

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Where the Membrane Is Thinnest

1. OTHERS

A woman is muttering candidly in her sleep; the man
beside her holds his ear against their shared air,
and . . .

 / But first we're going
into the caves—at Lascaux, Foz Côa, Saint-Cirq,
Siega Verde, Le Portel, Le Trois-Frères,
and the other sites of the great dream-beasts
of the Paleolithic artists. Here,
by blind touch in these subterranean chambers,
or by reed-light, or by puddle and guttering fat-light,
here . . . the shamans, they who journey
to the Other Realms and visit with the spirits there,
are sensing where the rockface is most open
(not necessarily *physically* open, but . . . amenable,
let's say) to the recognition of underworld beings. We can see,
still—at Chauvet, and Altamira, and Le Roc-aux-Sorciers
and the rest—the powerful depictions that were part of this
shamanic journey to seek out the Others,
elegant ibex outlined thickly in rust-reds,
an enormous lion dotted in char, the blocky bison,
and those patch-job fusions of human and animal . . .
almost, we can hear them, we can smell them, as they gather
in the throats of the cave-wall fissures . . . all of them, *almost* here,
like wild things pressing at back porch screens
just enough to reveal themselves /

 . . . he hears
the names of men, of *other* men, escape and then
recede on the cyclical lift and descent of her breath,
a James, and once a Francis (man? or woman?),
this, and a wordless, purring ardor . . . and he spends the night
awake at her side, unnaturally sensitive

to any emanation from that hidden (maybe vastly more important?) world and its presences.

2. "TO THE PEOPLE OF AMERICA: A SCIENTIFICK DISCOVERY!!!"

Those nineteenth-century crackpot hollow-Earthers don't encourage an echo of empathy in our twenty-first-century marrow. They're too dapper in their swallowtail coats, and too self-conscious in their lectures at the Knights of the Trident brotherhood lodge, and in their petitioning Congress: please, act, now, with a federal expedition into the planet's central vault. They're theory and mishmash Latin under diagrams, when what we want is older than the first root of our language, and is wearing the freshly flayed-off skin of a stag: its antlered glory bearing the stars in the night, and its snout and its hooves and its wounds like mouths.

...

A first approach to this might be the figurines—in clay of molded lead or wax, and found sometimes in tiny coffins, or bound in leather strips, or pierced with metal pins—that Roman-era professional witches “deposited in a grave or a well or a fountain: in the realm of ghosts or undersurface powers”: where the membrane in between the worlds is thinnest.

And before that, Theseus hunting down the nightmare half-man-half-bull in what we would metaphorically call “the bowels of the earth,” although, in this story, those ever-lower, ever-heavier, dark, maze-like inturnings are given literal shape. It's only there, beyond

the light of the outer-upper world, that these two protagonists meet.

And so the story of Eurydice
is the tray of an old-time photographic bath
in operation. The deeper she travels,
the longer submerged: the clearer are the images
of the shades who rise to greet her.

3. STAGE ONE

And the aurochs in its richly umber musculature
and its border the color of carbon . . . and the horse
that, in the jitter of the light, must
have looked ambient, or even roiling
out of a crack like smoke from something
boiling in the spirit world. . . . These aren't
all. There are also the abstract patterns
—zigzags, tick-tack-toeish grids, dots, nested “spoon”-curves—
that we find with undeniable consistency
amid the beasts with people shapes, across all time,
across all place: the geometric scribblework
of Africa is that of South America, is that of Europe. . . .

...

Clottes and Lewis-Williams say the reason is:
the caves were sites at which the shaman
entered (or commemorated entering) the trance
by which he flew to other realms; and of the three main types
of cave depiction, each conforms to one of the three successive
degrees
of the trance state: so before the *second* (a whorling tunnel)
funnels the participant into the animals
and the animal-human hybrids and the phantoms of the *third* . . .
first, there's this play of vibrant and ever-flickering

diacritical shapes.

We see them
(or their less emphatic cousins) every day
in the shower of cold lights under our eyes' scrunched lids;
in psychedelic visions (LSD is of course an example)
and hypnotic blitzing-out; and they're still here,
as hazy memory, in the stylized crags and vortices,
the tittles and the fiddleheads,
of military insignia and jewelry design
and spray-paint wall graffiti and gang tattoos.

These congeries
of hash-marks and these hills of piled circles
are a species-wide sub-language . . . up from the blood,
or even deeper than the blood . . . and every time we idly doodle
on a napkin in the corner of a bar . . . well, what we are
(and inescapably so) is latter-day, desacralized initiates
in stage one of the path of shamanic travel.

...

She's stopped speaking in her sleep. She's still
and cool—she's almost an architectural structure
under the bedsheet. But he knows
her mind is still a hotly oscillating ghost-domain
of history and secret. Half-asleep himself,
he gently sets his head against that other,
lower mouth . . . between her legs . . . as if
the things he seeks to know would be more likely
to collect here, and some errant wisp of information
wiffle out into the everyday world . . . and falls asleep
completely now, with his ear sealed damply against her.

4. THE MOST ANCIENT LIGHT IN EXISTENCE

And [the call / the invitation] came, to go among the wingéd
ones,
and the sky opened up [disappeared] and I was among them.

And [the call] came, join the swimming ones,
and the water opened up, and I was there among the swimming
ones.

