**THE PRODUCT**

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1

I’ve been trying to remember life before the product.

It can’t be done. It isn’t very pleasant, anyway.

In this country, when we think, if we think, we think

about the product. The product is our great joint project.

If poetry were still being written in this country,

it would be about the product. Thinking on other subjects

is permitted, for the most part. But who has the time?

What if, as some say, this is the only life we’re given?

2

I take a dollar bill. I slice it down the middle.

I eat one half. The other half I lick and crumple

into a tiny ball. I place it behind my ear.

In the morning, when I wake up, I know it will be gone.

The rest I put in savings. I realize at this rate

it will be a very long time before I can afford

a unit of the product. Still, I’m among the lucky.

There are those who have never even heard about the product.

They can’t even dream about it. ~~What do they dream about?~~

3

Also, of course, there are the thoughts that are forbidden.

But we are very clever. We’ve trained ourselves not to think them.

It is hardly ever necessary these days in our country

to track down and to put under arrest and to punish

anybody because they’ve been thinking non-permitted thoughts.

4

The product is always moving.

The product will not stand still.

Nobody knows what the product is,

though some say they have seen it, lurking by the docks,

or backstage at the awards ceremony. Last year

my favorite network won the award for Best Awards Show.

The ceremony, frankly, really wasn’t very good.

When the product moved from the East Side to the West Side,

politicians trembled. Doctors removed their stethoscopes

and patted at the sweat that had sprouted on their foreheads.

Grandmothers gripped their mugs of bourbon tightly,

whispering to each other in the fragments of Morse code

they remembered from the Cold War’s empty endless afternoons.

5

“What’s going on in this country makes me so upset

that I just feel like I have to go out and, I don’t know,

*buy* something.”

6

Like my father before me, my job is to make

a small part of a machine that they use to make

a machine that they use to make the product. It’s

a copper semi-circle, small enough to fit into

the palm of my hand. I’ve been assured

that the role that it plays in the proper functioning

of the machine that makes the machine that makes

the product is extremely important. I assure

myself. I have trained myself to reassure myself

most efficiently and most effectively, with a minimum

of wasted effort. Somewhere there’s a four-color graph

on which my satisfactory, perhaps even exemplary

progress in this respect is plotted.

7

The ones who track the product, who say where it should go

are handsomely rewarded even though it does not go

where they say it should. Every day, men are dying for

the lack of what is found within the product, or not found

within the product. For the lack of units, or, at times, an excess

of units. Their obituaries make a paper garden

in the financial section of our annual report

As for myself, I don’t know where I will be buried

or whether anybody will report it. ~~I sometimes~~

~~feel I am already being buried.~~ When I was

a boy, and the world was full of promise, my father

used to hit me all the time. It didn’t change the way

I saw things, the fact that the world was full of promise.

I suffered it. That’s what you do. You’re tough. You suck it up.

You go to a room deep inside. You think about the product.

8

Some people who should know better

have said that some are suffering.

But if people are suffering

why aren’t they saying anything?

~~If they are saying something~~

~~why haven’t we heard?~~

9

*Dear Ms. Vanderhaven:*

*lately I’ve become quite concerned about*

*my corporation. It seems sad somehow, listless. When I ask*

*what’s going on it insists that everything is fine,*

*but I trust my intuition. Please tell me what you think*

*I might do. Signed, Concerned About My Corporation*

*in Columbus.*

            Dear Concerned,

It sounds like you have cause to be concerned. Remember,

corporations are just like the rest of us: they need love

and affection, even and especially in those times

when things aren’t going well (have you checked the S&P Index

today?) and it wonders whether it even *deserves*

to be loved. Go to it with open arms, embrace it,

tell it you’ll be there in the good times and the bad,

and most important, *listen*. Listen without judgment.

You’ll see it blossom like a flower. No need to thank me,

                                                Ms. V

10

I was of three minds

like an elevator in which

there are three men with cell phones

talking about the product.

11

My friend bought a box of the product. Is a box

a unit? ~~Why is there no one who will answer this question?~~

He keeps it on a shelf. It comforts him

to know that it is there. In the evenings we go over

to his house and gather all around it. He tells us

that he will never open it. Though someday he might open it.

But only if he needs to. ~~After all,~~ ~~what if he opened it~~

~~and found it disappointing?~~ After all, what if he opened it

and found he was unworthy? What if he realized he had panicked,

acted out of desperation, opened it too soon?

12

Then the hard times came.

Years of trial and tribulation.

Many people died, but the product survived.

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*About "The Product," Troy Jollimore writes:* For further reading: Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel, The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice; , Dennis R. Fox, "The Law Says Corporations Are Persons, But Psychology Knows Better."