

Albert Goldbarth

THE SONG OF TOO MUCH

A polo zealot, Akbar, “the greatest and wisest Mogul emperor of India,” insisted that all candidates for public office pass a strenuous polo test by playing against the emperor himself, at night—a darkly moonless night—in chase of a wooden ball especially set on fire. Those who qualif—oh,

excuse me: e-mail. Lowell again. His marriage. As if I headed Office Central Command for routing the cloverleaf intricacy of Lowell’s and Angie’s emotional traffic. He hit her. He didn’t. She sucked off Freddie’s brother. She didn’t. Also, the night where every dish in their kitchen got broken. Lowell’s and Angie’s emotional *shit*

is how it finally feels to me, and joins the list of fecal exotica: otter dung is *spraints*; cow dung is *bodewash*; deer turds, *fewmets*. If we added every *offal*, every *spoor*, and then included *gleet* (hawk stomach phlegm), we’d beat—at least in quantity—the fabled ten (or fifty or a hundred: it varies) Eskimaux words for “snow”; for “shit”

it’s *anaq*. This is all too much. The formal prodigality of heaven is too much: or of the *heavens*, to be accurate; there are seven in Jewish mystic tradition, layered as if angelic realms were strata demarcating a canyon wall (a *not* atypical cosmology in world religious beliefs), and in the second of these heavens “stand one hundred thousand myriads of chariots

of fire (the wheels of which have eyes, and these
“are like the flames of burning coals”).

Nor is the human spirit simpler. For Confucians,
there are *two* souls, *shen* and *kuei*—that is, two *kinds*
of soul: in reality, the body holds at least five *shen*
(and maybe up to a hundred) and the *kuei* consists
of seven sections. Nor is the body

simple: not the weaving fan of fringe around the mouth
of the fallopian tube, and not the twenty-foot-long duct
that’s coiled in the *cojones*, and not a single one
of the hundred thousand beats of the heart in a day,
and not the scribbly walnut gnarls of the brain—there’s nothing
uncomplicated about, or under, flesh. The bruise
displayed on Angie’s left cheek has its origin explained now

by at least as many theories as the universe’s. Maybe
it *was* Lowell fueled by cheap drink and a costly rage.
But then again, a woman in a neighboring town presented herself
repeatedly to the police and doctors, over a span of two years,
with the knife cuts that a “stalker” inflicted who
turned out to be—at last, as she admitted—herself.
We can’t be sure. It’s all too much. 3,200

feet of helium are required to lift a person;
there are mornings when I wake and there’s not
helium enough for the weight of my eyelids.
“I don’t know,” said Lowell, sitting on a bench with me,
as if this aptly summarized his marriage-angst:
“I don’t know.” What he means is that the element
most commonly discovered in an opened human life

is overloadium. And we bear the facts
that are soiled by tears, as we carry the facts
that are spangled in celebration; we accept the wobbly,
in-and-outty “facts” of quantum physics, as we hold on
to the great Truths carved of marble, and the counter-Truths

of counter-marble . . . no wonder we falter,
and deal in hurt. And yet I think existence

wants an ever-thickened density of knowledge
and connection, so that one day Information
will itself have reached the threshold to become a mind
—a mind of which we’re neurons, know it and like it
or not. “I just don’t get it,” Angie said
when a third beer loosened her studied reserve,
“why *can’t* it ‘work out’”? What she means is

there are moments when we envy “the blessed virgin
Amelberga, whose body was said to have been guided
upriver to Ghent by a school of sturgeon”—she
was floated, trusting, cared for, through a sure,
directed course. I have my version
of this fancy. It’s a poem of, oh, say sonnet-length;
it’s supple, undisrupted. It feels like this:

*I close the door. (Behind it: gabble
and disjunction.) And I walk into the clear,
black night. I’m in a great arena. Nothing
can be seen—there may be nothing to be seen—except
of course for the ball on fire. That’s all I need.
That’s all: the darkness, and one burning sphere.
And I follow its light down the field.*