

Cruise to Nowhere Tales

A Modern Version of
Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

Nicholas Gordon

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DEDICATION

To Ellen, whose gift of a beautiful edition of Chaucer's
Canterbury Tales, and whose love, inspired this book.

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Foreward

Geoffrey Chaucer (1342 - 1400) wrote his masterwork, *The Canterbury Tales*, from around 1392 to the end of his life, when he left it unfinished. It consists of a series of tales told by a group of pilgrims on their way to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales is a modern version of *The Canterbury Tales*. It consists of a series of tales told by a group of tourists on a cruise to nowhere while they wait for their friends and lovers to finish gambling on the deck below. Each prologue and tale is an adaptation of its counterpart in *The Canterbury Tales*, told in the same verse form and with similar characters and plot elements. The contrast in tales is meant to highlight the differences between Chaucer's world and ours. But the tales can also be enjoyed on their own.

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GENERAL PROLOGUE

When sweet April, with its gentle showers
Winter's desert turns to Spring's bright flowers;
And Daylight Savings Time the early gloom
Banishes, that restless souls might soon
Emerge from their long labors into light,
Enjoying the long segue into night;
And Spring Break the youthful heart invites
To travel south for undisclosed delights;
Then do folks again seek out their muses,
Making pilgrimage on tours and cruises.

Some spend ten days on islands in the sun,
While others tour three cities on the run;
Still others like to gamble, win or lose,
On land or on a luxury liner cruise
That sails to nowhere two nights and a day
For time out on the sea to rest and play.

On such a cruise a friend and I set sail,

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--10

She to gamble, I to hug the rail
And search the emptiness for long-sought peace,
As she in poker looked for her release,
Both of us worn ragged from the fray
That was the substance of each working day.

After dinner and a little dancing,
A stroll out on the deck, some light romancing,
She went down to try her luck at cards,
Leaving me to turn back to the stars,
Wondering why neither of us said
The words we acted out each night in bed.

After a while, the chill drove me inside
Into a bar, where others chanced to bide
Their time until their partners finished playing,
And so I listened to what they were saying.

"By God!" the bartender said. "I swear TV
Holds not a candle to a tale at sea
Told with vigor, sailing with the wind
Till it reach port, no sailor left behind!"

"Here, here!" a soldier said, in uniform,
With rows of bright bronze medals to adorn
His chesty chest, and on his head there lay
The honorific of a green beret.

"These stories that you speak of, I have many
That I could tell, could I be sure that any
Of you my simple tales would like to hear."

A bearded backwoods farmer at the rear
Said, "Yes, as long as I can tell one, too,
Though not, perhaps, as skillfully as you."

"Damn the skill!" our host cried. "Just say what

General Prologue--11

Happens next! The spirit trumps the plot,
And vivid characters are vastly more
Important than what tricks you have in store.
For tales to bring us clarity and pleasure,
We must have characters that we can treasure.
But enough of this philosophy! I say
That while we wait, we while the time away,
Each to tell, with energy and grace,
A tale, be it beautiful or base,
Long or short, with farce or fancy full,
Just as long as it is never dull."

And heartily all in the bar agreed
To tell a tale, as you shall shortly read.
But before I tell the tales that were told,
In imitation of a bard of old
Let me first describe the company,
At least as they that night appeared to me.

There was a SOLDIER, a military man,
Who, from the time that he first began
To fight, loved battle and its savagery,
And lusted for it when he could not be
At war, as gamblers lust to be at risk,
Life shrunk to win or lose, the heart a husk,
Though he himself had little use for cards.
His lover, though, a friend of many wars,
Would gamble money when he could not life,
Addicted as he was to fear and strife.

This soldier fought the first war in Iraq
And then the second, just now coming back;
Fought in Somalia and Afghanistan,
Sometimes straying into Pakistan.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--12

Regardless of whose blood he might be spilling,
He was a master at the art of killing.

He felt a kinship to the men of yore
Who, like him, for their people went to war,
Guarding the frontier or gaining ground
So those who wished them harm could not surround
Them and then slaughter them at will,
For men do often wish their fellows ill.

He had only contempt for those who sneered,
And claimed to love those whom they should have
feared,
Like children safe from harm only because
Their parents keep an eye on predators.
They think their playpen is the world, and toys
They hug and talk to are the real McCoys.

He loved his country and democracy,
Freedom, God, and Christianity;
Proud to be a warrior, and true,
A man who'd gladly give his life for you.

There was a NUN, though in civilian dress,
Who came out on the cruise under duress,
Accompanying a friend, also a nun,
Who liked roulette as much as anyone,
But kept her bets and aspirations small,
Uncomfortable that she played at all.

These faithful brides of Christ would often see
Their pent-up longings as adultery,
And pray to be forgiven for their sin,
Though chaste, for they would often stray within.

General Prologue--13

Thus the sin of gambling was a small
Peccadillo, looked at overall,
And though the non-gambling sister disapproved,
She could not censure someone she so loved.

She had a figure large and manly built,
With pale blue eyes set in a cup of milk,
Lips just barely pink and cheeks so white
They looked near corpse-like in a certain light,
Though she was passionate and full of life,
To Christ and her good friend an untouched wife.

A GURU sat beside her, ghastly thin,
Though full of mystic consciousness within.
He could survive with neither food nor water,
And, as he told a skeptical reporter,
Could feed forever on the energy
Within the atoms of his cells. And he
Once demonstrated this for weeks in deep
Meditation, deeper far than sleep,
And then arose at the appointed time
As though awakened by some inner chime.

This guru with the animals could speak
And into past lives take a tactful peek,
Identifying what, so long ago,
Had blocked some energy that would not flow;
And, for a fee, reach back into the past,
And free it to flow easily at last.

He packaged well his secrets so that they
Could be acquired, more or less, by lay
Gurus, who then could pass them on
In seminars for those who would life hone,

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--14

Looking for a better way to be
In touch with truth and cosmic energy.

Although he had no need for goods or wealth,
They came in great abundance of themselves;
Nor did he give one cent of them away,
But he enjoyed them, and would often play
With beautiful young women in his pool,
Then bed them in his mansion. For the cruel
Fates of billions gripped by poverty
Were rightly their responsibility,
And all that he acquired rightly his.

He had a Jesus beard, his hair a frizz
High off his narrow head, and haunting eyes
As big as saucers wandering the skies.
His mistress of the moment down below
Was giving baccarat another go,
While he, like a bodhisattva, sat serene,
The perfect guru -- lithe, long-limbed, and lean.

There was a THERAPIST, a woman fair,
Who cared much for the patients in her care,
Mostly girls who were, as she had been,
Afraid to eat and dangerously thin.
She would have died but for her therapist,
Whom she became, but with a common twist:
For she could copy only what she saw,
But in her mentor there was much, much more.
So she became a stripped-down version of
The woman who had saved her through her love.

She loved her patients, too, but could not be
Beyond that love a person, whole and free,

General Prologue--15

As though she were an algorithm, used
To debug children who were self-abused,
And had no function other than that one,
Leaving her, her emptiness when done.

She was quite wealthy inadvertently,
Having little urge to spend the fee
That came along with what she did of need.
Nor could she but of her disorders read,
Anxious not to miss one single study
That might clear up some vexing difficulty,
And be of use to her in therapy.

She was demure, but still she could not be
Inconspicuous, for she was blessed
Or cursed with beauty. And though she always
dressed
In modest skirts and blouses not too tight,
Her body fought her clothes with all its might.
Even without makeup, her thin face
Drew stares attracted to its classic grace.
Her eyes were cobalt blue, and her hair gold,
Held in a bun to hide it, though the bold
Colors said what she refused to hear.

And though she told her patients not to fear
Their bodies, but their urges to enjoy,
She herself could never find a boy
To give herself to freely without shame.
Her present boyfriend gambled, and she came
Reluctantly with him, she knew not why,
And now sat with these random passersby
Waiting like some knick-knack on a shelf
As she, the doctor, fought to heal herself.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--16

There was a MERCHANT who imported wine,
The finest that did ever grace a vine.
He knew not only Dole from Beaujolais,
But also the best vintners in Valais,
And which *terroir* produced which subtle taste.

He was full 50 inches at the waist,
An epic epicurean connoisseur,
As much consumer as entrepreneur,
Enthusiast who loved to share his joy
And looked for like elan in his employ.

He made good profit on the wines he sold,
And when he bought, his word was good as gold.
He knew the worth of every drop divine,
And paid and charged precisely for each wine.
None could cheat him, none could feel
 shortchanged.

He was a generous man, and oft arranged
For tastings of the finest vintages free,
Enjoying the vivacious company,
Yet knowing shrewdly some in time would buy
Wines that else they'd never dare to try,
Educating all who came there well
For pleasure and for future clientele.

He was a man whose work and play were one,
Who made each move for profit and for fun,
Calculating both with equal verve,
For each the other god ought ever serve.

There was a STUDENT there, of history,

General Prologue--17

Who hung his new Phi Beta Kappa key
Proudly from the pocket of his vest,
Displaying his achievement on his chest.

Summa cum laude and valedictorian,
He hoped to be a great historian,
Discovering the secrets of the past,
Then telling them as stories that would last
As long as there were memory and time.

He thought the old historians sublime
And venerated Parkman and Prescott,
Henry Adams, Gibbon, and the lot,
And loved old letters, ledger books, and rolls
Of who paid taxes, judgments, fees, and tolls,
Springing most to life among the dead
Although he was but thirty hours wed,
His bride now gambling happily below.

He loved her, yes, but couldn't wait to go
To where some letter or some ledger book
Might contain a clue where next to look,
And next, and next, and next, as endlessly
He witnessed what would else no longer be.

There also was a LAWYER there, who could
Turn topsy into turvy, bad to good,
Convince a jury one way, then the other,
And make you think your sister was your brother.

He had a silver tongue that said what paid,
And was worth every penny that he made,
Charging by the second on the phone,
So some, to say hello, took out a loan.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--18

And if you could not pay, that was too bad,
For he'd take all the money that you had
Or borrowed, begged, or stole from who knows
where.

He would save Bin Laden from the chair
Or Hitler from the charge of genocide,
Just so long as they could pay to ride.
He said that all men had a right to him;
It wasn't his place to inquire within.
The law gave all the right to a defense
Regardless of their guilt or innocence,
As long as they could pay the lawyer's fee.

And so he argued well enough to be
Convinced he was not only rich, but good,
And served the law, as every lawyer should.

A COUNTY SHERIFF lingered at the bar,
A man who knew the limits of the law,
And what should be enforced, and what should not,
For laws can overregulate, and ought
To be applied with wisdom and restraint.

When battered women filed a complaint,
This sheriff would invite the husband in
And match him shot for shot with scotch or gin,
Allowing him to growl about his wife
And how the bitch was ruining his life,
Then twist his arm until he screamed with pain
And tell him if he touched his wife again,
He'd personally beat him till his balls
Went bouncing like two ping pongs down the halls.

General Prologue--19

He kept his county orderly and clean,
And was by reputation fair and mean.
No gambling was allowed unless he got
Each Monday night his customary cut;
And no construction could take place till he
Made sure there was enough security
Supplied by his men working on the side,
Or suddenly the law would be applied
So strictly that no truck could leave the site
Without somehow running a red light.

