

## A Conversation with Patricia Goedicke

August 20, 1998

Patricia Goedicke wrote thirteen books of poetry, including her final manuscript, *The Baseball Field at Night*, published by Lost Horse Press in 2008. Her numerous awards include a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, and the William Carlos Williams Prize.

Goedicke was an accomplished and passionate downhill skier and her poems frequently celebrate both physical movement and, quite literally, cerebral movement. In *Invisible Horses*, for instance, she set out to capture “what it feels like to think.” Though her books often have a thematic focus, such as *The Trail that Turns on Itself*, in which she decided to include all the narcissistic poems she could, her books’ themes were not always “preordained.”

This combination of cohesion and a resistance to preordainment is reflected in her long and complex thoughts, revealed both in her poems and our interview. She is known for her extended lines and extended metaphors. Goedicke can be tangential, gracefully returning to the beginning, to her starting point, but always, in returning, defining it more clearly. Peter Schjeldahl described her in *The New York Times* as having “discipline and the nerves of a racing driver... with enough vigor to rattle teacups in the next county.” The prepositional beginnings of her lines set up an expectation that is often fulfilled many lines later, after a multitude of associative meanings have been added. And yet her poetry remains grounded and memorable, rather than wandering into abstraction. Patricia’s poems “are a joy to read, and to reread. And reread,” Jonathan Holden wrote. Erica Jong wrote that she is “a poet to read in silence, to read out loud, to reread and to learn from.”

The following interview took place in the summer of 1998, at Goedicke’s home in Missoula near the University of Montana campus,

where she taught for 25 years. One year later, *As Earth Begins to End* was published by Copper Canyon Press, and was declared by the American Library Association to be one of the top ten books of 2000. In 2006, at the age of 75, Patricia Goedicke died from pneumonia related to cancer. Among her notes regarding this interview, she wrote, “Please be sure to speak of my utter joy,” and in fact her ruminations on death and deterioration are always balanced by an almost giddy celebration of pleasure and its importance, which she invites readers to share.

KENDRA BORGMANN

How has your relationship to poetry changed over the fifty years you’ve been writing?

PATRICIA GOEDICKE

I suppose the changes are much the usual. Nearly everyone of my generation started off much more formally than we wound up. I wound up with more spaces in my mind, and spaces and indentations and movement over the page than I used to have, and I like that. At the same time I think I learned—I hope I’ve learned—to wander more, to leap more, and I don’t really mean to leap only in the Robert Bly sense. I am able to write bigger poems now. At the same time, every time I start going in one direction I very soon decide I’ve got to change. Right now I’m thinking I must set formal limits. I don’t mean in the sense of sonnets or villanelles or anything like that. But I must stretch out within rules because I feel I’ve become a little too loose, and I want to give myself more pressure, more emphasis on vocabulary, on language again. I’ve wanted to cover wide landscapes and I forget—I’m constantly telling my students this—that the best way to do that is to concentrate on the particular word. The word produces the landscapes of poetry, deepens them, gives them a perspective and a breadth and height and dimension that the landscapes don’t have unless the words are tended to. I don’t mean that William Carlos Williams doesn’t have that. He goes for the moment, the gesture of the moment, and he says things with a lapidary skill from time to time in the midst of this free flow of change and attention. And I hope I can do that. But at the same time I want to slow things down a little. And I don’t know whether that’s not coming back a little bit to the beginning, when I wrote with great difficulty and it seemed to me in narrower spaces.

I know myself about as little as anyone does, so I can't really comment on my progress or lack of progress. I'm aware that my poetry has changed a lot, getting steadily, perhaps more abstract, more theme-oriented. The last book I wrote, *Invisible Horses*, had a deliberately thematic orientation. I knew I was going to write a book about what it feels like to think. I did a great deal of research into microbiology and neurophysiology. I read enormously, but at the same time my father was a neurologist as well as a psychiatrist and I have always been aware of the connection between the body and the word, the body and the mind, feelings and ideas. That's been a constant in my attention. This was just a more microscopic emphasis on it.

