

Grace Danborn, Sarah Hudgens, and  
Zachary Vineyard

## A Conversation with Beckian Fritz Goldberg

*Jean Valentine has characterized Beckian Fritz Goldberg's work as a "fierce homage to the body and to the spirit." Landscape may have influenced the intensity of this homage; Goldberg grew up in the harsh Arizona desert, where she currently resides.*

*"Death is the eternal problem," Goldberg says. "I can't write without that awareness—to me it's constant. . . . How can you love something and not mourn the fact that it's going to disappear?" Even when not overtly dealing with death, Goldberg's work concerns itself with the mortality of humans and the natural environments that shape them.*

*Goldberg is the author of The Book of Accident (2006) and Lie Awake Lake (2005). Her collection of prose poems, Egypt from Space, is forthcoming. Other titles include Body Betrayed (1991), In the Badlands of Desire (1993), Never Be the Horse (1999), and Twentieth Century Children (1999), a limited edition chapbook. She has been awarded the Theodore Roethke Poetry Prize, The Gettysburg Review Annual Poetry Award, The University of Akron Press Poetry Prize, a Pushcart Prize, and her work has also been anthologized in The Best American Poetry series. Goldberg holds an MFA from Vermont College and an MA from Arizona State University, where she was mentored by Norman Dubie. Presently, she directs the Creative Writing Program at Arizona State University.*

*Goldberg was interviewed over lunch at Europa Restaurant in Spokane.*

ZACHARY VINEYARD

What kind of progression do you see from your earlier work to your later?

BECKIAN FRITZ GOLDBERG

I think that's always a hard question for a writer, because you don't think about your past work that much; at least I don't. Once it's out there, it's out there, and some things hold up for you. Some things, you can only see what's wrong with them—like, Why did I write that line? What was I thinking? Or sometimes you look back and go, Wow, how did I do that? It looks like I have a brain!

I try to take more risks, push it, because I have a low boredom threshold. And so I always like to try things I haven't tried before, try to get away with things I haven't gotten away with before. I trained very early to use narrative in my work because it didn't come naturally. So I think my earlier work—I could be wrong—has a little more narrative in it, because I worked so hard at doing that. But my natural bent is lyric, and I've felt more freedom, I suppose, as I've gone along, to go with that.

SARAH HUDGENS

Can you identify certain risks in the new volumes, *The Book of Accident* and *Lie Awake Lake*?

GOLDBERG

*The Book of Accident* had been kind of bounced around, because it had a contract with another publisher, and that didn't work. So I went back to Akron because they published *Never Be the Horse*. It's just now coming out, but it's been there for probably three or four years. I feel lucky because I suppose if I still had it, I'd just—I get sick of things real quick. So *The Book of Accident* is very different. I remember being pissed off I couldn't write short poems. Or I didn't think I could write short poems. I'd look at people who could write a twelve-line poem and it was a complete thing—it wasn't a fragment—and I was thinking, Why can't I do that?

*Lie Awake Lake* was written shortly after my father's death. I was staying in Jean Valentine's apartment in New York. It was winter and I was sick as a dog. But she had an old typewriter and I was so tired that I would just write these short things, and I didn't have the heart to edit them so I put them away. Then I took them out later and decided to keep them.

In terms of the language and things—there is a “purple scrotum” in *The Book of Accident* that I'm very proud of. I get some flack for that, but, you know, it had to be. I don't know exactly if it's purple—I don't

know, there's some image in there. I like to surprise myself. You write and stuff comes out and the first thing your little editor head says is, You can't say that, and as soon as my editor says that, I go, Oh, yeah, I'm ready. Yeah, it's on!

GRACE DANBORN

Your work can be characterized by those surprising images. Not just the scrotum but other uncommon comparisons, like in *Never Be the Horse* when you compare a nebula to the steam of a rabbit's breath on a cracked cellar window. How do you allow yourself such free imagistic range of the imagination, but still maintain a tone of intimacy with the reader?

GOLDBERG

The imagery itself is probably something I've always been able to do, because it's the way I think. Anywhere but poetry it would probably get me into trouble. But that's the first natural poetic impulse I had. It took me a while to learn how to control images and not just throw them at the reader, but pace them and have the image come at the right time.

HUDGENS

And the voice and tone are still so intimate.

GOLDBERG

Poetry should be intimate. I have to believe I'm talking to someone who's listening, and who's like me. It is partly historical. When I read poems and feel like they're talking to me—that's what I want to do. I get bored with over-intellectualized stuff. Yeah, sure, we all have a mind. Big deal. Wow, so you're brilliant. I don't have a lot of patience for that. Not that stuff like that isn't any good, or isn't valid. I'm just not interested.