He was a big man, mountain-like, with hands
Like melons, and a paunch above his pants
That weighed a hundred pounds all by itself.
Nor did he ever flaunt his well-earned wealth,
But lived just like folks, who liked the way
He ran things, and so each Election Day
Gave him their votes, as many times before,
More interested in order than in law.

A FARMER who was just as big as he
Sat near the back, his first time out at sea,
And struggled with his nausea as the ship
Just barely rolled, biting on a lip
All but buried in his massive beard.

It was, in fact, far worse than he had feared
When wife and daughter dragged him on this boat.
He was never meant to be afloat,
But loved the land, its fields and wooded hills.
Now he felt the emptiness that fills
The heart so full it bursts with passionate pain:
O never would he put to sea again!

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--20

He was organic, strictly, and his farm
Would never do its ecosystem harm,
But balanced this with that so expertly
That bounty could be gleaned eternally,
The only input being sun and rain,
And compost, turning garbage into gain.

He grew fresh vegetables for restaurants
And raised goats to make cheese for true gourmands,
Had fruits and berries customers could pick,
And nothing to make man or nature sick,
But everything was fed with nature's food,
Grown and cared for as was right and good.

He talked to plants and animals all day
And understood just what they had to say,
Sensitive to nuances of needs
Expressed through colors, textures, blooms, and
seeds,
And taught his interns everything he knew
So they might be organic farmers, too,
And help him nurse to health the sickly earth
That to all living things had given birth.
His farm was not a business but an art
Whose beauty gave sweet comfort to his heart.

The CHEF was also visiting the bar,
Having finished for the day, a star
Among sea-going master chefs, who could
Make even cheap and frozen foods taste good.

He made a single cream stock and pureed
Each day a different vegetable; so made
Of one soup many, and he did the same

General Prologue--21

With gravies, sauces, toppings, in the name
Of offering his guests variety,
Though there was little to be had at sea.

He was well paid and had invested well,
But cared not whether markets rose or fell,
For he spent all his days alone at sea
And planned to leave his wealth to charity.

He loved his literally rootless life,
And never wished for children, home, or wife,
But had good fellowship enough on board,
And took his pleasure with whoever would
Enjoy, in all due haste, his narrow bed,
Then leave, for he was resolutely wed
But to the sea, whose grip none could annul,
That wrenched him from all rivals with its pull.

The ENGINEER was also there, a man
Who made quite different choices, and began
A family when he was a boy, by chance,
But then made providence of circumstance.
Each day away he missed his family;
However, his vocation was the sea.

He loved well a well-designed machine
And kept its innards oiled and wiped clean
Of grit that might it prematurely wear,
For he protected all within his care,
Human and machine, and did his duty
Not for gain or honor, but for beauty.

There was a DOCTOR, skilled at fixing bones,
Whose husband was among the band's trombones

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--22

Playing in the club two decks below.
She was young and beautiful, and so
Black she shone like night among the stars,
Whose voice and figure spoke of soft guitars,
Yet whose intellect was sharp and bright
As any operating table light.

Each day she cut and sewed, screwed down and
clamped,
Installed new hips and knees, and wrists revamped,
Carpal tunnels cleared and bone spurs shaved,
For this was, yes, the life that she had craved
And studied for, for ten long, lonely years,
The only black and woman. But her fears
Of finding no one who would share her life
And love such an intimidating wife
Soon met their match in Lionel, who played
Trombone with all the best bands, and who made
Her feel like some sweet song he had composed
And now could savor any time he chose.

They lived quite well, of course, but with some guilt
For those on whom their consciousness was built.
They served on boards and gave to charity,
Spoke in schools and were exemplary,
Paid their nanny and their part-time maid
More than most, and oft came to the aid
Of friends and family sunk in desperate need.
But still they felt some vital organ bleed
Within; for busy, busy all the time,
That was one wound that they would never find.

There was a woman, seven times a WIFE,
Who traded up in husbands all her life,

General Prologue--23

As some do houses, buying first a small
Two bedroom with no ground around at all,
Then moving up to something a bit better
Until the last, whose settlement would net her
Seven million, give or take ten grand.

There was no better lover in the land,
So good that of her husbands there were many
Who still believed she was worth every penny,
For they were just as cold and hard as she
And had but little heart or charity.

She saw no reason she should not be rich,
And liked to hear herself be called a bitch,
For that meant she had won, the lover's rage
Merely helping her to turn the page.

She made good use of surgery and gym,
And kept her little body neat and trim,
Her white hair blond, her wrinkles all smoothed out,
Her perfume and her makeup thick. No doubt
She was a good deal older than she seemed,
But still her ancient eyes with avarice gleamed.

A MINISTER, devoted to the Lord,
Was there to wed two congregants on board,
Who with their friends and families played below
While he remained above, contented so.

He was a liberal, and tolerant
Of much that might make other preachers rant,
Believing as he did that faith should be
A choice one struggled with continually,
Not made once and then forever closed.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--24

And so in church the questions that he posed
Were those to which he had himself no answer.

His wife died early on of bladder cancer,
And now their son was stricken with the same,
Arousing anger difficult to tame.
But he was not averse to arguing
With God, as Abraham once did, using
His own principles against Him, thus
Insisting He be ethical and just.

To him God was the personality
Of all that is, was, and would ever be,
One with whom he laughed and wept and played
And had a heart-to-heart each time he prayed,
Sometimes angry, sometimes full of joy,
A friendship that his doubt could not destroy.
For why give up so beautiful a love
For something he could not be certain of,
And live a life of such diminished grace
When one had but to look to see His face?

This minister believed it was his duty
To counter modern anomie with beauty,
And find a place for faith where science reigned
That would be neither backward nor constrained,
But would become a choice, not wrong or right,
But bountiful and sane and full of light.

A BAKER and a BUYER, also there,
A MAYOR, SALESMAN, and ENTREPRENEUR,
And I were all the others that there were.

The BAKER baked in the old-fashioned way,

General Prologue--25

By hand, as did his ancestors. Gourmet
Delis, grocery stores, and restaurants
Paid him well to do what his *paisans*
Used to do in rural poverty,
Now become a rare commodity.

How strange! he thought, that what the poor would
eat

Was now exclusively for the elite,
The same ingredients, techniques, and taste
That were ubiquitous before erased
By modern greed, that made of people things,
And severed them from all that gave life wings.

And so it was his pleasure to preserve
What else would disappear, and thereby serve
A family line of bakers stretching back
Beyond the curve of memory, one speck
Of ancient craft, now far more lucrative
Than then, but still a life less fit to live.

His sons and grandsons learned the ancient ways
Precisely in the glare of his strict gaze,
But he was old, though vigorous and thin,
And knew quite well the moment he was gone
A corner would be cut, and then another
And what was his life's purpose lost forever.

The BUYER worked for a large clothing chain
With stores in malls from Brooklyn to Bahrain,
And though she earned a modest salary,
Much depended on the choices she
Might make on what to buy the coming season.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--26

Now little gifts would never be the reason
She made the choice of this or that new line,
But she enjoyed the choicest food and wine,
And on her way to visit factories
Stopped off at Waikiki and Tuileries,
And got free tickets to whatever shows
Or concerts, plays, sights, sports events she chose,
And dressed far better than she could afford.

Of course she never asked for a reward,
And always chose the lines that best would sell
And be most in demand and profitable.
She had good business sense, an expert eye,
And knew somehow what customers would buy
Two years ahead, what numbers would be hot,
And figured in her head right on the spot
The price that should be charged and what would be
The markup on whatever she might see.

She thought only of her employer's good
Because she knew that all her vendors would
Shower her equally with gifts galore,
And so she could be loyal to her store.
She was past middle age, but trim and pert,
And still looked pretty good in her slit skirt.

With her was a SALESMAN, much younger,
Who came to share her cabin out of hunger,
Not for her body, but her company,
That is, the one she purchased for, for he
Was desperate for a lucrative commission
And hoped thereby to narrow her decision
With just a little romance on the side,
Perhaps a bit more suasive than a bribe,

General Prologue--27

While she enjoyed the sexual attention
Without the slightest post-coital intention
Of buying anything he sold, which was
Too risk averse to generate much buzz.

These lovers, then, were sitting at the bar
Holding hands, as though no truth could mar
Their happiness, as both parlayed their parts,
Haunted in the hollows of their hearts.

The MAYOR was part-time, of a tiny town
Of neither interest, quaintness, nor renown,
Now a bedroom of a major city.
Once, long ago, some might have called it pretty,
But now it was developments, the same
As any town called by a different name,
Just rows on rows of models ABC,
Sprawling out as far as one could see.

This mayor was an associate professor
Of urban planning, no less, and, God bless her,
Had tried hard to apply the principles
That she laid out in learned articles.
But, alas!, sometimes the plainest truth
Cannot with real life share a leaky roof,
For life is devious, while thought is clear,
And what one thinks is there is often here.

And so it was with her: the plans she wrought
Sat like lovely toys that no one bought.
Developers would maximize their profit,
While citizens would do their best to stop it.
To court and back, and forth and back things went
Until, when funds and energy were spent,

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--28

A compromise was reached, in which her plans
Just barely peeked their heads above the sands,
A textbook case of textbooks being wrong.

She knew she should have known that all along,
And turned her posture totally around,
Keeping both feet firmly on the ground.
Her first priority was reelection,
And so she made each personnel selection
Not on competence but loyalty,
Rewarding those who worked most valiantly
To get her votes, or gave to her campaign
And got their wealthy friends to do the same.

The next was keeping taxes low, and then
Keeping things just barely going when
Previously she would have called for change.
For things that are, are hard to rearrange;
The ecosystem works, and what is new
May often key relationships undo.

Self-interest was the only constant here,
And so the mayor learned to hold it dear,
Championing no sensible solution
Unless it meant a campaign contribution
With which she could reward her loyal friends,
An army dedicated to her ends.

Nor could construction in that town occur
Without some agent representing her
Receiving in a bag a wad of cash,
Which she secreted in a good-will stash
Dedicated to earning her good will
As she gave freely from the common till

General Prologue--29

To local clubs and charities and teams,
A Robin Hood of far more certain means.

It all worked well, as she well understood,
And wrote it down, though of course she could
Not publish it or teach it anywhere,
For these were crimes, as she was well aware.

Now here she was, away upon the sea,
Though still in constant touch through her
 Blackberry,
A handsome woman, smart, and single still,
Whose work had withered what had been her will.

The ENTREPRENEUR sat near her, on the phone,
Physically, not virtually, alone,
Emailing, texting, talking to someone
24/7, always on the run
Even when most sitting still, as now,
Supposedly vacationing. But how
Could he unwire when a deal was just
Unraveling, or some plan might go bust
Without a well-timed word from one whose clout
Alone could bring the bursting wallets out?

The world moved on; one had to be connected,
Else what one might miss might be perfected;
One might miss the boat as it set sail,
And all because one missed one freaking email!

Like a little child afraid to miss
Whatever lay beyond his goodnight kiss,
This entrepreneur would, if he were able,
Never sleep, nor slip the virtual cable

Umbilical, that kept him live and well
And loving every minute of his hell.

For hell it was, as he well knew, and yet
He was addicted to this real roulette,
The kind that governed quantity and price,
Just as his wife was wed to cards and dice.
Money was to both of them just chips
To gamble on the market or on ships.

He won, she lost, both equally obsessed,
Both caring only for what happened next,
Both aware of their own grotesque dance
Yet slaves to power, potency, and chance.

