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**The Truth About Head Cheese**

**A Collection of Poems**

presented by

**Mary Ellen Sullivan**

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in English

Major professor

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THE TRUTH ABOUT HEAD CHEESE  
A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

Mary Ellen Sullivan

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1988

ABSTRACT

THE TRUTH ABOUT HEAD CHEESE  
A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

Mary Ellen Sullivan

This book is a collection of poems allied around one general theme: that things are not as they seem. The poems are unified by this common observation, even though they involve very different subjects and a variety of situations.

The poem The Truth About Head Cheese was chosen as the book title because the subject graphically represents the book's theme. Head cheese embodies unexpected features not apparent in its final, edible form. Even on the plate, it has conflicting reputations--both as a delicacy and a repulsive inedible--a discrepancy caused by individual perspectives which are not changed by knowing the "truth" about head cheese.

All the poems, then, present an apparent reality, the unexpected features of which emerge from beneath the surface to create a benign deception and outcome from the poet's individual perspective.

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1988

For Larry

who taught me that, even though we are not as we seem,  
we are closest to our best natural selves when we are  
operating on automatic pilot

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Diane Wakoski for her unfailing guidance, criticism style, candid approach, and friendship during the development of this manuscript.

Thank you to Catherine Kaikowska for her ongoing special assistance and friendship, especially for her concise, objective opinions on poem drafts.



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## **PART ONE**

### **The Truth About Head Cheese**

## The Guest Outside the Algonquin

She was a lady of imaginary boundaries  
Claiming a space in each direction  
Much wider than herself.

She won this space  
By placing the temporal necessities  
Of any curbside resident  
In a homelike fashion  
And in a design which showed a flair  
Beyond her contemporaries.  
She had made herself a domesticated spirit  
But kept the gleam of native eyes.  
In the system of pedestrians,  
They would have found her lame  
Mostly in the head,  
But in a fixed population of one,  
There was no tease of keeping up.

Gifted in her solitude,  
She did not fight the clatter of the City.  
Peacefully she changed an old mat  
Stale with exercise,  
Into a pad for lounging in the evening  
And for sleep at night,  
Preferring sleek rubber to the stubbled pavement.

For her blanket,  
She fashioned a stack of clear plastic bags,  
First issued at the cleaners,  
Into a puffy coverlet stitched around the edges  
With assorted safety pins.  
And for a pillow,  
She folded a dingy airline bag against its seams  
And set it down.  
A disabled stadium umbrella,  
Rejected for its fractured spokes,  
Opened to a canopy  
To shelter almost any dream.

The daytime enterprise was a complex sorting operation:  
Bags of plastic and paper  
Were arranged into a gibbous moon,  
Thick with papers, peelings, soiled rags,  
And open grocery cans,  
Bottles, handy treasures,  
Cores of apples,  
Even whole withered apples,  
Sometimes a piece of underwear,  
Selected remnants of a puzzle,  
Or a branded towel from the Taft.  
With this variety of timeless inedibles  
And curios for possible consumption,  
She sorted and re-sorted through the days,

Preoccupied with progress, humming and muttering  
As she saw each item again for the first time,  
And brushed her hair on breaks  
With a giant, wooden-handled tool  
Sometimes used on vegetables.  
I stayed at the Algonquin for a week.  
By Friday I knew this was no ordinary lady.

My last night  
When the moon outshined the streetlamps,  
It was late enough to see  
She had retired to her nightly peace.  
I almost missed her  
Rising from her bed,  
Stretching long and scuffling to the curb,  
Regarding the gutter in both directions,  
Where, at a certain spot  
She stopped and squatted,  
Quite precisely.  
Facing me,  
She raised her wrinkled skirt high from the rear,  
Clutched it at her waist in front  
And waited patiently.  
She pivoted--her skirt still raised,  
Her bare rump pale,  
Its crescents aspicked in the light--

And examined closely, like a dog,  
What she had produced.  
Quite satisfied,  
She rose and turned and came to me,  
Regarded me from hair to waist,  
And circled me like a cautious animal.  
Then, seeing I was of no consequence,  
She backed up to her moonstruck bed  
And would not move again until I did.

Morris Blumstein

1883-1975

I knew him for a few years in the mid-1960s  
After he turned 82, by then a faded Old World tailor  
Secluded in a room on Broadway, where he could,  
If he wished, stop his cutting and stitching  
And look into the park, or with some imagination,  
Into the Hudson. He had a cluster of four narrow windows,  
Clean on one side, without the bother of curtains.

His work was situated near these windows.  
On the table several cigar boxes brimmed with wooden tools,  
Buttons, snips, elastics, and an odd assortment of pins.  
Great reels of tailor's twist and bobbins  
The size of fruit jars hung about the table.

The part of his room meant for living  
Was dark in daylight, dim at night;  
A portable floorlamp, iron cot, and washbasin  
With a shallow shelf of dishes and canned goods,  
Their opener dangling from a nail on the wall,  
Together clustered at the far wall with the topless toilet.  
A handful of clothing sagged from the pole in the closet,  
Including a morning suit pressed sleek,  
And oxfords polished on the rack



Poised for any American tragedy. Stuck to the doorframe  
With an old tapestry needle was the crackled photograph  
Of a woman, her hair and eyes still distinguishable.

When I first visited, he said yes, he could stitch  
For a woman's shape, especially the business suit,  
And made the conclusive promise that I would be satisfied  
When he was satisfied.

At first I was uneasy to be met at the door  
In pajama bottoms and brown corduroy scuffies  
But he said he was not just right today,  
Then made us some lemonade from powder in a smoky jar  
And called it a special hand-mixed Russian tea.

To measure me for a suit, he used his hands,  
His arms to the elbow, and his eye for distance.  
He understood the absolute importance of the shoulder,  
The armpit, the hip, and the knee,  
Eyed my worry about the outcome of his exercise,  
And reassured me that now he knew my shape,  
Which he believed was not too irregular.  
He would make the suit in two weeks, because he had to do  
The alterations on his rack-of-waiting first.

Alarmed, I went to visit his friend Otto Freedman,  
Who had referred me for tailoring,

And who told me again, without reservations,  
That I would have a suit more excellent  
Than my own standards.

Somehow Otto turned the conversation on the past  
And told the fragments that he knew  
About the confident Morris Blumstein, his oldest friend.  
It seems when Morris first arrived in New York,  
Imported at the end of the war,  
It was said quietly in the neighborhood  
That he had been in Belsencamp.  
Otto had privately managed to unfray  
Some of the remaining rags of truth  
Crammed into a corner of Morris's mind  
But still evident behind his eyes.

There had been the trial of a newborn son  
Delivered under the ridicule of guards,  
Assistance not permitted,  
And then the arbitrary separation from his wife.

He had wanted to tell Otto how many days passed  
Before they hung him from the wire fence  
Bordering the dreaded court  
Where devilish corrections took place,  
But he could not remember.  
He could see only his wife

Where she was tied up on the tree trunk, facing it,  
 Her cheek mashed against the bark,  
 The baby placed, directly behind her heels,  
 Bare on the ground. There was no confusion in his mind  
 That his wife died first.

These were the only details Morris could tell.  
 Otto never asked him how he came to drag a leg,  
 How he felt about the line of blue-grey numbers on his arm,  
 Or why some of his fingers had been mangled.

This knowledge, then, was the beginning of my trust  
 In Morris Blumstein as a tailor, with his oddities,  
 And in the difference between  
 The open wound and the mysterious scar.  
 The first time I went for a fitting,  
 Both of their promises turned out right.  
 After that I went to him for every suit I could afford,  
 And as a bonus to my custom wardrobe,  
 I learned three Latin phrases, which he used  
 During minor alterations:  
 I am not what I used to be (non sum qualis eram)  
 I hate and I love (odi et amo)  
 Time devours all things (tempus edax rerum).  
 With these expressions, a live dummy, and good goods,  
 He hummed and muttered his way through the daylight hours.

