

## Six Poems

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

### Tables

In religion—and this might be an extreme example, and yet an example nonetheless—it's when the supplicant kneels before the god the way the wheat bows down before the wind, and then that congregation writhes in a kind of pentecostal frenzy, and a thrill runs through the stalks, the heads are controlled now by a force beyond their rooted, earthly lives and, given tempest-level enough, they're taken up bodily into the air and *are* the air's . . . it's like that; having lost themselves, they've gained a place in something larger than their selves. Evidently deities require us to be mainlined into their systems. And I've seen it too as Heidi kneels over the acrylically sticky panel

—18 feet x 12—she's dabbing ribbon and gearwheels into, making art that in its turn makes her a component of cap-a Art, enlarged beyond mortality into secular communing with the silky, tendriled lily ponds through which Monet communed with the eternal, as did O'Keeffe, and Chagall, and Turner, all of them: magnified beyond death, all of them: made a part of the immaterial Oversoul precisely through obeisance to materials: their brushes and tins of turpentine and shellacs, the bin of gearwheels Heidi fiddles with sacramentally, the long transcendent river of paint to drown in and be resurrected from. For some, immersion in the military. Some, the thing—the one great thing—that happens when the wings of air spank out inside your own lungs with the first step on the conquered Alpine peak, and then

awareness of your smallness in its grandeur.

For Ricardo, it was Angela: we saw its start, that first night when he met her on the patio out back of Café Russe, and every gesture that he made toward her—a drink he bought, a word he said, a word he chose to *not* say—was essentially a genuflection. As for sex, her thighs held the pink chevron of a higher rank of being, we could see he'd suffer anything to be in its companionable graces: in a sense, to be diminished there in order—this is the Zen of it—to be empowered there. And of course she mistreated him. That's the prerogative of a god, and that's the chance we take to glory in the awe, at the portal. For some, their children; some, their political cause. We wouldn't have the stuff of majesty in us, without the other stuff: prostration. And so it was,

with Dominique Vivant Denon, who was one of the scholars—one of the “savants,” as they were called—who were embedded (the term we'd use now) with Napoleon's 38,000 troops as they battled, sleepless and starved, through Egypt. Naturally the soldiers—brawlers, men of bloody action—automatically disdained what they saw as the prissy affectations of the scholars in their midst. The soldiers were insolent, especially to Vivant Denon, “the lily-fingered sketcher,” who was in the sands without a drawing table, please, he said to them, please, come see this with me: the Temple of Karnak. There it was: a building that could alchemize a common soldier into the ethereal. And as one, they bent to offer their backs. They made themselves into tables. They made themselves into tables so they could be clouds.

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