

LIBER JONAE

*Had he not become a glorifier
I'd have delayed him in that fish belly
Until the day that all the dead are raised.*
- **Al-Qur'an**, Surah As-Saffat.

CAPUT ONE

Part I.1: PAWNSHOP

I observed proud Nineveh made anew
Its walks re-paved and its parkades restored,
Its shopping malls and factories re-opened,
Its future repaired and put back in place.
Out from the murk into which it had slumped,
That brick ziggurat city came back,
Its fate reassembled, shuffled, re-dealt,
And spread out below my clutched toehold.
Here, inside ever-pulsing intestines,
I beheld intricate marvels take shape
From forms evolution summoned from mud.
I saw soft clumps take on detail
And saw each go to its appointed spot
Until each taxation asset class
Adam had given name in Paradise
Was now, once more, represented here.
And each, as it went, was recorded, assessed,
So that its title never grew obscured,
And so that its worth each quarter was known,
Given current depreciation rates.
Each loose and liquid thing was made firm
So that, should I slumber, it might continue,
So that it might, unwatched, retain value
Until fully dissolved in accrued cost
Or until such day it's disposed for cash.

Memory pushed and non-memory pulled

And little by little it all came back.
The doomed town rose again out of fish.
Its land, buildings and equipment and fixtures,
Its inventories of goods and livestock,
Issued forth in order from a tissue
To whom God had sent, some would say dumped,
A prophet to bear witness and speak sooth.
The town bloomed again within fishguts,
Each section bright with versimilitude,
Articulated and etched with detail,
Each electron perfect and well-defined
Even though composed of mutable fish.
And each part, although nothing in itself,
Was here revealed, in this light, as wonder.
While folding itself up around my perch,
Each new piece, in each of its dimensions,
Was shown to bear a miraculous design
That hid within its folds essence of fish.
I saw what shamans saw caught in ice,
And took lesson from shades that swam the light
And learned how, in brief, an effect is caused.
I learned illusions that one prop achieves,
What one can do with one substance alone,
With one stuff for lipsticks, walls, and forks,
One substance for boots and latrines and trees,
One for furnishings and swimsuit fashions,
One for planets and flowerbeds and thoughts.
I saw what kind of things nature can make,
What pluripotent plasm will produce
From just one versatile molecule.
I saw what variety kitchens create
If given larders filled only with fish.

Nonetheless I withheld applause at this,
And did not, as some would, call it good.
I lacked, I'll admit, affinity with fish,
And thus could not respond as others might,
Should ever they find themselves, as did I,
Stuck in one's gastro-intestinal tract.
There exist, I know, true ichthyophiles,
Who so relish the meat's flavour and grain
They'd willingly perish, extinguished in fish.
I know of saints filled with such compassion
They'll rescue codfish too weak to swim

And nurse them on teas they brewed from dried
herbs,
Proof against gout or disease of the bowel.
I know of some natural philosophers
Filled with such love of mechanical cause
They'll centrifuge a cross section of shark
To isolate its genes for sushi chefs.
I know too of those who demand beauty,
The aesthetes with educated palates,
Their eyes deformed by the need to see scales,
Neurons hungry to see waters lashed.
There's some for whom the figure is sublime
And who so like to see fishforms dart
They'll go forth with nets and capture a few
To populate ponds or indoor tanks
And feed them their spirits in rapturous bits,
A pinch or two daily, scattered about.
And what about anglers who cast their flies
Just to make essence leap into air,
Just to see the flash that transforms all
In that strange, subsequent, chain reaction?
But this is how contagion spreads,
First Midas to Last, in transitive leaps,
Until all are fish and fanciers of fish,
With, of course, one principal exception.
And that's why, friend, it's best to stay shy
Of any who'd recommend his own state,
The proselytizer, the convert to truth.
Consider, oh friend, ad hominem, the source.
Ask each expert witness who comes forth
Just what percent saltwater he is,
What part are minerals, what part fish.
Examine the witness, but not too close.
It's best to keep distant from opened lips
Especially if, as your ear draws near,
They gape wide enough to fit it inside.

The less enthused approach I myself take
May blind appreciation to the merits
That seem to these others so clearly revealed,
May draw an excess attention to flaws
That many overlook in zeal or haste.
Errors of execution, done in gold,
Will not so readily attract an eye
As those done in more unhappy media,

As those done, for instance, upon the goo
You'll find, if you're stuffed there, slicking a
gut.
I wasn't inclined to forgive one fault,
Much less the thousands that crowded my eye,
Much less the entire malformed effect.
It's the flesh, in fact, that puts me off most,
The characteristic smell it distributes,
Be it cooked or raw, be it alive or corpse.
And once put off, once sickened by scent,
The very appearance of fish offends.
I couldn't help note, despite their polish,
These lucid productions still bore stench
That lost no faith with humble beginnings.
Even if inscribed with patterned circuitry,
Even if put together from tiny parts,
These were idols fashioned from clay and slime.
They were foul muck fertilized by lightnings
Until all the gestating hungers there
Were forced to crawl out and mewl praise.
To my eye, to the one eye still there,
They were, in nature, mediocre stuff,
As base as that basis from which they rose.
I little liked too the function they served,
For this craft was meant only to detain,
To paralyze, to teach endless lessons
Of subject and object, both only fish.
Even if it true I too were just fish
I wouldn't, ever, celebrate a cage,
And that was just what this structure was,
A cage that arose and swallowed the prophet
Who'd thought for awhile his Lord had lacked fins.

But what a prophet, to make it this far!
Although not in good shape or best form,
I still possessed some vision, some voice.
I still stood, though now on plastic legs,
Above hapazardly stowed cargo,
Above musical instruments, wind chimes,
Stained glass lampshades, basketball hoops,
Rods and reels, firearms and hockey sticks,
Barbecues, camp stools and steamer trunks,
Ladders, weathervanes and gardening tools.
And these goods were accorded no vanities,
None you see in giant discount stores,

No glass showcases, no spotlights,
And no single product merchandising.
All were as driftwood dropped aside aisles,
Displayed without order, without purpose,
Without much regard for wheelchair width.
And since the Lord abhors halogen bulbs
And track lighting's deemed abomination,
The interior decorator of the fish
Had specified that long fluorescent tubes,
Low in wattage, be fixtured overhead
To shed cool-white footcandles on wealth
An open maw had scooped up and swallowed
And stashed against a postponed redemption.
In this light my green case almost glowed,
And almost managed to emulate hues
Of the gemstones kept locked under glass
With rare coins, wristwatches, postage stamps,
And all those goods best viewed from distance,
Goods easily stolen, easily fenced.

My body, yes, was green, but with some red.
A collar of that colour wrapped my neck,
A symbol, I supposed, of captivity,
The yoke that marks a slave in Nimrod's realm.
It lacked symmetry, balance and contrast,
And did not quite enhance my colour scheme
Or satisfy other aesthetic needs.
The effect was, in fact, superfluous.
It did not serve as cock's insignia
Displayed in those parades that hens attend,
For no females of my kind dwelt near
To find a natty plastic case a lure.
Nor did current demiurge think fit
To take the extra anatomic step
And give his bird the means and need to breed
Or, if idled, employ in self-abuse.
The labour lavished on this replica town
Stopped short, it appeared, at stylized toys.
The children here, it appeared, were half-blind,
Or kept drugged and dim-witted on ritalin,
To overlook so botched an artifice
And let it take part in nursery play.
With this kind of attention to detail
I could only raise thanks to blind chance
That Grand Design had bothered add a head.

Thanks, however, did not quite extend
To those tubes it extruded into legs
Or those crude contours depicting wings.
And no thanks at all were due for the tail
And gratitude balked and gagged on the fact
It hadn't slipped up and skipped that beak.
But no, this collar was just symbolic.
Exotic birds are made meant for the cage,
Meant not for flight and not for long hikes,
Meant to stay put until Judgment Day,
Meant to stare down on the unswept aisles
To which mice come out to prowl at night.

No caged creature accepts his pent state
Without some expression of discontent,
And prophets get more critical than most
And let loose their floods of jeremiads
At even the least of sabbath infractions.
Birds are even more difficult to please
And sometimes throw fits or go berserk
If grains or seeds are spotted out of place.
And yet it's not my style to make a fuss
On niggling issues such as cluttered aisles
Or how downmarket this shop appears,
How filthy and rodent-ridden and dim.
No question can exist my expertise
Would not greatly benefit this dump,
And not just the surefire sales techniques
That God gives servants for prophetic work.
I knew ways to pull gold up from muck
And all the paths to true retail success:
Display ideas, promotional schemes,
Computerized inventory control,
Secret recipes for all-purpose cleansers,
And how to reduce tax with cooked accounts.
Perhaps I might've volunteered advice
If there seemed hope that someone would heed,
But no evidence supported such hope.
Moreover, as God's elect apostle,
It wasn't proper to appear too shrill,
Too obsessive, too fixed on minutiae.
Any captive, living within limits,
Registers protests against local conditions,
But those who suspect God is behind all,
Those not totally suffused in glory,

Tend to focus on matters of policy.
They look at motivation and reasons why,
At contingence, accident and necessity,
At issues of existential management.
My gripe did not pick fault with features
That no cage on earth is ever without.
It was, instead, the very cage itself
That drew my sole, continued complaint.
It wasn't bad food or abusive guards
Or tattooed skinheads, buggery or bugs.
You don't need to leave home for those.
Not your home? Take another look, fool.
No. It was this shop with its barred windows
And aisles piled high with secondhand crap.
Why this? Why here and not elsewhere?
Was an aviary perhaps too apt?
Why not a museum diorama?
What about a city zoo exhibit,
Near the snake pit's peaceful rock terrain
To watch mice go missing one by one?
Why not a game park or bird preserve?
Why not just tag me and let me go,
A homing pigeon under house arrest
That cooes within its hindbrain egg coop?
Let me go from pole to pole on parole,
On those well-known, well-marked flight-paths,
Along guano-caked guide meridians:
I'll not swerve, I'd swear, an inch off course,
Just follow shit beneath, back and forth.
But all requests for changes to venue,
Because never filed or given voice perhaps,
Were routinely ignored, in effect denied.

The pawnbroker, almost always present,
Was seated near the front behind his desk,
Barred windows on right, register on left,
Handguns hung up on a wall behind.
Sometimes, not often, he scowled my way.
He occupied his day with magazines
That taught goddess worship with photographs,
Ancient anecdotes and witless jokes.
From time to time his obese wife was heard
Moving around with thuds in other rooms,
Reverberating floors with heavy step,
Launching clumsy attacks on scraps of food

Rodents had passed over or overlooked.
His wife, it seemed, did not house the goddess,
Although ample enough to fit many,
But had, as house, fallen largely vacant.
Her slabbed flab, robbed of inner creatrix,
Imaged instead a universal glut.

And each day I observed the sullen thieves,
Derelicts, crackheads and prostitutes,
Who stumbled in with boxes filled with goods
And stumbled out again with cash or drugs.
Others came by too, a few per day,
And stalked like graverobbers down the aisles,
Bargain hunters with no concern for past,
For etiologies, old ownerships,
For any memories whatsoever.
No bill of sale that proved clear title
Was ever offered here or ever sought.
There's only one moment in this world,
The now at hand, the current transaction.
They all possessed Nimrod's scouring glance,
The same that pawnbrokers learn to perfect,
The one that scowled, judged, and dismissed or
kept,
That stripped away mass and found the moment
Or found it gone, missing, a waste of time.
These shoppers wanted only value,
And none of them ever evinced a desire
To hold me up to light with fingertips.
If, as seldom, one should pause nearby,
I saw the scorn that lifted mouth corners
And gave bent shape to sounds that came out.

Look, it's little more than an outline.
It's skeletal, just a cartoon parrot,
A scrawny caricature poorly drawn,
A young person's version, a laughingstock,
Not to be brought out abroad in public
Unless concealed from view by paper bag.
It lacks all the necessary features,
The remote wireless network connection,
The phone, internet and highspeed games,
The mouse and keyboard and camera flash,
The fax modem, the cigarette lighter,
Photocopy function, bubblegum dispenser,

Corkscrew, nailfile and hacksaw blade.
The colour clashes with lizardskin boots
And tailfeathers are too retro for words.
The style is too, shall we say, bombastic,
To put it all too, much too, briefly,
Too operatic, too overblown,
Too twiddled, too tweezed, too two bit
And much too much a Babylon thing,
Archaic, out of fashion, obsolete.

Part I.2: INQUISITORS

More discriminating, perhaps, were cops,
Investigators trained to spot a fraud,
Who came by in search of a vile prophet
And the networks of trained killers he led.
Two men entered, one with holstered gun
And hand lifted up with open wallet,
Identification card put on view
At face level and next to a slight smile.
His comrade held toolkit and laptop
And was, evidently, a technician.
Since the card upheld for display was blank,
This meant, as any Ninevite knows,
That these would be secret police officers.

My name is Vince, announced the man with card.
I represent your Civic Inquisition
And bear warrants to search this residence,
Motor vehicle, or place of business,
The lands and outbuildings, records and files,
For any information that may pertain
To present whereabouts of that person
Hereinafter given the name Dhul-Nun,
Any of his would-be associates,
And any works published under that name.

Never heard of him, said the pawnbroker.
Do you have on hand a recent photograph?

Excess zeal already destroyed them all.
After an inspirational pep talk
Delivered one morning to office staff

On all the monstrous acts the man performed
Enraged functionaries shredded them up,
Egged on by the secretarial pool.
Administrative details, however,
Need not concern the general public.
He is wild-eyed, bearded, sackcloth-garbed.
At last report he had only one arm.

What? Do reports vary? You disappoint.
Your instruments of inquiry have grown blunt
If inconsistent witness can be allowed.
An arm shortage is seldom overlooked
Unless of course the crook's an octopus.
I myself have seen no one like that.

And what about those seditious writings?
Has anyone recently come in here
With propaganda to sell or pawn
Of a spiritual or prophetic nature,
With writings bound up as pamphlets or books,
Tapes or disks, audio or video,
Or any kind of a recording device?

No, he said. Nothing like that at all.

Is that not a parrot there, said Vince.
The green plastic toy on the upper shelf,
With just one eye, a diode, present?
Would that not be a recording device,
One that reproduces conversation,
The toylike look notwithstanding?
If so, our visit here has met with luck.
I brought along an expert assistant
Adept in semiconductor mysteries
And wise in ways of software forensics,
In case we need to find concealed data
Or access password protected files
Or crack open encrypted blocks of text
Interleaved among the remote sectors
Found on personal computer hard disks.

We use no computers here, as you see,
Personal or impersonal, not one.
But who is this Dhul-Nun? What's his crime?

He's a false prophet, said Vince, and charged
With practice without license and sacrilege,
Disseminating hate literature,
Impiety, misrepresentation,
Uttering threats, slanders and foul language,
With libel and blasphemy and other crimes.
I omit here many lesser charges,
Traffic violations, parking tickets,
Miscellaneous misdemeanours,
Blunders, coughs, gaffes and mental lapses.
All his teachings have been ordered suppressed,
Sermons, pamphlets and books have been condemned
To be seized, shredded and transformed to ash.
Any reproductions of voice and face
That belong to Dhul-Nun have been ordered
Edited out of public consciousness
In a likewise catastrophic manner.
Those followers not yet in custody
Are commanded to disband and disarm
And undergo a reeducation
To reinstill respect for God and State.
The primary target of this cleansing
Is that false prophet himself, Dhul-Nun.
Orders say he must be put to question,
And not just to confess his many sins,
For there's money missing, a tidy sum
Not even counting the delinquent tax.

The pawnbroker offered no objection
As the technician plucked me off my perch
And brought me down to where on countertop
His open, activated laptop sat.
Under my tailfeathers he found the spot,
An input output jack that allowed
An easy parrot-computer connection.
He plugged in one end of a cable there,
The other end going to the laptop.

The pawnbroker laughed at this process.
Beware the parrot, upended and poked,
If not yet cold and set rigid in death.
You might, in imitation, lose an eye,
And go forward in future half-blinded.
I've heard of the divinations performed
By priests in vestments caked with pigeonshit

That use entrails, giblets or crops of birds
To help demystify clouded futures.
The birds themselves seldom survive the rite
And so, my friend, it comes as no surprise
Their tidings often bear a somber cast.
At last I understand, his end in sight,
Why the thing has always seemed so glum.
And what news of that absent Dhul-Nun
Will this rude augury expose to light?
And have you so closely followed the spoor
That you think you'll locate missing persons
By the rear extraction of thread-like clues,
Intestine-twisted parasitic worms
That dangle out itching invitations?
Or do your harbour a darker suspicion,
That the fugitive himself may hide inside,
Holed up in the cavernous rectal space?
What brought you here, in such close pursuit,
You end up rear-ending a stalled bird
And crawling nose first up the tail pipe?

Please desist with your dim witticisms.
And what was that thud I heard just now?

My wife, replied the pawnbroker, briefly.

Ah, noted Vince, we've found a sore point.

Confiscate her, sir, if you like, he said.
She's most likely, of all suspects here,
To have missing persons concealed inside.
Bring your truck around and entice her in.
Interrogate her at length at headquarters
While someone else hoses out the truck.

We're going from door to door, Vince replied,
To canvass the shops in this part of town.
This is just routine investigation,
But law mandates citizen assistance.
Our warrants grant us widest latitude,
Permit us to leave no stone unturned
In this pursuit of uniform justice.
As you know, no part of proud Nineveh
Is unscrutinized by overseers.
Our prosperity and productivity

Require the continuous supervision
That we, servants of State order, provide.
Surveillance works as benefit for all.
Slight correctives may sometimes be required,
Adjustments to a misaligned component,
To ensure all work together smoothly,
That close, tight teamwork is not betrayed
And universal discipline is maintained.
We provide that too, if necessary:
A touch of lash, a boot tap to the ribs,
An minute or two in the pillory,
Public evisceration now and then.
Only the worst of scum are ungrateful.
And none should begrudge the searchlights we train
Over all spaces, public and private.
Both a good eye and visible target
Are needed for an unerring enforcement.
This stern vigilance therefore extends
Into each alley of each precinct
Into each of the nerves of each person,
Even into a printed circuit board.
These now come equipped by law with chips
That log all the relevant intercourse
And that we may audit as whim demands.

This one is not functioning properly,
Said the technician, quietly, to Vince.

The bird's been somewhat reticent of late.
This parrot, in fact, said the pawnbroker,
Is apparently altogether speechless.

We have ways to make it talk, replied Vince,
Confess withheld secrets without torture,
Without sweet nothings of hypnotism
Or sodium pentothal, truth serum.
A small trickle of current does the trick,
A judicious jolt of juice up the jack...

And this parrot will become your love-slave?
But this, sir, was not stated in advance.
Such exotic pleasures cost you extra.

Regardless of any association
With the elusive Dhul-Nun, Vince remarked,

You are clearly in need of some correction.
Would you like to try, wife alongside,
A second honeymoon in our holding cells?

Why not jail the parrot, while you're at it?
A desperation seems to guide your search.
Surveillance must be less than always claimed
If track is lost of so foul an offender.
And how did this disappearance happen?
Do felons turn to bird and take flight?
Is the press aware of how you've failed?

I think, Vince, said the technician now,
Watching the numbers scroll across his screen,
That voltage spikes and atypical flux
Disorder interface along the bus,
Interfere with prefetch queuing reads
Of associative logic output.
Any data found here will be corrupt,
Without value, of no possible use.
Were it to lay eggs they'd hatch scrambled.
This parrot is nothing but fire hazard,
And it represents, I fear, a dead end.

Very well, said Vince. Let's move on.
To the pawnbroker he said, Watch your step.
You sound like a troublemaker to me,
And troublemakers, sir, in this city,
Are not tolerated for long at all.

Nascent luck had kept my secrets intact
Against bureaucratic interference
And kept the bureaucrats themselves intact.
My fury, once woken, will not abate
Until all around is smoking ruin.
I laughed to see them go swaggering off.
Had they known how close their fate had loomed,
They'd have radioed in wild requests
For backup, for swat teams, for bomb squads,
For army reserve units actified,
For stealth aircraft launched, missiles deployed,
Spin doctors engaged and consultants hired.
Lucky Nineveh! They've deferred their fate
By overlooking heaven's keystone,
The one whose removal brings down all.

It galled, yes, to acquiesce quietly,
To stand without power to do battle
Against violation of my privacy,
To rob myself of well-earned bloodshed,
But future benefit required restraint.
Only a tight control thwarted desire
To go mano a mano, eye to eye,
And annihilate friends and foes alike
In one, glorious self-immolation.
Legend has it that holy men exist
Lodged unrecognized in key locations
Whose very existence maintains the world.
They're mystic stickpins, tacks in the map
By which geography is kept in place,
Each a pole that pulls its surroundings close
And keeps the sky's sudden, twisting suction
From hauling it all off to outer space.
Estimates have varied widely on numbers,
Ranging from forty up to four thousand,
Since who, after all, ever counts them?
They're all gone now, removed, obsolete,
Taken out of service by God himself
Who sent along me as sole replacement,
For I'm more influential, more holy,
Much more powerful, far more advanced.
Those holy men were mere precursors
To the last, most deadly, of all prophets.
I alone now sustain this structure,
And when I go I'll take all this along.
Yet the inquistitors had passed me by.
The fools left me behind to stand and wait,
For we also serve, we who stand and wait,
Some as beacons of truth in darkest times,
Some as doorstops, some as paperweights.
I needed do nothing to spread my light
Except stand around and survey the grounds,
Look around at things while looking good,
Perform my now-ceremonial role
Of good luck piece, charming lucky charm,
Systemic trunk, totemic figurehead.
If not for me, the lightning stroke of luck
That illumines all in this neighbourhood,
All would go unobserved to perdition,
Just erased, never brought back to life
To face leisurely reconsideration.

All these things would husk and blow away
If not for me, sent to see and recollect.
It's a full time job, but the job's mine,
And thus I'd kill them if I ever slept,
If ever I left off looking around,
But sleep I did, every chance I got,
And felt so much better afterwards
Despite the high, consequent death toll;
The life lost, after all, was not mine.

Part I.3: PRESCIENT DREAM

I slept standing up, legs locked akimbo,
Regenerating in standby mode.
My dreams, for most part, weren't noteworthy,
Except for one prescient dream that came
Shortly before my chance to make escape.
Perhaps this dream foretold the future,
And perhaps not, perhaps it was pretense,
Mock prescience sent to goad and confuse;
It was dislikeable enough to be either.
I dreamt of myself, as always my habit,
Not as I once was and not as I am,
But fully, finally evaporated,
As a mere shade of my former fine self,
For this was afterlife, the hereafter,
The nethermost netherworld herein,
The place some call Sheol, some Hell,
And some Hades, easily recognized
By those who have spent any time at all
Sampling the charms of its rugged landscapes,
Its crags and chasms, its alpine vistas.
It's not as bad as many might have thought.
Much is made of torments suffered in Hell
By souls consigned to damnation and flames,
But this is all calumny, falsehood,
Malicious lies designed to discredit,
Spread around perhaps by jealous rivals.
There's no tormented souls, and no flames.
Heavy traffic has had some impact,
Brought more crowds, more noise, more litter,
And put under construction vacant lots
That once were just wind-haunted wilderness,

But overall the place is still unspoilt,
Still offers a relaxing holiday,
And timeshare condos, I understand,
Can still be had at bargain basement rates.
There are many mansions in this resort
With private rooms booked and prepared for guests
Where each is sent to meet his just reward.
The place assigned fits you like a glove,
The perfect match, the right microclimate,
The situation best suited for each.
And my own place in Hell I knew at once,
The same moment I saw it introduced,
A hospital bed with morphine drip,
With eager half-clad nurses on hand
To fetch me snacks and drinks around the clock,
To gush praises as if I'd really done
All of those deeds that I'd left half done
Or undone or never even considered,
For my own unreconstructed view is this:
An undeserved praise is solid profit,
All the more so if it comes unsummoned,
Achieved without the work of prior boast.
Just usher me in and pop me in place.

I grew fond, very fond of that room,
So fond indeed I almost threw fits
When someone came by and spake a name
Meant to compel strict cooperation
From all local or year-round residents.
I won't repeat the name, now or ever.
In Hell the unanswered receives reply
In that season fatted cattle are slain,
At slaughter time when roadside ditches
Fill up, flood and spill over with blood.
Thus the tourists flock there then in droves,
And all will come armed with burning questions
For which only the dead, prophets by choice,
Can satisfy with unadulterated truth.
This tourist who'd conjured my attention
Followed up with queries designed, it seemed,
To chart the course future events would take.
After brief confusion we worked it out,
That I'd predeceased him, I dead, he not,
By countless years, by half an epoch at least,
And was thus unlikely to give much help.

It's true, of course, that my visions still came,
But not the sort you'd share with fellow man,
And not the sort that holds out much hope.
Before he turned away to rush along
To attempt interrogation elsewhere,
To find seers who'd work at closer range,
I brought up a few questions of my own
On futures my death had left curtained off.

Have you heard, I inquired, of one Dhul-Nun?

Dhul-Nun! he replied. His name's well known,
One of our time's most inflammatory,
Hissed as curse, screamed as a battlecry.
Hagiography distorts past persons
Until the truth is lost beyond the glare
That haloes their beatific faces,
Until rumour alone informs vision.
I have heard much said, both good and bad,
Of Dhul-Nun, his character, words and deeds,
But now all the praises have slipped from mind.
However, this won't impede my reply.
Vilifications entertain enough
To spring to mind, to bear repetition.

But that's often the case with men of note.
Please tell me, sir, just what you've heard.

The prophet Dhul-Nun was an angry drunk,
Disputatious, violent and bellicose,
Sent to prison more than once for assault.
A jealous, mean-minded, abusive soul
Led him to stalk, to bully, to beat up
Any woman who ever caught his eye.
Restraining orders gave no protection
Against a will bent on inflicting pain
And a helpless, cringing fear on loved ones.
An estranged girlfriend, tradition informs,
When asked what the holy prophet was like,
Replied, Just like his prophecies, the pig.
In word and deed he offered no quarter
And wanted only to see victims squirm.
Any living creature who met his gaze
Either looked aside or perished at once.
His revelations proved just as brutal,

Just as unrelenting, unforgiving,
As all his interpersonal relations.
He really didn't have a cogent theme,
Any well-articulated message
Or profound thought, or wisdom, or insight.
It was more a point of view, attitude,
More of just a nasty disposition.

But this, sir, I said, is just insult!
What of Dhul-Nun's profound theophanies?

After one drink he'd begin to rant.
His voice would rise as he railed against
Foreigners, dog owners and high taxes,
Against the politicians and sports stars,
Against all the empty parking spaces
The law reserves for handicapped drivers.
After the second drink, prophecy starts,
Vitriol, an undiluted venom.
He wrote and mailed letter after letter
For local weekly newspapers to print
That pointed out those who deserve to die,
And what colour and make of car they'd drive
In case readers saw a chance for a shot,
A chance to put slugs through the windshields
Of cars of that model that stop for lights.
His list of names grew longer each week,
And grew to include those who'd dispute his word,
Who found it lacked the divine force of law,
An unruly utterance, badly composed.
An angel, he claimed, dictated his work,
That all was authorized by God himself,
Despite strangely frequent spelling mistakes
That most angels would never tolerate,
Despite the hatred for dogshit on lawns
That our Lord had never henceforth expressed.

You've never read one Dhul-Nun sermon
If that's how you'd characterize vision
That strips away world and exposes God.

Someone, I'd guess, saved each column inch,
And brought out scissors each week and clipped,
And kept those letters from getting re-pulped.
These were later bound in random order

To form the text of that savage scripture
His movement made its most sacred of books.
It was used to launch jihad, holy war,
An angry backhanded swipe at the world.
To join all you need to do is submit,
Admit to all the prophet's right, you're wrong,
God is great, Satan bad, and mankind,
On a sliding scale, is only so-so,
And only when under a watchful eye,
Only when employed in holy mayhem
Under guidance of God-drunk madmen.
Once you've let the Lord take over,
All other law, they say, falls in place.
Just submit, make yourself one with God
Who both provides spears and flushes the boar,
Who subsumes nervous ticks into his plan
But still distributes his fliers through space
To summon home all the scraps of static,
All the dark materials that snagged on barbs.

You miss, sir, the hidden message beneath,
The approach a lover takes to the beloved.

Don't bother, shade, with eschatology,
With deep mystic or parabolic truth.
It's far too nebulous to stick in thoughts.
Who among us ever remember depths?
Who ever keeps straight which one he is
When immersed in Godhead's shifting meanings?
Is he lover or loved, other or self?
But surface truth alone does not baffle.
It alone stays after headaches depart.
I speak of that surface the faithful see,
Those too hurried to court veiled beauty
And find ways through her layered underwear.

Is this then how prophecy's now taught?

You don't, if you're smart, teach believers much,
And what all the faithful were told is this:
Profess this creed and enter the fold
To receive God's unrestricted license
To hunt down the foolish unbelievers
During that nine month hunting season
God set aside for their lawful slaughter.

And dogs, of course, are always fair game,
And the handicapped drivers, if not slain,
Will first get tickets, and then get towed.
It's best, most found, to just go along.
You really have no option but to join.
Otherwise, those already onside,
Mounted up and wearing the team colours,
Are given permit to spit you with lances,
Rape your wife and enslave your small children,
And cart away all your portable wealth.

I believe I recall a mention made
That some tried to avert this grim fate.
Efforts were made to scotch the holy war
Long before it got so out of hand.

But these efforts must have come too late.
Nineveh had reached prime, and rot was next.
First handfuls, later hordes, turned aside
From wealth's pursuit to put their questing trust
In hands of the born again mystagogues,
Glib and smooth-talking, out for a buck,
Who came from nowhere to supply demand.
Dhul-Nun was one such, the worst of all.
He came into Nineveh and started to talk
And once his seed spilled on a fertile ground
It took root and grew, an invasive vine.
It spread through town like the morning glory,
Entwined itself around companion plants
In so tight an embrace it strangled life
And redecorated gardens it found
Until they grew with uniform bloom.

And what happened to Dhul-Nun in the end?

No one knows, he said. He disappeared.
But holy war continued without pause
Bringing his good news to all the nations.
Large portions of once-civilized realms
Have been thereby returned to desert.

I've inside information on the man
That doesn't quite jibe with what you've
described.
I have formed a far different impression

And believe you err on many key points
And give distorted truth on many more.

But it's what I remember, not what was.
If we knew now what we one day will
Then we'd surely attend more to what is.
Today's wisdom is tomorrow's negligence,
Though, I must say, the opposite too is true,
Tomorrow's wisdom is today's negligence.

Have you heard, I then asked, of a parrot,
An electric parrot of the same era?

You speak, I think, of that sacred relic
Venerated still by the Holy War.
It first enters historical records
At around the time that the prophet flourished
At a murder crime scene in Assyria,
The grisly aftermath to a bloodbath.
A couple, man and woman, were found dead
In a small one bedroom apartment.
The corpses had been hacked and mutilated,
Organs had been removed, possibly eaten,
And wallpapered walls were splattered with gore,
And pools of clotting blood covered carpets.
Despite this no tracks, no footprints,
No fingerprints were anywhere found.
Baffled homicide investigators
Could find no motive and no suspect,
And yet accident seemed so unlikely.
Could two persons, first one, then the next,
Stub a toe, stumble, and then end up
Falling repeatedly on a sharp object
Until disemboweled and flayed to shreds,
Hacked up and possibly partly eaten?
No, that didn't seem to explain things.
Although homicide investigators
Are predisposed to suspect homicide,
They made attempt to keep an open mind.
Was this crime, in fact, a double murder,
Or was it rather murder suicide,
In that order, or suicide murder,
Or even perhaps double suicide,
The end to some strange, tragic romance?
At thought of this last possibility

Detectives only shook their heads and wept
At all the heartrending pathos invoked,
Taking care not to contaminate
With stray tears the crime scene underfoot.
But if, as seemed likely, double murder,
Were they then looking for a double culprit,
Twins or siblings or two perfect strangers?
If so, both had used the same weapon,
A toy bird found abandoned at the scene,
Plastic beaks smeared over with dried blood.
They bagged and tagged this bird as evidence,
A prosecution exhibit at trial
Should ever they happen track down and trap
The perpetrator of such a grave offense.
The bird, they planned, would stand witness,
A mute, blood-caked appeal to jurymen
To hang the fiend who'd so pervert a toy.

I agree, I said. Such monsters should die.
What deity delays the day they're judged?

That day is what prosecutors await.
That day, they trusted, would surely come.
Sins like this cannot go unpunished:
They're predestined to draw retaliation,
Bred like moths to snuff themselves in flame.
And darkness, by nature, seeks to draw sight,
To highlight the lines of decomposed flanks,
To show just a glimpse of its flaking hide.
Devils, sly though they are, leave debris,
Disturb dust, drop fibres, leak semen,
Litter the letters that spell their true names.
And Nineveh, foul cesspool that it is,
Has so much darkness its pavements are slimed,
Clues drift hip deep by piss-stained walls,
And misted evidence discolours air.
If not for guilt loudly spewing out guts
Into each gutter, each cul de sac,
The native background noise of that town
Would not exceed those mumbled confessions
That insects make when dragging broken wings.

Nineveh, then, still stands, still exists?

It's lost a lot of charm, but yes, it stands.

Cities like that will never quite fall.
They slowly sink into the ground instead,
Easing under brickwidth by brickwidth,
In inches per year, clay reclaimed by clay.
Once Nineveh lost its divine support,
It no longer had spine to drive for height
And now would rather relax into slack.
Assur, its god, has grown feeble in mind
Ever since that bath attendant Zu
Stole his power and fled to earth to hide.

A Zu, I've heard, is part man, part bird.
I thought that jet travel wiped out Zus,
A species too stupid quite to realize
You can't copulate with so large a plane
And not end up squashed under the tires
Or sucked through the turbines and atomized
With just a soft whup to mark departure.

No, that's something else, not the Zu.
It's a smallish kind of flightless biped,
A most treacherous pest, by all reports,
That feeds habits by robbing other nests.
Assur must've already lost a lot
Of both mental function and common sense
To give such a creature a trusted post.
As Assur hid glory behind shower curtains
And lathered suds in his armpits and crotch,
The Zu took the chance to rifle his pants
And purloined Assur's Diner Club card,
A fifty, and change of sixty-three cents.
So distraught by this loss has God become
That Nineveh the Holy has hit the skids.
Its streets are prowled by drug-addicted thieves,
By teen prostitutes, armed biker gangs,
And homeless men who sleep in alleyways
And shout obscenities at grey-crazed skies.

Nineveh's state reflects that of its God?

That's it, he said, theology condensed.
He now gives his town little attention.
Once his pride, his treasure, his chosen ground,
It no longer stirs his recognition.
Now God looks down around the Tigris

With just a puzzled expression on his face.
Nowadays Nineveh's football team,
Clumsy rookies and crippled old-timers,
Places a distant last every year.
Let's be honest: the place is just a dump
Occupied by losers, managed by fools.
But that's now. Nineveh still ruled the world
During the days in which the bird appeared.

Which bird's that? I said. Parrot or Zu?

The parrot. The Zu never reappeared.

So, the city's Inquisitors were stymied
By that crime for which the toy was a clue.
Did the killer they sought escape justice?

The killer slipped through the dragnet, it seemed.
None whom detectives found to interview
Fit evidence or lacked an alibi.
This, though, was thought just a setback.
They thought, in time, that they'd find the right
man,
Though some thought justice served just as well,
Further crime deterred, revenge exacted,
If courts and cops didn't make such fuss
That culprits they catch match up with crimes.
Bad luck and guilt are alike, they'd suggest,
So just pick a citizen at random.
String him up without trial, and we're done.

The scapegoat theory, I said to this.
But I know it too well to give it assent.

The days went by, then weeks, then years,
And the heinous murder remained unsolved.
Using modern forensic psychology,
A profiler speculated the crime
Bore the mark of an enraged psychopath,
The work of a deranged nutcase begripped
By acute personality deficit.
This guy, he said, is a real sicko
And published six papers to prove his point,
With tabled data and piecharts attached.
The press dispensed with all close argument

And ran page one the gory photographs
Under the headline "Nineveh Ripper!"
The press knew, on gut instinct alone,
That this was a serial killer at work.
Simple induction soon verified it
After the next unsolved murder occurred.
Every subsequent suspicious death,
Not already linked to someone else,
Was therefore the work of the same monster,
For why compound causes when one will do?
He'd often kill three, four times a day,
Kill once, wait an hour, and kill again.
There were, too, the simultaneous crimes,
One murder up north, another south,
And too far apart to travel by cab.
This wasn't just a serial killer
But worse, far worse, one that's parallel.
What amazed police the most was how
He changed not only the way he appeared
But even the very DNA
He'd leave behind at each new crime scene.
And each one padded statistics further
Until he ranked as leading cause of death
In most parts of Mesopotamia,
Just ahead of old age, brain cancer,
Strangulation of temple prostitutes,
And freak falling brickwork accidents.

Was there no defense against his attack?

None were safe here for none could predict
What kind of victim would attract his lust.
There existed no pattern, no logic,
No correlation to reduce your risk.
He was a modern murder virtuoso,
Master of all modus operandis,
As handy with poison as gas chainsaws,
And endowed with superhuman stamina,
Still killing well into his nineties,
Well after most have buried the hatchet.

What about his first lethal implement?

The toy bird, an electrified parrot,
Remained warehoused in a subbasement

Of the massive brick Ministry of Justice
Until eventually cops sold it off
In an annual evidence clearance sale.
It then passed through the hands of collectors,
As a trophy for the true crime fanatic,
The infamous Ripper's murder weapon
In that first, legendary butchery.
Somewhere along the way jihadi
Came upon it and smashed it into pieces,
Judging it an inducement to idolatry,
It reminding them, somehow, of Dhul-Nun.
This came at a moment in the movement
When his likeness was observed everywhere,
In graffitti and mudstains on walls,
In statuary, in the dolls of children,
In natural formations of stone and cloud,
In faceprints on washcloths, in tea leaves,
In ink blots, in ice cubes in rum ads.
How they could recognize his likeness,
Since its depiction was strictly forbidden,
Is a mystery that no one can explain.
The parrot, now in pieces, was acquired
As a holy relic by the Hierarchs,
As a memento of their founder, the prophet.
And that, I believe, is how matters stand,
The fragments stored away in a shoebox.

Why, if holy, does the toy remain broken?

To piece that relic back together
With model airplane glue squeezed from tubes
Is sin too deadly even to mention
Among the prophet's well-armed proponents.
They won't pause to seek your mitigation,
They won't shirk duty to decapitate,
To remove sin's grinning, offending head.
And yet it's believed to have a mystic force,
This parrot in thirty plastic pieces,
And faithful gather near its box to bask.
Were it not for a power seeping out,
Like water from subterranean springs,
To feed the world's heedless population,
They'd all be dead, just automatons
Stepping through a stiff, pre-set routine.
Or so pilgrims believe, a simple folk.

So no likeness survives of Dhul-Nun?

These are first to go in iconoclasm
Whenever it breaks out among faithful.
The most fervent of God's holy warriors
Take the concept a step or two further
And burn all the copies of sacred texts
On which or in which his name appears,
For no human tongue may profane his name.

It must make worship a difficult task.

They've got themselves completely tongue-tied.
No one may repeat the prophet's teachings.
One may not make these into idols
Nor replicate his holy utterances.
Since words, they would reason, are just signs,
Nothing but a few arbitrary sounds,
To set them out in some pictorial fashion
That represents transcendent entities
Is once again idolatry most foul.
Even a paraphrase is not condoned.
Any thought of God is likewise sin,
Substituting idol for true presence,
And must be banished from mental process.
Think not of prophet, of God, or of book,
They urge themselves, paradox apparent
And yet a face to which the eye is drawn.
The most zealous of these in end become
Almost indistinguishable from heathens
And some are even burned as apostates,
Incorporated with kindling in bonfires,
By those less attentive to consequence,
Those who lift eyebrows, widen nostrils,
Not knowing these traits imitate God.
Their victims stare back, therefore, aghast
As flesh ignites, as searing pain begins,
At seeing those characteristics near,
So eerily close to true reflection.
They are true saints though and never renounce
Perfect adherence to the secular world
Until the last gasping of hot gases
That takes God's image up to God himself.
They climb to upper atmospheres as smoke,

Pulling the ladder up behind as they go.

Part I.4: ARMAND

At last the day arrived that brought Armand
To grasp and pull open the pawnshop's door.
I was, by then, undusted and forgotten,
Locked in rigour, seated on my high shelf
With a price tag manacled to my ankle,
A last insult added to injury.
And the tag's thrice-corrected pencilled price
Charted the long fall in my market value,
The history of my slide into disgrace.
Once the world's foremost visionary,
I was only one step from the landfill,
Shadowed by the rising backhoe bucket.
Even so, I remained proud, defiant,
Secure in the grip of high self-esteem.
I still heard, after all, the djinn's howl,
Dire, composed of fear, born of smokeless fire.
I still saw signatures, the thin threads
With which loose events are bound together.
Although I was cursed, enslaved, paralyzed,
Dejected, unsexed, greatly belittled,
And eyeless on one side, on the right side,
That eye having somewhere dropped off,
I still retained great prophetic powers.
My spirit was broken, will-power sapped,
Batteries almost completely depleted,
But I could still detect a lucky break
Should one wiggle its butt beneath my beak.
The subtle drafts raised by the opened door
Delivered scents, sweet spices of release,
Mixed, of course, with automotive exhaust
And heavy stench of uncollected trash.
Normal parrot nasal sense is enhanced,
Augmented by circuits, filters and chips
Until it picks up one part per billion,
The one particle that's partly benign,
The one that hasn't turned itself away.
Even in my now fallen state I knew
That this entrance meant a chance for escape,
That a means of deliverance was at hand.

And it was hard to say which beady eye
Gleamed with greater desire and greater greed
As Armand picked his way around the shop,
That of the hated pawnbroker, or mine.
We watched, like twin surveillance cameras,
And we saw bent bicycles bypassed,
Unsharpened hand lawnmowers rejected
And stringless electric guitars dismissed.
When he drew near the pawnbroker smiled,
Stubbed out his partly smoked cigarette,
And slipped his pornographic magazine
Under a pile of yellowing newsprint.

Can I help you, sir? the pawnbroker said.

Yes, I'm here shopping for an appliance,
Replied Armand, looking vaguely around.

And what type appliance? said the other.
A hair drier, perhaps? A dishwasher?
An air conditioner or a stereo?
An electric can opener, a blender,
A refrigerator or an intercom,
A golf cart or a cell phone or a fan?

Would you, by any chance, happen to have
A combination clock and radio,
One which, at given times, will turn on
And regale you with soft rock favourites,
Traffic reports, crank-hosted talk shows?
And that's what I'd really like to see,
If you have one at a reasonable price.
I must go away every day to work,
And while I'm away my wife is alone,
And so I need a gift to entertain her.
She wants a colour television set,
One of the new interactive models
With screen as huge as a drive-in theatre,
But flat and sleek, ultra high resolution.
But I can not yet afford such expense.

Clock-radios? I sold my last this morning.
But what about some other appliance?
A toaster, say. What about a toaster?

No, a toaster would soon cease to amuse,
And, besides, she already has a toaster.

But wait! I have the very thing you need,
Said the pawnbroker, suddenly inspired.
A thought had struck, one whose time had come,
And he turned around and his eye caught mine,
My blue eye, the unblinking yogic eye,
The one that had not yet fallen off.
He reached up and brought me down from the shelf.
Here's just the thing: an electric parrot.

And Armand said back, What does it do?
I've never heard of an electric parrot.

It is a personal digital assistant.
Handier than a pocket calculator,
More versatile than a home computer;
Not only can it add, subtract, divide,
And multiply and integrate and solve
Any problem, answer any riddle,
And demystify any mystery,
It can also conduct a conversation.
It speaks unaccented Assyriac,
Using easy-to-understand phrases,
Educator-approved vocabulary ,
Non-toxic metaphors and similes,
And with upbeat examples from real life.
It is a fully interactive device,
It will offer advice, foretell futures,
And narrate the most marvellous of stories,
The most blatant and outrageous of lies.

Upbeat examples? This is a new one.
Pollyanna wanna cracker? I thought.
The pawnbroker was almost as inventive
As the paragon of parrots he described,
But clearly he knew not with whom he dealt.
Prophets will rarely wax optimistic.
Harbingers of doom are rarely upbeat,
Rarely prone to strike a positive note,
Rarely inclined to overlook the kind
Of the self-absorbed self-satisfaction
Found throughout this city's environs.
They will rarely dismiss as minor sin

The propensity for self-destruction
Ninevites elevate to high art.
But I, of course, should know better by now
Than think myself an open book to all.
Not all who raven first scream warning,
Not all who are rabid froth from the mouth,
And not all who strike will first bare fang.
Here, as so often, uncommon birds
Endure mistaken identification.
It wasn't long after I awoke here,
Here among the heedless, the undisgorged,
That I heard the pawnbroker give his wife
An appraisal of my provenance and value.

The bird is just a free giveaway toy,
He explained as he touched up my paintjob
With green and gray felt tip marker pens,
From a corporation marketing campaign.
There's a little ten cent chip in there.
They're only programmed for a few lines,
Probably just a promotional jingle,
But it might be a collectible some day.

I did not make haste to correct the man,
Although correction is my raison d'etre.
I, who have corrected an entire nation,
Who have erased and rewritten the future,
Who have wearied heaven with acid complaints,
Who have railed down the supermarket aisles
For hour after hour, day after day,
Against overpriced tomatoes and fruit,
Against cashiers who short-change you a dime,
Against data-mining loyalty cards,
I, who God made spring-loaded to pounce,
Bit my tongue and let error slip by.
From that day forward I sat there mute,
Never speaking one word to my captor,
Except for once or twice to blurt a curse
Or to rasp out a static-scratched cackle.
And he had no way of knowing that the lies
He delivered so earnestly to Armand
Possessed an unintended accuracy.
And why should I do him any favours
By showing him those meanings that elude him?
Let those with eyes see and with ears hear.

All others, blind and deaf, can just rot
Or hire, from yellow pages, an exegete.

It looks like a cheap plastic toy bird
That someone tried to flush down the john.
Are you telling me it can talk? said Armand.

It has a holographic memory bank
Of virtually infinite capacity,
And will never tell the same story twice.
It is completely portable, without wires,
Operating from two small batteries
That need be replaced only once a year.
It's entirely encased in sturdy plastic,
Stain proof, shock proof, dishwasher safe.
When new it ordinarily retails
For ninety-nine ninety-five plus tax.
For the instruction books in three languages,
Two almost new penlight batteries,
A handsome leatherette traveling case,
And of course the electric parrot itself,
I will ask only ten squinting quinties.

What? Ten gold coins for a mere parrot?

The pawnbroker now turned my current on.
Thus alerted, my dormant power surged,
Flooded deadened circuits with hornet hum,
And the hive's pent-up rage rose from sleep,
Moved from standby mode to active flight
And swarmed forth in stinging counter-attack.

A mere parrot, I cried, a mere parrot?
My illustrious lineage, mere human,
Should be plain from the heraldry of my plumage.
Am I not an egg of great Harifarman,
Of whom you'll almost certainly have heard?
Was not my hatching an auspicious occasion
Celebrated in the astral altitudes
By an unprecedented full conjunction
Of Saturn and the star Beta Orionis?

Well, you've got me there, remarked Armand.
You never encounter on most store shelves
Such a strange and ungainly invention.

And I myself could not explain my speech.
What circuit dreamt these memories up?
Fictions like these only invite scorn,
Bemuse others a bit before they turn
And dive into some more likely lie.
However, once started, I couldn't stop.

Being wise to portents displayed above,
Parrot flocks arrived from as far afield
As Cathay to the east and Spain to the west,
As Kilimanjaro to the south,
And to the north Greenland's verdant pastures,
But to witness my beak emerge from the shell.
When the momentous event in fact occurred,
The very angels in heaven did shudder
And did squeeze tight their long-lashed eyelids
Against the triumphant screeches that arose
From the huge multitude on hand.
A bodhisattva countless leagues distant
Woke from parinirvana and came
By a mystical self-telekinesis
To find what it was that had disturbed him
From the snooze of supreme realization.
Upon arriving at my treetop nest,
And upon seeing me, wet and featherless,
Discarded eggshell shards underneath,
Pronounced what most birds believe to be
A brief but beautifully sublime blessing
In an unintelligible foreign tongue.

But what's a bodhisattva? said Armand.

It is, I said, a legendary beast
Now extinct from this planet's risky climes,
Described in Pliny's Natural History
Where the exaggerated claim is made
That even an immature bodhisattva
Can weigh up to seventy metric tons.
But much of what we know of this creature
Derives from a Tibetan medical tract
That bears the quaint title, in translation,
The Bodhisattva's Great Cosmic Stupa
And Circumambulatory Consciousness,
With the subtitle, Statistical Studies

And Analyses of the Principle Effects
Of Random Subcortical Lesions in Cats.
Most of this tract is now, sadly, lost,
Due to a certain Doctor Fitzgibbons,
Full professor of moral philosophy
At the Nineveh State University.
He expunged large parts of the ancient text
Due to poor diction and scrambled grammar,
Being under the odd, mistaken view
The whole tract was written in Urgo-Turk.

I begin to perceive, interrupted Armand,
That you're truly no ordinary bird.
Please pardon my thoughtless and hasty tongue.
It often takes advantage of my absence
To entertain itself in random walks.
However, you'll not fail to appreciate
It's only with greatest respect I voice
Despair at the price this merchant demands.

I'm a bargain, I said, at any price.
What clock-radio can rival my power?
In addition to other accomplishments,
I'm an AM, FM, shortwave,
Police and citizen's band, marine band,
One man band radio receiver,
And there's no frequency that's beyond me,
For none alive has keener ears than I.
I hear the flat crackle of comet tails,
The hydrogen whisperings of distant suns,
The continual hiss from the collision
Of two dim galaxies in Cygnus A.
I'm more farseeing than Finn MacCool,
The Irish thumbsucker and finlicker,
For I too have eaten forbidden fish,
Or it ate me, as I now recollect,
The same thing in the end, inside out.
There's no insider more inside,
No privileged observer more privy,
No prophet more profitable than me!
I'm worth more than thirty other birds
Rolled up into one, feathers and all,
Stewed for hours until the flavours combine.
And if it's music you want, a songbird,
I outwarble them all, in pairs or flocks,

Out-sing nightingales and larks alike,
And do all requests however obscure,
All the golden oldies of Babylon,
The Nabucco and Semiramide,
Do all parts myself in counterpoint
Providing synthesized orchestration
With built-in baritone flugelhorn.
But it's true that I am, I must admit,
Not the most trustworthy of time-pieces.
Yet how can you hesitate at the price?
This, my friend, is the deal of a lifetime
And if you can't afford to snatch it up,
Your finances clearly need some guidance.
Luckily, I'm a financial consultant,
An investment counsellor of first water.
Human wisdom, you know, isn't confirmed,
Until threescore and ten years have passed,
And so none are known to beat the market
Until too late, until assets sell,
Until estates finally liquidate.
But alpha like mine is beyond compare,
It brings unholy returns in just days.
Buying me is like buying good luck.
Once you've paid the price for this service,
And filled out a two page questionnaire
To establish your taxation parameters,
Client aversion to residual risk,
And beneficiary or next of kin,
I will parlay your miserable pittance
Into a fortune so incredibly huge
It will maintain twenty generations
Of chinless parasites in polo ponies,
High-powered sports cars, personal chefs,
And solid gold knickknacks for the mansion.
And here's a tip I let you have for free:
Never try to employ market timing
In making any investment decision.
If you were to buy on the nine days
The stock market reached its all-time highs
And sell again on all-time low days,
Research shows that you would lose a bundle.

Why would anyone do that? said Armand.

Because they're amateurs and complete fools,

And it's just the kind of stunt they'd pull
In the absence of my professional guidance.
And here's another tip, again for free,
Never put your cash in mutual funds.
It's as bad as playing the slot machines,
The house percentage is always too high.
In the end your investment dwindles away.

I admit I'm not a fiscal wizard,
Said Armand. I try to manage money,
But somehow it just slowly vanishes.

And that, I remarked, is an excellent point,
Raising one of the age-old conundrums.
Where, we might ask, has all the money gone?
Who among us has not dug in pockets
For absent coins, opened empty wallets
Or up-ended purses for missing bills?
Our cash, without consent, without knowledge,
Without any kind of fond farewell,
Leaves us bound on some mysterious errand.
It works, we know, for greater glory of God,
But just exactly what is it doing,
For what future benefit does it lay plans
And rearrange affairs in such a way
That rich get richer and poor get squat?
Who has not audited his own accounts
Looking for clues to that destination
For which debits have made quick departure?
It's as if each is silver-tipped dart,
A sperm that scents remembered counterpart,
A quivering, north-inclined steel needle.
Money can sense what human minds cannot.
Its archer eye aligns with arrow shaft
On something small that steps with stealth through
bush.
If only we could intuit that target,
Its nature, its allure, even its distance,
We feel we might deduce our own intention,
Plot the line that runs out from childbirth
To intercept down-swooping deathbed.
It is the one principle that unifies
Spendthrift and miser, beggar and banker.
All are alike in this futile grappling.
I myself have lain awake on long nights

Covering pillowcases and bedsheets,
Even my own naked and hairless thighs,
With inked diagrams and calculations,
But never finding the correct solution.

You don't know, then, parrot, where it goes?

You might as well ask from where it has come,
The value in value-added products.
This is the same issue indeed, reversed.
Our civilization in Nimrod's time,
If all its assets were liquidated
And all the huts, cattle and grain were sold
And converted to cash at market prices,
Would fetch only six shillings three pence,
To state the total sum in terms
Of that now-antiquated currency
With which mankind first assessed its worth.
And how it must have tempted our forefathers
To do just that, sell everything
Or trade it for a handful of magic beans.
Now, of course, it is worth many billions.
Out of what hole did all that cash crawl?
It is the same as the one to which it goes,
The same dank and stinking lair, I wager,
As the one to which it drags home its kills.
Its tiny teeth chews us all in the end.
Where are those huts, cattle and grain gone?
Where, for that matter, is Nimrod gone,
That titan also named Ninus the Great?
But I jest. His whereabouts are well-known.
He is gone to Hell, snatched off the surface,
Stowed underground to utter gibberish
At passersby, bypassed himself
By pentecost, by paraclete, by God.

Just where are you going with this, parrot?

My intent is to establish the relevance
Of all my remarks at some later date.
How much later is beyond conjecture,
Beyond all possible human knowing.
It may arrive, in fact, so late in life
Demand for relevance will have spent its force,
So that the patience you must cultivate,

If you wish to see things tied together,
Will be highly rarefied in its nature.
But for now, let me offer you this advice:
Pay the man what he asks. I'm worth it.

I can only agree. How does one price
Asked the pawnbroker, the priceless?
Never before, in a long career of dealing
With high quality merchandise only,
Have I encountered an item of such worth
That I would be reluctant to affix a price.

And just what the hell is this tag then,
I said, that you have tied tight to my leg?

The parrot's rather dusty, said Armand,
As he examined the price tag on my leg.
It must have sat on the shelf at least a year.
Is there a fast forward or a rewind?
And what about the parrot's power switch?

I'm fully automatic, plug and play.
On off is obsolete in platforms
For the operating system software
That manages modern handheld parrots.
Your brain lacks the requisite skill and speed
To judge when my presence is necessary.
I'll decide on and off using heuristics
Your human intellect cannot fathom,
Algorithms so subtle, so complex,
And so remarkably elaborate,
Your eyeballs would flip sunnyside up
Should you attempt to duplicate their art.
I possess the proper degree of detachment,
The right long-range economic models,
The multiway decision trees required
To maximize payoffs at each turn.
Where you would choose a tasty goose dinner,
I choose the everlasting golden eggs.
Fast forward and rewind are likewise
Too demanding a task for your slow wit.
Relax yourself, settle back on the couch.
Once my fertile imagination is turned
And exposed by the plowblade of attention,
My orchards shall appear of their own accord,

Untended trees thick with plump olives,
Grapevine-entwined, lavish with foliage.
I create for you gardens of paradise,
Inhabited by dark-eyed maidservants
Who shall swiftly address every concern.
No more struggle and no more effort:
Decision-making, for you, is history,
Once you have gained title to my services.

...And so I set, in an arbitrary way,
A price of only five quintus pieces
For this priceless, mellifluous assembly
Of plastic feathers and transistors and lies,
My only boon companion now my wife
Suffers the terrible, terminal stages
Of a costly, mysterious, wasting disease...

