

MELANCHOLIA

*The world began with the Word and with it she will end,
and in-between are lived the lamentable lives of men.*

I believe that all human beings experience melancholia but most of them merely pass through her shadowy realm and move forward into the light. Yet, there are those of us who remain. We are the Brothers and Sisters of Sorrow. We are wanderers and seekers, the emotional collective-conscience of all those who came before us, and we cannot turn away without understanding.

The *dark* side of life holds a distinct allure for those who desire to fully understand themselves and others. Vast wisdom can be mined within the darkness by those with the purity of heart to persevere through her turbulent emotional trials.

Although they know it not, those who seek only the *light*, deny themselves half of our loving Creator's gifts of perspective and compassion. I humbly offer this collection of 88 morbid tales and poems with the vague hope that those who are unfamiliar with *the sadness* may come to appreciate a little of her beauty.

This effort is dedicated to my Brothers and Sisters of Sorrow. I hope that these words will help inspire you during the dark moments of your lives. This book is my attempt to find beauty in the darkness and I hope that you will find her as well.

*Understand that you are not alone.
Understand that we are One.*

- Patrick Westfall July, 2015

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The Man Upon the Moor

Sitting in my study,
drawing upon a pipe of clay,
simply sitting, smoking softly,
I endure the remaining day.

Harder still, fell the rain,
against the glassless pane,
louder still was heard the rapping,
tapping of his cane.

As I rose to bid him in,
I reeled at the sight,
he was already there, beside my chair,
and he brought with him the night.

"Sir," said he respectfully,
"if I may speak free,
a scotch and smoke in trade for tale,
this night I'd share with thee."

His manner calm as he sat,
upon the moistened floor,
and as he lit his pipe,
I gazed out upon the moor.

Not a word said he,
for at least an hour more,
"Speak up my man, out with your tale,
this I do implore!"

But when he spoke aloud,
and ceased his muted way,
his tale chilled both my bone and blood,
and stole my breath away.

"Joseph Craig Dobler,
employed me but a year,
I took his life, and then his wife,
as my own to love so dear.

But alas! She knows the truth at last,
it is so she screams,
Dobler's ghost has come to her,
he speaks into her dreams.

His spirit shall haunt and spook,
wherever I may be,
already twice this night,
upon the moor was he.

Such is how I came,
into your house so free,
for when next he comes I'll surely die,
but with sin confessed to thee."

The wind did gust and blow,
through the glassless pane,
and it seemed we both could hear,
the rapping, tapping of a cane.

The man stood up as if to leave,
but could not find the nerve,
and as he looked into the night,
I watched his body swerve.

Then we both grew chill as the knob,
into my dwelling turned,
"What demon from Hell, had arisen,
its body blackened, burned?"

But the knob stopped, then was heard,
upon the door so plain,
louder, louder came the rapping,
tapping of his cane.

"No more! No more!"
he cried with palms upturned.
I could not bear to see its face,
and body blackened, burned!

The man turned in horror and fell out,
through the glassless pane,
nevermore to suffer the terrible,
tapping of the cane.

Oh how I loathe, even now,
the sound of rain upon the plain,
for now I always seem to hear,
the rapping, tapping of a cane!

All In My Name

From the depths of the dark,
I hear a man wither and die,
but his pain I do not mark,
and for his death I do not cry.

Adrift upon the Sea of Pain,
where a vast ship goes down.
I watch the crew struggle in vain,
and tearlessly watch them drown.

High upon Compassion's Peak,
a climber loses his hold,
he achieves that which I seek,
and becomes lost to fates untold.

I watch as the healthy trod,
upon cripples who fall,
as I lean upon My rod,
and ignore their dire call.

I allow all things that kill,
torture and cause pain,
and demand that each man will,
call them holy, all in My name.

Alone with His Hells

Meaning came to a man,
in all that he saw,
but from it he ran,
like the guilty from law.

For no man should seek,
meaning in all around,
lest with its cognizance reek,
lest he spook at each sound.

But this man could not avoid,
meaning in its utter clarity,
this one who has never toyed,
with unequal disparity.

Yet it found him again,
even as from it he ran,
as do the holy from sin,
but succeed no one can.

They've locked him away,
now in far-distant cells,
hidden from each day,
alone with his Hells.

The Crypt-Keeper's Tale

It was the darkest year of the plague and no one felt its presence more acutely than I, for I was employed as a crypt-keeper. Where else would all of the mutilated and disfigured victims of the bubonic be bound for, once removed from the streets of England?

I am an avid lover of all that is gothic and hence, enjoyed my solitary life among the wooden, iron and marble tombs. That is to say that I enjoyed it until the moment *he* arrived. As it was a small cemetery over which I had domain, I required no assistant and would tend to the corpses myself as they arrived. In doing so, I had become quite accustomed to gazing upon the grotesque faces and mildewed bodies of the dead. However, the occurrence of which I will now speak concerns not the mortal corpse of a fallen man, at least not such as human eye has ever seen. Come, let me begin.

It was a night at the very end of time. Cold as the grave, it was, and with a shroud of fog so thick that the eye could not pierce it. A knock was heard from outside my chamber door and I rose from the chair in dread, for who without the direst need, would expose themselves to such an evening? Still, I opened the door as was my custom without first ascertaining the caller's identity. If I had not possessed this idiosyncrasy, and had glanced through the uncouth peep-hole before removing the bolt, Lucifer in all of his many forms could not have persuaded me to do it. Yet, as it was, I opened my door to the very image of the Black Death incarnate!

Tall as the door, was he, and nearly as wide. Extremely thin and sparse threads of rotten and wilted hair hung from far back on his head. He was wearing a once-fine linen blouse and black denim trousers which were tucked into knee-length riding boots of excellent make. Thusly he stood, or rather enveloped, my modest foyer.

Let me now speak of his skin. Having professionally groomed myself with the dead, I have come to be quite unmoved, as I have said, when looking upon the diseased deceased, but what I saw in this man's cheeks wracked my soul to its center. His flesh possessed the same stale, tell-tale hues and the slightly bloated condition of a body robbed of life by the plague.

Further, in irregular, disfigured patches, were the most unspeakable leprous chancres. These appeared to be rotting and peeling away from him, as the skin of a fruit left in the sun uneaten. Nor even for all of this would I have been frightened of him were it not for his eyes. Colorless and pupil-less were they and with a hideous veil of milk-white film over them. It appeared as if his eyes had merely rolled backwards, leaving nothing but the whites to blindly guide the body. I instantly surveyed his hideous countenance while forcing bitter bile back down my throat.

"Be gone, servant, and summon the master of this house at once!" the corpse bellowed from powerful lungs.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but *I* am the master of this place and would very much prefer not to contract thy disease!" I

replied tersely. I attempted to close the door but in the final inch of its berth, it was halted by his cane.

"My apologies, good sir," he said in a decent and surprisingly dignified tongue, "but I am short of time and did not suspect you, as master of such a fine position, to service your own callers. Please sir, I beseech thee, I am unwell and desperate, may I please come inside?"

His newly-donned civility had a distinct calming effect upon me and I became inclined to spare a few moments for this monster of a man. "Before I can bid you within," said I, "I would first respectfully inquire as to your, ah, *ailment*."

"Wise indeed," said the stranger aloud, but clearly to himself, in the odd manner of those who frequently converse alone. His smile seemed to congratulate me for my caution and, at the same time, himself for choosing a wise confidante which, as I was to learn, was integral to his designs.

"Such is the very purpose of my visit to thee this night. Regrettably sir, it is not the bubonic, nor leprosy, as you must understandably think."

"Indeed?" said I, "Yet you still wish to inflict its nameless wrath upon me? Upon one who has never wronged you?"

"Sir," he replied in his patient, soothing manner, "that from which I suffer is no common strain of contagion. Nor is it

communicable at all, for I have been vexed by the supernatural! I have acquired this, *ailment*, not through human contact. Oh, would that were the cause, but alas, no. I, sir, have been cursed!"

As he spoke this last, he became quite excited and required some time to regain his composure, during which I, shocked and afraid, said nothing. "But this diabolical disorder," he continued at length, "cannot be transferred by conventional method. Only the demon itself, from whom I became inflicted, can bestow it. Rely upon this, sir, you shall remain free of it."

With this disturbing introduction, you may think that I was mad for admitting him into my home at all. Yet, to gaze upon the tortured apparition before me and then to turn it away without first gleaning more of its story, requires a strength, or weakness, which I do not possess.

"Come then, into my home and seat yourself beside my fire," I said cordially but, naturally, without offering him my hand. A tangible wave of relief washed over him and, for the shortest instance of time, I glimpsed the man as he had appeared before the malady has disfigured him; full of vigor, heart and passion. As the illusion faded, and I was once again confronted with his lifeless eyes and decaying flesh, I felt the desperate urge to flee, as if for my very life. But, of course, I could not.

Upon directing himself to a chair, which gratefully wasn't my favorite, he laid his face in his hands and remained

there, unmoving, while I readied a cognac and a pipe for each of us. We then sat in silence for some time, staring vacantly into the hearth-flame. During this time, he touched neither pipe nor drink, while I finished both.

At length, he raised his head and spoke, "You have been very kind, and it is with a heavy heart that I burden you with my tale. My name is Lofoden and am, or rather was, a fisherman. One night some years past, I was at port when, thoroughly by chance, I happened upon three of the dearest friends of my childhood. We decided to celebrate the rare reunion by making merry at a local tavern.

The night itself was bitter cold and with a powerful storm brewing above. For this reason, when we arrived at the inn, we found ourselves to be the sole occupants of the establishment, save for the tired old innkeeper himself. Given the intimacy of the inn and the fierceness of the tempest outside, we sat up late into the night talking and drinking freely from the cask. Indeed, it was early morning whence there came a rap upon the door. A single, solitary rap, which I have since come to believe was the very hand of Fate himself.

As the innkeeper had long since retired, I tended to the door myself. I stepped out onto the porch and called out but there was no reply and no one in sight. Oddly, I did spy an object in the distant, murky darkness. It appeared to be a box, or a chest of some kind, and as I was sufficiently intoxicated, I fixed my full attention upon acquiring it at once.

I gave no thought to the whirling tempest although I was soaked through within ten paces. The chest seemed now to rest at a greater distance than it had, at first, appeared. Thinking that this could be explained by the sobering effect of the rain upon my overburdened senses, I continued to give chase but the elusive chest seemed to move further and further away. I shed all pretense of dignity and began to sprint toward it desperately.

After many minutes and some distance into the moor, which was adjacent to the inn, I at last apprehended the tricky thing. As with anything that is obtained only through great difficulty, I felt a keen sense of satisfaction in my acquisition of it."

Here the stranger paused and I broke from my trance-like state of attention to his bizarre narrative and, as my visitor had yet to touch his cognac, offered him a different elixir.

"No, but thank you," he replied. "I have ingested nothing of food or drink since that night. My body no longer craves nor requires them."

I, thinking that he was merely exaggerating the truth, poured two glasses of my finest Scotch whiskey and remarked aloud what a beloved panacea the right alcohol could be. I replaced his glass but still he ignored it.

"The chest itself," he began again, "was uninterestingly constructed of ordinary wood with iron banding. It was, however, locked and without key so that I had some

difficulty gaining entrance to it. I curse my ignorant and drunken persistence!" This he roared as he rose to his full and formidable height with such sudden fury that I grew afraid.

He continued to bellow at me, "The instant I removed the lid, there arose from its shallow depths a terrifying and piercing shriek! It was as if a horde of banshee were suddenly loosed upon me. I cowered and sank to my knees with my head buried deep into my bosom but the sound would not cease. The screams came not from within the chest any longer but from the very atmosphere around me! And I, but blithering upon the wet soil, was unable to block its terrible cry.

Then, from above the chest, the wind began to swirl and spiral high into the air, turning and shifting and all the while changing color. First the gray of the night fog, then the green of the sea, and then it turned a phosphorescent blue so ghastly that I thought I must die to gaze upon it! Shifting, swirling, accelerating and growing until my entire view of the heavens succumbed to it. At length the maelstrom turned the crimson of blood while the banshee scream grew louder and more maniacal. Finally, as I began to feel my sanity waning, I realized to my horror that there were shapes in the sinister mist!

First, the form of a beautiful woman, then of a young child. Then an image arose so hideous that I am loathe to describe it. It had the head of a man, but there the resemblance ended, for its body was like that of a snake, yet with the

tall, spindly legs of an arachnid! Oh, it is madness to attempt description of the specter for it, like the very maelstrom itself, was ever shifting. Now the wings of an angel or a demon, now the many arms of a sea-serpent with a body of such dimension as to defy all sanity and reason!"

My grotesque guest had been gesticulating wildly and screaming with tortured passion as he related this to me. One side of his face was dully illuminated by the fire and I was now quite terrified to behold the dying and rotted creature so incensed. His eyes were still the murky, yellow-white of curdled milk and still painfully unable to mirror the emotions of his soul. This gruesome spectacle struck a terror into my heart as tangible as any blade.

He continued vehemently, "The violence of the whirlwind then plucked me from the earth and cast me into the raging eye of the pagan tempest!"

"Quiet! Speak no more," I cried in a voice that was too high-pitched with panic for me to recognize it as my own, "for I shall surely go mad to hear it!"

The man threw himself to the floor, weeping and clutching at my rug. Many minutes passed while we were both trying desperately to regain control of ourselves. At length, he slumped back into the chair and continued the story through his torment and fatigue.

"I recovered at some unknown hour to utter darkness. There was not a sound to be heard and the air was stale and

still. It took not much time, while feeling and groping around me, to understand that I was underground. It was a grave I inhabited! Imagine my horror! To withstand the violence of the maelstrom only to awaken buried alive!

The earth was well saturated from the rain and I was able to claw my way through the soil and worms, at last, into the outer world once again. Though time had passed and I was moving beneath an altered sky, I was not far from the aforementioned inn. I walked up to it on limbs as stiff as timber but when the innkeeper answered my knock, he recoiled in terror and refused to admit me. I had not a clue as to his queer behavior, and longed for the company of my chums, but was forced to search elsewhere for a dwelling in which I could sleep and collect myself. As I wandered, I passed a pool of rainwater and knelt to drink.

Ha! I did not yet know that I required such mortal nourishment no longer. I painfully regurgitated the vile liquid and remained there until the pool was calm once more. The water reflected an image so hideous that I rejected it as my own. I suppose that I looked much the same as you see me now, although my flesh had not yet had the time to decay. My eyes, once the clearest azure, had rolled back into my brain, exposing the abominations you now see before you. Yet, strangely, I felt no physical ill. In time, I would come to the supposition that the maelstrom had proven too violent for my mortal body and had destroyed it. Yet my soul, which was stronger, continues to live.

It is all true," he said in response to my awe-stricken gaze. "I know not what it was that I loosed from the sinister depths of that unholy crucible, or how I could have come to half-survive it so, but I cannot escape the reality of my present state. I now traverse our fair queen's lands from within a slowly decaying and inorganic shell. Although I am a corpse, I still exist!"

He stared at me for some time, awaiting me to either startle or to laugh, neither of which I did. I simply returned his stare and gazed again at the patches of dead flesh and allowed the reality of it all, of him, to penetrate my mind. For I entertained no doubt that the body sitting upon my chair could no longer be counted among the living.

"Such is the reason that I decline food and drink, for what should a corpse want with such mortal nourishment? Queerly, however, this body does require rest opposite the patterns which humans follow. Perhaps it is but my tortured mind which draws me into deep and sublime slumber, yet many times since my *death*, for how can I term it otherwise, I have been found while resting only to be presumed dead. Thrice now I have been buried alive! I began to keep a trowel such as gardeners use, hidden upon my person for such use as to dig my way out of the earth. I can endure that amazing terror not once more without finding a method of ending my own half-life as an immediate and final consequence."

I slowly began to reply, "My heart bleeds for you, for you seem to harbor no malice in your malady, but I fail to

understand why you have come to me. Surely there can be little that I can do to help one such as you?" The pitiable man twitched in the chair with obvious discomfort. Whether it was the candid nature of my question, or perhaps his singular reason for choosing me as his confidante, I could not tell.

"As I have said, I am in need of a resting place. Somewhere that I will not risk discovery and be cast into the earth. You, sir, are a crypt-keeper by the sign which hangs over your door." He ended his statement as if he had asked a question, but if there was one, it was merely to inquire if I had understood his inference.

I replied thoughtfully, "It is your wish then, that I build you a tomb? One from which you can enter and exit as you please and where no one will disturb your rest?"

"Not exactly, sir, for I would not consider putting you to exertions and expenses of such a magnitude. I could simply be given the key to a small vault, or perhaps be allowed to install a locking mechanism on the next vault that is to be sealed."

Now here I must pause, for you the reader, must think that *my* sanity was whisked away in some heathen maelstrom. To sit in my chamber, smoking rather calmly, while plotting with a hideous zombie many days dead! To discuss with him the possibility of permitting him to live in a nearby tomb! But no, I can assure you that I had become quite sober while thinking over the matter. The alchemical

crux of the issue was simple; I pitied the poor wretch, for does not everything that lives under God deserve its own safe retreat?

In the end, I acquiesced and fashioned a set of hidden hinges with a pull-handle upon the very next vault that I built. Such is how the next hapless victim of the Black Death, who happened to be wealthy enough to repose forever in a fine gothic vault, came not to be entombed alone.

That was many years ago. He is still there, I fancy, to be witnessed only by the keenest eye, only on nights of the fullest moon. I have often wondered what could be his fate, for surely the body must completely rot from around his soul one day and then what would become of him?

So Suddenly Stained

The mirrored glass could not lie,
so he knew that he was to die.
Could such a blow, to kind mortals fall?
Must he so soon hear the Reaper's call?

For minutes into hours, he thus remained,
stricken at his face so suddenly stained,
yet dark despair was not yet his to know,
‘til he saw the home where he no longer could go.

For the brothers would kill him if he but tried,
to again venture without, into the outside,
nor of his own will would he have them share,
the horrors he beheld in his own unerring stare.

Behind him his wife, slept on as before,
hereafter hidden by an impossible door,
she would have him open knew she the fate,
that would so swiftly steal her life's only mate.

He watched as his eyes gushed gory red,
inhuman and foreign were the tears he now bled,
and the near-bursting crimson that now filled his cheek,
brought him to despair and a brief death to seek.

So it was upon the vile morn,
when between light and dark the world was yet torn,
that the wretched widowed wife, woke to the day,
to find that her friend had died of the plague.

At Last

I wake to peace,
that surely decays.
I yearn for release,
such are now my days.

I know what I want,
time is all that I need,
my poetry becomes blunt,
scorned by disuse is the seed.

But I know if I give chase,
I lose all I have acquired,
yet in my youthful haste,
my impatience seems so dire.

So I wait with leaden heart,
for the days in-between to pass,
when the time to play my part,
arrives for me at last.

Soundless Solitude

Sweet sacred serenity.
Soft supple silence.
Sensual soundless solitude.
Soaring starless skies.
Sanguine surreal stillness.
Sifting soul sorrow.

The Dark Day Before

Upon the dark day before,
I lumber through explanations,
rather than gold, I strike ore,
and stand alone against Creation.

Yet go I will and soon,
for the time has finally come.
I now depart while they still swoon,
but love I have not won.

Evil Fears the Day

Take the pain from off my breast,
leave me to my peaceful rest,
burn and wither my soul from within,
as I toil and bear my burden of sin.

Awake in the night madly weeping,
memories of horror not for keeping,
yet hold fast as day follows night,
dwell once more in the bosom of light.

Moon rises fair to the sight,
arise from the grave, creatures of night!
Blood-stained blades and fangs that gleam,
but that which stalks is not always seen.

Terror will take you, round the neck,
an offering of blood to some strange sect,
yet the sun also rises to greet the sky,
spirits undead must flee and hide.
The sinister laughter echoes away,
for all that is evil must fear the day.

The Farmer and the Ellyll

On a certain farm in Glamorganshire in the land of Cymrik,
lived a man known far and wide as the unluckiest of all
men. Whatever he turned his hand to wilted at his touch.
His wife was forever ill and unable to perform the
household chores and the man's house, clothes and diet
were long since in the sorriest state of existence.

As he packed their belongings onto his tired old wagon, a voice said to him, "Why do you leave this fair land?"

The man looked carefully but could not find the source of the voice. "Because I am unlucky here," he finally replied. To his surprise, a small man suddenly appeared before him. He was dressed in rich green garb and wore a triangular little hat whose brim tapered to sharp points.

The Ellyll said, "I know more about you than you will ever know yourself, young man. You must not leave Cymric but return to your farm. Your wife must set a candle in the window every evening as she lays herself down to sleep. If she does this, then your luck will change."

The man overcame his surprise at the presence of the Ellyll and also for being called a *young man* by one whose height spoke of not more than three years of age. "This I will do though I confess that my faith is not strong," he replied.

The man returned home and bade his wife to light the candle as she retired for the night and she complied happily. She set the flame down next to her bed and never woke again.

The flames consumed the house entirely but the man's life was spared as the mischievous Ellyll spoke in his ear, "You must wake up, old man! Your luck has certainly changed!"

Demeter's Holy Grain

Must the sun burn so hot,
and the time pass so slow,
whilst I till to fill my pot,
with what I can grow in rows?

But then the family is taught,
after many days of rain,
what fills the pot and feeds the lot,
but Demeter's holy grain?

Death Seems Sublime

I awake in the early dawn,
the rising sun to gaze upon.
I awoken again to find,
that I'm yet chained to the mind.

Sincerely I have sought to end,
the illness, my soul to mend,
yet it is strong in its eternal power,
pervading my brain with each lonely hour.

Of the change inside the mind,
outwardly are seen few signs,
yet the metamorphosis is complete,
the prior soul is forced to retreat.

Of all of the terrible objects in life,
the mirror stands at the pinnacle of strife;
to gaze deeply, into one's own eyes,
once so kind, now blinded by lies.

I join neither body nor mind,
with any other of my own kind.
Too great the risks, too high the toll,
too long a prisoner of a decaying soul.

Look upon me with rare pity,
hidden forever like a walled city.
Dwelling alone amidst sadness and lust,
death seems sublime, romantic and just.

Painting Roses Red

I feel that I must retell,
what, yesterday, I had seen,
or was it the illusory image,
from a mere opium dream?

As I boldly strode beneath,
the full-moon's sharp gleam,
I caught the fools painting,
roses red for the queen!

The Hermit's Wisdom

In a hidden cave, high above land,
in ancient ruins which yet still stand,
dwells a hermit, wise and complete,
as rare a man as you'll ever meet.

As a prophet, understanding he keeps.
As a man, understandably he weeps.
He craves little of food or of drink,
desiring only time free to think.

The Secret Path of Sorcerers

"Why does Gandalf always have to leave when he's needed the most?" cried Tom, the ten year old.

"He has other stuff to do," Christian, the 15 year old replied, then added, "in other worlds."

"What could be more important than the quest for the ring?"

"Only Gandalf knew. You have to trust his judgment by faith."

"But it seems like he could have saved a lot of trouble if he would have stayed and helped them get to Mordor." His brother's words felt true so Christian didn't disagree with him.

The brothers walked along in silence for a while. They

were walking home on the dirt path that brought them past the old church where they used to play spy games and ninjas with the neighborhood kids when they were younger. The ancient oak trees growing in wild, twisting shapes, looking like solemn, bearded elders. The warm Santa Ana breeze was blowing slightly and the Topa Topa mountain range, which formed a 300 degree border around the town, was aglow in the late afternoon sun the locals proudly called the Pink Moment.

The boys kicked acorns, occasionally stopping to pick up a branch and torture it absentmindedly. Then they passed the old elementary school. There was the playground with its strange pipe; a seven foot section of concrete pipe that they had both sat in for many hours. Sometimes, Christian had even shyly sat with a *girl* there. Now they had grown too old to ever think of sitting there again. The next landmark they passed was quite close to their house and had not yet gone the way of *Puff, the magic dragon*.

"Montezuma's..." Christian exploded and ran down a hill. "...Revenge!" Answered Tom who then proceeded to leap on Christian. They rolled down the gentle slope of the drainage ditch together. As usual, Christian bested Tom and held him pinned underneath his body with arms that were skinny for his age but were still stronger than Tom's.