My other books are thematically oriented but they weren't preordained. I didn't decide ahead of time except for one other, *The Trail that Turns on Itself*, in which I decided I was going to talk about narcissism, and chose all the narcissistic poems I could. And I had plenty of them, believe me, which produced a very gloomy book because I wasn't writing just self-absorbed, bitter, self-hating poems. Not that all narcissists hate themselves, but it's a function of that practice, I believe, and living any kind of a real life. Anyway, that book was a result of selection. I wasn't writing toward something, as was the case with *Invisible Horses* or the new book, *As Earth Begins to End*. A lot of these new poems have to do with earth in the sense of the earth of our minds, the mind considered as a complex of chemistry and biology and meditation, and the deterioration of the mind and the deterioration of the body that happens in age, the age of the individual organism, the age of plant, animal, human being, human couple in this case, and the whole world. We are a dying organism, the planet is, the earth we inhabit. On the other hand we are also an expanding organism. There's an attempt in my book to come to grips with that on various levels. Anyway, if these things are changes—the two most recent books, the last one and the one I'm projecting—they are a kind of outgrowth of concerns that have occupied me from the very beginning. I began by speaking of formal changes but there's some connection between formal and content-related changes too.

#### BORGMANN

When you're writing a poem, do you write a couplet, then make a space and write the next one?

## GOEDICKE

Lots of times I do, but very often also I will break things into couplets and one-liners and tercets, too, because I'm very much aware of space. And enjambments, as my students will tell you, are terribly important to me. I think that's where the rhythm and music of poetry come from. And there is a silence that surrounds an image, just as negative space surrounds a sculpture. It's a silence in music which lends itself to a greater emphasis when you come to a single line suspended in space or in silence. Which is what happens to the single word, say, at the end of a line, and then the single word or phrase at the beginning of the next line; the kind of exchange of balance that goes on between those two lines is important to me.

An extension of that is the indentational poem I write more frequently now. The couplets, I think, were an early expression of the same feeling. It's not that I want to isolate things as much as give emphasis to different images and ideas in a dramatic flow. One of my beliefs is that a poem has got to move you, really move you in the old Emily Dickinson sense—if, when I read a poem, I feel the hairs on the back of the neck stand on end, then I know it's a poem. That's the kind of movement I believe a poem has to have; otherwise, it's a kind of wonderful entertainment, the difference between some Shakespeare and *King Lear* or *Hamlet*.

The aim is to control the presentation of the images and the sound so that the audience is moved, the readers feel what you want them to feel. And that's where the couplets come from, and where the line breaks come from, and where even the indentations come from. Because the movement is a matter of directing the attention visually, as well as verbally, as well as aurally, as well as kinetically. The breaking of lines and of spaces is what gets you in the gut as you read it or see it, as you feel it. I really believe what's been said somewhere, that indentations work as a kind of subordination, not only semantically but aurally and dramatically. It's a matter of graphics as well as aural. It never exists just on the page or in the head. It's a combination, I think, nowadays, in our age. Poetry used to only exist in the ear but now we have both.

## BORGMANN

I've heard it said that the most interesting poetry today is being written by women. Do you think that's true?

## GOEDICKE

I don't believe in generalizations, but I would say there are a lot of reasons it could be true. I don't want to say that it is true because I think there are men who more and more nowadays develop a feminine side. But I think that women are more aware of their bodies and therefore more aware of the darker, unconscious sides of life than men are. Also, women have lived for so long—have spent their lives—literarily and intellectually adjusting themselves to the animus of the male, that it's easier for them to develop the intellectual side, the animus side, at the same time they're encouraging the feminine side, the anima side, and I think the best poetry is always a combination of yin and yang.

The movement of feminism has helped women to come to the fore and be less afraid of speaking of these things. They are able to be more whole about it than men are. For instance, women's erotic poetry, the poetry of love and passion in women tends to be much more powerful and profound than masculine poetry, where there is so much objectification that you can only identify with it on one level. Whereas with women very frequently you will have many different sides of the relationship, of the feeling of each of the individuals involved.