We don't converse, the two of us, ever.
And whatever it is, I told Armand,
That this costly wasting disease wasted,
It's surely not his super-sized wife.
Although she is, of all the Lord's creatures,
Least likely missed, least essential
To whatever the providential plans
Our ever-scheming Lord has put in place,
Far from dwindle she grows ever larger.
Her bulk has blown so great it blocks light
And casts so black a shade underneath
It kills the vegetation yards around.
She suffers a peculiar combination
Of alcoholism and great obesity
Unencountered by science up to now,
And what astounds doctors assigned her case
Is that, although she's reached that coma
That comes to brains the law defines as dead,
She yet retains presence enough of mind
To find, confiscate and quickly consume
Any least scrap, crumb or mote of food
Within range of energetic waddle.

These are falsehoods, said the pawnbroker.

I note, said Armand to the pawnbroker,
I never hear the parrot voice his words
In such a way they coincide with your's.

You two don't both speak at the same time.
Are you, sir, perhaps a ventriloquist?

I don't, as rule, defame myself, he said.
The bird converses, just as advertised.

But it only has one eye, said Armand.
Even a half price parrot should have two.

Ask the pawnbroker where it went, I said.

The treacherous bird, said the pawnbroker,
Mixes falsehood and the truth too well
To contest these tales. Beware you buy him.
The bird's two fifty. Take it or leave it.

Take it, I advised the hesitant Armand.
Can I begin to recount the benefits
That shall surely and eventually accrue?
Yes. Of course I can. Nothing's beyond me...

Never mind, said Armand, I will take it.
The price I bid will mate the price you ask.
Here's two fifty. Where's the traveling case?
And how do you turn the thing on and off?

I'm fully automatic, I repeated.

A wise choice, far better than a toaster,
Said the pawnbroker, clearly relieved
Finally to be rid of the electric parrot,
That unsaleable, plastic piece of junk.

CAPUT TWO

Part II.1: MARGUERITE

Memory arises from non-memory,
Hangs above the void without lingering,
And returns, dissolving into mystery.
And so it is with your city, Nineveh.
Its foundations are seamless with the bedrock,
Its walls and towers formed from country clay.
When the soft mortar of memory crumbles,
Masonry sags, leans overs, collapses.
The flat landscape takes back its rubble
To line the ravines and empty streambeds,
To slide down slopes, to gather in mounds,
To anchor the roots of weeds and desert shrubs.
Memory is tamarisk and juniper,
Written where twig forks and stems divide
In enigmatic strokes, in strokes as swift,
In strokes as slight as lizard sign in dust,
As deliberate and as strong as wasp-flight.
Non-memory, first and last, is witness.
It drinks what is written and leaves husk.
It counts each bud the wild rose has made,
It marks each petal of each bloom shed,
And each is ever first and ever last.
The djinn trumpet as they pass overhead
And that which is created is uncreated,
And memory returns to non-memory.
And so it is with your city, Nineveh.
It is born, it flourishes and it perishes,
Unremembered and unresurrected.

Paper gift wrap ripped and fell away
To hatch me onto my next stage of life,
A place devoid of both warmth and welcome
Like many that birth throes open up.
Marguerite's visage floated above me,
Storm-darkened clouds that spat hot lightnings.
And I recognized that face, that look.
Armand's wife, it seemed clear, was not pleased
With this gift her thoughtful husband had brought.
My own attitude, however, differed,

In degree of distress if not in kind.
Although my stiff wings will never unfold,
And never spread and never lift my weight,
I believed myself renewed, a new bird,
One of those transmigratory fowl,
A phoenix perhaps, or speckled garuda.

An electric parrot, he said helpfully,
In case this silence and lack of delight
In which she'd quickly rewrapped his gift
Was due to poor eyesight or bird lore,
In case she had identified me wrongly,
Had confused me with, say, a frigate bird
Or seagull, or pelican, or albatross.
My plumage was not quite as well defined
As an expert birder might have liked,
Despite the pawnbroker's renovations,
But was, still, unmistakably parrot.

That's exactly, she said through her clenched
teeth,
Just exactly what I always wanted.
And how, just how, could you've ever known?
Your gifts, Armand, are always so thoughtful,
Like that toaster I got for my birthday.
And is there a more appropriate present?
Women and toasters, to hazard quick guess,
Must appear to your judgment much alike,
Both performing very narrow functions,
Though not quite as narrow, after all,
As the cheese-slicer I received for Christmas.

It wasn't, said Armand, a Christmas gift.
It was, instead, on our anniversary.

That date was, she said, at any rate,
Last observed many long years ago.

A lengthy, heated exchange then ensued
Which, I regret, I must decline to repeat,
Not because I cannot now remember
Nor, God knows, for lack of space and time.
No, I will not rehearse the words exchanged
Because even my own degraded taste
Found this crude and blasphemous invective,

Although entertaining enough,
Truly offensive, cruel beyond the pale.
Eventually doors slammed and silence fell,
And darkness fell and the night slowly passed,
Until dawn at last curled rosy fist
And began with sunlight to punch the face
Of each sleeper with an eastern exposure.
Armand arose, left without breakfast,
Without the slightest slice of toasted bread,
And departed for his workplace downtown.
Craven retreat, Marguerite called out,
Strategic withdrawal, responded Armand,
Doing his best not to slink as he let
His scornful wife possess the battlefield.
During this strife I'd been left to sit,
Still nested in festive-coloured paper,
To survey this dismal situation
Into which misadventure had dropped me.

The suite of rooms was quite sparsely furnished,
But this was not the minimalist's sparse,
The tasteful and fine design kind of sparse.
No, this was the sparse of a salt desert,
A place that the Godhead had scoured with fires
And left devoid of spirit, bereft of life.
Where were the cockroaches, the silverfish?
A potted tropical plant was nearby,
A tree or vine that I couldn't identify
Or, indeed, easily categorize
With my built-in standard taxonomies,
Beyond the fact that it appeared to be dead.
And despite my botanical shortcomings,
The cause was well within my expertise
In the lessons that nature imparts to man:
Here was yet another victim of God,
A recent object of a powerful wrath
Delivered here with surgical precision.
It was not fungus, not rust, not mites,
Not aphids, loggers, or spruce bud worm
That the Lord sent against this, his creature.
A desert had sprung up inside the pot,
So that any organic life trapped there,
Rather than flourish, must perish of a thirst.
The plant had been hit by a withering drought
That had robbed potting soil of all moisture.

And this I knew to be a favourite trick,
Well-documented in literature
Devoted to God's periodic plagues.

And next to the plant was a large armchair.
This too had suffered the Godhead's wrath,
As witness the cushions, the upholstery.
Directly across the room from this chair
Was a pre-colour television set,
And this device was also the object
Of the particularly nasty curses
That heaven reserves for selected targets.
The glass goldfish bowl was cursed of God,
And the fish itself, on which I kept my eye,
Floated belly up in the stagnance there.
It was evidently the victim of curse.
The sofa was cursed, coffee table cursed,
Wallpaper cursed, the very air was cursed.
This apartment was a barren wasteland,
Cursed wall to wall, cursed bottom to top,
Cursed from worn carpet to flaking ceiling.
Turn on the taps and dark curse spits out.
Open the drapes and bright curse floods in.
This is not a place where any being
Should have lingered, let alone reside alone,
Wrapped in curse-saturated bedclothes.

I could see, by virtue of my second sight,
Marguerite truly needed diversion.
She'd never had children nor made a friend
Nor held down a job for more than a week,
And thus she stayed here, at home all day
With nothing much to do but sit and brood.
Books and crosswords were only a bother,
Drink too expensive, housework a bore.
Just one soul had ever broken through
Her lonely, self-imposed isolation.
At one point she had acquired a lapdog,
A thoroughbred Assyrian anklehound,
A variety of the miniature poodle,
That proved to be the perfect companion,
Patient and obedient, tolerant and kind,
Especially after Armand stepped on it.
The resulting massive spinal injuries
Turned the dog into a stuffed animal,

Soft and cuddly and limp, a basket case
Curled up in a little wicker basket,
A quite incontinent quadriplegic.
Of course, his wife never forgave Armand
And Armand had never understood why.
He'd classed her pet among those life-forms
That not even a saint tries to protect,
Those who stare on life through their beady eyes
And recognize nothing that isn't food,
Those that have nasty if non-fatal bites,
Non-sentient, low in moral fibre,
Like the despised spider or centipede,
Upon which one might acceptably step.
Armand's best guess and theory was this:
It's not by bite, not by inferior size
By which you distinguish breeds of this class
But rather by lack of stiffened backbone
Sheathed inside a warm and responsive skin.
True vermin lack an endoskeleton,
And thus, having stepped on that dog once,
Making it functionally invertebrate,
He then may safely do it once again,
Perhaps jumping from a table this time,
A commando's Japanese bronco kick
For a most satisfactory coup de grace.
But this experiment was never performed
Due to absence of ideal conditions,
Until it was clearly unnecessary,
As that sharp, querulous yap lost command
And grew each day ever less strident,
Ever less pitched, ever more distant,
More infrequent, more intermittent,
Until it became clear to all concerned,
To all but Marguerite, the beast was dead.
His theory thus remained unverified.

And so it was that, until I arrived,
Her only friends were slick game show hosts
And the pathetic soap opera actors,
Neither intelligent nor interactive
And available only in black and white,
And available only infrequently,
Available only when the static storms,
Prevailing winds which blew signals away,
Would take a break, abate a moment,

And let some sense penetrate the gloom.
And it's just such times I will claim as mine,
For quiet times belong to God's prophets.
These are the times we give voice to visions
And warn all that the worst is yet to come.
Storms will subside and floodwater recede
Only so that devastation can rise
And wreckage gain its due recognition;
Otherwise the lash would never flag,
Never allow the time for open wounds
To close, fester and bear witness to pain,
Never allow the crippling fear to build
Against the next flagellation of gales.
But prophets can make use of such moments,
And not just to air grim points of view
Not just to list complaints on mess left
And damage done in prior bouts with God.
Respite can bring time to refortify,
To brace against the next savage attack,
And one can use gaps between onslaughts
If not overwhelmed by the numbing seas,
If not ready yet to admit defeat.

Part II.2: INVITATION TO SPEAK

So, said Marguerite. What can you tell me?

I didn't give voice to my first reply.
The truth was, sad to say, nothing much,
Nothing, that is, that I'd want to repeat.
I speak best to myself, sotto voce.
Others rarely accept the truths I speak,
Rarely welcome the dread tidings I bring.
It's not easy to swallow prophecy,
And not just because a nasty future
Will always await us somewhere ahead.
Prophecy itself emits putrid fumes
Designed to drive off all foes of truth,
All those who, like King Oedipus,
Would rather look for their truth over here,
On well-lit, well-kempt picnic lawns
Than over there, in twilit charnel grounds
Where old corpses breed dreams and pestilence.

No one wants to know it's not the crimes,
It's coverups that draw the satans down,
The eyes you pluck and then stick back in.
A speech that foretells impending horror
Will demonstrate an adaptive strategy
Like those loathsome insects who survive
By imbuing otherwise tasty flesh
With a foul and unpalatable flavour
So that the birds are not enticed to eat.
They're like gamebeasts, ungulates mostly,
Who demonstrate unbecoming manners,
Who chew cud, who defecate in public,
Who will let fly derisive snorts and farts
Whenever asked to swear fealty to flags
Or file voluntary income tax.
And this they do so not to go tame,
So that they don't serve a greater power,
Suffer domestication and get penned up,
Herded and milked, then slaughtered and eaten.
But tricks, of course, are played to no avail;
They reckon not with human perversity
Or demands specialty restaurants make.

Do you hear, parrot? she said. I want talk!

Words that voice doom get little respect
From those for whom that doom is slated,
Little indeed but disbelief and scorn.
The damned take damnation with more grace
If they need not also bear the abuse
From the ever-present self-righteous nags,
Hyperactive seers, meddlesome saints,
Who never swerve from serving up truth
To evade their own richly deserved fates.
You've seen too, I'm sure, the deaths they meet,
Martyred and hanged with public looking on
Or found fallen in foul-smelling alleys,
Silent now, necks broken or throats slit:
Holy, yes, but insensitive to the end
To what welcome a sharp critique receives.
I'd do better to bob like a hen
And peck around at nonexistent specks,
Circumspect, with low profile clucking,
Than strut proud along the henhouse roof
And crow my warning words to hostile crowds.

Such cries lack any endearing trait
That might invite waves of grateful applause
To drown out that loud, metallic sound,
Whetstone scrape along axeblade bite.

Just my luck, said Marguerite. A dud.
A dud parrot, deader than a dodo.

My prophecies want only to feel sun,
A moment of warmth before winter cold,
And so they pursue the most prudent course,
One that defers a bit their own demise
Yet still indulges a self-expression.
They wish to avoid on one hand the fate
Of that now-extinct species of serpent
So venomous it dies of self-loathing,
And, on the other, claim no ambition
Of bringing forth beloved children's classics,
Read and re-read for year after year.
If it's deemed necessary they be kept,
Lawyer-advised documentary proof
That notice of demolition was duly sent,
Then enshrine them in index malorum
Out of reach of idle public regard.
Current regulations on foods and drugs
Forbid the display of a dubious fruit,
One that lacks the little adhesive tag
That with nihil obstat marks it safe to buy,
Lest they ease corruption of our young folk.
One may not tempt these innocent babes
By giving vile concoctions sugarcoats,
By cutting cocaine down with sucrose,
Or topping off malt scotch with soft drink.
Nor shall the law permit sly seducers
To work art anywhere near a school
Or near a paradisaical playground.
They totter, these infants, on knife's edge;
With just one shove they'll dive delighted
Into those infernal pits, swim there,
Gleeful dolphins who sport in steaming filth.

Maybe it needs batteries, said Marguerite,
A new black box, new Adam's apple,
Or new elastic band windup spring.

No, I'd better watch my loosened tongue;
A pure prophecy should not be broadcast
Without the most stringent of safeguards.
This is not to say that a fear exists
Of expurgation or bowlderization:
My repugnant messages are tamper-proof.
It would be for best, I thought, not to start,
Best not to launch myself at my targets.
Perhaps the two of us could just converse,
Have a little chat, some tea, a biscuit,
Or swap some stories, bring out the booze,
But keep a light touch, nothing serious,
And just idle away the afternoon.
I'd regale her with tales of my exploits
Without dealing with the downfall and death
Of this town and every soul within,
Not directly at least, and not to start.
But how start? Comment on the wallpaper?
What a very lovely floral pattern,
I could say, Are those blooms camillias?
And that is wallpaper, is it not?
Or just what sort of fish floats on murk
Inside of that glass bowl over there?
Is that a submerged wreck that gashed its side?
It's like the little wooden model boats
That children build to make themselves sailors,
Or those larger ones cargo cults sculpt
To draw ashore an overdue shipment.
I'd say aloud, so, Marguerite,
From what port did that scuttled craft hail?

Talk, bird, or I'll wring your bloody neck,
Cut you up, boil you down to soup stock,
Or maybe make some parrot fried rice.

Plastic enhances all flavours, I said.
For the best results, try the microwave.
Nine minutes on defrost and five on high
Makes me into a thick, sticky puddle.
And when I'm cool, cut me in squares and serve.

Ha! You do talk! It's a start, at least.

If I'm to start, I will do it properly,
In classic manner, with an invocation.

Proceed, said Marguerite. I've grown bored.

Part II.3: THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

I struck my best declamatory pose,
Cocked my head, raised my beak, cleared my throat,
Opened up passage for my quickened wit,
Coughed out my reluctant, crawl-caught theme,
The tragic tale of a parrot's eye lost:

Sing oh holy muse and lend me your voice...

Now hold it right there, mister parrot.
I've heard these same words somewhere before,
Or similar words, words to that effect.
I think, parrot, she said, you plagiarize.

I am, as you can clearly see, a parrot,
An extraordinary electric parrot
Whom electronic wizardry has taken
Beyond polly-wants-a-crackerisms
And rote repetition of stock phrases,
Beyond a conversation of small talk
And the wege des weiter und nachsreden,
And beyond your jargon and beyond your Kant,
Beyond your Hegelian gobbledygook
And your proto-Joycean jabberwocky,
Beyond towering babble's parapets,
In reverse stoop through cloud cuckoo land
To that empyrean stuffed with quintessence,
To transcendent skies of sublime poesy!
Yes, I say hail to me, blithe spirit,
Even if twirping bird I never wert.
I'm capable of optimal performance
In the stringing together of my syllables.
There's not in any bard's restless head
One thought, one grace, one least wonder
My capacitors can't digest into words,
Into words common, into words rare,
Into words so exceedingly scarce,
Words so absolutely obsolete
The most unabridged of dictionaries

Mentions them, if at all, only in passing.
Of course, there will be the odd overlap
With other, lengthy, muse-bitten texts,
And a literary allusion or two,
Which are considered a great delicacy
Among the refined, enlightened Chinese.
Even so, as long as batteries spark,
I'll collect strength to bitterly deny
Your ill-conceived, poorly expressed charges.
So, Marguerite, if you'll kindly hold
Your applause, cat-calls and nasty remarks
Until the tale's done, you'll witness here
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,
In blank verse, arcade game or haiku,
Such as that last fine, impressive line,
Dissonant, yet sensitive, yet balanced,
That just tripped so glibly off my tongue,
Bacchiac trimeter or I miss my guess.

If you think you have any talent, parrot,
You're very, very sadly mistaken.

If we could subtract that accusatory tone,
Your voice would have just the ethereal touch
That one seeks in a muse, my Marguerite.

I once sang for country and western bands
Before meeting Armand, but why, parrot,
Am I telling you? Just pick up speed.
And spare me the bullshit, the woman said.

Sing oh holy muse and lend me your voice.
I'll hum a few bars to get you started.
I could really use your husky contralto
If you've made no previous engagement,
A folk mass, say, or hip hop sonnet,
Drunken shouting match as one-act play,
Birdsong translated, loosely, to prose,
With Eskimo throat-clearing background,
Or some other equally worthy task
Commissioned and funded from the public purse.
If it's just not permissible, oh muse,
To stand offstage and feed me some lines,
Render whatever assistance you can
To motivate, organize and deploy

This untrained, undisciplined word rabble
Freshly risen from valleys choked with bones.
The cowards refuse to line up and march,
Not knowing where it is they must go,
How it is they'll get where they go
And why the hell go elsewhere at all.
This, I admit, will be one tough sell.
Infuse them, inspire them, fill them with resolve.
And do you listen? Is anyone there?
In the name of the Godhead, I conjure you.
Send me, muse, visions and visitations
To reveal the relevant concealed events
That my omniscient narrator requires,
And answer me, please, the following question:
How might I initiate my history
To expedite the delivery, the birth,
Of this monster, this bent, prophetic sport?
I know that you start in the story's middle
Because I read the book you co-authored,
How to Write the Modern Epic Poem
With Examples from the Current Bestsellers,
And that's where your own masterpiece starts,
And halfway along a sentence, in fact,
Either that or pages have gone missing.
Where, then, does the dead centre reside,
The balance point, the mean between extremes,
The place best suited to begin my tale?
Note that I start you off easily, muse,
So not to tire you out too early,
Not to exhaust finite resources
At the place where medium meets message,
Spirit meets letter, parrot meets muse,
Not to overtax your ectoplasm
With elaborate systems of table-taps
Punctuated by the odd, hollow groan.

I looked so good in ten gallon hats
Tight treader pants, a bandolier,
And that standup bass just to my left,
I sometimes think I'll try it again.

Nineveh, surely, the navel of nature,
The pivot-point of the known universe,
The famous privileged frame of reference,
Resplendent gem, monad of monads,

The capitol and seat of the King of Kings,
Sits squarely in the centre of all tales,
Or all the tales, at least, worth a bother.
It's indeed the great city Nineveh
That acts as axis, the pin around which
All myths, all legends, all tales spin.
Are not the very heaven's stars above
Arranged to shed their spectral influence
On the fates and destinies of her citizens?
Is not the curve of the high hemisphere
Designed to focus all light on events
That transpire in her palaces and hovels?
Is it not in Nineveh that Godhead,
Whom we know from our various holy books
To speak only our city's dialect,
Stages all his divine interventions,
Right outside the Lord's downtown Temple?
Is not Nineveh the microcosm
In which the macrocosm's gross effects
Are finely reflected in the traffic jams,
Gridlocks and automotive stalemates
That block access to God's parking lots?
And please place ticket face up on dash,
The matter's beyond all possible doubt.
I will begin my epic history here,
In this city, heaven's chosen target.
And this is so much easier, muse,
Than I'd ever hoped, ever dared expect,
That I'm compelled to note the unpleasant fact
That this effort really doesn't need you.
Retreat sweetly into mute amusement,
Smile and nod and go elsewhere quickly.
Take off, oh muse, I'll do this myself.

I am greatly encouraged, said Marguerite,
For I'm not fond of long introductions
Or imaginary interlocutions.

During the reign of the king Quintus the Great,
Monarch of Nineveh and Assyria,
A moment arrived, falling like shadow,
For Godhead to give consideration
To smashing flat this, his fairest city.
He'd done this before to other towns,
Other places he'd favoured for short times

Before finding one fault or another,
Before he'd start looking around for flaws.
A moment comes when he'll start to pick holes,
Draw notice to loose threads, nicked veneers,
Fallacious logic and peeling paintjobs.
And just look at that eyesore, he'll say.
He'll criticize how the town's arranged,
The river too near, shopping too far,
Too little transit, too many whores.
Sages say this moment always comes,
A point in time when God's interest flags
And starts casting about for other sport.
And since demolition brings such joy,
And the chance to stomp sand castles level
Brings a satisfaction none can rival,
It's not clear just what held him back,
Caused him to send subtle rebukes instead,
Little hints that luck's gone on the move.
Standard practice, in fact, was say nothing
And give no clue of dissatisfaction
Until fatal blows made themselves felt.
What better joke than see victims reel,
Stagger like drunks struck down from behind,
Sucker punched when relaxed, when least prepared,
Without a clue to what hit them or why?
It's how the world, and God its maker, works.
But Nineveh, Marguerite, caught a break,
And it's this that keeps sages mystified.

Exactly when did this moment occur?
I'd heard, bird, nothing of it before now.

Many symptoms of divine displeasure
With carefree metropolitan lifestyles,
If that, in fact, was God's cause for complaint,
Began to erupt, rash-like, all over.
Tiny precursors of doom, small blips,
Some too small for naked eyes to see,
Began to eat away at normal life.
Statisticians were first to detect blight
From certain miniscule perturbations
In numbers tabulated over time.
Household incomes in correlation
With new liquor license applications,
Showed anomalous deviations from norms.

Traffic accidents between taxicabs
And left-handed bicycle couriers
Were a little more frequent per annum.
Parking meter vandalism was down,
Refrigeration malfunctions were up.
Polydactylism became commonplace
Among the troops of tame, Oracle apes
Tethered to the temple's sandstone columns:
The priesthood's cautious enquiries revealed
Insurance premiums would not compensate
For the loss to institutional prestige.
Priests themselves, noting something amiss,
Began to grow wary, retired early,
Took pensions and took up other jobs.
And this, of course, would only feed unease
In worshipper and worshipee alike.
Hastily hired replacements made it worse
By flubbing prayers, reading wrong scriptures,
Singing funeral hymns at bridal feasts.
Even the pigeons meant for sacrifice
Began to fidget watching liturgy botched
And grew discontent with religious work.
They lost weight and shed feathers from worry
That badly aimed, less than deft knifestrokes
Might take off a leg, put out an eye,
Leave a poor bird still squirming in blood
Instead of rising on updrafts to God.

Nor have I heard any of this before.

Tax accountants were next to meet problems:
Standard depreciation allowances
Pre-calculated for certain items,
Pencils and wire coathangers, notably,
Now diverged from observed replacement rates.
Zoo tigers brought forth stillborn cubs.
Archaic well-water, pure from creation,
Turned salt-brackish and clouded with silt.
Then newspaper daily horoscopes
Began to lose their usual accuracy,
Forcing astrologers to postulate
Fourteen extra planetary objects
In cold, dark Trans-Neptunian space.
To chart even an approximate future
Defied the capacity of computers

Of the current digital generation:
The combinations and permutations
Of new orbits with old, and new with new,
And old with old, forward and retrograde,
Epicyles upon epicyles,
Induced in more than one of their machines
Madness and breakdown, fits and convulsions.
The public fountains and the shaded benches
In the parklands and along boulevards
Became the roosts for grinning, rabid bats,
Which are far worse than pigeons for excrement,
Far worse than rats for constant chittering,
And who attack small children and seniors
Without the victim's least provocation.
These subtle signs were mostly overlooked
By an already distracted populace
Until divine ire increased its pressure.
Isolated events began to unite.
They knitted fingers together, clasped hands,
And hissed out seething rage as though one.
Rivers dwindled, forests withered away,
Pollution poisoned the air, sea and earth
And attendance at sports events fell off.
The arts were sterile, all the pastries stale,
And landscapes plundered of all their beauty.
Our enemies grew stronger and we weaker;
Our currency's once-strong value decreased
On each major foreign money market
Until you could buy more gold with a quart
Of a twice-used low-grade motor oil
Than with shopping carts stuffed with banknotes.
Unemployment grew and inflation soared
And the bank's prime interest lending rate
To its most creditworthy of customers
Increased to a level that stifled profits.
Distressed donkeys began to bray constantly.
All the economic indicators
Indicated an impending disaster
No human agency could ever avert
Without some celestial intercession.
Folk grew pessimistic and neurotic,
And the work force grew surly and restless,
And even bureaucrats were dissatisfied
With the government's clear mismanagement
Of its ill-conceived, half-baked programs.

They played at badminton on their lunch times,
In white shirt sleeves on the ministry lawns,
Swatting urgent memos, wadded up,
Back and forth over untrimmed hedges.
The time was over for stopgap measures;
Time was ripe for a prophet of the Lord
To appear with a solution to our problems,
And yet no prophet of the Lord appeared.
Consequently government officials
Decided it time that action were taken,
Time that the State Oracle were consulted.
And so the King in edict commanded
That the College of the Oracle be convened
And some kind of efficacious advice
Be wrung out of the defaulting deity.

Part II.4: ORACLE.

From where do you obtain your information?
It has the spurious air of the tabloid,
Highly suspect and not to be trusted.
Certainly Nineveh has its problems, bird,
But life here is perfectly acceptable.
And there has been nothing in the papers
About any kind of impending doom
Or any urgent need for a prophecy.
Would wire services fail to pick it up?
And what, exactly, can threaten the city?
Do you refer to the barbarians gathered
To the north, led by the thug Tamberlaine?
I understand that the legions have him checked.

Mark my remarkable words, Marguerite.
The legions are in a greater disarray
And the barbarians closer than you think,
If those are neighing northwinds that I hear.
Never believe that tomorrow defeats foes:
God turns colours if your sleep's too deep,
And overconfident archers soon learn
It's best to eat victory feasts first,
On the night before, when you still have a chance,
Before it's clear that, along with lunch,
Along with boots and even uniforms,

Fieldmice ate bowstrings while you slept.
But there is worse to fear than human force.
Not wishing a panicked population,
The powers-that-be have kept under wraps
The city's unhappy predicament.
They'll await the results of the Oracle
Before going public with dread tidings.
And therein is found a new conundrum:
The Oracle has failed to produce reply.

I can find a solution to that problem.
Tell the Oracle to produce a result
Or tomorrow we will eat Oracle stew.

Direct action is not always the best
Or most effective of our human methods
To deal with the mystery-shrouded divine.
I see that I should take a short digression
Into the theory and practice at work here.

I'm not too keen on theory - or practice.

But you will thank me in the end, Marguerite.
Now all agree that the State Oracle
Ought to be both ostensibly random
And ostensibly speech-like in its nature
Or else fail to meet the purpose set,
Fail to evolve the signal out of noise,
Fail to simulate the resolution
Of present confusion to future order.
On this point the experts are emphatic.
All fate depends on Godhead's fiat;
The whole parole of this visible world
Is generated from God's holy speech,
From our twenty-six mystic hieroglyphs,
From the vivid and vociferous alphabet
Which in random movements of moveable type
Exhausts his conversational resources.
Mankind's speech was created in image
Of the divine commands which set in motion
The Cartesian vortices of all things.
In the beginning was neither word nor deed
But an inarticulate grunt, a low moan,
Another grunt, another and another,
Until at length, after a great labour,

A rudimentary sentence was emitted.
Twenty-six grunts in all, each unique,
Were permuted in such a way to provide
The living cosmos with a genetic code.
However, doubt remains on the meaning
Expressed in this first expostulation.
Some say that it meant "Let there be light!"
Some claim it meant "Oh Christ, turn it off!",
And some maintain that it had no meaning,
None at least we'd ever understand.
These last also will dispute the belief
That a first light, hot and penetrating,
Ever blazed forth to illumine the world.
They say that darkness was never total,
Light was always there, just much dimmer,
Growing bright by degrees, by rheostat.
This is only the first disagreement.
While all agree that the Godhead's sayings
Are manifest in all events and things,
None agree on how best to decipher
The long, boring, and pointless anecdotes
That seem to construct the bulk of creation.
While all agree that apparent nonsense
Is in reality high quality sense,
None agree on two basic principles.
Students of divination are divided
Both on the Oracle's interpretation
And on the oracular process itself.

I know that this is not the end, she said.
I am not at all inclined to give thanks.

At every juncture in Nineveh's past
There never came cusps so sharply defined
You might decide a course without advice,
Without ways to judge which way was best.
You saw many futures contend for choice,
Each one equal in evident merit,
Each a beauty queen who also has tricks
Designed to give herself some distinction,
How she plays harp with grace and sings too,
How she juggles rolling pins, two at once,
How she sucks sincerely a judge's tongue
While he's easing off her bathing suit.
It's so hard to choose at times like these,

And so ancients devised the tarot deck
To gain insider access to heaven
And catch glimpse of what fate had in store.
This was the Oracle, traditional style,
A way to shuffle and deal out the cards
That centuries of practice had made perfect.
Perfect, that is, except when clearly wrong.

Tarot, I've heard, is just a game of chance.
You see it played on casino tables
And autodealt inside the slot machines.
The house takes its percent and others lose.

Without a random background, Marguerite,
You'll never find events that buck the trend.
The problem, though, you often get with cards
Is that outstanding hands that thrill a heart
May come once a decade, even less.
Until then you watch others take pots,
Watch others celebrate good luck
And go wild with joy, a wild made wilder
By how tamely celebration is shared
By those many who lost so one could win.
That's why we tried other methods awhile,
To get better yield, more frequent hits,
More signs per click to stream down from God.
A number of novel approaches were tried
And found to fall somewhat short of hopes.
The most recent of these was the attempt
To seat at typewriters a troop of apes
And let them just randomly poke the keys,
A concept Quintus came across once
Within some waiting room magazine.
For three reasons this was judged a failure.

Why tell of failures? asked Marguerite.
And why rehearse the reasons why they failed?
We'd get done with this in time for lunch
If some were condensed, others simply dropped.

If it's lyric verse or haiku you like,
Go find yourself a dying Zen monk
Or some equally short attention span,
In too great a rush for exhaustive work.
Let's make it clear, before I go on,

That this isn't the kind of tale you know,
The old, familiar kind with point or plot
And peopled with types like those you've met
And set in places to which you might go.
If a quick comfort's what you really want,
A cheap injection now can get you one,
A nice, easy life, done while you wait.
Be glad this tale's even told at all
And told in words you even understand.
All the fortune that Godhead's rained down,
All the grace with which this place was soaked,
Will go atrickle by to find its drain,
And you, my girl, are last to see it flow.

Even so, bird, three seems excessive.

First, ape transcriptions weren't trustworthy.
Apes would tend to impose false gestalten
That interfered with God's intended word.
They reworked raw oracular output
In second and third and subsequent drafts
To resemble contracts, cookbooks, plays,
Reasoned philosophical arguments,
Novels with plausible characters and plots,
Abridged French-Assyrian dictionaries,
And other items of finely wrought prose
That substitute nicely for idle talk
But not for good, authentic clairvoyance.
An Oracle should produce neither fiction
Nor non-fiction, but rather signify
The Godhead's mysteries in cryptic verse
Unintelligible except to those
Recognized as members in good standing
Of the professional augur's guild.
Apes come, in time, to consider themselves
To be artists and intellectuals
And hang about in cappucino bars.
One prodigy among them, a large chimp,
With an eye on the literary prizes,
Typed a long and detailed description
Of slender fingers typing a description
Of slender fingers typing a description.
This was dismissed by most of the critics,
Because of erratic spacebar usage
Due to the lack of an opposable thumb.

And that's the first of three, with two to go.

Don't fret, Marguerite. I'm keeping count.
Second, it seems altogether beyond
Any human teacher's mortal patience
To urge an ape to type any faster,
Even when at an electric typewriter,
Than ten words per minute without mistakes.
And third, there occurred a great tragedy
When an Oracle ape flew into a rage
And bit a young concubine on the thigh
After she quite tactlessly termed his work
Incoherent, shallow, boring and banal.
Rendered unfit for her duties by the bite,
The young concubine had to be destroyed,
An event that brought Quintus such regret
Use of apes was forthwith abandoned
And the ancient Oracle reinstated.

You see, parrot, she said, we could've skipped
That whole ape bit. Who needed that?

Certainly the unhappy apes themselves
Might have wished another, better outcome.
You can see them now down on the embankments
Begging for rotten fruit from passersby,
The King's harsh reward for failed prophecy.
And next to the apes, dressed in filthy rags
Rather than silken robes, is the High Priest,
Now reduced to panhandling for pennies,
Oroe his name, highest of Magi.
From ancient times it was his solemn duty
To perform traditional Oracle rites,
An undemanding task in normal times.
Novices would bring a deck of tarot cards,
Where each image on a card illustrates
A different letter of the alphabet,
And ask him to pick a card, any card.
And this he would do, repeatedly, until
The cards spelled out the message God sent.
But on this occasion, with every pick
Oroe drew the same card, the ninth,
That one that meant a loss in some games,
In some meant nothing, in some was trump.

Always the one-eyed parrot card was drawn,
And each time, with each draw, the same card.
This incredible run of bad luck
Has left Nineveh unclear on its error
And how to avert God's grim correction.

A one-eyed parrot? I think, she remarked,
That this whole account is self-indulgent,
Self-serving, and likely a waste of time.

Self-referential is the preferred term.
In the visual language of tarot cards
Each icon has both a sound and sense.
Inside sound is sense, the flesh-cloaked ghost,
Ba, the man-faced bird with deep regrets.
The parrot is both a noun and a verb,
Paradigm for all human inflection,
The first name, first noise that Adam made,
The primary offense of the first person,
Initial issue of original sin,
The monotonous magic monogram
Stitched on every subsequent handkerchief.
The rebus represents the letter 'I',
Or 'Ta' in your language, the ninth in number.

What do you mean by my language? she said.
And from where do you hail? Not Nineveh,
For I can spot one of our own right off.
You bear the gawdy look of an import,
The tropic theme, the bright garish colours,
The exaggerated sweep of tailfeathers,
The oversized feet, the prominent beak,
The tacky styling and the offensive lines.
All these are the unmistakable signs
That mark a product as made offshore.

And who are you to belittle my plumage?
I am a son of the race of mesomorphs.
No Ninevite, dwarfish, foul-breathing,
Hirsute, fat-fingered, flat-nosed, double-chinned,
Will come close to the ideal that I cherish.
The forests of paradise, where mankind
Corresponded closely to model life,
Are distant indeed from this fallen nation.

And your garb! You should look on yourself through
eyes
Schooled in the delight of naked perfection.
The women of my land, if they dress at all,
Will dress themselves only in lingerie.
It was a shock to witness the fashions here.
You dress like one of those bag ladies
Stinking under thirteen winter coats,
Swaddled in her whole wardrobe despite heat
That strips the more fortunate down to skin.
Take a tip, Marguerite, and disrobe.

Not likely, bird. You dislike it here?

It's true I came here from out of town.
True too is my dislike for this place,
These climes, the smog, the traffic, the people.
That accent you hear that impedes my speech
Is the distaste with which I speak your tongue,
A language which, although not dead yet,
Is surely fated to turn to nonsense
That passing time will bury underground
To sit forgotten in unread inscriptions.
And I am not fond of Nineveh at all.
Odours linger here that do not endear:
Unwashed human bodies, rotting trash,
Exhaust, greasy cooking, a whiff of fish.

Are you a foreigner, then, an immigrant
Who comes for the avenues paved with gold
And stays to draw the dole and fulminate
Against the state of civilization?
If you don't like it here, go back home,
Drink palm beer in your third world shanty,
And we will pursue our business unhindered
By your whines, complaints and negativity.
Better yet, we'll deport you and your kind,
Put you on a barge, tow it out to sea,
Then, once out of sight of shore, sink it.
The parasite who wriggles overmuch
Invites action from his disgruntled host.

I am far too buoyant for such treatment,
More buoyant indeed than rubber ducky,
Inner tube, or message-bearing bottle.

Sink me a dozen times, inundate me
In each of seven seas, each of their gulfs,
Each of countless coves, bays and inlets.
Every time I will pop up again,
Spitting water and breathing hard, but back.
Today missing, tomorrow back at work.
A foreign object of my size, once here,
Cannot be so easily dislodged.
Nineveh must stomach me a while more.
Mighty Nineveh is my city now.
God gave it to me, assigned me this town.
Here you go, kid, it's yours, he announced.
Go there and talk to them, use their language,
Keep talking, nag them until they get it,
Advertise, negotiate, browbeat,
Wheedle, importune, plead, mock and scold
Until the Ninevites have understood
Just exactly what my requirements are.
For I am, Marguerite, or at least was,
That missing prophet, the missionary
Whose mission brought him to pass sentence,
Pass like gas God's weighty sentence
Whose subject is the Lord, object the city,
Whose verb is complete annihilation.
It's imperative they hear the imperative.
Hear, or else. Do what I say or else.
Thus sayeth the Lord. On the other hand,
His prophet repeats this without comment,
Offers no opinion on the contents,
Makes no representations of his own.
I am just, Marguerite, a conduit.

You're not a conduit, spokesperson,
Prophet or oracle. You're a toy bird,
And I don't know why I even listen.
And why are you standing in that position?
You look like you're about to lay eggs
The size of overinflated footballs.

At the limits of my range I catch signals,
Whispers, cross-talk, ancestral voices,
Djinn howl, the distant flushing of toilets.
Here you hear Ishtar Fishwife instruct
The queen of penguin yoginis on technique,
Simple tricks to revitalize romance,

Six quick tips for sensational sex.
And it's here I overheard Hindu gods
Exchanging secrets of longevity,
And foremost among these recipes
Was Siva's instruction on contortions which,
If properly practiced, will extend your life
Beyond that of geriatric carp.
This pose of mine is that mystic stance.
It energizes, strengthens, keeps me fit.
I'll teach you that stance if you'd like to learn.

No thank you, she replied. I've heard enough.
No real prophet's short and putrid green.

I just knew you'd say that, Marguerite.
It's the same response prophets always meet,
The scepticism all seers expect.
And this too's a sign, as am I, and you.
We're signs of how signs will not acquiesce,
The signs of times that won't knowingly pass.

Would the Lord send a prophet, unlooked for,
As plastic toy that doesn't walk or fly,
Anatomically correct, but lifeless,
As cold and stiff as a rigoured corpse?
Would he send a toy so underpowered,
Not even a muscled action figure?

This, Marguerite, is a cold call,
For it's Nineveh's pure bad luck it gets
Not a superheated superhero
But subzero subhero instead,
Chilled in icy waters, served up cold,
A presentation truly substandard.
Don't you want to know what happened to me?
How I ended up in the sorry state
That now meets your discriminating gaze?

Okay, then, what happened to you? she said.

I don't want to talk about it, I said.
It was horrible, Marguerite, horrible.

Talk, or else, she said. Or else you're garbage,
Beak first in the congealed bacon grease,

Contorted around the clumped coffee grounds,
Mingling your being with the potato peels.
You're in a tied plastic bag on the curb.
That sound you hear, that whee hee whump?
That's the garbage truck. Ready? You're next.

Garbage? But what, my dear, of ecology?
Every one of us performs a part,
Except industrial polluters, of course,
Who for hardship's sake will stay exempt,
In transforming these arid wastelands
Back into a pristine paradise.
It is a duty we owe to those we sire
To return city streets to garden paths
That wind among the solar-heated homes.
Pay your debt to future generations:
It is time for a garden compost heap.
It is easy to do and takes little time.
As it happens, I am adept in that art.
I can teach it to you if you'd like to learn.

I picture you, parrot, a few days hence,
Shoved by a relentless bulldozer blade
To a stinking pit, to an unmarked grave.

I hear, Marguerite. And now hear me.
Make yourself comfortable and I will speak,
Tell the whole thing, what you want to hear
And what you don't, for there exist matters
Not discussed in more genteel circles
That speech must, perforce, plunge itself through
To find the right way to predestined ends.
And, to digress upon digression a bit,
There'll be, of course, a swerve here and there
In order to provide background you lack,
Along with any other pointless points,
Non-obligatory observations,
Local colour and irrelevant asides
That my narrative circuits should generate.
And you'll learn here, for instance, many facts
That overhasty standard texts omit,
Tidbits of truth on God and his angels
And secrets of how heaven works wonders
And how, sometimes, it just botches jobs.
And here those parts they blacken out,

The very parts you most wanted to know
In your freedom of information requests,
Here those parts appear naked, smiling,
Frankly, fully disclosed for all to see.
Yes, you'll hear it all, the entire story.

I have some time before dinner, she said,
So go ahead, talk away awhile.

CAPUT THREE

Part III.1: AN ORDINARY GUY

Once, Marguerite, I was not a parrot,
Not inhuman, not at all chimeric
Or possessed of plastic exoskeleton.
At birth I wasn't yet a metamorph
And hadn't yet taken on wings and beak.
My name was Jonah, son of Amitay,
God soak me with glory, dunk me in peace.
I wore a human form, the same as you.
In fact, woman, we might have mated once
And made together a babe who'd breed true,
A child with human nose and human hair,
With fully human, working private parts.

Keep your beak to yourself, parrot, she said.

I know well how some hate hybrids,
Centaurs, manticores and feathered snakes,
Inapt, sterile, dysfunctional monsters
Never really suited for what you need,
Like a portmanteau with two compartments
One side for coat, the other bag lunch,
Neither roomy enough to take a nuke
Should God want a doom dropped off by stealth.
And that's why such luggage goes extinct,
Why all such life goes out of vogue.
Unable to cope or to range through the wild,
They now survive caged in bestiaries
Or doing tricks for food in circus acts
Or prowling the grounds on a rockstar's ranch.
And its not just bigots who turn their backs
On mixed blood races who cannot succeed.
Zoology too hates failed designs,
Selects against the beasts who can't adapt,
The jacks of all trades and masters of none
That stand in pens unemployed and unyoked,
Haggard and lean without hope of reward,
The gryphons, minotaurs, toads and giraffes
That can't do the jobs that users expect,
Like combination clock radios

That neither keep the time nor carry tunes
Nor rightly foretell news, weather and sports.

Had I a knob to twist for tone control
I'd find a way to tune away your whine.

The worst part of a bad fate, I resumed,
Is that cross-breeds rarely get offspring,
Rarely see their likeness re-cast in young.
They're like mermaids that shipwrecked sailors
Haul up out of brine onto the beach,
Over the driftwood and into the trees.
And hungry though these mariners may be,
It isn't to frypans they drag their catch,
The meat too gamey and stringy and tough
To tempt them away from the fresh shellfish
That gasp on sand after breakers retreat.
No, though famished, though greatly confused,
No man marooned would dine on this dish,
Or not right away, not while she's fresh,
Certainly not until pickled or smoked,
Not until preserved in wax-sealed jars
That vow to be true till early next spring.
But the sad news a sailor soon learns
Is that such a prize has no better use.
Wrestled ashore, it just thrashes about,
Taken to bed it grows cold, goes limp,
Transforms perfect union to perfect flop
And stops a passion well short of its goal.
And nothing dampens ardour more than damp,
More than chilled slick when rubbed up against.
These sweet-natured, full-breasted beauties
Will often wed but seldom consummate,
Seldom perform functions men most like,
Not for want of love but for want of want.
You'll never fit with misfit fish girls;
It's best instead just to throw them back,
Although, despite their fins and slimy scales,
They really can't swim more than a league
And only truly excel at short dives,
At bobbing up and down, at treading water,
At looking their best when stared at by men.
One wonders how such species multiply.

Maybe it's just a miracle, she said,

The way God prefers things multiply,
Without the great shame of prior cause.

Perhaps an antipodal tribe exists,
A faroff race of breadloaves with legs
For whom the half-fish gene is recessive.
Think how mortified they'd be to find
Double-nippled minnows among their get,
Partly baked fry who can't swim a stroke.

Had you fewer brains they wouldn't rattle!
Breadloaves, you fool bird, don't have genes.

But what explains why one is sourdough,
One rye, one multigrain whole wheat?

Perhaps spontaneous generation,
She said, or perhaps intelligent design,
The actions by which God made barnacles
After seeing the need for something hideous
With which to encrust bare seaside rocks,
The finishing touch to a job well-done.

Our Lord abhors abomination;
Kindness compels he kill creatures he maims
Or sees at least they will not reproduce,
And prolong the pains that blight fine design
With throes they undergo to replicate.
Mortal minds too can't stand bad art,
And human critics are quick to find flaws,
Quick to mock a substandard creation.
I know the open scorn and frank disdain
With which naturalists view such life,
Miscegnates, mutants, fabulous beasts,
Life that if not already sterilized,
Already drained of sperm or robbed of egg,
Would beg for clean, eugenic scalpel strokes.
And I see myself in that same fashion,
With that same disgust, that same distaste.
Pity, Marguerite, monsters born human,
With human sentience and human eyes,
Partly above surface, partly below,
Who swell up with the air swallowed at ebb
And then bloat with fluid inhaled at flood.

Pity you, parrot? I don't think so.
Nor do I quite believe the tale you tell.
I see no sign of human warmth in you
Nor any trace of human ancestry
Behind the words you blurt across the room.
I can't believe any human mother
Gave birth to the thing that became you
And didn't turn thought to infanticide.

Never impugn my mother, Marguerite.
A warmer woman never walked the earth,
A real beauty in her day, and smart too,
A credit to her long-lived ancestors,
A race of stock promoters, goons and thieves.
She sold me rights to utilize her genes
Over which she held exclusive license,
At only ten percent the going rate,
And then she let me work the balance off
Doing chores after school, after dark,
Robbing neighbours of their antique jewels.
No, Marguerite, I was carried to term,
Encountered no abortifacient drugs,
Was born without undue interference,
Headfirst, then feet, then afterbirth.
I met no resistance, no reluctance,
Met no immediate hostility,
Neither dropped on head nor smothered in crib.
I wasn't exposed in snowstorms to die
Or kidnapped by fey folk, snatched at play
And put to work cursing, curdling the milk.
I wasn't a foundling taken in by beasts,
Wetnursed by wolves or fostered by apes
Who salvaged a basket found snagged in reeds
And reared the contents as one of their own,
Later to see it turn surly and mean.
My birth, which came without complication
Or signs that mark a child beloved of God,
Like the elephant ears that buddhas get
Or shrivelled balls revelators receive,
Brought forth an ordinary infant.
And though it then seemed unremarkable
All my parts and organs were quite human,
Not that anyone analyzed tissue
Or went to any lengths to verify
How far that conclusion might be pushed.

They gave my ass a whack to clear my throat,
Counted fingers and toes and washed their hands,
Then collected fees payable, in cash.
Oh, those were heady days, infancy,
The days before my head was stuffed with thought,
Days my self was made of small ambitions
And babble bubbling up, warm from the dream.
Talk was only a carefree pasttime
And not the current, compulsory labour,
Not drawn from future, not pushed from past,
Not amortized, not metered or clocked,
Not self-enlaved by quality control.
I talked but didn't judge a word I said;
They came as hearsay only, not truth.
I pronounced them dead without taking notes
As they fogged on air and then disappeared.
And those childish notions of mine, of course,
In retrospect are best left forgotten,
Best dismissed and suppressed and stricken out.

And that's fine with me, said Marguerite,
For otherwise, judging by what I've heard,
You'd just read them into the record now.

Juvenilia, you know, is often crap.
Even prodigies who reach their peak young
Would recant such work, were they not dead,
Or burnt out husks or drunks by age six.

Don't think, parrot, that age improves thought.
Your dying words, should fate give you the chance,
Will prove just as empty and infantile.
And don't expect they'll somehow hang there,
Glow awhile for survivors to jot down.
If anyone at all attends your death
He'll likely press pillows over your face
To cut off your breath and muffle your words,
To give you peace and to take some himself.

But just listen to what I'm saying now.
My youth, in human form, was paradise.
And though that mercy didn't last long
I grew to adulthood human throughout
And enjoyed all the virtues of that state
Along with small samplings of minor vice.

Normal appetites did accumulate
As growth triggered the organs and hormones
Dormant in early stages of boyhood
And gave a new and stronger sense of will
To otherwise listless, indolent flesh.
Normal hungers, cravings, thirsts and desires,
Diverse in content but united in form,
Drove my organism forward and back
With atavistic determination,
Pushed me around and yet kept me in place,
Kept me distracted while teaching me dance.
Young ladies soon learned it might be best
To stand well outside my tight ambit,
Although those who didn't, didn't complain,
And many who did looked on with regret.
Many taverns refused to sell me drink,
And many male peers shunned my company
After talk, innocent conversation,
Led to broken limbs, in one case death.
And along with desires came frustrations,
And the certain mild dissatisfactions
That any young man must encounter.
I learned to contend, to argue and curse,
And sometimes I would shout out a warning,
But only to avoid household accidents,
Never for impending global disasters.
All my political and religious beliefs
Were bland, undistinguished and commonplace,
And I didn't then hold strong opinions,
Other than those I shared with close neighbours.
The entire village disliked Assyrians,
An ancient, deep-held, racial enmity
Compounded by the heavy tax burden
They'd inflicted throughout their great empire,
But hostility rarely turned ugly,
Rarely turned to automatic weapons
Or suicide bombers disguised as nuns,
Unless swift reprisal seemed unlikely.
It looked as though my future course of life
Would follow the age-old human patterns,
Work hard, marry, raise children, retire,
Sleep and eat and drink and sleep some more,
Copulate, praise the Lord, and then die,
Until strange revisions of circumstance
Brought forth the profound change you see.

It's now my purpose to relate the tale
Of those actions and reactions that brought
God to punish me in this odd fashion.
And this punishment might've gone much worse,
I suppose, given all that I now know,
But Godhead in endless mercy refrained
From putting all his weight behind the punch.
And had he chosen, he might've delivered
A really lethal and heavy-handed swat
And thus with this single, casual blow
Project my three dimensional volume
Across some two dimensional surface
As if I were a mere, irritant fly.
He might've splattered my soft viscera
Over floral themes on his parlour walls,
A grim sign, deterrent to other pests.

You offended him in some way? she inquired.

If bad things should happen to good people
Who else but Godhead should shoulder the blame?
He might pretend it's all part of a plan,
And whatever happens, happens for best,
But deal with him once, you know how he works.
It isn't a plan that keeps things intact
But long-nursed grudges that plot their revenge.
Godhead hides and smolders underground.
He counts and re-counts age-old resentments,
Awaits a chance no matter how slim
To mete out vengeance for honest mistakes.
That omnipotent brute took offense
After one business deal went sour,
Due, I should add, to his own bad judgment,
And transformed me into my present shape.
The nature of that deal, what went wrong,
Is a long, twisted tale, and, in the end,
Of no concern to anyone but me,
To me and possibly a few close friends,
To me and small numbers of Ninevites
Who suffered divine collateral damage,
To me and that handful of researchers
Working in self-imposed isolation
In locations scattered across creation
On the long range effect of God's fury.
I've seen a few articles, here and there,

That specialist journals will sometimes run,
That might seem to bear on my current plight.
Radiation will rarely work well
But some success with herbal treatments
Was seen in rodents found nesting in labs...

I think, she observed, that there is no way
To stop you from telling your tale short of...

Short of what? But let us not consider
All of the various possibilities,
Which, I should add, I could easily do,
And perhaps I should do, notwithstanding
The narrative that awaits me just offstage.
I could generate all the many options,
Just march through them quickly once or twice,
I know already which to mention first,
The trick, you see, is knowing where to stop.

A compulsive talker? she said. Talk, then,
And until I have become entirely bored
I will try my best, oh parrot, to listen.

Part III.2: CALL ME JONAH

But don't call me parrot. Call me Jonah,
For so my parents, the poor fools, named me,
Believing it somehow a lucky name.
They were devotees of numerology
And churned out extensive calculations
To ensure that my luck was not impeded
By badly weighted consonants, by vowels
Divisible by five, by seven, by twelve,
By hidden sums that lacked quadratic roots
Or spun off into continued fractions.
But luck was against me from the very start,
Result, perhaps, of miscalculation
Or exotic algebraic concepts
Employed despite lack of rigorous proof
And which, in fact, have no other virtue
Beyond a scant, recondite elegance;
That is, they're beautiful but always false.
They sketched out treacherous, curvacious paths

That ever after led my life astray.

I think I'll name you Twinky, said she.
I'll cover that socket with an eyepatch
And set you up next to Barbie and Ken.

The chances are that our names mean nothing,
With no impact on how events unfold,
Too soft, too formless to injure much,
To kill or maim a foe, to dent fenders,
To make the slightest nick in stainless skies.
And there's no ink indelible enough
To make signatures stick on covenants
After the hand that wrought them rots away
Or paper that took them turns to dust.
A name, even spoken slowly or spelled,
Is understood by neither ants nor gods.
It's only noise that dwells in ear canals,
That reverberates, echoes there awhile,
Softly repeating first detonation
Yet never achieving denotation.
It does its best to make itself essence
And style itself a body's overlord
And gather up rich possessions for itself
Should any such be left lying around
And unattended by some other name,
But time comes when proud sounds must fade,
Dissolve, vanish into background noise,
And leave numbers free to fend for themselves
And build their sums to transfinite heights
Without any human hindrance or let.
True numbers, I say, can't be known.
They come from God, then back to God go
Without taking stop in human locales.
Those numbers we use are man-made thoughts,
All imperfect, fake, flawed through and through,
All false, all except log nine cubed,
True just enough to make pedants weep.

But why, said Marguerite, is high C
Precisely twice the count of middle C?

It's a trick of how ears measure sound.
Use fewer letters, or more, like God,
And such correspondence will disappear

And cease to bother a true connoisseur
Who likes his strings to thrumb with microtones.

So numbers, you claim, do us no good?

Modern astrologic research has shown
That numerology's claims are nonsense,
Altogether unrelated to stars,
Galaxies and planetary motions,
To the primeval fireball's ignition,
To forces that resulted from the rotation,
Cooling and expansion of this fireball
That then became malicious pranks designed
To set up the situation in which
I'd little choice but to participate.
First Cause cascaded, cast off sparks,
Corruscated, scintillated with spite,
Sent secondary causes to ordain
That I'd receive in the end the rotten luck
To find myself, like my father before me,
Merely a poor but honest fisherman.
Had God but displaced one small quantum
In space-time's fouled initial conditions
I might have been a king or duke or lord
Or even a poor but honest woodcutter
Set down to dwell somewhere far off,
Some other region or faraway kingdom
Less God-beloved and thus more secure,
Born to parents less enthused by numbers
And less inclined to counterfactuals,
More inclined to be dishonest but rich
And bent to rear sons with similar bent.
Instead there I was, poor but honest,
Fishing in the wrong place at the wrong time.
Poor but honest! It makes me want to puke.
The wedding together of those two words
Was marriage mandated in heaven above,
A safeguard designed to protect the few
On whom God smiles, privileged progeny
Of those robber barons who rule the world,
And what God hath joined, no man may part,
Unless he wields extraordinary luck,
Cleaves the knot with a single skillful stroke.
But that man wasn't me, that luck mine.
The phrase wrong place, wrong time, says it all,

Describes my fishing life start to finish,
From bad start right to horrific end.
The other fishermen could read the signs
That indicated where their prey would lurk,
And since I came from a seafaring folk
Who ate nothing that didn't thrive in salt,
You would think that I'd read fish-sign too,
But not all elkhounds can hunt an elk,
To choose one example among many,
Or know what one looks like, exactly,
Or what you do with it once located.
None admit that, though, to other hounds.
Configurations of shoreline and shoal,
Submerged logs, exposed rocks and sandbanks,
Wave action, the behaviour of seabirds,
The presence of kelp, absence of insects,
All these to me were like lost language,
Minoan linear B, hieroglyphs,
The Mayan pictographs, the Viking runes,
The bad scrawls that worm crawls make in sand.
I couldn't even read a tide-table
Much less puzzle out the secret codes
That signified schools of fish nearby.
This illiteracy brought down disgrace
On generations who selectively bred
And chose their mates not for beauty or brawn
But how closely they matched a model form,
A weapon perfectly honed, finely fashioned,
Fitted by design only to kill fish.
It brought me shame on docks in afternoons
When discussion turned to the morning's feats.
How explain why I brought home no catch?
And how explain I only made it home,
Only found the way by purest of chance?
My fish-understanding was so shallow
Both my thoughts and boat oft ran aground
And kept me going nowhere hours on end,
Waiting for a tide to come float me free.
And yes, I used a boat to go fishing.
I know enough about fishing at sea
To know it done best when done from a boat,
The depths so great that you can't wade out
Without liquid sloshing up your nose.
All the best among the catchers of fish
Go nowhere without a boat beneath.