"Give!" Tom yelled, thrusting his head forward at the neck, his chin jutting out defiantly.

Christian released him quickly for his was always a gentle

nature. His happiness sprang from within himself and was lavished on the hobbies he loved, never at the even accidental expense of another. Tom, not so much.

"False retreat!" he cried fiercely and lunged at Christian. As usual, taking his revenge on his older brother for defeating him fair and square. After all, he was only ten years old and was still learning *the Code*. They left off grinning ear to ear, sweat and dirt forming boy-mascara on their cheeks. No offenses counted because they were brothers and they were becoming good men.

They walked up the dry creek until they came to a bridge. There was always a decision to be made at this point. Climb up the ditch and cross the street *like a girl* or brave the tunnel like a man. It was only about four feet high and not terribly long as the road above was a normal Ojai road, which meant that it was paved perfectly for two cars to barely scrape by one another. If a driver sneezed on a corner, they would trade paint.

Neither brother wanted to go under the bridge now, but for different reasons. Christian, only because it was too low for them to walk upright. Tom and his friends would have dared each other and made a big deal about going through the tunnel of doom, but they all would have done it. At that age you simply *have* to. Now that they were older, Tom didn't want his brother to think that he still cared about it any more than he did the cement pipe. Funny, Montezuma's Revenge was still okay, though.

"I'll race you up the side!" Tom challenged and started climbing the steep soil, and Christian followed.

Something blinked in the corner of Christian's eye and he turned his gaze quickly to the tunnel. There was an old man sitting very calmly, smoking a long, gnarled pipe. He was certainly not there before, Christian was almost completely sure. Before he could tear his initial gaze away from the man and alert his brother, the old man looked at him.

Christian's gaze was held against his will by a force very much stronger than his own. All time seemed to have stopped. With his blurry peripheral vision he could sense that *everything* had stopped. His brother was still three feet up the hill to his right. The car that had been approaching the bridge wasn't getting any closer and the bird he knew had only moments before absquatulated from an oak limb, was impossibly suspended in flight.

The old man spoke, but before I reveal what he said, I must first explain *how* he said it. His voice reverberated in shameless mockery far beyond the echoes the boys' experience knew the tunnel produced. It was everywhere and it hung in the air long after it should have receded wherever words go when they've finished being heard. It was a living sound, earthy and stale, as if the sound waves he created when speaking obtained animation and conscious thought.

Christian might have described its timbre as hairy and

black, because his vocabulary isn't yet as good as mine, but he *was* instantly aware of an extreme malevolence in the voice. Even had the man simply offered a *good day to you*, the evil in the half-living voice would have terrified him.

"Have you chosen your path?" asked the old man with an intonation so dire that it must have appeared to him as the most important, possibly the only, topic that could possibly interest him or anyone else.

Christian only stared at him, optically transfixed while his mind seemed to operate very slowly, as if it were a 4x4 truck stuck in the mud.

"Speak quickly for the hour is growing late!" hissed the old man with an urgency so sinister that Christian woke from his reverie to reply.

"I walk the path *of service to others*," Christian replied, not quite knowing where the words came from. He felt that the only other choice on the table was *service to self* and that didn't sit right with him at all.

The old man seemed disappointed to the point of anger. His illusory affectation receded and the being's true, diabolical nature shone forth brightly. He stood up slowly, as if his old joints bothered him, and patted his seat free of dust. Then he stretched his right arm toward Christian and fell lifelessly to the ground.

What happened next is as difficult to describe as it was for

Christian to comprehend. Instantly, a translucent image of the old man from the shoulders up, sprang from the outstretched human hand and rushed at Christian. It was much larger than mortal size when it grabbed him by the shoulders of his shirt and began shaking him violently.

"Speak my name if you ever wish to seek *the other path!* I am sometimes called Ba'al." Its eyes, hideous and bulbous, stared into Christian's for more than a moment before it saw or conveyed what it sought, then it said, "Oh yes, you understand perfectly. You *will* be held accountable."

Christian understood the statement to imply that he should never waiver from the path he had chosen. Now that he had been warned, failure to tread his chosen path would mean death, or worse. The bodiless ghost-form withdrew and the old man retrieved the apparition back into his hand.

The mortal figure appeared to reanimate, for the head raised and then the arms moved. Before the old man had risen to his elbows Christian realized that the wizard's trance no longer held him. The incomprehensible physics of time and of reality were restored as if there had been no gap in their currents at all.

"You know what, Chris? Who do you think would win in a fight, Gandalf the White Wizard or Aslan the Lion?" When there was no answer Tom looked down and was surprised to see his brother frantically clawing his way up the earth next to him, gasping for air and weeping soundlessly.

He couldn't imagine what happened to his brother because to him, there had been no evil wizard and no lapse of time or reality at all. He turned his attention to Montezuma's Revenge. He didn't want to lose the race!

They Suffer, the Children Do

They suffer, the children do,
through the burdens we create.

They suffer, the children do,
as we sow the seeds of hate.

They silence the children, too,
so they do not dare speak.

They silence the children, too,
and don't even let them think.

Start them young and clone them,
to be just like me and you.

Tell them what to think and read,
and control all they say or do.

Or set them free to love or sin,
and experience all that is.

Let them divine guidance from within,
with a Love that is One with His.

Three Levels Below

*The smells of rot and decay,
abound in places removed from day,
and sinister, vile creatures dwell,
down where a man's soul will sell.*

*Down, down three levels down,
into the jailing caverns underground.
Watchmen grins a toothless grin,
as his key, in lock, slowly spins.*

*All along the southern side,
in cells of earthen rock abide,
human creatures for every crime,
slowly rotting away with time.*

*The story brings us first to land,
upon the shadowy remains of a man.
Let his voice speak and mine be silenced,
and let him tell you of his repentance.*

One Level Below

"I am master of the art of pen,
so my nightmare did begin.
Of my fate you may have known,
for my books are read oft as leaves are blown.

Wealth and fame are to blame,
for the spark turned into flame,
without them I would not have strayed,
but lived in peace, unbetrayed.

My fiction was that of suspense,
heinous crimes through pen dispensed,
but when all was won and life grew dull,
I took a new genre for my mind to stay full.

Imaginary characters may suffice for page,
but for real life of a dawning age,
more and more is needed to spawn,
the creative link a writer lives on.

Largely true as the news was told,
I carried out crimes against the old.
No longer fiction were the mysteries I penned,
but carried out, as in test, the sins.

Of all the sinister books I've read,
late at night while in my bed,
none approached the silent stealth,
or added as much to my wealth,

as the testing of morbid theories,
performed in a thieving series,
for I enacted the deeds of which I wrote,
and wagered them the unsolvable note.

But true lives begat true detectives,
and with them, fresh perspectives.
Too late, I saw the delusions in my plan,
and so was jailed a demon with heart of man."

*Beyond the writer the air becomes stale,
warmth is taken, light becomes pale.
Further and further down the path,
lay the murderers trapped with their wrath.*

*Evil creatures who take life with ease,
who know no wrong but do as they please.
Creatures blind from the tunnel's dark,
forever stained with the jailer's mark.*

*Once again I will ask your leave,
and allow another's tongue this tale to weave.
Stand not too close for bar of iron,
may not hold against this siren.*

Two Levels Below

"Just a simple thief, says I!
Now a murderer sentenced to die.
A turn of events played the trick,
and now here I dwell, growing sick.

I watched at the house each night until dawn,
I shivered with cold still I lurked on.
The pattern was clear, no one was near,
I entered in darkness using instincts to steer.

I peeped upstairs and I prowled below,
behind pictures I poked under rugs I did go.
I moved table and chair, I sought here and there,
but not a coin or jewel could I find anywhere.

Until the time came when I should take my leave,
for the Master would soon arrive through the trees,
yet I could not leave before I had something thieved,
I stole through the house but was tripped at the knees.

Imagine the horror to find that my fall,
had even been occasioned at all,
and that a corpse lay upon the floor,
of a tiny child aged only four.

He had roused from his sleep,
along the floors he did creep.
In my haste I had stepped,
on his head as he crept!

Just a simple thief says I,
never intending for a child to die,
but my fate I await and I know,
I will die two levels below!"

*It's a terrible sadness sure,
to be sentenced without cure.
Still an eye for an eye is taught,
let another's suffering bring food for thought.*

*One cell is left, embedded in rock,
with madness and sadness its occupant mocks.
Dare ye approach his cell which stays locked?
Careful lest ye too fall into his flock.*

*This villain is quite weak for he has aged very far,
if iron were straw, he still could not bend the bar.
Yet trickery and deceit are not heavy to wield,
let him now explain how his fate became sealed.*

Three Levels Below

"Seventy years imprisoned says I,
and as I now prepare myself to die,
I'm accosted by questions of guilt.
Where I once weaved a liar's quilt,

now will I tell all the tale,
omitting nothing lest the truth fall stale.
Consider this my one true confession,
and may it prove my last earthly session.

The land was different in days' past,
in my youth which vanished so fast.
Aged only twelve, if I remember well,
far too young for a boy's soul to sell.

We were all quite guilty,
I know it full well,
and when the end comes,
we will all rot in hell!

The nights we would ride,
taking strong spirits to drink,
never keeping still,
lest the ground 'neath us sink.

Truly we meant her no harm,
but she shouted in alarm.
Silence needed, silence delivered,
a blade flashed, a body shivered.

Guiltless, we returned, thinking nothing known,
but a bitter bile grew from the seeds we had sown.
In the end we were caught, three altogether.
Myself, the last, and my two older brothers.

But those two have long since died,
and for their very souls I have cried.
We're bound for Hell now, to smother,
herald's hark the arrival of the third brother."

*A tortured soul can be offered little relief,
if he cherishes no faith in God or other belief.
So it seems the last to die in order,
even now his soul descends the border.*

*Think on these lives so squandered and broken,
reflect on the dire words they have spoken.
Follow the good path wherever you go,
else be imprisoned three levels below!*

A Dead Flower

A dead flower upon the table,
does it represent me or my dream?
I wish that my mind were more stable,
and my troubles not what they seem.

My dreams, or the man within?
I find that the difference is truly small.
Though the line between is rather thin,
myself, and the flower, differ not at all.

The Poet and the Philosopher

I approach a bridge over a creek,
and though I wish to cross it,
I pause to philosophize,
about which view to seek.

*In a poetic wander,
I once reached a creek,
its beauty I chose to ponder,
its wisdom I thought to seek.*

*Upon its bridge I would perch,
and listen to all it had to say.
But in which direction shall I search?
To watch it come or go away?*

Shall I watch the trickle come as a sunrise?
Shall I watch it depart like a sunset?
Somehow I know that it will matter,
and I ponder the question too long.

*Watching it arrive was as a new morn,
flowing to me as the sun in the east.
Purposely, yet vainly, it was borne,
and until it died, it never ceased.*

*But watching it, from me, depart,
as the sun sinking in the west,
a longing sadness filled my heart,
as each drop pursued the rest.*

The stream dries up and stops flowing.
I cross and move on without choosing,
for I know that I've already done so,
and missed both the sunrise and the sunset.

*To choose the rising or the setting sun?
I considered with what wisdom I had brought,
until the lonely water no longer runs,
both sights sought lost to poetic thought.*

The Vampyre Hunter

I have finally healed sufficiently to pen this narrative, yet even as I dip my pen into the dark pool of ink, my hands threaten to abandon my command. Yet, although my very reason considers mutiny, my *will* must prevail. My story must be told!

In the late fall of last year, I followed her from Eastern Europe to North America. I stalked her through the long, bitter winter as she preyed upon New York City's homeless and criminal nightlife, but always she eluded my stake.

Sometime in the early spring, she fled to a small town in New England where she attempted to blend in for a time amongst the townsfolk. I suspect that she fed unhappily upon rodents, cats and dogs, rather than humans, in order to conceal her malevolent nature. I found the demon quickly for she had left tell-tale signs of her flight in New York and I caught up with her by the summer solstice.

One day, I had anticipated her pre-dawn arrival at a small cemetery in New Hampshire that she seemed to favor, and I stood silent sentry for many long hours before I was startled into awareness by the sudden presence of a youth. He appeared to be of the *romantic* or *scholarly* sort and was clearly not there to mourn, vandalize or haunt the seemingly empty graveyard.

She, too, watched him approach. I do not believe that she *chose* him immediately, although I could see her openly lusting for his blood. That night, she was to take her time. That night, I was to discover, was a very special one for her. Although I was not yet aware of it, this was her three-hundredth *birthday*, of living as an undead creature of the night. It was a powerful milestone to one such as her, for with it came the ability to bestow upon a mortal the most beautiful and terrible gifts of everlasting life *and* eternal damnation.

I watched with the taut nerves of the hunter as she followed the man's movements among the graves. She appeared to entertain little more than a casual interest in him as he marveled at the natural beauty of the place. I knew that she also favored Nature, held it dear to her like an eternal elder sibling. *I* see Nature and Vampyre as charming and whimsical, yet vicious and devastating. They are both creatures with the patience and skill of those blessed, or cursed, with timelessness.

The man seated himself in the shade of a tall headstone and

began to read from his book, which was a scientific study of ghostly phenomena and witchcraft. I believe that it was his book which caused her to smile, and to reveal the tiny, delicate and deadly fangs which she concealed behind desirous crimson lips. She was beginning to enjoy herself now. My thoughts were in tune with hers as she considered the man's strong jaw and wondered how his face would be altered in rebirth.

The man read on and on until the sun had nearly risen through the budding trees. The gaze of the patient one never blinked as her infatuation mounted. I could swear to the very instant when she chose him for her dark purpose, irrevocably selected to share her obscene, bloody immortality. Of this, it shall be remembered, I knew nothing at the time.

She then chose to appear to him, first by allowing her luminous skin to shine in the night from a distance; a mere instant's flicker and she was gone. I knew that she did not truly disappear, yet so it must have appeared to the young man, for the vampyre can move with a speed that far exceeds the range of mortal reflexes.

I thought him the perfect fool as she repeated this trick several times. Each split-second glamour, almost apparitions of the mind, were too swift for the man's conscious interest to become aroused. He looked up from his book only once, responding I am sure, to those unknown, primal senses that are alerted by such supernatural creatures but which the eye cannot find and

the mind cannot justify. I boiled in impotent adrenaline for several breathless moments as he shot a keen eye out into the brightening sky. Seeing neither the immortal nor myself, he presently returned to his book with a simple, apathetic shrug of his shoulders.

I nearly laughed when she grew tired of the patient, subtle game and raced unseen to a tombstone that stood clearly within his view. She then rose unnaturally from the knees and must have appeared to the man to be rising from the grave. The man's gaze fell upon her, but then comically, his eyes returned to the printed page. He clearly didn't believe what he had seen. When he looked up once more and caught her impatient stare, he never blinked again, but lost himself wholly to her will.

She seemed to have been pleased with his strength of character, for he was not afraid of her. Indeed, it seemed to take her longer than I to interpret the young valiant's mind. *I* knew instantly that he was falling in love with her. His shoulders dropped slightly, as if the muscles had gone weak. His head twitched oddly to the side as he gazed adoringly up at her.

Never had he beheld such beauty, nor been in such grave peril! She gradually disguised the unholy glow of her skin as she shifted into direct, mortal contact with him. The retiring night birds lingered to sing haunting odes to her beauty and soon the wolves in the forest added their cacophonous howling voices to the eerie, reverent dawn-song. The night pulsed and passion soon overwhelmed

both Christian and Damned alike. Never had I witnessed such uncharacteristic behavior from the vampyre, for she toyed with the poor devil and flirted with him as would have shamed a harlot in Gomorrah.

For many long minutes I lay in wait, watching their unholy courtship and cursing my own regrettable indecision. How I longed to spring upon her then, to ward this innocent from his fatal intoxication, but my own movements, fueled unintelligently by morbid curiosity, did not allow it. Ha! A savage and bitter blow it was to the human cause, for instead of ending the blasphemous seduction with my stake, I merely watched and listened!

Too soon, she rose, took his hand and led him away. I was forced to leave much of my equipment behind but I never lost sight of them as they followed the twists and turns of the cemetery path, for keener eyes at night were rarely bestowed upon another mortal. Such is how I was mere seconds behind them as they entered the gate of a dark, looming mausoleum. I followed closely as they descended the stairs, taking great care to disguise my own shadow and step.

The vampyre led her willing prey to a stone bench deep within the earth. She motioned for him to join her, but instead, the sturdy youth fell to his knees before her and grasped her cold hand in both of his. It must have been the unnatural chill of her skin that gave him a second's pause for he hesitated, but he was soon consumed with passion once more. He pressed her hands against his lips with the

intimate confidence of a lover and began to utter romantic rantings of her beauty until it seemed that neither myself, nor the fiend, could endure it any longer. When he had drawn quite close to her, she suddenly reared her head back and released seductive fangs from their crimson-lipped confines.

I could bear it no longer! I burst out from hiding and fell upon them, feeling like a revenge-mad, bloodthirsty voyeur. In a single leap I covered much of the distance between us, stake and hammer in hand. To my eternal surprise and dismay, it was the man, not the vampyre, who rose up against me with vengeful intent. Within moments, he had armed himself with an aging broadsword from the walls of the medieval tomb. I looked down sorrowfully at my own weapon, a mere eight-inch length of wood that had been sharpened to a dullish point; sufficient to end supernatural life but nearly worthless against a human's broadsword.

I locked eyes with the demon as she threw her head back and laughed at me with the scorn and mockery of one who is to live forever. The man advanced upon me with a ghoulish eye and gleaming steel. I danced around his thrusts, distracting him with feints, until I could avail myself of a sword from the wall. I would slay this man, this brother of living flesh and blood, for the greater cause of Mankind, but only if I could not first achieve his allied strength. Together we could slay the vampyre!

While in melee combat with the enamoured man, I began

a terse detail of his lover's true nature; explanations which could scarcely be heard above the din of our swords and the siren's hypnotic laughter. The mortal fought with a devoted heart but with a deaf ear, and soon he had bested me.

I lay upon the cold stone, only superficially wounded, but completely immobile and defenseless. The man looked to his wicked, undying lover for her command and would quickly have taken my head for her had she but nodded. Rather, she called him back to her. I watched from a growing pool of my own blood as she laid her fanged kiss upon his neck and gorged herself on his life.

She drank for many minutes and my horror redoubled as she turned her sharp fingers against her own throat and gently tore the soft skin open. Beads of blood that was not her own dripped from the small wound. She held the man's mouth against it and he clung to her artery instantly, questioning the act no more than an infant suckling at his mother's breast. He drank from her until blood slathered his lips and ran from his chin.

It was then, in the almost sexual aftermath of his mortal death and rebirth as vampyre, that I heard her speak of her birthday and of the newfound ability to reproduce. She called him her immortal child, then made love to him.

I shuddered a terrible tremor of pain for all Mankind, for though they knew it not, another mass-murderer was born that night. One whom they would never catch and imprison behind their iron bars. One whose crimes would

be forever attributed to random, hapless innocents. A new killer was among them, one which they chose not to believe in. God help us all!

Two Slender Eyes

The image before the two slender eyes turned,
as a guillotine falls fell the terror as it learned.
The image opened its mouth to utter a plea,
but its throat was torn and it died silently.

A mortal day has passed and a child trembles,
eerily aware of what the image resembles.
Crying out, not for help but in primal fear,
as the two slender eyes coldly draw near.

A third mortal morn and a crowd has gathered,
two corpses lay; in blood they are slathered.
Feeble attempts are made to learn why,
the two young beings were chosen to die.

Watching all this through two slender eyes,
the creature was present though safe in disguise.
Hearing the oaths that were sworn at the scene,
it knew, if discovered, death it would mean.

The blood between the eyes pumped as before,
and it knew that soon it must rush for a door.
Quit the vile scene it had again made,
while its identity remained cloaked in a shade.

One night before it then peace for twenty-eight,
or to die as a martyr of supernatural fate?
A single day more and the moon would wane,
but to merely exist would mean another one slain.

Steal away now while over the victims they wept,
and creep away it did and for the long day it slept,
but dusk falls again as it forever will,
bringing lastly for the month the desire to kill.

Its redemption would wait for Mankind to take,
for conscience alone could not a martyr of wolf make.
An image arises as another life dies;
the sight of the prey through two slender eyes.

To Different Eternities Cast

Two lovers while living,
rejoicing in giving,
just now have passed,
into the unknown at last.

Traversing the new land,
still hand in hand,
they met upon the road,
two beings oppositely robed.

The being of Light,
banished the night,
bearing a cross upon his breast,
he seemed infinitely blessed.

The being of Dark,
bore no mark,
save eyes flowing red,
for from them he bled.

To the man spoke the Night,
to his wife spoke the Light,
and each were asked to follow,
thus they parted in sorrow.

They were thus led away,
as opposing poles held sway.
The tie severed at last,
to different eternities cast.

What No One Can Know

Push aside the sense of dread.
Cast off all the dreams that are dead.
Dismiss the lies that are said,
and permit a man to lie in folly's bed.

The eternal wheel is always in spin,
but the game of Life, you cannot win.
This bears heavily down upon me,
crushing and choking the air that I breathe.

Eternal damnation upon the race,
forever the carrot is dangled to chase.
We seem to be content, at times there is peace,
yet we leave upon the page of time no crease.

Soon to pass into turbulent times,
fatally pondering questions through rhymes.
“Why?” Is the terse question I pose,
as I writhe in my final death-throes.

Again I ask what no one can know,
"What comes after the end of the show?"

The Jukebox of Broken Dreams

Now don't misunderstand me, we all liked the song. Hell, *everybody* likes that song, but there is such a thing as too much of a good thing.

The Blurr is like any other mountain town dive-bar. It has a long, wooden bartop with a dozen or so tall barstools that short guys like me always kind of disfavor on account of our legs being just a little too short to reach the god-damned footrests.

There's only one pool table in there now, thanks to old Steve Ellison. He came in one night all liquored up from the bottle he kept in his truck and tried to buy another one from the Blurr on nothing but his good looks. When they wouldn't give it to him, he pulled out his car keys and took to cutting up the felt from the best table. We tried to stop him, of course, but he's big and, like I said, drunk. The Blurr has only had one pool table ever since.

There's a couple of round tables scattered here and there now to cover its absence, but it's just not the same. There's

also the state-owned electronic poker game at the bar and a jukebox way in the back near the grimy restrooms.

So, getting back to the night it all happened, I was there and so were some of the locals; Bob, John, Sue, you probably know who I'm talking about. All of us were talking and maybe someone was even listening but it would have been impossible to tell. I remember hearing words float up above us from conversations that people had had years before. They were just kind of dangling there in the air over our heads like they do. Snippets like, *I hear there's work out west* and *So, what do you do for a living?* and I could hear one ghost tell another that they looked like someone they had known once, many years before. I remember thinking to myself because I had heard that one so many times through the years, *Does everyone look like someone else?*

There were other things being said by the old ghosts in the bar but it was still too quiet in there. The old bastard who ran the place never gave you a break with a dime for the damned jukebox. He would let the melancholy just slide over the joint and suck everyone in like a black hole of blues, like a sad and slow jazz piece. Then he would finally put a damned dime into his own jukebox and liven the place up for three and a half minutes.

Sure, we could have taken it upon ourselves to do it, and I did sometimes, but these days, dimes come too hard and a song plays out too fast. Besides, a man wants something tangible when he pays for it. Beer, whiskey and tobacco,

those things are tangible.

So there we were, all of us talking, the old ghosts talking, and nobody was listening. I continued thinking about how the romance of a place like the Blurr simply dies out when the jukebox plays out its last song. Things get too quiet, too sad and too real. A fella gets to noticing the smoke hanging in the air, slowly choking him. He's liable to notice all of the old names carved into the bar, and all those kinds of things, but the worst of all is if he takes to questioning things.

You know what I mean, *real* things. The issues that matter to everyone, like life and death, and should I be at home with my wife instead of at this damned bar, and all those kinds of things. Questioning ain't never good for no one. I've seen it take people, good people, and rot them from the inside out like a damned cancer. The only thing worse than sitting in a place like that, with nothing playing on the jukebox while you're questioning things, is sitting at home doing it alone.

Even though I knew how bad it was, I couldn't help but make that very same mistake. I took to questioning things that Mankind had no right to question, and it was all on account of that damned, silent jukebox.

