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Many thanks to my readers, who pulled things together in true K-College last-minute style.

* Michelle Goodwin, Nancy Crump, Anne Okon, Joni Overton, & Margaret Wood
I. Introduction: "You'll have to forgive me; I feel like I'm not all here"

Anna Wickham, excerpt from "The Affinity"

On January 4, 1985, I walked into the Quick Weight Loss Center on S. Westnedge and filled out a form. I remember that amongst the multitude of questions about my medical history, there was one which asked, "Why do you want to lose weight?" I sat and sat, wondering whether I would laugh or cry. What an absurd question. Then I weighed in -- at 285½ pounds.

The last time I was there, I had lost a total of 130 pounds -- the weight of a fairly average-sized woman, who used to live with me inside this skin. The last time I measured myself, I had lost 15 inches around my bust, 15 more around my waist, and 18 from my hips. I have gone from a size 24½ dress to a size 12, and I've also lost one or two shoe sizes, depending on the cut of the shoe. I have twenty pounds left to go, but already I've lost just shy of half of my body weight.

I find myself a celebrity. Nothing I could ever do would elicit this volume of attention. Everybody wants to know how and why and if it hurts and if I'm OK and whether I'm ecstatically happy now. I'm amazed by the interest -- and then I remind myself that the highlight of the magic show was always the part when they cut the woman in half.

II. Garden Variety Woman

Reading from Genesis 3:6

Most of the world suffers from lack of food, yet the great majority of Americans state that they need to lose weight. The proportion is much higher for women. It is true that more women are overweight than men; it is also true that the overwhelming majority of clients in weight loss programs are women. And it is also true that from 25% to 33% of college women suffer with eating disorders -- anorexia or bulimia. If compulsive overeating were added, imagine what the figure would be. Listen to the talk of women -- how often it circles like a vulture around food. Listen to how they talk about food -- with what intense guilt, what guilty intensity. Lately I've been noticing how common metaphors of eating and hunger are in our language, especially in women's poetry. There seems to be only one question to ask: What IS it with women and food?

I don't recall how far along I was in this odyssey of mine when my attention turned suddenly one day to our creation myth, which is nothing more or less than the story of a woman eating something she's been told not to eat. Is it really any wonder that we're obsessed with the pleasure and danger of food, when one bite of one apple generates the whole of human suffering?

Poem: "Forbidden Fruit"
Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "It is in great part the anxiety of being a woman that devastates the feminine body." Like so many other issues in female life, the tragic struggles of women with food are now emerging from the netherworld into the light, where those of us who have wrestled with the food demon all our lives can see that we are not isolated freaks, that there are contexts and reasons for our eating behavior, and answers for us too. Let me mention three reasons at the outset. Susie Orbach's FAT IS A FEMINIST ISSUE is a great starting place. Hilde Bruch's THE GOLDEN CAGE, the first full-length study of anorexia, was illuminating for me, in itself and in my realization, which experts are now confirming, that the profiles of the classic anorexic and the classic compulsive overeater are very close to identical. Kim Chernin's THE OBSESSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE TYRANY OF SLENDERNESS is a beautiful, brilliant book, despite some enflaming blind spots. Her new one, THE HUNGRY HEART, is on my list.

Central themes emerge to help us understand how food functions in female life. Tonight I will talk only about compulsive overeating, my own personal addiction. Suffice it to say that as I understand them, anorexia and bulimia can be seen as variations on the theme, different responses to the same issues.

First of all, the extent to which women have been and are defined by their bodies is so huge that I think most of us take it for granted. We have to stop and really THINK about how much more a woman's BODY matters than a man's -- how powerfully it sells products, how potentially dangerous it is, how tyrannically it dictates the quality of her life. Seeing and hearing about our bodies everywhere, is it any wonder that women are obsessively narcissistic and solipsistic, self-conscious, always looking at themselves, literally or in their minds? Is it any wonder at all that there is no creature so rare as a woman who feels at home in her body?

And what does it mean to be a fat woman in such a culture? A fat man is often an object of pity or ridicule; a fat woman is a monster, believe me.

Reading: from Orbach, Fat is a Feminist Issue, p. 32-33.

Kim Chernin's thesis in her book is that fat women an insult to a patriarchal culture where bigness in women is a threat, and an indictment of a culture which values the mind over the flesh, which is always traditionally represented as female. Well, of course; I always knew the fault was in the culture, not in me -- though that didn't stop me from despising myself for my flesh. But the fact is that this is the world in which we live. And the other significant fact is that, FOR ME, the challenge was not to affirm myself at the size I was, but to figure out why I was the size I was -- what the compulsive eating -- as opposed to healthy eating -- was all about.

