

# Keepers of the Flame · Albert Goldbarth

## 1. Two-Els

They don't know *how*, in an A-security ward, he finagled himself a matchbook. But he did; he set his hair on fire—again—and here he is now, thrashing violently over the rec room floor, a nightmare's nightmare come to wakeful life.

I wish I could write about him. Even here, amidst the veteran excrement-eaters, lesion-pickers and zero-eyed starers, he's known as The Legend. And when he's doused and forcibly sedated, and a fidgety calm returns, we see the rec room television bears the image of a holocaustal fire in some riot-torn downtown; I could swear it's an infant that the jumpy 'copter camcorder footage catches being pitched off a roof.

Somebody bearing witness to this, in an essay. Someone adequately finding an interior heat that's equal to this contagion of madness and rage. I've done that essay, I've written that poem, before.

But now, today, the subject is the sifted-down ash of a mild regret that grabs me by the jacket lapels and shakes me with a wiry strength, imploring me to tell its story—and, to be honest, I need to hearken to this.

When I look carefully, I see that the jacket it grabs me by is a baggy vinyl windbreaker that I wore all through the autumn of 1956. I'm eight. The air is . . . listen: "I asked many people what scent first came to mind at the mention of autumn. To most, I think, it was the smell of burning leaves" (E. W. Teale, *Autumn Across America*, 1956).

The air is signifiers, is something stirring chthonically in the memory hookup. Everything else—the overpowering sweep of human drama with its wingéd awards and its ambulance wail—is sacrificed now, to be this smoke that rises from an oil drum like a pillar, one of hundreds of thousands of pillars that bear up the sky of that year.

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"Hearken," I just wrote. "Amidst." I'm trying to think of the little things that leave us, almost unnoticed. Hairnets carded four-for-a-dime in a tray at the local five-and-ten.

“Whence,” I say aloud, and see it flimmer in the air. “Whence.” “’Lest.” And “o’er.” I like them. I look at them as if my gaze is high-beams freezing deer. There aren’t many left on this urbanized side of the river, and it’s staggering to see them a moment—almost an afterimage of their kind—before the spell breaks and they’ve melted back to darkness.

“Ergo.” “Prithee.” Back to the black of their ink.

A herd of them: “Whither.” “Morrow.” “Oft.”

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When an industry dies: subsidiary industries die.

The mail coach: the way station hostler.

1994—I don’t think anybody’s gung-ho into ashtray manufacture. Remember the giant kind, about the size of a washing machine, in festive colors and matched to the room’s predominating notion: poodles; Chinese junks; pink elephants . . . ?

To the last, diehard practitioners of a craft, a heroism accrues. The woman who remembers the oral lexicon of quilters. The man who travels the country, renting queen bees. The smithy: a row of shoes—of upsilons—over his doorway.

“Melmac.” “Dacron.” “Naugahyde.”

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My Uncle Lou—whose small and yet sustaining business seemed to me a fact of life, like the alternation of day and night, or the seasons—wasn’t prescient enough to segue, when the time came, from producing accordion carrying cases to those for guitar: that flexibility hadn’t been built in. And so he *was*, it turned out, a season: a decade of cultural taste.

I was six, seven. They had no children. He’d show me how to judge the slub of a bolt of silk. He’d run its powder-blue edge through his fingers like someone shyly, reverently playing with the negligee hem of a famous hothouse beauty. He let me wander the bolts—the pillars of an ancient city filled with dangerous shadow! He tried to explain the craft: got to heff goot heenges.

Then the silk was rayon. Then the quarterly catalogue was annual. When I was eight, he was dead, and Auntie Hannah said the doctor should write *foreclosure* under “cause of death.”

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That tidy wayside factory *is* an ancient city, nearly forty years ago lost to the wrecking ball. Completely unrecoverable, it is, in a sense, more distant than Pompeii or Chichen Itza.