Now that I've described the company
And how we came that evening to agree
Each to tell a tale to pass the time,
Let me tell the tales, both coarse and fine,
Instructive, useless, fun, sad, gripping, true
In ways no truth could tell the truth to you.
The bartender was judge, who took a jar
And numbered slips put in for all there were.
Each took one, and so he made a list,
And said that at the end he'd choose the best.

The soldier was the first to tell a tale
As we to nowhere through the night did sail.
"I guess it's fitting I be first," he said,
"Since I was first to go where our host led,
And said I'd like to tell a tale if you
Would like to hear it, and it seems you do.
So here it is, and may our judge judge well,
For all have well-loved tales they long to tell."

THE SOLDIER'S TALE

Once two friends were sitting at a bar,
Thinking there was nothing that could mar
Their friendship or engender enmity.
But they were wrong, as shortly you will see.

These two were both fine soldiers, none was better,
And both could follow orders to the letter,
Even into rivers of hot lead.
One was Tod, the other one was Ted.

They were childhood friends from a small town,
And on the day they doffed their cap and gown,
Both enlisted, neither would say nay,
For if one went, the other would not stay.

Together in Iraq they served a tour,
And then another, surer now than sure
That after each had saved the other's life,
No lover could divide them, nor no wife.

But at that bar there was a girl so hot
That both these friends were smitten on the spot.

Her long blond hair went down below her waist,
And breasts, half showing, begged for just a taste.
She wore a sweater open to the cleft
And a short, tight skirt. Whatever there was left
To see of her was bursting through her clothes.
And her name, appropriately, was Rose.

"The Yellow Rose of Texas," Tod exclaimed,
But she was a Virginia girl, she claimed,
Like them, small town, and just their age to boot.
As they talked, the friends stared at her fruit,
Each imagining that she was his
Exclusively, so fragile friendship is,
And wished the other vanished, gone, kaput!
Two young and healthy specimens in rut.

There was, however, no way one could lose
The other, nor could Rose at that point choose
Which one she wanted, and so soon all three
Were often in each other's company,
Hanging out or going here or there,
As near inseparable as any pair.

Eventually, each male wanted more,
And there was undeclared a silent war
Between the former friends for Rose's love,
As both looked hungrily at every move
She made, and melted at the thought
Of savoring at last the joys he sought.

One day Tod couldn't stand it anymore
And asked Ted, "What are we pretending for?
I want Rose for myself, and so do you.
Let's tell Rose and see what she will do!"

The Soldier's Tale--33

"True enough!" said Ted. "And I agree
It should be Rose who tells us who will be
Her lover, who should stay and who should go,
If it be either one of us. We know
She likes us, but perhaps only as friends,
While what I feel for her each moment rends
Me into bloody rags! I cannot sleep
Or eat for want of her! Instead I keep
Her face in front of me, and dream she's mine.
But I can't make a move when all the time
You're with us like a constant chaperone
Who'll never leave the two of us alone!"

"Alone?" Tod raged indignantly. "Alone?
I'd rather smash your head in with a stone
Than let you touch what's mine by right of love,
The greatest that has ever mortal moved,
I have no doubt -- I feel it in my heart,
That every day is freshly torn apart,
And torn apart again, and then again,
Each time I think of her with other men!"
And so the two agreed to leave to Rose
Which one gets to stay and which one goes.

But Rose was not so ready to agree
To choose which of the two contestants she
Would want to keep and which she'd throw away.
"I love you both!" she weeping said. But they
Insisted that she choose one or the other.

She would, she said, keep one just for a brother,
The other for a lover all her life,
And thus be both a sister and a wife.

But they were adamant that they would not
Accept less than the most desired spot,
And if not chosen, then would disappear,
For less than all was more than they could bear.

And so at last she said she would decide
Which of them she'd spend her life beside
When they came back from their next tour. For why,
She asked, choose now? She did not want to lie,
But told them that she feared what might transpire
In war, and that revealing her desire
Now might lose the love of the survivor,
Whose passionate return might well revive her.

Angry and dissatisfied, these two
Former friends bade their love adieu,
And soon were shipped out to Afghanistan
To fight the now resurgent Taliban.

Secretly each wished the other would
Not return, for then for sure he could
Enjoy the lifelong love of his sweet Rose.
Still, however hid, such feeling shows.

The two just barely spoke, and only when
Their duties forced them to, for they were then
Engaged in firefights both day and night,
And they, good soldiers both, did what was right.

They couldn't help but think, though, what might
 happen
If one were at the other's back. For passion
Sometimes overrules the god of war
And lets a rival rival be no more.

The Soldier's Tale--35

Both equally were knave and victim here,
Touched by the temptation and the fear.

One night, as they awaited the next day,
Knowing the anticipated fray
Would be the fiercest they had ever seen,
Both prayed to God to save them, and redeem
Their lives now sunk so deeply in despair,
For there was ample cause for sadness there.

Tod prayed for courage, and the strength to do
Whatever God might ask of him. And, too,
That his company might win the fight
And crush the enemy, for then he might
Return to his sweet Rose victoriously
And leave Afghanistan at peace and free.

Ted prayed for love, that it his heart might seize
And end the hatred in him by degrees,
So that cleansed he could return to Rose.
For each may harvest only seed he sows,
And if he would enjoy the fruits of love,
Then that must be alone what his heart moves.
He felt regret for many things he'd done,
The enemies destroyed, the battles won,
Yet not one inch of ground gained towards peace,
For in the heart is where all wars must cease.

Two prayers to God, of opposite import,
Yet both would find the answers that they sought.

At dawn the company moved out, with Ted
Leading the platoon that went ahead
To reconnoiter where the enemy

By best intelligence was thought to be.

Ted was lost, of course, in thoughts of Rose,
Mentally removing all her clothes,
When suddenly they started taking fire,
Undoing in an instant all desire.

Soon they were surrounded and could see
Nothing but the vaunted enemy
Firing from all sides as they took cover,
Each providing succor for the other.
Some were wounded, some already dead.
Now we switch to 'Tod, forsaking 'Ted.

'Tod from a distance heard the battle rage
And lickety-split appeared on center stage,
Racing towards the battle carbine blazing,
Hoping that the hell that he was raising
Might distract the ambushers enough
To think that this was real and not a bluff.

And so it happened: the Taliban withdrew
As 'Tod's platoon came racing into view,
Recklessly exposed to enemy fire
Like seraphim descending in a choir,
As though the vanguard of a mighty host
About to turn its enemies to toast.

But just one Taliban, before he fled,
Turned to fire not five feet from 'Ted,
Who threw himself upon him, but too late
To save 'Tod from his self-appointed fate.
The bullet went right through 'Tod's head and came
Back out behind with pieces of his brain.

The Soldier's Tale--37

"Oh, no!" cried Ted. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no!"
But nothing that he said made it not so.

The Taliban was knocked cold to the ground,
And in a rage Ted almost fired a round
Right into him, to shred him into bits,
As one might who relieved himself in fits,
But then restrained himself, for one ought not
Revenge a wrong when anger is still hot,
Nor take a life to satisfy some pain
That then will doubtless come around again,
And then again, like ripples in a pond.
For every evil echoes far beyond
What you or I can see, and stirs the air
In ways that stoke the anger everywhere.

Ted secured his prisoner, then turned
To give his bloody friend the kiss he'd earned,
Holding him and rocking back and forth
Until his love had conquered all his wrath,
And sorrow like an evening darkness filled
His heart completely, now his friend was killed.

He had no thought of Rose, not even one,
And when his tour in hell was finally done,
He came back home to work upon a farm,
His only hope: to do no further harm,
But peacefully to live upon the land.

One day in town he heard a big brass band
Come thumping down the street, and followed it
Into the square, so full he barely fit
Against the storefronts lining the far side.

There upon the podium he spied
Tod's mother and Tod's portrait on a screen.
Ted wondered what this pageantry might mean
Until he saw the President hang on her
The prize that was the nation's highest honor.

Then followed praises of Tod's bravery,
How he saved his desperate company
By leading his platoon into the fire.
There was no sacrifice or calling higher.

And so on and so forth till the band again
Struck up its loud and soporific strain,
And soon the square was empty save for Ted
And Rose, who came across to him and said,
"I knew I'd find you here! Now tell me why
You never got in touch with me. Don't lie,
Please, for the truth is all I want. I see
A much-tormented soul in front of me."

Ted couldn't speak, but wept, and turned to go.
Said Rose, "You have no right to treat me so!
I loved you long, and would have married you.
Now just a bit of truth will have to do."

"The truth," Ted said, "is that I am no more.
When Tod died, so did I in this sad war.
For he died saving me, while all I thought
Was how his death might bring me what I sought,
Which was you, your body and your love,
While naught but selfish hate did in me move.

"And when I spared the life of him who shot

The Soldier's Tale--39

My friend, I felt some inner well-knit knot
Become undone, and all that was came flooding
Into me, the hating and the loving,
The bliss and bloody massacre, the murder
Holy -- lying, honesty, trickery, candor
Equally holy -- and I was holy, too.
Nothing mattered. Everything was true.
I wanted, needed, wished for nothing more
Than peace within, the antidote for war."

"You are my Ted," said Rose, "both good and bad.
The problem simply is that you are sad
And feeling guilty for what you have done.
But please believe me, Ted, that anyone
Might well desire a friend to disappear
Or wish a rival dead. But now you're here
And he just isn't anymore, not missing
Life and love, the sweet intent of kissing,
The fatherhood, the praise, the celebrations,
The memories, the pain, the altercations --
All, all to him is nothing, nothing at all,
As he is merely now what we recall.

"Death is the conclusion of the movie,
After which the passion and the fury,
The courage, cowardice, the shame, the meaning,
The love, the hunger, sacrifice, and seeming --
All is over, finished, done, complete.
Nor does one player get to keep his seat
Once it's over, lingering in the theater,
But everything there is has no hereafter.

"Tod is just a story we remember,
Nothing more to him or us. You render

Him no service in your grief, nor do
You serve the soul of anyone but you.
Grief is but a stage; its time is past.
Time to enter life again at last,
To live robustly, loving long and well
The family that will save you from this hell.

"Now turn to me, and I will be your wife,
Your lover and your friend for all your life,
And heal you, so that you may once again
Make joy the sweet companion of your pain."

Upon these words Ted came to life, as though
Some angel, just descended, bade him go
Back to the world to love, as well he would,
The woman who would bring him only good.
The universe receded into two,
And universal love to passion due.

Soon they were wed, and so I end my story.
Ted has got his love, and Tod his glory:
Each what he most sought, for fate is will,
As inner gods arrange our fortunes still.

THE BAKER'S TALE

THE BAKER'S PROLOGUE

When the soldier's tale was finally told,
All the company, both young and old,
Praised it for its fine philosophy
And held it fit to keep in memory --
All but the baker, who said the New Age crap
Would drive him to a Heineken on tap,
Except he had a counter-tale to tell
And needed a clear head to tell it well.

"Now hold on!" said our host. "Remember that
We all drew lots -- it's not your turn at bat."
"It's my turn," said the guru, "but I swear,
I'd like to know the man's objections there.
A counter-tale would seem a better fit
Than one that had no argument in it.
So let him tell away -- I'll take his turn --
And let us see what wisdom we can learn."

"You'll get no wisdom here!" the baker said.

"Just a laugh or two to take to bed.