When it was time for me to leave the City,  
I did not know how to say goodbye.  
Knowing he would make some Russian tea, or lemonade,  
I made some unfrosted fudge brownies  
With extra large eggs and real butter,  
And arranged them in a sturdy tin-lined box.  
Mute as he opened it, he laid it down  
And went to stand a while at his clustered windows  
While I waited, not surprised,  
Until he returned, mildly infirm, dragging his leg,  
To issue his instinctive blessing:  
    You bring me these wonderful brown cakes, my dear?  
    Then I will not worry for you.  
    You will be all right.

## The Eyebank

"Excuse me sir," I said, leaning forward  
"But is that a glass eye?"  
My husband poked me sharply in the side.  
"She didn't mean ...." The old man chortled,  
Scraping his chair closer to my knees,  
And in a wink, held out his eye  
Which was rounder on the seeing side.  
It was a spot of whiskey glazed in cream,  
Dry-varnished, glaring up, unwavering.  
I took it, pushing on it hard,  
It had no give--a heavy, irregular marble.  
"Real eyes are hollow. I guess I thought glass--"  
"My god, what are you DOING?" His urgent  
Whisper showing disrespect for viewing an eye,  
"Don't you know he's BLIND?"

The old man, enjoying his condition,  
Took the eye back, putting it in his head,  
And pulled my wrist toward the little table  
With its shallow, long box of spiced wood.  
The inside, lined in old velvet, displayed  
In separate cells one empty space  
And six irresistible orbs.  
He handed me one, and then another. We held

Them all, we studied them for suitability:  
Which were heavy, which easy, which fit snug,  
Which served best for dressup, how they should be buffed.  
My husband had now moved closer, making periodic,  
Almost inaudible groans. Even allowing a closeup view,  
He showed the girdle of mesh, installed in his head  
Without a scar, to hold any of his eyes in place.

There was a glass one with a painted iris,  
Intricately spoked in browns at the center,  
One in baked enamel on china, translucent, .  
With a dab of red on an ivory complexion,  
A modern one of fiberglass, not too convincing,  
And anyway, too ordinary for the job,  
And two plastic ones, satin-finished, of a soiled  
Ivory, and beige, one iris too dull, one too pitch,  
And the rubber one, too porous, looked best  
At a distance. Some, at my request, he modeled:  
Each removal made his eyewell shrivel shut,  
Each inset stretched and pulled it open,  
His artificial eyestrings loose, then tense.

Embarrassed only when I asked to try it myself,  
And after a slow-motion lesson about taking pains,  
He waited, still uneasy, while I took the china eye,  
Pulled open the unorganized shrivel of his lids,  
And pushed it in. Delighted, we both laughed aloud,

He blinking with his head forward, mine back.  
"You have a magnificent collection, so many eyes  
To choose from," I said. "Magnificent, oh yes,  
Lovely specimens," he said, "if only I could find one  
That ever really works!" This time we laughed,  
All three, at the luck of a man with seven lovely  
Specimens, seven perfect models that could barely see.

## The Truth About Head Cheese

A composite opinion from Oxford and Webster  
(Compatible authorities on Head Cheese, or Braun)  
May entreat the adventitious to consider:

"A jellied, potted loaf made from the edible  
Parts of the head, feet, and sometimes  
The tongue and heart of tame, or wild, boar

(Uncastrated male), especially a pig: also calf  
And rarely, the guinea pig or raccoon; presented  
Chilled, sliced--frequently as an appetizer."

Private recipes are most exclusive,  
But the New York Times and Joy of Cooking  
Include their tested, classic recipes for 12.

Both competent, they agree on all procedures  
But the cleaning of the head. The Times advises  
That the expert butcher clean it, removing the snout.

Instead, The Joy extracts the blood by soaking the head  
And then cuts out the ears, eyes, snout, and fat, reserving  
The brains. Both clean the teeth with a stiff brush.



The undesirable parts all cut away or cleaned,  
 They submerge and simmer the head until the meat is mushy  
 Enough to pull from the bone; the brains are simmered  
     separately.

The rest of the day is spent tossing part of the delicate  
     brains  
 With the diced, mushy meat, adding a medley of seasonings,  
 Packing the loaf pan, holding it under water to make it jell,

And at the end, blending a vinaigrette sauce with what is  
     left  
 Of the brains. One drawback is the wait of two days' curing  
 On the refrigerator shelf, to set the strength of the flavor.

A minor difficulty may arise when that first slice is cut  
 And laid face up on the plate: it will look adipose,  
 And multicolored--a mosaic injected with pink, mauve, and  
     grey

Irregularities--pressed and re-formed, slightly resembling  
 The original ingredients. This is evidence that the head  
     of a boar  
 Has been artfully moulded into the delicacy known as  
     Head Cheese!

There are those who view each slice as a cerebral hemisphere  
Or a necropsy cross-section of a limb prepared for the  
microscope.

Their blameless knowledge stops them; they respectfully  
abstain.

Others, who are zealous in their worship of the natural  
and pure,

Worry about preservatives and additives,  
Especially while the pig was on the hoof.

The fatuous, who otherwise would want at least one taste,  
Were told that Head Cheese contains occasional bits of  
animal brains;

The possibility of such contamination is enough.

But those with the wisdom of New York Times and Joy of  
Cooking,

Caring less about appearances, stand for the Truth,  
And, knowing how the Head Cheese was prepared,  
eat themselves silly.

PART TWO

The Triumph

## Deviled Cow

I called her Lady Gladys Alexandra Cow--  
Cow was her family name, her race was Holstein--  
She had black birthmarks all over her body,  
One on her udder which changed to jet velvet  
When I rubbed it. My uncle said not to devil her,  
Not to try her patience, but when I stuck an apricot  
Up her nose, all she did was moo and shake her head.  
My uncle didn't know her very well,  
Because he was busy being a farmer.

He didn't know her hip and shoulder bones  
Had not been put in right. They stuck up  
From her back like four dunce's hats, and she was tall,  
So tall she could lick the top of my head, but  
Her tongue was too thick and long to ever be able  
To learn English. Mostly we stuck to our own languages.  
Her diet was cud--something she had to chew over and over  
Without thinking, and four stomach chambers to feed,  
Though I didn't really believe that one.

I knew her drumsticks were too big but my uncle said  
If she had little ones, she couldn't hold up her top.  
I dreamed of having one of her drumsticks,  
Not on a flowered dinner plate,

But cooked and served from floor to ceiling  
On a tension pole. I got tired--I couldn't finish it.  
I had to use a ladder, moving it around  
For different bites. All through the dream Lady Gladys  
Waited patiently on three legs for me to bring it back.

My uncle told me milk cows are not meant for people meat.  
When Gladys got too old, she would go into gourmet catfood,  
Or potted meat product--better than deviled ham--maybe  
Even something pressed and re-formed like luncheon meat,  
But he assured me that what was left could go to heaven.  
I went to see if Gladys knew what was going to happen.  
She liked the sound of what I said. She turned to look  
At me, her eyes like inky marbles with a pinprick  
Of light behind them, and chewed on her cud as usual.

More and more I thought about her health, so I examined  
Her whenever I could. One morning I saw her nipples  
Hanging together in a clump because her bag was shriveled,  
So I pushed them up from the bottom with the sweep-end  
Of the broom. She stomped in place and grunted, and on  
My second try, rushed forward. It was impossible to get  
Under her tail--she needed it for swatting flies--and  
When I wanted to taste her cud, she tried to scare me  
With her eyes. She didn't want a broomstick in her mouth.