I remember its rotary dial phone, a black substantiality with the *hereness* of a bowling ball. The ashtray in his customer showroom: two lime-green ceramic panthers bore an outstretched lime-green odalisque on their backs, who bore a lime-green basket for the ashes (it was taller than I was then). The tacked-up day-by-day wall calendar of the kind that, in the movies of the 1950s, always was having its pages blown away in a sudden gust of months—and so we'd know the arrow of time is like a snake: it sloughs.

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I've trailed my hands with a breath-held wonder over the palm-sized terra cotta oil lamps of the Middle Bronze Age—corner-pinched to a clumsy quatrefoil shape—then held them close, and viably breathed-in their odor from over 4,000 years of human doing and undoing; but I've never yet found the lamp in the shape of a bellboy and a carhop holding hands (presumably after their shifts?) that lit my Auntie Hannah's face as she kneeled beside me, licking a Kleenex, then wiping the tear-tracks off my cheeks.

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I remember for him the gradual dissolution of the business was a quiet, interior sadness. He could see it happening order after order, in diminishment, over ten years. Lucretius says, "The bronze statues at the city gates have right hands that are worn thin by the touch of travellers who greet them in passing." That's the way my uncle went, in barely discernible increments.

But he had a partner: the company was called Two-Els. At Uncle Lou's funeral, Laszlo stood there radiating rage; I thought of the Pillar of Fire, from out of my Bible in Hebrew School.

In Europe—back in the Old Country—he had been Laszlo, cutter of fine cloth to the Duke and to the Rabbinate, and in the dressing chambers of ladies of high estate, who had him drape the gold-shot damask over breasts

that not even their own physicians ever touched—he, Laszlo! Now he hated the world. He hated my Uncle Lou's so uncomplainingly succumbing to the world. My uncle's death was felt by Laszlo to be a betrayal of their partnership.

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I see that now. But then—? I was eight, a kid in a vinyl windbreaker secretly tucking a soggy Swiss Warbler under his tongue.

(Do you remember them? “Ventriloquize Your Way to Popularity!” “Throw Your Voice!” And then a picture of some rascal punk adopting an angelic face while a workman lugged a great wooden crate on his back that was yelping *Help! Help! Let me out!!!*—a little-fingernail-width of reed you bought for a penny, hopefully sloshed around in your saliva for a while, vainly striving for one ventriloquial poot, then threw disgustedly away. . . .)

Not that I thought of attempting any such tomfoolery that day. I only wanted something hidden and familiar I could bring to this, my first true being-admitted to the world of adult grief. In fact, I don't remember feeling grief. I don't remember feeling any loss: I was eight, I was happily stupid and eight.

What I do remember is how Laszlo suddenly ran to the side of the grave with a guitar in his hand, interrupting the service. He flung it showily, viciously to the ground and started stomping on it—energetic, moonleap stomps—the goddam, the accursed, guitar: the destroyer of family businesses!

It was only string and splinters by the time my father and two older cousins subdued him. *That's* the picture I've brought with me from the scene of my aunt in the throes of her bereavement.

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It was thirty years later before I understood, before I *really* understood. And when I looked down into my father's casket—his carrying case, I guess you could say—I unaccountably heard, from nowhere, *Gots to heff goot heenges*.

## 2. A Smaller and Bearable Voice

And this is the way they gouge out an eye with a spoon in Rwanda. In Bosnia. In any cellar storeroom where the door is chained against media supersnooping in the cities of the Mississippi Valley. This is the way they make you talk, the tooth-edged clip around your nipple, the match at your balls.

But this is personal. For *general* devastation, a sniper eyried in the belltower is efficient, or—for easiest and largest-scale effect—the mere withholding from a populace of any material goods: this guarantees not just the passing of a life, but of a way of life.

I wish I could write about this. The child floating in an inner tube in the turd-clogged drinking stream of a village.

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“Village,” I said, but Dog Bone Hill is shacks of cardboard and garbage bag plastic. The Bigwig deals business from a junked van that, when the tide slimes in, can be up past its headlights in dead rats.