For I shall tell a tale straight from life

About a New Age guru and his wife,

And how a clever student had his way

With both. For now I have no more to say

But straight to my bold narrative will go,

Rated 'R' -- just so you will know."

Said the host, "There are no children here,

But some there may be present who'd not care

To hear your bit of soft pornography

Nor think so humorous adultery."

"God forbid," the baker said, "That I

Should ever advocate sex on the sly.

But just as soldiers well may write of those

Who think each hostile thought disturbs the flows

Of mystic consciousness through mental fields,

And so aborts the unity love yields,

So I, a baker married happily,

May tell of those who transgress lustily.

"I'm not an advocate for sin, but for

The freedom tales give to be far more

Than just one soul immersed in just one life.

So may one in tales seduce the wife

And joy in what one never would enjoy,

As one with all the grace of life may toy,

Laughing, weeping, with no consequence

But pleasure in the play of words and sense.

But enough of this! Let's to the tale!

Our host will judge if it succeed or fail."

THE BAKER'S TALE

There was a guru once who taught that love
Was ecstasy, and ecstasy was love.
Angels' love of God was ecstasy,
And so ought love on Earth unfettered be,
For one ought never own another's heart
Nor be owned by another, lest love start
To curdle, just like milk too long unused,
Or children who too long have been abused.

Love, like water, has to flow, or it
Will stagnate, and before long be unfit
To savor, or to bring one ecstasy,
Which is the full-fledged meaning of "to be."
All violence and anger, crime and sin,
Arise from dammed-up energy within.

So taught this guru, also known as Fats,
Who wished we were as free as dogs or cats,
Or horses, pigeons, elephants, or geese.
Fats lived these thoughts and used them well to
fleece

Rich followers, who wanted an excuse
To have young girls and not call it abuse,
Freeing them, they said, for ecstasy,
Then throwing them away conveniently.

Fats also had his fill for many years
Until, now old, he somehow stripped his gears
And fell in love with one whom he would marry,
A sixteen-year-old runaway named Carrie,
Who quickly tired of the fat old man,
For young girls find their pleasure where they can.

Now Fats, to his surprise, became obsessed
With his young wife, the first that he possessed,
And jealous of each look or word or glance
That might so much as hint of a romance.

He longed for every morsel of her body,
And with his passion nearly drove her dotty,
Kissing her and touching her all day
And night. He almost never was away
From her for more than half an hour's time,
And then, as though suspecting some great crime,
Subjected her to an interrogation
That ended in a desperate fornication.

The thought of her in bed with other men
Drove him near to homicide, but then
He thought of it again, and yet again,
As though the highest form of love were pain.

In that same complex in New Mexico
There lived a student just one floor below,
A Hopi Indian, who studied well
The ancient arts of which the elders tell:
Of visions wrought by pain and long privation,
And spirits summoned by deft divination;
Of holy words in languages unknown,
And other secrets only years could hone.

This Billy Sundown liked his women white,
So soon as he discovered Carrie's plight,
He began to plot with her how they
Might from the old tormentor get away
For long enough to share some mutual joy

The Baker's Tale--45

As comes quite naturally to girl and boy.

Soon he had a plan he thought might work
To get rid of the old, fat guru jerk.
He came upstairs to share philosophy
And mystical accounts of energy,
Meditation, mind control, and more
That soon had Fats looking on with awe
At this authentic scion of the ages,
Heir apparent of the tribal sages,
Unspoiled by civilization, the genuine thing,
Who might new product lines to Fatso bring.

Since he now the jealous husband played,
He needed a new gimmick for his trade.
Some Native-American rite might do the trick,
Which he could put together nice and slick
Into a weekend workshop, after which
The followups might soon make Fatso rich.

So he listened with intense delight
As Billy Sundown trotted out the trite
New Age versions of the age-old ways
His ancestors had polished all their days.

There was, he said, an ancient ritual
That let one join the master flow at will,
Involving a short stay within a womb.
"A womb?" Fats asked. "Did you say a womb?"
"A painted wood-and-reed one," Bill explained,
"Hung up from the ceiling by a chain.
I'll make one for you, if you like, today,
And write down all the words that you must say
So that tonight you can try out the thing,

And tap into the root of everything."

"Yes, please," Fats said, delighted. "But what of
Carrie?"

I can't leave her alone, you know. We're married,
And have to sleep together every night."

"Have no fear," said Bill. "We'll tie her tight
Within her own womb, as I'll be in mine,
Three hung from the ceiling in a line,
A wire along which energy may flow
Across our spirits into worlds below.
You'll be much closer to her than before;
After tonight, I swear she'll love you more."

That settled it, and Billy went to get
Three wombs from those his tribe too long had let
Moulder in the house of spirits gone.
(Actually, three crates in a barn,
Gussied up with glue and fingerpaint,
Some old wicker chairs, and just a faint
Trace of charcoal drawing on the sides,
Ancient symbols drawn from long-lost tribes.)
And then three copies of some gobbledygook,
Nonsense syllables typed out to look
Like verses, ancient prayers that would invite
Great spirits to unveil the primal light.

All this did Billy bring into the room
Where he would have his bliss with Carrie soon.
He hung the wombs from hooks with laundry rope
In hopes of hoodwinking the fat old dope,
Furnishing each womb with straw-filled sheets,
A pillow, and a bag of store-bought treats
To offer to the spirits, that they may

The Baker's Tale--47

The primal source of secrets give away
Unto the conjurer. Also there,
A flashlight so that one might read the prayer
While shut up in the darkened womb. And last,
But certainly not least, to each tied fast,
A rope ladder hanging off the side.

Now all was fit for Fats to make his ride
Back into his future. Ancient lore
Would buttress all that Fats would have in store
For those who dabbled in the truth of being,
Believing without actually seeing.

Fats questioned Bill minutely of what he
Would need to do to feel the energy
Of all the universe surge through his heart.
Billy told him first of all to start
By offering the treats as sacrifice
To those whose providence he would entice.
Let the choicest lie upon his chest
While he was free to nibble on the rest.

Then the prayer in its entirety
Must be chanted twelve times silently
While concentrating hard on every sound.
The meaning, although lost, was still around,
Billy said. The spirits understood,
And hearing once again those lost words would
Reawaken, then come down to see
Just who was asking for their energy.

"But if you lose your concentration, then
You'll have to read the entire prayer again,"
Billy warned, "as many times as you

Do not with your whole heart pay homage due."

Once the prayer was chanted properly,
One could only lie awake and see
Whether the ecstasy of being flowed
Through one's heart, as though one were a road
Through which the universe might move through
time,
Each thought, each heartbeat, each sweet breath
sublime.

"Let's go!" Fats said enthusiastically.
"Come on! Get in!" And up the ladder he
Began to climb, then stopped, as though just now
Aware that in his womb he would allow
Carrie to be free for much the night,
When he would never let her out of sight.

"Ladies first!" he said, and climbed back down,
Motioning to Carrie with a frown,
Suddenly unsure of the whole thing.
But Carrie sprang as though upon a spring
And was in seconds safe within her womb,
Swaying like a chicken in a tomb.

Then Fats ascended, Billy tucked him in,
Put on the cover -- Let the games begin!
Carrie, of course, descended lickity-split,
And she and Billy dove right into it,
Careful not to lift a leg or head
As Fats swayed gently just above the bed.

After sacrificing the choice treats,
And downing all the rest for bedtime eats,

The Baker's Tale--49

Fats took out the flashlight and the prayer,
And began to chant the nonsense there
Silently twelve times with concentration,
Knowing all too well his mute oration
Would not do, and so again, again,
He chanted in the cavern of his brain
Until the soundless sound became like music
Long memorized, and he would never lose it,
But know it till he died, its simple beauty.

And when he thought he'd finally done his duty,
Fats waited for the flow of energy
That would at last bring him the ecstasy
He had so long sought at the heart of being
With neither sense nor thought, unseeing seeing,
Unknowing knowing, all that is and ever
Would be flowing through him like a river ...

And there it was! Rising from below,
An energy of love no love could know,
Ecstasy just pouring through his heart,
Up from where two lovers played their part,
A universal loveliness that sings
Of all the grace that simply being brings.

And then -- nothing. It was over. Fats,
Exhausted, fell asleep, and that was that,
In his womb, suspended from his hook,
While underneath him two young lovers took
Themselves with whispers out of Fatso's bed
And out into the silent darkness fled,
Vanished into ordinary lives
Of ordinary husbands and their wives,
Their ecstasy, too, vanished in the flow

Of energy that moves the world we know.

When the following morning Fats awoke,
He banged his head so hard he thought it broke.
"Where am I?" first he wondered. "Am I dead
And buried?" But the sharp pain in his head
Told him he was still alive. And then,
Just as his womb/tomb swung back and forth again,
It all came flooding in. "Help! Help!" he cried.
"Help me out of here! I'm stuck inside!"

But no one came, of course, so Fatso squirmed
And twisted in the swinging crate, and wormed
His way up sideways, lifting with his shoulder
The cover of the crate. Then he looked over
At the other womb/tombs hanging near,
And said to the one next to him, "My dear
Sweet Carrie, did you feel the ecstasy?"
But, of course, no answer came, so he
Then shouted, "Time to wake up, everyone!"
But the crates hung motionless as stone.

"How do I get out of here?" he yelled.
He jiggled and he juggled and propelled
Himself halfway and then completely 'round.
But from the other crates there was no sound.

And then he understood the game at last,
Just as the knot that held his womb/tomb fast
Gave way, and Fats came crashing to the bed,
Smashing once again his aching head.
"Aieeee!" he screamed. And, "Oh!" But Carrie and Bill
Were gone. Their crates just hung there, mute and
still.

The Baker's Tale--51

Fats felt like the fool he was, and vowed,
Saying it a dozen times out loud,
That he would let the universe just be
And live with ordinary ecstasy,
Like other folk who totter to and fro
And are content to know what they don't know.
And so my story ends as best it can,
The one-time guru now an honest man.

THE SHERIFF'S TALE

THE SHERIFF'S PROLOGUE

All laughed at this ridiculous tale just told
Except the sheriff, separate from the fold,
Who still stood at the bar nursing his drink.
"I don't give two horseshits what you think!"
He blurted out, obviously quite drunk.
"What we've heard is just a lot of bunk!
None of you know life beyond the veil
Of decency, which is itself a tale
We tell ourselves to make it through the day.

But now I'll tell a tale about the way
Life is lived here in America --
Of the Moose and his Angelica,
And a moment of epiphany
That ought to turn to ice the energy
The New Age idiots babble on about.
This will shut them up, I have no doubt."

The Sheriff's Tale--53

"Now just hold on!" the bartender complained.
"The point of this is to be entertained.
Tales ought give us truth admixed with play
So we have art instead of everyday."

"Well, here's my truth!" the sheriff growled. "The
kind
That leaves not one sweet bit of balm behind.
The baker said through tales we can know well
Another's truth. So welcome to my hell!
It's what life is like in our time,
As Christianity gives way to crime,
And drugs become the quintessential good
Investors can make profits on. I would
Not want you to go on with shuttered eyes,
So here's the truth I live, with no disguise!"

THE SHERIFF'S TALE

Once there was a dealer in hard drugs
Who used to kill his enemies with hugs.
He'd snap your backbone like a walking stick,
Or merely crush your ribs and make you sick.