I tried some water treatments with the hose, first on her  
Udder. She just looked back at me--probably too cold.

If I turned the spray up, she would moo and move away.  
By afternoon her bag was swollen up, so I poked it  
Just a little with the broom handle, to see if it would leak.  
Even from different angles, it didn't. After a few  
More pokes, Gladys stopped chewing on her cud.  
I laughed--she looked so silly. She lowered her head.  
Then she pawed the ground like a bull and bellowed, loud.

I ran, fast, down the cowlane toward the pasture.  
She barreled after me, head down, snorting,  
Her bell clunking the alarm.  
I turned back to look--she was mad, bellowing at me,  
Her bag swinging sideways, spilling milk.  
Just as I got on top of the fence, she reached me,  
Rammed the fence, almost hitting my legs,  
Revolved and switched her tail in my face like a whip,  
Then stood still, snorting, watching me, breathing.

Pleased, she glided back toward the farmyard,  
Lady Gladys again, balancing her great weight  
On her drumsticks, her bag swelling up and down.  
I touched my bloody face. She stopped, turned her eye back  
On me, grunted and trotted off, swishing her black tail,  
And seeing that tail, I got an idea about hanging it  
In my room--whether they would let me have it  
When they got around to dividing her up  
Between potted meat, catfood, and heaven.

## Bathroom Sizzle

We were a pack of amateur eggheads then  
Heating up the neighborhood  
With logical experiments taken for pranks

Six of us--my little sister,  
The tall boy with too many freckles and grins,  
Staying the whole summer--the adults called him slow--  
Rhonda Gloria, who already had her pillows  
In a pink two-hook bra, Me I was ten,  
And the other two were just boys from Pine Street

Which is how it happened, being taken for pranks,  
In the upstairs housebath next to my room  
Which had the pure white rugs for visitors  
And the biggest toilet in the house  
With a seat the shape of a cello.

We were up there because Rhonda was roosting.  
So I brought up the question of fire and water,  
That fire burns, and water puts it out.  
Everyone agreed that I was right  
Which led to the question of whether fire  
Would burn on water, and we thought

Using the toilet would be a handy way to find this out  
If we raised the wooden seat and lid to watch.

We bet our roller skates, pros and cons,  
Pulled Rhonda off our research pot  
Before she was ready, made her put her index fingers  
In the spare toilet roll, then went fast  
Unrolling the paper, stuffing it in--  
Freckles in the way as closeup spectator--  
Then lighting it with a match  
From the brass desmeller box mounted on the wall.

In no time the fire jumped above the tank--  
Someone yelled Suffocate, we cowered, we danced--  
Brave Rhonda slammed down the seat and lid  
But it got hotter, worked faster around the sides.  
With little screams we made a junior fire line  
Using the foot-soaking pan and bathroom drinking cup  
For buckets. The seat was chewed thin and black,  
The rugs were soaked and smeared with toilet paper soot

When, bang, my father broke in--  
As in a fire drill we formed a dillydally line,  
Our feet in water, the toilet smoking,  
Poked each other and took turns  
Burning my father's ears



About how Freckles

Didn't mean it

Didn't understand what he was doing

Really didn't mean it

And how we helped,

We came and put the fire out

But Freckles--waiting to participate--

Made the crackerjack argument

By pitching in his eager smile at the end.

## Hollyhock Dolls

We called them  
hollyhock dolls,  
our summer playmates  
we could see at their best,  
like Cinderella, only for a day.

They grew in parts  
we had to hook together  
on towering plants  
that stood in groups  
each with flowers  
that looked like fringed bells,  
turned in all directions  
in position to peal  
but with their clangors caught.

To make a doll  
we waited for the afternoon  
when the bells were open  
wide and shining  
and picked one off  
taking the stem  
preferring pink or rose  
but with the choice

of many other hues,  
and set it upright  
to be the bell skirt  
of the finest ballgown,  
the tiny hairs of the stem  
quaking in the wind,  
an empty neck.

The other part  
needed imagination--  
to select the right bud  
still all green but fat,  
a miniature teaball  
with a crown of plugged-up holes--  
the stem could hitch  
to any hole to make  
the head and neck,  
and other ones for eyes  
and a slanted mouth.

We had no feet  
no Cinderella slippers  
no jewels or hair  
not even arms and legs,  
nor were there any escorts,  
or flutes and horns  
to make a ball.

Our ladies never  
got there anyway--  
by tomorrow  
they would still be  
waiting to depart,  
barely standing,  
bells collapsed,  
their chins dropped  
to the waist.

## The Triumph

Two serene teens, fastidiously casual,  
We pressed our secondhand baby Triumph  
That last two miles toward Mount Airy Lodge,  
One hairpin, one more dash of wine.

The rain never stopped basting the windshield  
And the headlamps made two columns of heat  
Steaming before us into the dawn. We knew  
Of our turns and the push of the incline

From the gauges on the dash, telling separate  
Peevish opinions, and made a game of matching  
The radio against their needles. Just when the radio  
Changed tunes, the rear tire slipped off the pavement.

Catherine, jerking her head back, screamed, pushed  
Her hands against her ears, leaving the wheel to itself.  
Then it came, that final close turn left,  
While we instead rode forward, off the cliff,  
A Triumph in the air, two girls, radio, engine alike.

I watched the plateau and pasture below,  
And in the echo of another scream, I said, O God we've had it.

We barely touched the rocks we floated to, then rode  
The pasture, missing cows, outflanking the fence,

Rode it hard against the crackle of the song, the rain,  
The prongs of passing branches, skipped the narrow iron gate,  
Reamed a tunnel head-on into the slotted grain crypt,  
And, throttled in a flush of corn,  
Our Triumph heaved and died mid-song.

From everywhere white streams of corn  
Poured in our laps, drained to the floorboards,  
Rose up thick and clutched us at the chest--  
Our legs already paralyzed in grain,  
Only our shoulders and heads left out.

We strained like rural mannequins  
Shoved in the storeroom between events--  
Catherine stuck sideways in the seat,  
My head off-balance, tilted toward the dash--

Ladylike, we rode in place, coated in corndust,  
Live dummies caught in our own good luck.

## Bull

He didn't have to move to scare me--  
His shallow breathing huffed out pale tornadoes  
In the chilly air, his eyes turning  
With the black fire of an overpowered lunatic  
Of witless expectations, and each time he snorted,  
I flinched with new surprise.

His outdoor pen, made of hopeless iron poles,  
Could let his head and neck but not his shoulders  
Through to freedom, but with callous pageantry  
He would plunge between the poles and jerk his muzzle  
To a stop, aimed at my face like a great cannon straining  
For the charge. He knew I was no match for him.

I wondered how a cow could bear this reckless Angus--  
The battering, the shock, the weight of a smoldering  
Mass of power humping to his basal music, the bloody  
Hindquarters, the rugged climb--all for a calf.  
But now she gets her Angus through insemination,  
A mere squeeze of the cool syringe outdating the assault.

Though he didn't know it, this bull was scheduled  
On the local sperm bank circuit, to make routine deposits  
Of his distinctive bullsap, the zesty juice of a first-rate

Champion. For all his solid hulk, the real prize was in  
His furry sheath resting in its wrinkles--an old wineskin--  
And the low-slung portly gonads--dark balloons blown tight.

