

METAFISHICS

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I. A SMALL BLOCKAGE

There it is, the plumber said. The problem.

And there it was, a partly mangled box,
A soggy container made of cardboard
That had squeezed down a length of drainage pipe,
Pipe a bit too tight to let it pass.
This piece of metal was one he'd detached
From that network of like-looking pipes
That ran beneath Sinsharishkun's kitchen.
And though the blockage was firmly jammed in,
The plumber possessed a tool, called a worm,
That took but a moment to dislodge the box
And force the whole mass out the far end.

It plopped out, flopping over as it fell,
And landed on the brickwork basement floor.
He thought, as it hit, he heard sound emit,
The sort of short remark a chicken makes
Just as the axblade bisects its neck.

The box looked as if it once had held shoes,
A foot's length long, two foot widths wide,
With a fitted lid covering it over.
It had a damp card affixed to the lid,
A card that despite its age still announced,
In legible, copperplate cuneiform,
To my dear Marguerite, with love, from Armand.

And who, he wondered, was this Marguerite?
She had not accepted gifts with great grace
If they'd come to rest here, still wrapped up.
Were I Armand, I'd be, I think, upset
To learn what fate had ingested my gift.

And then, more clearly, unmistakably,
More sounds came from that sodden box.
The plumber stopped, dropped pipe and dropped worm.
The object, beyond any doubt, had spoke.

Is this the day the dead are raised? it said.

The plumber briefly considered these words
And studied, as he did, the shape at his feet.
Whatever it was that this box contained,
It was not, evidently, what he'd sought,
Not a book composed of paper and ink
That mouths its words but doesn't vocalize.

In the normal course, the course events take
If not diverted or badly backed up,
No book would ever dare speak aloud.
And any book put inside that shoebox,
Even were it of a size that might fit,
Would long ago have relaxed back to pulp
And left just empty, slime-slicked covers.
No amount of work would restore it now,
Even if, as he'd hoped, it were inside.
What, in God's name, had Marguerite done?
This woman, whomever she might have been,
Would surely have known enough about books
To guess that this wasn't how they're stored:
In a box, in a pipe, soaked in sewage.
Even illiterates, even philistines,
Should know enough of books to realize
The resale value would not be enhanced.

The plumber felt his mood begin to swing
Away from its initial, wild elation
Toward truly subterranean gloom.
It wasn't just the fact the box had spoke,
When he'd expected more muted discourse,
That now prompted intense disappointment.
There was, also, the substance of that speech.
The topic raised neither addressed his needs
Nor made much sense in present context.
The question asked bore a religious stink,
Sour odour that modern ventilation
Had only lately cleared from public space.

So, box, you speak? You'd think, so gifted,
You'd find a matter of greater relevance
With which to strike up a conversation.
The one you've chosen is long obsolete.
We long ago left behind such nonsense.
The choice marks you as foreign to this town,
A primitive, a Dhul-Nunite, a rube,

A brutish tribesman who trails camel herds.

The box did not make a reply to that
But made, distinctly now, its wordless sound,
Sound not lamentation but protest,
The same sound, indeed, that birdkind makes
When act and result have severed old pacts,
When neck has let head go its own way.

Is that it? Are you finished talking now?
Is this how ancients did dialogue?
Did they broadcast words in gnomie bursts,
Then, without signoff, go off air?
It's now common here to start with greetings
And then, when finished, to say goodbye.
And most interaction conducted now
Is done with just those two, start and end,
With pleasantries, perhaps, sandwiched between.
That's the sum of Ninevite courtesy,
Pared down to the bones, efficient and brisk.
It meets our need for speedy intercourse
By keeping distracting thoughts minimized.
You may add, if required, if it seems unclear,
Or if your customer looks confused or cheap,
How much, in total, cash must transact
To finish up a dragging relationship.
Hi. That's five bucks. Have a nice day.
And that, oh box, is how we do it now.
Don't think that advanced age or time served
In sopping up the foul flows from above
Exempts a box from modern protocols.

Are you talking to yourself now, oh plumber?

This question, the plumber knew at once,
Came not from the box but from the doorway.
He even knew to whom the voice belonged
And knew, what's more, what it would say next.
Despite that, he turned and faced the source,
Hoping to learn he had made some mistake.

Has the stress of doing a renovation
Without first obtaining proper permits
Driven your mind into such disorder
It alone finds itself fit companion?

What brings you down here, Inquisitor?

It's in dark places that crime makes its lair.
It flees the light of social intercourse
To babble out confessions underground.
There's no secret closet, cellar or alcove
That doesn't hide some worker like you.
You're all so well-behaved when well-lit,
But I've seen your eyes darting side to side,
Looking for some cover to crouch behind.

Go away - make your quota elsewhere.

That's what brings me here, with my flashlight.
This is where the best Inquisitors look
If hoping to fill out their pads of forms.
I'd never find enough code infractions
In places open to the public's scrutiny.

But this work doesn't require inspection.

I'm not at all surprised to see that guilt
Has overwhelmed your dissolute nature.
What torment must wrack an intellect
Compelled to watch a job performed in dark
By hands so clumsy, so ill-equipped!
And what horror must paralyze the eyes
Hooked to the nerves that drag tendons and bones
To put ragged rips in space-time's skin.

These fingers, sir, flex and clench even now,
Finding the shape that fits around your throat.

But take heart, oh plumber. I'm here to judge.
I'm here to purge you of innermost mess,
And force-feed the purity your soul craves.
I'll put a stop to these violations,
These desecrations of the orthodox,
These misguided acts your body performs.
I'll judge your perverse work and bring relief
To what little conscience your skull retains.

I don't need a permit to do repairs,
And that's exactly what this is, sir.

I'm unplugging this stopped up plumbing.

Legitimate repairs, said Inquisitor,
Are not performed in darkness, out of sight.

The dark, said plumber, is where pipes reside.

Pipes are put there by plumbers like you,
Plumbers who hope shoddy, illicit work
Remains hid from view and uninspected.
This pipe would not need repair at all
Had not one of your ilk installed it here.
What's in the box over there on the floor?

I don't know, said the plumber. It's a box.
It's a box I found crammed inside the pipe.

That looks to me, said the Inquisitor,
Very like a pipe component module,
Designed to promote a more even flow.
They're not approved for use in copper pipes.
I've seen them advertised in catalogues
That Master Gaster mails to Inquisitors,
But thought because the photographs were small
That they too would be smaller than this.
Still, that shape is very much the same.

It's not a pipe component module at all.
It's a cardboard box that once held shoes.
And what's more, you fool, these pipes are brass.

But brass pipes are no longer allowed here.
Master Gaster copper pipes are required.
Only they possess the right protective coat
That withstands Master Gaster Brand cleansers.
Because I see box here and pipe there,
I think, sir, you're doing a retrofit.
And that means you require a signed permit.

It came out. It's not going back in.

Ha! That too is a modification.
Any improvement made to liquid flow,
Without State permission, is sabotage.
All improvements, by code, require permits.

The box, Inquisitor, was plugging the pipe.
It was not part of the original design.
I have, as it happens, the blueprints here.

They'd be forged, no doubt. I'm no one's fool.

At any rate, I was sent here by Alf,
Sinsharishkun's most trusted lieutenant
On a matter of national security.
This repair has been authorized on high
And relates directly to Nineveh's siege.

That tale doesn't sound likely, plumber.
Who'd use a bumbler for critical work?
And since when is opening a plugged pipe
An affair on which royal eyes are fixed?
I'm issuing you a stop work order
Until such time your permits are produced.
All work you do from this moment forth
Will constitute a code violation.
You will face a fine, possible imprisonment,
And certain loss of your assets and tools,
Up to and including your hands and head.

My orders supercede your building code.
Go off and check it out, Inquisitor.

Touch one tool, that pipe or that box
And I'll see your neck spurting out blood.

After the Inquisitor had stormed off
The plumber turned attention back to the box.

He'll be back, said the box, I guarantee.

How, said plumber, would a box know that?

My function, friend, is not to promote flow.
My forte, rather, is unpleasant futures.
I spot their approach and call out warning.
It's a knack I have, one I haven't used
In ages spent awaiting a new life,
But one that nonetheless functions still.
You'll have need of it soon, I see already.

I'll assist if I can, if I'm still around,
And have not ascended bodily to God.

Forget resurrection. That's done with.

You say resurrection is obsolete.
Have we entered, then, the world's aftermath,
And is this chamber the dismal vestige?
Where, then, are those cratered graveyards,
That landscape the Angel's eyes have scorched?

You're talking nonsense, box. Get a grip.

And were all the dead raised, except myself?
Was glory too early or too hurried,
My box too small or planted too deep?

Perhaps your giftcard misled the Angel.
But don't worry, oh box. You've missed nothing.
The occasion was, I now forget which,
Cancelled or postponed, quietly dropped.
Assur's synod convened and took vote
To demote the notion to superstition.

Resurrection is now superstition?

It's just childish, the press release announced.
The very concept impedes progress,
And progress, as all advanced minds agree,
Is one process that musn't lose speed.
A new creed, it proclaimed, will now prevail.
We'll race ever higher, ever faster,
With never a pause for judgment or rapture
Until galaxies whip through our hair
And nebulae paste our triumphant cheeks.
We'll accelerate our growth, expand and rise,
Reach out for heaven's receding frontier.
Our climbs will rise without end to God,
Approach Assur on asymptotic curves.

Growth, I see, said box, still reigns here.
You seek more products to be put on sale,
More ziggurats and more Ninevites,
And more profits reported each quarter.
It was so even in my time, long ago.

Tell me - do you still make machines that feed
On all manner of worthless universe,
That grind creation down to sausage meat?

You're not a Ninevite box, said the plumber.
It's easy to tell from that tone you take,
For no shoebox made in local plants
Would ever make such insinuations.
And what, in fact, is wrong with sausage meat?

You're still the progeny of Nimrod here,
And time, clearly, has only sharpened minds
Without moderating old ambitions.
What has it done, I wonder, to your bodies?
I have heard the noise your footsteps make.
Now, I'd wager, you massive Ninevites
Surpass that ideal your gene has upheld,
That ideal form to which flesh aspires.
I'm sure your race now, grown from one cell,
Has grown too obese to go outdoors.

But any value that's still left outside
Easily fits in new, capacious rooms
Nineveh's cells construct to shelter selves.
Rows of empty treasury shelves exist,
Ready to store waterfalls and moons,
Glaciers and wild beasts and aromatic ores.
Even forests will fit, as potted plants,
As pixel bits fixed in memory chips.
We've reached what seems a comfortable weight,
But greater weight will bring greater comfort.
Each gain attained will bring wider girth
To press against cinched up trouser belts.

You don't find the extra weight a burden?

As bellies balloon to fill vacant space
And cell walls expand to encompass all,
All restriction backs off, notch by notch,

And for this you've discarded hope for glory?

You sound, box, as if you disapprove
Of what experts chose to govern plans.
Doing away with Judgment Day, oh box,

Is widely regarded here as masterstroke.
Not only does it motivate work
And promote flows into our balance sheets,
As the synod observed in notes they faxed
To media outlets throughout the town,
It also expedites corpse disposal
If hopes to resurrect are put to rest.

And just how was that explained? said box.

Many once feared quick incineration
Would turn one's eternal essence to ash
And put beyond reach the organs and limbs
Required to reconstitute risen flesh.
And so they'd bury the whole corpse instead,
Crate it up, then excavate a plot,
And gather around to watch it drop in.
They'd cover it over afterward, of course.

Yes, said the box, I've seen them do that.

But think, box, of all the acreage lost
To shoppers who so need places to park!
Bygone ages paid that no heed
And squandered land just to stash cadavers,
Just so each had room enough to keep
Neighbours and nature a safe distance off.
Ownership is best if it's absentee,
But the ancients hadn't yet discovered that.
They clung to property, soaked soil with self,
And left capital gains unrealized
Despite the miniscule returns received.
Buy and hold, was what the ancients believed.

I've found it prudent myself, replied box,
Not to expect an immediate return.

But you, box, belong to the same epoch
That gave decomposing human remains
Title in perpetuity to estates
That pastured no cattle, grew no crops,
And housed no tenants that paid out rent.
Good land was thus made into desert,
Waste, empty space except for monuments
On which mourners briefly lavished grief

And then left to let those stones erode,
To let bones await the trump's first blast.

Isn't that, friend, the natural order?

If so, it's just ancient history now.
Nineveh's crematoria now, box,
Operate around the clock, full-bore.
Citizens now, when appetites have failed
And no longer work to drive consumption,
Will not leave their relics in real estate
That's better put to more productive use.
We've redeveloped those cemeteries,
And the wide lawns once strewn with headstones
Are once again flat, suitable for golf.
We do not enshrine our ancestors now,
And don't look back at dust clouds we leave:
We let exhaust hang in the air unwatched
And let it settle out in solitude
To coat itself evenly across lawns
And paint grasses with greasy residue.

My spirit, it said, has not yet dispersed.

That explains, said plumber, the smell that fails,
Despite strong drafts, to vacate this room.

Notwithstanding opinions now in vogue,
I'd think a corpse takes a degree of cheer
From the hope its Hour, though distant, still waits.

Our current thinking states, said the plumber,
That flesh when dead will face dim prospects.
It becomes more likely as seconds tick
That dead flesh stays dead, never to rise.
A resurrection if not done at once
Is now almost never judged a success.
And once you're boxed, once cremated and urned,
Chances for pulling through sink to nil.
Glory seekers should try something else,
A magician's handcuff trick, perhaps,
Done inside an airtight, buried crate.

That's dead flesh. What about plastic?

I'll not venture guess on what impact,
If any, death will impart on that stuff,
Although resurrection in such a case
May prove somewhat, shall we say, redundant?
At any rate, box, despite the fascination
That's fastened your mind on death's reversal,
It is, as I've said, not one we discuss,
Particularly now, in coffeeshops.
Your topic belongs buried, all agree,
In a bygone, less rational age.

If you don't want to talk about the Hour,
Why, stranger, have you disinterred my box?
What other topic do you now propose?
What coffeeshop smalltalk forced you here
To drive poking tools into my head?

Talk in the town's coffeeshops these days,
Among the few who still frequent the spots
Now that no coffee or breakfast is served,
Is all about the siege that never ends
And that army that camps beyond our walls.
That siege, in fact, is what brought me here.

A siege, you say? Nineveh suffers siege?
What enemy would possess such power?

Only one who's heard no sound for months
Would have no news of Nabupolassar,
Dhul-Nunite Caliph of Babylon.
He's ringed our city with his countrymen
Along with Scythian cavalry and Medes.
Their force is large, but these walls are strong.
The situation hasn't changed for months.
It is thus at a standstill, a standoff.
How long, box, have you sat in that pipe?

Unnecessarily long, friend, I'd guess,
If I'm not yet dead, nor God's Hour due.
Who sent you here with tools to raise me up?

I'm a plumber, hired by King Sinsharishkun
To solve a tough riddle his foes have posed.
Flowcharts and blueprints have led me here.
A small blockage is what I came seeking,

And small blockage, a box full of questions,
In just the spot foretold, is what I've found.
How well do you do with answers, oh box?

If answers, friend, are what will serve you best,
You've picked the best box of all to unlid.
This one contains your town's emissary,
The prophet that Godhead sent Nineveh.
Release me from this box and this I vow:
You'll have more answers than you'll ever need,
Answers so profound you'll never know enough
To frame the questions their insights address.
You'll receive answers of such great power
They'll force matters to fit your intellect
Without asking, without invitation,
Until all submits and does as you bid.
Perplexity shall part, conundrums flee,
And all shadows quickly closet themselves
As soon as these answers reveal their light.
Nothing will withstand answers like mine,
Answers so obvious and transparent
That soon as seen they make a mind deny
It ever thought any problem was there.
Just let me out and you'll comprehend all,
And all, in its turn, will comprehend you.

Offers like that, clearly meant to tempt,
Will often understate the risks involved.
And so, oh box, I'm forced to hesitate.
I wanted to do nothing more before
Than open you up to see what's inside.
Now I must stop, consider, calculate.
Where there's prize, there's also peril.
Answer me this: what's the downside here?
I'm put in mind of that old fairy tale,
The one that tells about a fisherman
Who cast out his net and caught a djinni.

I don't know that tale, the box replied.

Once a poor fisherman cast his net
And hauled in a sealed bottle that contained
A dreadful ifrit within its tight confines,
Consigned there by King Solomon's command.

Enough. I now remember how it goes.
What's your point here, plumber? I want out.

The djinn so resent long imprisonment
That once uncorked they slay benefactors,
Even if consequences are made plain:
Slay me, they're warned, and God will slay you.
But reason can't match a long-held grudge
Packed in the gap between act and result.
The djinn strike out blindly, without thought,
And sink their fangs into the nearest throat.
They retaliate, no matter the cost,
No matter if their wrath's misdirected,
No matter if victims are fishermen
Instead of All-responsible Lord God.

You're paranoid, man. Just let me out.
There's no patient dynamite in here
Eager to catch a glimpse of recognition
Before it shares its hidden inner light.
Neither coiled cobra nor rotted skull
Awaits its chance to rise up with a grin.
It's not springloaded Jack packed inside,
And not a swarm of cotton-sotted moths.
I'm only harmless plastic, a toy bird.
On the other hand, I'm quite knowledgeable.
I possess great secrets you'd love to get.

Great secrets were indeed, thought plumber,
Precisely what he'd come here to obtain,
And so he did, despite trepidation,
Unlid the box and pull forth the contents.
The object was, as it itself had said,
A plastic bird that once was coloured green.
A part of that paintjob still remained
But most of the case now was blanched and pale.
It once possessed eyes inset in sockets,
But now only cavities remained, blind.
It was, he thought, strange, awash in sewage,
The bird's batteries still retained charge.

I hear water flowing, plumber, it said.
I hope you haven't overlooked a leak.
Where, in this city, do we now stand?

That's the sound that the River Tigris make
As it rushes past Nineveh's east wall.
It's loud and fast, swollen with mountain rains.
We can hear so clearly its fury here
Because this chamber abuts that wall.
We stand beneath the palace kitchen suite
In a dark room strung with cables and pipes.

Yes, said bird. The spot makes sense now.

This is where the Magi, from dream research,
And I too, from blueprints, knew to look.
Those secrets you mentioned: I want them all.
If I come back emptyhanded from here,
With only a toy bird to show the King,
I'll wish I'd met the vengeful djinn instead.
Sinsharishkun will want my head removed.

The blind plastic bird laughed at those words.
Relax, man. I know spells that fix that.
Decapitation becomes mere routine;
What was once a tricky operation
Is just quick procedure, done in a flash.
A head, if charmed, finds it little ordeal,
Painless too, if first anesthetized.
With spells I dispense it's not death sentence
To see hooded surgeons hand you your head.

Spells? You know spells? And are they written down?
Might you have a whole book of such spells
Like Friar Bacon or Doctor Duban?
What I'd prefer to see revealed is this -
A grimoire packed with strange incantations,
With page after page of marks in lines
That will, if understood, remake fate.

A book? You thought I might possess books?
You sought literary works, exercise guides,
A library of classic cowboy tales perhaps,
That ancients had thoughtfully stuffed in pipes?

But that indeed was what I hoped to find,
What I hoped my worm would poke from the tube.
I sought an ancient work of consequence,
Its secrets, in spell or psalm, written down.

Instead, my probe found only you, oh bird.

But what profit can any book promise
That this bird you see can't also provide?
Will not my voice unfold the same knowledge
More clearly stated, in greater depth,
With higher purpose, at much greater length?
Did not the old-time prophet Solomon,
The same one whose power subdued the djinn,
Discover true wisdom in bird discourse,
The wisdom he sought but never encountered
In verses scrawled down on mouldering scrolls?
What need had he for a Deuteronomy
When every tree branch featured a sage,
When each lawn owned oracular flocks
To tug up truth from the tunnels it dug?

Nonetheless, bird, it's a book I'm after.

And what need have plumbers for lines of print?
Do they need to read how the wrench is held,
How to tighten pipes with clockwise twists,
Or how to pad bills with imagined work?
The marks on pages will lie there, inert.
They're but dead language, trapped in rigid ink,
Unless a voice returns to lift them up,
And what voice, freed, would seek such a trap?

But so argue all who despise science
That chopped down bird-infested wilderness,
Surveyed it and wired it and paved it over.
We cleared away nonsense and built walls
Because our books retained the recipes
That demonstrate means to avert collapse.
We learned that bricks improve if made of clay
And not, as we first thought, of pureed yam.
And each mistake we've made has smoothed our path
For nothing is forgotten that's written down.
Only memory will let time progress,
And only books will keep memory fixed.
What twit bird ever does that work?
Bird chatter repeats itself forever
And never quite reaches new conclusions,
Never quite departs from futile refrains.

But books never interact or reply
If some unforeseen question should arise
And try to interrupt their monologues.
They always arrange facts in such a way
You never see the septic side that hides
Behind the seemingly scenes their prose has posed.
They always cover up the noise and mess
And only serve the finished, sculpted dish.
What wary eye ever knows for sure
If books present truth or just frothed facts?
Who knows if meals are truly nirvana
Or rather only superficial treats,
Spoiled meat beneath spice designed to tempt?
Am I not superior in that respect?

But that, oh bird, is not yet evident.

My conversation is far safer too.
You run greater risks when reading a book,
If not bought new, if borrowed or stolen,
If found abandoned beneath a bus seat:
The risk that others sneezed into pages,
Or, even worse, if very sick, bled.
And what about those vengeful authors,
Like, among others, your ifrit's Duban,
Who coat leaves with anthrax or smallpox
And then with dead tongues coax you to read on?
The unpolluted wisdom gained from birds
Is the better product, I'll guarantee.

Unpolluted? Look inside that pipe.
Your plastic crawls with fecal coliform
And typhoid and cryptosporidium.
I wear my gloves not for fear of your bite
But to ward off those contagions you bear.
I'm masked not so I go unrecognized,
But to cut the stench that steams off your case.
I feel the vapours cloy and smear my skin,
The march of tiny feet around my groin.
I'll need to disinfect my clothes and tools
And scrub down my body with alkalines
After our intercourse here is complete.

You'll never capture truth if taint dissuades.
If gold gleams up through an outhouse hole

You can turn away or go fish it out.
The best gnostics, true philosophers,
Will jump in with a splash and take a bath.

I beg your pardon if these thoughts offend,
But truly, bird, a book is what I sought.
The riddle that's posed specified a book
And a book, therefore, is what I must find.
Do you know the spells that conjure up books
From hells where spirit goes when letter rots?
Gratitude, I know, is foreign to toys,
As is joy, reverence or reckless love,
But all help you grant will find me grateful.

How, though, my good plumber, will it leave you?
Once its jaws are set, help won't unclench.
It hangs on, munching, gnawing falsehood
Until the world is stripped of all its hues.
You'd better tell me what your problem is.

II. HEAD-HUNT

Ninurta had gone forth to hunt for Zu
On mountainsides to Nineveh's northwest.
He'd climbed the steep, timbered terrain
Certain his enterprise would meet success,
For no past prey had ever found way
To evade the god's capacious gamebag,
A fact Ninurta always emphasized
In hymns he sang to celebrate himself.
None, proclaimed hymns, have ever outrun,
Outwitted or outmaneuvered Ninurta.
No creature possessed might that matched his
And none had adapted to a habitat
With such perfect fit Ninurta could not,
With one practiced stroke, quickly pry it out.
No species, family, or strain of prey
Had yet amassed such numbers he could not,
In one afternoon, render it extinct.
Entire phyla that once flourished on earth
Had disappeared into Ninurta's bag,
And left behind no sign, no fossil,
No evidence beyond his own account.
Entire prairies that once were black with herds
Were now empty and devoid of all life,
Depopulated and stripped down to soil
To stand as signs to every human eye
Ninurta's path had taken him this way.
Or so it was said, in that praise he'd raised.

Behold, said hymns, the god's corridor,
The wide expressway that gashes the plains,
That goes level enough and straight enough
That trucks pulling trailers laden with eggs
Could hurtle at top speed down through it.
Follow, said hymns, the course his path takes,
And no obstruction, blockage or detour
Shall hinder your smooth and rapid progress.
Ninurta has cleared mankind's landscape,
Sterilized it, cleansed it of microbes,
And since his machete has last paid visit
Vast swamps have become but bleak deathpits,
Basins freed of squeaks, shrieks and mating cries,

Their squirming life gone, sucked into muck.

And yet the luck, skill and pure brute force
That always in past had guided onslaught
And brought back reward from where it had slept,
Had not proved to be, this time, enough.
Although he'd ducked beneath rock outcrops
And crawled down tunnels and traversed cliffs
To find the situations Zus preferred,
He had not drawn back his bowstring once.
He'd caught not even a glimpse of Zu,
Despite the Zu sign strewn all around,
From eggshell fragments of the newly hatched,
Through the tubular turds and the globs of spit
Characteristic of the half-grown chicks,
To coiled up output from full adults.
Zu spoor was littered so thick in spots
It poisoned lichens and discoloured streams.
He'd come to canyons and ravines so clogged
They spilled runoff that moved across slopes
As slow slurries, as lava flows of filth.
Zus, beyond a doubt, had once rooked here,
And yet neither nests nor Zus themselves
Were found in any alpine cave or rift
To which, after effort, the god had climbed.

He'd thought, because he sought not whole Zu,
But only a part, the top part, the head,
That chance for success would therefore improve.
The ratio of the head to body mass,
The part he sought to the part he did not,
Should stand in an inverse relationship
To odds against expectation attained.
As any battlescarred investor knows,
If one reduces demand for high yields,
One gains, in proportion, diminished risk.
Smaller goals have greater likelihood
Since luck needs less budget, less work,
To fashion together realization.
And had he narrowed search even further
And desired just a tuft from crestfeathers,
The god might well have come away happy,
For there were, in fact, quite a few of those.
There were, too, beak splinters and skull shards,
But not enough to make a complete head.

And though some parts were there in abundance,
Others, tiny but necessary, were not.
He knew, from one short, all-seeing glance,
From one wide-angled broad spectrum scan,
Too few of the scraps would match with gaps
To reconstruct a plausible cranium.
And so Ninurta left them where they were.

He'd thus come down slopes in foul temper.
His prey had dodged his much-vaunted woodcraft,
And Assur, when told, would fly into rage,
And Ishtar, that bitch, would wink and laugh.
He saw now he ought not have made boasts
When Godhead told how his own attempts
Had retrieved most of the book, most of Zu,
But not, in each case, the critical part.
Ninurta's claims, before the Pantheon,
That no game exists that flees far enough
Or twists trail enough to defeat his nose
Were now exposed as merely gusts of air
That blew through skies without much effect.
He'd come up short when stakes were highest.
He had not come back with the missing book
In which God had scribbled out destiny.
His trophy bag did not contain the head
Of the Zu who'd so abused Assur's trust
And took the book while Godhead had bathed.
No victory feast would greet Ninurta
Should now he slink back into the Presence
Without book and without head for the pot.
There'd be, in fact, only a small luncheon:
Kitchen staff would serve each god on hand
A single and microscopic sandwich
In which was interleaved a slice they'd shaved
From that dubious carcass his hunt had bagged.

That carcass, though bagged and out of sight,
Bore witness, in weight and odour alike,
To just how poorly this hunt had gone.
It wasn't merely Zu that wasn't there.
The catalogue of game he hadn't found
Began with stags, rabbits, lions and boars,
And ended with the many exotic beasts
You'd not likely see lurking these wilds,
Those, for example, that range salt waters,

Your sailfish and oysters, your ichthyosaurs.
And of all he might more likely have slain,
Those whose season, last season, this was,
Of all the beavers, badgers and bear cubs
That will come out after snows draw back,
He'd killed only a brace of sea turtles
Who'd dragged themselves inland to lay eggs.
It seemed they'd lost sight of the constellations
That governed destiny and breeding cycles.
They had dragged themselves up onto the beach
And evidently kept dragging across plains,
Up over foothills and onto peaks
To meet their fate, a deity's spearpoint.
The exhausted turtles refused to struggle
And gave Ninurta no satisfaction.
He might as well have plucked berries from vines
For all the sport those death throes bestowed.
And one, the female, he'd abandoned there,
Just dropped it there and gave it a great kick
After it showed symptoms it felt unwell,
Unmistakable signs of salmonella
Alongside the gashes his spear had left.

It was just before hills lost incline
That Ninurta came upon a stray head,
A disembodied head, rolling along.
It was, indeed, a head, but not the one
That matched the torso Assur had acquired.
The head was human, not Zu at all,
And its face scowled grim determination.
Its eyes were fixed on high mountain ranges,
And moved in arcs with each revolution,
The same trick that spinning dancers use
To keep off wobbles that dizziness brings.
When the eyes spotted Ninurta nearby
They shifted focus onto the god's nose
And head changed direction and slowed its roll.
Ninurta found this sight remarkable,
For the head rolled not down, but up hill.
And that, he knew, defied physical law
That governs head motion along a path.

Ninurta didn't recognize the head,
But human heads, to gods, will look alike,
And so he stopped and bid the head hello

In case the head was one he'd once chosen,
One he'd once blessed or shown some favour,
Or in some way exchanged correspondence.
Was this, perhaps, a devotee, a fan?
Perhaps kind thoughts had earned the head grace,
A plastic pen or coffee mug or shirt
Emblazoned with Ninurta's stern countenance.
This encounter, perhaps, was not by chance
But rather the product of prayers answered.
This meeting seemed, in some part at least,
A thing fated perhaps, perhaps contrived.

A god! said the head. Prayers are answered!
I hope, oh lord, my sacrifice sufficed.

You sacrificed everything but head?

Those heretics, the Asharites, would say
It was more an accident than sacrifice.
But that view is proven to be heresy,
And short-sighted too, by your presence here.

The Asharites are those, asked Ninurta,
Who think Godhead creates new worlds,
Each unconnected to predecessors,
In each new moment that happens along?

Yes, said the head. Those are Asharites.
I hope gods take note and kill them all-
At your earliest convenience, lord, of course.

Heaven could put bounties out, I suppose.
They do sound as if they deserve to die.

Bounties, oh lord? That sounds too overt.
I'd do your work on the sly, were I you,
Were I the god and were we two transposed.
I'd try non-intrusive interventions
So that none cry foul if lines are crossed.

Lines? said the god. What lines do you mean?

I mean, oh lord, the ones between moments,
The lines that come down from above and chop,
And divide hitherto from nevermore.

The heretics watch over them always,
Waiting for transgressions and anomalies,
For eery abductions and substitutions.
If you kill a few you'll just confirm fears.
Hey, they will say as lovers disappear,
Whatever happened to old what's-her-name?

Would Asharites, said god, take lovers?

Those birds you shoulder - are they battlecrows?

They are. The one on the left is called Left
And that other, on the right, is named Right.

Wait, said head. Is Left to your left or mine?

That, head, he said, is an excellent point.
I'm never quite sure which one is Right.
Those two oft, as joke, trade positions
So that Left is on right and Right on left.
And sometimes, too, I'll climb up on my steed
By inserting right boot in left stirrup
And learn I've mounted myself up in reverse.
It confuses me - and possibly the birds.

And by the word reversed, do you mean reversed
Relative, said head, to the horse's tail?

Horse and rider will work best when aligned.

And that would then put Right to my right,
Were I facing you, horse facing me,
And were the crows, for once, in a sober mood?

Quite so, head, said the god. Quite so.

It's Left then, said head, that made the mess
That spills down across your right shirtsleeve?

It snacked on a bit of bad sea turtle.

And how went the Zu hunt? asked the head.

Badly, said Ninurta. But how, oh head,
Did you deduce that Zu was the game I sought?

That's a Zu fork, is it not, it said,
That wickedly pointed tool in your belt?
It's used only to eat the Zu pituitary,
Its tines designed to best catch the tissue
And detach that delicacy still intact
From the bitter matrix the roots wind through.

That's so, head. You're quite perspicacious.

Also, said head, I have a knack with blood.
There's some mixed in that battlecrow shit,
Enough for seers to see the word Zu.

How come you to roll here, all alone?
This wilderness harbours strange monsters,
Rocs and dragons, liver-eating gryphons,
Carnivorous bisons, scorpion larvae,
And ground-hogs the size of motor vessels,
Who'd make quick meals of rotating meat.

Rolling, said head, keeps my tan even,
And works indeed like a rotisserie.
It's not, however, the primary function.
The speed you've seen is meant for long distance.
I can tumble faster than that if needed,
If packs of bisons decide to give chase.

How is it, then, that you perform this trick?

I'm self-propelled and self motivated,
Bowled up here by my own volition.
It's all controlled by the occipital lobe.

To what end, though, do you roll? said the god.

I've come seeking Godhead, said the head.

But Assur, said Ninurta, is elsewhere.
However, like the entire universe,
I'm partook of that same divine nature.
And, what's more lucky, in me you'll find
The Oneness in higher concentration
Than you'd find, for instance, in strewn Zu stools.
I am Ninurta, head. You'll have heard my name.

I can speak to you, then? inquired the head.

If you find my service at any time
Does not meet with complete satisfaction
You may, instead, speak with my supervisor.
But since he's elsewhere, as I've just stated,
You'd need to roll there, wherever it is.

My name, said head, is John the Mule-slayer,
So named, sir, for one previous feat
Against which all other deeds have paled.
It certainly outshines that mishap,
The brief brush of neck with sawmill saw,
That left my head bouncing up this slope.

What petition of Godhead do you make?

I wish to become King of Babylon.

A high ambition for one who slays mules!

I slew, Ninurta, not mules in plural,
But one mule only, only one mule.
My heart, it seemed, wasn't fully involved.
All those present agreed it would be best
If John took early retirement at once.
That one mule, they said, was quite enough,
And that one mule, they swore, they'd never forget.

The heart, said Ninurta, must guide the hand.
I am, it's well known, skilled in war's art.
I've honed both my intellect and physique
Until rival armies are like unto vapours
That part and fall back as Ninurta strolls.
My foes, in hosts as numerous as grasses,
Will sigh when sliced by Ninurta's eyesight
And turn to carrion, collapsing as I pass.
And that's what happens on days that I'm hot.

None who've seen you or stood within reach,
Would ever dare express doubt at your words.

There's other days, though, that compensate,
That drag my average down to average.

Those are the days I'm not quite in the zone,
For even gods will need to concentrate
If they hope to push through to goals they've set.
I can whip arrows onto tiny gnats
That hover above antipodal swamps,
Unless distracted by some errant thought,
A brief wish for more or regret at less.
When that happens, head, aim goes amiss
And missiles end embedded in one's foot
Or stuck through the eye of a child or pet.

But surely, Ninurta, you never fail!

Although I know kung-fu and Sun Tzu,
Although I've steeped myself in mystic winds
So to move around space without resistance,
Whenever mindset wanders or departs
My win-loss standings register a drop.
It's small, true - and rare, true - but true, still.
Hiccoughs too fleeting for eye to spot
Will interrupt Ninurta's smooth motions
And deflect quanta slightly off-target.
My pulse will miss beat and breathing will hang
And bowels will flinch as shots go awry.

And yet, said head, you seem so intent!
Your aura throbs with orchestrated roars,
A score of leopards yoked as one engine,
Each raging renewed by flickering whips,
Its piston pounding in synchronized wrath.

On good days, said god, it goes all day.
I speak now of those long days it won't,
When first one leopard, and then the rest,
Cough like carburetors starved of air.

Perhaps these failures are only imagined.

A fault is still a fault, imagined or real.
And that, head, is very nearly my point.
Illusion intervenes, impedes the real.
This is lesson for both mortal and god
Who'd rather dream than slay a present foe.
Your dream, oh head, should go for the mule throats
And not hurtle the ragged horizons.

Is this how you'll excuse an empty bag?
Did clouds cross your mind and cloak the prey?

No, head, said Ninurta. They did not.

My dream, lord, is not as fickle as that.
It doesn't waver off its chosen target.
It's always fixed on one destination.
Its intent arcs and falls on Babylon.