They called him in the neighborhood the Moose
Because he was as big as a caboose,
Six-foot-six, three-hundred-and-fifty pounds,
All muscle, and his avarice knew no bounds.
He'd always shortchange customers on weight,
And any who complained soon met their fate
Within the jaws of death that were his arms.

Among his many other well-known charms
Was his jealousy about his wife,

The one soft spot in his granitic life,
Whom like a vicious dog he would protect,
Warning away all who would inspect
Her opulent treasures, openly displayed,
So all would know where he alone could wade.

She loved him, too, her mountain of a man,
And often passion strongly in her ran,
But she knew well how well to stoke his fire
And then as well to satisfy desire.
So these two would several times a day
Be at it like two pigeons hard at play.

This Moose's wife was named Angelica,
An angel to him, and, in character,
He was a god to her, both strong and wise,
Colossus that bestrode her paradise.

One day a dealer that the Moose supplied
Sent two couriers to go inside
The Moose's house to watch him weigh the stuff
And make sure that for once they got enough.
For everyone knew well the Moose would weigh
His finger with the stash they had to pay
For by the ounce. So these two men intended
To see that they received what Moose contended.
Al and John they were, two tough young birds.

When they came, the Moose and they had words,
They insisting that they had to stay
While Moose their many purchases would weigh;
The Moose insisting he had naught to hide,
Eventually allowing them inside.

The Sheriff's Tale--55

As he weighed, Moose bragged about his wife,
How she was the story of his life,
How hot she was, and what she oft would do
To pleasure him. But these young toughs well knew
The strategy: To make them look at her
When she came in, at which time Moose could err
A bit here and a bit there in his favor,
While they his wife's sweet hanging fruit would
savor,
Looking where their real concern was not.

Among the stories told to make them hot,
Moose described each afternoon's delight:
Angelica, in scanty top bedight,
Would lean upon the windowsill upstairs
While Moose behind would take her unawares
While she stared at the parking lot below,
Face expressionless, that none would know
The glory that was going on behind
As Moose thrust in and then began to grind.
"I'll tell you, boys, that wife of mine's a treasure!"
Moose said. "There's none on earth like her for
pleasure."

But when she entered, dressed in very little,
Just briefs and halter, naked round the middle,
Al and John just stared at Moose's scale
As though they were both hammering a nail
Right into the center. So the Moose
Stopped weighing weed and told them to hang loose
For just a moment while he made a call,
Then left the room, leaving them with all
The millions in illegal drugs unguarded.

Al and John exchanged a look, then started
To take a little here, a little there,
While Angelica resumed her stare
Out the kitchen window at the back,
Then asked them whether they came in the black
Lamborghini that was parked outside.

"Why, yes," they said. "We took it for a ride.
Our boss, the Butcher, told us to impress
Any chick we might want to undress."
"Well, take another look," she said. "It's gone."
And in a New York minute Al and John
Were racing out the door to see their car
Spinning left out to the boulevard.

"Shit!" they said. "Our ass is grass!" And ran
To get a cab quick, and the mean streets scan,
While Moose weighed out their purchases as he
Saw fit; that is, not quite religiously.

When the boys returned, they said they'd found
The Lamborghini in a marsh, half drowned,
And had their boss's tow truck pull it out.
"Sorry, boys," Moose said. "Without a doubt,
You shouldn't park a car like that out here.
These teenagers run wild, without fear.
They'd shoot you in the head just for your shirt.
So on your way out, be on the alert."

Moose laughed as Al and John went out the door,
No two ever wanting vengeance more.

The very next day the Butcher had a plan
And sent Al and John back in a van,

Which they parked beneath the second floor
Window in the afternoon. They saw
The Moose come over to investigate
And shot him with a tranquilizer straight
Into his chest, enough to stun a bull,
And while he was staggering, they pulled
Him into the van and chained him to the wall
Hands and feet, so he couldn't move at all,
Then stuffed his mouth with rags and covered his
eyes
To keep him still and suffocate his cries.

When he came to, he pulled with all his might
Against the chains that held his body tight
Against the van wall reinforced with steel.
But, unlike Samson, no God would reveal
Himself to him to add faith to his strength.

So even Moose was forced to yield at length
And hang like meat, defeated, from the wall
While Al told him in vivid detail all
That was to follow, so that he might suffer
The full torment that this hell had to offer.
And when Al made the horror of it clear,
He slashed the Moose's throat from ear to ear.

Next John slipped inside the unlocked door
And quietly tip-toed to the second floor
Where Angelica was in the shower,
Preparing for the still-appointed hour
When Moose would take her from behind, while she
Stared out upon the world expressionlessly.

At last she came out in a scanty top

As John peeked out a closet door, then propped
Herself against the sill, her lovely face
Emerging as the sign all was in place.

Al tried to pull the Moose out of the van,
Struggling with the weight of that huge man.
He tugged and pushed and tugged with all his might
(Even dead, the Moose put up a fight),
Afraid he'd be too late, while John above
Entered the sweet precincts of his dove,
Feeling her wet passion as she came
Against him, muttering the Moose's name,
By which time Al had got the Moose around
Far enough to dump him on the ground.

Moose lay on his back, his glassy eyes
Staring vacant straight up at his wife's,
Who, looking down, could not at first take in
The fullness of the truth unraveling
Around her. Then she met her husband's stare
And screamed a scream no one should ever hear.

Yet hear it still we do, day after day,
As life goes on in the old modern way
In this, the century we call 21.
Here I rest my case; my tale's done.

THE CHEF'S TALE

THE CHEF'S PROLOGUE

A silence greeted this ungodly tale,
As though whatever words one spoke would fail
To resonate in depths so dark and cold
As those that drowned the tale the sheriff told.

Until the chef, whose turn was next, spoke out,
And said, "Now there's your truth and play, no
doubt,
For art arranges happenings just so,
To make us see again the world we know.
I have an epiphany as well
To grace the tale I will shortly tell --"

"God forbid!" the bartender broke in.
"We've had enough of brutal tales and grim
Epiphanies. Now leave that stuff alone,
Or all these lovely people will go home.
Give us something lively, light, and fun,

Or I'm afraid our tale telling's done."

"All right," the chef agreed. "I'll do my best.
But you have put my powers to the test.
I have no tale in mind ... Ah, yes! Here goes!
But how I'll ever finish it, God knows."

THE CHEF'S TALE

There was an assistant manager whose work
Would once have been intended for a clerk.
But nowadays we make the ego king
And so inflate the worth of everything.

Assistant manager's the lowest rung,
But sounds much better on the ignorant tongue
Than clerk or secretary or cashier,
Words that we no longer wish to hear.
Hard work and real achievement get the same
Recognition, title, status, name
As mediocrity, or often worse.

Now this young man was to his boss a curse.
He hated work and often loved to play
Computer games to while the time away,
Or chat online with strangers, friends, whomever.
When his boss came 'round, he would endeavor
To look as though he had no time to spare,
So overworked he was, and full of care.

Yet at five o'clock, right on the dot,
He was gone, overworked or not,
To happy hour at a nearby bar

The Chef's Tale--61

Or home to find friends for his avatar,
A cartoon he called Perkin Reveler
After Chaucer's uncouth character.

This Perkin chatted gaily with cartoons,
Avatars he met in closed chat rooms,
Where they had sex (in words -- they had no
flesh),

Two avatars in virtual congress.
The person -- Stanley -- had a friend named Steve,
Whose wife was somewhere out there, he believed,
Since Steve once said he caught her in the act
Of having sex in words, if not in fact.

She promised him that she would stop if he
Would satisfy her in reality,
But Stanley knew quite well her avatar
Was having better sex online by far.

There was no way, of course, that he could know
What lay behind each avatar, and so
He fantasized right through the fantasy
That it was Steve's wife in reality,
Enjoying all those layers --

At this the chef broke off, and to us said,
"I am afraid my inspiration's dead."
"Oh, go on!" the baker urged. "You've made
Us anxious to hear more. The plot you've laid
With Steven's wife is quite intriguing, and
Your character is quite the modern man."
"Have a drink!" the sheriff said. "And then
You'll get your inspiration back again."
"I'm sorry. You don't understand. He's dead,"

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--62

The chef insisted. "Chaucer. Chaucer's dead."

"Chaucer wrote this tale of avatars,
Computers, chat rooms, happy hours at bars?"
The lawyer asked, as though it could not be.

"Not exactly," said the chef. "But he
Set out the bones. The flesh, it's true, is mine.
This isn't a translation, line for line,
But let us say an adaptation that
Rides through our own brief time on Chaucer's
back.

"But somehow I was drawn to tell a tale
That Chaucer left unfinished, doomed to fail.
Well, there it is. I've tried to do my best.
Now I'll sit back and listen to the rest."

THE LAWYER'S TALE

INTRODUCTION TO THE LAWYER'S TALE

"Well," said the host, "this is a fine affair!
You say you will and then you won't! But there
Are others in the company who will
Regale us until we've had our fill.

"It's just past ten now, the gambling's over at one.
A quarter of our time has thus far run,
Pleasantly, I hope. For precious is
Each moment, and we find our joy in this:
That though we cannot have again what's done,
There's always more to have till we are gone.

"So, lawyer, come now! You must have a tale
So full of lusty truth our own lives pale
Beside the secrets told in confidence
That you might now disguise in fiction, whence
Good tales all come -- from life, but subtly bent,
Sufficient to protect the innocent."

"I'm afraid," the lawyer said, "that I
Have little in my head to satisfy
The need to hear a tale yet unheard,
And what I have strikes me as absurd.

"Yes, much in my long life that I have done
Might easily into a tale be spun,
But Chaucer, in his massive oeuvre has
Already done it all with more pizzazz
Than I could ever generate. And so,
Like the chef, I'll to his great work go,
But this time to a tale he finished, taking
All the essential ingredients of its making,
And bringing it up to date, as you will see
In this, a tale from Chaucer and from me."

THE LAWYER'S PROLOGUE

O may we be spared from poverty,
Hunger, torture, rape, of loved ones shorn,
And all descendants of this company
From being of the starving billions born,
All their lives to suffer and to mourn,
Or through some twist of fate or will of war
From being cast among the wretched poor.

But if misfortune come to us, then let
Us bear it patiently and with good grace,
For what we are is more than what we get,
And fortune is far more than time and place,
Ready to return a strong embrace,
As you will hear in this, my tale of woe

And courage, that makes one of high and low.

THE LAWYER'S TALE

PART I

Anna Weiss was born to wealth and ease,
A daughter doted on in early years
By parents whose greatest pleasure was to please,
And with love to inundate her fears,
And with kisses still her infant tears.
Till she was four, she knew nor want nor pain,
Nurtured in a world both safe and sane.

With her father she was very close.
Often he would take her on his knee
And read to her, or talk of what was most
On her childish mind, but seriously,
As though there were no better company.
She was indulged, not spoiled, as she grew
To imitate the generous love she knew.

She was affectionate and trusting, shy
At first, but then a little chatterbox,
Quick to laugh, not easy to make cry,
Innocent as yet of painful shocks
That later fit the soul with doors and locks.
Universally she was adored,
An angel whose sweet face one's faith restored.

All that wealth could do for her, it did:
She had a spacious room chock-full of toys,
And what she wanted, want did not forbid.
But most of all, she learned the deeper joys

That later lie beneath the foreground noise --
All that taste and culture could instill,
And compassion could shape into will.