I was fascinated by a remark made in a *New York Times* book review recently, regarding Jonathan Lear's book, *Open Minded*, something about essays on the logic of the soul, whose lynchpin, according to the reviewer, is an essay in which Lear's trying to rehabilitate Freud from some of the wear and tear that he has suffered in the middle of this century—and he suggests that Freud, or rather psychoanalysis, is important not only for our individual freedom but for democracy. That's a remark that I couldn't agree with more, because it has to do with understanding. He says that the danger in a democracy is people going around not knowing themselves. If we believe that everything we do is for the good, and our rational selves are triumphing, then we are perfectly susceptible to the dark side, which is always lurking. If we don't realize that rationalizations not only seem to avoid the dark side but also tend to express it without our knowing it, we're not going to get anywhere when we try to do things together. I don't think he adds that. I do.

And I think that women's insistence on the particulars of emotional and intellectual context is not only what produces the famous networking—which is the ideal vision of what a democracy should be, where things are done by consensus and informed discussion—but also makes for an illumination of both the dark and light sides of human

behavior. Which is what poetry does. Which is what the image does. The reason humor is so important in poetry, the pun is so important, is because no great image in poetry ever exists flat on the page. It has all dimensions to it, all the layerings of dark and light, and it's both smart and dumb, both enlightened and endarkened, and it moves us because of that.

If poetry does that it is always interesting to me, and interesting and moving to everyone, I think. And perhaps it is true, nowadays, for whatever reason, that it's easier for women poets to do that. But I know some men poets who can. I think right now off the top of my head of Forrest Gander, or the critic Cal Bedient whose first book came out of Wesleyan last year; Edward Kleinschmidt has poetry like that; I think Jim Tate does too.

#### BORGMANN

Maybe I'm generalizing, but it tends to be women who write poems from the first person, whereas many male poets, I don't know if they're trying to make it more universal, but it seems they don't use "I"—

#### GOEDICKE

Perhaps it's easier. Women stand on their own high heels or bare feet and want to speak to the world as "I" see it. Perhaps men in business have to speak corporate speak more than they speak "I" speak. In fact, that's one of the things you learn as you go out and join the world of business and corporate procedures. As a woman at least, I have had to learn—in fact I never learned it successfully—I have to go into bureaucratese. I mustn't say in a meeting, "Well, I hate that idea!" I have to couch it in the passive voice and preferably without my "I" being visible or heard. But as I say that I'm hearing, "What is the difference between corporate speak and networking?" There is a very particular difference. I think the corporate is aiming to make a monolithic, single-voiced statement: what "we" will say. Whereas the kind of statement or world view or cultural image of the soul in this century—again going back to the review of Lear's book—would be many voices heard, individually speaking, and joining hands as they speak. And the voice of the minority is heard as well as the voice of the majority. One of my touchstones is Octavio Paz's book of essays *The Other Voice*, where he speaks for poetry as the other voice, the voice of the personal, the voice of the individual, the

voice of the minority, the voice of the unconscious which is a minority in our world, because in order to be civilized, we have to suppress some of our rampant, instinctual behavior. But we mustn't suppress it entirely or we'll be waylaid and ambushed by it. That's one of the ways poetry works most importantly to me.

BORGMANN

What are some of your favorite essays about writing? Is it better to read about writing or read the writing itself?

GOEDICKE

Both, both, both, both. Sometimes, when I read a really wonderful poet criticizing another poet, I learn so much, because I get somebody else's eyes on it. When I read Helen Vendler or Seamus Heaney's marvelous appraisals of other poets, or when I read Randall Jarrell or Cal Bedient—and there are many others critics I'm slighting—that does help me a lot. Jonathan Holden is very interesting on poetry.

