**Page, P.K. (1916-2010)**



Photo Credit: Fred Lum

Patricia Kathleen Page described herself as a traveller, and invoked this status through both her poetry (under P.K. Page), and her visual art (under her married name, P.K. Irwin). Her experiences informed her work, and changed her understanding of both poetic and artistic production: as she learned the latter, she more fully developed the former. Travel gave her other means with which to satisfy her creative output, but most importantly, travel necessarily made of her an observer, and perception has been her primary interest from poetry to paint to prose. As she comments in her non-fiction essay "A Writer's Life," "I believe art has two functions: a lower and a higher. The lower is invaluable. It shows us ourselves—Picasso’s *Guernica*, for example. The higher—more valuable still, in my view—gives us glimpses of another order." Alternatively a poet, writer, and artist (and prolific on all counts), P.K. displayed a supremely imagistic and visual quality that underlines her devotion to observing the world in new ways and to self-introspection. As poet and editor Gary Geddes has observed, "No other poet in Canada, with the possible exception of Atwood, has been so intensely concerned to explore the nature of visual perception." P.K. helped found and worked on the magazine Preview (1942-45, with poets Patrick Anderson, A.M. Klein, F. R. Scott, Neufville Shaw, A.J.M. Smith, and John Sutherland), has had her written work published in over three dozen books of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction (including children's literature), and has had her visual art collected in several permanent collections in Canada—including those of the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

**Timeline of Life**

**1916 1919 1941 1950 1953- 1956- 1960- 1964 2010**

| | | | | | | | |

Birth in Moves to Moves to Marries William in Australia in Brazil in Mexico moves to Death

England Red DeerMontrealArthur Irwin and Guatemala Victoria

**Timeline of Works Published During Lifetime**

**1944 1944 1944 1946 1954 1967 1981**

| | | | | | |

*Unit of Five The Sun and Ships and Forts: As Ten, as Twenty The Metal and Cry Ararat! Evening Dance*

*the Moon Canada Builds Merchant the Flower of the Grey Flies*

*Ship Recalling Historic Names*

*of Her Pioneer Forts*

**1985 1987 1989 1991 1993 1994**

| | | | | |

*The Glass Air Brazilian Journal A Flask of Sea Water The Travelling Musicians The Goat That Flew Unless the Eye Catch Fire The Years*

**1994 1997 1998 1998 2000 2001 2001**

| | | | | | |

*Hologram The Hidden Room Alphabetical Rosa Dei Venti Alphabetical/ A Kind of Fiction And Once More Saw*

*/Compass Rose Cosmologies the Stars*

**2002 2003 2003 2005 2006 2007 2007**

| | | | | | |

*Planet Earth A Grain of Sand Cosmologies A Brazilian Alphabet Hand Luggage Up on the Roof The Filled Pen*

*for the Younger Reader*

**2008 2008 2008 2009 2009 2009**

| | | | | |

*Jake, the Baker, The Old Woman There Once Coal and Roses Cullen The Sky Tree*

*Makes a Cake and the Hen Was a Camel*

Born in Swanage in Dorset, England, on November 23, 1916, P.K. became a traveller at an early age and moved with her family to Red Deer, Alberta, in 1919. As a soldier, her father became an officer with the 50th Battalion by the end of the Great War; consequently, she was brought up in Calgary. At the age of 17, she spent a year in England living with an aunt and reading, writing, and frequenting theatres, museums, and galleries. Upon her return to Canada, she joined her parents, who were then living in Saint John, New Brunswick, before coming to live in Montreal, Quebec, in 1941, and working as a filing clerk and historical researcher (while in Montreal she also helped found and edit *Preview*). From living the bohemian life in Montreal, and after a brief return home that coincided with the death of her father (then 59 and commander in-chief of Allied Command) in Halifax in May, 1944, she came to Ottawa and worked from 1946-1950 on documentary films as a scriptwriter for the National Film Board. After she quit the NFB in need of a change, and married William Arthur Irwin (the legendary Maclean's editor and publisher) in 1950, they went to live abroad (her new husband became a diplomat for the Canadian government in 1953) for many years in Australia (1953-55), Brazil (1956-59), and Mexico and Guatemala (1960-63), before returning to Canada in 1964. She lived out the rest of her days in Victoria, B.C.—the place where her mother came to live after the passing of her father.