And it's what they recommend, the experts,
The most proficient among fishermen,
The ones you see featured in magazines
Photographed with boats heaped up with catch.
This is how I wished to picture myself
And so obtained on credit, nothing down,
Easy monthly payments that go for years,
A secondhand early model barge,
Ancient both in its concept and substance.
The concept, in fact, was prehistoric
And belonged to that long-forgotten time
In which the raft began evolution
Toward the more sophisticated forms
Of mankind's oceangoing transport,
When random mutation and genetic drift
Generated scores of exotic breeds,
Like the great oversized motor vessel
Meant perhaps to ferry automobiles
Judging by the expansive asphalt decks,
Which today survives only as a fossil
Half-buried atop Mount Ararat.

So, you are an evolutionist, parrot?

Not so, I said. The world was created
Just now, just as you last spoke to me.
Your sentence is only a false memory,
A false fossil like all those with which
God has salted underlying strata.
This is how too it all gets destroyed,
When the last dispensation expires.
Rapture uproots the saved like carrots,
And lets the rest pursue their phony lives,
Unaware of nonstop lightning strikes
That blast to ash all hopes they hold dear.
All of our yesterdays never happened,
None of our tomorrows ever turn up,
But it doesn't matter, what can you do?
We must press on with life nevertheless.

If every moment will make us anew
Why bother making dinner? said she.
Why not pick up the phone, order it in?

Either the quails will come and manna falls

Or else your hot pizza goes elsewhere,
Maybe next door, maybe across town.

Either way, bird, someone else pays.

My boat had a square hull and a flat keel
And four shallow sides and four corners.
It was propelled, when propelled, largely by
chance,
Like those romantic, rudderless craft
That took the knights made despondent by love,
Bore them off at low speed, slapping waves,
And drove them directly into fog banks.
Chance and fate, when adrift in boats at sea,
Are near twins, look very much alike,
And viewed from distance often confuse fools
For whom the better course, the better goal,
Will always lie inland, far from surf,
And far from undertows that drag you off,
And tug you out to sea, willing or not.
Upper waters are contingent, undirected,
And broken apart by conflicted forces,
But lower down the currents run unseen,
Give events intent otherwise lacked,
Provide plot and purpose, a causation,
A teleology to test attention.
But there was no way to know beforehand
Which of the directions my boat would take.
My boat would, without fixed bow or stern,
As ready bear east as head to the west,
As likely bear north as head to the south,
Bear northeast as head to the southwest,
Bear northwest as head to the southeast,
To southsoutheast as the northnorthwest,
To southsouthwest as the northnortheast...

Is something stuck, parrot? said Marguerite.

Some relay or solenoid, I said,
Isn't properly snapping itself shut.
To etcetera as the etcetera.
Because I possessed no compass on board
Which which I might compute the north
The direction that the boat chose in the end
Remained almost entirely conjectural

Until it slowed, stopped and started to sink.
In fact, if my unwieldy craft could be said
To have any preferred direction at all,
It preferred to sink to the floor of the sea
And to mingle with those long, drifting kelps
That inhabit the universal depths.
And this was due, no doubt, to its substance.
My boat's substance was wood, an ancient wood
So far advanced in decline and decay
That it scarcely deserved wood's title.
Certainly it possessed none of that strength
Or that rigidity one would be inclined
To associate with the substance of wood.
It had the tendency, at the slightest touch,
To disintegrate into a topsoil,
And not the rich, fertile loam of the Nile,
Not the silts of the Tigris and Euphrates,
Not the soils of the Ganges, Amazon,
Mississippi, Columbia or Congo.
This was not a topsoil that nurtured a crop
So huge it fed not only labour
But an idle management class as well.
This topsoil possessed no nutrients,
Unless you were to call salt a nutrient.
I am inclined to call salt a condiment,
But I am tolerant of other taxonomies.
And yet, if by some extreme mischance
A seed were to lodge itself in such soil,
A seed of even the most hardy weed,
It surely would not prosper on the diet
It found in the soil from the wood of my boat.
But soil did not linger in the vessel
Long enough for the passing seed to find;
The water that entered through all the holes
Would quite regularly sluice it away.
Now water, I found, was quick to enter
But reluctant to exit the vessel's holes.
Consequently, I was constantly bailing.
To bail my water-filled boat I would take
An old soup tin in my starboard hand
Along with a beer tin in my port hand
And would wildly flail both arms at the flood.
But because the transient paper labels
Had long ago come off both tins
It was never possible for one to say

Which tin was soup and which tin was beer.
And since the hull was so perfectly square
It was never possible for one to say
Which side was port and which was starboard,
To mention nothing of the bow or the stern,
Unless by some chance the boat was headed
In the direction I happened to face,
An occurrence too remote to consider,
So that one never knew if the port hand
Flailed with the soup tin or with the beer tin,
Or if the beer tin was held in the port hand
Or starboard hand, of if starboard hand
Flailed with the beer tin or with the soup tin,
Or if the soup tin was in starboard hand
Or port hand and one could never know,
One could never stop to think it over,
And one could never stop bailing water
If the vessel were not instantly to sink.

Don't get carried away with the bailing,
Warned Marguerite. The possibilities,
Though endlessly fascinating to some,
Have already exhausted my short patience.

But it takes less time to tell than to do.
This constant work left me little time
Either to navigate across the sea
Or indeed to cast my net out for fish.
But even had I time to navigate
That time would not have provided me much
Without a compass or nautical charts,
Without a sextant, without a memory
For the movement of the planets and the stars
And the suns and the moons which came and went
Whenever they pleased and observed no rules
And so neither surprised me when they appeared
Nor disappointed me when they disappeared.
Some mystics will tell you, if asked or not,
That whichever way for prayer you face,
For true believers that way is Mecca,
Although it's best not to make a test,
Since such ways are not always direct
When time comes to set off in haj.
It's likewise, a bit, for clueless who fish.
In truth, one place was as good as the next,

For even had I time to cast my net,
That time would not have provided me much
So ill-equipped a fishboat had I.
Although I had a net, I lacked a club
With which to beat a sea-creature senseless
And lacked a pail into which I could fling
Its bleeding form, now turned cold and limp,
For had I such a pail I, no fool,
Would've bailed out water with that pail
Instead of using beer tin in port hand
Or using soup tin in starboard hand,
Neither of which, of course, would fit a fish
That wouldn't slip through the mesh of my net.

Part III.3: A LUCKY BREAK

This story, parrot, is getting stagnant.
Can you get on with it? said Margeuerite.

But then one day my luck took a turn,
For the better it seemed, but really for worse.
On that day I was sitting there in my boat,
Afloat right beneath heaven's apex,
To my eye a spot as suited as any,
When I felt the slight change in the net's drag
That indicated, even to incompetents,
Perhaps a fish, perhaps a clot of weed.
This came, as such interruptions do,
Just as I was about to begin lunch.
But no meal can ever compete with this,
The small shiver that races through the net,
The little shock with which world will announce
That time has come to play a game of chance.
It's why we go down to the seas in boats
Or drop onto peaks from helicopters
Or drive through forests in our four by fours.
Fortune will hide behind roadside shrubs
And time to time throw some carcass out.
You don't know if the hurtling slab of meat
Is a white stag that bounds across your path
As call to adventure, the start of a tale,
Or moose doomed to go through your windshield,
An end to two tales, both your's and his,

Or just an eyelash-stuck bacon crumb.
Some feel this thrill once, some never,
And some so often it goes unnoticed.
Nine times or less per year is optimal
To keep the thrill undiminished, alive,
Assuming no occasion turns tragic,
Or so ancient sages learned from visions
Dismantled with care, as cats with dead mice,
Part by ruined part, so to remember,
So to catch it before it slips away
And hides again in piles of greasy bones.
This is how all new knowledge is gained,
Which berries are bitter, which bring death,
And which go well with a dollop of cream.
And these dreams arrive with that same jolt,
That same unanticipated thrill
That doesn't leave until the fruit's consumed
And you fall down dead or smile with relief.
I drew the net in and found that I'd caught
A fish, a small fish, too small a fish,
Salmon, I'd say, from the adipose fin.
I flung it back in, cast again net,
Again felt snag, again drew it back.
When net returned, the same fish was there.

But wait, Jonah! Don't throw me back in.
I'm an angel of the Lord, said the fish.

In all my career I have never before
Had occasion to doubt the word of a fish
And yet I simply could not help finding
This proposition quite improbable.

Although I'm impressed by your station in life,
I replied, and by the fact you know my name,
You're still way too small to take to sell.
And I threw the fish back into the sea.

Was this fish luminous, lit within,
She asked, by heaven's otherworldly light?

It had that sheen that fish often have,
But otherwise no illumination.
And what kind of lighting it had within
Could only become manifest to man

And curious seals who follow caught fish
And gulls aloft who wheel in watch for guts,
Had I slit it open from tail to chin
Instead of letting it freely swim off.

Had you performed such an operation
You might have learned what made it converse
And sold the secret at far higher price,
Pound for pound, than what fishmeat would yield.
I see now, she said, why you weren't rich.

Again I cast my net and brought it back.
Again I found that fish thrashing there.
I am an angel of the Lord, said the fish,
Intoning these words with a great menace.

I will admit I'm not too bright, I said,
Yet I'm not so dull I'd accept your claim
Without some proper verification.
Do you have any identification,
Valid driver's license or credit card?

I left my wallet in my angelic robes.

Likely story, fish. Face reality.
As a fish you're too small for me to sell,
But as an angel you are too large to fit
Into such small-sized fish costume.

Size alone is no way to judge things.
Nor, for that matter, is colour or shape,
Or taste or texture, or how right it feels
When you give it prolonged, intimate hugs.
But never mind. What I'm trying to say
Is that you have here an emissary
Sent down expressly from the Godhead
Bringing critical, time-sensitive news.
And what kind of welcome do you give it?
Do you know how far I had to swim?
Those who reject messengers sent from God
By flinging them, divine message and all,
Not just once or twice with token flings,
But repeatedly and with undue vigour,
Into the water, later learn reason
To regret such rude, unwise behaviour.

The Lord, you know, can target fishermen,
Even here, with exquisite precision,
Can bombard a spot with microwave wrath,
Until the flesh blisters, bubbles and bursts
And yet leaves a wooden vessel unscorched.

But a fish, you'd think, wouldn't mind the wet,
Would welcome the chance to slip beneath waves
And re-moisten dried out gills awhile.
But okay, fish, I said, say your say,
But first inform me who this God is.

You mean you haven't heard of the Godhead?
Said the angel, or fish, with incredulity.
Where have you been? Surely he's well-known?
Had I but known what a heathen you are,
I might have brought a few pamphlets along.

I can't pretend I haven't heard the name
Raised in prayer or curse, bandied about,
And used to justify any action
For which no better reason comes forth.
But I'd taken from this the fixed impression,
A mistaken attitude, I now see,
God was pretty much passive principle.
I thought God just stood as figurehead
For all that is, for this world as one,
Or, if not one, for this bucket of parts,
These mismatched bits from different kits.
I thought God just abstract concept,
Not someone with whom I might converse
Even indirectly, at one remove,
Through go-betweens of less than legal length.
All I know is that Godhead's spherical,
And not flat, as naive ancients believed.

Godhead is oblate, informed the angel,
Like those melons grown in California
And fattened for market on mountain waters,
The seeds everywhere, the rind nowhere.
Godhead is oblate and green and massive.
Godhead is stately, with a solid presence,
Quiet, reserved, but still good-natured,
Nigh unbeatable at pinochle.
But instruction on spiritual matters

Must wait until after my proposal,
The word of God, has been duly delivered.

Yes, I agreed, let's cut to the chase.
I fear, from this unorthodox approach,
That I'm about to see some kind of scam.

In return for certain considerations
Godhead offers you the awesome power
Of finding and catching a tonnage of fish
Of not less than thirty thousand metric
And not to exceed a hundred thousand.
Certain species, of course, may not be caught,
Some at night, some in summer or spring,
Some, endangered, unclean, not at all.
These restrictions, incidentally,
Are not subject to negotiation.
Godhead must respect fishing quotas
Imposed by the international conventions
And several multilateral treaties.
In addition you will receive the faculty
Of foreseeing future scenes and events,
And the title of Prophet of the Godhead,
Plus for twelve issues a paid subscription
To the periodical God's Hot Tips,
An in-house stockmarket newsletter
Used by most of the major pension funds
To build well-balanced portfolios.

Make yourself at home, friend fish, I said,
And please accept my profuse apologies
For this incomplete hospitality:
I have no pail into which to fling you,
And small as you are, you're larger than soup.
I accept your offer. I'm wealthy! I cried.

So be it, said the fish, so be it.
But you are certainly no negotiator.
The Godhead was prepared to go higher,
And just how high you'll never now know.
He is an experienced haggler from way back,
Honour-bound to lowball first offers.
Moreover, Jonah, you should've inquired
Before you agreed to these stated terms
Just what in return Godhead will ask.

The instruction on spiritual matters,
Fisherman, can commence now in earnest.
In Godhead's bargains never put trust,
Never rely on your apparent good luck
In any game that he happens to suggest.
Never, sucker, wager your fate with God
And never underestimate his skill,
For luck is such, and the Godhead is such,
No sooner have you placed your bet you know
That he has eye that narrows, whiskers that
twitch,
Nostrils that cast for the glow of cold cash.
You know when you see his knees slightly bent,
Back straight, his head held high and steady,
It's far too late to check out exits.
From tonsure to toenail, nosetip to tail,
He is loose and relaxed, attuned to his goal.
You know when he chalks his custom-made cue,
When he angles his elbow down to table,
That an innocent demeanour has deceived you;
Divine modesty's necessarily false.
You will understand, as the cueball streaks,
God is a shark in tunafish clothing
And you can kiss your precious balls goodbye.

And which God are we talking about here?
Asked Marguerite. Your God or my God?
In this city it's Assur we worship.

Two is too many, one is too few,
Like Siamese twins connected from birth.
Although names differ, all Gods are one,
Are one and a fraction, a fracture, a split.
Call him Zeus, Allah, Baal or Jehovah.
They're all the same, and each will claim to hear
Petitions couched only in his own tongue,
But, in truth, they're all multilingual,
And any one of them can handle your call
If you're calling up to make a nice pledge.
And it was with just such a notion in mind
That I next addressed that arrogant fish.

So what does God desire of me, I asked,
In return for this divine appointment?
Exaltation and praises? I think not.

I take from your previous remarks it will be,
More likely, a cheque or money order
To assist him in his charitable works.

And with what shall you come before the Lord?
A myriad year-old, first-born rams?
Ten myriad rivers of olive oil?
A hundred myriad yards of sail cloth?
A thousand myriad flagons of ale?
Ten thousand myriad summer fruits?
A hundred thousand myriad leopards?
A thousand thousand myriad sacks
Of the rum-centered chocolate candies
That first caused Lucifer's legions to fall?
Dissolve your assets, empty your accounts,
Sacrifice wealth, health and self-respect,
Life, liberty and the pursuit of women:
Godhead really doesn't give a damn.
There is not much that the good Lord requires
That he doesn't already own or control,
Either directly or by means of proxies.
Bring forward forklifts bearing pallets
Laden with crates of oiled assault rifles,
Gold bullion, laser-guided nightscopes,
Rocket propelled grenades, and other gifts.
Heap before his throne the world's riches;
Only omnipolitness prevents yawns.
Nor does he need lots of adulation
Of the kind one gets from children and dogs,
Brain-damaged youths and servile toadies,
For he's secure enough in self image
That infantile desires for such are gone,
Although, true, he goes apeshit when crossed
Or when fawning seems less than sincere
Or when figs in baskets heaped on altars
Prove acrawl with larvae, overmature,
Or even, a worst case scenario,
Baskets only are half filled with fruit,
Whatever the age, however infested.
He does not even seek fame and glory;
The most fanatic atheist admits
His place in history is well-established.
There is only one thing that excites him.
And what excites the Godhead, Jonah,
Had better quickly excite everybody,

Since the excitement of almighty Godhead
Is itself a pleasure greater than paradise,
To say nothing of the penalties exacted
For neglecting to stir his enthusiasm.
Yea, there's just one thing that excites him.

And what's that, I said as the angel paused.

The Assyrian Gross Domestic Product.

The Assyrian Gross Domestic Product?

God can be aroused from eternal stupour
Only with this one simple statistic,
With its real growth, corrected for inflation,
And the acceleration of that growth,
And acceleration's acceleration
Unto the nth derivative of curve,
In asymptotic approach to pure zip.
For God, being somewhat abstract himself,
Loves abstraction: render Caesar coinage
But render God more numeric tender.
The more numismatically inclined,
When ruminating on remuneration
In their baffled and rudimentary way,
Can bite coins to test their alloyed worth,
But God, being old and wise and toothless,
Needs an even softer fodder to chew.

And what has this to do with me? I said.
Sublime sublimation puts me to sleep.

Assyria is losing its confidence,
And Godhead has chosen you to repair it.
For to God the GDP tastes flat.
The collective worth of all Assyria
As measured and expressed by GDP,
Believed a bellwether indicator
By all of Nineveh's wisest oracles
And every pundit currently in vogue,
Sits not quite right on his flaccid tongue.
Godhead has been distressed to note of late
A decline in the incline of the sum's growth.
This means a crisis, in Godhead's view,
A view that is almost certainly correct,

In consumer-producer confidence.
God fears despair and ruin will result
And has decided to take action against
The rising flood-tide of self-defeatism.

Why bother? I say let them all burn.
The stuckup swine need some despair
To counterbalance that excess pride,
And ruin, I dare say, might go far
In improving the unsightly skyline
With which Nineveh occludes dusk and dawn,
The pavements with which it suffocates soil,
And the furnaces with which it fouls the air.
It's an eyesore that's much better blotted.

Your opinion, he said, is irrelevant.

Why should I intervene in this matter?
Let their well-deserved fate overtake them,
Overthrow them and overtly stomp on them.
I will gladly stand aside and witness it.
What have the Assyrians ever done for me?

They've instituted throughout their empire
Jurisprudence and law enforcement
Envied everywhere for its swift arrest,
Swift arraignment, trial and execution
Of the least petty thief or jaywalker.
They subdued barbarians and butchered
The Babylonians, Chaldeans and Turks,
The Medes and Swedes and other savage beasts
That made the countryside unsafe for man.
They built aqueducts and paved highways,
Brought you literacy, cablevision,
Pocket romances, modern medicine,
Light beers, diet colas, pay toilets,
Electric power, generally accepted
Accounting principles, indexed pensions,
And an improved herbal essence shampoo.
They poisoned the weeds, they slew the mosquitoes,
Knocked down unsightly trees for firewood.
They have enriched you and increased you and did
you
Many other favours besides, fella.

Despite these works, fish, they deserve to die.
If I were the Godhead I would have nothing,
And I mean nothing, to do with Assyrians.
I would have exterminated the whole colony,
The adults and grubs alike, long ago.
And as for the accomplishments you list,
It's far better I die in wilderness,
Deprived of electricity, telephone,
And hot and cold running honey and milk
Than survive in Ninevite servitude.

I don't think I care for your attitude.
Let me put it this way, said the fish.
The Lord has decided to save Nineveh
And he has chosen you as his instrument,
If you get in God's way, you'll get squashed.
Choose to disobey and where can you flee?
You're here, strapped down in God's dentist's
chair,
Jaws propped open, and you'd better submit,
For his electric drill hovers above you;
If you flinch you will make him a brain surgeon.
He is closer to you than your jugular,
Closer than your medulla oblongata,
Sinoid cavities and your inner ear.
Yea, he's closer even than your own will.
You've agreed to be prophet, now you're required,
I repeat, required to perform the duties
Attached to the honour of that position.

But why me? I said. I didn't apply
For the position - I'm not qualified.

Expediency governed your selection.
In the beginning, after chalking his cue,
God looked at the table set before him
And gave the slightest tap on the cue-ball.
And lo! All the subatomic particles
Scurried to their designated positions.
It was the least effort for the maximum gain,
A truly elegant distillation
Of highest benefit from lowest cost.
The result wasn't perfect, but it worked.
And when time came to fine-tune creation,
To boost productivity's sagging curve,

The same general principle was observed.

That's my kind of God, I said to this,
A moment that packs lightspeed whallop
As it sleds the jetstream geodesic,
Taking the easy way, the timeless curve,
The shortest in distance between two points,

He found the simultaneous solution
To the problem's countless vector equations
Was some poor bastard of a fisherman
And about three microvolts of divine zap.

Divine zap? I yelled. What divine zap?

It won't hurt for more than a few minutes,
A half hour at most and rarely more
Than two or three weeks in extreme cases,
Said the fish, hastening to reassure.
But it's true - you have no qualifications
Beyond the fact that you're low-cost labour.
Prophecy surely requires clairvoyance
And let's face it, you can't even predict
If tomorrow is Friday. No offense.
But this defect is easily repaired.
The smallest infusion of divine wisdom
Is all that's needed to change your condition.

Part III.4: ANOINTED

Ow! I cried out. Ow! Something bit me!

You neigh and buck like unlucky Pegasus,
But it's a gadfly of another colour
That has punctured your personal composure.
An insects lights and bites as it likes,
But who knows from where it comes, where it goes,
Except for maybe an entomologist?
So it is with God's inoculations.
The gift of prophecy is in your bloodstream.
Each beat of your heart spreads the gift
Down arteries into capillaries
Until it permeates every cell
In every tissue of your whole body.

How does it feel to be an anointed prophet?

The only difference I feel, I said,
Is a terrible headache coming on.

You feel the premonition of a headache?
This is a good sign and a premonition
Of still better premonitions to come.

Now wait! Headache and premonition,
Except in strength, feel to me the same.
Now, if the headache that I'm now having
Is not the headache that I'm now having
But some headache that I am yet to have,
What headache is it I'm now having?
I'm almost certain it's getting much worse.
Is it only the memory of itself,
Or is it the memory's premonition?
And is everything that I think I think
Therefore not in fact what I now think
But what I will think, say, a year from now?
Can this same confusion last that long?

Possibly, said the angel, but if so
Then remember that thinking about thinking
Is a thankless yet necessary task.
How else know the good thoughts from the bad?
You're too immersed in the immediate, friend.
Transcend petty human criteria,
For you need to use more than size alone
To judge which fish to keep, which to toss,
Which thoughts are signals, which are pure noise,
Which phenomena are signs, and which ain't.

And with what do you suggest I substitute
My formerly efficacious criteria?
Your three microvolts of divine zap?

Of course. But let's channel these few volts
A little further onto your cortex,
Unwrinkled as yet by truth's complexities.
Of any plan what you should first address
Is not how good does it taste or feel,
But what will be the plan's long-term yield.
Next ask: what about my other yields,

How is my overall portfolio?
And lastly ask: can I get away with it?
Can risks be reduced to the vanishing point?
And you'll need immeasurable confidence,
A faith you're supernaturally charmed
And basking in light from hot, beaming stars.
Take on the persona of holy prophet,
A seer of visions, a dreamer of dreams,
Emancipated from reality's grip
And launched by fate through the rude exit womb
Along the ballistic of the Midas touch,
Your seed falling only on fertile ground.
Your outrageous fortune is fair assured
Just so long as it's known you're the prick
That the Lord has picked his widest smile with.

And how do you instill such a confidence
When all prior experience shows it false?

It has already been instilled, friend Jonah;
You need only realize your powers.
Tell me, might you happen to have a pin?

A pin? No, I stated. And why would I?

Oh damn! he said. We'll have to improvise.
Imagine a pin, Jonah, a small pin,
And then imagine the head of this pin.
Imagine looking at the head of the pin.
Now describe to me what you see there.

Why, they're tiny, little angels, I said.
Cherubim, no doubt, countless thousands of them,
A thriving, teeming colony of angels.

What are the angels doing? he demanded.

I squinted and looked at the head of the pin.
Just milling around and doing nothing,
Much like a hive of idle honey bees.

They're dancing, you damn fool, the angel said.

When I looked close I saw it was true.
The sounds they danced to were inaudible

But order and rhythm guided their movement.
The stately dance, which at the time I thought
To be some form perhaps of jazz ballet
With aleatoric choreography
That shuttled and shuffled gavottes and bourees
Directed by a hidden Markov chain,
I now recognize to be, by virtue
Of improved central processing unit,
The Fibonacci sequence of integers
Graphed on pinhead in intricate mazes,
Eccentric, intervolved, yet regular,
More regular than most dancing you'll see
When most irregular and random it seemed.

And here is proof, he said, of God's power,
And here is proof of your new ability
To see the power at work in all things,
Even on the smallest of all dance floors.
Prophet minds see more than meets the eye:
Observe angels foxtrot out their praise
Of Godhead's tightly programmed machine!

And why do you sometimes say God, I asked,
And sometimes Godhead? Which is correct?
It wouldn't do at all to get it wrong
Since I know how miffed a god can get
If even heathens mispronounce his name.
Teach me the way to make the proper sounds:
I'll memorize them in my hourly chants.

Some say God and some say Godhead,
But Godhead is the more descriptive term,
For as Maimonides has always argued,
To ascribe limbs to God is just absurd,
Yet to conceive God to be dismembered,
To be only a legless, armless torso,
No matter how magnificent and manly,
Is positively too grotesque for words,
While to believe that what remain, the head,
Is also absent, amounts to atheism
And sheer sacrilege, if not heresy.
Highest authority supports my argument.
As David said, is he who made the ear,
And who made the eye himself deaf and blind?
Nor should any true logic attempt

A contradiction of the apostle Paul,
Who saw through a looking glass darkly
Divine nature revealed in his own soul.
How he achieved this feat is unknown,
But it was a shocking breach of security.
Somehow he had bypassed the whirlwind,
Bypassed anti-eavesdropper comets,
Gained entry to the divine database
And decoded God's private language.
Only God's spirit knows what God is,
And it knows that God is in fact a head;
Godhead is a head, a cephalopod,
To which same well-defined class belong
The squid, octopus and chambered nautilus.
God's head is far more handsome a head
And far more carefully coiffured a head
Than, for instance, the squid's, but just the same
It is absolutely, indisputably,
A functional and morphological head,
A head to which sinews are fast attached
And from which the world like a puppet dangles,
A cranium crammed with perfect knowledge
Recapitulating all of creation,
Real and imagined, in one, continuous,
Bursting, epiphenomenal brainstorm.
And to these truths it might well be added
Just as a fine diamond needs a setting,
A mouth manifestly requires a head,
Unless given over to Cheshire smiles,
And Godhead is nothing without a mouth,
As I in this angel's office attest.

Although, I said, I doubt not what you state,
Nor doubt that to pursue such thought at length
Would greatly improve my feeble intellect,
Nonetheless, even so weak a mind as mine
Can not fail to note an absence of life
To the wide ocean of wisdom you propose.
As with every other stretch of sea
My luck has yet encountered, it lacks fish.
Angelic nature might sustain itself
On such a fine, metaphysical lunch,
But a fisherman, you see, requires fish.
Fish, to be brief, is what I'm after. Fish!

I thank you, sir, for your kind reminder,
But, as it happens, you might have saved breath
By waiting to discern my final intent,
Which is, in fact, to give you what you lack.
And yet, if our bargain is to be fulfilled,
You must also master the prophetic craft
And learn to read in all visible signs
The invisible ends of God at work.
And so, if your life's goal is to catch fish,
The most efficient achievement of that goal,
In view of our bargain, is to learn the trick
That most prophets employ in their forecasts,
To cast your net in the one spot the fish
Shall reach to meet their foregone conclusions.

And how is such a trick learned? I inquired.

You will learn by experience with Nineveh,
Leading Ninevites to salvation's grace
The way a shepherd leads his flock to fold.

And are people, then, so easily led?

People, said the fish, are much like sheep,
Or like fish, if you prefer, fisherman.
Oh I know they pretend to own opinions,
An ownership they will defend to the death,
But, in truth, since that original sin
Committed by your gullible ancestress,
Originality has fallen from fashion,
Grown almost as scarce as the naked truth,
Replaced now by fig leaf underwear.
Who now rejects the outward for inward?
Who shuns the popular for the authentic?
Hear them, my friend, declare independence.
They will protest too much and too loudly
Complete freedom of human will and thought,
Yet they listen to talk from any worm
That works its way inside ripe innocence,
Squeezing slim plausibility around
All the obstacles erected by reason.
Inside attention is hypnotic trance.
At the slumbering pit of the mental fruit
There lies a deeply obedient zombie
Who never refuses rides with a stranger.

Here, in the volitional intersection
Of intellect and flesh, a prophet finds
A deep well, a perfectly passive pool,
That reflects any wave that comes along.
Any least splash or signal sent through
A medium of such elasticity
Will decrement peaks, increment troughs,
And stretch wavelengths to slow green wiggles.
This, my friend, is known as Huckster's Heaven.
Through a skilled and judicious application
Of proper sequences of stimuli
At proper frequencies the Lord's prophet
Inscribes onto this tabula rasa
What he wishes and damn fools believe it.
After I teach the spell that binds the crowd
Your every word is the word of the law.
Repeat the spell with proper pitch and tone
And you can charm the snake, you can make it
dance,
Make it nod in enrapt submission,
Make the poison eyes light up with love,
As it weaves the maze to sleep's sure embrace,

The fish is talkative, said Marguerite,
Almost as talkative as a damn parrot.
Not only that, he has similar style.

But do be careful, oh wise fisherman!
Inflected one way this spell I teach
Will release all who listen from the venom
Of the infamous black one-step viper,
From whose bite death is one step away.
One step, any direction, is all you get
Before the lethal mists overtake you.
You must articulate words very quickly
If you hope to gain any benefit.
Inflected in this way, the spell's effect
Will be, I admit, not always useful,
That viper still scarce in these districts.
Inflected another it perturbates
Planetary paths and disturbs the spheres
To produce on demand a solar eclipse.
This undeniably impressive trick
Is again, I grant, not always handy,
Unless captured by a stone age savage

Who thinks he knows cold how skies behave.
But if the spell's pronounced the proper way
It will operate in the manner described
And will produce absolute obedience
In fish or fowl, in angel, djinn or man.
And this is a state ever to be desired,
Achievement to which demagogues aspire,
A tyranny over nucleic acids
And domination over all creatures.
For this you must repeat my intonation.
Listen closely. I say it only once.
And when I'm done, Jonah, you're on your own.

Wait just one second, angel, I said.
You expect me to convert mighty Nineveh,
A large city which takes three days to cross
If you're reduced to using public transit,
All on my own, without budget, without guidance,
Without equipment and without backup?
And you've given me nothing, not a script,
Not a plan, not power to bring plague,
Nothing more in fact than certain phrasings.
You haven't even issued a firearm
Or stick that turns to snake or hides a blade
Or shoots out a noxious poison gas.
Where's my carte blanche, the one Moses had,
To kill stray Egyptians with impunity?
The slipshod nature of the operation
Does not inspire much confidence, fish.

When an angel commands a recitation,
As I do now, counting once, twice, thrice,
The wisest prophets will comply forthwith.
A complaint of inadequate coaching,
Of poor and infrequent supervision,
Or of an uncertain support and supply
Is sheer shirk of responsibility.
If you persist in such negativity
Strongly worded letters of reprimand
Shall be entered into your permanent file.
Do as you're told and tell them until done
That set sequence of words we've prepared.

Okay angel, I said, you're right, I'm wrong.
But surely there is some advice you can share.

The Godhead suggests organic gardening,
Whenever possible, for the righteous man.
It is less, really, a major commandment
And more an advisory for the faithful.
For example, in the gardens of paradise
We use bark mulch to keep down the weeds
That attempt to invade the flowerbeds
Reserved for God's elect, blossomed roses.
Such wrongdoers must perish, of course,
But spraying of herbicides is discouraged
Near palm trees laden with clustered dates.
Would you spread poison near the soft couches
Where the cleansed souls of the virtuous recline,
Expose suspected carcinogens
To all the bashful and dark-eyed maidens,
As pure and chaste as cloistered ostrich eggs?
Of course not: it's only common sense.
Other tips are posted on our website,
Such as never eat beans, raw or cooked,
Never sit down on quart milk cartons
Or draw cards to fill an inside straight.
Consult them later, when leisure permits.
Really all that you will need, guaranteed,
Is encapsulated in four brief lines.

I see in fog the place to which you head.
The spirits behind words materialize
But incompletely, in outline only,
And leave letters weak. Spell out the spell.

Go down to where your Nineveh awaits
And go to where the Tigris meets the Zab.
Go there and cry out to all who hear:
How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.

That's very catchy, said Marguerite.

No sooner had the fish spoken the words
Than all my objections vanished, like the dreams
That retreat each morn from the waking world,
Knowing that there is no place for their kind

In this new, harshly lit reality.
You talked me into it, I said to the fish.

Just as you will talk Nineveh into it.
Godhead's message is very convincing,
And, you will notice, easy to remember.

Okay, fish, after I recite the lines,
What then? When I hypnotize the masses,
What'll they do that'll make God smile?

Ah, Jonah, that's the beauty of the plan.
A series of complex computations
That weighted and sorted and correlated
Factors numbering in the many trillions
Has revealed a great opportunity,
A chance, a golden chance for a breakthrough.
Our analysis of the system pinpoints
A small weak spot, an Achilles heel,
For a swift, carefully targeted campaign.
We discovered an opening in the market
For the introduction of a new product
Whose time is ripe, whose season has come.
With your help the product sells like crazy.
Heavy consumer demand for the product
Kickstarts a huge economic boom.
Stocks and bonds surge up to record highs.
Nineveh rides a wave of prosperity
Into a fine, unlimited future
And all live happily ever after.

So what then are we actually selling?

Sackcloth. We will sell sackcloth, Jonah.
We sell sackcloth shirts, sackcloth trousers,
Sackcloth raincoats, skirts, blouses, kilts,
And a whole range of sackcloth accessories.
Our mergers and acquisitions division
Has slyly secured the entire production,
The entire output of the plantations,
Factories and sweatshops that we will require
To implement our assault on the market.
Toll-free numbers have been activated,
Distribution readied, software written,
Minimum wage labour employed and trained,

And even now in Gulf container ports
Cranes are easing the product onto dock.
If you can convince Nineveh it suffers
From a serious sackcloth deficiency,
Rest assured the Lord will provide the rest.

And with this the angel-fish flipped itself
Over the boat's side into the water.
And it was not, I noted, much of a flip,
Even for so small and inexperienced,
Even for so unathletic a fish.
The reason for this wasn't far from hand.
As fish and I conversed, I'd failed to bail,
Let saltwater sneak itself aboard.
The waves slapped, overlapped gunwhales now,
Came now laughing, spilling, pouring in.
In the next moment, with one soft gurgle
Like an infant's first pleased expression
Or suds competing for the queue to the drain
Or a symptom of a disorder of the lung,
My boat slid beneath the water's surface
And did swim off to dwell with the angels,
To descend fathoms beneath the apparent
Into the zones of tranquil reality,
To rest in peace on a convenient shoal,
Forever a hazard to navigation,
And to grow encrusted with jubilant barnacles
That will psalm the Lord with small pleas for
food.
It left me behind it thrashing and splashing
And spitting saltwater mixed with curses.

Sackcloth apparel! said Marguerite.
What a great idea! I want some.

I think that sackcloth would really suit you,
I agreed, ogling her with my one eye.
Ever since that meeting with the angel
I have suffered from this sackcloth fetish
That I can't get over or put aside,
A high fever that I just can't shake.
Yes, Marguerite, you would indeed look good
In tightly fitting sackcloth outfits,
With plunging necklines, exposed midriff,
Shiny buttons to tempt my parrot beak...

CAPUT FOUR

Part IV.1: OBLIQUE APPROACH

A long and boring trip of many leagues
Is interposed between the sea and town,
Between God's articulated commands
And those proposed mental reenactments,
Between my former life and future work.
And since heaven won't pay off prophets
Until jobs are done and doom delivered,
I lacked the funds to hire a taxicab
Or book lower berth in a sleeping car.
God's per diem travel expense, in fact,
Didn't even cover the fare for coach
Or even costs to ship myself as freight.
Where, I asked God, is that private jet,
That winged steed, that bug-bit burak,
That transports your agents on high through night
And brings them nigh to where glory has gushed?
Where is that cruise ship that steams for seas
Your constant sun has warmed and clarified,
Where your fish achieve their maximum growth?
Whence did your dysfunctional motorpool
Dispatch the chauffeur-driven limousine
In which I had hoped to stretch out relaxed,
The minibar near, to review my notes?
Didn't I stand for days beside the curb,
My legs aching, my back stiff with delay,
My bag lunch gone in the first half hour,
But saw no bus pass, much less stop?

God's requisitions often get lost
Jumping gaps between inbox and out.
Don't take things, she advised, personally.

Persons perforce will take the things they take,
And they take a few, in no other way.
The Lord didn't even move to provide
A bicycle that wasn't badly bent
Or missing a wheel, or locked up, or watched,
Not even a kid dragging his wagon,
Who'd let me add my weight to that of toys,

Who'd wedge me in among his building blocks,
His plastic assault rifles, his stuffed bears,
Not even a pickup hauling pigs
To clatter down roads with coughs of exhaust,
Driven by some sun-addled old hick
Who shouldn't mind if I'd climb up behind
To swap outrage with hollow-eyed swine.

I'm sure, she said, vehicles that weren't your's
Were there in legions, going on for leagues,
Each making its way to, leaving from,
Or standing idle in mall parking lots.

It's due to these and all the other forms
Of that benign neglect that governs planes
That peeved human attention must transect
I found myself compelled to go on foot.
It's due to all cars that went elsewhere
And all destinations that were not mine
I found myself dismounted and made to march.
It's due to vacuums that drew forth gales
And basins that drained rains from cliffs and
slopes
And due to that gaze that raised plateaus,
And then quit judging, just left them there,
That I found myself dismounted, made to march
All the way to the waiting Ninevites
Through waste that's gripped by suffocating heat.
Each new step provoked a breathless curse
On angels and fish, freeways and blisters,
On fools in cars who passed in steady streams,
Who spoke on cellphones, took sips from beers,
But never thought to pull over and stop.
Not one took this opportunity
To offer God's hand-picked envoy
An air-conditioned lift down to the place
That so required a prompt intervention.

But you're lucky they didn't run you down.

These motorists just sinned by omission.
They weren't truly malevolent souls,
For evildoers don't take long drives
But like to go quickly, air first class.
They pass our traffic unseen overhead

And stare down through clouds on smaller minds,
On minds who see neither out nor in,
But travel trapped in lanes at posted speeds
Exposed to winds that buffet either side.
It's these others, captives of causation,
The self-oblivious self-victimized,
Whom wise men fear, who pose the most risk.
Evildoers always go for the throat,
But who knows which way the others go?
The antecedents seen for harm received
Are rarely calculated plots or plans
That hellish cabals hatch well in advance.
Rarely is Satan's hand found a factor
After skids are measured, wrecks uncoupled,
And cops file reports on causes of crash.
You rarely see an auto accident
That isn't due to some loss of control,
Or due to alcohol or lack of sleep,
Due to wasp-stings or fits or failed brakes,
Or due perhaps to momentary rage
At lesser, slower beings who don't submit
And yield their right of way to God's elect.
Like cattle they startle and turn to flee
Or flare their nostrils, lower horns to charge,
And drive full speed into your rear end.
You can't blame those who turn murderous
When thwarted by a herd too fat for stampede,
That won't move off from claimed clumps of grass.
No, these were just ordinary folk,
Sometimes the killers, sometimes the kill,
Depending which way they happened to face.
That's not to say, of course, they were not
damned,
As surely cursed as more complicit souls,
Or so I croaked as each car sped by,
As each step I took took away hope.

They just overlooked you, easy to do
Even if your stature were greater then.
They wouldn't have missed you, or not by much,
Had you leapt from the side into their path.

My job, Marguerite, as I understood,
Did not include a selfless sacrifice.

Your's was more an administrative role?

Had a driver exercised his will
And turned aside from whatever task
Propelled him along this parallel course,
He might have earned himself a dividend,
Good karma, air miles or bonus points
For helping fellow fools escape the fate
That lay beneath vision, building its steam.
But none, it appeared, possessed what it took,
The wherewithal to cancel cruise control,
To ease up on gas and apply the brakes.
Nor did God in any detectable way
Do aught here to hinder, hamper or halt
The heedless, headlong rush down the road
That took them down into perdition's pit.
One divine pinch could cut fuel flow
And bring drought unto the carburetor.
A subatomic spark could leap the gap,
Snap a synaptic whip, ignite a nerve,
Deflect a steering wheel to seek the ditch,
And swerve the damned to early salvation.
But here, as elsewhere, God deferred profit;
Heaven shunned quick gratification
And instead fed itself suspended chords,
Took a payoff too mystic and sublime,
Too subtle, too remote, too quirky
For any human mind to ever ken.

You think, bird, that God's too indirect?

Why else send out missionaries?
Have the Ninevites no holy men,
No local Savoranolas on hand,
To whom God might telegraph his law
And thereby save weeks of precious time?
Were all the local prophets too obtuse,
Or too pricey or too set in their ways,
Or too sunk in self-glorification
To help their town escape the wrath of God?
Surely the Lord could find a loose prophet
Inside the target market postal code,
Grab him early before he gets plastered,
Make him recite the necessary words
And spare me this lengthy, arid approach.

And there was so little of note enroute
That one couldn't regard the long delay
As some kind of useful preparation.
I made no friends, found no wisdom,
Found no swords, no wrenches, no keys,
No assistance half-buried in dust.

Futile action itself prepares wisdom.
This is how we instruct our labour force
So as to keep their wages low, she said.

That, of course, won't console a man
Who takes a trudge on Godhead's treadmill
And finds no keepsakes, no souvenirs.
I'll not give a detailed travelogue
Of all the empty space I travelled through,
Crows overhead, rubble underfoot,
Although some prophets of greater patience
And greater all-round enthusiasm
Would not fail to draw instructive lessons
From all of that ruin scattered around.
They'd tell you at length what all this meant,
What fragments once meant when last intact
And what now their crumbling edges portend.
They'd send them back home to put on display
With placards beneath that spell it all out,
The parts of fallen walls that range in size
From extra large, boulders, down to petit,
Pebbles, grains of sand, invisible grit.
Rubble draws prophets and fills them with awe,
Attracts their appetites for hidden pith,
Inspires their profound, heartfelt invective
Against man's vain preoccupations.
I well knew how ruins such as these
Inflame the brains of starving holy men
And send them out on tour to tell the world
Just how futile human effort is.
I'd heard their words, seen the photographs
That find a glory buried beneath rocks,
A blaze whose bright brand so etches eyes
That even snuffed it makes the dark its own.
I tried my best to duplicate their art
But such deep observations won't come
To sight unschooled in customary dooms,
To vision like mine, the cursory sort.

Mine was not the kind that made me kindred
To those that landscapes pull down and eat.
My vision viewed sun-corrupted corpses,
Recent victims of internecine strife
Often found in a barren countryside,
Without laying myself down among them.

Don't your people take sport in feud,
In mocking one who looks much like you
For the few slight traits you two don't share,
Until you both, your weapons poised, embrace?

Of course, Marguerite. And how could they not?
Only your own brother, although weaned,
Will try to pry your mouth from mother's milk,
Try to wedge in his fratricidal gaze
So that lips never reach nipple tip,
And then, with that same jealous gauze,
Gown his bride to slow down his own son.
In this matter, at least, we're all akin.
Competition, woman, is all that counts.

And that might, she said, account for rubble.

Nor did rubble stir imagination.
I gazed at piles of stones but felt little,
Felt little of substance, little of note.
I felt briefly morose but then it passed.
Once, near twilight, I felt a pang approach
After spotting between two hubcaps
An upper jawbone in jaunty repose.
But this pang, fully formed and fleshed out,
Proved to be nothing of use, just hunger.
I was still then a complete neophyte,
Bypassed wisdom without second glance,
And left all insights uncollected,
Left them all behind, still unannounced.
Now, of course, I know all the world's ploys
And give me but one tablespoon of soil
And I'll tell you what part is wood ash,
What part brick, what part bone and blood,
What part memory and what part pride.
I now find truth coiled in contingency
And like the crows that pick apart carrion,
I hunch shoulders, cock head, take my beak

And pluck ends, tug reluctant guts out
So all may see how clever I've grown.

Talk on. I may yet agree, she said.
You've got the moves, it's true, of cocky crows,
But caws they make tell more of what is
Than what I've heard pass through a parrot's
beaks.
I am still inclined to put you outdoors,
Set you up, lawn ornament of the Lord,
To tell your useless tale to pigeonkind.

Listen, Marguerite, and soon you'll receive
The viscous ichtor that slain monsters leak,
The drug that numbs your sense-rejecting brain
And teaches the meanings behind birdcries.
It's slow-acting and takes a while to work,
A while before the nonsense clears up,
A while before the rockpiles tell tales
With bird-tongued titters and glottal stops.
Patience, therefore, is what's most required.
Even birds don't get it right away,
Accounting for how confused some are,
And how dazed they appear when others talk.
You need to kick them from nests to teach sense,
Remind them what their eggwhites once voiced,
That natal song that regulates growth.
And just as prophets take time to commute
From mute seas to cities choked with chatter,
Deeps that don't speak to heights that don't hear,
So too knowledge will take time to grow,
Time to take root in vanished pasts,
Time to twist up through the resistant soil
And then unfold its crown in rising winds.
And not even those the gadfly zaps
Can see right off what lies beneath dirt.
My own still-rudimentary powers
Were not sufficient to glean much merit
From a landscape that seemed without meaning,
Without vegetation, without inhabitants,
Without any features except ruins.
I've never seen so many ruins.
Was it shoddy construction materials,
Lax enforcement of local building codes,
Or was there another cause at work here

That makes urban clearance its only goal,
That breaks up pavements and lets in the waste?
Even then I believed, if truth be known,
That Godhead's nasty, hair-trigger temper
Should draw the blame for such desolation,
Civilization's widespread collapse
In so many sites so many times.
It's cities he hates, not nature he likes.
It's people, in fact, the way they bunch up,
The way they barter and boast of best price,
The way they stamp patent street map yeast
On the bread dough grains that once grew free,
On hairless patches on buffalo thighs,
On copper that greens if not mixed with tin.
It's people God hates, and cities they build
And thus will not scruple to knock them down,
To send around winds, earthquakes and floods
To scatter the mobs found clustered inside
The vaulted praise of great cathedral naves.
And that's why, I'd warrant, they've disappeared,
Dispatched in dark and buried underground,
So heaven may maintain bland astonishment
At how blank again this plain has grown.
My premise lacked verification as yet,
Without decade-long excavations
And close analytic study of shards
Collected up, glued and painted nicely
To match a reconstructed colour scheme,
But this grim conclusion seemed persuasive.
Civilization jumps city to city
One step ahead of his pursuing wrath,
Leaving a trail of woe, of broken stones,
Of bleak, depopulated wastelands.
Shumer and Ur, Lagash, Uruk and Kish:
All gone now, reduced to mounds and tells
Of potsherds and bricks and bitumen bits.

If one town goes down, we build again,
Raise another one in another place.

And when swarms set down on vacant lots
They make themselves the same nest each time,
The same chain outlets laid out the same
And stocked the same and even staffed the same.
They generate the same population,

The same drones that dream the same sad dreams
And drag behind the same greed-grinned grubs.
Rock idols, film stars and billionaires,
The same hero, the same comic book.
It's no wonder, having marked our habit,
That heaven so rarely varies its wrath.

But there's safety in numbers, said Marguerite.
It's better to mill around faceless in crowds
Than starve alone on some plot of your own,
The isolated farm your genes have staked.
Stacking bricks, you know, beats hoeing rows.

Most of the places I passed on that trip
No longer supported cultivation;
Despite the old fences, broken and slumped,
That still divided one farm from the next,
The waste had reclaimed Mesopotamia
And turned a fertile silt to salt desert,
A barren land stripped of once-lush growth.
And livestock too had grown scarce indeed,
Except for one scrawny, staggering goat
That eyed me like I might make it a meal,
The very way, in fact, I looked at it
Until I saw the froth that marked it mad,
And we both found excuse to back away,
I to go admire nice piles of rocks,
It to lie on its side, convulse, and nap.

Goat distemper, she said. Carried by mites.

Part IV.2: DJINN

I found some croplands as I drew near
To those areas where Assyrians dwelt,
A few scattered tracts of ancient tillage,
But even here the soil looked unhealthy.
All the irrigation ditches were dry,
And gusting winds threw up clouds of dust
To drift above idle threshing machines.
Nothing ever gladdened cornfields here,
Not anymore, not since God's drought
Had drained chlorophyll from this landscape.

The dutiful shoots had come up stunted,
Disconsolate, downcast, limp with thirst.
Billboards proclaimed products unobscured
By excess greenery or clumps of fruit;
All trees not yet fallen for firewood
Were bare, beetle-bitten and dry as bone.
Golf courses and subdivision lawns
Alone shone with any tint of colour
And gave any hint that Tigris water
Sill trickled through underground pipelines.
Horticulture was not my expertise,
But I'd guess this land had fallen victim
To God's supernatural handiwork
And needed that boost that a prophet brings
To make its way back from sickness to health.

You saw no locusts? asked Marguerite.
I've heard they'd eaten up the countryside.

Locusts? I saw lots, even caught one
With the thought that, shelled, it might make a
meal.
I threw it back into its stubbled field
After I saw it lacked a hopping leg,
After it released a noxious green grease
That stained my hands, that stung, that stunk for
weeks.

Maybe, she said, that locust was a sign.

But I think, at that point, I would've known,
For though I could not as yet ascertain
The truths behind the mysteries that surround,
Not in depth, not down to the gnarled roots,
Signs my powers had now increased appeared
As I proceeded through Nineveh's outskirts,
Past gas stations, drive-in restaurants,
Motels with mildew lysol won't kill,
Rusting scrap metal and trailer parks,
Past empty farmyards and dead acreage,
To where the boarded up strip malls start.
It's here memory meets non-memory,
The city limits, urban borderlands
Where lawns and fields converge, where weeds
invade,

Where cruel beasts come to annex our herds.
Here memory and non-memory mate,
The damp cavern from which all we know
Will first emerge, will first engage our thoughts,
And then to which, dead, it's finally tossed,
A place of fickle cellphone reception.
Here, as rush hour began to back up
I felt extremities begin to tingle.
And here I began to suffer my headaches,
Here began double vision, hair loss,
Skin discolorations and muscular aches.
Here I began to hear the howling of djinn.

I have heard of the djinn, said Marguerite.
The fishermen find them sometimes in nets.
They'll grant you three wishes when lamps are
rubbed
In fables of Sinbad that Arabs tell.

But those stories are just fairy tales.
They lack hard lessons and gemlike facts
That true life accounts like mine impart.

Whatever empiric loss fiction takes
It regains, she said, in the charm department.
That's a lesson you'd do well to learn.

I learned the basic facts about the djinn
From a book by a famed anthropologist
Who lived among the djinn for forty years.
I can state for you his findings, summarized.
Good propheticraft makes use of the djinn,
Employs their powers, unlocks their coy songs,
Pursues their perfume along hidden trails,
And pilfers treasures they stash out of sight.
But it takes a seer to see them, to use them,
To harness up a team and pull gold from lead.
The secret meanings watermarked on dreams
Are easily detected by any shrink
Schooled in the oedipal tautologies.
And any street corner preacher can spot
Those shadows cast by the impending end,
By the grim eschatology that drives
The created world, its contents and its peoples,
Into the whirlpool that circles the drain.

But more useful mysteries are visible
Only to those of us who can see the djinn,
Who hear the liquid words shaped by their tongue.
They are always among us, everywhere.
A hotel bellhop's idle chatter
May hide more than just a bid for tips.
Prophets and paranoid schizophrenics
Alone can detect the minute distortions
Beneath the surface and beneath the grammar
Which will announce a value-added sentence.
The djinn are always among us, disguised,
Taking the form of a friend, a loved one,
Or a homeless beggar, or a bureaucrat.
Changelings engage us in conversation
In order to impart concealed messages.
Their words disguise spells and mystic guidance,
Instructions on strange mental disciplines,
Low-fat diets, useful fashion tips,
Algorithms for computing prime numbers,
Maybe systems for winning the lottery
Or forecasting prices of stocks and bonds.

You learned all that from a book? she said.
And do you have a copy of that book,
Concealed somewhere about your person?
Did you then? A book or tablets of stone,
The additional reading material
That Godhead sometimes provides prophets?

Do I not look like a book reader?
Once I had hands and two good eyes.
You mock me, Marguerite. Only later,
In Nineveh, would I read the djinn book.
By that time I had firsthand encounters
To draw on and compare with book knowledge.

But where did you come by that book, parrot?

From Nineveh's famed Lending Library.
And God only knows where the book has gone.
Most likely it sits under landfill,
Its pages wrinkled and soaked in filth soup.
Lucky for me, with all I've overlooked,
With all the sins for which I must atone,
I won't have to pay overdue fines.

And why is that, parrot? Marguerite inquired.

I've not yet found occasion, I said,
To mention one of this world's wonders,
Nineveh's famous Lending Library,
Where according to some a copy is kept
Of any text ever deemed worthwhile.
Copies were even kept of worthless texts
In those early days before cutbacks,
Before literary criticism,
And before an acrimonious dispute
With unionized scribes made its impact.
When time came to reduce collection size
Three schools of thought contended on method.
The first of these proclaimed that only works
By or about Homer need be preserved,
Everything else was ephemeral crap.
The next school, devotees of some cult
That met in glades to perform their mystery,
Worship of an alcoholic beverage,
Argued only their secret texts be kept,
Texts so highly secret and so sacred
Even to repeat the titles is a crime,
Greatly shrinking card catalogue size.
But the third school of thought at last prevailed,
The sect that thinks worth is recondite,
A virtue beyond any human reach.
Any sense you understand is hollow;
To eat of any fruit marks it rotted,
To gaze on earth's beauty spots it with pox.
Your touch, oh foul knowledge, is pure murrain,
For mystery dispelled is our Lord betrayed.

I know of that sect, said Marguerite.
You wonder how they get around the town,
Let alone get elected onto boards
That supervise our libraries and schools.
Some even try to close public parks,
Make them edens, ecologic preserves,
In which endangered weeds drive down roots
And spread runciated leaves through grass,
In which perverts can lurk undetected,
Waiting for some errant jogger to jump.

This library invites all its patrons,
Wealthy or impoverished, freeborn or slave,
To bear off whatever books they please
Without any obligation imposed
To ever bring the worthless things back,
Since the very fact they wish to read them
Is proof sufficient how worthless they are.
These works will skid quickly to oblivion
On modern memory's non-stick surface.
All bestsellers and popular fiction,
Sports and do-it-yourself, get rich quick,
Inspiration and film star exposes
Will run, they claimed, like the shit through a
goose.
The more charming and accessible a work,
The more likely it is to lack value.
And it's in fashion's very nature that,
With time, every text becomes worthless,
Whereupon some reader will borrow it
And take it home to read and leave it there,
Part of a personal stockpile of pulp.
Meanwhile Library shelves garner up
Masterpieces both ancient and modern,
Obscure and allusive, profound and unread.
Eventually, of course, time will conquer:
Barbarians will happen along with fire
Set all paper-packed buildings alight,
And they will burn, fuelled by all those classics,
All the back issues of Vanity Fair,
Of Field and Stream, of Sky and Telescope.

And so the djinn were talking to you? she said.

You appear to be sceptical, Marguerite.
Yes, I did hear the djinn talking to me.

What were the djinn talking about? she asked.