Poem: Elinor Wylie, excerpt from "Let No Charitable Hope"

Why should food be so central to women's lives? Think for a moment about the concept of NURTURANCE. The nurture of others has been for centuries the dominant duty of women -- literally, in their cooking and their nursing of children from their own bodies, and also metaphorically, in the careful way they are taught to place others' needs first, to be almost supernaturally attuned to the nuances of others' feelings, to give of themselves to keep others going. Food is symbolic of our relation to others -- and "relation to others" is what the female world is all about.
But wait a minute. If I asked you all to define the primary function of food, you wouldn't call it "something we give to others." You'd say "Food is the substance we need in order to survive." Continuing in the metaphorical vein, then, what we see is a world full of UNFED women, hungry, starving, ravenous women. Compulsive overeating is the expression of this hunger on the part of nurturant women to get fed themselves. It is also often the way emotional need gets diverted in a culture where women are made to think of themselves as too needy, too emotional, too reliant on others for sustenance and sense of self. And then they learn to hate themselves for eating, to hate food itself, our primary human need.

A whole lot of fat women, I'm saying, are internally emaciated. They eat and eat because they are not getting enough. The old saying is true: There IS a thin person trying to get out. But that thin person is a dangerous character -- a hungry, demanding, angry woman.

Poem: "The Famine of Daily Life"


Poem: "Hungry"

I went on my first diet at age five. For the next five years I ate nothing but protein, vegetables, fruit, some starches. No ice cream, no cake except one piece of angel food on my birthday. I didn't know what candy tasted like; I forked over my Halloween bag without a protest. When I think of how I rebelled as a teenager, ballooning outward, I know how easy it would be to blame my mother and the doctor for enforcing such a rigid, unnatural regime on a child. But the problem is that I can't see what else she could have done, seeing as she did that she had a little girl headed for a serious weight problem. It very nearly worked -- at age eleven, I was close to normal size and very healthy and strong. But my relationship to food was absolutely central to my concept of myself. I was Gail-who-can't-eat-this, Gail-who-diets, Gail-who-has-a-weight problem. I wonder, I wonder, if I will ever be anything else in my own mind.

Skip forward now. It is fall quarter, 1984. I have been through thinner phases, but mostly the weight curve goes straight up from age 12 to age 34. Now it is at the point where I am uncomfortable, hideously uncomfortable in my body. Clothes are impossible to buy. I am nearly lame in one ankle. Physically, socially, psychologically life is very very painful. In six months I will turn 35 -- I am middle aged. I enter the Christmas season profoundly depressed -- and I do depression much as Sylvia Plath said she did suicide attempts: "I do it very well./I do it so it feels like hell." It surely did. Just before I left to visit my brother's family in Oregon, I noticed the Quick Weight Loss Center add in the Gazette. Kim Somebody from Kalamazoo had just become their first 100 pound loser.

In Portland, I was sitting in the kitchen across from my nieces, then aged 15 and 17. I hadn't seen them for a while and I was marvelling at how lovely they'd become -- tall and strong and very pretty. Suddenly I see myself: their fat middle-aged aunt. Suddenly I want my life back. I am sickened, panicly. The day I arrive back in Kalamazoo, I call the Quick Weight Loss Center. Somewhere at the back of my mind there is a thought: If I don't do this now, I'm lost. And if I don't do this, I'll kill myself. I cannot live anymore. I want to claim the rest of my life.
IV. The Diet, Phase I: Sweetness and Light (spring/summer, 1985)

Poem: "Garden Variety Diet"

By March, when Marigene Arnold and I met in Mexico, I'd lost 50 pounds. By my 35th birthday in July, I was moving up on 100 pounds, the point at which I believed I was really going to do this. And it was all remarkably easy. The hardest part was the terror during the first week -- about the commitment I'd made and what it would take to fulfill it. I knew, you see, that I couldn't do this secretly; I was going to have to come out. I was going to have to identify myself as somebody with a problem, as alcoholics do at AA meetings. Too much of my social life circles around food and drink for me not to make known what I was doing and radically alter my socializing patterns. The prospect frightened me a lot. But I developed a little mantra that got me through. Every time I thought about obstacles, embarrassments, complications, I said to myself, "There is nothing more important than this. Nothing in the world. There is nothing more important than this."