HUDGENS

In an online interview, you said that writers have to know the audience doesn't care about their feelings. Do you still hold that to be true? How does that work?

GOLDBERG

You have to make them care. I don't know how you do that. I think you have to give them enough of your sensibility, touch some sort of common ground first. Part of that is voice. If you read Nazim Hikmet, the Turkish poet, his voice—of course I've only read him in translation

because I can't read Turkish, but who the hell can? Turks can—his voice is very immediate. I think you have to surrender to what you're writing. It really has to—I hate to use this phrase because it makes me want to retch—come from the heart. But it really does.

DANBORN

Are you risking sentimentality, then? If it “comes from the heart,” are you afraid of being characterized that way by readers?

GOLDBERG

No, I'm too weird. [Laughs.] Sentimentality is usually bad because it's unearned emotion. You know, people writing about how bummed they are that they broke up with their boyfriend or girlfriend. So what? If you tell them about the relationship to the point where you share the history a little, then they start to care. That's the balance you have to strike to make that intimate connection with the reader. And sometimes you just don't know; you have to try to be as true to the poem as you can and hope it works.

HUDGENS

Do you, then, equate the writer with the speaker? Or do you see your speakers as separated one degree?

GOLDBERG

It's one degree removed, because it's artifice. It's not like me talking to you now. It's art, sculpted and formed and thought about. It's not spontaneous. Even though an occasional verse will be. But you always have the option to go back and tweak it.

VINEYARD

You're starting to work in the prose poem, and you've previously published other formal poetry, such as the crown of sonnets in *Never Be the Horse*. Has form in your poetry changed as you further trust your poetic instincts?

GOLDBERG

I always trust what I'm trying to do. Form is nothing I think about in advance. I work a lot on the basis of sound. Sound will tell me its form. The crown of sonnets was sort of an exception. I didn't plan it. I had serious writer's block and was trying to write my way out of it. I'd

had this idea that connected the devil and the sonnet form for a long time. I was writing it down and I was thinking, That's kind of iambic, okay. And it turned out to be a sonnet and a half, and I thought, I can't have a sonnet and a half. So I said, Okay, I'll go for two. Well, then I had a line left over. I remembered my old forms class, from way back, and thought, Yeah, there's something where you just keep going with it. So I did, and it was miserable. I would be up nights working on two lines.

But I don't consciously approach something thinking it's going to be in a certain form. I do go through phases, though. I had a desire to write short poems for a while, which usually means I end up writing long ones, since that's the way things work. When I wrote *Never Be the Horse*, I went for longer, more raggedy-ass lines, because I was like, Why do lines have to be all tight? So I thought I'd just let it roll, and wherever the line breaks, screw it. The two books that followed that are shorter-lined, more lyric, with more space in the poems. I didn't want to keep doing the same thing.

HUDGENS

So if sound dictates form for you, would you also say that sound dictates meaning or content?

GOLDBERG

A lot of the time, yes. When I'm looking for the rest of the line that's not there yet, I know exactly how it's supposed to sound. I know, DUM da da DUM dum dum. So I have to find the words to fit that. Obviously, it has to make some kind of sense. But I will actually hear vowel sounds and things that need to be there. That has every bit as much to do with it as *what* I'm saying.

I think sound is the hypnotic force in a poem. If that's broken, things fly apart. I'm much more aware of it now. My poems usually start with hearing the line. Or I hear a certain tone, or something I can't even articulate until the poem acquires its body. If I can't hear it, I can't write it. I can't think it. And that's frustrating. Because I will, when I'm writing, try to think it. You want to finish the goddamn poem, so you can go have your coffee and your cigarette, you know? And I'm not allowed to smoke in the house.

HUDGENS

When you're reading poetry in which the main thrust isn't sound, do you value it less?

GOLDBERG

Probably. I suppose that if I look at the poets I'm most attracted to, that I return to, probably they have that quality. It's not that I can't appreciate the craft of something that's not quite as musical, but it doesn't hold my interest. I think sound is an important quality in poems, and I think all great poems have it. It's an issue with language poetry: some of it's just—you know, I've got TV to watch. Hey, *Law and Order's* on, man, don't waste my fucking time!

DANBORN

You said that trusting sound allows you to play with more surreal images. But are the images themselves ever the genesis of a poem, before being shaped by sound? Do you ever see a rabbit or an olive and say, "I want to write that image"?