This is no anomalous knot of human misery: this is the future. This is the pent-up, conflagration-under-the-braincap, savage strength of the future, knit tight, unassuageable. “The world,” says Michael Vlahos, a U.S. Navy payroll brain, “is not following us. It is going in many directions. Do not assume that democratic capitalism is the last word in human social evolution.”

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Everything altering. Of course. You can’t be alive in the future without consuming the dead. Propulsion *is* change.

And once, their people practiced daily rituals of magisterial power: the masks of cowrie and horn that the priestesses kept in the god-house, and the parade of initiates door to door with seeds in silver chalices, and the community lyrics sung at sun’s set—fairy stories of birds on quests in the land of the ancestor High Ones.

Once. And now? “. . . not just the passing of a life, but of a way of life.”

Or think of those New Guinea Stone Age people that we found unchanged for thousands of years, with suddenly one transistor radio traded to them.

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The passing of which I mourn. I mean the radio. One, from when I was eight, a white and brick-red plastic Japanese product the size and shape of a deck of cards, I attended adoringly—so inept was its hesitant drizzleflurry-and-knucklecrack reception, it inspired extra devotion simply to be retained in the house at all. It had a small earplug, by which I could listen secretly; we were a *system*.

It's gone. I have it still, this relict one, but as a *class of object*: gone. The automat: gone. The vinyl record: going. Drive-in movie theaters. Carbon paper. Now, today, the subject is a heart-pang as the dusts of yesterliving coat the moment.

In the basement of a library somewhere, someone is opening every drawer of the discontinued and un-updated, century-old card catalogue that's scheduled for being trucked to the landfill—deeply inhaling a fraught aroma of cabinet oak and handled paper. Nicholson Baker opines that this card catalogue is “in truth, the one holding that people (who enter a library) would be likely to have in common, to know how to use from childhood, even to love.” Silk stockings. “Rabbit-ear” TV antennae. Sectioned metal holders and their bottles of home-delivery milk . . .

. . . *Swiss Warblers*.

The ventriloquism tricks by which unbearable disappearance tries to speak to us in a smaller and bearable voice.

“Withal.” “Tomfoolery.” “Yclept.” “Eftsoons.” “Humdinger.”

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“Dasn’t”—one of my father’s words.

We dasn’t \_\_\_\_\_ (here, you could fill in almost anything adventuresome by way of late hours or furtive consorting with strangers). He was fearful all his life, from love of us, as if some early proof of the terrors and vanishings the world can work had once so thoroughly demonstrated itself, he couldn’t now cup our faces casually in his hands without remembering the brevity of flesh.

And yet this man helped search for bodies in the flooded mine, and helped patrol for plunderers after the gang war. He was known as someone to call if a building caught fire. Once, he walked between my sister and a frothing dog, an agitated thing with its rump-end cocked already for leaping. My father just stood there, as solid and empty and endlessly patient as a fortress door, he didn't give ground, he didn't give cause for attacking—and the dog slinked away.

Only *then* did he turn to my sister Livia, she was four or five, and fall to his knees in front of her, his face so soft, so hopeless, it looked like a face of soap, dissolving in the turmoils of the day. He was no coward, he was simply a man who understood: we're  $x$  in a universal equation that's always looking to preface us with a minus sign.

"Hunky-dory," he'd say, if anything went well, or "copacetic."

"Ixnay." "Toot sweet." "Yoo-hoo." "Moxie." "Ishkabibble."  
"Skedaddle."

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Enough public ink is being lavished somewhere else right now on the loss of our "national identity," on the disappearance of "childhood". . . .

I'm going to remember the ill-lit dogpiss basement workroom where he fretted balanced answers every night from his account books, so the rent would be on time. Just that.

