

Autobiography: Magic

Albert Goldbarth

*I was watching old Superman reruns from the fifties. Every adult male—
good guys, bad guys, indoors, outdoors—always wore one of those hats,
like any father's back then. A daddy hat.*

—friend, in conversation

Night—and lightning cracked the sky,
a dropped black platter; my father was down
in the basement, “doing the books” for his job
at Metropolitan Life Insurance. Winter—ice
an alabaster mummy case that hardened across the city; he
was “doing the books,” was working his attention
to a powder against the emery edge of those figures.
Spring—a breeze was shaking the aspen leaves
like snare drum decoration; he was in the basement,
doggedly making a fit shape of those numbers
in the way a juggler might pattern the air with clubs.
Sometimes on weekends we would drive out to “the country”
and buy fresh eggs or we’d pick a basket of blackberries.
Somebody else would know the terms for the when and how,
the little ring of cloacal feathers and the optimum
insemination temperature for the oviduct—as someone
could expatiate on the globular knobules
holding the berry’s sweetness, and say they were “drupes,”
and explain this fruit was kin to the whortleberry
and crowberry—but not us, no, we were tourists
in that world a thirty-minute ride away. What
I knew?—“dinner,” “family,” “school,” “TV.”
“Girls,” I knew, and a cluster of potent, unutterable
words that grew therefrom. My sister. My comic books.
Nothing exotic. The “neighbors.” My “bar mitzvah.”
So ordinary. My father never snapped
the leather traces to the hames of a shying sorrel,
never tracted his fields below the whiteface cattle
and dark green pine, the way that Rodney Jones’s father
did—or anyway does in Rodney Jones’s sweatily sumptuous,
jawful poems. My mother might have thriftily
flattened-out and reused the tinfoil wrap—for there
were months when the rent and the paycheck didn’t
exactly see eye-to-eye—but *how* can that detail hold up

as a peer of the sucked-clean pig-neck bone
 in the poem from the barrio childhood,
 its dance of desperation and pride, its dream of a sharp tortilla
 ready to be flung like a discus slicing
 the throats of the smug. Or how could our patched-together week
 one summer in a mildew-dotted, pungent, tilting cottage
 in the Indiana dunes think it should be recalled with the power
 of someone's summer in the embassy villa outside of Rome,
 those sweetened ices on silver trays and those languors.
 "Piedmont," "fescue," a "brindled half-Guernsey"
 —Rodney Jones's poems again. I knew the "subway."
 Big deal. Once I went downtown to the circus.
 It snowed. The spring would bring forth shabby dandelions.
 Nothing to grab from which to squeeze the nectar
 or blood or sturgeon roe. And even so, *somehow*
 a life was germinated there that, after
 being cast to the winds and landing, continued along
 with the sense of the same astonishments
 and degradations as anyone's life—the same move toward
 the orchid folds of sex, or the antechambers in which we wait
 and wash our feet in preparation for being admitted
 into the various halls of heroism, intellectual ardor,
 spirit travel: with the mouthfuls of vocabulary
 to match. How did it happen . . . out of "dinner,"
 "neighbors," "comic books"—such meager seed—I harvested
 "teleology," "arthroscopic," "the G-spot," "Zulu,"
 "Kalahari," "strontium-90," "botox," "hanky panky,"
 "egalitarian," "ruth," "cow pattie," "eucharist,"
 "systems theory," "plutonium," "rim job," "Kafkaesque" . . .
 it isn't possible, the normal satiated human allotment
 of weeping and numinous slivers of hope is simply not possible
 out of such zilch. It must be something
 like the top hat that the third-rate stage magicians
 always seemed to be slyly tapping with a wand
 on those television ("TV": remember?) variety shows
 of my insular childhood, yes but instead of a fiesta cascade
 of scarves or a mini-aviary of doves, "paisano"
 came out, and "quark" and "fromage" and "ultraviolet rays"
 and instead of the top hat, it was my father's

seemingly empty everyday nowheresville
of a half-price lower-middle-class *circa* 1950s
“men’s hat,” that—like the Original Cause—gave forth
the entire universe *ex nihilo*. Once, it might have been
Thanksgiving, when the entire extended family was gathered,
some imagined slight evoked a very real tremulous lip
in me, and dampening eyes, and a sullen pout
—I must have been six? seven?—and of course
I was humiliated too by then, and I stomped off
into a corner, into a pitiful snit, and so was ripe
for being coaxed back into the general goodwill
by the right light touch: my uncle Morrie
walked up to me, and sat down in silence,
and gave me A Look, and lifted his fingers showily
to my empty head, and from my ear
he gently extracted two gold coins.