But how could anyone convince this spiteful, wild creature  
To make his delicate donation, especially on command?  
Inside the barn a half-dozen veterinary students  
Were planning The Collection, a solution far more elementary  
Than my imagination. My part, as a visiting student wife,  
Would be to open the chute from the pen into the anteroom

When the bull got hot. The only prop they had was a crude  
Facsimile of the hindquarters of a cow, built into the wall  
At the right height for the hole in the center. Everyone  
Was ready. Standing at the chute, I could see the bull  
In a normal state of turbulence and the inside quarters  
For the show. Into the nearby hallway two students coaxed

A cow, who must have been in heat because the bull got crazy,  
Ramming the poles, rearing his head, making bullish sounds.  
I pulled the chute. He barreled in and struck the fence,  
Thrusting his horn stubs with full-horn force. The cow shied.  
He whirled around, pawing, snorting, whirled again, looked  
Wildly around him, ran forward, stumbled back, hit the fence.

The cow mooed in alarm, tried to run. He did not know  
Where he was, doing his four-legged pantomime, his dance.



Then suddenly the sheath, all its wrinkles uncreased,  
Fell open, and his thousand pounds of frustration  
Were pulled into the longest organ I will ever see,  
A penis polished like a sleek torpedo ready to fire.

Backing up, he turned away from the bridled cow snuffed in  
Her ripest odors, and bashed instead the artificial one  
Closeby, shooting the bull's eye in the oval fortress, while  
At the wall's backside, an edgy student held the precious  
Vial in both hands, collecting many servings in one shot,  
Until the bull backed off panting, finished with his cow.

## Hawked at Sunrise

Living alone on a knob of land  
On Island Lake Road isn't enough.  
There never was an island, and down the road  
The scanty lake is stopped-up by land--a liquid island--  
Trapped at every inflection. The waterside scums,  
Lathers, and at dawn takes on the property of a pungent  
Meat sauce which has lost its slap.

But on the flat side of the woodsy hill which empties  
Into Island Lake on the eastern shore,  
A wild clearing makes a view straight up  
Where I can stretch out on the shaggy ground  
And watch the hawks hunting on the wind,  
Soaring, circling with absent-minded protocol,  
Assorted blasphemes issued in subsiding screams.

I try, but never can, pick out a Red-tail Hawk,  
So detailed in my glossy field guide, unfairly ranked  
With vultures and falcons, that I would have to  
Soar up and join the flight to see those thin white  
Eyerings, the dark bands on the ivory belly, and the  
Liberal tail of chestnut with its pinkish underside  
To be sure I had a Red-tail--and then what would I have?

Before dawn this morning I drive to the top  
Of the woodsy hill, to think--with just a thermos,  
No books, no work--and shut off the engine  
Out of respect for morning, to coast down to the clearing.  
But before I get rolling, I hear ahead of me a hoarse,  
Descending scream and see a massive shape holding down  
A frantic squirrel, his tail pluming up and up.

It is a kill in progress, a hawk, too large to be a male--  
The wings are right, the crown, the fat plumed thighs,  
The eyes circled in white, the broad chestnut tail,  
Her bellyband the dark hem of a marble statue.  
The squirrel scolds immodestly and squirms. I have found  
The solitary hawk on foot, dressed up in riper colors  
And wilder than her lacquered reputation in the book.

She swivels her head to look directly at me, screams  
And lifts up, rodent in tow, wings partly folded  
In slow-motion flight, and hovers above the car--  
I lock the driver door, push harder on the brake--  
Spreads her wings full against the sky. Can she smell  
My fear inside the car? She descends on the hood  
First with her talons, delicately lighting her prey

On the windshield wiper, then settles her swollen breast  
Onto the glass, glares in sideways with her chilly eye,  
Her gleaming psychotic weapon. This is rage, this is war!

Her slotted wings come down like venetian blinds,  
 Clattering, her wingbeats shutting out the light,  
 A multitude of shutters slamming in a storm.  
 Her bill and tongue push raspy cries full volume in my face.

Primitive, she knows that only the glass divides us.  
 Alone, I have no natural defense against this rage.  
 But she has mounted me and the car as a single unit,  
 This unreasonable bird. Even a feathered Heracles  
 Or some crazy bird-brain would not try to take a giant  
 Heap of metal, glass, and wires with a licensed driver,  
 Would not prefer us to a tasty rodent, still alive,

Would not keep up the clatter for such bloodless strangers.  
 She seems to know my thinking, drags her squirrel back  
 On the hood and sits up tall with her head out of view,  
 For a moment an enormous mythical hood ornament  
 Dispatched by some god to convince me I am a lowly rodent  
 Trapped inside, and she a superharpy with a lot of time.  
 But with her new composure, she decides to let me go.

Not out of mercy, but to strategize her game with German<sup>1</sup>  
 Luck and precision, she sails calmly to a shoreline stump,  
 Looks side to side, her aquiline face shifting in the sun,  
 Waiting her turn, and makes no sign of her intentions.

---

<sup>1</sup> German playing-card suit of hawkbells (or bells),  
 analogous to diamonds

The sun is running over the water behind her now,  
Her red tail, less important, blending in. I pour  
A mug of coffee and know I am no longer part of this.

This is her kingdom. She is preoccupied again with wind  
And sky and going home, her lofty attitude inbred.  
She is withdrawn, confident, and does not know I briefly  
Died for this. I get out of the car, still high above her.  
We should have a trace of history between us. I look for  
A turn of crown, a quiet body gesture, a settling wing,  
Some sign of victory, but she is hawklike to the end.

PART THREE

Wild Tobacco

## Assorted Screws

I only needed one screw  
but like other newlyweds  
who had one multipurpose screwdriver

I was a neophyte and bought enough  
to last a lifetime--an infinite selection  
of at least a thousand screws

lying in so many offhand postures  
in the tiny chambers of a glassene storage box.  
I set the box on the parlor floor,

I on my knees before it  
to find the flathead screw I wanted  
and pinched the glossy clasp, smiling

until my thumb and forefinger went flat.  
I thought of vises, awls, and files  
but realized, how silly

that I, a bride many times more refined  
than a cheap plastic box, could not  
simply unlatch it and snatch one screw.

With the floorlamp pulled closer  
and magnifying glass in hand,  
I stretched out across the carpet

on my elbows and studied the box.  
There were filmy strips of clear tape  
across, down, sideways, perhaps a

preventive device, and scraping my nail  
like a razor blade, I pick-pick-picked it off  
in sticky shreds, the box now tacky to touch.

This tricky labor made no difference  
to the clasp. I took pains at  
every angle, upside down, on end,

I pried it, shook it, bent it,  
and, close to the screaming meemies,  
pounded the floor, snorting, shouting--

at the box for making me buy it,  
at the population of screws for commingling--  
shouting, Why won't you open?

I hate you, hate you!  
This thing is jinxed, screw you, you mulish trap,  
and as I shook the box, then put it down,



and yelled, goddammit anyway, close to tears,  
in the sunny doorway of the room  
appeared the mellow bridegroom, unimpassioned--

no bugle, no flag, no male advice.  
He moved toward me and the horrid box,  
his shoes and pants cuffs synchronized,

stopped briefly to raise his foot  
like a giant hammer--high as my chin--  
and in a cocksure wallop

struck down once, smashing my box of screws  
to smithereens, then glided out  
and left me, rescued, in the room alone

with my lifetime heap of liberated screws  
mixed up in countless bits of glassene splinters--  
the pickings from the screwbox made handy by the groom.

## Irene Eats Her Own Brownies

At first it is the sincerity of her nosiness  
That holds us back. The day we move in,  
She stands firmly on her lawn, with just her toes  
Touching our driveway, stands in the sun for hours,  
Stiff enough to be an outdoor wooden sculpture,  
Drying out. We decide she must be taking inventory--  
She eyes the furniture, counts lamps, tilts her head  
To site the labels on our barrels and paper cartons,  
Gasps at the matching oriental rugs.

