

So as not to offend Babette who has served them so long and well, the group concedes to eat and drink the finest offerings of France. Reluctantly. Suspiciously.

One of the delightful word games in the story is the ascetic group's repetitious singing of a paraphrase of Jesus' promise: "Never would you give a stone/ To the child who begs for bread." The biblical text goes on to say that God's gifts surpass our requests.

The movie's irony is that the meal is over before the sisters' eyes are opened to the value and art of the gifts before them. They had asked for ale bread; they had feared they'd been given a scorpion. Instead, they had been served real-turtle soup and *cailles en sarcophage*.

I still foresee days when the gift of words will feel like a curse. On mornings when the labor is hard, I must remember to hold on to the hope of the joy. I must remember that I'm not alone. Annie Dillard reminded me of this in the May 28, 1989 *New York Times Book Review*: "At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace...you search, you break your fists, your back, your brain, and then — and only then — it is handed to you."

Perhaps it's so with all who would redeem the gift they've been given. The struggle to be faithful to that gift is propelled by the hope of joy — whether the gift is in dealing with numbers instead of words, with people perhaps, or with programs and policies. All have their mornings when labor is hard. And all hold that possibility of great joy, when eyes are opened to the value and art of the gifts before them. When the results are worth the cost of bearing the gift.



Praying Hands

At my bedroom door an unarmed guard
stands statue-straight — a nightlight
once Christmas-wrapped in Mother's love.
After dusk I flip the switch and a bulb
hidden in the nest when palm presses palm
shines through parchment-plastic skin
veined like the Mississippi Delta.
Early some mornings when I can't sleep
the steeple-finger hands belong to my mother,
awake all night, weeping for her children,
pleading for our cause.

by Evelyn Bence