

Editors' Choices

Albert Goldbarth. *The Kitchen Sink: New and Selected Poems, 1972–2007*.

St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007.

To enter Goldbarthian territory is to step into a land of plenty. Goldbarth is a collector—of words and information—and a master of connection. Once you know his work and become familiar with his sense of humor, the title of this, his second, *Selected* will lodge in your heart and chuckle there until you pass into the next world, where, if there's any fun at all, they'll still be reading Goldbarth. *The Kitchen Sink: New and Selected Poems, 1972–2007* is a collection of collections on a number of levels, dazzling, enlightening, serious and elegant in its scope and intelligence—and riddled with humor both dry and out-loud-laugh-inducing.

Goldbarth's trademark is the long-lined, many-paged free verse poem—*many-paged* meaning, as often as not, twenty-plus pages. The dilemma of choosing poems for this *Selected* must have been onerous: he could pack, maybe, sixteen such signature poems in a volume of three hundred and fifty pages with both front and back matter? Hardly what one could call a representative sampling of a body of work as vast as Goldbarth's. In his "Prefatory Note" to the volume, he states he decided "not to excerpt," a decision that eliminated the inclusion of a huge percentage of his longer works, including book-length and chapbook-length pieces. So, for a Goldbarth fan there seems to be an unusually high number of uncharacteristically short poems included in this volume. It was a reasonable editorial choice, however—and a reminder that Goldbarth isn't limited to writing on entire continents of Goldbarthian land alone; he's been known to write the small country, the state, the town, and, occasionally the single room, often the bedroom. A reminder, too, poetically speaking, that he's as good short as he is long.

He is plenitudinous—in his interests, within his poems, and across his oeuvre, but that does not mean that he is chatty, wordy, or repetitive. He is not. His detractors—and he does have them—have been known to call him *longwinded*. He is not. Goldbarth's poems are only as long as they need to be to work their peculiar magic. His aesthetic is one of Goldbarthia, a ver-

EDITORS' CHOICES

bal planet whose language and meaning is structured on accretion, connection, and consolidation. So, how to write a short review of a book that touches on, despite its omissions, just about everything *and* the kitchen sink? Awkwardly, and with great respect, knowing nothing I can say or quote will equal the experience of reading Goldbarth for yourself.

His instinct to include only entire works is mine as well. As a Goldbarth enthusiast, I'd find excerpting a poem of his a profanation of sorts. Remove a line or snippet and a sad diminishment would result. If the poem, as a whole, didn't need that line or snippet, it wouldn't have been there in the first place. Goldbarth knows what he's doing; he is not, let's say, *full-bodied* for the sake of full-bodiedness. His poems are chock-full because his mind is; it makes connections. And his ability to distill meaning and resonance is enormous. Yes, you can give examples of his wit and his breadth, his seriousness and his depth by sampling sections and displaying them like natural crystals or thin slices of a brilliant geode, but the extraction would be anecdotal, less than a true representation of a single quadrant of the planet Goldbarthia or of a square inch of a small Goldbarthian beach. His poems are made with some *other* math. Some other physics. Not brief, usually, but definitely compressed. He has a mind that takes in everything and returns it, better and sharper for having been mulled over and conjoined by a master.

His titles are emblems; they function as more than mere labels for the poems themselves, and a selection might be one way to get across the topography of his terrain. They range from the openly encompassing ("A Continuum," "The Poem of the Praises," "Powers," "Gallery," "How the World Works: An Essay," "The Saga of Stupidity and Wonder," "Things I've Put in This Poem") to those which merely *appear* less openly encompassing ("The Talk Show," "Heart, Heart, Heart, Heart, Heart, Heart, Heart," "1880," "Splinter Groups at Breakfast," "Stephen Hawking, Walking," "The Jewish Poets of Arabic Spain (10th to 13th Centuries), with Chinese Poets Piping out of the Clouds (and Once an Irishman)," "A wooden eye. An 1884 silver dollar. A homemade explosive. A set of false teeth. And a 14-karat gold ashtray," "A Photo of a Lover from My Junior

EDITORS' CHOICES

Year in College,” “Thermodynamics / Sumer,” “The Way the Novel Functions,” “Some Common Terms in Latin That Are Larger than Our Lives,” “Scar / Beer / Glasses,” “Whale and Bee”). See what I mean?

In “The Splinter Groups at Breakfast” (chosen rather at random—it’s medium-short for Goldbarth but long—six pages—for most of us) we can see a sample grouping of topics (scanned and scooped up in a not-being-compulsive-first-glance-sort-of-way): God, vomit, masturbation, Winnebago Indians, “some poor dead dork,” *Scientific American*, ouzo, retsina, the metaphoric “rump of a pony,” the Pope, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Mali, West Africa, thermoluminescence, Rembrandt, rock-opera, turkey, the Virgin Mary, and the “varying-speed-of-light theory (VSL).” The last word of the poem is *coheres*. And the poem does.