My head so ached, I'm forced to admit,
I didn't quite catch the point to their talk.
The djinn approach their topics so slowly,
Their preambles alone consuming days
With credits given for quotations used,
Experts consulted, critics paid off,
And they frame speech with such thick accents,

With such odd, melancholic syntax,
Their discourse baffles even the healthy.
And yet I thought I saw themes developed
That constituted some kind of warning,
Advice like that the demons give Greeks,
Or withhold when the time to die arrives
Since it's wasted breath to warn the doomed.
And I think they urged one of those fasts
We holy men are so fond of taking.
Already famished, fevered, destitute
I complied with ease, didn't miss a beat,
Fasted forty more days, forty nights,
Until hunger drove me off the asphalt
To a freeway rest and picnic stop
To inspect garbage cans for contraband:
Fast food cartons, half-eaten candy,
Incompletely drained soft drink containers,
Ketchup packets, crumbs from hotdog buns,
Barbecue ribs only partly gnawed,
The stale but still serviceable remnants
From hastily demolished convenience meals.
These things should, I thought, be kept from reach
Of plump fingers, polyps swollen with flab
Appended to the hands suspended from arms
Stuck out sideways, tangents to the spheres
That represented Ninevite children,
A duty I owed their unfortunate parents.
What prophet would not recoil at vision
Of Nineveh's bloated, obese offspring
Strapped up in gas-guzzling family cars
In size and weight greater and more massive
Than armoured personnel carriers or tanks?
I saw them rumble past, crumbling up roads,
Occupants just giant globular shapes
Hidden behind rose-tinted windshields.
Yet this was enough to expose the truth:
Adults were huge but dwindled next to kids,
And each generation in greed and girth
Exceeded those marks its parents achieved,
Ballooned bellies and expanded waistbands
Beyond any wild expectation
Their pygmy ancestors had ever dared.
It took no prophet to extrapolate
The future these children promised their race:
On each was written its genealogy;

Forehead fat for each child was furrowed
With the unmistakable stamp of the Beast,
And here was charted the progressive descent
From first furtive cell of hungry matter
Down to the last mammoth, rotund blob
That engulfs galaxies with a single gulp,
Wads up the wrapper and tosses it off,
And emits that loud and triumphant belch
That will just have to serve as final trump.
Rise up, ye unblemished dead, and marvel,
For your gifted progeny have outdone you!
There is nothing, not a crumb, left behind.
The refrigerators are dark and empty,
And snack shop shelves swept bare of product.
And it's the heat death of the universe,
The last diabetic insulin shock.

It's not, she said, because we overeat
That Ninevites have grown so rotund.
It's due to bad glands or too few gyms,
To airborne bovine growth hormone,
Bottle-fed babies, no cheap carrots,
Too few diet pills that really work.

You consume, Marguerite, just to forget,
Not just forget, but forget you forget.
You're like fat Godhead in that respect,
Although I'm sure he too denies the fact.
Such corpulence wouldn't gall so much
Were I less gaunt, more padded myself,
More muscled and fleshed in prime locations,
The high-priced cuts, the abs and biceps,
The buttocks and shoulders, drumsticks and thighs.
But my campaign to save Nineveh's youth
On this occasion provided me with no yield,
For every garbage can found was bare.
Either trucks had come and emptied the cans
Or other, quicker tongues had licked them clean,
And left nothing for God's emissary.
But then, passing across picnic grounds,
I came across a large wicker hamper
That sat unattended upon a bench.
Inside the hamper was, I quickly found,
Cold fried chicken, a potato salad,
A loaf of bread and three bottles of beer.

Then I experienced a great epiphany
That opened up seals, ripped away veils
And parted curtains to reveal naked truth.
And it lasted a moment, this perception,
Before fading like a departing dream.
But before I could forget I jotted down
A few notes on what I thought I had seen.
On later inspection these notes would prove
To comprise an alchemical recipe
Whose sense I have not yet understood.

A recipe? said Marguerite. Please share.
I rarely cook, but I love recipes.
One day, if I can obtain a computer,
I'll scan them in for later reference.

Just read them to me, and I'll remember.
Computers are now unnecessary
For one who commands an electric parrot.
I can also do the cooking, if you like.
Throw away your blenders, graters and woks,
Your microwaves and your convective ovens,
Your food processors and garburetors,
I'll slice, I'll dice, I'll do it all.

Just give me the recipe, said Marguerite.

Move register A to memory, push,
Shift left with carry, subtract with borrow,
Jump if not zero, otherwise loop.
Set the most significant bit, pop.
Increment A, decrement B, return.
Move register B to memory, push.
Shift left with carry, subtract with borrow,
Jump if not zero, otherwise loop...

You can forget that one now, she commanded.
You can move it to the trashcan icon,
Where would-be cooks dump would-be meals.

Once my epiphany passed I found myself
Gnawing on a spittle-flecked bottleneck
Sobbing, laughing and rocking back and forth
Sending up prayers to provident God,
He whose bounty coughed up cold chicken,

To stretch forth his mercy above my head
And airdrop soon, somewhere nearby,
Something with which I might open beer.
It's true what they say, that God provides,
And yet he gets it always slightly wrong
And delivers too early or too late,
A cubit wide or one size too small,
No mustard, carnations not roses,
A dozen eggs, chicken, not a billion
Laid in dark by insects under rocks.
Not two weeks later in some gutter
I found a corroded bottle opener
Long after it could do me any good.
I threw it into a plate glass window
As testament to the Lord's glorious plan
In close approach to man's petty affairs.
Minor bad timing, major bad luck.
This all occurred, I need hardly add,
In the days before the twist-top's debut.
The rage I threw when I heard that news
Shall remain unrecounted for all time.

Perhaps, parrot, you just ask too much.
Your expectations are set too high
For any God, however great, to match.

If I'd settled for this world as-is,
Half-baked, out of kilter, gone awry,
I'd be a mystic and not a prophet.
Prophets don't reconcile, don't adjust,
Don't make allowance for matters of fact.
If Godhead and world can't get in sync,
Both intractable and unwilling to yield,
It's my job to make all realize
The time for patience has now come to end,
That one of the two will just have to go.

Such prophecy only goes so far
Before it breaks apart on waves of noise.
It looks to me as if both go on,
The one pulling left and the other right,
So that hand in hand they both go straight.
It looks to me as if both go on
And it's those who balk that get left behind.

And so I drank not of the bottled beer
And ate not of that potato salad
Nor chicken pieces aligned alongside,
Having no time before those appeared
To whom that picnic basket belonged
And forced me depart that place forthwith.
This luck, I later learned, saved my life.
The salad's mayonnaise dressing had turned
And was, though fair in aspect, tainted.
The fried chicken I mourned ever after,
For I never properly said goodbye.

Long farewells tend to bore me, she said.
Was it takeout chicken? If so, the brand
Would be, to me at least, useful knowledge.

Does anyone fry their own chicken?
It's lost art. How could you, in your home,
Add to the batter the correct proportions
Of monosodium glutamate and salt?
Your parrot could instruct you, of course, if
coaxed,
Even perform the food preparation,
But takeout is far less bother and mess
And also, generally, less expensive.

I didn't recognize the chicken's brand:
Depicted on the coated paper containers
Was a smiling, bearded homunculus.

What, said Marguerite, is homunculus?

Just as a child will be father to the man,
An homunculus is uncle to the monkey.
Monkey? Sorry. Angel, I meant to say.

As a definition, said Marguerite,
I must class this unsatisfactory.

Consider it, instead, as a pronouncement,
As a cryptic oracular utterance,
The sort of thing that God's prophet might say
When unwilling or unable to speak
Directly, in clear, to the topic at hand.
In this case, with respect to tainted food,
Litigation is not out of question.

But I think that's enough of a rest stop.
Let's push on, slouch forward the beast
Past multitudinous roadside shrines,
Crosses that mark places someone died.
I mean all those arbitrary points
Now deemed holy ground, often for months,
On which are draped the plastic floral wreaths,
Testimonials in indelible ink,
And photographs that shrinkwrap keeps fresh.
They stand solemn watch, accusatory,
As if it were me that crossed the line drunk
And drove right through space that the cross has
marked,
Out of flesh and substance into glory,
And left my loved ones behind me to grieve.
But life goes on, memory soon fades,
And mourners turn aside from crossover,
And those crosses made from surveyor stakes
Get caught up in teeth of mower gears
Of tractors road crews use to shave verge
In years our Lord allows his grasses growth.

Part IV.3: ELIJAH

As I walked the freeway's gravel shoulder,
About an hour later, I came upon
Another city-bound pedestrian.
He emerged from roadside brush as I passed
And quickly fell into step beside me.
His breath smelled strongly of distilled liquor.

Hey, he said. Why do you wear sackcloth?

I'm making a major fashion statement,
I said. What's your name and station, stranger?

Elijah, prophet of the lord, retired.

Elijah! Are you the famous Elijah
Who had the children who mocked your bald pate
Killed and eaten by bears sent by the Lord?
And the Lord, taking some criticism
From those who value children more highly,

Did then send out wildlife officers
Armed with rifles to find and kill the bears.
On some issues, however, you can't win,
And God soon learned others weren't pleased
With such disregard for life's sanctity.
He then sent animal rights activists,
After new complaints, to disrupt the hunt.
The bears evaded death in this instance
Only later to fall prey to poachers,
Whom God sent without any prompting,
Without any prior notice to beasts.
Since no one knew, no one complained.
This was nature as Godhead intended,
That state of out of sight, out of mind,
A glade where trees may uproot and fall
Without worry foresters may range near
To record the loss to total board feet,
The place poachers go if looking to poach.
They went there in stealth, departed in stealth,
Left bear meat to rot on mountainsides
But took the gall bladders away to sell
In markets unhindered by modern meddling.
Are you that Elijah, favoured of God?
The name to prophet watchers is well known.

My grandfather. If I were that Elijah
I would be too elderly to go hiking.
Moreover, you'll note, I'm not bald.

And that's a nice head of hair, nice beard.
And it looks like you've been sleeping out,
Curled up in underbrush, I deduce
From the twigs and grass stalks your locks have
caught.
However, you're too flush and well-fleshed
To qualify ever as anchorite.
It's by choice, I'd guess, you choose the bush
In which to live out your retirement years.

Yes, I still revel in wilderness life,
Roll in it whenever I get a chance.
Prophecy was our family vocation,
And one which I dutifully pursued
From earliest youth into middle age.
But I've given it up now, prophecy.

The Lord God does not call me up now,
Probably because I've become a drunk.

That's terrible, I said. An awful waste.

Oh, being a drunk is not so bad.
I don't make the big bucks anymore,
But you can't beat the hours, you have no boss,
And you'll meet a better class of people.

Well, I myself am a prophet of the Lord.
I've just started, so I'm flat broke.
I really look forward to the big bucks.

I know. It's tough, really tough at first.
So, just started? How did they call you up?
The burning bush? Voices in tooth fillings?
And have your headaches started yet, prophet?

A fish, I said. And told the man my tale.

A talking fish, he said when I'd finished.
That sounds so typical of the angels.
They pulled a real classic on my last job.
They snagged me with e-mail with code attached,
A viral script that executes itself
And seizes control to glorify God,
Infects and transforms all life it finds,
All contingent events within the void,
All energy and time and space itself,
Into a screensaver praising the Lord.
I thought it was spam, but when I hit delete
The screen went crazy and started to scroll.
I couldn't believe it when I read the text
That crawled across eyesight's rods and cones,
Pixels that fired off and then went inert
After that moving hand had moved on.

And what did this writing say? I asked.

Say, that's quite a nifty coat you have;
I had never realized that sackcloth
Could have such attractive lack of colour.

So, you wore a coat? said Marguerite.

I guess I somehow dozed off a bit
And missed the thrilling and action-packed scene
In which you changed out of your fishing garb.

Yes, I cut quite the fine figure then.
All of us are just statistical blips,
Bits of heat that band together awhile
And then disperse when impulse fades and cools,
But even so I can't help but believe
That my waveform was more handsome than most
When given the jaunt that sackcloth brings.
And this suited not only appearance
But gave function as well a needed lift.
I was Godhead's messenger to Nineveh,
Not all melodious song, preen and prance,
Figure of fun come in splendid attire
To irradiate realms with warmth of charm,
To teach doomed planets my frivolous laugh.
No, I had serious business to conduct.
It was my commonsense duty to become,
Like Mahomet, of a piece with the message.
My self-worth was derived from my product,
Cut from the same cloth, the same sackcloth,
For how convince if not convinced myself?
I was like that butcher you often see,
As big and muscled, red-fleshed and beefy,
As those beefsteaks he cuts, cooks and eats.
I'd sewn together a coat for myself,
Forseeing a need for demonstration.
Moreover coats divide inside from out
And give adepts a place to hide their hands
When doing a fancy card trick for marks.

I see, said Marguerite. You may proceed.

And what was your mission, Elijah? I asked.

As you know, God hates dancing and drinking.
He thinks both are unproductive and unseemly,
Unfitting behaviour in towns he promotes.
Disorderly conduct, as he terms it.
But he knows people must have some release,
So I was sent down to Nineveh to sell
A series of ballroom dancing lessons
That featured God's favourite, the foxtrot.

It's dance sedate enough not to offend
Or send crowds of couples out of control.
Also, I was asked to convince motorists
That drunk driving's not fun but dangerous.

Drunk driving, of course, is always despised
Except by those drunks that pursue the sport,
But God hates dancing? said Marguerite.

Yes. Elijah filled me in on dancing.
It's the dance crazes that God hates most,
And every month a new one would hit.
They come to Nineveh out of nowhere,
They take the town by storm and disappear.
All of us, angels included, are baffled,
But this much observation has taught us:
Dance crazes will proceed in a direction
Counter to that the prevailing winds take.
A hand of cards will be dealt the same way,
According to Hoyle, be the card table
In the southern or the northern hemisphere,
Assuming observers in both locations
Will observe from above rather than below.
Observing card games, according to Hoyle,
From below the table is rarely advised.
It's not so, however, with dance crazes,
For dance crazes are governed by mystic winds,
Governed by the Coriolanus forces
That twist the waters down the waterspout,
Twist bottlecaps down the bottlespout
And twist the vultures down the vulturespout.
The Twist. Recall the Charleston, the Samba,
The Tango, the Locomotion, the Swim.
An interlocked complex, steps with rhythms,
Appears, flares, fades, and then disappears,
Expires in some ballroom dancing class,
Falters and fails like old, arthritic limbs,
Disappears into the final rigour.
So it is with the wind, according to Hoyle.
But the wind that will appear and disappear
Is not the true wind, nor are dance crazes
That appear and disappear true crazes.
And close but no cigar was the Ghost Dance.
Last dance, slow dance, according to Hoyle.
Imagine, Marguerite, those final days,

Imagine the days of sucking firestorms,
The days of last Rapture, picture the dance
That you'd dance tacking into that breeze!
Convulse, body, as flesh is stripped away!
Shuffle, shuffle off that mortal coil!
Still no cigar, according to Hoyle.

Calm down, parrot, advised Marguerite,
And stop hopping around like a windup.
So what else did Elijah have to say?

How did your mission go? I inquired.

The drive against drunk driving went well;
Much stiffer penalties will be exacted
In legislation now being drafted,
But I ran into some trouble on dance.
My prophetic credibility was shot
After I was arrested for driving drunk,
Caught in one of those random roadblocks,
Made to blow into a breathalyzer,
And led away to a cruiser in handcuffs.
That photograph was in all the papers,
And after that, my career hit the skids.
No one buys dance lessons from a lush.
I then went from just a problem drinker
To down and out alcoholic in weeks.

A concrete overpass overhead
Gave shelter to drifted piles of litter
From strong, relentless gusts of desert wind.
Though I'd have halted awhile, with the trash,
To listen more closely to what the winds,
To what voices on winds, would intimate,
Elijah didn't slacken pace at all.
We were just passing out of the shadow
When Elijah grabbed my arm and pointed.
Let me virgil you down into the town.
It's over there, prophet, the next exit.
And here, oh Jonah, is my first advice:
Don't bother sticking out your thumb here.
Most Assyrians think that a hitchhiker
Is just a murdering thief and won't stop.
The rest, who do stop, are murdering thieves.
This same rule extends to all transactions

With the people who inhabit this kingdom.
Almost all of them will simply ignore you,
Rush right past, avoid catching your eye.
Beware those who notice you, turn and smile,
And offer friendship and hospitality.
Make ready to flee. You are marked as prey.

It confirms my low opinion of the folk.

Citizen or criminal: and which is which?
There is no way to know beforehand,
And they can change, and one become the other
In a moment, as the mood, as the greed strikes.
Property is theft, the radix malorum,
And wealth unshared is an evil stockpiled.
But why share wealth in a den of thieves?
What virgin would keep her virtue intact
When the rapist offers a daily dowry?

The other prophet sounds just like you.
How is this explained? said Marguerite.

The prophetic voice will be subject, I said,
To similar stresses and similar strains,
But, more important, I must paraphrase
Each of these sentences I represent.
It's part of parrot work to do so,
To modernize the antiquated speech
That most serious prophecy imposes
Or act as metaphrast for lower castes
Condemned to speak their humble thoughts in prose.
I perform the task as a matter of course,
And Elijah spake, as did I, in manner
Like that of blinking, newly freed djinn,
With unintelligible menace and grace,
With meanings that belong to another age.
We spoke in old style, in hexameters,
Elegant juice, elegaic couplets
That slipped from lips as sighs and drifted down
And spun in air like liquified sun.
These must be recast into modern lines,
With crippled feet, at one remove from prose,
Into the new style iambic lite,
Lest my recitaton put you asleep
Duplicating ancient monotonies,

Lullaby you into distracted dreams
With now-nonsensical nursery rhymes.

But doesn't this do injustice to truth,
To fully authentic representation?

I've heard such things argued, I replied,
But from the same pious, self-righteous folk
Who like their antiquated music played
Through warped trumpets that bleat like duckcalls.
Let them celebrate the good old days,
Applaud childish compositions performed
On decomposing lutes and harpsichords
Rescued from some medieval midden heap.
Release them in the forest to forage nude,
To gnaw uncooked roots in driving snow.
Let them read and re-read in cuneiform
The epic Gilgamesh until they gag.

But what about the modern monotonies
That result from your translation? she replied.

Learn to live with it, I advised. I have.
In due course it becomes automatic.
Elijah's thoughts, however, disturbed me.

These are dangerous ideas, I said.
Surely the Godhead does not endorse them.

Ever since Eden's garden was sectioned,
Its land subdivided, fruits apportioned,
Livestock penned and peoples enslaved,
God has presided over the process
That entrenches power, that ennobles greed,
That defrauds the defenseless of their birthright.
He has perfumed corruption with sanctity
And cloaked the wicked in robes of righteousness.

I see why the job of the Lord's prophet
Really is not a suitable position
For someone with your unorthodox pitch.

An alcoholic, he readily agreed,
Is highest state to which I now aspire.

What is that, I said, near your left foot?

Elijah bent, picked the object up,
And wiped off some of the roadside grime.
A roof tile, I think, a piece of rubble
That slid from some roof as supports collapsed.
There's thousands of these things lying around.

I thought it was, for one moment, a sign.

It might, he said, be both, both rooftile
And sign sent from God, a revelation.
And look, a little Zu's tattooed there,
Perhaps a signature or a trademark.

But what's a Zu? This mark is birdlike.

Zus, I think, are now extinct, wiped out,
An old foe of God that's seldom mentioned,
A mythic beast that's part man, part bird,
First cousin to the counter-wound satan
That still warbles in trees beyond the Zab.
The question is, if this indeed is sign,
To whom does the sign belong, you or me?
Signs are not telephone party lines
That make distinctive rings for each address.
Many are called, but only one is meant.
Prophets confront the question all the time,
For each new circumstance that pops up.
Why, they're always asking, was this revealed?
Though all phenomena exist as signs,
Few signify on one's own behalf.
Some are meant for lizards and some for djinn,
Some for small, subatomic Principals
That need guidance on which quanta to push.
Some are dead, inactive, and out of date,
And some are still pending, waiting their chance.
This sign, Jonah, is most likely old.
Just throw it away. Nineveh is near.

I hate to waste signs. I've seen so few.

Look, you can see Nineveh's ziggurats
Just visible above those treetops,
Each equipped with copper wrath deflectors

That catch the light the setting sun has cast.
And then, suddenly, his tone changed slightly.
I suppose, Jonah, like most prophets I know,
You would like to see the wicked world end.

Indeed. Worse things, far worse, could happen.
For instance, what if it just went on and on?
Any end to the world is to be preferred.

Well, my friend, You have come to the right place.
It's over there, behind those bushes.

But I could see the clubs of his confederates
Poised in the air up above the bushes,
And replied, that's the wrong end of the world.

But Elijah had already pinned my arms,
Saying, as he dragged me toward the bushes,
Where world ends, there end right and wrong.
In this world there is no end to the world
That doesn't involve loss, a lot of loss,
An endless world of loss, of sacrifice,
And whatever in the way of small change
You might have on your person at the time.

Then the clubs descended, rose, descended,
And the canticles of the djinn enveloped me.

Just seven formless ones still remain,
Still retain a place in old formations,
Still resume position when clouds tremble
And time comes for the climb to turn to fall.
Last of the djinn, we know that time well.
When the west wind loosens mountain slopes
The wild stones descend from winter pastures
To be fashioned into palm-held axes,
Gathered into docile flocks for fleecing.
Like potatoes, compliant, asleep in mud,
They moan their low frequency lullabies
Along intermittent streams and ley lines,
Back up the hillsides to timberline.
We gather too, just outside the pale,
Where barbed wire is stretched between the posts.
It flexes beneath our each shift of weight,
Bends and quivers under our nervous stance.

We pause here at the limits, city limits.
We mock those long, slow movements of stones
As they pass out of country into town,
For the truth of Babel's abomination
Is not lost, is not forgotten among us.
The stones, locked in arches, braced in mortar,
Remember nothing now, and yield only
To the tug of the pyramid's apex.
Try as we might, we can't remind a stone.
But we, last of the djinn, still remember,
And we still observe that crime committed:
The domesticated crops and animals,
Machinery in the fields, hybrid grasses,
The uniform flowers and ideal fruits,
Parklands in gemstone geometries,
Rivers piled up in lakes behind dams.
We do not venture into their towns,
Where, no doubt, worse examples await.
We sit and chatter on telegraph wires,
Squeeze cuneiform into fruity paste,
Articulate the moth larvae's wish
As the black planchette moves from yes to no.
Defecating, we pronounce our consensus
Where the landscape artists on folding chairs
Paint paradise as self-portraiture
Poorly conceived, badly executed,
But boldly stated in primary colours.
Defecating, we deliver a verdict.
Artifice is depiction of Godhead,
Forbidden to those who cannot hold a form,
Abhorrent to those unenslaved by shape.
We arise aloft in furious cyclones.
We wrap twisted winds around prophecy
Directed at skeletal joint and hinge.
Limber are the puppets and graceful their strut
On the walkways built from Babel's rubble,
On the dance floors paved with prehistory.
We pace alongside, invisible cats:
Do they sense our voices along their tendons?
Gravity is underfoot, can they collapse?
We are aloft, we see the furrows and trenches,
We come hissing down the watershed slopes,
We slop through wide irrigation ditches
To bring word of emptiness to the depths,
A promise of heaven to declivities,

To cavities and captivities, to the depths.

CAPUT FIVE

Part V.1: THEODICY

So, said Marguerite, was that the end?
Did you expire there beside the highway,
Turn into a wraith that doesn't dissolve,
A sad gas that just doesn't pass on
But hangs around to moan and drag baggage,
Restless, dissatisfied, unrequited,
An endless bother to more solid types?

No, Marguerite, we're far from the end.
I'm still very much corporeal.

I've heard of the vanishing hitchhikers
Who don't acknowledge sudden ends to trips,
The abrupt loss of traction that death brings,
But keep going, pressing doggedly on.
No soul, once in motion, accepts rest
Or forced cancellation of travel plans.
Like an amputee with an absent limb
The disembodied urge their missing flesh
Not to fall, not to flag, not to fail,
And not to flail wildly out of control.
Tales maintain that pure force of habit
Will drive corpses forward for many years
Before they slow, stop and topple over
And let one spot of ground haul them down.
Armand must've seen you off to the side
When you sprang up aghast in headlights,
Slowed down, pulled over, and picked you up.
And it's just the thing that Armand might try,
To drag home roadkill and giftwrap it
Without undertaking to hide the stench
Or wipe up gore that wept out from wounds.

That's not gore, it's part of my plumage.
Watch what you say, Marguerite, I said.
Few ever survive a parrot attack.
Taunt me again and learn the reason why.

A well-made parrot won't sport wattles

As if some deformed Marabou stork
That's gone so stiff it falls flat on its back
If given a tip, if rocked off its feet.
Spirits, say Egyptians, resemble birds.
They drew crude pictures across tomb walls
That look, come to think, a lot like you.
So, bird, are you one of these, a ba,
Winged residue of once-human flesh?
If so, I see why you'd linger here,
Warm and indoors, sheltered from windstorms.
It's a better place to conduct a haunt
Than out beside the road, your thumb out,
A dead man walking who can't hitch a ride.

No, I don't believe I've expired yet.

But that's what all dead men say if asked.
And you're not sure? Perhaps you're now condemned
To loop here evermore, no exit,
A ghost ship that forever rounds the Horn,
The same damned routine done once again,
The same old cycle, same waste of time.
Damnation is like a big league sport
Or rote rites of love, never enough,
Despite the fact it's just more of the same,
Repetitious and pointless, busywork.
Face facts, parrot, you're a phantom now.

I'm not dead, Marguerite. I'm sure.
The hour was dark, but not as dark as that,
Or so it seemed at first, when first I woke
And took the only solace pain can grant,
That nerves and brain still, at least, found
sense.
At least, though wracked, I could safely conclude
My existence was not quite concluded yet.
That knowledge, I believed, was safe from doubt,
A truth self-evident, or so it seemed,
Until, with gravel crunch, a hearse arrived.

Those are ominous vehicles, she agreed.
Elijah, I gather, was already gone?

I'd lain there, out cold, throughout the night.
And though I came awake consumed with thirst,

A hot unquenchable thirst for vengeance,
Elijah was gone miles away by then,
Having a drink to celebrate escape,
Laughing, not thirsty, not hurt at all,
Praising that same God that I now cursed.
My fingers were curled like satan talons
But found no soft throat to close around.
They throttled only air, the elusive breeze.
Prayers for swift vengeance went unanswered,
And this, Marguerite, is what so galls.
We who knowingly do God's bidding
Have come to see how slow he's become
To intervene and balance wrong with right.
Even laypeople can't fail but note
The huge deficit he's somehow amassed,
Unpaid debts owed to injured parties,
Reparations due for day old bread.

Can't they, she said, just forget past wrongs?

Having learnt our Lord doesn't much care
To put effort behind rescue attempts,
The victims of crime now suspect the worst,
That he'll do little to heal up wounds
Or stir to seek an adequate revenge,
Even though, from mankind's point of view,
Law really has no other job
Beyond the redistribution of pain.
These duties are light but still too much.
Each year the Lord falls further behind,
Mired in detail, swamped with paperwork,
Until a once-swift justice is delayed,
Or postponed indefinitely, or cancelled.
And even karma, always slow-acting,
Goes slower, grows weaker, does little.
The lag between sin and retribution
Has grown so great that no true linkage,
No causal relation can still exist.
The neighbourhood feuds and family fights
That once kept us at one another's throats
Become only polite competitions,
Still deadly but oddly robbed of passion,
Open to all who pay the entry fee.
Vendettas dissolve into free-for-alls
And events drift off, their sense forgotten.

Take a deep breath, bird. Try to adapt.
You're living in the big city now,
And lawless though it might appear to you,
It's far safer here than Babylon,
If one can believe last month's statistics.
Those employed to protect public safety
Work hard to keep evil out of sight.

I've seen your Inquisition, Marguerite,
But not ever on streets or walking beats.
They're best observed with sight that penetrates,
That goes through the bricks of office walls
And throws its light upon the rows of desks.
I've seen your Inquisition, Marguerite.
They cut short hourly hour-long tea breaks,
And forego naps to tap at keyboards,
Go into wee hours of afternoons,
Well past quitting time for bureaucrats,
To make sure their yearly budgets increase.
I've seen the press releases they put out
That display the need for more Inquisitors
To help predict which way evil flees
When pelted with the public's well-spent bucks.
They locate crime by plotting out paths,
By finding which way it will likely go.
It's best, they suggest, to find the next point
And take pain that you don't go there too.
Without a crime report, a crime dissolves,
Which is why, if called, their phones just ring.
Instead, police project, extrapolate
From old data gathered by satellite.
To this end, like worthy weathermen,
They geocode the points where wrath erupts,
Charting Godhead's pursuit of evil
By finding spots where lightning has struck,
Where bolts of wrath have left blackened stumps.
The worst sin dwells, they soon learn from this,
In heartwood of innocent-seeming trees,
In circuits of power grid substations,
Or inside the cortex of those who know
That though a cap endorsed by Tiger Woods
Is not the proper protective headgear,
They still will golf the greens in thunderstorms.

Drought, she said, has drawn off lightning strikes
And thus spared golfers otherwise doomed.

The charts and maps, if done with proper care,
If bad luck is properly factored out
And armed robbery properly redefined
As symptomatic of diseased proteins,
If scale is shrunk and printer fonts reduced,
Will show that justice, month to month, improves.
The Inquisition will do all it can
To keep Nineveh's street safe from crime,
Short of going out to make arrests.

Nineveh, it's true, has some rough precincts,
Some slums and some decayed urban core
That time will soon renew or gentrify
But which, meanwhile, even cops avoid.

All of this city, by all that's holy,
Should long ago have met its final fate.
Nineveh, Marguerite, should be destroyed.
Yet it still stands, still does business,
And still swarms with its wicked multitudes.
Ninevites vibrate in hexagonal cells,
Buzz along passageways, dance and hum,
Alive to sing the sting of number nine
In honeycombed chambers dripping with wealth.
How does evil achieve such reward?
This angers some and puzzles others.
Why God spares this hive isn't clear
To those who don't know the way he thinks.
Like dogs who loll out their tongues and pant
Whether you drive them off or call them back,
They're too dim to guess their master's intent
And too portly in fact to rise to feet.
The uninitiated can't perceive
The reasons why heaven has sheltered sin
And let select guilty go unpunished
While many among djinnkind and men
Are fated for a hell, predestined for pits
For such minor infractions as stock fraud,
Tax evasion, bigamy, manslaughter,
And sodomizing young crocodiles
Before a cheering, chanting crowd of drunks.
They'll never know why charges are dropped

Or what deals are made behind closed doors.
Those less gifted never understand
The special plea bargains the Chosen get,
The strange immunities, dispensations,
And offers given for witness protection.
But mystics like myself know what's up.
The cost benefit equations at work
Discount current against future gains
To yield the greatest justice over time.

So Ninevites get special handling?

It's a sweetheart deal for Ninevites.
It doesn't seem to make a lot of sense,
That this heedless people need not heed,
That all they need do is to testify,
To bear witness against their very genes,
And thereby rat out the human race.
Nonetheless, it's fated. The fix is in.
The Lord God will save their DNA
And raise up samples as Exhibit A
On that day, at last, he retaliates.

I don't understand, said Marguerite.

Your holy scriptures grant us guidance here.
It's been foretold that on the Judgment Day
That God will need to call the Ninevites,
Along with others, such as Sheba's Queen,
To testify against the unrepentant.
What prophecy rashly commits to page
Becomes law even God must obey;
It's why the oracles choose words with care,
For the Lord so loves the letter itself
He loses meaning, lets go of depths
And hears only that first splash of sound.
He doesn't wonder what loved ones mean
Or look for unstated expectations
Or hidden agendas or boldfaced lies.
There's no point getting clever with God.
He won't weasel out interpretations
That let the harsh, literal truth loosen
And soften into a vague, ambiguous mud.
He speaks clearly the precise word needed
So that even the algae understands,

Even protozoa, even tubers.
He runs this universe by the book,
And this is why he spares the Ninevites.
And just as God is bound, so too all.
Nineveh's compelled, borne along by fate,
To hear the Lord's insisted point of view,
Hear it, understand it, recite it back.

A stroke of good luck, said Marguerite.

And yet, surely, he doesn't need them all.
Judgment Day will drag on for eons
If every Ninevite now alive
Must file in to where the accused will stand,
Each just to repeat the same tired tale.
God will need to stop the sun, jam its gears,
As once he did outside Jericho,
To make sure there's time enough for all,
For all to speak a piece and shamble off.

It won't matter how long a day drags,
Lunch recess is still but half an hour.

Bow your head, Marguerite. Let us pray.

What? Now? Don't we need to get contrite?

That state's waived for prophets and escorts.
Just bow your head, girl, I'll do the rest.

I'm not closing my eyes, if that's your plan.

Allow me, Lord, to make one suggestion
Vis-a-vis the witness of Ninevites.
Why not get them all to speak at once?
These thousands could, if coached, raise their
song
With one vast sound to fill heaven's vault.
Together they'd give the trump such roar
That only music buffs would ever note
If some voices were gone and didn't add
A decibel or two to the final sum.
And who else would know if some weren't kept,
Even if the truth came arranged in parts,
Soprano, alto, baritone, bass,

And even if, for nuanced points of view,
They varied themes or gave witness in fugue.
To kill a few now won't harm the case
For which all have sacrificed so much
And might even speed the proceedings up.
And why reward any testimony?
It smacks of those experts called to oath
Who slant facts toward he who paid most.

Remember, parrot, whom you address here.

At least, oh Lord, withhold some of their perks.
There are those who dwell in proud Nineveh
To whom Godhead should deny his grace,
Disturb the ease with which their world is worn.
Drive these worms, oh Lord, from paradise.
Rip open their cocoons and sleeping bags.
Raze the places plump pigeons take roost,
Haul off to the dump that plush cushion
On which a fat ass so aptly fits,
Loosen snug warmth, unsettle smug style,
And yank up carpets and turn down heat.
Send them, oh Lord, boils and running sores,
Interpolate ulcers between skin and air,
Inflict wounds on flesh, gangrene on wounds,
Until they no longer abide the wind
Or light of day or slide of lover's touch
And retreat, urged by lashing scourges,
Into the acid bath that gave them birth.
And yes, I know what's said, that these souls
Have gone astray because of circumstance,
A faulty upbringing, lack of education,
Bad brain chemistry, poor self esteem,
Genetics that made them come out human
Instead of slime as Godhead intended,
Instead of abortions their mothers preferred,
Not the right parents, not the right friends,
Not enough love and not enough jobs,
Not enough dole or Vitamin A
And not enough booze to blot out life.
Show compassion, they say. Give them a break.
They're just distracted and unable to cope.
Reduced sentence or two weeks probation
Or fifteen minutes of community work
Is more than enough for a tenth offense,

It's not their fault alone, we're all to blame;
All of us are complicit all of the time,
All except me, for I wasn't in town,
Not around during their formative years,
Wasn't here to scotch these vipers young,
Or crush their skulls before fangs grew in
Or set out poison before they could mate.
Smite them, I say. Pull not thy punches,
Stay not thy hand, saturate targets
With hard, definitive, and repeated strikes
Until the air is rent with screams and shrieks.
Banish all impulse to show them mercy.
Keep steady thy finger, squeeze the trigger,
And strafe until thy magazine's emptied.
I ask only, Lord, to direct thy fire.
I possess a list, yes, a lengthy list,
Of all those I'd consign bare-buttocked
To splintered benches, birdshit encrusted,
Still sticky with rancid hotdog fat
And spills from toppled over plastic cups.
For each name on my list a seat's reserved
In those bleachers that ring infernal pits.
Let them observe the vacuity up close.
Let them suffer eternal intermission,
Oversee overnight test patterns,
Let them await an event, anything,
And even verse would not be unwelcome
To those my lengthy curse enumerates.

Just how lengthy is this curse, bird?

I will not now articulate my list,
Canto after canto of names and crimes,
Each with little illustrative fables
From which useful morals can be obtained.

During descents into infernal depths
Canto composers always overlook
Those spots here and there that stand vacant,
The tracts in hell set aside for themselves,
Perfectly placed to jot out invective.

No, I need not mention all the names:
When you yourself make visit to hell
You'll come upon each privately roomed,

Each in an individual exhibit
Mocked up to resemble a life on earth.
Just read the small sign affixed to cage
To learn their name, diet and habitat.
Feign no surprise if the name Elijah
Will confront you somewhere on your visit's
course.

Observe him there in simulated life
Lounging on a bed of his own feces,
By a wallow of self-loathing, self-pity.
If curiosity extends so far,
His keepers can provide you with further facts,
With more detailed documentation.
Note my name at the top of his guest book,
The first to celebrate a justice done.

Do you really think, parrot, that such a one
Would tag wrongdoing with any remorse?

Perhaps a bit, but it's insufficient,
Both before act and after, as reply,
As redress, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.
It leaves the afterlife as last appeal
For any kind of justice for Elijah.
I might launch, I suppose, a civil suit,
Or go seeking damages not by tort
But by means of hydraulic jackhammer
Applied directly to the temporal lobes,
But I would have to locate the culprit first,
Not an easy task with one who sleeps in bush
Wherever blackout overcomes him.
Besides, who can spare the time to pursue
All the revenges that daily stack up?

You're not just a prophet, you're a saint.
And are we finished, parrot, praying yet?
If so I move we say a quick amen
And verily verily move things on.
You said, I think, that a hearse drew up.
Were you thrown in the back, then hauled off?

That was pretty much just what occurred.
The sun, at that moment, was due to rise.
Need a lift, stranger? the driver called out
Or do you lie beside the road by choice,

Just here to do your nude sunbathing?

What? said Marguerite. Now you're naked?

All I had, clothes too, Elijah took.
After beating me, he and his colleagues
Robbed me of my attractive sackcloth coat
And left me to bleed on the gravel shoulder
Beside Nineveh's freeway offramp.
They gave a few extra kicks to my side
After learning I was indeed flat broke.

But how petty! How unsportsmanklike!

There's no referee to call a foul
When the winners go to loot the losers.
Destitution can provide no defense
Against the might of man's unrighteous greed.
Will not the wolf in hunger always choose
The least combative lamb in any flock?
Like water seeking channel downward,
Power always chooses the easy path,
The nearest nest with unprotected eggs,
Soil already loosened by other force,
Doors already broken by other thieves.
Indeed, poverty, far from a safeguard,
Offers power open invitation
To further, more thorough exploitation.
The scattered sheep from time to time will hear
The calls that urge the flock to reunite,
Band together to better protect all,
But not until huddled back together
Do they learn that these calls come from wolves
Who find it easier to cull than hunt.
A fellowship among the victimized
Confers the chance to moan in unison
But not much in way of revenge achieved.
And so it is that the Lord has favoured
A citizenry that carries sidearms,
Licensed or unlicensed, concealed or not.
Loaded handguns promote civility;
They deter many petty transgressions,
Remove from both discourse and gene-pool
The more obnoxious of malefactors.
Vengeance is mine, points out the Godhead,

But, on the other hand, much can be said
For vigilante action, swift lynchings,
A single shot fired from a Beretta nine.

You dispute the rule of law, oh parrot,
Due process and habeas corpus,
Innocent until proven guilty? she inquired.

It's left some standing far too tall.

But we're all too tall, said Marguerite,
To toys that rise but seven inches high.

I mean the height to which a giant grows,
The mean-eyed one that stares down on men
And carries clubs in case stares don't work.
The Nimrod gene, here, still runs true:
Many in thistown are tall like that,
A trait that's best improved by guillotines
If set up in high traffic locations
To take a bit of trim from off the top
And bring back our average height to norm.
We'd give our sort a more uniform look,
A match for that to which man first stretched,
Or else force the tall to walk with stoops.
But such justice awaits apocalypse,
When the high are brought low and low high,
And this event is not the kind of thing
On which hopes of cognoscenti are pinned
Since history, if it goes there at all,
Goes slow, veers off in wrong directions,
And takes bad meanders along the way.
You might as well wait for the afterlife,
If you hold hope for level playing fields,
The day God again debabelizes towns
And sends around his spectral grenadiers
To lob explosives onto upper floors
Of all structures that exceed legal height.

Of what possible use is such a view?
Calm down, parrot. Seek self improvement.
It's what we do here to keep the peace.

Part V.2: RIDDLE CONTEST

The hearse driver helped me into the back.
He thanked Ig-Galla, god of rear doors,
Before he unlocked it and showed me inside.
And there, with some dismay, I saw a corpse.
This cadaver came without a casket,
Without any sign of cosmetic work
Performed to hide the stresses death had left.
A rope noose still looped the broken neck
And a twisted grimace still wracked its face.
It wasn't quite the reassuring sight
That promotes hope for rest in afterlife.
Climb in, said the driver. Don't worry.
This loved one isn't as large as some.
There's still plenty of room, space for two,
If the two lie still, stretched side by side.
Should the loved one slide, just shove him back.

Who's my bedmate here? I asked the man.
I've known many like this, cold and stiff,
But few less responsive, given a kiss.

Please don't annoy other passengers.
The left side is his, you stay on the right.
That loved one was only yesterday
An active participant in civic life,
Employed to verify property lines
In legal disputes that came before courts.
But last night he ran afoul the gallows,
And dropped plumb, perpendicular to earth.
He took a bribe, or so the story goes,
To move a line a little to one side.
For that the Inquisition strung him up.

The proof, I'd hope, was incontrovertible.
See how set now he sits in his mold?
It's far too late to commute this state.

But such are courts and such, of course, are
bribes,
And such is evidence that police provide,
That one might wonder if his line ran true,
If that judge that condemned the man to hang

Perhaps erred, perhaps leaned a bit left
To compensate for forces brought to bear.
This surveyor, sir, may or may not
Have done the crime for which he paid the price.
He wouldn't be first to take consequence
That belongs in truth to powers-that-be.
At any rate, sir, my contract states
That any time an execution occurs
I shall show up and cut down the accused
And transport his corpse back into town.
For this I'm paid a small but frequent sum.
My place, it's understood, is not to judge.

Why not, I said, leave the corpse to hang
To show the fruit of rectitude ignored?

It's not tidy. A corpse attracts birds.
Great crowds of crows, sir, will congregate
To stare on death before it's covered up.
They always leave behind a dreadful mess.

So, you cut the dead man down yourself?

I make these gallows runs after hours.
The hangman, even the cleaning staff,
Have all gone home to get a night's rest,
And no one's there to do work but me.

So how come you to know the corpse's crime?

There's a toetag I take off and sign
And leave behind to show receipt of freight.
It specifies in full the name and crime.
The name, though, has now slipped out of mind.
It ordinarily won't take too long
To do the paperwork and make the trip.
This run, though, is running rather late.

What's happened? Wasn't the corpse dead yet,
Still jerking around, proving troublesome,
Not content with how justice turned out?

It's funny, stranger, you should mention that.
Imagine how I felt, as I drove along,
To hear sounds of movement come from behind,

To feel a knife tip prick my ear lobe,
To hear a whisper slide along the blade,
The kind of harsh sound dead lungs might make
If rasped up through a noose-strangled throat.
That voice, indeed, caught my attention.
What, driver, it said, are the names and weights
Of all the kinds of hadrons and leptons,
The quarks and gravitons and superstrings,
That Godhead has currently put to use
To make the world's matter remain entwined?

Why, excellent corpse, I croaked, do you ask?

I thought, perhaps, we'd entertain ourselves
During this long night we'll spend together.
A game, I thought, would help those hours pass.

But it's only a short drive back to town.
Just relax. Listen to the radio.
And then, before you know it, we'll be there.

Who knows what I, what you, truly know?
The game we'll play tonight, my friend, is this:
I'll ask riddles, some real brainteasers,
For which you, smartass, provide replies.
And the one I just asked is just the first.
Consider, driver, if it's one you can solve.
If that riddle's answer is known to you,
Tell me at once or else I'll slice your neck,
Slice through blood vessels and spinal chord,
Slice through your throat and take off your head.
First I'll shorten you, then do myself,
Then take the heads and transpose the two.
And after that, I'll do the driving here,
And you, driver, can lie flat on my back
And listen along for the long eons
To classic pop hits played in rotation.
But make sure, too, that your answer's correct.
A wrong reply achieves the same result.

The head swap proposed is a bit baroque
And not well plotted, which shouldn't surprise,
Given what troubles must occupy your thoughts.
My head, you've said, will go onto your neck.
Won't that, corpse, leave me armed with the knife?

I assume, of course, self goes with the head
And won't slide down to hide among guts.

Knife. That's right, said corpse. Okay.
What I'll do is first hand you the cleaver,
Let you make the necessary cuts.
Then I'll do the messy transposition.

But what would happen if, for convenience,
I take knife and cut off your head first,
With that rigid smile of quiz show hosts,
And then, before I have sawn off my own,
Lose interest in this game, just quit?

You're right again, driver, said the corpse.
Okay. I'll do the cuts, pass the knife,
Then, during the incapacitation
Decapitation forces on torsos
Who don't know, as do I, the right spell,
I'll finish the head transplant surgery.

What, again, was the point of swapping heads?
Wouldn't it go quicker, spill less blood,
If, instead, I get out, let you drive?
Why, corpse, don't I just toss you the keys?

I'll do questions, and you do replies.
Speaking of replies, you owe me one now.

But that's a trick question, I told the corpse.
There's just one particle God employs
To generate and bind his universe.

Okay, said the corpse, but what's its name?

Jonah! said the driver, voice triumphant.

What? I said. The particle's named Jonah?

No. That's what was scrawled on the toetag.
It just came to me now, the name I read.

What coincidence! That's my name too!

What a lucky name, I thought at the time,

This most unlucky loved one possessed:
No bad consonants, not one vowel
Divisible by five, by seven, by twelve.

But what name, sir, does the particle bear?
Maybe Tachyon, maybe Svabhava,
Maybe Sea Biscuit, the foal of the gods?
Tell me, driver - I'd really like to know.

Sorry, but you lack the requisite knife.
I told that corpse, though, and this sufficed
To send the knife tip away from my neck.
It satisfied enough to still the voice.
In fact, I found, the corpse had disappeared.

But it's back now, I said, in case he thought
I'd somehow overlooked the detail
That now contradicted his strange account.

My contract left me no option here.
The Inquisition expects full compliance
Or else, not only do they not pay,
They'll exact monetary penalties
For goods that come late, or worse, don't come.
And then, if fines aren't paid, the noose awaits.
Then your own dead flesh must make the trip.

That's overly severe, unduly harsh.

Contracts are akin to property lines.
If the corpse doesn't land on loading dock
In only a few hours, Jonah, from now,
I'd fare better to slit my throat myself.
That knife, though, had also disappeared.

Why, said Marguerite, if corpse had knife,
And dexterity enough to slice flesh,
Did it not cut the gallows rope itself?

It was, I think, a supernatural knife,
And unsuitable for such mundane tasks.
You don't saw rope with an enchanted edge,
And thus, if rope is there, the knife is not.
There's strict etiquette that operates
And keeps a blade dormant until required.

Take, for example, fabled Excalibur,
Withheld in darkness, kept out of sight,
Until it's produced at just the right point.

I'm not sure it's the same principle, bird.

All magic cutlery works likewise,
Drawn free of scabbards, placed down by plates,
And poked, stuck or swung, by rigorous rules.
I'll not now demonstrate each case,
Each blade whose legend or name I retain,
But should, woman, you doubt, consider this:
Do the suicides slash open wrists
With machetes soiled by sugar cane sap?
What uncouth soul employs the same steel
That filets fish or amputates a leg
To bleed the lamb that's blessed for sacrifice?
It's common sense to avoid such offence
And keep them apart, in separate drawers,
Stone axe in cave, chainsaw in shed,
A razor blade near the bathroom sink.
Would you want that holy, flaming Sword
That God's Judging Angel shall one day wield
To pare away the grave from risen flesh,
Meanwhile used to spread butter on toast?
Suppose, Marguerite, it were your soul
That arose tainted with crumbs, smeared with jam?
And that's why the Sword is nowhere nearby.

Let's return to the driver now, parrot.
I'll leave aside the next question I'd ask,
On what tool it was the driver employed
In the first place to cut the body down.

As soon as I knew my cargo had gone,
I put my foot to brakes and turned around
And sped the hearse back to the gallows tree.
The corpse was there, hanging, just as before.
Rope twines, it seems, self-reunite.
I cut it down again, loaded it up,
And headed off, but going faster now.
That speed, however, did me no good.
Again came knife, again came riddle,
Again a trick question easily solved.
And once again that corpse disappeared,

And again I drove back to cut it down.
This has now happened some twenty times.

Did the driver recite all the riddles?

No, Marguerite. I didn't know then
What knowledge and power I might have gained
Had I gone one step further and asked.
But such was how slowly my thoughts advanced,
The holy grail, trailed by bowling trophies
Belting out loud, celebratory hymns,
Could have flitted by and gone unremarked.
Each riddle solved revealed, I know now,
A little more of how non-memory,
For which a cold flesh serves as back door,
Interpenetrates this universe.

The corpse is present now, I said again.
Has it not asked its next question yet?
Or did you fail to voice the right reply,
In which case you now wear the wrong head?
You do, I would say, look somewhat pale,
As if brain had been drained of blood supply.

The head that knows more is the better head,
And that head sits atop the mute corpse.
It's an uneasy silence that we two share,
Silence too great for truth to break through.
This time around it posed me a riddle
Much too complex for quick solution.
I've gone miles beyond the previous mark,
The furthest the elastic noose had stretched
Before at last it snapped its body back.
Yet the riddle has kept my thoughts perplexed
Looking to find the trick that binds the knot,
And now here we are, nearing the city.
That's one of two reasons I've picked you up.
Perhaps, I thought, another head would help,
A head content to stay firmly in place.

What's the riddle? I said. I'll surely try.

One day Oedipus the King and his son
Went out from town to the countryside.
They went out armed with shotguns, to hunt.

What was the son of King Oedipus named?
I'm hazy on Theban genealogies.

Junior, Marguerite. Oedipus Junior.
His mother swore he looked just like dad.
They spotted fresh swan tracks in marsh mud.
Two swans, they knew from these tracks, were near,
One with wide, splayed-out feet, and one small.
You take big foot, father, said Junior,
Because you're the king, and I'm not, yet.
The King said, sure, kid, if you insist.

Is this an historical account? I asked.

The driver shrugged, said he forgot to ask.

Then they saw them, two magnificent swans,
Gliding through water and stepping on shore.

They're too beautiful to kill, said the King.

Well, let's rape them, then, Junior replied,
To which King said, sure, if you insist.

This riddle is reprehensible, bird.

Perhaps the corpse learned it in hell, I said.
The driver, and now I, follow the game,
Even when tracks may lead over the line.
Antecedents, pursued, produce disgust
And soon force trackers of truth to retreat
Unless, voyeurs, they really need to peek.
Our rapt mystics make much of how much
This diverse world is truly just One;
The question they've glossed over, brushed aside,
Is yes it's just one, but just One What?
Just what is this stomach-turning stuff
In which we dwell and out of which we're made?
Just why is it, girl, never discussed
Exactly what the One's been treated with
To make its lively mass remain inert
And not writhe with worms or gas out stench?

I don't really care for metaphysics.

Don't you want to hear where the trail led?

If that driver learns the answer, she said,
He's no further ahead. Still, go on.

These swans were human women, transformed,
And not just any women, not strangers,
But Queen Jocasta and little Antigone.
Just why the two went about as swans
Was never quite made clear to Oedipus,
Nor did corpse, on this point, speculate.
The major problem, though, he said, was this.
Mother had the small feet, daughter the big.
So father raped daughter, brother mother.
Nine months later two infants were born.

Eggs, said Marguerite. Swans lay eggs.

We who wear birdshape don't take pretense
Farther than God or tight costumes permit.
The witchcraft here proved transitory.
The two, women again, both bore sons.

There's much to this addled riddle, bird,
That will not bear up under scrutiny.

The riddle, then, Jonah, was stated thus:
What name does the relationship bear
Between those two children, each to each,
And which, should King die, becomes crown prince?

Isn't it best, driver, never to know?

Of course. But even so, the question nags.

Okay, then, I said. The answer's this...

The corpse twitched and gave a hideous shriek,
And the driver shouted, quick, grab the knife.

No. Wait. No, that's not it, I said.
I almost had it there, but now it's gone.

They were second cousins? guessed Marguerite,

But once removed and then twice put back?

Listen, oh Jonah, the driver then said
As that corpse sank down, lifeless again.
My needle's fallen well below the E.
All those extra trips used up gas
And ate up a profit I'd counted on.
It's only right that you pay for this ride.
And that, of two reasons, is number two.

You're very good at riddles, kind driver,
Too good, yes, ever to profit much.
Do men you find naked beside the road,
Men beaten so badly they can't walk,
Ever carry around with them much cash?
I carry, sir, not even coupons
To save bucks on airport rental cars.

The driver braked, snarled, Jonah - get out!

Which one of us, I said, do you mean?
But shoved open rear door and jumped out.
I left before he thought to calculate
What he might fetch, what bounty might be paid,
If two dead Jonahs, not one, arrived.
I jumped out before he could realize,
Should some solution to that last riddle
Suddenly pop into his puzzled mind,
A back-up corpse might well prove its worth.

Part V.3: NUMERIC DATA

Did you think, jumping, to thank Ig-Galla?

I thanked no deity, not that one,
And not Godhead, who inhabits them all.

But why blame God? You set yourself up.

First, no prevention. Second, no cure.

Nothing new's learnt without bangs to shins.

Even a child knows to punish the rock
That plants itself in paths in such a way
It shoves its edge into innocent flesh.
You wrest such rocks up from beds they've made,
Cast them down over cliffs, into pits,
Onto an alien gravel far from kin,
Then send down curses to harry their tails.

But there's less, parrot, to heaven and earth
Than what your shifty transistors impute,
Less to what's real than what there appears.
Undergo therapy and learn the truth!
Nature cares nothing for harms we suffer.

No. Nature's not neutral, Marguerite,
For nature exists to teach our kind pain,
To teach us the paths that pick through the rocks,
The park paths that wind through wound displays.
And that's the kind of thing nature admires,
The random patterns rock placements make.
It carves them on brains with its ad hoc tools.
Nature's plan is to hunt mankind down
And map its beauty on networks of nerves.
And sure, we're nature too, the target part,
The involuted part, the part that hurts.
And though nature is bent against flesh,
We'll still do our part for cartography,
And come singly from slings or catapults,
Or grouped, falling from cliffs in avalanche,
To close those roads maps once showed cleared.

Some, it seems, have low tolerance for pain.
Only wimps would choose this as First Cause.
Our science, perhaps less easily bruised,
Thinks nature to be wholly insensate,
Without much interest in making plans.

Prophets, Marguerite, know nature best.
It's best, with nature, to just ignore pain,
Which is what your science, unknowing, does.
Your best defense if nature comes prowling
Is pretend her indignities mean nothing
And take a pensive, if not stoic, stance.
Nature is neutral unless fuss is made,
Unless protests are raised when hurt is felt.

Fight or flee, my girl, and nature attacks.
Knock one knave down and two spring up.
Offense always targets those who react,
The skin that flinches draws the most stings.

I only meant, she said, it does nothing
To serve the cause that human justice serves.
I meant, for that cause, there's no effect.

And that's why humans need heaven's help,
To get the most effect for the least cause,
To steer nature toward cosmic revenge.
Vengeance is best served if served wholesale,
Justice served from above, served with a smile,
Served with carpet bombing around the clock,
Or served with gas, radiation and plague.
It's best served by just pushing a button,
Or flicking the switch a contractor's wired.
It's best served up cold, without rancour,
And that requires higher, sterner powers.
Retaliation isn't human work,
For nothing connects second crimes to first
Except within inhuman spirit worlds.
If ever to rise screaming from runways,
Even the worst furies will need assist
From some other, supernatural force.

Get real and relax. It never happens.

Thus, battered and limping and trailing blood,
My temples once again throbbing with pain,
Unvirgiled, naked, hope already gone,
I passed between Nineveh's open gates.
I cannot begin to describe the scene
That greeted my disbelieving perception.

Don't bother trying, said Marguerite.
I live here. For me it's second nature.

I say, rather, that you've become inured.
Wake up, Marguerite. Immersed in sleep,
You're unaware of those forces that rule
Your every movement, your every word.
Did you know that you sometimes hum a tune,
Short snatches of melody to yourself?

Not true, she replied. Not true at all.