There is nothing magical about the diet I follow. No drugs, no packaged foods. Any good doctor or clinic would prescribe something similar. The secret is protein/carbohydrate balance. Yes, the calories are very reduced -- 900 for people over 200 pounds, and then down to 700 or 650. But I was not hungry.

Two critical realizations came early. First of all, I realized one day that I thought about the diet as positive rather than negative. That is, I thought about what I WAS choosing to eat, not what I COULDN'T eat. Therefore, the entire venture was like a mission, entailing choice and commitment rather than self-denial. Most women on diets conceive of themselves in terms of what they CAN NOT HAVE. That would have doomed me in a minute. I had spent my whole life consumed by what I could not have; that's the reason, or one of the reasons, that I devoured food -- to fill that emptiness. It was time to think of foods as choices, not compulsions to eat or to deny myself, both equally defeating.

Second, I rapidly learned the difference between the two hungers -- that is, physical hunger, which is located in the stomach and nowhere else, and the other hunger, which seems to lie in the mouth but in fact resides in the head, or the heart, or even between the legs. As I separated the two, I thought deeply about that second hunger, the really big one. I remember that a conversation with Brant Pope helped me understand that hunger clearly for the first time. I had always thought of it vaguely as a desperate, humiliating need -- for love and approval, mostly. Need Monster, I called myself. Brant put it in a different way, though he had no idea at the time that it had anything to do with food. "You'll always want more than other people, Gail," he said. "You're a hundred-watt bulb in a thirty-watt world." It had never really occurred to me to see that other hunger, the Great Hunger for More, as emanating from something strong and positive in me, something creative and intense. I went home and wrote that Wolf poem you just heard, affirming that the problem was not the hunger but the way I had taught myself to try (in vain) to feed it. Like Kafka's Hunger Artist, a reverse image of me, I was only looking for the right food.

The rewards come fast, not only in weight loss. I felt wonderful, full of health and well-being I'd never known. I slept better, and less. My body almost instantly abandoned its traditional mid-afternoon and early-evening slumps. And through the summer I watched someone slowly pulling into focus, someone I'd never seen but liked very much.

Poem: "Terra Nova"
I remember milestones as monumental to me as the Statue of Liberty:

-- Walking. When people ask me about the biggest change, I say "walking." Walking is an entirely different activity. Locomotion seems to me like dancing, something expressive and artful and strong -- and incredibly easy, joyful. You don't PULL yourself any more; you CARRY yourself.

-- And sitting! I'm amazed at how comfortable sitting can be what interesting things one can do with one's legs. Two years ago I would cheerfully have exchanged my Ph.D. for the ability to sit like this, with one leg crossed over the other and then tucked behind it.

-- The day I first wore a shirt TUCKED IN, with nothing covering it.

-- Discovering old--or new and unworn--clothes at the back of closets and knowing they would fit.

-- The day I realized that my thighs didn't rub together when I walked or ran.

-- The day I crossed from size 18 to size 16, meaning that I'd entered the realm of the Normal, where one can buy things at a regular store, something I hadn't done in 20 years.

-- The day I was putting on makeup and realized I saw cheekbones, before the blusher went on. Very shortly after that I decided to cut my hair off so I could see them and my whole face better -- a very symbolic "coming out," which is what I felt my body was doing. In August I drove home to Ann Arbor to show the folks this new person, some 110 pounds lighter. My mother came out to my car, hugged me, stepped back to look, and said softly, "I remember those cheekbones. I saw those when you were ten."

Oh, I thought. Have I been hiding all these years? "Hiding" was to become a very important metaphor in my thinking about the Fat Years.

-- And I remember laughing to myself the day I took both my watches to the jeweler to be shortened, as they were falling off my wrists.

As the summer wore on, my day organized itself around conversations about my diet and my new body. Mostly, the affirmation I felt around the college was wonderful. But just for the record, let me share with you the responses that triggered homicidal fantasies:

1. "I'm so glad you've finally done this; we were all worried about you." Translation: "You were talked about constantly as a problem in our midst, and thank God you're finally living up to our standards like a good girl." Oh, friends, don't you know that it's the good girls of the world who wind up anorexic or overweight as a way of defying the constant expectations?