She never smiles, waves, or brings iced tea  
Like an ordinary neighbor, and so between our grunts  
And stretches, lifting and placing, going in and out,  
We size her up as "lonely and unpopular," my assessment  
Reinforced with a "no wonder" from my husband.  
This is a kind of open stakeout--the woman has no shame.  
Already, we know that we shall have to watch her  
Watching us, even if she doesn't use her toes.  
But perhaps the house itself will shut her out.

The other neighbors warn us that her name is Irene--  
A self-appointed neighborhood detective, who believes  
In searching without a warrant, continuous surveillance,  
And keen investigation until she discovers a crime.

And they are right. We catch her looking from her window  
At our library, her dark little rodent eyes darting,  
Pulsing, focusing. She frisks our furniture and shelves.  
We draw the drapes on her side of our house, in every room,  
And if we open them, her face is waiting there.

It is a new form of indecent exposure she's committing,  
But we must find our own crime. Only if we fall below  
Her standards can we hope to rid ourselves of that face.  
Our only crime is private: a pleasant cleaning method,  
Doing it in the nude. We casually pass through the rooms,  
Two consenting adults with dustrags and a vacuum.  
This crime, of course, is out of the question.  
"Her nose is so busy ..." I say, and my husband finishes  
Me off with " ... that it never needs a single picking."

With our drapes drawn shut, Irene invents a new technique  
Of tapping on our front door every few days with bribes  
Or entry fees--a plate of ribbon candy, airy krispy cakes,  
Gluey puffed rice blocks, and finally, fudge brownies,  
Our favorite. She says she never eats brownies herself,  
Never. We always take her bribes but never let her in.  
My husband, who doesn't budge, is in charge of this.  
She doesn't look at him--only around him--asks questions,  
And laughs at everything he says. By now, we hate her.

Today, when she visits our door with another brownie bribe,  
My husband will not answer. She rings. I shake my head.  
She rings again, staccato, tries the door. She knows  
We are always home when she comes. She bangs.  
My husband has an idea on his face, ready for a trick.  
Irene, now on the sidewalk, is studying our house.  
Yes, she's got the answer, starts off for the back door.  
Like magic, we go into a fast-forward of gestures,  
A pantomime--Irene deserves a proper crime.

In no time we are doing it. The vacuum roaring,  
Clothes scattered in the kitchen, the back door curtain  
Pulled aside. Her face sticks to the window, and we move  
And turn for a full view of all our cleaning secrets.  
Even in our busyness we watch the private eye go AWOL,  
Overjoyed and horrified at her first real case in weeks.  
Our crime is good enough! She jitters backward on the walk,  
Stuffing great chunks of her own forbidden brownies  
Into that gaping hole right under her own big nose.

## Wild Tobacco

Without me

The photograph would not have worked.

I was the frame of reference

To show how tall the grass had grown--

A nine-foot yield from 87 pure Jamaican seeds.

Next to it I looked a modest size

But, standing in the foreground

In a dotty garden hat and apron

Fullface to the camera in the morning sun,

I was dominant.

The picture clearly showed the row of plants

Spread wide against a stand of corn,

Letting in the light between its many pointed fingers,

Leaves joined in fives like hands

But with the thumbs and palms trimmed off,

Waving loosely in all directions,

Stroking a stray corn tassel here and there.

The camera couldn't show in a mere photograph

The chalky resins on the female flowers--

A foretaste of that certain twirl of hardihood

That models the best hash.

Or know the trick of standing in devotion  
 Forward of this rarely tended cornyard chapel  
 Overgrown in ordinary weedy green,  
 And topped by a host of little cockeyed steeples  
 Which open to a filigree so intricate  
 The camera would never spot,  
 In such a crowd of joints and fingers,  
 The flower motes that congregate in clusters  
 When conversion is at hand.

Nor could the photograph contain  
 One puff of evidence about the groundwork:  
 First the decision to grow the seeds from the smokey vial,  
 Then draping the windowsills  
 With damp, rolled paper towels, each embedded  
 With a hand-placed row of seeds,  
 And later tucking their thin sprouting bodies,  
 Paper and all, into the spongy earth  
 Beside the final row of field corn.

The very day of harvest we took the picture,  
 Wanting an extract of our deed, however wild,  
 Then cut and dragged the crop, our piles of outsized weed,  
 Across the lawn to hang upended in the cellar.  
 For processing we found one of our wedding blenders,  
 No good on Grind or Pulverize, on Frappé  
 Could make the same untangled nests reserved for

Gourmet prices. Finally, the clammy green volcano,  
Picked clean of seeds and twigs  
Still overweight at 23 pounds,  
Was put to rest in one-pound visqueen bags,  
Clamped shut and stored unmarked  
In the rec room freezer.

We hung the photograph in the livingroom  
Over the rose brocade easy chair  
In a basic flat-black frame  
Behind an extravagant non-glare glass,  
With the caption WILD TOBACCO at my feet.  
People passed it through the years. To be polite,  
Some noticed it in tours around the room,  
Some asked the time of year, others got as far  
As picking out the corn tassels,  
One thought my apron looked too clean--  
But I was the only part of the picture  
They ever searched for cause.

One viewer hailed me  
That he could see a picture of real substance,  
That my expression hinted I was sitting on a fortune,  
That I looked happy, even sky-high--  
But as a whole, he said, the picture didn't work  
Because the background was just a bank of weeds  
Without me.

Truce With the Husband Who Thinks He Wants Chickens

I have decided to believe you  
About the chickens.  
I went out to scrutinize the dogyard  
And it is large enough, after all,  
To bunk a good two dozen nervous hens;  
So is (I paced it out)  
The space between the dogyard and the house:  
Their presence couldn't possibly pollute  
Our rules of sanitation, for as you said,  
They prefer to track through  
Their own quarters, seasoning their feed.

As for the wind, which you claim usually blows north,  
Undoubtedly it would whisk off the stink and noise.  
The argument that they don't eat much,  
That in return we get the freshest eggs  
Sometimes the fun of double yolks,  
That at the end we get the chicken, too,  
And livers, and those chewy rubber hearts,  
This argument is good.

I agree you have a claim  
To such a simple, zealous enterprise,  
A stable project of so many certain parts,



Your turn at managing a living food supply  
Without experience, raising scads of rations  
For only two prerequisites:  
A modest outlay of commitment and supplies  
And a grin of notice from your wife.

You have, my dear, convinced me.  
For what have I to lose  
When you want all responsibility?  
Yes, I am relieved that you  
Will handle the puzzles of input and output  
Edible and inedible,  
And that you will unfluff your brooders  
When they panic in the night. I even leave to you  
The undiscussed dilemma of roosters.

As for me, I have the same requirements  
I mentioned when we disagreed:  
You know I want no part of pulling combs,  
Cracking a single stringy neck, or tearing feathers,  
Certainly not sawing off those waxy,  
Lizard ankles and toes.  
And I want eggs  
As well-formed, white, and smooth as Krogers,  
Extra large or jumbo  
To maintain my recipes (the ones you like).  
I usually require a dozen at a time.

And I need chicken parts, standard-cut  
Spring fryers, often with  
An extra breast or thigh.

Are you convinced by now  
That I believe you and that we agree?  
Then you should hurry up to activate your plan.  
Perhaps tomorrow? Please trust that I will  
Never interfere no matter what,  
But I'm remembering how soon you take  
Your business trip, and you'll need time  
To hire and train a caretaker  
To substitute for you.

## Leftovers

### I

Two years after the argument  
We still had the physical evidence:  
The fossilized remains of a once-hearty  
Homemade vegetable soup  
Spread widely across the wall  
Above the kitchen table.