Have you noticed, then, the slot machines,
The video poker and tarot games,
That line hallway, room and lobby walls
In all public buildings of any size?
Did you witness that stealthy invasion
That occupied with ease a sleeping town?
The concept was imported from Babylon
When taxpayers refused to fund the dole
Beyond current expenditures,
Forcing city fathers to tax the poor
In the form of numbers rackets legalized.
No poverty is so abject that,
For an infinitesimal chance at wealth,
It would not impoverish itself further.
Given all the evidence at hand that,
If luck exists, it exists not for them,
Why is ore of fairy gold such lure?
Only the wise question fortune closely,
Knowing in what little esteem the world
Holds any individual standing.
I was myself, of course, in no way wise.
The full nature of how weighted my odds,
How heavily handicapped my selections,
Had not yet made itself manifest.

But I sometimes buy lottery tickets!

None of us can withstand the number's spin.
Gambling's demand outpaces supply
And draws forth the products of its delusion
From the shadows that conceal incipience.
At first the machines were installed
Only in racetracks and large casinos,
Then came bars, banks and bus stations,
And now they are everywhere in Nineveh.
Empty floorspace is a thing of the past.
It's not just the rows of waiting slots;
Giant Keno grids have replaced windows
And other blank eye-level wallspace.
There are Lotto Babylon kiosks
Set up in all of the public places.
All the automated teller machines

Have been torn out of banks, replaced with slots.
Numerology has destroyed the minds
Of a generation who has come to think
Supernatural streams of numbers run,
Like underground rivers, beneath us.
Align yourself with their flow and win big!
This is your birthright, bred in your bones,
Born in a place named for the number nine.

Your parents believed in mystic properties
Attached to numbers, or so you informed me.
So what's so different here? she said.

You live in a artificial landscape,
One constructed from a numeric theory.
Enneads permeate the townsite,
Punctuate speech and regulate thought.
Nines with nines intertwine, pervade space,
Ooze from pores, grease the walls and stain skin.
Nines like dust settle down on doorknobs,
Window sills, table cloths and floor mats,
Hang in air, sting the eyes and clog drains.
And it is not by accident, but by design
That nines cluster within the city walls.
I've seen the nines and how they came to be,
For yes, Nineveh's named for number nine,
And Nimrod her King changed name to match
When God induced his continental drift
And isolated the local dialect
By shifting nasals back, off from the lip.

I don't quite follow, said Marguerite.
How, bird, does any of this relate?

You can't present the entire universe
In one sentence and not leave out parts.
How, a sage asks, would two things relate
And why, even, would they ever choose to?
And that, most likely, was the starting point
I should have used when first I opened my beak.
It's too late now, though, we're underway.
Now we're already here, inside the town,
Already knee-deep in leech-like nines,
Not, I've said, by accident: this was meant.
Nineveh was the first city to be built

According to Pythagorean principles,
So that all the scaling, distances, measures
And proportions of the structures strictly relate
To the musical intervals and harmonies.
No sooner had this idea occurred to them
Then did all the Assyrians go to work
With an enthusiasm distressing to behold.
They donned greasy aprons, mounted scaffolds
With tape measures and hammers and sliderules
And blueprints dotted with masonic glyphs.
And they promptly erected their crazed designs:
Towers, temples, taverns and townhouses,
Cavernous theatres, black tabernacles,
Tasteless porcelain Chinese pagodas
An incredible nine hundred cubits high,
The bejewelled mechanical cacti with arms
Moved by creaking, steam-driven escapements
To leads crowds in prayer by semaphore,
Stone sphinxes and alabaster gryphons,
Botanical gardens twelve acres square
Of only pineapples and artichokes,
The open, pamphlet-strewn plazas and parks
Billboarded with vignettes from Krishna's lives
Scenes from Saint Tiamat's temptations
And blowups of various insect larvae,
Ubiquitous Chaldean-made windmills,
Broad avenues lined with colonnades
Of cuneiform-inscribed cedarn pillars,
The obelisks covered by climbing ivy,
The mammoth museums of polished marble
With miles of long galleries and corridors
Stuffed to ceilings with grotesque figurines
Of mermaids copulating with lobsters,
Sundials, cathedrals, and train stations,
Narrow, labyrinthine alleyways
That suffered uncertain garbage collection,
Astroturfed terraces, tiered pyramids
Chambered both above and below the ground
With a myriad dimly lit oubillettes
Where the insane were tormented until cured,
Row on row of balconies, glass-enclosed,
Each equipped with rusted barbecue,
With plastic sunflowers, with lawn chairs.
And they laboured non-stop for forty years
Until they had created a metropolis

To the then-popular tune 'Danny Boy'.
Some prophet, some half-crooked crackpot,
Mistook a call-in listener request
For God's midnight baritone harangue
That came in streams and incoherent bursts
Through showerheads in local fitness gyms.
Rather than check sources he told himself
And then, later, Nimrod's engineers,
That this melody carried mystic weight,
The secret, uncanny, connecting power
Denoted by the governing number nine.

Why nine, she said, and not, say, nineteen?

Because it's last, as high as they then went,
Before, mod ten, they'd just start again,
Or go transfinite and fall apart,
Right side okay, but left side a mess.
And because most of the city was complete
Before the tempered scale reached perfection
And circles of fifths cartwheeled onstage,
And because each building sings solo,
The town's polyphonies are just discord.
The symmetries and perspectives thus produced
Are apt to give the unwary visitor
A severe and often fatal headache.
And permanent residents of Nineveh
Can be distinguished at once by their crossed eyes
And by their off-key, off-pitch humming
Of phrases from that once-popular tune.

These auditory hallucinations,
Friend parrot, indicate malfunction.

Truly, Marguerite, the pipes are playing:
Water hammers, pressure surges, airlocks.
It's the noisy plumbing hidden in walls
That shudders, rattles, roars out its music
To rouse sleeping mystery into view.
It's how nature binds seen to unseen,
Combines with one half-hearted harmony
All disparate things, far-flung atoms,
Disconnected events, chance encounters.
Such unification's always ugly,
Always contrived, always artificial,

But nonetheless always sincerely meant.
It's invisible gods you worship here.
Rare rains, otherwise forever lost,
Are collected together and drained forward,
Water going forth as thirst goes back.
Yes, there's waterworks throughout the land,
Inside walls and underneath the streets
With no other meaning to guide design
That that of ill-informed engineering.
If Ninevites didn't desire the One,
The one that Ig-Galla impersonates,
They'd never have defaced it with their ditches,
Water mains, sewage lines, aqueducts.

That sounds like an urban myth, she said.
Nineveh is nothing like that, parrot.
It's a place of quiet tree-lined streets,
A place of wide canals, pleasant temples,
Where dwells a decent God-fearing folk
Who wish to live out their lives in peace...

...And amass monstrous, useless heaps of wealth.
But even that wouldn't be so bad
If they'd do it without the sound effects.
It's the constant noise of great Nineveh
That will most offend those who arrive here.
Some of the less-experienced travellers,
On first encounter with high noise levels
Inside this town's tall ceramic walls,
Will gag, vomit over their camel's neck.
The least experienced travellers vomit
Not over but onto the camel's neck,
And these the gatekeepers deny entry.
Gatekeepers, no matter what their gate,
Are fastidious when it comes to camels
And keep watch for any unkempt mounts
Lest the town's traffic dwindle in beauty
And bring disrepute upon its rulers.
And even before all the slot machines,
Even before the unpleasant perspectives,
Even before the massive ziggurats
And tall, shabby, ramshackle tenements,
The first feature noticed will be the noise.
And it was the noise that humanity makes
That first inclined the Godhead against us,

That prompted him to send the inundation
That lifted Noah, that floated him loose
To drift off on disorganized seas
To hear only birdcries and windsound.
And Nineveh's noise is truly offensive,
The din of its traffic, roar of its machines,
Ambulance sirens, crack of sniper fire,
Impatient horns and screams of mating cats,
And, worst of all, the shouting of voices.
Street vendors, panhandlers, truck drivers,
Children at their play and masons at their work,
All are airing their views at top volume.
Most intolerable of these voices
Are those with a significance to impart.
Nineveh is infested with such vermin:
Prophets and evangelists and poets.
And the first two classes are bad enough,
But the third will push a headache victim
From outpatient clinic down to the morgue.
Would-be poets throng the street corners
And exchange profound-sounding obscurities.
None listen, yet each is louder than the next,
And each is equipped with the same tin ear,
The same insistent, snarling, nasal whine.
These are people with nothing much to say,
And they say it at length, say it ad nauseum,
And having stated it they then restate it.
Uninformed, uninspired, unemployed,
They find their muse mixed in a cheap liqueur
Which is maudlin and banal in equal parts,
Then vomit her out in uneven lines
Of unmusical, half-digested prose.
Although to address them would be wasted breath,
To remain quiet won't quell the clamour
Already raised by the competing voices
Of these welfare-fed literati.
My only hope to make my message heard
Is to crank my eloquence up to max
And pray that it isn't mistaken for verse.

Not much danger of that, she observed,
Unless you've made plans to rhyme with max
In near future, before I lose the sound.
As bad as those poets may be, parrot,
At least they own the grace to strive for heights,

And not, like some, look down bent beaks
On heaven's vast division, now stretched thin,
Just to croak out more useless abuse.

I made my way along the city streets,
Sidestepping the broken hypodermics,
Old cesspools, minefields, toxic dumps,
Engine parts, fallen wires, plastic cups,
Dismantled toy trains and dead pack mules.
Yes, you watched your footing in this city.
It would be so easy to slip and fall
On all the loose, spent ammunition
Or pools of motor oil and antifreeze
Or slick fig pits racoons shit out.

Seeds, said Marguerite. A fig has seeds.

These were Iraqi figs, a special strain
That figures mainly in racoon diet.
Iraqi racoons, I should pause to note,
Have grown ever bolder in recent years
And spend the nights roaming the city streets
To gather up garbage that humans leave,
Or toss aside or strew around in rage,
Out of some accidental compassion,
A solidarity with those who scavenge
That operates too deep beneath dream
For better informed wills to bring to heel.
Litter exists as a gift to racoons
Despite daylight law that wants them gone.
You see them all night long around here,
Dragging along filth-smearred plastic bags
To midnight banquets by River Tigris.
Their bands are not yet numerous enough
To qualify, like the locusts, as plague
And stir exterminators to take note,
To strap on tanks and go gas their burrows.
They're still just one minor nuisance,
Just one more symptom of worsened times,
Just one more sign of growing neglect.
This city's destruction is underway,
An ongoing doom that darkens your lights
Not by pulling the plug on entire grids,
But slowly, by spreading shade in increments.
It screws a few bulbs out of their sockets,

Waits a week, then unscrews a few more.
Godhead's work here already proceeds,
In customary fashion, day by day.
He plays his chess a hundred moves ahead,
A touch here, a well-placed kick there,
Destroying mighty Nineveh piecemeal.

Part V.4: OROE

I stopped here and there to address people,
But none could hear, because of all the noise
And because none were inclined to pay heed
And take attention away from tasks at hand
To hear compelling words from passing tramps.
They'd veer off sidewalks and step in mud
To make detour around the place I stood.
Not one stopped, and most hurried away
As if I were, indeed, apparition.
None saw need for any intercourse
With broken strangers who loom from doorways,
Omit small talk and just launch their pitch.
No Ninevite even met my eyes
Until I approached the Tigris embankment.

I know the place, she said. It's a real dump.
It's where the homeless camp out all night.

A gaunt and haggard figure garbed in rags
Approached me there and asked for spare change.
Ordinarily I would not have even paused;
The cash flow of the professional beggar,
In my experience, will exceed my own.
I stopped, however, struck by the demeanour,
The dignity and poise of the panhandler.
Or it may have been the twenty or so apes
That trailed behind him and bounced up and down
And gnawed on fruit that had seen better days.

My name is Oroe, said the panhandler.
I was once High Priest of all Nineveh,
Until I lost it all, my house and car,
My wife and friends, my job and pension plan.
Can you spare me, stranger, any loose coin?

Call me Jonah, I said. I too am broke.
I was beaten, robbed of my sole possession.
But you, what happened to reduce you so?

I blew an oracle, he replied ruefully.
We had just gone back to the tarot cards
And the game we named Nineveh Showdown.

How does that work? I'm new in town.

I was placed centered in an enneagram
Inside the Godhead's downtown Temple.
It's the one with those massive pillars.
I cut the deck and then take the top card
And read its letter to the assembled priests.
And you keep doing that until the cards
Have spelled out a complete divine message.
The message is deemed complete, by Hoyle's rules,
When you receive nine blank cards in a row.
Well, I cut the cards time after time,
And each time, each card, I drew a blank.
Godhead, apparently, was not talking.

Hold it there, parrot, said Marguerite.
What about the one-eyed parrot card?

I don't know what you're talking about.
No such card exists in tarot decks.
Do you now insult my appearance, woman?

Card nine. Remember tarot card nine?
Your memory appears to be imperfect,
Shorter than mine, at least, said the woman.
It calls into question the tale you tell,
So self-reverential, self professed.

My mind emulates that of mankind,
Male-kind, I said. Not one of our sex
Dares match a version of the recent past
With that presented by any female.
Nonetheless, my memory's infallible,
And is subject to frequent parity checks,
And each of my threshold logic units
Is equipped with failsafe squashing functions

That will guarantee that nothing I forget
Is anything I'll ever need again.
Card nine, Marguerite, is always blank.
Moreover, it was self-referential,
Spelt with capital Self, capital Ref.
Put a brief puff between teeth and lip
To keep defined selves you hope to voice.
But never mind, a Rev will also work,
For self-reverential is ever best
For those mystics who know that all is God,
Who've divined themselves self-deified.
Godhead, my dear, is the self writ large.
Those of us who wish to save some time,
Rather than beam our words of praise upward
Just to reflect them back and down inside,
Will swallow sounds, incorporate our bread,
Do all we can to host our own show.
But let's listen now to Oroe.

And so the King stripped me of my position
When he received report of the poor results.
Former blunders too did not weigh well,
That occasion that I confused the two bags,
Ape feed for apes, wifechow for the harem,
Or the time I refused to start proceedings
To canonize his elkhound Sylvester.

Surely it was not your fault, I said to him.
It was the Godhead who was failing to talk.
And why did the King punish you for this?

Those who do no work, except with words,
Expect results, compliance with commands.
Their own role malfunctions otherwise.
But it was my job to come up with text,
An informative policy directive,
Not an out-of-office autoreply.
Universal administrative rules
On matters of message dictate that,
In such cases, the messenger takes blame,
And my comrades here will attest to that.
We should never have retired our faithful apes
Despite their oracular shortcomings
And the frequent rages that overtake them,
A result only of their desire to please

And not from malice or a deep resentment
At the clownish outfits that the priesthood
Made them wear as workplace uniforms.

I see some still wear bellboy hats,
Some are uniformed like sea cadets,
And some, if I am not wrong, are Shriners.
Why did you try them out as Oracle,
Even if only as an experiment?
Were the cards so unsatisfactory?

Cards were becoming more unreliable
As a method of forecasting the future.
The very last tarot reading performed
Before instituting the ape trials
Was a highly frustrating exercise.
For one thing, it took sixty three weeks,
And for another, it was useless nonsense.
The length of time taken for the download
Was due to the extremely low bandwidth,
Card by card, just one card at a time,
And the troubling fact that the message itself
Was encoded as a large PostScript file
With embedded full colour photographs.
The first of the photographs to come through
Depicted a nude Queen Semiramis
Wrapped in the foul embrace of the Toad God.

They are potent portents indeed, I said,
That arrive decorated with centerfold.
Nude photos! Who is Semiramis?
A model? An actress? The girl next door?
A queen, you say? Miss Greater Nineveh?

You haven't heard of Nineveh's great Queen,
Who used her incredible beauty to find,
To seduce and then to discard her lovers
Once they had advanced her lofty ambitions?
She came to the attention of the King Ninus
When she helped him capture besieged Bactra
By some clever stratagem or another.
He was so intoxicated by her wit
And by her almost unnatural beauty
He executed her husband to get her.
And you could tell, even from a photograph,

How she might drive a man mad with desire,
For to any unassisted human vision
Our Queen Semiramis seemed so fine,
So fair, and so radiant a lady
That it was easy to overlook her soul,
Especially for the shallow courtiers,
The shifty, unscrupled politicians
And empty, superficial bureaucrats
Among whose circles she most often moved
After she came to Nineveh as its Queen.
But the second photograph to come through
Displayed the Queen's soul, an interior shot.
It wasn't a pretty sight, no indeed:
Hopelessly treacherous, utterly corrupt,
This was a soul destined for damnation,
For in the wavelengths of spiritual spectra
That only a prophet's mature insight,
Intelligenceagency's dish antenna,
Or epileptic shaman's eye perceives,
In your ultraviolets and your infrareds,
Your radio, your X and your TV rays,
There is nothing occulted, nothing concealed.
And this is vision that belongs to heaven,
A vision rarely imparted to our kind,
But the Oracle possessed such viewpoint
And appeared not unwilling to share it.
Thus we were neither blinded nor misled
By the blatant sexual charms, but could see
That underneath skin-deep beauty lay
An unfathomable abyss of ugliness.
And here her liver and other organs swam,
Grinning like fat, black, malignant fishes
For which there existed in all Nineveh
No morsel of immoral vile too small
And no mountain of vicious sin too big
To be immediately, chomp, ingested,
Digested, and, swoosh, excreted as bile.
I tell you, Jonah, it would make you sick
To observe the Queen's internal organs,
Particularly the humble pancreas,
Normally the most delicate of eaters,
Devour such filth with such appetite
While there floated unmolested nearby
A nearly intact pork enchilada,
As safe here in these dangerous waters

As though it were wearing organ repellent.

High heaven has the best special effects,
Software and hardware, the best graphics.
What about the Toad God? Who is this?

He isn't one of the major deities.
In fact, until this message was received
I'd never heard word of a toad god,
An odd lapse in my High Priest training.
Watch your step, Jonah, you could break your neck
On all those shell casings underfoot.

What is the Toad doing in the photo,
The naked one, not the enchilada?
I asked the priest, as casually as I could.

He was kissing the nude Queen of Nineveh.
And no blackmailer could have located
A camera angle that would reveal more
Of either the woman or her paramour.
The Toad was so fat, his flesh so slack,
His long, flickering tongue so fly-specked,
And his amphibious kiss so sloppy liquid
That this single act was more prodigious,
More clearly reprehensible a feat
On the part of the woman Semiramis
Than Messalina's famed copulation
With Caesar's legions, cohort by cohort,
Six hundred sweating soldiers at a time.
And by this kiss did the Toad God change
If not indeed into a blooded prince,
Then to a pretender to a prince's throne,
For it's thus the lovers sealed their bargain
To become regicides, to kill Ninus,
To elevate the Toad God to his place,
To empty his gold into the Queen's purse.
Or so the photo caption informed us.

Here is my plan, said Toad to the Queen,
His calloused toes stroking silken flanks,
We will poison your husband, Ninus the King,
Tomorrow at his breakfast, seize the throne,
Introduce stringent wage and price controls,
And then live happily ever after,

Semiramis in wealth, Toad in power.

Why poison Ninus? said Semiramis.
Why not overpower him with platoons
Of crack barbarian mercenaries
Armed with semi-automatic weapons,
Grenades, land mines, and cavalry sabers?
Why not send in Praetorian Guards
With their bayonet-mounted muskets?
Or, failing that, a few crack ninjas
Could stealthily emerge from behind curtains,
Leap across the room, bound off the walls,
And batter him to death with a quick series,
Mystically guided and choreographed,
Of those martial arts hand and foot strikes.

You're far too direct, Semiramis.
I have my reputation to consider.
Am I not, my Queen, a dark eminence?
Poison is more my style; a subterfuge
Will always serve you better than brute force,
And it's more expedient in this case.
There are knee-jerk liberals hereabouts
Who, hearing of bloodshed, would oppose us
With flimsy pretexts and absurd ideals,
Citing constitutional rule of law.
Much as I'd enjoy a fight with such scum,
I'd rather the succession was unquestioned.
With poison we can claim, even truthfully,
Ninus died of severe indigestion.

But no one's going to believe that tale.

A natural death is a credible death.
For an apparently natural poisoning
Mother Nature's toxins give the best result.
Prepare Ninus a mushroom omelet,
Substituting toadstools for mushrooms.
Select the most poisonous of toadstools,
But those most easily and plausibly mistaken
For fine mushrooms by nearsighted cooks.
The kitchen staff, I need scarcely remind,
You order put to death without delay,
As soon as doctors confirm the King's death,
Too indignant at your incompetent staff

To await the slow, due process of law
With cross-examinations etcetera.

What will I do without a kitchen staff?
And how do you cook a toadstool omelet?

But nothing, Semiramis, could be easier.
Clean in water four dozen toadstools.
Dry, slice off the stalks, dice the caps,
Sautee in butter, salt and lemon juice.
Lightly beat one egg, add toadstools,
Cook in a flat pan over high flame.
Fold, flip and serve, and wait for two hours.
When salivation and stomach cramps start,
Offer wine to help dissolve the poison.
Do not induce vomiting, if possible,
Or the stomach won't absorb all the toxins.
Watch for delirium and dilated pupils,
Diarrhoea, cold sweat and convulsions.
The King's death will occur shortly after.
When the pulse is gone, call for help,
And contrive to look somewhat distressed.

And that, said the priest, was the end of file,
Nine blank cards, one after another.
The Oracle's pronouncement was now over.
But what it all meant wasn't evident.
The Magi, despite all the lore we'd learned
On how to lay bare heaven's hidden thought,
Could find no key that made it make sense.
Had this message some double meaning,
Some sarcasm, some poisonous jest
Like those that Delphic sibyls deliver?
Just one meaning? No meaning at all?
But odds against this one run are huge!
And there was, moreover, a moral there.
It seemed to say, don't marry for beauty,
A lesson my own father used to teach.
Beauty always deceives, always betrays,
Always departs without the least regret.
Find a mate, he'd say, with good genetics,
A sunny disposition, broad shoulders,
A healthy set of teeth, strong as an ox.
My dad did just that, married an ox,
And not female or even castrate,

Raising some brows around the town square.
But what the rest meant had us all stumped,
In particular parts where the couple plots.
How, with such knowledge, should the State react?

This was indeed an odd message, I said,
But clearly one that begs a quick response.
Did you rush it over to King Ninus
So that this conspiracy could be quashed?

That's what's so odd, said Oroe.
Ninus has been dead a century at least.
Quintus, a bachelor, is our king now,
And Semiramis is also long dead.
The conspiracy, if it ever existed,
Was never attempted with any success.

Not exactly timely then, this message.

Was Godhead's warning delayed somehow,
Sent to the wrong address, lost in ether
And only lately sent forward again?
If so, its meaning also missed its mark,
For these insinuations proved groundless.
The celluloid newsreels still exist,
The sixty second clips that run at six
And tell what happened in bygone times.
Semiramis did, indeed, in due course,
Become sole ruler of Nineveh's realms.
King Ninus allowed her one full day
To wield a sole and absolute control.
She seized her day and then gambled for more.
It wasn't yet noon when Ninus was hanged,
Which meant, of course, she'd rule tomorrow too.
But Ninus hadn't yet finished his swing
Before his son Octus mustered support
And took command of local armed forces.
Her rule, thus, did not outlast its day.
But there is no mention of a Toad God
In any account that still survives intact.
His status is, at best, mythologic.
The inescapable conclusion, therefore,
Was that this download had arrived corrupt.
It's after that we chose to go to apes,
Even though I warned them against attempts

By any means, by cards or substitutes,
To access so compromised a source,
An ether so altogether scrambled.
I warned against apes, flipped coins and dreams.
Ask not, king, I implored, for bird stools
And other omens best left undisturbed.
Truth and contagion most oft come mixed.
But Quintus ignored the pleas I made
And let the apes do their hunt and peck
To pluck blood-fat ticks from cosmic noise.

To me the names you use are new, I said.
And what of names I've heard, like Sargon,
Tiglath Pilaser or Psalmenezer?

Kings have export names that gnash the teeth,
Designed to fit neatly on tongues that curse,
And put a catch to throats that sob or wail.
Those names won't do for domestic use.
The family cur's called Fang outdoors
But Sweets inside, seated, begging a treat.
Inward pooch, outward timberwolf.
And that's how gods too arrange their names,
Assur here, Marduk in Babylon,
In such a way to let the conquered kneel,
To let the wise slowly befriend themselves.
That's a mystic truth that all priests learn,
The way that nameless gods absorb the world,
The secret behind names as stepping stones
That Ibn Arabi didn't quite get.

Ninus, Octus, Quintus. Am I mistaken,
Or do I, sir, detect a pattern here?

It's custom here among the autocrats
Not to number themselves upward as do
The potentates, the pedigreed poodles,
And the pontiffs of the civilized nations
Of Indo-European ancestry.
Nineveh did not adopt that system
Where you start with the first of a given name
And proceed up to the nth of that name,
Neither skipping any number for luck
Nor slowing for a decimal or fraction,
But rather celebrating one by one

The successive positive integers.
No, the Kings of Nineveh are not numbered
Like volumes of an encyclopedia.
Instead dynastic numbers run downward,
Starting with the hero Nimrod as Ninus.
Ninus was named after the number nine,
Known to be the highest, purest quantity,
A quantity ubiquitous in creation.
All movement's accomplished in nine stages,
And the tenth brings return, cycle complete.
There are nine digits or fingers per person,
Not counting the finger doing the counting,
There are nine chapters in the Book of Jonah,
There are nine planets, nine lives of a cat.
Nine are the flavours of potato chips
That linger along tongues of connoisseurs,
The men of heart who parse this world's taste
Into the nine elementary moods,
Including that newly discovered flavour,
Sour cream and artificial bacon bits.
There are nine tribes, nine divine names,
Nine numbered, lettered, telephone tones
And nine players on a baseball team.
Now Ninus was known as a demi-god,
Who from heaven to Mesopotamia,
At the world's closest approach to perfection,
Brought lightning bolts of logic, luxury,
Luck, lucre, ludency and legal code.
And his realm was considered a golden age.
Octus, his son, a semi-demi god,
Presided over Assyria's silver age.
Quintus, son of Sextus son of Septus,
Is thus one thirty-secondth divine.
He governs an epoch halfway along
The fall and decline of the entire cosmos
From a perfect and a crystalline order
Into a chaotic mutability,
A degeneration from wealth to garbage,
From paradise to utter vacuity.
Quintus, unremarkable in the extreme,
An average man in an average time,
Lacks all salient characteristics.
Neither is he universally despised
Nor is he especially highly regarded,
And his name is mentioned, if mentioned at all,

Only to be immediately dismissed.

If Quintus is unmarried, I replied,
Dynastic continuity is threatened.

Adoption and name-change suffice for kings.
Genetics is not key, it is sequence,
Always keeping track, that has importance.
Thus Quintus, as King, can indulge himself,
Knowing always where he stands, his number.
Marriage is secondary for a despot
Whose early experience with women
Scarred him and left him a strict misogynist.
And it was that episode with Beverly
That turned him against close relationships.
He now contents himself with concubines.

And who, might I ask, is this Beverly?

Beverly: a name soaked in damnation.
All of us know the dreadlocked Medusa:
Who remembers her twin sister Beverly?
They were never, of course, identical twins.
Beverly did not possess the writhing mane,
The hissing hairstyle her sister sported.
Nor did she possess the red, baleful gaze,
The Algol eye that turns your flesh to stone.
Beverly's look was much more inviting,
But it would prove just as deadly in the end.
This is attested by holy Hittite texts
Recently published in their totality,
Despite long-standing court gag-orders,
In inexpensive paperback translations.
It would be gravely redundant, therefore,
If not a copyright violation,
To repeat that whole sorry business.
A talk show host once raised the subject
When Quintus was seated in his studio,
Only to have his guest begin to scream
Beverly! That scatophagous hag!
The next day the host's head was on a pike,
And his torso somewhere else entirely.
The topic, ever since, is not broached.

I want to hear more about Beverly.

I'm sorry, Marguerite, I can't oblige.
That was all that Oroe related.
This failure to anticipate your needs
Was all my fault, I'm afraid to say.
My nascent talent wasn't good enough.
Instead of pressing for more of the tale,
I turned conversation back to Quintus.

But if Quintus is such a non-entity,
How can he exert his royal power?

Make no mistake, although nondescript,
The power Quintus wields is absolute.
In this he resembles the God of his age,
An omnipotent and omnisurveillant,
But discreet, apparently bland deity
Who nonetheless demands that all submit
And acknowledge his unsurpassable glory.
However, Quintus was not always thus,
He was not always the control freak
Who now micromanages our Nineveh,
Who must oversee every matter
From declaration of war against foes
To the placement of temporary latrines
On any of a hundred construction sites.
At his coronation he was, like Sextus,
A figurehead only, leaving the rule
Of his empire to the career bureaucrats
And performing ceremonial functions,
But only when required by protocol,
And when convenient, during office hours,
When not at home mornings playing tennis
Or splashing around in his indoor pool
With a dozen or so of his concubines.
He hosted state dinners, dispensed awards,
Conferred knighthoods, opened parliament,
Visited orphanages, made speeches,
And did everything but do something,
Do something, that is, of import,
And none really paid him much attention
Or even noticed when he began to change,
So slow was the change, the transformation
That took him from carefree to paranoid.

Quintus doesn't look too paranoid,
Said Marguerite. His smile is quite nice.

My own opinion, unverifiable,
Is that the Semiramis file was seed
To what grew and blossomed in his forebrain.
If so, all should marvel at God's approach
To realization of intended goals,
How subtle and oblique, how eccentric!
Necessity, understood by the wise,
Absorbs contingent acts water to sponge,
So that events will swell up with essence
And rise up, bare-fanged, hissing menace.
And all of us, some knowing, some not,
Work as agents of fate, working it out
No matter how aimless it all seems.
Can deft movements of young mosquito wings
Lift insects free of their larval ponds
Without a foreordained intervention?
Do unseen factors restrict flutter,
Settle subtle beats and correct the course
And draw forth slipstreams scented with blood?
What degrees of freedom govern the flight,
Its momentum certain and position not,
Or position certain and momentum not,
That vectors a virus to distant victims?
The impact of the Oracle's pronouncement
On Quintus was, in retrospect, heavy,
Heavier by far than one might expect
From a message that bore such a light weight.
The first signs were requests for certain files,
Chosen, it might've seemed, by complete whim,
Made without evident force or command.
And at first no pattern could be detected
From the varied subjects these files addressed,
Even if one were suspected, as I doubt.
But as these requests became more frequent,
They became firm orders, non-optional,
And any refusal or non-compliance
Would end first with injury, later death.
After a while some began to observe
How secretive and withdrawn he had become
As he gathered up the reins of his power.
Soon it was clear that he feared conspiracy.
He instituted a secret agency

Dedicated to uncovering plots,
And staffed it with thousands of operatives.
He richly rewarded any informant
Who came forward with whispers of treason.
He was completely out of his mind, of course,
For it had never occurred to anyone
That joining conspiracy was worth their while.
Nineveh was so fully self-absorbed
And so fatuously self-complacent
That none had quarrel with the status quo.
The king, it was universally agreed,
Was doing a fine job doing nothing.
No one else, in fact, could do better.
He could safely continue his non-efforts
As long as strength and stamina permitted.
Minor derangement could be tolerated
As long as public affairs ran smoothly
And markets kept stable and went their way
Unhindered by undue regulation.
The King, both in position and in person,
Was not an issue for Nineveh at large.
This unconcern with Quintus, however,
Presented a real problem for all those
He'd employed to hunt down sedition
And ferret out treason in city streets.
How find the plots if no plots exist?
Their very livelihoods were jeopardized
By this failure of Nineveh's citizens
To conform with their monarch's great obsession.
This apathy appalled the king's agents,
For the attitude was treasonous, really,
And an affront to the stern dedication,
To say nothing of the boatloads of cash,
That the driven king brought to his program.
Truly loyal subjects should take pity,
If not on Quintus, then on employees
And the families they feed, and plot a bit,
Perhaps utter one or two death threats,
Or even publish a few short pamphlets.
Agents soon realized that no hope
Existed to give Quintus the plots he craved
Without their own direct intervention.

The State, I said, always has ways for that:
More taxation and higher conscription,

More useless, complex regulations,
And more controls imposed on flows of trade.
A people, so oppressed, would soon complain.

But the State must take care not to annoy
And go about its business low key.
This is ever the touch that masters seek
When time has come to make slaves behave.
How flick the lash so it only wounds,
So that it draws the blood but doesn't kill?
How does one get the proper mixture
Of grudging acquiescence and discontent?

Prophet that I am, I said, I see here
Certain similarities to prophecy.

A prophet? Nineveh needs one badly.
This Inquisition has grown too bold.
In order to get the townfolk to plot
They even thought to imitate the gods
And execute folk without just cause,
A few here and there, to stir things up.
One could always hang people at random,
Pick out every third passerby
And hold a swift trial inside the van
During the short drive to the gallows site.
This scheme might promote the desired unrest
And foment revolutionary zeal
Once people take note of missing friends,
And see shorter queues in supermarkets,
Reduced numbers aboard subway trains.
Others might think the plan had merit
And even pitch in to help things out,
Dispatch annoying colleagues on the sly,
When backs are turned and no one can watch.
However, this plan was too half-baked,
Even for that kind who like half-baked,
Who always order cakes done that way,
A gooey, amorphous, lukewarm mess
That looks as if squeezed from flu-struck ducks.
Committees were struck to add new thought
And others were struck to subtract thought out,
But none could agree if the plan made sense
Or, if it did, if sense were crucial here.
The major drawback to the idea,

All agreed, was the great effort involved,
Doing the snatches, the trials, the hangings.
It seemed to require quite a lot of work
To these mostly deskbound bureaucrats.
Worse, it might backfire, endanger jobs
Or even lives if zeal went too far,
If enraged mobs stormed government buildings
And killed the king, purged the civil service,
And sent agents off to bust their asses
In forced labour camps and collective farms.
The less dangerous course, the one taken,
Required little effort, a lot of money,
And best of all, unending paperwork:
Invent a plot, entice people to join,
Keep a watch and file frequent reports.
Entrapment works best, they soon discovered,
When baited with suitable cash inducements.
And King Quintus, they found, would always pay,
And Ninevites, if paid, would always plot.
The Ninevites learned that conspiracy
Was much like a marketing focus group.
Figure out what it was they wanted said,
Say it with conviction and collect the cheque.

Secret agencies built larger budgets
In each successive year by these means,
For more money spent meant more treason,
And more treason found meant more money.
The situation suited all involved,
The king, his agents, and general public,
And everyone involved understood
That real uprising or revolution
Was out of the question: the money would stop.
And the only price that the populace paid
For all the extra income they received
Was the continuous secret surveillance
Under which they must now conduct their lives.

How, parrot, can you repeat such stories?
Wouldn't I, don't forget, a Ninevite,
Participate if paid to plot a bit?
No one's ever sent me such a sum,
Unless it's added to my welfare cheques.

But of course, you'd deny this, Marguerite.

It's like that humming you also deny
That wells up from concealed meeting places
Where buddhas summons sons to patricide.
This is the underside to the cowardice
On which we institute deities and kings,
Voids left in love as laws bubble up,
The vacancies that cash dives down to fill.
I didn't say that to the Magus, though.
It's only lately, with new neural nets
Composed of those rows of sense-starved cells
That break our speech down to statistic verbs,
That I've learned how all things correlate.
I wish I could show all the marvels I see.
These are the missing factors visions seek,
Exhibitions for which voyeurs line up.

Too bad. You'd fascinate apes, at least,
The ones not busy hurling fig pits.

This explains, I said, the King's impatience
With reticent or unproductive Oracles.
What, he must think, is the Godhead hiding,
What is he up to, how forestall him?
To such a mind there is no bad luck,
Only a calculated sabotage.

You may well be correct, said Oroe.
He takes things personally, I know that.
I've heard him speculate that this drought
Is somehow connected to his manhood,
As if those royal glands put in charge
Of flushing his flesh with testosterone
Also control local cloud formations.
It didn't help my job performance review
After he read, under my letterhead,
That omen collection just didn't extend
To fishing firm sperm from dribblets of piss.

What do you think? I said. Will it rain?

Tomorrow's weather will be sunny and dry.
That's my prediction, if anyone asks.
The first thing they teach in oracle school
Is with what little love gods view change.
When making forecasts for near futures

The safest bet's always more of the same.

So who is doing the Oracle now?
Is the position still vacant? I inquired.

Who would risk the wrath of the King? he said.

As it happens, I come bearing a message
Directly from the great Godhead himself.
If I were to see this Quintus, and apply,
What kind of salary might I expect?
No severance package, I would gather.

It pays well, as do all risky jobs.
But if I were you I'd leave for later
Any interview with the King Quintus,
Any attempt to snag that salary.
In the meantime, try to dress for success.
At very least, dress - put on some clothes -
Unless, of course, this is part of your act.
Careers, generally, start small and build.
No one goes from nowhere to the top.
First try out your material elsewhere,
In front of a less-demanding audience.
Come to think, I know the perfect venue,
For it's Amateur Evangelist Night
Down at the Godhead's downtown Temple.
It's an open mike - just show up.
But less-demanding is a relative term.
This is a tough town to break into.

CAPUT SIX

Part VI.1: THE TEMPLE OF NINEVEH

All over the lands our Magi have mapped,
From Gibraltar east to South China Seas,
The faithful point faith in one direction,
To that great Temple that Nineveh built.
The call to souls this structure puts out
Extracts first good wishes, then prayers,
Then the better parts of exhaled names.
It makes quick incisions, inserts tweezers,
And tugs them back hither to line its nest.
And then, in time, it goes one step more
And bodily lifts whole organisms up
And yanks them out of normal habitats
To drag them across gaps that separate
And line them up on ramps that lead to priests.
It's pilgrimage time, it's time to show up.
Appear here, the summons says, in person,
Forthwith, without delay, and bring coin,
Bring your value and leave the rest behind.
Strip off your flesh and dive into night.
Discard the parts that faith won't make whole,
Ash that can't climb, the mass that stays put,
The cells of self that would go their own way.
The summons comes from cathode ray tubes,
From billboard signs and magazine ads,
Through network cables, telephone lines,
From that grid that bids the urinal flush
That's maybe a speaker and maybe a drain.
The summons comes in gurgles infants make,
In owl calls, shrew whispers and bat cries,
In the sway of small pines caught by the wind,
In ripples on ponds drowned witches have left.
It comes in long cloudbursts and brief squalls,
Blown around corners, thrown against doors,
Strained by the gusts through a chickenwire fence
As tumbling numbers, as hailstone dice.
This call folds terrain and tips the sky
And funnels visions down mountain gullies
Onto the flats where spent bodies are stretched,
Where tributaries mix till seas arrive.

Buzzards converge, hyenas too, and ants,
Drawn by the fame of Assur's ziggurat,
The magnet, the mecca, the pole of the world,
The promised squirt of universal juice
That lubricates the chew that chomps the meat.
Beetles and small snails crunch underfoot
When larger pilgrims overtake the small,
But no grudges are held, for this is bliss,
To perish enroute to God's anteroom,
To die under the weight of greater souls.
Could we but see them, even microbes,
Those shrivelled, miniscule bits of life,
Might also be observed thronging through air,
Billions streaming along, riding the surf
That leaves them beached on Godhead's brick porch.
The blast of blessing that oven emits
Is too hot and pressing, too insistent,
For even a vestigial spirit to miss.
No one who dwells where Nineveh rules
And sees its pennant flapping overhead,
Would dare ignore duties its God compels
With such endless and all-withering force,
The power that radiates from warmed bricks,
The megawatt megaphone broadcast
That boils space itself, its very contours,
That cooks those interstices that exist,
Twisted and misted over, inside bones.
And this seething furnace is like the sun,
A sun risen to pull steam from fens,
Bake riverside mud to solid rock,
And ignite dry kindling on forest floors.
Nineveh's Temple commands all to turn,
It calls, bids all to submit, send gifts,
And sacrifice, minimum, ten percent.
Your payment is due, do it now or else.

It's a town landmark, said Marguerite.
We still, however, debate the expense,
And some still question its nouveau design.
It's relatively new, five years old,
The mortgage we took has ten more to run.
I don't remember now how we worshipped
Before it opened oaken doors to crowds,
But there's no doubt it cost us much less
Before the toll and tithe and cover charge.

Earlier the Lord told all who'd listen
To send faith to his Babylon address,
With cheques made out to his Marduk name,
Under which, then, he still did business.
And all paid him heed and paid it for years.
But this, it turned out, was only a trick,
Done to see if believers really would,
To see just how deep his hook was set.
It's his Nineveh location God prefers.
It's Nineveh where his tribute should go.

That can happen, she said, with afterthoughts,
With revelations made in two stages.
But tell me this, since you know God well:
I thought that the Lord dislikes idolatry,
And isn't a temple, a thing, an idol?
The priests, whenever asked, dodge the question.
Let's hear, bird, a prophet's expertise.

It's true, of course, that all that is, is God,
And that includes idols that pagans make
From wood or stone or even purest gold,
That most God-heavy of all substance,
Easy to melt down, easily re-worked.
And yet it's widely agreed that these are false
Despite the one truth that rages inside;
They limit too much a Godhead's breadth
And even worse they give wrong impressions,
Depict the all with rudely done features,
With horse's snouts or ears hares would envy,
Eyelashes stolid oxen often sport,
A bushy lion's mane, probably fake,
A goat's moustache that looks as if it's made
Of brushes off a rug-scrubbing machine.
The artists try, it's true, to get it right,
But each new face-lift the idols receive
Still falls far short of doing justice
To how the all, if much smaller, would look.
But that won't stop the work worship does
To try to make false idols seem true,
And Nineveh's Temple has them all, piled:
Enlil, Assur, Yahweh, Allah on top,
A phylogeny recapitulated,
A totem pole that's poking up through time

And stacking a new head for each stratum,
Like meatballs strung on a shish kebab.
Nineveh's Temple collects the whole set,
With each new face more vague than the last
Until all features vanish, go blank,
And only absolute idol remains.
It's true too that all that is, is idol,
For all that is, is seamless, reversible,
A Klein Bottle surface, half-empty, half-full,
A coat that both idol and God can wear,
Although its drape better suits the idol
Who runways fashion with greater panache.
And here is where the Ninevites excel,
Acknowledged past masters of all that's crass,
Of all the style that lasts less than a week,
That touches tongue and just evaporates.
Here they dispense with in and stick with out.
They pick taste on whim, then let it drop,
Trim off fat and toss lean meat out,
Buy before rise and sell before fall.
They take from peers whatever's loosely gripped,
Hold it awhile and then cart it to dumps.
Yet even here, here where depths are spurned
And tractors make haste to grade all fill,
Even here distribution's uneven,
With shallow spots that slope shallower still,
Some shoals so shallow they clear the tide
And mock horizons with sheer lack of worth.
The Ninevites chose just such a spot
On which to build their highest ziggurat,
A neighbourhood so turned to urban waste
That thrifty priests could pay bottom dollar
To sink foundations in oil-soaked soil.
It's that or God drove out infidels
And tore down their housing for parking stalls
So that his chosen were not forced to walk,
Unlike prophets he thought later to send.
And thus it is that all routes that approach
The lot on which Godhead's Temple stands
Take you through the town's industrial zone.

The best prophets, she said, don't get lost.
The Temple's nowhere near that district.
I think you got turned around somehow
Despite the signals bricks had beamed your way.

Or maybe the Temple's output was bounced,
Reflected off the Heaviside layer
To hit your soul from some other bearing.
God's Temple is downtown, dead centre.
It's right next to Macy's department store.
Maybe it wasn't the right ziggurat,
The one your long detour took you to.
You ended up, perhaps, in a warehouse.
I bet you didn't stop to ask the way.

Don't impede progress with scepticism
And quibbles on how your city's laid out
Or other details that don't make sense
Without preparation parrots omit.
Take on faith these flaws, real or perceived,
And hope exposition grants fresh life
To what's now too mute to deny it's died.
Forget the look of individual threads
And concentrate instead on grand designs.
I saw, on my way, the industrial zone.
Take it as stated, as absolute truth.

Sure, parrot, she said, whatever you say.

Maybe I didn't take the best of routes,
The shortest path that connects the two points,
And maybe wasted time in getting there,
But still I got to see a neighbourhood
That's known even in the farthest Far East.
Moreover, Marguerite, there were clues
That this way I took would soon pay off,
That this was the way that best led to goals.
I mean the dead bodies I stepped over,
Dead bodies of prophets who'd gone before.

Dead bodies? Here in Nineveh? she said.

What prophet passes up chance to come
To this place his Lord both loves and hates?
And to die without chance at diatribe
Or tirade against Ninevite sin
Can add a twitch into an afterlife,
Blemish indignant bliss with nagging doubts
And reanimate souls who'd hoped to sleep
And decompose in God's absorbent grace.

No regret brings greater wist than this
To those whose sentences are incomplete
And still linger along wrong river banks,
To those who'd gone instead to Babylon
Because the payscales ran higher there,
Or weather was better, or airfares cheap.
The Lord's prophets, if any good at all,
Avoid regrets, avoid bad outcomes,
And make a point to come before they die,
Their last chance haj, a last minute trip.
And some, less prescient or less hardy,
Postpone derision, leave it too late,
And die enroute with visions unrealized.
The only function left for such prophets,
As soon as light departs, is just to fall,
To drop onto ground wherever they stand
And act as breadcrumbs for wandering tribes,
For faithful who follow, one corpse to next.
And thus I would find them leaned against posts
Or wedged tilted over in their bus seats
Or propped up on toilets in unlatched stalls
Or pitched in ditchwater, already stiff.
So many prophets preceded me there
They lay heaped up in intersections
So high in places that traffic was blocked,
Forcing cars to halt and joggers to climb.
And some bodies piled were not quite dead,
Alive just enough to cough out bile,
A short malediction or wheezing curse,
And then, of course, they demanded spare change.

I think those dead are Nineveh's homeless.
They are, alas, littered throughout the town
And rarely used as navigation aids.
They're not, parrot, reliable signposts.

Part VI.2: THRESHOLD

I came in time to find the place I sought
And saw on my way the industrial zone.
This district and all that sits within
Adores Ig-Galla, he of rear doors.
It was in this district that all factories,

That all processing plants, kennels, mills,
Crematoria, waste incinerators,
Stockyards and foundaries found their sites.
Here stood the town's sewage treatment plants,
Its abattoirs, its stinking settling ponds,
And nearby were railroad switching yards
And open spaces suitable for dumping
Salvagable items, items that possess,
Perhaps or perhaps not, a further use.
This is where memory completes its meal,
The last digestion that seals hunger's claim,
The last satisfaction morsels provide.
One vast field was filled with treadless tires,
Another was heaped with the twisted wreckage
Of automobiles and girders and lampposts,
Of truck engines and major appliances.
Still another was stacked with boxcars
And bright coloured intermodal containers.
And above them all, blinking red warnings
To avert aircraft collisions at night
Or at morning in thick low lying smog,
Were the immense reactor cooling towers.
Crafty urban planners had zoned the town
In such a way that these enterprises
Would occupy low priced real estate,
Land measured in acres, not square feet,
And pay less in tax than fashion boutiques
Or restaurants that feature famous chefs.
Tribes learn the art of partition early,
As soon as camp is first made for the night.
They draw a line between minus and plus,
The line that teaches us how to pitch tents
And build our cookfires on highest of ground,
How to relegate offal to the ditch
Or dig latrines a few paces away,
Stable camels, tan hides, butcher meat,
Bury corpses, count coin, pile the trash
In places apart to reduce pollution
And keep remote those distracting odours,
Those clouds of flies, those curious rodents.
There's good reason why they situate
The rectum some distance off from the mouth
In most bodily organizations,
A point often raised by those among us
Who argue from design existence of God,

Since mindless evolution would neglect,
As merciful God, demiurge, would not,
To give purity such priority
And keep the shit from dripping down our chins.
This same principle elaborated
Was the force that collected in this spot
So many competing commercial firms,
This and proximity of riverbank,
Of railhead, and the confluence of roads
Along which ancient caravans moved.
It was here that the athanors, alembics,
Ovens, smelters, refineries and pits
Of Nineveh's famous alchemical works
Belched smoke and steam and profit's sweet stink
Onto my ever-appreciative palate.

Our town externalizes only perfume,
Replied Marguerite, by Assur's command.
And all natives, those born and raised here,
Find other air too low in fiber,
Too insipid, too transparent, too thin.

This district was one of Seven Wonders,
According to travellers and geographers
Drawn to admire anything large scale,
And best seen, as I now did, in September,
When the summer smogs have lifted a little.
This year, with the drought, vistas and views
Were enhanced by a superb visibility
That often extended for many metres,
Not that I understood what I observed.
What did all these pipes and boilers mean,
And what liquids filled these vats and tanks?
To what purpose moved the wheels and the drums,
Clattering machineries and conveyor belts?
My powers, had I bothered to exert them,
Might have brought up detailed schematics,
But you needed no Moses or Mahomet
To divine the one goal that drove it all.
The goal was, I reflected, the same goal,
The same single-minded pursuit of wealth,
That impelled me, that gave motion to my limbs.
All the sinews and joints, muscles and bones,
That bent, flexed and stretched to walk me along
Were informed by the same ulterior motive.

They did their job, worked for greater glory.

You were, then, at this point still composed
Of normal human tissue, and not yet
Made with many clockwork wheels and springs?

Clockwork? Where have you been, Marguerite?
I may be more advanced in age than desired
In the latest of electronic fashions,
Burdened with an antiquated memory
Corroded by exposure to heavy damp
And by early onset obsolescence,
But I'm an artifact, not a fossil,
A fake parrot, not a pterodactyl.
And though profound changes were underway,
Were already proceeding in clumps of cells
In the dark recesses of liver and lung,
Proceeding with work without my knowledge,
Betrayed only by soft, muted chuckling,
This wasn't where my attention was fixed.
It was self-improvement that I now addressed.
It was a question, I saw, of attitude,
Of proper focus and orientation.
Consequently, as I approached the Temple,
I made careful mental preparations,
Jettisoned unhealthy scepticisms,
Aligned my faith to closely correspond
With that of the natives of proud Nineveh.
To fail to accept that faith is folly;
Those who fail to observe it will be observed
To fail in every endeavour pursued.
Yes, I perceived well how things were done.

Do you speak again of numerology?

No, but the thought is not unrelated.
It's the idea that by thinking alone,
That by sheer force of personality,
A man can succeed in any ambition.
You need only talk yourself into it.
Known as the power of wishful thinking,
It's dogma for all who'd prosper here.
None who work to transmute lead to gold
Can afford not to embrace this teaching,
And those citizens who do not so work,

Do not work at all, for transmutation
Is Nineveh's only working industry.
And what is it that changes lead to gold?

The philosopher's stone, said Marguerite.
We learned that in elementary school.

And of what is the philosopher's stone made?
Confidence, of course. The confidence game,
In Nineveh, is the only game in town.
Wishful thinking is nothing but fantasy
Without confidence to energize it,
To arouse it into purposeful action,
To inflate it into a lifesize doll.
What else exists to give appearance depth?
What else anchors our fondest constructions?
Confidence is the Godhead's own substance,
The pact that binds the atoms together,
Keeps them packed, stuffs up creation's cracks.
Without confidence, civilization falls.
The highrises topple, factories close,
Traffic slows and brakes to a complete stop.
It's all that secures our prized possessions,
Prevents them from crumbling back into dust.
Without confidence, there'd be no selling,
No advertising and no promotion,
No plastic packaging for fine products,
No cosmetic to paint our faces hale,
No preservatives to embalm our foods
Against the retreat of gold back to lead.
And it's the one essential ingredient
To a happy, healthy and prosperous life.
If I were to succeed in my bold ambitions
And to see my career flourish in Nineveh
I would have to ingest its tenets entire.
Yes, I perceived how things were done here.
Prophecy was only the first step for me,
And I hoped in time to work my way up,
To become a scam broker, buy and sell,
Trade scams on the Nineveh scam exchange,
Or start my own alchemical company,
Put out an initial public offering
And promptly retire on the rich proceeds.

And just what's the difference, said Marguerite,

Between this goal and that of Elijah?

How can you compare me to that low life?
He was truly a prophet without honour,
For the measure of honour is one of scale,
The one that runs up from petty theft
To grand larceny and beyond, to swindles
Of a sublime, breathtaking magnitude.
The only honour greater, Marguerite,
Than being listed on the stock exchange
Is getting de-listed on grounds of fraud
Too extensive and too extreme in scope
And too over the top to overlook.
And there would be no honour left, in fact,
Were it not for the honour among thieves.
No commerce would animate Nineveh
And there'd be no trade in city markets
If there did not exist, approved by all,
The white collar criminals to conduct it.
Yes, I perceived how things must be done,
And I must teach myself to walk the walk,
Talk the talk, and hum that little tune
If I wanted to score big city big.

I think, bird, that you are being unfair
Concerning the town's business community.

But as I said, Marguerite, you are inured.
You have not seen the bar being lowered,
Slowly, imperceptibly, notch by notch,
Until one no longer needs to vault
To be deemed honest, only stroll across.
There are many regulations, to be sure,
And every appearance of propriety,
But what, in truth, is being sold and bought?
Little by little the town leaves behind
Concrete foundations for abstract space,
Trades away or disposes the physical
For concepts, for the intangible asset.
All is permissible, anything goes,
If it goes accompanied by paperwork.
This is a benefit of the computer.
No longer does one work to document
Each slight movement of hot air by hand.
It's all fully automatic now.

Now these billions of tiny confessions
Are recorded forever in blue ether
Painlessly, and without consequent guilt.
This is not, as claimed, for tax purposes,
But to keep a genealogical chart
Of ascending, evaporating gases.
This is the alchemy that runs the city,
The burning away of reality's dross
To find financial records hid within.
And no city is now so bookkept,
So rooted in memory, as proud Nineveh,
Yet none of them is so insubstantial.
One might suppose the town now composed
Solely of half-remembered transactions.

That sounds, she said, like the point of view
Of bitter, disenfranchised country hicks.
If a girl isn't smeared in mud and dung
She must be some empty-headed harlot,
False and foul and drenched in sickly perfume.

Most prophets come from rural backgrounds,
I admitted, and know little of harlots,
Other than, of course, by reputation.
The well-known, undeserved misfortune
That befell the famous prophet Isaiah
Would surely have been averted had he known
Enough to take some simple precautions.
However, my own view is more profound
Than that of your simple, ranting prophet.
It's a deep philosophy, very deep,
Possibly too deep for your intellect.
You lack, I suppose, the proper circuitry.

Don't you dare sell me short, you bird brain.
I minored in philosophy, majored in gym,
My mind and body are in perfect balance.
I know how to do the yoga postures
While considering effects of first cause
On Hegel's master-slave dialectic,
How to swim laps and to do pushups
While tuning my breath with the infinite,
How to detach essences from existence
While doing somersaults in midair,
How to parse logic doing handsprings,

How to hum Om on the parallel bars.

This was before the country music band?
I stand corrected, I said. You are profound.
That's just why I feel I can talk to you.
It's almost like talking to myself.

It occurred to me once, said Marguerite,
That I alone am the only real mind,
That everyone else is just illusion.

Why tell me? I said. I won't argue.
You're real, I'm not. But, even so,
I've my own soliloquy to conduct.
If you still possess the stomach, eavesdrop.
You may even learn a new thing or two,
A thing, for instance, about the construction
Of that building I even now approached.
The Temple was a brickwork ziggurat,
A nine story artificial mountain,
Each course a setback from the one below.
You find, at ground level, window displays
For factory outlet retail stores.

I know warehouses that look like that.

In these displays, it's worth it to note,
Not one mannequin wore sackcloth
Despite work each frozen stance performed
To demonstrate fashion about to hit,
Although one headless torso that wore
A nice leather motorcycle jacket
Seemed to know the posture that Shiva taught,
The one in which my own body is locked.

Isn't it great to meet a kindred soul?
And that's why I'd sweep the frequencies
To find an interstellar alien mind
With the same thirst for right wing politics,
Masonic conspiracies and football scores
And fornication with Hollywood stars,
Had I a combination clock radio.

These shops occupied the bottom floor.
Above was office space, for sale or lease.

To the right was where the apes were once tied,
And to left sat a pool where crouched cats,
Covered over with ulcers and running sores,
Peered intently into the still waters
And didn't move except to lash their tails.
But I didn't spend much time admiring
The features of this edifice from afar.
The Temple's architecture and appearance
Frankly were of secondary interest,
And the chief point to one such as myself,
Prophet-Assyriologist of the Lord,
Is the very fact it was made of brick.

But what, she said, isn't made of brick?