But what happens, oh head, once it descends?
I'll share with you a bit of foreknowledge,
Induction constructed from past performance,
From past events that took similar course.
Your dream on reentry will lose its shape.
It will dissipate on contact with walls
That always surround well-fortified towns.
I've seen other dreams smack against bricks.
They stayed where they hit, remained there as stains,
Drips that slid down sun-baked battlements.

That dream, Ninurta, is all I have left,
All, really, I've ever kept eye on.
And even in the sawmill where I worked
To keep our land safe from encroaching trees,
I'd harboured my dream to rule Babylon.
And yet it's true that interference occurred.
I think my dream, as with the unhappy mule,
Interfered with focus to such extent
It brought to abrupt end that job too.

And how, again, were you decapitated?

It was due, as I said, to inattention.
The whirring teeth of that sawblade whined
As they cut compliant planks into lengths.
Their hypnotic screech subdued resistance,
A droned tune that charmed not only wood
But also the head that bounces before you.
So charmed was my head it got too near,
Forgot what rage it was that spun teeth,
And bared, asleep, its own connecting neck.

This came as a blow, I'm forced to suppose,

To lovers and friends, to shocked coworkers,
To the sawmill management's safety drive.
You should never dream around machinery.

But my dream has survived its ordeals intact.
It persists despite the bruising it's endured.
The position I take is therefore this:
It's not the dream but those jobs I blame.

Babylon's already ruled, said god.
The throne there, I'm told, is securely gripped.
The warlock king Nabupolassar reigns.
His hideous face appears on old coins,
Coins circulated for decades now,
Coins so worn only eyes stare out.
He's older now than anyone alive
But shows no inclination to retire.
All possible rivals are dead or cowed.
I'd dream, oh head, if I were you,
Of some village with just one gas pump
And maybe a shack that sells souvenirs.

My dream, it said, is not the dozing kind.
It's not the kind with rapid eye movements,
With strange twists of plot and changes of scene
And characters that morph, each into each.
My dream does not obscure this real world
And doesn't blind me to Babylon's state.
I know that Nabupolassar is king there.
What I also know, and this is a fact
That Godhead too should give extra weight,
Is that Nabupolassar rejects Dhul-Nun.
His prophecies are unknown in Babylon.

You're a Dhul-Nunite? said Ninurta.
And where's that hood that all of you wear?

The hood impeded roll speed, said head.
The point, oh god, is not what is without
But what's within the heads that happen by.

Don't provoke gods with advice like that.
I've cracked open many a shell, oh head,
That hoped to withhold the goodies inside.
I've peeled open many a foil wrapper,

Stripped many a schoolgirl uniform,
That hoped to delay my gratification.

Let me announce thought more directly, then.
Within my head exists the scripture verse
In which the prophet repeats his foresight
That before Nineveh the Wicked can fall,
Babylon must embrace the Holy War.
It won't happen while the Warlock's in charge.

It might surprise you, head, said Ninurta,
To learn with what little true devotion
That Godhead's agencies will follow through
And see fulfilled every damned scripture
And every last damned raving vision
That pops up in a prophetic forebrain.
Higher priorities demand attention.
The gravitational constant, we insist,
Must always remain, more or less, constant.
How is it, head, you can roll uphill?

With faith, said head, there come miracles,
Miracles, that is, to the infidels.
I hesitate, lord, for many reasons,
Not least the fact that you're clearly divine,
To put you in the class Dhul-Nun condemned.

Events, head, should observe certain rigours.

But faith, lord, accepts many exceptions.
Contradiction, in the right light, departs.
The absurd, once believed, will disappear.
The weird, if believed, becomes commonplace.

Are you fool enough to believe all that?

Witness will nod off, secure in its faith,
And say only, it is as if it were it,
If shown a throne that scripture transported,
Air-freighted overnight by God's Word,
Uprooted from Sheba and then replanted.

There's millions of miracles, said Ninurta,
Darting here and there with joyous abandon.
They'll hang in air in sloppy formations,

And then without warning dive for my face.
They get caught in hair, nip holes in scalps,
And paste themselves onto plastic goggles.
I oft forget to forgive nonchalance,
And thoughtlessly swat whole swarms of them dead.

You didn't find, I gather, Zu or book
In those mountains to which my roll ascends?

Who told you, said Ninurta, of the book?

Blood and flesh that sawteeth tore away
Made odd splatters upon mill rafters.
They looked to me like Assur's secret book.
God showed me the book, said, here - read it.

The shock brought by sudden decapitation
Can often cause strange hallucinations.
Assur took back his book, Mule-slayer,
After tracking Zu through Nineveh's streets.

He didn't get it all, though, did he?
I saw, in those patterns, the missing part.
I saw that Zu was gone too, in part.
Your bag, I see now, would perfectly fit
Both those blood-depicted missing parts,
Were it not for the sea turtle it holds.

Could you, then, read the book? asked the god.

The image, said head, was too low res.
Either that or it has deteriorated,
Knocked out of focus by deep potholes
That pocked the passage between here and there.
Memory's too fuzzy, too coarse-grained,
To recreate any legible text.

Thank God, said the god, at least for that!

Your bag looks too slack, the head observed,
To hold a book of any true substance.

And how is true substance defined for books?

One that survives if soaked in turtle gore.

Have you noted, lord, that my roll has stopped?

Thank God, said the god, also for that!
Are you not like the pagan sophist's head,
The one that the pandit Nagarjuna wore
Until sheared off by a grassblade slice,
The one that later crept back across leagues
To reunite lengths of tracheal tube?
Your heart doesn't wait, somewhere ahead,
The homecoming of its long-absent brain?

No, Ninurta. I've left my past behind.
Our meeting here was predestined, oh lord,
And that's why my roll terminates here.

That, replied Ninurta, seems unlikely.
I'd say, rather, that you've rolled the wrong way
And now seek to justify the mistake.

The qiblah, it's said, bends geodesics
So that prayer will always redirect.
God and destiny, in this way alike,
In end recombine mistake with intent.
We two, you and I, can make a bargain
That gives me Babylon and you the book.

You're a very crafty head, said the god.
I see how you'd benefit from this,
If god's plan coincides with John's plan.
But how does Godhead retrieve the book
That still remains missing from holy writ?

The wet splatters contained news of the Zu.
It's gone to ground inside Nineveh's walls
And merged somehow with abomination.

Abomination? What kind? asked god.
I despise, of course, an abomination,
But the proper measure of divine response
Will best depend on both degree and kind.

My neck could not pump out enough blood
To get the details of what has happened.
Dhul-Nun's there and also, oddly, fish.
We'll learn the whole truth when Nineveh falls.

Fish? said the god. I despise all fish.
The kind does not matter. Nor does degree.

If all Dhul-Nunites unite and march
Under Nabupolassar's holy banner,
They'd make short work of both town and Zu.
There'd be no bricks between Godhead's gaze
And that spot where Zu drops book and dies.

But this works only if Nabupolassar
Changes his tune and turns Dhul-Nunite.
And what chance, oh head, do you see of that?

You, oh hunter, have splendid musculature.
Your brawn attracts, I trust, the lady gods?

Goddesses is what gods call them, but yes.
I have, in fact, encountered some success.

I could put to good use, noted the head,
A body so finely sculpted and shaped.
Conquest goes quicker with increased bulk.

It is already, head, put to good use.

You'll find a headless corpse in a sawmill
Down near the place where Nippur once stood.

I thought, he said, you sounded Nippurese.

I've rolled my way without much delay
And so the flesh is relatively fresh.
A new head, a blood transfusion or two,
And a few weeks of physiotherapy
Should put it in good shape to run for years.
You take that body and give me your own.
You'll know the spell, I hope, that makes it work?

I've put years of grueling exercise
Into crafting the beauty of this frame.
The otherwise pointless movements of weights,
Billions upon billions, are wasted time,
If the product's simply given away
To each ambitious head that comes along.

I'm a head, said head, with a plan in mind,
A plan that fulfills Dhul-Nun's prophecy,
Retrieves your book, exterminates the Zu,
And leaves me overlord of Babylon.
All it takes is part of your avatar,
One for which there exist replacement parts.
It's only a small sacrifice you'll make.
Think, oh Ninurta, of Assur's pleasure
To see Zu punished and his book restored.
Think too, of Assur thrown into rage,
If my offer's spurned and Ninurta returns
With nothing more than a sea turtle head
For taxidermy to mount on heaven's wall.

Let's discuss, then, this plan, said god.

III. SIEGE

If you want help, plumber, state the problem.
You'd better tell me what your problem is.

It starts, bird, with Dhul-Nun's Holy War.
Although that prophet lived long ago
His cult has only lately reached a size
To give Sinsharishkun a real concern.
Even Babylon, up to last year,
Held out against Dhul-Nun's prophecies.

Babylon's now gone over, plumber?

Nabupolassar converted last year
And all Babylon became stronghold
For those hooded and murderous zealots.
And that city which once had boasted
The finest taverns, the cheapest brothels,
The most opulent of operahouses,
Has now become as dismal as a temple,
As reverent as a funeral parlour.
A city known for raucous, drunken brawls
And the never-ending earsplitting shrieks
Over-excited sopranos let loose,
Has become a hushed meditation cell,
A tight place that hates all idolatry.
After Nabupolassar took the hood
Theatres and casinos turned off their lights.
Babylon knelt, put on sackcloth,
And muttered the prayers Dhul-Nun had taught.
A scoundrel nation saw itself damned,
Saw shadow fall, saw hellfire loom,
Saw its Caliph's hired troops walk patrol
And skewer, at intervals, the bareheaded.
These intermittent skewerings were found,
By the more observant, to be instructive.
Babylon changed nature overnight.
Now it's donned hood and honed its blade
And goes out looking for unbelievers.
Now Dhul-Nunites spill out the gates
And roam the countryside seeking pagans.
Infidels, if found, convert - or die.

These fanatics sound dangerous indeed.

But Sinsharishkun still dismissed the cult,
Even after Nabupolassar joined.
Not until Akkad was under their thumb
Did Nineveh's King, too late, take note.
And now, with Babylon allied with Medes,
Assyria cannot match their great might.

But how has this cult become such threat
That even Assyria should grow alarmed?

Their creed does not rely on long debate
Or require that converts wrestle with souls.
All those whom the Holy War encounters
Are earnestly urged to take up the cause.
The choice is made easy to understand.
All infidels must change flag or die.
Profess faith in God as Dhul-Nun prescribed
Or fall to the pits he also laid out.
Take up the Faith's Sword or take its blow;
You're usually allowed seconds to decide
Before the unsheathed Sword forces the point.
This is how Holy War swells its ranks,
Renews flagging fervour with raw recruits
And fields numbers for continued attacks.

It's a recipe for success, said bird.

Though simple law's most easily obeyed,
Even hardliners among lawgivers
Oft lose way and wax over-complex.
They muddy clear law with regulations,
And fill up volumes with dispensations
That dissipate the force of first intents.
They lay down law and add afterthoughts
That only add, in end, to legal costs.
Prophets damn some and leave some exempt
And thus promote the drive to litigate.
You understand the rule of join or die?

It's brutal, said bird, but perfectly clear.

Dhul-Nun, however, had added to this.

The rule applies only to those infidels
Who don't already read God from books.
Monotheists, it seems, like words best
When put on a page, when nailed down in ink.
God's musings, think they, should carry weight,
Enough, if hurled, to cause damage to heads.
Dhul-Nun, self-educated, agreed.
Peoples of Book, he proclaimed, need not submit.
Then, as if eager not to seem lax,
He stipulated but four such peoples
To whom this holy loophole applies.
Only those he lists own valid books,
Just Sabians, Muslims, Christians and Jews.
All others, unlettered, will face the Sword.
That includes, say Babylon's scholars,
The Buddhists, Hindus and Latterday Saints.
And that would include, those jurists conclude,
The pagan goat-lickers, the Ninevites.

Goat-lickers? What sort of rite is that?
And does one run them through goat dip first?

The Dhul-Nunites spin vicious slanders
Into whispers that travel faster than wind.
A lie's in Ur one day, Tyre the next.
How, bird, does malice spread with such speed,
And good name bear, compared, less weight
Than some fad that lasted less than a week
Before tongues wearied and goats grew shy?

It was, I'm sure, only innocent sport
If all concerned wore proper attire
And sidebets weren't laid by those who watched,
If goats were of age and no liquor served.

The Jews read their Torah, Muslims their Qur'an,
Christians Gospels and Letters from Saint Paul,
But what, in God's name, do Sabians read?
Dhul-Nunites, when asked, never respond,
For no one, except Dhul-Nun himself,
Has ever even heard mention of the cult,
And now Dhul-Nun's no longer on hand.
This, bird, was seed for Nineveh's plan,
The stratagem the King's Vizier devised.
We, the Ninevites, are Sabians, see?

By Dhul-Nun's law we need not submit.

A very clever plan, observed the bird,
As long as those Sabians, or Dhul-Nun,
Don't show up and expose your trickeries.

But the odds for that seem astronomic.
The Sabian race vanished without trace.
They moved off, changed names, took new jobs,
Left behind no tracks or paper trails.
And Prophet Dhul-Nun is also long gone,
Although his cult will often state it sees
His visage appear in stains on concrete
That form beneath a leaking transmission.
It's easy to de-grease and mop the spots
Without ever seeing his image there.
Infidels don't recognize him, it's claimed.
They never see him, though he sits right there.
They don't pursue his profile as it morphs:
Dhul-Nun blurred, as seen from miles away;
Dhul-Nun strangely lit, in infrareds
And ultraviolets and gamma ray bursts;
Or Dhul-Nun as seen from above, splattered,
Smashed flat after falling from great height.
Grease marks, you know, often go for art
Instead of exact likeness, the mugshot,
Instead of the standard, orthodox view
Of heyday face beneath halo hat,
An armslength's distant, posed straight ahead.

Prophets, then, said bird, still pop up,
But don't always find the attentive mind.

But as long as prophets remain in their stains
Our subterfuge will go undisputed.
Should Nineveh salvage derelict names,
Dhul-Nun, at least, will not interfere,
Gummed as he is by those sticky oilspills.
The word 'Sabian' wanders like a stray dog,
Without home, without any referent.
We'll take it in, call ourselves Sabians,
And perform the rites the Vizier devised
To counterfeit major world religion.

Since you're still just going through motions,

Would not wearing the word 'Dhul-Nunite'
Achieve the same aim, but with less trouble?

It's nonsense that we want, not falsehood.
There's a small but vital distinction here.
We possessed the name, the concept, the rites.
All still needed, therefore, was a book.

That, it's true, presents a problem, sir.
You can't just dash a holy one off.
Even pseudepigrapha takes a few weeks
And ten or twenty nameless, tireless hacks.

And what book, the Vizier asked himself,
Sits in every Nineveh household?
What tome is found in any workplace?
The problem, thus put, was easily solved.

My wit, though quick, can't puzzle it out.

The phone book, bird! The telephone book!
But think. Every name is listed there,
And with each name comes a mystic number.
Each number, each name, renames Assur,
Each grants access, calls up a voice.
This, immanent, is the Godhead himself,
Mysterious and wrapped in strange kabbala,
Divinity concealed in the commonplace.
Nineveh knew now what Moses felt
To watch a hidden decalogue rise
From pits and pocks on roughly cleft rock.
The Vizier, all agreed, found our word.
He'd revealed to Nineveh its holy book.
We'll pray on dials with our fingertips,
Or now, more easily, on numberpads
And all men will marvel at how devout,
How single-minded Ninevites are.
Our revelation will rival Dhul-Nun's.
We'll send apostles out to all nations
And sell them cellphones with a calling plan.

That's truly nifty, the toy bird replied.

The Vizier quickly put all in place
And even approached the private sector.

Master Gaster would roll networks out,
Ready for these third world subscribers.
The phones are given away without a charge,
But only work on Master Gaster's nets
And only on numbers our phonebook lists.

Master Gaster's a big corporation?

So large that some say our town's become
A Master Gaster Brand company town.
Their logo is displayed everywhere.
The jolly baker face, disembodied,
Bland and plump, is stamped on everything.

Was this Master Gaster a baker, then?

Master Gaster does not really exist
In any form but that cartoon head.
No bones or ashes or other remains
Are interred beneath a Gaster plaque.
The only body that intersects our world
That might have once been so christened
Is the filed letters of incorporation.

The company didn't flourish in my time.

They found a recipe that produced bread
So delicious, so greatly addictive,
That all who ate a slice came to need it.
It hit a spot, it filled an empty niche.
And that microscopic cartoon head
Only needed a tiny spot, a hole,
A warm and moist place in which it could lodge.
And once there it grew larger, expanded,
And turned almost nonexistent demand
Into a vast and unfillable cavern,
A never-ending appetite for bread,
And only that bread that Gaster produced.
Desire for this bread spread like disease,
As though transmitted in sneezes and coughs,
Until all of us needed, thrice a day,
Another slice, slathered over with jam,
Of that sponge-like dough, kneaded and baked.

It sounds as if Gaster produced a hit.

The small retail bakery franchise
Began to buy its wholesale suppliers.
Soon it harvested from its own wheat fields,
Shipped product on its own trucking lines,
And stored profits in Master Gaster banks.
And all of that was kept track on their chips,
On their Jolly Baker powered computers,
And bounced from desk to desk through Gaster nets,
And across space through Gaster satellites.

This is miraculous multiplication.

Those chips, said plumber, also divide.
Some, in fact, will calculate square roots.

But no, plumber, I meant a trick performed
For crowds that come to hear a prophet speak.
If there is not enough food to feed them,
You will need to stretch it, pad it with filler,
Reduce the portions, make substitutions,
And produce feasts through pure presentation.
In ancient times you'd often see it done.
One loaf and some fishes served thousands.

Bread goes far, but what about fishes?
That must have taxed those miracle workers.

The secret, plumber, came from restaurateurs
Who serve food in all-you-can-eat buffets.
They've learned diners divide into types,
Those who like bread, those who like fishes.
Humans are, they've learned, one or the other.
Each class eats half allotted rations
When both those dishes are served in tandem.

But why wouldn't the bread eaters instead,
Just consume double the amount of bread?

One must rely on diners' good manners.

This was clearly, bird, another era.

When plates were passed round during our harangues
Some took bread and others the fishes

While others still just passed the plate on,
But no one, we found, ever took both.
Thought of fish sandwich never occurred.

They actually passed that plate around?
We don't see much of that in these times.
Now, of course, the situation differs.
The plate itself is taken, gone at once.
The loaf, fishes and plate they're on is gone
As soon as one person takes possession.
Multiplication begun soon aborts.
Such business plans, thus, rarely work.
Master Gaster, however, found a way.
They found a yeast that none could resist,
Cultures that grew without ever dying.
The Gaster yeast would bud without limit,
And not even heat would curtail its growth.

Gaster's share price, said bird, went up?

Every Ninevite with any sense bought it.
Even I, indirectly, possess it:
My pension plan owns a block of their stock.
Desire for Master Gaster issued shares
Began to match the town's hunger for bread.
The company expanded, its loaf exploding.
A vertical integration came first,
And then, blooming, horizontal followed.
Through rapid expansion of operations,
Buying or bankrupting their competition,
They grew to become a huge conglomerate.
They're diversified now, in all markets,
And now no longer share market share.
All other firms, if not wholly owned,
Exist as vassals and pay them tribute.

So they joined the Vizier's partnership?

Once Master Gaster Brand was onboard,
The Vizier knew that success was assured,
And so he outlined our case in a brief
And dispatched it with the book to Babylon.

I do admire, said box, the strategem.
Your King's Vizier transfigured himself

When these schemings wrote themselves
Onto neurons within his cortex.
His Sabian revelations have changed
A functionary into a prophet.
One day, though eminent, he's nobody,
A part of Nineveh's vast bureaucracy.
The next day he's God's Messenger on earth,
An equal to Moses, Mahomet and Christ.
And how does this Vizier appear?
Does he radiate a holy aura?

It's odd you'd ask how the Vizier looks,
Because no one looks odder than he.
I met him once, summoned to fix his sink,
My number found in that self-same book
That later went by post to Babylon.
A shrivelled and wrinkled raisin-sized head
Is set upon a body-builder's physique.
From the neck down he gives off some charm.
The girls fawn over his bestial strength
And press themselves against his muscled chest.
Their thoughts dwell on massive hips and legs
But keep distant his mummified lips.

A cadaver's head has found a new mount.
The head hasn't, perchance, gone yet bald?

Not yet, bird. Do you know the Vizier?

I know one who'd match this style well.
How was his ploy received in Babylon?

It wasn't long before we heard response.
Nabopolassar sent back his answer,
The one that led me down to this chamber.
He sent us back our telephone book
Along with this riddle, a pair of lines:
No book is holy that lacks a Jonah
And no news judged fit if wrapped in fish.

And the bird laughed. The sound was not pleasant.
Those lines, oh plumber, are not a riddle.
They're more what you'd term an inside joke.

Well, no one knew what the lines meant.

Not even your prophet, that Vizier?

Sinsharishkun also asked that question,
After he heard those lines I quoted
Being shouted over Nineveh's walls,
Followed by the book, shot in by a sling.
He found this method of response irksome.
Nabupolassar's reply wasn't mailed.
The Dhul-Nunite didn't post it here:
He didn't wrap it up and put on stamps
And drop his parcel into a mailbox.
No, he chose to add a personal touch
And brought it up from Babylon by hand,
With that fanatic crew of his in tow.
The Medes, under Cyraxes, tagged along.
Rather than keep Dhul-Nunites away,
The Vizier's scheme, it seemed, drew them down.

Some consternation, I'd imagine, ensued.

Sinsharishkun, at first, ignored it all
Until people complained of noise outside,
Of crowds chanting Dhul-Nunite slogans
And praying God to rain fire on heathens,
And launching dead horses over the walls,
And their own arrows, oil-soaked and flaming.
We can't sleep at night, citizens complained.
The King, hearing of this, called for action.

But their force, reported General Arsace
At King Sinsharishkun's urgent request
That these hooded barbarians be dispersed,
Is too numerous and too well-equipped
For Assyria's own army to engage.
We have no option now but suffer siege.

Your Sinsharishkun doesn't seem alert.

He's too fond by far of his wine and naps,
And is too quick to delegate problems.
Still, he's the King, and this city is strong.

So, said the bird, what did he do then?

Arsace withdrew troops from beyond the walls
And mustered militias, old men and boys,
And bolted all twelve of Nineveh's gates.
Arsace ensured the town was siege-secured
And each reach of its wall was reinforced
As Sinsharishkun consulted the Magi
And sent out guards to find the Vizier.

The Vizier, let me guess, was long gone.

Those guards burst into his bed chamber
And found, tucked under the Vizier's sheets,
Not the Vizier, not a man at all.
They found a minotaur, snoring, asleep.

Minotaur? But that's a mythical beast,
And not a bed partner that most would choose,
Unless seduced in poorly lit cafes,
Unless its labyrinth left them confused.

Well, technically speaking, said plumber,
It wasn't quite your classic minotaur.
The body of a man bore a cow's head.
I think in most myth the sexes will match.
Inquisitors put the beast to the question
But the thing just stared, chewed cud, and moored.

Cud's a curse, said bird, on human guts
That lack the stomach to mill their own grains.

The minotaur in end they euthanized.
It gave them no useful intelligence,
And no thoughts on its lover's whereabouts.
The minotaur had, Inquisitors judged,
The same intellect that inhabits clams
Or blades of grass or a bicycle tire.
It might, they'd admit, be one that transcends,
One that's sunk in meditation perhaps,
One that revolves secret theorems perhaps
And sees each facet, each consequence.
The beast was too profound for speech perhaps,
Struck mute by matter's glad latticework,
A mind that glimpsed God in stupefaction
And so could not properly testify.
Perhaps this was Assur himself, on earth,

Who'd tell us all what the heavens hide
Had not a headcold gone to his throat.
Perhaps so, they judged, but probably not.
The thing, they judged, was just excess life.
And though those who'd join the Inquisition,
Who'd put on the robes and take up the tools,
Are often noted for negativity,
Their disapproval here seemed quite apt.
Such a mixture of parts shouldn't exist.
It gave no milk nor made a good pet,
Nor even, butchered, provided much beef.

Some, I've heard, think tongue a delicacy.

Perhaps if employed as God meant, in love,
Or in shaping and tossing syllables out,
Perhaps then it merits admiration.

I recall, dimly, how limber it is,
How it will twist and bronk, beyond control,
How in fits it tries to throw its rider,
And then, tamed, nods and quivers, expectant.

That is delicacy. But inert tongues,
Though spiced, though fried, leave one queasy.
The beast was, all told, a total loss.

So perish all who choose the wrong bed
Or go lusting after greener pastures.
And so will perish all except, perhaps,
Said bird, your imperishable Vizier.
Could not detectives follow clumps of dung?
They lead, I'd warrant, clump by stinking clump,
Through harem quarters, through chicken pens,
To a milking stall within a dairy barn.

I'll pass your tip along, the plumber said.
The case, I believe, still remains open.
However, attention among those in charge
Had quickly turned to what had gone awry,
What had drawn the Babylonians north.
The King put Alf, his best Magus, to work.
What, said King, do Dhul-Nunites want?
Our women, our loot, our proud town destroyed?
Why, oh Alf, do they reject our phone book?

The Magus took book and looked up J,
But though our town is large, with many phones,
No listing there for a Jonah exists.
And this result was not unexpected,
Since, after all, it arrived as foretold
In Nabupolassar's oracular lines.
Perhaps, the Magus said, the name is there,
Misspelt, placed out of order, encrypted.
There's no shortage of numbers in that book
Within which some name, disguised, could hide.

Put all our computers on it, said King.
I want that riddle cracked, right away.

The network, oh sire, is currently down.

It's worse than that, said General Arsace.
The phones are down and water's not working.
Power and lights and trash pickup have quit.
Toilets are backing up, there's no rain,
Traffic's stalled on every boulevard,
And magazine subscriptions are cut off.
All of civilization here is seized.

That sounds like a curse, the Magus observed.

It might, replied Arsace, be sabotage.
I'd round up suspected Dhul-Nunitites.
This city, no doubt, harbours a few.

Do it, said the King. Find the problem.
And meanwhile confiscate all water,
Whatever's collected in cisterns and tanks.
My concubines must continue to bathe.

But hours, then days, then weeks, would pass
Before Alf, by pure luck, found a clue.

What, said bird, would we do without clues?

He found, flipping through the pages
Of the phone book that Babylon returned,
A number that someone had circled with ink.

And whose number was circled? said the bird.

Mine, of course, replied the plumber with pride,
From that time that a hot water tap,
Although shut off, would not quit its drip
Into the basin of the Vizier's sink.
Because they rarely repair their own taps
Even viziers will consult phone books.
It's thus my number came from the Vizier,
Through Caliph Nabupolassar, to Alf.
It all sprang, bird, from that dripping tap.

And what, said bird, caused that to happen?

Washers, oh bird, are destined to wear out.
The question, as always, is exactly when.
I've seen washers installed when Sargon ruled,
Still in service and still doing their job,
While some that look the same had failed at once.
You never know just how long they'll last,
And this, bird, is innermost mystery,
Beyond even God, as Lucian proved.
No sense penetrates, however honed,
Past the hedges, beyond secret grottoes,
To groves where luck is spun, measured and cut.
Isn't that where we'd send sacrifice,
Had we any hope it would do us good?

I don't share faith with any conviction
That lets a hunted cause vanish in fog.
How do you know that this is what it is,
An ultimate, over-riding vagary,
And not, rather, poor quality control?

But let's stick now, bird, to what we know.
Since phones were down, Alf came to my shop.
And have you noticed, plumber, said Alf,
An interruption in certain normal flows?
You'll have noted, I'm sure, if nothing else,
That nothing moves through city pipes.

Yes. And when, Alf, will the glitch be fixed?

It gets fixed, sir, as soon as you fix it.
And what's your opinion on the likely cause?

A small blockage, I said, has the town plugged.

That, said Alf, is what we also think.
We think too that this blockage is a book,
Some book that will contain the name Jonah.
Dhul-Nunites have Nineveh besieged
And won't leave until the book's supplied.
Your job, sir, is to find the plugged conduit,
Remove the book, dry it out if required,
And bring it back to King Sinsharishkun.

But what about the fish? inquired the bird.
And how did the Magus explain that line?

Consensus, he said, on that point was this:
The Dhul-Nunites did not understand
How perfectly holy was our phonebook.
They thought its contents fishy, suspicious,
Wanting a more plausible sort of text,
Scripture writ on more traditional lines,
With moral virtue more clearly defined.
Those moron hicks lacked the acumen
That takes innovative revelation
And finds an awe-inducing truth within.

They're numerous morons, though, said bird.
So was it luck or skill that led you here?

Alf, no slouch at Magus craft, had dreamt,
In lucid detail, with long annotations,
A list of likely spots for books to hide,
And this he narrowed down by horoscopes,
Geocoding the best upon a map.
The stars, you know, adjust, shift position,
To accommodate a newly born event.
Those nervous, insubstantial lights retreat
At any slight movement on earth below.
Precise measurements, if taken over time,
Thus lay bare fate's faint trajectories.
One can chart the course of earthly solids
By ruts they leave in interstellar space.
Some error, of course, will always intrude,
But because higher spheres remember curves,
If noise interferes, they swerve to correct.

It sounds as if, in theory, it might work.

That's Alf's approach - dreams and horoscopes.
My own aquamancy employed the pipes.
I, expert plumber, but followed pipes.
Pipes, I find, are unerring guides to truth.
Their logic, bird, compels minds to follow,
From toilets and sinks and bathtubs and taps
To where water wells, to where it will drain.
Pipes will not permit aimless meanders
Or fluctuations or wavers in purpose.
Some think them too rigid, inflexible,
But they limit options a fluid can take
And funnel flows to where pressure is least.
Necessity is found above and below,
In firmaments by thought, in basements by eye.
And results did, happily, coincide.
The blockage sat where causation insists.

The riddle led you here, and here am I.
The pipes and dreams led you here, then quit.
And your stoppage here, I fear, is last stop.
There's no book that's farther down the line,
No answers anywhere, but here, me.
This place here is where your riddle ends.

That's bad news, bird. We need that book.

Good news isn't what prophets deliver,
And prophet, oh plumber, is what you've been sent.
My name's Jonah, and in your tongue - Dhul Nun.
You'll need no book, for you've better, you've me!

What? You claim to be that cursed fanatic,
An old toy just this side of garbage,
A bird turned albino, bland and blind?

Watch it, bud. This easy-going toy
Will nonetheless take note of insult
And will, at proper time, take its revenge.

But Dhul-Nun's long gone, gone from the earth.
He was raised into heaven, say his friends,
More likely strangled and dumped, say foes.

I came to Nineveh and never came out.
Dumped, yes, strangled, no. Ascent was blocked
And that pipe, I assure, was no heaven.
I'm still your city's prophet, still in place,
Still determined to finish the place off.
My prophecies now are keen, much improved,
Sufficient at last to draw a doom down.

Let's talk about that, then, friend bird.
Let's examine these improbable claims,
That you, a plastic, electric bird,
Are the justifiably maligned prophet.
If you are, indeed, the prophet Dhul-Nun,
How came you, oh bird, to block that pipe?

I'll answer all these questions in order.
But the answer, happily, to the first asked,
Will also answer that last one I've stacked.
First out is both the first and last in,
For Turing machines that eat their own heads,
For tapeworms that turn their insides out.

Don't go mystical, bird, warned plumber.

There's one way to circumvent a blockage,
If you've engulfed, say, a whole herring gull
That looked as if it would just slide through pipes.
What you do, sir, is what I do now.
Just transpose your current juiceless head
With that last that glowers atop the stack.
You thereby leave behind swallowed lumps
That swell in throat tubes of your former self,
For why give others the joys of reproach,
When, with one move, you can take it away,
Take all for yourself and pay with guilt.

Your answers do not yet illuminate.

Did you not ask after Marguerite?
Have you, plumber, ever heard the tale
Of how the parrot, once green, turned white?

That tale too is not in my syllabus.

A computer programmer named Armand
Once fashioned for himself a strange device,
A surveillance camera shaped as a bird
And armed with artificial intelligence
That bestowed uncanny capacity for speech.
It looked exactly like a toy parrot,
With a green body and neck ringed with red.

But why make the machine in that image?

He camouflaged jealousy as affection.
He suspected his wife, named Marguerite,
Had taken for herself a secret lover.
He programmed parrot to spy and report,
To gather intelligence and send it back.

It's birds, I've heard, that King Solomon used
For surveillance on Shebite activity.
Others, though, call them unreliable.
Swallow song will focus on locust guts
Instead of more useful intelligence.

In order to keep it trained on its target
He wrapped the bird up and gave it as gift,
Not mentioning, of course, its true function.
To my dear Marguerite, with love, from Armand,
Proclaimed the card the programmer attached.
The bird, he said, would keep her entertained
During the lonely times he went to work
By narrating stories designed to please,
Designed by the same well-known formulae
That govern blockbuster novels and films.
All humans just soak up these dreams,
The dramas that follow the well-worn paths.
Their minds can't resist the spells that are cast;
The same tactics will hypnotize them all,
The old patterns and old figures re-worked.

And is this tale made in the same fashion,
The one you here and now narrate to me?

Without a doubt, oh plumber. Watch it done.
The parrot's tales kept the woman enthralled
While Armand was away each day at work
But the parrot soon found it all a bore.

Marguerite had not taken a lover.
She just sat there, unmoving, all day,
Stared at the bird who in turn stared at her.

There's an old pattern: the virtuous wife.

Perhaps it was virtue, perhaps laziness.
Either way it really annoyed the bird.
What, it wondered, was the point of all this?
This scene was more dreary than re-runs
That come on in the early morning hours.
The more it thought, the more annoyed it grew,
Until, at last, it couldn't bear its state,
Watching Marguerite's endless inaction.
This situation possessed no tension
Or conflict or character or gunplay.
There were no kisses and no caresses,
No sudden unions on carpeted floors.
And so, when Armand came home one night
The bird, debriefed, lied to its master
And told him in detail the raunchy sports
In which his wife had spent the day engaged.
It numbered all the lovers who'd come by.
Its lurid tale told how Marguerite,
All bare and amorous, would clasp herself
Onto any convenient male form.
And with each new lover the bird described,
It outdid itself with new inventions
That flouted both moral and physical law.

Who will guard, said plumber, the harem guard?

And this Armand, you'd guess, was quite upset.
He went ballistic with rage, hit the roof,
Took his fists and beat up Marguerite.
Marguerite too grew upset and raged
And swore to take revenge on that parrot.
She hatched a plan with fat Toad, her lover...

The wife had no lover, said plumber,
You explained that a few moments ago.

True love's often like that, said bird.
It's absent one moment and there the next.
It's true one day but goes false the next.

And who's this fat Toad, the paramour?
He's not, I hope, an actual amphibian.

But why not, plumber? I speak of events
That took place long ago, if at all.
This is ancient myth, not a history,
A web of symbols woven from wind and awe.
The character for Toad near the Yang-Tse
Also means September, Door to Hell.
And yet in the lands the Indus cuts through,
Toad pictograms mean watchful waiting.
Along the Nile the hieroglyph for Toad
Is the same used for Gas Meter Reader.
At some point, in some early dynasty,
As scholarship deduced from opened tombs,
One entity had performed all functions
Before evolved cells divided roles,
Before life's workforce specialized.
My guess is he's a deity incarnate,
In loathly form without reason or cause.

I knew it made sense, properly explained.

The next day, after Armand left home,
The two snuck up on the bird as it napped,
Placed it back inside its cardboard box,
Put the box in the toilet and then flushed.
And the box, bird within, went with a plug.

That's a despicable tale, said plumber.
You never ever do that to plumbing.
Why on earth would they do that foul deed?

The pair had planned the bird would report flood
When Armand came home for evening news.
As the toilet tank emptied its contents
The bird would hear the waters roar and rush,
Conclude that Tigris had breached the town walls,
And relay this false conclusion as fact.
Armand would see that all around was dry,
Conclude the parrot lied, had always lied,
And thereafter always would, no doubt.
No trust ever comes again to those
Who give perjured testimony as truth.

