

Albert Goldbarth

from THE SMALL VISION

Letter From R.K., fragment

"My Prussian thanks to those Dutch lens-grinders
toying -truly! making toys- two centuries ago,
their skill: my saving. I was nobody
in Posen, Prussia; the town's new medic, yes,
but as such I was trained for objectivity
and looking at whose look was mirrored back from the silver
stethoscope head, I saw the heavy-lidded
watery-blue eyes of one more unknown
misplaced researcher trapped lancing boils
and kissing cuts. And I was lucky for lance
and stethoscope, patients' pfennings appearing
so slow!: it was anthrax time, cows convulsed cold
and bloated with it, and nobody prospering.
That day -it was 1871- I returned from my rounds
of gauze and gargles still dreaming of Leeuwenhoek,
Pasteur, and Jenner, men who faced disease eye
to eye (such can no doubt be truly said of the look
down a lighted microscope; but I hadn't one,
I was not of their ilk) who burned sickness
sterile with such peering -and who was Robert Koch!
eh? just a malcontent stumbling to dinner.
Except Emmy'd done up my favorite food;
it was my birthday, I'd forgotten, and she
closed the bowed drapes, opened the roll-top desk
and showed me what was (though the cheapest
model -with cardboard tube- the Hapsburg
Medical Supply House Catalogue had to offer)
mine; saved for from her marketstall budget;

and I would have wept but was busy plucking
a gold strand from her tress and clamping it
straightway to the microscope's stage; then a saw-edged
bee leg, a fish scale, maybe... blood?
from an anthrax-infested cow's corpse.

When anthrax chanced the following summer
at Hoffmire's farm, my chance arrived
(in inverse proportion, I must admit
-and Emmy was quick to remind- to the sniffing
who battered my door for pills;
they trailed off like a nighttime cough,
like my income, over the next nervous years)
and I started my half-decade's-peering-at-dots
with a cut udder Hoffmire offered me
from a struck calf. That night, that June 25th,
the oil lamp gleaming the sides of my slides,
the sealed bottles of red-black animal blood,
and my forehead's perspiration -the room
so decorated with dazzling, I first gazed
agape at the greenish rods. They were deadwood
sized under magnification, hid in the chickens,
hid in the sheep -floating in seven cases
of anthrax -but cause of the disease
or result? My eyes that summer were filled
with a dream of fame and, bloodshot, seemed
filled with a reflection of animal blood smears;
how many miles of mammal-life poured
over my cheap microscope's mirror? till
butchers barred their doors to my begging
with empty jars; but I'd seen enough:
healthy blood rodless, and always the anthrax
blood gutted with rods, carcass to carved carcass!
Barely twenty-five-thousandths of an inch
thick, still they were there, a cipher.
How to prove them causative? I drummed my fingers

impatiently on Emmy's head all through to '73
for the answer: inoculate
white mice with two months' -worth
of whittled hardwood slivers shaved from a shelf plank.
I'd followed Herr Mueller, his only cow
and income-source tipped stiff in the lean-to,
and tapped more bad blood; when Ruri, poor mouse
my fancy x-marked, died from a dose of that
rodded drop, I could only dream Mueller dead
from dragging a cowless plough
through his fields, the taste of its bit the last
imagined morsel in his starving mouth.
It was more than fame like a carrot dangling
before my sight to lead me on now, but visions
of the donkey dead; I wanted barnyards and tables
teeming; I wanted success for this third -last-
step: prove the motionless rods lived
by breeding a new generation, as deadly to mice
-and pin the blame on those second-generation germs
with their own sharp ends! In what living
incubator to raise my plague? Emmy paled
to see my answer unwrapped on the countertop,
but those cow's two gouged eyes sparkled so!
that I knew the rods would thrive in their liquid;
and, too, it seemed fit to end my thousand-nights' stare
in the knowledge a fresh-killed milk cow glared back.
My five especially shaped and scooped
slides flame-cleaned, the eye-film riddled
with rods... in ten days eight
generations budded, and at their first quiver
I pushed aside the microscope's high-objective
and fine-adjustment, and over that blind eye
I cried; fitting, too, to finally use a drop
welled up from subjective depths as a lens;
the tear is a specialized focus. Anyway, the rest

you know: acclaim for isolating the rods
(and, just last year, the delight of discovering,
yes, the preventive inoculation); the post
The University of Breslau offered for further research;
the work on tuberculosis; and then the return
from India, having -more optics- identified the cause
of cholera; what we see, we define."

Note: Robert Koch's letter is excerpted from a longer poem, *The Small Vision*. Most of the "facutal" material in the letter is true to the account in Edward F. Dolan, Jr.'s *Adventure With A Microscope*, although the tone of the letter, and whatever personality may be inferred from it, are of my own imposition. —AG

The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems, Morton Marcus (Capra Press, \$4.95). If Alfred North Whitehead were writing today, he could point to the poems of Morton Marcus for evidence that every slug and stone has a spirit of its own we could know if only we could spirit it out. Marcus can. Reading *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems*, I thought of others who have gone after the spirit of some place. Marcus makes them look blinded by the deaf, dumb surfaces of things; he goes beyond them and finds voice for the things of his world: "The weeds rejoice. / They are hands raised above heads sunk in the earth, / bodies clamped in a thickened atmosphere, / in a still rain of beetles and stones. / They say, 'I am old, old, / but my hands have broken through.' "Toward the end of the book Marcus offers his prayer "To the Tall Spirit:" "...raise me to your head / which is the hive of many voices. / I want to put my face inside." These poems are a testament that his prayer was answered. For Marcus finds voice for many things, and not only things but the bond between things and men: "The week puts out its hand. / Take it. Hold fast. / We are flying into a long night." He speaks, too, for the many mysterious voices that come out of nowhere in solitude and silence. Appropriately, these poems are italicized and untitled, holding their own among those more easily placed. They give voice to various spirits: the other self, the invisible presence, the anonymous god of the place who gives advice that goes to the bone. It's easy to get lost in the mountains, among so many things that sing. But Marcus knows his place. These are some lines torn from the most remarkable poem, "*Waking at Night*." "...I know my quilt is the meadow / and that turning / I'll drag the whole field with me / into sleep. / ...the whole field tips, / rises before me / with beetle sparklings, / flashes of eye, moon shell, / lightninged branches, milky leaves, / and rears higher only to pour through me / as if I were a doorway / between one room and another." These poems deserve the fine printing they've been given. The drawings by Gary H. Brown are a secret I'm not going to tell. Take a mountain home; buy *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems*. Barton Sutter.