My husband did it,  
But I provoked him.  
So even were our contributions  
To the wall that we absolved each other  
Of the cleanup, and so the stain  
Got darker, and the solid pieces--  
Lima skins, pea wrinkles, tomato seeds,  
Potato dabs, celery threads, strings of beef,  
Corn nubbles, gloss of onion, and barley smears--  
Diminished not only from their proper size  
But also in our minds. They became artfully  
Remote, as dried-up specimens,  
From their original pileup on the oval spoon.

The heaving of the soup against the wall,  
Reduced to a mess of picky peccadillos,  
Became our symbol of natural reconciliation

And though we sometimes pointed and laughed at them,  
 They were finally so familiar that we took  
 No further notice--until we decided to sell the house.  
 When I proposed trying sandpaper on the scraps  
 And whitewash as a hasty coverup,  
 My husband discharged a drop-dead look  
 That meant I should remain on standby.  
 He would fix the buyers' curiosity about the wall.

## II

Mrs. van Wijngarden, carrying her white gloves,  
 In her dress whirling with tiny golden rectangles  
 Which turned out to be wooden shoes, had already  
 Poked the carpet, gasped happily at the bathroom,  
 Exclaimed over the snug insulation at the back door,  
 And patted the refrigerator. Now she stood bewildered  
 Before the vegetable soup. "What is this," she asked me,  
 "Some sort of painting?" My husband stepped smoothly  
 Between us. "Well, not exactly," he said, "it's ...  
 More like a painting in relief, actually, in bas relief."  
 He was in his perfect deadpan mode, reverent,  
 No chance of smirking. The sturdy Mrs. van Wijngarden  
 Was now eye to eye with a cluster of tomato seeds.  
 I leaned back against the stove. It was not my painting.

Had she heard of the young modern painter, Angor Veggasupa,  
 Who was our houseguest--who did this in only a week?

No? My husband got her to repeat the name. He told her  
It was a mural relief, where the designs stand out  
From the surface. He got her to touch some tomato seeds.  
"Paint," he said, "was used as well as other substances  
Depending on the subject. This piece of art, for instance,  
Is on a backdrop of beef broth, a hot nutrition waterfall.  
To get the natural color, Angor had to use authentic broth.  
This entire mural is supposed to be an abstract map  
Of a Dutch vegetable garden, planted intermixed--Angor  
Loved the concept of chaos, you know." Agreeable, she nodded.

She studied the dried-up bits of the relief. "So--you mean  
This is made with real vegetables?" He cupped her elbow  
And made a sweeping gesture. "Oh, yes! Most of these  
Are real vegetables but difficult to recognize right off.  
These tomato seeds represent the total tomato, same goes  
For the limas and peas. Here you have some onion, some  
Potato, corn--see what I mean? You need to touch them  
To get the pulse of the artist." She put her index finger  
On a lima skin, felt its wrinkles. He shot a grin at me.  
Then she stepped back. "Oh, no, what are these? They look  
Like squiggly little worms!" He dropped her elbow. "Oh--  
Those ... are just some strings of leftover pot roast."

She scowled. "Pot roast? Pot roast doesn't grow in gardens."  
"Certainly not," he hesitated, "but in abstract work  
The artist has a special license to make his choices ...

We have to make a leap of faith." She scowled again.  
"So where are the carrots? A garden should have carrots."  
He searched for something that could pass as carrots.

Finally, I stepped in. "Mrs. van Wijngarden ... my husband  
Wasn't in on the carrots. Angor is allergic to them."  
She giggled. "Oh, something that simple? No wonder.  
So, what do you think of this painting--really?" she asked.  
I gave her a good smile and said, "We've enjoyed it,  
Every bit, and would have to take it along, even without  
Carrots, if it weren't stuck forever on this wall."  
She looked from me to my husband to the Dutch garden.  
Her blue eyes glowed. "Now that I understand it, I think  
I like it. Do you think Mr. Angor would mind if you signed  
His name on it, just below the beef broth waterfall?"

## The Invitation

Three years ago,  
when I decided  
to come back to you  
as a surprise,  
it took me  
until midnight  
to pack my minimum  
living requirements  
in three cartons.

I couldn't find  
the engraved  
silver locket you gave me  
which I can't open  
without your  
compressed oval face  
twirling to the floor.  
I looked everywhere.

Finally  
I chose only  
the pussycat,  
my grandpa's  
gold watch and chain,

and my bent  
gold wedding band.

Meanwhile the cat,  
more suited  
to survival,  
went off  
the whole night,  
returning dirty  
and joyful at noon.

By then  
you too  
had gone off--  
like the cat--  
on a business trip.  
A good dose  
of timing  
and bad luck.

I dropped the idea  
of arriving intact  
with almost no  
accompaniments.

Instead I found  
in the card shop



a solitary  
unidentifiable  
fuzzy creature  
in the corner  
of a greeting card.

The inside message  
in small letters  
said in red:  
please come home.  
You still live there,  
so this seemed  
the perfect invitation  
for you to send to me.

I put the card  
unsigned, unsealed,  
in its canary envelope,  
then addressed it  
to myself, and wrote  
your return address  
in the lefthand corner,

then placed it  
in a larger envelope  
which I addressed to you,  
and propped it

on the dashboard  
to mail in the morning.

I liked this idea  
because it was clever  
but also plain  
and secret--  
only you and I  
would know  
if it failed.

It has been  
three years  
since the invitation.  
Now I don't know  
if I still  
want  
to come home.

So I ask you:  
why didn't you  
send back  
the invitation  
I never sent to you?

## PART FOUR

### Waving at a Baby

## Letter to the Lord & Taylor Computer

Thank you for the first letter  
I have received from Lord & Taylor  
In three years;  
This is my answer to your questions of May 1:

Three years ago  
When you sent the first bill,  
I convinced the lady in Customer Relations  
That I did not  
Nor would I ever  
Purchase two identical green coats  
In the same hour.  
She made several chummy calls  
To other departments and filled out  
A series of multi-copy forms  
Which we both faithfully signed  
And addressed to you for correction.  
In case you deal with human beings  
In your correction process,  
Her nameplate said M. Longonetti,  
And she had on a teal blue double-breasted suit  
Which shouldn't be too hard to locate.  
Please ask her to verify what she did  
So that you can verify what you did.

Two years ago  
The billing discrepancy  
Was partially resolved.  
You made an entry on my payment  
For one green coat, which was absolutely correct,  
And started accruing service charges on a second one,  
Which I never purchased.  
In the friendly paragraph about paying up  
Which you printed with exclamation points on my bill,  
You asked me to return my credit card  
In the special envelope provided  
But to disregard these instructions  
If payment was already in the mail.  
Unable to follow your instructions, I made  
Instead a short visit to the apologetic Mr. Whitney  
Who activated another series of multi-copy forms  
With the assurance that I should keep the card,  
But not use it since it would confuse you,  
Until the matter was clearly fixed forever.

One year ago  
When I still believed in the ability  
Of humans to control computers,  
I decided to send out some dragon flames  
In hopes of finding a human being  
To sponsor my dilemma and negotiate with you.  
Instead I got a referral to you, from a Mr. Goffard.

Though he sympathized with my nasty letter,  
He felt that the computer would be the only solution now;  
The matter was simply out of his hands.

That is the general history, from my view.  
For specific history, you may want to send out  
A questionnaire among your departments.  
You asked my opinion of how the mistake occurred;  
These are my simple thoughts:

I bought a green coat.  
When the bill was punched up,  
The operator must have hit the repeat button.  
I paid for the coat.  
In posting the payment,  
Your computer program noticed that I had  
Not paid for the second coat.  
Service charges were activated.

I think I would have been better off if

1. I had not gone shopping at all  
or if
2. I had bought two coats.

You asked my opinion on what compromise action  
Could be taken now.