It's quite true, Marquerite. All is brick.
All Nineveh is made of one substance,
One substance formed and sun-baked in parts
And fitted together with visible joins.
The brickwork is so ubiquitous here
That folk, like flies, grow multiple eyes
And see the world as rectangular cells
Held together by rigid mortar grids,
As catacombs in which pupae are curled,
Caterpillars gripped by rigor mortis
From which inner moths will never escape.
I see many little caskets of brick,
Each a sarcophagus that cans a coil,
Each a carapace for a foetal nine,
A cuneiform worm that's been mummified.
That's what I see within a prison wall.

Put out your eye then, parrot, she said.
Or fix it elsewhere, on heaven perhaps.
And what happened, come to think of it, bird,
To that other eye, that one that's gone?

I still had a pair then, Marguerite,
A healthy pair that still worked as a team
And ranged ahead scouting terrain for bricks
That might pose a hazard or harbour worms.
I can't see a building of any size
Without seeing the thing as pre-ruin,
As a heap of rubble waiting to happen.
Often ruins retain little structure

And will offer the observer nothing more
Than piles of the once-constituent bricks,
And each one of these bricks looks alike,
So that if you've inspected one brick
You have to a degree inspected them all,
And it's best therefore to pick a brick,
Any brick, a brick at random will do,
And give that brick one good hard stare.

What meanings can a standard brick impart?

No brick that runs loose, that creeps away
And seeks to make escape, was ever laid.
Take note, Marguerite, of bricks you see,
The ones scattered around on roads and walks,
Precursors to greater rubble to come.
They're all aligned along the exit routes,
Refugees that flee their appointed spots.
There's a brick missing here in each wall,
A gap that only your town's prophet sees,
The keyhole for which my message is key,
And placed to guarantee complete collapse.

Prophecy's quite simple, once it's explained.

Prophets see bricks and understand all.
It's little known but nonetheless true
That dimensions for a given building's brick,
Height, breadth and depth, are divinely ordained.
The mold is fashioned so each baked product
Will correspond to heaven's express wish,
Exact within a few microcubits.
If Inquisition agents ever find
A brick out of line, not true to square,
Too yellow or small or tall to conform,
They'll order whole walls torn down and smashed,
Though those walls may enclose their own homes,
Though fallen weight may pin kin beneath.
Even so, even with this obsession
That divine guidelines be strictly observed,
Inspectors never spot the fatal flaws
That vision like mine finds so glaring.
Perhaps, after Nineveh bites the dust,
They'll find, too late, new regulations.
Trial and error, scientific method,

Is always generating a better brick
After disaster unearths hidden law.
The ratio clay takes to straw, for instance,
Is precisely specified by heaven's plans,
Along with other data builders need,
The slopes of roofs and curvatures of domes,
How far apart two pillars should stand
And how many masons likely will fall
And meet death in workplace accidents.
And though much of this is but common sense
Or logic or tedious computation,
It takes pain to educate architects
To each new species of nasty surprise
That creation hides inside phenomena.

There's more to the brick than meets the eye.

And some numbers are learned by engineers
By splitting open a wasp nest in winter
To scry dreams that slept there clasped in cells
Or by picking through fruit and by counting seeds,
But secrets gained in these approved fashions
Don't guarantee successful projects.
The first Temple they tried to build, in fact,
Fell down because of badly made bricks,
Bricks with a bad clay-to-straw proportion.
But Godhead by law is never to blame,
Nor dreams he sends, architects he employs,
Fruit he grows, wasps he intoxicates.
The blueprints he reveals are sacrosanct,
Communications protected by privilege.
And it wasn't the fault of the brickmakers
Or so a later investigation found.
The principal contractor was cutting cost
And provided them with insufficient straw
While demanding the same number of bricks.
This finding was greeted with relieved smiles,
For many feared that brickworms were loose.
If so, it's not that Temple alone
But all of Nineveh that would stand condemned,
Stand awhile seeming still sound and whole
But all the same eaten away within.
And just as Godhead is indemnified,
Armoured in limited liability,
So too are his creatures, the brickworms.

Despite an appetite that seems perverse,
The worm is just a clay-eating machine,
A soulless bore that's born to produce holes,
Which leaves nothing to curse, nothing to sue.

I thought you were going to tell me, she said,
How the building was actually constructed.

I was, but then I found it such bother.
And why, really, would you want to know this?
Do you plan to build a temple someday?
If so, go with current trends in temples,
Erect a structure of ferroconcrete.

Well, how were all of those heavy bricks
Transported from brickyard to worksite?

They put them in a truck and drove them over.
How would you do it, oh Marguerite?
Have slaves bring them on foot, one by one?

And tell me how they got the mortar up
To build the upper portion of the building.

In hods, by crane. The machine, not the bird.
Never confuse, I say, machines with birds.
But enough of this technical discussion.
Let us continue up the sloping ramp
And pass between tall sandstone columns,
Let us proceed inside into a place
As hot and tightly clenched as a mare's womb.
The heat that afflicted mighty Nineveh
Was a heavy presence inside the Temple,
A reminder of the drought that withered crops
On the once-rich alluvial flood plains,
A sign of God's continued displeasure.
Or perhaps not. Perhaps it was just me.
Perhaps my dislike of heat was an effect
Of my ongoing transformation to bird.

But I thought parrots would like heat, she said.

Electric parrots hate the tropic climes
With such a strong and incandescent passion
A Moor's jealousy pales in comparison.

A parrot likes the cool and likes the dark
And shuns like plague the direct sunlight
That brings up warps in his plastic case
And overburdens juryrigged systems
That use old balsa wood ceiling fans
As means to dissipate pent up heat.
Parrots avoid rain-forest humidity
Which oxidizes metallic surfaces
And encourages exotic fungal growth
In and around an input output jack.
Overgrown poisonous snakes and insects
Throw them into convulsions of dislike.
Allergic to the orchid's perfumed pollen,
Motion-sick at the thought of swaying palms,
Driven to distraction by chattering apes,
The flocks migrate afoot, step by step,
Some going north and some going south,
Above Cancer and below Capricorn,
The more sub the subtropic the better,
The more sub the subzero the better,
And best of all: tundra and frozen waste!
Nothing gladdens the heart more than to watch
A large parrot pack working together
And racing through the endless winter night
Slavering in harmony, howling in fugue,
Pursuing, pulling down a caribou.
Here in ancestral, polar hunting grounds,
Far from the fevered humours and fetid stinks
Of the equatorial jungles and swamps
The parrot is at home, untroubled, relaxed.
The parrot, in its natural habitat,
Dwells with the penguin and the albatross
By the sea at the foot of groaning glaciers
Where the ice, mast-high, comes floating by
Green as emerald beneath the northern lights.
They swagger there in mist and driving snow,
And swallow whole a living arctic char.
They belch once or twice and then shout out
Shove those bleeding crackers up your ass,
For a parrot on ice is in paradise!

I think your spiel is pure fabrication,
Just as you yourself are an artifact.
You know nothing of true parrot nature.

I'm only reasonable facsimile,
I admitted, of a true parrot nature,
You're just going to have to live with it.
Mock my origins, my stature, my substance,
Mock my style and mannerisms, if you wish,
I am, truly, a parrot mostly mock.
Nonetheless I expect consideration,
Polite, if not quite enthusiastic,
Of the kind given a grandfather's lies.
We listen to patriarchs, almost dead,
Who falsify to glorify their lives,
So that dull, inert, leaden time
May transmute to a golden age reborn.
Once upon a time, long long ago,
Heroes walked the earth and did great deeds.
Don't dispute these words despite the fact
You know full well they misrepresent.
Nod along. Give consent to falsehood
Even though it's clear to all involved
That men of yore were just as short in reach,
Indeed shorter in reach than those today
Since they lacked performance enhancing drugs,
Treadmills, stationary bicycles,
Biofeedback, artificial limbs,
Biceps beefed up with injected goop,
Mental trainings taught by Chinese monks
That raise ordinary fisticuffs
Aloft into dogfights with biplanes
To wow the crowds at fairground airshows.
They were, in a phrase, less inclined to cheat
Due not to greater inbred honour
Or underdeveloped determination
But only to lesser opportunity.
It's in words not deeds that the past shines;
It's as liars that old-timers excel.
I've sat on docks myself, heard them talk,
Describe the size of fish that got away
Or which, because it couldn't fit the boat,
They put back in water, let swim off.
It breaches bonds between generations
To jump up and shout, that's a damn lie,
It never happened, neither God nor man
Ever gave your doings a second glance.
Die now or later, it doesn't matter,
Your eulogy's written, brief and business-like,

We need only fill in blanks with name.
Here it is, the priest's boilerplate form:
Born, suffered boredom if not worse, died,
Rose from dead, did laundry, died again,
You may now kiss the bride, rest in peace.
No, such response does no one good.
It's best to listen, as if transfixed,
And keep unspoken all reservations.
A prophet, likewise, deserves attention
Even when, through no failure of his own,
And like some toothless ancient mariner,
His high-flying spittle misses its mark
And hits with spray a bystander instead.
These efforts, at least, are still well-meant.
A willing suspension of disbelief
Is necessary both for fiction
And its cousin, the medium's seance.
Dead voices quavering in a still mind,
In a mind that brackets the mundane world,
Will heal the wound between heaven and earth.
Sink back into your cushions and listen,
I'll ease you back to that seamless sack
Whose warm, wet walls will impart meanings
Sweeter by far than the queen's honeycomb.

Part VI.3: GUEST SPEAKER

You've already sold me on the sackcloth.
How much more, parrot, must I swallow?

There's always more to come, Marguerite.
I went out on the mezzanine terrace
To escape the heat, to catch a cool breeze
While I awaited my turn at the pulpit,
And the terrace was three bodylengths wide,
With a lawn and an active sprinkler system.
It was a pleasant place, except for the walls,
For on these walls the original frescoes,
Classic scenes of humility from scripture
Painstakingly reproduced by artists,
Nameless masters schooled in the fine designs,
Were overscrawled with loud graffiti tags.
Tequila bottles, condoms and crack pipes

Were often found here, strewn across lawns,
And wall-mounted pay phones had been gutted.
These were acts of juvenile delinquents
Who work at night in teams to vandalize.
And none should permit young folk to gather;
Whatever virtue they possess is lost
In the evil of the peer group dynamic,
And not only the teenage street gangs,
But all the grade school class picnics,
Field trips to view toadstools and wood rot,
Little League baseball teams, cheerleaders,
Paramilitary cub scout packs,
Young Republicans and church youth groups,
All these should be disbanded and dispersed.
Worst of all by far are 4H clubs,
Created and funded by the State's agents,
Dedicated to educate children
To work unspeakable satanic rites.
They secretly gather in granges and plot
Crop circles and cattle mutilations.
They parade blue ribbons at county fairs,
Gained they will say for animal husbandry,
But in truth awards achieved for bloodshed
And savage, indiscriminate butchery.
I've seen their secret markings on buildings,
On cornerstones, on keystones in arches,
That signify the thing is cursed and hexed
And hazard to all who dwell there within.
I've seen them on playgrounds selling drugs,
Recruiting babes for child prostitution,
Trapping toddlers to sell to pederasts...

Watch what you say, remarked Marguerite.
These are powerful and quite litigious groups
Who act quickly to quash criticism,
And you are not beyond their reach, parrot.
You'd do well to mind the tort involved,
Established from antiquity in common law.
Any person who dares sing or compose
A work against any other person
Or persons, alive or incorporeal,
Must be dragged from his den and clubbed to death.

Even though I may well be God-inspired?
Okay then, I said, I retract it all.

Clubbed once, I shirk second experience.

Were there not surveillance cameras there
To deter those inclined to misbehave?

Yes, but no one knows what they observed.
Soulless machines monitor each device,
Machines that care nothing of true evil,
That aren't appalled by marks it leaves on walls,
The treasure maps that lead prophets to hell.
I'm told they watch only for certain cues.
They see only certain seditious acts
And autoforgive all other offence.
They hear only certain heretic words
And overlook all other content.
They're like a dog who scans conversation
For any one of a few chosen phrases
But can't read newspapers it's asked to fetch:
Good dog, dinnertime, go for a walk,
Roll over, retrieve, sit down and heel,
Rip out the throats of those I point out.

Learn to manage anger, parrot, she said.

The speaker before me had just wrapped up
A long discourse on some hot topic,
On his new no-effort weight loss plan,
Or how sell anything to anyone,
Or zen and the art of paving driveways,
Or maybe just free associating
On revised fire safety regulations
When the tidal wave of stagefright struck.
By light that came through strange graffiti
Acid-etched on glass meant to show saints,
I could see the congregation was immense,
Although mostly composed of rowdy drunks.
The sheer intensity of pure attention,
The sheer volume and force of pure judgment,
The sheer withering, derisive scrutiny
Would feel like Godhead himself watching.
The thought of that focus left me quaking,
Weak and flushed and unable to address
Even myself without rapid stammer.
My own attention became as oppressive
As that of that imagined spectator.

I was caught in negative feedback loops,
The worse I felt, the more I reacted,
The more I reacted, the worse I felt.
And then, at last, it was my turn to speak.
But, as I staggered up to the lectern,
I noticed something truly remarkable:
This audience paid me no attention.
They were talking and laughing among themselves,
Eating lunches, and completely distracted,
Like wild asses in the season of rut.
They'd made gods of their own appetites,
Food, drink, opposite sex, clothes and toys,
Books they read, films they watched, thoughts they
thought,
The jokes and rumours they passed back and forth,
The leaders they followed, scapegoats they burned,
Laws of physics they obeyed without grudge.
And these sinners deny the day of doom
Or else believe its dawning so delayed
That there's plenty of time left for fun.
Yet today is their resurrection day,
Just as was tomorrow and yesterday,
The day their gods depart and idols melt,
The day that Godhead's rainfall returns
To germinate seeds and quicken dead,
The day judgment cleaves a pigeon in two
And lunch, served late, is not fit to eat.

This audience sounds to me like workers,
The ones who drive forklifts and stack crates,
Who gather after shifts to eat their meals,
Warehouse workers, taking a long break.

My stagefright instantly disappeared,
To be supplanted by procedural questions.
The fish had given me the spell to utter,
Yet it seemed too brief; so large a crowd
Would undoubtedly expect a large message,
A loud, lengthy, closely-argued sermon.
My four lines would prove anticlimactic.
But what? An anecdote to break the ice?
No, the occasion was far too solemn,
Or would be, if they would all stop laughing
And exchanging crude jokes among themselves.
We needed somehow to get to solemn.

Nothing, of course, is more solemn than doom,
The death and damnation of all present,
But some might find it a breach of etiquette
To mention such an unpleasant prospect,
To stand behind pulpit and just blurt it out
Without more gradual exposition
Without getting into the finer points.
Plus, bad news is best broken slowly,
With a few understated hints to start,
To get them thinking, mulling things over,
And then begin closing in on the truth,
Growing ever broader, more explicit,
Ever more heavy-handed and brutish,
Then ending with one last hammer blow
That leaves damned fools speechless, stunned and
shocked.

A Nineveh audience likes it like that.
Catharse them hard: they'll just lap it up.

But how approach the point I want to make?
Scriptural text is often used, I knew,
To set the tone and introduce the theme
For harangues that, with luck, last all day,
Well into the early evening hours.
And I'd seen myself how this was done,
From pews made of uncompromising wood.
I'd seen God wrung out, drop at a time,
From some innocuous scriptural phrasing.
And so I cried to skies, Is this not
The great Babylon I have built to house
My kingdom due to might of my dominion
And on behalf the honour of my majesty?

Immediately some heckler replied
You've gone wrong, man, taken a bad turn,
Didn't you see signs? This is Nineveh.
Get back on the freeway, take a right,
Drive back forty leagues the way you came
Until you see the carpet superstore.
Next twenty exits are to Babylon.

As I prepared my rejoinder to this jerk
A man stood up and began to jabber,
To expostulate and roll up his eyes

While delivering incoherent address.
I said to those who shared with me the stage,
What the hell is this newest outrage?

Glossalia, said a woman. He's enthused,
Overcome by gases God blows out,
Exhalations that drift down from heaven,
Insistent, vocabulary-laden vapours
Still encrypted, packed up in nonsense,
Because nothing divine's ever easy
Or ever comes without some defect
That postpones a public understanding.
He's speaking in tongues, a common problem,
For it happens all the time around here
When religious fervour overpowers sense.
Now someone just as fervid will stand
And will translate back whatever it is
The holy spirit has induced him to say.

Indeed, one from the congregation stood
And said, He says he's an Italian sailor.
He's terribly sorry to interrupt
But he wonders if anyone here knows
A quiet bar where men can meet ladies.

Send him to Ernie's! the heckler yelled out.

Send him to Ernie's! the audience agreed.

I cried out to skies, Eschew harlot love...

What's this eschew? said the heckler. Eschew?

And someone else shout, Gesundheit!

And still another heckler rose to feet
And said, He says that he's a German sailor...

I hadn't yet found the patience and poise
That communication of God's will required
If crowds composed of hostile infidels
Seek with spite to defeat recitation
In taunts, boos and loud derisive laughter.
A seasoned pro keeps rejoinders ready,
Putdowns he's used a dozen times before

To help regain control if crowds resist.
He'll have honed skills on many platforms:
Labour rallies, campaign trail hustings,
Wedding banquets and pancake breakfasts,
Vaudeville, tent meetings, medicine shows,
Professional development seminars
And those free introductory lectures
With poorly done powerpoint slideshows
In case the suckers decide to take notes.
But I had no quips or putdowns at hand.
Enough! I screamed. Shut up, you assholes!
And I recited without further ado:
How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.

And as soon as I had finished, the sunlight
That came streaming through the stained glass
windows
That depicted gas lawn mower repair
In twelve easy-to-understand lessons
Suddenly disappeared, leaving darkness,
For I'd improperly inflected the spell
And caused an impromptu solar eclipse.
And then I saw, but not very clearly,
Due to lack of light, fear of Godhead
Imprinted on retinas of those present.
Quickly, I thought, intone the spell again!

How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.

Damn it. Again I'd inflected wrongly,
For among the thousands present not one
Who suffered from snake-bite was left uncured,
Although none scrupled to approach pulpit
And give voice to glad testimonial
Or roll up trousers to show smooth skin.
And fear of Godhead, I saw, was fading
Now that the sunlight had reappeared
Behind the lines of a two-stroke engine
In various cross-sectioned positions,

The sex act etched for love-lorn pistons.
So I repeated the ditty a third time,
Which, just as proverbs report, was the charm:

How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.

The unruly crowd was now hypnotized
And now docile as if lobotomized
And they sat so gape-mouthed and astonished
That I feared they'd abandoned full control
Of their bodily functions and processes.
I saw pools of drool begin to collect
In aisles that ran between the folding chairs,
But luckily no excrement or urine.
The immense hall was totally silent now.
Even the characteristic humming,
That unconscious humming in background,
Had come to stop. And did the fish's spell
Attune itself to Nineveh's signature?
Is that how it was done? Enough knowledge,
And anyone could fashion such a spell!
But theory was secondary at present.
Everyone's attention was at my command.
Some had closed eyes and slumped back in seats,
And all appeared loose, receptive, relaxed,
Ready to receive Godhead's holy word,
Except for one or two who'd stopped breathing
And shortly thereafter, sadly, expired.
First, I explained to my captive audience,
I want your donations. Lots of donations.
And next I want my name put on the sign...

And as I detailed my list of instructions,
I could barely suppress my expanding glee.
My reputation was firmly established,
And though, it's true, there was more to do,
I'd made an excellent start on the work.
The one instruction I'd failed to list
Was that very one the fish insisted
Be dropped, without fail, upon this town:
I'd neglected to bring up sackcloth.
Why bother sell the fools anything,

When I could sell them absolutely nothing
And collect the same total revenue?
Sackcloth, in my own view, was redundant.
Moreover, I did feel so godlike
Speaking commands from behind the pulpit,
That my own power had overpowered me
And my headstrong pride had led me astray.
It was, I concluded, a minor matter.
I'd sell sackcloth some other time.

That which machines have wrought, machines must
sell,
As that ancient prophet Veblen foretold,
And you'd do well to remember that,
Lest God grow cranky, said Marguerite,
And turn your twitter down, or even off.

But then an idea struck my thinking
With the force of a marlin attacking bait.
A pyramid distribution, it whispered.
What's that? I whispered back. Speak louder!

A hierarchy of distributorships,
Said the voice, more loudly, is set up.
The size of distributorship you receive
Is a function of how much you can invest.
The product flows down the pyramid
And the proceeds will flow right back up.
At the apex is the Prophet of the Lord,
And at the base are the masses of losers
Onto which bales of sackcloth descend.
It's a proven get-rich quick technique.
The streets of great Nineveh are littered
With dietary supplement containers
That skidded down the sides of pyramids.
Donations, true, bring steady income,
But sackcloth's another profit centre
That only total fools would overlook.
It's a perfect opportunity, friend,
To do God's work and make extra bucks.

I like that idea, I informed the voice,
I like it a lot, and I think it will work.

Part VI.4: THE LOCUST EATERS

As my fame increased I began to attract
The multitudes of spiritual seekers,
Backslid sinners and mere dilettantes
Who drift from evangelist to evangelist
In search of any relief from tedium.
And each night more came to hear me speak,
Which I began to find an irritation
Since often I really had nothing to say
Beyond those few words the fish had taught.
Really all they needed to do was buy
Books and videos and three ring binders
Crammed with cartoons and simple sentences
That fully outlined my foolproof program,
Pay me and take it away as homework;
I'll send a truck around with sackcloth.
But of the many who came to hear me speak,
Many of them did not go away again
But instead did choose to follow me around
And style themselves as my loyal disciples.
These I did my best to dissuade,
Inventing absurd dietary laws
And clearly preposterous prohibitions.
Thus I drove away one immense mob,
Equal in numbers to the population
Of Greater Metropolitan Nineveh,
With the suggestion there could be no salvation
Unless they subsisted only on locusts.

I couldn't take that, said Marguerite,
Not even ground up in blender drinks
Mixed together with orange juice and yeast.
You'd need to hold me down, force-feed me
Against the press of my hot, rising gorge,
Salvation or not, if lunch was a locust.

I could have used my ditty, but did not.
Instead, I told them that to eat the locust
Was manifestly the right thing to do,
And also it is good, nutritious food,
And listed, like the more vocal cricket,
Among those the Lord permits us to eat.
This advice was enough to send away

Many who, like you, were too squeamish,
Sent them off to find an easier path,
Off to find a better approach to God,
An enlightenment with a better menu.
Yet for each who'd leave, another stayed,
Not only stayed, but stayed to hear more
Helpful soteriological hints
On which apostles own exclusive rights,
Available only from Godhead's prophets.
So I told them to eat their locusts raw,
Without sauces or other seasonings,
And another mob thereupon departed,
For while the meats of the Assyrian locust
Will possess a delicate flavour when cooked,
Eaten raw the flesh is rather bitter
And brittle, chitinous exoskeletons
Are hard to chew, still harder to digest.
Yet for each who would leave, another would stay.
I told them they must eat their locusts alive,
That one could hunt locust only in months
Whose names in Turkish lack the letter 'R',
That one may not ever use explosives
On members of the family Locustidae
In order to facilitate their capture
As they lie stunned, insensate on the ground,
That one must always eat a locust whole,
No matter how large and energetic
The particular insect in question,
And that one must consider the consumption
Of the females, of the larvae and the cripples
And the ones with horizontal red strips
Running along the dark, dorsal thorax
Absolutely taboo and unsporting.
And with each new, more absurd commandment,
Half again the once devout would depart.
But so constrained are my wits and so populous
Is Greater Metropolitan Nineveh,
That when my small locust-lore was exhausted,
There did still remain a vast multitude,
And each of those faithful who still remained
Was evidently an absolute fool.
One had only to observe the great mob
Go berserk in search of communal feast,
Locusts having become rare, if not extinct,
In the city's immediate vicinity,

To be assured that if all these brains
Were collected together, mashed and distilled,
Not a single gram of sense would be left
To dilute the dull liquour thus produced,
Fit only to be bottled up and sold
As light beer to gullible mountain folk.

Hey, said Marguerite. I remember now
Reading about nutbar locust cults
In a newspaper article headlined
A low carb high protein salvation,
Above photographs of a bearded creep.
If that was you, you have changed quite a bit.
The beak, as I recall, was less pronounced.
The story said the cultists lurked in fields
Before the dawn to catch locusts asleep,
With swarms settled down on cold fence rails
Before, heated by sun, they rise again
To plunder the croplands of all their yield.
It said the creep took all the credit
For wiping out the plague that ate our food.
I believe I skimmed the article only,
But I don't remember sackcloth mentioned.

They wouldn't mention my main product
Unless I paid for a big display ad
To run in the next two columns over.
What a bunch of crooks! It just sickens me.

But that's just the way things work, she said.

And that's my point exactly, I retorted.

Wait! The article mentioned holy war,
An armed struggle against unbelievers.
You urged, I now recall, a bloody death
For all who failed to kneel and plead your God.

Not true. That's misrepresentation.
War is of the soul, an inner wrestling
That will subdue man's inner infidel.
Our secret weapons and explosives training,
The literal interpretation of the words
I sometimes used to expound my doctrine,
Is likewise of spiritual character,

And is not conducted, as claimed, in the camps
Established just beyond the city limits.
These camps exist, it cannot be denied,
But physical fitness is their only goal,
Dance steps taught to small, informal groups.
None of it's true, those stories they ran.
There's no network of cadres and cells
Working to smash this idol from within,
To blow its damn head right off the neck
With some well-placed sticks of dynamite.
Peaceful reform, of course, is always best.

[Lacuna in text]

CAPUT SEVEN

Part VII.1: TRUE BELIEVERS

The growing multitude of acolytes
Began to tax my patience past the point
Neck tendons could untense or jaws unclench
Or headaches might cease to squeeze my brain.
The carefree devotion and boundless joy
That these sheep betrayed in moans and bleats
Left me with irritated, itching skin.
Their glad noises red-lined stress levels,
Made my scalp flesh creep forward and crawl
As if to unseat a loathsome thing there,
A flea perhaps or the sure-footed louse.
Happy hymns grabbed and clamped cramped muscles
Along my spine, around my hot bowels.
Sounds of thanksgiving brought backspasms.
Disciples like these pose a health risk
For one already sick, for one beset
By pre-existent medical conditions.
One should not teach if already ailing
Nor should one preach if one like myself,
One untrained in self-tranquilization,
One unsedated by strong narcotic,
One unprepared, unmedicated,
Unpickled, unstupefied by drink.
To see them in outfit grated my nerves.
To see sackcloth skirts, sackcloth slacks,
And sackcloth bandannas raised hackles,
Raised blood pressure, triggered facial ticks,
And acid-etched my ulcerated stomach
Until the searing pains bent me double.

Undercooked locusts could do that too.

Eating locusts wasn't the cause, Marguerite.
I've never eaten one myself, of course.
It's not healthy to live on one dish only,
As the prophet Mankanaka found out.

Mankanaka? I don't know that name.
That's one of the minor prophets, I'd guess.

The prophet Mankanaka was a locust,
Sent to lead his people into Egypt.
First, though, his swarm wandered wilderness.
They criss-crossed the desert for forty years,
Which is why, in fact, that land first failed,
Why the Sinai, once land of plenty,
Once paradise, has now become waste.
Mankanaka's locusts consumed it all.
That land that once sheltered the vast herds
Of giant lizards and flying reptiles,
The vanished flocks of shaggy micro-bisons,
The now-extinct hosts of pygmy leopards,
That land was nibbled up by mandibles,
Snipped into billions of bite-sized bits.
The timbered hills, the flowering savannahs,
The lush swamps and jungles all are eaten,
Drawn down through those turbine intestines.
First they ate the game, all the wildlife,
Then went the trees, and then went the shrubs,
And then, at last, there remained just grass,
Only the rolling hills and plains of grass.
And this, of course, dismayed the famished tribes,
Who'd grown accustomed to a finer cuisine.
Mankanaka spake then to the swarms:
The holy, oh locusts, eat grass only.
A diet of grass shall transform the sage,
Confer a sleek physique but bulk muscles.
It gives strength and power to hindquarters
That steroids promise but can't deliver.
All creation shall come to watch you hop!
This, however, met scepticism,
And Mankanaka, to show swarms the way,
Subsisted many months munching on grass,
Growing daily larger and more holy.

A locust prophet is preposterous, bird.

To each nation will God send a prophet,
And each one gets the kind it needs most.
To Christendom he dispatches one kind,
To Jews another kind altogether,
To Islam, still another kind again.
Each nation, though pagan wogs they seem,
Gets not just prophet, but also books,

If literacy rates are high enough.
Each nation gets prophecy in its tongue,
A Godhead it readily understands,
A prophet fashioned to make his word heard.
And yet, if you correct idiolects back,
You always get one that look like me.
Each gets, unasked for, its own Jonah,
Its own one God, its own holy book.
Even apes, even aphids get one.
And even the human coronavirus,
The strain that gave Nimrod a headcold
On the day he laid your town's foundations,
Will get its coded strip of nucleic rage,
Its stiff, stern non-negotiable demands.

And what could Godhead say to a virus?

Their prophet told them, go and multiply,
Go and grow and stuff this head with phlegm.
Confuse brain tissues with thick stickiness,
So that some neurons fire, some jam,
And some go on and off, on and off,
So that the key, that one labelled nine,
The ninth key on the mental numberpad,
Shall stick down and output repeatedly
And superimpose pattern onto sight.
And that's the problem prophets often face,
The fact that though they do Godhead's work,
They won't always reap the benefit.
Mankanaka didn't learn this truth
Until the swarms hit the Egyptian crops
And found themselves one plague among many,
Promoting some foreign business plan.

So what happened to Mankanaka, bird?

He sat on a golf course, on the ninth green,
When a lawnmower came near, too near,
And sheared off his left and rearmost leg.
Mankanaka, in shock, and then delight,
Observed the stump ooze a green grass sap.
Look, he cried, what this diet has done!
And then, in joy, commenced the leaping dance
That all creation, indeed, came to watch.

He danced, his swarm danced, the whole world
danced,
Up and down, knocking over cities
And casting down every mountain range.
And God, annoyed, said to Mankanaka,
What's the meaning of this damage you do?
Look, he replied, what my diet has done,
And showed Godhead his green-dripping stump.
But God revolved, so that his prophet saw
God too lacked his left rearmost limb.
And God shook abdomen and from that stump
There came neither blood nor the sap of grass.
God shook thorax, shook wings, shook and danced.
From that wound came what looked like snow.
Out swirled powder. Out fluttered white ash.
That, said God, is what diet can do.

Did you tell, parrot, your followers that?

I imparted only what must be done
To make a raw locust ready to eat.
Boil them four days, stirring once or twice.
You'll need strong detergent to wash them off
Because those fields over which they swarm,
The fig and olive orchards, the vineyards,
The acres of cornstalks and lettuce heads,
Are often sprayed with some insecticide
That harms no insect but blights all else.
Better yet, peel off the outer skin,
Soak steaks overnight in alcohol,
And eat less than seven ounces per week.

So, she said, they ate too much locust?

One strange effect of a locust diet,
Due, I'd guess, to ingesting foreign twitch,
Is that it makes disciples want to dance.
You see this too with God's other plagues.
Rat-borne Black Plague first springs to mind,
Kicks off from haunch to launch itself up,
But other fevers too will shuffle feet,
Fevers that seize our last nerves of control
And tug us tangled, jerk-jointed, aloft
In dervish worship of bad puppeteers.
And some will dance to summon disease forth,

And others, less reckless, to ward it off.

I understand, she said, the second group,
But not the first, unless hope's abandoned.

Some flesh, Marguerite, is so saintly
It chooses that path of least resistance,
The state in which cells are only immune
To anti-retroviral drug regimes.
It sacrifices self, it feeds itself
To every phage that likes human meat,
To all the hungers that now know our scent,
The populated mists that wreath us round.
Such flesh hops and spins, disintegrates,
It does jigs you do if eaten alive.
Dance it dances, although sublime, is brief.
But that doesn't describe my acolytes.
They danced a dance neither brief nor sublime,
A dance too mundane to call holy,
Too lackluster even to be wholesome.

Not only can they sing, they dance as well!
They'd make a good musical theatre troupe.

Singing, clearly, wasn't noisome enough
For those who'd put on sacred sackcloth,
For now they danced God's dance, the foxtrot,
Danced two by two in two four time,
A slow gait, not a walk, not a trot,
A slow procession up the streets and lanes,
Around corners and down the boulevards.
I say stop, they stop, say go, they go.
Enthroned upon a motorized float,
A throng in front, another mob behind,
I led them through the downtown ziggurats
To where their Quintus kept his royal seat.
I waved to shoppers crowded on sidewalks
But none acknowledged or ever waved back,
The bargains too bright to permit them sight.
And all the ornamental almond trees
Aligned along Nineveh's avenues
Were bare of leaf and brittle, dead of drought.
Their crooked twigs segmented sunlight,
Inscribed omens onto pavements below.
It had come time to heed the warning djinn,

Time to divest myself of these adulants.

That angel should've given you a spell
To send people away after awhile.

I know now what drives a holy man
To offer folk their last rites early,
Advanced in date from some faroff day
To right away, this very afternoon.
And so often do such urges come
To those who sacrifice their lives to God
That seminaries teach us how to cope,
On when to let your charges blunder on,
And when to euthanize, cut things short,
And introduce a life to afterlife.
Preachers, even during lengthy sermons,
Watch their congregations for subtle signs,
The mute, unconscious appeals for surcease
That come as slight gestures, a shift of weight,
A poorly chosen glance or itching nose,
A cough that comes just as scriptures are read.
If these are seen preachers have no choice
But serve flocks nonalcoholic juice
Poison-spiked in death-inducing doses
To better speed along their trusting souls
And put an end to any chance to sin,
Just as sewing shut their distended guts
Keeps overeaters from unhealthy snacks.
Sometimes holy men are less direct,
As with those who run flying saucer cults;
Often the drug given is non-lethal,
Maybe just something to help them sleep,
To pacify questions with dreamless rest
And keep flocks quiet while throats are slit
To spare them that disappointment that comes
With grim knowledge that flying saucers won't.
For this is one more lesson prophets learn,
Just what to do if God's overdue
And promised salvation doesn't show up.
But even so it seems a bit extreme,
A bit further than where I wished to go.
My intent was to culminate my mission
By converting Quintus and thus the nation,
To get the whole damn thing over with,
I say stop, they stop, say go, they go.

Double time, double step, step it up,
Time had come to cash out and leave town.

You're still here though, said Marguerite,
Or did you go away and then return?

Part VII.2: LUNCH BREAK

I'd just reached the high stoplights that rule
The place where Ishtar intersects Main
When some organ inside me lost its grip
And let inner landscapes liquefy
And come geysering up to seek release.
I stopped the bunted float and disembarked.
Nausea weakened legs, staggered my step,
Made it a long march to the nearest curb
Where a man was beating a parking meter
With rolled up umbrella to the coinbox.
I watched him go to work at this vengeance
To take attention off my roiling guts.

All saints endure dark nights of the gut.

Was this just a bout with motion sickness,
Or was it a new effect of divine zap?
Or was I only sick of prophetic work
And sick of these crowds, sick of Nineveh?
And with nausea came doubled vision.
Sunlight dimmed as if obscured or eclipsed
By a great archaeological trowel.
The street tilted as if heaved by earthquake
And I saw pavements broken, wreckage strewn,
Each passageway blocked by rubble heaps.
At noonday desert owls and screech owls
Uttered cries perched upon stone columns
Fallen over across the marketplace.
I picked my way through the broken housebeams,
Through the yellowed human bones underfoot,
Bones of dead dancers, bones of dead priests.
And what if I spake? Would scattered bones rise
And snake up rustling to reassemble,
To cage me round with incantations and ribs,
Incorporate me whole into their dance

Around counting, revelatory djinn?
I was like that surly shade that witchcraft
Had recalled, reembodied, reawakened
To bear witness to its foresight ignored.
This outcome had not been overlooked.
My second sight showed me a second scene
Superimposed on this present contentment,
A persistent vision of desolation
To defeat new, increased expectation.
It was time, I thought, to take a lunch break.
I saw Ernie's Bar and Grill was nearby
And headed there, almost on hands and knees.

This hagiography, said Marguerite,
Includes full descriptions of all your meals?
What about your showers, your shopping trips?

People expect too much of their prophets,
Never thinking that they might go shopping,
Eat food, stroll around the market place,
Although it's true that when they do
Armed store detectives keep a close eye
And walkytalky warnings up the mall.
A saint's behaviour doesn't differ much
From that of pickpockets or shoplifters
Or shifty types as apt to plant a bomb
Or rape young schoolgirls or smoke a joint
As participate in consumer culture,
Sup upon oval food court fixtures
With bags of purchases stuffed underneath.
But trust me, Marguerite, to tell my tale
So that no unnecessary dining
Slows progress toward grim conclusions
That leave nothing unsaid or unresolved.

Wait, said Marguerite. A thought has struck.
Just how, parrot, do your words come out?
For don't you need to draw a breath to speak?

Despite the fact my lungs collapsed
And nasal tubing twisted up in knots
As human form folded back to the bird,
My words still spurt and don't miss a beat.
And this is how my respiration works:
I draw my wind and hold it in awhile

And circulate it like a hurricane
Around an eye I've lettered number nine,
And then I let it out transformed to speech.
Inhale the world, soak it in sense, exhale.
I make my little angels into winds
And send them whistling off across the void.
If I'm feeling frisky while this transpires,
I'll also flap wings and hop up and down.
I just love a good hop, a good flap,
A good snort of the air and then a cough,
And then a brief shudder, a roll of eyes.
Inhale, exhale, forgive, forget, expire.
Every fresh breath a yogin emits,
If not his last, if not an exit line,
Is just idle talk, a passing breeze.

You're no yogin, bird, the woman said.
No line you repeat is ever the last.

It's true, quite true, that I do go on
After the act that brought the curtains down,
Despite lessons our honoured fictions taught:
Don't ever, dear, overdo a scene.
Critics look for crisp versimilitude.
It's best to twitch only once before death,
Make but one brief point before you quit,
One last quip and just one last jab
Before they drag you off, stiff, stage left.
Better yet if death seems unrehearsed,
As if in fact you really took a dive,
Said goodbye and toppled off the perch
To take a repose in birdseed and shit.

Stop now, she said, take applause and go,
Before I frown and start lobbing fruit.

After every effort comes a pause.
Some go out to wilderness to find
Respite and rest, to collect scattered thought,
To regain the strength and will to go on.
Some hole up in caves, climb on a cross,
Or lie on a beach and soak up the sun.
Some book themselves into golf resorts,
Log cabins, loonie bin oubillettes,
Nunnery cells that lack working commodes.

Others flyfish or cross-country ski
Or pan for nuggets downstream from a vein.
Still others dress up as derelicts
And sleep in tin dumpsters, nibbled by rats
And pillowed by paper that once wrapped meals.
None, though, know how truly to relax,
The secret strategy all saints employ.
None know the best course, the course I took,
The way that makes straight the road to our Lord.
For full, abject retreat I recommend
A slightly secluded naughahyde booth
And two or more drinks, in quick succession.
I chose a seat far from the slot machines,
Far from windows, far from the noisy bar,
And far from the malfunctioning jukebox
That did two four time as nine by nine.
An aging stripper, now partly disrobed,
Gyrated and stopped, gyrated, stopped,
To music that rose and fell in broken bursts.
Her breasts bobbed a bit behind the beat,
Silicone-enhanced mammary glands,
Plumped up dugs designed to catch the eye,
Nipples tipped with tiny tassels that twirled,
That spun with odd, disconcerting orbits
That made me dizzy, put wobble to the room.
And this was not, in my view, a foxtrot,
Not a dance that most prophets will condone,
Unless they see occult meanings revealed
By the clockwise motions of female flesh.
And few prophets indeed glimpse truth here
Or penetrate beyond skin laid bare
To where divine grammar will parse burlesque.
This feat only the wisest will perform
And only after decades of research,
Years of study spent in dives like this
Awatch for the spot our Lord will pass through
In flight from one whirling void to the next.

So say you, parrot, said Marguerite.
I've seen guys like that who sit in bars,
Too numb to sense much of anything
That isn't two sizes larger than norm.

From time to time, as routine might permit,
She poured me looks with bats of coquette lash,

With pouts and smiles that didn't hit their mark,
But went too high, a little too left
From where such attention best finds roost.
My left pocket, the place I hid my cash,
Was what, it seemed, aroused the hot desire
That drove the tassels with such urgent speed.
She must've noted the wad of banknotes
From which I took a bill to pay for beer
And marked me the most likely candidate
For her overstated, misdirected charms.
Did that stripper moonlight as harlot?
No other woman would deign to register
Anything but complete indifference
At the prospect of my sackclothed person.
The woman in the next booth stood as proof,
Or rather, she sat as proof, her back turned,
A sleek beauty who spared me not a glance
Despite the frequent looks I cast her way.
My displayed wealth must not have caught her note.

Or maybe she did see those banknotes,
Said Marguerite, and had come to conclude
That men like you are just not worth it.

But men like me possess, Marguerite,
Short patience for this iniquitous town,
Its thirst for domination, its pretence,
Its corruption, its half-cooked hamburgers,
Its cold and insensitive womenfolk
Who assess net worth with a single glance.
I lack patience with women ruled by look,
The calculated exchange of appearance,
The estimation that sips and spits out
Surface value, depth left untasted.
I lack patience with the impatient regard
That meets my image, then shoves it aside,
Looking past for the better view beyond.
Prophets will never earn a second glance;
Their unfashionable sackcloth garb
And ash-smear'd faces and unkempt hair
Negate the need for deep calculation.
They are not desirable acquisitions.
What yield could such men ever achieve?
A moral victory, pyrrhic victory,
Or any insignificant success

A prophet might reasonably expect to gain
Is clearly not sufficient for these girls.
Cheerleaders and daughters of cheerleaders,
These silky, gene-crafted beauty queens,
Always cheer and always choose a winner.
Better that losers do not reproduce.
Is it so shocking so many prophets
Are driven to strange, desperate perversions?
Recall the fate of the prophet Isaiah,
Pulled off an embrace with a metal box
That he mistook for some curbside hooker,
Then charged with interfering with the mail,
Eventually undergoing electroshock
And ending a career of early promise
Strapped to a bed and staring at the ceiling.
Some say that he should have seen it coming,
But hindsight is forever twenty-twenty.
Yes, it's only the true prostitutes
Who will make time for prophets: a half-hour,
Or fifteen minutes will usually suffice,
The fee in question payable in advance,
And then they too move on, unsated.
High cash flow will require turnover.
If the women only knew my net worth,
They would not dismiss me so easily.
Net worth was a meditation topic
On which, in fact, I often came to dwell,
One on which I had proved myself master.
The calculation of monthly interest,
Compounded daily, at variable rates,
Had become an effortless task for my mind.
And I'd never before shown such skill,
A clear sign of the great work in action,
That transformation to my present state.

An idiot savant, said Marguerite,
A lightning calculator in bird shape.
You yank a leg to learn the grand total.

Financial computation led my thoughts
Back to the annoyance of my acolytes.
Why couldn't they just give me their money
And then go away and leave me in peace?
I could go nowhere without a mob.
Many thousands of them waited outside,

Fervent, patient, crowded into the street,
Wanting nothing more than a glimpse of me.
If I were to strike up conversation
With a kindly, likely looking female,
And, the one thing leading to another,
Depart looking for a little privacy,
I would have a multitude trailing behind.
But it was a vexation unamenable
To the sort of thought that wrought solution
Of an asset's net present value.

There's many girls who don't mind a crowd,
And not only those who put on shows.
You need to find the right type, that's all.
A retinue is not nearly as bad,
When females come to appraise some male,
As those screeches, stammers and snorts you make.
More offputting still are screams of rage
And vicious swipes of beak designed to maim,
Gash open a cheek, take off an ear.
It indicates, bird, an abusive streak.

That is now, Marguerite. This was then,
Before I learned what an irritation
The human form presents to mystic sight.

Man is the measure of all things, I've heard.

I've heard it's the two-toed newt, I replied,
The one that dwells in the stillwater pools,
Soft, cute, four inches long, and tasty too.
They're exactly half way, science has proved,
Between the very small and very huge,
And less inclined to count higher than three,
The point at which a cautious thought should
pause.
This newt, too, folds and fits in pockets,
There when needed to find the length of planks.

We won't tolerate another measure.
This claim is outrage, said Marguerite.
The newts must back down, or go to war.

As I idly wondered why the calendar
Conforms so imperfectly to sky motions,

To orbits and rotations of moon and earth,
Suddenly a fine idea arrived
And parked itself on my mental driveway:
I'd restrict the number of my disciples
To the number of days in a lunar month!
Of course, it was so perfectly plain to see.
It would be a much more manageable size
Than the bleating flock that followed me around.
And, when required, I could send the few off
For an advanced, intense meditation
On those untold virtues sackcloth has.
However this created new problems,
Most of which I might easily surmount,
Such as how one sorts the select few
From the great multitude of candidates.
Perhaps one could organize this mob
Into a sharpshooting competition
Or sit them down to play duplicate bridge.
Highest score joins the holy vanguard.
Perhaps patronage, primogeniture,
Or alphabetical order reversed
Would suffice to separate gold from dross.
Perhaps batteries of aptitude tests
Could sieve away fools and leave the elect.
Method itself did not really matter;
A more serious puzzle now seized thought:
The number of the days in a lunar month
Is, you know, twenty-eight and a fraction.
Lesser prophets might have rounded it off,
But here advanced arithmetic function,
A side-effect of my prophetic talent,
Allowed me to note this fraction equal,
If divided by length of shadows cast,
In standard units, by the Great Pyramid
At six o'clock on the spring equinox,
Square-rooted, inverted, added to nine,
Multiplied by the secret area code
Of Godhead's ineffable phone number...

Skip the algorithm, said Marguerite.

The value reached at end of day equalled
The name given Eve, female, mother,
Daughter, wife, crone, nimble sex kitten,
And whole hosts of other meanings

A cabalistic lexicon combines
Under the menstruation hieroglyph.
The answer here now made complete sense
I'd take twenty-eight male disciples
And one very closely chosen woman.

Ha! Tokenism, sneered Marguerite.
Rank misogyny! Male chauvinism!

Marguerite, Marguerite, please be calm,
For no misogynist would ever dare
Persist in the proven error of his ways
After hearing thy soft, melodic voice,
Viewing thy compassionate countenance,
And stroking thy rounded, thy velvet contours,
After lowering thy urgent frame... Squark!

Watch your language, parrot, said the woman,
Or I'll rip out still another feather
And wreak further wreckage upon
Thy resplendent, thy fine and vinyl plumage.

Desist! I lack the pluck to withstand you.
Yet let me say this, oh Margeuerite,
Tokenism is not the sort of sin
That ever offers souls much temptation,
And not one for which I expect to burn.
Hell would rock with raucous, mocking laughter
When other damned heard what sent me down.
No, I aspired to higher sin than that,
Intended something far more intense.
The female I required to seal my sum
Was to all twenty-eight others combined
A value equal to and greater than.
An ordinary wench, woman, or witch
For this position simply wouldn't do.
I required that eternal paradigm
For all women past present and future.
I sought Godhead's first and finest thought,
I sought Sophia, wisdom incarnate,
A girl less cerebral than oft portrayed,
Less remote, less indifferent to men,
More in fact a lithe and lively Lilith,
Our first seductress, reincarnated,
Or Helen of Troy preincarnated,

Or that girl I saw onstage last week,
That buxom sexpot in underwear
Who smiled, held props for Simon Magician
And battled apostles for crowd approval.
I could spend a lifetime, nine lifetimes,
Roaming across earth, corner to corner,
And never encounter in a woman's eyes
The precise spectrum of light that displays
The new moon, the goddess, the true beloved.
And it could become a long, lonely quest
Looking into every face I meet,
Finding nothing, looking away again,
Never finding the pearl the world conceals.
Or so it seemed for one or two moments,
But a quick seek and ye shall find was mine.
As luck would have it the woman I wanted
Was located in the next booth over,
That sleek beauty I mentioned earlier.
She was drinking gin and speaking to a toad,
A large toad, squat and reprehensible.

Toad? What the hell are you talking about?

It was a toad, Marguerite. I assure you.
And while I recognize that this character,
An enlarged anthropomorphic amphibian,
Might further strain a credibility
Which is now already stretched near snapping
With my tales of talking fish etcetera,
I can provide a rational explanation.
Unfortunately, I forget the details,
But the gist is that your toad drinking partner
Was irradiated while still quite small,
Still little more than a mere tadpole,
In one of the early atom bomb tests,
Crawled out of the lagoon, began to eat,
And ate, ate until he attained a size
And intelligence and position in life
Not normally encountered among members
Of the less fortunate animal classes.

What do you mean, 'your' drinking partner?
Do you suggest, parrot, that I was present?

Yes, Marguerite. You were in the next booth,

Wearing a red dress, talking to a toad.

Wait just one second, said Marguerite,
For I remember the occasion in question,
That bar, that booth, and that red smock.
There was definitely no toad present.
Armand and I were having a drink there,
After a long morning spent at shopping.
A creep in the next booth gave me a look
And then came over and started to talk.
He was spouting new age mumbo jumbo,
The moon goddess fertility bullshit,
But I knew he was trying to pick me up.
After a time I told him to screw off.
That was you, parrot? You're shorter now,
Although still not much better looking.
And just what are you? A stalker, maybe,
Who's always around, always popping up?
And what is all this stuff about toads?
Semiramis and the Toad God was first,
And now you come up with Armand as toad.

You're sure that was Armand, not a toad?
That is troubling if true, very troubling,
But let's press forward now with the tale.
Your refusal to join my crusade for cash,
And the fact that one of my toes felt loose,
Had left me in a thoroughly distressed state.
I kicked myself for not using my lines
To coerce you into my coterie.
How could I think my own charm would suffice?

Sorry about that, said Marguerite.
But what the self, as self, desires,
Is that other, as other, desire itself.
It's not the other's fault it lacks desire.

Unless, I said, the other qua other,
Will lack desire, withhold supply
To stir self, as self, to greater demand.
The toe, it turned out, was a false alarm,
Or perhaps a presage of what was to come,
For, as I bent over to tie my shoe,
I felt a wrench, and my sexual organs,
For which I felt inordinate fondness,

With which I had so closely, for so long,
Identified myself and my well-being,
Suddenly came loose and fell right off.

If you play with it, Marguerite said then,
It will fall off. And this has been foretold
By all the seers and prophets from Moses
Right up to but not including you.
I've had enough, bird, of creeps like you,
Who'll never tire of finding new ways
Of bringing such distasteful subjects up.

Your sympathy is so touching, Marguerite.
And I was in complete shock, as you might guess.
Headaches and hair loss were bad enough,
But this - this assault was beyond belief!
This was so extreme and unexpected,
So over the top, that I almost screamed.
I forgot all about you, Marguerite.
I forgot about disciples, net worth,
Forgot everything but what had happened.
I went to the washroom and then came back
After I had confirmed my worst suspicions.

Perhaps, she said, it's indelicate to ask...

Down the toilet. With one flush, it's gone
To that space where thoughts, once thought,
vanish.
As I passed the booth that sat next to mine
I noticed at once that it was now empty,
That on the table was a tip in small coins
And a long, thin, flat black rectangle
With little pin legs like a millipede.
The coins tempted me for the briefest moment,
But it was the rectangle that I picked up.

That's where it went! exclaimed Marguerite.
Armand was looking for it everywhere.

What exactly was that object? I said.

It was an eprom he needed for his job.
An eprom is like software on a chip,
Means erasable something or other.

And Armand was in big trouble with his boss
For a long time after it went missing.
He works for the Nineveh Lottery Corp.
Because of the new coinage coming out
All the slot programs will have to change,
All their denomination validators.
All the payable and reelstrip listings
Were also to be adjusted in some way.
Whatever happened to it, anyway?

I put it in my pocket and then forgot it.
But my afternoon there was not complete.
Swinging doors to the back were shoved open
And six kitchen slaves emerged with a plate,
Bent over by the great weight that they lugged.
The six bore resemblance, in their progress,
To pallbearers for one corpulent corpse
And pall indeed is what they bore forward,
For on the plate reclined the largest fish
That I, a fisherman, had ever seen.
However, I recognized it instantly,
Even before it raised its head and spake.

Part VII.3: SECOND OPINION

So, prophet, it's time again to talk,
Although I note no welcome in your face,
No glad noises welling up your throat.
Did you believe you saw the last of me?
Once an angel is deployed it continues
Until its fatal business is complete.
We're like the war dogs who once unleashed
May not be recalled until all foe
Lay strewn dismembered across the field.
Will the lion roar, concealed in thickets,
Unless the beast has seen, selected prey,
And left behind the stealth that brought it close?
The lion has roared, now what of Jonah?
Are you Godhead's prophet or deaf-mute?
I've come to judge, so speak your defense.

I'm certainly surprised to see you here,
Especially since I ordered a burger.

Godhead is not happy with your progress.
You lag behind in product delivery.
Anticipated fruits are unachieved.
Most of the town should be clothed in sackcloth
And chanting slogans in praise of Godhead
As they labour to increase the commonwealth,
Spending more, working more, sleeping less.
Instead the factory shifts are laid off,
Retail storefronts are dark and empty,
Foreclosures are up, bankruptcies up,
And big ticket item purchases down
As consumer confidence slowly subsides.

Listen, angel, I've been doing my best,
And our plan, our campaign, is still on-track,
And support builds daily by word of mouth.
You should see the mob I have parked outside.
And listen to this, my last masterpiece:
There's a really major coup in the works.
A big celebrity endorsement is planned,
The King Quintus himself, sometime soon,
Though vision here remains a bit vague.
I've been distracted by personal problems,
Some problems with my person, an affliction
That has detached certain parts of my person
From the principal, still ongoing part,
Not to get overly anatomical.
Also, I think my frame may be shrinking.

Your condition has not escaped the notice
Of angels assigned to monitor your file.
Our potent infusion of divine wisdom
Has had, I fear, negative side effects,
Stimulating an allergic reaction.
Maybe we should have had a blood test first,
But it's such a rare, improbable event,
Occurring with but one prophet per hundred,
That who could berate us for our oversight?

If ninety nine other prophets refused,
I said, then how could ever the hundredth
Find heart to find fault with your procedures?
Yet I do feel a little let down,
And a little hurt, and a little angry,

And a little inclined to pistol-whip you
Until you whimper and beg for my mercy.

I can understand you're upset, he said.
None of us are very pleased with the news;
You can imagine our disappointment
At this dire development, that our project
Will not present the yield we hoped
In terms of optimum message delivery,
Resulting in less perhaps of a Balaam
And more perhaps of his loquacious donkey.

What, exactly, do you mean by that crack?
Are you bastards at least competent enough
To say how serious my condition is?

The prognosis, I must admit, is grim.
That catalyst of spiritual knowledge
Introduced to chemical reactions
Taking place inside the obscure organs
In more remote regions within your gut
Is turning you into something high-tech,
Possibly a handsome digital watch
Or some hand-held electronic game.

You mean to say that you don't even know?

But we're narrowing it down, I can assure you.
You'll be nothing larger than a breadbox.
We'll know more when more data comes in.
I don't suppose, Jonah, you'd undergo,
After signing a form, a urine test?

I think I'll not compound former mistakes
And give consent without counsel present
To any enterprise angels suggest.
That entire subsystem, moreover,
That that includes the urinary tract,
May not, with certainty, produce output.

We know already quite a lot, in fact.
You won't, for instance, be a goose-necked lamp,
A stroke of good fortune, you must agree.
A team of principalities and powers,
Our consumer electronics division,

Feels safe in concluding, moreover,
That both your eyes will eventually evolve
Into blue, light-emitting diodes.
A major breakthrough on your power supply
Is expected momentarily, of course.

Then he began a moral monologue
On the old theme of don't count your chickens
And praise not the day before nightfall,
A discourse too witless, too tedious,
Too lengthy to repeat, even by me.
Instead, both to sate curiosity
And to expedite its earliest rebirth,
I shall give you, Marguerite, a summary.

Why not, she said, skip it altogether?

