

## The Mister is Away

i

When it is time to put the chickens to bed  
I step into your shoes and walk  
Like a lazy clown, laces trailing,  
Out into the yard. The coopies mock me,  
Dodge left and right, ignore my clapping hands,  
My call, our mutual agreement that they  
Are free until I say they aren't.

In a week you will be home again  
And I will walk like a good wife.  
Until then I will eat at the sink, not wash,  
Drink more than is advisable, perhaps even  
Sleep in the middle of the bed, but still  
Reach toward you for the laying on of heads.

ii

Ulysses screams, the noise huge and urgent  
Enough to send me running to the yard.  
From the tall grass, a hawk bursts upward  
Scattering feathers and seed pods into the air.  
I crouch, examine the body-- too small surely  
To be my rooster. Fragile geranium petals  
Resolve themselves into wattles and comb.  
I straighten the neck, lift the surprising weight,  
Stand guard as snow begins to fall, and run with  
Each hen as it emerges, makes for the coop.

In the roost, the hens cry  
Short, splintered noises—  
I cover my ears as I count them,  
Unable to bear their grieving.  
After supper I gut and rind a cantaloupe,  
Scavenge in the fridge for leftovers,  
A funeral feast of lashings and leavings.  
By the time they have eaten they have  
Almost forgotten, look around in confusion.

That night I dream of the hawk,  
Wake crying for you.

iii

Syd is flying from fence post to  
Tree branch, her mother follows below,  
Plowing through the tiny drifts,  
A wet smudge of feathers trudging in pursuit.

Syd is so white she is  
Invisible in the field of snow.  
She is the only chick her mother  
Has ever hatched.

Syd's mother can't get off the ground,  
Her colour weighs her down,  
Ties her to the earth, a fat  
Black shadow of her daughter.

Syd disappears again in a  
Sudden dwigh of flakes,  
Loses a feather in the air,  
And heads back to the henhouse  
To eat the last of the mash  
Before her mother gets home.

iv

Who made you?  
The Egg made me.  
Who is the Egg?  
The Egg is the alabaster ovoid,  
the package with no corners,  
the Egg is perfection.  
Why did the Egg make you?  
The Egg made me  
so that I might make other eggs.  
Why did the Egg send the cock?  
The Egg sent the cock  
to satisfy the henhouse,  
to teach us all things,  
and to abide with us forever.  
What are your rights  
and your obligations to the Egg?  
My right is the right to eat  
anything and everything,  
and my obligation is to lay an egg  
anywhere and anytime.

What is Purgatory?

Purgatory is a place outside the henhouse,  
where some souls suffer for a time  
before they can go to Heaven.

What is Heaven?

Heaven is the nest.

What is Hell?

Hell is wet straw, an empty bowl,  
a new hen, a visit from the hawk.

What are the Seven Gifts of the Egg?

The Seven Gifts of the Egg are  
Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel,  
Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety,  
and Fear of the Fox.

What are the two great Precepts of Charity?

The two great Precepts of Charity are  
“Thou shalt make room on the roost,” and  
“Thou shalt love the Egg as thyself.”

What are the Three Capital Sins  
and their Contrary Virtues?

The Three Capital Sins are  
Chastity, Temperance and Diligence,  
and their Contrary Virtues are  
Promiscuity, Gluttony and Sloth.

v

Maccabee struts around the property,  
Glad to be the only cock in the yard  
For the first time in his life. He flaps  
His wings and crows a time or two,  
Just to try it out. He sounds fine  
To himself. He stands on tall yellow legs,  
Toenails flashing in the grass.  
Through the kitchen window he looks like  
Butterscotch ice cream topped with cherries.  
From the top of a black spruce he looks like  
Two meaty fillets encased in feathers.  
From the hen house he looks like  
Peace and good order and an occasional  
Burden on the back. From the roots  
Of the grass he looks like a backhoe or  
Icarus plummeting into a sea  
Of blue and white. He crows again.  
The beetle turns back to her aphid—  
*Hungry bird don't cackle when he find a worm.*

vi

She lays an egg and then she eats some grain,  
She takes a dust bath and she has a nap  
She ventures nothing that will tax her brain,  
She lays an egg and then she eats some grain.  
She lives for pleasure and avoids all pain,  
Her head's not made to wear a thinking cap,  
She lays an egg and then she eats some grain,  
She takes a dust bath and she has a nap.

vii

Straight and tight,  
With oiled hinges,  
A clever latch,  
The door you built has  
The only plumb lines on  
My tipsy hen house,  
And when I open it, your love,  
Lies in my heart like an egg  
Hot from the hen.

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Senior Poetry Submission

Robin McGrath  
131 Beachy Cove Rd.  
Portugal Cove, NL  
A1M 2E7  
Tel. 709-895-1098