I don't like to compromise, so  
Here are my simple thoughts:

Enclosed is my credit card; I don't want it.  
I used it only once and it did me no good.

Please send a notice of the accrued service charges  
To M. Longonetti, Mr. Whitney, and Mr. Goffard;  
You will find them very helpful.

If you want the coat back  
(The one I bought, not the one I didn't buy)  
It is out of my hands.

Please contact the Salvation Army  
In case it's not too late;  
And, if you find the other coat in your records,  
It would probably have a better future out on the rack.

## Knowing A From B

On Wednesday I had no car  
to travel the metropolis  
(My water pump was pumping water  
out instead instead of in)  
so I got on the first bus that came by  
and quizzed the driver, to find out  
what to do about  
being a bus ignoramus.

He shoved a clump of graphic schedules  
at me and, smiling like the devil himself,  
said, "This should do it, mum."

I sank down in the seat  
and searched for the familiar patterns  
I traveled in the car  
among the dots and diagrams of streets  
I recognized only by name.

The system did not show landmarks,  
weather, moods, or construction schemes--  
the faithful guide my car goes by  
without having to translate  
a bunch of lines from an aerial view



into a network of streets,  
most of which no one wants to go down anyway.  
Clearly, these bus systems are no damn good.

Aha. Finally I found the lines and notations  
for the route I wanted, 121 A or B, covering  
the same ground in opposite directions, a clever idea.  
I could see the advantages, for me, of A over B  
and managed to pull the ding-ding cord just in time  
to debark at the spot where 121-A sets out.  
I hurried to the east side of the street  
since Bus A moves clockwise.

The sign on the bus that stood there idling  
said BIRCH - GORHAM 121-B.  
Below the window with the emergency exit arrows  
slouched a driver, pleasant-looking  
with round cheeks which were puffed out  
even though the man was frowning from age.  
"Excuse me, sir," I said, "are you  
the driver of this bus?"

He made a peevish grunt.  
I moved forward. "Then can you tell me--"  
"Not today." His cheeks raised up,  
somehow attached to his upper lip.

"No, not today?" I asked. (God, what's the matter with this guy?)

"Yes, not today."

I tried again. "No? Not today what?"

He laughed. "I don't drive this bus today."

Aha! "Well, I am wondering if this is really 121-A instead of B like it says. It's in position for the clockwise route, yes?"

"If it says B, then that's what it is, lady."

"Then does the 121-A stop here, too?" Now

I was getting someplace.

"Listen, lady, I told you all I know."

With a hint of style, he drew some midnight sunglasses from his pocket, put them on (two hands) and looked down. The tops of his cheeks turned into sandy plateaus, unmarked and polished like a child's.

It was a stalemate of sorts. We waited separately, he against the faded metal of the bus, I half-sitting on the periwinkle fire hydrant. Some regulars, not checking the sign, boarded the bus.

I looked around--no other busses in sight. It was time, No Bus A. Suddenly, the driver got on the bus and rolled over the sign! It now said GORHAM - BIRCH 121-A.

He squared himself (can you believe this?)  
into the air-ride seat, the whoosh of air  
not unlike the goatish eruption from the bus's brakes.  
Was this a joke? Was this guy crazy?  
I stepped on, knowing I had to retaliate

and dropped each quarter, separated by  
dramatic pauses, into the till, and hissed  
quietly, "You have a rather cheeky attitude, sir,"  
thinking this would either insult or confuse him.  
Instead, he said quite cheerily, "Well, thank you!" .  
and broke out, head back, in a grin  
ample enough to reveal his assorted, gleaming teeth  
and to shift his plateaus well up over his eyes.

No, It is Not Morning

No, it is not morning.

The cuttlefish and octopus have spilled themselves  
Above the surface, their inks mixed in gauzy sacks  
Fumbling above the water. They collapse and rise,  
Leaking inaudibly. Watery cankers chafe  
In the shivers of night air;  
They blot the view of the horizon,  
And at the waterline the spongy ulcer on the hull  
Sags open for the haphazard slobbers  
And dull teeth of the waves.  
That shape of paste, stiff in the tree,  
Must be the weary magpie  
Propped comatose, even to the chalk of her tail;  
She need not practice her tattle before dawn.  
If there were a sow, she would tilt  
At the scaffold of the barn,  
Hefting her snout up from her belly;  
The rooster would hang his wattle under some bush  
Or hold his toes a while longer  
On the lowest shelf of pine.

No, it cannot be morning,  
For the window is not clear of grease stains;  
The sun has not raised herself, gingerly,

To the ledge of light--  
Still swollen from pressures in her dreams--  
First pushing up the brim of her dirty hat,  
Its streamers stretching out  
To draw thin umber tangles in the sky,  
Dragging the clouds for the first curds of sunrise.  
Nor has she turned her hat, exposing one fat cheek,  
One eye turned out, a blotch of faded iodine.  
The scattered shapes of green-gray cotton shrubs  
Are hidden--dull pangs from her own early light.

She has not arrived.  
Far off, only a greasy parasol has flared,  
Its underpinnings poorly lit,  
Its spindly, gun-metal spokes rigid  
As the skeleton of a building.  
No cheek, no eye. No varnish leaks  
Around the fleet of clouds.  
Only her parasol  
Bordered thick in soiled suet,  
The fat which warms and squeezes  
On the kidney bags of sheep.

## Quality, Quality

One low-grade week in early '82  
The kingpins of the company  
Cried: Quality! Quality! We shall have a  
Corporate Exhibition on Quality

And to the managers they issued \$25 each  
To purchase any manufactured product  
Of any quality they could personally defend.  
From these we would fashion a corporate definition  
Of quality--pure pukka quality.

I asked permission to buy more than one item,  
A silly question. They said only the \$25 should stop me  
And the two-day allowance to shop.  
With such dismissal to perform, I made not two or three  
But 19 fussy purchases  
For Quality:

A Stanley Surform Shaver for working wood	\$3.53
One X-acto Knife with two deadly, pointed blades,	1.38
A pair of stacked C-Thru Rulers, 6-inch, 12-inch	.55
And a dispenser of 1200 peewee Hermesetas Sugar Alternative Tablets, a clutch at the bottom.	1.69

Complete with sheath and lifetime guarantee,	
The Diamon Deb Nail Dresser seemed more useful	1.81
Than the tiny soapstone pot with lid I found later.	1.00
To get one stainless steel spoon-straw, I had to	
Buy a set of six and keep five for myself,	1.10
But the antique hand-blown shot glass edged in gold	.50
Was one of a kind. I chose an ecru package of 7	
English Home Repair Needles, with instructions,	.87
A Chinese wooden rice paddle, made in Holland,	1.00
A teal blue melamine cooking spoon from Denmark,	1.25
And some Bangkok coasters in an oiled olive case.	2.00
The solid brass sailboat winch, sold as a keyfob,	
Outweighed its capacity for keys, a dead ringer,	1.04
And four paper items, two for free, made 17:	
A Scotch 3-M Post-It Note Pad	1.28
A two-tone pocket card for red-letter business	-
A vestpocket travel calendar in grey suede	1.63
And a Marlboro Flip-top Box, designed to fold	
Into a box from a single slice of stock,	-
For a flash of beauty, three yards of trim ribbon,	
Chestnut satin, jungle-green rayon grosgrain, and	
Rose embroidered cotton, all thin, all washable.	.99
Last, I found <u>Magic Windows</u> in a closeout sale,	

USA-made in 1875, then in Colombia in 1980,

A revolving picture book,

12 experiences in 6 pages.

4.25

I placed all items in the designated Corporate Project Box

With my Submission Form and curling sales slips,

Then waited in the name of quality for three months--

They had to ratify the contest winners

And tag the products for display, a multiplex task.