GOLDBERG

Usually one thing's there first, like maybe the rabbit. And then my mind goes off to, what was it? An olive. I like that. Martinis, yeah. My mind will leap to that association. If I'm really on, I'll hear it and do the association at the same time. Those are the good poet days, where you're just on, just rocking. Sometimes it's just a little scribble off to the side of the margin: "Get to the olive." But if I can't find the sound for it, I probably won't do it. The challenge is to make the image make sense to the reader. An associative sense, not a logical one.

My thought process is in image. So the sound will determine how the image is played out. Or sometimes, I'll go with the sound and that's where the surprises come from.

DANBORN

Like a horse suddenly starts talking—

GOLDBERG

Yeah, that was kind of a shock. That was one of those moments: A talking horse? Man, you can't do that!

VINEYARD

In your work there's so much repetition and recurring image—I think of the last poem in *Lie Awake Lake*. How does repetition function for you?

GOLDBERG

I suppose the honest answer is I don't know. Part of it is, again, sound, because the right amount of repetition is musical and gives weight to certain moments. I think it's a natural impulse of language, too—kids repeat things all the time, obsessively, until you want to slap them. And I like it when I read things that have repetition. I guess it's one way of keeping the reader in the poem, keeping me in the poem, but it can be overdone. Somebody pointed out to me once that in one book I tended to repeat things in threes, so I was like, I'm not going to do that anymore. You don't want to fall into a mannerism.

DANBORN

Gertrude Stein suggests that repetition without change is death, but repetition with modulation is insistency, is life. Does your repetition work in a similar way?

GOLDBERG

I am conscious of what Stein said. I don't want to repeat just to repeat. And even throughout the course of a book, it's not entirely conscious. Like this last book, there's a lot of water in it. I didn't start out thinking, I'm going to do water stuff. When I became conscious of it, I didn't want to do it every other line or anything, but I became aware there was a lot of water in the book. It seemed right. But that was unique to that book. *Never Be the Horse* was drier, more desert.

VINEYARD

The desert figures prominently in your work, often as an adversarial character infused with intention—

GOLDBERG

Well, it is. I mean, the desert hates you. It doesn't want you to live there. It is not a hospitable environment, and you feel that. Especially in Arizona. The summers there, which are six months long, are like living in an oven. And you get used to it in a way, but you're aware of how much it hurts to go outside. Though I do have moments of tenderness toward the desert. It's like when you have a worthy enemy—there's a close relationship even though it's not a friendship.

I think a lot of people in Arizona feel that adversity. What bothers me is the people who—it's all becoming gated communities and cement, so the desert is disappearing—get pissed off when javelina, which aren't

really pigs but more like big rats, eat their flowers. They were there first. I have coyotes running all over my property. They run across the driveway and look at me like, What the fuck are you doing? And I'm fine with that as long as they don't eat my cats. We had a bobcat for a while, that liked to sun on our roof. And that was kind of freaky. I called him Bobby because I am so original with names. And you know, if you leave them alone they'll leave you alone. Javelina, too. They're blind as bats but they can smell you. They like cigarettes, too. I was out on the balcony smoking one night—two in the morning, whatever—and a big one came up. I really think he was attracted to the smoke.

I have also noticed that there is some sort of geographical thing happening in *Egypt from Space*. I don't know exactly why yet. Well, the book is titled that because I saw a satellite photo. You know how they can take photos now of the earth, and there's some picture that's supposedly Egypt, but it looks like shadow and scar? And I suppose that got me thinking about view of places and how only in recent generations have we had that ability.

I saw an art program where they talked about the Eiffel Tower being built, how people were able to go up high and look at stuff for the first time. You know, people weren't flying in airplanes and they didn't have skyscrapers, and that changed their perspective in more ways than one—in art and also in their ways of thinking.

#### HUDGENS

You've characterized *The Book of Accident* as a meta-narrative. How does meta-narrative work in that book, and how has your approach to narrative changed throughout your work?

#### GOLDBERG

I don't think about narrative much anymore. I just had fun in that book. It's not really narrative, and my editor told me it should maybe have more narrative. It's a series of lyrics and recurrent characters that form a narrative arc. But there's not a story, no action that leads to an event and then drops off. It's little glimpses into characters in a particular time and place, which is not quite real—fictional. I like that because I guess I got tired of ending with a pile of shit that I knew was connected. But trying to figure out how to order a manuscript is so awful. It was nice to work with something that took care of that for me, at least to a degree. Not that I didn't shuffle and change, but at least there was some impetus there. In *Lie Awake Lake* there is obviously a central event that

generated the meditations and the lyrics but there is no narrative as far as I can tell. There are glimpses of things that happened to my father, but it is almost all interior space.