Donald Hall has written some brilliant things. There's one essay of his in *Claims for Poetry*, in which he posits a dark wood with a fire in the center of it, and around this fire are dancing the three archetypal figures of poetry. One is called Goatfoot, the other is called Twinbird, the third is called Milktongue. Goatfoot is prancing [Goedicke gets up and prances, saying, "Oh I can't do it... maybe... yes I can."] prancing around the fire in the iambic tromp; Goatfoot is rhythm and that powerful release. And then Milktongue is the baby at the mother's breast sucking words, sucking the world into its mouth, thinking, "I am the world and everything comes in through the mouth, and it's mine, and my unconscious is the consciousness of the world." It's sounds, the aural, speech part of poetry. And Twinbird comes from, I think, the baby is sitting there making patterns with the hands, making twin birds as rhyme comes together and rhythm come together, and those three things, the rhythm, the overwhelming instinctual force, and the melos of the words themselves are the three. They all come together in another wonderful quote from him, "the dark mouth of the vowel through which the image tells its ancient runes." That connects the mouthing of the instincts, the unconscious feeding and greed of the sound pleasure of language with the riddles that are enfolded and then unfolded from the image; they are layered in the images that poetry makes.

BORGMANN

In your essay “Entering the Garden,” you write, “Still the *dream* of somehow or other becoming able to accept the eventual dispersal of ourselves into who-knows-what motes of energy is essential, not only to our political well-being but to the very survival of ‘planet earth’ itself.” Does this pertain to *As Earth Begins to End*?

GOEDICKE

That’s what I’m aiming for. The more we realize that the inevitable is the loss of the boundaries between ourselves and the world, the less it seems we’ll cling to the boundaries that prevent us, that say “I can’t give this up, I have to have this food, these animals, this place, this space. I don’t know how to compromise.” And yet if we realize the compromise is coming no matter what, the dissolution of the self, that will help a little. I don’t think, and I have very little hope, that we can save anything, but at least perhaps we can go more gently into the night.

BORGMANN

I see that as your brand of optimism. There is something always hopeful in your poems.

GOEDICKE

Well, who’s to say? One of the things I was thinking about as I wrote *Invisible Horses* was consciousness. Where does it begin and end? We have a very narrow view of human consciousness. Animals have a kind of consciousness and plants have a kind of consciousness and it’s pretty humanly egotistical to say, along with the Bible, that we are the stewards of everybody else’s consciousnesses, but maybe we’re not. Maybe it isn’t so bad. I don’t know if that’s optimism. It frightens me to think of becoming nothing—nothing in my sense, but who knows what the other sense is? We don’t know what is coming. If that’s optimism, I guess it makes life a little more bearable because you don’t know for certain. There are two things that are true of beginning students. They don’t know how bad they are, and they don’t know how good they are. The same is true of this. You don’t know what’s coming. It all seems so trite and unmoving when it’s not a poem.

BORGMANN

Who are the great poets today?

GOEDICKE

My mind pulls an absolute blank on who is great. I don't want to choose. I know poets that interest me tremendously. I'm always fascinated by Jorie Graham. I liked *The End of Beauty* very much. And a couple of the books after that. I like... [Laughs.]... oh... I don't want to make these distinctions. I resist it because I am indisposed, I suppose habitually, to making judgments. I used to think that was a fault and I still do sometimes when I hear a really scathing critic, usually a young critic or a person with a lot of judgment, speak. In my thinking, an ideal community would be one where every view is expressed, every person's particular, different take on the world is visible, is expressed to everyone else, and the voice would be the sound of all those different voices. That's not choosing what's the best. It's choosing where the most agreement is. So if people ask me who my favorite poet is, I list a whole lot of poets, and that's partly what is happening here, too.

