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A Collector of Collections

A review of *A Room in California* by Laurence Goldstein (Northwestern University Press, 2005)

We often use the phrase "a collection" to mean a loose assemblage, as in "a collection of poems." Goldstein's book is a collection of thirty-nine poems. But more to the point, this collection is about *collecting*. Inevitably, then, as they unfold, the poems also tell us how Goldstein grew from childhood into the adult poet, editor, critic, and professor: by collecting ever new experiences in widening circles. The collecting child is indeed father to the accumulated man.

The first poem would reveal this all, if only on a first reading we could know all that it means. "Scrapbooks" nakedly exhibits Goldstein's passion for collecting, its origin and its fate. Growing up in California, figuratively in the shadow of Chavez Ravine and the newly installed Los Angeles Dodgers there, Goldstein's first collection of baseball cards placed Duke Snider at the top of the pile. Here is the budding origin of his instinct to grow by acquisitions of desire. Then came larger collections, life anthologies assembled from newspapers and magazines as "Scrapbooks became more interesting than cards." Into his omnivorous scrapbooks, murders, movie stars, obituaries, photos of "female pulchritude," were clipped and pasted. Scrapbooks too eventually paled in interest and were replaced by scissored photos of the unseen, mysterious, exotic, undersea world. Then came travel photos and accounts of the wonders of the visible but as-yet-unseen world. But these, too, pass on and foretell the next emanation of collecting: Goldstein's adult travels to "outer copies of [his] . . . inner pictureland," scrapbooks of what can be remembered by the preserving imagination.

That poem foreshadows the rest of this collection, unfolding remembrance of things past in the guise of a book, pointing the reader from the accumulative child to the collecting scholar who is writing the poems about the child's varied collections as his way of growing up. A child's scrapbooks, after all, will become an adult's books, and must remind the reader that Goldstein is the compiler

of seven published anthologies and the editor of a distinguished journal. These assemblages of treasures and wonders stretch a line of force from the boy's to the man's researches.

If the dull reader misses, as he must, Goldstein's thematics on its first adumbration, he is given another chance in the second poem, "The Celebrity." There are in fact, two coequal celebrities in this poem, the first ambiguously Jewish and the second certainly so. The first is the great pass receiver for the Los Angeles Rams, Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch—"my favorite athlete," Goldstein writes—who is seen catching "a mile-long pass." The second celebrity is glimpsed sitting in a booth at the deli near the football stadium. This is the Los Angeles mobster Mickey Cohen, "the vicious gangster," heir of Bugsy Siegel's West Coast franchise of Murder Incorporated. Larry gazes at both, as his father tells him that if the boy can keep these sights in memory, he will be able to weave a great story someday, "sitting in a deli." Scrapbooks and photo albums can be stored in a garage. But of Hirsch and Cohen he can keep only what he remembers. Henceforth, memory will be the great collector.

Yet a third memory is reproduced next. In this instance, an actual photo is part of what was collected. It is a 1947 photo of two great celebrities linked arm in arm with Larry's three aunts. The Soltot girls were out on the front lawn of their house taking photographs when, lo and behold, a car stops and Bing Crosby and Bob Hope pile out and ask to join in. Are they on the road to another of their road pictures? Are they unable to resist a camera? But the fourth sister, Larry's mother, was occupied inside the house caring for her toddler, Larry himself, and so she misses the great moment. But the grownup poet Laurence doesn't miss it: he collects, preserves, and illustrates the fabulous event.

So the book continues. The boy grows. He collects by re-collecting episodes, personal memories, visits to the "only used bookstore in Culver City," movies, restaurants, news reports. Whatever the boy collects builds toward the man to come. The eerie, apocalyptic predictions by the California radio personality Criswell, so exciting for the adolescent Larry, later will expand into the professor-poet's understanding of "Poe and Lovecraft, and later... Yeats and Blake" and "their orphic prognostications."