I was still doing it hours later when he walked in. He was a young guy, early twenties maybe, and he carried himself with a lot of style. His hair hung down to his jawline and was parted in the middle like the hippies used to wear it. I

saw Sue take notice of him right away. He came up to the bar, ordered a Beam and Bud, paid with a ten-dollar bill and walked, or sauntered, or strutted, or whatever the hell you want to call how the damned kid moved, toward the back. He was either going to take a leak or play a song on the jukebox.

I lifted a quizzical eyebrow at him and he seemed to have said something as he passed by, at least I think he must have whispered something. It was hard to be sure with all them ghost conversations hanging in the air, but what I think he said was, *jukebox of broken dreams*.

He dropped the bourbon down his throat while he popped what must have been another ten-dollar bill into the coin-changer. I raised my other eyebrow when he didn't even look through the pages of records; didn't even flip through them to see what was there! I suppose now that he had found what he was looking for right off and was smart enough to know it and not waste time seeing what else there was. Not many of us are as smart as that.

The long-dead speakers crackled into life and I recognized the song right away from Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam-madness masterpiece, *Apocalypse Now*. I think we all recognized it because we stopped talking and started listening. Ray Manzarak and Robbie Krieger drifted into our ears first, kind of slow and mournful but awful pretty. After a while Jim Morrison's baritone began, *This is the end...beautiful friend*.

The good-looking kid finished his beer about halfway through the long song, brought his empties back to the counter like a gentleman, then strutted out of the Blurr without making eye contact with anyone. It might have been his voice, or maybe it was them old ghosts again, but I thought I heard someone whisper, *jukebox of broken dreams*.

The song finished and we were still in shock when it came on again. We all knew that we couldn't talk through *that* song so we made a silent pact to gossip about the kid when the music was over. Only *The End* didn't exactly end! I mean that it played through but would then start all over, then over and over. The damned kid had put ten dollars into the jukebox and ordered up the same, sad tune a hundred times!

The End is a long song and after about six or eight plays, we all knew what we were in for. It had become a mission, like finding Ray Brower's body in Stephen King's *Stand By Me*, and we all knew that we were going to listen to it until closing time. Like the Blues Brothers, we were on a mission from God.

So what I'm getting at here is this; some kid comes into our bar, orders up the same mournful tune on the jukebox a hundred times, then walks out and leaves us locals with the aftermath. We sat there questioning *everything* and were all feeling mighty blue and the damned kid wasn't even there to share our pain!

When the last track faded out and the quiet fell onto the place again, I heard the ghosts repeat the refrain, *jukebox of broken dreams*. And I guess that's kind of what it was, for us at the bar I mean. We never did gossip about the kid that night and before long, none of us wanted to hear the silence any longer. More than anything, I think that we wanted to outrun our questioning minds a little bit as we headed our different ways home.

As I walked through the cold, empty streets, I thought I heard Marlon Brando whispering to me in Colonel Kurtz' aggrieved voice, *the jukebox, the dreams, the horror!*

Tonight

Tonight does swell,
into my own hell,
and the ringing of bells,
from the dark and empty well,
are seeming to say,
"What is the point in living today?"

Tonight does stand,
upon a heaven of sand,
upon the clifftops so high,
too depressed even to die,
and she says,
"Oh, God, where are You today?"

The world does stand,
there and say,
"Where are the good today?"
Present only are those who say,
"Blessings be upon me today."

Kind hearts rock,
only in the abyss,
and the strangers who kneel,
down to kiss,
Rockefeller's tomb and they say,
"Oh, where has it all gone today?"

Oh, God, how can You stay,
and watch me go astray?
Upon Your earth, not mine,
alone in Your old shrine,
and You say,
"Oh, what evil have I created today?"

The Devil abounds,
and silently makes his rounds,
he looks about him and sounds,
a horn which all can hear today.
He mocks, and says,
"Oh, dear God, where are You today?"

Naked in gardens,
your pastors do sit,
and the violent nuns,
who aggressively knit,
a cloak for the dagger
and they say, "Oh God, are we pious today?"

Religion is,
the elixir of souls,
but night folds,
it flies fast past the day,
and can be heard to say,
"Holy disciples, where are you today?"

Where is the protection,
You promised to uphold?
Even though it's cold,
I'm still singing, thinking,
and am told,
"Truly, there's nothing new in the world today."

Oh, God, in Your wrath,
who does silently downcast,
all the saints and the sinners,
who all look just like me,
and You say,
"There's nothing evil allowed in here today."

It's easy to disdain,
the one and the same,
who say unto the fame,
the poor and to the lame,
quietly they say,
"Farewell, for I no longer need you today."

And Syncopian-Nun,
believing violently in the One,
who made her lie in psalm.
The crowds are no longer calm,
they say,
"Where are you Sisters, leading us today?"

It is easily done,
you strangle and sum,
with your knowledge and your guns,
you who trick, mistreat, mislead and run.
You, the apparent masters, who say,
"We are the Law you must obey today."

Say goodbye now to the ones,
who have made you flee and run.
From the day and from the sun,
from those who have,
taught you to say,
"There's no place for you in the world today."

The Impossible Stage

This is going to be the sad story of poor Sid. Sid is dead now, but when he was alive, he had many adventures. Sid was kind of crazy when he died, but before that happened, he thought a lot and wrote his thoughts down on paper. Before Sid died, and before he lost his mind, Sid was a bit dim-witted. His mind didn't operate like yours or mine, but before Sid knew this, he was happy.

Sid saw Life as rather impossible and never quite understood why it was so important to people. It wasn't important to him because Sid was sad. Sadness brought Sid into many dangerous adventures, which are usually avoided by those of us who wish to remain alive.

Sid believed that he understood everything. He was like a timeless god in his mind, watching and seeing, but incapable of acting or conveying what he saw and understood to other people. When he lay dying, he said about his life, "I have been but an actor upon the Impossible Stage."

At first I didn't know how to interpret his words, but when I began to consider his writings years later, I started to believe that those final words were true. He alone, to my knowledge, had truly understood how all of the pieces fit together. He recognized the irony and conceit in his statement; he, a half-wit, cursed or blessed with a vast, inscrutable manner of cognition, could observe cause and effect interacting like parts in a transparent machine. Some clues he left behind were notes upon minutiae, such as a

scar upon a man's cheek, or a vague blandness in another's eyes, which he knew, belied pain, defeat, emptiness and overall lack of fulfillment in that person's life. Sid wrote some pretty creepy stuff.

Sid knew more than he should have, more than he scientifically could have. I now believe that he understood more than man was ever meant to know. I now believe that his understanding of the Impossible Stage, or *life* as you and I would term it, had both caused and healed his mental illness. One begat another, so to speak, while itself was being created by the other, like a serpent eating his own tail. A more intelligent and learned scribe could phrase it better, but I am the only one who knows anything about him, his curses and gifts, who he was as well as *what* he was.

You who choose to continue reading are tasked with the formidable duty of turning your own mind inside out, with shifting your perception of every action, consequence, cause, *its* cause, and so on. Sid's writings revealed to me glimpses of the true complexity of the Impossible Stage, yet they will be scorned and scoffed at, misunderstood and misquoted, if they're even read at all. I suspect that they will be lost to mankind, like the fabled library at Alexandria, before they are ever brought to light, before they are understood and appreciated by another living soul.

Does the beauty, complexity and self-fulfilling futility of what Sid knew, and of how I have interpreted it, scare you? If you (here I speak to *you*, who are a very special reader)

can begin to truly understand, then you may choose to follow the path of wizards and of gods, but know that you are equally likely to lose your mind in the process. If you want to know what Sid knew, then you must be willing to forfeit your previous life and most of what you believe that you know. This is a bold statement and an outright challenge, but as Sid once asked me, "Are you prepared to be an actor on the Impossible Stage?"

Poems and Roses

When love finds its way,
into a welcome heart,
it is truly a wondrous thing.

When a poet is struck,
and requited in his luck,
poems and roses he will bring.

Lover Long Drowned

While once wandering in an English wood,
with no path to follow even if I would,
I moved in awe of everything that stood,
or crawled, flew or died, or wished that it could.

Drawn ever deeper into the swirling mist,
whose beauty was fed by an angel's kiss,
but as night drew near and the day was dismissed,
its sight I feared as the serpent's evil hiss.

Once lushly nurtured in moistening fog,
the woods now became a dying bog,
perfumed breeze changed to hideous smog,
living sound replaced by a howling dog.

All green turned to a morbid gray,
and the song of the wolf was heard to say,
that night reigns tyrannically over the day,
and death comes quickly to those who stay.

Terror struck and seized me fast,
when a voice arose from the far-distant past.
I broke free and raced to the sound at last,
as if the Devil's own wind blew at my mast.

Rushing onward over squishing ground,
wildly pursuing her siren sound,
memory reaching out to unknown bounds,
pairing the voice to a lover, long drowned.

My reason slept as I willfully believed,
that I glimpsed the figure for whom I grieved,
but ever drawing near to the shape I conceived,
she would draw further into the leaves.

Never did she cease her mournful song,
as I chased her through night ever-long.
Would that a man could right a god's wrong,
and allow her again, to the living, belong!

I followed her to where only devil's rule,
and knelt to weep the old tears of a fool,
but as dawn began, her memory, to cool,
I saw her again in a rainwater pool.

Where water collects she waits for me there,
and gazes at me with forgiving stare.
Nevermore shall I chase her ethereal glare,
nevermore shall I hear her step on my stair.

The Woman in the Road

The oncoming car wouldn't in time have seen,
the woman in the road beneath the moon's soft gleam.
Her robes flowed a ghastly white while she awaited,
the form of a swift car assumed her impending fate.

Why did she not move when there was yet still time?
When a single pace would bring her over the line.
Her face wore the mask of eternal sadness sung,
and a pale, fair sound emerged from her voice and lung.

I couldn't move limb nor tongue to alert the murderous car,
for the treacherous scene had already played itself too far.
The driver screamed as her form appeared before his glass.
A squeal of tires, too late, brought the metal mass,

into mortal contact with the woman's flesh and bone.
Whatever her reasons, surely death she must have known.
The vehicle which was the perfect weapon of murder,
came to a stop certain that it had hurt her.

Through the glass could be seen the panicked stare,
of the driver who had played his part unaware.
Imagine our tandem terror as the woman did arise,
and appear before the man who shrieked in surprise!

I could not hear the soft words between them spoken,
as she entered the car which had left her body broken.
I watched in a curious mind as they drove away,
leaving me alone under the pale moon to stay.

Of miracle or madness, the answer I sought,
for many minutes, with Reason I fought.
Until an approaching engine broke my reverie,
it was the very nightmare car returning toward me.

Amidst anguished weeping, the woman arose from the car,
her robes shining brightly under moon, under star.
The driver left the way he had come as she,
knelt upon the pavement to weep before me.

My guile faded as another car soon entered the turn,
and I fled from the scene before her secret was learned.
In the distance behind me was heard as I fled,
the banshee scream of rubber, heralding the dead!

I awoke in the morning from the nightmarish dream,
to prove its reality I drove to the scene.
The road was indeed blackened with long, paired lines,
proving to me that the scene had happened many times.

Who was this ghostly woman who stood upon the road?
How did she survive and where did she go?
I stumbled into town with delirious thought of how,
God up above, such a vision, could allow.

My pulse quickened as I pulled up beside
the very same roadster I had seen in the night.
The driver emerged from the church in a state,
seeming tormented and afraid, our eyes could relate.

This was his tale as he spoke it then to me,
when I explained what I had seen through the trees.
"She appeared before my windshield, too late to slow.
Sure that I had struck her and under my wheels she did go.

Yet I did not feel her body crash into me,
but surely she stood in my path directly.
Frightened greater, was I afterward to see,
her luminous face appear beside me.

She made no remark about the accident that night,
but asked that I take her away from the site.
She said that she was late to meet a dear friend,
by way of a letter, for her, he did send.

Yet, as we drove some little distance ahead,
her countenance grew pale and grave as she said,
that she had been waiting for many, many years,
but could not leave the road so laden with her tears.

For her death had been found on this road long ago,
and beyond its depths she was forbidden to go.
So I returned her back to that fateful spot again,
to forever dwell without peace, without friend.

Forever doomed to dwell, searching for a way,
to leave the road she haunted but forever must stay."

Forgive Not, Understand

I have dreams where my eyes drip blood instead of tears,
and I feel that I have aged beyond the telling of years,
for now my nose, lips and ears gush gory red,
and I fear that, at twenty-five, I soon will lie dead.

Before I descend, however, over that shadowy line,
may these words fall upon ears that are kind,
for when I am forever removed from your loving eyes,
may these words help you penetrate illusion and lie.

First, I would ask your tolerance once again,
for the truly damned do not have many a friend,
with whom they can speak and from whom to learn,
and the bridges I have built have long ago been burned.

So it must fall to you, who cannot sever the tie,
that will be carried until death, between you and I.
I implore you to gaze through my cancered eyes,
so you may see how Life appears to one such as I.

You must be able, from the clues I have left,
to appreciate the sorrow that leaves me crookedly cleft.
Surely you can see that we do not play a like game,
and that I, though alive, may have died all the same.

When or why did this fate befall me, you might ask?
I am bereft of answer for I know only my mask.
Let me return, if I may, lest from my task I will stray,
for I speak of forgiveness that will come as it may.

But I plead not from you the pity, which is long overdue,
for what I truly seek, is understanding of me, from you.
I do not expect you to approve or be overjoyed,
I do not feign hope for your judgment to avoid.

I endeavor only to have you understand,
that over my mind, I cannot claim full command.
Rather I behave as will a beaten, stray dog,
as the cowardly drunkard who remains lost in his fog.

Acutely aware of this long ago,
(here I can feel your esteem of me sink low)
for how can I, being aware as I have said,
suffer myself, this lonely path to tread?

But I must recount the little that I have said,
that I have never claimed the helm of my head.
Perhaps I am cursed with eyes keener than your own,
or maybe I closed them to what I've been shown?

The result is the same, due to your sight or mine,
I have lived inside the darkness, prone to my mind.
We have all tried, have we not, to force the great heal?
But how, in battle, can you aid a mind that will reel?

All whom I see, merely seek to appease,
walking phantoms without clear identities.
And all of the lies lie deep in the abyss,
of their minds which blindly seek bliss.

The meaning of these words is only,
that they do not know that they are lonely.
I am no longer One with their individual concerns,
and therefore, their inner secrets, I cannot learn.

For I am tossed to the waves at each sight,
of passionless people, unaware of their plight.
It hurts me to understand that Man created God,
and that I seem alone in thinking this odd.

I grow weak from the internal torment I cause,
to the effect that I cannot reason society's laws.
I yearn for what apparently cannot be,
and will never, I fear, of this be free.

Something is wrong with the way we live,
but I'm too wounded for an answer to give.
I long for a soul to pair with my own,
but I distance myself from all whom I am shown.

Could it be mere madness, a trick of the hand?
I pray that it were, for then I'm a free man!
Show me the pattern but show it to me quick,
if you know the answer to life's tormenting trick.

I possess not the patience to truly learn a thing,
for the sand in my hourglass, with its fall only brings,
a tremor of haste that soon deteriorates,
into attention to time, which nothing abates.

So look upon me not with forgiving stare,
for that I can find nearly anywhere,
rather attempt to understand the plague that I've brought,
down upon myself and within, am forever caught.

I fear that I have lost most semblance of thought,
and have given myself over to the melancholy I sought.
I have indeed, far more to say,
but I have incurred too much damage this day.

The Words of the Young

Forever bold are the words of the young,
who know not the meaning of the songs they've sung.
Nor is there a topic upon which they won't speak,
for wisdom is not yet the path that they seek.

Far too content are they in their song,
to pause and consider their path right or wrong.
They take today, caring not for tomorrow,
when age will slowly turn their laughter to sorrow.

So encourage the young to revel in their mirth,
deny them not what is their right from birth.
Give them loving words from your aging heart,
and hope that, in time, they will appreciate your art.

Eyes No Longer Blind

Cast away all doubt from you now,
else your reason, my tale, disallow.
Forsake the comfortable truths you have known,
and listen to a tale heard on winds blown.

My tale begins as all great ones do,
in the darkened forest of impenetrable gloom,
the night sky's light cannot reach the ground,
and the swaying of limbs above creates not a sound.

But there is life in the forest, to be sure,
and for their lives death can bring no cure.
Myriad eyes, unblinking, will see,
anything that traverses through the trees.

*How can they be, these devils now I see?
Who hid behind my faith in God.
Will I, from them, be free?
Oh how can they be, these eyes that now can see?*

Iridescent and clear, they see and they hear
and spook from the traveler the faith he held dear.
For in their unholy eyes, their very life,
meant for him a soul full of strife!

For they could not exist in the world he had known,
and he therefore must dwell in another one shown.
Far from his mentors and biblical minds,
the traveler navigated through eyes no longer blind.

Could they all have been wrong at once?

Could the scholars have been taught by the dunce?

For whose god above can reason these,

who live so secretly behind the dense trees?

Uncertain in mind and equal in step,

the faithless, but wizened, traveler crept,

but was lost to the knowing and despaired of recovering,

from the truth that his god had never been hovering.

How can they be, these devils now I see?

Who hid behind my faith in God.

Will I, from them, be free?

Oh how can they be, these eyes that now can see?

I'd rather hide behind a god!

Close my eyes and mind.

How can I see God,

with eyes no longer blind?

Mountain of Hippies

He sat down in a crash of despair. His girlfriend had dropped an emotional bomb only moments ago and he was clearly entering the first stages of denial. He tried to read, and at that moment his book was *The Magician's Nephew*, the first about the Daughters of Eve in Lewis' Narnia. Aslan, the God-Lion, was in the act of creating the land with a song as he walked, populating it with his will. Everywhere, everything was new, lush and growing. In his own heart, however, he felt nearly a polar opposite to Narnia's fledgling naiveté, for everything in his own carefully balanced, all-nourishing world, appeared to have crashed down in ninety seconds.

Though the act itself was hopelessly complicated, his mind was concerned with only one aspect of it. Her betrayal, he felt, must necessarily destroy the glass face of trust between them forever. His initial gut feeling was that he had no choice, that like it or not, he must end the relationship immediately. All was lost.

Or was it? A very large part of him recognized that he could easily pretend the words were never spoken, but as always, he felt it was his duty to feel this, to relish the broken feelings as if they were a sweet ambrosia. He closed his eyes and was pleased at the first tear, comically tragic as it rolled down his cheek and hung upon his chin. This tear meant that he was still alive, he was still a lover, he hadn't grown too hard and cynical, he could still feel. They flowed unceasingly shortly afterward and these he tolerated because he was alone. "Only extraverts cry twice,

saith the Magus.” He smiled at the recollection of the exquisitely-bizarre story by John Fowles which she had asked him to read.

His mind drifted back to the early days of their relationship. They had dreamily spoken of honesty and, with tens of thousands of well-chosen words, they had shed illusions until, he had thought, they stood revealed before one another emotionally bare. The deep, soulful eye-contact they had shared during the first dozen weeks, he had thought, had solidified their words of trust and sanctified their actions in her bedroom.

He couldn't bring himself to think about the bedroom now. It was like sending a dear-John letter to a soldier at war; it created a helplessness in the bosom that would devour him whole and deposit his remains upon desolate shores, alone and mad. Much as a law of physical mass states that no two objects can occupy the same space, these two things, sanity and her bedroom, could not coexist in the same place at the same time.

Now she, alone, stood exposed as a traitor to all they had been. *To them*. Her eyes, apparently, had always carried hidden deceit while his own were as unveiled as a those of a child. He had long since learned his lessons about lying, especially to a lover. He remembered another woman whose heart had once paid dearly for his carefree indiscretions. He also remembered that she had tried hard to forgive him but, even after years of marriage, she could not.

Would he be able to forgive this new woman even if he chose to try? What about the practical aspects of the secret problem? The question reverberated erratically in his head while the ache in his stomach worsened. He remembered feeling a similar sickness at the beginning of a mushroom trip. Those were scandalous days and their recollection served to further remind him of his own sins. He renewed his vows against hypocrisy.

But could he really love her after this? Should he even try? He quickly understood that this was a personal decision and that no one could provide much assistance. A friend might help him understand *why* she had felt that it had been necessary to lie, but these reasons were not hidden deeply and he felt that he understood the crux of them already. He understood *why*, but not *how* his lover, his good friend, could choose the dark path of treachery.

Then her face appeared as a radiant ghost behind him. She hovered respectfully until he nodded his head, whereupon she stood before him, pale green eyes pleading, imploring him. He willed her to encircle him and she obeyed, solemnly disbursing her ethereal essence around him. She was once more the beautiful, pristine woman he had known since childhood.

Always, she had possessed a generous and courteous nature. She had once said that she felt it was her duty to provide for the people around her, to give much more than she needed or expected to receive, and she was okay with that. He loved her for her great compassion and

selflessness.

Academically she was always near the top, if not the absolute pinnacle, of their class. She graduated valedictorian while he had dropped out and graduated from an abbreviated, equivalency school in the mountains where he had only learned how to roll cigarettes and pick up hippie chicks.

They were equal opposites in many respects and it was this, in the end, that decided him. There were many personality types that had attracted him, but her mix of passion, wisdom, intellect and art was absolutely one of a kind. He could choose to end his relationship with her, which is always a lover's right, but he would lose the great many joys that her acquaintance brought him.

She was already a very dear friend and he couldn't persuade himself to believe that she lied, or concealed, habitually. The issue at hand was a severe one which she had found impossible to deal with openly. She had become thorn, like a rabbit in the headlights from Adams' *Watership Down*. She did not really *choose* to hide her secret from him because it wasn't really her choice; it had already been suppressed too deeply into her subconscious mind.

His own mind painted a fleeting image of her as a little girl and his tears renewed. No, he would not hold her unduly responsible for the treachery he had endured in previous relationships. This was a test, a very grave inquiry into his own character, which happened to be his favorite part of

himself.

He knew that he had already forgiven her for the hurt she had caused him and they would deal with the practical complications of the secret problem together. With this welcome epiphany, the heavy, mushroom-poisoned feeling in his breast quickly transmogrified into the surreal, expressive eloquence of the magic mushroom experience. One endures the former pain in order to experience the latter effect of blissful harmony.

His heart trilled happily and he thought of himself as a hero for a few moments. He was proud to demonstrate to his love that he was true to her, that his love would persevere. He would be her knight in shining armor in this one respect, and he would forgive where justice might coldly adjudicate otherwise. He would be to her as perfect a fool of passion and devotion as an immortal lover from the ancient texts of Homer and Mallory.

His overtaxed mind enjoyed this steady gravitation into the peace that forgiveness can bring and he grew certain that he would overcome this emotional tragedy and carry his queen proudly over the mountain of hippies.

A Drunk Poet's Prayer

Forgive me Father,
for I have sinned,
I took to the bottle
once again.

I let the bourbon whiskey,
make me sublime,
thank You it was only,
a pint this time.

Oh, cruel and wicked world,
makes me think,
and my mind whirl.

Oh, cruel and wicked girl,
makes me think,
makes me drink.

As I walk through the valley,
feeling like the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil,
with bourbon on my breath.

As I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord, my soul, to keep,
while I'm at it, here's number two,
You can keep my hangover too!

I Am Soul

Forget, for once, that I'm a man,
on mere perception of strength I stand,
and consider only that I am soul,
who cannot further play this mortal role.

For gain or loss, I cannot yet decide,
for your attentions, I have so often vied,
but because I cannot play the game your way,
I must follow my own path or be set astray.

Yet, because I am my own, you won't understand,
how the soul can be jailed inside of the man,
but when thou art found with nowhere to stand,
forgive not, but understand.

Can It Be Otherwise?

Can it be otherwise,
that my soul turns inward,
away from what I know are lies,
mere foodstuffs for a sleepy herd.

Can it be otherwise,
that my soul turns away?
That it rejects what I recognize,
as meaningless decay?

Ask not whether such is true,
for the perception makes it so,
and if my words appeal not to you,
rejoice that my pain is not yours to know.

For, alas! You and I do not dictate,
to our haughty hearts or minds,
and if yours dwell in a different state,
uncover wisdom of a different kind!

Once we agree upon the fact,
that perception controls mind's need,
and necessarily dictates how we act,
then only are we free to proceed.

