

Fall 1977

## Three Poems

Albert Goldbarth

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## OTHER

There's only one good reason to call  
the passenger pigeon a buffalo.  
What's the difference. There's a moment  
you become an empty place, and  
there's the moment after. My  
brother will never point and go *Oh,*  
*look, a passenger pigeon.* No, not  
if one came back. Not if they all came back,  
having mixed themselves whole, again,  
from their diffusion — elements,  
torn from flesh and rain and charcoal, refashioned  
as birds. Because I don't have  
a brother. He follows me, in something that's to  
me as gasp is to voice — and I'm  
afraid of falling in. He's the brother  
everybody doesn't have, the chromosome  
combination that could have been you but  
wasn't, and then wasn't him. A brother  
doesn't have this brother. This is something of  
the way sun casts a shadow but never  
has one. A sister won't have this brother,  
a mother this son. He will not die,  
the wind threads a gasp and this is  
the suit he won't wear in the grave. He's  
here, even now, beside us and sometimes  
in comparison to the day's long slaps and charges,  
he's a comfort — continuity  
is. He's pointing, even now, to the uncrumpled  
photo in which I'm five years old and  
straddling the park's stuffed bison. He  
gasps, *Look, a passenger pigeon.* He  
always never made that mistake, so  
cute, and we always never loved him for it.

## WICHITA

—KSD

Smell of Teddi's green beans like snapping  
fingers through the air. In a while a brown, a  
roast beef, blankets it. Outside,  
Tony's hefting the planks in. Over thirty,  
he'll kid about no longer getting  
it up or dreams that leave him shaking.

I've come to the middle of Kansas, a month  
with them, my own reasons a small motor  
and its awful noise. But one week  
here and everything's quiet. This is the light  
and the quilt and the water they've given me,  
and from my window  
Teddi's garden's a patterning: spokes  
for the earth's great turning. Tony's  
middle years, where even he can't see them,  
bide time with the fragrance  
at the center of wood and he'll reach it  
and breathe in heady. I would tell him this  
but he's busy sanding.

These are the standard cats  
and plants of simple moments  
in simple middle-class lives in my generation.  
One's tipping the other  
over as I write, and it turns out my real reason  
to be here is to record  
it's allright.

A clay pot lays with a  
lightningzag of breakage up its side and Pussfoot's  
cloverleaf mudprints skulking off — but  
even so, the cactus angled  
askew into dusk's wan light is a lever,  
no matter its direction, pushing toward balance. And

in the complex skin of this  
and that it runs a simple heart.

After dinner we crush plums for wine; a sweet, a  
mutual, stain on us. A year from now they'll  
drink my share in the taste. It  
darkens. Linda Ronstadt, spinning on the stereo.  
It darkens more, the house in a black that brings  
out star and cricket like a polishing-rag  
rubbing distance. By the middle of the dusk  
they're on the couch, close, almost a fine stone  
and its bas-relief.

Tony and Teddi,  
the deepness, Ronstadt's voice an old friend, and the house  
in night, the house in acquiescence.

Nobody touches the dial, nobody  
turns the volume up, but  
it's a quality of our life here in the middle,  
the music grows louder  
as the day grows less.

## **SLEEPSONG**

It's dusk — I mean night and day,  
plaited. This is the rope, the  
gray rope, the heavy world  
hangs from.

Isn't everything  
done in the limited shading  
of turn-of-the-century cameras,  
isn't everything withdrawn  
just an inch  
inside its own clear outline?  
What's left, that haze, floats  
somewhere between a  
drunk's blur and an angel's nimbus.

Now if I lift my hands from my eyes  
the darkness remains. And now the  
knots in my muscles, the whole  
long afternoon's work, undo — a  
child's tallystring  
in me, clearing itself for tomorrow.