2. "Great! Now, when are you going to quit smoking?" Translation: "Well, that's one item on the list; tick off another and you'll be very nearly adequate." Response: "The day you lose 100 pounds, we'll talk about what else I have to do to be perfect for you. Meanwhile, got a light?"

3. "But do you FEEL ok?" Translation: "It's very threatening to me to allow you such a complete victory, so whatever you say, I'm determined to be convinced that you're somehow suffering for this."

And there was one response which met not with anger on my part, but with some confusion and ambivalence: "Gail, you're a different person!"

Poem: "A Different Person"
Where is the note of regret coming from in that poem? I didn't plan it. But as summer moved into fall, something changed; the word "losing" began to take on its full significance.

Poem: "The Woman I Lost"

V. The Diet, Phase II: Wearing Thin (fall, 1985/winter, 1986)

Reading: Excerpt from "Alice in Wonderland"

Christmas, '85, was, I'm sorry to report, a lot like Christmas '84. It was the culmination of an autumn where panic, anxiety, and a terrible sense of loss gathered like the leaves.

I suddenly hated — HATED — the new body. It was too thin in some places — amazing but true — and not enough so in others. It was covered with baggy skin (though not nearly as much as you'd expect), for after all, another woman used to live in here with me. I became obsessed with how old I looked, for my face couldn't hide under those unwrinkled layers of fat any longer. Yet, I thought, looking in the mirror, that woman is definitely 35. Bob Dewey told me one day that somebody on the faculty said that his or her main impression was that I'd been a person of indeterminate age before, but now I'd become definite. I was terrified. Definite WHAT?? I yearned desperately for the past, for all the years I wasn't thirty-five, all the years when I didn't get the things other girls and women got, didn't pass through the rituals of growing up female. I felt deprived, frightened, denied -- HUNGRY as ever before.

I had been told that what I would feel was resentment at being treated differently, as getting attention and response I didn't get before, as if I were a different person. But that wasn't the case. What I felt was something else. In January I began talking to a psychologist who specializes in eating disorders. Early in our discussions she said, "What I hear most often from clients who've lost a lot of weight is a terrific sense of loss -- loss of protection."

BINGO.

And then one night, around the same time, I was having dinner with Eleanor Dewey, my surrogate mother. "I know what's wrong with you," she said, leaning across the booth at Holly's Bistro. "You're waiting for your reward, aren't you?

BINGO again. Of course I was. Shit, all my life the message I got was that if only I'd do something about my body, I'd be great. So I'd done it. So where was the Perfect Life? Where was Prince What's His Name? Where were the Wings of Eagles on which I would soar over obstacles and struggles? Where in the hell was my reward??

Instead of accomplishment, I felt loss and failure. Instead of relish in my new life, I felt deprived of some reward. Physically and psychologically I felt exposed, alone, isolated -- unprotected, as Merry had said. Physiologically I did indeed feel the cold much more quickly than I had with all that padding, and emotionally I was feeling chilly too -- shivering inside, withdrawing oddly from people on the outside. I looked around at the trees shedding their leaves, emerging dark and skeletal and exposed against the sky, and I knew just how they felt.
Poem: "Leavings"

And after having fought through several tough plateaus on The Diet, I suddenly hit the Great Plateau, this time psychological as well as physiological. I began to deviate from the Diet more and more, and the weight loss stopped. Panic. I was backsliding. What I'd thought were altered eating habits, a whole new relation to food, were superficial; I was the same old food junkie, and I was doomed. I had expected someone new -- that "different person" everybody else seemed to recognize on sight. Instead, I was just Gail.

Only more so, which is an odd paradox, considering how much less of me there was. "So much less of me to love," I'd say to people, sardonically. It was not as if I were running into new problems; it was as if all the old stuff was emerging, like the tree branches, into high relief, pronounced and clear and unavoidable and stark, unmuffled and unblurred by all that fat.

Around this time two people very dear to me, whom I hadn't seen in a while -- my mother and my friend Diane -- both expressed on the phone a similar fear. Both said, in different language, that they were frightened that they were losing me, that I was going to disappear. I knew just how they felt.

My mother's fear translated into a demand that I see my internist to confirm that this weight loss was not becoming exaggerated. One does such things for one's mother. In the process of examining me and finding me in no danger of anorexia, my doctor also discovered, in my left breast, a fibrocystic density, known to the terrified as "a lump." "It's ironic," she said; "I'm probably able to feel it better because of all the fat tissue you've lost in that area."