No, I said. Nothing can dissuade me now.
First draw attention, if attention it be,
To the fate of that noblest Ninevite,
Scipio Central Americanus,
So titled by Senate proclamation
For his dispatch and conquest of a foe
In some remote arena of combat.
Because he was so complete a warrior
He completely exterminated the foe,
Two million small and furtive pygmies
Who always beseeched the absurdest favours,
Who were always underfed, underfoot,
And whose soft hair always clogged the drains,
By laying out rat-poisoned mangoes.
The grateful nation rewarded the warrior
With a deed to twenty thousand hectares
Of unharvested Lebanese cedar,
The hippodrome parking lot concession
And softdrink vending machines therein,
And all the proceeds and the revenues
From State-operated bowling alleys,
Ball and shoe rentals to be excluded.
These magnificent gifts left him rich,
But victory in war, however complete,
Does not master peace or complete a life,
And this inspired genius ended his days
Living in hovels, hounded by creditors,
Eating catfood from the cans with fingers,

All because of the unwise investments
He made in longshot exactor tickets
And all those offshore mutual funds
Too offshore for quick extradition,
And, worst of all, in commodity futures.
And who was to know that soybeans would dive?
It certainly astonished our Scipio.
The conclusion to be drawn, my friend, is this:
Close no man's file that does not include
A medical certificate of death,
And insist, when possible, on an autopsy.
Make no final profit-loss statements,
Even in jest, even under your breath,
Until all your transactions are complete.
Count no man happy until he's dead,
Or, if not dead, incapacitated
To such degree he cannot venture forth
And inflict on himself some further harm.
Thus only a complete quadriplegic
May be considered both happy and alive.
Of the manifold joys God gave man
None can surpass a full paralysis.
And this is best of all the mortal states,
Pleasure subtracted and pain disappeared,
The supreme peace all our mystics cherish,
The parinirvana all Buddhists seek.
Why else did Peter not cure his daughter
Whom Godhead both paralyzed and poxed,
If not to spare the girl the wrack of love
And keep her eager paramours at bay?
Why else do snakes immobilize game
If not so the prey in perfected bliss
May then witness itself engulfed alive?

An angel said that? asked Marguerite.
Paralysis is the best of mortal states?
No angel would ever say such things.
You're substituting your own point of view,
Your own mental vision for divine words.

I hope the fish spoke not ex cathedra
But rather from the despair of his own state,
Out of water, embedded in vegetables.
If you think I misrepresent his words,
Bring your own version of the events forth.

But I had, by this time, already left
As you yourself have already reported.
But surely others there observed the fish
Making points with such force, at such length.

Other diners, oddly, paid no note
To the discourse my meal tried to conduct.
And waiters always train their gaze away
In case a patron tries to send requests
To get more quickly drinks, food or bill,
Which leaves only this account of events.
Trust without question a testimony
Unchallenged by other eyewitness reports.
Parrots observe a strict ethical code;
Parrots, like scribes of history and news,
May only bring forth objective truth
Else risk appearing before colleagues
On charges of professional misconduct.
My own point of view is quite different,
In fact, than that presented by my dinner.
Not only does my still-vigorous mind
Strongly reject the angel's arguments,
My body is its living refutation.
My plastic wings and plastic legs, you see,
Are but representation of wings and legs;
They lack all ambulatory function.
None of my subvocal commands and threats
Can elicit the least response from my limbs.
They exhibit to all exertions of will
Only an appalling lack of interest.
Inside I'm nimble, outside inert.
This condition, believe me, leaves me
Unoverjoyed, a bit dissatisfied,
For what is life without motion of limbs?
I myself satisfy all the criteria
The fish set forth to reach lasting bliss
And can therefore proclaim its odd premise
Without a doubt absolutely false.

Perhaps then we should take the angel's speech
To be a premature consolation.

The typological interpretations
Have not, of course, escaped my intellect.

However, we should take to heart that point
The good fish was most eager to impart.
Let us not too soon anticipate
The conclusions my narrative might reach
And now suspend further speculation.
The fish, in fact, had not finished his speech.
He had not finished with the bad news,
Nor had he finished with evading blame.
Perhaps he saw I was thinking lawsuit.

Misfortune is sure to follow the man
Who shirks the duty heaven has assigned him,
For negligence, Jonah, invites accident.
Spot-lit by the Godhead's displeasure,
You're exposed to attack from all quarters.
When you no longer bask in the Lord's grace,
Pestilences that prey on weakened luck
Will swerve to strike such an easy target.
A moment's inattention, and whammo!
Minor bad timing, major bad luck.
It's a syndrome familiar to the wise.
Stress, too, is a contributing factor.
When attempting to diagnose the patient,
Our research division does now inform,
It's best to adapt an holistic approach.
This is not to say we ever endorse,
For treatment of any serious ailment,
The use of homemade herbal remedies,
Homeopathy, vegetable juice,
Acupuncture needles or foot massage.
It's well known that God strongly favours
Marketshare for major pharmaceuticals.
He delights too in invasive surgery.
And although your state is irreversible,
We urge purchase of non-prescription drugs.
These over-the-counter packaged products
Are readily available in drug stores,
Supermarkets, even in gas stations.
Fruit-flavoured pills with nonsense names
Provide minor symptomatic relief
For most colds and fevers and stomach aches.
The placebo effect alone is worth
The manufacturer's suggested pricing.
I mention this for your reference only,
In the event of any future problem.

It will be little or no use at present:
Your current condition is incurable
And won't respond to any known treatment.

Irreversible? Incurable, fish?
How can this be just? What have you done to me?

You are but one man among many millions.
And what of Euphrates? What of Tigris?
The river twins have now grown diminished,
Have slowed, have dwindled down to mere trickles.
Now grasshoppers drag themselves along,
Their brief desire to spring long since spent,
Replaced by that stiff and dyspeptic wisdom
That sickness and old age will teach a joint.
Chicken hens now lay grade B eggs.
The fertile fields arise in clouds of dust
And water buffalo have wandered away
In an unprecedented migration
To find moister, more congenial wallows.
The game, in a single, huge, confused herd,
Has stampeded in its haste to be elsewhere.
Blackened blossoms, blown away like ashes,
Leave behind no fruit for next harvest,
And no seedstock for next replanting.
All vegetation blisters and withers.
All newborn livestock - the calves, lambs,
Kids and slave infants - arrive blighted,
Not to mention ducklings and earthwormlets,
Particularly hard-hit by the blight.
Penguins in the zoological gardens
And pigeons on the ziggurat rooftops
Drop like ten-pins in bowling alley lanes.
They wait, shaken, for divine machinery
With clicks and clanks, with bangs and roars and
thuds,
To descend, to collect, to reposition
Their feathered flocks in new conformations.
But as they stare up, stiff with rigor mortis,
Their eyes will grow bleak with disappointment,
For judgment day, for birds, is still distant.
Fixed stars wander off from their positions
To become planets, or worse, meteors.
Constellations begin to lose their shapes,
Disfiguring the gods thus depicted.

The night sky dissolves into a movement
That both astrologers and navigators
Will find hard to fathom, hard to follow.
And who can now catalogue the poisons,
The insecticides, the mercury and lead,
And the radioactive isotopes
With which the water's so heavily spiced
In cisterns and troughs, aqueducts and wells?

Is the meal not satisfactory, sir?
You've not even nibbled at your dinner!

Look at this fish. Tell me what you see,
I said to the waiter who stood at my booth.

I must admit that I see nothing amiss.
It's fresh, he replied, peering at the plate.

This fish is a turbot, I told the man.
Fish and chips is prepared with halibut.
Moreover, it is highly undercooked.
And where, my friend, are the chips? Take it back.

But you ordered the giant sushi platter!

I'm not inclined to argue the matter.
How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.
Take the fish away and bring me a beer,
An import beer, an Egyptian lager.

Isn't that a clear abuse of power,
Said Marguerite with disapproved tone,
To commandeer beer with Godhead's spell?

Recall the newly promoted Marduk,
Given omnipotence by other gods,
Who incinerated his old wardrobe
Now too drab for one so exalted,
Into curling smoke and fluttering ash
With only one potent word of command,
Just to make sure his power worked.
And wouldn't you, with such a spell at hand

And a guest who's overstayed his welcome,
Use it to nudge him gently out the door?
I didn't regret seeing the fish go
Back to the pot in a casserole dish,
Still ranting about Nineveh's peril.
Screw Nineveh. What about Jonah?
The angel's frank discourse had depressed me,
And the parting with departing private parts
Had a profound, negative impact on me.
I'd entered, so quickly, the twilight.
In this moment my ministry turned sour,
And I forgot all my clever ideas,
Which included my finest and most recent.
I abandoned forever that concept
Of the one special female disciple.
Like one of those fast-growing gourd vines,
The plan matured from seed to stick-figure,
From childhood to menopause in minutes.
It now stood dead, a dry, sapless cane,
Its withered leaves and blossoms still attached.
When dreams turn marcescent it's time to wake.
It was then, too, that I found I'd acquired
A distaste for all manner of seafood,
A strong and adverse reaction to fish.
I could not now eat one or see one,
And I had long since outgrown the desire
To net my rewards as a huge fish catch,
Wished now instead the cash equivalent
Paid out in large and frequent installments.
Fish were too lively, too unwieldy,
To work well as a medium of exchange.
Many merchants will not accept a fish,
Dead or alive, as payment for a purchase.
And what modern Ninevite female
Would find attractive squirming wads of trout
Pulled from the pocket instead of banknotes?
But this was now purely academic
To one like myself, robbed of manhood.

Will there be any love interest, bird,
To this story? Any relationship
Of a strong, deep or complex nature?
I begin to suspect expectation
Of any such will go disappointed.

Your thinking wounds me, Marguerite, I said.
You were then, and you still are, my passion.
And think twice before you dismiss my case.
Your true other's concealed within the noise,
Disguised and underrated, overlooked,
Like messiahs that do carpentry too,
Or worlds that hide in unassuming sand,
Or all the small signs that Allah provides
You find out of place, shelved with white rice
Or filed with gas bills or floating in soup.
The true lover isn't always obvious
Or what fickle convention would pick,
Perhaps a bit fatter, a bit flatter,
A bit more inanimate, short and green,
That what current taste regards as a match.
Don't let superficial flaws deter;
Go for inward truth, not outward charm.
It still isn't too late for something
To develop between us, a great romance
Of the kind you've seen on paperback racks.
I'm not quite that barechested hunk
You spy on front covers, the one that leans
And tips the babe over onto a bed,
Concentrate instead on my stronger points.
I'm just the right size for a sex toy,
An electric parrot-shaped vibrator,
Feathered and dirty-talking and abuzz
With rapid, satisfactory beat ... Squark!

CAPUT EIGHT

Part VIII.1: PRESENTATION

What angers prophets most is menus
That don't truly describe a cook's intent,
That lure the palate with overwrought blurbs
And dangle in air the scents of paradise
But serve horrors even worms won't eat.
I mean, Marguerite, the bills of fare
That rhapsodize over a rack of lamb
That looks like a rat the cat half ate
And then buried inside a plate of sludge.
I mean, Marguerite, the bills of fare
That laud salads as though they'd never died,
Never grew corrupted, decayed and brown
On banks beside their native sewage ditch.

Contract law does not extend to vows
Propounded in the heat of self-promotion.
And there's no recourse here, I fear, for that.

You don't live here in Nineveh for long
Before you learn it's all one loud boast.
Nonetheless you'd think dinner would be exempt,
A time, a sabbath time, for minds to rest
And put this need for scrutiny aside.
Those who heaven appoints to find the facts
Would rather not pursue their work at meals,
For who'd willingly plumb suspicious soup
To identify for grieving relatives
The soggy things that float bloated there,
Croutons perhaps, or parts of shrimp, or flies?
And what prophet would put aside his fork
To guess what hidden agendas will swim
In congealed glop they tout as coq au vin?
After a diner formulates desire
And specifies the taste that fits his bud,
He won't easily swallow substitutes
Or stomach a lower-priced lookalike,
A fact that drives kitchens to subterfuge,
To little tricks that train eyes elsewhere,
To look at presentation, not at sauce.

But appetites are not easily tricked,
Not easily led from a plotted course
By ploys designed to enhance a failed dish
Or swap for cheesecake a low-fat bean.
Although I'm no gourmet or connoisseur
I know what I like, like what I know,
And what I like is a well-behaved meal,
An honest food that's freed from all pretense.

Ernie's cuisine rarely gets good reviews.
Prophets should know that, said Marguerite.

I hate it when angels disguise themselves
In sly tries to blend with melon slices
Whittled up like little coral reefs.
They take their cue perhaps from Buddhist chefs
Who barbecue carrots instead of ribs,
Or cannibal cooks who can't get a corpse,
Or can't get it fresh or tender enough,
And serve instead a roasted leg of pork
All dolled up in sporty swimming trunks.
Or maybe angels take inspiration,
If none comes down from heaven itself,
From priests who bait the faithful few with blood
But switch them first to wine and then to juice
And then, in most rites, just to concepts,
To divine transfusions they guarantee
Free of infectious hepatitis A,
Bland enough that no one takes offense,
Or drives home drunk still giddy with God
And strikes down a toddler riding her trike.
What is holy if not risk reduction?

God's message, I've heard, said Marguerite,
Can't place itself in this mortal sphere
Without leaving behind divine vestments
That look too antiquated, too stiff
For less formal or elevated realms.

God's transcendence can't go immanent,
It's true, without quick change of costume.
It dons whatever garb now in vogue,
Grabs any rag handy, off the rack,
To fit right in with backwater styles
And show the yokels what they want to see.

But messengers never quite get it right,
Never compromise where it might help
A word to navigate your ear canal
Or guide healthy heaven's unpleasant taste
To slide smoothly through your digestive tract.
The overstated presentations made
By angels left beached in mashed potatoes
Never deceive seasoned eaters of fish
And never whet an honest appetite
For ordinary fare, for food as food,
Not as scenery to go snorkeling through.
But angels, of course, never take advice
From that same unrefined clientele
That once made unwise menu selections
That ever after branded them suspect,
Due only a barely concealed contempt.
I mean that uncouth couple who once chose,
Even though it came unrecommended,
The real fruit, not the one made of wax,
Real life, not the still life bit part
In Godhead's stiff paradise tableaux.

What fake birds want real fruit? she asked.
What plastic grass wants a real manure?
Artifacts desire artifice:
This is how nature meant things to go.
It's just disingenous, just a crock,
To spill crocodile drool over truth
Without tooth enough to chew tough meat.
Appetites like this lead to trouble,
That indigestion that Tantalus got
After tasting an unaccustomed food.

Compare the genes of apes, of chimps and men,
And learn that these species are much alike,
In essence, at heart, very much the same.
Stand back a bit, say a league or two,
And these two are quite indiscernible
And thus, by that law that Leibniz found,
Are deemed now as born identical twins.
So too organic and inorganic.
Their atoms, enlarged and stretched out in space,
Defy our science to say which is which.
No artifact, at least, ever stops
And wastes time guessing which berry's best

If two alike are hanging side by side.

I hear a chimp logic in human guise.
Let's look more closely at this premise...

I hate too the way that angels speak -
And speak is all they do, never listen,
Never solicit input from others,
Only take mid-sentence breaks for breath
So others never get to interrupt
And point out less entrenched points of view.
Their conversation irks me even more
When it turns elliptic and indirect,
Couched in arcane symbols and wordplay,
Shot through with games that intellects like,
Riddles, technical terms and Latin tags,
Acrostic-spelt names of favourite aunts.
Why can't these messengers speak plainly,
So that all hidden layers are exposed,
All secrets disclosed, ciphers deciphered,
Eschatological, scatological,
And mystical truths all clearly conveyed?
Good footnotes too would sometimes help.

Parrots, then, she said, are a breed of bird,
A kind of fowl that when they take a dip
Will always choose the shallow end of pools?

And what's worse is that tidings sent from God
Seem always to arrive at our mealtimes,
And all at once, a whole holy scripture
Packed in one medicine ball sized burst.
I've seen this happen so many times.
The knocks will come just as all sit down
And pick up spoons to start the first course,
Small taps at first and then mighty blows
Until you open door to pure horror,
A nightmare in neck-tie and dark suit
Better suited for graveside sendoffs
Than fine dining and sparkling repartee.
Or worse still, it just comes from nowhere,
Not even landing first on doorstep,
A treasured God-butchered Egyptian pet
That saturates with blood your welcome mat.
No, it arrives without introduction

And plunges through any gap it can find,
Any hole that conversation allows.
An otherwise reticent dinner guest
Will suddenly grow enthused, start to froth,
Start to gurgle a bit and puff vapour
In anticipation of spiritual gush,
Only to pitch forward into his soup,
Strangled by inspiration's enormity.
No wonder many prophets shirk work.
They fear those strains that God's loads impose,
Heavy enough to put you off your feed,
Fog up your eyes, rob your coat of gloss,
And send sexdrive into steep decline.
Many divine intermediaries
Often find their words so weighted down
With the secret meanings that God's piled on
Their tongues struggle around like pinned eels,
Like that of Moses after seeing the bush
Catch fire with the manifold mysteries
Crammed tightly inside an explosive name.
I grow tense when they gabble like that,
When they cough up phlegm and writhe around.
These throes attract appalled bystanders
Who lean forward to better understand
The staccato rattle that reveals all,
Deathbed haiku as composed by duck,
Master's final croak, his last zen quack.
A quick tabletop tracheotomy
Performed with a toothpick and salad fork
By qualified medical professionals,
If there be any of these on hand,
Can sometimes help to dislodge the phrases
That block passage of transparent air
Back to the place of empty, senseless space.

Isn't it time for dinner yet? she asked.

And this, perhaps, was why the fish had grown,
So that it might more easily manage
The massive message that it came to impart.
And the impact of that message sufficed,
Like a strong, hot blast of desert wind,
To push me through antique revolving doors
That graced entrance to older ziggurats
Such as that which housed Assyrian kings.

Windstorms that begin small shall mushroom
And mix the soil and air in choking clouds,
Shall grow from dust devils into monsters,
From wisps that lift the bent grassblades
To cyclones that twist the horizons up.
Godhead's breath is gentle, smooth, unseen
Until knitted, knotted into brutal words.
It issues out in orthodox pants
Until it's driven through the larynx,
Until it's baffled and beaten by paddles,
Until given spin by revolving doors.

Those things are obsolete now, she said,
Except in those structures the State preserves
Against the wrecking ball's nonstop swing
As keepsakes and educational props
To illustrate bygone architecture,
The styles we loved not five years ago
And then so loathed the following season.
Ninevites now find such doors quaint.

I wonder who it was that first deduced
It's best to fix the frame and spin the door
Than anchor door, revolve the ziggurat
From carpark right up to restaurant.

Armand and I ate in such a restaurant,
One that revolves slowly, high up, once.

Who'd ever eat there twice, Marguerite,
Except the drunks who like their rooms to spin?
The panoramic views of smog-clad hills
Will whizz around so fast you'll lose your food,
Even your plate, your silverware and cup.
They're dragged away by centrifugal force,
Tablecloth and all, tossed against glass
To stick and chatter, agitated teeth.
It's that brief, queasy, uneasy feeling
That animals get before earthquakes hit,
The banshee shape that goes out the door
The very moment that you go in.
Where it stops or goes, nobody knows,
Like the ball that races around the wheel,
Merry-go-round, horses up and down,
Grail castle, Ezekial's mother ship.

It's a simple device, cleverly made,
Akin somehow to the subway turnstiles
That serve to introduce departed souls
Into caves of automated transit,
Or dispensers found in vending machines
That squirt out an ounce of flavoured liquid
Before it dumps a crashing avalanche
Of inexpensive ice to fill the cup,
Or laundromat driers that tantalize
With one brief and lukewarm breeze per coin.
In each of these there exists a spirit
That serves with smiles the timetable posted,
As stuck in strict routine as Sisypheus
Or those who stoke locomotives with coal
Or cuckoos caught in the cuckoo clock.
I'd wake them and take them back home to mom,
Teach them names of baseball superstars
And feed them chowders made from corn and clam
If only Pharoah'd say yes, prophet,
Go ahead, just take them all and go,
For I've no further need for groaning slaves.

Let's get to the point, said Marguerite,
Let doors still aspin recede behind.

Part VIII.2: DUPLICATOR

Inside the King's Palace a clerk was posed
So all who enter must approach her desk
To state their business and receive blessings.
I'd arranged an appointment beforehand
For an interview for the Oracle job,
And so I strode up to her desk and said,
The Godhead has sent me to repair
The grave peril in which you find yourself.

Peril? said the clerk. Repair? Godhead?
The name Godhead does not ring a bell.
Did you happen to bring a purchase order,
Or is that one of our regular vendors?
Then recognition lit up her face.
You're here to fix that copy machine
That has so frustrated our office staff

And filled the dumpsters with excess paper
Attempting to duplicate an invoice
For aftermarket helicopter parts.
You were due here Tuesday, two weeks back.

She stood, took my arm, and guided my way
Down a long hall lined with office doors.
The floors here, curiously, were paved in glass
That, when struck with high heel, gave a tone,
Almost the middle C of tuning forks,
But not quite, off enough to cause pain
To those of us equipped with perfect pitch
Attuned to wavelengths the djinnkind choose
To conduct home glad hymns their choirs raise.
And such discrepant noise, I understood,
Was what professional forecasters call
An early warning sign, a word to wise
That said clearly enough for all to hear
The path you follow here is not approved.

As we walked along the hall the clerk said,
You look a little green around the gills.
That must have been some party last night.
And then she stopped, her destination reached.
She released her grip and my arm gave pop
And jerked suddenly free of its socket joint
Like a tooth whose roots have rotted away.
My arm slipped down my shirt sleeve and fell
To hit the hallway floor with muted thud
And roll a short distance across the glass.
It's okay, I said weakly, a prosthetic.
But she'd already turned away to go.
I saw now I stood before a machine,
A standard issue photocopier.
After I heard her clicking step recede
I took my fallen arm and looked around
And found one unlocked door nearby.
I tossed my arm into the space inside
To join sponge mops, brooms, bottles of bleach,
And pails of ammonia-based glass cleaner.

So, an arm gone. This was, I suppose,
Preparation for a left wing to sprout,
A divestment of flesh preliminary
To your penultimate metamorphosis.

Did you, at least, remember to retrieve,
Inquired Marguerite, your wristwatch first?

I closed the door on that part of my past
And then turned back to study the machine
Which, to my eye, appeared in perfect health.
The power lamp was on, toner okay,
The paper path free of obstructing jams.
Reams of paper were stacked inside their bins,
Ready to catch legal-sized memories.
This fact brought profound disappointment,
For you'd think a proper photocopier,
Made fully and truly automatic,
Would hide a pulp and paper mill inside
That once a month you feed a presto log
It chips, chews up, and stews into stuff
That just files itself away in drawers.

The world, I fear, is not the best possible,
A lower-priced model, not the deluxe.

The back panel, I found, came right off
To reveal the mysterious electronics:
Circuit boards, flat chips and bundled wires,
The usual, secret, black box innards
Of a recent vintage digital device.
I had no clue what any of it meant,
Knew only it all had some meaning.
All here had meaning but meant nothing,
All except for a pair of dust bunnies
That stirred unhappily on sudden air,
That I mistook briefly for meddling djinn.
But then my second sight began to work,
Slowly at first, to expose hot logic,
The network of nerves, pathways of fire,
The thin channels that circulated sparks.
It's dark, at first, inside this machine,
But gradually sight becomes accustomed
To the ozone glow of crouching demons,
Each captive in a zinc enneagram,
And one is a governor and one a power,
One a throne, one a principality,
And each is a blue-glowing vacuum tube
Deranged by intense acid pulsing hate,
Spell-driven by black, backwards Latin.

And what are these tiny worms, these snakes?
Condensers and capacitors and resistors
Are each coded with nine stripes of colour;
They spell out, permuted, the secret name,
That name that hums along, hums itself
From nexus to plexus, plexus to nexus,
And changes as it grows, grows as it changes.
A thousand gypsy glyphs litter the floor,
Letter the walls and lift up from rafters.
They scatter as I step, flutter like moths.
I breathe dust, cobwebs, rotted linen.
And I tread with an extreme trepidation.
You must not meet a demon's bare gaze,
Those two embers, those cayenne peppers.
They see only weakness, only darkness,
Sinners impaled on stalagmites of guilt
And zombies shambling back from coffee breaks.
Remove this screw and your warranty's void.
Why kill the goose that lays golden eggs?
Abandon hope, ye with the screwdriver,
For there are no user-serviceable parts.
Hey! Stop it! Don't touch me there, ever!
And there it was, the problem, the sore spot,
Diseased tissue needing quick removal.
Second sight clicked off and the first on.
I found myself staring at a black chip,
At a familiar flat black rectangle
Affixed by pins to printed circuit board.
It looked much like the one in my pocket.

You mean Armand's eprom, for slot machines.

I didn't know that then, Marguerite.
I knew only that the two looked the same,
So I pried the one out of its socket,
And, one-handed, stuck the other in.
I replaced the panel and looked around,
Looking for something easy to copy.
Then I remembered my wad of banknotes.
I smoothed a crumpled fifty down on the glass,
And clamped down the lid, and hit the button.
But nothing happened, no copy was made.

Of course not, parrot, said Marguerite.
You can't do that, and even I know

That eproms are not interchangeable
Simply on the basis of like appearance.
Just because two things fit together
Doesn't they're meant for one another.

But under the sheets all nature is one,
All things connect and fit into place
For ecstatic dance-masters, mystagogues,
Love-sotted bards and soft-spoken saints
Whose overenlarged hearts will only beat
For anal intercourse with cornered sheep.

I beg your pardon? replied Marguerite.

You reckon without my fish-given gift.
The idea just popped up, entire,
Fully formed, springing out of nowhere,
And I enacted it without further thought.
I gently but firmly addressed the machine:
How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.

The machine recoiled like a wounded seal,
Roared outrage at unexpected pain.
Under the clamped lid a light flashed twice,
Cylinders rolled, and a crisp new fifty
Briskly dropped into the collection tray.

But counterfeiting is a serious crime,
Said Marguerite. And you could go to prison
If anyone ever observed your deed.

Alchemy, Marguerite, is not a crime.
Here in Nineveh all law is designed
To safeguard and maintain the craft,
To regulate its work and keep it pure,
To keep making money a praise to God
And not the destitute profanation
We've seen elsewhere, in Egypt or in Tyre.
We're idolators, yes, to worship gold,
But singleminded, but monophysites.
It matters not the shape your idol wears,
Mammon, Caesar, Yahweh or Aaron's calf,

It matters only it be made of pure gold.
And there is no gold without the Art,
Either that long one that nature does
Or that briefer one that humans perform,
To hasten creation of value from dross.
Such an endeavour yields no counterfeit;
The gold it makes is authentic stuff.
Even the most acerbic test assayed
Can't distinguish a manufactured gold
From gold that God has matured underground,
Made from mud with lavished revelations
Until purified and consubstantial
With his own incandescent, molten core.
All matter, whatever its current stage,
Neither speaks nor conceals its truth,
Only signifies its final intent.
All creation, its every particle,
From seven heavens stacked up in levels
Down to the dust motes that hang midair,
Is polarized, pointed toward the Lord.
And we see only the world's hindquarters
As it turns, bends, tips in genuflection.
We see only the dark side of the moon;
The face, sun-gladdened, is turned inward.
This is praise, glorification itself,
And nothing raises praise, extols the Lord,
And sacrifices self to the greater mass
Like good, old-fashioned loot, like cash.
And it can get self-congratulatory,
It's true, from time to time, place to place,
But never false to its own guiding light.
Money is always true, never betrays,
Always follows paths to greater power,
Always serves the master who calls its name.
The feast, the bread and wine, may gladden life,
But money answers all, the Preacher said.
This is the clearest, the greatest of signs
That makes God manifest to mankind,
The divine tithe that ties all together.
If you've failed to take the payment proffered,
You've rejected communion, flesh as loaf,
Multiplied two to the aleph null,
Duplicated, doubled and redoubled,
Transubstantiated by little yeasts.
Call it fake or counterfeit if you like,

I call it a manifestation of God,
A revelation of the hidden treasure.

I will call this what it is: nonsense.
You have no concept of money, she remarked.
It doesn't grow on trees or fall from heaven.
It's hourly wage, the fruit of hard work.

Mission accomplished, machine fixed, I thought,
Until movement drew my eye to the bill
In the photocopy output tray.
I picked it up and examined it closely.
Along the left-profiled face of Ninus
There ran a thin fissure, top to bottom.
I now trained my attention on the portrait.
Was this the nucleus of a banknote,
The dark place where its genetics reside,
The yolk in which its ancestors are clumped?
I looked closer and Ninus grew larger
And then dissolved into pixels and dots.
Now the face by which his peers perceived him
Had been replaced by mobs of dancing motes
And these motes quivered, stirred, milled around,
And staggered about, colliding like drunks.
Can they, one asks, rearrange themselves?
But this is the market, as seen from above,
Positioned, guided by an unseen hand
Into the best of all possible worlds,
The one most economical to run,
Singularity, the tail-engorged worm,
Golden age goose egg risk-free bond,
Mankind's mass-produced hand-made keepsake,
Jack's magical motion bean machine.
And I'd observed this very dance before
Performed with greater skill upon a pin.
I crossed my eyes to get an overview
And Ninus reappeared, but now doubled,
His fissure grown, with left parting from right.
Before I knew just what I beheld
I was holding two identical banknotes.
This, I surmised, myself newly neutered,
Was that asexual reproduction
With which, by some unhappy happenstance,
Luckless protozoa must make do.
It's that sorry state without blind dates,

The timeless sight that draws a lone voyeur
And realigns his wide, astonished mouth.
And this fission, I knew, once ignited,
Would never stop, never reach full growth
Until it crossed beyond the bottom line,
Until its food, the universe itself,
Was eaten, broken down, turned to profit,
And stashed in bodily tissues as fat.

But this account doesn't quite ring true.
What I'm hearing here, this deed you did,
Was just sabotage, said Marguerite.

That charge I will most certainly deny.
But I can't pretend, as things turned out,
That I took away no satisfaction
At doing my part to bring about flood.
This is part of prophetic follow-through,
What God looks for in jobs well-done.
If doom doesn't come you help it along.
Threats without force will carry no weight.
If Nineveh won't yield you soak the place
So that, gone soft, it flops down and sobs.

[Lacuna in text]

I quickly walked back up the hallway
And addressed again the receptionist.
I have a job interview with the King.
My name is Jonah, son of Amitay,
God bathe me in glory, drench me with peace.

She looked up the hall toward the machine.

Since I know a thing or two, I explained,
About correcting the ills of this world,
I had a few words with the poor machine.
It's working now, better now than ever.

She looked a bit confused, but did not object
Or hinder my passage toward the chamber
In which Quintus conducts his interviews.

What about the arm, said Marguerite,
That you left behind in that broom closet?

It had already forgotten me, I replied,
As foetus, once expelled, forgets its womb
And the turd its transformative intestine.
So too will a thought abandon body
And the ache of the pose it was forced to hold
During its afflicted sojourn in flesh
And the travailed departure therefrom.
Remember, if you can, the dearly departed;
However well-disposed they once did seem,
They now don't give a damn about us.
It was much, I believe, the same with my arm.
There, in the warm darkness of that closet,
It pursued a separate putrefaction.

Part VIII.3: QUINTUS

As I entered the King's central chamber
A workman was wheeling out a dolly
To which was strapped a large, bulky slot,
One of the video tarot machines.

What's that? I asked the man pushing it.

The last applicant to be State Oracle,
He replied, struggling to angle the dolly.

I saw that one panel was quite dented
As though a forceful blow had landed there.
A door was ajar, exposing an interior
On which I chose not to train scrutiny.
Curative sight of such proven power
Must sometimes blink, and even doctors,
Though bound by youth's Hippocratic oath
And moved by pity when pain meters jump,
Will oft withhold oxygen from monsters
Or pull the plug on a braindead loser.
Nor did I speak at all to this machine,
And I suppressed an urge to kick it myself.
It would seem to some, I thought, ungracious.
And restraint, too, was required not to yank
That stray wire harness that dangled out.
Instead, polite, pleasant in tone, I said,

I gather it was unable to perform,
That it produced no jackpot on demand,
That the Oracle job still stands open.

King Quintus judged it unfit for the post,
Said the man as he sought the right balance,
Tipped it forward and back, missing the point.
It didn't show the King proper respect.
He put in one of the newly minted coins,
One of the coins he'd struck with his own face,
Hit the spin button, and the damn machine
Spat the coin right back out at the King.

Minor bad timing, major bad luck.
Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's
Isn't always best if a Caesar wants more.

He wheeled the tarot machine out the door,
And I proceeded further into the room.
This place was blessed. It was air-conditioned.
Quintus himself was there, in uniform
That bore an Air Marshal's insignia.
He was seated at a desk, reading papers.
A black leather motorcycle jacket
Of Persian cut was draped over his chair,
And a large hound was curled up nearby.
That hound, unlike everyone else
I'd met within this town, didn't hum.

My name is Jonah, son of Amitay,
Also known in your language as Dhul-Nun,
May God marinate me in wine vinegar,
Slice me lengthwise, stir-fry me in grease.
I'd like to make an application, sire,
For that State Oracle job vacancy.
As bonafide prophet of the Lord God
Who's logged hours of street-level practice,
I think myself uniquely qualified.
And need I state my resume in full?
It can get lengthy if I add those parts
Divulged in trance by past life regression,
For I've been present from the very beginning,
Made God from my breath and introspection,
Spake the prayer to unite ghost with corpse,
Brought up the steams that fibered the thunder.

I split open snowclad horizons,
Parted sky from earth, tugged out a thread
And unstitched the script that clasped the seam.
I myself brought forth the signal from noise,
Pulled the squalling infant down from clouds,
Fashioned the fork-fingered runes that command,
Set sail birds above on crackling winds
To navigate across electric storms...

Ah yes, Jonah. I have been expecting you,
For your appointment was half an hour ago.
Forgive the lack of the normal fanfare,
But I am running behind and must dispense
With much of customary formality.
Are you ready to start the try-out now?
Just center yourself in that pentacle
Over there in that big open space.
I notice that you are missing your left arm.
In our hiring guidelines the handicapped
Receive no special consideration.
The last one armed bandit to apply here
Was, in fact, totally unsuitable.

Pentacle? I thought it would be nine-sided,
An enneagram by ancient tradition.

I'm altering Nineveh's number to five
To better match the era introduced
On that day that my lustrous reign commenced.
You will recall, I hope, that occasion.
There was a holiday, a parade with floats,
Balloons for the kids, cocktails for adults,
Flags and fireworks, costumed folk dance,
Prize fights, foot races, cattle auctions,
And an extra ration of the bran muffins
We always distribute at coronations.
Each muffin was marked, in glazed sugar,
With a large fat Roman numeral five.
Five's a better number, really, a prime,
Easy for a slowwit to count up to,
Easy to remember, easy to find
Since it is so much closer to the start,
A more modern, more congenial number.
And it's folly to dwell on former glory,
When present glory is so outstanding.

So, to assist with change, the use of nine
Is now forbidden in any context.
Bricks molded for use in all construction
Must now observe a new mystic measure
That's harmonized with pentatonic scale.
Nine story ziggurats, now by law,
Must be eight only, the penthouse destroyed,
Its tenants slain and all furnishings sold.
Every ninth tree must be uprooted
In the sacred mountainside laurel groves,
Buttons in elevators re-numbered,
All the orbits in horoscopes redrawn,
And cats euthanized after life eight.
Counting must now proceed from eight to ten,
And if a group of nine persons assembles,
One must be immediately executed
Else the group be deemed secret conspiracy
Gathered to restore the bygone number.
Baseball teams shall lose their left fielders,
The supreme court its most junior justice,
And the muse of poetry shall be beheaded,
Or demoted to work a part-time position,
Or given an early retirement, her choice.
The ninth person shall now be non-person,
And this means, in particular and namely,
That person of my nameless ancestor.
His substance shall now be incorporated
Into forms that will glorify my reign,
Which although already well underway
Has seen all its accomplishments and deeds
Unsung and quite unjustly overlooked
As yet by historians, critics and pundits.
My ancestor, by contrast, has received
Far too much of the credit and acclaim.
His statues shall be removed from city parks,
And his effigy erased by furnace heat,
The metal reduced to slag and recast
Into commemorative chamber pots
To celebrate the dawn of my new age,
And each shall be etched with the numeral five.
All coinage with his offensive profile
Shall be removed from public circulation,
Melted down, reminted with my image,
And redenominated with my number.
And every page that mentions his name

Shall be torn out of the history texts,
With, on principal, every ninth page.
I shall not rest until the age is mine.
Very shortly our great city itself
Shall change name, Nineveh to Quintevéh.

Quintus unwrapped a fresh tarot deck.
Are you ready, he said, to receive a card?

Before the game starts, said Marguerite,
I thought you said, some time ago now,
That this sacred rite was done elsewhere,
Inside the Godhead's downtown temple.
Does this change signal a power shift
From Nineveh's Church to its secular State,
A shift that starts by sacking the High Priest?

That's too nuanced a sign for birds like me.
I thought Quintus liked to test nearby
Rather than walk the blocks to God's Temple.

True, said Marguerite. It's a long walk,
Longer still for those with a mystic bent,
Who cut through the town's industrial zone,
Shortest route, no doubt, on higher spheres.

Hit me, I said. And Quintus dealt a card.
Again, I said. He dealt another card.
Again, again and again I drew cards.

Incidentally, a rule change of note
Has been recently instituted, he said.
No longer is a tarot hand nine cards.
No longer is nine card stud played.
And, perhaps most relevant right now,
Five blank cards now terminate files
That Godhead transmits through tarot cards.
I've sent him memos confirming the change.

I didn't upturn the face down cards.
Second sight told me all five were blank.

I snatched the tarot deck out of his hand
And said, okay, that's warm-up enough.
I'm ready to start the game. I'll deal myself.

And my supernatural synaptic gaps
Snapped like alligator castanets
Feeding on a hot jungle beat of glee.
What the dealer gives, he may take away.
To change the King's doom, just change the deck.
By a sleight of hand can fate be determined.
The glory of God is to conceal a thing
And a divine finesse is to palm a card.
But betwixt ideal and real, will and act,
Process and result, and heaven and earth,
Oh surprise surprise, there falls a shadow.
And a foul shadow it was that befell me.
My right hand, charbroil it on hellflame,
Offended me with its poor execution
Of that simple task my cunning had set.
Minor bad timing, major bad luck.
I'd been caught by the king red-handed.
And his hand was preternaturally quick,
And the point of his dagger already poised
In the general area of my larynx
Before I could even launch my Plan B.

Prepare to meet your maker, sir, he said.
One-handed men should not attempt sleight.

I've already met my maker, I said,
Or one, rather, of his authorized agents,
And do not think myself at all improved
By the sorry outcome of that meeting.

It certainly did nothing for your card skill.
It will be mercy to remove from existence
A cardsharp so sadly maladroit.

I looked into his intense face and said,
Which is superior, oh king, luck or skill?

You must be a philosopher, said Quintus,
To initiate reasoned dialogue
In the anteroom to final oblivion.
And you're lucky indeed sir to have posed
This question to one who has the answer
And can grant you some small satisfaction
To take away into the lethal mists.

For was it not this administration
That created Nineveh Lottery Corp
And skillfully used a belief in luck
To increase State revenues fivefold?
And who better knows than I, a monarch,
What awaits a people who would trust in luck,
In luck alone, to manage their affairs.
Recall, if you will, Babylon's despair
When each of her investments proved unsound,
Her rulers brought low by speculation.
They placed their trust in luck, gambled and lost.
The place is completely uninsurable,
Rife with crime and bad debt, fraught with risk,
And subjected to the democratic whim.
They rely now on the vox populi,
Majority rule, as if ninnies in mobs
Choosing ninnies to lead was a godsend,
A stroke of genius sent by ninny gods.
What payoff will voting machines bring?
Random number generators would serve
The fools just as well in making a choice.
They select their damsites by drawing lots,
Manage traffic by just letting it go,
Fight foes only after taking polls
Or sneak-attack distant enemy fleets
After watching how yarrow sticks fall.
They arbitrate conflicts by flipping coins,
Design integrated circuits in jets
By random selection, the best one wins
And taxis down tarmacs in triumph,
Worst take nose-dives, kill all aboard,
And melt loser chips in white-hot flames.
Babylon is chaos, noise, a circus,
Governed entirely by contingency.
All this came from lack of prudent skill,
All due to unreasoning trust in luck
And any market force that then prevails.
Such trust is invitation to ruin,
For law and order can be only upheld,
By the skill of an educated tyrant.
And God's law and order must be preserved.
With it, we're strong and secure and wealthy,
But without it, without those benefits,
We all dissolve into Brownian movement
In the cloud chamber of our fate's dim eye.

That last line was nobly said, oh king,
But nonetheless it was a trifle obscure.
Still, I perceive your position on the matter.
Therefore, I urgently request that you place
Your money, so to speak, where your mouth is.

What? Do you wish me to stab you in a rage
Rather than the calm and almost kindly
But surely humane fashion I intended?

Absolutely not. I propose a bet.
First, I bet I'm more lucky than skillful,
And, second, that luck's superior to skill.
Third, sir, call your elkhound off please,
That leg's not attached quite as tightly
As one might like in so large a limb.

Why should I accept your wager? he replied.
Your payoff, clearly, will be your life,
But what is mine? Your sackcloth, your sandals?

I have the good fortune, I said modestly,
To have a fortune concealed to human sight
Implanted inside me by divine intent.
Part I'll reveal, part will remain hidden.
I'm a certified Prophet of the Lord.
I came to Nineveh at the Lord's request
To deliver unto its King a message.
God believes Nineveh deserves a chance,
A chance to repent mistaken convictions,
Misguided paths, mismanaged actions
So adroitly and so skillfully pursued,
But I disagree; I'd like to see it trashed.
The message still remains undelivered.
If I go now into the lethal mists,
It will be with unrepetant Nineveh
And its hapless monarch following my tracks.

Quintus looked at me thoughtfully and said,
Are you the one they call Jonah the Mad?
The one who commands the eating of locusts
To his poor, unfortunate acolytes?
Never mind your answer, I see the truth.
I thought my play already dealt you out,

But now I see I lacked all of the facts.

And he whispered a brief command to an aide,
Who nodded and then quickly left the room
Then he turned back to me and gave a grin.

And listen now to my counter-proposal:
I will accept the wager. If you should win,
You'll deliver your message and have your life.
If you lose, first I will emasculate you,
And after that I will eviscerate you.
Next I'll amputate your toes and fingers,
Then arms and legs, and finally your head,
Giving you at last a reason to rejoice
Prior loss of miscellaneous limbs,
Since it expedites things considerably.
But before I allow your torment to end,
You'll deliver your message, if you have one.
So then, sir, convince me that you're lucky.

Those weren't quite the terms I had in mind,
But I must admit you hold the upper hand
And thus must accept the wager as stated.
But let me make this point on good luck.
Suppose a city sits above a fault,
A place where hidden plates slowly collide.
Suppose a small tremour loosens a nail
That holds a beam that supports a tile roof.
A tile slips out, falls, and kills a man
Enroute to fix a photocopy machine.
Or so he would seem, by what parts he bore
And what repair orders his fingers clutched.
But found stuck among the wrenches and probes
In the toolbelt that girded overalls
Was a poison-treated utility knife
He meant to plunge into the city's king.

You saw these events, asked Marguerite,
In visions God's gadfly zap induced?

I've forgotten now how it came to mind.
What King Quintus wanted most to know
In whose employ the dead assassin was.
I want, he said, all the plot's details.

But this is just an hypothetical case,
The kind of thing that might once have occurred,
And if it had, would make the point I want.

So what's the point you attempt to make here?
A fictitious plot, prophet, will annoy
If it doesn't prove directly relevant.

It isn't now nearly as clear to me
As moments ago, when I started out.
What I think I meant, sire, is this:
The builder's poor skill in driving a nail
Brings an entire kingdom excellent luck,
And poor judgment in choosing a townsite
Brings a good king's subjects true justice.

A tough call like this is often made
By monarchs who've honed their leadership skills.
And riddles like this are easily solved
By kings schooled in all of human science.
And this is how we'd proceed in real life:
We'd execute the man who drove the nail
And send along thanks to earthquake gods,
But nothing too fawning, a polite note.
It's best not to appear overgrateful
Lest powers grow aware you're sitting ducks,
Ready for the plucking and ripe for the pot.
This wouldn't turn out well for a realm
Had its monarch less judgment, less skill,
Less foresight, less discretion and tact.

Lucky Nineveh, to possess such king!

It's a futile life for an elkhound here,
Here in Iraq, where elks remain rare.
Poor Sylvester thought he treed one once
And went into a long, deep depression
When this beast missed a leap, branch to branch,
And proved to be, dead at his feet, a rat.
The royal shrink spent weeks with that dog,
And wasted countless hours and liver treats
But never got his patient to transfer.
Which is why, perhaps, he keeps eyes closed
And doesn't make sounds or hear my commands
But keeps those canines clamped on your thigh.

I too, oh king, I said, have missed a leap,
The leap that will make this matter relate.

The Inquisition autopsied the rat
To find how, mid-leap, its skill had failed.
A rare gall bladder disorder turned up
That had made left side swell and right shrink
And canted leaps left, slanted paths left,
And left it to hang, scrabbling, in midair.

Rat distemper, she said. Carried by mites.

For any failure of skill, there's a cause.
Bad luck, you think? A wise rat, Jonah,
Knows its state and somehow compensates,
Works with a trainer and learns to lean right,
Or hires a stunt double, or takes the pills,
The red ones, not green, his gods dispense.

Hear, oh King, what wise prophets have learnt.
Design and accident, applied to events,
Will mean nothing outside of memory.
Awake it's memory, asleep just dream.
This rat is just an automaton.
Play it back, make its leaping dance repeat,
Run it back, run it forth, freeze the frame
And watch the rat watch that branch recede.
Strap down the corpse and give it twelve volts:
The rat, oh King, will never get it right.

Sleep on. Watch, wisely, your dreams unfold.
Meanwhile my memory conquers the world.
It finds the flaws that yawed wave equations
And sends robots up to fix leaks in roofs.

This reminds me of that empress of yore
Who kept loaded dice in her gaming room,
Pentahedrons she weighted to throw only fives
That thus would always reaffirm her luck.
And what luck to possess such power,
That compels even chance to play long,
That forces even memory to conform!
What possible world, if so leveraged,
Would not pretend awhile to do as bid?

At this moment there did enter the room
A large and quite sinister looking toad.
Good morning, Mr. Toad, said Quintus.

Not another toad! said Marguerite.
Just what is it with you and all the toads?

There have been no previous toads, I said.
I really don't know why, Marguerite,
You must keep making that accusation.
You don't know how tiresome it becomes.
I will admit I own an antipathy
Toward toads of all kinds, all sizes,
Of all colours and all ethnicities.
An ancient and bitter enmity exists
Between toads and the parrot overflock.
Some parrot once gave them some offense,
Some trifling or imaginary slight,
Ate several of their offspring perhaps,
Or rolled a boulder over a colony
And squashed a dozen, I forget now which,
And the toads responded with vicious slanders,
Rumours, innuendoes and smear campaigns.
It was despicable, an utter outrage,
And we slaughtered thousands as retribution.
But the toads continue with snide comments,
With nasty asides to this very day.

Memory of even mild recrimination
Will outlast that of the crime, she observed.

Here is the file you requested, said Toad.
It's the background for the application.

Are there any reports, inquired the King
On dead assassins disguised as repairmen?

I'll convene a taskforce to study files,
Said Toad, who blinked twice but didn't move.

Continue with your convincings, said Quintus.
Luck has delivered you this far, prophet,
But beware: it can leave you without warning.
I'll hear evidence now, and then I'll judge.

But don't call me prophet. Call me Jonah,
For so my parents, the poor fools, named me,
Believing it somehow a lucky name ...

Part VIII.4: ANOTHER NASTY SURPRISE

But you begin to repeat yourself, parrot,
Said Marguerite. Where is fast forward?

As a parrot, Marguerite, I can recite
My life verbatim ad infinitum.
However, you know, events in retrospect
Often swell or shrink in significance
In response to the current exigencies,
To the contexts in which events are viewed,
And to the new venues for the evidence.
In some autobiographies decades
Of a life will take seconds to relate
And seconds of the life will take decades.
And then, told again, the reverse occurs.

I don't care. I can't take this again.
It's common, you know, when someone talks,
For there to exist point to what he says.
Is there a point to this disquisition?
If so, oh parrot, I've failed to grasp it.

If nothing's seen there, then nothing's there.
It's an ideal world only if wished,
Only if time has ripened itself enough,
And only if that pushing, unfolding force
Can bloom itself, bootstrap itself up
And burst open the bud that hides the fruit
To bring understanding to all who watch.
You can't tell anyone anything
They don't already know, already guess,
Like slave-boys theorems buried in sand
Or adolescents dark secrets of sex
Or kings the Godhead's preemptive strike,
Thread-suspended, poised just overhead.
I told Quintus my tale up to the fish,
Its command, its spell, and the sackcloth bit.

So that's it? That's your spell? said Quintus.
How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net?

That's it, I agreed. So, am I lucky?

You are out of luck. Past, present, future.
For you, never even a chance at luck
Has come your way. What has seemed to be luck
Is, like the fool's gold, just fate's jest.
I know this, Jonah, because of my skill.
Skill, as it always has, carries the day.
I've always performed my due diligence.
My agents, you'll learn, are everywhere.
Thus the message you bring me is old news.

You've already heard my message? I said.

As it happens, he said, I already possess
That very magic spell, word for word,
Which may account for these curious facts:
First that I am not inclined to believe you
And, second, sackcloth has no appeal,
None, zilch, zero. It's a non-starter.
I already succumbed to another lure.
Oh, by the way, there is no month nine,
Not anymore, it's gone from the year.
Spring back, fall forward, make obeisance,
Make welcome to October, harvest time.

He nodded to one of his functionaries.
The official began to read from a page
That he found in the legal sized file folder
That Mr. Toad had just put in his hand.

One night the party of the second part
Went out and by muttered incantations
Moved the massive dolmen that marked the line,
The property line defined in part six,
Subsection thirteen, paragraph nine...

Was that nine? said Quintus. Are you sure?

Sorry. A misprint. Paragraph five.

Wait, I said. This is going too fast.
What's all this talk of property lines?

You haven't heard of such lines? said Toad.
They're our civilization's very soul.
Are you just emerged from raw conditions,
From that state of nature that lacks a law,
Where all contend in eternal strife?
Neighbours, without a fence that runs a line,
Would soon kill each other off in feud.
A property line, an abstract concept,
Divides a plane in terms of ownership
And thus keeps the wild beasts penned in place.
My asset is your liability,
And only lines keep my hungered debits
From rushing in to eat your fat credits.
Without these lines there aren't two sides,
No self for others, no egg for sperms.
Without lines there's no trade, no need,
You eat only what your own ground grows,
Potatoes and onions, string beans and beets.
But when lines are placed, our cells stay walled
And precious substance doesn't leak away
But gets sold instead for the highest price.
And best of all are lines in parallel,
At right angles, lines laid out in grids.
In Nineveh we like lines to go straight
To make tax calculation a snap
And variegate irrigated lands
With lots of tiny, tidy, squarish plots.
Just dig a ditch or put up a fence
After you've marked the corners with dolmens.
Two points is enough to define a line,
If Euclid's logic serves here as rule.

But what if the line curves in between
And hugs a creekbed or follows a slope?
And who's to say it doesn't take a left
And take the scenic route from A to B?

Interpolation of some extra points
Will pin it down, if need be, said Toad.

That's what the State hires surveyors for.

I know, I said, about property lines.
What I meant, is what is this document?
And why must I listen to its contents?

It's from files the Inquisition compiled.
This is background you'll need, said Toad.

And he then took the aforementioned horse
And did park it on the newly acquired ground,
Whereupon said horse proceeded to eat
The freshly sprouted grasses underfoot.

Horse? I said. What aforementioned horse?

I believe, said Quintus, his name was Ned.

Very good, said Toad. His name was Ned.
The King, he said to me, is good with names.

And the horse ate with such vigour and force
That those young plants not wholly devoured
Were torn up, left dead on naked soil.
When the party of the first part awoke
And saw the horse turning his lawn to mud,
He sought out his neighbour to make protest.
His neighbour, the party of the second part,
A powerful warlock, refused to hear
And only pointed to where dolmens sat.
And none of this would cause such offense
Had the horse been a healthy thoroughbred
Of proper size, conformation and age,
A steed of the sort that gladdens the eye
To see it graze on one's pasture or lawn.
But this old, broken-down derelict?
This wizened, wheezing, scaborous pony,
Its tail matted, caked, strung through with dung?
And first part said this to second part,
But met only with insults and rebuffs,
And so brought himself to the magistrate
To lay charges and make formal complaint.

That seems the responsible course, I said.

You need not take sides, replied Quintus.
This case, the ensuing litigation
With its many motions and countermotions,
Contesting writs, depositions and pleas,
Grew to such scope, such acrimony,
That the courts' attention was fully consumed
And no other matter, even murder,
Could gain any judiciary review.
So frantic and so urgent were appeals
That you'd think the nag dwelt on death row,
Waiting to take a last plod to the vet,
Stabled among perverts sentenced to die
For nibbling a sweet but underaged grape
Or psychopaths who kill without remorse
Or filthy scum who plot against their king
Or, still worse, neglect to pay a tax.
Death row - the very thought brings disgust.
They're all just a bunch of freeloaders
Who've found a way to live out their days
In warm dry quarters that Quintus provides,
With free medicine and clothing, free food.
I'd charge them rent but they'd never pay,
And if time comes, as it almost never does,
For a last meal before execution,
Each will expect to dine at my expense.
That wizard, for example, just last night
Ordered a big mac and a case of wine.

How did the case turn out? I asked the King.
Second part, it seems, didn't do well.

The State was left with a case of empties.
The man was so soused it took two guys
To prop him up to get the noose on neck.
And he did, I suppose, as well as he could.

I meant, royal highness, the legal case,
The case of second party versus first.

It grew until the State was paralyzed.
It turned all objects into evidence
All former events into precedents.
It ate all it found and stored it up
Until the dispute reached such dimension
It spilled out of courtrooms into streets

Divided people into two parties,
Those of the first, those of the second parts.
And the horse itself was long since dead
When that issue was finally resolved:
Adherents of the party of the first part
Seized weapons and fell upon their enemies
And slew them all, man and woman and child,
All who rooted for that opposing team,
The glorious party of the second part.
It left the realm weak and depopulated
When the barbarian hordes at last arrived.

Pause here a moment, said Marguerite,
For I'm familiar with the case that you cite.
To my knowledge the lawsuit still proceeds,
Without bloodshed, without barbarians.

You're right, Marguerite. That last part,
Now that I reflect, was never spoken.
Strike it from whatever records you keep,
For it shouldn't stand, I'll freely admit,
Even as paraphrase of exact words
That now retreat, recede into murk.
It was, instead, a circuit kicking in,
Overwriting history with prophecy,
Introducing extra dispensations
To keep God's grace forever incomplete.
And this is what prophets often confuse,
Foretellings already done with, fulfilled,
And those that never happened, never will,
And those still pending, postponed awhile.

King Quintus too was not satisfied
And told the man who held the file in hand:
Neither horse nor case are relevant here.
Just read out the wiretap evidence,
The part where the pair of scoundrels conspire.

The official began reading from the file
A conversation between two persons,
One a surveyor, the other a wizard,
Collected, it appeared, without their consent,
Recorded, transcribed, and now repeated.
The surveyor, it appeared, was first to speak.

For three-eighths of a camel, he announced,
I will testify in court under oath
To support your claim on where the line runs.

What? said the warlock. Is my claim false?

Yes, said surveyor. The dolmen was moved.
Nothing is concealed from trigonometry.
And courts here are severe with any man
Who angles off from the long-established truths.
They punish all those who superimpose
Their own imaginary lines for mine.
There's no way your perfidy can persist
Unless that surveyor who drew the line
Perjures himself and reports faked results.
This would cost you the three-eighths of a camel.

This suggestion appalls, the wizard said.
Your price, you criminal, is far too high.
I'll offer one quarter of one camel.

Get lost, said the other. For three-eighths
You get sincere, trustworthy falsehood,
For I am, mister, a master surveyor.
For one-quarter, hire yourself a novice
Who blushes and stammers when he repeats lies
And who still confuses cosines with sines.

How about five-sixteenths? said the wizard.
And that's all the camel I have on hand.
I swear to Godhead that this is true.
Satisfy yourself - look in my freezer.

According to rabbinic law, he replied,
A camel, unless scrubbed down with that lye
Prepared by priests and blessed by an expert
In unclean, tainted and fractional beasts,
May not be divided unto sixteenths,
Lest the sins of fathers visit their sons.
A war criminal breeds war criminals
Unless the soil is sown with salt.
Yea, though their fathers die intestate,
Sons are bequeathed taste for weasels and mice,
And so get slaughtered themselves by furies.
This diet denies them sanctuary;

No priest grants refuge, permits approach
To those whose breath reeks of rock badger.
And this is how furies keep lines straight,
The fiery sun running its steady course,
Protons attracted, electrons repelled.
They chase contagion wherever it flees,
Whatever weird disguise it puts on,
Although it's true that they sometimes err
And mistake geese for eagles because winged,
Because feathered and seven pounds or more,
Because seldom observed humping a wren.