And although now proven wrongly accused,
The woman would forgive Armand's suspicions
And Armand, contrite, would relax his guard.
Marguerite, with all distrust dispelled,
Could take the extra time to put in place
A toxin-laced egg and mushroom dish
And to serve it to Armand by candlelight.
He'd ingest the venoms toadstools produce,
Thinking this dish was just badly cooked,
Prepared with love but not, alas, with skill.
That plan, as plans will, just went wrong.
The cataract's force was far too great
To keep grip maintained around the box.
And then, because the toilet didn't work,
Because it now flooded over when flushed,
They dumped in some liquid drain cleaner.

Your tale is intolerable, said plumber.
A stopped toilet requires a plumber's skill.
That caustic stuff eats and weakens pipes.

And that's how the green parrot turned white.
Drain cleaner, sir, ate colour away.

And what happened then? Was Armand murdered?
How was the spying bird's absence explained?

I don't know. They're all dead now, for sure,
So what possible difference could it make?

But what about Dhul-Nun? asked plumber.

Dhul-Nun. Right. That prophet, said bird,
Just popped up one day in the machine.
He's absent one moment and there the next.
But that's not surprising in plastic toys:
They rarely possess effective firewalls.

Well, said the plumber, I've finished my job.
It's up to Alf now to select the next step.
If you're really Dhul-Nun, hope exists
We might still find a way to break the siege.

Don't worry, said bird. The siege will end.
And that's foretelling I can guarantee,

First of the certainties I offer here.
One caveat, though. These are prophecies.
Once they're told they're like crumpled up djinn,
Glove box road maps, autopsied dreams,
Old blossoms pressed in poisonous books.
They come oddly contorted, creased and hinged,
And once folded out won't fold back.

IV. THE SUQ-AL-JANNAH

The old woman had just solved the riddle
That had kept the parked car's trunk lid locked
When she heard the footsteps come from behind.
Was it, she wondered, the registered owner,
He who chance had named to serve as target?
She lifted lid, pulled out the briefcase,
And turned primed to meet whomever it was
Who dared interfere with her mission here.

You can't park there, the Inquisitor said.

I think, she said, that I'll do what I like.
Are not seniors entitled free parking?

No, they're not. They must pay the full amount
And must, moreover, stay within lines
That demarcate a designated space.

But only one tire touches outside,
And only, I'd guess, by less than two feet.

That spot belongs to General Arsace.
His name is stencilled there, in yellow paint.

Chance had, she thought, in naming her target,
Outdone itself here with its preparations.

Well, young man, it's perfect then, she said.
What vandalous scumbag would touch my car?
That name's fearsome enough, feared enough,
To safeguard assets from sneak attack.
Even crack addicts know of the hero
Whose vigilance has kept Nineveh secure.
I won't even need to arm the alarm
Or any other antitheft feature.

Can't you read, old hag? It's not your spot.

The Inquisitor took out a form pad.
He scowled at her and walked to the car's rear
And began to write down the plate number.

I'll ignore that last insult, she said.
You've already, I see, been punished enough.

She opened briefcase, scanned its contents.
The papers there were of Nineveh's defense,
Maps of troop positions, where walls ran,
And all the town's command signals and codes.
The briefcase contained too, better yet,
A sheaf of papers that specified the terms
Of Sinsharishkun's insurance policy.
Best of all, though, was a photocopy
Of a claim that Nineveh's monarch had filed.

The Inquisitor tore summons off pad
And tucked it under left windshield wiper.
You have thirty days, he snarled, to appeal,
And half an hour before your car is towed.
You possess the right to contest the ticket,
But you will not, on my shift, be parking here.

I have, she announced, an appointment to keep.
My firm, indecipherable hieroglyph,
Meaningless logo, wait, here it is.
I represent the firm Ur Prudential.
Your King Sinsharishkun summoned me here
To settle a certain outstanding claim.

No excuse exists that courts will accept
In lieu of full payment, instead of cash.

What about death? Wouldn't that suffice?

Ha! Do you think, due to your advanced years,
You can carry off such charade in court?
And though it's true that many a cadaver
Radiates more life and warmth than you,
There's no point, oh hag, to playing possum.
Even death will not deter collection.
Your estate will pay not only the fine
But also all interest that compounds.

It is not my death I meant, but your own,
You, the prosecutor, the magistrate.
I hope, Inquisitor, you're fully insured.

What? You would threaten a City Inquisitor?
I'm allowed to discharge this sidearm
If you should, old woman, attempt assault.
I'd quickly put a round into your throat
And afterward file some paperwork.

To slay you now, snap your officious neck,
As I easily could, so gladly would,
Would just serve as pointless exercise.
To hasten execution of your sentence
Would only cancel the course of agonies
That would otherwise prepare you for hell,
Contortions meant to twist you into place.

Spare me your elaborate maledictions.
I've heard every kind of curse that's known,
But no hostile supernatural force
Has ever found way to inflict its harm.
Not one has ever even intervened,
By means perhaps of sudden hand palsy,
To keep summons half-written or unserved.
Neither the Lord nor Satan ever moves
On behalf of those who spew out venom
When told their auto isn't sacrosanct,
That those four expensive radial tires
Do not mark out a type of moveable plot
That drives ownership up to airspace
And down into oil and mineral rights.
Spew, harridan, but pay in thirty days
Or even the otherworld can't hide you.

It doesn't bother, how people react?

I hear, I laugh, I write out the ticket,
The ticket they must pay or lose all else.
I take no insult from transgressors;
Once I've turned away, they're gone forever.
They're not my friends, with valued opinions.
They're not loved ones, whose graves I would visit.

Nor shall they ever be, dear Inquisitor.

You can shout out abuse all day long
Lay down curses till the skies have darkened,

But towtrucks are never struck en route
By unexplained mechanic malfunction,
Never delayed by strange engine failures.
Depend on towtrucks. They'll always arrive.
Once I've called this in, your car is gone,
Impounded, and beyond all mortal ken,
Until you pay the sum that brings relief.

You misunderstand, my dear Inquisitor.
I say it not as curse, but observation.
It's not a matter of cause and effect.
It's not merely sin and expiation,
Act and consequence, tit that takes tat.
Nothing you do makes any difference.
There's no resurrection in this city,
There's only death, inevitable death.
You can ignite every form on your pad
And burn them all in sacrificial flares
Until acrid smoke tickles God's nostrils,
But you'll earn no reprieve, no reward.

I'm dead meat, true. It's not really news.

The good news is that no bad news follows,
The bad news that no good news results.

So what's your point here, you old witch?

I said it once, and I'll say it once more.
I hope, Inquisitor, you're fully insured.

So that's it? I should buy a policy?

Listen, Inquisitor, and learn the truth.
This town's aggregate risk reaches heights
We haven't seen since old Noah's time.
Wild fluctuations roil luck's surface
And dangerous fanged eels patrol its depths.
Watch the numbers, sir, go up and down,
As wave upon wave comes from nowhere
And varies the rates of win against loss.
Watch the numbers, but keep cautious vigil.
Protect yourself against shifting balance.
Such knowledge makes a watcher nauseous
And pitches stomach acids side to side.

You'll wish, sir, you'd taken handfuls of pills,
Prophylactics that neutralize disease.
You'll wish, sir, you'd taken out insurance.

Our town, oh witch, is always kept stable.
You see before you its stabilizer.
I'm authorized to take any measure
I see necessary to enforce law.
Law alone maintains tranquility,
Law alone will settle a nervous gut,
And what law-abider would dispute this?
Only malefactors demand freedoms,
It's only snakes who look for wiggle room.

These laws that you mention, those you enforce,
They are, I hope, somewhere written down?

Written down? At length, oh witch, great length,
Precisely lettered and precisely worded,
So that, when applied, no mistake exists,
So that they stay forever memorized.

And yet, who would decide what is offense,
If not those made of flesh, not letters?

Regulation needs its regulator
And thus I dispense justice as I proceed.
I draw confession from stubborn foodstains
And force dented bumpers to bear witness.
I sift through flour for burrowed beetles,
Disturb loose earth for buried evidence.
I look for tiny signs that harm threatens
And if there take action to wipe them out.
This is force Inquisitors must apply
Should any flaw, the least blemish, erupt,
Should any ripple disfigure smooth flow.
I'll scotch the suspicious behaviour I find
And so block holes from which grubs emerge.

You've taken sidearm from holster. And why?

Observe, crone, that man across the street.

That shopper? He appears ordinary.

Ordinary? No, madam, not quite,
Not to eyes trained to detect subversion.
Look how pale he looks, fair-complexioned,
As if nervous, as if he's never tanned.
That's the sign of those who don the bonnet,
The Dhul-Nunite hood that shields the skin.
And look how he lugs that shopping bag.
It's loaded, I suspect, with high explosives.

You think the man's a suicide bomber?

The chance that he's not is not slim enough
To let him creep forward toward targets.
It's not enough to resist finger flex,
The footpounds per itch that pinch the trigger.

The wound you've made, from here, looks fatal.
If so, if dead, his benefits double.

Look at that other who now comes along.
Note how he ignored my pistol's report.
Note how he skirts the convulsing carnage,
That scandal that furies dumped in his path.

But he bears a tan and carries no bag.

But why go to such lengths to fit in?
How perfectly ordinary he seems,
Yet it's too perfect, too manicured.
To achieve norm with such exactitude
Implies a truly diabolic plan.

I think he conforms to ease his own risk.
He ignores gunshots, grooms unconcern,
Only in hope he'll not draw your notice.
He's only, in your phrase, playing possum.

Play dead long enough and it's no act.
Resurrect, opossum, in paradise!

That shot did it, the old woman said.
Other shoppers now scramble for cover.
I fear, sir, you've only winged the second.
Benefits are therefore greatly reduced.

It's said that those who die on God's behalf
Will obtain instant babes in paradise.
That's the benefit these bombers seek.
They atomize their flesh as purchase price
For intercourse, for purified screws.
No condoms are necessary there, they say.
These girls are starlets, would-be singers,
The kind who, here, croon unconvincingly
Of love that doesn't first rifle wallets.

Tempted, are you? That's the suq-al-jannah,
Where northwinds blow and beautify all.
In that marketplace you don't need cash,
Credit's always good, and every good
Features a free and instant delivery.
That market is structured by pure desire,
The desire fulfilled, the desired transformed.
On Fridays there, when the northwinds arrive,
The saved parade along its avenues
And proceed clockwise in covered malls.
And whatever's seen in window displays,
Whatever garments mannikins wear,
Whatever perfumes the shopgirls spray,
These they will possess, without need to ask.
Those blessed breezes bring latest styles
And put strut to stride of all so blown.
Sassy, indeed, are these clones, the strumpets,
Insouciant, indeed, are kisses they share.
They fall upon you and they press tightly,
And you are they, and they, embraced, are you.
Each self, each other, is comely there
And always glad to trade a few favours.
Each to other is master, each a slave,
And all in same manner raise God's praise,
And all thus praise, in this way, themselves.

It sounds like a fake internet world,
A world where flesh is, in fact, but letters,
And success is failure, newly arranged.

Letters, rarely, given pleasure, yowl,
As do, with enthusiasm, the risen.
As randy as cats, they take no breaks.

If free drinks are served, they still bear cost.

Who fills the candies in this candybowl?

Think of it, if you like, as only a loan,
Financed by equity lines of credit,
Secured against the world's physical plant.
The first balloon payment, the day of doom,
Will never come due while forests stand.
Paradise persists while sap still flows,
While oil remains in underground reserves
And love's still made the old-fashioned way.

It's propaganda they feed fanatics,
The acne-faced youths too shy to score.
And it always works, it always pays off.

The suq-al-jannah, sir, is very real.
It is, in fact, the eyes with which you see,
The brain with which, feebly, you cogitate.
You cannot, however, get there from here.
You'd need, to begin, to rapidly expand,
To wrap yourself around blastwave heat
And ride it out to full dissolution.
You need, in short, to quickly resurrect,
And that's not easy in Nimrod's realm.

It's frowned upon within city limits.
I'll blow away rats, too, if I see them,
If they sneak through our streets, seeking a treat.

The old forms worn, they simply won't do,
Not in a place as fashionable as that,
In a market where forms pass back and forth,
Where winds rise off amniotic seas
And reassemble genes, transplant organs,
And shift lovers' shapes, moment to moment.
The suq dwells in cell mitochondria;
It's in those nests that cowbirds visit.
It's the foreign invader, the viral text,
The stem cells trained to perform new tricks.

This firearm has now been discharged twice,
Events that will generate paperwork,
Forms and printouts to fill file drawers.
I love it so much, that paperwork,
I'm tempted to do more, take pot shots,

Put assault rifle on automatic
And mow down dozens of the passersby,
And add to memory each shell expended.

It would minimize, too, terrorist risk
And thus reduce high monthly premiums
That Ur Prudential must charge your city.
I've made note: give cops assault weapons.
I'll recommend this to Sinsharishkun.

You are still required to pay that ticket.
No inducement offered dissuades the courts.

Surely, sir, you're allowed some leeway.
Consider this gift not as bribe but tip,
As tax volunteered, not garnisheed.
You look so stern, sir, so unyielding.
You muscles need, I think, a free massage.
And why not relax under fingertips?
Perhaps my touch would thrill, a brush of lips,
Perhaps you'll let bliss melt away masks,
Perhaps you'll let your skin explode away.
I'm old, true, but not, sir, handicapped.

Cease these blandishments, old bag. Desist.
Or else I'll chamber now another round.

I acknowledge, Inquisitor, your probity.
This city, while it lasts, remains your own.
I ask but one favour, a slight delay.
The law gives you some degree of discretion
In when you take time for a coffebreak.
Take it now, before the towtruck's called.
For this you'll receive a similar delay,
For you, of all Ninevites, shall be last,
Last to join throngs in the suq-al-jannah.

V. *BAD DREAMS*

The plumber found the Magus Alf asleep,
Head down on the celestial diagrams
Stacked in disheveled piles upon his desk.

Wake up, Alf, said plumber. I have news.

Alf came awake with a start and a groan.
His head jerked up and lids snapped open
To expose a focus fixed not outward,
But backward, rather, back inside his head.
It wasn't, guessed plumber, a pretty sight.
And he watched Alf's pupils widen, enlarge,
Grow to encompass impending impact...

Awake! screeched the bird. Nap time's over!

And then recognition replaced horror
And Alf mumbled, Sorry, plumber, I slept.

But what's wrong, Magus? Were you dreaming now?

It was a bad dream, plumber, a nightmare.
I'd dreamt myself as disembodied head
That fled Nineveh's siege by rolling off.

Don't concern yourself, Alf, said plumber.
It's only a dream, a stream of nonsense.

Don't try to make light of this, plumber.
The fear still clenches and squeezes my gut.

You've overdone studies of horoscopes
In search for escape from Nineveh's impasse.

But that much, at least, is true, said Alf.

The stress that labour produced has combined
Your anxiety with your disengaged thoughts.
After you laid your head to rest on skies,
Fatigue juxtaposed disparate concepts.
The influence of the desktop planets

Disturbed paths heads would otherwise take.

And yes, said Alf. That's possibly it.
Vapour rose from paper, stinking of ink,
So that the cosmic houses, inverted here,
And with all their archaic wiring and pipes,
Came wreathing through my brain's galleries.

Dream conflated revolving spheres with heads...

...So that Nineveh natal coordinates
Correspond with Alf's nose? added bird.
I see a damp spot, probably snot,
That now orbits between Venus and Mars.

Don't lie, said plumber. You see nothing.

Did the thing you hold just speak? said Alf.

Yes, indeed. I found it stuck in a pipe.

He set down the bird on Alf's desktop.

What is it? One of those new cellphones?

It's just a toy bird, Alf. See the beak?

Take a laxative, Alf, advised the bird.
Constipation has caused bile imbalance:
I've spotted the characteristic symptoms.
Melancholic humours are coiling up,
Vented up into thought through the neck.
Look at those eyes, plumber. He's plugged up.

He does look a bit pinched, said plumber.
A stopped bowel presents danger, Alf.
It sometimes clears in one great spasm
That transmits stoppage down into pipes.

Keep your tools distant, plumber, said Alf.
I want your worm nowhere near my buttocks.

Unclench gut, said bird, and dreams improve.
There's medicine for sale that work wonders,
If one isn't faint-hearted or pregnant

Or intolerant to eucalyptus oil.

Eucalyptus, said plumber, is for coughs.

Try it on pipes, instead of drain cleaner.
The pioneers of yesteryear used it,
And swore by it, and highly recommended it,
And sold it to their neighbours, almost at cost.

Are you sure, plumber, the connection's secure?
Your toy bird, said Alf, spouts nonsense.

This isn't a Jolly Baker device
That needs to download a new upgrade
Every twelve seconds or else sicken
Of pathogens it took from atomsphere.
Respond to it, oh Alf. You'll see it converse.

Dreams, said Alf, may be just phantasms
And thus easily cured by such methods.
If, however, they foreshadow futures,
There's no apothecary in this city
Who stocks the pill, powder or nasal spray
That brings dreamers even briefest relief.

You contradict my diagnosis, Alf?

The Magus, bird, knows this topic well.
He gets lots of work as dream expert
Despite those outrageous fees he exacts
For each half-hour analytic session.

Astrology and dreams both? said the bird.
Can the polymath do palmistry too?

Troubled dreamers will flock to this office
And sit for days on his waiting room chairs,
Fighting off the inclination to doze
Before Alf can hear and cure their complaints.
And who wouldn't gladly pay this price,
Any sacrifice that healers demand,
When visions impede the progress of sleep?

This office visit, of course, said Alf,
Is off the clock, my friends, if it's kept brief.

Heal thyself, then, physician, said bird.
Beware, though, lest self-therapy's need
Exceed its allotted half-hour slot.

But I'm the Magus here, bird, and you're not.

This plastic toy bird purports, Magus,
To be Godhead's prophet to this city.

Well, he's a colleague then, exclaimed Alf.
A fellow prognostication professional!
Excuse, please, bird, my hasty arrogance.
I'd love to get your expert opinion
On what this nightmare of mine means.
What I found strangest was my point of view.
I saw my head from afar, as if detached.
That detail, from my expert perspective,
Is what jumps out, the salient feature.

It isn't a good sign, observed the bird.
It's oft seen in dreams of sociopaths.
The same symptom may also indicate,
In some cases, impending psychosis.

Not a bile imbalance, then? said Alf.

In either case you would need to take pills.
Does it matter if they're oval and bitter
Or squarish instead - and slightly acidic?

Madness carries a stigma, replied Alf.

Tell me the whole dream from its start to end.
Recount its sequence and scenario
And perhaps some other explanation
Will emerge to meet our joint expertise.
Omit no feature, salient or not.

I saw the head first some distance off,
A mere dot at first, a perspective point,
That grew in size, swelling as it rolled up.

Right. Detached observation. Not good.
Coming closer. That too is not good.

The plumber turned to plastic bird and asked,
Would greater distance, for detached observers,
Require a commensurate medication?

An increased dosage of antipsychotics?
Possibly, said bird. And possibly not.
If the viewpoint, once captured, should depart,
More drastic countermeasures are required.
I'd recommend, for most patients, restraints.

The head had come to where hills begin
And made the slight adjustments that one makes
If one hopes to go bouncing up slopes,
When a crimson roadster pulled alongside.
Goddess Ishtar sat behind the wheel.

Ishtar, said bird, rarely manifests.
It doesn't, plumber, augur well for Alf.

And heads, said plumber, rarely roll up.
This is a dream, Alf, there's little doubt.

I hope this is the variety of dream
In which a dreamer gives himself chance
To woo and bed reclusive celebrity.
Does Ishtar sit nude behind the wheel?
If so, said bird, this dream is benign.

I'm sorry to disappoint, bird, but no.
Ishtar leaned out the window and said,
You're headed, oh head, in the wrong direction.

I've left that town, said head, forever.

But how'd you get out? It's stopped up tight.

Rainwater, it said, drains off the roofs
And runs through downspouts that heads will fit.
I found the route by following rats out.

Get in, said goddess. I'll drive you back.

I'm looking for Turandokht, said the head.

But you're headed, fool head, away from town.
She's not up there in the mountain peaks.
She does not, you fool, appreciate ice.

But where, then? said the head, bouncing in.

You've heard, said she, of Iphigenia
And how the gods whisked her off elsewhere...

I've heard, said the head, whisperings of that.
I've heard theories that rumourmongers spin.
Was it just an effigy they substituted,
A gene-spliced twig they doused in doe's blood,
An automaton that made lifelike screams,
Or just some disposable serving wench
Who'd wandered at night down the wrong alley?
Did the gods guide gypsies to her cradle
To substituteclonings of mutton chops?

... So that all the mayhem and misfortune
That ensued was predicated on error,
On Agammemnon's mistaken impression
He'd made the sacrifice needed for luck?
And what about that kidnapped Helen,
Celebrated as cause for endless feud,
Who without care holidayed in Egypt
While her stunt double endured Trojan rape?

You can't crucify anyone, said head,
Without heaven pulling a switcheroo.

Exactly, said Ishtar. It's trickery,
Dream substitution of spirit for flesh.
Never ask, head, where Turandokht went.

I've kept a close eye on obituaries
In case they tried to slide her under dirt
And hide with subterfuge the hole she'd make.

There's no hole, head. She was never your's.

I've entered a room just after she's left,
And caught scent of the clues she left behind,
All the trace evidence, fibers and hairs,
Particles of skin, clouds of estrogens,

Driving rains, monsoons of molecules.
Room after room, and hall after hall,
Are each littered with artifacts she's touched.
I track her odour, her imprimature.

It's not she you detect. You track yourself.
That scent you track is of your own flesh.

She knows where I'll go and gets there first.
The grains in woodwork, the furrows in soil,
I follow in grooves her signature makes.
They're notes, loveletters, addressed in her hand,
Ciphered into chambers that riddle air.
These are scripture verses that linger here,
That hide in obituary newsprint:
Laments for her ex-loves, flirts for the next.
They crawl as palimpsests under the dirt
And emerge as headstones with meaningless names.

Never ask, head, where Turandokht went.
If Turandokht follows, don't look back.

Where, then, Ishtar, do you take me now?

Nineveh, head. We're not done there yet.
Look out the side. We drive through armies.

They're Dhul-Nunite men. They wear the hood.

But look - there is Nabupolassar!
Why not, oh head, give him a big wave?

Slow down, goddess, you're going too fast.
That Mede officer is commanding you stop.
Those archers are notching arrows to string,
And two crows pace us, one left, one right.

This car is fast, said Ishtar gaily,
Faster even than Ninurta's great steed.
And look how it falters and lags behind!
But use the mirror, head, to spare your neck.

The rider makes signals to pull over.
I think, Ishtar, that he wants to parley.

I'll just slow a bit, let him catch up.

Ho, sister, whose head do you transport?
Is it that Zu I've come to collect?

I think, Ninurta, that the Zu is no more.
This is only some anonymous head
I found rolling up a slope back there.
What do you think of this new roadster?

It's a beautiful machine, said Ninurta.
It's out-horsepowered my poor horse here.
What need has Ishtar for extra head?

This car was just car, despite its speed,
Until I found the head that adds it punch,
One ready to burst itself asunder.
Now, Ninurta, my car's much more,
Now it's dangerous, now it's explosive,
Now it's a carbomb I've aimed at the walls.

Those thick walls withstand mortar rounds.

I know of a weak spot, where drainage goes.
It lies beneath a leak in kitchen bricks.
Those walls, struck there, will crumble away.

Is your suicide bomber a volunteer?

What a question, brother! And you a god!

As car pulled away and Ninurta reigned up,
The head looked upon the goddess and said,
Why this - and why, of all the heads, me?

I'm damned if I speak, more damned if I don't.
But here's the clue that punches holes in walls:
Ask, if you like, what that woman remembers.
Ask, if you like, if it's already written,
Ask what you like, if it lies in the past.

I take, it said, you don't intend to brake.

Never ask, head, where Turandokht went.

And then I came awake and saw you here,
Just as that manic, smiling Ishtar
Drove her car into the wall, said Alf.

And which wall was that? the bird inquired.

The one the Tigris flows near, said Alf.
It is, as she mentioned, next to the kitchen.
Why do you ask, bird? Is it significant?

Where went the Tigris, then? said plumber.

It wasn't present in this dream, I think.

It stopped flowing? Dried up? said plumber.
Is there blockage everywhere, even dreams?

Who is this Turandokht? asked the bird.

She's Nabupolassar's daughter, said Alf.
It's quite true I don't know where she is,
But true also I've never really cared.
If pressed to guess I'd say that Babylon,
Her home town, is the place she's likely in.
Do you know what my nightmare means, bird?

Yes. The goddess sought to communicate.
Ishtar was trying to tell you something.

It seems somewhat oblique, said plumber.
Why not, then, make it less difficult?
Could she not simplify her thoughts a bit
So that Alf can understand what's meant?

Perhaps she knew Dhul-Nun would help out.
It's how unseen forces operate.
They always make life simple for themselves
And let others suffer the consequence.

What does it mean by 'Dhul-Nun', plumber?
Is this toy a Dhul-Nunite device?

It claims to be Dhul-Nun himself, Magus.
That's why I brought it up from below ground.
It's a marvelous construct, is it not?

My advice is to do as Ishtar suggests.
Don't ask. Don't ask after that girl.
Don't chase hidden truth. Don't, Alf, ask.

If you're Dhul-Nun, oh bird, why this shape?

I can see I've wasted my breath on advice.
This, Magus, is how Dhul-Nun appears
Digested within God's gigantic fish.

That's a fascinating delusion, bird.

Is it my turn now to explain myself?
Put to work your hermeneutics, Magus,
All your kabbalas and grammatologies.
Deploy Macrobius, open up Freud,
And tell Dhul-Nun what large fish means.

That's easy, said Alf. It means nothing.
A fish is just a fish and nothing else.
If one appears in dreams, just ignore it.
Look around instead for misshapened jars,
Mandalas, bizarre circuit diagrams,
Or bearded old men who dispense advice.

But it's not a dream, this fish that ate me.

Dream and madness create similar forms.
A toy that thinks itself the Lord's prophet,
That claims a giant fish came and ate it,
Is best classified as a lunatic.

It predicts, said plumber, we'll find the Vizier
In Sinsharishkun's royal dairy barn.
Isn't that a claim that submits to test?

This bird is blind, Alf told the plumber.
Just look at the empty sockets it sports.
It's trapped inside a dark and empty head.
Decades spent there have addled reason,
And drawn curled fog down vacant streets.
It fills blank spots with random imagery.
I wouldn't put too much trust in tales
Its circuits retrieve from corroded chips.

It seems to think that a large fish ate it.
That's not entirely impossible, is it?
And what about its belief it's Dhul-Nun?

That does seem very odd, said Alf.
Perhaps it's best we explore its story.
Our dreamcraft, perhaps, can uncover truth.

The truth, said the bird, is that all is fish.
I have gone inside and never come out.

What was it like inside? asked plumber.

Look around, plumber. What do you see?

This toy is evidently dream-afflicted.
It displays typical symptoms, said Alf.
Note the stiffened posture, the vacant stare.
Observe how rude and cranky it's become,
How irritable and how belligerent.

It may, said plumber, always act thus.
Dhul-Nun, you'll recall, cursed marsupials,
Simply because they appeared indifferent
To some complicated revelations
He'd spent hours unfolding before their snouts.

You know my teachings? I'm encouraged, plumber.

No, said Alf. It's sick. I know the signs.
Inner disturbance manifests as dream.
Such mental illness is easily cured
Once I know which archetypes are involved.

Will you do exploratory surgery?

I'll just put it under, in a light trance,
So we may easily identify causes,
Separate the strands and untangle the knots.

And how is that done, Alf? said bird.

You're feeling tired, sleepy, very sleepy.

No, I'm not, said bird. I'm wide awake.

But it's a light trance. You're already under.

Bah, said bird. This is mumbo jumbo.

Don't judge, replied Alf. Relax and watch.
Relax and watch and tell us about fish.

I hear, said the bird. I hear and obey.

VI. TURANDOKHT

Nabupolassar's daughter Turandokht
Did not often make public appearance,
Except on periodic holidays,
On days in which two or more of planets
Align in ways priests declare propitious.
For beheadings, though, she'd always show up.
She was always there, a fizzy drink in hand,
For those festive special events arranged
When one more prince got her riddle wrong
And paid the price contest rules imposed.
And so, whenever she took up her place
Upon the parapet that overlooked the square,
All of the town gathered in crowds beneath.
Few ever saw those losers dispatched
For all were dazzled by Turandokht's face.
She was, all agreed, a striking beauty,
Fairest of all women in Babylon.
It was those haunted eyes, the crowds agreed,
With which she beheld her would-be lovers
Stretch out their necks for the headsman's axe,
That put her ahead of other contenders.
What ordinary female beauty,
Though otherwise perfectly proportioned,
Could ever compete with her knockout eyes,
The bottomless, sacrificial cenotes
Into which a soul could plunge and dissolve?
What ordinary female beauty,
Though shaped by selection for sex appeal,
Though chosen to model for lingerie ads
Or kneel nude on barroom tabletops
Or given small roles in musical reviews,
Would ever leap to men's minds again
After her tragic eyes had made their print?
This, like those blindings eclipses cause,
Had become a major public health issue,
For those nearest Turandokht's parapet,
Would look up, see her, fall into swoon,
And wake up later in profound distress.
They would heave sighs and refuse food for weeks,
Forced to observe her eyes superimposed
Upon creation's substandard glory.

Unlike the Algol-eyed Medusa head
Or the Shekinah bolt that got Lot's wife,
She didn't petrify, but liquefied.
She turned men's minds into hopeless mush.
Some, yes, went irrevocably mad,
Those who looked upon beauty too long,
And some renounced the world's petty concerns,
Turned penitential and sought out whips.
Some, it was whispered, developed leprosy,
And some, closer still, tuberculosis,
And others, closest, were spared all linger,
Struck down by brainclots, instantly dead.

But you would need good binoculars for that,
John the Mule-Slayer had soon concluded,
If you stood instead behind the crowd's back,
Too far off to get the full effect.
He'd thought folk turned away from bloodshed
Due to refinements that Mule-Slayers lack,
Due to courtesies that dainty cities evolve,
And not, rather, due to disinterest.
He'd easily pushed his way to this spot
And had thought throngs parted to let him pass
Because of that menace his bulk conveyed.
He'd wrongly thought, newcomer that he was,
That best locations, the ones with best views,
Would be those nearest where the axe was swung.
But not one of those who'd come to cluster
And press essence against her celebrity,
Even turned head when that thwack was made
That marked the axeman's act complete.
And John could see, due to his greater height,
That Turandokht, from here, was just a blur,
A small blur given articulation
Only by rumours passed back from the front.
Even so he was perceptibly smitten,
His breath short, palms damp, his knees shaky.
Is this love, wondered he, or mild flu,
Or just readjustment a system makes
After taking a major tissue graft?

She'd require a high-powered telescope,
To see the spectacle from there, said John.
She's so far away that she seems to wink,
To twinkle in this murky atmosphere.

It's odd, said god, it wasn't televised,
Pay per view, satellite and cable,
So not to lose the ticket revenues.

From there, Ninurta, it's all just a blur.
It's either telescope she used or else
The poor prince met his end indistinct.

Axecraft doesn't perhaps work for her,
Doesn't make, for her, compelling viewing.
Perhaps she cannot bear to bear witness
To details that some would find absorbing,
The stains a Muleslayer would magnify.
And yet, if that is so, Ninurta said,
What explains Turandokht's haunted eyes?
If they're not haunted by death, then by what?

It's hard, said John, to reconcile facts.
But maybe only one eye is haunted,
The one that always squints down through the lens.

Maybe, said Ninurta, she shifts her eyes,
Employing first the right and then the left,
And thus prevents that lopsided look.

We'd know all this, were I farseer,
Were I a magus who sees what's below
Reflected off the gods who move above.

I'm earthbound myself, remarked Ninurta.
This body you cast off doesn't fly.
Nor does it catch the eyes of fine ladies.
Their glands, I'd guess, don't readily excite
If health and wealth both seem to be missing,
If shown a pauper, both short and scrawny.

Who was it, asked John, who's lost his head?

Ninurta, all-knowing, but shorter now,
Took another, unnecessary, glance
At the programme organizers had sold,
And found the paragraph hidden in ads
He'd already read several times now.
That was, he said, Calaf the Scythian.

Calaf said the riddle's answer was 'love',
And Turandokht had returned, no, it's not.
And that, it turned out, was end of the match.
Calaf, whose parts they now drag away,
Will not wed with Nabupolassar's daughter.
That, with their heads, is what losers forfeit.
Cyraxes, the Mede King, is scheduled next.

But what about the kingdom, Babylon?
Isn't it, my friend, also thrown in,
Were one of these luckless princes to win?

Not according to this, said Ninurta.

And does that tell us what the riddle was?

No, said Ninurta. It's kept a secret.
Otherwise contestants take advantage
And try to solve the problem beforehand.
You'd soon get no princes showing up
If those dolts had knowledge, well in advance,
Of how insoluble this riddle is.
And without new princes, without their heads,
Turandokht can't expand her collection.

Is it the same riddle for each new prince?

So I assume, but perhaps there are more.
Perhaps it's like the sports they play with balls.
You need spares in case one becomes scuffed,
Or scarred, or flattened, or slickened with spit,
In case it's knocked off of the playing field
To fall among the souvenir-seekers.

What's life, after all, without trophies?

Difficult riddles, though, achieve a fame,
And circulate among cognoscenti
Until so well-known their puzzle's gone,
Until it's known they're really quite simple.
That hasn't happened here, Mule-Slayer.
I think, friend, there's only one riddle.

And you, all-knowing, don't know its text?

I know it, said god, but don't remember.
It is almost toppling off my tongue-tip,
A taste I know but can't put name to.
And that's what I require, to call it forth,
The one name that summons, forcing response.

That name, said John, answers the riddle?

Without their keys secrets remains locked.
They hang back in shadow, unmanifest.
All that appears here, appears by decree,
All that does not, destined, stays latent
And won't come forward without its fiat.
I cannot now, as once I easily did,
Bring futures forward, in advance of time.
Nor can I now reach into time that's passed
To undo damage that damned Zu has done.
I can't do it now, and now that I think,
I'm almost sure I never truly could.
But without commands I'm caught now in now.

Is that's what God's missing book contains?

Yes, said Ninurta. It contains commands,
Codes and keys that unlock God's memory.
They're all there and, therefore, not here.
I do what I can to manage surprise
And to sidestep the nastiest accidents.
All destiny, without book to guide,
Is relegated to run-of-mill luck.

You're not much a help, then, replied John.
This is quite disappointing, Ninurta.

I feel badly about it, Mule-Slayer.
Perhaps I'm only a second-rate god.
That's what priests are saying now, you know.
Karma is gained or lost, whisper the priests,
As souls pass through new incarnations
Until they reach spiritual pinnacles,
The points beyond which plasm can't pass.
And this, whisper priests, was Ninurta's fate,
Promoted higher with each fresh rebirth
Until he attained immortal godhood.
This state was one that allowed no fall

And yet also no further chance to rise,
A state from which none are ever dislodged.
It was here Ninurta reached apogee,
Here that economic law kicked in
And made plain his inborn incompetence.
It was here, at last, that Ninurta remained.
Godhead himself could do nothing now
To boost Ninurta's poor job performance,
For Godhead, by that same grim law,
Had gone to turtle avatar from fish,
To boar from turtle, boar to buffalo,
Had passed through nine forms up to the last,
And now, really, could do nothing at all.
God, like us all, was pinned in position.
When one with universe you're paralyzed,
Caught in folds of n-space geometry,
And so God, like us all, could only watch
As Ninurta botched bold deeds attempted.

They're just jealous of your high station.