Just that, and the 1950s pea-green wholesale office desk down there. The round glass ashtray the size of a hiball coaster (of the sort I once secretly slid in my fist, years later, for booted-up punching oomph in a bar fight). An old-fashioned adding machine with the bulk, the blunt industrial look, of a submarine's control panel out of World War II. Where would anyone go, today, for a virginal roll of its tape? For the pale box of blotting tissues he kept at the ready, alongside a lineup of extra bulbs for the fountain pens? For a slide rule?

Gone, irretrievably gone, a world for which we've yet to find the proper honorific set of obsequies.

Easier mourning these, than thinking of him directly.

Collar stays. Men's hankies. Yellow plastic shoehorns with the name of a local office supplies distributor on them.

"Obsequies."

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The erasers I fancy especially: maybe a dozen kinds, as if to contend with error in a dozen different guises. I picture them dutifully, cartoonily erasing a row of figures from off an onionskin page; and then the pad below it, and then the desk, and now the room is unroomed, and all of 1956 has ceased to exist, its last leaf burned and then even that one-leaf smoke erased, until only my father's face is left, and they take it from me feature by feature, until, like a pack of small rabid beasts, they even erase themselves, except of course for the memento one—the flat gray rolling disk and its leg of plastic bristle, for typewriter errors—I've placed in a drawer in a desk of my own, as if I could save an echo.

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In fact, what current cosmology says—among its many hundreds of metaphorical applications—is that we *live in* an echo. We *are* an echo. We're nothing so much as the organized after-rumble of the original First Moment when space and time exploded from out of no-space and no-time.

We're the densed-up blips on the chronological outpost-edge of 15 billion years of radiation—Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson heard it first, in 1965, while tracking Telstar with an ultrasensitive radio antenna. Although I fancy I've heard a version, myself: the cellophane-crackle that dollar-ninety-eight transistor radio provided as a preface, coda, and counterweight to all of human song.

So: echoes. Surely this explains nostalgia. Surely our common fondness for fossils—and I'm considering 1940s accordions and 1960s TV theme songs “fossils”—is a function of being compounded, ourselves, of souvenir *ur*-tumult from the Big Bang. *Its* smaller and bearable voice.

“Espy.” “Forthwith.” “Fiestaware.”

Echoes. The tracks of a doe that one night seven years ago lightly patterned—like flowering plum on a Chinese vase—my neighbor's fresh cement. Now the deer are gone, and the sidewalk is saying this ideogram for the rest of my life.

### 3. Burning to Know

When an industry dies: there will always be someone to cherish its cooling embers. The American Accordion Musicological Society “has established a museum of antique accordions” in Pitman, New Jersey. The Center for the History of Foot Care and Foot Wear, in Philadelphia: 700 shoes, from a pair of Egyptian burial sandals *circa* 2000 B.C., to the fetishy pumps and mules of Hollywood hotshots.

Phillumensists, “lovers of light”: collectors of matchbooks. Some have—believe me—in excess of a million. Introduced in 1894, the promotional matchbook has, in the century since, become the zillioned, overmuch, slip-in-a-pocket canvas on which we’ve pictured the face of our national life in all of its grandeur and tawdriness: the sunstruck jetting spire of Old Faithful; a domino-fall of sliced Spam.

The ones I like best, of these remnant squares and oblongs from a quickly obsolescing world of prideful public smoking, are the ones that show yet other dead or endangered subjects: doubling the minor-key wistfulness. A vegetable push cart (“Get ’Em Fresh!”). Hats, both men’s and women’s, in their lavishly substantial “hat boxes,” because the right chapeau deserves its own luggage. The Chili Bowl Restaurant (featuring “Barbu-cated Steaks”): shaped to its name exactly. A truly beautiful matchbook, wherein every individual match is printed to look like a fountain pen. And here’s a happy pinup cutie (doubling) in her gartered nylons (tripling) at a manual typewriter (fully *quadrupling* the wistful thrill of contemplating ambiances in dwindlement): she’s “Just My Type!” Maybe she’ll contact Dixie Evans, President of the Exotic Dancers League of America (Helendale, California, off Route 66): “the League collects photographs, playbills, costumes, and other memorabilia of this rousing and original American tradition.”