At the same time, I'm always stimulated and pleased to be challenged by a mind which says "Oh! You can't like so-and-so because of such-and-such." A lot of the time, because I have abdicated this judgmental quality, I find myself—and maybe this is a function of the optimism—going too far in the direction of generosity. That's too nice a word for it. I let people get away with things. In talking to critics, such as that person throwing his weight around or being crisp and good about it, I like it because it makes me wake up, and makes me start to do that kind of thinking. Which of course you have to do in your own writing, when you're rewriting. But to begin with seeing and experiencing the world you really have to do that Keatsian negative capability. Otherwise you won't find out anything new and you won't see anything real, anything more than anybody else sees. Keats describes Shakespeare as being a person who is able to encompass all worlds without judging. He can inhabit, without having to decide—Oh, Richard was a bad man. He is able to see Richard in all of his various aspects, and present him to the world, because he has not decided, I don't like him. He has not insisted on his own positive input. He negates himself, is the way I would put it. The scholars would probably be outraged by a definition like that.

He also says—and it's been a long, long time since I read Keats—"You should see the sparrow scratching on the pebbles outside. You must be the sparrow scratching." I never thought of it before, but there is a relationship between Keats and the *via negativa* that is an apprehension which is not prehensile, it's not aggrandizing, but it is, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous word, "wait-and-see." And let it happen.

#### BORGMANN

Is it true, as Harold Bloom has stated, that the best poetry was written by Shakespeare and that the general quality of poetry has been steadily decreasing since the Elizabethan age?

#### GOEDICKE

Traditionally, we say that we're in a world where form has broken down, a world of chaos, where all forms have broken up—institutional forms, artistic forms, music, painting, poetry, the novel—everything has broken apart, as is happening to us in terms of our science. We are breaking things down more and more into particles. Even the universe is breaking down into discrete particles. We are seeing things in that sense. That means we can't hold on to the shape of a Shakespearian play or sonnet.

But that doesn't mean that we lose Shakespeare anymore than we lose Bach. We just hear him with different ears, feel him with different insights, think about him with different thoughts. Historically, whatever art form appears is usually initially called formless. Then our ears adjust to it as in music, as in the new poetry. We have postmodernism now, so what do we have after postmodernism? We're adjusting constantly. Although there are giants like Shakespeare, I don't think it's fair to say everything has deteriorated since Shakespeare. There will never be another Shakespeare who can encompass that much. But we don't know how we're going to hear or understand some of the people who are writing today. We've already learned to hear many of them in a different way in my lifetime. When I stopped going to school, the end of my poetry books was devoted to Elliot and Pound, and many of my teachers were just throwing up their hands over Elliot and saying, "Well, we can't understand him; this is a breakdown of form."

#### BORGMANN

Do you dream vividly?

GOEDICKE

I don't know that I dream more vividly than anybody else, but I do dream. I do not write about my dreams, because I think dreams conceal—either deliberately or just by their nature or the constitution of the dreaming mind. And it's the business of poetry to reveal. So when I'm faced with a dream that has been moving and exciting and interesting to me, I consider it. I'll use parts of the dream, but I wouldn't ever just recapitulate the dream. I try to understand what the dream is saying. I very often use the word "dream" when I mean "poem," and "poem" when I mean "dream." A poet loose enough in a dream sort of state—not really dreaming—allowing the free play of the unconscious will come up with words and images that cause her to say, "Where did that come from?" the same as a dream will. And a poet's response to that would not be as an interpreter of a dream, analyzing it, at least not right now, but instead to move it forward, to push, to play with it more, to do a kind of waking dreaming with it. At the same time, trying to use that other resource we have, language, to express it. Once you do that, the language begins to tell you other things, because dreams, like poems, are full of puns. But the poem is a far more conscious process, a conscious release of the unconscious. That's why it's so hard, because it's so easy to will a poem. You say, "Ah! I know what that's about." And then you're lost. You give a quick, glib ending, and you set the poem so it won't move again. Whereas it may have a life that you haven't discovered yet.

BORGMANN

Have you ever had something bubble up from your unconsciousness where your consciousness said, "No, I can't write about that," either because you might hurt someone else or yourself?

GOEDICKE

Oh yes. I used to just make sure the person didn't recognize himself or herself. And if the poem were published, I'd be sure it was published in a magazine the person would never see. But sometimes those poems are the best. They are the ones, for me anyway, that are easiest and looest, and I have the most fun with them.