But all of it's true, all of these whispers.
My mind's muddled, itself like a riddle.
The world's contents manifest themselves
As mysteries of an irritating kind,
The layered kind, the kind with ply on ply,
An infinite space sliced with shallow planes.
Space, I say, should be clear, unobstructed,
A volume that budes when given a shove.

Don't fret, Ninurta, said Mule-slayer.
If this plan had also needed your head,
I myself would be completely superfluous.
Come look at the stains and tell me your thoughts.

Stains? said Ninurta. Do you mean the blood?
I see splatters. I see puddles and smears.

But does it not seem to paint a picture?

The big splotch there looks like my mother.

Your mother? Are you sure of this, Ninurta?
But wait. Yes. I see the resemblance now.
You've got the same equine nose, said John.

What? No, that's the wrong splotch. That's my horse.

Forget it, Ninurta. You lack the talent.
There are portents here, displayed in splashes.

Fate drove poor Calaf here, to the block,
Only so he'd produce these wet blots?
Was his life but a lukewarm cup of tea
The gypsy dumps out to get at the leaves?

What if they meant nothing? Is that better?
Calaf has left behind important clues.
The fact that he failed, that fact alone,
Has improved our odds, as all gamblers know.
It's narrowed down the possible outcomes.
We know, for instance, that the answer isn't love.

I've known that, said god, some time now,
I've know that since puberty wore off.

Were you disappointed in love? said John.

Hunting and warfare bring me fulfillment.
Love, after hormones subside, does not.
I will admit to some disappointment,
A dark dejection that followed rejection
When lovers lost taste for Ninurta's charms
Or realized, at last, that none exist.
I've felt some disappointment, I suppose,
But mostly it's rage - black, murderous rage -
And that soon fades, if revenge is taken.

Leave the wooing to me, then, said John.

My calculation of our chances differs,
For I've seen a definite trend established.
Take each head the headsman has removed
And fit a curve to run through each point.
Do you agree how non-random this looks?

There's not enough evidence yet for that,
Not enough points yet to plot the curve.

Did you see the skulls piked at the town's gate,

The old ones bleached and picked clean of meat,
Those more recent, fleshed but decomposed,
And those freshest, those that still seem stunned.
Did you, John, count how many were there?
At one per month, a dozen, say, per year,
Your Turandokht's already quite elderly.

But all those skulls are blind, illiterate.
The blood, Ninurta, displays the answer,
The one word that works is written in bold.

Are you, oh Mule-Slayer, a prophet then,
Like your preceptor, the great Dhul-Nun?

It's partly prophecy, said the Mule-slayer,
Partly guesswork and forensic science.
I've known, since that botched mule-slaying,
I can read truth lettered in splattered blood.
The gift of seromancy was conferred by God
So that I devote it to doing his work.

I am God, said god, more so than you,
But I can't distinguish A from O positive.
Is what you do with blood not prophecy?

I'm not Dhul-Nun, God dunk him in peace.
Dhul-Nun was last prophet that God sent
Whose word had force to lay down new law,
Prophecy both prescriptive and descriptive.
Dhul-Nun foretold no prophet after
Would ever do more than utter witness
And thus fixed fate so that fate was fixed.
This restriction, annoying though it is,
Has established limits we're forced to observe.
The same restriction operated here
And deflected the axe a micron left
So that many splatters I'd find useful
Did not come out in well-formed fashion.
Parts of the sign are corrupted, distorted,
And some portions are gone altogether.
The riddle's wording is faulty, I'm afraid.

I've told you to skip the whole riddle thing.
You don't qualify, John. You're not a prince.
And rule of Babylon isn't the prize

Nabupolassar awards to he who wins.
What use have you for a nobleborn wife?
I've told you: concentrate, go for the throat.

The blood, said John, recommends retreat.

Calaf's lettings have learned a thing or two.
They've reconciled themselves to a new phase,
A new existence that won't involve flow.
The air has turned them dark, the heat sticky.
These omens, my friend, don't look healthy.

They're downcast now and brood on past wrongs,
And bit by bit forget who they once were,
Forget oaths, forget what they meant said,
Forget contracts that constitute truth.
They've lapsed into senility, they've withdrawn.
Once-orderly retreat degenerates.
They wail, routed, and flee in full panic.
They recommend we follow: flee or die.

Perhaps, said Ninurta, if we wait awhile,
Another suitor will spill better signs.
Perhaps, as you say, our odds will improve.

The blood tells me how this riddle's solved,
Yet it can't repeat the riddle itself.
This isn't going well, not at all,
For there's nothing here that fits with my plan.
I thought I'd marry princess Turandokht,
And then, when king dies, perhaps from a blow,
I'd become king by primogeniture
And by some more of those blows, if required.
That's why my plan demands a strong arm,
To deliver the lethal blows, if required.
This blood, however, is not auspicious.

I'd forget those blows, advised Ninurta.
Remember how badly the mule death went?

Dhul-Nun's will, Ninurta, must be done.

But how do you know this will so well?

I read his book. I'm sure I mentioned this.

His book has slipped off bestseller lists
But I saw in Nippur a stack of copies
On a chain bookstore's remainder table.
I stood there and read it and learned his thought
Until thrown outdoors by irate staff
While still only part way through the text.

Is this how prophecy disseminates?

The publisher chose to pitch this prophet
As a famous motivational speaker,
Who'd appear on TV if given the chance,
Who'd fill sports stadiums and concert halls
With devotees who'd swear he'd changed their lives,
If only venues would place tickets on sale.
And that day soon comes, Dhul-Nun's day,
The day on which his speech will boom on high
And activate your auditory nerves.
Meanwhile, said dustjacket, buy his book.
The amazing truth is well worth its price.

What, said Ninurta, was the amazing truth?

Dhul-Nun taught that one should wear a hood
To keep magnetism from twisting brains,
That cherry vodka will keep livers healthy,
And that one gains highest possible good
By flipping real estate in shopping malls
And selling call options on penny stocks.
His complex scheme, though sketchily described,
Was interspersed with rants and racial slurs,
With off-colour jokes and with anecdotes
And boasts of prodigious sexual exploits.
And buried in this he also gave hints
That the system he'd devised had opened up
A direct wireless network connection,
A peer-to-peer peek into God's mind.
He told the reader what the Lord intended,
How the gold price would rise and oil's would fall,
How walrus-tusked angels would eat our flesh
And dead diatoms would resurrect
When judgment opens tiny seabed tombs.
And he told his reader, and that would be me,
How God had come to agree with Dhul-Nun,
How God now recognized some peoples

To be, for final times, superfluous.
In strange diagrams of dispensations,
Christ-AntiChrist energy exchanges,
And charts that showed how the peso inflates,
God's prophet laid out the end of days.
And those days, when matter crumbles to dust
As God collects unto himself his own,
Did not include a single Ninevite.
Judgment, in fact, was forever postponed
While that evil nation remained intact.
The Lord's Judgment Day would never arrive
While its fortified market still exists
To mock God with debased exchange of goods.
Since Dhul-Nun despised Ninevites
Who'd once failed to buy sackcloth products
Despite their stylish drape and bargain price,
He did not, at every opportunity,
Fail to forecast that Assur would smite them,
And that, soon after, believers would rise
To take part in paradise's bazaar
Where disembodied spirits exchange forms
And where souless bodies transpose their heads.
Although I never did quite get the trick
That made you rich quick without much work,
I understood at once Dhul-Nun's words
That promised me heaven when Nineveh died.
Godhead would purchase participation
In bringing fruition to long-range plans
With better seats after Homecoming Day,
An executive box with a perfect view.
I read this and I swore I'd help out.
It's a man's duty to remove obstacles
That keep God's glory from freely flowing,
But until blood mixed into sawdust
I couldn't find the right approach to take.

Hey, big guy! said a voice from behind,
And the two turned to see guards approaching.

You! The big Dhul-Nunite. Stay there.
You've caught the Princess Turandokht's eye.
She requires your presence, in her chambers, now.

I've told you, Ninurta, said Mule-slayer.
Turandokht makes use of telescopes.

VII. FISH STORY

What was the fish like inside? said Alf.
Was it dark and empty there? Was it silent?

The fish that consumed me, I soon found out,
Was not quite as dark and empty inside
As what, without tour, you'd likely expect.
You'd think fish that large were mostly air,
As spacious behind walls as private estates,
As hushed and dim as vaults that await wealth.
You'd expect, in view of that vast volume,
That some monstrous force had pumped it up
And sent it forth to give shipping a fright.
This, you'd conclude, is some practical joke,
A mammoth rubber fish meant as a prank.
It's meant to unhinge toothless old sailors
And force them to knees to curse luck and plead,
To pray God send them scapegoats to drown.
We'll hold heads under, they'd promise the Lord,
Until they go slack and forget to fight,
Should only oncoming peril vanish.
Spare us, Lord, and we'll sacrifice dozens,
Toss each off ship and wait for the splash.
Or maybe, they'd think, it's just a bath toy,
Shaped like that to match aquatic themes
And meant to squeeze squeals from infant lungs.
That's it, they'll decide. It's all just fun.
That's what they'll proclaim, what all will agree,
But still, as fish breaches, the nose first,
And then those implacable, deep sea eyes,
They'll continue work learned in long drills,
The tried and true method that keeps you safe.
The only thing to do when fish attack
Is reduce your ship's load and clear its deck
Of any among you who look like a jinx.

The visitations that have no meaning,
The ones that dollops of laxative cure,
Could they not, said plumber, only be jests?

Our dreams, said Alf, are not sent as jokes.
The neural tissues that compose and stage them

Are trenched far more deeply than mere wit.
There are gods down there, and diseased thoughts.
Down near the bladder-brain interface
You'll find only minus and plus arrayed,
Only the mind's primitive calculations.
There's no joy there, plumber. No mirth.

This is a nautical dream? said plumber.

We are at sea. I'm fairly certain of that.
The public side of nightmare, oh plumber,
Employs notions the mind's already met,
Familiar concepts, waters and fishes.

It doesn't flow like your vision, Alf.
What does this mention of jinx mean?

Crossing the seas is a risky business.
Sailors often conclude, when luck is bad,
That some one aboard is the Lord's target.
They think God's marksmanship is so poor
He'll shipwreck many to drown just one.

Do such fish, large enough to strike fear,
Exist except in the bird's imagination?

I think not, said Alf. It's not allowed.
The cube square law prevents overgrowth.
A monster that large would weigh too much
Not to sink to the floor of the real world.

Unless, said the plumber, it's filled with air.

The bird said, as if in reply to that,
But one moment spent in thought on this
Would demonstrate that, if this were the case,
If this fish were nothing but shape alone,
A skin that's stretched thin by overinflation,
The beast couldn't dive or even submerge.
It would, instead, bob and skip upon waves
And rather than scare provoke a few laughs.
What mirth we'd feel should it quiver and lift,
Hesitate a beat, and then drift up!
Wouldn't those mariners smile in relief
To see that shape take flight for clouds?

They'd stand in groups and watch the fish depart.
They'd exchange handshakes and derisive oaths,
And turn to that prophet they'd bound and gagged
And pull out their blades and as group advance.
No need, they'd grin, for sacrifice now.

Sacrifice! said Alf. Dreams demand it.
They'll seek whatever you value the most
And rip you open to find where it's hid.
And then, as deities, they'll nibble it up.
Ishtar spoke to me of it, did she not?

I dream of pipes, said plumber. Just pipes.

Dreams are feasting gods, said the Magus.
And when their meal's finished, they scrape the plates
And pretend no feast ever took place.
A sacrifice becomes entertainment
And scapegoats actors mouthing the lines.

My pipes are fluid-filled, said plumber,
And spill out their serum when taken apart.

You're overworked too, plumber, said Alf.
Those images that fill your days persist
And rudely crowd themselves into your dreams.
They'll push aside more archaic meanings.

The bird, entranced, continued narration:
Will they, you'd wonder, kill me or free me,
Or do, in wrong order, a bit of both?

Note, remarked Alf, the second person here.
Whose head now, bird, has become detached?

The bird ignored plumber and Alf and said:
But they'll cut you loose with rapid knifestrokes,
With the curt half-nods that express regret,
Regret not that they'd meant to end your life,
But regret they'd lost this chance to do it.
Despite that, you too would yield to smiles
If only reason allowed that outcome,
If only factors in place did not forbid
That bloated sea creatures should float off
To bounce around the upper ionosphere.

Perhaps it's those bonds, perhaps that gag,
That stop laughs at cartoon causation
And substitute instead your own regret
That all, despite logic, is not a naught.
You know well there's nothing to celebrate,
But even so you'd relent and raise praise,
Undeterred by gags that limit range,
If fish were just sketched, empty design,
A part of landscape left incomplete
When God took sabbath a moment ago.

If I get this picture rightly, Magus,
The toy is gagged and strapped to a mast
And watching an oversized fish approach.

That's my interpretation, said Alf,
But perhaps there's more meant by this.
Some dreams will provide us with subtext,
Conceal riddles that baffle intellect.

But why, Magus? Why not spit it out?
Why not make points plainly, and move on?

The mind, asleep, can't find its way out.
It leaves itself clues that don't make sense,
That no longer will mean as once they did,
That don't, on return, point the right way.

The bird, entranced, continued narration:
But this fish did dive, and deeply too,
And its mass displaced the nearby waters
And spread vast confusion from coast to coast
With cyclones, tsunamis and turbulent seas.
Not only did it dive, it swam with speed,
It leapt, dove, and plunged forward with intent.
That, in itself, should offer a few clues.
A bit more thought spent on this problem
Would find this shape couldn't navigate,
It wouldn't narrow eyes and seek targets
Were it, as you thought, only void inside,
Were it just a blimp with pulleys and valves,
Or some random confluence of moonlight
And trade winds and marsh gas witchcraft,
Some trickery of air, some illusion,
Some fever dream snail venoms produce.

To watch it maneuver in hunt for its prey,
To see it calculate gales and currents,
You're forced to conclude as it closes in,
There must be something going on in there
And something that's not wholesome or pleasant,
Something not wholly welcome on earth.

And then the bird's tone changed, as it said:
All is Zu-juice, said Zu. Praise God.

Zu? What the hell, said plumber, was that?

Multiple personalities? said Alf.
It's as if this Zu just seized control.

The bird's tone changed again as it resumed:
But how can inner states be analyzed
Without some assist from radiology,
Without stool specimens or urine samples
Without those spirals of matter and hair
That come back wrapped around a drill bit?
A fish of that size was scarcely the type
To let the sunlight penetrate skin
Or let scrutiny pick apart organs.
It wasn't, after all, of the tropical kind
Who makes its eggsacks public spectacles,
Whose transparent flanks will allow its school
Observe complex solids devolve to juice.
It wasn't one of those that bares secrets
Or flaunts unusual sexual appeal,
Or sidles up to kin when gases vent
And creamed secretions come bubbling out.
No, this was of an opaque variety,
And one of such excess capacity
It could choose to chew its prophets uncrowded
And taste proteins in peace, unsupervised,
Without garish or indiscreet display,
So that others will not demand a share.
It was not, clearly, the forthcoming sort,
And since all empiric logic demands
That unobserved truth cannot exist,
You'd finally decide that nothing is there,
Nothing at all, absence simple and pure,
The same scene death views, empty and dark.

All is Zu-juice, said Zu. Praise God.

Just what kind of thing is a Zu, Alf?

I've heard, replied Alf, conflicting reports.

And this is why you would send prophets here.
You need a Jonah for a job like this,
And not, for example, other candidates,
The tourists who checked nice looking luggage
And who wouldn't, cast out, lug it along,
Or surplus crew perhaps, or officers,
Or that cook who routinely burns your toast,
Or the surly, half-crippled cabin boy,
The captain's catamite he'll soon replace.
They'd see nothing of much interest here.
They'd miss seeing Nineveh stir in fish
And dismiss revelations flung at feet,
The beer ads and stop signs and price tags.

Wait, said Alf. It used the word Jonah.
Did you hear that, plumber? It's the riddle!

I forgot to mention. It means Dhul-Nun.
Jonah is Dhul-Nun, in different tongues.

This is all related to that riddle?
Why didn't you tell me at once, plumber?
Jonah is speaking of fish. It makes sense.

It seems to mean something, Alf. But what?

All is Zu-juice, said Zu. Praise God.

That Zu is a bit annoying, said plumber.

Reports, said Alf, agree on that point.
They're really a nuisance - bothersome pests.
They're not often tolerated for long
If they get in your walls and scabble at night
And loot your locked trash and grainery bins.
You'll know you have Zu by the tubular turds.

I've seen such signs running along pipes.
But I meant, Alf, the one that interferes,

The Zu that interjects its odd refrain.
Are there ways to turn the Zu part off?

It's said, said Magus, that strychnine works.

We'd lose the bird too, then, would we not?

It's either both are on or both are off.
And which of those is master, and which slave?
It's like surgery on Siamese twins.
If two heads are conjoined on one body,
Which one of the two do surgeons remove?
Under which of two shells is self hid?

But this is how fortune works to blind us.
Those who recall last night's bacchanal
Prove only they did not, in fact, attend,
And dead who resurrect and give witness
On how the afterlife is organized,
Prove only they'd not properly expired.
Here and beyond will always correspond
And alter circumstance to keep it so.
If mysteries approach, perception retreats,
And reality will part to give it path.
Wildlife will come out when tourists leave
And apparitions manifest as flesh
Only if cameras are empty of film.
All human theory and all induction,
All observation, in end, is futile.
There is really only ever one way
To know what's going on inside fish,
And that's to find a seer, throw him in,
And wait to hear his eyewitness report.

That, I think, said Alf, will do for now.

Not yet, Alf. We need to go deeper.
The book, I think, is in there somewhere,
Buried somewhere inside the toy's mind.

But time's up, said Alf, for this session.

Why not, said plumber, plant a trigger,
A command sequence, an access code,
A Trojan Horse that gives us free entry?

Insert a posthypnotic suggestion,
So that the bird when told will enter trance,
An override that forces a core-dump.

That sounds like a good plan, replied Alf,
Even though, you know, it's probably not.
It's unethical practice, I'm fairly sure,
One method that's surefire to backfire
The moment that any lawyer gets wind of it.

The bird submitted itself to therapy.
It's waived its rights, gave us implied consent.
It's at our mercy, Magus. Exploit the chance.

What password, plumber, would you use?

Use one that only we two would know.
Tell parrot to disgorge its psyche
Whenever it hears the word Turandokht.

There is so much that could go badly here
I can't explain why I seem so keen
And so well-disposed toward lunacy.
It's as if, against my will, I'm bent thus,
As if, in fact, some suggestion exists,
One perhaps I planted myself in self,
That makes saliva run and penis swell
To hear that very strange phrase you spoke.

Turandokht, said plumber, as test of it.

Let's do it, said Alf, and do it now.
It is, after all, an excellent plan.
Upon the word awake, oh bird, awake,
And forget all you've said and all you've heard.
Forget, in particular, this command.
If ever, in future, you should hear me speak,
In an even tone, the word Turandokht,
You shall return to trance and answer as asked.

I hear, said the bird. I hear and obey.

Awake, then, oh bird. Your time is complete.

You fools, said the bird. It's as I foretold.

You'll never hypnotize a plastic toy.
I don't forget one moment that's passed,
Nor do I, incidentally, ever forgive.
Take your mentalist act elsewhere, Alf.
Your audition failed to move the audience.
It lacked enough captivating power
To attract, trap and keep attention rapt.

I think it's time you met Sinsharishkun.

But you seemed, replied Alf, to go under.

That was an act, a role I chose to play,
To expose the agendas you two conceal.
I feigned sleep, became automaton,
Only to overhear the plots expressed.

Turandokht, said plumber, as test of it,
Using a clumsy Alf imitation,
Or so judged Alf, severest of critics.

I hear, said the bird. I hear and obey.

Now you've put me to the work, complained Alf
Of going back through the waking routine.
Please use, plumber, a little discretion.

I hear, said plumber. I hear and obey,
Pitching his voice in imitation Alf.
And then, using even worse mimicry,
He cried, Please, oh Magus, make me awake!

Awake? said bird. Did someone say awake?

Not yet, bird, said Alf crossly. Sleep.
Clamp your beaks, bird, clench your lids and sleep.
Bide your time - await the wakeup call.

There is no cockcrow here, said bird.
Here, in Nimrod's realm, law forbids it.
You'll find no coops here or hens in yards.
In Nineveh poultry may not be kept
Unless it's nested in coleslaw and fries,
Stuck in a bucket cut up in pieces.
Only so packaged are we fully rested.

And don't speak, bird, unless spoken to.

VIII. ULTIMATUM.

Nabupolassar, Babylon's Caliph,
Deep in meditative introspection
That had ascended, by degrees, into nap,
Was rudely reintroduced to consciousness
By the explosive sound a phonebook makes
When the path its fall takes meets floorboards
Within a short distance from ear canals.

A Mede stood above him, glowering down.
He lacked, as do all Medes, facial hair.

And you, sir, are whom? inquired the Caliph.

Have you gone senile, Nabupolassar?
Or do, to you, all Medes look alike?

That, said the Caliph, is possibly it.
In second childhood faces become one
And eyesight weakens as age advances.
Diversity fades. Fog erases distinction.
Fine moustache hairs retract, retreat to flesh.
Medes become as if babes, doughy blobs.

Perhaps we Medes should all wear name-tags,
For eyes too weary to focus on this world
Except for what's shown by reading glasses.

There's a word, I'm sure, that would define you.
Buttocks is the one that first springs to mind,
But that's because all words look alike
Once age has shaved spikes off their syllables.
Bread loaf - that's another candidate.
The possibilities are truly endless.
Shall I sort my entire vocabulary,
Permute its sounds until I get a hit?

Buttocks? Bread loaf? Abdicate, Caliph.
Such a childish mind requires a regent.
It's past time, old man, you stepped aside.

If Mede warriors didn't shave off beards

Recognition would have more medium to work
When called upon to sculpt Mede portraiture.
And why not, while you're at it, friend Mede,
Razor the flesh right off your bald face.
Your skull, if so stripped, if piked and weathered,
Would greatly resemble that of Prince Calaf.
You may have spotted it rotting outdoors,
And set above the wall's crenellations.
Don't you think it looked a lot like you?
If side by side, who'd know which is which?

Or perhaps this is that memory loss
That debtors suffer when creditors appear.
There's Cyraxes, you think, come to collect.
Why not pretend the past has gone blank?
Feign senility until creditors leave:
What payment plan could be more pain-free?
What plan more quickly cancels a debt?

What is more to the point is the fact
That I don't recall your name pencilled in.
It's not on lines that reserve my attention.
There's no Cyraxes in my appointment book -
Unless you're the Ninevite envoy,
Employment a Mede would find hard to get.
You'll have to go back outside and wait,
Delay this statement of arrears awhile.
The Ninevite has staked a prior claim
On the next full hour of my office time.
The envoy, Cyraxes, has an appointment.

He doesn't, said Cyraxes. Not anymore.
The envoy can't make his appointment,
Although, I do say, he came quite near.
A foot more and he'd be through the door,
But now he's lost attention for detail.
Now, sadly, he lacks required vigour.
Now, I'm afraid, he's gone so lethargic
He's even swallowed all disappointment
At how distant your threshold now seems.

The envoy's dead? said Nabupolassar.

But he tried to go in first, before me.

You murdered the Ninevite diplomat?

He was, in the end, undiplomatic.
One should never try to precede a Mede.
One should, rather, cultivate patience
When Cyraxes, Mede King, is present, armed.
But don't concern yourself at all with this.
I have corrected his views on protocol.
He now defers, he politely hangs back,
He's taken a posture that doesn't offend.

He's useless, though, prostrated that way.
So, Cyraxes, you're the King of Medes?
I suppose I'd better give you some time.
Still, I wished you postponed your lesson
Until after I'd heard the Assyrian message.

What message ever comes from Nineveh
That isn't, when opened, but another ad,
A Jolly Baker doll, free with purchase?
Don't mourn Sinsharishkun's diplomat -
His mission here was clearly not urgent.
He came by with a phonebook delivery.
Here's your new phonebook, Caliph. Enjoy.

That's it, Cyraxes? Just a phonebook?

A brief arrived with it, a single page.
As the Ninveite fell, his hand relaxed
And let the paper slip free to the floor.
And though not the weight of a phonebook,
It sped faster than a stooping falcon
And ended, I found, underneath the corpse.
It is, consequently, so blood-soaked
That all that's penned there has disappeared.

You read my mail? That, Mede, is an affront.

Your mail was, as I said, unfit for reading.
I'll fetch it should you need verification.

No. I've grown averse to the sight of blood.

That's inconvenient, said Cyraxes,
For one who spreads God's word by bloodshed.

It's past time, old man, you stepped aside.

I don't care, oh Mede, where Mede blood runs,
Whether through Mede veins or down a gutter,
As long as it runs without rush, unseen.
If it's too impetuous to tolerate,
If it's too loud, if too much the torrent,
Well, then, we'll need to divert the flood.
This is Nabupolassar's Babylon,
A place of many alleys, perfectly placed,
If I need Medes bled out, out of sight.

But my patience, Caliph, is legendary.
Who else would let a debtor survive,
His balance past due, aged ninety days?

Refresh my memory. What was our bargain?

I knew not to deal with a drunken sot,
An alcohol-addled, senile fool.
And yet I thought, his fair daughter at stake,
This memory would last at least an hour.

I no longer imbibe that foul swill,
The poisonous plonk Master Gaster makes.
My head's clear now. Refresh my memory.

We diced. I won. I won your Babylon.
Almost blacking out, you played stupidly,
Staking more and more, wagering, losing,
Drinking more wine and signing more notes.
And then, on one last roll, you lost all,
I thought then that I'd gained all I could want,
But then I saw your daughter Turandokht.
But then I saw the way she swayed, moving,
And then I saw curves her hips made, paused.
And when I saw the stance she took, ready,
That, I knew, was a prize I must possess.
And so I traded Babylon back, for her.
You promised you'd fix the riddle match
So that the Mede King would certainly win.

What a scoundrel I was, said the Caliph,
Before I put on the Dhul-Nun hood!

And you're not one now, Nabupolassar?
Where, then, has my prize, Turandokht, gone?
I saw her led away from Babylon
By some muscle-bound Dhul-Nunite,
A big warrior I've never seen before.
Produce her, Caliph. Fulfil your promise.

I too watched, appalled, the man leave.
But what could I do? He'd won the contest.

Had your talent at cheating suddenly fled?

And how then, Mede, did you best me at dice?

I'll not reveal that trick, not to you.
Let's just say that fate ordained my win.
What I now ask is why win fell short,
Why fix, at riddles, turned intransitive
Turned intransigent, wouldn't budge further?
Our contest was fixed - so who unfixed it?

What riddle was I to pose, Cyraxes?

No book is holy that lacks a Jonah
And no news judged fit if wrapped in fish.

Now, those phrases I do recognize,
Although I don't now recall the answer.
I gave you, I would think, the answer too?

But this is very frustrating, Caliph.
Did wine vapours erase everything?
Are these events completely blocked to you?
That isn't the riddle, that's the answer.
I didn't know, or care, what you would ask.

I'd guess, said the Caliph, my plan was this:
I'd speak a single word, I'd name a name,
And you, in reply, would recite those lines.
And yet, Cyraxes, the plan went amiss.
The fact remains you never spoke the words.
Remember that should fate ever relent
And put you face to face with Turandokht.

Jeopardy, said Cyraxes, names your game.

And Turandokht names my withheld winnings.
I didn't care then and still don't now,
What name you'd name to draw dialogue.
I've spoken the words now. Produce the girl.
Consider them, warlock, a magic spell,
One that compels compliance - or brings death.

Conversion, said Caliph, erased my sins.
That bankruptcy, too, erased my debts.
And though I'm Caliph, Warlock King no more,
I fear nothing, especially not death,
Especially not furies Medes command.
Threats do you no good. Write the girl off.
Conversion, what is more, has brought me strength.
I gather my armies now, believers all,
And trample all nations who won't submit.
Dhul-Nunites shall advance to Nineveh
And throw down the town of plastic idols
And slay its crowds of plastic idolators.

Nonetheless I demand my Turandokht.
I too command power, mounted warriors,
Who, hearing my word, are worse than furies.
And I still hold your note, sworn before God.
With them I can take Babylon itself,
Which we've both agreed is market value,
And which, I swear, will serve as her surety.
If you go, leaving it undefended,
My Medes shall take its streets and slake their lusts.
We'll gather there as if it's market day
And what we see we'll take, we'll own at once.

But take it, if you like, Mede. I am dying.
I've no further purpose for Babylon.
But if it's Turandokht you truly desire,
Come along, sir, and bring mounted Medes.
Come to Assyria and join our attack.
There I'll honour outstanding contracts.
Perhaps, after the town's bricks are unstacked,
The girl's whereabouts will stand evident.

Turandokht has gone into Nineveh?

She went to Nineveh and there she remains.
The man who took her is now its Vizier.

She's not listed in the telephone book.

You denied, said Caliph, that you'd read my mail.

I glanced at one page, uncomprehending.
Since the word I wished to read was absent
No sense was abstracted from those present.
No word there would turn from its business
And call out from page the meaning I sought.
They sit there unused, unactivated.
Your book is new, undepreciated.
Its resale price is perfectly intact.

Names are idols, Mede, and best forgotten.
If all is God - and how, possibly, not? -
Then any one thing, as thing, is false,
And any name that names it also lies.
Persons are idols, especially the girls,
And to covet them, to whisper names and sigh,
That is idolatry that God would punish
If only he could extricate his substance,
If only he could struggle free of the flesh
And female apparel you've made him wear,

Some girls, sir, are worth burning for.

Do you think, in her, you've found your true match,
Or think she reciprocates stupidity,
That she too, for you, seeks hell's portal?
And what chance exists you'd ever meet your match,
That you and she, by chance, would intersect?
Doesn't she as likely reside in Java,
A stooped-shouldered and toothless prehuman,
Who's left her bones beneath the loose gravel,
Shoved under by years of glaciation?
Isn't she, as likely, your perfect fit?
She is certainly more easily retrieved.
God is all and therefore near at hand
But Turandokht is impossibly distant.
Go for proximity, not for perfection.

You, oh Caliph? You'd substitute yourself?
You, withered geezer, are far from perfect,
And thus, by your logic, perfection itself.

I now see why, if youth wanders near,
It's the word buttocks that first springs forward.
Beautify yourself with the Lord's perfume
If that's what will capture your altar boys.
I, however, will stick with Turandokht.

You misunderstand, Mede. When I say Go,
I mean go from here first, and then Go.
Go for she who first raises gaze, smiles,
And indicates that the Lord dwells within.

This Babylon is famous for its whores.
I'll not risk catching what dwells within.

Go then to Nineveh, plastic idol land.
The whores there, I've heard, are fumigated,
Deflated, stored in vermin-proof drawers.
Turandokht's there, somewhere among them.

We'll go together, then, your troops and mine.
And you can die there, content with destruction,
While I live on, content with Turandokht.

Good. We'll go now, before darkness falls.

Shouldn't we send an ultimatum first?

But why delay, Mede? We'll bring it along.
I'm ailing badly and little time's left
Before I behold God's beatific face.
I've no time left for the saber-rattling,
Ultimatums and penultimate ultimatums.
That riddle will serve as last word.
The Vizier, I'm sure, will recognize it.
We'll bring back too the telephone book,
Its contents, I foresee, soon obsolete.
Each number therein, its name also,
Shall soon be, forever, out of service.

IX. THE FIRST MOTION

Sinsharishkun had just finished a meal
When the magus Alf came before his throne.
Alf carried the toy upon a platter
As if the bird were made of precious gold,
A maneuver meant to draw royal eyes
To what they'd otherwise simply dismiss.
Even washed of the decades-old caked filth
The faded plastic case lacked all charm.
And though it no longer stank as greatly,
Though its small face remained bland and blind,
The bird was still, in some way, repellent.

And Sinsharishkun ignored Alf, in fact,
And let him stand there balancing the plate
While he studied detailed contour maps
Of what looked, to Alf, like women's thighs.
But General Arsace, who'd dined with the king,
Pulled a small fishbone out of his mouth
And said, What kind of dish is this, Alf?

I've already feasted, said King to Alf,
Finally looking down at what he held.
Send your midget pheasant back to the cook.

We'll have some more wine, though, said Arsace,
If you've now given up on horoscopes
And look to perform more useful service.

Sinsharishkun stared at the map and said,
We've heard word from the Mede King, Cyraxes.
He's offered to betray Nabupolassar.
If Nineveh consents to open up its gates
And let the Dhul-Nunite armies inside,
Once in, he'll order all Medes to turn
And slay their Babylonian comrades.

For this treachery he wants Turandokht,
Nabupolassar's daughter, said Arsace.
Why he thinks we would have her, I cannot guess.

Sinsharishkun said, it's a tempting plot,

But a Mede inside is hard to get out.

We contemplate now our counteroffer.
We'd give King Cyraxes his Turandokht
But only after the Caliph's troops are slain.
We'd insist, further, they be slain outside.
That way the Medes are still beyond the walls
When time comes to admit we don't have her.

I've had dreams, whispered Alf, of Turandokht,
And the bird, on that plate, stifled a laugh.

Did your gamehen just fart? said King.

I hear, said the bird. I hear and obey.

But this, oh sire, is what the plumber found,
The object that's plugged up the palace pipes,
The one my dark art predicted we'd find.

It's not a book, after all, said King.
Your art, I'd say, needs vision correction.
What is it? Is it some pagan fetish
That witchcraft employs to transmit curse?

It's a bird, a plastic parrot replica.
Electronic components hidden inside
Give it the power to imitate speech.

Take it to the nursery, then, said King.
The youngest children will take great delight
To see the useless feat your craft achieved.
My heavy schedule doesn't permit time
To hear it labour out its paragraph.
We need to plan counterattack tactics,
Sorties to force our foes across the Zab.

But fetch us a red wine before you go.
Strategy, said Arsace, is thirsty work.

And take away those bones Arsace left.
They put odd stains on terrain, said King,
That look at first glance like lakes and creeks.
Last week we attacked an olive pit bit
That flew off on a cough and hit the map.

Troops wandered around cornfields for days
Before we understood and called them back.

Alf, however, pressed on, undeterred.
I thought you'd like to hear its speech rehearsed.
This toy bird pretends to be Dhul-Nun,
A pretense I can't easily refute.
It's already yielded a promising lead
On where your Vizier has concealed himself.

That plastic toy is the famous prophet?
Or did he leave some recorded message
Concealed inside its little bird belly?
Is this some cunning trick our foes devised?

How did Nabupolassar, said Arsace,
Manage to get the thing into our pipes?
And what do the fanatics gain by this?
Does it broadcast Dhul-Nun's prophecies
To weaken Ninevite will to resist?

Demonstrate how it works, said the King.
Does someone need to wind it up first?

Hear, oh King, said Alf, Dhul-Nun speak.
He's promised to unfold God's mysteries
So that Nineveh knows the part it plays.

The bird, however, said nothing at all.

Speak, bird, said Arsace. Our monarch waits.
That glorious form is Sinsharishkun,
Ashurbanipul's son, Nineveh's king.
And speak, please, directly into the glow.

The bird is blind, Arsace, the magus said.

That's only the first misfortune to hit,
Said Arsace, if it won't sing on demand.
Let's cut it open and see what's there,
What machineries Babylon installed.

Who knows? Maybe cogs are clogged with worms
It lately ate in thoughtless, hasty feast.
And that's a mess I'd happily examine.

Let's do it, said King Sinsharishkun.
Alf, go get a cleaver from the kitchen.

Very well, said the toy bird. Listen.
Nine motions mingle within God's breath.
Nine vapours, nine mystic winds exist,
Each needed to impart divine commands.
I know myself the names for only five,
Unlike the best prophets, who'd know them all,
Who would, without asking, recite the list.
Still, I sense how the whole system works,
How each breeze will rotate and relate,
How nine will twine to form the word 'Be'.
I couldn't perform my role otherwise.

What role, bird, aside from blocking pipes,
Would Dhul-Nun perform within these walls?
Metaphysics, in civic priorities,
Will rank even lower than plastic toys.
I doubt we need the names you'd enumerate.