Terrific, I thought. What poetic justice: I've lost all this weight in order to find out that I'm dying. I've finally got breasts I want to show off instead of hide, and now they're going to cut one of them off.

One mammogram later, that turned out not to be the case. Sorry, kid; you're going to have to live. "Oh, no, doctor; say it ain't so! How long have I got?" Oh, about sixty years. Better get with it, honey.

What a metaphor that episode was. I was slowly discovering that the weight loss was the beginning of the story, not the resolution. If the weight had been in some sense a protection -- though it certainly doesn't feel that way when you're carrying it around -- then abandoning that physical buffer meant confronting all the things it had kept at bay -- hurt, risk, self-knowledge, commitments of all kinds. I had felt like an open wound and a wandering orphan all my life, but I began to see the ways in which the fat was merely a physical manifestation of hiding, dodging, avoiding, retreating, and protecting myself against life.

Eating had been my way of protecting myself against deprivation, a deep sense of deprivation that I was unable to confront and deal with in another way.

Reading: from Hilde Bruch, "The Golden Cage"

Poem: "Storing Up"

VI. Conclusions: In My End is My Beginning, or, Butterflies are Not Always Free
I wish I had a happier, more conclusive ending for you, but as Alice was feisty enough to tell the supercilious caterpillar, turning into a butterfly isn't exactly a piece of cake.

I do have the lessons to share with you, the knowledge I gained from munching my own little personal apple. Put very simplistically, they are these:

-- Find out what the Hunger really is, and find a way to really feed it if you can, but also be prepared to live with it gurgling away inside you. Don't try either to placate or to stifle it with food or any other substance. Find the right food.

-- Think of what you eat in terms of choice, not compulsion or punishment. Women don't learn to think of their lives in terms of choices; they characteristically avoid choosing or attribute the events of their lives to external forces. To choose is to assert, to make yourself known, to commit, and it's scary, but far less scary in the long run than the alternative. Work toward a redefined relationship with food as the substance necessary to our lives -- our fuel, not our enemy. For the self-denial of unhealthy dieting and the self-indulgence of compulsive overeating are actually identical: they are both punishments of ourselves and ways of avoiding self-affirmation through choosing.

There are still wonderful milestones.

At Thanksgiving my mother suddenly jumped up and ran upstairs and began yanking dresses out of her closet -- beautiful things she couldn't wear. For an hour or so in my old bedroom, we finally played out that wonderful ritual we'd missed twenty years before: the daughter inheriting the mother's clothes. One is a blue Diane von Furstenburg dress that makes me look like Christy Brinkley -- or as close as I'm ever going to get.

At Christmas I was at a party, talking to a friend about the diet, of course, and a stranger, overhearing us, said to me "Why or earth are YOU on a diet?" It's impossible for me to tell you what I felt to realize that someone meeting me now for the first time does NOT immediately define me as someone who needs to be on a diet. There's a little sadness in encounters like this too, oddly enough; for better or worse, the woman I lost was part of me for most of my life, and it seems wrong that people don't know her. Just this week Dan Stewart, our choreographer-in-residence, astonished to hear about my weight loss, said to me, "I thought I was pretty good at judging body type, and when I saw you in class I thought, 'Yeah, classic tall, thin type.'" Who, ME??? Already there is an entire class of students on this campus, the class of 1989, who know a Me I still don't fully identify as Me.

Maybe, the psychologist tells me, this Great Plateau I've been wandering upon this winter is 'adaptive' (her favorite word). Maybe it's my way of getting to know myself at this weight, living in this body a little before doing the last laps of the race.

People ask me constantly if I feel I'm different, and I become speechless. Yes? No? I'm radically different. But it's really just me.
I watch spring struggle for life in Michigan, and it occurs to me how cavalier we are about rebirth; we think it’s so pleasant, so thrilling, so easy. I look around my yard and think how hard things have to fight to be reborn.

Poem: "Season of Naked Things"

Judith Viorst has just written a book about human development whose thesis is that, for the most part, we grow through -- you guessed it -- losing things. The book is called "Necessary Losses." I really want to read it. Maybe the whole secret, for dieters and the rest of us, is to become adept at what poet Elizabeth Bishop calls the Art of Losing.

Poem: Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"
from "The Affinity"

I have to thank God I'm a woman,
For in these ordered days a woman only
Is free to be very hungry, very lonely.

Anna Wickham

from "Let No Charitable Hope"

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
The little nourishment I get.

Elinor Wylie

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for
good, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that
the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took
of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband,
and he ate."

