Imagine the loneliness

of an old woman.

Imagine the loneliness

of an old woman who calls

the bank's automated voice response machine

to hear

the balance in her checking account
(which is adequate
not more
not less and

not the point).

Imagine and listen:

the machine welcomes her

repeats patiently and politely
when asked
even more than once

and says

thank you for calling.

Listen carefully now
(close your eyes)

it says thank you for calling

it says thank you for calling me
thank you for listening

thank you for being.

e. e. cummings wrote once about loneliness in a leaf falling. I don't think he lived to try automated voice response technology.

Imagine the loneliness

of an old woman who knows

the bank's young people will spend

less than two minutes with her

and then
only if
she has a real problem
such as
a bounced check.

Loneliness isn't listed on the trouble shooting
forms.

Imagine and look:

see her strength:

she's too proud and sensible
to bounce a check every week.

She's not incompetent.

She learns the new ways
when she must.

She knows what buttons to push

to talk with the machine
that welcomes,
repeats,
and says
thank you.

It's odd. She never imagined speaking with a machine by pressing numbered buttons on a telephone. Her nerves and blood carrying messages from her brain to the electrons carrying messages to the computer's brain.

She only lets herself call every other day.

And, at the end,
every time,

the machine says thank you for calling.

—Mary Ann Allison, 1992