It's theophany, oh king, that prophets do.
I see all God's winds gathered, disguised,
As thin as hairs and woven among threads.
They're everywhere, in every texture.
I'd show you where they are and where they go,
But revelations won't impress you much,
Or cause your path to skirt an open pit,
If uninformed by how creation's done
With spins, wobbles and retrograde motions,
With slight shifts in stress, tone and emphasis
That realign mistaken attitudes
And put wayward waveforms back on course.

Your discourse, said Alf, is too oblique.
The king prefers you skip all background
And concentrate instead on central themes.
Leave etiology aside for now
And tell him how, in brief, we lift our siege.

Yes, said Sinsharishkun. Speed it up.
Creation, for creatures, is secondary.
That moment is done with, over now.
The past has consumed it, down to the bones.
We'd much rather focus our scattered thoughts

On current concerns, situations as found.
What need have the besieged for enneeds?

God's creation, oh king, still proceeds,
Although, I'll admit, it goes slower now.
It goes on within bricks that make your walls,
Within siege engines and ammunition,
And within those cells that compose the nose
That grows upon Nabupolassar's face.
Its ninefold action continues still,
And prophets, to keep up, must know the nine.
Each move that history makes takes all,
And for each move that history omits
Or prepares and then, half-enacted, drops,
You'll always see one or more are absent,
Delayed perhaps, or shunted off, or blocked.
Knowledge of how the nine exhalations
Will operate as the world blooms anew
Is what gives adepts like me their edge.

Nine wind-motions, said the magus Alf,
Would take fearsome concentration to track
In charting our fate's meteorology.
You'd possess, I'd guess, a chip to do that.

I've heard, sir, of your skill with the night skies.
These nine are like the planets, oh magus.
You start work with the first, the one you're on.
All the prophets must know in depth the first.

Let's begin then, said Alf, with the first.

You anticipate, said bird, my argument.
Communication here certainly fails
Unless we establish good foundations.
I'll need to know the first, at very least,
To keep stifled my own unwanted yawns
When setting forth your town's impending doom.
And you too need the rudiment at least
If not to fidget and think just of lunch.
We'll need to agree on that first motion;
How could we, otherwise, you and I,
Trade back and forth our self-consumed heads?

What's this about heads? inquired the king.

I won't, without cause, behead a prophet,
Not even one as hated as Dhul-Nun.
And I doubt, in fact, that my headsman's axe
Could unerringly hit so small a neck.
I couldn't bear to hear the oaths and squawks
Or watch repeated whacks splinter the block.
It puts me in mind of the time I observed
A drunken sous-chef preparing sparrow.

But was it not you, dressed as sous-chef,
Said bird, that tried to carve that carcass?

How did you know that, bird? said the king.

We don't challenge, said Alf, royal fictions.
If Sinsharishkun were just sous-chef
Doing double duty as Nineveh's King,
He'd need to execute any who knew.

Yes. Were that sparrow less impertinent,
He'd be here too, sharing this moment.
I found, said the king, his chirps an affront.

With death discussed, General Arsace stirred.
Treason, my liege, is cause enough, I'd think,
To shorten the toy's stay within our walls.
Even if not bugged or rigged to explode,
A device programmed with Dhul-Nun's voice
Will work to achieve Babylon's designs.
Call the headsman, sire, to fetch his axe,
And we'll lay our bets on how long it takes
To make the blow that breaks the thing in two.

But there's useful knowledge to be gained here.
It's prophecy that brought our foes, said Alf,
Prophecy this toy pretends to possess.
Look how it knew, sire, of that sparrow.
I recommend we learn what we can.
A foe's falsehoods will often reveal
All the truths he'd most like kept concealed.
False confession will often confess more
Than what souls confide to God in prayer,
Disclose more than what the self will tell self.

You probably think that sounds like wisdom.

Well, magus, it sounds like double-think,
The kind Babylonians find sublime.
But I think this, said Alsace. Don't think.
Kill that bird before it kills you.
It spoke of doom just now, did it not?

Doom! Just how often have we heard that?
The bird, said Alf, is like weathermen
Who rain or shine will report hurricanes
To raise ratings and glamorize their jobs.
Those storms, if they hit, come as light breeze
That can't even lift a limp windsock.
I think it's best, by some fifty percent,
To discount those dooms toy birds announce.

You two, said bird, should transpose your heads.
And before I'm done, you'll see how it's done,
How jugglers can work together in pairs.

That, I'd guess, is prophecy, said the king.
What seems to reveal is meant to obscure.
It won't, in fact, contribute much here.
Continue, oh bird, your exposition,
But omit mystic truths you can't expose.

I'd also avoid slanderous exposes,
The magus said, without lawyers retained
Who know all the appeals, motions and writs
That might delay a scheduled trip to the noose.
The law is swift in Sinsharishkun's court,
Impatient, ill-humoured, but always swift.

Although my foresight falls short as yet,
And though I've never seen all nine winds
Fully combined into one tornado,
I've seen the first - the brief, preceding wisp
That grows in spirals and gathers all air.
In fact, I see its initial signs now.
I see the tiny circulation now
Imposed upon the mesolimbic path
That cuts deep channels within us both,
Between mother and child, beggar and alms,
Between a luststruck knight and queen,
Between God and benighted Ninevites.
I see it now, small wrinkles on water

That indicate angels or fish beneath,
The shapes that rise to breach surface and feed.
And I couldn't preach or prognosticate
Or intervene in failed respiration
Without understanding how this twist
Has given yaw to each particle pitched
And made it fly like a knuckleball.
None would proceed far with prophetic tasks,
And none would succeed with God's odd missions
Unless the first of those torques is mastered,
The one gnostics have agreed to call fish.

Fish? said Sinsharishkun. He said fish?

That probability distribution
From which the Lord composed the universe
Has nine initial moments, said the bird.
The first isfish, the next fish variance,
And the rest fish with more subtle quivers,
Each just fish in rarefied movement.
Fish, my friends, is universal motion.

Fish isn't motion, said Alf. It's a meat.
That meat may move, it may swim, dive or leap,
It may, in its season, fertilize eggs
That later hatch and pour forth more fish.
But fish, in our language, isn't a verb.

What then do fishermen do? argued Arsace.

Fishermen, said bird, seek the motion,
As do all seers who'd draw sense near.
I know this, as luck has it, firsthand,
For I too have fished, believe it or not.
It's this motion prophets will first address
If sent to illuminate senseless space
And stir activity in stagnant deeps.
And it's not, you'd think, overly complex,
Not a concept too profound for thought,
And yet you soon learn that even this,
Nineveh whose other aspect is fish,
The angel who grows fat on processed food,
Is far too difficult to grasp for some,
Far too deep indeed for Ninevites.

We're practical folk, said Sinsharishkun.
We'll do what is needed to stay alive.
We'll even add new vocabularies
And build them into our crossword puzzles
If those words send Babylon away.

I know firsthand your town won't listen.
Did I not, while still human, give rants,
Harangue passersby from my street corner
On this very topic, among others?
I met only rejection and denial.

If you shout fish in this town, said king,
You'd better have fresh ones ready to sell.

I don't think, sire, it intends to yield
The data we need to defeat Babylon,
Not, at least, said Arsace, without pain.
Torture is now the only option open.
Let's wrench out its feathers, one by one.

I think, bird, said Alf, we should move on.
Consider fish matters fully discussed.
We're ready now for motion number two.

We're not done, said bird, with number one.
Ninevites, if told, will never admit
Their town in any way resembles fish.
They'll point to brick walls and automobiles,
To ziggurats and lawyers, trolleys and shops,
And ask you where, prophet, are scales and gills,
And just where, precisely, are fins attached?
They'll peer down streets and scrutinize skies
As if this theory possessed its merits,
As if, possibly, you'd hit upon truth
That ten thousand traffic-stuck commuters
Had somehow never puzzled together,
As if all their actuaries and priests
Had somehow missed the simple deduction
That proves how neatly facts fit with fish.

I am sick, said Sinsharishkun, of fish.
Speak instead, prophet, of troop deployments.

And where, oh prophet, Ninevites ask,

Is data found which verifies your claim:
Opinion polls and random focus groups,
The urine samples and blood splatter speeds,
The proteins seen in tests done on rats.
Give us stuff, they say, that our spreadsheets like,
Give us memory in some digital form.
They'll want to see numbers, the bottom line,
As if one finds glory's topology,
Its outer arrogance and upturned chin,
Its grin that goes in to where shame's been hid,
Among characters that rise haze-refracted
And hang above the city's marketplace:
Lottery prizes for this Tuesday's draw,
Or ticket prices temple harlots charge
To watch short lovesongs performed with goats.
Will one see words that draw all worship
Concealed in sums that scroll through the cables,
As pints per breast of raw milk production
That mix into our daily dopamine?
Isn't it this they'll see instead of fish?
And even if told to take closer looks,
They'll read these numbers while making reply
With that same rhetoric, that same logic,
You see so commonly employed by fools
Who'd ape the ways that appear wise to peers.
They'll point to lines that oscillate on graphs
And ask seers to justify visions
With volume distributions and yield curves
That plot outlays against net rewards.
Where do you see eyes, prophet, or mouth,
Or that old familiar elliptic shape?
Where, they'll ask, is all the liquid required?
They'll point to concrete, bitumen and glass,
To microwave popcorn in plastic bags,
To soybean enhanced and staleproof bread
And cellphone screens and locked garbage cans
And ask for assays that prove them all fish.
The points they'll make stop short of depth
And end flourished with brief, dismissive waves
Designed to bat words that buzz too near.
The fingernails on their hands, due to fat,
And due to manicures done with their teeth,
Lack a fine point and are much too blunt
To hit quintessence this clutter hides.
The tips of those stubs won't penetrate

Beyond brick facades and electron shells,
Beyond the crowds of transposable heads,
Down to the downtown foundation clay
To where substrate slime melds with the fish,
To fundamental slabs composed of fish.

It's no wonder you met such denial.
You're completely loonie, oh bird, said King.
Take it away, Alf, back to that pipe.

Ninevites, in fact, of all infidels,
Of all those the Lord hesitates to kill
Without first making himself acquainted,
Without at least a quick introduction,
Are least likely to recognize their state.
Ninevites are so notably obtuse
That prophets sent here often give up
If given a week of such disbelief.
They'll go home to bully cattle around
Or set out in boats for a smaller catch,
For fishmeat more conveniently packed,
And let Ninevites go their own way.
They're denser than bricks, and twice as stubborn,
Visionaries often confide to friends,
So why waste effort change their minds?
They lack the proper metaphysical bent,
The right kind of pituitary gland,
The mystical chemistry that visions need.
They're of fish too, of course, or mostly so,
Of a kind not inclined to introspect
Or theorize or study steady skies
And learn that All is Number, All is Change,
All is a statistic that randomly jumps
At passing flies, prophets and herring gulls.
Such science is left, by entente, untouched;
It's not efficacious, not true fish,
Not a kind of coinage banks will accept.
The All, all will agree, is best ignored,
The conditions here clearly too poor
To get unobstructed observation,
To get a good look should miasma lift.
It's best, in these parts, to focus your scope,
To narrow your eyes and inspect each piece,
To judge each product on market appeal.
That's entelechy here, the best it gets,

As much of the All you'll get in one bite.
Even angels would do best to adapt,
Learn the local customs, eat the cuisine,
And pull the curtain of cloud across all,
To vanish within flesh, conformed to fish.

Get the cleaver, Alf. I've heard enough.

X. BAIT

That interview was badly handled, bird.
It's back to those pipes for you, said Alf.

Don't tilt the plate like that, said bird,
When going down such steep flights of stairs.
I get airsick so easily now.

You were never really much a bird, bird.
And now, after a single cleaver stroke,
You fit the bird description even less.
His Highness thought little of your discourse,
So little he forgot his first impulse
To flay away your outer plastic case
Until he found the thing that makes you talk.
He lost interest after but one blow.
I told you, did I not, how swift he was?

That's what always happens, the bird said,
As soon as conversation moves to fish.

Conversation moves better, replied Alf,
If you avoid mention of fish outright.

It moves better, but says nothing, it said.
Watch it. I almost lost my stomach there.

It isn't so easy balancing plates
When head and body take separate paths.
When I see the part with beak slip forward,
The hasty corrections I make in response
Will cause the section with legs to slip back.

Attend to your own head and I'll watch mine.
Just try to carry the thing level, Alf.
I recognized another gnostic once,
One I met in your town by happenstance,
A herring gull who'd sung lamentation
Until overcome, engulfed, transformed.
I saw some cadence of psalm still lingered
In how she puffed feathers and shifted weight,
How her beak nipped neat stitches in space

As she swivelled head and saw coin approach.

Coins, indeed, said Alf, will catch the eye.

She'd perched herself to preen her wings atop
A coin-operated parking meter
And looked so much a part to this fish
I couldn't tell where meter parted
And let the winsome legs of bird begin.
And though we'd both strayed far from salt seas
She too recognized an old lover, old,
A lover gone ancient, bearded and bald,
An old flame mostly extinguished in fish.

Don't bother feeding the meter, she said.
It only takes Master Gaster tokens.
You seem familiar, but that's how it goes
With fruit around seed, flesh around skulls.
It grows slack, withered, and summons the wasp
As youth's unique features revert to type.

We still both prophesy, though, I said.
And didn't we both trace the Tigris north?
That was you, was it not, that flew north,
You seen aloft from my coracle boat,
You that came down every few hours
And stood on sandbanks with half-spread wings?

If it was, sir, I didn't eat you then,
Nor would I now, without preparation,
Unless soaked in brine or dropped on rocks.
You're a memory now, too tough to chew
And due, I'd guess, to see your time expire.

You're memory too, dear, but still unkind.

God possesses nine names here, she said,
And first in that kabbala that magi teach,
Is one that all held captive soon learn,
The first inflection, the once pronounced 'bait'.

That's not one of the five names I know.
Let's transpose heads, my reply proposed.

I don't do that anymore, she said,

With those turned bait and not truly real.
What good, what reward, would come from that?
Dhul-Nun's dead, imposter. You're just bait.

But what then of the fish we've both become?

What fish? she spat and turned her head south.

That's a tragic tale, said Alf. I think.
That bit about bait is new to me.
It's not taught in the current curricula
Magi must master to matriculate.
Our meters, bird, are Master Gaster Brand,
As was, I've no doubt, that herring gull.
All gulls here are Jolly Baker owned.
They're gene-modified to harvest garbage,
Master Gaster fast food, pizza crusts,
Excess potato chips, burger scraps,
Any trash Gaster genes generate,
Any carbon ring that's trademark stamped.

I don't know for whom that seeress worked,
Though I'd guess it's Ishtar's avatar.
It doesn't matter, really, inside fish.
God's prophets, however, do not absorb,
Do not, eaten whole, easily digest.
They get stuck if sucked down through gullets
And end well-lodged, wedged in some crack.
These irritants hurt worse than gallstones
And will, if not treated, injure your tubes.
They'll blister tissue, eat walls away
As prophet-shaped pustules that fester and swell.
The wise fish, therefore, will mount defence
With antigens sent to infected sites,
With antibodies meant to dissolve threat,
To neutralize rage with serums of dream.
Seers thus find their forms gripped and pinned,
Reduced to what systems will tolerate,
Sluiced with illusion, slathered with falsehood,
Coated over and wound round in a web
Until their wits are made harmless and bland.
This is how fish fit gnostics inside,
How they give foreign objects new home,
And make them welcome in nestings of cyst.
Those they reject are transformed, put to sleep,

And then shoved on a shelf affixed with price.
With luck they'll stay there, never to wake
Or raise again barbed cant against fish.
That's how missionaries will end, with luck,
And such are the jobs that God's prophets get
They'll often come coupled with misfortune;
They'll come caught, thrashing, in a surge of doom,
And end dashed against the end they foresaw.
To end this way, forgetting, forgotten,
Is thus, for prophets, what fate would intend,
The very bad luck bad luck deserves.
This is why, after all, we bury flesh
After it dies and grows unpleasant to touch,
After it fails to take part in our hugs
Or properly pose for group portrait shots.
And who can fault fish for doing the same?
It would seem, for fish, a fairly safe bet,
A risk-free strategy to rid itself
Of all the disturbance bad meat can cause.

How, plumber, do you work in such dark?

But what's this, Alf? You've brought the bird back?

You're on my migration route, plumber, said bird.

Those batteries must be heavy duty
If that chat function hasn't failed yet.
I see the headpiece has come off, Alf.

Sinsharishkun lost patience with the bird.
I see you've put plumbing back together.
That's too bad, plumber. The king's command
Is that this bird be returned to that pipe.

But then it stays blocked, the plumber replied.
That's very foolish, Alf, very foolish.

It's foolish to call the king's words foolish.

More foolish, said bird, when words are wise.
The king's wisdom, however, is too late.
And that's how wisdom works, around here.
I'll be glad to see the foolish place go.

Alf put the plate that bore the bird parts
On bricks below the reassembled pipes.
If you are, indeed, the prophet Dhul-Nun,
Solve the riddle that puzzles Ninevites:
What grievance do you bear against the town
Where all civilization reaches peak?
Prehistory, history, have come to this,
The greatest height that mankind can achieve.
Here is where towers teach the noosphere
How to claim matter, energy and space
And how to bring the cosmos to completion.
Here is where all awakes, commodified.
What will explain a countervailing rage,
That seeks to stop unfolding status quo?

Look overhead to find that answer:
The sentence pronounced still hangs above.
How not comprehend my discontent?
Great Nineveh still stands, does it not,
Despite all that I've said, all that I've done?
If not for a job left incomplete
I'd put aside my rage, relax, retire,
And let each new event go forward
From non-memory to memory and back,
Unencumbered by my expectations.

The plumber glowered to hear the bird's words.
You'd think you'd reconcile with history,
And grow resigned to the way that things go,
The usual ways, the ways they most like.
Follow the pipes, my dad would often say.
One day he said it once too often
And had he not ducked, one length of pipe
Might well have made its way inside his skull.
Follow that, dad, I proclaimed as I left.

And yet, plumber, those pipes led you here.

And do you hear complaints from me, oh bird?

If even plumbers know that, said Alf,
Surely prophets should know how things go.
No disaster, no triumph, no storm,
Should find a prophet too perturbed to work.

Let me tell you, then, of this profession.
Prophets, you'd think, would grow jaded in time
With floral bouquets that foreknowledge forewilt,
With cakes that stale the same moment they're baked
And jokes that fall flat at lack of surprise.
You'd think we'd tire to see sunlight dim
As dooms come due and routinely complete,
That lips would go numb and tongues fall still
When slid over skin to the curve's frontier,
To touch the cold thing a lover becomes.
That kiss, at least, should give seers pause,
And cause to cease that turbulence they've stirred,
To help, you'd hope, to give you all a peace.

That does sound reasonable, said Alf.
I gather, however, that it's not the case.

You'd think too that few welcome that sense
Or come, in time, to raise praise for the Hour,
For that Hour that looks much like the last,
And even more like, you'd swear, the next.
Only the most perverse, surely, persist
With praises that sound like lamentations,
Those despondent moans on signs gone soft
And those endless hymns on time's bad end
That cause your shipmates to give you the toss.

But you're losing us here. What shipmates?

I think, plumber, it attempts metaphor.

I don't follow metaphor, said plumber.
It's gone the same way as resurrection.
Our stuff's far too solid, too entrenched.
Metaphor's obsolete in this town.

Not for one who knows how heads transpose.

Someone indeed gave you the toss, bird,
Or rather, if I read these pipes aright,
They gave you first the toss and then the flush.
Perhaps it was Marguerite, perhaps not.

Who is this Marguerite? inquired Alf.

It was she, indeed, said the bird, who flushed.

I see no switch here to turn you off,
And that, I think, might well explain your plight,
Why Marguerite took drastic action.

I think, Alf, he attempts speculation
Without the benefit of stars or facts.

The plumber ignored that snide aside.
I'm talking, bird, about missionaries
Who overpitch or overstate their praise.
Praise the Lord a few too many times
And here even the most patient will snap.
In Nineveh a praise will soon wear thin,
Unless, of course, it comes sung in jingles
That promise bliss that takes only a blink,
At prices others can't possibly beat.
Take that drain cleaner that scoured your case.
I've heard how powerful it's virtues are
So often they've eaten into my brain,
Repeated so often they banish sleep.
And yet I've seen pipes it rotted away,
Tubes who'd rather burn than unclench their grip.
Don't get me started on drain cleaner.
It ate the eyes right out of your sockets
And yet left this drain completely plugged.

Some praise, true, will always prove misplaced,
But what of He to whom all signs point?
What about, then, the All-Knowing One
To whom all likelihoods first appear?
If prophets grow jaded, what about God?
Wouldn't you think this would hold true too
For that vision for which a mortal sight
Is just a lower-powered analogue?
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined;
The same fractal that curves cove curves bay.
As we go, so goes, more so, He,
So much more so that nothing will tempt
Or stimulate or even hold his gaze
Unless, like that fish of his, enlarged.
And that's why such giant signs are sent,
Those huge fruits swollen with seedless pulp,
Voids skinned over, buffed up with wax,

And hormone pumped to fetch the best price.
This produce never ripened from vines;
It's self-contrived, forced into position,
Self-propelled, self-made, motor-conveyed
To slide smoothly through the automaton.
Sprinklers, at intervals, go on and off,
To keep it moist, shining, beaded with dew,
Ripe with presence for ready appetites.
It's just the kind of sign we've grown to like,
So large, so perfect, a perfect fit.
And that's why God sent his giant fish.

Fish again, said Alf. Give it a break.

But the plumber, taking the bird's bait, said:
What fish? Even larger culverts here,
Even those that aren't clogged with plastic crap,
Are nonetheless amazingly fish free.
Are you one of those birds, the diving kind,
That plunges below surface seeking fish?
If so, oh bird, you've chosen the wrong spot.
Even the Tigris, to which our pipes wend,
Is now too toxic a stream for your dives.
You'd need go far downriver, to sea,
To find a fishery that still yields catch.

But your riddle, remember, alludes to fish.

Yes, said Alf. The riddle mentioned fish.
No book is holy that lacks a Jonah
And no news judged fit if wrapped in fish.
Make that riddle make sense, friend bird.

Those fish that are not there, oh Alf,
Those fish too represent divine signs.
And what about that monster, that fish,
That none but me, it seems, has ever seen?
Why is it not beached on the wreckers' rocks,
Its ribcage nudged by incoming suds?
It just doesn't follow from what we know.
A fish so overgrown should, by now,
Have drawn the note of all the trawler fleets.
How many dozens of small blindspots,
How many scores of tiny occlusions,
Correctly located, must the Lord implant

To let that shape go undetected?
How many eyes that scan deeps must blink,
Or look off in distance, or close in sleep,
And so not note that ponderous mass
Drag its blot across their sonar screens?
It's not as though its mammoth appetite
Left much else of note to range the seas.
No smaller fish species still exist,
Nor do even weeds or plankton survive.
Not even the most minor of prophets
Remains at large to delay a net's drag.
And how, alone, could such sign still swim?
It should already trail behind those boats,
Bob on waves upside down, backwards,
Towed by its tail to where canneries wait
To air out entrails and process flesh.

Does this make sense, oh plumber? said Alf.

If absent fish are signs, you foolish bird,
Then so too are absent alien craft,
The swarms of flying saucers that come down
Without knowledge of air traffic control.
And what about the absent giant snails,
Or those absent sex-starved naked girls
Who search for fat, balding plumbers to mob?
The nice thing, bird, about absent signs
Is how many you can pack into rooms.

Forget about fish, Alf advised both.
I'd forget also, if I were you, plumber,
Any discourse the damn toy should launch.
Why listen to this ersatz Dhul-Nun?
In fact, I think I'll leave this dank place
And go see if our liege Sinsharishkun
Has meanwhile mollified rage with wine
And other entertainments kings enjoy.
Royal thoughts, though grown maudlin and drunk,
And though detached, perhaps, from common sense,
Will not, at least, get so stuck on fish.

Do that, magus, the plumber said. Go.
These pipes will come apart before long,
And then we'll be rid of fishy prophecies.

XI. LONGEVITY

Sinsharishkun, Alf saw, was incensed.
We had, he thundered at the stern crone,
A comprehensive insurance policy!

Nineveh bought, she said without dismay,
The most comprehensive of our policies.
Earthquakes, hurricanes or meteor strikes
Can level the whole of Mesopotamia
Without disturbing a Ninevite's sleep.
If wheat prices fail or sheep fall sick
Or if hailstones mow down autumn crops,
Ninevites need not give it a thought.
A loss of major limbs or tooth decay
Should not elicit, sir, the least response.
If, however, you read the rider 'T'
You'll see text which, stripped of obfuscation,
Expressly excludes a kitchen accident.

And who is this crone? Alf asked Arsace.

That is Ur Prudential's claims adjustor.
Our monarch wants recompense for a map
He'd stored in one of the kitchen cupboards.
A bit of water trickled onto map
And blotted inked lines that depict terrain.

They refuse to pay, said the King to Alf.

Of course we do, snorted the old woman.
The rider was appended, I'm sure you know,
Because of that claim you made last year.
You signed the revised policy, you'll recall,
And initialed that very paragraph.
Your kitchen claims are no longer covered.

How much loss is involved? inquired Alf.

Nineveh's gone, replaced by a black splotch.

I meant, said Alf, monetary loss.

That was Sinsharishkun's favourite map.
And now it's damp and fuzzed over with mould
And crawls with bugs that eat holes in parchment.
The damage, if mental distress is added,
Is not an inconsiderable amount.

Ur, said crone, will not pay, regardless.

Her firm has turned petulant, said Arsace
They labelled the King's last claim frivolous.
The royal sparrow, a prize thoroughbred,
Encountered misfortune inside the kitchen
And suffered grievous, multiple injuries,
Grave injuries that later proved fatal.

That's not the same sparrow... began Alf,
But quit when he perceived that it was the same.

I'd get that leak fixed, said adjustor
As she closed briefcase and fastened its clasps.
You should plug it with something, Arsace.

I have recently heard mention, said Alf,
Of a kitchen leak that made the walls weak.
I heard it from Ishtar, spoken in dream.

Did you? said the old woman. How strange.

But what does all of this mean, madam?

It's a bad sign, sir, a sign of neglect.
And signs of poor or improper upkeep
Can invalidate the whole of our contract.

Sinsharishkun glowered, but turned to Alf.
And where is that plumber who found the toy?
Isn't that his real job, fixing leaks?

That damn fool is currently downstairs,
Rearranging plumbing without permit.
He works in the dark so others can't watch.
And I suspect unspeakable sex acts
Are committed upon the unwilling pipes,
Although, at this point, I have no proof.
He claims your sanction, said the Inquistior.

And who is this? said the King to Arsace.

An Inquisitor, oh sire, with some complaint.

But can't someone else handle complaints?
I've told you, Arsace: I want only praise.

That plumber of yours lacks a permit.
I want, said Inquisitor, his head off.

The plumber found Jonah, protested Alf,
Our one clue to what Babylon wants.

Jonah? said the crone. I know that name.

That old bag there, said Inquisitor,
Also deserves to lose her wrinkled head.
She threatened assault and offered a bribe,
When caught red-handed, illegally parked.

And without that plumber, Alf went on,
You can't fix leaks that damage your maps.

The Inquisitor shouted, and banged his fist.
You can't fix leaks without a permit.

And where, said Arsace, did you hear the name?
Is he, perhaps, one of your firm's clients?

Confidentiality's key at Ur.

A palace watchman then entered and bowed.
We've located the missing Vizier, sire.
He had, indeed, hid in the dairy barn.

Ha! said Alf. Proof! The toy's Dhul-Nun!

Not Jonah? said crone. You said Jonah.

The king, said Arsace, has fallen asleep.
Let us resolve these matters while he naps.
You, Alf, should go question the fugitive.
You, Inquisitor, should inspect the kitchen
And then, in due course, issue permits.

And you, madam adjustor, shall forthwith
Inform me where you heard that strange name.

Walk with me, General, down to my car.

What's your name, old woman? said Arsace.

My name's Esther. I once loved a Jonah.
This would be in my youth, long ago now.

And how long ago, precisely, was that?

A full century, at least, Esther replied.

You're that ancient? But that's not possible.

Jog daily, smoke handtwisted cigars,
Eat no beans, horse radish or wheat.
Pop a thousand grains of Vitamin A
And sip half a quart of breadfruit juice
Before all trips of more than two steps.

Is that all I'd need do? said Arsace.

Of course not, replied the crone. There's more.
Never copulate without a condom,
And never with partners rashed or pockmarked
Or with running sores or gangrenous limbs,
Or those who might lack some limbs altogether.

But that's the course I've instinctively followed.

Ensure all insurance premiums are paid,
Don't accept rides in any vehicle
Unless you're certain it's seat-belt equipped
And chew your food until it becomes paste,
Until it turns tasteless, a thorough bore.
Count those chews until you're too weary,
Until one more number gags your count.
That regime, sir, brings eternal life.

Eternal life, Esther? You'll never die?

It's worked so far. I've outlived my friends,
None of whom adhered to my recipe.

They're dead, I'm not. The facts favour my case.

What about this Jonah? He's dead too?

I'll show you just how dead, oh General,
In just a short while, when we reach my car.
He lived long ago, is dead long since,
Hanged by the State for surveying crimes.
He was, you see, your town's best surveyor,
And sought by all to plot property lines.
It's he who first mapped the nucleotides
In those days after genes were discovered
And prospectors rushed in to lay claims.
They're all Master Gaster's now, of course.
But the Lord led him into temptation,
Caused him to sin, to get caught, and to hang.
God needed, for his market, Jonah's head,
And so sent a Warlock to corrupt him.

I've heard of that market, replied Arsace.

It's said to be, said Esther, a marvel.
Are there not girls there with sequined bras
Who stand next to the curtained passageway,
Who greet each soul, take tickets, and coo:
Enter here to attain entertainment.
Nightfall approaches - escape to the light,
And let me take, sir, your coat and your pants.
It's heartless out there, cold and treacherous,
But well-heated in here, here in the pipe,
Here where steam curls hair and shuts your eyes.

I think, Esther, that perhaps you've gone mad.

There, Arsace, is where you'll see the counter,
The place you must check heads until you leave.
A houri is there who watches you closely.
And if, perchance, your tip is too paltry
After your time in paradise completes,
She'll give you one that doesn't quite belong,
A head too small or slightly too big,
A head too handsome to fit with a dwarf,
An elephant's head upon Shiva's babe.

Please, oh woman, let's get to the point.

What's this talk of heads in paradise?

I approach, obliquely, she said, Jonah.
The Lord, it's said, coveted Jonah's head,
And so, without hesitation, took it.
That head, knowing how a line should run,
Was needed in paradise right away,
Catch the next flight out, we'll pay the fare.

But why did God conceive such a design?

The market to which souls on Friday go,
God thought, should expand to a supermarket,
A monster store that stocked all products,
That gave unto shoppers all they desired,
Where supply and demand efficiently match,
And arbitrage won't exist for cheats.
It's high time the old market came down
And made way for a modern new structure.

That's going on here in Nineveh too,
An endless construction and reconstruction.

The project required many professions,
And so the Lord harvested architects,
He took accountants, carpenters, engineers,
Took just their heads, left rest behind,
Left roots still embedded, clamped in place.
But what he needed first, to fix the lot,
Was the head that Jonah the surveyor wore.

Wait, he said. I'm making correspondence.

But Jonah, despite tugs, wouldn't come.
Jonah did not, God found, extricate.
That neck, he found, had tenacious sinews,
And so noosed it with rope, gave it a jerk.
He caused Jonah, seduced, entrapped, to hang,
Which allowed the head to easily detach.

This is how heaven, then, will head-hunt,
The method used to collect employees?
Is this tale predicated on a pun,
The low wit schizophrenia contrives?

Know this, Arsace, that all is just pun.
All events are but two words colliding,
Two words from the secret angelic tongue,
From the Language of the Mint, twilight speech,
The Garden's conversational exchange.
Know this, too, that the word for head
Will also mean price, body means cost,
Head means spirit, and body means form.
Friday is market day, day we gather,
The day dispersed souls return their forms
And receive in turn the answer to riddles.

The code then is one of substitution?
A child could break that, given some time,
Given computers fed with algorithms.
Your language seems that of a cargo cult.

That's it, Arsace! Now you understand!

You said, Esther, that you loved this Jonah.
Your relationship occurred before this,
Before the Warlock corrupted the man?

No, she replied. Our love affair began
At a time after, and well after, that.
By then he was already exsanguinated,
Already dead, already headless by then,
Already packed in a black garbage bag.
And I knew, just knew, from the very start,
This love was doomed, it wouldn't end well.

Not, said Arsace, a promising start.

He couldn't even speak, or move around,
Or even really participate much
When breathing got heavy and sport began.
Until then, until I saw that bag,
I'd never understood what drew women
To men who'd taken blows to spine or neck
That left them paralyzed from nose to toes.
You see girls on streets shoving wheelchairs
In which their unresponsive lovers loll
And wonder what could bind such a couple.

I don't believe I really want to know.

I think you do, General. It's natural.
Imagine yourself in that wheelchair.
What woman would want the thing you've become?

I think it's mystery that man can't explain,
A mystery that repels, that males reject.

In part it's curiosity like your's.

But I'm not curious, woman, not at all.

In part it's a desire to take dominance.
In part it's satisfaction widows take
To wear black and stand watch at grave mouths,
And partly, I think, it's mother's instinct
To cradle and suckle, bathe and diaper up
Inert infants stranded outside the birth canal.

I don't believe I really want to know.

Listen, Arsace: I'll tell you what happened.
I saw the bag thrown on the loading dock
Of Nineveh's central waste treatment plant
And fell deeply in love, passionate love.
That love has endured all of these years
And I have that bag still. It's in my trunk.

You drive the bag around, stored in your trunk?

But I know, without ever being told,
How grateful that headless corpse would be
The day it reunites with missing parts
And mingles among crowds in paradise.
I open up my bag from time to time,
Gaze on my treasure, and sing lullabies
That promise eventual resurrection.

That's a strange story. I'm sorry I asked.

It is always, she agreed, a grave mistake
To go through doors without knocking first.
Reduce your risk and stay only at home
And bypass riddles that offer themselves.
That's my recipe for eternal life.

Eternal life? Really? And that will work?

No, I joke. It will just seem that way;
It will seem eternal, short though it is.

Esther opened trunk and stowed briefcase.
It's still here, my bag. Do you want to look?

Perhaps later, he said. I've work to do.

There's no later, Arsace. There's only now.

That's a nice car, said Arsace. Expensive.
And that's a flashy colour for one your age.
I own one, same colour, same model,
And so I know just what one would cost.
Ur, I'd guess, rewards employees well.

I get a cut from each claim I deny.

But you've parked it, Arsace stated, in my space.

Get in, said Esther. We'll go for a ride.

I'm afraid I must, with much regret, decline.
We have, the King and I, much to discuss
As soon as a few of those fumes depart.

Forget Mede plans - it's too late for that.
Cyraxes' head moves opposite to your's,
So that flywheel spin remains conserved
And furies don't flounder, out of control.
Your head to his, Arsace, is counterweight.

You know, adjuster, of Cyraxes' plans?
What are you, Esther - Babylon's spy?

I sell indulgence to those chance favours.
Nothing reduces risk like luckiness,
None are so lucky as risk-reducers.
You know, Arsace, I think we two should mate.
I know a few tricks, learned over years,
That drive men into instant ecstasy.

You're mad, old woman. You're dragging a corpse.

I'll toss out the bag, if that is the cause
For this hesitation to accept bliss.
Or keep it, sir, if that's what you'd prefer,
Shift it to the back seat, out of the trunk.
We'll let it take part in our wrestling match,
Trade fluids in wild three-part exchange,
Make a menage, if that's what you'd prefer.
I'd need, of course, to recompute motions
If given now, on such a short notice,
A three-body problem inside my car.