The book progresses as the gaze of the young man takes in more and more, always new entries in the rapidly growing collections of

accumulative glory. Soon, he is a sophomore at UCLA, scrutinizing the pages of Faulkner and Yeats and spending a pagan summer as a counselor at a camp on Catalina Island. His best friend Bobby Levin styles him "Laurence of Catalina," after the blockbuster movie of the year. It is 1963. Madam Nhu, wife of the assassinated South Vietnamese leader, appears at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel for a press conference. The college student Laurence bluffs his way into the throng of reporters in the VIP room and collects her ominous forecast, now, forty years later, preserving it in a poem:

> "I can predict for you," she fixed *me*
> in the front row, "that the story of Vietnam
> is only at its beginning." And so the fifties ended,
> though none of us notetakers wrote this down.
> None saw how this stock femme fatale
> spun out the sixties' thread before our eyes.

The end of innocence. Not long after, Bobby Levin, that boy of summer, steps on a landmine near Pleiku. He has his name duly carved into the Vietnam Memorial. Thirty years later, in Washington, D.C., Laurence of Ann Arbor traces Bobby's name on the stark granite.

Time moves. Laurence writes poetry against the background of the literary traditions that he absorbed. Poems connected to William Carlos Williams, Arthur Miller, Radcliffe Squires, Frederic Prokosch, John Barth, Euripides, Verlaine, and Plato are markers of his incorporation of his literary and intellectual forebears. The very variety of the poetic forms in which he writes also suggests his rich experience of literary traditions. Fragments of a play, an epistle, a villanelle, an imitation, a sequence poem, dramatic monologues, a long dramatic monologue in eight-line stanzas, a double dialogue, and even a traditional "advice to the painter" poem, all describe the growth of a poetic talent that has learned to become expert in the varied forms inscribed in literary history. Goldstein's mastery of prosody is evident, and his compositional talent is everywhere on display.

The easy grace and capacity for surprise is exemplified, for instance, by "English Drawings and Watercolors, 1550–1850." Goldstein is leafing over another collection, a book of the art of watercolor painting that the English raised to its heights, a book

"perfect for the quiet summer eve, /...mainly mild admiration of the land...art as refuge, stasis, silence." No poem is likely to emerge from such a perusal. But then he turns a page and a ferocious gouache assaults him,

> *A young daughter of the Picts,* wearing
> if that's the word, a tissue of tattoos,
> nothing but the blazonry of roses and
> vines blooming on her pale body.
> Not entirely au natural, she carries
> a boar spear and a scimitar
> hooked by a golden chain to her belt.

"Her erotic force is unforgettable," he remarks with wonder. Now, where it was least expected, he finds a poem after all.

Section One of this collection brings little Larry through youth to manhood and offers reflections from a rich life. Section Two begins the move toward the crises of generativity and age, along with the crises of terror in a world for which he had not been fully prepared. The first line of this section is "I am the Empire at the end of decadence." On the last day of the millennium, he reflects upon the Russian Revolution detailed by Aleksandr Kerensky, now settled in California. A shrewder Criswell, Kerensky wrote in his 1965 book, *Russia and History's Turning Point,* "a great world cataclysm has run its course, / and we are on the threshold of an unknown era." Turning fifty-seven, Goldstein is in the same predicament, "planning retirement in the new century." The poems become reflective, looking back in order to move forward, in "Millennium's End," "Paris in the Twenties" (meaning the 2020's), "Rock Star," and "August."

By the end of the second section we arrive at the central terror of this moment's century—suicide bombing—in "Consummation." A "terrible consummation," out of history, Yeats might have said. By now, it is clear: these poems are personal portraits of the artist as a boy and man, now sixty yet ever starting anew. The final poem of this section, "War Babies, Sixty Years On," circles back to "Scrapbooks":

The past is not even past,
it occupies our living room,
the late century's whole
cosmopolitan collectible
ensemble of artifacts...

Perhaps we must leap ahead by the daring imagination to make a future, and in Section Three, still limber, he leaps. For his final accumulation he takes on the character of a young American woman who tells of her search for the mythical king, Prester John. Two versions of his life compete: did he dwell in the Orient, beyond Persia, and come to aid the crusaders in Jerusalem? Or did he rule in Ethiopia? The answer must be *both*. For these are the centers of our twenty-first century terror. What guidance, and, better still, what romance of courage can be encapsulated in present-day men and women by his legend?

In the end, of course, our Prester John is Laurence Goldstein, moving us, with him, from the pastoral, innocent worlds of Duke Snider's centerfield, to the centerless world of the present, with no end in sight. It takes courage to write poems so close to our contemporary anguish. Look for them in this book.