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Laurence Goldstein

MILLENNIUM'S END

The beginning is like a god which as long as it dwells among men saves all things.—Plato, Laws

I

A baby screams in the night.
The new father holds his breath
and thinks, "To stop that cry
I would torch Alexandria's
word-hoard, every microchip.
History would recommence with one purpose,
the muting of *that scream*."

II

How often, the year of graduation,
I thought of my fellow Californian
Kerensky, in his Berkeley soviet,
the mordant reproof he would offer,
like the actor he wished to be, and became:
"Mr. Goldstein, citizen of the new frontier,
in your valedictory speech, 'The Voice of the Future'
I notice you say nothing of dispossession
or thwarted desire, nothing of
the malignity of intellectuals
nor of red Czars who fatten on
the bovine simplicity of the urban poor,
nothing of *peace, land, and bread*."

III

A card fastened by pushpin into cork,
a phrase written on it: "third stream"
asterisked in the *New World Dictionary*
as *new word*: a music combining
jazz improvisation with classical
mostly 12-tone composition. Think of
artists plotting this marriage, this
new fact of evolution, one with
The Gossamer Albatross and the fiberoptic brain.

IV

Leaving Providence for a new position,
Year 2 of the Nixon Era, I bequeathed
to the Salvation Army for reassignment
the shirts into which I had sweated
my dissertation, pans that had overcooked
three hundred meals of scotch ham & beans,
my sets of Bulwer-Lytton and Walter Scott,
my caved-in chair cushions, my
worn-out carpet remnants
rubbed bare by history's Top 40 ideas—
I assumed that in Ann Arbor,
commune lately under siege,
I would create truth and see justice done.

That September, Robert Hayden said
"I took no part in the Black Action Movement.
I voiced my epithets in new poems
crafted like the eloquence of Keats
or my fluent models Auden and Rukeyser
who make their own music, like the soul.
Don't talk to me about Uncle Tom!

Haven't I imagined Malcolm's quest
as oh-so-true to our American gospel,
'Strike through the mask'?"

V

A telegram arrives, "Mr. Kerensky,
now is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius."
Expletives in Russian, and a bitter scowl.
Yes, he is an emblem of the *provisional*,
fifty years of interminable waiting.
"A great world cataclysm has run its course,
and we are on the threshold of an unknown era,"
he writes in nineteen sixty-five.
But who is *he*? To Eisenstein, a peacock.
"A Bonapartist," said Trotsky, "who lives
in the Winter Palace, who sleeps in
the bed of Russian emperors." To Lola Ridge
"flower the storm spewed white and broken
out of its red path."

He cannot outlive another war.
Now his prolonged Acts of memory,
his contra-Lenin, is finished for all time;
he is one with the transfiguration
imagined in the closure of his holy book.

VI

"Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth
the truth may enter in."

Perestroika was a beginning.
Those who struck through the Wall
made a beginning, a halo of sky.

Animals became visible again; the body
glowed when May Day lost its terror.
I traveled to Washington with my sons,
“new Moscow” some called it online,
but redeemed in spirit since 1967
when I marched on its guns. “Guns
will govern the future; don’t tread
on me,” the militiaman ranted,
wanting the war back again,
not Armageddon, a provisional war
righting the balance of power.
Time is a tunnel, I told my sons,
or several tunnels; and intermittently
we drive into the light. “*You* say it’s the light,
we say it’s the tunnel . . . look around, dad.”
The House of the People coiled in darkness
visible even on the fourth of July.
An implacable speaker twisted his mouth,
raised his arm over the multitude: “Comrades . . .”
Suddenly I was fifty, greyer,
less creaturely, less eager for miracles,
planning retirement in the new century.

VII

Imagine the year 2099.
The binaries lie in ruins;
a third stream, blue-skinned
and unclothed, more fond of fruit
than of anything on four feet
assembles in the vacant condos of
the former czars, where it reads
Russia and History’s Turning Point.
Since we have the freedom to say so,
let’s pretend that several extinct species
have survived; they regenerate

and become local gods, flying or crawling.
Anthems are made in odd cadences
the voice must be trained to utter.

The point of such pretense is this:
the babies are sleeping again,
peaceful as underground pools
bathing the roots of evergreens
they live in the provisional heaven
of perfect animal satisfaction.

VIII

One fall morning, writing this poem
and gazing for recreation
at the yellowing pears on the tree,
winter savories whether
for squirrel or human gourmets,
I saw a cardinal in the ocher leaves
turning the black mask of its visage
back toward whatever home he had left;
shaking his red crest he let flow
a loud slurred whistle of speech.
“New neighbor” (I almost said “new spirit”)
“make my dwelling less comfortable,
a habitation not a prison,
an origin not a refuge;
open the gates of my desire.”