Away from acquisitional society,
turn, my soul, away from greed,
for a thinking man's life is his commodity,
and requires little more than basic need.

I grant that a family requires a home,
with food and fun as well,
but we acquire aught but a tomb,
when we purchase these from Hell.

The Will of the Walls

The pattern in the walls,
both repels and enthralls,
through the time it has yellowed,
through the years it has mellowed.

Take them away from my sight,
for I cannot upon my own might,
look away from the walls,
for to their will I am called.

Inside the pattern are the bars,
from these grow the scars,
for from inside, they are quite strong,
and for escape, I have tried long.

When I hear I must obey,
the potent will of the walls,
for I know what they say,
and I know when they call.

From inside I only see through,
but I cannot see you,
for I do not think you are there,
when I'm locked within the walls.

Do you leave me to my cell,
from behind these bars to dwell?
Is it you that I hear,
this mocking in my ears?

I shake to the core,
as they open the door,
look away from the walls,
for to their will I am called.

I shake to my core,
as they open the door,
surrender to the call,
and to the will of the walls.

The Three Crates

It is very difficult to explain this idiosyncrasy of mine, but I simply awoke in a foul mood. Often, I would awaken from the nightmarish dreams of slumber feeling mean, or, if I had taken too much to drink the night before, evil. At such times I feel acute malice and the urge for mischief coursing hotly through my veins. At once steeping like tea and as icy as spring water. Together, and only on the rarest occasions, they can cast the spell for murder.

Now I do not wish to imply that I experienced these symptoms frequently, nor to say that I often acted upon the impulses. The true fact is, that when I found myself in such a melancholy temperament, I would drink heavily at home, avoiding people at all costs so as to offer them the smallest chance of incident or harm.

That morning, however, the ill-feelings were impossible to avoid or suppress. I had performed my duty and had shut myself at home, and it was truly unfortunate that the young

woman rapped upon my door.

I greeted her amiably. It happened that she was wife to a London perfume merchant and was offering her wares at a severe discount, as he had considerably over-purchased. She was quite attractive in her simple, white summer dress and sky-blue bonnet. I asked her to come inside and take tea while she displayed the fragrances. I had no intention of purchasing such trifles for my wife but I hoped to enjoy the simple company of the fair woman.

While she talked, I am afraid that I was allowing my mind to commit all manner of despicable crimes upon her. I imagined, with macabre vividity, crashing one of my pewter beer steins into her soft, alabaster temple. Or my strong hands upon her neck, slowly and with relish, choking the breath from her.

Please understand that I had no intention of actually harming her in any way, I was simply amusing myself with these somewhat brutal imaginings while she blathered on. Outwardly, however, I was quite civil, even growing flirtatious with her. I am sure that the poor woman could have had no idea of how severely my mind had been using her. Indeed, I was so lost in my sinister reverie that I had no clear distinction between what was actually transpiring and the dark illusions of my mind.

After she applied the sweet fragrances to her neck, one by one, she leaned delicately forward to offer me the fair scent of her skin. As my wife was visiting her family and would

be away for several more days, my mind replaced violent lust for a more romantic strain of that limitless narcotic.

As she leaned over to me, I nestled my lips behind her ears and kissed her. She stood abruptly, clearly taking offense at my loving advance. I became a devil, a thing of evil which I knew not at all. I forced myself upon the fair woman though she fought, screamed and endeavored to strike me with her flailing arms and legs, or to bite my flesh with her pearly teeth. I began to fear the arousal of my neighbors as a result of her shrill cries and understood that I had to silence her.

I kept, for ornamental purposes, a few small arms of Celtic origin upon the mantle. There were jeweled helmets and shields, blood-stained swords and, in particular, a short-handled, broad-bladed battle axe. It was this sinister weapon that my groping hand blindly fell upon.

I reached up to take the weapon and she ran swiftly for the door. Quick was she but I was swifter! In an instant I was upon her. With a madman's shriek I buried the blunt, black blade deep into her spine.

She lay face-down only two paces from the door, still twitching in her death spasms. I stood gazing at the gore growing and spreading upon my floor. All at once I felt the malice run off me as water down a drain. Not so, the impish desire for mischief. I knew that I needed to dispose of the body and I thought to myself that, of the numerous droll methods of disposing of a human corpse, I must

choose a particularly clever and, if possible, humorous one. I feel that I must provide some small description of myself before you resign to consider me a devil. I was reasonably well-known in the town, if not well-liked. I was a shipping merchant and my small, but lucrative, enterprise afforded me ample time for thought and drink. I enjoyed my station which, if I may venture to say, was not exceedingly high but was certainly far from rough.

In my business, it was a common sight to observe the arrival, or removal, of many large, wooden boxes with exotic names and addresses on them. I knew at once what was to be done with the woman's body. I laughed darkly as I imagined the expression on the poor soul who happened to open *these* crates!

I broke my fast with a three-minute egg and toast, then strolled to the woman and removed her bonnet as I thought that it would make a nice gift for my wife if I could remove the crimson stains. Then I carried her body into the cellar where I laid her atop a large pile of packing straw and dismembered her corpse using the same fouled tool that had taken her life. I then placed her body, minus head and limbs, into a very large crate, which might otherwise have held a large shield. I carefully sealed it in linen and lined it with straw. Into another, slightly smaller crate, one which I might have used to ship a broadsword, I placed her slender arms and legs. I had left only one crate on-hand and it would scarcely accommodate a medieval helm, although it was perfectly suited to hold the gory head of the perfume merchant's wife.

When it came time to pack the contents with straw to prevent them from shifting in transit, I found that I had already used all that I had in packing the other two crates, which lay fully sealed around me. I remembered that the bottles of perfume which the woman had endeavored to sell me had each lain in its own basket of straw. I thought this clever enough as the fragrant straw might help to disguise the contents of the crate once it began to rot. So much did I fancy the idea that I pried the other crates open and added some of the sweet oil to each of them.

I encountered little trouble policing my house of evidence and before noon, I sat calmly smoking an ebony pipe in my great-chair and enjoying my favorite spirits. I had sent a message-boy for the delivery men whom I knew were likely to be found loitering near the docks. When the men came, they brought to my attention that I had failed to address the crates. I quickly scribbled a fictitious name and addressed it to an island in the South Pacific that my whimsical wife had once wished to visit. Needless to say, I offered no return address.

All three crates were then taken and I let the matter fall from concern. There was a brief inspection about the missing woman and within the week a large-bellied foreign inspector appeared at my door. He explained that he was seeking information about the missing woman and asked if I had seen her. He did not appear to be at all optimistic about resolving the enigma of her disappearance.

He said nothing about her having offered her fragrances to

a long line of my neighbors on one side but to no one on the other. After this omission, which I had reasonably feared might incriminate me, I relaxed fully. He soon left and for myself and the general public, if not for the widower, the scandal was soon forgotten.

I employed my time idly for another week before I began to feel any emotion at all. You may ask, *surely you must feel remorse?* I'm afraid not. Rather, I felt little but impatience for my wife who had failed to return home on her specified date. I wrote to her family explaining that she had not returned and another week elapsed before I received their cold reply. They explained only that she had indeed left on the carriage at the appointed time, for none other than her father had watched her board.

With the passage of another week, I grew convinced of foul play. I was forced to bring the issue to the attention of the authorities and, who other should be on duty when I arrived, than the large-bellied foreign detective who, I alone knew, had already proven himself inept at locating missing wives.

His manner changed slightly from the *I'm sorry to disturb you* tone which he had affected at my home, to one of considerable impatience. He glowered coldly at me as I explained all that I knew of my wife's disappearance. He raised an enormous cigar to his lips and callously reminded me of the *other* missing wife. He said that it was impossible to prevent someone who wishes to leave the city anonymously from doing so. The implication that she

might have abandoned me was so absurd that I left his office in a blind and impotent rage.

When she did not return in three months, I despaired that she were dead. I mourned for a reasonable amount of time while I imbibed an unreasonable amount of spirits. Soon, however, I had forgotten both of the missing wives and was back to business and shipping heavily once more.

One day, as I was returning from an errand in the city, I found a large crate upon my step. It was the proper size to ship a large shield. I checked the address to verify that it was indeed meant for me, for I had not been expecting a shipment of any kind. I began to blame the delivery men who had been overly impatient for the tavern and had left it there by mistake, but upon closer scrutiny, I found my own name and address scrawled in the wood. There was no return address. The stamp certified that postage had been paid in gold upon an island in the South Pacific. I failed to recognize its peculiar name until it was too late.

I opened the crate. Inside, packed in straw and smelling of perfumed oil, lay a rotting human body. A woman's bloated torso, to be exact, minus head and extremities. My mind reeled violently but I retained consciousness. *Who had found out my secret deed and why had they chosen this manner of reprisal? Whose body now lay in the straw? It clearly wasn't the perfume merchant's wife!*

As I asked myself the questions, their respective answers boomed into my ears like the rushing of blood. It must,

after all, be the body of the merchant's wife and he had simply failed to recognize it due to the advanced state of decay. I began to consider that perhaps I had failed to include enough postage for its weight and it had been returned. Or perhaps one of the stalwart delivery men had recognized the sweet scent of perfume as the same which had characterized the crates they had taken from my home. It must have been one such as he who had scrawled my name into the wood. I sealed the crate up once more and took it into my cellar. I had calmed myself considerably but still did not know what to do with it. I drank strong spirits as I pondered the matter and fell asleep in my chair.

I awoke unpleasantly to a loud knocking and the rude word *delivery!* shouted through the door. I roused slowly and the courier had departed before I reached the door. A medium-sized crate rested upon my doorstep, one which might have been used to ship a broadsword. Visions of the rotten limbs, which I knew must lay within, flooded my brain and I snatched the fragrant crate into my arms and rushed it into the cellar where I made certain that my fears were founded. Inside the crate lay the arms and legs of one who could only have been the perfume merchant's wife.

I grew amused. Surely I had no reason to fear. I had simply forgotten to pay the postage on this crate as well. Perhaps I had forgotten postage on all three? Yes, of course! I knew that I could thenceforth await the arrival of another small crate upon my doorstep. Just as my psyche burst with the revelation, there was a knock upon the door and another uncouth shout, *delivery!*

I took my time once more and arrived at the door only after I heard the sound of the delivery man's heels receding down the street. There upon my step lay the ominous third crate, one which might have been used to ship a medieval helm. I calmly tucked it beneath my arm and retreated once more into the safety of my cellar.

I had full confidence that my assumption was correct, of course, and I would undoubtedly discover the head of the unlucky merchant's wife. As I began to unseal the lid, my sly and smug smirk faded into mortal shock. I stood stricken and agape! My voice uttered a mournful sound entirely of its own accord. Inside the crate, packed with small vials of perfume, wrapped in straw and linen, lay the head of my own wife!

How could this be? The grisly decay made absolute identification impossible but I knew that I must be certain it was truly her. I remembered the freckles which formed a remarkable pattern upon my wife's left hip and leg. I tore the other two crates open and looked for evidence of the tell-tale pattern. There, clearly visible amidst the horrific mold and decay, were the markings which my wife had been born with.

I rushed off to inform the inept foreign detective and to demand justice for my poor wife. The inspector on duty was a normal person like me, not a foreigner. He informed me that the previous inspector had retired from the department as well as from the country. He had returned to his native island because he could no longer tolerate our

country's leniency toward criminals.

The dawn of understanding shook me as I asked for the name of the particular island to which the detective had returned. Without needing to hear it confirmed, I already knew that it must be the same one to which I had rashly sent the three crates, the very island which my wife had chosen for her secret holiday!

My mind flew over the improbable circumstances. Had the three crates containing the dismembered corpse of the merchant's wife reached the shores of the inspector's homeland? Had they somehow reached the attention of his kin and been tracked back to their point of origin? Had the inspector, having failed to uncover evidence against me, meted out justice upon my poor wife for my crime?

Something small, black and shiny slithered out of the crate and bit me on the pinky toe before I could react. I stepped down hard upon its frail, serpentine body but its poison was already coursing through my veins. I felt that I could hear the inept, large-bellied detective, who could not tolerate my country's leniency toward criminals, laughing at me from his island in the South Pacific.

I poured a tall glass of strong spirits and began to pen this confession, which lies now at its end. Now I wait only for the viper's poison to end *my* story as well.

Death Upon the Ocean

As I listen to the full-force gale,
slapping the waves at full sail,
I begin to ponder in awe and wonder,
how many like ships has she sank under?

Falling prey to the wild breeze,
of some devil or god taking life as they please,
and wondering aloud as madmen do,
whether she'll choose to sink this one, too.

Well if I be carried away, ever and on,
into the deep which I sail upon,
may I fall into a cove or a knell,
and within its darkness continue to dwell.

*And if you, my love, hear nothing of this;
of my fate down in the abyss,
may your sorrow not last long,
but write and sing of me in a song.*

As I consider the merciless tide,
it occurs to me and I shudder inside,
that you will not see the tears I have cried,
and will not even know that I have died.

You may think that I have sailed away,
to another, to a brighter day,
but then you will know, for you knew me better,
and one day in a bottle you'll find this last letter.

O! Woe is me as another wave crashes,
and splinters and tears my sail and sashes.
I am tied to the mast with the tightest of lashes,
that perhaps I will not be returned to dust or ashes.

*Remember, my love, that I was true to the last,
and while speaking your name overboard was cast!
Nothing feebler could keep me from you,
may we meet in heaven when your time comes due,
then you will know that my love was true,
and in eternity I'll still love you!*

The Missing One

The hours pass slowly now,
and I'm coming undone,
marveling at the wonder of how,
I can live without the missing one.

Man cannot long live,
on but three parts of a whole,
and that, to me, she cannot give,
half-mast on ragged seas I roll!

There are a thousand aching perils,
which a man cannot outrun,
chief of all is a heart gone sterile,
pining the loss of the missing one!

If I Refuse?

But what if I refuse to believe?

he yelled into the stars.

Will I not, God's grace, receive?

Will unhealed remain the scars?

Will my stubborn mind,

and questioning reason,

deliver me, by my own hand signed,

into the eternal, torturous season?

Can this be, to us Men, fair,

when He hides himself away?

When but a sprite in the air,

would prove He was the way?

To believe in Him now,

would be, to myself untrue,

but I cannot, as yet, see how,

to fully explain this to You.

In the End

I'm an articulate kind of guy,
don't cheat, gossip, steal or lie.
I don't have a formal education,
or care for Ivy-League segregation.

But no one understands what I say,
I'm looking up while they're looking away.
Nobody knows what my words mean,
it's like one or all of us live in a dream.

Lost my love to miscommunication,
we talked like a static AM station.
There were times we could've been friends,
but everything comes out wrong in the end.

The Ibis and the Winged-Serpents

The boys stood in the gorge, watching the innumerable, dignified Black Ibis sitting motionless upon the cliff's crags and outcroppings. A warm wind blew gently through the narrow valley in the mountains on the northeast corner of Africa.

The boys were investigating a legend that the long, narrow gorge served as the entryway for the annual migration of innumerable flying serpents who rode the winds from the east.

"Tales tell of them arriving on the spring winds from the marshes of Arabia," Itvan told his younger brother, Kami,

who gazed at his older sibling with wide-eyed fear.

"Will they put their poison into us?" he asked.

Itvan laughed and replied, "No, Kami, the Ibis will eat them before they reach us. There are no tales of them ever reaching Egypt. That is why the Ibis are sacred to our people."

The merciless sun beat down upon their glistening, creamy-black skin as they waited. The wind blew toward them and seemed to Kami to be a living entity; an invisible god warning them to flee.

"Must we remain?" he asked plaintively in a voice like a whisper.

"Yes, Brother, for soon I leave for the ringed-city far to the west, where I am to be educated. These are my last days in Egypt and this is my final opportunity to witness the great migration."

"Why did the other boys refuse to accompany us?" Kami asked astutely.

Itvan frowned deeply and looked away from his brother, "They are afraid, Kami."

"Afraid of death?"

"Perhaps. I think mostly they are afraid of truth. Many of

our people prefer to view our legends and religion safely from afar; accepting them without question but not really *living* their principles."

"And we are different from them?" Kami was almost ten years old but Itvan thought he looked and sounded much younger, as if fear had shrunken the boy's entire being and not just his voice.

"That is so, Brother. At least, I desire to be." There was an unmistakable sense of longing in the young man's voice which matched the far-away stare of his dark eyes.

"Then that is my desire as well." Kami set his jaw firmly and looked up at his brother. Minutes passed in silence until the boy could hold his question no longer. "Are we brave, Itvan?"

Itvan, who was nearly thirteen years old, followed the example of his elders and did not immediately reply. *All words must be measured carefully and spoken only after ample contemplation.*

"I believe that you are brave, for though there is much fear in your heart, you remain with me."

"And are you not also brave?" Kami asked, who was suddenly very proud of himself.

Itvan contemplated the question for many minutes before replying, "No, Kami. For me, this cannot be an act of

bravery, for I am not afraid."

Kami looked at the handsome, stoic face of his brother and tried to emulate his stern countenance and noble bearing. The wind blew stronger and carried with it a sour flavor that caused the Ibis to flit from their perches. It was still too early for the hunt to begin and they returned to roost after completing a few impatient circles, yet their instinct told them that their vigilance would soon be rewarded.

"Why are you not afraid, Itvan?"

"Because I do not fear death." Itvan spoke truly but found himself beginning to worry about his younger brother. *Perhaps I should take him home*, he thought responsibly.

Kami echoed his brother's words bravely, "Nor, then, will I fear it."

The serpent-stench carried on the warm breeze began to nauseate them but neither boy complained. Itvan was proud of his brother and realized that he would worry about him while he was away. *Perhaps he will forget me as he grows into a man and when next we meet it will be as strangers?*

His father had already paid an enormous tuition of twelve cattle and four daughters so that his eldest son could be tutored by the learned giants in distant Atlantis. Itvan understood that it was not possible to alter his path without disrespecting his family's honor, which he would never do,

so he tried to force the issue out of his mind.

"Can you tell me more about the winged-serpents?" Kami asked him as the silence grew too heavy for him to bear.

"Legend states that they are small; merely two cubits in length and they fly on the thin, leathery wings of a bat. It is said that their breath is like fire without flame and their poisonous bite is always deadly."

Kami began to tremble and tried to will his body to be still. "But their poison does not kill the Ibis?"

"That is true. It is said that the Ibis have eaten from the divine body of Osiris in the water. Then they became holy and were blessed with an immunity to the serpent's fiery ichor."

The boys instinctively looked again upon the dark avian horde lying in wait for their prey. Suddenly, Kami had a singular thought.

"What if we were to frighten all the Ibis away?"

Itvan was startled at the outrageous question but answered reflexively, "It is said that the little dragons would multiply into a plague and our people would be forced to flee Egypt forever."

They looked somberly at the myriad bones of the serpents that littered the valley floor and imagined the great

mischief that such a multitude would wreak upon their homeland.

The wind blew fiercely and the serpent-stench it carried nearly overcame their olfactory senses. The boys were forced to cover their faces with cloth as if they faced a sandstorm. They could begin to hear a sound like the tents of a vast army flapping gently in the wind. A few of the tall birds began to stir from their roosts.

Suddenly, the black Ibis began darting everywhere and the boys could see them; tens of thousands of winged-serpents flying toward them on the breeze. Within seconds, they were boldly ambushed by the many hundreds of holy avians. The winged-serpents were scaled in azure plates that were the color of salmon underneath. They drifted easily on the strong wind with the assistance of two large, thin wings but flailed desperately as they were impaled by the mighty black beaks of the noble Ibis.

The serpents fell by the thousands but they were so dense that the Ibis would require time to slay them all. Itvan's heart thudded loudly as he realized that the birds could not entirely halt the serpents' advance.

The two boys were quickly embroiled in the combined mass of flying snakes and the hunters who mercilessly swooped through their dense ranks. The stench burned their eyes and their noses secreted freely from the noxious effect.

Itvan threw his body over his younger brother as the sinister maelstrom fell upon them. Mercifully, he felt the sting of the vipers' bites only an instant before life fled from him.

Kami wept from fear and guilt but he remained hidden underneath his brother's lifeless bulk. The birds gave chase as the serpentine horde passed over them and the valley grew eerily silent once more.

He wriggled his way from underneath the fallen hero who had saved him and wept for many hours. At length, he felt the cool touch of the night wind upon his face and it carried his brother's voice.

"Do not weep, Brother, for I do not suffer. RA has rewarded me for seeking truth with my own eyes. Return to Egypt and, for all of your years, fear no servant of evil. You, like the noble Ibis, have become holy and the venom of the world can no longer harm you."

Kami rose from his knees and lifted his arms skyward. Lightning cracked the sky and a cleansing rain fell upon his face. He buried his older brother under a cairn of heavy stones and began the long march southward to Egypt.

Although his heart was heavy for years to come, Kami was educated in his brother's stead and brought great respect to his family, as his deeds earned him the far-reaching name of Kami, the Noble Seeker of Truth.

The Tale No One Would Hear

For many hours the snow had dropped,
but within was snug and warm,
when all the labors of the day had stopped,
and all were safe from harm,

there did approach a wretched wraith,
stumbling blindly from malformation,
up to the door with utter haste,
speaking vaguely of information.

The citizens parted as he passed by,
none willing to touch his skin,
and with a plea and a cry,
he fell among the men.

He was rushed ale from the keep,
and there were many voices to hear.
He was soon revived from his sleep,
and awoke with countenance sere.

"I have come to tell you of a Thing,
which lives now within our land,
for miles around no bird will sing,
near his castle made of sand."

"The sand of which we heard you speak,"
cried one who spoke for all,
"is but wintry snow from hilly peaks,
where birds never voice their call."

"But the land of which I tell,
lies many miles distant!
And only by the force of spell,
did I travel in an instant!

For I have come into many homes,
warning of the Thing's arrival,
since summer last, I walk the stones,
barely earning my survival."

"Then what you saw was but mirage,"
cried one who spoke for none,
"for it is clear by your visage,
thirst and hunger won't be outrun."

"But won't you hear more of my tale,
which will strike each and every breast,
or must I walk further upon the trail,
to find an ear that differs from the rest?"

Yet to his tale, no one would,
lend him thought nor ear,
so he left into the wood,
with the tale no one would hear.

Leave Happy People Alone

A writer came up to me the other day,
saying that he wanted to make a change,
said he couldn't figure out what to say,
that was true and important, yet strange.

I told him there wasn't anything new,
to say, do, think or write.

He said, "*Something* must be true!"

I told him that wasn't right.

"But if nothing is true," he said,
"wouldn't that be enough for a song?"

I told him it's already dead,
and penning another would be wrong.

My friend doesn't like me anymore,
he says I've already been defeated.
He says that I'm dead, down to my soul's core,
and I should probably be treated.

I don't miss him or his vague thoughts,
'cause it does seem to have all been done.

*Just then Bob Dylan brought,
another tune from the dark into the sun!*

It appears that it is only I,
who cannot see the point in going on,
but I have learned that it's only kind,
to leave happy people alone.

Is It Any Wonder We Lose?

As a child, I laughed and I ran,
and kissed my lover down in the sand.
Best of times and worst of times,
living inside somebody's rhymes.
Choose your path, they say,
you'll be glad like me someday.
Surround myself with that which I love,
find the peace which comes from above.
Looking up at the fall's full moon,
I need a high and I need it soon.

Born into a time that is wrong,
living inside somebody's song.
I look around at all my peers,
with whom I share no hopes or fears.
Live the life of a saint and a thief,
listen to the clergymen lie and deceive,
but I look ahead, to what I'll have said,
and I'll fully live before I must leave.

Look back on a life that is gone,
sing a sad and slow somber song.
I knew a lot, guessed even more,
looked for secrets behind every door.
Wouldn't go back even if I could,
can't learn more than what's understood.
If you do look, look with a smile,
decisions made with a turn of the dial.
Looking back on all that we choose,
is it any wonder we lose?

The Pulse of the Occupation

Carrot-Top meets Poindexter,
standing in a leisure suit,
they're guests of the Occupation,
worshipping idols of disinformation.
Radical roots, original truths!
But what do they find in their mind?

The Pulse of the Occupation,
throbs in a minor key,
as another ghost in a leisure suit,
arrives to chastise me.
A connoisseur's melancholia,
wholly devoid of joy,
yet no one else wants to share,
my melancholic toy.

