

# ALBERT GOLDBARTH'S FOSSIL HOTEL

*Comings Back*, by Albert Goldbarth (Doubleday & Co., 1976)

by Bob Leitz

*Comings Back* is Albert Goldbarth's most inviting, and in many ways, most generous book. The anxious phrasing and overeagerness to please that marked and often marred the early work is gone here. In its place is confidence, control and compassion. The intellect is assimilative as ever, constantly compiling, cataloguing, until it seems that nothing is too small or odd to escape Goldbarth's notice. Friends, specie, the bone matter and rockface of the hard world, the atoms we inhabit and from which we simultaneously take form, the solar system and the universe are the repeating concerns that dominate the text. Indeed, the book itself, at a generous 141 pages, is almost itself mimetic, a cataloguing.

Yet its concerns are unified, and it is not too much to consider it as an extended sequence, a long poem on origins and ancestry. So the cataloguing here is more than just an accretion of objects. Rather, it is an attempt to gather everything together and examine it all at once. As a long poem, the book probes the layers where "basements will go down to the diamond" and "mattresses stained / with our glandular dyes / will be Fossil Hotel."

As in *Coprolites*, the book represents a discovery of the process in which things are built, assembled — and then unraveled, while the probe of intellect and craft work to find what is of value. As the title suggests, that process is cyclical, and throughout the book, the poems deal with returns and resumptions, and with what remains constant thanks to the archeology of the memory.

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The first sequence, “Some Poems Around Some Lights,” anticipates the techniques and themes that follow. Successive considerations of family, love and separation from both the family and the loved one are its concerns. Its theme is the resumption of order, the reassemblance of the old objects into a new situation:

The old myths return. And we stand  
hands twined on the beach near where the  
line of lake  
and the definition of flagstone  
mix — or we stood here  
once — — or we’ll stand there again . . .

Things are reaffirmed, even in their confusion, in new contexts. At one point, Goldbarth concocts the end of a joke about a skeleton thrown from an airplane. Later in the poem, a boy is teaching his dog to fetch. Suddenly — is it the dog who brings it? — we get “a bone from the other joke!!!” immediately followed by “a mill: water / grinding Earth; / a planet, / spinning, endless, as if 4 / grandparents, slotted in place / made a motor.” The wit here threads together serious matter, and the poem is revealed in segments, gradually, gathering its humor and sense of timing for the final punch line. At the same time the tension of the voice increases as the poem travels between the serial joke.

Pervading this first sequence also is a sense of the

simultaneity of opposites, an extravagance that adds to the gathering of that final order. The stars require death's darkness "to set the kings and fabulous beasts in position," and the poet acknowledges the "quick bulbs / of phosphorescence in a ribcage / at the pit of a grave." Spirit is fused with matter: "the father / *was* the house." Finally, the old myths return as the bone of the skeleton reappears. But there's more. The father who was the house is still keeping our rooms ready. Even "the Chicago Ten-Dollar Flotilla," that "hundred balloons, with a hundred / keychain-flashlights clicked glowing inside," returns at the conclusion of the sequence. "Look Syl," says the narrator, fascinated by the punctuality of the night sky, "our balloons / from the other poem, coming back."

Not only do the balloons reappear but the dog, the family, Syl, the preoccupation with layers and strata reappear throughout the book. Sometimes the recurring objects seem to rob the poems of their individual significance, and sometimes we have the sense that the poems have lived more fully elsewhere. But the risk is intrinsic to the poet's technique. In fact, it is absolutely unavoidable in a poet who seeks to gather all the variegated materials and objects of the world and unravel and reassemble them until he has either uncovered their essential texture or exhausted their utility as instructional devices. Ineluctably, poems crafted in this fashion are forced to give up some of their particularity.

More significant, however, is that the objects and materials do yield instruction, wisdom. And ever, the losses are replaced by an accumulative vision that more than makes up for it. Certainly, Goldbarth is not above pushing what is ultimately rejected for one more discovery; or of laughing even at what he loses:

Tears are the closest we can come  
to pearls. This is true.

A day is twenty-four hours long.

I've measured.  
12:01 — a jack-knife on the clock  
opens, reams out another hour . . .