HUDGENS

And you said earlier that in your first couple of volumes, you forced the narrative because you thought you should be writing in a narrative form—

GOLDBERG

Well, I knew it was a weak point with me. You start with your strengths—I could give you an image every line, but that doesn't make a poem. So, I had to find some other stuff to put in there. It was a good grounding. Now, I use narrative tools all the time. I don't like poems that have no time, no place, nothing. Narrative also freed me up to take the lyric further; and ultimately, given my bent, that's where I wanted to go. I was not going to become the narrative poet. I think there is great power in a really good story, but I don't think in stories. I think that's the difference between poets and fiction writers. We look at something and think, That would be a great poem. They look at it and think, Great story. I don't see the story.

HUDGENS

I don't know that all poets think only in images—some of us also think in stories—

GOLDBERG

Yes, there are great narrative poets. A lot of Larry Levis is narrative. Things happen, he goes places. He screws her, she screws him. And that's terrific. It's just a matter of how you see and what you're comfortable with. I tend to think in images and that's probably why I'm a lyric poet. But I wanted to be able to tell a story if I needed to. It just didn't come naturally to me, though it's easier now. I'm more comfortable with what constitutes a story. I think I was inhibited by my initial idea of what narrative was. And I had to learn that it's more flexible than I thought.

A lot of times when you first write, I think you're afraid to have a line that's not beautiful. And that was me. I had to do fireworks every line or it wasn't working. People had to slap me around and say, "That's not going to work, that's just masturbation."

HUDGENS

Who are some of your favorite contemporary poets?

GOLDBERG

Jean Valentine. I just adore her work. I love Michael Burkard. Those are the people who, as soon as I find a new poem by them, I'm on it. It's like I want to suck their brains out. I love Charles Wright. I'd like to have his children. Actually, I want to have Marvin Gaye's children, but it's too late. I love a lot of poets. I'm a big Gerald Stern fan, a Philip Levine fan.

HUDGENS

Are there specific poets you look to for inspiration to start writing?

GOLDBERG

Sometimes I have to read my way into writing again because my brain just flat-lines. I read a lot of European poets. I love Rilke but he doesn't help me write because he's just too fucking good. After I read him I want to off myself. I like Marina Tsvetayeva and Boris Pasternak. A translation of his poems called, *My Sister-Life*, is just a knock-out book.

I don't think Michael Burkard is getting any props. They're all writing about Jorie Graham, Louise Glück, or John Ashbery—which is fine. Larry Levis—goddamn, I think he is phenomenal. I'm in the pits that he died, but so is he: *damn man, all that cocaine fucked me up*. I think he was the great poet of this generation. Poets won't forget him. I have yet to see a critic write anything, which is an odd dichotomy in this culture. The poets who become well known are the critically acclaimed but not necessarily the ones who inspire poets. Ultimately, both types of poets will survive and their work will survive, because the critics decide who gets into the *Norton Anthology*, and because the rest of us keep reading really cool poems. I think Levis' work will continue to be read.

DANBORN

Has your treatment of death changed as your books have changed?

GOLDBERG

I don't know if it's changed. I mean, death is the eternal problem. I don't want to do it, I don't want other people to do it, I don't like it. So I suppose I'm trying to find a way out or an answer to why it happens.

I don't know if I've come to any conclusions, but I can't write without that awareness—to me it's constant. Poems that don't acknowledge that seem dishonest to me. How can you love something and not mourn the fact that it's going to disappear? To me that's the essential question of the human condition, and if you avoid it, I don't think you can write an honest poem. I think that's the reason that essay—I think by Donald Hall—says, “There's no great poem that is simply happy.” It doesn't mean there isn't joy or celebration in poems, but it's always in the face of the fact of loss.

#### HUDGENS

But there seems to be a tension between that sentiment and a desire to transcend the body—there are instances where you refer to the body as the “hell of form” or write “somebody has to stay behind and be the body.” So there seems also to be a yearning for death.

#### GOLDBERG

No, it's a yearning for the opposite. I'd like to wipe out death altogether. I'm not buying it. And I can't arrive at a theological belief that allows me to be okay with it. I wish I could—it'd be nice to believe we die and go to heaven and float around happy all the time, but I suspect not. So I fight it and it informs just about everything I do. I don't think it would be that way if I didn't love so many things. There's so much beauty and wonderful stuff. As Woody Allen would say, Death just spoils the whole party.

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