Genesis 3:6
Forbidden Fruit

Why the fruit? Has anybody asked, in all these churlish centuries of asking (which was, of course, the problem to begin with), just why that Finger pointed at that Fruit?

I see some diet doctor in the sky, a balding, genial man of fifty-two, arriving at his anti-fruit conclusion and publishing it on the intercom which piped his pleasant voice into the Garden: "No apples, under any circumstance. When hungry for an apple, try zucchini, try eggplant, cauliflower, lima beans. Tomatoes are all right, though somewhat risky, but apples, rest assured, will do you in, wreak havoc with your ketones, and upset the level of potassium we want.

Believe me." And they did, and so, of course, immediately craved a Granny Smith, had luscious dreams about a Jonathan, and salivated for a Mackintosh.

The Man made do quite readily with salads and lost eight pounds a week without a twinge. The Woman, on the other hand, obsessed upon that scarlet globe, and nothing else would do. By day she circled like a dog beneath the Tree, eying the laden branch; by night two apples hung inside her eyelids; rosy and glowing in some moon's white light.

Until one day—was it despair or weakness, or was it fury, finally, that reached and yanked the god-damned thing down to her mouth? For which capitulation—or assertion—she promised, even as she took the bite, the perfect, succulent, ecstatic bite, to pay and pay in centuries of guilt, atoning for that hungry little crime.
FAT IS A FEMINIST ISSUE...

To be fat means to get into the subway and worry about whether you can fit into the allotted space.

To be fat means to compare yourself to every other woman, looking for the ones whose own fat can make you relax.

To be fat means to be outgoing and jovial to make up for what you think are your deficiencies.

To be fat means to refuse invitations to go to the beach or dancing.

To be fat means to be excluded from contemporary mass culture, from fashion, sports and the outdoor life.

To be fat is to be a constant embarrassment to yourself and your friends.

To be fat is to worry every time a camera is in view.

To be fat means to feel ashamed for existing.

To be fat means having to wait until you are thin to live.

To be fat means to have no needs.

To be fat means to be constantly trying to lose weight.

To be fat means to take care of others' needs.

To be fat means never saying "no."

To be fat means to have an excuse for failure.

To be fat means to be a little different.

To be fat means to wait for the man who will love you despite the fat—the man who will fight through the layers.

To be fat, nowadays, means to be told by women friends that "Men aren't where it's at," even before you have had a chance to know.

Above all, the fat woman wants to hide. Paradoxically her lot in life is to be perpetually noticed.

— Collected by the author, Susie Orbach
The Famine of Daily Life

"Poetry is a defense against the famine of daily life."

Alan Seaburg

The curse is to be one of those for whom there is never enough.

Stranger among those blessed with sufficiency, finding what they need in what is, you wonder and hunger, hunger, sifting through pebble and sand, finding nothing. No one knows you emaciate, fleshy desire wasting to ribs, prey to cold wind and damp and wierd pizza dreams. But your eyes grow huge and burn into the details of the street, siezing upon possibilities in the gutters and the garbage. People hurry past, full of disgust, full of the rank offense of this hunger, to which you have no right in a fat country, a land of blatant plenty.

Gail Griffin
Hungry

When was I not hungry?
When was there not this wolf
howling in the midnight
of my guts, snapping
its jaws, drooling for
all it could not find
to kill and eat?

No prey would satisfy—
no rabbit, no quail,
no terrified sheep,
no lonely hunter with
his ludicrous gun.

Why could I not suck
the whole river to mud?
Why could I not swallow
the lemony moon?
Why could I not gobble
the entire thick soup
of the night, with its
crunchy stars?

Nothing but rabbits, sheep,
stringy stray dogs,
innocuous deer,
ineffectual hunters.
Nothing but this endless
hungry howl.

Gail Griffin
Garden Variety Diet

To all who wish to know the Secret—
to all who want a xerox copy of
the Commandments, the Dietary Laws
for those who would be Chosen People,
here it is. It's really very simple:

I eat a lot of things in fairly
pure form, unadulterated substances,
clear of sauce or salt, mustard
or catsup, simple and distinct.

I eat a lot of fresh things,
thus moving closer to the source,
eliminating intermediaries—
freezers, cans, and the like.

And fruit. I eat a lot of
apples. With every impertinent
sinking of my hard teeth into
that red skin, tearing loose
that tough, sweet flesh, I
lose something, falling
into a wilderness of knowledge.
Terra Nova

Every day I check
the lay of the land, exploring
this strange place the surest way,
the way of the blind, reading
the topography with my fingers.

