

ALBERT GOLDBARTH
from *The Two Domains*

overture

A heavy, violent sky:
ironmongery and smithy forges.
A night for murder. Then it settles
out of its kettledrum drama,
into zitherstrings of drizzle,
into a morning of drizzle, a noon
of after-drizzle, and a dusk of thick long fog.
A day for ghosts.
The year is 1888. The subject is
Samuel and Liza Ruby Williams,
dead on their honeymoon night
of random rifle-fire from a feud they aren't part of,
in a gabled hotel near the seacoast shingle.
That's all we know. The rest is fog,
is salt air eating up details.
Generations pass. It's now,
we're here. Hello.
A poem is about to begin. The sun
appears above the horizon, limited at first, like someone
matter-of-factly entering a warehouse, with a flashlight.
Then the overheads get turned on.
Time to start. The sun is taking its daily
inventory, shining with impartial force on every row
of what we know
and what we don't know.

We don't *know* if the Yeti really
stomps its great splayed cinquefoil prints
up icy goat-paths at the Top of the World, though
there are over seven decades of photographs,
and spoor, and depositions
taken somberly with the breaths of the testifiers
afloat like lovely, ivory jellyfish in the Himalayan air.
Yeti. Sasquatch. Nessie. The Surrey Puma.
The thirty-foot Tatzelwurm of the Alps.
Iffy fellow creatures of an ecosphere beyond
Linnaean tagging. We don't know what improbable
vehicle spun like a pinwheel for Ezekiel,
or didn't, in the desert's shimmervision,
we don't know if the boggling monologues that so
stirred Joan of Arc were in- or exterior, or
what transcendent gizmo (or quintessence) (or infinitessence)
speaking
at the heart of the Bush on the Mountain—what
Rosetta Fire—deciphered the thought of the Lord Almighty
into the language of wandering tribesman. We don't know.
Kaspar Hauser: who? Amelia Earhart: where?
The Shroud of Turin: how? and even: what?
The sky folds open over the otherwise unremarkable
village of Cam-at-Wye, and a minutes-long fall
of ibises and cormorants—hundreds, dead but spookily perfect,
as if killed by a look, and then preserved in salt—
heaps up the gutters and thunks on top
of the fish-and-chips carts. O we never tire of this
unending catalogue of what-we-don't-know,
of Tut and Bigfoot and Jack the Ripper: maybe they
distract us from more intimate not-knowings. There are strange
beasts
at the back of every brain, and there is burning inside every heart
but, lo! the heart is not consumed, the heart is not consumed
but burns with want and fear unceasingly, and
why we're who we are, and how to get through any day of it,
we don't know—so,
“I have seen the tracks of mountain bears on numerous occasions.
Believe me: *these* are not tracks of a bear in snow.”

But we *do* know, assuredly, SLIPCOVER TOP
TURNS ANY BROOM INTO A MOP! (its "Fleecy Head Grabs Dirt!")
and EASY STRIPPER ZIPS OFF PAINT
WITHOUT STRENUOUS SANDING, SCRAPING, OR DANGEROUS
CHEMICALS,

fourteen-ninety-eight. The age of the fishes and loaves,
of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, is long, long gone,
and a day is an irksome, crummy thing, but still we know that
in our darkest hour
MIRACLE KLEEN and MAGIC SPONGE and MIRACLE CAR BRUSH
work "in a snap" and that their snazzy confrere,
Mr. WASHABLE, REUSABLE LINT-OFF ROLLER, consists
of "Space Age Material"—"Great . . ." (if that's not
understating it) " . . . Stocking stuffer!" Yes! And
SUPERKEGEL HELPS END INCONTINENCE and
AUTOMATIC CARD DECK SHUFFLER is "Great for Arthritics,"
and CORDLESS ELECTRIC SAFETY TRIMMER
NEATLY REMOVES UNSIGHTLY NOSE, EAR, BROW HAIR
QUICKLY, PAINLESSLY, with the merest of swiveled insertions.
We *know* this. It uses one double-A battery, and it fits in purse
or glove compartment, and comes in vinyl carrying sheath,
and if it tumbled out of the heavens
onto the ziggurat-dotted Babylonian plains, the peoples
there and then would build it a golden altar of wingéd bulls
and never again let it touch the defiling ground.
A day is a burdensome thing. A day is an entropic, burdensome
thing,
and moves to the random piping of Chaos,
a multigalactic organization represented on Earth by the firm
of Mess and Clutter. But still we know that
OVERSIZED FOLDING LAUNDRY RACK OFFERS OVER
79 FEET OF DRYING SPACE, and here to help
in that valiant effort are SLIDING UNDER-SINK ORGANIZER
and TILT-FRONT WICKER HAMPER and UNDER-BED
STORAGE BOX and COMMUTER SHOE TOTE and
OVER-SINK SHELF and DISPENSE-A-BAG, o *everything*
is accounted for, and CEDAR TOOTHPICK TOTE
"Keeps Toothpicks Always Handy and Sanitary Too!"
The sky is endless, the world of particle and wave by definition
is unknowable, the sky will swallow the grandest plan
and shit it out ulcered in fungus. Still, we

