

The Theme of the Three Caskets · *William Matthews*

*Men and women are two locked caskets,
each of which contains the key to the other.
Isak Dinesen*

One gold, one silver, one lead: who thinks
this test easy has already flunked.

Or, you have three daughters, two humming-
birds and the youngest, Cordelia, a grackle.

And here's Cinderella, the ash-princess.
Three guesses, three wishes, three strikes and

you're out. You've been practicing for this
for years, jumping rope, counting out,

learning to waltz, games and puzzles,
tests and chores. And work, in which strain

and ease fill and drain the body like air
having its way with the lungs. And now?

Your palms are mossy with sweat.
The more you think the less you understand.

It's your only life you must choose, daily.

* * *

Freud, father of psychoanalysis,
the study of self-deception and survival,
saw the wish-fulfillment in this theme:

that we can choose death and make what we can't
refuse a trophy to self-knowledge, grey,
malleable, dense with low tensile strength

and poisonous in every compound.
And that a vote for death elects love.
If death is the mother of love (Freud wrote

more, and more lovingly, on mothers
than on fathers), she is also the mother
of envy and gossip and spite, and she

loves her children equally. It isn't mom
who folds us finally in her arms,
and it is we who are elected.

* * *

Is love the reward, or the test itself?

That kind of thought speeds our swift lives
along. The August air is stale in

the slack leaves, and a new moon thin
as a fingernail paring tilts orange

and low in the rusty sky, and the city
is thick with trysts and spats,

and the banked blue fires of TV sets,
and the anger and depression that bead

on the body like an acid dew when it's hot.
Tonight it seems that love is what's

missing, the better half. But think
with your body: not to be dead is to be

sexual, vivid, tender and harsh, a riot
of mixed feelings, and able to choose.