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Powers

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Powers

Whizzer, The Top, Phantasm . . . They come back sometimes, now that my father comes back sometimes. With their lightningbolts sewn the size of dinner utensils across their chests, with their capes rayed out, with their blue lamé boots. And he. . .? It's hazy, usually; he's a part of that haze. It takes his early morning stubble, it muffles the worry love so often set like candles in his eyes. And: "Albie. . ." / then that smile meant kindly, but also to say it came from some source wiser than mine / ". . . all this reading is fine. But there's a real world." It wasn't The Streak. It wasn't Mistress Miracle. With their antigravity belts, their bellcurve muscles. Night. One lamp. While he read every scrap of fiscal scribble that said the rent couldn't be met, and in the darkness tried to fight that vague opponent with every poor persuasive scrappy peddler's stratagem he had, I read by flashlight under the covers: City Hall was being burgled of its Gems of the World display, and Captain Invincible faced a Mineral Ray (that already turned 2 bank guards and a porter into clumsily-rendered crystalline statues) jauntily, his wisecracks by themselves could make a "mobster" or that dreaded gorillaish creature in a double-breasted suit, a mobster's "goon," collapse in the ultimate cowardly self-exposure of "crooks" and "scoundrels" everywhere. The Dynamo could will himself into a wielder of electrical jolts, and even invaders from Alpha-10 were vanquished. Smasheroo's special power was fists "with the force of entire armies." Flamegirl was . . . well, flames. And flying, almost all of them, blazoned on sky—a banner, an imperative above our muddling lunch-and-shrubbery days. With their "secret identities": Spectral Boy, who looks like someone's winter breath (and so can enter "criminal hideouts" through keyholes, etc.) is "in reality" Matt Poindexter, polo-playing dandy; The Silver Comet, whose speed is legendary and leaves small silver smudges on the page as he near-invisibly zips by, is ironically wheelchair-bound and Army-rejected high school student and chemistry ace Lane Barker; The Rocket Avenger parks cars; Celestia is a bosomy ill-paid secretary. It could happen—couldn't it?—to me: the thick clouds part as neat as prom-night hair and a nacreous flask of Planet Nineteen's "wizard elixir" be beamed down to my bedside: I would wake reciting a Pledge Against Evil, and set to work designing whatever

emerald star or halo'd eye would be incised on my visor, it
 could happen, right?—I wasn't Me but
 an inchoate One of Them. With their Wave Transmitter Wristlets,
 with their wands, their auras, their cowls. The Insect Master.
 Blockbuster. Astro Man. Miss Mystery. Gold Bolt. Solaris. . .
 They come back to me now, they ring the bedroom air sometimes
 like midges at the one watt of my consciousness, and sleep
 is entered with this faint token of sentinel benignity upon me.
 Maybe because sleep also
 isn't what my father called the "real world." And
 he. . .? Dead
 now, with his stone, with his annual candle, my father is
 also a fiction. And so he appears
 with their right to appear, from the kingdom of the impossible,
 he appears in their midst, with Doctor Justice,
 The Genie, The Leopardess, Meteor Man . . . he steps out
 from that power packed crowd, he's thrown his factory outlet jacket
 sloppily over his shoulders, it's late, so dark now, and
 he's worried about me. Someone may as well be. I'm
 in pieces over some new vexation: hopeless in the drizzle,
 perhaps, a flashlight clamped abobble in my mouth, and trying to find
 whatever
 damage in the mysterious shrieks and greaseways of an engine
 bucked me ditchside in the wee hours; or, with equal befuddlement,
 staring damp-eyed at the equally damaged wants and generousities
 whirr in the human heart. And: "Albie. . ."/then that very
 gentle yet censorious shake of the head/. . .how many times
 have I told you? Be patient. Never force your tools or materials.
 Don't give up." At moments like this, that his blood
 pumps through me, his blood is half of what actually made me, seems
 as wondrous as Bob Frank "deep in the jungles of Africa"
 dying of fever and being saved by—positively
 thriving on—a transfusion of mongoose blood.
 This was in 1941, in *USA Comics*; Frank returned to New York
 as the Whizzer—superfast, in an outfit
 the yellow of mariners' slickers. And Triphammer.
 Ghost King. The Scarlet Guardian. Eagleman. Magic Scarab. The Wraith.
 With their domino masks or their gladiatorial helmets.
 The Mighty Elasto. Lady Radiant. Space Devil. Reptile Boy.
 With their various signs of legitimacy: their pharaonic rings,
 atomic lariats, stun guns, mystic arrows, tridents, with
 such amulets as hinge the Earth and Heavens into symbiotic grace.
 The Invoker: I remember, he kept two planets at peace. And Hydro-Man:

could turn to water (a dubious strength, I always thought) and once
 he conducted a current that fried some ne'er-do-well, so rescued
 a willowy flibbertigibbet princess. And Panther Woman: her golden claws
 and sinuous inky tail were all the good that (successfully) stood between
 a scientist "bent on enslaving the world to his crazed whims" and
 the populace of "Center City," the first place on his list. And
 Whizzer. . . I remember, once, Whizzer was. . . I put down the page.
 The knocking. The landlady. He was shaking
 in front of her. She filled the door. He had to explain
 the doctor cost extra money this month, and he worked all week
 on double shifts, he really did, but this one time
 we didn't have the rent, we'd be late, he was fighting back crying,
 who'd never had to say such a thing before to such a person,
 I remember: he said it straight to her face,
 the one good pair of suit pants keeping its crease in the closet
 cried but he didn't, the long day's wadded-up tissues cried out,
 and the bar sign blinking pinkly across the street,
 the horseshoes of dust that collect on the house slippers under the bed,
The Little Taxi That Hurried and *Scuffy the Tugboat*, that sorrily-stained
 lame angelwing of an ironing board, the ashtrays and the aspirin,
 everything yielded up its softness then,
 the carpet was green and black, the light was ruthless,
 his voice never broke and his gaze never shifted although
 the universe did, because we would be one week late, there! he said it,
 he said it clearly, to her and to everyone,
 spent, and heroic.

Albert Goldbarth