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lattice the sky with recognizable pattern, Cup, Bear, Throne.
And so we rung a day, we give ourselves
these handholds to climb through a day, and
I'm happy to say some come in decorator colors,
I'm pleased to announce that polypropylene
"will not rust, dent, or chip," and I'm delighted to know
that I know these things, these sweet dependable things
that are yours, and mine, and come in our sizes,
and are affordable.

The invisible, ectoplasmic stitch by which
the worlds attach—I mean this world
of human interplay and baskets of radish
and airport paperback spinner racks; and
the other world, of otherbeings
living out the terms of other spatialness—
is a perilous place to be, if “be”
is even vaguely accurate, if modes of concentration
can be places. You see?—I only have the language
of the world of human interplay, and it is,
I’m sorry, insufficient. Let me try this:
when a friend of mine goes bow-hunting deer,
he wears the colors “tree,” and clambers into a tree
where he waits all day, unmoving and scented
in deer pee. Me?—I
“ghostify” myself, I go a partum-epidermis closer
to *that* world. It isn’t a visible change
(although I might start in a trance), I’m not
translucent in a moment. I don’t begin
to fume like a block of dry ice. But
mentally I *do* flimmer a receptivity—a willingness—
toward the plane of ghostly presences
(I think of it as “the twixtworld”) and I don’t exist
right then so much as *transist*.
Sometimes nothing happens. I grope my way
like a mole’s starred snout
through empty psychic goop, and
nothing happens. There are other times . . .
they come, with their various grievances and signs.
And we start talking.

In *Landscape in the Style of Ni Tsan*

by Wang Yu (dated 1690), the fisherman/scholar
seems to glide in his sketchy one-man craft
on breath, from out of breath, and into an endlessness
of breath, like a gnat
into billows of stiffened eggwhite—no,
the eggwhite has more substance, more
interior geography, than this

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suffusion of mist-and-void
we lose ourselves in, looking. I'd go
ghostified that way, into the spectral realm,
and sometimes *so* successfully
be a part of its acorporealness,
the way back wavered like smoke, and started
blowing away like smoke, past
my reclaiming. I was always bad
at the things of *our* world: income tax
has left my mind as well as my desktop
something like the rubble after a bombing raid,
and studying the absolutely untranslatable
zeppelin rudders and robots' bungs and metal lasagna
under my car hood leaves me
ineffectually giggling—I'm up-front about this
with clients—but set me to parley with a wandering spirit,
and I can cross the border
speaking spiritese in a jiffy. There have been times
when only the serendipitous squeal of outside traffic,
or a jackhammer's clamor, or a baby's squawl
—some tendril of Earthly interconnection suddenly
beseeching—served to rouse me, and bring me
hand-over-hand up its length, back
to the body.

In that, I'm somewhat like a ghost.
They have a tendril yet
that ties them to the world of the living.
The tendril's the problem.
There's no such thing as a ghost without a problem,
a ghost without a request.

You can't tell from the photographs.
Under the sepia administered like a ham glaze,
everyone's uniformly grim
or uniformly pitching smiles at the camera like softballs.
Some, though, will die

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with a quiet acceptance, wanly waving
one last time,
as if for the nailpolish to dry.
While some . . . the air
inside the air is torn, is stained, with the violent, struggling
reluctance of their going. Maybe a vow
is unfulfilled, maybe a love is sundered, it could be
even a hate is sundered—a tendril,
an anchor, that keeps them from becoming
elementary again. And all I do
—it's usually simple—is help them snap
that tie. I once delivered up
the cloth bag of a stillbirth buried for twenty-nine years
behind the back porch steps,
so someone dead for twenty-seven years
could offer a humble prayer of goodbye
that she'd been too ashamed to make at the time.