It's no accident that it's easier to write a curse poem than a praise poem. I mean a good curse poem. You're letting out stuff that's original, because you've been suppressing it. Suppression is the enemy of originality, of course, and of honesty. We're busy being polite and civil

and we don't let things out. I think poetry is based on both praise and cursing... swearing. What's the opposite of praise? Denigration? Hatred? I don't know. But misery, joy, those things are both there. It's hardest to talk about the praise and the good things but you have to be able to. If you are all sunshine and joy no one is going to believe you, because we know it's not that way. But if you bring in the dark part of it, that makes it whole. Usually.

One of the things that has always interested me is how much many of the philosophers I've known have been drawn to poetry. And vice versa, how many poets are drawn to philosophy. I think it's intimately connected with, I'd say "ground and sky" or "earth and sky," but also body and mind. I do believe if you concentrate on one aspect, you are fascinated by a lack of the other, and you want to go to it. And since both poets and philosophers are after wholeness, you tend to keep an eye out for the other, and of course both are yearning inevitably for some kind of—not an absolute—but an answer.

I'll tell you a secret about *Invisible Horses*—I'm always waiting for some smart-ass person to say, "Oh, we know what those horses are in the burning stable. They're just the shadows in Plato's cave. We know that." And they are, in a way, because, it seems to me, now here we are back on the dark side and the shadow, but the shadow and the substance—we're always searching for what is substance and what is shadow. What's particular and what's general. How to make the particular general and the general particular.

#### BORGMANN

How do you write what's in your heart when it's painful and you want to avoid it?

#### GOEDICKE

Why is it easier to write about sad things than happy things? But here you're saying some things are too sad to write about. And in a way, they are. When Leonard and I first met—in the MacDowell Colony—he asked what my favorite line of poetry was, and I said, "Brightness falls from the air," from "Litany in a Time of Plague," by Thomas Nashe. The brightness falls and yet fall is bright, too. And there's always poignancy and beauty because it will not last, because it's falling, it's transient, and your awareness of it, that's the shadow of the sunlight. It's hard to

write about because of that pain and yet it's important, it's wonderful, because in writing it, you can have your cake and eat it too. You can say, "Brightness falls from the air." And there is the brightness. And there it is falling.

I can't tell you the number of times that something beautiful and wonderful has struck me and brought me to tears, or almost to tears, because of the awareness that it's not all. On the other hand, there are moments, as Jocelyn Siler said to me, that are "moments the devil can't get at." They're not necessarily conscious moments, but sudden feelings, little bits of bliss that float across your landscape or emotional interior. They're not really expressible but they are there. The fact of their inexpressibility is what encapsulates them from the devil.

When I had cancer, the first breast cancer, and even the last one, I wanted to write about it right away. But the nature of things made it impossible. Then gradually I decided I shouldn't, and it was fine. When I wanted to write, I could. In fact, there was a period in my life when my friends used to keep saying, "Are you all right?" It had been ages, and I was cured, but they were still worried, because I kept writing about it. It's that emotion recollected in tranquility of Wordsworth. When there's some great grief that occurs, it's a truism, but I think true to say that you mustn't write about it too soon. There is some pain that takes a while to deal with. It's frightening and so you need to wait to let it come out. But part of the way out of pain, in a way, is the shaping of it, and once you pour it out and then begin to shape it, you begin to feel some kind of control, some kind of intimacy with it which is not painful. I used to have a philosopher aesthetician teacher who talked about the "savage shriek of ecstasy." He said we are savages. We go up to a sunset and we want to express it. We feel this glorious thing, and what do we say? "Wow, gee, come look, isn't this great?" Or we feel a tremendous emotion toward someone, and we say, "Oh! I love you." Or we artlessly say in pain, "Ow, ow, ow, ow." But once you begin to put it into words, and you have any pleasure in the words, and any pleasure in the shape you're beginning to make, then you begin to be able to stand it at the same time you begin to be able to express it. The reason you can't do it when it's so close is because you're too busy saying, "Ow, ow, ow." I think that's how it works.