



RED RIDING HOOD

Many are the deceivers:

The suburban matron,
proper in the supermarket,
list in hand so she won't suddenly fly,
buying her Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food,
meanwhile ascending from earth,
letting her stomach fill up with helium,
letting her arms go loose as kite tails,
getting ready to meet her lover
a mile down Apple Crest Road
in the Congregational Church parking lot.

Two seemingly respectable women
come up to an old Jenny
and show her an envelope
full of money
and promise to share the booty
if she'll give them ten thou
as an act of faith.
Her life savings are under the mattress
covered with rust stains

and counting.

They are as wrinkled as prunes
but negotiable.

The two women take the money and disappear.

Where is the moral?

Not all knives are for
stabbing the exposed belly.

Rock climbs on rock

and it only makes a seashore.

Old Jenny has lost her belief in mattresses
and now she has no wastebasket in which
to keep her youth.

The standup comic
on the "Tonight" show

who imitates the Vice President

and cracks up Johnny Carson

and delays sleep for millions

of bedfellows watching between their feet,

sits his wrist the next morning

in the Algonquin's old-fashioned bathroom,

the razor in his hand like a toothbrush,

wall as anonymous as a urinal,

the shower curtain his slack rubberman audience,

and then the slash

as simple as opening a letter

and the warm blood breaking out like a rose

upon the bathtub with its claw and ball feet.

And I. I too.

Quite collected at cocktail parties,

meanwhile in my head

I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.

The heart, poor fellow,

pounding on his little tin drum

with a faint death beat

The heart, that eyeless beetle,

enormous that Kafka beetle,

running panicked through his maze,

never stopping one foot after the other

one hour after the other

until he gags on an apple

and it's all over.

And I. I too again.

I built a summer house on Cape Ann.

A simple A-frame and this too was

a deception — nothing haunts a new house.

When I moved in with a bathing suit and tea bags

the ocean rumbled like a train backing up

and at each window secrets came in

like gas. My mother, that departed soul,

sat in my Eames chair and reproached me

for losing her keys to the old cottage.

Even in the electric kitchen there was

the smell of a journey. The ocean

was seeping through its frontiers

and laying me out on its wet rails.

The bed was stale with my childhood

and I could not move to another city

where the worthy make a new life.

Long ago

there was a strange deception:
a wolf dressed in frills,
a kind of transvestite.

But I get ahead of my story.

In the beginning

there was just little Red Riding Hood,
so called because her grandmother
made her a red cape and she was never without it.

It was her Linus blanket, besides

it was red, as red as the Swiss flag,

yes it was red, as red as chicken blood.

But more than she loved her riding hood
she loved her grandmother who lived
far from the city in the big wood.

This one day her mother gave her
a basket of wine and cake

to take to her grandmother

because she was ill.

Wine and cake?

Where's the aspirin? The penicillin?

Where's the fruit juice?

Peter Rabbit got camomile tea.

But wine and cake it was.

On her way in the big wood

Red Riding Hood met the wolf.

Good day, Mr. Wolf, she said,

thinking him no more dangerous

than a streetcar or a panhandler.

He asked where she was going

and she obligingly told him.

There among the roots and trunks
with the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss
he planned how to eat them both,

the grandmother an old carrot

and the child a shy budkin

in a red red hood.

He bade her to look at the bloodroot,

the small bunchberry and the dogtooth

and pick some for her grandmother.

And this she did.

Meanwhile he scampered off

to Grandmother's house and ate her up

as quick as a slap.

Then he put on her nightdress and cap
and smuggled down into the bed.

A deceptive fellow.

Red Riding Hood

knocked on the door and entered

with her flowers, her cake, her wine.

Grandmother looked strange,

a dark and hairy disease it seemed.

Oh Grandmother, what big ears you have,

ears, eyes, hands and then the teeth.

The better to eat you with, my dear.

So the wolf gobbled Red Riding Hood down

like a gundrop. Now he was fat.

He appeared to be in his ninth month
and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother
rode like two Jonahs up and down with
his every breath. One pigeon. One partridge.

He was fast asleep,
dreaming in his cap and gown,
wolfless.

Along came a huntsman who heard
the loud contented snores
and knew that was no grandmother.

He opened the door and said,
So it's you, old sinner.

He raised his gun to shoot him
when it occurred to him that maybe
the wolf had eaten up the old lady.

So he took a knife and began cutting open
the sleeping wolf, a kind of caesarian section.

It was a carnal knife that let
Red Riding Hood out like a poppy,
quite alive from the kingdom of the belly.
And grandmother too

still waiting for cakes and wine.
The wolf, they decided, was too mean
to be simply shot so they filled his belly
with large stones and sewed him up.

He was as heavy as a cemetery
and when he woke up and tried to run off
he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight.
Many a deception ends on such a note.

The huntsman and the grandmother and Red Riding
Hood
sat down by his corpse and had a meal of wine and
cake.

Those two remembering
nothing naked and brutal
from that little death,
that little birth,
from their going down
and their lifting up.