“I used to keep my matchbooks in a brandy snifter. Now I have *four hundred* brandy sniffers.”

They meet once a year. They internet. They publish their various newsletters.

“Every wall of my house is completely covered.”

How do they do it?—the usual passion.

Why do they do it?—one group calls itself Keepers of the Flame.

I imagine it this way: running/sneaking/running at dusk, when everyone else is inside eating or clustered around the flickering interplanetary-blue of the TV screen in expectation of “I Love Lucy” or the show that scooted Lucy out of the coveted number-one spot in 1956, “The \$64,000 Question.”

Running—madly. And maybe catching himself at isolated moments, slowing, strolling nonchalantly—mad, but smart. His silver-starred silk scarf imported from Genoa gets snagged on an alley catalpa’s dangling claw. He leaves it, he doesn’t even notice it—careless. But hearing the blood thumpthumpthump in his temples to the beat of some triumphant Old World martial air. The book of matches is in his jacket pocket, and I imagine it’s one of their own, that he saved: “Best Cases ACCORDING To Everyone!” They thought this motto was clever.

We’ll never know his motive. The insurance money? But that was so diddly a walletfull. I believe it was more in the way of a vast incendiary cleansing, and the swan-song glory of seeing that horrible tiger lily of fire snap and fold against the black night sky. I imagine him standing there, doing an in-place series of those same emphatic stomps I saw at the funeral. Leaping—and sobbing, I imagine.

They soon enough caught him, of course. As if he weren’t a primo suspect anyway, there was that evidential scarf. I imagine that *he* imagined a scarf of smoke around his neck, as they hustled him into the cop car. First, he’d try to wear it with dignity: who were *they* to determine *his* actions! Then, by stages, it must have sunk in: a vagrant had died. She’d been huddled up rotgut-blotto in a side door all the while. They made him look at her reeking remains: one held his head above the body, and the other forcibly opened his eyes, and kept them wide for minutes.

The rest I can’t imagine: it gibbers away across a border beyond my introspection. I only know that the other inmates call him The Legend—a third, a final, El—and that (to do him some justice) feeling even a useless guilt like his, implies a moral component.

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I wish I could write about this today. I wish that. . . . If I *had* an understanding of the foreign moral conduct of an A-security ward, then maybe I could *start* to start to understand the next thing, Dog Bone Hill,

which seems to me to be a world without a moral component altogether. Maybe it's there, and my xenophobic First World eyes are blind to its grace and its dignity. Or maybe it *isn't* there, not now, not yet, not in the middle of the backbreak, weevily day, when every calorie of human expression beyond an occasional grunting fuck is needed simply for climbing out of the rubble and crawling back in it by night.

And at Dog Bone Hill, and at Paradise Hole, and at Little Cry, the death squads own the town, if "town" is the word for sheet tin shacks, if "squad" is the word for seeing one's own countrymen in masks, with pig-eviscerating knives, and in their bellies a scream that could power the wheels of Monte Carlo for centuries.

Even now, they're destroying something—but I'm no primary voice for that. Even now, they're beating away the carrion birds and rebuilding—but I can't speak for this. The future is theirs, as the cities decay, and the cultures clash, and the resources yield and scale off. The future is theirs, and the past is dead, there is no past, just a daily barbaric beginning—and there is no looking back and no nostalgia without a tended-to past.

Even now, they're lined up on the edge of an encampment, hungry, keening, cursing, lifting pitchforks, calling down lightning to crawl their scalps—tinder awaiting igniting.

I can't represent this new world. I can only trust that, nonetheless, my small pique means that somewhere else is the flame of an eloquent outrage, and my fondness means that somewhere else a burning longing roars inside a heart.

