the morning dark thick with rain a day of shadows sunlight afternoon...”

rosebud blooms a touch of grace a touch of champagne to the rose was it a long war? how the day stopped we sit in the garden (amongst those that need barbed wire fences—radioland a new love, an old love) watch each other drink in loving eyes the beauty of enough hoping not to attract the guards the heralds of Berlin at the gate “surely he is not dead” my blonde soldier and virgin pink in the middle of the feast I look up (the colour of blond champagne the air of pink roses a full moon full sweet the air of roses drift...) and he was gone it is not dressage what the heart owns (I live for second chances although sometimes do not get them) you’re different changed somehow he never said a word how the day goes the sounding church bells in the distance God knows the day brightens so for January trees...

Rebecca Anne Banks on P.K. Page

Reading P.K.'s beautiful verse, I was touched by the writing and the poem "The Metal and the Flower" which seemed to be the essence of sunlight in a crisp Canadian winter. This poem struck me, and I felt as if it could have been written by a former me from over fifty years ago. I was also struck by similar images appearing in my own untitled poem, written in the last year.

John Barton

A Son's Nineteen-Seventies Wardrobe

What the hand, dare seize the fire?

William Blake

Consider a new habit—classical

The skill she used to embroider my new
Jean jacket with roses, new leaves sprinkled
With runoff-blue, stitch-sized raindrops I knew

She took pains to make look real, knew she strew
Down vines buds yet to open, newly dropped
Petals around our patio renewed
In floss about the yoke, new deadheads lopped

But unrecorded, my youth a new crop
Of years she saw I'd not share, new threads
She bought me made newer still, sprays cupping
Shoulder blades newly squared, a blind spreading

Across my back, a newness I'd not see
When worn, nor the tiger she knew I'd free.

Illuminations

*recasting P.K. Page's "After Reading
Albino Pheasants by Patrick Lane,"
with apologies to Arthur Rimbaud*

*At the bottom of the field
vagrant winter grasses clatter with sun
and I am lifted to a weightless world.*

With eyes heavenwards and wind-rubbed skin peeled
back as thawed loam, I am coldly undone.
At the bottom of the field

uncaged birds—countless luminous calls hurled
deep into the ear where echoes, subterra, run
and I am lifted to a weightless world

of unchecked imaginings, inner maps about to yield
green-vowelled panoramas, blind flights begun
at the bottom of the field

of vision to far-off branches where, among half-curved
impatient leaves, uncertainties perch and stun
and I am lifted to a weightless world.

Inked thumbprint of cloud overhead as syllabics whorled.
Camouflage sloughed as feathers in rising abandon
*at the bottom of the field
and I am lifted to a weightless world.*

John Barton on P.K. Page

My first awareness of P.K. Page came via Gary Geddes. As my creative-writing teacher at the University of Alberta in 1977, he recommended that I hone my craft with her at UVic's Department of Creative Writing, where I enrolled in September 1978. Unbeknownst to Gary or to me, she had decided not to continue teaching, after only one year. Nevertheless, she was the lure that led me to a series of experiences and decisions that would make me the poet I am today.

My next encounter with her was, of course, through her work. In a UVic English class with Eli Mandel in 1980, he asked his students to write pastiches of two poems by a Canadian poet. I chose to write in the manner of P.K.'s "A Bark Drawing" (my poem is called "Hieroglyph"); and "Personal Landscape" ("Shared Landscape"). Through this act of mimicry, I learned a great deal about, and came to respect even more, her mastery of startling imagery, nimble line breaks, and, most importantly, the knack she had of knotting the thread of a poem through a progression of stimulating ideas.

It was only after I became the editor of *The Malahat Review* in 2004 that she and I would meet. Within a month of my return to Victoria after a twenty-year absence, she invited me to her home for a drink. It's then I came to know a little of the fully engaged mind and exacting woman behind the poems. I greatly benefited from her open support of me as editor and was very grateful when she would, on occasion, compliment me on an issue and in particular for the tribute issue that the magazine published in 2007 in honour of its founder, Robin Skelton. This meant a great deal to me, for she was also very candid about the fact that no love had been lost between them.

After I met P.K., I would read each of her new books, and her prolific output in diverse genres during the last years of her life made this both a delight and a challenge. I am a great fan of *Hand Luggage: A Memoir in Verse*, *The Filled Pen* (essays), and *Coal and Roses* (her second book of glosas, the poetic form that other Canadian poets, following her example, still write today). She continues to motivate me as a poet, both through her writing and by her example. Her engagement with ideas, verse forms, and the language itself sets a high standard.