Her poetry has won her the Oscar Blumenthal Award (in 1944 for poetry in Chicago's *Poetry* magazine), the Governor General’s Literary Award (in 1954 for her second book of poetry, The Metal and the Flower), Canada’s National Magazine Award (Gold) (in 1985 for poetry published in Malahat Review), the Canadian Authors Association Jack Chalmers Poetry Award (in 1986 for The Glass Air), the B.C. Book Awards Hubert Evans Prize (in 1988 for Brazilian Journal), and the Banff School of Fine Arts National Award (in 1989 for lifetime achievement). She was named an Officer of the Order of Canada (in 1977) and a Companion of the Order of Canada (in 1998). The United Nations’ 2001 Dialogue Among Civilizations Through Poetry reading series chose her poem "Planet Earth" from The Hidden Room (1997) to be read at the United Nations, Mount Everest, and Antarctica—that is, in places considered "international ground."

P.K.'s interest with the visual aspect imbues her writing, but in a manner always searching for new understandings of vision, perspective, and perception. She says in her non-fiction essay "A Writer's Life," that she grew up immersed in the fairytale narratives of Grimm, Andersen, Perrault, and the Arabian Nights, which altered her conception of the spatial dimension: she comments that she was readily able to accept "worlds…where one can defy gravity, become invisible, pass through brick walls. What appear as surrealist images in [her] work may stem from listening to such tales, and to [her] subsequent belief in the possible infiltration into our three-dimensional world, of our brothers, the gods." In her writing she skews the plane and stretches the known shape of things: for instance, as she does in the poem "After Rain," where "feet in gum boots pace the rectangles— / garden abstracted, geometry awash— / an unknown theorem argued in green ink, / dropped in the bath. / Euclid in glorious chlorophyl, half drunk." But in altering perception, in distorting the visual sense, she grows something unexpected and wonderful that can take even a visible "ruin" and make her audience pause to consider how a scene is, in fact, precious and wholly essential to existence. In "After Rain," her crisp visual of a destroyed "silver web— / its infant, skeletal, diminutive, / now sagged with sequins, pulled ellipsoid, / glistening"—transcends to that of "pears upon the bough / encrusted with / small snails as pale as pearls / [that] hang golden in / a heart that knows tears are a part of love." For P.K., distorting the normalized visual plane results in a gained perception that captures more than just what the eye records. In her writing, both the act of seeing in a different manner and the result of that new sight are important to her pursuit of imagistic elements.

P.K. also studied art under Frank Schaeffer in Brazil and under Charles Seliger in New York in addition to attending the Art Students' League and Pratt Graphics in New York. Of her artistic work, P.K. stated, "I began drawing in Brazil in the late 50's. Immersed in a language I could not understand and surrounded by a baroque world of great and tropical beauty, I was wordless. My writing, except for a journal which I didn't count, stopped. Then the pen that had written, miraculously began to draw. It drew everything around me—each blade of grass, each tree, each chair and table." Her drive to create, formerly reserved to the written word on the textual page, was transferred to colour and texture on a visual scale: in her introduction to visual practice, she learned that "there [is] no formula for art." Instead, she became drawn to the "'gear and tackle and trim' of art[, to] the tooth of the paper [she] worked on, the colour of the ink, the thickness of the nib, the sound of the nib on the paper—one might even say, 'its song'—and then the different ways of applying colour: oil pastel, gouache, oil, egg tempera." She came to understand that instead of being learned, art (of any kind, be it visual or written) is a process of practice and immersion, of discovery done on one's own: in this manner she proceeded in stages—going from writing to art and back again—always working, always experiencing the new with open eyes and the old with fresh ones, always finding an outlet for her ever-present creativity. Her essay "A Writer's Life" concludes, "So where do I go from here? I have no idea. The journey is without maps. But when I glance back, as I have tonight, to where I have been, I know that the life of the artist is one of the most privileged of all lives." As a poet, writer, and artist, she had ample experiences that allowed her to explore her craft and, in turn, gain perspective on the process of her development such that her depth of vision always fed back and informed her mastery of her work.