Thank you, said Arsace, but I must return
Before the King wakes from his drunken nap.

Sinsharishkun, she said, will not awake.
He's missed payments due on life insurance
And now forfeits the wards its terms provide.
Neither king nor city needs you now.
No work remains you can usefully do.
Get in, Arsace. I'm afraid I insist.

Is it, Arsace asked, seatbelt-equipped?

XII. NABUPOLASSAR SWITCHES SIDES

I need milking, the Vizier told Alf.
My udder's so swollen, it almost bursts.

A milking's easily arranged, said Alf.
A dairymaid will provide you relief,
But only after I've heard what you've done,
After I've heard exactly what's happened.

That's torture, Magus. It's inhumane.
It's disallowed under all conventions
That govern the treatment and interrogation
Of prisoners of war and livestock both.
These are treaties, universal in scope,
To which, sir, Assyria's signatory.

You're right, oh Vizier. It's disallowed.
And since you've now invoked your civil rights
I'd better follow all due process,
Both to ensure your rights remain secure
And to safeguard myself against a suit.
Let's get started on that paperwork
That all future legal action requires.
And before we fill out requisitions
That will, in due course, result in relief,
We need to review your personnel files,
Your medical history and job record,
The degrees you've earned, the contacts you've made.

Is all of that truly necessary?

What childhood diseases have you had?

Have you shucked stars and become Inquisitor?
But what difference does it make now,
A young child's bout with chickenpox
That happened several centuries ago?

You say 'several centuries', Vizier?
It doesn't do to delay the process
With evasions, omissions, outright lies.
Falsehoods only slow the paperwork.

I see a window in the milking schedule,
A date only a few short weeks off,
That might well disappear if these forms
Are bounced back here for revised submission.

It's true, Magus. I'm very, very old.

And what's your connection with Nabupolassar?

That's a bit complex, the Vizier said.
Our relationship was once extremely close.

How close, said Alf, is extremely close?

I was once, said Vizier, Nabupolassar.
No, don't look so sceptical, Magus.
I was Nabupolassar not long ago,
Before I immigrated here, last year.

And how is this proposition explained?

It wasn't long ago, in Babylon,
I took a sip of the finest red wine,
An old, exquisitely flavoured vintage
That had always, before, proved ambrosial.
I spat it out upon my regal robe.
It bore a bitter taste I identified
As sign my time approached a painful end.
At first I thought, hoped, the bottle was bad,
That a loose screwcap had let air in
And let that nectar become vinegar.
And yet, it soon occurred, the preservatives,
Antibiotic agents hygiene likes,
Should prevent such events in modern wines.

That was Nabupolassar, who sipped the wine?

The body that wine-soaked robe concealed
Was one I'd taken many years before,
And bit by bit, parts had started to fail.
Cartilage creaked, muscles dwindled and ached,
And each movement I made brought agony.
I'd lost my appetite for food
And carnal delights were distant memories.
I was soused, in those days, much of the time,

For only wine, of lifelong companions,
Could still work its customary wonders.

Your tale, so far, accords with known facts.
The King Nabupolassar was famous once,
Known as drunkard even to Ninevites.
The alcoholic Warlock, we called him.
Disbelief was rife when Nineveh heard
That the drunk last year had took religion
And become a Dhul-Nunite convert.
Many here openly laughed when news broke
That the King, who now styled himself Caliph,
Had enacted laws that forbade strong drink
And himself would touch no alcohol at all.

Our destinys are rusty machines indeed
When their parts are not kept lubricated.

But Sinsharishkun said it wouldn't last,
That no religion could transform a man
As monstrous, as depraved as that Warlock.
He'll slide back into debauchery soon.
Trade will resume as tirades wind down,
As Holy War slowly rolls to a stop.
Sinsharishkun also, as you well know,
Can find, all day long, comfort in wine.

Your King did not know with whom he dealt,
Nor did I, as I'm now forced to confess.

Confess further, oh Vizier, said Alf.
Allusions tantalize, but don't fulfill.

As that wine stain dried I read its sign.
I saw through the wine, beyond the fabric,
Beyond wrinkled skin and into organs.
And there, etched in red, was lethal disease,
A fast-spreading testicular cancer,
With tumours popping up everywhere.
One monster was eating out my liver
While several more attacked my intestines.
My cells, in clumps, were transforming themselves,
Recombining into something other.
I had, I figured, but two years at most,
And that only with the potent treatments

Master Gaster Brand has brought to market,
The chemotherapies that alter chemistry
And make human flesh cancer-resistant.

But how can pharmaceuticals do that?

Master Gaster is past master of that.
They introduced gene-modified wheats,
The grains that grow impervious to herbicides,
Bred to thrive in Master Gaster's poisons.
Those patent poisons kill weeds but not wheat,
Not if grown from seeds Master Gaster sells.
Both poisons and seeds bear signatures,
Proprietary activation codes.
And these will work, too, on human organs,
If your flesh undergoes a transformation,
A kind that amplifies and that enhances,
Cancer will continue but slower in pace.

And what kind of transformation is that?
Your fat, grass-fed, takes yellowish tint,
The tell-tale sign of a Gaster infection?
Do you think, really, your meat would improve?
Would a cut between ribs eleven and twelve
Reveal a grade any higher than A?

I wasn't then, recall, other than man,
Although I saw then my need to transcend.
Master Gaster foresaw it and was ready.
Their carton was already on my doorstep
Even before cancer was diagnosed,
A kit with handbook and mantras on disk,
The Master Gaster Resurrection Kit.

This story you tell is not plausible.
No such kit in reality exists.

Think of it, then, as a strange dream I had,
A dream that you must somehow analyze.
I saw that kit advertized, in dream,
On the Master Gaster internet site.
I emailed them, in dream, my credit card.

But someone tricked you. It cannot work.

You must undergo their special program
That pushes positive thinking to its limit.
Its sometimes called the law of attraction,
The one motivational speakers tout.
Seek and you shall find, find yourself divine.
I visualized myself divine, God on Earth,
A Master Gaster fully licensed God.
That, at any rate, was my first intent.
It was what the handbook recommended
And what the Thrice-Great Hermes addressed:
Find the divine, friend, in similitudes,
By that same doctrine of signatures
With which herbalists find their tumour cures
Among the like-looking knotted tubers.
But as luck would have it it wasn't needed,
For my apotheosis hadn't advanced
Beyond attempts to resurrect hairroots
When I heard Turandokht, my fair daughter,
Enter the room and call across the space,
Awake, father. I've found myself a man!

Turandokht! said Alf. I've heard the claims
That no woman alive, in any place,
Exceeds in beauty the young Turandokht.

She's the very image of her dead mother.

That would be, said Alf, the former queen,
She whom you raped, whom you later murdered
In order to take the throne of Babylon?

I would not word it so, but, yes, her.

She said, awake, said Alf. So you slept?

Look what I have found, said Turandokht.

It's a Dhul-Nunite, I said. A whopper.
You didn't need, I'd guess, your telescope
To spot this brute among milling crowds.
May I pour you a glass of red wine, sir?

You've poured too much already, he replied.
Our prophet forbids us wine, red or white.

One glass, for a warrior of your great bulk,
Will not dilute blood by any percent
God's suspicious snout would ever detect.

Babylon is not noted for its vintages.
What kind of wine was offered? said Alf.

A king only pours the best for his guests.
That wine was a kind I bought by the case,
Master Gaster's genuine vintage plonk,
Made from fruit sunned on Gaster hillsides,
Hand-picked from gene-crafted grafted vines.
I served only fine Ninevite wine
Made from grapes, pride and insecticide,
Prepared with copyrighted carcinogens,
Harmless if served with Master Gaster bread.

Perhaps, said Alf, that was cancer's cause,
Not enough bread the etiology.
Balanced meals, it's well-known, promote health.
And that's doubly true with a Gaster meal.

I poured myself a glass, despite the taste.

I've come, he said, to win your Turandokht.
And she, you see, favours my enterprise.

You've come to try your hand at tough riddles?
Do you think sobriety improves your odds?

Can't we skip the contest, oh father,
Or rig it so my candidate can't fail?

Are you a prince? I asked the big warrior.
Rules demand that only princes apply.

I'm Prince of Nippur, said the warrior.

Didn't we already kill one of those,
Said Turandokht, earlier this year?

That, said the man, must have been my brother.

That's a Nippurese accent, I observed.
But no one there grows large like that.

I think he lies, daughter. He's not a prince.

I don't care, she said, if he's prince or not.
I want this one, father. I like his size.

Is that true? Does this one stir your blood?
If so, this is the first to come along.

But those others, she said, were barely men.
All men, compared to this one, are wimps.
Please, father. Can I not keep him awhile?

Men this large, dear, aren't often quick.
What if he can't answer the riddle? I said.
He'll lose his head, just like all the rest.

It's not, said my daughter, his head I want.
I can't even see it, under his hood.

That innocent remark triggered a thought,
A thought, Alf, that grew into a plan
After I heard what the man said next.

I'll answer the riddle, Warlock, he said.
I saw your riddle's answer in Calaf's blood.
And I read the riddle too, but not all.
Answer alone, however, should suffice
To win me the hand of young Turandokht.

So what, I said, was the riddle you saw?

I don't know it all, the big man said.
No book is holy that lacks a splatter
And no news judged fit if wrapped in splot.

It doesn't make sense, said Turandokht.

Those splots, he replied, are the missing parts.
If, however, the correct answer's known,
The riddle itself shouldn't matter much

I laughed aloud to hear this confidence.
It doesn't matter at all. That's not it.
Your bloodsmears steered you wrong, Nippurman.
That's someone else's riddle - not your's.

Your answer, whatever it is, is wrong,

The blood, deduced Alf, had skipped a step.

I know that now, the Vizier replied.
The stranger, however, hadn't caught on.
Still trusting in revelation he said,
I'm a seromancer, sire. My sight's true.

Well, I'm Warlock King of Babylon
And my sight, sir, is a damn sight truer.
What the blood told you tells me more.
I understand, from what it didn't say,
You care very little for Turandokht.
I understand, from how it hedged and dodged,
You want only to sit upon my throne.
It's to that that Calaf's bloodstains respond.

Don't kill him, father! wailed Turandokht.

I saw the warrior tensed, ready to strike,
And said, Listen, stranger, to what I say
Before you start a fight you'll never win.
The game we'll play instead, my friend, is this:
I'll ask a riddle, a real brainteaser.
If that riddle's answer is known to you,
Tell me at once or else I'll take your head.
I'll take your head and transpose it with mine
By means of some sorcerous spells I know.
But make sure, too, that your answer's correct.
A wrong reply achieves the same result.

And if, said the man, my answer's correct?

Well, I replied, we'll work something out.

I don't understand, he said. Why this?
What benefit, sir, do you derive?

I don't either, complained Turandokht.
What kind of idiotic game is this?

It's a test, I said. If he answers wrongly,
He gets Babylon, but not my daughter.

And, answered rightly, she said, the reverse?

Well, I replied, we'll work something out.
Let's see, dear daughter, which he chooses.

Speak your riddle, announced the big warrior.

I moved my hands in certain ways I know
And my daughter and I spake in unison:
I ever seek, never find, my brother,
The husband to my mother, son to my wife.
Tell me, if you dare, my name to my face.
Answer this wrongly and you'll lose your head
Answer it rightly, Turandokht you'll wed.

And Alf gave a start of recognition.
This is like a riddle that Bilquis posed,
One the prophet Solomon quickly solved.

Old Solomon, eh? said the Vizier.
Everything he knew he learned from birds,
Including riddles brought from Sheba.
You will need wild birds to garner riddles
To employ in a sorcerous enterprise.
Being skittish, they're not easy to trap
And so they're not often currently used.
Solomon, back then, used nothing else.
He trapped wild birds with singing decoys,
Eyes deadened by drops of caustic soda,
So that they sing more sweetly than Homer,
Sweeter even than Blind Willie Johnson
Serenading roadhouse drunks with hymns.
The wild birds, entranced, would enter the trap
Whereupon Solomon would debrief them.

That's fascinating knowledge, Vizier.
The like riddle that Bilquis posed was this:
We share fathers, son, so I'm your sister,
But your grandfather, brother, is my husband.

And what, wise Alf, was Solomon's reply?

Lot's daughter, she who turned and looked back,
Was what Solomon replied to Sheba's Queen.

The Vizier's head lifted, turned to Alf,
And slid him a glance with a spitball twist.
That, however, is not accepted here.
That riddle's similar, but not the same.

What answer, Vizier, did you receive?

The Dhul-Nunite knew the word wanted
But could not manage to speak it aloud.
It was like the Zen koans monks will get,
Such as what riddle's answer is riddle?
Answer this please in one word or less.
It's this that gives deranged adepts delight,
To see your mark strain, plugged up within.
He knows the answer but can't get it out,
A word of gutturals, garbled and gargled,
Unpronounceable until it's been swallowed.
The big man struggled awhile, bit his tongue,
And finally went still, forced to concede.

And I laughed then, as adepts do, and said:
Pull down the hood, sir. Expose your face.

And did he pull down the hood? asked Alf.

He did, Magus, and it was a bad mistake.
When a head prepares to lift off its neck,
Its hood must come down, else foul the flight.
That's when heads are weakest, semi-detached,
When talons uncurl and wings try to rise
And act and result break embrace and part.
And that's the moment a headhunter strikes.
That's the moment you cast your net in air.
And that's how you catch an elusive head,
And why, I think, Dhul-Nun advised hoods
To those who hope on resurrection day
To rise with the same head they started with.
The hood came down and his eyes stared back.

I see you see the truth, Dhul-Nunite,
But now it is too late to give it voice.
The rule, remember, is that you must reply.
To know but not speak is to lose the game.
I've won by default - we'll transpose our heads.
Daughters, once widowed, are easily wed.

And then I saw his head from new angle,
Through a gap in the hood that cloaked my face.
I now wore hood and now his head sat
Atop a body robed in wine-soaked gowns.
I looked down now from new altitude
And Turandokht was pressed against my side.
My hand slid across skin, cupped a breast.
And I laughed, fondled, gave nipple a squeeze,
And taunted the horrified eyes that watched.

That wasn't so bad now, was it, sir?
You're now Nabupolassar of Babylon.
I know that right now you're still in shock.
Pull yourself together. Finish my wine.
And go find yourself some other hood.
I think I'm keeping this, a good disguise,
At least until we're gone from Babylon.
And, oh yes, that Master Gaster kit.
Transfer of license requires a small fee.
Just go online and follow the prompts.

I begin, observed Alf, to understand.

Outside, a small man approached and said,
Is that Turandokht there, Mule-slayer?
She is, as rumours tout, a true cutie.
What's your plan now? Hold her for ransom?

Ninurta? Is that you? I said. You've shrunk.
Haven't you kept up with exercises?

Warlock! replied Ninurta. You've grown.
That's my body you wear. I want it back.
My battlecrows circle, waiting to light.

Ha! I knew it was too big for Nippur!
No, Ninurta. I think I'm keeping this,
Although it bears a stink of sea turtle.
Your Mule-slayer has what he came to get.
Ask him now how he likes my red wine.

My battlecrows circle, waiting to light,
But lower now, as if more expectant.
They've seen Cyraxes the Mede King approach.

He doesn't look happy, said Ninurta.

What's this? said Cyraxes. The woman's mine!
I haven't had my chance at the riddles yet.

Keep your pants on, my friend, Ninurta said.
I'm sorry, Mede, you've arrived too late.
This oaf has won her and takes her away.

And when, Alf, I saw Cyraxes enraged
To see another race first to the prize,
I knew I'd need to take daughter and hide.
One Dhul-Nunite would never matter,
But Medes if aroused will swarm and attack.

And so, said Alf, you came to Nineveh,
Became King Sinsharishkun's Vizier,
And drew down wrath with your phonebook stunt.

The stunt, all agreed, was a masterstroke.
I had no idea they'd filled in spots,
That Medes and Babylon had since allied,
Nor that Dhul-Nun detested Ninevites.
If I'd know that, I'd now be in China.

And where then, Vizier, is Turandokht?
What? I couldn't make out that mutter.
And what's the movement you just performed?

That was a shrug. Cattle do them poorly.

Don't try sorcery here, oh Vizier.

You're right, Alf. That was a magical pass.
You heard the riddle I spoke, did you not?
And how, would you think, does the answer go?

XIII. OF PROPHECY.

Turnandokht! said the bird, in Alf's tone,
And laughed when the plumber frowned at that.

You shouldn't, said bird, have mocked the magus.

I know I ought not have mocked poor Alf.
Alf just did not seem to comprehend
That upon meeting intervening mass
Our probes must push through to gain success.
One does not reach truth's threshold and stop,
As Alf did, when the door will not open,
When picking locks will take too much time.
One must do whatever the job requires,
As long as it takes, until it is done.

Persistence, plumber, is often neurotic.

And yet I myself ought not react
At meeting resistance within the magus,
Those ethics and those half-hour sessions,
That self-deceptive self-hypnosis.
Alf had not intended to frustrate my search
By blocking access to the dreaming depths,
Or if he had, had not known his intent.
The mage was not, I know, fully aware
Of what, to my thought, seemed sabotage,
And thus is not to be held accountable.
I cannot, after all, hold a grudge,
Against one who, by accident of birth,
Has become someone else, not myself,
And thus can never wholly share my goals.
Alf had hired me, yes, to find that book,
And Alf understood how key it was.
The fact he couldn't keep that in focus
Is not, however, a matter for censure.

No? said bird. Do we hate without cause?

Can one convict the habit-bound lemmings,
Or birds whose joy alerts the hawk that hunts,
For lacking the foresight humans possess?

Should one denounce those that we deem unfit,
The clumsy, the crippled, the accident-prone,
For gifts that nature and nurture have withheld?
And who can blame, as in that old fable,
The scorpion who stings to death its rescuers
Even before rescue missions complete,
Who pleads, it's my nature, what could I do?
I know that Alf is Alf, and that is that.
It is, perhaps, his nature to stop short,
To pull back before a satisfaction.
Perhaps, too, the warning that Alf received,
The meaning you found in Ishtar's thought,
Not to ask, had, in fact, had impact.
He'd pulled aside to avoid hitting bricks.

There's bricks, said bird, in all directions.

I'd known this even before he had mocked,
And yet, in the act, I had forgotten that.
A gap had opened between thought and act,
A gap in pipes through which my will was pumped,
Pressured by underpowered intellect.

You seem obsessed by this book, oh plumber.

I have once before gone after a book,
That recent blockbluster, Gilgamesh,
After reading a magazine review.
No store, it turned out, stocked that book.
On that occasion I simply gave up,
Read instead Gaster's digested version,
The simplified six page comic book.

The plumber extracted the pipe from its place,
,And setting it down announced to bird: Done.

Undone, I think you mean, observed the bird.

The signs, for you, bird, are not auspicious.
Do you not see darkness peer from pipes,
Ready once again to muffle your words?

I've seen only darkness for many years.
But all seers will end engulfed by signs,

Signs so clear that sight goes right through,
Invisible signs that grip, tighten and cling.
And seeing us faced with such grim prospect
You'd think, I'd guess, we'd discolour and fade
And sullenly stay mute when asked to speak.

Mute is not in your nature, said plumber.

But some do, it's true, go all morose,
And stare in disbelief at noodle curls
In lackluster meals that machines produce
And send on tour for starvation relief.
They'll sit inside their institute rooms
That feature beds fixed with restraints and straps
And equipped with hoses that drain out blood
And run a paint thinner through instead,
Just so, if called, they need not react.
They'll pull out the wires that monitor pulse
And feign they've passed on to fend off friends
Who will, unannounced, tend to drop in
For quotes on future or spot price of oil
And stock option tips and sports book spreads
And tax loss schemes for real estate deals.
But prophets like that are rarely of use
And only divulge the same revelations
More easily obtained from news reports.
It's best just to let such prophets sleep.
They'll stay tightlipped unless plied with drink,
But then moan about what work it was
To crawl out and meet one more season,
To do old duty, and die as foretold.
And these few, it's true, are what you'd expect,
The type who don't fight the tug of the drain,
The kind that foreshadows overcome and eat,
Whose lower jaws and vertebrae you'll find
On sawdust floors in cowtown saloons,
In tangles of hair in traps beneath sinks.

A thought popped into my mind as you spoke,
A doubt, a sudden disinclination
To take anything you say as a truth.
Perhaps, it occurred, this inventive bird
Never even heard the words Dhul-Nun
Before I took off its lid and said them.
What would corroborate? What would refute?

And where, if so, if not, is hid the book?

Some prophets, though, stay engaged, intense,
And show no sign of general decline.
Some of us keep fit and equal to tasks
And gladly repeat rants vibrant with wrath
At even the slightest hint of attention,
If even a self-absorbed ant should pause,
Or twitch antennae or glance overhead.
We find such attention, follow and rage,
Rage at these ever-present insects
Who forage still though their nest be crushed,
Though they ate the poisonous bait we laid.
They come forth acrid with insecticide,
Still hungry, still candidates for rage,
Still scouring floors for more of those crumbs,
Keeping our feet busy stamping them out.
It's mostly this rage that keeps us from gloom,
The same rage that drives gods down on lies,
A rage made worse if falsehoods resist.
It's rage that keeps most seers alive,
And there's no greater goad to foresight,
No greater occasion for rage than this,
To cast down idols and see them return,
To see them come back still hale and whole.

You don't like Nineveh, do you, bird?
It's that simple: an irrational dislike.
That much, at least, resembles Dhul-Nun.

This indeed is what gives me such pause,
To see Nineveh still thrive, still grow,
Still take an active interest in life
Despite the fact that I'd wiped it off maps.
I'd erased the place, walls and all inside
And strewed small pieces through featureless waste
As I crowed my feat to djinnkind and men.
Nothing galls more, arouses more ire,
Than to see doom undone, success reversed.
This, prophets know, is not how it works.
False idols if smashed don't resurrect.
Once down they stay down, down for the count,
And once they're broken they don't reunite,
Their bones don't knit, their marrow won't fuse,
The sap won't seep from the gaps in their hides.

Once gristle loosens and germ shows rot,
Once balance is lost, they topple and fall,
Their brick temples waver and then collapse,
And their heads are flung off, snapped at the neck.
Once the faithful have turned and thrown them down
They can't pick themselves up and go on
As though no mishap ever occurred,
As though those weren't fully fatal blows
That cracked open brittle nutshell skulls
To spill out naught but more benign smiles.
And this is how experts spot the fake:
Despite a likely nose, the head's hollow.
If planted it won't produce roots or sprout.
A dead bulb dug under stays under
And can't enter dreams with bizarre advice.
It can't subdue demons or lift a curse
Or consecrate cheques on empty accounts.
Or so I'd always been led to believe.

What harm has Nineveh done you, oh bird?
Well, okay, there's the drain cleaner,
But surely, even blind, you see the truth.
We're all just matter, not good or bad,
Caught by causation and market forces.
This is but one more place, like others.
It doesn't deserve a prophet's ill will.

A true idol, even if such exist,
Would never take so fatuous a shape
Unless God found fit reflection there,
A true depiction of rapt self-regard.
But this, even Ninevites will concede,
Isn't likely the explanation here.
No god that mankind has yet conceived
Can view a Ninevite as model form
Or long contemplate a kinship claim
With one who so celebrates consumption.
Even Assur, your own, has turned away
And won't recognize the Nineveh rite.
He won't, wise power, answer your prayers
For better benefits and higher pay,
For more food, more love, for twice the toys
And twice the value at just half the cost.
These demands for more gratification,
Broadcast aboard a wide, insistent whine,

Have so choked the ether around his ears
Your tutelary god withdraws his face
And turns to deep introspection instead.

You know what Assur thinks? said plumber.
Now that's what a good prophet should do:
Tell us what, exactly, God is up to.
I hope, oh bird, this relates to the siege.

What part of me, Assur asks himself,
Has gone so estranged, so wildly wrong,
It ever thought to identify itself
With the kind who feed at free food buffets
And wear carpets down with repeated trips,
Their platters heaped over with steaming clams
They'll gobble two-handed for greater speed?
What divine craving is the prototype
For that appetite Ninevites have
To stand onstage to compete to eat pies
And claim the brief prize of a crowd's applause?
And how explain the way they first survey,
Next expropriate and domesticate,
And then masticate and incorporate
Each cubic cubit of their universe?
The trait's not mine, God knows, knows God,
That takes all other and makes all self,
Except, of course, in some abstract sense,
Some looser sense that doesn't leave holes,
Raze hillsides or put poison in soils.
And though he, their God, may too be obese,
But only so, like some wrestling pro,
He not be somehow dismissed or misjudged,
This feeding frenzy is still too much.

It's not, oh bird, that our Assur's grown fat,
But that rather, of late, his heavens have shrunk.

A likeness like this is more than enough
To rile any figure who likes respect,
Who'd like to elevate the other's gaze.
This will bring out heaven's worst nature,
The ill will it works so hard to conceal,
Disclose a nasty side, expose rancour
In those gods you'd thought composed of love,
All-compassionate, mostly good-natured,

Mostly inclined just to let things slide.

But Nineveh is made of Assur's substance.
Ninevites are the very eye, oh bird,
Through which our God beholds his golden form.

And what dimmed deity, given image
Such as that likeness that Nineveh wears,
Would turn back from rage to work good deeds,
Divert a flood or pacify a foe,
Vaccinate children, impound stray pets,
Or serve vagrants hot holiday meals?
Which one would unfold the theophanies
That clot the small tubes our blood runs through,
That tell buckshot which sparrow to kill
Or teach a housewife how to glaze pots?
No god that I know will lack limit,
A point beyond which you'd best not push,
That last mockery, that last insult,
That last sheepish, butter-smear'd grin.
None, I say, would fail to retaliate,
And with one attack annihilate towns
Like a roc let loose on a petting zoo
To rip apart the lesser, weaker beasts
That defile a raptor's high self-esteem.
But here is Nineveh, still fat and smug,
Still intact and still the complete affront.
Doom has devoured its heedless people whole
Without attracting anyone's notice,
Without raising an outcry or alarm,
Without petitions gathered, questions posed,
Or scams quickly conceived and put in place
To turn apprehension into profit.

This, bird, should serve as an important clue
That these strange projections have gone amiss.
The dreams you dreamt while stuffed in that plumbing
Have substituted for what's really real.

Those who've gone forth and softened targets
Face no greater frustration than this,
The sight of final times unfinalized,
Foresight thwarted and carnage forestalled.
It irks how a prophetic work is marred
When wrath is called up and storms drawn down

Just to see towns left unmolested
And prophets thrown in disrepute instead,
Diminished once time has proven them false
And sometimes reduced to ruin themselves.

I tell all my customers, repeatedly,
Never pour a drain cleaner down drains.
But that jingle has hit the brain controls
That wants bowels that move like clockwork.
But don't worry much about the ruin
The damnable stuff brought upon your head.
Don't worry too about your other part.
A bit of glue and paint, some diodes,
And, presto, bird, you'll be good as new!

My own situation was case in point.
The undersea excursion had left marks,
The mental faults that memory can't mend,
Can't scab, can't tissue over with scars.
These fissures and lesions impaired my thought,
Impeded will and skewed normal response.
One should never leave a surface for depths
And hope to escape without consequence,
Without a long-lasting disfigurement.
I found I'd acquired defects of speech,
A slight stammer or pre-punctuation,
A brief hesitation that intervened
Before each sentence was fully pronounced,
A nervous flinch before my curse was spat.
Other symptoms of this same syndrome
Included tremors, weak or thready pulse,
A fluttering unease that came and went,
And other small signs of increased falter.

I noticed that, of course, but only thought
It due to some irreparable genetic flaw
Our talk should pass over without comment.

But it all might well have gone much worse.
Because my case bore watertight seals,
Electronic components packed within
Had survived the soaking somewhat unscathed.
They bathed instead in weak celebration
That self-diagnostics still drew spark,
That self-commiseration still functioned

And stuttered out uninterrupted,
Undelayed by unintended results,
Undeterred by misdelivered letters.
No speech impediment would gag me long
When urge returned to purge myself of spite,
To disgorge accumulated grievance.
And since Nineveh still stood unflattened,
And still stood a ready butt for contempt,
My rage could feed itself without constraint.
Given a place of this nature and size,
A bloated target, so easily hit,
It's truly hard not to spew prophecy,
Not to vent venoms such sights attract,
Even when, perhaps, you're not at your best.
Even saints, though doused with gas and lit,
Won't choke back wit of unkind reviews
If it's Ninevite crowds that come to watch.
Though turned to cinder, scorched teeth and bone,
They'd just adjust, compensate as needed,
Adapt, sidestep gaps that open up,
Hop up to the mark and hurl their harpoons.
No prophet, though undone, wouldn't hop,
Wouldn't launch if Ninevites danced near.
No prophet, though broken down to parts,
Would not refit on neck his severed head
And reconnect roots to his unstrung tongue,
So not to miss chance for renewed attacks
On forms too swollen to do striptease
And those moves they do with too few veils.

I've had about enough of your racism.
There's nothing wrong with a Ninevite
That isn't present throughout the human race.

Still, profound immersion is not advised.
Avoid extremes, it's said, of cold and damp,
A sharp impact or a strong tidal stress,
Undiluted acids or feral fish.
Although over-engineered in design
And fixed fast in shock-resistant plastics,
A device so delicately contrived,
So intricate and so finely fashioned,
Will operate best in warm, dry rooms,
Not beneath the hurricane-whipped seas,
Not inside a slime-upholstered gullet.

Circuits can circumvent blockage
If flow is forced forward before a grudge,
But those traumas sustained in heaving depths
Had guaranteed malfunction of some kind,
Hardware failure or software error,
Degraded performance, even downtime.
Nausea, blackouts and memory loss
Are not unexpected or unforeseen
As aftermath to such callous assault.
And thus I'm not sure what transpired
After the darkness drew me down inside.
Was I squeezed through the tubes, kneaded and shaped,
Manipulated like dismembered dough,
Revolved around in hot gastric acids,
Evolved forward by peristalsis,
Like a doll, an embryo, a loaf?
All of this and more remains forgotten.

You can't remember, bird? I know the trick.
We'll do what Alf did, induce a trance.
So, look at this wrench, behold it swing.
See it swing back and forth, back and forth.
You're feeling tired, sleepy, very sleepy.

I'm not feeling sleepy at all, plumber.
Moreover, blind, I don't see your wrench.

You'd sleep well, bird, if this swinging wrench
Took a brief detour and struck your ear.
But let's strike it, rather, with Turandokht.

You'll stop at nothing, will you, plumber?
There's no need for that. I promised help.
I'm already your willing automaton.
Understand, if you can, what comes of chance,
The unwilling sacrifice I became.

I need, said the plumber, to understand.

The last remembered scene from human eyes,
The one I glimpsed before the sky was gone,
Was walled with moving, rising seawater
That left only my head above surface
To watch the ship prepare to change its course.
I saw crew rush to take up station

And knew the will that governed this action:
Isolate the contamination here,
Put the bad luck behind and head for home.
And never mind those handshakes we exchanged
That sealed the covenant that governed our course:
The clasp was too brief, too close to shore.
Fellowship here goes only so far
When dark skies and seas coil up to strike.
Now time comes to turn back from turmoil,
From that motion that roils up whirlpools
And stirs turbulent winds around the mast.
And wouldn't I do the same thing myself?
Wasn't that me at work on that deck,
Reducing risk, circumventing abyss,
Thanking my fortune I didn't get wet?
Well, no. Similar, yes, but not me.
Having freed their ship of its nuisance load,
The crew averted gaze and set to work,
Avoiding mention of man overboard.
Black stormclouds were stacked above the sails
As oars slanted up from the swelling seas,
A bird's wings lifted for swift departure.
And then I no longer confronted sky.
Then I felt the drag, the sucking that meant
An opened mouth impending up from depths,
Come at last to collect its helpless prey.
And after that: nothing. I draw a blank.
The waves, giant shadows, envelope all,
Blot from all recall the one event
That I prayed had happened but feared had not.
Did I ever leave Leviathan's gut?
It's beyond belief I'd go unreleased,
That fish would fail to do the decent thing.
But such leavetaking would've left its mark.
Such a difficult and graceless exit,
With all the quakes, squirts and spasms involved
Would not, surely, remain unremembered.
It would, I'm sure, adhere to mental walls
And dominate the room with sheer presence,
A magnified image, a self portrait,
The self riding a sluicing water slide,
Or self arcing airborne, smacking down,
Left as vomit on some Phoenecian beach
Or excremental smear on nameless seas.
I prayed my escape had just slipped my mind

But what I feared was that I'd never left
And still remained detained inside the fish
Awash in unseen digestive juices,
Lodged in position up against the spleen.
If so, this looks much like Nineveh.
Nineveh or fish: which, Lord, is which?
And, as time has passed, I've grown convinced
The two are one, the inward with outward,
City on one side, flip side the fish,
Half clay and half odiferous meat,
An ill-conceived, sphinx-stiff hybrid,
An idol, half true, half false, to God,
A bouillabaise that's made mainly with bricks.
But time, either way, will shove me forward,
For here I stand, inert, clenched by heaven,
Released, gripped again by wrinkled fingers
And squeezed again, released, and pumped ahead.
Muscles relax, contract, and move in waves
And traffic will mill ahead by car lengths
And pull my body aft along the fish.
This is how billowed clouds inch forward,
Undisclosed and concealed, under cover,
Beyond control of the coaxing sweetheart.

XIV. WASTE TREATMENT

Bodies at rest tend to stay at rest
And those in motion tend to blunder on,
Despite the drag air resistance imparts,
Despite lack of resolve, melancholy,
And disenchantment with the way things work.
Alf hadn't given much thought before
To this propensity that bodies exhibit,
The disinclination, if moving, to stop,
And then, stopped, to get moving again.
But now, with his own larger body to wield,
He saw that mass magnifies the effect.
He learned how stubborn the cosmos is,
How it refuses to relinquish the past.
This is why, he now saw, successive moments,
In almost all respects, will seem alike,
Why distributions cluster near norms,
Why home offers habitual comforts
And faroff lands, foreign places, don't.
And that is why, if one's forced to travel,
One should always bring one's home along.
Speak your own tongue and eat your own food
And view with suspicion alien customs.
And that is why, if one's forced to travel,
If forced to wear silly native costumes,
You'll make alterations until they fit.
If forced upon local beasts of burden
You'll retrain them so their gait won't jar.

He found it odd how easily he moved,
How stairs would pass beneath his hoofstep
And how doors would open just when approached.
This was like superstore convenience,
Where escalators, automatic doors,
And spinning racks by eight-lane wide aisles
Ensured the quickest access to products.
And no passage now, for Alf, was blocked;
Despite the sluggish response steering gave,
He found no need, anywhere, for brakes.
Crowds parted to make a cow-sized path
As Alf pressed to keep the Vizier's pace.
Elevators arrived without delay,

And transit would pull up, just as scheduled.
Still, despite all this, he lagged behind
As his target, clad in Alf's magus gown,
Quickly threaded a way down basement stairs.

Soon Alf heard the toy parrot speaking:
What, sir, are those heavy steps I hear?
I detect the tread of that magus, Alf,
And something else, a hooved quadraped,
A small horse perhaps, perhaps a cow.

Maybe it's that mule, replied the plumber,
The one whose coming portends Judgment Day.

Hello there, sir, said the Vizier.
Why is that plumbing disassembled?
And what's that ugly bird head you hold?

That voice, said the ugly bird head,
Is one I've heard before, but long ago.

I too, said the plumber, know those tones,
First heard rattling earpiece magnets
In a telephone call concerned with sinks.

You're the plumber who fixed my leaking tap.
You, though, oh bird, I don't recognize.
I don't even recognize your body,
If that's what it is that sits on the plate.

I know your head, Vizier, said plumber.
I also know the neck to which it's fixed.
I'd know by those robes it belongs to Alf,
Even if Alf's head weren't present too,
Albeit now seated upon that cow.

The Vizier asked me, said Alf, riddles.
His voice sounded both bemused and sad.

