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A Sympathy of Souls

by Albert Goldbarth

Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, 1990

Reviewed by *Cindy Linse*

Missoula winters bring snowflakes that waft in large clumps to an earth insulated in cold, the kind of cold that lets you know you're wrapped and bound in it until spring. It's the sort of season that lends itself well to long ruminations over Irish Coffee or hot chocolate beside the woodstove; it's the perfect season for Albert Goldbarth's *A Sympathy of Souls*.

The essays in this fine collection are put together like collages, scattered bits torn from somewhere else that seem to have nothing in common beyond their physical proximity, a subtle deception that tricks the mind and draws the reader into making a few connections of her own. Forgivable chicanery since Goldbarth, like a master magician, always leads the reader to see things in a new way. On occasion, this recontextualizing may seem a bit frenetic, overwhelming. Perhaps you will read these essays as I did, slowly, in pieces, a small bit at a time to allow my own mind grazing rights along the unmapped lines of connection.

This is the true genius of Goldbarth's stream-of-consciousness style; he leaves enough room between images and impressions for the reader's own consciousness to operate. Somewhere between the mythical, Jewish Baal Shem Tov, Mircea Eliade's Serpent's belly and Disney's *Pinocchio* I was swallowed into the convoluted snake of my own cerebellum to enjoy the rebirth of a few of my own memories and thoughts, and they didn't look the same this time around.

Goldbarth ranges over vast arrays of topics, from mythologies of all kinds to personal tragedies, from the minute moments of history (he writes beautiful passages on Marie Curie and the dancer, Loie Fuller) to the greater problems facing our society, piercing through them all with irresistible imagination. In the essay entitled, "Wind-up Sushi," he creates a character, Jocko, the toy god, to tell the

anonymous tale of an abused young girl spanking her dolls, then promptly launches into a discussion of the cave paintings at Lascaux, all of this wrapped in the reminiscences generated by Elsie the Cow purchased at a Toy Show in Topeka, Kansas. Maybe this list of topics seems somewhat schizophrenic to you, but the writing is so beautiful that I couldn't help but be an involved reader. I open the book to a random page and quote Goldbarth. He writes of his niece, Lindsay, drawing with crayons at two-and-one-half years of age:

She can't even do a circle and lines for the sun yet, I think, she's so small. The wind could knock her over. Certainly angry words could knock her over, open furrows in her brain that won't heal for decades.

So I, involved reader, absorb Jocko the toy god's monologue and remember a certain doll from my own childhood. My mother named her Gretchen. She had a body made of small-check, blue gingham, a plastic face with freckles and only a fringe of bright yellow yarn for hair. Gretchen was plain, homely, and always the naughty one of my many fabricated children.

But I read on, involved, about the caves of Lascaux and remember my own trip to France, the museum of natural history in a small village, Avallon, the way every French woman seemed to know innately how to dress herself as aesthetically pleasing as possible, how thin she was in the midst of the world's best cuisine. You see, I'm beginning to understand why Gretchen always got the spanking rather than Suzy with her sculpted plastic perfection and headfull of auburn curls. I'm beginning to draw lines--to a friend of mine so obsessed with looking trim (we all have a friend like this) that she feels unable to relinquish her predilection for cocaine because it makes her forget to eat. And now I desperately want to go back, find Gretchen in a box somewhere in an attic, and hold her close the way I never did as a child. I want to find her so bad I'm crying. And I realize it isn't Gretchen I'm searching for; I'm crying over someone who can't be found so easily in a box in an attic, a plain little girl

who exists only in my heart.

Of course, this isn't where Goldbarth ends up when he writes out Jocko's monologues, the cave paintings, the Toy Show in Topeka. It's not where you will end up when you read them. But I get the impression that Albert Goldbarth would understand, and maybe you will too. It's like paint-by-numbers: sooner or later, even if only by "accident," we fill in the blank numbered spaces with a color of our own choosing. What lies between the dark, to-well-defined objects of our reality is light, the light to see by, differently. As Goldbarth writes:

Light doesn't die; we *can* call it up. It's the commonest scientific wisdom of twentieth-century poems, repeated in hyperimaginative contexts like this one until it accumulates spiritual force: the past can be grabbed by its photoelectron lapels and dragged into immediacy.