Her father wanted her to learn what men
At that time exclusively were taught,
And to be equal to her husband when
She married, in both character and thought,
And bring to life more than her mother brought,
Not stunted in what she could say or do
By being limited in what she knew.

So was she destined for a happy life
Of pleasure, plenty, privilege, and praise,
To marry well and be a loving wife
And mother, who in turn would ably raise
Children bright and gentle in their ways.
But fate had something else for her in store,
As you will see, if you listen more.

When she was four, the Germans came to town.
Soon Anna had a Jewish star to wear
On all her clothes. Now rarely she went down
With her parents to play. The Germans there
Would curse and spit at Jews, or cut their hair.
And so they stayed at home and waited for
The end of what seemed just another war.

One day her parents told her she would go
With Luba, a former nanny, for awhile
Into the country, how long they didn't know,
Until the Germans, as was oft their style,
Finally left. And then (this with a smile),
She and Luba would return, and they

The Lawyer's Tale--67

Would be just as before she went away.

Anna naturally could see behind
The veil of normalcy to what the heart
Was saying, quite the opposite of mind,
And understood, for all her parents' art,
That they would for a long time be apart,
Perhaps forever. She wept and held them tight,
And nothing that they said could make it right,

Till Luba had forcibly to pry
Her from her parents, and drag her out the door
While they, weeping, did not even try
To stop her, so that Anna became sure
That Luba was a witch, the kind that tore
Children from their parents so that she
Might eat them up, once fattened properly.

They took a train out to the countryside,
And then a horse-drawn cart, and then on foot
Through snowy fields to a barn with cows inside,
Some goats and horses, too. Then Luba put
Down the things they brought with them and shut
The door, and said that Anna must stay here
Until there were no Germans left to fear.

She would bring her food each day, she said,
But warned her never, never to go outside
Because the Germans wanted all Jews dead
And searched for Jews to murder far and wide.
So should some stranger enter, she should hide
Beneath the hay and not come out at all
Until she heard Luba to her call.

Then Luba left the child there alone
With nothing but the cows to keep her warm.
Whether she returned cannot be known,
For little Anna, weeping, left the barn,
Thinking that the witch might do her harm,
Fattening her up to eat her, as occurred
In a tale that she had lately heard.

How else explain the power of the witch
Over her parents? She must have cast a spell!
Or maybe Luba engineered a switch
With demons that in deep, dark forests dwell
And her loving parents! Who could tell?
Her parents never would have sent her here!
So much, then, was absolutely clear.

Little Anna walked across a field
And found a path that led into a wood.
It was past four, the light began to yield,
And there before her evil demons stood,
Five of them, all dressed as demons should
In shrouds that blended with the ambient snow,
And blocked the path on which she now would go.

One came near and knelt in front of her.
"Who are you?" he asked, "my dear, sweet child?"
She was not used to Polish, though there were
Many words she understood. He smiled
And said, "A little Jewish girl!" Then piled
Some snow into his hand, a little mound,
Covered her face and threw her to the ground.

What they did to her, I need not tell.
Enough to say she bled from front and back,

The Lawyer's Tale--69

Left lying naked in the snow that fell
Like heavy, frozen tears down from the black,
Half-burying her on the drifted track,
As she, freezing, could not move, but lay
Dying on the unfrequented way.

And then she saw an angel coming near,
Who dropped a sack of wood and knelt beside
Her praying silently, yet she could hear
Music like an overwhelming tide
Drown her in love, when else she would have died,
A love just like the pain she could not bear
Flowing from the angel with blond hair.

PART II

Twenty-eight years now pass, and Anna Weiss
Is Anna Michnowicz, a Catholic Pole,
Married to her angel, who is twice
Her age, unquestioned icon of her soul,
Father, husband, lover, joy -- the whole
Passion of her life, but for Christ,
Whose love alone for her would have sufficed.

The horror in the woods became a gift
Through which she found divine and earthly love,
A trauma that eventually would shift
Her childish vision to perception of
The permanence of pain and need to move
With dancer's grace to choreography
Beyond what she could comprehend or see.

It was enough to witness pain, of course,

And feel the fullness of our suffering,
For God alone had wisdom, wit, and force
To render good and true salvation bring.
The love one felt was what made one's soul sing,
One billionth part of what one had received
From Christ, if one's heart could be believed.

Still, one ought to imitate His life,
Who came to Earth to illustrate the good,
Teaching by example man and wife,
Who otherwise might not love as they should,
Not knowing love within as now they could.
Love was the gift that Christ gave on the cross,
Turning into gold life's bitter dross.

So Anna loved her husband long and well,
A farm wife with two sons. At times she thought
Of her strange past, though it was hard to tell
Fantasy from memory. She caught
Glimpses of a time that sometimes brought
Such pain to think about she let it go,
Wondering whether it was real or no.

Her husband Jacek was a fiery man
Who fought against injustice and oppression,
First against the lords of his own land,
Then against the foreigner's aggression,
The Nazis and the Reds in swift succession.
Often he was beaten and in jail,
But now he was becoming old and frail.

One day some friends came to the house and said
That he would be the special target of
A campaign to remove all those who led

The Lawyer's Tale--71

Some protests that had too successful proved,
And so the government to slander moved.
They would say he was a Zionist spy,
And his wife a Jew, which was a lie.

Jacek blushed and said that it was true.
He found his wife when she was just a child
Raped and dying in the woods. A Jew,
Yes, she was by birth (and here he smiled),
But now with Christ completely reconciled,
Spending so much time upon her knees
That he would often miss his midnight squeeze.

This is no joke, they said. They will accuse
You of Zionism, and your wife.
You must go into exile, now, or lose
For good your freedom and, perhaps, your life.
The capital is with these rumors rife:
That to crack down on protests, they will use
The age-old Polish hatred of the Jews.

Jacek didn't want to go, but when
They warned that Anna might be tortured, too,
He gave in reluctantly, and then
Did everything they said that he should do,
Afraid of what his wife might be put through
After all she suffered long ago
When he found her dying in the snow.

Off they went, they and their two boys,
Adam and Pavel, guided on their way
From house to house by those who found their joys
In making their dark midnight into day,
Living as they would while others lay

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--72

In darkness, slaves to history and will,
The innocent accomplices of ill.

They crossed the borders of those states enslaved
On foot, through woods or over mountain passes,
Crossing streams in small boats, or on paved
Roads traveling in holes carved into chassis,
Barely breathing as a guard harasses
The driver at a checkpoint drowned in light,
Harsh and ugly adjunct to the night.

And then at last a crossing so remote
To a place so backward none can tell
What century it is, where a boat
Awaits to take them out of that cold hell
Across the sea to where one might rebel
And speak the truth, and say what one believes,
And not be ruled by murderers and thieves.

But here the brave, like-minded network ends,
And smugglers for pay must take their place,
Far less dependable than were their friends
Among the many dangers that they face.
The smuggler leads them at too fast a pace
And soon is gone, too far ahead to see,
Abandoning the winded family.

And there upon a ridgeline Anna saw
The same five evil demons she had seen
So long ago, when she was only four,
Coming towards them like some awful dream
That could not be, but is. Anna's scream
Echoed like a banshee's off the hills,
The kind the heart with dread and anguish fills.

The Lawyer's Tale--73

But why detail what those demons did?
First, they stifled Anna's screams and tied
Her hand and foot, then took all that was hid
In clothes that her sweet angels wore; then tried
To find out more with torture till they died --
Anna's angels buried in a wood
While Christ looked on and wept, as well He should.

After raping her till they were done,
They sold Anna to a brothel in some town
Deep in the mountains, far from anyone
Who spoke her language or might help her. Down
In a dark cellar she was tightly bound
Until the owner finished eating dinner,
Then came down to teach the raw beginner.

She found her deep in prayer on her knees,
For Christ had come to see her there, and held
Her in His arms. She had begged Him please
To take her to her angels, but life knelled
Incessantly for her as bright tears welled
Into His eyes. "Not yet, not yet," He said.
"You've much to do before you join the dead."

Then she wept for comfort in His chest,
As child to parent, burrowing inside
Towards something that made sense of all the rest,
A love for all that was, that never died,
In which all things might innocent abide.
The owner then unbound her, let her be,
For never did she such sweet radiance see.

And so it was the next few months as Anna

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--74

Became a prostitute in that small place,
Accepting what her fate had thrust upon her
Without complaint and with uncanny grace
That made the men ashamed to see her face,
And gave to those who shared her slavery
New hope in what they sensed but could not see.

But, knowing that Christ wasn't welcome here,
Anna learned the teachings of Islam
As she taught the others not to fear,
But to find strength in God, the "am that am,"
While they taught her the ways of the Koran
And their language, which was of the same
Kind as hers, and so words quickly came.

As Anna practiced well the Muslim faith,
She came to love it also, and to pray
To Allah purely, as the Prophet saith,
Without Christ's human image in the way.
Yet for her faith she dearly had to pay,
Especially since she influenced the others
To treat even their customers as brothers.

Yet there was something beautiful within
That made even the brutes that owned her pause,
Evil as they were, and steeped in sin,
But human still, and touched by higher laws,
Though rarely acting without selfish cause.
And so they sold her to a pious man
Who freed her and then asked her for her hand.

PART III

Thirty years now pass, and Anna Weiss
Is Anna Spahiu, wife of Muhamedin.
Although a Muslim, she's still in love with Christ,
Adding new loves to what loves have been,
Seeing through eyes shaped by what she's seen.
She is poor -- the years show on her face --
Yet she is grateful for this time and place.

Most of all she loves the times of prayer,
Alone with Allah, pure and full of peace,
A breath upon the void, no more than there,
Free of all that must begin and cease,
A bit of longing, longing for release.
At such times all her suffering and joy
Become one love no demon can destroy.

Her husband was a widower with three
Young girls, for whom he needed soon a mother.
Hearing of this saint, he went to see
Her for himself, and then would have no other.
The first few years he was to her a brother,
But then she came to love him as a wife,
And shared with him his sweet but meager life.

They now were getting old, the daughters gone
To their husbands' villages nearby,
Married and with children. Left alone,
Anna and her husband oft would lie
Hand in hand and share a silent sigh,
The house full of memories, calm and still,
Rich with love, untenanted by will.

But one night demons knocked upon their door,
Then knocked it down and came inside, the same
Five demons that had come for her before,
Laughing as they called them both by name,
Anna and Muhamedin, then came
Into the bedroom, neighbors that they knew,
Yet now doing just what demons do.

"Dirty Muslim pigs!" they said, then dragged
Them out the door and set the house on fire.
"Your wife will love this!" the cruel demons bragged
As they tied her husband up with wire,
Then raped her till they had all their desire.
"Just wanted you to see!" they laughing said,
Then shot her weeping husband in the head.

And then they left, those demons, as she lay
Bleeding on the ground from front and back,
As she had so long ago that day
She met her angel on the forest track
As snow like frozen tears fell from the black,
And she lay nearly dying and in pain.
But this time her angel lay beside her, slain.

And so she prayed to God that she might die
And not be rescued this time. Her desire
Was simply to beside her husband lie
And never move again, but to expire
As though to sleep. No hope did she require,
Nor faith, nor love, but all was bleak despair,
For life itself was more than she could bear.

O those who stoke the evil in each heart
For power, vengeance, greed, or hope of gain,

The Lawyer's Tale--77

Know that as you play your ugly part,
There is a part of you that writhes in pain
And drives you on to massacre again.
You shape your inner world, and outer, too,
By everything you think or say or do.