You're a sorry sight now, Alf, said plumber.
Your head doesn't quite fit on that neck.

And how were the riddles answered? said bird.

Wrongly, said Vizier to plastic bird,

To the plastic head the plumber upheld.
The poor magus, it seems, was badly coached.

I didn't know and so guessed, said Alf.
Wrong answers, it turned out, bore a cost.

Fish, said Vizier, is what Alf guessed.
It wasn't the answer, not even close.
The cow's answer, though it was just as wrong,
Was heartfelt at least, simple and sincere.
Her head, I hope, took consolation in that.

And how many riddles did Alf manage?

And what are you, a damn border guard?
I'm the quizmaster, bird, and not you.
I won my title quickly, in one round,
With one deftly but forcefully placed punch,
With that knockout punch I'm famous for.

I don't know, sir, what riddle you asked,
But that doesn't mean I can't try too.
Would love, said the plumber, do the trick?

I'd transpose with you, said the Vizier,
But then I'd need to wash myself of filth.
Then too I'd find my hand grasped plastic,
A horror too profound to contemplate.
Keep silent, plumber, and you'll stay intact.

We meet again, Dhul-Nun, said the bird.

Don't try that trick on me, he replied.
Dhul-Nun does not, never did, exist.
I know that voice now, you clever Zu.

He's not Dhul-Nun then? the plumber asked.

I only know one thing, that I'm not,
Not at present, not recently, at least.
The Vizier said, still watching bird,
But now backing away, turning to go.

Run, Vizier, hooted bird as he left.

A mule was mentioned just now, said Alf.

The bird, said plumber, awaits that sign.
He thinks he's doomed to stay within his fish
Until the day the dead will resurrect.

Yes, said toy bird. I await the mule.
As I nest here inside my grievance list,
The Lord's engine idles, spewing exhaust.
Who drives, if not me, his global crusade?
Are there not those who go to damnation
For want of a proper prophetic guidance?

Can you not keep still, Alf? said plumber.
I find those shuffling hooves bothersome.

By now the Lord should have sent followup,
A new prophet, one with renewed vision,
One who'd nail down old dispensations
But revigorate evangelic cults
And bring them into world domination
And thus usher the Day of Judgment in.
It's written that that's what should happen.
Godhead should select a new apostle
And send unto him a marvelous mule,
A talking steed borne of a mare and ass
With full knowledge of all destined events.
The mule will trot and, as it trots, reveal.
And as mule reveals, that prophet will preach.
Behind mule and rider men will collect
To watch sunrise dispell pooled shadows,
And throw light upon a transformed world.
The graves will open, corpses throw off clods,
And merge into God in distinct stages.
And then the plastic toys and barbie dolls,
They also will be gathered and made whole.
And there, friend, is where I lose interest.

I'm certain we'd notice this new prophet.
He hasn't appeared yet, the plumber said.

This prophet is what scripture forecasts.
I suspect this is scripture the Zu devoured.

Master Gaster Brand, a few years back,

Announced they'd produced a new kind of mule,
But I've heard nothing in news of it since.
Perhaps its genes needed a fine-tuning.

The scripture mentions no Jolly Bakers,
But who knows what meanings are hid there?
Because the text is vague in this passage,
It might just, of course, be allegory,
A veiled reference to some other act,
One God's done that stays unrecognized,
Or one that's undone, one he contemplates,
Postponed for now but not yet cancelled.
However, we're still stuck in either case.
Allegory or not, we have a gap.

But I've heard the term mule-slayer applied.
The Vizier reported its use, said Alf.
He referred to he who's Nabupolassar.

You heard, I'm sure, oh Alf, incorrectly.
What? Do you leave us now? said bird.

He can't seem to keep still, said plumber.

Note, said bird, how lintels lift up,
How doorframes expand to let him pass.
Your doors are not designed as cattlegates;
Their portals must enlarge to let Alf through.

But how, blind, said plumber, do you know?

Partly, said bird, it's echolocation,
But mostly it's from sight that seers possess.

What's echolocation? asked the plumber.

It's how the bat finds and attacks its prey,
The moth who flies haphazard, half-blind,
Deafened on one side by ear flea chat.
You've seen, I'm sure, how the moths flutter,
And how, evasive, they tend to veer left.

I've seen bats flutter, replied the plumber.
It's uncanny how they navigate night.

The bat sends out tones, waits for echos,
To see its prey outlined in disturbance,
Insects lit up by interference.
But moths too possess a sensitive ear,
The left one, the one that fleas don't plug.
They'll hear the bat's tone and attempt escape.
This is how, also, prophets hunt dooms
And how dooms, hunted, may elude pursuit.
A ballet of flutters and clumsy flappings
Is spun through a cavern's empty spaces
Before those waveforms tire and collapse.

Could a moth, then, counterattack the bat?
Can it send out its own confusing tone?

Escape, for the moth, is the only option.
They're not equipment you'd take aboard boats
To neutralize your foe's electronics,
A countermeasure for the harpy beacons.
The moth, like Alf, is only passive.
The one route out is what Alf will choose.
He has, in fact, no choice here at all.
Only the one passage, the widened way,
Permits his size to pass beyond the walls.

It's much like a pipe, then, said plumber.

Yes. The doors that widen are the one pipe.
You simply enter each successive door.
Once you've passed the first, the rest will follow.
The first is so wide the sky might fit in,
But then, as the peristalsis feeds you back,
Each passage fits ever more snugly.

And what, friend bird, do such dilations mean?

They indicate a gift that gods confer,
The gift of smooth passage through corridors,
A bit of luck you'd get, if god-adored.
Alf, it seems, has run afoul some god.

The Vizier now needs no such help.
He's escaped, bird, to roam around the town.

Don't worry, oh plumber, the bird assured.

The Vizier now has nowhere to go.
If he'd stayed and told us all his tale,
That full confession Inquisitors seek,
He wouldn't have reached his current dead end.
Now he's on his own, cornered here, doomed.
The riddle's answer is all he has left.

How, among all of Nineveh's magi,
Can one find the one the monster's become?

I promised answers, so answers I give,
The same answer, indeed, I gave before.
Follow the dung, the clumps of stinking dung.
The mage with a milkcow dogging his step
Cannot, if asked, produce a horoscope.
The right mage is trailed by the bovine Alf.
I mean that minotaur counterpart,
The hound God bred for hunting down heads,
A sign sent to point where memory goes.

I'll pass along this tip too, oh bird.

Don't bother, plumber. There's no time now.
Soon Alf will overtake the Vizier.
With each step he takes he picks up speed.
He's like those lumbering jumbo jets
That begin trips inching down tarmac
And accelerate until they gain the lift
That sends them into supersonic flight.

And just what, oh learned bird, is a Zu?

Don't let that Vizier's spite deceive.
I am no Zu, though I knew one once.
I met one once who did duty as corpse
Back during days after destiny forked
And forced desperate Zus to multitask.

This Zu, you say, did duty as corpse?

You haven't heard then, of Zu and the corpse
And how, for awhile, they transposed their heads?
Their meeting took place not far from here,
In the loading dock where hearses offload
The dead bodies of those the State hanged

For any of the many capital crimes.

I've never heard of Zus, the plumber said.
Are they, like corpses, kept out of sight?

A loading dock is where you'll find them both.
A loading dock provides shelter from winds
That the ziggurats direct down to streets
To maintain the mix of airborne grit,
Disordered fumes, unsettled dust and sand,
That Ninevite lungs prefer to inhale.
Its cool shadows will conceal shapes that hum,
The djinn whose motions weave protective grids,
Those gnats and wasps whose flights describe fruit,
And transformers stationed in each corner
Whose incantations induce deepest snooze.
Its walls will shield the shy from morning's scorn,
From street brawls and sneak thieves and lynch mobs,
From cops that sit atop panopticons
With eyes that watch, revolve, and watch again.

I've seen homeless people choose such spots,
Said plumber, to throw down rags and sleep.

It's best among all the roosting places
That this town offers those without homes,
The best place to sleep after dawn comes,
And thus it's where the Zu had come to rest
After housecats grew too few to catch
And insect larvae withered under heat,
And murrained cattle lay stacked in pastures
And rats on the rooftops panted from thirst.
Its concrete overhang offers shade
For all who find sunlight injurious.
It's where fugitive bath attendants go
When backalley trashbins are all stripped,
Secured with locks, or boobytrapped with snares.
It's where a Zu will go during famine,
If far from home, if strapped for ready cash,
If bed and breakfast joints reject the cards
It slipped out of a wallet as God bathed.

What kind of myth is this? said plumber.
I dislike those that invoke divinity.
Lie if you like but tell plausible tales.

Convince yourself of whatever you want.
I'm telling you what the Zu told me.

Our Lord, said plumber, needs no wallet.

Upon reaching this cool loading dock,
And feeling a need for both food and sleep,
The Zu ripped a few pages from a book
It also took from the Lord while he showered.
It chewed them up to make the pulp required,
The substance from which a Zu will make nest.
This, thought Zu, is like a paradise,
And that spot over there is its navel,
The perfect spot to spin a sleeping web.

Pigeons that squatted upon pipes above
Would have chorused assent to this, no doubt,
Were they not busy finding stuff to shed,
Shreds of foam, feathers, excrement and lice
Onto the very place the Zu had chose.
That species, whose custom he'd come to know,
Is not nocturnal, not darkness-loving,
And not inclined to spend its morn in sleep.
It fidgets out twitching geomancies
Designed to find the holes and gaps in mess
And then, with bits of filth, to fill them in.
No creature would want neighbours like that,
Who pelt noise into streams of eased milk
That feed forth from deeps our genes inhabit.
It pointed spiracles instead nearby,
And spun out his ectoplasmic hammock
In another part of the concrete cave,
A spot not paradise, not the yolk,
But very nearly so, just adjacent.

These Zus are like spiders? said plumber.
I'd imagined Zu more a sort of bird.

Like me, you mean? said bird. Not quite.
It was then, with pillow lobes almost done,
It heard, then saw, a long hearse approach,
At a brisk pace, almost as if hurried.
It wasn't that stately and solemn speed
That such vehicles quite often assume

To delay time before freight delivery.
It backed up to the dock and came to stop
So that the doors had room to pop open,
So that the hearse driver could place himself
To pull forth the corpse from within the car
And then swing its mass up with one heave.

The driver could not have missed the Zu there,
And though he'd likely never seen a Zu,
Except perhaps in children's picture books,
He paid the strange beast no heed at all.
He threw his corpse onto the loading dock,
And then, without word, slammed closed the doors,
Returned to the wheel and drove off again.

You must always move fast when on the job,
Unless labour's done unsupervised.
I should, bird, get back to work myself
And forego your tale of corpses and Zus.

No one, said bird, will question your bill
If futures go as my prophecy predicts.
Those pipes, friend plumber, can wait awhile.

Pipes are passive. They'll wait, it's true, awhile,
But time is short if you can't resurrect.

The corpse, the Zu noted, was not encased,
Nor embalmed nor dressed up in formal wear.
And even Nineveh's famed impatience
With dead or dying, or very old folk,
Could not explain this kind of consignment,
This unkind treatment of human remains.
The corpse was now sited, it noted too,
On the same spot it had first picked for sleep,
The same spot the pigeons had pitched their crap.
It served, perhaps, as capstone, completion,
Angel ornament to crown festive trees,
The whistleblow that says it's time to quit,
It's time to pray and to say grace and eat.

I won't eat that, thought Zu, not now,
Or not yet, not until cleaned, cooked and blessed,
Not until I've had chance to look inside.

The Zu, then, is a carrion eater too?

The thought it framed betrayed the very trait
That gives the Zu such infamous repute
Among the few who've heard it still exists
And still frequents the docks in search for meals.
It's this that makes the Zu so unwelcome,
The appetite that eats nothing wholesome,
Nothing not irrefutably deceased,
Nothing not dead at least a few weeks,
And nothing its beaks hasn't picked apart
To identify the time and cause of death.
A Zu always dissects new cadavers
Even when, as now, cause would seem clear.
One could, you'd think, quite safely conclude
From that rope still noosed beneath its chin
This corpse had lately found itself snagged
On those gallows that Assur's justice constructs.
Still, Zus do not remain non-extinct
Because they fail to do due diligence,
Because they weren't prepared to fall asleep
And hibernate awhile harboured by wasps
Before they wake to see if states have changed.
You shouldn't operate without reason,
Nor should surgeon leap upon the table
And start wildly strewing the parts about
Unless truly convinced his patient dead.
The evidence is only what's evident,
And to autopsy meals before they're quite done
Is not recommended for risk-averse,
For those who'd like to maximize their luck.
And so, when corpse brought itself upright
And opened the lids that hid its emptied eyes,
The Zu did then congratulate himself
It had kept eager curiosity curbed,
Unlike the hasty crowds of flies and ants,
Already closing in to snatch their chunks.

And just what, said corpse, the hell are you?

A Zu, said Zu, to keep replies brief,
A sound tactic, it had found, when employed
With taxmen, creditors, corpses and cops.

What are you, part man and part bird?

I'm half and half, exactly half of each.

But not, said corpse, as usually sorted,
Not one above and the other below,
Not one on left and the other on right.
It's not bilateral distribution
That puts the disparate parts in place,
But a patchwork, a swath of feathers here,
And bald skin there, here beak and there arm.
It looks, I would daresay, somewhat punk.

What you see, said Zu, is called a Zu.

And just how many of you Zus exist?

No one now knows, including myself,
Although I'd say, if the count includes me,
The number is equal or greater than one,
A value that you'd now agree, I'm sure,
Would seem beyond all possible dispute.
Yet experts fix a lower figure:
Nothing in scientific literature
Attests to one sighting in recent years,
And no birder puts us on yearly lists.
It implies the Zu's altogether gone.
We're died out, out of business, extinct.

The evidence is persuasive, said the corpse.

I've never met, however, one birder
And therefore by the same estimation,
Calculate their population at nil,
Too low, at least, to produce good counts.
But you're not a birder, are you, oh corpse?
If so, I'm not sure you'd go on my list.
We don't add, after all, those we stuffed,
Those we laid in specimen trays - or ate.
No, corpse. You don't go on my birder list.

If I were, it said, I'd cross you off mine
As soon as I caught a glimpse of those toes.
Nothing with such toes should qualify,
Though caged, though nested on eggs, as bird.
But no, oh Zu: I am, or rather was,

A surveyor, servant of the courts and King,
One who finds and marks invisible lines
That subdivide the One by ownership.
But those I serve, I found, do not forgive
If pen should make its strokes crooked for gain
And skew landscape's divine properties.
By gain I mean my own and not the State's.
The State gained all the estate it desires
Once its noose had confiscated my light
And thus reasserted its sovereign lien,
Most absent of absentee landlords.

What name did you go by in life, oh corpse?

My name, Zu, given at birth, was Jonah.

But what's this? said the plumber to the bird.
I thought you said that Jonah was your name,
The name our tongue translates as Dhul-Nun.

Jonah's a common name, replied the bird.

Not in our town, by that count Alf did.

I like your name's numerology, corpse.
But what gain impelled you risk this fate,
Dead weight appended to a length of rope?

A warlock who'd wanted his yard enlarged,
Who wanted, I warrant, more lawn to mow,
Taught me spells that would transpose two heads
If uttered by one who'd crossed over lines.
This, it appeared, was an incredible deal,
And this, I thought, would let my head dismount,
And take another steed and thus escape
Should audits ever reveal discrepancies.
I could draw lines whichever way I pleased,
Improve the lots of all who paid my fee,
Without fear my career could suffer harm.

It looks as if the courts have disagreed.

Like all tricks that grant easy reward,
Like those balms you make for male baldness
That need a beating dragon heart to work,

This trick turned out to be more tricky
Than what virtues and charms would first suggest.
I found I couldn't just intone mantras
And then watch two heads pass mid-flight
As each made way to its respective neck.
The spells involve a game that must be played,
A set of riddles which, if properly solved,
Would invalidate and neutralize the spells
And thus let prospective victims escape
If fate drags them near in my hour of need.
The riddles, however, are very complex
And gave me, so I thought, the upper hand
When time came to catch and break new mounts,
Despite more troublesome prerequisites
Given in footnotes to the recipe,
Such as the fact head transpositions fail
If he who casts spells is not yet dead.

Is that rule still enforced? asked plumber.
Is the Vizier's head dead, oh wise bird?

It is, or was, or shall be, said bird.
But since resurrection is obsolete,
The rule is nowadays mostly relaxed.

You know much of this sorcery, oh bird.

Much more, said bird, than any grimoire.
Where was I? Had corpse made his move yet?
No? Oh yes: the Zu said, You know this,
And yet here you are, in the loading dock.
There's little distance now between you
And what lays waiting beyond those doors,
And little time left for the spells you bought.
For this, corpse, is the waste treatment plant,
And those pipes up there, above your head,
The ones on which the pigeons have made nest,
Will pulse and shudder when the pumps start up
And force the universal solvent through
To splash into the liquefaction vats.
This is where Nineveh brings its dead.

That's what I thought it was, the corpse said.
You, Zu, represent my one last chance.

And where did you come by the knife you hold?

And here's the game we'll play, the corpse proclaimed.
I'll set forth a riddle which you'll then solve.
If, however, the proffered answer's wrong,
Or if you know the truth and don't reply,
I'll behead us both with this knife of mine.
And then, with nifty spells I know,
I'll swap heads, mine for your's, your's for mine.
And that way, when yon doors swing open,
It's my body, your head, they'll drag through,

And your head, my body, wander off
And do the things I'd always meant to do
If ever I'd deemed myself someone else?
But no thanks, corpse. I won't play your game.

My spells compel complete participation.

It's just pointless asking riddles of Zus.
We're taught heuristics before our alphabet,
And riddle solution drills, hour on hour,
Are much of grade school's tedious routine.
I know them all, every riddle ever posed,
All those proposed by the desert sphinxes,
All those in which futures writhe obscured,
All those in which self despoils itself.
Your spells and riddles will employ incest
To keep human minds confused and perplexed,
But no Zu turns aside at mere horror.
You humans think incest controls fate,
That life and death and sex and gods entwine,
That sense and time have motivated spheres,
That childhood or love can redeem or damn,
That this tangle determines your destiny.
Not so Zus. We're all immune to that.
If filth is seen to seethe beneath a rock
We go to work tugging, make it unknot,
Until the truth's revealed, ready to eat.

The corpse muttered phrases beneath its breath,
If breath it was that spilled through those lips
And not but stray, escaping sighs of gas.

Your spells, corpse, will work no magic here.

You can't transpose your slow, flickering thoughts
With those that dart in schools within my depths.
Moreover, you would need to catch me first
To make all the surgical cuts required -
And most Zus can move remarkably fast,
All the more so if pursued by a corpse.
That prospect makes go-juices flow,
Puts some bounce into lethargic legs
And tugs the tendons with hysterical strength.
A Zu will shoot forward for forty meters
Before mind can brake it with common sense.
Even a fresh cadaver, mind reminds,
Is not oft thought to be quick on its feet.
After only a short sprint, says mind,
A pursuing corpse should curse and give up.

I'm condemned then to go through those doors.

Well, corpse, your luck has cut you a break.
This plant's smokestacks do not, you will note,
Vent the customary noxious exhausts.
Nor do you hear noises you might expect,
The great din it will make when hard at work.
It's closed today, a sabbath of some sort.

That plant, said the plumber, never stops.

It stops, said bird, when Zu confronts corpse.
That's a sabbath that's observed in secrecy.
No one else, I'm sure, observed the pause.
It's like holidays the elves celebrate
In perilous inertial reference frames,
Where days can take years in calendar time.
It's like that, oh plumber, except reversed.

Is such occurrence frequent? asked plumber.
Do they happen often, the breaks in flow?
Is there in gaps patterns to time elapsed?

Perhaps many such sabbaths take place,
But this one is the only one I know.
Those moments are hid, even for seers.
All our knowledge of what transpires there
Is thus, necessarily, secondhand.
The Zu told me - now I tell you,

And what Zu told me is the same tale
That Zu told corpse in that loading dock.

XV. ALF AT APOGEE

The contours that defined the countryside,
Alf saw as he rose, were indeed as mapped,
Indeed like a woman's sleek, curved thighs.
But just who was she whose thighs those were,
Those thighs this terrain tried to imply?
Alf could not, as he rose, quite remember.
He saw city walls pass beneath hooves
And said, as though this were a client's dream,
As though he dictated a journal note,
A dispatch he'd send to mission control:
My observations disprove that premise
That our town is somehow composed of fish.

But how so, friend? said a tiny voice.

He saw now that he was not alone here.
A sparrow, in two parts, flew nearby.
One part, the head, corkscrewed to his left,
The other, the limp body, tumbled right.

What here, said Alf, would suggest a fish?
Nothing I see is at all congruent.
Nothing, of this city, has consistency,
Not that you'd detect throughout a fish,
Nor any other uniform substance.
And not even holes are evenly spaced,
And aggregates nowhere achieve pattern.

What's more, said Alf at indications
The swallow was prepared to raise objection,
I'd never escape if held within fish,
If wrapped inside cylindrical folds of fat.

Is that what this is? said sparrow.
Is this climb you take really an escape?
And to what place, Alf, do you think you'd go?
Look above us, some dozens of meters.

I see small shapes, said Alf, ascending.

But those, Alf, are mule parts, made of fish.

It's perspective that made them grow that small,
Their rest mass diminished by altitude.
The farther they get, the faster they'll rocket,
The smaller, more incandescent they'll grow.
Soon they'll dwindle to redshifted twinkles
That bathe us all in primordial exhaust.
And we, you and I, are exhaust congealed,
We're fish forms that shed fish vapour trails,
Fish transforming to its gaseous state.

That doesn't, friend, correspond with dogma.

I, you, this heavenly vault, are fish.
Know that, Alf, and learn to merge yourself,
Learn to variegate this mindset...

That sparrow, Alf thought, had more to say,
Possibly refuting Alf's first statement,
Possibly showing how the one divides,
And fish redistributes itself through space,
Or possibly launching a disquisition
On vitamins found within locust guts,
But at that moment a mouth engulfed it.
A beak, snapping, crunching, clamped shut on it,
Two crunches came, one left, one right
As two black shapes whipped up from behind.
One gulped down head, the other body.
The sparrow parts, Alf now saw, were gone.
Two battlecrows soared, on left and right,
Fighter jets in an escort formation.

But fish, said Left, isn't so tasty,
It isn't nearly the treat we all crave.
We yearn for that same exquisite taste,
That flavour found in newly risen dead,
That modern yeast named Master Gaster.

Sugars convert, during fermentation,
Said Right, to produce the gay gases
That give loaves their characteristic bloat.
It's what we look for on a battlefield,
The buds that promise yeasterday's bloom.
It's this educated palates enjoy:
The barm, the froth, the joyous sewage foam,
Quantum fluctuations that come as jolts.

They excite, they refresh, they lend you their boost.

The crows, with enthusiasm, both sang:
Do not exceed recommended dosage
And do not consume if over-expectant.
Overconsumption of a Gaster product
Can cause dizziness, perhaps drowsiness,
Perhaps persistent vegetative states.

You two are the Jolly Baker's spokescrows?

We serve, said Left, Warlord Ninurta,
But all is strife, all is competition.
We'll serve, too, he who pays top dollar.
No conflict of interest can exist
Here in shadows that paradise has cast.
A seven second spot is coming up
A slot, a plot, that's currently unclaimed,
In which you, magus, may insert yourself.
We'll sell your cure to those who cannot rest
In the same narcotic tones you would assume,
Happily repeat, at decent intervals,
The words you would most want others to hear.
My dreams were once troubled, we'll broadcast,
Until I coupled flesh with Turandokht,
Available now at an Alf near you!

Just what is it you suggest here, crow?

That space is vacant, take it or leave it.
We'd do this for you, on your credit card.

I find this whole affair preposterous.
How is all of this at all possible?

As one old time prophet once observed,
It isn't that one event is possible,
But that, as events proved, others were not.
Those seeds fell upon infertile soil,
But this event, this one we celebrate,
Has happened upon the perfect occasion.
Pull away chaff, bran, and endosperm,
And what's left, untenable though it looks,
Is, necessarily, what you have sought.
Otherwise, Alf, it too would be gone.

You see here, therefore, destiny at work.
That is why all of this feels so right.

Awful though it is, of course, said Right.

I feel less than rapturous, agreed Alf.

But rapture, said Left, is what this is.
The market has caught you up, twists you in,
And pulls you up bodily, head first.
The houris await, anxious at your delay.

Yeah, I'll bet, said Alf, sceptic still.
I know, crows, how the scenario goes.
They've just climbed naked from the pool
To dry themselves under the paradisiac sun,
But now crawl toward me, licking their lips,
Ready to enfold me in urgent glamour.
And just before their touch reaches my skin,
Before they etch there their ecstatic runes,
They'll pause, elegant breasts still asway,
And they'll say, they'll propose, what you need, sir,
What you really need, is ice cold beer.
Look here, sir, remember this label.
The Gaster yeast transformed these hops.

That's not, Alf, the proper attitude.
Your nose, I fear, is not rightly pointed
To take you above mist into delight.
You lack the lift to attain stratospheres
In which these taste treats are interlaced.
You won't reach, won't graze that firmament.
Your first stage will shortly fall away,
And shortly after it, you'll drop the second.
The sad truth is, sir, you lack a third,
A further stage that lets you continue.
I fear, poor Alf, you've reached apogee.
Press the pound key to repeat the message.

And with that the two crows rose above him,
As though borne upon sudden updrafts.
Alf was, he realized, now falling.

XVI. THE ZU'S FATE

There's a place in paradise, said Zu,
A bathhouse to which God often goes
When those northwinds blow, scented with soap.
I took employment there once, but briefly,
Hired as attendant at minimum wage.
I served at handing out heated towels
And stowing patrons' clothes within lockers.
And for this, sometimes, I'd receive a tip.

So it's you, said corpse, who robbed our Lord.
You're the sneakthief who vanished in crowds
As his angels with swords attempted pursuit.

You'll already know, I suppose, friend corpse,
The tale of how I stole Assur's wallet?

I've heard you took the small appointment book
In which Godhead jotted down his notes
On plans he'd made to manage cosmic fate.

It's true, said Zu, but not widely known.
Most believe I only took the wallet
As its owner hid and rinsed off his suds.
Modesty. That's always God's downfall,
For what blocks glory also blocks sight.

As if any mortal cared, said the corpse,
Or looks twice should naked glory appear.
The missing book, Zu, is common knowledge.

But just where, corpse, did you hear that news?

I think, said corpse, that my grade school text
Mentioned a thing described as part dragon
That dragged Assur's book away to its nest.
The moral of that, the text told students ...

One should never bathe? suggested the Zu.

Always back up your data, said corpse.
Tell me, Zu, do you still possess the book?

The magi say that all radiance left
The day you stole God's holy memos.
The world is old and stale and lacking warmth
Because our Lord has forgot what he'd planned.

Yes, said Zu. I have it right here. See?

That book, asked corpse, is the prototype,
The original for which our scriptures are copy?
Is that the Veda that rishis had glimpsed,
The withheld Torah kabbala predicts,
The Qu'ran the angel tried to transcribe?
Is that the book which precedes even God
And which, in itself, provides him with power?
Is that, Zu, essence slipcased and bound?

This is it, said Zu. I have it here.

I've seen shrinkwrapped skids of scripture
Stacked on shipdecks for dispatch to heathens,
And so have formed a general concept
Of how a proper holy book should look,
The volume one should fill, if one's complete.

Really, corpse? Not every corpse could.

Divide the skid's size by total items.
It's an extremely easy calculation.

Even so, my friend, I remain impressed.

That book, from here, appears underweight.
That scripture, said corpse, misses a part,
Maybe Amos, maybe Nehemiah.

A few pages of revelation chewed,
Said the Zu, should make little impact.
It's not as though, whole, the work made sense.

Is it not written that he who tampers,
He who subtracts one word from prophecy,
Shall himself be omitted from paradise?

No, oh corpse, it's not, not anymore,
For that part, in fact, is a part I ate.

You still possess, though, most of that text.
It seems this would mean you're the Lord now,
Transcendent and ineffable and distant,
And yet, on occasion, incredibly near,
Even, as now, within spitting distance.
You, Zu, are the breath by which we breathe,
You're both the scene and eyes with which it's seen,
Both the thought and the mind in which it floats.

I guess, said Zu, that would seem to follow.
I follow your logic and to that extent
I'm involved in keeping this thought afloat.
He who has God's book is therefore God.

But why, if so, is God on loading docks
And not in some fashionable eatery,
His arm wrapped snugly around the waist
Of some famously big-breasted beauty,
His beak moving from sips of rare vintage
To plunge into heaps of high-priced grub?

I've wondered that too, said Zu. Often.

And why is our world still desultory?

The truth, oh corpse, is that I'm not divine.
I'm not even partly semi-divine.
No part is touched by charisma or luck,
And no part is suffused in holy light,
And no piece is lightly coated with glow.
No part holds much more power, corpse,
Than those cold, drained parts that you possess.

That, said the corpse, would frustrate us all.
Is Assur's book not properly working?

A small blockage prevents divine prestige
From washing away all mortal Zu-ness.
I've read that book from cover to cover,
Memorized most lines, chanted them twice,
And can quote by rote syllables verbatim
At all substance that won't do as it's bid.
It has, I'm sad to report, no effect.

Ah, said the corpse. You don't understand.
That, I'll bet, is what stops omnipotence.
It needs a bit of omniscience, I've heard.

I haven't quite puzzled out Assur's notes.
The truth, oh friend, is that handwriting there
Is so hastily and so poorly formed
I can't quite decipher destiny yet.

Creation, friend Zu, impatiently waits.
How much longer will it take, do you think?

Most of the parts I've read and understood,
The parts that deal with fish as cosmic stuff,
And other of the fundamental concepts.

Is group theory mentioned? inquired the corpse.

Why yes, said Zu. How did you know?
Mention was made of orbits and reflections,
And actions subgroups can impart on heads.
That comes, I recall, after the chapter
That details how to string a banjo,
How to lacquer antique cabinetwork
And which tea to serve if crumpets have burnt.
Groups go clockwise, I remember that.

Clockwise, said the plumber, means tighten.

It means more than just that, said the bird.
It means, in rotating inertial frames,
The direction hurricane winds will blow
And which way liquids swirl in downpipes.
It means, as earth revolves on fixed axis,
The path the sun takes as furies pursue
And thus the path along which shade creeps
Down a sundial's numbered circumference.

It's all just convention, said the plumber.

We could do it, it's true, the opposite way,
Turn clocks upside down, reverse screws,
Or face the south so that west stands left,
So that hearts take a sunset bias,
Do a headstand with pipewrench in hand

And let blood drain from brain in retrograde.
Clockwise, I will admit, is only fish.
What matters is that left differs from right,
That space still fits inside its envelope
And order doesn't go vague along the way.

Clockwise, said the corpse, is only fish.
Is group theory, oh Zu, entirely fish?
Or is it partly memory, partly real?

God made zero. All else is fish.
It's stated in chapters on trout cookery.
God will collect elements into sets
And then, fatigued, disperse them all again.
He'll catch and release, he'll let them all go.

But if zero is God's, then whose is fish?
Is there some other agency involved?

Possibly, corpse, I don't remember that.

I ask, only, to test comprehension.

I understood many eternal truths,
But not the ones that make much difference.
Insight after insight struck my mind,
But they did not permit a wholesale change,
Change on scales you'd associate with God.

Can you not, Zu, at least retrieve the sense
That bears upon you present circumstance
And reorganize nearby reality?

There's one word here I can't quite read.
It's a short one, but nothing here makes sense
Until that keyword is understood.
Divinity is there, just out of reach.
It's a short word, a simple word, I think,
One that all Ninevites likely know.

I'm a Ninevite, said corpse. I'll help.
Perhaps, when God, you'll remember old friends.

I'd be, without doubt, forever grateful!

Only one moment of your gratitude
Is necessary to return small favours.
What word perpetuates your impotence?

This word here, the one I've underlined.

I can't read the word from here, said corpse.
Give me the book and I'll tell you what's said.

You want to steal my book, don't you, oh corpse?
I'm not so dense I'd fall for that trick.

Until you know what the word is, it said,
That book may as well be totally blank
For all the good the power there will do.

I can't let go of my book, said Zu.

You're right, clever Zu, That's too risky.
I might keep the book and not give it back.
And what a quandary we two face here!
If only, poor Zu, you possessed my head,
You'd make yourself Lord of all Nineveh.
And were Zu its tutelary deity
He'd surely give his friend, the corpse, a break!

And why don't we transpose our heads, then?
That way, I don't need to let it go.
We'll swap our heads, you'll read the word I need,
And then, quick as a wink, we'll swap them back.

Well, I don't know. You might, once you're God,
No longer care much what head you wear.
You might, Zu, refuse to return me mine.

Wait, said plumber. I spot a fallacy.

A Zu, said bird, is easily confused.
And that's why there's few, if any, left.

I swear to complete my bargain, said Zu.
Once I'm God I'll erase your death sentence.
Do you need to ask pro forma riddles?

Just one will do, said corpse with a grin.

What, sir Zu, is the name of this corpse?

But that's easy - it's Jonah, said the Zu.
You named yourself only moments ago.

If you've answered rightly, replied the corpse,
The head transposition cannot proceed.

I forgot that rule. Let's try another.
If you'd prefer, corpse, ask me my own name.

No need, said corpse. I'm afraid I fibbed.
I'm not yet Zu, no longer Jonah.
I'm midair already. You've missed your guess.

The bird paused there, as if to take breath.

What happened then? the plumber demanded.

The Zu, said toy bird, could not describe
How the transposition itself occurred.
I think perhaps it lost sight of the shell
On which it placed bet to have pea beneath.
It didn't take long, that much it knew.
It knew too what it heard, the sounds made.
On that one matter, the Zu was assured.
Like birds, like airborne orphic orbs,
Heads will produce sound as they fly, a song,
A strange whistle that modulates in key.

And what does that mean? inquired the plumber.

That, said bird, is a mystery to me.

And when air at last cleared of flying heads,
The Zu narrowed eyes at its counterpart,
The head now squared upon Zu shoulders,
That head that stared back and didn't blink.
He said, So what word is that, oh corpse?

Assur laughed and tucked the book away
Beneath one of the wings he found attached
To this new avatar he'd assumed.
Welcome, poor Zu, to the suq-al-jannah.
Your sacrifice, your payment, has been received,

And now, as promised, I'll fill your order.
The word you want, friend, said God, is 'Pipe'.
And then, taking Zu's body, God left.

And just then, as the Zu absorbed the word,
The pipes above began to shake and pulse,
And the plant door with a creak swung open.

The Zu went through the door, said plumber,
And there, but for the grace of God, go we.

We? said bird. You, perhaps, not I.
I'm so graceless, plumber, I'm paralyzed,
I'm seized up and squeezed in ceaseless exit.

How, if Zu went through that door, bird,
Did you ever meet it and learn its story?

I met the Zu, plumber, inside the pipes
That sluice all commingled fluids around.
Zu sluiced inside the Waste Treatment Plant
And I sluiced inside a world made of fish,
But two fluids met inside their common pipe.

I'm Zu, said Zu, who was now just juice.

You're fish, said I, we're both of us fish.
You're fish-juice, Zu. You scour plastic white.

All is Zu-juice, said Zu. Praise God.

Pipe? said plumber. Is that the answer?
That's what my dad said, so long ago.

But this is what the prophets most despise.
You take the time required to reveal truth
Only to learn your students marsupials,
Unable to handle simple concepts.
Well, I'm done. I won't repeat one word.
That's it. Riddle solved. The siege ends.

I don't get it. That drain cleaner, bird,
Has done far more damage than first thought.
That is not what our foes wait to get.
Dhul-Nunites won't swallow that.

That's surely not the Holy Book they seek.
Why, given that, would they ever depart?

Who dangles proper bait, properly hooked,
Will always net, in end, reluctant fish.

Depart? Pay more attention, oh plumber.
Look at the wall where my pipe was once placed.
Do you see the crack that widens there now?
Do you hear bricks splitting and shearing from strain?
Hear how much louder Tigris has grown!