I’ll do my excerptional dirty work on his already-classic poem, featured on *Poetry Daily*’s website at one point, and aptly titled, “Library.” It’s an anaphoric list poem dotted with brilliant variations that keep the reader leaning into the page, in my case, in awe. It’s a poem that shouldn’t work, but does—because its author is a genius. I’ll do the knifework, but with a cry of “I’m so terribly sorry, Mr. Goldbarth” and a certain amount of chagrin. Being a list/catalog poem, “Library” is probably the least damaged, though damaged and diminished it will be, by excerpting. It has, if I’ve counted correctly, one hundred and thirty-two entries and a total of two hundred and sixty-one lines (and nowhere at all so evenly dispersed as dividing by two might indicate).

It begins:

This book saved my life.

This book takes place on one of the two small tagalong moons of Mars.

(It might be fun to note, at this point, that Goldbarth collects 1950s “outer space stuffs, toy spaceships and robots” as well as manual typewriters; see Richard Siken’s excellent interview with him on this topic at www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/feature.html?id=179326. Also, a number of Goldbarth’s epigraphs are from classic science fiction writer

EDITORS' CHOICES

Clifford Simak.)

This book requests its author's absolution, centuries after his death.

This book required two of the sultan's largest royal elephants to bear it; this other book fit in a gourd.

This book reveals The Secret Name of God, and so its author is on a death list.

This is the book I lifted high over my head, intending to smash a roach in my girlfriend's bedroom; instead, my back unsprung, and I toppled painfully into her bed, where I stayed motionless for eight days.

The anaphora continues to entry twenty-one in which Goldbarth seems almost to jump right out of his poem:

He was driving—evidently by some elusive, interior radar, since he was busy reading a book propped on the steering wheel.

And then dips immediately back in:

This book picks on men.

Which is just a marvelous segue! And goes on:

This is the split Red Sea: two heavy pages.

In this book I underlined *deimos*, *cabochon*, *pelagic*, *begira*. I wanted to use them.

Goldbarth, by the way, is everywhere in his poems, and because of entries like the one above, readers get an extra sort of meta-poem-chuckle in the process.

Another example:

This chapbook was set in type and printed by hand, by Larry Levis's then-wife, the poet Marcia Southwick, in 1975. It's 1997 now and Larry's dead—too early, way too early—and this elliptical, heart

EDITORS' CHOICES

breaking poem (which is, in part, exactly about too early death)
keeps speaking to me from its teal-green cover: the way they say
the nails and hair continue to grow in the grave.

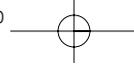
This book is two wings and a thorax the size of a sunflower seed.
This book gives me a hard-on.
This book is somewhere under those other books way over there.
This book deflected a bullet.

You get the idea. But just part of the idea, because four entries later comes this:

This book is by William Matthews, a *wonderful* poet, who died today,
age fifty-five. Now Larry Levis has someone he can talk to.

The weave of Goldbarth's multitudes is a tight one. He invariably pulls what seems to be winging centrifugally outward back in, reins it, though never tames it, never flogs the life out of it, and still renders it cohesive. He's a sorcerer. (Remember in Disney's original *Fantasia*, the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" segment, in which Mickey—by splintering the broom-that-carried-water—multiplied, by what seemed like an order of magnitude, the number of brooms carrying water and, so, flooded the Sorcerer's quarters? All because, as the narrator in the film says, "[H]e started practicing some of the boss's best magic tricks before knowing how to control them." And the sorcerer came down and cleaned up Mickey's mess by magically pulling it all back in, by rendering the many, many brooms *one* broom again? Well, that's what a Goldbarth poem is like, that's who Goldbarth the poet is: the sorcerer. He is in control of all that motion. And he's showing us, in his way, that despite the fantastic activity in his poems, it is all *one* broom. It's Goldbarthian broom-unification theory.)

If, by some chance, you've never heard of Goldbarth despite his two National Book Critics Circle Awards, read this book. If you've heard of him, but haven't read his work, read this book. If you've read some of his



EDITORS' CHOICES

work before now, read this book too. If you think you've read every bit of his work, read this book for the new poems which, in all likelihood you *haven't* read, at least not all of them. If somehow, magically, you've read all the new poems in this book, and all the older ones, buy this book anyway because it's got the best and most apt bookcover art you'll ever see. Buy the hardback; frame the dustjacket. Read the book. Then go back and read it again.

Goldbarth is a maximalist, a *sui generis*, novelist, essayist, intellectual, philosopher, professor, and a serious, inherently funny poet, among a plethora of other things. He's read everything and, I swear, has remembered at least ninety-nine percent of what he's read. And he's made marvelous poetry from it.

Renée Ashley