This case! This wonderful case! You know
the clanking chains, the creaking chair, the clouded mirror.
Last week I was called to a warehouse:
hundreds of mirrors, ladies'-purse-sized compact mirrors,
flying through the air like jet maneuvers on the Fourth,
then crashing like supersonic kamikaze lemmings into a wall!
Ten gross of plastic parrots (purple and yellow residua
from some out-of-business cake-top decoration company)
swooooping through the room, and making this chowdery
seacoast building
(an abandoned hotel) the tropics! Of course,
as is typical, I followed the police,
five university professors from geology and physics,
a priest, and—obviously—the media, though
my client seems proficient in keeping those video vultures
mollified and away. Weeks passed.
The factory-reject hiball glasses continued to soar and dive.
So now it's my turn. It isn't that these
specific spirits are any more troubled than most
—but what fine props they've been given! Ah, but
my client! She's driving me crazier than nosediving rosebud vases

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ever could. I need to sign in. I need to sign out.
I need to file receipts each day in some elaborate
color-coded accordion-like case with a microchip lock.
She doesn't believe in what I'm doing, and she *tells* me
she doesn't believe in what I'm doing, even while telling me
how to most efficiently do it
(using her Sleep-Eze White Noise Hum Machine for trance states
was her yesterday's suggestion). After an hour
of her overlyorderly fussing, I finally
ghostified myself . . . the world turned fog
so thick I could grab it like bolls of cotton . . .
there were shapes in the fog . . . the first
faint feeling of contact . . . and
her fucking beeper watch sounded.
I told her: it only takes one pinhole
in the darkroom wall to ruin things—right?
I told her there was liable to be one
more ghost here before the day was out.

On the way home, in a deserted stretch
of rocky coast, with rain coming on,
the car died. And after my panic attack,
I did, I admit, take out the pamphlet
she'd pressed on me insistingly this morning,
Car Survival Step By Step, and in the pitiful flicker
of light remaining, I did plug wire one
to wire two, and the car did start again,
I admit it. And now I also own the voluminous pleasures
of *Income Tax From A to Z*.

interlude

time: 1888

place: a seacoast hotel / room 18

He: I'm a simple man,
I'm a steak-and-potatoes man.
My brother Silas and your sister's husband Dell
have kindly sponsored this honeymoon night
at a hotel that pretends to a kind of homespun
ritziness, and I appreciate this generous sign
of their blessing our union, but even so
I'm not a man for terrapin nor the mango chutney
that quivered on its white plate
like the pudding-meats of a squirrel
when I first chuck it into the gutting bag; and
so we've made our excuses and returned
to our room before the third course, and lit
the candles you brought, that are scened of fennel.

She: Is that why we left the dinner table?
Really (*shyly*) is that why we left the dinner table?

He: No. I'm so simple a man,
I'm still a boy. I'm a steak-and-potatoes boy . . .

She: I love that in you.

He: . . . and I didn't know how to say it,
but I say it now, and to your face
that opens and closes and opens again in the candlelight
with the complicated shadows of a rose or a lettuce:
we've come back to the room because we couldn't wait
another slurp of prawn-and-pumpkin-consomme longer
to consummate our love!

(falls to his knees before her)

I haven't wept since I was ten, and Festus died.
I placed my lucky penny inside his jaws
and we buried him out near the wild columbine.

She: I'm weeping too! The candlelight

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licking the corners of the room, the heirloom double-ring quilt
that my Aunt Teodora gave us and that I packed
in the leather satchel below a layer of lilac sachet,
your own enormous passion I can see is exploding
deep inside you like fireworks bursting forth in a foreign country . . .
everything is alive with an animal beauty!

I'm so glad we waited. Even when your tongue discovered
a nerve at the base of my neck that made me feel
as if my body stretched to the moon and back
and contained the heaving Atlantic, even then
we waited, my agitated muscles-flexing boy/man
kneeling before me in your brand-new nankeen trousers and
suspenders
(and only that), and I in my sleeping gown
with the delicate shell-pink ribbon trim (and only that)
—this is what we have waited for.

He: Oh I wish at this moment
I had the gift of golden-tongued expression,
like that wild-eyed Professor in the room below,
who we met yesterday in the whist room,
and whose speechifying left the ladies
intoxicated on language—*then*
I would come to you with the proper words of endearment,
lust, and fidelity.

She: You ninny. That Professor
is a gassy fossil. And, as you know, your tongue
may not be gold, but it can mine
my treasures exquisitely. Come
(*she opens her arms*)
the stars are sprinkled across the night
like the angels' own bijoux, and this is our hour,
and this is its first impetuous minute.
Come—

(*noises*)

He: There's some commotion below in the corridor.

She: Let's peek out and see.

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*(They open the door an inch, peer out. More noises,
shouting. They look at each other questioningly,
and they both step gingerly into the hall:)
(some seconds of silence; then:
blam! blam! blam!)*

October 3

Well! Nobody's going to see *this* entry!!!

Last night made it easier.

Though, in its own crazy way, it was easy enough.

We met at the warehouse, at 9 p.m. He'd already "cleared the ethereal bridge," as he put it.

It seemed to me that the dim-lit air of *The Gull*, and the merchandise on the shelves there—rustled. Barely, but rustled. As if in expectation. That was the only sign.