Within these words lie suggestions,
as well as spontaneous confessions,
and all of the gracious guests,
who've visited here and then left,
are but shifting winds of Mother Gaia's breath,
in understanding of secrets we already knew.

All in harmony, harmless to the Tree of Life,
which grows with allowance and love,
who can truly know, just how deep,
our roots grow, into the Garden of Glory?
In the end we must all recall,
the gentle swell of Gaia's breath.

A Morbid Crowd

Time passes slowly here,
and the wind we cannot feel,
memory sends us a tear,
and brings our minds to reel.

We live in darkness here,
yet are warmed by the sun,
of pleasure we seek now only rest,
our sadness is what we've become.

We all wander here,
a morbid crowd,
never speaking of our fear,
lest we speak too loud.

Our pestilence is our loneliness,
yet it claims us all,
but our cure, we need not guess,
for we deny solution's call.

For we shall never part,
or ever look away,
though it would free our hearts,
we shall die this way.

Lost to Himself

Prior to manhood the boy would flee,
then seeking only a higher form of free.
He walked all the way across America's south,
trying to find his own voice to mouth.

Looking inward he fell again to dread,
longing for the shelter of someone else's head.
He asked, once again, the highway to make him free,
and walked the lonesome miles in sad reverie.

He worked here and there, at this and at that,
always longing for a new peg to hang his hat,
until time overtook him and the boy succumbed to age,
he looked back on a life which seemed wasted rage.

Caught up in a madness he knew of no way out,
doomed to live and lose at his great inner bout,
until he finally lay his head down upon the ground,
and died once more without speaking a sound.

Caught amidst the subtle poundings of tide,
torn by a life that had long within him died.
His mind had been strong, but his youth could not wield it,
too impatient to study, the boy had to feel it.

Tossed from shore to shore as the pitiless winds blew him,
lost within himself until he no longer knew him.
His family mourned and pleaded for his return,
but couldn't accept him while the passion still burned.

Lost to himself, in his own little hell,
forced to ring his own empty bell.
He chose one day to hang upon a tree,
forever lost to friend and family.

Love Lurks Inside

Men judging themselves upon their score,
to strike little ivory balls.
Stumbling through the grimy back door,
when they say *nature calls*.
Formal men, cowboys and loggers, too,
they all play a game that's the same.

And the ladies, I'm afraid,
are well past their glory days,
if, indeed, they can claim any,
though lovers, beside them, were many.
Yet the love still lurks inside,
and we all come to the bottle to hide.

Fulfilled as Foretold

The first nail tore his left palm,
and was answered, by him, in psalm.
The second nail pierced his right,
and his dying eyes lost sight.

But when the third broke his feet,
his faith with doubt did meet,
yet as he hung upon the cross,
he did not feel his own life's loss.

And when they finally took him down,
they saw, upon his head a crown,
not of thorn but alchemical gold,
so the prophecy was fulfilled as foretold.

The Heart You Rend

Of the gentle slope of your jaw,
and the subtle prominence of your cheek,
I may stand, forever, in awe,
for you render a strong man weak.

Ah, the curl of your tongue,
carry me into your auburn embrace,
and the sweet sound from your lung,
is consummated in thy fair face.

Dare I forget thy soft hands,
that I have felt but once only?
Or when your gaze upon me lands,
and raises me from sad to lonely?

Stronger still is the lurking fear,
that our serendipitous affair will end,
and my endearments, you'll fail to hear,
and you'll not recall the heart you rend.

God I Sought

Within the dark hearts of ill-fated men,
is where my melancholy tale begins,
wherein dwell morbid secrets of wonder,
yet tranquility of mind is torn asunder.

Born unto a noble family was he,
schooled and taught most thoroughly,
but the downcast hero of whom I speak,
chose a dark path, his own, to seek.

Wishing not to till and farm,
he sought after life's subtler charms.
'Twas impossible for him to believe;
a god so hidden, he could not receive.

Now he must seek out his own,
then compare it to what he was shown,
leaving both kind friends and kin,
a sad, soul journey to begin.

With a wave and a smile, he took to the trail,
the die was cast, the lid thus nailed.
'Ere long he knew hunger and cold,
though his body was young, his mind grew old.

He was unprotected from the Hells,
prey to thoughts his mind upheld,
and these words he spoke aloud,
before his body was draped in shroud.

"Seeking only to be free,
I awoke to terrors inside of me,
would that I could now go back,
avoiding travel on that fearful track.

This I learned while seeking reason,
man has no cause for his treason,
now I've learned too much, too fast,
and for this sin below am cast.

For any who might remember me,
I wish only blind belief to thee,
never look too deep for answer,
lest ye discover unholy cancer.

Rather be content to stay,
inside a stable with grass and hay,
do not ask if He is true or not,
for we create the God we have sought."

Sad Sabbath's Past

The lonely priest sat quite still,
in God's own mansion upon the hill,
and in his melancholy took his repast,
pondering the memories of sad Sabbaths passed.

To his god he had given of his days,
awaiting always sight through the haze,
yet as he sat alone with the cold wintry chill,
he feared the burdensome bore of more Sabbaths still.

Will they always upon his shoulders fall?
How can one man be made to bear them all?
With a cry then, going unanswered and for unwept,
so died the priest while another Sabbath slept.

And in God's lonely, heavenly throne,
He looked out upon the world that was no longer home,
and awaited the end of His folly at last,
to deliver Him from the sins of sad Sabbath's past.

Willful Entombment

In the Year of our Lord, 1855, just as I was beginning to experience the first, sweet freedoms of adulthood, my father died. His death left me the last in our ancient family bloodline. Father's death had a severe effect upon Mother, who was still rather young herself. In the weeks following his death, she took to listlessly wandering the gardens by day and, to avoid the terrors of the night, she employed artificial sleeping agents.

At the time of my father's death, I was residing in a distant city and feasting indulgently upon its many pleasures. This is a peculiar weakness which I have yet to overcome. Upon his death, however, I was summoned home to care for Mother.

It was not long afterward that Mother was discovered to be with child. She perceived the pregnancy as her husband's final, departing gift to her and soon my brother, Joseph, was born. With his birth came Mother's rebirth. He alone possessed what had been required to revive my mother from the dark melancholy that had threatened to engulf her. Their relationship was extraordinary from the first. Never was a mother's love so lavished upon a child! She was near him always and it was instantly clear that he reciprocated her love with his entire being.

As young Joseph grew, the singular bond between them strengthened. They were as complete in their love as any who have ever lived under God's protection. I remember many times, having returned late from the day's labors, to

find them curled together in slumber near the small fire which Joseph had learned to make. The boy's tiny body would seem lost, enveloped among the tangle of their arms and legs. It was an intimate sight which always filled me with joy.

Observing their utter contentment for a period of years, and after making the necessary arrangements for the labors of the estate, I left them and returned to the adventurous city. I feel compelled to explain that, although I am admittedly self-serving in nature, at no time did I harbor any malice or jealousy toward my brother. Nor did I possess spite or bitterness toward my mother. Indeed, I was grateful to Joseph for restoring her so, for it was their very happiness which had freed me to continue my lavish life in the city.

The years of Joseph's youth passed quickly with a dream-like happiness and the powerful bond between them never waned. One December morning, I received a correspondence from Joseph, imparting news of Mother's sudden illness. He suggested that she would benefit from a visit with me. I very nearly did just that, but as I stalled, I found that I was rather busy myself and could not easily leave my affairs in the city. I wrote to him that I could spare little time at present but that I wished Mother a swift recovery from her sudden malady.

You may, perhaps, think me a monster for neglecting my filial responsibilities, and your judgment would be just. Yet, it is merely the truth that I wish to relate here and will not endeavor to sweeten the taste of my behavior.

Several weeks later, I received another letter from my brother. It bore the post-mark of two weeks earlier. There had been a major storm, during the interval, which had undoubtedly occasioned its fateful delay. I will not summarize his words, but rather, offer them as they were written by his own tender hand.

Dear Brother,

The good doctor pronounced Mother dead this morning. However, I know that she is most certainly not dead. She has, thrice in the past, suffered from catalepsy. This is a very rare, but fairly documented condition, in which all of the victim's bodily functions are slowed to such an extent that they are presumed to have died.

She was diagnosed years ago by a foreign physician but has secreted the knowledge from everyone, save Father and very recently, myself; her and I alone knew the secret!

I am yet beneath the age of legal manhood and, therefore, my word carries not the adequate weight to dissuade the doctor from his grievous error. He has, however, indulged me enough to delay her funeral until your arrival.

Please hurry home to save our dear mother. Your word alone can rescue her. Brother, they must not place her in the tomb for she is still alive!

*God's Speed,
Joseph*

Imagine my horror! I fled from the city as if on wings but was slowed by the aftermath of the bitter storm. When I breathlessly arrived, the manor house was alive with a nightmare frenzy. I found the doctor weeping at the great dining table. He explained to me that, due to the approaching storm, Mother had been placed into the vault early. This had occurred fully a week before I had even received the letter!

This, however, was not the cause of the physician's misery or the manor's general panic. Amid the wild, rueful activity, which both precedes and follows a death, Joseph had been lost. No one had seen him since the storm.

I became a madman. Harshly and justly I scolded the doctor and all who were nearby for their mistreatment of the hateful affair. The time to judge myself would come later. As I began to tell them of Joseph's letter and the possibility of a premature burial, a terrible vision took me. I rushed out into the raw winter air, through open snowy pastures, to the family vault.

Our vault is a tall, ornate structure dating back nearly three centuries. It had been constructed from very large blocks of stone and was adorned with deep, gothic engravings. The names of all who lay within its walls were also etched carefully into its door. I saw that Mother's name had recently been added directly below my father's.

The tomb was surrounded on three sides by ancient willows, whose boughs rested directly upon the roof of the

structure, which served it as a crutch. Near the apex of the roof, now partially hidden by snow, was a single small opening caused by the fall of a weakened and misshapen stone. First Father, then I, had put off having it repaired. I remembered climbing the adjacent willow with Joseph many years before and peeking curiously into the dark depths of the crypt.

After much labor, I succeeded in prying open the heavy, frozen door. I lit a candle which hung from the interior wall and entered the tomb. There, upon the floor in the center of the room, next to the cold ashes of a small fire, lay the lifeless bodies of my brother and mother. They were curled up together, my brother's body seemingly lost, enveloped among the tangle of arms and legs. Forever entwined in death, in the very embrace that was so particular to them in life.

The stone casket, which had so briefly held my poor, breathing mother, lay off to one side. Its lid had been partially removed despite its formidable weight. I knew that little Joseph alone had not the strength to remove it. I then saw what had happened as if the dreadful scene was being played out before me.

With Mother's entombment falling early due to the cursed storm, Joseph knew that I would not arrive in time to save her. This was too much for the noble lad to bear. He ascended the willow and dropped some small amount of kindling down into the opening in the roof, then he followed it inside.

He would have known that he could never reach the opening again, nor budge the heavy door. The poor lad had willingly entombed himself with his mother, so certain was he that she yet breathed, simply for the privilege of dying with her. Only together could they have had the strength to slide the lid of the coffin aside. Mother would have understood what had transpired as she must have feared a premature burial for years. Joseph would have lit a pitiable fire and the two lay down together without tears, to die upon the stony floor in each other's arms.

When the vision ended, I used a hammer and chisel to add my brother's name in the stone, directly beneath Mother's.

Solution Circle

Release yourself, thy god is beside thee.

Release yourself, to He who hath made thee.

Come join the circle, the circle is life.

Come join the circle, the circle brings life.

Come kneel beside us, directly behind.

Come kneel beside us and be of our mind.

Grasp the one in front and in back.

Grasp the one who never looks back.

Complete the circle, which lies beyond fear.

Complete the circle, your path becomes clear.

Here are the daggers made of gilded stone.

Here are the daggers of ebony bone!

Close your eyes, the light we have shown.

Close your eyes, we're all going home!

A horn will blow to signal the start.

A horn will blow take aim at the heart!

Complete the circle, no cross for to bear.

Complete the circle, you're solution lies there!

Objects Resting

I dwell alone, alone and sad,
though there may be life around,
and I wonder what use I've had,
what is the meaning to all the sound?

Objects resting without life or mind,
designed to bring joy by their sight,
but joy through mere beholding I do not find,
for they bring me no closer to the Creator's light.

Rather, from wisdom they only distract,
and I, therefore, despise their accumulation.
For higher purpose, 'tis nobility they lack,
and will never lead to worthy revelation.

Place them back upon shelf or table,
do not place your faith in such dolls,
do not spread the seed of their fable,
'tis better not to handle them at all.

The Images I See

The sailor raises his glass,
in mock toast to a long journey,
upon the sea, more years to pass.

The policeman slaps his chains,
on a boy who reminds him of himself,
and they both cry out in pain.

The judge hears an important case,
represented by two lost liars who,
remind him of someone he can't quite place.

The writer spends twelve long hours,
before a blank page looking in vain,
for gentle words of love and flowers.

A lonely lover now walks alone,
upon the sandy beaches,
he and his love once had known.

A hooker accepts another lowlife,
inside of her and secretly saddens,
while mourning for the man's poor wife.

A smoker wakes coughing,
and reaches for the flame that sparks,
the next nail to his coffin.

Whiskey drinker freely falls,
from his feet to the street,
safe now behind thick amber walls.

The junkie steals a friend's last piece,
to escape the direful guilt he turns,
to his next fix to find release.

A romantic young man weeps,
for the lives of everything that lives,
and for the innocence he no longer keeps.

A man afraid of his own mind,
annoys everyone who is kind,
enough to endure his whines.

And the myriad hungry, hunted poor,
who are left alone in misery,
must endlessly knock upon a closed door.

These are the images I see,
as if they were my own memory.
Looking too far into Future's past,
I see so little in Life's forecast.

I pray that I could be more like you,
to ignore or defend the evils we do.
I used to think that I could make the change,
but, too often, what I believe is too strange.

I've got to stop thinking about you,
and find new dreams to pursue,
but how can we find peace inside,
when from these things we hide?

How do we pretend to love ourselves,
while we leave others to rot on shelves?
Do the calluses grow with age?
All that grows within me is the rage!

Don't ask me why I weep every day,
when Life, we are told, should be gay.
I'm a willing but saddened martyr,
in a world that's only getting harder.

Though I can never elude the sorrow,
that Life will surely bring us tomorrow,
I shall see you on the other side,
when it is no longer your wish to hide.

Though He Did Cry

Across the sky,
flew the bird,
though he did cry,
he spoke not a word.

"Peace," he would have said,
"is what you seek."
He shared this from his head,
to the humans below asleep.
"Disregard what you now call charms,
accept instead, brotherly arms."

But to utter the words,
across the sky,
was not for the bird,
though he did cry.

The Redwood Boy

There once was a boy who lived nearby. You just go down your street, turn left and follow it down for a ways, then turn right on Old Farm Road. If it isn't the bumpiest old dirt road you've ever been on, then you made a wrong turn somewhere. You feel each bone jangle against the next one until you feel all mushed up from the ride and then you see the swamp-house where he lived.

He started out with a family like most of us did, but his mommy run off with her friends and his daddy got drafted into the army. No one came back for the little boy. No one

seemed to remember him at all.

Well, he tried to make the most of it, which really wasn't much at all. He ate no breakfasts and instead spent all morning digging for worms. He didn't like to do it but he needed worms to bait the hooks he would use to catch a fish for dinner. So he would skip lunch and go fishing, which used to be a fun sport but now was so important that it became work. He'd fish all day sometimes and maybe catch a fish and maybe not. Sometimes he'd get awfully hungry.

He would have gone to school but he completely forgot about it with all the digging and fishing he had to do. No one had come looking for him either, which he thought was probably normal except that he didn't think it was normal at all. He thought that one of the adults should see his name on some file somewhere or remember the clever artwork that he used to turn in for extra credit and come asking questions about him. Still, entire seasons came and went and no one came looking for him.

His house was inside the old swamp. The swamp is pretty small but it grows millions of skeeters, alligators, biting turtles and a few monster snakes. One kid said he saw an electric eel out there once but no one believed him. The house had no electricity running to it because his daddy never could get the time to learn how to do it.

Once he installed all those fancy wall-plates and they plugged the new TV into one and his daddy's proud smile

failed him for a minute. Then he threw the TV out the door into the swamp and said to the boy, smiling as it sank, "TV was broken. That's what it was." They never plugged anything else into them fancy wall-plates in case they were broken, too.

Well, it got so the boy didn't much care anymore if he caught any fish because he hated the way they tasted so badly that it wasn't much better than going without. One day he even tried just eating the worms himself, but he never tried that again.

"I'm a lot like these trees," he thought. He actually spoke his thoughts out loud because he liked the sound of his voice. He would have liked the sound of yours even more, though. He looked around at the soaked trees, sitting in ugly, murky water their whole lives. "If I were a tree, I'd rather be a tall redwood tree than a short, black swamp tree." He kept saying that to himself as the days went on into winter again. "If only I were a redwood tree."

Winter hit the swamp hard and a chilling wind blew through the water carrying the coldness right through the swamp-house, through his homemade pajamas and into his bones. He thought, "If only I were a redwood tree, then I'd never be too cold."

Those seeds grew in his mind all winter long until it was just about all he could think about. He had a map of California that his daddy had won in a card game years and years ago. His daddy had showed him on the map where

he used to work the redwoods as a lumberjack. The boy didn't know if California still existed or exactly where it was, but he came up with the idea that he should go there and somehow learn to be a redwood tree.

You might think that idea was pretty funny but you see, you've been to school. You've learned that people can't become different things. Certainly not trees, right? Well, the Redwood Boy didn't go to school so he didn't know that he couldn't become a tree.

So the Redwood Boy set out the very next day and he didn't have to go far, no more than a thousand miles or more, before he found a small grove of redwoods. They were saplings, just about as tall and thin as he was and they weren't what he had in mind at all.

He sat down next to them and thought about it and realized that in a hundred years, those fifty young and spindly redwood trees on the side of the hill would grow to be fifty tall, strong redwood trees. So he just stood in line, right where the next tree would have been if it *had* been, and he stood straight and tall. He stayed like that for a very long time and the snow started to fall.

He looked around but something didn't feel right. The other saplings had limbs coming down from the trunk, so he spread his fingers, held his arms out and did his best to look and feel like a redwood tree. He stayed like that for a very, very long time and the snow continued to fall.

Somehow, he still felt cold and hungry. Then he turned his face to the sky and started to cry. He stayed like that for a very, very, very long time and the snow began to collect on his arms and around his feet. Only once did he try to move after that, and when he realized that he couldn't, he knew he was taking root in the good, solid ground and becoming a redwood tree at last.

Someday, he would be tall and strong. The wind would sing through his branches and the animals would nest in his arms; squirrels, woodpeckers, spiders, caterpillars, he would welcome them all as friends, and even more importantly, they would welcome *him* as a friend too, when he became a giant redwood tree.

And that's it, that's the whole story. What, you want more? Well, that lonely old Redwood Boy is still out there, only no one can tell which one of them giant redwoods is him now that they've all grown up. When I walk around out there I hear the wind and the birds singing through all those giant Sequoias, I hear the squirrels chattering happily and I don't think he's so lonely anymore.

The Beast

From the cauldron of wicked love,
I serenade the night,
and if I chance to look above,
bedazzled by the height,

I see stars of men shooting by,
‘midst rays of dawning fear,
and from this fear I should fly,
before the shadow passes near.

Look away lest I fall,
and cast not another glance,
and listen not to the call,
as the whores of heaven dance!

For who has lived and felt not the stare,
of the Christian carrion bird?
And who escaped what was never there,
when first the Beast had stirred?

Of Sadness Sung

Oh, they tell me to look ever on,
and to employ my days with toils long,
but where lies the greater wrong,
if purpose be gained in mirth and song?

Look about you of increasing age,
would you doubt the wizened sage?
Ask he whose life was wasted rage,
whose song is over, a turned page.

I ask not for pity's touch,
of worldly gifts I need not much,
but give to me as a cripple's crutch,
the time I take to live as such.

Woeful is He who dwells in the sky,
promising life in the sweet by-and-by.
Why should man endeavor to try,
to convince and coax this belief in lie?

Wretched is the touched man,
whose head lies buried beneath the sand,
with a need so dire, create a god he can,
and all control from man is banned.

Bereft of an agile tongue,
I sing what has already been sung,
but before I would draw false breath to lung,
I'd swing in death; from the neck be hung.

Sad Mortal Pain

I would not believe I was there,
locked within a tomb in the earth,
the soil was wet with poisonous air,
a dark womb that would never give birth.

Into the dirt I attacked with my nails,
as a low sound issued from within me,
but I soon knew that my efforts would fail,
the land above, nevermore would I see.

A higher sound came now from my throat,
as the livingman's air started to wane.
I fancied myself rising, now fully afloat,
oblivious to my own sad, mortal pain.

I fell from the earth to the sky,
and smiled down on faithful dear friends.
I leave it for them to ask why,
for my tale now lies at its end.

The Army of White

White Pawn advances to begin the game,
and is quickly captured knowing unknown fame.
Cruelly commanded by a mind long-gone lame,
simply and swiftly slain by chivalrous Knight,
so died the Pawn of the goodly White.

Black Knight rides forth into the fray,
his banner flying high in the dawn of the day.
With sword upraised and poised again to slay,
swift flies an arrow from White's hidden Rook,
and Black's brave banner falls into bloody brook.

From high upon White's castled walls,
the Rook laughs as noble Knight falls.
Yet Black's bloody Bishop witnesses all,
and summons the sweet revenge of his faith,
as White's Rook falls victim to Black's unholy wraith.

But Black's bloody Bishop himself turns to find,
White's very Queen to be lurking behind.
Her long, dainty fingers then gouge him blind,
and he falls to feminine foe only swiftly seen,
while peals of laughter ring from White's bloody Queen.

Yet, who should answer for Black Bishop's demise,
but his own sovereign King, so regal and wise,
White's only Queen falls in sorrowed surprise,
as she feels the cold sting of Black King's blade,
who looks out upon the fields of blood that he made.

When up steps a young and nothingman Pawn,
with little but fear to drive him ever on.
He sends Black King's head to roll on the lawn.
White Pawn is risen to the order of Knight,
victorious this day, the army of White.

Guillotine Suicide

Poison was too painful; painful and *common*. Hanging presented the dilemma of breaking the neck instantly or it, too, would be prohibitively painful. He laughed at the amusing image of himself hanging there, his entire body-weight being supported by the coarse rope around his neck. For this discomfort, he had long considered padding but he felt that he would then be too tempted to release himself before the noose's grisly work had been completed.

Also, hanging was too *common*. He considered injecting air into his veins, for he had heard that it was quite effective, but quickly dismissed it as he remembered also hearing of the death throes which, although swift, were said to be agonizing. *So how?*

His mind blissfully indulged itself in his past attempts. He had once fallen asleep with his head inside a tub filled with a fatal fifty-fifty blend of ammonia and bleach, but he had awakened the following day. His nose itched and burned and bled incessantly. His hair, which had soaked overnight in the noxious solution, had been turned perfectly white. For this, they had laughed at him. He did not mind when he laughed at himself, but felt a peculiarly acute shame when others did it. *Uncommonly* ashamed.

Another time, (he was laughing once more) he had discharged a portable can of propane gas into his lungs. He had been forced to use a pencil to open the seal while he held it near his mouth and inhaled. The can had grown too cold for his bare hands to hold so he had wrapped it in a

towel for insulation. He remembered laughing at himself back then, too, thinking of how silly he would have appeared if anyone had burst in upon him. That incident, although uncommon, had accomplished nothing.

As a child, he had sat with the barrel of his aunt's shotgun in his mouth. He replayed it in his head over and over. He would say goodbye to every person he cared about, then imagine in vivid detail their shock and remorse when he was found. Then, slowly, with tears streaming from his fifteen year old eyes, he would pull the trigger. He *always* pulled the trigger. He shuddered every time he performed the morbid ritual but he could neither find nor purchase shells for the gun. Besides, blowing your head off was *very* common.

His mind tired of the exercise so he picked up his current novel and finished it. He read and re-read the ending lines: *It is a far, far greater thing that I do, than I have ever done. It is a far, far greater rest that I go to, than I have ever known.* Amazing! A Tale of Two Cities was certainly uncommon!

