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Laurence Goldstein

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A Letter to Andrew and Jonathan and Other Poems

LAURENCE GOLDSTEIN
Vertigo, A Sequel

When Alfred Hitchcock traveled underground
And settled his famous bulk in Charon’s boat
(“A star vehicle at last!”), and heard the sound
Of oars, and felt the deathship float,

He turned for one last framing glance
At the cool blondes, the shapely auburn-haired,
Whose shades whirled about him in a bawdy dance,
Lifting their crimson dresses, bosoms bared.

His fingers trembled toward Grace
Who modeled once more the postures of sin.
He read the brazen line on her painted face:
“I don’t like cold things touching my skin.”

He would kill her, again, for saying that.
Strangle or stab, in living room and shower . . .
Hell swung into view like a Hollywood matte;
Kim and Tippi spun beyond his power.

At the helm, some likeness of their leading men
Directed his freight toward the paysage triste,
But their king-sized genius, scissors in hand,
Gazed backward till their movement ceased.
How bizarre, that human reason—
adventurous, isothermal as the warm
equatorial currents and the cold
nutrient-rich water upwelling from the ocean bottom—
when it scans the pictures of this book
lingers at petrific images,
chalk cliffs, cathedrals, the immobile,
like Friedrich's *Wreck of the 'Hope,*
then locked piecemeal in polar ice.

No story needed here, no gloss.
Who can take seriously the authors'
ship of state, their "paralysis
of German politics under Metternich"
or any duping subtitle
that frees the ice-locked mind
into the trade-winds of Time?
This is the *navigatio vitae*
stopped, blocked, crusted over
beyond the energy of reform
or democratic temblors to unloose.

Or perhaps, the authors' hunch is right.
It's the age of Goethe, after all.
Goethe! he would do something,
salvage the ship by a sea-change
as when Aurelia hymns for Wilhelm
the "talent, force, and capability"
of their forward-looking countrymen.
"Turn the page!" Goethe would say.
And yet, what's there? Friedrich again,
*The Temple of Juno at Agrigento,*
moonlit ruin where no people are,
none of Aurelia's busy leaders
or the elite corps that Wilhelm
forgets himself long enough to serve.
Nothing moves in the Temple of Juno.
Reason can bear such hopeless beauty
only a while, before the ardor
of some Dionysian will to change
swells the lime trees with wind
and lets the evening star shed light
and settles birds on the brown pillars.
Landscape too needs Lebensraum,
as the enlivening of culture needs
and needed fire not fixity;
and if reason turned to impulse
and science to magic—all was foreseen.
After Goethe, other masters
set their hot voices to the ice
like pickaxes, they broke
the Temple with barbaric joy.
Domain

Some poets write best at home,
if we can find one. And we try.
Hostile cities lend us a room
or we berth in colonies of our kind
or voyage into torrid zones
where “sweet wasted symbols”
like the bird-speech of Rima
inspire us to fitful success.

Home is where we can be haunted,
overhearing from some other home
just this: a voice no audio crew
has been assigned to publicize,
no digest of bestloved poems
has parsed or so emptied of gist
our literate angel rebels.
(“That is not speaking,” she says.)

Home is the *prima musica*, the one
our strict esperanto tamed.
No force can close our ears
to the strange creature of our speech:
the guest of an arborvitae
awakening us at half past four
or the uncanny song
rising from a chapbook in the morning mail.
A Letter to Andrew and Jonathan

I

Mystery of parentage! The stuffing
of so many canards
you’re fated to
feel with, as Oedipus or Oliver Twist
when life’s vexing feedback
makes you knock at houses never to be your own.
"Were you ever poor?" asked Emily Dickinson.
"I have been a Beggar."
They say the needy who seek door to door
signify the angels who have never sinned.
So will you, my adopted boys,
dearly engrafted as we are,
feast on your occult names,
nourishment of such spice
it chokes up tears on the way down.
From the author of this letter allusions come as no surprise; here they are remedies not ornaments, pharmacons, potent self-erasures when exposure quickens self-disgust. They will guide you through the mirror into any neighborhood an author names; then you are changelings, ragged anonyms, hero or maiden whose blood flows when the soul of the action says, *Advance, perform your desire!* In such intrigue, my sons, your father has multiplied the rich stone of his name, leaving behind a foreign shape for unruly rides in stolen cars, having nothing that is not stolen, not begged or prised away, in those hours you slept and midnight waited to close his eyes.
Someday, one, then the other of you while on a forest walk, eyeful of May apples or skeleton buds, empty of destination, will say for the first time, "Who am I?"
The woods will have their hard answer:

A self is a moment's peace
with the loam you kick as you walk until it adopts you wholly.

Nature, great maker of nobodies:
"This child I to myself will take" is all the philosophy it knows.
Gourmet and feast at once, this green world greedy of life drinks the blood and the name with the practiced art of four million years.
Warning: no personal grace
can quell your nemeses, the snobs.
*Blood* is the wound always on their lips.
Some you will know by the bend-sinister
in their lowered, purebred voices.
These can list the royal family of Liechtenstein.
These have sewn a coat-of-arms on ever sweater.
Genealogy is their holy book,
their blind and ambush;
they wade from the marsh elders
pot-shotting with the plosive charge,
their one sanguinary word.
Others are not so absurd, not
Ferraras who say their damages aloud
but acquaintances, even intimates
who share your work and your deserts.
They too seek the mysterious *me*,
rooting day-to-day for favors
only chips off the old block
would claim as rightfully theirs,
theirs not yours, these self-possessed
imply in the manner of a friend.
You see, the suspect takes us deep.
In whodunits, every suspect is probed
and each is less a suspect
than a phantom who suffers
the searchers' anxiety to reveal.
And two especially, not just guiltless
but blessed in the art of life,
romancers fugitive as the secrets they share,
will seem your familiar embodiment:
surely authors know best why they begin,
and what their unfinished stories are . . .
Who can tell you the unthinkable,
that no real parents, no true self
wait for your friendly cuffs.
A free assortment of strange lives,
an autumn of falling names
fill up the hollows in our being.
Bygone America fixed "the line of election
through the loins of godly parents."
Our plot is wayward, our age
banquets with aliens to make them brothers.
   So now you have a clue.
   One is all you need.
VI

(While writing, I pause to remember writing in the small hours, your cradles—cornucopias of beads, bird-mobiles and talismans of artificial fur—halfway between my study and the moon. In mid-verse an unmuffled cry would transport me, nourishment in hand. “Savage is he who saves himself”—saves by letting himself be nurtured, a hidden instinct human as words. Lawless infants, your mother and I wondered the night away, watching your full-bellied smiles, enigmas, miraculous facts Fate put in our needy arms.)
From the first, you adopted shapes,  
a phalanstery of appetites you named  
father, mother, more than friends.  
These guardians you parent  
will answer more suavely  
than writ of blood, or  
all the unopened stories  
made for you to make your own,  
the conundrum of origins.  
The imposter seeks to possess,  
or be possessed, as if ancestral ghosts  
ward off the hauntings they in fact perform.  
Better, to address the presences  
who will be the primal memories you require.  
Andrew and Jonathan, in this poem  
you will read if you read no other,  
your father offers, not alms exactly,  
a few resolute words, a charm  
in a summer of heart’s ease  
and your first quizzical whys and hows  
on the relations of love  

July-August, 1984