*Swiss Warblers. Echoes.*

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Now nobody smokes—the unregenerate smoke, the last Cromagnon and untutored among us, only those. We know now, tiparillo smoke will coil in a lung like an anaconda, a wreath of it lingers there as if nailed to a blackened shanty wall.

And yet I can't shrug off the beauties of that earlier mode, and who could more objectively delineate their praise than I, non-smoker always (nary a one), as if a collateral member of the family were called on, for the eulogy.

The lighters in every engineered fantasia, lucite flame-thrower dragons, gold-plated sputniks, palm trees, penguins. Humidors of cedarwood and

ivory inlay, scrimshawed over with lotus-bordered scenes of pharaonic splendor or, more familiarly, scottie dogs. An automaton, from France in the 1940s, features a hookah-using pasha, feathered, bejeweled, and turbaned, who puffs out blooms of smoke (from a cigarette you insert) and then clears the air with a wave of his peacock fan. On the other hand, the boomerang swoops of certain deco ashtrays stun the eye by their very severity.

Mainly I remember (from observing, not from practicing) the semiotics of cigarettes, their way of physically making exclamation points, and bridge-like raisings or lowerings of esteem, and italicized passions, appear in the air. I remember clearly seeing faintheartedness steel itself in the swagger loaned by a smoke—and seeing, too, smoke soften the brunt of a loneliness. My parents smoked: two heads in a mutual nimbus. There have been times (a diner counter in rural Pennsylvania at four A.M., a frowzy downtown Greyhound Bus lounge made a ragtag Noah’s Ark by hammer-pounding downpour . . . ) when I’ve seen that smoke as the tapestry fabric keeping otherwise fly-apart lives in a pattern, when I’ve seen that omnicontributed haze as the byproducts smoke of democracy at work. An *esperanto*.

Once, I asked a friend why he smoked. He gave the answer I think my father would have provided if I’d asked him, if we’d talked that kind of talk.

I imagine it this way:

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*He was known as someone to call if a building caught fire.*

Back then, what seemed to be a containable blaze was often fought by one official pumper truck and a corps of reliable amateurs from the neighborhood. (It was seen as a neighborhood entertainment, too—a form of open-air Grand Guignol. Thus has it ever been.) How far was he still from the clamor, when he recognized the building as his brother-in-law’s, the failed and partially boarded-up Two-Els?

Well, they’d save eighty per cent for the wreckers to have a swing at, a week or two later. Not a major blaze by any means. But that’s pure retroknowledge; at the panicky, hell-tinged moment, it was touch-and-go ferocity enough for anybody’s pulse.

Earlier I compared the flames to a tiger lily, but that was wrong. More of a lion, wildly maned. More of an inferno of a rose, its billowing petals of lethal saffron and henna, its charry attar.

That's not it either. That's writer-speech. It's fourteen men saying *shit* and *o Jesus* in front of that monstrous fahrenheit heart. He took his orders, he smashed his share of windows open, he felt the invisible sear along his skin, and the pulmonary danger entering his throat. And then it was over, somehow. Out of the chaos, they'd brought it under control.

As always, a few of the neighbors provided coffee and donuts from their own kitchen tables. Some wives and girlfriends appeared, with their usual tearful ministrations, and the rough jokes in return. For the most part, everyone motionless, awed by what had happened and by their escape from it—*this* time. Everyone feeling the cool, ensuing blackness of the night like a balm, like a sleep mask over the whole spent body. Then someone shared her pack of smokes: tribal. Tiny orange points of constellated glow against the intricate, ravenous universe. That was almost all you could see: those dots of community.

Then, by ones and twos, they drifted off. I imagine we could stand in place and watch, and follow him home that way, as he walked those couple of midnight miles. Soon, we'd only know him by the dance of that breath-fed firefly—that feeble but familiar lantern leading him back to a place of human lives in proper balance. We could watch him, that way, disappear into the dark of forty years ago. Eventually we'll every one of us enter that darkness. For now, though, we dasn't.