Then it hit him; fell upon his imagination like a divine and diabolical plot. The guillotine! *Madame la Guillotine!* He was sure that *that* had never been done before. He could possibly be the first ever! After the initial euphoric contemplation and visualization of the goodbyes, the reactions and then the act itself, he channeled his mind to the particulars. He began to construct the device in his head and was pleased with the effort that he saw would be

necessary. It was perfect!

What other method would scream premeditation like a carefully constructed guillotine? What other method would ring of personal bravery and dignity than yielding one's own neck to a fifty pound blade? These were important points to consider, to him, because he did not wish to be remembered as a coward, or that the act had been spontaneous. Neither of those would lend themselves to the effect of complete and permanent bewilderment and remorse for those he left behind.

He felt the surge of excitement well up within him and began laughing out loud and dancing about his room like a drunken leprechaun. When he considered what a spectacle he would be, especially if the viewer knew the uncommon source of his gaiety, he laughed even louder. Later, the tears would come and he would be forced to deal with them, but for now, he was happy.

He began construction the following day. His father had a large woodpile in a remote corner of the yard, hidden behind an old shed. The shed housed only the chicken feed that was his responsibility to administer to the fowls. He was sure that no one would come exploring and accidentally expose him.

He dug, then sank two vertical posts into the ground. One was nearly two feet longer than the other and, rather than cutting them to equal lengths, he simply sank the longer one deeper into the ground. Then, as if sent by God, he

found two long strips of door-molding that had been treated with a square router bit throughout their lengths. These he easily attached to the uprights.

Now for the fun part! For the blade, he chose a heavy axe-head whose edge measured eighteen inches. He sharpened, then polished the blade until it gleamed and glistened with potential. To the end he attached, with frustrating effort, a heavy strip of wood exactly equal in length. Upon the edges, he carved out a pattern that would allow them to fit inside the routed grooves of the uprights. A perfect, fluid fit required labor that he quickly tired of but he endured it for the greater cause. To this assembly, he attached a rope that would be used, first to raise the sinister blade, then to release it and allow the grisly work to be done by gravity. For the block he simply found a large hunk of rough-sawn firewood.

When all was finished and the time was right to test it, he placed a grapefruit from his mother's kitchen upon the block. He hoisted the blade and then, in an orgasmic frenzy, let loose the heavy steel. *VAP!* The blade descended like a demon-asteroid and buried itself fully an inch into the soft wood, cleaving the grapefruit cleanly.

He realized that he needed a basket to catch his head for, though the grapefruit had been severed with little mess, his neck would probably issue an amazing amount of blood. He found a basket inside the barn, emptied it of its feed, and placed it at the foot of the stump. He raised the heavy blade once more, *VAP!* Each half of the grapefruit landed

squarely in the basket.

He was now confronted with another problem; did he want to die just yet? He pondered the question for what little remained of the afternoon. He sorely wanted to use his new machine and understood that he couldn't leave it erected for too many days without it being discovered.

That night, while gazing dreamily from his bedroom window at the looming skeleton of the guillotine, he came upon a temporary solution. He would design a last-second stopping mechanism to halt the blade only twelve inches above where he would lay his exposed neck. Then, like his aunt's empty shotgun, he could indulge in the goodbyes and shock over and over again! He grew so excited that he couldn't sleep.

The next morning, he installed two blocks of wood that he figured would stop the blade. This way he could feel the harrowing rush of the blade's descent, but delay the moment of mortal contact. Once this was accomplished, he wanted to play with his new toy. He wondered if the stopping-blocks would catch the heavy blade. He wondered if he even cared.

At Play in the Fields of the Lord

When the days of my life have all gone their way,
and the ship of my soul is forever moored,
know that I am forevermore,
at play in the fields of the Lord.

And when you remember the man I was,
and all that I've ever had to say,
understand that I held true to my cause,
and pursued my heart to its end, every day!

Though I be gone from your mortal days,
passed forever across that unknown fjord,
know that I am forever at play,
at play in the fields of the Lord.

And forgive me for the pain I knew,
for the demons were forever at my door.
know that I now have clarity anew
and will play on in the fields of the Lord!

Let me now pass through the immortal gates,
and I ask that you not look upon me with pity,
for I know that a holier Judge awaits,
far beyond in that golden city.

Let He, not you, pay me what is due,
as we're forever told that He must.
Suffice yourself with the man you once knew,
and allow me to find peace in the dust.

And finally, if all I've ever sought,
was always upon the wrong door,
remember my life as a favorable lot,
for now I play in the fields of the Lord!

Images in the River

When I was a child,
I sat by the riverside,
and watched the water rush by.
And on that running river I saw,
images, too, floating by.

I saw brothers and sisters holding hands,
and children smiling up at me.
I saw the waves in the ocean,
crash upon the shore,
and the sun setting red behind the trees.

And I remember running up the hill,
behind my father's house,
my brother and I up in the old treehouse.
I was just creating memories,
I still had innocence inside of me.

Although I'm older now,
I still sit by the riverside,
and watch as the water rushes by.
And on that running river I see,
images still floating by.

I see a thousand people living in sorrow,
strangers who exist to borrow,
I see lovers sharing hearts today,
but trading them upon the morrow,
the price of true love they cannot pay.

I see the decay of man,
resulting in the decay of the land,
coming so quick and complete.
I see complication in everything,
and peace running red in the street.

But I remember running up the hill,
behind my father's house,
my brother and I up in the old treehouse.
Although those things are just a memory,
I still hope to find that innocence inside of me.

Lost Vegas

When the crowd is hot,
you've got to spin that wheel,
I hope you know,
how good that feels!

When the cards are right,
you've got to double-down,
rake in that dough,
and spread it 'round.

"Shut up and deal!"
I said to the man.
He said back to me,
"Are you gonna hit or stand?"

Bluffing's no way,
to get to the top,
and once you start,
you can never stop.

And the glare of Lost Vegas,
lighting up the street,
like the shimmering illusion,
of the people that you meet.

Sadmask Wasn't My Dog

I met Sadmask as a stray. He was simply *there* as I rounded a bend in the road. Just sitting on the double-yellow line watching cars zoom past him and, I guessed, just waiting for death to find him.

Sadmask was facing my southbound lane and I sped past him before I even realized what I was looking at. I wanted to stop and retrieve the poor hound but I could not, for headlights appeared on the road behind me. The road was too narrow for anything except a three-point-turn which I didn't have the time to execute. I feared the oncoming car wouldn't, in time, see him in the road. I understood that I could do nothing to save him from the onrushing vehicle. He performed a grotesque roulette by remaining there; he had spun the barrel and would take a chance on its chamber.

I became frantic as I considered the headlights from Sadmask's perspective. Imagine facing the unyielding rubber tires, carrying thousands of pounds of speeding oblivion, rolling first toward him at a distance, then drawing closer, closer. They would first impact his head, which would draw him underneath the car so savagely that my heart rends to describe it.

Why did he not move? I hissed as I slammed the car into a violent half-spin. As I sped northward to save the suicidal dog I saw that the vehicle had missed him, but another oncoming pair had loomed into vision.

When I had drawn up close to him, I was relieved to discover no headlights behind me. I could safely stop my vehicle and pick up the dog, for I assure you that I did not share his suicidal tendencies. I observed the oncoming headlights with dismay, which I recognized as a police cruiser that was only six or seven seconds away.

I stepped on the brakes hard to bring my vehicle to an abrupt stop and opened the door. I had in mind to simply step out and scoop him into my arms but my unfastened seatbelt impeded my first attempt and precious seconds were lost to folly.

I jumped out and was horrified to discover that Sadmask's hind-quarters had already been smashed beyond anything a surgeon could heal. He had already met the unyielding rubber of car tires and his stoic intelligence was already resigned to his fate. I looked into his sad brown eyes and that's when I learned his name.

I looked up from the dying dog's eyes, into the headlights of the oncoming police car. I waved my hand pitifully but realized that I was going to meet the unyielding rubber, too. I was going to lose my life in a spontaneous attempt to rescue a doomed animal. It wasn't regret that I felt, but sorrow.

* * *

I am told that the officer had failed to apply the brakes at any time before, during, or after he struck me for fear of losing control of the Government's valuable asset. Therefore, I had not been dragged under the police car but

rather was blasted, first crushingly into the grill, and then forward through the air like a soccer ball. Sadmask's face had met the front-left wheel and he was instantly relieved of his pain.

It has been nine months since I was run-over by the police car and have only just regained the use of one finger. This one ragged, misshapen pinky-finger alone has penned this odd tale and I hope that you will not soon forget us.

Although Sadmask wasn't my dog, I know that I will never forget him.

P.S. - I mention this now as they have only arrived at the decision yesterday; the Police Department has decided not to press charges against me for the accident. My finger and I are relieved.

Cold Rain

From the darkened, polished wooden floor,
to the heavily stained locked wooden door,
I hear and see and feel the rain,
and wonder how it has found me again.
Oh, the cold rain.

Impossibly high the roof must be strong,
for it never does rain on those who belong,
but upon me always the rain,
and I wonder at how it has found me again.
Oh, the cold rain.

Into the dark, starry night sky,
I burst through the crowd as if I might die,
but there ahead, all around, the rain,
laughing out loud as it drives me insane!
Oh, the cold rain.

So I fall to the earth's moistening soil,
and consider how I may end my toil,
but I fear that in death where darkness doth reign,
always the cold rain will find me again.
Oh, the cold rain.

Separated from Shroud

The boy died suddenly,
as if he but dreamed,
the guiding light he could not see,
he merely slept, so it seemed.

But the boy awoke,
and watched in wonder,
as beloved hearts broke,
for in shroud he lay under!

From far away and behind,
the boy watched the crowd,
together with his higher mind,
separated from shroud.

He could not console or tell,
and, for them, lessen the blow,
for he now heard the bell,
ringing for him to go.

The Other Side

I stand upon the ledge,
so staggeringly high,
and prepare to leap from the edge,
from this, to the Other side.

For the path must surely be plainer,
upon the far-distant Other side,
where I feel that I might grow saner,
like Jekyll removed from Hyde.

I leap and drift without sound,
and feel no regret of mind.
I find wisdom in the up-rushing ground,
and little loss in what's left behind.

An angel nears and holds my hand,
but I struggle to shake him free,
preferring the truth of the approaching land,
and he at last lets go of me.

Further and faster, I resume my fall,
through blue sky and puffy cloud,
my resolve shakes not at all,
when I observe the hopeful crowd.

They eagerly wait for me below,
and I would not have them disappointed,
when inexplicably my descent is slowed,
as my soul from the body is disjointed.

I remain now as my body ever falls,
and marvel at how Death too has lied,
as I float in a weightless All,
betwixt the mortal and the Other side.

To Save a Maiden

There once was a fair maiden,
fairer than all in the land,
she was rumored to come from Aiden,
and wore no ring upon her hand.

A handsome fellow saw this,
and looking for a wife was he,
so that he boldly asked her for a kiss,
and if she would marry.

The maiden smiled then began to cry,
and turned away from the man.
The tears filled up into her eyes,
for she longed to give him her hand.

"Kind sir, I cannot marry thee,
nor anyone else on land or sea,
for I am already tethered to *he*,
whom I wish I had never seen!"

"No ring, but still wed to a man?"
cried the gentleman in angst.
"If help you need, then help I can,
and perhaps then earn your thanks."

"Oh no, your kind help I must refuse,
to even think of it is folly.

I must be with him 'ere the night ensues,
else be stricken with melancholy."

"Who is this husband of yours?

Surely he will see reason,
with you as his bride, his love should soar,
and dwell in the gayest of seasons."

"I must never tell, for he hears all,
and it would mean death if he heard,
already I hear his call,
I must fly to him like a bird!"

She left the man thinking sadly,
standing upon the lonely road.

"I must find out just how badly,
she is treated and ignore her ill forbode!"

He followed her quickly through all,
of the streets in town and more,
and finally reached a tall,
castle he'd not seen before.

He looked into a window,
and was careful not to be seen,
save by an ancient crow,
who perched upon a nearby tree.

Inside the window he gazed,
and then he stood aghast,
for in the room, through the haze,
was his love, tied to a ballast.

To rescue the woman he loved,
he beat upon the door,
then he pushed and shoved,
but accomplished nothing more.

Sadly he left the castle strong,
"Perhaps I will meet her again.
Why was she, by him, thus wronged,
and to what end was she enchained?"

He met her upon the street quite soon,
and asked her what could be done,
she looked so fair beneath the moon,
but her eyes were red as the sun.

"There's nothing to do, not even to hope,
for I am his bride and his mate.
It is, brave sir, beyond your noble scope,
for my husband in dark arts doth meditate.

You see, he is not a man himself,
but the fallen one, Lucifer, he is called.
Into Hell you would need to delve,
and in failure become appalled!"

"If you speak the truth indeed,
and not some vile hoax,
then I am bound to you in need,
and your courage I would coax."

Hope gleamed briefly in the maiden's eye,
but then faded to duress,
yet would she not rather die,
then remain a bride to wickedness?

"There is but one way,
in which to save my soul,
that is by forcing upon him the day,
for his death, its rays, doth hold."

"If that be your only chance,
let us take action now.
Surely I will make him dance,
until the sun comes out from shadow!"

The knight fought the Devil,
all the terrible night long,
his courage was bold against the evil,
though his terror was very strong.

The duel took them outside,
just as the light of dawn was seen.
The rising sun glared into the Devil's eyes,
and to stone was turned the evil being.

The noble man had thus earned his wife,
and she was happy as never before.
They lived in peace for all their life,
and the Devil walked the earth no more.

The Safety of the Woods

The safety of the woods! He did not know whether he was being pursued yet or not, but nevertheless, he understood that he had to reach them. Only there, among the impossibly strong, bare narrow trunks and symmetrical branches of the woods, could he find true solace. He also knew that he had to reach them as soon as possible because *they* were after him.

Time! How much time did he still have? It was impossible to tell, so he knew that he must leave at once. Forsake, once more, the worldly possessions and human relationships that had grown under his care since the last time *they* had found him. He must escape to the woods!

Were they still following him? Had they *ever* been? It was too risky to wait and find out so he must flee at once. His eyes had been opened to the *possibility* of the thing, and that was all that mattered. It wasn't important *how* he knew. He believed that only a fool would wait for capture before recognizing that he was being pursued, and he was determined not to be a fool.

The man stuffed a small backpack with blue jeans and flannel shirts. Then he donned a similar outfit and the stiff,

black leather boots that the U.S. military had supplied him with. Then he left the house. He didn't bother to lock the door for the first time since the last chase had begun. Why bother? *They* would know that he had flown simply by his absence from the house, so there was no point in attempting to disguise it. Perhaps common thieves would desecrate his home and, in the careless and spontaneous act of random violence, provide an otherwise unattainable cloak between himself and *them*. *They* might think that he had been carried off instead of fleeing their clutching hands. He knew that it didn't really matter whether *they* chased him or not, because he knew they *could*. Therefore, he would struggle and sacrifice to maintain his lead.

Surely *they* knew that *he* knew, but that didn't matter either. *They* had been careless, or maybe he had just been rewarded for understanding his own intuition. Perhaps his primal instincts had become aware of the hunt before it had even begun? The result was the same either way; he would be gone when *they* came for him and he would outrun their pursuit at all costs. He was confident in his success because he had been doing it all of his life.

He followed the path up the hill, beyond the city lights, and reached the stream before the moon had fully risen. When it did, he indulged in a brief, respectful contemplation of its staggering beauty. He marveled at how it shone upon the writhing turmoil of water below him and understood more than ever that, as long as he maintained nothing more important *to* himself *than* himself, he would survive. He could allow nothing to burden him that could retard or

prevent complete and immediate flight, for he must be ever vigilant and watchful. He must always stay ahead of *them*. The moon exposed his profile and he caught sight of it in the rushing water. He was proud of the strength he saw in it, and the cunning.

Later, as he chose a tree that had thoughtfully grown in such a manner as to leave a hollow cavity near its trunk for him to sleep in, he wondered for the first time whether the lamentable existence that his relentless pursuers had forced upon him was worth the prices that he paid to stay alive. Or, he contrasted himself by considering the nobility in it; the admirably firm conviction to pay the price, no matter how dear.

He proudly refused the weakness of character that others might yield to. Their wills would not be strong enough to forfeit friends and family upon a moment's notice, so they would be caught. But he would not, because he had once again proven that he was strong enough to pay that woeful price. He laughed out loud as he crawled under the tree, then grew shy of the pride which had welled up within his breast, and laughed quietly until he fell asleep.

The morning sun shone down upon him, not through the impossibly strong, bare narrow trunks and symmetrical branches of the forest, but through the equally strong, bare narrow bars of a jail cell. His head ached and he remembered nothing of the prior night's desperate escape. He could hear a familiar voice speaking to an unfamiliar one in a room adjacent to his cell.

"I don't know what could have set him off this time," said the familiar voice. "He was sound asleep when I went to bed. The next thing I know you're at my door telling me that he had run off again."

The unfamiliar voice said, "Did he read or watch anything that might have scared him? Did you tell him a bedtime story?"

"No, officer, I make sure there's nothing to scare him, especially at bedtime. His doctor instructed us to avoid all manner of excitement. I think it must have been a dream. I fear that his condition is getting worse." She tried hard to stifle a sob before continuing, "Well, thank you for bringing him here. I hope the boys who found him will overcome their shock."

Footsteps approaching...her! It *was* her voice! The man rose to his feet and ran to the bars. "Mom!"

"Hello, Son." She hoped that her tired voice sounded to him like the ever-affectionate mother she no longer was.

"Can I go home now?" he asked timidly.

"Yes, you can go home now."

The Church of the Burning Soul

In a town of small stature and size,
an American town beneath mid-west dust,
lies hidden a tale from all holy eyes,
of horror, death and soul-tormented lust.

There among the green grasses grown,
and disguised against a horizon-less sky,
evils exist dwelling deep and unknown,
cringing in shadows of man's souls they lie.

Standing broken and shamed still can be seen,
'twixt withered vine and poisoned knoll,
the unholy remains of an unholy dream,
known as the Church of the Burning Soul.

Fair as the dawn it was in its age,
unburdened with sadness, its fields grew strong,
now all creatures walk clear of its rage,
the tale which I tell, it served as the stage.

Young and robust, fair of cheek and skin,
stood the young priest first chosen to lead,
whose duty it was to save those who had sinned,
learned and devout in his God's holy creed.

The first of its kind and new to the earth,
proudly he taught the townspeople to kneel,
before his God, so new in His birth,
who knew how to rule before how to feel.

'Twas long indeed before any trouble began,
nearly all attended, converted of faith,
through the many toils required of Man,
the Church grew bold by the doctrine it made.

Far and wide the priest did travel,
fresh converts from darkness he sought,
mightily wielding his judicious gavel,
and those who could not be bought, he fought.

'Twas on one such trek that he learned,
that his god was cruel, for disciple and not,
dwelt in a hell which allowed good things to burn.
Outside His Church, where were the morals He taught?

Deeper and darker, his soul grew to hate,
he prayed to the god he had never seen,
asking why this savage, unjust fate,
must befall His people as a nightmare dream.

Filled to brimming with angst and alarm,
as he witnessed the children's growth into sin,
that he began to ask himself, "Where lay the greater harm,
if a child's life be ended before evil could begin?"

Many a night for many a season,
the compassionate priest sought for answer,
until he despaired of ever seeing reason,
why children so pure, should grow into cancer.

A commiserate madness, it was to be sure,
to euthanize a child before it knew pain,
yet this occurred to him as the gentlest cure,
and was decided 'midst October rains.

Choosing but the eldest his dark path began,
he used their own trust to lure them inside,
most willing victims were they to his plan,
and only the weakest of them, at the end, cried.

A cellar of the church served as the tomb,
and amid wretched prayers the poison was dispensed.
As complete a shelter as mother's own womb,
the sinless children fell before his anger incensed.

From distant lands his victims were brought,
and never against their own will were they,
through belief in their god, in the web they were caught,
saddened but proud, they were removed from the day.

Grieving and torn, the folk threw their lives to God,
only through Him, could their sanity be saved.
Parents could speak only of the wrath of His rod,
therein the priest's safety from blame became paved.

For many years this madness, unchecked, reigned,
'til the underground vault within the church became filled.
Imagine the degree which would be their pain,
if they knew that they sat atop their children so stilled!

A divine vagrant passed through the town poor,
and to seek refuge and shelter at the church he did try.
He was offered a room, adjacent the tomb, on the floor,
and heard a voice from beneath which brought him to pry.

A dying child with grace in her death,
before the priest's poison claimed her last word,
spoke fully of the fate, to children bequeathed,
the vagrant learned all of her story and stirred.

He flew fast against the dark night,
toward the town of vast mourning below,
but his speed and his purpose did not miss the sight,
of the priest who watched the humble man go.

To arouse the whole town the poor traveler cried,
telling the tale of the Burning Soul.
A vengeful rage waged when they learned that inside,
the priest of the church, their children had stole.

The dark sky lightened with torch and with eye,
as a lynching host formed and sped to the place,
lightning cracked and sizzled the night sky,
as they beheld the church, now fallen from grace.

Deep into its caverns the vagrant led,
some splitting the horde in search of the priest,
a terrible weeping and gnashing of teeth 'tis said,
arose from the earth when the souls were released.

Into the sanctuary the search did take them,
and awestricken and humbled were they to find,
upon the giant crucifix they had built Him,
impaled and torn was the priest hanging blind.

Near to the roof he stood at the mast,
and quiet awe fell upon all who gazed in the air.
"How came he to hang upon the cross so steadfast,
if not the true hand of God placing him there?"

To prevent Man's fall from grace was the cause,
of the tale which I have sadly now told.
Deep in the reaches of unholy jaws,
dwells still the priest of the Burning Soul.

Through Morbid Eyes

A life filled with melancholy dreams,
can best be viewed through a morbid eye,
for where else is joy never what it seems,
if it be not fated amidst misery to die?

An acute, ominous perception is key,
as seen in the mind that anticipates its end,
to truly achieve eyes that cannot see,
and to forsake the tools required to mend.

For of all that is sought and held dear to mind,
and one of the few comforts afforded you and I,
is the graceful ease with which we all find,
that terrible sight, through morbid eyes.

So rest in peace and comfort once you know,
that Life must always, at best, be endured,
and trust in He who willed it to be so,
that Man will forever, in misery, be cured.

Do you understand the sweet release that I teach?
Dare you follow down this dark path?
Rather listen and compare all who will preach,
but always remember His promised wrath.

Live as you will, I will not cast a stone,
but I beg that you remain aware as you choose,
the direction you take each day while alone,
and choose for yourself, lest regardless, you lose.

An easy path is, perhaps, as good as a hard,
beware of roads leading to hypocrisy and lies,
yet perceive that each day shaves off a shard,
of the sad sight of life through morbid eyes.

Special Delivery!

Special delivery! Henry responded to the knock at the door grudgingly at first, peering through the curtain to ensure that opening his door would not be a waste of time. Henry hated wasting time. He saw the delivery truck idling in his driveway. The warm exhaust met with the early morning frost and resulted in a pleasant fog. *No, his time would not be wasted.*

When he opened the door, he saw the man already returning to his truck. He watched the driver wrench the gears into reverse and let the clutch out too fast leaving ugly black marks on the cement. In the street, another harsh grind rolled the vehicle forward and another took it out of sight.

Henry looked down in disappointment at the box. *How important could it be if he didn't even have to sign for it?* Still, it was a large package. Perhaps his time wasn't going to be wasted after all. He stooped to pick it up and remembered the corny OSHA posters which hung on the walls at work. He mimicked the correct posture to lift with his legs, not with his back, and found that he had wasted his time for the box was extraordinarily light. So light indeed, that he fancied it to be completely empty. Disappointment showed on his face once again as he carried it into the house.

It was too late to go back to sleep so he brewed some coffee and sat down to examine his gift. He had not ordered anything and therefore, had been expecting

nothing. The package bore none of the common shipping stamps and the sender had not even been identified. The only evidence to be found upon it was a word that appeared to have been scrawled in red crayon; *HENRY*. That was all.