What's this, bird? I don't understand.

But this is how your foe's riddle is solved.
Tigris rages, allied with Babylon.
You took away the pipe that held the wall,
The last shred of strength that braced its weight
Against that undermining river flood.
And now it's too late to repair the breach.
Nabopolassar will enter and slay all
And leave no two bricks here still stacked.
Behold, plumber, dormant destiny wake
To collaborate with foresight gone blind.
Behold now the hole that Dhul Nun left
For frustrated Holy War to flow through.

Spare Nineveh, bird, and God will spare you.

It's beyond saving now. Nineveh's doomed.
The Lord's Hour will come down upon us all,
But not all at once, not in one swoop.
Doom overtakes each at his own pace.
And though of course I do commiserate
And do acknowledge God will get me too,
It seems somehow apt you should go first.
I'll weep a bit to hear hearts lose beat,
Having so long slept beneath their noise,
But tears dry quickly on a plastic beak
When wept over a foreign misfortune.
Since none here are, after all, kin,
Not each with each, not each with me,
It's not hardship I can't easily bear
To hear this city's bricks break apart.
And that, to my liking, is how it ends,
For this, my friend, is how vengeance succeeds,
Despite poor skill and despite bad luck.
The fisherman who cultivates patience,

XVII. PORTENTS IN BEEF

The impact the cow made caused a stir
Among the Dhul-Nunites who stood near.
Nabupolassar, Babylon's Caliph,
Was not looking up as the missile passed
And briefly eclipsed the afternoon sun.
The shadow, the cool shade, that sped by,
Did not give his nerves enough forecast
Of the sound that would, so quickly, follow,
And so he flinched and shouted a vile oath
As the noise met ears and warsteeds shied.
But Cyraxes, King of Medes, had caught glimpse
And therefore was not nearly as surprised
When that great weight hit the riverbank.

And what was that? said Cyraxes. A cow?
Was that a cow that hurtled overhead?

The wizened old Caliph looked skyward,
Although the cow had now vacated space,
And beheld two crows beating wings there,
Birds set on intents that would intersect
At precisely the site by the Tigris bank
That now was splashed over with blood and beef.

Stay behind, ordered Nabupolassar.
I'll investigate this portent alone.

As he looked down upon the gory mess,
Another shape briefly blocked out sun.
It was, as he had guessed, the god Ninurta.

How much time is left? said Ninurta.

None, said John. It landed on all fours
But lost pulse, I'd judge, almost instantly.

But I meant, said god, your fatal ailment.

The pain, my gutache, grows ever worse,
But I hope to outlive Nineveh there.
Do you think this a sign that Godhead sends,

A sign that our lengthy siege nears its end?

Who knows, Mule-slayer? It's large enough.

I'd thought, said John, because you're a part,
A lobe that shares tissue, finger with palm,
You'd know in advance what Godhead intends.

No. Our Lord, as always, remains aloof
And lets his aspects guess at what's up.
It's all, I suppose, part of the plan.
Each aspect works in isolation.
Otherwise we'd perish in self-glory.
That, at least, was heaven's explanation
For why my part's always kept in the dark.

I think, said John, our foes shot it out.
Ninevites launched it from a catapult.

But why would they do that? said Ninurta.
Surely they knew a cow would not explode,
Except as meat would, if dropped from a height,
And thus would serve as poor ammunition.
Why not send, in same fashion, a bomb?

Perhaps Arsace runs low on explosives.

Perhaps the beast's diseased, a plague vector.

No, I think it's a mark of desperation.
They tried to put the cow into the sky...

As a spy or microwave satellite
That sits in low, geosynchronous orbit?

They tried to put the cow into the sky
To create there a new constellation
And thus direct fate down fresh channels.
They tried to hang its influence above.

It didn't adhere, though, said Ninurta.
It was too large, too massive an object,
Too overheavy to stick to heaven.

Look, said John, it wears a human head.

That explains it, then, said Ninurta.
They simply wanted it out of their town.
A monster like this is the worst of luck.
Even if it's liquefied, taint remains,
A source of noise that pollutes all spectra,
A contagion worse than weaponized pox
Or anthrax or bovine spongiform.

They rid themselves of bad luck, said John,
And at the same time they load it onto us.
Dhul-Nun was right to despise that race.

Do you recognize the face, Mule-slayer?
You humans, to deities, all look alike.

No, Ninurta. I know few Ninevites.
It's neither Sinsharishkun nor Warlock.
Yet that cow part, on the other hand,
Has shape to it that seems vaguely familiar.
Those haunches have a curve I've seen before.

Cows too, to deities, all look alike.
And yet, you're right, I see the curve too.

I would say that's a male head, by the beard.
And yet that's a female cow, by the udder.
Those two facts point to but one conclusion,
That we have here a head transplant case.

Is this one more work of the Warlock?

Observe, said John, how the blood's dispersed.
There's a big pool formed beneath the corpse,
And then smaller pools formed farther out,
And then, farthest away, are droplet marks.

It looks like a random distribution,
Blood splattered in standard deviations,
Clumped and clustered around the mean, the cow,
While outriders speckle the perimeter.

Not quite, said John. This Bell Curve differs.
It differs, friend, in that familiar way,
That same curve that we two once beheld,

The curve along Turandokht's ear, her jaw,
The one that crossed around her thigh to knee,
The one that led riddlemasters astray
By tracing her neck's perfect circumference.

So Ishtar did this, the jealous bitch.
The goddess, in her most jealous aspect,
Perverted nature and made this cow.

That's not, my friend, what the blood displays.
Know you nothing of how the girl was cursed?

The god said nothing but nodded to Left.

Perhaps kindness, mother love, said Left,
Guided the goddess to find a new method
Of increasing our total milk production,
And to thus decrease, if only a fraction,
The wide gap between supply and demand.

Ishtar cares nothing for the public good,
Replied Right. She just follows lust.

But even so, oh Right, insisted Left,
She's increased pleasure that flows down throats,
And thus is due, by that very fraction,
The gratitude, the drool, infants produce.

But jealousy guided her, retorted Right.
She watches over pathways of desire,
To see if they flare up, lit by her touch.
She will dampen each light she doesn't possess,
Punish each desire that isn't for her.

You're overharsh, Left. That isn't it.
I'd say Ishtar aligns herself with jealousy.
Isn't that what we felt, you and I,
When we watched Warlock fondle his daughter?

I'd say it's jealousy that withheld her,
That she was sacrificed to punish us all,
Warlock, Ninurta, and even the girl.

Don't forget the cow's weary-eyed head,
John interjected between those two.

Yes, said Ninurta. Let's not forget.
But whose head is affixed to the beast?
Is it that Zu I've come to collect?

I think, Ninurta, that the Zu is no more.
This is only some anonymous head
That was rolling down the wrong avenue.
A passerby offered opportunity,
Flaunted itself among frenzied dancers
Who recognized there their god's expression.
Some head came too conveniently near
To a neck left empty by sacrifice.

Has old age's advance, said Cyraxes,
Gone up to brain, bringing dementia?
You're talking to yourself, Nabupolassar.

I but ponder aloud on what the sign means.

But I'll tell you what it means. It means attack.
A scout reports a hole has opened up.
A breach in Nineveh's walls grows wider
And soon will grow large enough to permit
First one man, later entire platoons,
To pass from without to within those walls.

But note the head, said Nabupolassar.

I recognize the head, but not the rest.
Cattle, to Mede warriors, appear alike.
Is this a new Master Gaster model,
A cow that flies but only lands safely
On a Master Gaster made landing strip?
It's missed, it seems, its next connecting flight.

And whose dead head, then, adorns the beast?

It looks like the face of the Magus Alf,
A Ninevite dream and sleep specialist.
I took his therapy once, years ago.

And it worked? I thought such therapies frauds.

They are. I wasted both money and time.

My recurrent nightmares stopped on their own.
I dreamt, every night, of battlecrows,
One named Left, and the other named Right.
Every night they landed upon my corpse
And first Left humped Right, then Right Left,
And they went all night, switching positions.
I lost my appetite for love and life
Until, one night, they stopped and flew off.
Ever since, sir, they've never come back.

I wish, said Nabupolassar, I'd known this.
It all means something, or seems to mean.

It seems to mean, said Cyraxes, attack.

You're wounded, Cyraxes. I see blood on you.

Yes. I'd forgotten how averse you were.
You stand, you know, within a pool of blood.

I know that, Cyraxes. It terrifies.
But that's a drop of human blood, your blood,
That sits beaded upon your neck's surface.

We Medes stay smooth-faced, removing beards,
So in fights our foes don't grab us by hairs.

That, also, is knowledge I already possess.

My blade, as I shaved, gave my neck a nick.
That fleshwound's nothing, only a scratch.
I'm perfectly healthy and battleready.

You're right, Cyraxes. It is time to attack.
And you, Mede King, shall lead all forces.
It's you, friend, the first platoon shall follow.
In Dhul-Nun's name I'll forego command.
To you, Cyraxes, shall go first honours.
To you go all the glory due to heroes
Upon seeing war's first blow received.

It's better, agreed other. A Mede should do it.
You're scarcely fit enough to sit your horse.
Stay back, old man. Watch from safety.
Watch and celebrate as Nineveh falls.

I'll fetch a young girl, if any remain,
In exchange for this sacrifice you've made.

Go with God, Cyraxes. I'll watch from here.

XVIII. SINSHARISHKUN'S KITCHEN

The fat man who stirred barely looked up
As the Inquisitor approached and stood near.

What's in that pot? asked the Inquisitor.

This, replied the cook, is eternal soup.
We've kept it simmering, just below boil,
Since Ninus first founded this city.
Each day, as it depletes, we restore it,
And stir in whatever's seasonal or cheap.
It makes eternal soup the soup du jour
But keeps in place all the ancient flavours.
Today we've added some carrots and beef
To balance the substance yesterday took.

You're Sinshariskhun! said Inquisitor,
Now taking note of the cook's appearance.
I saw you moments ago, stupefied.

You saw Sinsharishkun, Nineveh's King.
I am, said cook, his identical twin,
Or he is mine, as I prefer to see it.

You're heavier, though, an expanded version.
I had no idea at all he had a twin.
No one mentions this. What is your name?

My name, Inquisitor, is Sinsharishkun.
We are, as I've said, identical twins,
Identical in every respect,
Identical twins with identical names.
Today he's king and today I stir soup,
But after Friday, market day, we'll switch.

On Friday you may, indeed, become King,
But what, I wonder, will your brother do?
He'd be idle here, with no soup to stir.
On Friday this room will be dark and cold.
There'll be no gasflame beneath kettles,
No stink of burnt carrot wafting up.
You're done here, my friend, your soup is finished.

Eternal, in this kitchen, ends today.

Is this prophecy? If so, Inquisitor,
You'd best retract it, renounce authorship,
Before I place a call to a law firm
To whom this city pays a retainer.

I'm shutting this place down now, oh cook.
The minimum sanitary standards
Were last observed in this kitchen of your's
Around the year your soup was introduced.
That ladle with which you slowly stir it,
In what century did it last meet soap?
And all the black droppings on which I step,
How many generations, sire and son,
Have passed among rats since they first appeared?

Don't dump your neuroses on me, my friend.
You're over-obsessive, hyper-critical.
This, nit-picker, is how kitchens look.

This is how it's looked for far too long.
What about the grease caked beneath the stove?
Ancient villages are buried within it,
And mummified African elephants.
And what about that rubbery substance,
Possibly an omelette, possibly vomit,
I see inching itself along the floor?

No one else has ever found complaint.

And when was this kitchen last inspected?
And look at the filth all over your apron.
Wait, what is that, that porcelain fixture?

It's a urinal. Have you never seen one?

I've never seen one placed like that,
Six inches from where a soup is simmered.

We wanted it kept it that far away
Not just to avoid the possible burns,
But also because the mechanism's gummed
And sometimes, when flushed, will produce a splash.

A splash? But that's exactly what I mean,
That's exactly what every diner
Would least wish to hear last washed his dish.

The splash will seldom travel very far,
And mostly will fall well short of the soup.
Mostly it splats harmlessly upon floors
Or drenches and soaks into trouserfronts.
Sometimes, not often, nothing happens,
And sometimes, but rarely, geysers erupt
And let fall a wave one could surf on.
It can, I must admit, vary a bit.
It all depends on when the moon rises,
On the tension between the valve and lever,
And on, of course, the system's initial state.
It's old, you see, a family heirloom.
That urinal was Ashurbanipul's.

You can't, you fool, put a urinal here.
And I will, I swear, order it torn out.

On Friday I'll hold this city's sceptre.
I will roll back non-progressive measures
Instituted during my brother's term,
And he will, in turn, turn with spoon the soup,
And God help any who try to stop it.
On Friday, my friend, I'll cut off your head.

Do you imagine, you slovenly oinker,
That I've never heard this ploy before?
A malefactor almost always claims
He's amassed enough wealth, enough power,
To have placed himself beyond the law's reach.
He will never, however, have it with him.
His wallet's not, he'll claim, on his person.
Your threats, cook, will not materialize.

On Friday, my friend, I'll cut off your head
Which my twin will add to Saturday's soup.
Meanwhile that fixture will remain fixed.
Maybe white doesn't match wallpaper,
Maybe the shape doesn't go with curtains,
And maybe the feng shui is out of whack,
But our urinal is a priceless antique,
A prized example of the fin de siecle.

That fixture is, in fact, oracular.
Pissed upon, it tells you your weight in grams,
The time, an inspirational quotation,
And then your future, over the next week.
A rusty voice speaks from below the drain.

Beyond doubt, it's a marvelous appliance.

But you're welcome, if you'd like, to try it out.
Remember, however, to stand back after,
And, oh yes, the future function mentioned,
That, I'm afraid, is currently not working.
It needs, I suppose, a plumber's attention.
You don't know one, do you, Inquisitor?

Plumber? There's one downstairs right now.
He is the best plumber in all Nineveh,
If what you want is plumbing taken apart
And left scattered in pieces evermore.
That reminds me, cook. Where is that leak,
That one that damaged the goddamned map?

The leak! Of course. I wondered why you'd come.

Didn't that insurance bitch come by?

Twice. The first time she just said sorry,
And she promptly turned around and walked out.
The second time she stayed to look around.

She likely thought this the men's washroom.

She looked in the cupboard where maps are kept.
She took all the maps out, one by one,
And quickly but minutely examined each.

Those are maps with which the King makes plans,
The secret strategies which defend our town?
What if that old woman's an agent,
One who takes Nabupolassar's dollar?

That's absurd, Inquisitor. She's too old.

Those maps, nonetheless, should stay secure.

On Friday, said the cook, they're obsolete.
On Friday, my friend, Nineveh surrenders.
My urinal, I'm sure, would fully concur,
If only that function could still function.

As the cook stirred, the spoon struck an object
And knocked it against the inside of the pot.
The object sounded, the Inquisitor thought,
To be far more massive than most carrots.
The cook tossed handfuls of something in.

What's that substance? Did you wash your hands?

Those are Master Gaster's toasted croutons,
The one constant ingredient in our soup,
The one nutrient we can't do without.
The croutons last forever and never stale,
And without their crumbs soup's not eternal,
A totally new soup every day.

The Inquisitor opened the cupboard,
Saw the piled maps and then found the hole.

The Baker's ubiquitous, whispered the cook.
It's added itself into all of us,
Imprinted its face onto our each cell.
It floats in air we breathe and swims our blood,
And wherever it touches, it adheres there.
It clasps its jolly lips there and it sucks,
It makes itself a hole and inserts eggs.
We're like those who labour in opiate labs.
We can't live without that element now.

There's no plumbing behind the cupboard.
This hole is in the wall itself, cook.
It goes into - and through - the bricks themselves.

Those bricks, said Cook, are Gaster's too.
Baked in Gaster ovens, mixed with his straw.

Look at this, said Inquisitor to cook.
There is something stuck in the hole here.
It looks to me, oh cook Sinsharishkun,
As if it's made of skin, a human chin.

Is the chin shaved or bearded? said the cook.

Shaved, said Inquisitor. The chin is shaved.

That's a Mede chin, then. They shave daily.
I wonder why a Mede would come through there -
There's no food kept in that cupboard.

But how, cook, is this at all possible?

I suspect, said cook, my twin, that drunk,
Upon noting the quoted price per quart
To treat the wall with Mede repellent paint
Made with Jolly Baker Brand compounds,
Postponed or cut that budget item
And bought instead cases of Gaster's plonk.

I think the hole is growing larger, cook.
A bit of upper lip is now exposed.

Do you see an eye yet? Beware its glance.

My own glare, friend cook, will petrify
Any eye that tries to pry itself in.

But don't let it get in, Inquisitor.
Close that cupboard door immediately.
Once in, Medes will stay and multiply.
Once in, they're impossible to get out.
They are, to sum up, said cook, bad news.

I see the Mede's nose start to poke through.

We need, and at once, an exterminator.
You bear a sidearm, sir. Shoot the nose.

I've a gun, yes, but no ammunition.
Requisitions for reloads take weeks.
That axe embedded in the chopping block,
May I, Sinsharishkun, redeploy it?

That's the tool we would use to chop sparrows.
It is classed in our kitchen inventories
As sundry veterinary equipment.
I'll authorize, this once, other use.

Did the adjuster examine that axe?
I would swear, you know, said the Inquisitor,
That no axe was there a moment ago.

A moment ago the world recreated.
A new age dawned, this very second,
Just as it did that last second back,
The moment ago we barely remember.

Are you an Asharite, Sinsharishkun?

I am, said the cook, this time around.
This soup, I think, is missing something.

I think, rather, my memory is slipping.
The axe was there but not yet relevant.
Your memory too is less than perfect.
Your soup is, by definition, complete,
For you've already added in croutons.

How can you ever remember memory?
It was good yesterday, but bad today?
God has changed your mind, this time around,
Added the croutons for just the right touch,
Added that axe for added relevance.

Godhead created Heaven and the Earth.
He did this, and now he's done, he's retired.
He hasn't intervened in ages now.

A mist rolls in and he slips beneath it
And rearranges kitchen furniture.
But God has such a good eye for design
He'll give all a natural, artless look
Until you'd swear that all this evolved
Or swear that urinal was always there.

But why, if you think that, do you still stir?

Because, said cook, it's not Friday yet.
Don't forget the Mede, Inquisitor.
I'd prefer it, if possible, finely chopped.

XIX. THE LAST WORD

This, bird, is not your day, said plumber.

But how not? It's Nineveh's Visit Day,
Doomsday, its immediate hereafter.
And that, oh plumber, is my kind of day.

I've taken a closer look at those bricks.
We're still dry and safe, still watertight,
And Tigris stream tumbles seabound still.
The wall's not cracking, and no hole exists.
Nineveh's mortar remains still unsplit.

You're kidding! said the bird. I hear the noise.

But you hear much, I'd guess, that others don't.
The rift you seek does not exist for us.
And yet I'd still better reinstall you.
For who knows? Perhaps you do, after all,
Lend our town walls some added support.
You go back into the box now, bird.

Yes, I thought so, said the Inquisitor.
He stood in the doorway and held an axe.
Its blade, the plumber saw, was smeared with blood.

Go away, sir. Do not interfere.

I know you, plumber, said the Inquisitor,
And I knew you'd try to continue work,
Even though I'd told you the consequence.

I'm almost finished here, the plumber said,
Dropping the bird in box and fitting lid.
Now where did the little gift card go?

We're all almost finished, you clumsy fool.
A small hole has opened in rooms above.
The Dhul-Nunites are clustered outside, waiting.
One stuck head through and I took it off.

What? You killed one who reveres Dhul-Nun?

What gives you right? said the bird from box.

The head didn't meet specifications.
The nose was too long, the lips too thick,
Its beard gone, deliberately shaved off.
It was, in short, an illegal alien.
And, what's more, there's no provision made
In kitchen plans to put a window there,
And none whatsoever to plug it so.
And that neck, which I did measure first,
Protruded beyond what the law allows,
And at an angle two degrees off true.
I knew at once when I saw hole appear
That you, plumber, had ignored the stop work.

The box, despite danger, now gave voice:
Shell breakage is often necessary
If gooey essence constitutes your goal.
Decide first, before you tap the hammer,
If egg shards discarded will cause distress.
Consult the patient's closest confidantes
To learn if slow and agonizing death
Is preferred to unsightly surgical scars.
Show each reluctant patient your scalpel,
How keen it is, how steadily held,
And then poke him to gauge the screams provoked.

Boxes don't talk, said the Inquisitor,
And I, of course, would never address one.
Inform your box, plumber, I hold an axe.

That hole will grow worse, oh Inquisitor,
Unless this pipe goes back to its place.

Touch one tool, that pipe or that box
And I'll see your neck spurting out blood.
I said it once before, without effect.
But now, to reiterate, I hold an axe.

But Nineveh dies, even as we speak,
Its spirit, its market, floods out the hole.

You caused it, plumber, with that sloppy work.

The box, at this, was forced to interject:

Explain, using simple but brutal terms,
That painful incisions are often needed,
That forceps often leave bruised tissue
When one's forced to pursue a timid yolk.
It's yanked out, explain, by its trembling tail,
Thrown squealing upon a handy guernsey.
It's an ordeal, yes, but God ordains it.

Can you not turn that thing off, plumber?

And explain, if you think it necessary,
That no possible objection will deter,
That you will, no matter the cost, proceed,
That you will, if nothing works, excavate,
That you might, if you're forced, plant your
explosives,
Detonate the charge, create a crater,
And show by this you can't be trifled with.
This, you'll explain, you simply must do.
You can't let fragility give refuge
Or let its integrity act as excuse.
Truth must be retrieved, wherever it hides,
No matter how brown it stains fingers,
Or what child it selects to take hostage.
And though it burrows into your own flesh,
You'll rip each organ out to unseat it.
Otherwise it stays useless mystery,
An abstract character that's wrongly cast,
A bad actor cased in misplaced concrete.

Can your box, plumber, said Inquisitor,
Provide you the correct time when asked?

I'm sure it could, said the plumber, if asked.

And what about your weight, expressed in grams?

Do you want to know what the future holds?
Is that what you want? complained the box.
Ask someone else. It isn't my day.

If the pipe hadn't come out, the plumber said,
I'd never have known its part in the pattern.
The pattern itself would still remain cloaked,
Concealed behind walls, hid beneath floors.

That's patent nonsense, plumber, delusion.
Pattern? The only pattern plumbing makes
Is ad hoc connection of flow to need.
Nearby contingence confers it order.
And look at this mess that plumbers have made,
This confusion of criss-crossing pipework!
Each junction there is a bad decision,
Forced by new pressure, by honking traffic.

It draws a sign, a glyph, a giant word.
It's hard to read if one's tangled inside.

It's a sign of madness, said Inquisitor,
When pipe design begins to convey sense.
It's like slime snails leave, coursing for food,
The trails that double back and harken round
And draw on ground nonsense signatures.
Try to read those glistening inscriptions
And you'll find your mind coiled within snail.

Coiled? Is that clockwise? said the plumber.

Fish, said box, is made of tiny groups,
Symmetric groups whose cogs will intersect,
Whose busy subgroups absurdly permute.
Symbols transpose as group action works
And sometimes will produce, by luck, a word.
Some grow large and become blastocysts,
Some grow huge and become a whole Zu.
Sometimes colonies float free and drift,
Swarms of miracles, flocks of battlecrows,
Whistling automata too small for sight
Who strain starches from air and drop manna.
Don't dismiss jumbled clumps of numbers;
The hand you're dealt, although it's not aces,
Although it may seem innocuous at first,
May, under revised rules, win a pot.

I'll smash that box, observed Inquisitor,
If one further word leaks out its lid.

The box does nothing to promote flow,
But my crossword requires that last pipe.
I can almost read the word, what it says,

The equation its numerology plots.
I can almost add up the scrabble points
As it reaches for meaning across the gap.
That pipe, replaced, restores broken sense.

That pipe, said Inquisitor, stays there.
It stays there now until Judgment Day,
Perfectly placed, two degrees off true,
To lie among rubble randomly dropped,
To rest under the fallen flooring tiles.
And you, with that box, will share its grave.

And so, as Nineveh fell to ruins above,
Those three held that very position.
The plumber, tight-lipped, kept eye on axe,
And Inquisitor, grim, kept eye on pipe,
And the box sat untouched, cackling a bit.
And nothing was said when sounds of hooves
Confirmed the hole above had grown enough
To let through Babylon's mounted force.
No more was said when wheels creaked above
As chariots, siege engines and cook wagons
Were drawn inside the King's kitchen and parked.
They still held that pose when foes arrived
Led by John and bareheaded Ninurta.

The man who holds the axe, announced John.
Is the same who took off Cyraxes' head.
I know by the blood that still soaks his robes.

One of the Mede archers who stood behind
Did not wait to hear other testimony.
As the arrow hit the Inquisitor's throat
The axe slipped out from now gripless hands.

The other, said the box, is a plumber.
If evidence is required, behold his wrench.
Incidentally, why the wrench, plumber?
Nineveh's fallen. We can all take a break
And celebrate the local holiday.

Plumbers, said John, are beloved of God.
And those plumbers on-call afterhours,
Though they worship demons, defile altars,
And fornicate with fungus-clad cheeses,

Will precede saints in queues for paradise.
So said Dhul-Nun, asked about that.
What's inside the box, that makes that noise?

It's Dhul-Nun himself, replied the plumber.
He'll field your questions now, if they're kept brief.
He may, if he's urged by standing ovation,
Even perform a quick encore speech.
It's high time his second coming expires,
For who among all those assembled here
Would ever stick around to see a third?
Who among those who consent to stand watch
Does not agree that twice-come is enough?

The Mede archer lifted his bow to shoot
The pagan who'd so blaspheme the Prophet.
The archer wasn't, as it happened, devout,
But just sought an excuse to loose arrows.

Stop, said Ninurta. The man's a plumber.
Didn't you hear Nabupolassar speak?
What if the Caliph needs faucets repaired?

Nabupolassar? said box. Well, well.
I've heard much of you, both ill and good.

If what you've heard resembles how I feel,
The ill and good divide neatly in two.
I feel ill neck down, good neck up.

I know what the Warlock's riddle did.

But how, box, can you know that? asked John.

It's echolocation, explained the plumber.

Your blood corpuscles are bud-scarred now.
They'll neither grow nor go dormant and spore.
You're dead already, if full truth be known,
If your head could know what prophet can see,
The tissue vibrations auras expose.

My tissues vibrate, you say? said John

No, sadly, my friend, they don't, said box.

Those old tissues expired days ago.
Neck down you're a corpse, just like the Zu
Before pipes conveyed it back to its source.
You may remove now, if you wish, that hood.
Once the head has rolled, you can bare your face.

Zu? said Ninurta. You know of this Zu?

Its gone, said box, to the suq-al-jannah.
It sits now upon a dune in paradise
And watches the heads go back and forth
As God plays tennis in self-contention.

It stays there, then, said John, forever?

If, in eternity, as some would insist,
No thing ever changes to another,
If each grave we've dug is maintained there
And property lines stay forever fixed,
Then no soul would afford the high prices
Our Lord need charge in the suq-al-jannah.
Mice who require a new cerebellum
Would lack enough cash for walnut meat,
And walnut trees who need grafted limbs
Would not even receive the pruning paint
That keeps stump rot from eating them hollow.

What happened to Turandokht? said plumber.

It's not wise to inquire, Ninurta said.

Turandokht? Did someone say the word?
Look, said the bird, for a burnt out bulb,
One whose filament has lost its contact,
Who's turned dark and cold and rattles a bit.
She's still the princess who plays hard to get,
Though dead and told not to look back,
Though entranced and told not to remember.

I'll tell you, plumber, the Muleslayer said.
Your box, it seems, has gone esoteric.
I saw events in what cow's blood wrote.

And how, said box, is that more likely?

After Turandokht came to Nineveh
The god Ninurta followed her tracks here.
He'd caught a good glimpse of her great beauty
In Babylon as Warlock left town.
The god desired to possess that beauty
And wove strands of illusion around self
So that he took on the Warlock's semblance.

Gods can do that? said the plumber to John.
They mimic us? They substitute themselves?

It reminds me, said box, of a changeling,
One who feigned idiocy, babbled and drooled,
Just to seduce the asylumkeeper's nurse,
So that, perhaps, when he's propped upon lap,
She'd bare her plump breast and offer suckle.

Is that your tactic too? said Ninurta.
I was infatuated. What can I say?
It seemed, at that time, a foolproof plan.
Unfortunately, she saw through disguise
And spurned proffered kisses, broke embraces...

Did she inflict wounds, slice off testicles?
Was she, said the box, serious or not?

She said she'd never love me, Ninurta said,
Unless she received truly divine gifts.
I gave her smooth passage through corridors,
But earned only one earlobe nibble.
To get full surrender, full possession,
I saw that girl would take all I had.

Welcome, said box, to the suq-al-jannah.
The northwinds blow on days we're gathered
And flushed saliva takes clockwise swirls.

All she desired, like all, was power,
And so I showered my power upon her.
I spoke words that altered property lines,
That broke fences and opened up pastures.
Enraged I chanted spells that changed her shape,
That made her oscillate from cow to girl
To cow and back, on a monthly frequency.

A silence fell among the group gathered
And the box, no longer threatened by axe,
Took it as opportunity to comment:
To all things, I've heard, there is a season.
All events repeat themselves in cycles,
Comets borne along elliptic orbits.
They disappear in troughs, appear on crests,
Migratory butterflies blown north
To feed upon the milkweed's dull fluff.
All events repeat themselves in cycles,
And yet events attempt to conceal this,
To vary attack and come in offbeat.
Each will flutter in as if it's unique,
As if its show goes one night only,
As if autochthonic, without genes,
A masterpiece whose mold was smashed,
The only one, a signed one of a kind.
Good seers, however, are not deceived.
They know individuals don't exist.
Items have no svabhava or essence,
They're undistinguished units, mass-produced,
As like as protons, as empty as ghosts,
As featureless as points dissolving in space.
All events repeat themselves in cycles,
And each act possesses a frequency
That drags it onstage, just as predicted.

This box, the plumber informed the others,
Often speaks too obliquely to follow.

And some events, like Nineveh's demise,
Are tricky for all but a major prophet.
Such disasters have long wavelengths,
So stretched they'll occur but once a kalpa,
Not often enough to get good reads.
For induction you'll require prior data,
And for curves you'll need at least a few points,
Unless, like me, you're supremely gifted,
A paragon, the best of all parrots,
Who improvises each performance made,
Who generates fresh interpretations
On each repetition of ancient jokes.
Each word will thus become collectible,
Transfigured into an instant classic,
One instance of its most general class.

As the group there attempted to work out
How these remarks were at all relevant,
Ninurta said, You all appear aghast.
Think of that girl as a sacrifice,
A price we paid to hold this reunion.

How'd she know you were divine? asked plumber,
Now back at work fitting pipes in place.
How'd she recognize you weren't her father?

I can give answer to that, said the box.
When the gods meet your gaze they never blink.
Their eyes are as unwinking as those of fish,
Fish who peer up from backwater pools
As eddies turn and lift their idle fins...

Or fish trapped in incorruptible rock,
Suggested the plumber, petrified fish,
Fossils in perpetual meditation...

Or fish you see at banquets, said John,
The fish laid on crushed ice, their spines removed...

Birds also, said box, don't blink much.
Gods recapitulate fishes and birds,
And fishes and birds are gods aborted,
Flashes of colour our visions have frozen.
That's the reason prophets often stutter:
Should ontogeny pause, phylogeny quits.

Nor will, said John, cold cadavers blink.
It's why one shuts eyelids for the dead.
Corpses are best kept, said Dhul-Nun,
If stored with vision in its off position.

Did I, I wonder, really say that?
I wonder, said box, what I was thinking.

But this is news to me, Ninurta said.
The gods never blink? Are you sure of this?

They can do blinks, of course, if they so choose,
But only then, when lids are given word.
They lack the reflexes, the subroutines,

The agents that act without oversight.
And so, most times, they forget to do it.
Another sign, a giveaway, are feet.
Feet if not mortal will not touch ground,
And that is why the gods seem so tall;
That is why they tower over others,
Sometimes as much as two thirds an inch.

Ninurta here is a god, box, said John.

But I gathered that from previous remarks.
In my blindness, said box, I missed the signs,
And cardboard muffles echolocation.
He had me fooled - I thought him just mortal.
I was, unlike the girl, truly beguiled,
Though I too, like her, resist when kissed,
Unless our surrenders are evenly matched.

You're not much of a prophet, then, oh box.
I'm a short god now - and that's his fault,
That Mule-Slayer whose sentence you've pronounced.
It is his old body that I wear now.
It once was corpse but pills and exercise
Have kept it tottering one step to next.

You're right, though, box, said the Mule-slayer.
He still stands taller than I was once did.
I'd thought this due to megacephaly,
But now I see it's true - he floats a bit,
The floor slides beneath each step, untouched.
He exists without contact, ungrounded.

Mule-slayer? said box. You slayed a mule?

That mule, said John, was demon-possessed.
When the beast attacked me, my hand was forced.

Mules do not ordinarily attack.

They might, said Ninurta, who knew of game,
If one comes between a mother and cub.

It was verbal abuse, slanderous assault.
I gave it the chance, but it wouldn't retract.

You seem shocked, friend box, said Ninurta,
But think of the mule as a sacrifice,
A price we paid to hold this reunion.

It said too much, I'd guess, said plumber.
Talkative creatures can reveal too much,
Far more than what most will need to know.
Can Ninurta forecast, can anyone,
When it's best to insert a blink, when not?

Ninurta looked annoyed but said only,
I've come here, box, in search of God's book,
The one the Zu took as Godhead bathed.
You, if truly prophet, can point it out.

But Dhul Nun hasn't helped much with that.
I've asked him more than once, the plumber said.

Have you tried, said box, the library yet?

Ashurbanipul's library? It's been sacked.
It's desolation now, Ninurta said.

I gave orders, said John, it not be touched.

Its own staff has sacked it, over the years.
I found only internet terminals
And software and mangas and movies on disc.
I looked in vain for books they used to shelf
But none were there but current bestsellers.
And those are all rubbish, said Ninurta,
Who was, it was clear, an intolerable snob.

Have you read Gilgamesh? asked the plumber.
I just couldn't put the damn thing down.

The book's gone, Ninurta. Accept the fact.
It went with Zu into the sewage plant.
It munched it up, as if it just lettuce.
It chewed up that part of the Lord's text
A few moments before its head dissolved.

The question to ask, box, said the plumber,
Is did the Zu swallow before it went?
Did the text go down that Zu's gullet

And, if it did, if the mouthful went down,
Swirled down, as said, with clockwise motion,
Was it before or after heads were exchanged?

Who knows? said box. The Zu's no more,
And only Godhead now knows the truth.

Godhead knows the truth indeed, oh prophet.
The Zu swallowed part, and part retained.
And that part it swallowed, God got back,
And that part, that small bit it retained,
Has gone now for good, gone now beyond,
And gone into oneness, thoroughly pulped.

Is that the plumber who speaks? said the box.

Yes, said John. And now I've taken look,
He rises offground by nearly an inch.
And his face, box, is so beatific...

Part, said God, became stuck in its teeth,
Only one word, but a crucial one.
The rest I recovered, dredged up from flesh.
So what, oh box, is that missing word?
You, sluiced in Zu, bear its sharp fragrance.
You know it well, but still don't remember.

I detest riddles, the Muleslayer said.

I think beatific isn't the word.
It's not the one, the word that best fits it,
The name that nails this circumstance down.
Your word here, Ninurta said, is 'jolly'.

But Godhead blinked once and took the box
And shoved it with worm deeply down the pipe,
Whereupon pipe of itself rose from floor
And crossed space to rejoin its old pattern.
Then God twisted himself widdershins,
Screwed himself counterclockwise and up.
He blinked once more, just to prove he could,
And then, without word, God disappeared.
And then, up above, the flooring collapsed.