Some of the poems may seem minimal because of their juxtaposition with longer poems in the volume; yet, even these smaller poems would comprise major attempts in many of the slim volumes of verse that have proliferated recently. Included in this group are poems like "Village Wizard," "The Children's Crusade For Peace," and "Silk," a remarkable poem that fuses women in "orthodox *schuls*" kept separate in balconies from men, their "black dowdy gowns and babushkas," their sexuality, the sexuality of silk moths considered responsible for the "Family's heirloom / black silk yarmulke" which breaks down before our eyes into its component moths, who in turn distract "us from something so small as the heavens / that fit our eyes to something so huge / as what fits fondling."

Simple truths, "our ability to symbolize / saves us," suggest Goldbarth's implicit faith in order, his capacity to scoff at chaos. He concludes "List For The Capsule," a poem about survival despite the pincered "lump / from Aunt Sally's neck" and the speaker's own heart, "the dark jar of lard," arguing that the message left in the time capsule for 30th century scientists should be one saying that our century was "okay, sometimes," especially when "forsythia shook flame / from its pigment" and "the day danced." Finally, the speaker declares it should "be scrolled: We hoped for the best, / We tried big."

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Goldbarth dedicates the book to "those mentioned." Without them, *Comings Back* would be eviscerated. Besides "Song In One Serving," where the Pakistani student who failed freshman composition selects the

military as an alternative to academic success and learns how “demolition reverses his failing grade,” (a poem by which the speaker purges his “superflous hate,”) there are numerous poems and sequences, like “The Errors,” “The Reunion Sonnets,” and “Letter To Tony” that could never have been realized without these presences. Without these informing spirits, the poems would be disingenuous, exercises in word-play rather than concerned art.

“Letter To Tony” is a small book itself, an 18-page poem prompted by Tony’s separation from his wife. Tony’s sense of himself as *shit* elicits Goldbarth’s reflections on the dung-beetle, the evolution of life and the sustaining of it despite and also because of feces. Here, the entire process is seen as the creative revival of the self through the arts which, in turn, are seen as extensions of our fantasies for our own excrement. Goldbarth’s nifty peptalk is appropriately self-conscious. It draws an analogy between the archeologist who attempts to discern order from the assemblage of Egyptian artifacts in the Salt Lake Museum of Fine Arts and the despairing friend’s need to re-establish order in his fragmented psyche. Art consumes grief through creative expression, engenders joy, “despite the rage / to abort, and deplete, and dim, and vandalize, / and contracept.” The poem is a “cross-pollination between friends,” a dance of camaraderie in the face of pain.

Goldbarth’s poems are self-conscious. They demand that the reader discover them as much as they have been discovered. Only one sequence fails wholly, “The Chariots / The Dogs.” If some poems seem clever in excess, the wit, the sleight-of-hand, clicks in poems like “A Week On The Show,” a parody of daytime television soperifics, or “Clock Invention,” a sequence expostulating on the invention of the sandwich by John Montagu, and clock collections, where the poet earns belly laughs at his personal expense, declaring:

Nobody's every slapped salami's mauve rump  
 with a whitewash of mayonnaise, and bedded  
                   it down  
 between rye slices thinking: I've just made one  
                   hell of a  
 goldbarth.

The poet laughs to drive off suffering. If the "griefs are immense," the "joys must be commensurate." If the solitary ridge-walker discovers places where "the blood of storm-crazed cattle crusted / rust-colored on the asterisk prongs of barbed wire," there are stars and prisoners' imaginings of women, where "making love . . . is an entering the sky" and "the earth, / our breaths," a wish that we "be whole and all wire be suture."

*Comings Back* is expansive, encompassing. The energy that makes the phrasing vital asserts itself inexorably, and reflects Goldbarth's penchant for the surprising, for happenstance, like sudden comings on white water. He plots survival, assembles the data of lives, like incantations to ward off the ominous, gathers the rags and detritus, the urban slough, the commonfare of deaths and departures, revitalizing these, and causing his poems to resonate for the holdouts who keep their dignity while applause and catcalls peak to crescendos in arenas beyond their quiet.

Each poem is marked by the intelligence that makes art of private observation. Each transcends the ordure and morass of the day-to-day. Goldbarth fends for his generation. The early acrobatics have matured. The eloquence continues to promise. Significantly, there is no place in *Comings Back* that suggests Goldbarth will comfort himself with stasis. The work instructs, enlarges his audience's circumspection, discovers solid ground and footholds, and, should the earth's crust slide beneath that footing, provides the energy and inclination to dance, to dazzle catastrophe with footwork.