

SUSAN GUBERNAT

The Right Hand of Goltzius

at the Metropolitan Museum

He had fallen into the fire,
a baby then—the kind of
sixteenth-century kitchen
accident that maimed him
for life, torqued the hand
into a useless caliper,
where, as it happened,
he most needed
to be lithe, and free.

From such disfigurement
came an engraver's
exacting figures:
striated loins of pagan gods
and heroes, fretted tableaux
of the Virgin's life, a taut
and tensile study of
the twisted fingers
of his own right hand
not the least of these,
and the exhibition's centerpiece.

So we celebrate
the romance of recovery,
enshrined in a curator's cure
for ennui. Nothing's impossible,
yes, yes, we already know. Just
think of what can be done
armless, a brush clutched
between the toes, the teeth.

Then why am I not comforted?
Not inspired, not raised up.

When Dolores on the street,
homeless, exchanges my money
for her story, unbidden—
she's less nauseated from

chemo today, the tumors
are shrinking, she has to get
back to her “babies” now, as if
she might grind their food
in her toothless mouth,
pierce her rotting breasts to feed them—

all I can think is how Goltzius,
burin in his good left hand,
also made these:
A series of engravings of naked
hubrists, each tumbling, solitary
into the void—Phaeton and Icarus,
viewed from behind, too late,
limbs flailing decorously: powerful,
useless musculature in free fall.

Show me the sparrow, Lord. Show me the tree.