

THE POET AND RULON GARDNER

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Tonight I sit in room 340, sandwiched in with three hundred listless students to hear Montana's poet Patricia Goedicke read her work. Faculty mingle with the students, most of whom are here to fill the FA-100 fine arts attendance requirement. They chatter back and forth about romances and homework, fanning themselves with their scantron bubble sheets. Me, I'm here for the reading, for art pared to essence, its bare white bones; I'm here for the raw emotion, the terse diction of love. But I'm torn because, not five hundred yards away in the gymnasium, Rulon Gardner is watching his *alma mater*, Ricks College, wrestle Yakima Valley Community College. And I could be there instead of here. I'm torn because Rulon has returned.

See, I'm a writer of poems but I was a wrestler, too. I know the sonnet, the caesura, and sprung rhythm. But I also know the ankle pick, the power half, and the Saturday night ride. I know what it's like to bridge and bridge, blood burning in my lungs, straining every last inch of the body, anything not to go down, hearing in my mind the ref's whistle and the slap of his hand even before it explodes on the mat next to my ear.

As a high school wrestler I never made much of myself. The zenith of my career was winning the consolation match against a feisty, whip-legged, Neanderthal-looking kid from Challis in the Magic Valley Classic. All I remember from the match was that I outlasted him, and my coach, Tim Matthews, congratulated me for making it into, as he put it, "virgin territory." By the time I was a senior, I'd earned the sobriquet "King Consolation," an honorary title some of my jock friends plastered in black lettering on an orange T-shirt for me. It's been something I've lived with for some time, you understand. Poets and wrestlers, they take these things to their graves.

I know the wrestler. I know the poet. Tonight, listening to Patricia Goedicke read about love, life, the cosmos of her cabin, I realize that the poet and the wrestler are one and the same. They come from the same dusty edges of the universe, where the trash blows around the gas pumps at the Chevron station off Highway 20. At the edges. The fringes. They are not popular. Their lives, for the most part, have been processes of elimination, a sliding slope of concessions and consolations. They couldn't manage calculus so they wrote. They couldn't make a layup so they wrestled. Both, in fact, are weird to the majority.

Seriously, have you ever seen a wrestler warm up for a match? The hype of the moment shoots all his adrenaline out into his extremities—

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arms, legs, fingers—so that he starts patting and slapping himself with a Samurai vigor. All over. Slapping, hitting, shaking. All the while bouncing, jogging, jiggling in place. Tonight, I sit and listen to Patricia Goedicke read about parallel universes and the anatomy of dreams, and I wonder if the poet and wrestler don't deserve the reputation they've given themselves.

The wrestler, the poet. Out there, man. Seriously out there. From somewhere completely other than else.

And thank goodness, I guess. Thank goodness is what I'm saying.

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At about ten after seven the rumble of conversation dies down and Patricia Goedicke enters. Septuagenarian, affable. Grandmotherly and grand in her white cardigan and curled brown hair. She reads from her latest collection, *As Earth Begins to End*, poems with titles as stark as the leafless January branches outside: "Except for a Few Footprints," "Chunk of Mars," "Time Zones," "Alma de Casa," and the title poem, "As Earth Begins to End."

Halfway through, the microphone crackles like a frying egg cranked up a few decibels. Goedicke tries to go on, then stops. I'm pained, pained for her. Two of my colleagues, Jack Harrell and Jim Papworth, rush to the front and fix the mike, and she continues, unflustered, practiced, a pro. It's a rhythm she's been in for life, a groove, something she's drilled herself on. Like the wrestler who's drilled the shot for the fireman's carry or the inside trip to the point it's become more natural than nature itself, a smooth reflex on call at the tweet of a whistle. At fifteen after eight, Goedicke finishes with "For All the Sad Rain," and I rise with the herd and throw on my jacket to see if I can hoof it across campus and catch a glimpse of Rulon, the Russian giant killer. Exiting through the Smith Building's west doors, I'm caught in the lungs by a rush of January air. Feeling somewhat of a hypocrite, I try to recall Goedicke's reading. There are some bright shards: her husband's silk shirt, she read, wrapped around his torso "like the Aurora Borealis." Another image: "biscuit colored" sunlight on her Montana porch. And from "Moving with You," her last line: "flying so high we don't notice the pain."