And so for good the opposite is true,
For love allows the loving soul to flower,
And being's sweet effulgence to renew
With more resilience and with greater power,
As it did in Anna's darkest hour,
Moving her to move and then to rise,
Though no one heard her sharp and painful cries.

She found a shovel near the burned-out barn
And buried her dear husband where he fell,
Untying first his feet and then his arms
That he might rest in Heaven safe and well,
Away from this advertisement for Hell.
And then she left her smoldering abode
To join her fellow Muslims on the road.

For days they walked with little food or water,
Thousands, tens of thousands, on the run
Towards a distant and indifferent border
Where they were left in limbo, and undone
By hunger, thirst, and sickness one by one,
In their thousands slowly dying there,
A nation dispossessed and in despair.

Anna searched the camp for her stepdaughters,
Hearing things that filled her heart with dread,
Many seeking kin as she sought hers
Only to find for certain they were dead,

Killed by Christians or dying as they fled.
Two sons-in-law were dead -- that much she heard.
But of the others there was not a word.

Sick with grief and hunger, still in pain,
Anna fainted, and there she would have died
But for some angels finding her again
And with a stretcher taking her inside
A tent, where volunteers from Israel tried
To save those that they could, though Muslims all,
And they were Jews who came at mercy's call.

When Anna woke, she heard a doctor say,
In a language that she knew she knew,
"She will be fine." He knelt down where she lay
To feel her pulse, then, satisfied, withdrew.
"Wait!" she said. "Please wait! I am a Jew!"
The translator translated, the doctor turned
As lost, beloved memories through her burned.

"My name is Anna Weiss," she said, "born
Somewhere in Poland soon before the war.
But then I was from my poor parents torn
And became a Christian. After more
Troubles, then a Muslim. Please, before
You go away, I wish that you would see
Whether anyone still looks for me."

The doctor nodded, then withdrew again.
Anna waited white with hope inside
The tent, while he contacted Yad Vashem
In Israel, to say that he had tried,
Certain she, to stay alive, had lied.
But sure enough, Anna Weiss was there,

The Lawyer's Tale--79

A little girl lost near Lublin somewhere.

The doctor then returned to her and said,
"There is an Anna Weiss among those named
As missing, though none knows alive or dead."
And looking for some proof she had not feigned,
He said a prayer perhaps she still retained:
"*Baruch atta* --" "No! No! It is *atto!*"
And so they hugged and kissed and wept with joy.

PART IV

Six months later, Anna Weiss was on
A plane from Tel Aviv to JFK,
Looking for her father, who was gone
From the last place he'd been known to stay
After moving to the USA.
For fifty years he'd faithfully sent in
His address and his phone to Yad Vashem.

He had never given up on her.
He registered her name soon after he
Had come to Israel. The others were
All dead, each member of his family
Gassed or shot. He could not know that she
Had been saved by her angel, and then grew
Up barely knowing that she was a Jew.

She followed him upon the ledger there,
From Tel Aviv to Dan to Jerusalem,
And then Seattle, Cleveland, and Bel Air,
But always, always, telling Yad Vashem
Address and phone, that they might tell him when

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--80

She had been found, or, perhaps, they'd heard
From someone somewhere sometime just one word.

His last address and phone, in Riverdale,
The Bronx, was sent in just four years ago.
She called and wrote to him, to no avail,
And now was flying in that she might know
If he was still alive, and then, if so,
Would want to come to live with her at last,
To heal the wound inflicted so long past.

She traced him to a nursing home nearby
Where he had lived, and went to see him there,
Directed to a ward, she knew not why,
To which she had to be buzzed in, and where
There seemed to be but little nursing care.
Residents roamed up and down the halls
Aimlessly, or leaned against the walls.

She found a desk, deserted, then a nurse
In a white coat, and asked her for her father.
She led her to a room where someone cursed
Them viciously, got up, began to totter
Towards them, then decided not to bother,
Collapsing back to bed. "That's him," she said,
Then went back out, no longer interested.

"Papa!" Anna cried, though knowing he
No longer was, yet was. She was too late,
And yet on time to live the irony
That was the last expression of their fate,
So long had both of them had had to wait
To be rejoined, and now he could not know
The daughter he had lost so long ago.

The Lawyer's Tale--81

Two years she stayed to care for him, while she
Worked as a companion and a maid,
In the USA illegally,
Alone and poor and ever more afraid
Of being caught, the longer that she stayed.
She wrote to her stepchildren, now back home,
And talked to them from time to time by phone,

But could not go to see them, lest when she
Returned, she would not be allowed back in.
Every day she could she went to see
Her father, though unrecognized within,
And fed him that he might not get too thin,
Until he died, and she was free once more
To start again, as she had done before.

She went back to Israel to live
In Bat Yam, a suburb by the sea,
Living off a pension that they give
To Holocaust survivors, and what she
Was sent by her remaining family
For her share of the farm, which they had sold
To someone who had paid for it in gold.

They reburied their father properly,
Inviting her to come, which now she could,
And did, though as a Jew, which all could see,
And prayed and wept for her dear husband, good
Man that he was, and later stood
Deep in the mountains, where her angel lay,
And her two sons, and on her knees did pray.

"Dear Christ," she prayed, "and Allah, and Jehovah,

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--82

A trinity now of a different kind,
Three-in-one, my Gods, may you look over
All my loved ones gone, and help me find
Them once I leave this gift of life behind."
She hungered then for death, when she might be
Reunited with her family.

Her stepdaughters were anxious she remain
With them, to spend in comfort her last days,
But she returned to Israel again,
Which was to her, her home, in many ways,
The first she felt her own, where no bright glaze
Need cover her dark truth, as it had done
Till she to Israel's tent had finally come.

She studied Hebrew and the Talmud, too,
Kept a kosher home, observed Shabbat
And all the holidays as they came due,
Turning her home into a *Migdash Me'at*,
A little space of holiness, where not
One demon would not bow the head and pray,
So pure and clean and simple was her way.

Yet well she knew the demons were still there,
Waiting to be summoned by the heart
That would call out and draw them from the air
To play their ghastly, cruel, inhuman part
And commandeer the souls that now would start
To massacre and torture, burn and rape
Those whom for their difference they would hate.

The demons, yes, were rampant among Jews
And Arabs both, just itching to begin
The reign of hate, that would collect the dues

The Lawyer's Tale--83

Long owed by both sides for their years of sin,
A retribution savored long within.
Yet angels, too, were hovering nearby,
Singing songs that filled the radiant sky.

Just as the sun casts its light on Earth
Not meaning to, so Anna gave to her
Small circle of good neighbors something worth
Far more than those whose words the many stir,
A peace that helped to calm what passions were
Dancing in their hearts; also a grace
That helped to make a sanctum of that place.

So there's my tale, the best that I can render,
Leaving Anna innocent but wise,
Tiresias of faith instead of gender,
Having worshiped God through many eyes,
Becoming what would else have been disguise,
And joining in her prayer all those who love,
And whose sweet will to peace might others move.

EPILOGUE TO THE LAWYER'S TALE

"By God, that was a most affecting tale!"
The bartender exclaimed, lifting his ale.
"And long enough for two or three, I'd say.
But now enough of God, I humbly pray,
And preaching in the guise of narrative.
I want to see some characters who live
As I do. Minister, is that OK?
The lawyer's stole your thunder! If I may,
Could we have a tale without religion?
But I say too much -- it's your decision."

"That it is," the minister agreed.

"Perhaps I shouldn't go, if you have need --"

"I'll take his turn!" the engineer broke in.

"I have a tale steeped in venal sin,
Some bitter beer, the taste of everyday,
Where morals are a universal gray.

"Let the minister assume my place
Later on, perhaps when we can face
Another tale to profit from. Right now
We'd favor one distinctly lower brow."

All agreed that's what they'd want hear,
And so this next went to the engineer.

THE ENGINEER'S TALE

There was a taxi driver named Miguel
Whose wife, named Mary Lou, put him through hell.
He drove for many hours every day
So she could throw his hard-earned cash away
On clothes and pocketbooks and shoes and jewels.

Ah, the world is too full of such fools!
Better a wife who's plain and full of love
For you than one who's always thinking of
Ways to spend what you work hard to earn.
But those who wed for lust will never learn!
Never even thinking what a life
One might have to live with such a wife.

And so it was with poor Miguel, who drove
All day long on crowded, dangerous roads
To feed his wife's desire for brand-name stuff,
Of which, of course, she never had enough,
Too tired, mostly, to enjoy the charms
He had so long envisioned in his arms,
And, besides, too angry at her greed

To feel the slightest stirring of his need.

Still, it felt good when Miguel could see
Men stare at her and wish that they were he.

One day Mary Lou, as usual,
Was shopping at a nearby high-end mall
When she saw a lovely Prada bag
That made her cold heart ping and spirits sag,
For at a thousand it was quite a steal,
And yet no calculation could reveal
A way she might get cash enough to pay
For it. And so she found another way.

With dreams of that bag dancing in her head,
A little dark-brown clutch with hints of red,
She called a close friend of her husband, who
Her husband called a cousin. But she knew
That he would love to get her into bed,
Though he was never crude in what he said.

She asked him to take her out to lunch, which he
Was pleased to do, listening while she
Complained about her husband bitterly,
And how he treated her so stingily.

He was a loser, not worthy of her glance,
And here she was, trapped by circumstance.
All she wanted was a little clutch,
A tiny bag, it wasn't asking much,
But she knew he was sure to tell her no.
Oh how! Oh how could he reward her so!
All she did was love him, give him pleasure!
Other men would treat her as a treasure!

"I would," his friend Ramon at last broke in,
As she had expected, "were I him.
How much does that bag cost?" "Not much," she
said.

"A thousand. It's a steal." He clutched his head.
"A thousand! I don't have that much! I would,
Believe me, give it gladly if I could.
For I have loved you from the moment I
First saw you in the glint in Miguel's eye
When he told me about you. And since then
I've wanted you without a word. But when
You just revealed your feelings, I felt free
At last to tell you what you mean to me."

"Oh, Ramon, my darling, never fear!"
She said. "I have a plan, as you shall hear.
We shall get my stingy husband to
Cough up the money for my bag, while you
Get everything you want -- and more -- today!
If you do precisely as I say."

That afternoon Ramon called up his friend
And asked him for a short-term loan, to tend
To an investment for which cash was due.
"How much?" Miguel asked. "A grand. Too much for
you?"

"When can I have it back?" "Just till tomorrow."

And so Miguel allowed his friend to borrow
A thousand dollars from his cash reserve,
As true friends ever one another serve.

Straight from Miguel, Ramon went to deliver

The cash to Mary Lou, who gave the giver
All he could desire, and more than he
Had dreamed of in his wildest fantasy.
Then off she went back to the Prada store
To buy the bag that she was lusting for.

The next day Miguel inquired of his friend
About the loan. When did he intend
To pay it back? "I gave it to your wife,"
He said. "This morning. I swear upon my life!"
"I believe you," Miguel replied. "But she
Said nothing of this interchange to me."

Ramon shrugged, so Miguel said nothing more,
But waited till they went to bed before
He asked his lovely wife whether she
Had gotten from Ramon the money he
Had lent him just the day before. "Oh, yes!"
She said. "And guess what I got -- you'll never guess!"

