Letter to Friends East and West

Albert Goldbarth
LETTER TO FRIENDS EAST AND WEST

What's new? I'm still in Illinois, and the pamphlet says I can find white squirrels in Olney if I wait long enough. They're rare you know, and a dung-daubed boy from Kinderhook swears how their whiskers are each attuned to one of the four Primeval Whites: snow, milk, sperm, moonlight, but that's just a rumor; the squirrels are fact. And there's a gorge "nearly 200 feet deep" near Starved Rock; if it's no Grand Canyon, Diane, if cracks don't zag here quite like they do near the nation's extremes, your awesome Western schisms, still even my disappointments won't fill 200 feet though I chunk them like stones all day at the face in the crick at bottom. All night a wind howls through, and scours out Skeleton Cave, The Giant's Bath Tub, Well-In-The-Wall, and hones the Illinois rock: Twin Sisters, cradled, Needle's Eye, pierced, The Devil's Smokestack, pared and polished, you'd have to see such wind to understand what shaped the raking hands above my sleep, you'd have to let it sodomize you too or hear it lap once at your mattress. It's not easy here, white squirrels are never easy. I wouldn't lie to you. But Abraham Lincoln christened the town of Lincoln, Illinois by squeezing a watermelon onto the dust and it's hard, as you could intuit, to run from a state with stains like that; and even you, as far as Maine or Florida, will think of that story the next time a sweet rivulet of any kind froths, rich, across your lips. And didn't you write me, Ron, to say how deer in California print the Silverado Trail right up to your sill, you parse out apples, four deer legs are dark bars
squares of sunlight cool in. Well in Illinois we've sows like troughs of oleo, we've rat-packs in Chicago till our sewerpipes shake with all the will of epileptic nerves, and a broom-handle chopped across the gnawing snout-bones sometimes does no good. But, though there's nothing so far north in my life as the bear, so thinking as the porpoise, here in Illinois is dark the thickest filament from a sweet corn couldn't glow through, here's a dark in the field just made for our own mammalian radiation and, though it's low, it's light, this star in the Illinois night, this udder. All I need do is bide my time: no kidding, Olney hosts white squirrels "unique in all the world" and I adopted the stance of a beech last week to coax them, wish me luck. The search is difficult, yes, and nothing even so small as a white incision tooth or whitish pap as yet rewards my diligence. But, honestly, a plaque outside of Byron commemorates soldiers under Major Isaiah Stillman who shot point-blank at a band of Black Hawk Injuns approaching with the truce flag; you can't just high-tail out of a land like that, it deserves a certain observation or, perhaps from the damp underside of the brain, one root. In any case, Ron, when you visit bring Cheri, tell me what a twin bed's like, here "once each year the town of Nauvoo celebrates The Wedding of Wine and Cheese Festival"; it's true, I'll show you. I'm in Illinois. I know: a statue of William Jennings Bryan "created by Gutzon Borglum," I have: trilobites in the Jersey County quarries, shell bracelets, chert blades and stemmed stone hoes from the giant Cahokia Mounds. When you were in last May you'd say the ocean defines *expanse*, report how you chugged up from New Haven, Conn. to the Cape, there are stories of co-eds and jellyfish, Michael,
I believe them all. Now
you must believe me: I'm still here, remember,
Illinois? A man could kneel to Apple River to drink
and let the touch of his tongue go
mainlining, quick, a fix, through the evening prairie;
maybe my mouth gone silver in the rush of the Kaskaskia,
the Sangamon, the Sinnissippi, Big Slough, Vermilion River,
or the Kankakee, is even now a shine at the lip
of far-off faucets, intimacy with me will not sustain
and still: I'm here, I'm pouring, I know, if one is patient
there are white squirrels. I wouldn't bullshit you,
my friends. I'm stuck, half-chance, half-choice, and some
left over to weep in the stand of virgin white pine
along Rock River. Really. Can you imagine? I'm
still in Illinois, I've waited long enough
for anyone else to meet and mate
and raise a whole teat-dangled brood, and still
the Olney Woods has not released its secret beasts
for my catching. Someone... Can't you see him,
year after year, running for squirrels like these with the taste
of Devil's Kitchen Lake in his cheeks,
sun on his scalp and dust up his breathing,
screaming through Geneseo
and Bald Knob and Burnt Prairie and Peoria
and Kickapoo “I'm here
I'm here in Illinois with the nation's
oldest evaporated milk plant!”
How could it not be true?