The face rolls in, over the arch
of cheekbones into shadowy hollows
beneath, apparently ending in
the jaw, like a Cornwall cliff,
so definite and brave.

The sharp hills of shoulders slope
down from the long neck,
rippling out and up,
sure of themselves, along the ridge
of the rocky clavicle.

The breasts, those soft fruit,
sit in my hand. The belly, I see,
is a firm rise between
two sentinel ridges,
the miracle of hipbones.

And the thighs==supple trunks
standing together against the sky,
sturdy landmarks
arrogant of time and winter as
the summer air slips between them.

Wait==I have been here before.
in some dream or previous existence.
I can see it now, what is over
that rise. Surely
this must be home.

8/16/85

[Signature]
A Different Person

I am a different person, so they tell me, and they won't take no for an answer. So

I rummage through my purse seeking a driver's license, a little social security.

I find nothing, yet others seem to know this poor amnesiac. After all, they spot her right away, knowing a different person when they see one. They rush to the door waving, bringing the kids, as if the stranger stepping out of the taxi were some long-lost much-missed cousin, a redhead who laughs a lot and always brings gifts.

No one will miss the fat maiden aunt slipping out the back door, who lived quietly upstairs for years, always helped with the dishes, babysat, never played the radio past midnight, and ate very little, really.

Gail Griffin
The Woman I Lost

"112 pounds—do you realize you've lost a whole person?"

—Melinda

I turned just in time to catch her disappearing around a corner, the edge of her coat, her left heel vanishing. There is no point in pursuit; she is already through a revolving door, heading for the cosmetics. I have seen her before, I think: as I stepped from a subway car she slipped into the one behind it—slight, not a hundred fifteen dripping wet, her face hidden by a headscarf. There is no following her now. But sometime today, in a buzzing street, I will turn suddenly, caught by an image in a store window, next to the bald unnipped mannequin whose haggard eyes scan her detachable hands, and there she'll be, watching me.

Gail Griffin
"Who are YOU?" said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least, I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar, sternly. "Explain yourself!"

"I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."

"I don't see," said the Caterpillar.

"I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," Alice replied, very politely, "for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing."

"It isn't," said the Caterpillar.

"Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet," said Alice; "but when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will some day, you know—and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?"

—From "Alice in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll
Leavings

"Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?"

G.M. Hopkins

"Fallings from us, vanishing . . . ."

Wordsworth

Oh, this rude sweep
of October wind,
rushing the leaves
away from us, down
to the cold street.
What are we becoming?
Nothing but hard black
lines, naked twists of limb
reaching awkward
into a gray sky.
Here we stand, nothing
but our bare selves,
open to all
the winter to come.
Here we stand, relying
only on time and what
sleeps inside us.

10/22/85
Storing Up

"But if there were undefined hours ahead, she experienced a sort of emptiness or discontinuity, threatening and ominous... 'The idea of hunger is that you are not going to be able to get food, you are going to go indefinitely without food, so you have to eat right now.'"

--Hilde Bruch, The Golden Cage

It is not so absurd, this storing up against some personal dearth. Look: why do the squirrels of November get so busy, hurrying, cheeks fat with forage, back to sanctuary, that safe tree?

We fear not what is coming but what may not come--the looming expanse of negative space, the empty field, the empty hour, the unplanned year, the awful stretch of time unbroken by butte or scrub or cabin smoke.

We run, gathering, siezing, saving, pitting the solace of nuts against the dire forecast within, the conviction of January. We drive ourselves before traveller's advisories, speeding home to dinner before the snow.
Season of Naked Things

It's no picnic, this shedding—
wriggling loose, working free
of the old scaley thing
left behind in the grass,
the blades sliding tenderly
across your pale new skin like a knife.
The foolish frantic field mice
run from this slithering shadow.

It's fine to be born winged,
except that you are not
born feathered, but rather
bald, pimply, tufted
with useless fuzz. You cannot see
these gawky elbows getting you
anywhere, so you squirm and chirp,
mouth agape to be fed.

For spring they ought to write
not epithalamia but elegies--
for all discarded skins,
all useless shards of egg,
all cocoons like mummy cases,
all embryonic tombs from which
we rise, dumb butterflies,
speechless and lost as Lazarus.

Gail Griffin
3/86