Albert Goldbarth

Our Small Attempts, Etc.

Albert Goldbarth

We don't know enough. Not how to make
an engine work or a fire start or a love resume
successfully after its failure. And what
to tip the head waiter?—we can't say
if it's rubles or yen, we may be What to Drink
to Ward Off Jet Lag, and we may be Here's
the Punch Line to a Movie Joke, but ask us
if a god lives in the seed, or why the stars are so
at home in the hold of the ocean—ask us anything
important—and we're stumbling in that same
murk-unconnectedness between Neanderthal
sex-in-the-night and Neanderthal birth-of-the-baby,
acausal and useless. What to do
when you're angry? Pose like this: I saw it
on Monday on Angry TV. They picked it up
on Slightly-Pissed-Off You-Tube. We don't know,
without these teachers. Jesus said
the other cheek. Okay: my other cheek. I give it
to the stars and to the ocean. We're so naked.
Every other animal seems to be born
with the menu it needs, and the map, and the commandments
in it already. We don't know enough
to read the next step, although there are maxims aplenty
that we cobble together and paste on our walls
to be an instructional exostructure. Interiorly,
we don't know how to live. Not one of us
knows how to live. We look to others for this,
as they look to others. And so, our small attempts. . . .
The fork gets set on the left; the knife, the right.
Be careful of who you look in the eye.
These fruits are good to eat; those others there are poisonous.

The Story of Wax and Wane

Albert Goldbarth

Things change over time etc., a river
redoes the banks with even its most gentle of caresses
etc. Language too: “Infomercial,”
“crackho,” “blogger,” “particle accelerator”
bellying out of the matrix-slime
and testing the flex of their cilia
on the shore of a first appearance . . .

just as “devoir” and “caitiff” and “harrico”
return to that element, this time disappearing
in its more corrosive aspect. Once,
a “typewriter” was the person
behind the machine, and not the machine.
Once, we lit cigarettes with “lucifers.”
In the fullness of time, the language

Middle Chulym has come to be spoken
by only 426 people—hunter-gatherers in Siberia,
“none of them under 52.” The wind, that old
absconder, snatches the words away as soon
as they’re offered aloud, it drives down
out of that sky the color of sturgeon-leak,
it pockets “radish,” it grinds “love” to a rosin,

it bends to the faces and it soul-kisses
sentences out of those mouths as whole and elastic
as eels. The wind, “the wind of time,” it makes
our finest cerebration its own intellectual property,
it makes our songs about lust its own sexual chattel.
The wind. The ocean. The night. Vocabulary doesn’t
stand a chance, in their digestion. Hamlet,

talktalktalktalktalktalktalk, soliloquizing
his agony into the sixteenth century’s Denmark air:
“fellies” he says, and “fardels” he says—*what???*—and the wind,
the Siberian wind, reduces this to spittlefleck: and then
to invisible pinches-worth of hydrogen and oxygen,
from these to mix the water in which
“cyclotron” is baptized, “dotcom,” “zip-a-tone,”

“nerdy,” “jewfro,” “polyurethane.” In the fullness.
 In the passion of the river for the medium
 it changes as it flows. In a picture I’m looking at
 now, a woman sits behind an office typewriter
 —it’s a standard 1960s model, and so is she—
 and indulges herself in a cigarette. The smoke
 like a scarf she’s fluttering. The picture, marinated in time.

