

Stephen Corey

*Typewriter and Looney-Tune Lunchbox in
the Two Hands of God: Albert Goldbarth,
Always Armed and at the Ready*

EVERY now and then I console myself: Yes, I realize that Albert Goldbarth has published (at last count) two dozen full poetry collections, eleven poetry chapbooks, five essay collections, and a novel compared with my four, five, zero, and zero—but hey, he’s seven months older! Somewhere along the way I’m bound to catch up.

I haven’t tried totaling the pages encompassed by all those Goldbarth book gatherings, but my general experience with the genres involved—and the presence of some of said volumes on my bookshelves—leads me to a broad estimate of 3,000–3,500 pages. The number of those pages whose contents first saw print in *The Georgia Review* I can determine with fair accuracy: since 1979—and including the works in this feature—we have published forty-seven poems, eight essays, and a self-interview totaling some 230 pages. That’s far more than could fit into a regular issue of the *Review*, and—if my arithmetic is reasonably accurate—perhaps 7–8 percent of the Goldbarth oeuvre.

I cannot in good conscience claim that ours is the journal historically most rife with the work of Wichita State University’s Adele M. Davis Distinguished Professor of Humanities, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that were the case—and whether it is or not, I *can* say the *Review* and Goldbarth have had a good working relationship for many years, and that I believe the distinctiveness and importance of his poetic work across the past three-and-a-half decades are not exceeded by the accomplishments of any other living writer.

The English poet Stephen Spender wrote in *World within World* (1951), his midlife autobiography, that “the true poets are not just ‘poetic.’ They also

have an audacity of the imagination which enables them to pursue an idea even when it may seem unpoetic, a desperateness in clinging to their own vision wherever it may seem to lead.” If you are already familiar with Albert Goldbarth’s writings, you are likely to recognize (or sense) why I would propose to link them with the notion of artistic pursuit fueled by audacity and desperateness. If what follows here is your introduction to the word wizard of Wichita, bear the key terms in mind—*audacity*, *desperateness*—as you come across “bird doo,” “poetry,” and “government” in the space of two lines; a wife’s sleeping form as both intercontinental jet stream and outer space within the same stanza; and an obscene act in a barroom cozied up with Neanderthals and “the Dickersons right across / the street . . .”

With seemingly effortless and inexhaustible aesthetic/philosophical inventiveness, Goldbarth draws upon the microscopic, the cosmic, and every level in between as fit fuel for his body of work—as if he were some hungry god staring into the cosmic refrigerator and thinking, “Hmmm . . . pureed pickles and yogurt on a chocolate-syruped raw egg—why not?”

I do not choose that simile lightly—though I do *mean* it lightly, because it points toward one of the most crucial elements in Goldbarth’s astonishingly varied stew of poetry: seriously deployed, many-faceted humor. (This element also reveals itself through the poet’s obsessive collecting of cultural kitsch. For instances of this, see the photo spread that begins on page 597.) Intellectual danger and embarrassment lurk for any commentator claiming something or someone to be the best this or the greatest that, but I’m ready to say that no American poet from any era has matched Goldbarth’s ability to mix and shift subjects, tones, dictions, and emotional registers. We read one line or passage in a Goldbarth poem and think him obscene or at least perverse—don’t leave his work with your young children, please—but a moment later he is a starry-eyed romantic. A stanza begins boiling with anger but concludes giddy with innocent wonder. A stick of chewing gum becomes the objective correlative—I’m so glad Mr. Doverspike taught me that term in high school—for a cornerstone principle of capitalism *and* for a reminiscing man’s deep love for his father.

Goldbarth’s writing, though I am certain it will keep, will not keep still; the concept of *protean* could rarely be employed more tellingly than when speaking of his approach to artistic creation.

In 1986, a fledgling Goldbarth—he’d only published about ten books of poetry, and I think none of essays—submitted to *The Georgia Review* a manu-

script titled “After Yitzl,” which then-editor Stanley W. Lindberg and I both loved and wanted to print. However, we had to get past a certain, unique categorical-aesthetic hurdle set up by the author: he wanted us to list “After Yitzl” in our table of contents as an “essay/poem/story.” Quite aware that we were opening ourselves to charges of conservatism, anal-retentiveness, and so on, we held to the position that no such heading had existed for us and that we were not ready to create it for the one work at hand. To us the work was essentially an essay, albeit one employing some techniques of fiction and poetry. (See our Goldbarth online feature at www.thegeorgiareview.com for the full text of the essay.)

Disaster lurked, but cool heads and compromise triumphed: We listed “After Yitzl” in our table of contents for Spring 1987 as an essay, and Goldbarth got to place a footnote on the work’s first page—a note that begins, “In the writing of this essay/ poem/story I drew on many rich sources of information and inspiration. . . .”

Albert Goldbarth was born and reared in Chicago, which Carl Sandburg famously labeled “Hog Butcher for the World,” and has now spent more than twenty years in Wichita, one of the central market cities during the cattle-drive days of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If this poet had instead been a cowpoke, his favorite work song would without doubt have been “Don’t Fence Me In.” Of course, he wasn’t a cowpoke (though he says in the faux-third-person author’s note to *The Kitchen Sink: New and Selected Poems, 1972-2007*, “He *could* have gone to med school”), but the song is *still* his—and as if to remind us of this without even thinking of it himself, Goldbarth includes in the poem “1124 into Wichita” an astonishing and beautiful metaphorical moment—just one of thousands in his thousands of pages—whereby he shows us how “a tarp that’s half-undone on top of a farmer’s rick is repeatedly / lifting and dropping, all day, like a woman’s hand on her breast / in a worried self-diagnosis.”

Stephen Spender, whose autobiography I quoted above, once told me in conversation that he considered W. H. Auden to be a great poet because in reading the body of his work one feels that an entire world has been created. My Webster’s dictionary defines *great* as “much higher in some quality or degree; much above the ordinary or average.” I think I’ll run with Spender on this one.