The outside air is seventeen degrees. This is Eastern Idaho, a Russia in its own right. Speed-walking across campus, I think of poetry and Karelin, his physique like a chiseled granite cliff, the way he shook Gardner's hand on the awards stand, the way he finally turned to putty in Gardner's hands.

Who are these people, these wrestlers and poets? Where do they come from? Which planet?

I recall Gardner's match for the Ricks College Vikings in 1989, facing Northern Idaho, frequent national champions, the team we can never quite beat. And I think of how surrealistically similar it was to his win over Karelin, twin victories a decade apart. Both times his opponents

appeared physically superior. Both times Gardner rocked the world. I took a date to the match that night, blonde, candid Kristy, an art student who specialized in abstraction. Throughout the match she mustered some ersatz enthusiasm while I caterwauled with the other fifty or so grappling aficionados. Outsiders at poetry readings and wrestling matches wear the same expression. Kristy did her best. The Vikings wrestled to a three-point deficit in the team score, and a classmate of mine I'd never heard of stepped onto the mat to wrestle the heavyweight match.

And it was poetry. No other way to describe it. What I saw was poetry. Remember how Gardner looked on television before his gold medal match? There he is next to Karelin. Next to the chiseled cliff he looks a little dumpy, like somebody from the Feed 'n Seed store in Afton, Wyoming, not the ripped-out Russian terminator, right? Hey, I'm all apple pie and Yankee Doodle, but admit it: at that moment you were thinking silver's the best he's going to do. I was. That's what I was thinking in 1989, sitting there next to Kristy, my abstract date, watching Rulon square off against an olive-skinned, muscular heavyweight from Northern Idaho. With our team down by three points, I wrote Gardner off. We all did. As the ref's whistle bleated and the match commenced, the small crowd seemed only vaguely interested. Kristy yawned and gazed at her watch. Defeat seemed imminent for Gardner and for me.

But something happened. Gardner transformed from within; his spirit had flown the limits of the physical. Unbelievably nimble for his size, he jumped, sidestepped, controlled his opponent's head, arms, shoulders. He defended himself, refused to be taken down. And once his opponent began to tire out, with a stunning *démarche* Gardner went in for the kill, scored a take down, and rode his man into the mat as seconds blinked off the clock. We were on our feet, crazed with unhopd-for emotion. The gym rang with our cries of shock and elation. It's like when you first read the poem; you stare at it curious but perhaps a little disappointed. Nothing special. Not much to look at, really. Yet your own uneasiness tells you you've overlooked something, so you had better look again or miss history.

Gardner and Goedicke have tapped into something—call it spirit, courage, whatever—transforming and transcending what seems possible, spinning beauty and history out of a single moment. Call it poetry.

Tonight, reaching the east doors of the gym against a current of bodies, I overhear that Ricks has defeated Yakima Valley. In the gym I look for Rulon. The floor is a carnival of spectators, kids, and parents. Student trainers are rolling up the blue mats. For a second I feel a rush of disappointment; I've missed him. Then I see him on the stage. He's signing T-shirts for a line of kids that stretches the length of the floor and snakes back around on the near side of the gym, winding from Wyoming

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to Moscow to Sydney and back around to Idaho in one cosmic arc. Like a school kid, I pace back and forth along the railing, catching a glimpse of the gold medal man, my classmate who toppled Karelin, Czar of the Thirteen-Year Reign. Gardner rises, surveys the long line of young hopefuls, sits back down and returns to autographing. And I wonder where he finds his magic.

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Difficulty and defeat are old companions we all know well. When we hear the poet, when we watch the wrestler, we're allowed out of our corporeal shells to become something greater, along with them. Their victories are illogical, victories perhaps because they are illogical. In the end it's because the poet opposes the demon of meaninglessness, because the wrestler writes the paean to the impossible, that Goedicke's last line rings true for us too—now, as the earth begins to end, we can take it flying so high we don't notice the pain. ∞