We used what equipment the shelves could provide. That was part of the physics, part of the aesthetics, of this transaction, he said—we needed to use what was there, in that building, ghosts "are very cosmos-bound to their buildings." Okay with me. We'd gone over this rigamarole before, I knew its outline. And it's not as if just then I had anything better to do with my unused stock.

He took a funnel, he placed it into a vial of Holy Water. That was for Samuel Williams. He did the same, right after, for Liza Ruby. There was more of his trance-like mumbojumbo. Mr. Abracadabra. Two scented candles. Fennel, he told me. The air was—pressure air, as if before a storm.

I'd found the hospital hypodermics (what was left of the original shipment, after some fanciful aerial loop-de-loops). He injected himself from his vial. Then he injected me, from mine.

It was easy enough. On the floor of *The Gull*, by fennel-light, we made love.

And at last, after one hundred years of waiting, love was being made *through* us.

Long after the candles guttered, we lay there heavily in each other's arms. The air was still. The air seemed to say to me, OPEN FOR BUSINESS. Ribbon cutting. Champagne. Reporters.

The air was calm, and I was calm.

Untenanted by restless spirits.

October 4

Questions:

Can they return? No (he says)

That's a written guarantee? Yes (he says)

Is any of the damage tax deductible? No (Samantha says)

Should we continue to "see each other"? No (we both say)

then Yes (we both say) so who knows?

Aren't we married already, in some strange way, for a century?

He gave me, with gestures that seemed to attach a vast importance to it, an old-time rhinestone men's lapel pin. I imagine my eyes said: *So?*

"It's a token," he told me. (*Of what?* But I think I know.) "It was my first—" then he searched a minute for *my* terminology—"intercom system."

poet's diminuendo, with quotes

*Most of these poets do not seem to be as informed
or well-read as some of the best poets who immediately
preceded them; but each of these poets feels that he
knows one big thing: what it is to be, in a particular skin
and at a particular time and place.*

—arranged from

James Dickey's introduction to Paul Carroll's anthology
The Young American Poets

It's a nothing-sky over Wichita, Kansas.
Invisible cloud, and a few barely-visible stars.
The poet's out for a walk, with nothing to distract him
from himself, his spitting flame-of-a-self
he's brought out to the dark streets of his city
at the close of a poem. Whatever light we give to,
or withhold from, one another—whatever
burning we do—we're larger than the stars,
when it comes right down to our own necessary
perspective. He's been up all night
—it's 5 a.m.—to write, been
“counting wolves,” he calls it, forcing himself
awake and—hopefully, anyway—aware.
But then the imp-voice in him rises and asks
who's *he*, to believe his rippled thoughts
and windblown words should be set down on paper?
He knows—what? himself? his wife
asleep upstairs in her familiar sweetcream skin?
But . . . in the opium den, at the drear start
of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens shows us
people, and maybe by implication everybody,
harboring (as the pop-psych texts would implausibly
nautically phrase it) a secret, inner life, unknowable
except through such extreme release; and even
objects: the opium pipes are made
“of old penny ink-bottles, deary.” Everything
drifts in a smoke-gray, purplish *else*. Is it
because of this that Dickens loves his lists
of what's been safely mapped and captioned?
—so, of somebody's almost museumly larder: “The pickles,

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in a uniform of rich brown double-vested coat,
announced their portly forms, in printed capitals, as
Walnut, Gherkin, Onion, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Mixed
The jams announced themselves in feminine calligraphy,
to be Raspberry, Gooseberry, Apricot, Plum, Damson,
Apple, and Peach Lowest of all,
a compact leaden vault enshrined the sweet wine
and a stack of cordials: whence issued whispers
of Seville Orange, Lemon, Almond, and Caraway-seed.”
These hasty notes he’s taken from that same erratic,
incomplete novel. We’ll never know
its intended end. Our poet
mumbles some 5 a.m. frustration over this thought.
He’s in that awful state of being simultaneously
sleepy and jazzed-up. He’s
—me, is who he is. And: *So?*, as one of his characters
recently put it. She walks the beach now
in her own contemplative mutter (although
for her it’s afternoon) and idly watches the lapping
cover and uncover the sand—a lace mantilla
peekaboo game. That’s all so far
from landlocked me in Kansas, it isn’t
a smear of brine, it isn’t
even the ghost of a smear of brine, on my horizon.
But I’m off-and-on reading a fantasy novel,
Fletcher Pratt’s ornate *The Well of the Unicorn*, and
its shipdeck-and-fishing-village scenes
persuasively offer a second-hand touch of the coastal.
Of a river meeting the sea:
“ . . . from the left hand brown Vålingsveden swept
to slip his waters almost secretly into the blue.”

And so it goes—the great length of what we know,
into what we don’t know.