Brazilian Dolls, 1958-1959

Oil on board 25.5" x 19.25"

**Key Biographies of P.K. Page:**

Documentaries

* *Poets on Film No. 2.* Dir. Janet Perlman et al. National Film Board of Canada (1977).

(Link: http://www.nfb.ca/film/poets\_on\_film\_no\_2)

* *Still Waters: The Poetry of P. K. Page.* Dir. Donald Winkler. National Film Board of Canada (1988). (Link: http://www.nfb.ca/film/still\_waters)

Books

* Orange, John. *P.K. Page: An Annotated Bibliography* (1983)
* Orange, John. *P. K. Page and Her Works* (1989)
* Rogers, Linda, and Barbara Colebrook Peace, eds. *P. K. Page: Essays on Her Works* (2001)
* Djwa, Sandra. *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page* (2012)

**Chronology of All Works:**

Poetry

* *Unit of Five: Louis Dudek, Ronald Hambleton, P. K. Page, Raymond Souster, James Wreford*. Ed. R. Hambleton (1944)
* *As Ten, as Twenty* (1946)
* *The Metal and the Flower* (1954)
* *Cry Ararat!: Poems New and Selected* (1967)
* *P.K. Page: Poems Selected and New* (1974)
* *Five Poems* (1980)
* *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (1981)
* *The Glass Air* (1985)
* *Two Poems* (1988)
* *The Glass Air: Poems Selected and New* (1991)
* *Hologram: A Book of Glosas* (1994)
* *The Hidden Room: Collected Poems*. Ed. Stan Dragland. 2 vols. (1997)
* *Alphabetical* (1998)
* *Rosa Dei Venti/Compass Rose* (1998)
* *Alphabetical/Cosmologies.* 2 vols. (2000)
* (and Philip Stratford). *And Once More Saw the Stars: Four Poems for Two Voices* (2001)
* *Planet Earth: Poems Selected and New*. Ed. Eric Ormsby. ( 2002)

Link to P.K. Page reading from *Planet Earth* for the Griffin Trust:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWFTFE8Icf0&feature=player\_detailpage

* *Cosmologies: Poems Selected & New* (2003)
* *Hand Luggage: A Memoir in Verse* (2006)
* *Coal and Roses* (2009)

Link to poet Dionne Brand reading from *Coal and Roses* for the Griffin Trust:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzYY-UJkhJ0&feature=player\_detailpage

* *Cullen* (2009)

Fiction

* *The Sun and the Moon* (1944) (pseudonym Judith Cape)
* *The Sun and the Moon and Other Fictions.* Ed. Margaret Atwood. (1973)
* *Unless the Eye Catch Fire* (1994)

Link to Dramatic Reading on CBC by P.K. Page, adapted by Joy Coghill, with music by Francois Houle (2011): http://www.cbc.ca/video/news/audioplayer.html?clipid=1887095387

* *A Kind of Fiction* (2001)
* *Up on the Roof* (2007)

Children's Literature

* *A Flask of Sea Water* (1989)
* *The Travelling Musicians*. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. (1991)
* *The Goat That Flew* (1993)
* *A Grain of Sand* (2003)
* *A Brazilian Alphabet for the Younger Reader* (2005)
* *Jake, the Baker, Makes a Cake*. Illus. Ruth Campbell (2008)
* *The Old Woman and the Hen* (2008)
* *There Once Was a Camel*. Illus. Kristi Bridgeman (2008)
* *The Sky Tree* (2009)

Non-Fiction Books

* (and E.L. Harrison). *Ships and Forts: Canada Builds Merchant Ship Recalling Historic Names of Her Pioneer Forts* (1944)
* (editor) *To Say the Least: Canadian Poets from A to Z* (1979)
* *Brazilian Journal* (1987)
* *The Filled Pen: Selected Non-Fiction* (2007)

Scripts

* *Silver Pennies or The Land of Honesty* (1935)
* *Teeth Are To Keep*. Dir. Jim MacKay and Dino Rigolo. National Film Board of Canada. (1949)

Graphics (as P.K. Irwin)

* (and Mike Doyle). *Planes* (1975)

Settings to Music

* *A Children’s Hymn: S. A. and Piano (or Organ*). Score by Harry Somers. (1996)
* *The Travelling Musicians*. Music by Murray Adaskin. (1997)