

OBITUARIES

# Lucie Brock- Broido, Inventive Poet, Is Dead at 61

By RICHARD SANDOMIR MARCH 10, 2018

Lucie Brock-Broido, whose poetry glistened with embellished, inventive language about her life, beauty, art and real-world people, like a baby who famously fell into a well, died on Tuesday at her home in Cambridge, Mass. She was 61.

Her half sister, Melissa Greenwald Parker, confirmed the death, saying it came after a brief illness, but did not specify a cause.

“I came to poetry because I felt I couldn’t live properly in the real world,” Ms. Brock-Broido told *Guernica* magazine in 2013.

That epiphany came to her one day in algebra class, when she was 13, and so she walked out of it, she said, seeking leave from a world in which she was a “straight-A student, the most perfect little girl,” and entree, eventually, into the universe of poetry.

Her four books — including one inspired by the three letters written by Emily Dickinson to a mysterious “master” — established her as a fearless, evocative and playful stylist. The poet Stanley Kunitz once praised her “brilliant nervosity” and “taste for the fantastic.”

Tracy K. Smith, the current United States poet laureate, who was a student of Ms. Brock-Broido’s at Columbia University, said in a telephone interview, “She was just a full-force, wonderful presence of creativity, magic, belief and reverence for poetry.”

Ms. Brock-Broido called her style something simpler: “feral.”

She opened her first collection, “A Hunger” (1988), with the fanciful, ornately wrapped “Domestic Mysticism.” In its third stanza she wrote:

*This work of mine, the kind of work that takes no arms to do*

*Is least noble of all. It’s peopled by Wizards, the Forlorn,*

*The Awkward, the Blinkers, the Spoon-Fingered, Agnostic Lispers,*

*Stutterers of Prayer, the Flatulent, the Closet Weepers.*

*The Charlatans. I am one of those.*

Her most recent book, “Stay, Illusion” (2013), was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry.

In a review in *The New Yorker* in 2013, the poet and critic Dan Chiasson praised her poems for their “frolicsome gravity,” and said that while some baffled him, “their stylish spookiness (some combination of Poe and Stevie Nicks)” ensured that they were not boring.

“I think a triumph of her work is that she didn’t finally rest on her ability to create gorgeous decoration,” Deborah Garrison, her editor at Alfred A. Knopf, said in an email. “She could have done so easily, but she went deeper into herself, into grief, and into the hard work of growing older.”

Ms. Brock-Broido was born in Pittsburgh on May 22, 1956, to David Broido, a real estate developer, and the former Virginia Brock, an actress. When she was 12, her father died, on July 4, 1968. By noon the next day she was writing a love letter to him, she told *Poetry* magazine.

Years later, she wrote “Father, in Drawer,” which read in part:

*Mouthful of earth, hair half a century silvering, who buried him.*

*With what. Make a fist for heart. That is the size of it.*

*Also directives from our DNA.*

*The nature of his wound was the clock-cicada winding down.*

*He wound down.*

When she discussed the origins of the poem with the Poetry Foundation in 2012, she recalled how inconsolable she was to lose her father, who was 44.

“I wrote the poem, intentionally, with sharp edges and all hopes of innocence in ruins,” she said.

Ms. Brock-Broido did return to school and earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Johns Hopkins University and a master’s of fine arts from Columbia. While at Johns Hopkins, she recalled, she submitted an 80-page poem called “Pornography” to her teacher, the poet Richard Howard. He handed it back to her a week later and told her, “My dear, there is not a line break in the whole 80 pages.”

“At which point,” she told *Bomb* magazine in 1995, “I thought I would writhe on the train station platform where we stood. I thought, ‘What do you mean there’s not a line break? Look at the lines, there are thousands of them!’ But I had no concept of what a line break — no less a line — was.”

She would acquire the technical proficiency that Mr. Howard demanded, specifically an artistry with lineation. She became an expert on the architecture of poems, teaching for many years at Bennington College, Princeton University, Harvard and most recently Columbia, where she was also director of the poetry concentration at the School of the Arts.

Ms. Smith, her former student, said, “She guided us to look at choices within individual poems and the largest structure of a book and the way that questions, recurring themes and obsessions could be highlighted by placement.”

Ms. Brock-Broido wrote many more poems than she published; at one point, she said, she was

writing as many as 300 a year. But she became less frenzied about production in recent years, she said, taking about seven years to complete a book of poems.

“Now each poem must be, as Larkin wrote, its own sole, freshly created universe,” she told Guernica, referring to Philip Larkin, the British poet.

Ms. Garrison, her editor, said Ms. Brock-Broido had been working on about a dozen poems in anticipation of a future collection.

“Now she’s gone,” she said in a telephone interview. “She’d only found out a month ago that she was ill.”

In addition to her half sister, Ms. Brock-Broido is survived by a sister, Julie Parmenter, and a stepsister, Ann McLennon.

In some of her poems Ms. Brock-Broido created voices of people as varied as King Edward VI; Birdie Africa, the only child to survive the bombing of a black separatist group in Philadelphia in 1985; and Jessica McClure, who as an 18-month-old tumbled down a 22-foot well in Midland, Tex., in 1987 and remained there for nearly 60 hours until she was rescued, a plight that drew international media coverage.

In “Jessica from the Well,” a small epic written in six parts that appeared in her first book, she imagined Baby Jessica’s inner thoughts as the child was falling:

*The noise of my own form against the loosening*

*wall as I am born into the dark*

*rococo teratogenic rooms of the underground.*

*All the noise of the world*

*stops here & muffles, muffles me.*