*

The engine-revving premise of *Then They Were Married*
 —that astute, high-style comic strip
 Cliff Sterrett created—is simple; and it must have provided
 a mirror to its readers’ lives they welcomed
 as an accurate description: it repeated
 its single joke over numerous years in the 1930s
 and under alternative titles: *Belles—and Wedding Bells;*

Sweethearts—and Wives. You get the idea.
 In the courtship stage, he’ll keep a sturdy silence
 (in a whirl of inky zigzag gashes stabbing at his stomach)
 rather than ever imply the hammer-smash, unpalatable nature
 of her salmon-jelly casserole: and on the other side
 of the “Then They Were Married” panel, we see him fling
 a chafing-dish out the window as if it’s a fuming Bolshevik bomb.

His snoring, the same . . . her outlandish galoshes . . . his sharp whiskers . . .
 it will all be cherished, all be damp
 and saccharine in lovergoo, as it will also be
 little lumps in graves to piss on. In the mineral eyes
 of mica and coal a geologic era watches with,
 it will all occur, the whole abobble bouillabaisse.
 A war—or not “a” war, but the current

visible edge of a continuous condition. Then a breath
 —a day; a generation; a featherfall—of peace. A rose,
 let’s say a rose at its peak, a great symphonic rose.
 And then its petals scattering like unconnected notes. *Sex,*
intellection, fidelity, boredom, betrayal, apology, sex again—a wheel.
 The fullness of time demands it.
 The narrative needs of a story demand it.

*

And so the couple enters this poem—*reenters*,
for they were here all along. The secretary,
over her typewriter keyboard with the cocked wrists
of a pianist; the suave and exotic go-getter guy
from a village east of Chulym (via apprenticeship
on the floor of the London stock exchange): against
that drab backdrop of global ever-war,

he's given her those roses. Now they're on the wheel,
fifteen years of man-and-woman wheel. Maybe
we know them. Maybe there's something, oh,
familiar when he's in the room with her and more alone
than when he's by himself. She used to be . . .
well, anyway, she's not. She's all involved now in her "art"
and with her "artist friends." "You just don't get it,"

she lectured him once, "it's leaves and sand
intentionally, it's *supposed to* decompose." He drove out,
one afternoon, without her, to view it. An "eco-installation."
Even as he watched, it seemed to slightly curl and rustle
in the increasing chill of the season, it heaved
and darkened—it became something else.
He got it. When my friend Michael Pointer

was six, an uncle gave him a watch from the 1930s
that had two radium-painted hands. "Turn off the lights.
See? Glows in the dark!" It took a year
for Michael to figure out the mysterious burn
on his wrists, a deepening raw sienna.
He'd been altered every hour
by the sear of one more circle.

*

And then the Earth will be jacketed in ice. And then
the Earth will be a furnace of baking jungle terrain.
Everything—in the fullness; in the photon eyes of the stars.
And us? . . . we'll float on serotonin highs, we'll sink
in the greedy mulch of despair. . . . There's a word for this.
Bipolar.
Why should we be any different than the planet?

*

“Software.” “Cyborg.” “Morning-after pill.”
 In order for these and their kin to wriggle for the first time
 into the sun and dry their just-sprung wings,
 other words must clamber backwards
 and drown. “Postilion.” “Thimblerrigger.” “Mugwumperry.”
 They drown, they’re dead forever; or they drown
 and are reborn, sometimes in bodies that are stranger

than they could ever imagine. So when Hamlet
 and his enemies and friends at castle Elsinore
 address us in their grandiose suffusions,
 while the spirit of it is eternal, the spoken skin
 is as susceptible to a sloughing-away as any,
 “stithy,” “mazzard,” “quilllets,” “cataplasm,”
 and some words over the centuries have reversed

their polarity altogether. “Season your admiration,”
 says Horatio, “season” meaning not “add flavor to,”
 but “tone down.” Or “I’ll make a ghost of him
 that lets me”—I would think that “lets” here means
 “allows,” but it means “hinders.” In an early scene,
 when Hamlet is informed of his father’s spectral presence,
 and all of the tragedy’s dominoes are first arranging themselves

along those cold and stony battlements, he says,
 “Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
 As ever I had seen that day,” and “dearest” here
 means “bitterest.” Who might have guessed
 that even the fullness of time would occasion a shift like that?
 (And so the couple reenters this poem.)
 You heard me: “dearest” was “bitterest.”