His curiosity rose quickly in the short time he looked at it. The obvious course of action was to open it immediately, but something held him back. A shudder of fear ran through him and, for a moment, he considered tossing it into the dumpster outside. Then he remembered the cold morning and the frost upon the grass and realized that he didn't have any shoes on. He dismissed the idea simply because he felt that it would be a waste of time to put them on. *Besides*, he thought, *it would be crazy not to open the mysterious package.*

He found his keys and inserted the sharp end into the thick tape, then drew the key toward him. He felt a sharp, stinging pain upon his finger and cried out. He smacked it impulsively and felt the tiny body of an insect crush beneath his fingers. The pain was enormous, completely incommensurate with any bite or sting that he had ever felt.

He stumbled through the gloom to the bathroom and clicked on the light. A dusty fixture filled with dead moths emitted harsh, fluorescent light into the room. He was terrified to see that his finger was already purple and swollen. He looked at his hand for any clue as to what had bitten him but realized that he had wiped its gooey body off on his boxer shorts. He swallowed four aspirin and went back to the box.

Four or five steps away from the box he crunched another bug beneath his bare foot and was relieved to discover no pain this time. He looked into the enigmatic, troublesome package and his heart nearly stopped as he beheld hundreds of tiny spiders making their way out of it. It was not difficult for them as they easily leapt three or four feet in a bound.

Terrified, Henry switched on the lamp. More abrasive light filled the room. He whirled around to face the box in time to see a spider rear up on its hindmost legs and leap six feet into the air landing upon Henry's face. His cheek felt like someone had pinched him with barbed pliers. In a panic, he swatted at it but felt no satisfying crunch of the arachnid's fragile body.

Any reader who has ever felt the icky, sickening panic of stumbling into a spider's web while crawling under an old house or into an ill-used barn can begin to understand how Henry felt. In the light, he could see what appeared to be thousands of hairy black spiders crawling across the floor, up his chairs and down his curtains. Many of them were jumping on and off of his kitchen counter, crawling over the dirty dishes, looking for food.

Henry felt another intense pain, this time in his bare ankle, which brought him out of his shock and into stark realization of the bizarre scene before him. As implausible as it seemed, *someone* had mailed him a box of venomous spiders and he had to deal with it. He slapped at his forehead, cheek and ankle as he dodged to avoid the

crawling and leaping little beasts.

He was considerably impeded by the blinding pain but he knew that he had to get dressed if he was going to succeed in killing them. He began with his shoes, not bothering to lace them because he could not hope to fit his swollen ankles and toes into them anymore. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw that the skin on his face where he had been bitten, appeared to be rotting and had already turned a dark, sickly, blue-black. He could see where the venomous infection had spread through his veins by tracing the dark red lines that were now horribly apparent on his skin. *What would happen once the venom reached his heart?*

As he began to understand how lethal the spiders were, he accepted that he was probably going to die. Yet, there was something that he felt compelled to do first, a responsibility. He knew that he must seal his house to prevent the spiders from creeping off into the world outside.

He threw on a suede overcoat and a baseball hat for protection then ran into the kitchen. Now, purposely hunting the spiders, he felt the stupefying satisfaction of bloodlust as he felt each delicate body destroyed by his hand. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a large one rear up slightly, as they all did when preparing to leap, then jump onto his exposed calf. Henry screamed in pain and rage as the demon sank its tiny fangs into him. He killed it easily but the damage had been done. He had been bitten many times now by the deadly spiders and the pain nearly

overwhelmed him.

In desperation, he reached under the kitchen sink and found a can of ant and roach killer. He never had a problem with either pest but it had offered 50% more for free, so he had bought it instead of the more expensive and toxic spray for spiders. He knew that it had worked on the occasional grand-daddy long-legs around the house, but would it be strong enough for these monsters?

The spiders in the sink eyed him coldly as he sprayed them at point-blank range. They seemed to grin defiantly as their bodies foamed up and crumpled under the sizzling acid-spray. He turned upon the masses in his living room. They had either smelled or sensed his offensive and, as a flock of birds change their paths as one, seemingly without signal or cause, the spiders all turned towards him. They froze and stared menacingly at him with dark eyes, their bulbous black bodies pulsing with anticipation.

Henry grabbed some clear packing tape from his utility drawer and slapped it in place over his eyes. He couldn't see well but he knew that it no longer mattered. To prepare for the final battle, he sprayed himself with the poison, his hair, face, neck, arms and legs. The spray stung his many open wounds but he now paid little attention to the pain.

Henry faced the legion of spiders and sprayed a mist of ant and roach killer before him as he advanced. He didn't falter or give an inch when he saw them *all* rear up on their hindmost legs in preparation for a final, unified leap. As he

lay dying, Henry's only wish was that he hadn't wasted so much time.

The Guilty Flee

The prison walls were dark, 'tis true,
painted an ugly, monotonous hue,
but the blackened trees were far worse,
thought he, as if they were cursed.

Pursued or not, one can never tell,
so flee on, else be recovered by Hell.
Still, tiresome and wounded was he,
when at last he slept against a tall tree.

*A black bird alighted,
by chance he was sighted,
for all was black here,
and in each night was a year.*

*He caught the bird unawares,
but it plucked at his hairs,
and pecked at his eyes,
so he squeezed until it died.*

Waking in the cold he found,
that a snow lay upon the ground.
Rising, he fled once again,
through the forest and fear was his friend.

At length the treetops grew sparse and scattered,
and he could see beyond them a sky had been shattered,
could this have been the sky he had seen,
so long ago, when boy he had been?

A dog barked in the night,
and set his body to flight,
seeking only to be warm,
ruing the day he had been born.

Perhaps he will avoid capture,
but will never know true rapture,
such is how the guilty flee,
from themselves, so desperately.

Walled Without Walls

Stay with me but a little while,
just long enough to notice my style,
appreciate who I am today,
for soon I will be gone away.

What more do you ask,
that I cannot be?
For I still pursue,
the man that is me.

Walled without walls,
tethered without leash,
I struggle and fall,
still seeking release.

Know you the cure?
Know you the cause?
Know you of one pure,
worthy of applause?

For I do not, nor have I ever,
believed such has ever walked,
so I am left to alchemically endeavor,
to become such a being as I have just talked.

Imperfectly made, less perfectly learned,
exquisitely lost and hopelessly burned,
forgive me or not, for I ask not of you,
to condone what I think or all that I do.

The Moment Too Late

What manner of devilry plays,
this trick upon the mind,
whilst we move in guided haze,
as fools led from behind?

How clever is the Mage's derision,
that allows us not the answer to see,
until we are past the time for decision,
only too late arriving correctly?

The moment itself shines in my sight,
as the instant the die is cast.
How oft does it alter our flight,
whilst we mourn mistakes of the past?

Many such errors are not,
the only demons that haunt our lives,
but inquire deeply of aged thought,
if but *one* demon alone can thrive.

For they do not easily die,
these regrettable human errors,
committed with anguished cry,
when the All becomes a hall of mirrors.

Yet more than once will they occur,
and before them hope is vain,
for they will surprise and disturb,
your memory once again.

Most are merely embarrassments in fact,
far exceeding those that bring true loss,
but I ask how many swings of the axe,
can we regret upon the cross?

But *one* is sufficient to goad,
us onto divergent paths,
often to a far rougher road,
but *one* ghost can revive the past.

The Would-Be Zombies

"Arise," spake the tyrant to the newborn twins,
whom she would shield from all but her own sin,
and the twins awoke, sharing the tyrant's face and mind,
save for their eyes, which were closed beyond blind.

"Surely if they do not awaken soon,
they must walk in the darkness of doom,
far more trouble I see than what's told,
which they cannot know until they grow old."

In a desperate attempt to open their mind,
I grasped at a doll and removed its blonde rind,
the despicable thing fell to the floor,
as its poison, onto the floor, outpoured.

"Awaken!" I cried, but then was smote from behind,
by the cold understanding that the children weren't mine;
that they might yet prefer to accept the tyrant's wish,
and suffice to sup from what is put in their dish.

"Goodbye," I cried as away I drifted,
thinking myself sand, through their lives sifted.

"Goodbye," I cried at what could have been,
had not the tyrant such control of their sin.

The Lighthouse Spectre

Part One - His Nature

He oft-assumed the human shape,
for there he was at his ease,
inside the form of civilized ape,
he walked among them as he pleased.

And what could bring greater disguise,
than a mere man among men?
Thusly he appeared to their eyes,
while they fatally mistook him for kin.

He could, at will, change his shape,
as water takes the contour of its glass,
any form was his to wear and take,
limited only by density of mass.

So if a bear he chose to be,
the animal would be rather small,
but large, if he chose a fish in the sea,
for he could not alter his size at all.

Another virtue of his human form
and a testament to his own skill,
was that his physique was above the norm,
and he could change this image at will.

So this he chose when at his ease,
more than any other shape,
but when hunting or when he flees,
many faces were his to fake.

Have you guessed or must I tell,
what precisely was this being?
For I will not have your questions quelled,
and, thereby, prevent true seeing.

The mortals had named him many times,
as vampyre, demon or ghost,
and, of him, they accused vile crimes,
of which he was innocent of most.

Part Two - The Threat of Man

Quite aware, was he, that Man,
now possessed much greater power,
for upon speedy wheels they now ran,
their machinations growing by the hour.

They replaced weapons of wood,
and sharpened tips of stone,
with projectiles of lead that could,
be fired from powder blown.

And dangerous beyond any other,
was the advance in communication,
for now they all spoke as brother,
through wires spread over Creation.

In past days, they could not tell,
each other of what they had seen,
he had seemed an apparition from Hell,
a ghostly being in a dream.

Such skills added greatly to the hunt,
when the prey could quickly summon aid,
that it was now the legend he sought to blunt,
the myth they had so long of him made.

But always, there were the eyes,
which bled from guilty soul,
inopportunately belying disguise,
leading Man, the truth to know.

At such times they would rise,
and the hunter became the prey,
exposed as different to their eyes,
as the night-time from the day.

But escape he always had,
for he could disguise himself quite well,
and if he was pursued by men gone mad,
he was said to have gone to Hell.

If a building was set afire to trap,
what could the ghost not be?
He could take to the air with wings a-flap,
or if in the woods, a tree.

Imagine how difficult it would be,
to catch a spectre with chameleon shape,
even if the change, a mortal chanced to see,
reason would deny it even as they stood agape.

So utterly safe from Man he felt,
that he often walked among them bare.
They rarely guessed that a monster dwelt,
watching with wicked stare.

Part Three - The Lighthouse

He lived now upon seven floors,
of a lighthouse in the sea,
felled first, were mortal doors,
for these he did not need.

Then the peninsula was availed,
making an island of the tower,
he required no craft upon which to sail,
perfect isolation was its power.

The lighthouse walls,
at the base were thick,
and as upward it crawls,
became narrow and slick.

Within the interior gloom,
stood seven ghastly floors,
varying greatly, each vast room,
yet nothing between and no doors.

The chamber on the highest peak,
was walled only in glass,
where revolved the ship-guiding beacon,
standing sentry over the dark fluid mass.

A great hearth was shared,
upon each floor of the tower,
and the blaze always glared,
fed only by his strong willpower.

Bereft of windows allowing sight,
save from the highest part,
from which shone the guiding light,
for he preferred windows of art.

Of these he had a vast number,
from famed and unknown hands,
preferring the impressionistic thunder,
of seascapes and hidden lands.

The furniture he had was wrought,
and carved wholly by hand,
and each piece was dearly bought,
for each artisan died for the damned.

There was a particular piece,
that had withstood the ages,
the pipe organ, offering release,
upon which he played out his rages.

Part Four - The Sadness

And should it surprise you,
that he, too, felt human emotion?
Could a mind exist that knew,
not the renderings of devotion?

If the whole truth now be told,
I must further have you see,
that, excepting that his mind was old,
nearly human would he be.

Love and fear, and desires dear,
though of a somewhat varied strain,
were all his to wield and steer,
him through his immortal reign.

More acutely than all others,
was the loneliness he felt,
a dark abyss that chokes and smothers,
and in it, he forever dwelt.

Necessarily, perhaps, in ageless life,
sad emotions rise in import,
until something is done to ease their strife,
and thus, admit cares of a new sort.

With immortality, one may begin reeling,
from the endless amusements to be found,
and for many years his mirth knew no ceiling,
his soul was expressed through joyous sound.

Until he had long outlived this peace,
and at his raging soul he tore.
Reflection and thought brought no release,
for wisdom brings only questions more.

As with philosophers of the mortal kind,
when no answers are expected to come,
feelings of worthlessness will find,
a home in the mind they sprang from.

Such is now, the lamentable state,
of the wearied Immortal One,
so while for answer he must wait,
his heart has lost its will to run.

His eyes, through faulty ducts or guilt,
bled tears of unholy red,
while within the soul, left to wilt,
his eyes became those of the dead.

For his guilt was forever housed,
in the immovable walls of his intellect,
there, fermenting and growing aroused,
was hatred of a Self he could not respect.

For the loneliness he sought to stave,
he maintained an enormous black bird,
and when the raven began to rave,
the voice of a wizard was heard.

Lyric was the name bestowed,
upon the stealthy, clever beast,
and as though through uncanny code,
the two spoke through thought released.

Such were the lonesome pair,
atop the lighthouse in the sea,
watching from his cylindrical lair,
the shifting tides of humanity.

Part Five - The Boy

It was during one bold rule,
while serving as mayor, it chanced,
that he was befriended by a mender of tools,
and he knew the lad's skill was enhanced.

The two were, for a time,
as dear as father and son,
and when the boy wished for a dime,
he was given, by the father, a ton.

Discussions they enjoyed of God and Reason,
for the boy was, himself, quite enlightened,
and he understood concepts of intellectual treason,
holding disbelief in a God that was frightened.

This impressed the immortal so much,
that he took the boy to see death,
to, perhaps, test his need for the crutch,
and prayers came out on his breath.

After many years flowed slowly by,
and the boy began to mature,
the being feared the tears he might cry,
would alert the lad to his true nature.

Often he found himself turning abrupt,
when the crimson tears would flow,
and the emotion within him erupt,
for fear that his son would know.

When finally, the day of doom occurred,
while mourning a chance death in the street,
drawn by the circling of a carrion bird,
the boy and bloody tears did meet.

Instead of beauty, the boy felt only,
loathsome horror without pity,
for his was the sorrow of the lonely,
he knew well the cruelty of the city.

It was this action that led,
to the loss of immortal trust,
the boy saw upon what the immortal fed,
and was repulsed by his unholy lust.

The immortal knew deep despair,
and fled from the city,
but as time softened the air,
the boy's hate transformed to pity.

Yet the Immortal One would never know,
for to the city he would not return,
banished by his shame to ever go,
and within him the loss still burned.

Part Six - The Music

Upon the organ he would play,
the eternal mourning song,
and, from below, men would say,
the sound, upon earth, did not belong.

Ethereally it floated from the tower,
and brought tears to the eyes of the maids.
Conquerors, too, succumbed to its power,
and, through it, peace ended their raids.

Miles upon miles the mournful song carried,
wafting through kingdoms all around,
for the sound, with his soul, was married,
its effect borne by hearts together bound.

Impossible to ascertain its source,
for the winds carried it so,
without diminishing in force,
and so spread as each gust would blow.

Some have called it the Siren's Song,
and others claim 'tis the Harpy's Cry,
but when a note lingered impossibly long,
'twas said that a mortal man must die.

Part Seven - The Hunt

From grain or from fruit,
he gained no mortal health,
his appetite was only soothed,
by skill and sudden stealth.

Carnivorously cruel,
ever upward he evolved,
his body embraced the soul in duel,
but to his fate he had long devolved.

Not entirely human was his diet,
though they were far the sweeter,
when compared to cattle or rabbit,
a bloody, living theater.

He disdained meat of any kind,
but lusted for gallons of blood,
mutilation was used to disguise the find,
distracting the path from where he stood.

He struck in odd, varying locations,
often engaging with the victim socially.
He savored his practiced recitations,
and mocked the end of mortality.

The shape-shifting creature was all,
the prey had ever feared,
but his eyes held her enthralled,
so she did not flee as he neared.

After he had fed upon her, he slept,
her blood satisfying his crave,
he did not laugh but wept,
with emotion from the orgiastic rave.

Such was the hold he had over his prey,
that they were rarely in regret,
and were often willfully carried away,
into the violent stage that he set.

Only rarely, although vividly,
did he elongate the suffering and pain,
revering such moments triumphantly,
torturing himself with every victim slain.

Part Eight - The Others

Whatever year his immortal birth knew;
however spawned this shapeless being,
he lived and lived on without a clue,
of the shadowy Others lurking, seeing.

They watched him coldly from the dark,
awaiting their own time to proceed,
until a warm summer eve ended in spark,
they reached out to him as fiends in need.

They asked him to join their raucous crew,
or be eternally despised and hunted down.
Yet, instinctively, from them he withdrew,
and turned back peacefully toward the town.

True as their word, the immortals attacked,
with the varied weapons of their many shapes.
They bit and tore, kicked and scratched,
and he was beaten nearly to death by the apes.

Yet kill him, they could not, though they tried,
for his immortality, like theirs, was eternal.
They eventually tired of his pitiable cries,
and disbanded into night infernal.

The Lighthouse Spectre lives on,
though few have seen his ghost.
His sorrowful tale, from dusk 'til dawn,
is sung by Hell's own host.

The Pardoner's Tale

(Based on the 14th century short-story by Geoffrey Chaucer)

Early enough one ill-fated day of October,
for even drinking men to be sober,
three withered wights gamed with dice.
Their skins were verily sickened over,
a loud testament to every wicked vice.

Their tongues spoke with ignorant breath,
but even dunces hearken at Death,
for when the undertaker's cart rang by,
its bells were heard with every step,
a calm betrayed the unanimous fear to die.

"Arise," said One before resuming the game,
"and learn you of the corpse's name."
"I need not rise," replied Two soon,
"I have already heard the story same,
and for his name, he was called *Sam-soun*."

Hearing this jest with untroubled mind,
a crone arose and announced from behind,
"Death, they say, took him with spear,
whilst he slumped in sepulchral wine,
and wrought from him his life's last tear.

A privy thief, called Death by men,
before whom we should all ready for our end,
for he has slain legions in this way,
and lest, by my own word, he descend,
I will speak no further of Death this day."

So the aged crone rose as if to leave,
but was halted by the Third of the thieves.

"Your words cannot be issued so lightly,
before going you must first, their enigma, relieve,
and tell us where Death can be found nightly."

The crone smiled up the road at a tree,
and told them where Death could be found by the three.

The drunken ones arose to give death to Death,
and began the road, of violence decreed,
within and without were heard the oaths of their breath.

But the tree instead hid coins of golden wealth,
which they put to their lips and pockets with stealth.

One was first chosen to return to the inn,
for more drink to sustain their health,
before the division of the horde could begin.

Saith Two to Three as he leaned upon his staff,
"Would not a wise man prefer to a third, a half?"

So Two and Three plotted the end of the first,
and soon fell upon him while the Devil did laugh,
then, from One's own wine-bag, slaked they their thirst.

But the fallen One had developed his own scheme,
and had met an apothecary with a plot he had dreamed.

A sinister poison into their liquor he poured,
and returned to exact the wicked plan, that seemed,
would remove Two and Three without bloodshed or gore.

And so the three thieves died upon the tree,
each of the other's and their own treachery.

As we must call each decision our own,
Death found not one that night, but three,
and somewhere in the gloom still smiles the crone.

Until I Am Pleased

Peer into an open door,
into spreading human gore,
for it has first reached your home,
to rob you of your wife and throne.

Chase your hatred all the globe,
don once more your holy robe,
find the monster who did you wrong,
kill him slowly, end his song.

Return to find your family has fled,
and those who remained, now lie dead.
Battle again your wicked enemies,
fight forever or until I am pleased.

Moses and the Jack 'Muh

The moon rose over the magnolia trees and the mysterious night-birds cawed raucously and frightened the men. They longed for the nocturnal avians back home, who sang melodious tunes that uplifted their spirits. They were returning to the plantation known as Verdi et Rouge located one-hundred miles north of the burgeoning city of New Orleans.

Their master had sent them to the city to procure a rare ingredient for one his *remedies*, which they had successfully found only in the superstitious slave-quarter. A disreputable woman bearing the name Madame la Fin du Monde had sold them the rare ingredient from her private chamber in a dilapidated brothel. She stood well under five feet tall and wore elegant but ancient silks around her rotund body. Her black eyes burned intensely as if they were nearly bursting with secrets and Moses had sensed the magic within her immediately.

They now walked the lonely road home, although the *road* was merely a mound of earth that had been raised slightly above the water table by the enormous effort of slaves just like themselves. Moses was older than Jeremiah by nearly forty years but stood almost as tall as the younger man. He had been born into hard labor and had earned the strong muscles that lined his thick, black body. He had picked up many stories from the men at the various labor camps he had known and now entertained Jeremiah by retelling them to pass the time.

They watched as a lone water-moccasin slithered through the brackish water that glistened like a mirror of polished onyx under the moonlight. The wind moved slowly through the trees and the swaying of moss-lined boughs seemed to whisper their names.

"Do you b'lieve in h'aints, Moses?" Jeremiah asked nervously.

"Course I do, 'n you bettah b'lieve 'n 'm too! Out hea', they 'most outnumber us black folk."

"Fo' real?"

"Lawd, yes."

They walked in silence for several quiet miles until Jeremiah asked Moses, "Why don't you tell me a story 'bout one."

Moses stopped walking and said, "What's the p'int in that? They'd hea' us talkin' an' come lookin' f'us straightway t' be sho'!"

The heavy, tired trodding of their feet was the only sound for another mile. Suddenly Jeremiah pointed into the trees to the west.

"There! D'ya see it Mo'?"

Moses *did* see it but only responded by walking faster.

Jeremiah was entranced by the orb of light he saw bouncing in the woods and foolishly left the road to pursue it. He was already hip-deep in the mire when Moses heard the splashing and turned around. He ran back toward his friend who continued to move with all his strength toward the receding fairy light.

"Come back hea', Jeremiah! It's jus' a spirit o' the woods yo' chasin'!"

If Jeremiah heard the older man, he gave no indication of it. He forced his way through the thick muck until the water covered his head. Moses knew that he couldn't save the younger man for the swamp was like quicksand. He hung his head and prayed for Jeremiah's immortal soul.

At length, he set his jaw toward the dark road before him and began to walk. He did not turn his head but his peripheral vision made him aware of an eerie glow in the woods that was keeping pace with him.

"Ma used to tell 'dem stories o' the ghosts of runaway slaves," he said aloud to the night. "Mebbe that's what they is."

He attempted to reassure himself that the apparition wasn't malicious and that he had nothing to fear but soon had to admit that it *was* the evil Jack 'Muh stalking him and not the well-meaning guiding light of runaway slave's lantern.

Suddenly, the sinister will o' wisp tired of the game and

appeared in front of Moses. Its skin was far darker than Moses's own and he could see that its back was sorely hunched. Its thin, wraith-like arms waved wildly in the air and Moses recoiled in horror as he saw that the fingertips of its right hand glowed eerily as it spun them in a deft circle, creating the illusion of a single orb of ghostly light.

Its eyes glowed dully on a bulbous head that resembled a grotesque, black pumpkin. The hideous maw was grossly oversized and grinned with long, wicked teeth as it advanced toward him.

Moses was awoken by a small band of travelling Freeman on the road the following morning. His skin was severely desiccated and his hair had turned pure white. They roused him with cool water and he related to them his tale.

When he had finished, a small woman approached him. She had the same mystic aura that he had noticed while in the presence of Madame la Fin du Monde although this woman wore a different face.

"What do you have in your bag, old fool?" she queried him sternly.

"I have only this," he replied defensively and withdrew the mandrake root that he had purchased for his master.

The sly houngan priestess smiled and said, "It is to this that you owe your life, for the Jack 'Muh despises its reek and will not harm those who carry it."

Moses traveled with the group until he reached the plantation known as Verdi et Rouge where he told his story to his master in its full, honest detail, and was cruelly flogged for helping Jeremiah escape.

What the Stars Saw

Who first saw the trees grow tall?

From tiny seeds they began so small.

Who saw the first rainbow in the sky?

A promise from God, never to die.

Who saw the first bird fly?