And [the call] to be with ones in the under[spaces] came,
and the stone does not open up [the stone does not disappear],
but I watched the stone to see [its speech / its truth / its way];
and I entered the under[spaces].

...

My issue of *Time* for February 24, 2003 says
now we *know* the universe's age;
and the relative distribution of "ordinary atoms" (4%),
"dark matter" (23%), and "dark energy" (73%);
and when, in the fiery proto-origin of things,
"the first stars turned on." Now we know, because
the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe
"a million miles from Earth" has been studying
"the most ancient light in existence," lifting its sensors
up (back? out?) to the "whisper of microwaves
left over from the Big Bang"... as one night the child
lifts her ear to the wall
and, on the other side, is a faint and remnant echo
of the energy that created her.

...

In issues of *Juggs* and *Leg Show* and *Coed Cuties*
are hundreds of classified ads like the one
in which Michelle (who's also Cherrie and, elsewhere, Naughty
Girl)
will sell you an initial sample set
of her "sexy, wide-open pix"
for "a token of fifteen dollars." "No holes barred."
And you can typify this
in any dismissive or angered way you'd like, but

for the man I'm choosing to follow today
as he wheelchairs up to his P.O. box with trembling hands,
it's a miracle. Yes: from out of the world's impenetrable
refusals of his attentions, yes: from out of the blank
and formidable wall of postal number codes, here:
the fissure. The opening source.

5. THEIR NAMES

It's 1953, and let's face it: her life
is a mess, her life is even less than a mess,
it's "falling apart":
a man has treated her heart like a plank
in jujitsu practice, her parents are dead
just last year in a subway wreck (the mother
six months pregnant with *her* accidental, late-in-life
"good news"), and her job...!—publicity
for a pharmaceutical research lab,
so every day she's torn between the jerkheads
over in science and the other jerkheads over in design,
and she *tries* to "keep up" with the news releases
out of the various -ologies, the way she tries
for her mind to keep up with Gibbon's
The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire stockily squatting there
on her bedside desk with a stern, canonical air,
and the way she tries for her legs to keep up
with the rise and fall of the hem. It's all "too much,"
her friend Denise just bought herself one of those new
"electric mixers" (or "blender" maybe?)
in turquoise blue, and that's, *that's*, what the hokey-pokey dance
of a day can do to her! But it isn't only
dailiness that scatters her chaotically to the winds.
Is there a "God"? A... "purpose"? "Meaning"? Like,
take suffering: does suffering have "meaning"?
Is the world itself about to break in two,
as the euphoria of her post-World War II teenage years
becomes the war of "freedom versus Communism"

that's going to fill her twenties and beyond with spy planes,
fallout shelters, and federal witch hunts?
What about "love"? Hey, what about "faith"? When she was eight,

her parents took her by train on a trip out west: she still
recalls, and vividly, a wolf she saw in silhouette
on the rim of a ridge in Wyoming, saw and *heard*,
as it tilted its throat to the moon and asked the sky
a series of questions so intense, they sent the very essence
of that animal's heart out into the chilly
lacunae between the stars. It was a scholar of kabbalah,
it howled so imploringly for its answers.

When the news was announced in the April issue of *Nature*,
she cried. She remembers: she read it standing
at the water cooler, casually, not really looking
for anything of special importance, just passing the time
of her five-minute midday break, and then suddenly
weeping out loud. She'd understood *immediately*.
James Watson and Francis Crick had discovered
the shape of the structure of DNA. The shape!—do you see?
There *is* a shape, there *is* an organizational pattern
anchoring us, despite the overwhelming flux of this-and-thatness:
anchoring us, *explaining* us, there *is* a field
of neuropatterns she can conjure up now
from the deepness of the body's own unknown, unlit, unvisitable
layers, and commune with something stabler and grander
than any one life. *Of course* she weeps! *Of course* this changes
everything! Years later, in fact, a lover will tell her
(almost it seems in jealousy) that she'd even
call out their names in her sleep.

6. ART

When I look at these reproductions of tailed mages
and the herds that seem to roar like auburn storms
across the walls of the caves . . . that is, when I look
at the populace that lives below the stone

and can be seen (in certain places and under certain conditions)
through the stone, and sometimes even approaching us
as if the stone were a crossable border . . . I think
of those well-known half-completed statues of Michelangelo's,
the ones where the original block he worked
is like a womb, and the roughly indicated figure is struggling,
some of it not defined yet from its original mineral hold,
but some of it just emerged into the world of the air,
arising from a stone dream, with the stone-dust
in the corners of its eyes, and a word . . . a first word,
from the language of stone . . . about to turn
(yet never will turn) into a word of breath.

...

In Elihu Vedder's oil-on-canvas *The Questioner of the Sphinx*
from 1863, that monumental head is pictured
upright on the sand, in a desert
as alien and inscrutable as a moonscape.
You heard me: the head of the Sphinx.
It must be sixteen feet in height,
and solid inside with the wisdoms of the Illuminati
—formulae and covenants
that were already old when the Druids first invented
their blue dyes, and when the Zoroastrian priests
regarded the heavens from their parapets.
Knowledge like that . . . *one syllable* of knowledge like that,
if it were released—! A man is kneeling;
his ear is exactly level with the mouth of the Sphinx,
and pressed to those rose-granite lips.