

LAURENCE GOLDSTEIN

Merciless

The black and merciless things that are behind great possessions
—Henry James

I
Sometimes, for my own amusement, I take
this dour premise literally, as if I could venture
around a mansion and find . . . a black thing,
not a black person, presumably, but
some tangible bane, some undisclosed crime
lurking at the rear of Grey Oaks, Valhalla,
Fairfield, the night of its enviable day,
the motive that raised it on prime real estate.

Not just obscure, these things, not only
secret in their shady, perpetual workings,
but “merciless,” a verbal turn of the screw:
the owners have caused affliction, let blood,
erased indelibly the sweetness of life.
It’s a matter of optics: one peers *through*
the portals and brocade of Kenilworth, to back acres
where the dispossessed still mourn the perjured deed.

Mercy: kindness to one who has no claim,
forbearance shown to one in your power.
And the opposite, when you are turned away
from one of untainted beauty, desire mocked,
or kept from improving books by one possessed
of blind faith and insufficient curiosity.
Some soul on one knee has asked a favor
it is the other’s pleasure to deny, to turn

back toward the great house of no spirit,
the place of having, not wanting, of having
what is everwhite, pure as gold plate,

a reproach to every approach, a weight
upon the heart, a conversation audible
to all but one, mute as his ancestors,
who takes a servile place in the banquet's shadows,
bowing as he withdraws, bowing, bowing . . .

II

The wealthy are not our kind, said père Crusoe.
Walking dollar signs, one-dimensional,
fighting off emotional destitution
by accumulating more clothes—don't envy them,
that's what they crave, what they live for.
When Robinson becomes rich, a byword for greed,
he wanders the world like a savage ghoul, and nothing,
not Friday's death, stirs him to shipwrecked life.

Live somewhere in the middle station of life,
Robinson's father advised, not "embarrassed
with the pride, luxury . . . and envy of the upper part
of mankind." Avoid being poor—that was a given.
The poor, too, are merciless, thinking only
about money, how to get it, how to stretch it.
In their dreams of avarice, they lead the feckless rich,
their neighbors, and finally themselves, to the guillotine.

Father Defoe, I swear on all my goods,
I daily consider what I enjoy, not
what I desire. Not the contrivance of fame
but the manual fashioning of line & stanza;
not the noble estate, the vast greensward,
but the lucent marigolds in the window box;
not the miser's treasure or the patriot's sword,
but the austerity of the *dayanim*, my judges.

III

Faced with this vow, shall I count my possessions?

Or count my afflictions? The spoils of good fortune
lured my grandparents from the Odessa shtetl,
the black and merciless Cossacks behind
their glad voyage, westering in rough waters.
I signed my X in transit, in that month
when my ancestors, having nothing, held
in suspension on the alpha voyage of our clan,

gave their unscripted voice to prayer.
God, the overseer, numbered the fugitives
huddled in steerage, the Czar's starlings.
I sailed with them, surely, the heir
unapparent, the tall shape hardly imaginable
as, during their only sea-change, they gazed
beyond time, counting the waves to Zion,
speaking of me while I loitered in the spume.

Those who crossed had no English, no money.
They envied the shipbuilders and men who turned
the propeller for a good profit; they foresaw
stores in Iowa and Saskatchewan, congregations
of New World merchants, civic-minded,
spare-time scholars... riding the waves...
then came, with the twentieth century, pointed words
from Emma Lazarus and a day at the Customs House.

Who knew whether black and merciless things
lay behind the golden door; if so
they would stand up in town halls;
they would tell grandchildren to speak loudly,
to call out *Cossack, Nazi, plutocrat*;
they would counsel the middle station,
the habit of mercy, the lamplit, ardent,
unpatronized eddy of testaments like this.

for Leon and Pauline Goldstein, Samuel and Anna Soltot