Up into the air so high.

Who saw the sun first set?

And was there when the moon he met.

Who saw the rivers first flow?

Winding down mountains, oceans to grow.

Who saw the first babe born?

Crying aloud, helpless and forlorn.

Who saw the first wars of Man?

And witnessed his blood spilled upon the land.

And who saw Man's first kiss?

Why the stars, of course, saw all of this!

When Sadness Slept

To a seeker such as I,
many truths are aught but lie,
most of sin is consequence,
and virtue is mere coincidence.

Sad, soul-dreamers like me,
know not how it feels to be free,
for melancholia lurks closely behind,
in a land of light, shadows we will we find.

But we can watch the children play,
and find new marvels in every day,
and if, in the end, there is treasure kept,
it lies in the moments when Sadness slept.

Delusions of a Dying Poet

SCENE 1

The curtain rises to reveal a distinctly lower-class living room. There is a weathered couch centered underneath a large bay window and a tiny, badly chipped dining table with three matching chairs placed around it. For ornament, the ladies of the house have collected porcelain figurines and have artfully placed them around the room. Although the dwelling appears to be quite poor, the overall cleanliness of the house is a testament to the two women who apparently devote a large portion of their time to its upkeep. One understands that these heroic efforts alone prevent the house from falling into immediate decay.

Two ladies sit facing each other on either end of the sofa. They hold mismatched teacups and are talking softly, the obvious need for discretion showing upon their sere countenances. They appear to be terribly concerned as they speak confidentially to one another. The elder gazes out the window with the rigid stare of the melancholic while the younger woman, more set to her task, sees only her mother's pained visage. Through the window, the rain can be seen clearly as much of it adheres to the glass and drips down the pane.

Wife: I still maintain that we commit a horrible sin towards him.

Daughter: Mother, you simply cannot look at it that way.

He needs to feel accomplished, now more than ever or, (*hesitates*) his health may never improve.

Wife: But through lies?

Daughter: Yes, Ma'am, if need be, with lies. (*She is determined to relieve her mother's guilt and has convinced herself of the rightness of her actions.*) They are not such treacherous lies, are they? Surely you agree that his health would improve if he believed that his life-long dream had been realized. He needs it so badly mother and it might be fun!

Wife: I agree that he would benefit by the ruse, but I should never speak of the deceit of my husband as fun.

Daughter: Oh, think about it mother! Give me the benefit of the doubt. I'm not a cruel person, I didn't mean *fun*. I want so badly to be able to say these things to him, and for them to be true, but the truth is, although you and I may enjoy his writing, he may not possess the talent that is required of the great, published writers.

Wife: (*Always defending her husband, even when he was not besieged, turns to confront her daughter but softens before she speaks.*) I have always enjoyed reading his stories, (*She gazes out the window again and tears can be seen welling in her eyes.*) especially his poetry.

Daughter: I as well, Mother. (*She, too, affects her mother's sad, sightless gaze and directs it at the rain*

outside.) It's a pity the publishers do not agree.

Wife: (*Tears falling freely*)

Curtain Falls

SCENE 2

The curtain rises on the living room upon a different day, as evidenced by a wardrobe change and the morning sun filtering into the room. A tall, dapper gentleman stands in the doorway.

Wife: Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Conrad. You know that I hate to inconvenience you but it will mean so much to him.

Daughter: And we promised him that you were coming today and he's terribly excited to meet you.

Conrad: (*Removing his hat*) Not an inconvenience at all, dear ladies. Believe me when I say that nothing would please me more than interviewing your father (*bows very deeply toward the daughter*) and your husband. (*He bows toward the mother, though not as deeply.*)

Wife: Then if you require nothing further, and are prepared to meet him, then I will show you to his room now.

Conrad: I require nothing, Ma'am. Let us begin at once.

You say he is very ill?

Wife: I am afraid so, you see, he has smoked tobacco for the entirety of his life and it has withered him away inside.

Conrad: I see. Does he take medication?

Daughter: (*Betraying her bitter contempt*) Never, sir, unless one names whiskey a medication.

Wife: I can attest that, for the last decade of our lives, he has lived on little more than whiskey, tobacco and his lifelong hope of becoming a respected writer.

Conrad: (*Growing uncertain.*) I see. Well, here we are. Shall I introduce myself or await you here?

Wife: I am certain that he will require precious little in the way of preparation, sir. He has never taken much interest in his appearance and, besides, there's so very little that can be done in that regard now. (*She slips off into a sorrowful reverie, her downcast eyes shimmering with tears.*)

Daughter: (*Nestling her mother in her arms.*) Shall I go in, Mother?

Wife: No, I will do it. (*She regains her composure and knocks upon the door.*)

Poet: Who's there? (*His voice is gruff at first but grows affectionate as he recognizes the soft signature of his wife's*

knock.) Dear woman, why knock? Come in, come in!
(*She holds an index finger to her lips as a gesture to Conrad, enters the room and closes to door behind her.*)

Conrad: (*Quietly to Daughter*) Tell me, Ma'am, have any of his stories been accepted by a publisher?

Daughter: (*Flushing*) No, sir. Not precisely published at all, ever. You see, the editors and agents to whom he has applied over the years have all criticized him quite harshly and we have had to fabricate their *widespread success* to prevent him from doing himself harm. (*She turns away dramatically, putting her hands upon her face to cover her tears.*) That must sound terrible.

Conrad: (*Immediately grasping the opportunity, takes her hand and gently pivots her around to embrace her.*) Not at all, my dear. It rings, to me, of the deep devotion and love that you and your mother obviously have for the poor man. Tell me, however, do you mean to say that *none* of his work has ever been accepted for print?

Daughter: (*Unable to answer, merely nods meekly with downcast eyes and rests her head upon his chest.*)

Conrad: And you are certain that he believes that his writing is renowned?

Daughter: (*Nods, without looking up.*)

Conrad: I see. (*He speaks nervously and takes to chewing*

his upper lip while he considers the fragility of the situation centered upon the deluded man behind the door.)

Curtain Falls

SCENE 3

The curtain rises to reveal the poet's sickbed positioned under the only window in the small room. There is a pitiable fire under the mantle and a drawing table with a single chair adjacent to it, which is warm to the touch due to its close proximity to the fire. The remainder of the room is bare of details. The poet lays upon the bed at full length, which results in his ankles resting beyond the mattress.

He is not as old as he appears to be, for his spirit-soaked, leathery skin has the effect of adding decades to his appearance. His eyes vary from a dim, cataract-stare to the bright optimism of a child upon Christmas morning. His wife sits upon the bed at his side and is holding his hand between her two.

Poet: *(With the eagerness of a child.)* So he has come at last you say? *(Instantly affecting a pompous, self-important demeanor.)* From which publication am I to be hounded and pitilessly coerced into commenting upon my varied, important works? *(Reverts back to the childish eagerness which, it is clear, reflects his truer nature. His ego ebbs and flows thusly throughout the play.)* Has he

really come this time?

Wife: Yes, my Love, he is here. He waits outside this very minute.

Poet: Well show him in, dear lady, show him in. It would not due for a great writer to tarnish his reputation as a gentleman by having the press rot outside his door. Show him in.

Wife: (*In a moment of weakness, or strength, she nearly exposes the hoax.*) I would like to tell you something, my love, before you speak with him. I have been awaiting an opportune moment but have found myself to have procrastinated beyond that luxury now.

Poet: (*With a haughty laugh*) Dearest woman, I can take only so much praise and attention in one afternoon. I must insist that we speak privately after my duty to the press is obliged.

Wife: (*The tears are heavy in her eyes as she silently acquiesces.*) Yes dear, it must wait. (*She rises from the bed, walks to the door and motions for Conrad to enter. As he draws near, she whispers in his ear beyond the hearing of the bed-ridden poet.*) Please sir, I must demand your highest word of honor that you will not, under any circumstances, reveal the truth of his career.

Conrad: (*With a slight bow*) You have my word, Madam, as a gentleman, a Christian and as a compassionate human

being.

Wife: (*Leading Conrad into the room*) Dear, this is Mr. Conrad from the paper. He has come to ask you some questions about your, (*pause*) long career. (*She virtually flees the room.*)

Poet: (*Rising up from the waist as well as he can and extends his right hand to the reporter.*) How do you do young man?

Conrad: (*Jumping deftly into his role*) I am very well, sir, but more importantly to the world of literature, how do *you* do?

Poet: Well now, you may tell them that I will yet live to pen another masterpiece. Please, have a seat next to the fire. I may mention that this chair and table are the very ones that endured the long hours of thought that resulted in my greatest tales.

Conrad: I am honored to occupy them for even a moment, sir. Quite honored indeed.

Poet: (*Assuming an air of the hurried businessman*) So, my boy, what is it that I may do for you today?

Conrad: (*Coughs nervously into his fist, withdraws a handkerchief from his breast pocket and generally fidgets for fully half a minute.*) Well, sir, the paper has received dozens, or rather hundreds, of letters from your many

readers wishing to know the details about your personal life. They wish to know the particulars of the roads you chose that have led to the spectacular, ah, insight and humor, that can be perceived in your writings.

Poet: (*Quite pleased to hear it*) Well now, I suppose that it may indeed be of some interest to them. Some practical use, as well, if I may speak with complete candor. The great majority of the general populace simply muddle their way through life without truly grasping the context in which they are, themselves, living! Perhaps you will consider that as you write this interview and find a way to help the poor souls understand. It is our duty, you see, to assist those who are less fortunate than ourselves in every way possible, and this with the sole intent of furthering Mankind's aggregate understanding. Don't you agree, Mr. Conrad?

Conrad: (*Having difficulty believing his ears*) Quite so, sir, quite so.

Poet: Well, my boy, I have succeeded in maintaining the strictest of privacies for such a noteworthy figure as myself, and as a result, have very little knowledge of the proper course of these things. How shall we begin?

Conrad: Well, if it pleases you, simply begin at the beginning, as they say. I am confident that we will soon arrive at the heart of your brilliant career.

Poet: So we shall, my boy.

Conrad: If I may chance a request, Sir?

Poet: Anything you like.

Conrad: It is only that you address me by my first name, which is Joseph, or merely Conrad. You see, I have my degree from the university now and will soon be starting a family of my own, and I do not consider it appropriate to be called *boy*.

Poet: And right you are, Joseph it is then. Well now, if there are no further nomenclatural impediments that I should be made aware of, I shall tell you more about myself than you may care to know. (*His quiet laugh gives way to a hoarse, rasping cough.*)

Conrad: Are you all right, sir? Is there anything that I can bring you?

Poet: (*Dabbing at his nose with a kerchief*) Nothing that lasts, my boy, nothing that lasts long enough to help at all. But since you ask, perhaps you would be so kind as to pour a glass of the Scotch whiskey behind you there, and help yourself to some as well if you are of the mind.

Conrad: (*Does as he was asked and is, in fact, grateful for the liquor as he feels very much out of his realm of comfort with the role. He hands the poet a glass and returns to his seat.*)

Poet: Well then, I was first assigned my title as *poet* during

my fourth year of education. A program of sorts, or a club if you prefer, was made available to me by recommendation of an instructor on the merits of a simple, rhyming short story I had written in class. I learned absolutely nothing of the skill in those days, or in any other classrooms, but carried with me from that day forward the noble title of Poet.

Conrad: Your parents were relieved from the burden of payment for this special opportunity, based upon the merits of your first story-poem, I am sure?

Poet: *(A little flustered at the inference)* Now that you pose the question, I cannot recall whether the tuition was complementary or not. *(He recovers)* But I know that it must have been, for I remember clearly that they all greatly esteemed the poem.

Conrad: I am equally certain, sir.

Curtain Falls

SCENE 4

The poet's sickbed on a different day. The poet's wife sits upon her knees in the latter stages of stoking the fire. The poet is sitting up in bed and looks far more virile than in the last scene. He is drinking coffee this time instead of whiskey and every part of him, from his groomed hair, his lustrous eyes and his posture, now speak to the robust

recovery of his health.

Poet: (*Absent for now are his haughty airs*) Can you believe that I have finally achieved what I have desired for so long, my love?

Wife: (*Without facing him*) You have deserved this for so many years.

Poet: But that I should actually achieve it electrifies and overwhelms me. (*He drifts off into a daydream for several minutes.*) Tell me, how did you collect my works and submit them to the publisher without my knowledge?

Wife: It was easy, my dear. You have slept so much as of late. (*Her partially deceitful answer gives way to vague, fiddling gestures.*)

Poet: (*Smiling warmly*) You have always been cunning, my life's only love. Please sit with me upon the bed for a moment.

His voice has changed, it is now passionate, yet tender, in texture. We understand that this was the voice of the poet as a romantic youth and that these charms have only now been revived from decades of dormancy. His wife obliges him with downcast eyes that reveal her deep sorrow and regret for misleading her husband. The poet grasps her hand in his and gingerly raises her face to meet his gaze with a finger below her chin.

Never have I owed you a greater portion of my happiness than I do at this moment. *(He begins to choke up with tears.)* I have lived with this dream, this obsession, for so many years. I have surrendered myself before it, knelt and worshipped it above all others, even you. I fear that I have neglected you and my daughter to such a degree that I will be forever unable to forgive myself.

She starts to disagree but he quiets her with a sentimental finger placed upon her lips. She closes her eyes, torn between the ecstasy of evocative submission to her lover, and the bitter remorse and contrition that looms over her conscience for the deceit; the very same deceit that has rallied him to such romance.

Above all else, I cherish you for your undying faith and the many instances of courage you have shown throughout the years we have shared. I...I- *(His voice cracks and degrades into the sob of the eternally relieved, and he embraces her. While his face is turned, his wife's pain and torment, as well as the resulting weariness and spent emotion, is evident on her face.)*

Curtain Falls

SCENE 5

The curtain rises to reveal the frail woman sitting alone in the living room. Her face is lost to self-reproachful introspection as she focuses intently on nothing through the window. The sun is shining brilliantly and illuminates the dust in the air as it enters the room. Daughter enters in the gay, free-spirited manner of youth.

Daughter: Why Mother, whatever are you doing? I declare that you are the only unhappy creature beneath the sky anymore!

Wife: (*Mumbles an unintelligible something to avoid ignoring her daughter's words completely.*)

Daughter: Mr. Conrad is due this afternoon, is he not? (*We understand from her tone that her words are more conversational than quizzical, for she already knows that he is expected.*)

Wife: (*Relenting*) Yes, dear, he is coming today.

Daughter: (*Nervously*) Mother, upon his last visit, his third I believe, he asked me to consider joining him on a jaunt through the woods. May I please go?

Wife: (*Has anticipated the shy interest that Conrad and her daughter feel for one another.*) Yes, my dear, you may accompany Mr. Conrad.

Daughter: (*Gleefully*) Oh, thank you Mother! He is, you may have noticed, rather a handsome man, and so very distinguished.

Wife: (*Offers a wave of her hand that neither acquiesces with or contradicts her daughter's words.*)

Curtain Falls

SCENE 6

Poet's room, with him sitting fully upright bed. It is no longer a sickbed, for his health has returned in full and only habit inhibits his quitting it. Mr. Conrad is seated at his usual place near the mantle. He has dutifully filled an entire notebook with the poet's pompous and digressive speeches.

Poet: So you see, my boy, that it has all been a simple matter of cause and effect. I have given every portion of myself, even those that are not customarily offered, to my art. That is how to succeed in any of the penned arts, be the field journalism or fiction.

Conrad: Have I told you that I am considered quite accomplished in the field of fiction as well, sir?

Poet: (*Clearly dismayed by the words*) Indeed? How so?

Conrad: (*Relishing the false-celebrity's jealousy*) Why, I

claim three number one sellers in the New York Times in the past five years alone! Two before that with numerous smaller achievements in-between.

Poet: (*Considers this information with a frown until he decides that Conrad is merely envious of his own, well-deserved success.*) Now, now, my boy, we must not put on airs. You see, I, more than any mortal walking the earth will understand the insatiable lust for renown that you must feel in my presence, but I simply cannot condone deceit and exaggeration.

Conrad: (*Insulted*) But it is true, sir! As I sit here I am currently among the most revered writers of our day.

Poet: Come now, this behavior is bound to lead to no good, for only diligence and (*eyes the younger man pompously*) *talent* lead to widespread publication.

Conrad: (*Aghast with incredulity*) There can be no denying it for I can easily prove it to you, and so I would, were this not my last visit to your home.

Poet: (*Taken aback*) Last visit, you say?

Conrad: I am afraid so, sir.

Poet: Well then, you must believe that you have learned enough from me to erect an infallible image to my devoted readers?

Conrad: (*Contemptuously*) Quite so, sir.

Poet: (*Filled with sorrow at this information but is determined not to betray it to what he considers an inferior and arrogant young man.*) Very well then, I bid you good luck with your, (*smiles wryly*) *astonishing* literary career and a very good day on top of that!

Conrad: (*Visibly restraining his frustration, rises.*) I thank you for the *considerable time* (*stressing the words almost sarcastically*) you have offered me.

Curtain Falls

SCENE 7

The living room once again, with sunlight filtering in through the windows. No fire is lit in the hearth and the room is further lost to neglect as witnessed by the presence of dust upon everything in the room. The room is empty and yet the air of melancholy has returned.

Poet enters the room, dressed in knee-length riding boots with his pants tucked neatly into them. He wears a clean, flowing white blouse and a coiled whip on his hip. He holds his hat in one hand and a dozen red roses in the other. He is quite relieved of his prior malady and his eyes again shine with the vigor of youth. His voice, too, speaks of his rejuvenation.

Poet: Where are you, my love?

Wife enters. Her eyes are swollen and red from tears but an observer might have witnessed her struggling attempt to don a gay visage.

Wife: I am here. (*Seeing the flowers*) Oh, what beautiful roses! *She rushes toward him, past the offered bouquet and embraces him tenderly.*

Poet: (*Grandly*) It has been far too long since I have shown my love properly, my dear.

Wife: (*Gazing into his eyes, still oblivious to the flowers*) Oh, they're beautiful. And you! Why, you look (*choosing her words carefully*) like Ernest Hemmingway.

Poet: (*Enjoying the compliment*) Thank you, dear lady, thank you. I tell you that I feel a tad powerful these days and-

A knock upon the door interrupts him. She reluctantly releases him so that he can answer the door. Conrad enters, dressed in a fine suit and is also carrying a dozen red roses. He is visibly impressed by the poet's improved health.

Conrad: (*Touching his hat to each in turn*) Good afternoon to you, Sir and Madam.

Poet: Hello, my boy.

Conrad: I must remark, sir, that you are looking quite well.

Poet: And feeling it, too. What brings you here today with such a romantic gift?

Conrad: (*Hesitates*) Well, sir, I am calling upon your daughter and, if you do not object, the flowers are for her.

Poet: (*Surprised*) For her? Well! No, I guess I don't mind at that.

Wife: I shall tell her that you've arrived. (*She departs, leaving the two men alone.*)

Conrad: Sir, if you've a moment, I have been meaning to speak with you.

Poet: Why, I suppose I can spare the time now. (*He offers the youth a chair with a grandiose wave of his hand, oblivious to the dust covering the austere living room.*)

Conrad: (*Nervous, but resigned to speak his mind*) Well, sir, I shall come to the point directly.

Poet: Please do. Always the best way, you know, unless one is writing, of course. The fewer words the better, that's what I say.

Conrad: Oh, yes, I suppose you're right. The thing is, sir, your daughter and I have a considerable amount of affection for one another. We should like nothing more

than to be married.

Poet: (*Appears insulted, even horrified*) You ask for the hand of *my* daughter?

Conrad: I love her above all else, sir, and I dare say that she feels the same toward me.

Poet: But, she is too young and you are not yet accomplished in life. How could you, a mere journalist, hope to maintain the lush standards to which she has grown accustomed? (*Waves his hand about the room without noticing its advanced state of neglect. Wife and daughter enter soundlessly and begin to listen.*)

Conrad: (*Perplexed as to how to proceed in the face of the conspiracy*) Well, sir, I-

Poet: You don't have an answer to that, do you? No, my boy, I cannot see fit to grant the hand of a princess to a common man.

Conrad: But sir, I have earned a fortune with my novels!

Poet: (*Angrily*) Bah! Lies! You are experiencing delusions, my boy, and I am not one to tolerate them.

Daughter: (*Passionately*) It is true, Father, he has become quite famous! Please do not worry about the money, I do love him dearly.

Poet: (*Contemptuously*) I see that you have already corrupted my daughter with your pathetic illusions. I will hear no more about the matter, and you, *famous* writer that you are, are no longer welcome to call on my daughter.

Conrad: (*Remains speechless but his eyes begin to tear as he gazes into his beloved's eyes.*)

Daughter: But Father, won't you listen to reason? His claims can easily be proven!

Poet: (*Acknowledging her directly for the first time and roaring with contempt*) I will not tolerate any further discussion! You, (*indicating Conrad*) get out of my house this instant! (*Everyone is quiet as Conrad rises, turns hallowed eyes to the lover he was losing, offers her the flowers and then exits the room.*)

Wife: Love, do you think that you might reconsider in a couple of days, once you have had time to judge the man more clearly? They have been courting now for months and are deeply in love.

Poet: No! Never will I reconsider or alter my decision. Nor will I suffer that lunatic with delusions of grandeur into my house again!

Daughter: (*Weeping openly and speaking with contempt that borders upon hatred.*) A fine one you are, to speak of lunacy and delusions of grandeur!

Wife: Hush your mouth, child!

Daughter: I will not! All three of us have suffered countless indignities, especially you Mother, in order to support the withered ego of this tyrant! He shall now share in the misery with us.

Wife: (*Slaps her daughter across the cheek, then recoils in horror from the deed. She sits down with her hands clasped together upon her lap in hopeless resignation.*)

Poet: (*Confused and terrified of the insinuation, he turns to his wife.*) What is she trying to say? What indignities have I caused and what are the delusions she refers to?

Daughter: (*Maliciously enjoying the exposure of the truth*) What delusions? Why, those of your *fabulous renown* of course! No one has ever published your drivel! No critic has ever spoken respectfully of your pathetic verses, it was all a lie!

Poet: (*Seeming to shrink in size*) Wh-what do you mean?

Wife: Don't.

Daughter: I mean that we made it all up to save you! You were dying because you wanted to be a rich and famous writer, so we invented everything and asked Joseph to assist in the farce. And see, we were right to do so for it has wholly rejuvenated your spirit!

Poet: (*Seemingly crushed by her words, sits down and*

speaks to his wife.) How can this be? Surely my success cannot be a fabrication. (His eyes are like candles that drown in their own wax and go dark. His back bows until he is nearly doubled over.)

Daughter: *(Realizing the enormity of her words)* Father, I...why couldn't you have consented to our marriage? You liked Joseph! Then you would have lived forever with your delusion and I could have been happy, too! *(She bursts into wracking sobs and rushes from the room.)*

Poet: *(Bowing lower, his dark eyes peering deeper into the truth.)* Is it true then? Was it all a lie? *(Wife nods slowly but is unable to face her husband.)*

Poet: *(In a fit of passion that momentarily revives him, he stands and raises his fists into the air, as if at God Himself, and roars with bitter passion.)*

But I have given everything! I have lived my entire life so as to absorb the very essence of my art! I have traded my family, social station, even my physical comfort; all for the purpose of achieving greatness! I deserve it! I *need* it!

(He breaks down completely and falls to the floor. Saliva dribbles from his mouth as he repeats the words, which trail off into incomprehensible mumbles.) I *need* it! I *need* it!

Curtain Falls

SCENE 8

The poet's gravesite, attended by his wife, daughter and Joseph Conrad. All three are dressed in mourning black. Mr. Conrad holds the daughter's arm in his and they are wearing engagement rings. The priest's words have been spoken and the casket has already been lowered into the ground.

Daughter: We are to be married in a week, Mother, we hope you decide to come.

Conrad: Yes, please do.

Wife: Perhaps I will. *(The young lovers walk off, leaving the widow to speak with her husband alone.)*

I should have been enough for you. I adored your poetry but you always wanted the whole world to adore you. All your life, you were so consumed by your desire that you sacrificed everything and everyone. I see this clearly now, for I am one of those you surrendered. Why was I never enough for you?

Oh, my life's only love, my poet, I will miss you.

Curtain Falls

The End