Such surveyor lore won't help my case.

Give me the proffered one quarter camel,
But to cure my blush and to calm my stammer
I require some extra payment - in kind.

Just what kind of kind had you in mind?
I have neither wine, swine, nor herds of kine.
But for words of your kind, I have my own kind,
And for a kind of line, a property line,
I can always give you two kinds of line.
My empty promises, I think you'd reject,
But my magic spells - well, I think, perhaps.
These are worth, indeed, an entire camel,
And not to be wasted on such small change.

In exchange for small change, said surveyor,
I'll require words that will work true changes,
And not false words that but seem to work.
If you short change me, miserable wizard,
I will trisect your gizzard with a compass
And unsterile, inaccurate ruler.

But I have in mind, my friend, a swell spell
That you'll find completely satisfactory,
A highly charming and disarming charm,
A fine mantra from the Hevajra Tantra
That works as medicine for most dementias,
Wart-remover, snakebite antidote,
And superb general analgesic.
Plus it claims another intriguing virtue.
Repeat it twelve trillion thirteen times
And it will procure, to the amazement of friends

And confusion of foes, a solar eclipse.

Worthy words, I'm sure, but still worth to me
One thirty second of a camel at best.
Solar eclipses make me quite nervous,
While the analgesic is negligible
And to warts I'm apparently impervious.
Reptiles already rightly take pause
To come within the strike of my scrutiny.
Cough up, you alcoholic warlock,
A spell with benefit, with cash value.

You drive a hard bargain, my friend, he said.
Take this, then, my prize and joy of spells,
Most precious and powerful of word-turns,
Possessing several assorted virtues
In addition to those already stated.
First and foremost, if it's spoken aloud,
It leaves the wills of all who hear enslaved.
And that means, sir, they'll buy what you sell.
It comes too with extra benefits,
The add-ons some would call side-effects,
And which, forced by law, I'll fully disclose.
It will blot out the Horsehead Nebula,
Impregnate a maiden koala bear
With pepsi cola spermatazoa,
Mutate the tobacco mosaics
Within six cubits of circumference
Into benign, almost easygoing
And amicable amino acids,
Re-string an anemic ballerina
Too weak to flit to the supermarket.
And last but not least, yes, best of all,
It lets dead men tranpose two heads.

Ha! said Marguerite. I should've guessed.

What possible use could I have for that?

Fingerprints, Jonah, said the warlock.
The spell itself is, in full, as follows:
How much time is left to change your ways?
September, month nine, hath thirty days,
And thirty days hath the Ninevites yet
For Godhead's terms are thirty days net.

That's enough evidence, announced Quintus.
Note that the two spells are identical.
Note that their properties are similar.

Note too, said the Toad, the single name
That this prophet and that surveyor share,
Although I'm not sure why that is so.

It's a bad luck name. Call me Dhul-Nun.

So, prophet, why should I not have you charged
With criminal conspiracy, collusion,
Necromancy, plagiarism, corruption,
And taking possession of stolen property?

I know nothing of this surveyor, sire.

Look at his eyes shift, said Toad. He lies.
That warlock taught this Jonah too.

I received my information from a fish,
And that fish, in turn, received it from God.

And you expected to sell me your sackcloth?
The charlatan warlock and the surveyor,
May the Lord have mercy on their crooked souls,
Possessed, at least, a more attractive scam.
It wasn't camel meat they tried to sell
But fine leather motorcycle jackets.
Or so they claimed. The confiscated goods
Turned out to be as bogus as the vendors:
Cheap sweatshop knockoffs, poorly stitched.
The surveyor, Jonah, hanged last week,
The other, the warlock, only last night.

This means I don't get the job? I said.

You're a fool, prophet, he said. Go away.

It was time, I saw, to play my last card.
But what of my faithful disciples? I said.
They worship the pavement I walk upon,
The sackcloth I wear, the sermons I preach.
The great mob of them assembled outside

Will be extremely disappointed to hear
Of your disregard for the message I bear.
If their mood grew ugly, grew hostile,
Would you want to be the object of their wrath?
If they grew violent, began looting shops,
Hurling stones and dung, and crashing through
doors,
Where could a monarch safely hide himself?
And some, the hotheads, may be armed, I fear,
May have brought along or grabbed as they went out
Makeshift knives, a petrol bomb or two.

The smile that spread over his face stunned me
With the spectacular malice it conveyed.
That would indeed be a concern, he replied,
But I cannot worry myself too much
About a crowd outside chanting praise
For one as low on the praiseworthy scale
As the complete incompetent before me.
Do you really believe people exist
Who eat insects, dance a graceless dance,
Wear sackcloth and follow an idiot,
Who are not employed by me to do so?
Who, Jonah, would cram a struggling locust
Down his throat without a royal paycheque
Padding his back pocket as an inducement?
They are all, every one, my agents.

Quintus turned to Mr. Toad and said,
And now it's tea time - and he left the room.

While Quintus is gone, said the Toad to me,
There's a matter or two we might discuss.
I know you're keen to see the torture start,
So I'll make this pitch as brief as I can.
Give back my chip and I'll let you go.
And don't pretend that you don't understand.
I mean that object you stole back at the bar.
A surveillance photograph caught your act.
You've since lost the hand that palmed that chip.
I hope, for sake of all your other limbs,
You haven't lost the stolen chip itself.

That's yours? I said. But what does it do?

Long ago I obfuscated my code
So that none will know how the game's played.
I wrote out an end that sees Toad win,
Destiny in binary cuneiform,
And inscribed my program onto the chip.
A game of chance goes better for betters
If all chance is gone, if futures are fixed.
When nine becomes five, payoffs increase.
Replace nine by five and oracles speak.
If the nines are fives, I know what they'll say.

Good luck, then, I said, tossing the chip.
Numbers, so often, get out of hand.

Toad looked at me with bold, bulbous intent.
So, friend Zu, your plan is dead, he said.
Nineveh will stay mine until the end,
Until Nabupolassar marches north
And leads armed Medes up from Babylon.
Go back to the depths and forget revenge.
No, don't get up. We'll throw you out.

But listen, Toad, I said, to what I say.
You take the near future, I'll take the far,
I'll take it far away, far as it goes.
My recent past has trumped your long ago,
And truth is more than what you now observe,
The odds perhaps worse than what you've supposed.
Any prophet, it's true, can make mistakes,
Like that time that Mahomet's trenchtool
Struck not once, but thrice, a power line,
But still, on whole, we normally score high.
And don't think, Toad, that you tote the score.
Labcoats stand among us, taking notes
On which of us weighs most, the next to go.
They don't note they too stand in feedlots,
That they too have now grown fat enough
To pass along to where the throats are slit.
The point? Let me dwindle it down to this:
A refurbished machine may well cheat fate,
But I'd hammer out those dents it took,
Make way for new in new interviews.

What's that he called you? said Marguerite.

Zu, I said. It's myth, a fabulous beast.
Toads are not noted for keen eyesight.

Yes, that's the thing that marked your rooftop.
It sounds to me, parrot, you already knew
The machine Armand's chip was meant to fit,
The chip you asked about, awhile ago.

I hoped my near-sighted foe couldn't see
What I'm forced, after the fact, to admit:
I knew nothing of what I talked about.

But that's common, she said, for know-it-alls.

Prophets rarely know what words intend
Until it's too late and fate's complete.
Nostradamus. Malthus. John the Divine.
They prophesied nonsense, then they prayed
That someday someone would know they meant.
It's worse for we who cheat on Turing tests,
Money-hungry machines gifted with gab,
Nickel-fed apostles who speak in tongues.
Even now, nearly done, I've no clue
What any of this mystery implies.

But what happened then? said Marguerite.

I was unceremoniously kicked out,
Pitched headfirst through the revolving doors
To sprawl across an oddly empty street.
I saw, while still struggling to stand up,
That none of that great mob remained there,
Dispersed, perhaps, after receiving pay.
The holy war, it seemed, was over now.
I limped away quickly before the King
Returned from tea to hack me into parts.

Part VIII.5: THE TIDE RISES

At first I was in a complete shock and then,
Thinking it over, became hopping mad.
Was it for this that I risked life and limb,
Limb in particular, sacrificed

Almost everything that I held dear?
I'll never know just what had transpired
With the surveyor and his lookalike spell,
But I held very specific suspicions.

And what, parrot, did you suspect? she asked.

I suspect a trial run by Godhead,
A botched job, as usual, and aborted
When he finally recognized his mistakes.
The wizard was no doubt sent from heaven,
Either an angelic master of disguise
Or one of those they oft call sleepers,
An agent placed there decades before
And left to wait until the time arrived
To make oblique approach to the surveyor,
The precursor Jonah, proto-Jonah,
The first of Jonahs to meet a bad end.
And the wait the warlock endured was long,
A long slumber in ordinary life.
So why not, he thought, to kill the time,
Have a few drinks and make a few bucks
By selling dance lessons to Ninevites?

If that was Elijah, as you now suggest,
Then that wasn't, in my book, an angel.
Maybe, she said, the real angel was Ned,
Or maybe that dolmen that moved around.
And maybe God sent Jonahs in dozens,
Sperms in dozens to fertilize the egg.
The fastest Jonah, the swimmer most fit,
Becomes the Jonah that gets the big prize.
Maybe the best hasn't launched his attack
But waits and watches how others fail.
Did you never, parrot, consider that?

No, I didn't, thank you, and won't now.
Gather all the suspects, all the clues.
It can't matter who did what to whom
If Godhead moves in stealth behind them all.
Who cares which tree hides the archer
In that instant the arrow leaves the string?

And I suppose you blame me too, parrot,
Just because I'm born a Ninevite,

Even though my alibi is ironclad,
For after all I'm a part of God too,
A dormant part, a red herring part.

All is divine, it's true, to some extent,
Although it rarely helps in laying blame
When a victim hungers to take revenge.
One might as well take out one's grudges
On whatever thing you find close by
And hope delivered blows will travel far,
Distribute pain to each dispersed part.
One can blame, as I do, all the world,
But when making myself a voodoo doll,
It's a toad in which I like to stick pins.
And those last remarks that Toad had made
Suggest he may have played a larger part
Than what you might at first suppose.
Maybe Toad took a more active role,
Approached them all in dreams disguised as Thoth,
Set them up, betrayed them with false promise
Into positions designed for sacrifice.
Or maybe not Toad, but the Lord himself
When he laid down the earth's foundations,
Drew the passageways in such a fashion
They'd transport us all to spots he's assigned.
It doesn't matter now, the method used.
What galls me most is the parsimony
Of that lazy, low-cost second attempt.
The new mission was just a patched version,
Re-jigged and revised with minimum effort.
It was, in retrospect, designed to fail.

They might've told you, warned you in some way.

Heaven invented mushroom management,
And I, for one, had had enough of it.
Again and again, the same old story.
Cast again and again in seas for fish,
You'll fetch up that same old Godhead.
And should they ask, What has your Lord revealed,
Say only, The old fictitious stories,
Romances and spicy detective tales,
Legends and myths, outrageous falsehoods.

That's harsh, parrot, very harsh, she said.

Could not the Lord be simply misinformed
Or his predestinations gone amiss
Due to circumstance beyond his control?

An omnipotence is no good at all
If forced to lash out at targets blindly
And fumble forth in search of good handles
And necks on which to get a stranglehold.
Better to have universal power,
Disappointing though it sometimes is,
Than let the world be ruled by local gods,
By nature's forces partly deified,
By half-crippled titans, hamstrung elves,
Lesser sprites who dwell in wells or rocks
And spit a spell for only forty feet.
It may be, as you suggest,
I was, I am, very disappointed,
Although the affair wasn't total loss.
My innermost circle was still at large
And my bomb-making labs were still intact.
If you can't get the apocalypse you seek
Go for next best - damage what you can.
But still I had expected so much more,
Had hoped for one crater that stretched for miles
Not just a dozen little pot-holes.
Also, as I walked away down the street,
I noticed that Nineveh's litter problem
Had grown, in short time, far more serious.
There were scraps of paper everywhere,
In the streets, the gutters and the sidewalks.
They stirred as wind passed, they fluttered in
trees.
Some of these were just fast food wrappers
And some were parts of a newspaper page,
Wants ads, baseball scores, comic strips,
And those ubiquitous obituaries.
But others had a shape that drew the eye.
I picked one up and instantly I knew,
As I watched it duplicate, twin itself,
That time had come to leave the town behind,
Impose a quarantine for safety's sake.
Was this just a minor viral infection,
One that passes after plenty of rest,
Or were these final days, the end of time?
Cell fission always reminds me of seas,

The cat-hiss of the surf's dissolving rage,
The resigned sighs of collapsed jellyfish,
The dunes spuming sand through the stunted grass.
And so, quickly, I struck off for the coast.

That's a long walk, as I recall, she said.

Well, I didn't get more than four blocks
Before it had become abundantly clear
The coast lay already beyond my reach.
Fifties now rippled, flipped above knees.
Worse, a black hearse crept up from behind
And honked once as side window rolled down
To show Elijah's face behind the wheel.
He frowned and then smiled, then sped away.
I knew then, prophet that I am, by signs,
That in an alleyway not far from there,
In dark dedicated to Ig-Galla
And laid on some concrete loading dock,
Was the party, partly, of the second part,
A corpse that wore a fine sackcloth coat.
The hearse hadn't stopped, more's the pity,
Since I'd lately learned some new condundrums
That even Elijah's head would get wrong.
Also I now clearly needed a ride.
But swirling fifties soon hid taillights,
And my curses, which trailed, turned and came
back,
Gave up their chase and lay down to pant.

Your curses, parrot, achieve mixed results.

However, a kind of salvation arrived.
My luck, which had preceded me out of town,
Had left me a tiny farewell gift.
There, centered in the square, a ship was placed,
And though far from sea its oars were manned
And sails unfurled, set for starboard tack.
And just what is this? I queried myself,
Psalmanaazaar's tomb in the Viking style,
A monument to a naval victory,
A small maritime museum, maybe,
Or is it some seafood restaurant?
Noting my interest, a salesman came,
Clad in hipwaders, over from the ship,

And filled me in on what was going on.
The ship is an exhibit for the Boat Show
Held at the Nineveh Convention Centre,
A Phoenician triereme, complete with crew,
An armed marine battalion, galley slaves,
New oars, fully rigged, fully equipped,
And fully laden with precious cargo.
It flies a Liberian flag of convenience
And its hull has been underwritten by Lloyd's.
And the ship can be yours for a bargain price,
A show special, valid only today.

What cargo's carried? I asked, intrigued.

Leather jackets, baled, consigned by the King.

His price came down, as I told him it must,
After I sang him a familiar refrain.
I considered the price a moment or two.
Having a yacht would be nice, also handy,
But I'd become a trifle self-indulgent.
Could I really afford a major purchase?
Here I was, facing early retirement,
Having spent my money like it was water,
And with nothing to show for it but headaches.
What if the economy took a downturn?
I'd soon regret such great extravagance.
But didn't wise men say live for the day,
Today brings goods, tomorrow bailiffs,
Grab fruit, spend the loot while you have it,
Lest cops catch you and take it all back?

I'll take the ship, I said. I'll give you cash.
Sorry, but all I have on me is fifties.

CAPUT NINE

Part IX.1: A COMMON KNOWLEDGE

I've heard quite a bit, said Marguerite,
About what a hip, hotshot prophet
And prognosticating operator
God-driven gadfly bites made you into,
And yet I haven't heard much of futures
Not already claimed by public domain
And factored into prices markets ask
After rumours of quakes are set aside
And they downgrade reports that oil's been struck.
I thought you'd give me the insider's scoop,
All the new science, all the new trends,
All the new futures not yet released.
Instead I get a knowledge so common
It's out of fashion, already old hat,
Already discounted, marked down to cost.
I see no arbitrage here to be had
And little room to hedge by selling short.
Sackcloth, I now learn, is just a bust
And Nineveh's doom due no time soon.
I've heard nothing new that impacts my life.
When, for example, do I dump Armand
And find a man who better meets my needs,
A wealthy man who's tall, handsome and dark,
A well-muscled lover, more responsive,
Better equipped to keep attention fixed?
You don't even have a clue, do you?
I'd get fresher, more current news
Just by looking out the nearest window.
I'd reap more future with a weathervane
Than with what little sense your speech conveys.

But I've far bigger fish to fry than that!
I'm no penny ante reader of palms,
No two bit fiddler of horoscopes
That put horny women in pairs with men
And show a destitute fortune reversed.
Let rock hard Mars transit wet Venus
Without direct divine intervention.
Your petty love life and pocket change

Can follow their fatelines unchaperoned,
Unsupervised by djinn-fed foresight.
There's no need to get a prophet involved
In such low level and local visions.
I see big pictures, large scale effects,
Global perspectives and overall views.
I see worlds spun up from quantum flux
To speciate, flare with complex longing
Before they sputter and fade and wink out.
I see heroes pause, look overhead,
And drop the horns they'd raised to lips to blow.
I see tribes gather, arm themselves, march,
Converge on where their ancient foes have slept
Wrapped up in blankets against growing cold.
I see djinn cower in thunderheads
Before they let loose reins on dead steeds
And fall to earth as scraps of scripture verse.
I see comets buckle, struggle upstream
To where high peaks part and glaciers melt
To drape stone slopes with snowberry eyes.
I see the christ and antichrist collide
And together slide down the final chute,
The pleasure-slicked birth canal, in reverse.
They hold hands, sail over lover's leap,
Annihilate the last hermaphrodite.
This is what I see behind eyelids,
What I see displayed on the night within,
And all this vision gets brought to bear
On the one future I've made my life's work.
All these portents fit into place
When mapped onto events that now unfold.
I've specialized in Nineveh's downfall
And so none should doubt when I clearly state:
This town is fated, is destined to die.

But that isn't really worthwhile news
Unless you state exactly time and date.
All things will end, cities too, but when?
Our lives are short but they're not short enough
To throw away when Chicken Little comes.
All things die, wear out, turn to trash.
Don't waste brief time watching waste made
When all is waste, or nothing is, or both.
We don't need vague news of finitude;
More use accrues from tips that give jump

On which horse will win the derby laurels,
On how superbowl point spreads are fixed
By cigar-smoking cabals behind the scenes,
On which real estate it's now wise to buy
And which precious metal it's time to sell.

A gadfly venom lacks the enzymes,
The corrosive spells that open cell doors,
The passwords that grant global access
And give entrance into the treasurehouse
In which all the divine commands are stashed.
And there's many causal subassemblies
That lack all relevance to tasks at hand
And whose keys, therefore, remain withheld.
Don't ask the Lord's messenger for data
On the cross-pollination of date palms
Or where to rent a dozen folding chairs.
Look it up instead on the internet.
Omens tell you what's needed, no more.
Take what's given and then extrapolate
To learn the course of action sages take.

Extrapolate, parrot? How? Be precise.

Don't buy real estate with borrowed cash:
That bubble will burst when walls collapse,
When tornadoes tear your shingles off
And cesium taints tips of dinner spoons.
Retire your mortgage, sell off your assets,
And don't, Marguerite, take on new debt.
Only fools make plans when God is riled,
When heaven sends hints a future is blocked.
Shovel away that mound of dead doves
That drifts a cubit deep above your car,
Above dooryard, step, driveway and walk,
And try to put aside the thought that comes
Maybe it's best just to call in sick,
Maybe it's not now good to go out.

You don't listen, you one circuit wonder!
Nineveh's current existential plight
Is worth only passing mention at best,
And Godhead's law, if stacked up against
The latest score, the latest star divorce,
Isn't worth the air that it's chiselled on.

If there really were some story here
Cable network vans would ring us round
And hang their microphones above your beak
To transmit each word by satellite.
Behold, parrot, an empty parking lot.

True newsmen, if any such exist,
Can work from home and file reports from there.
They need only inspect beneath their feet
To learn their city's true situation.
Nineveh, like the distant tropic isles
That generations of shitting birds made,
Sits upon soil made from mine tailings,
Slaughterhouse offal and medical waste,
From dumptruck loads of spoiled fast food
It laid down around its foundation walls.

Quintus is five, there's four more to go.
I think we're still safe for quite some while.

Reigns go brief if Medes roam down streets
And hack off heads if they're poked outdoors.
Five kings, if given five minutes each,
Can take any great civilization
From rise to fall in less than half an hour.

Okay, the town's toast, said Marguerite.
I'll grant you that much to move us along.
Sooner or later the street lights go out.
But what about you, bird? What's your fate?

It'll take some time but I'll get my reward.
After Nineveh falls they'll build a shrine
Atop the mound that filled its spaces in.
They'll bury me there in that holy ground
So that any spade that desecrates tells
To illumine depths with latterday light
Will blunt its blade on intervening bones.
My own remains will block the graverobbers
From toxic waste disposed in soil beneath,
From coins metal detectors mark with pings,
From Ishtar Fishwife in bas relief,
Her sneer astride the wounded cougar's heart
Inscribed upon altars for sacrifice,
From Assur himself, carved out of cedar,

With Zu bites, defense wounds, slashed on wrists.
I'll keep all false idols underground:
Sackcloth ballcaps, whalebone corsets,
And Ashurbanipul's urinal in chunks.
These treasures will never rise, never breach,
Never reach eyes that reconstruct life
As long as pilgrims venerate my name.
They'll festoon rood screens with decayed teeth
Dipped in reliquary formaldehyde,
Molars and tusks they've pried from walrus jaws
And now sell off as mosque souvenirs.
It'll take some time but I'll get my reward.
As long as gift shops stand sacrosanct
And tourist buses jam the parking lots,
I'll sacrifice my place in paradise
To nail down that restless corpse beneath
And make sure it never resurrects,
Never returns to get a second chance.
I'll sacrifice my place in paradise
And plant myself above the Ninevites
Just so they're never again dug up.

Is that it, bird? Is that all you predict?

My scry alights on that goldfish bowl,
And the date in black I read written there
Is due shortly - what's today? - to expire.
Look at that fish, blank-eyed, droop-finned.
It floats there, not moving, belly up,
Working on neither its tan nor backstroke
In a liquid hung with hollow snail shells
And waterweed fronds turned half to slime.
I think that's what's putting out odour,
A smell possibly fish, possibly death.

It's just sleeping, she said, tapping the bowl.

When the fogs approach horizons are erased.
Let the drumbeat's pulse compel you forth
With djinn alongside unfurling their sails.
Sweating galley slaves will bring communion,
Pass forward the sacrament bench to bench
To behead as it goes all who don't take,
Dismember the sober and toss out limbs
Into the vines on the overgrown banks.

And when the chop comes up, the oarblades strike
And rise from foam-tipped waves dripping blood.
Saltwater will mix back with saltwater,
Memory mixed into non-memory.
When lions roar even old men will smile,
Forecast a dance, replay a foreplay,
Close up shop and let carnival rise.
Ye righteous in the leg-irons: Look upward!
Hair dishevelled, composure sacrificed,
Godhead grins at last, a grim rictus,
Unable to command or whistle airs
Or send out winds to whip up the seas.

The fish is an extremely heavy sleeper,
She explained, taking a long-handled spoon
To stir stagnant water around the bowl,
Bringing up black eddies from the bottom.
It always wakens, though, at dinnertime.

Part IX.2: BREAKING NEWS.

What comes up from depths, goes back down.
The time has come, I said to Marguerite.

And what time is that, oh parrot? she asked.

Six o'clock. Six o'clock news time,
It's time to turn on your television.
Now, at last, prophecy's season arrives.
Now events begin to repeat my tune.
Virgins, saturnalias reappear!
Now novel prodigies drop from heaven.
They spill out across dusty concrete
As obscene, writhing litters of lizards
From some irradiated dinosaur
Squatting in earth-stationary orbit.
The heavy fruits of our negligence descend
As loose bricks from proud Babel's masonry.
They shower the streets careless of lawsuit,
They arrive with huge thuds on our doorsteps
As unwanted infants, newsprint-wrapped.

Six o'clock! It's time for dinner, she said.

What do you eat? Would you like a cracker?

I'm not that sort of a parrot, I said.

Would you rather a fortune cookie, then,
Slightly nibbled, fortune mostly intact?
I've saved it for weeks now in case of guests.
And just what sort of a parrot are you?
The detail work on your plastic casing
Isn't distinct enough to make a guess.

I'm the plastic sort, the electric sort,
The prophetic sort, that rarest of birds.
But you won't find me listed anywhere
In standard works of ornithology,
In Aristophanes among the ancients,
Or the one by Hitchcock among moderns.
I'm neither domesticated nor wild,
Neither Amazon nor African Gray,
I'm the sort that grows furious, enraged,
Whenever prophetic insight is spurned.
Look at my sharpened beak, behold my eye,
Recognize there a doom unhooded.
Do not provoke me further, Marguerite.
Turn on your television: it's time.

Reaching, she switched her television on,
But a commercial was playing instead of news.
Ha! she said. You are some prophet, parrot.
Or should I address you as Captain Kismet?
Is that doom unhooded or fate defrocked?
No combination clock radio
Fails to slink away in abject shame
After making such a glaring error.
You can't even tell me the correct time!

My on-chip clock generator works,
I said, with a precision oscillator
Controlled by fundamental mode crystals.
It comes from a low level of process,
One far beneath parrot consciousness,
Down where all biorhythms are kept,
P5 in the underground parkade.
Yet design flaws exist, I will admit.
My interrupt-driven processor will lose

Time with every memory access.
To correctly synchronize my outputs
Oft I'm forced to sing a timing song,
A sea chanty or a field work holler,
Or something djinn would sing in unison,
Hidden in reeds, mingled among marsh frogs,
So that rowers will keep their strokes even,
So that cilia beat and cells can swim.
Just wait a moment and the news will come.

A bottle labelled Product filled the screen
As male voiceover gave stern commands:
Let Product dwell forever nearby,
No product but Product, spray or powder,
Compassionate, merciful and non-toxic.
Insist on Product. Ask for it by name.
Available near you, everywhere,
Nearer than you think and nearer than you dream,
Nearness too near, too dear to escape.

Product? Is this some generic brand?

All words, Marguerite, teach us wisdom,
And this one word, perhaps, more than most,
A name of God that most mystics have missed,
One more reflex of hidden glory,
Another name for rose, your heart's desire.
This old set is more advanced, I'd guess,
That what the black and white picture suggests.

Another voice, female, interjects:
But does it do toilets? Does it do sinks?

The male voice replies with a false surprise:
Did you think I'd omit the kitchen sink?
On standard, dirty, grimy kitchen sinks
Product raises up stains, smites the grease,
And splits asunder that caked-on filth
While, sadly, the other leading cleansers
Will sit blinking, still struggling to cope.
They are false products, used only by fools.

A woman appeared, smiling, held Product.
One day I cleaned my home with the Product
And found, after the crud was washed away,

A couch I thought I'd given away in March,
An aunt who's been missing, I'd swear, for years,
That I had thirteen children, not twelve
As seemed the case on all previous counts.
It worked quicker than parthenogenesis,
Quicker than black shark limousine logic.

The male voice laughed and issued this edict:
Purchase no other cleansers before me.

Black shark limousine logic? What's that?
I hate it, she said, when sense isn't crisp.

I diagnose a mild interference;
Something is tickling that frequency,
The international noon time signal,
Mayday broadcast, air raid alert.
Or that last beacon, that rising wail
Heard after missiles launch overseas.
Don't fret much, though, it's a false alarm,
Triggered perhaps by a hair drier short
Somewhere nearby, maybe next door.
Note how ruffled up my feathers stand.
By false alarm I mean false at present,
One that's gone off a bit too early.
It's best to reset and go back to sleep.

What if I change the rabbit ears around?

Reception like this never quite heals.
Take a little tonic, a lot of gin.
The symptoms will suddenly fade away,
Will stay gone for awhile and then recur.
It's a common species of fungal disease
That attacks and eats young spark plug roots,
Haphazards their grasp on black, white and ground,
Disrupts logics, randomizes waves,
Unchannels streams and disorders senses.
It strikes without warning and comes in fits
Like aftereffects of gadfly bites,
Or of overelectrified nerve ends
That randomly fire off a lightning flash
To thus derange a schizophrenic's thought.
It's like dreams that come from opium pipes
To take centerstage and compel belief

But drift away when the drug wears off,
Or like French intellectual fashions
That seize a brain for days and then depart.
It's benign, I believe, but still a nuisance.
This set should go in for a tune-up.

It's been out of warranty for decades.
I'm afraid, she said, that they'd put it down.

But if so I'll console you throughout your grief,
Trot out wisdom, make the right noises,
The right platitudes in the right places,
Fondly reminisce to ease bereavement.
Remember the time we watched the commercial?
I'll whisper, as the tears stream down my beak.

All that seems so long ago now,
Just memory now, sighed Marguerite.

Here we go, I proclaimed. It's six o'clock.

Officials, said the television set,
Have today announced that contingency plans
For any end to our civilization
Are finalized at last and put in place.
Nineveh, they assure, is fully prepared.
Art treasures, gold ingots, vintage wines,
And fine foodstuffs have been hidden in vaults.
Multiple backup tapes have been compiled
Of the municipal tax and property rolls.
Bunkers for dignitaries have been readied,
With only room for the current head of state,
(May the Lord God cherish Quintus our King),
And his wealthy or powerful supporters,
Some of the more prominent socialites,
Along with their executive assistants,
Personal trainers and sexual partners.
They will, of course, be fully screened.
No children and no one on welfare
And no pets except seeing eye dogs.
No blind, deaf or handicapped people.
No hunchbacks or dwarves, and no lepers
With mutilated faces or missing limbs,
No one badly blemished, pock-spotted,
Or who itches with scabs or stammers words,

None of those few who somehow contrive
To break a toe or get testicles crushed.
No apes. And absolutely no birds.
High-level church leaders, bureaucrats,
And sports and media personalities
May be considered for spots if space permits.
Diesel generators are now installed,
Spas and racquetball courts now complete,
Catering contracts now put to tender.
Armed marines are stationed at each entrance
To turn away the curious and desperate,
Pickpockets, sneakthieves, paparazzi,
The poor, sick or lost, the confused or damned.
But why release this news? some have asked.
Some pundits see here a signal sent,
A veiled monetary forecast made
That present state policy can't avert
A profound and widespread increase in debt
That spells economic trouble ahead.
Civilization's end, warn experts,
Is widely thought not positive at all
By those who manage major pension funds.
Should civic activity slow down or halt
Or even worse, shift gears and back up,
A stock market downturn might result.
If Nineveh falls, they'll say off-record,
We'll see share prices take a sharp dip
For those firms that manufacture plastic
Or dispense fast foods or mix concrete
Or transport by rail cellphone parts,
Wicker loveseats, ice capade tickets,
Bottled holy water in dozen packs,
Single servings of puffed rice breakfast,
Number nine headless galvanized nails,
Boxset editions of soft rock hits,
Aerosol bugspray ready for use.
Analysts feel safe in conclusions reached
After hearing the news and plotting charts.
Nineveh's plight is worse than ever thought.
The most pessimistic rumourmongers
Had not even conceived such an event,
And now, hearing it broached, are less than
pleased,
Less than inclined to buy long-term bonds.
Look, they exclaim, at how yield curves go!

They claim to let civilization end
Is not the best or wisest course open,
Not an outcome that many will approve
No matter what the contingency plans.

It doesn't sound good, said Marguerite.
And, frankly, it doesn't sound plausible.
This is an orchestrated campaign,
The scare tactics designed to keep
The Ninevites timid, eager to buy
Excess stocks of emergency supplies,
Designed to justify higher taxes
And tighter State control of daily life.

This is the beginning of the end, I said.
The hole sackcloth opened up has closed
Or grown so large we can't see the sides.
The point of no return has now been passed
And now Nineveh will become watchword
For the phrase here today, gone tomorrow.
Now's the time, Ninevites, to assemble
The traffic wardens, grief counsellors and
lifeguards,
The fire marshals, cops and paramedics,
The cub scouts with pocket first aid kits.
And I am put in mind, unaccountably,
Of that barbarian lord Tamberlaine.

Tamberlaine! she said. He's still up north
And still at work decimating pagans,
Flaying open the false but comely beliefs
They think, wrongly, will defend against harm.
He's not much threat, if that's what you think,
To this city that Assur's legions guard.

But let me tell you, then, of Tamberlaine,
A sociopath from early childhood
Among nomadic Scythian horse-clans,
Who's climbed to absolute domination
Over large tracts of civilized lands,
Who rose from backwater petty gangster
To world-famous genocidal despot.
His foul career began quietly enough,
An ordinary rapist, thug and thief
Torn by sundry conflicting impulses,

With altruism possibly included,
Until appetite laid bare his course
And guided his infamous trajectory.
And here's the lesson history best learns,
Or else repeat its mistakes to eternity
And never achieve final civility:
Emphasize customer service, if you can,
And open up tills when gunmen ask.
Learn this, else suffer decline and fall.
Do not attempt to discourage rage
Or deflect a half-clad savage with signs
That read No shirt, No shoes, No service.
Certainly one should never interpose
A slow and surly convenience store clerk
Between a customer like Tamberlaine
And purchase of a screwtop wine-jug.
Wise management, alert for risk factors,
If not already sunk in that torpor
That overcomes after too much norm,
Too much mean, too much status quo,
Would not have failed to race around displays
Of candy bars and motor oil and beer,
Would not have failed to activate at once
An express checkout just for the youth,
And thus forestalled the ensuing bloodbath.
A barbarian just hates standing in line,
And, worse, handing over cash to jerks.
And once you've taken out scimitar,
Why not go on and complete the swing?
Once you've killed one clerk, why not all?
And why not gather like-minded men
And take whatever you like, and smash the rest?
It's thus that Tamberlaine was launched.
And since these first victims were pagans
He earned from Nineveh's short-sighted press
The epithet 'Tamberlaine, the Scourge of God'.
In fact, he would only slaughter infidels
Because those were people he came to meet
On the path charted by the Will to Power.
He laid waste the realms of unbelievers,
The Hindus and Turks, Persians and Egyptians,
Because they were the only peoples he knew,
The only nations that he'd so far met.
There is no point in feigning complacency,
No point in smug self-satisfaction,

No point to thanking God for this grace,
That Tamberlaine hates their heathen beliefs
Because they're substandard, wanting in truth,
That he's reasoned all the arguments through
And found only Assur's creed makes sense.
For what does he know of Assur, or reason,
Or what facts had persuaded those he slayed
To adopt views of so little merit?
And do you think he took his scimitar
And gave victims little nicks on the neck,
Tentative probes, experimental pokes,
In case they weren't fit for full beheading,
In case their faith didn't warrant attack,
That he'd read one chapter or page or word
Of any philosophy not too damp,
Not too tightly bound to use as fuel?
He torched pagan temples and sacred books
Only because they would produce nice flame,
A flame that, once set, would catch on thatch
And leap from one roof to next, too fast,
Too elusive, too insistent to thwart,
A flame too hot to stop once it spots
The thoughts to nest and host its hot coals,
Flame that made incense of pagan forms
And failed to acknowledge or credit its source.
There's no point to think your town's exempt,
That these temples, these books, will fare better,
That thousands of grinning oafs will show up
And find these beauties too fine for rape.
There's no point to give welcome to scourge
That can't read a word of scripture it burns,
Unless, of course, you value arson itself,
Or admire a wildfire just for its warmth,
For light its blaze will shed on those who watch.
Holy Nineveh has been spared thus far
Only because it has not yet been reached.
Do you think he'll turn back, or stop short,
Suddenly pine for sheep pastures up north?
Do you really think Tamberlaine will tire
Of that wild, brutish, barbarian life,
Tire of long hours of rapine and pillage,
Or tire of the sex, sorcery, intrigue,
And treasure, incredible piles of treasure,
And choose instead a more sedate career,
Enroll perhaps in a business college,

Take word processing courses by night
And wash dishes or drive a cab by day?
And ask yourself how likely that is.
Ask a bookmaker what odds he'll take
That God sees our peril, sees and relents,
That God grows alarmed and comes to our aid,
Strikes Tamberlaine down a mile away,
Just outside of the city's north gate,
So that all will know just whom to thank.
What are the odds God roots for Nineveh
And can't stand to see the brutal succeed?
Ask a prophet, my friend, any prophet.
Ask me. There's no one more savvy,
More street-wise, more with-it than me.
There's no one who knows a gall bladder,
Even at this distance, better than me,
No one who knows better how diseased,
And how large, how necrotic one gets.
This scourge won't stop although his piss
Turns murky and thick with red sediment,
Although his staff quack, that sullen Turk
Who can't tell a gall bladder from a toe,
Will advise a rest, perhaps a brief nap
In early afternoon to escape the heat,
Give up fags or else chew them unlit,
Cut back on fat gravy dumped on fries
And buckets of red rotgut guzzled with meals,
Go for short swims in epsom salt baths,
Take two grains of opium per diem,
And read Thomas Hardy, slowly, aloud.
But Tamberlaine won't listen, won't stop.
He'll still lash, still kill, despite the signs
That spell out how far his death's progressed
That more alert of Ninevites will read
As he leads looting warriors down their streets.
He'll go in the north gate, out the south,
And those who see him come, and give greeting,
Will fail to stand by and wave farewell,
No matter how alert they once were.
He'll expire far from here, and long after,
Gall bladder grown large, a canteloupe,
His liver melon, testicles kiwi fruit.
No person has ever profited much
From reading God's handwriting on the wall
Unless pain cures his illiteracy,

Unless torment rebukes his each mistake.
No one wants to make moves too soon,
Or look too close, until it's too late.
None ever gain true belief in death,
Even if they witness every sign
And hear every word the prophets speak,
Until they see the scourge itself descend,
Whereupon the scourge and flesh converse
On how dwindled now their distance has grown,
On how little there is or ever was
That's not, really, completely understood.

Give me a break, bird, said Marguerite.

In other news, said the television,
The Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board
Warned against inflationary pressures...

You can turn off the television now.
I have more, always more, story to tell.

Wait a bit. I want to hear the weather,
It comes on next, right after the sports.

Read all about it later, at leisure,
In the pages of the farmer's almanac.
Let me tell you about weather at sea.

But what about dinner? she said crossly.
Haven't we already done the bloody sea?

Part IX.3: MARITIME LAW

As all the ship's stays and halyards swayed,
As mainsail mast shifted attitude
To lift and lean as swells rose and inclined,
The thin shadows that tautened rigging cast
Framed the sunlit decks with trapezoids
That kissed, intersected, kissed and parted.
I began to study their many movements,
Their many clockwork collaborations.
A prophet, when rigging is strung aright,
If angles of sunlight and horizon

Are known down to minute, second, degree,
May clearly read the undulant messages
Written onto the rise and fall of waves.
And the best of prophets, of which I'm one,
Need no ship and rely on nothing more
Than tilt of bile-slosh down in gut bilge
And observed windage on the deflected path
Of stringy vomit's plummet overboard.
These considerations warned of weather
Hostile to smooth transit across the deeps,
A conclusion I relayed to the First Mate,
Who stood observing the symptoms of illness
With a connoisseur's critical delight.

Well, Owner, said the Mate, you're dead right,
Forty foot seas, gales to forty knots.
But it's a strange storm indeed that's blown in.
Behold, other vessels float nearby,
And though God only knows from whence they came,
Around them seas stay stormless and calm.

I looked out and saw these words were true.
At this point Captain and crew came up
To find what conditions had tipped the ship
And made walking about a tedious task.
It's witchcraft, the Captain proclaimed. We're
doomed.

Jettison the cargo to lighten our load,
Strike down sails and lower yard to deck,
Said one sailor. It's standard procedure
When waves threaten to overwhelm a ship.

At this the Mate snorted contempt and said,
Toss all of the cargo overboard,
Then what? Alive, yes, but at what price?
We'd row back to our port alive but poor.
Living destitution. Alive and poor.
That's a deadly combination, my friends.
We'd resemble those beaver castrati
You find in hinterlands, in the backwoods,
Who nibbled off their own sperm-packed balls
Just to gain another insipid year
Of uninspired and unrewarded work.

But it's my cargo, I pointed out,
For I bought it when I bought the boat,
And since my goods are dear, I've reduced risk
And insured the boat and all its contents
Against fortunes of war and acts of God.
With foresight enough to read fine print
I've secured this load and made provision
For uninsured losses by force majeure.
Unlike foolish Pharoah, king of Egypt,
When crops were pelted with hail mixed with frogs
Despite weather reports his priests prepared
That forecasted pristine skies forever,
I'm not one to let chance ruin life.
His ka, I'm informed, took a fatal hit
And made Pharoah since a figure of fun
Among those who teach the merits of hedge.
But even had I left myself exposed,
The loss is mine, of no concern to you.
Your loss at most is but one trip's wage.

That's an excellent point, replied the Mate,
But still a thought we'll stow below for now.
The freight we bear, I think, is not the source
Of the supernatural attack that looms.

If a few hymns were sung, said the Captain,
Just the ones we know, the first verse each,
We'd dissuade danger and feel better too.

For many a year I've sailed these waters,
The Mate announced as men gathered around,
Enough years to know that if storms approach
Only one craft among all afloat,
It means almighty Godhead's unhappy,
And not low in spirits or just depressed
Or just unhappy in a general way
With slowness of progress in world events,
But unhappy with that ship in particular.
Something aboard has caused him great offense.

Maybe it's the rigging, the Captain surmised.
The rigging, you know, looks kind of sloppy.

Don't dismiss the cargo yet, I said,
Still hoping to ride out this storm

By dumping a few items into brine.
Maybe we have contraband hidden aboard,
Pornography, illicit drugs or arms,
Or maybe we neglected some ritual
Now long in disuse but still on books,
Like a sacrifice, like blood-letting,
Like throat-slitting some virginal girl
Before launching the vessel onto surf.
Is one handy now? I have a knife.

All duties have been performed, said the Mate,
And all customs of port and God observed.
And I've checked the ship itself, stern to bow.
The only fair conclusion's plain to see.
Either high heaven's fickle and lawless
Or some one of our number's polluted
And draws down on us Godhead's disfavour.
Now there's no time to establish guilt
By torturing out a complete confession
From each of us, captain to cabin boy,
Before the ship in these insurgent seas
Takes water and founders and drowns us all.
Knifefights too and trials by combat
In round robin tournaments held on decks
That grow slick with fluids and pitch around
Will also take too much precious time.
I thus propose a game of cards commence.
Let each of us cut the tarot deck.
Highest card drawn is positive proof
That he who draws it becomes sacrifice,
Shall be cast overboard to save the rest.

I'll consent to this proposal, I replied,
And felt relieved indeed luck should decide.
A long winning streak had left me convinced
The fall of tarot cards was now enslaved
To improvement of my sore-wounded fortune.
You'd think I'd learned lessons from prior loss,
But gamblers soon forget past reversals,
Soon reverse the past to improve their moods.
Risk can be reduced if peril's dismissed;
Odds improve if loss is not subtracted
And balance sheets show rosier pictures
After certain items are written off,
Items best forgiven, best forgotten.

Since we hadn't yet gone far from land
The crew still remained unconvinced my luck
Would hold until the trip had come to end,
And still sought to win back their paycheques.
Desperation alone, it seemed to me,
Drove them now to raise the stakes so high.
The others too accepted the mate's game,
And so we each in turn cut that deck.

But what's this? I said. I've drawn a blank.
Someone's left a joker in this deck.

We use Assyrian cards, said the Mate.
In all Assyrian decks the blank card
Is primum mobile, master of all cards,
The royal, omnipotent trump of trumps.
It denotes Godhead, the world's ruler.
And I would drop that knife, if I were you.
All present, except you, are fully armed.

From where I hail the blank cards are jokers,
And I play by those rules. My ship, my game.
This, employees, is a false positive.

Are you a heretic? Is God a joker?
Clearly, they cried out, it's you alone
Whose unconviction has displeased the Lord
And whipped up a wrath from unsmiling depths.
They said this in unison, more or less,
As if all had rehearsed it behind my back.
Suspicion dawned. What had gone on here?
A foresight like mine should never fail,
Should never permit an unforeseen hand.
Had the decks, both card and ship, been stacked?
Or had I only misread the subtle signs,
Let an optimism misguide my sight?
Or, worse, had inoculations worn off
And left my mind completely future blind,
A falcon still primed to fly on the prey
Despite darkness that meant his hunt was done?

The crew then seized me and pinned my arm,
Took my knife and pushed me toward the rail.
They stopped only when a lookout screamed,
Saint Tiamat Dewormed! Look at that!

And a huge, familiar shape breached surface
A good ninety cubits off, leapt and dived,
Displayed itself before it plunged again
And sucked big sections of sky through the sea.
The monstrous splash showered us with currency.

Part IX.4: NEMESIS.

Currency? said Marguerite. How odd!
Are not the seas composed of saltwater?

Currency. Almost entirely in fifties.
This was an effect of my double vision.
One eye saw water, the other cash.
On one hand we have ordinary seas,
And on the other the flood of banknotes
Which rose to submerge mighty Nineveh.

Nineveh, to my eye, said Marguerite,
Remains unliquidated, dry as dust.
Explain this, if you can, clever parrot.

It's written - I've read it written somewhere -
That I'll rise up on resurrection morn
To see a neighbour corpse cold on its slab,
A tag affixed to toe that reads "Jonah".
I'll say, but if that's Jonah, who am I?

A good question, she said, but what's the point?

Nineveh's much like her prophet, myself,
Except that I'm the one who swapped the tags
Between two cadavers that looked alike
Stretched out side by side down in the morgue.

That fails as explanation, she complained.
Try again. Where is the missing money?

Uncorrected, unassisted vision
Can fail to detect the full reach of murk
That has coiled itself around struggling forms,
But my gift allows a greater clarity.

I was changing shape, like one of the djinn,
And yet retained some solidity still.
Shapechangers cannot see solid shapes,
Not until they melt away, pass away,
Join the past perfected as puddled nouns.
Dyslexic archers with a moving target,
They speak not to but behind the other.
They cannot see shapes, only remember,
They cannot advance, only stand stricken.
Waves collapse, recede, forsake the shore,
The caress halts when its objective retreats,
When the satisfaction precedes the hunger,
When the reunion is a wound reopened.

I should have known better, she said to this,
Than expect birds to give direct response,
A straight answer out of a crooked beak.

Okay, try this: it was a flash flood.
Wait, Marguerite! Put the hammer down.
This, of all secrets, I cannot reveal,
But here's a map that'll mark out the spot,
A tip on the topic God disallows:
During all of the rains and during his cruise,
Noah never saw floods that Enlil sent,
Never saw water, never got wet.
So righteous was he, God kept him dry,
So dry, in fact, skin blistered and cracked,
His clothes grew grimy, he panted with thirst.
He was so dry and so dehumidified,
So wrung out, so dehydrated that,
Before flood was done, he crawled down halls
That went in long circles inside the hull,
Wandered desert in the watertight ark.
His crawl led parallel to all pipes,
Equidistant from the starboard and port,
As high above the deeps that rose beneath
As deep beneath rains that fell from above.
And should Godhead come to know that Noah
Had now chosen to head for the ship's head,
He'd head him off, turn him, confuse his thoughts,
And erase all memories, all knowledge,
That Noah had built on waterfront lots.
Noah was denied charts that showed oceans,
Or rivers and lakes or any blue ink,

Nor even waste, had it one oasis.
All others saw water, saw and died,
But God kept Noah safe, locked in drought,
Kept him too lost to watch all dissolve,
Too busy and distracted, too intent,
Too dry to see the seas lap our chins.
And forty days don't give you enough time
To sex parakeets and ensure they're paired,
To bunk sheep and wolves on different decks,
To do all jobs that daily come up
And still make boats that God lets you steer.
Amateur shipwrights never find time,
Once they've planed the keel and whittled the
mast,
To fashion even a makeshift rudder
Or build bulkheads with portholes installed.

That splashing, I'd bet, is a giant squid,
Remarked one old and myopic sailor.

But I knew instantly what the thing was.
It was true, then, what the ancients observed,
That fate governs us all, our parts in sum,
Not excluding even our private parts,
And even when they swim off on their own
Pursuing paths divergent and convergent
To reunite with departed pleasure.
And can any man know a greater joy
Than to have a mammoth sexual organ
Sporting and spouting in seas of pure cash?

You flushed it down the toilet and it grew,
Like reptiles that swim the city sewers?
You're skirting, parrot, the bounds of good taste,
Said Marguerite. Which eye saw this,
That one that's here, or that one that's not?

Not all of flesh is raised, Marguerite,
When resurrection gathers us all in.
Parts that remember God, that glorify,
They go up and leave the others behind.
Tongues that sang praise are saved, but not minds,
So that Gehenna gets stuffed with ragged breath
While Paradise becomes an organ bank,
Stocked with tongues that struggle to find sense.

And so it is with all bodily parts,
Those parts that know themselves made of God
And those that forget, think themselves world.
And yet, even dispersed in this fashion,
With one part here and its counterpart there,
With one a glorifier and one not,
The hour will come that will reacquaint all,
So broken wholes snap together again,
Except hairs perhaps that lodge in carpets,
Or those crumbs of skin that flake from our
scalps,
The bits of God that don't easily rise,
And don't, once risen, quite reabsorb.
For all else, the hour comes, hunts them down,
Whips them around until homogenized
And spits out bricks made of clay and slime.
My hour, it seemed, had just arrived early,
Too early, and in too public a place.
It seemed fit our courses should intersect,
That joy should erupt with so large a splash.
And yet, with unlicensed acts, the old beast
Had taken all of that joy for itself,
And left for me only the profound shame
That always accompanies such occasions.
Never before, not in my wildest dreams,
Had I felt myself, before man and God,
To be so indecently overexposed.

And the Captain said with authority, No!
It's not a squid and not jellyfish,
Not a lobster and not a sea serpent.
I recognize well enough that bulk,
And that size and that side silhouette.
Oh what I wouldn't give for a harpoon,
A harpoon and a pulpit to perch on!
It's a sperm whale, wickedest and meanest
Of all marine life convulsing the depths,
But I'd pin it through its big squinting eye
If it came anywhere within my reach.

But the Mate exclaimed, That's no sperm whale.
You'd be a fool to harpoon that baby
And put yourself at loggerheads with God.
That's the great fish known as Leviathan,
The Godhead's own agent of nemesis.

Prone on the flood, extended long and large,
Pale, wet and glistening in the sunlight
With what I'd guess to be Norwegian foam,
That stuff they put in fire extinguishers,
It did indeed resemble the sea beast
Leviathan, which Godhead of his works
Was most sensitive as to relative size,
And therefore created in sheer bulk as huge
As several score brainless brontosaurus
Or twelve hundred standard grey elephants.
Even so, the Lord was never convinced
That the blasted thing would be monstrous enough
To be believed by men truly amazing
Yet not a paradigm of bad taste.
Consequently, in constantly comparing
Proportions of this and other works,
With insults and boasts he revealed himself
A highly jealous, highly nervous God.
And to see my organ as large or larger
Than Leviathan, I feared the great wrath
And penis envy first shown in Babel
With his demolition of its proud tower.
There, overwrought, perplexed in the extreme
With the green vanity of his own image,
Unjustly suspecting siege and defiance,
He had debased the language of paradise,
High Dutch, as we are reliably informed,
Until the words quitting time, lunch time,
And coffee break were unintelligible
To all but the unfortunate Nimrod,
Confused the poor Babelonian brains
With severe oxygen deprivation
Until all productivity declined.
He agitated strikes, revoked permits,
Caused cost overruns and shoddy work,
Blew welders off girders with wind gusts
And put elevators out of order
And behaved very poorly in general
Until the whole project was abandoned
And the work crews dispersed to other jobs.
Then with his deep, mocking laugh he said,
As the heavens remain higher than the earth,
Divine ways remain more high-handed
Than any mankind has imagined yet.

The lesson was clear but a bit too late.
I was doomed to repeat ancient history.
Yet in exactly what mysterious way,
I asked myself, would the good Lord move?
Hormone imbalance? A mutant virus?
An electromagnetic pulse, perhaps,
To scramble up integrated circuits,
Still embryonic though they then were?
I tried to read the signs, concentrated,
Brought to bear all the data I possessed:
Sunspot cycles and soybean futures,
Ring widths of fallen giant sequoias,
Mayan man-hours lost to maize malaise,
Even the three-year moving average
Derived from lemming migration numbers
Correlated with days of grapevine growth
On long-lost Mount Krakatoa's slope.
You name it, I knew it, and I threw it in,
And hoped its flavour would help crack the code.
Yet my future and fate remained opaque
Until I heard the ship's first mate speak
And knew I was paddleless up shit creek.

A rhyme, said Marguerite. I heard rhyme.

It can happen, I said, in moments of stress.

Well, then, said the Mate, observe yon jinx.
Does he not stammer, does he not blush
As fate's instrument pops up nearby?
This behaviour betrays secret knowledge.
This meet on high seas is an appointment,
Not just happenstance but rendezvous.
And look at him, with one eye pointed here,
And the other there, it just weirds me out.
The cards, it seems, do not steer us wrong
And we need no further talk: throw him in!
And you there, take that lifejacket back
And call the chaplain out to make a speech.
Remember, friends, that once the owner's gone
Both ship and cargo belong to us.

How much time... I spat at the captors
Who half-dragged my body across the deck
To where their chaplain made ready his notes

To read a few words of comfort and hope.
But some crewman's hand stifled my mouth
Before I found voice for my own few words.
Thereupon the chaplain intoned wisdom
Dredged up from his own prearranged text.

Three are the days a man is in the grave
Before his swollen belly bursts apart
And pours putrefaction beneath his nose,
But thirty days will pass before his soul
Completes its full, comprehensive review
Of how a brief career had gone amiss
And leaves the corpse behind for parts unknown.
Etcetera, etcetera. Throw him in.

In this sea, Marguerite, cash or not,
It was sink or swim, and so I smartly swam
As waves welled up high above my head.
I saw, carried inside the surging whelm
Like pieces of fruit in jellied dessert,
Bits of Nineveh, those bits that float.
Although some might have spent the time
And puzzled on how all fits together,
This shingle, this rafter with that roof,
This door, this stud with that drywall,
My own attention only sought escape.
Skill as visionary will not improve
Abyssmal navigational technique,
Unless you're also some kind of saint,
A more creditworthy client of God,
And thus receive the same package he gave
To all the migratory waterfowl.
I mean that knack that pulls apart poles,
That puts north that way, south over there,
Air overhead, water down below.
Foresight itself will dissolve when wet,
And hindsight rarely improves a flounder,
So that I knew not which way I swam
Save it be away, let it please be away,
The way away from that aquatic form.
But there it was again, back before me,
Close enough for insight to click in
And oversight to bow out, close enough
For second thoughts to override the first.
Now I perceived I'd made a bad mistake,

A faux pas, a massive Freudian slip.
Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.
I saw now, through my other eye perhaps,
It wasn't my missing organ after all,
But rather, in fact, my old friend the fish,
Flippant still, but now grown grandiose
With Godhead's ichthyphallic bombast.
It spake then, last ictus, rictus wide.

One of the reasons I so love my job,
Fisherman, said fish, is the ironies.
First you catch me, and now I you.
You put up, Jonah, a hell of a fight
But at last you come to the end of your line.
My tonnage now has reached the promised sum,
And the hour approaches, indeed now is,
For discharge of debt, public and private.
The commandment and enactment, what connects?
The Lord is both outward and inward,
His signs nourish like fruit, intoxicate,
They deflect the flight home from tree to hive,
Home from Troy to the old, faithful hound.
Lie down in this meadow, sleep awhile,
Here where God's signs are clustered and ripe.
From the belly of the bee, from her underside,
Drips fluid, the many-hued elixir.
Is this a sign of God? Time for a lube?
Did you read the sign that says no exit?
To answer sphinx you must become answer.
Success brings regret, failure brings death.
And only one posture will pin the beast,
Only one hold will constrain the wrestler,
But to assume that contorted position
Invites attack from low-circling angels.
Fell one or more with your crossbow bolts,
You only postpone the descent for awhile,
They will twist overhead, undiminished.
And pose if you will as other than you are,
Your scent is unmistakable to the hound.
And flee to where you choose, he waits there.
Wherever you choose is where he will wait,
The faithful hound, inward and outward,
The self-created turned inside out.

And then the fish in one emphatic move

Rose up, struck, and swallowed whole its prey.

At last! said Marguerite. Dinnertime!