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Paul Bunyan's Bearskin by Patricia Goedicke

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Paul Bunyan's Bearskin
Patricia Goedicke
Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed, 1992.
$11.00; paper.
Reviewed by Janet Homer

Paul Bunyan's Bearskin is Patricia Goedicke's first all-new book in a while. I suppose it's permissible in the career of a poet as hard-working as this one to spend some of one's seventh, all of one's eighth, and most of one's ninth books elegantly experimenting with juxtaposition and sequence of previously published poems. Publishers like that kind of thing, I'd guess—they get to reap the rewards of the slow spread of fame among the reading public (and so does the poet). Still, a body might get impatient and approach this tenth book with an arched eyebrow: what have we here? Well, growth, for one thing. And lots of it. Growth, juice, and jazz. In Bearskin, Goedicke really opens up in a lot of ways: there's quite an expansion in her personal view, as well as in poetic form and general scope.

To rework the old axiom: in her earlier work, Goedicke wrote of intensely personal experience, rendering it universal, allowing her audience to touch her; in this collection the universal is incorporated—intensely—into the personal, the poet reaching out to touch the audience. More simply put, the consciousness in her poetry has become global.

A trajectory is completed here that started in the next-to-last poem of her seventh book The Wind of Our Going (1985), "The Tongues We Speak." That poem works its way around to "The warm currents of the senses / Are a two-way street, my friends" but never entirely resolves its opening:

. . . In bars and at lecterns I have told the truth
Fairly often, but hardly ever to myself.
I have not cried out against the crimes of my country
. . . I was comparing lipsticks
The day Nagasaki vanished . . .
Bearskin is the poet's attempt to get past that earlier view ("What is a block vote against steam shovels?") and engage the important issues of the day. But these new poems are not diatribes, nor newsreels—Goedicke reserves her right to remain a thinking, feeling individual.

The book is in seven parts (she has gotten good at juxtaposition and sequencing), with the first being an overture (in the musical sense), seating the audience with a reminder of the poet's established accomplishments while laying out motifs for what follows. The second section opens with "American Exercises"—in the voice of a rather silly someone who is just waking up to the fact that not everybody has a wonderful life:

... my dear I don't understand it,
That nice yellowhaired girl, you and me,
Surely we mean no harm, if all we want is each other
And a little lean meat...

After the polished elegance of "The Goldberg Variations" (the overture), the risks Goedicke takes early in the sequence may jar a bit, but what seems at first like a light medley of current events and pop culture references—"Ms. Pacman" certainly jumps out in "On Second Thought"—are not at all inconsistent with the state of mind being portrayed and certainly not in the light of a world in which somehow we keep talking to each other right after 60 Minutes with Eleanor Roosevelt and Qaddafi with Superman and Derrida and Einstein and Bruce Springsteen and the President of Coca Cola and Ronald Reagan and Dr. Strangelove on a white horse.

The secondhand history of the "she-Nazi" stuck in the middle of "The Emperor's Nightingale" doesn't work for me, but it was the only real clanger I noticed. I was more impressed when the influence of the media was directly addressed, as, for example, in "The Story":

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I turned on the television
And suddenly the whole day turned into John Gielgud
In a concentration camp . . . yellow cadavers rolling
Right into the living room.

The emotional and intellectual development thus begun continues throughout the book. Take the pain of “Without Looking”:
how
difficult it is to look
hard and head
on has not been said
often enough . . .

Or the confusion of “If There Were a Real Voice”:
If this is all we have what is my real name
How can anyone stop searching
Everywhere, under the bitter garbage of stars
All I want is one clear thought that will stay.

Even in the middle of a poem about coming to terms with a sibling (“The Rain Between Us”), the world consciousness is there: “the animals are still at it, / snarling over the white body / of elegant Beirut this time.”

“The Color of History” is a key poem, signaling the transformation is complete: a distraught friend demands “what have the most recent, even the most dangerous/ strategic missiles got to do with her.” In the penultimate poem, “The Periscope of the Eye,” there is acceptance—“As the underwater days rush by / Fists knock at my hull, political prisoners/ And South African refugees reach for me in the dark”—but not surrender: “how can I say what fish / are too big for our nets/ What immense songs may be moving / right now, out there beyond all instruments?” I think we will be seeing “Along The Street” anthologized as a single poem that powerfully expresses the blooming of this kind of consciousness—and conscience.
Another facet of this development is the poet's departure from a characteristic first-person point of view. Goedicke has included poems that take a step toward short-story conventions in using an omniscient narrator to explore the experiences of others. This can be chilling, as in "Coin of the Realm," a scary little piece about an all-American gun freak; intimate and insightful, as in "The Charge," about adult sons at their farmer father's deathbed; or dark and driving, as in "Frontier," in which Goedicke does an amazing job of getting inside the head of a young man in Kansas. She ventures into broad political satire, with a little help from Jonathan Swift, in "Whenever She Speaks Up."

Yet another manifestation of this broadening of scope, it seems to me, is the inclusion of several poems about the power of women together. There are, as before, poems about mother and sister, but there are also many women friends moving through the poems, as instigators of growth—the heroine of "Passports" and "Cathay," for example. The dreamy "In These Soft Trinities" celebrates feminine archetypes and "crowned, constellated friends." One of the poems I liked most was "Women's Workshop" which weaves together powerful stories and personalities (although I do wonder why there has to be a passing nod to men telling their stories, too, in the second section). All of these poems fall into the center (fourth) section of the book—suggesting, perhaps, that this collective feminine energy is a kind of fulcrum, if not an apex.

The context of this review doesn't really permit me to show what's going on with Goedicke's poetic form—you have to see the book. Some poems have such a completely different shape, it's hard to believe they're by the same writer from whom we've come to expect elegant, flowing lines with charming, controlled rhythms. A lot of that is still there—as lovely as ever—but her lines really open up and dance all over the page in "Now, This Morning, Beaming" or "Many Houses" or "Deer Crossing, Wild Horse Island" or "The Wind that
Swept Up Great Homer." What she does for the reader with irregular patterns of indentation and some occasionally breathtaking lining is to impart that jazz I mentioned earlier, giving us an energy and sense of urgency to support the essential optimism of her world view. Or she might use short, spare lines, as she does in "Near Zero," and let the imagery carry the poem along. Or she might go long, as in "The Story," or she might dazzle us with a tightly crafted villanelle ("The Point of Emptiness"). Or she might just go straight up into the air, as she does in the final poem, "Paul Bunyan's Bearskin," sailing across America.