

**THE  
MORROW  
PLOTS**

Poems by

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*For Ka*

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*Only what is human can truly be foreign.  
The rest is mixed vegetation . . .*  
—Wisława Szymborska

*The one doubtful tree here  
is the broom*  
—Robert Graves

*Internal Organs of Murdered  
Girl Received at University*  
—Headline, *The Urbana Daily Courier*,  
Friday, April 28, 1922

# The Cast

**George Morrow:**

*Based on the first Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 1876, he established, with Professor of Agriculture Manley Miles, the Morrow Plots, a now-revered series of soil plots upon which agricultural experiments could be conducted. The Plots became a National Historic Landmark in May of 1968.*

**Manley Miles:**

*See: George Morrow*

**Sophia:**

*Greek Goddess of Wisdom*

**Chevreuil:**

*Early 19th-century French chemist said to have invented margarine.*

**Blackall:**

*Based on Clarence H. Blackall, the architect who, in the late 1800s, designed what was later to be dubbed Foellinger Auditorium, the intended nucleus of the University of Illinois.*

**Artie Clarke:**

*Based on Sir Arthur C. Clarke, author of 2001: A Space Odyssey.*

**Kepler:**

*Based on Johannes Kepler, a German astrologer, astronomer, and mathematician who, in the late 1500s–early 1600s, revised the previously-accepted laws of planetary motion.*

**Gert:**

*Based on Gertrude Hanna, a Central Illinois choirgirl who was murdered in 1922.*

**Alice:**

*A dual role: At times the name refers to an imagined version of a major donor to the University of Illinois's Alumni Association; at times the name refers to my sister.*

**Helene:**

*Based on Helene Foellinger, the daughter of an Indiana newspaperman. In 1932, she served as that paper's first female editor. In 1958, she began the Foellinger Foundation, which donated a large sum of money to the renovation of an auditorium on the University of Illinois campus that now bears her name.*

**ONE**

# The Morrow Plots

You sit on the roof  
of the Biology Building, against

such a color green,  
you don't know if it once

was copper, capable of boiling  
or freezing

an egg. The book opening  
to your knees

explodes with border scenes—  
skeletal fish becoming women

with piñata faces.  
When skin is cut

into strips like this, it can,  
from a distance, be a beard,

a chapter about the half-life  
of food. Below you,

one vegetable huddles  
against another, evolving,

these incredible skins  
unchewable, the worm

who finds its way in,  
to fruit.

We must be peeled  
to be eaten, under a roof

to find heat. And the jarred gods  
of reptile and rock,

the way that, in the formaldehyde  
suspension, we are all missing

links. That sound below you  
is the corn talking,

to the cows, the agronomists,  
the piñatas filled

with endless *huitlacoche*.

Up here, you can't tell

exactly who experiments and who  
is experimented on.

When you wake on the roof  
of a biology building, the stars

will be so affectionate  
that you can't muster enough anxiety,

the temperature required  
to boil water, to make more than

half of this life  
astonishing.

# Baphomet

Sophia escaped into corn today  
to venerate wisdom

and the families who eat it  
with holders.

She was chased by four college boys  
who didn't dare jump

the fence, crack the code on the soles  
of her feet. No time

for the emergency callbox,  
the jangle of security.

In the rows, she could hear  
the ocean,

imagine the scallops there, charred  
on their flat tops and bottoms,

soft as wax in the middles. Under  
her tongue, the sponge

of urchin, the orange brine  
and sea vinegar,

the champagne that, by definition,  
is heretical. On our lips,

still the flavors of an idol  
and the human head,

wood gently smoking  
our lives.

In wisdom is this code and worship,  
the word that ends in *ss*. It is,

when spoken, the aperitif of escape,  
the liver of God, the loved thing

that allows us our quickness and the right  
to disappear

from drunk boys in open shirts,  
every superhero

leaping for their lives from a torn breast  
pocket. When we drop

our capes, we can't fly, differentiate  
between what's salt

and what's pepper. Here, all voice  
is not song,

the way the lip strains  
to cover her teeth.

Someone will hear her comfort the stalks  
and mistake it for a night wind

of specific hour, the flavors  
of the Midwest making

boneyards of the sea. The soft give of all  
red meat, the poaching

in fat, sweet cream and paprika.  
We bite to hide

and taste to protect—our fingers  
from burning at the tips,

the wisdom we lose  
to eating.

Can you imagine being punched in the mouth?

# Wildfire in Central Illinois

The blackened Morrow Plots,  
experimental corn, never having  
known shade. The Graduate Library

built underground so as not to cast  
a shadow, this burial  
of books, this shovel

of young minds looking  
everything up—*ichthyology*,  
*perspicacious*, *sex as social*

*construct*, *the origin of the skirt*.

Who, now, will boil us our dinner,  
slather it with butter and salt?  
Yesterday, a woman found

Chevreuil in the stacks, mistook him  
for a pearl. As later reported, this  
is a common thing with French chemists.

He was the first to boil water,  
to write, *the first time you made love*  
*to a woman named Margaret . . .*

Yesterday, three boys took  
off their clothes, ran through  
the sacred fields, cutting themselves

on the silks. They thought, *in our blood  
is a National Historic Landmark, a blow  
to crop science*. Today, they are in jail,

a pair of red boxer shorts still tied  
like a flag to the stalk. An oyster  
to the Parisian . . .

The pirates are buried with the hooks  
and books, their teeth having fallen  
to corn. They blame the fire

on a six-year-old boy whose mother  
insists it was an accident, his first time  
playing with matches. She remembers

the day the Dewey Decimal System  
died, her grandmother praying for corn  
and a mortar, for a book

of matches to clutch her  
in its skinny hand. This literary coffin:  
she wonders if it can still

be eaten, studied. She prays for . . .

Winter is coming and things are burnt,  
a polyp for the kernel,  
a mouth for us all.