But in the end I was cited First in Quality

The only winner with such a quantity of goods.

Pinned to my plastic nametag, I stood in place at my display

And watched the duteous camera team snap closeups

Of the glossy sign beside me:

FIRST AWARD	19 Products	\$25.87
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Judges' Favorite:

Set of 7 English Needles	\$ .87
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heavens, Betsy  
(apologies to e.e. cummings)

heavens Betsy didn't perhaps you listen  
?     (God knows you'  
ve hadIt)

there

's only one way

          according (for a change) NOT to the holyword but  
          to the holymass legis(perilous)

                                  -la-chure (the Body thereon)

:to separate yerSelf from the wh

-ite picket   fence    , theculture, thesociety, the IRS

                                  the speedypharisees

          Fade-in-fadE-out teluh-

                                  phones, sex on Easter (with hat),

earwax

          Tucks

                                  thoseonionsoupruns

(not to mention)

          decisions on toothfloss, softcorn plasters, peanutty

          butters, or the punctiolios of laundrysoap

:to go 7-sevenths to ah-heaven (you won't come back neither)

:slo w ly to rise upthechosenshaft

to heaven-gawd-heaven-peace-heaven-angels-heaven-scent

to cleanze thySelf &

wash clean once forever \*Amen\* your brains

O Decon.taminate, O fill with eternal

(exclusive)knowledge

:there's only one Way to go; you goest

alone Betso (be prepared

to rise to Al,Mi,Tee Heav,un anytime when

you don't expect it, dearie)

and here's the blinger (oo-oo); you will go bareass

naked-no-paraphernalia

:naked

no Revlon, no powders (mind expanding), no BabyBen,

no aftertanlotions, no hairbrush, no Cheerios,

certainly no eyeglasses-umbrellas-tampax

, no NY Times, no nose clips, nightlight, or mirror,

no purse anysize

no salt substitute (eating up there is out)

skin only, no bundleups (5° colder every 1000 feet  
up = for mortals only)

no practice ascension, no launch pad, no coverage  
:no Allow6WeeksForDelivery;SendMoneyToday;Supply  
Limited;PlusShippingandHandling

0 Betsy 0        heaven has real A advantages  
                  you being so f.ing sure

T think of what you get you get no B Burden you get no  
R rules of suburbalife

where you go you will never forget (x!ozbç..Q?2#H<sup>0</sup>%+=G)  
never remember ( )

where you go

the arms of heaven will rock you forever  
forever, anever

0 listen 0 Zesty betsy 0 Zealot  
you will rock, rock always,

rock only,

rock hereafter with peacefulest zeal, tasteous peace  
hereafter heaven's angels' loquacious wings will flap  
on thine agenda and thou shalt have allatonce  
youse own eternal Piece of paradisseo

## Waving at a Baby

### The Decree

The corporation was self-congratulatory.  
It had engaged a guru psychologist  
And two alert, nameless attendants  
To educate ALL MANAGERS AND DIRECTORS  
In an intensive, week-long, retreat seminar  
Hallowed with the handy title INCREASING COMPETENCY  
IN A PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENT,  
Soon nicknamed ICPME among the ranks,  
Pronounced ICK-ME, since the P naturally fell silent.

### Inculcations

The first group of 50 checked in to the Guest House  
Routinely, like executives on another business trip.  
Their assembly room had plush moss-green carpet  
Instead of windows, and a square block of tables  
Draped with ecru cloths, held down by equidistantly placed  
Water urns and glasses, with continuous coffee on tap  
In one corner of the room. Everyone could see everyone--  
Not any telltale closeup expressions, of course,  
But certainly the most extreme expressions could be seen.

The grand schedule began, stingy on sleep and food,  
And the pressure rose until the best-mannered managers

Belched at dinner; dignified executives wept unexpectedly  
Before their enemies. Drill sergeant types sent notes  
To the guru--May we eat lunch earlier today, please?  
But no one retreated at this retreat, except  
The reserved Mr. Pinebay who went haywire by laughing  
Uncontrollably sometime on Wednesday, until three men  
Took him to the hospital, while the other 49 looked on.

### The Assignment

By the end of the week, most executives had practiced  
The art of being confidential and chummy with strangers  
And enemies. The bold got watchful. The shy got obnoxious.  
It was time to go out in pairs on field tests. The guru,  
Who treated tests, profiles, and executives alike,  
Explained the new assignment: Engage one or more strangers  
In a sustained conversation of at least ten minutes,  
Without revealing your true identity or purpose.  
Leave the hotel site. Return in three hours to report.

One woman, in spite of mental and physical exhaustion,  
Dismayed at the indoctrination and false pretenses,  
Thought of herself on a park bench. She would not want  
To be disturbed. The experiment was an invasion of privacy.  
"I can't do this assignment," she said. "It goes against  
The golden rule." The guru snorted, "The golden rule  
Never applies to business, if it applies at all."

So she went to the shopping mall with her partner,  
But they soon separated, not agreeing on approach.

She had been sitting on the stone bench for an hour.  
The Salvation Army man was ringing his bell upsidedown.  
Premature Christmas shopping music jangled in the air--  
An impossible orchestra. Then she noticed a baby,  
Wrapped in blankets almost like a package, the mother  
Asleep on the opposite bench, her wrist draped over the  
Stroller handle. The baby looked, regarded the woman  
From chest to forehead. What a little cherub, she thought.  
Such intelligent eyes. Automatically, the woman smiled.

The baby kept looking straight at her face. Oh look  
At the fuzzy white lamb, she thought. Maybe this kid  
Is a girl. "Hi, sweetiepie," she called softly,  
And waved at it baby-style, with little forward dips.  
The baby looked away, scanned the crowd. The woman  
Felt exhilarated, knowing babies would be forever banned  
From the ICK-ME plan. Babies know how to look away,  
She thought, the way our peerless housecat blinks placidly,  
Then looks to its own view, exempt from duty.

ICK-ME hung like cheap tinsel before her. The Christmas  
Tidings expired in mid-strain. People surged everywhere.  
Far off, she saw her partner interviewing an entire family,  
And it was almost time to leave. She looked over at

The baby once more in order to remember it, smiled again,  
And the little wobbly arm raised up, fingers waving  
Slowly, independently--little ribbons of recognition,  
Stretching and collapsing. The baby did not smile,  
But she felt a toss of joy and hope as she waved back.

### The Report

She took her place at the giant square of tables--  
Knowing that she had not ingested much of the new  
Acculturation. The reports began. There were interviews  
Of a policeman, a laundromat attendant, a funeral director,  
An Italian restaurant owner. Everyone looked beatific.  
A jock-type told exactly how he interviewed a prostitute,  
But no one laughed. The woman's partner introduced each  
Member of the family she snared--on the guru's blackboard.  
Clearly, this was heavy stuff.

The guru prefaced the woman's turn with some remarks  
On compliance, then asked, "Did you complete your interview  
Without breaking the rules?" "Well, not exactly," she said.  
"Not exactly? Rules are rules! Did you do an interview?"  
"Well, not exactly," she tried again. "What did you do?"  
"Well," she said, thinking fast, "I waved at a baby."  
The group broke into sudden, uproarious laughter.  
"You waved at a baby?" the guru repeated.  
The laughter ricocheted in bursts.

"Yes ... and after awhile, the baby waved back."

She could hear people repeat her words before laughing.

Interrupted each time by laughter, she continued her report

In one-line fragments. The guru, caught in his trappings,

Kept silent--identity and purpose of the interview

No longer relevant. Finally, he laughed wildly by mistake,

Disarmed by such effective disobedience with the helpful

Wisdom of an untrained infant. In that instant, the woman,

In awe of her own story, felt sanctimonious as hell.



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