She hopped right out of bed, turned on the light,
As if assuming mutual delight,
And took out the Prada bag, a treasure
So beautiful it must give equal pleasure
To both of them. "It was a steal!" she said.
"I knew you wouldn't mind!" Then back to bed
She leapt. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!"
she

Cried out, smothering him with kisses, while he
Just lay there, hapless, helpless, hopeless, numb
To love and lust alike, thinking how dumb
He was, and how many miles he'd have to drive
To pay for this, and how he must deprive
Himself of little things he might enjoy,

The Engineer's Tale--89

While she, laboring to his member buoy,
Plied his body with exquisite art,
Engaging every morsel but the heart.

THE NUN'S TALE

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE NUN'S TALE

"Bravo!" the bartender cried. "Well done, I say!
I recognize them all! That's just the way
We carry on, we folk of venal sin,
All fully liable for the fix we're in!

"But Sister, now it's your turn next to tell
A tale for us, if that would please you well."
"Well it would," the nun said with good cheer.
And so began the tale that you shall hear.

THE NUN'S PROLOGUE

If you will just bear with me, I will pray
To God and Christ, and to the Virgin Mother
Before I start my tale. It is my way
To ask for Heaven's help, I know no other,
Though most of you, I realize, would not bother.

The Nun's Tale--91

But I have little talent and less skill,
And so I must add faith and hope to will.

O Lord, whose word across the Earth has spread,
And whose love encompasses us all,
The living and the still-awaiting dead
Who shall arise the moment that You call;
And Christ, Whose sacrifice reversed our fall:
Please help me tell this modern miracle
With feeling, grace, simplicity, and skill.

And blessed queen, who loved your martyred child,
Yet knew the sacrifice for which He came,
Knew that on your soul Heaven had smiled,
Yet knew how sharp would be a mother's pain,
Help me, too, I pray, this tale sustain
Of a mother who would lose a son
Who'd save his killer through his martyrdom.

THE NUN'S TALE

In Chicago there lived a single mother
Who had one child, a boy named Lionel.
She had just one, she could not have another,
And so, perhaps, she loved him far too well
For both their good, as shortly I will tell.
She made a meager living caring for
The elderly, as poor as she was poor.

She would not send her child to public school,
For the local one taught little and cared less,
Ruled by gangs, ubiquitous and cruel,
Who would for sure cause Lionel distress.

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--92

And so, with little, she had to do with less,
And sent him to a Catholic school, though she
Was not religious, nor wanted her child to be.

But little Lionel soon fell in love
With the Virgin Mother, and prayed each day,
Looking up towards Heaven, where above
His ceiling, cracked and peeling, angels lay
Their heads upon her lap, or oft would play
Their harps and sing, full of love and joy
That touched the heart of this unearthly boy.

Often he would sing a childish song
That he was taught in school, that went like this:
*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss,
Come to us, and all our sorrows kiss
Away, as once you did for God when He
Was still a child and sat upon your knee.*

He sang this prayer on his way to school
In his little sing-song childish way,
And also swinging when his mother Jewel
Would take him to the park to romp and play,
Until the toughs who to that park did stray
Could stand no more of it, and took offense
At words that spoke of love and innocence.

They planned to silence him, but only when
His mother wasn't sitting right nearby.
They had to listen to him until then,
Sick to death of words that did not lie,
Though at the time, they could not tell you why.
Their hearts were hard in preparation for

The Nun's Tale--93

A life of vicious crime and outright war.

One day Jewel was sick and could not go
Downstairs when Lionel desired to play.
She felt bad for him, he wanted so
To be outside, and so she thought that day
She'd take a chance and let him have his way.
So down he went to his beloved swing
Where as he swung it was his joy to sing:

*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*

Yet now the toughs could see he was alone,
Which was a chance they did not want to miss,
And so surrounded him, and spoke like this:
"Shut up, you little bastard, or we'll kick
Your freaking ass! Your singing makes us sick!"

But little Lionel, now scared to death,
Never having had to face before
Such brutal talk, could scarcely take a breath,
But whimpered in a way that somehow bore
Resemblance to the song he sang no more.
"We warned you!" one boy said, whose name was
Chris,
And smashed him in the temple with his fist.

As Lionel fell off the swing, the boys
All crowded round him, making sure that none
Could see them kicking him, and made some noise
Like cracking jokes, so none could hear him moan
Until they stopped, and he lay like a stone.
"That'll teach you," Chris said as he spat
On him, "to sing a stupid song like that!"

Little Lionel, with sightless eyes,
Just stared up at them. Nor did his chest,
As they watched it, either fall or rise.
Chris dared touch him, for the final test,
Ear to heart, to put all doubt to rest.
"He's dead," he said. "The little bastard's dead."
And then, in anger, kicked him in the head.

Chris carried him in the middle of a crowd
So none could see the nature of his load,
Urging them to joke and laugh out loud,
Taking care that none of Lionel showed
Until they got the body safely stowed
In a dumpster, where, throwing him in, he leaped
In himself to bury him down deep.

When Chris climbed out, they heard a voice sing
this:

*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*

It was Lionel, it could be none
Other than he who sang, the only one
Inside the dumpster, from where the faint voice
came,

And so Chris sighed and jumped back in again.

Digging down through garbage, he got to where
Lionel was buried, but the singing
Stopped, and all he saw beneath him there
Was a dead body. There was no point in bringing
It back out of the dumpster, or in swinging
Over the side himself, and so he stayed,
Hoping he'd hear nothing, but afraid;

The Nun's Tale--95

And then, clearly, once again heard this:
*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*
Coming from the body, which alone
Could be the source of that uncanny song.
Amid the garbage, Chris got on his knees
And prayed, "O God! Dear God! Forgive me, please!"

And sweet forgiveness came to Chris's heart,
But with a price that he would gladly pay,
A love from which he could not bear to part,
That sang from little Lionel as he lay
Amid the garbage. Again Chris knelt to pray,
To Whom he did not know, but he knew this:
That somewhere beyond death lay life and bliss.

Chris waited for Lionel to sing again in vain.
Instead of miracles, there came a shout,
A voice possessed, calling Lionel's name,
Desperately a woman crying out,
Lionel's mother, Chris had little doubt.
"Here!" Chris called. "He's here! Here in this bin!"
And Chris stood up, garbage all over him.

Jewel turned to see a motley specter rise
Up from the dumpster, dripping bags and slime,
Motioning down as if to some lost prize,
A monster making do with pantomime
As though in horror at some ghastly crime.
And then she knew, and screamed a scream that tore
The sky in two, till she could scream no more.

Years later, she finally visited Chris in jail

Where he was serving life without parole.
He was strong and healthy, she was frail;
His life was full of meaning, rich and whole,
While she was still in mourning, sick of soul.
"I cannot give him back to you," he said.
"But he's in Heaven. Don't think of him as dead."

"There is no Heaven!" she almost growled in pain.
"Only life here. And after that, just nothing.
You took from me all that I had. Refrain
From pep talk, please, or fairy tales, the puffing
Up of truth to salve your conscience. The thing
That is true is that you killed him! That fact
Is all there is. No talk can take that back!"

"I wish you could have heard his body sing!"
Chris said. "It was a miracle, no doubt
Of that. One that would my lost soul bring
To Christ and love and goodness. Hear me out!
My call for your forgiveness was not about
My need but yours. It came to me in prayer
That in your suffering, I should be there.

"It is a cruel irony, I know,
That murdering your son was my salvation.
Can I thank God for it? The fatal blow
Gave life to me, a pure abomination
That brought about the grace of revelation.
I would share this with you, that you might hear
Your dead son sing to me of Mary dear."

"You brought me here to preach to me?" Jewel cried.
"To save my soul? Wasn't killing him enough?
I have to see you smug and satisfied,

The Nun's Tale--97

Full of this pretense that lets you slough
Off guilt so easily? I'd like to stuff
You full of just one breath of what I feel,
So you might know one second that is real!"

Chris wept at this, and suddenly Jewel saw
The truth behind the miracle of grace,
Something passionate and ever raw
That lived untenanted by time and place.
"Please, please don't cry," she said, and wiped her
face.

"Of course I forgive you." And then they wept
together
For Lionel, for themselves, and for each other.

Then Jewel went home, filled with grief and love,
Renewed by the sweet moment of her tears,
While Chris, chastened, prayed to God above,
Tormented by the salience of his fears.
"Was it real?" he asked. It had been years
Since the miracle that saved his soul
And made his life harmonious and whole.

No answer. So to Mary then he prayed:
"Dear Mother of God, did I really hear that song?
Or was the death of that boy just delayed,
And I have been deluded all along?"
No answer whether he was right or wrong,
As though a door had been slammed shut above,
And he was left with nothing but his love.

He got up off his knees within his cell
And looked around him, where he'd spend his life,
Fit punishment for killing Lionel:

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--98

No home, no kids, no wandering, no wife;
No safety but his prowess with a knife;
No Heaven, faith, work, worship, guidance, goal;
Just love within the precincts of his soul.

If that's the case, he thought, I answer this:
*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*
Embracing what I have and what I've done,
Forever free, forever not alone!
He knelt again to pray. We leave him there
In joy and silence, wholly rapt in prayer.

THE TALE OF SIR RAYMOND

THE PROLOGUE TO THE TALE OF SIR RAYMOND

When the nun was finished, all were silent,
Not wanting to disturb the somber mood,
Until the bartender essayed a comment,
Not wanting to seem unimpressed or rude,
Yet needing to move on. "And now if you'd
Oblige us with a tale," he said to me.
"One that might uncouth and wanton be.

"For certain it is that after that sad tale
We've all just heard, we need a bit of fun;
To that dark wine a pint of bitter ale
With foaming head, tossed off and quickly done.
Though we enjoyed your tale." (This to the nun.)
"It touched both mind and heart. But to the
next!"
(This to me.) "One ought not be long vexed!

"You look a likely lad. You must know tales
Of love to get our old blood running fast,
Or sport, or bravery. Wisdom pales
Alongside vivid moments. Moments last
When pulsing with passion. Think of moments
past!
Bring them to life with your imagination!"
Oh, well! I tried. But here is my creation.

THE TALE OF SIR RAYMOND

FIRST FIT

There once lived in the realm of Blight
A dealer who, though not a knight
Assumed a noble name.
Sir Raymond was this well-known wight,
Much feared in any gangland fight,
A master of the game.

He was six-nine, three hundred pounds,
A man whose vengeance knew no bounds:
He'd tear you limb from limb,
Or mince you with a hundred rounds,
Then feed you to his starving hounds.
All were afraid of him.

One night while in a drugged-out sleep
Upon a midnight dark and deep,
He had a wondrous dream
That caused him out of bed to leap
And wonder what the bleeping bleep
Had made his member steam.

The Tale of Sir Raymond--101

It was a maid -- oh, well, not quite --
But like a bride all dressed in white,
With breasts as big as bales,
Bursting out of clothes too tight,
An apparition in the night
Designed to torture males.

Her name? What was her name? he thought.
He knew that in his dream he caught
A glimpse of it somewhere.
Ah, yes! It was in limerick wrought
Upon a toilet stall, all fraught
With drawings, crude and spare.

She was a faery queen, no doubt,
But of the earlier kind, without
A member of her own.
And so Sir Raymond raced right out
To find her, if she was about.
Her name was Lady Joan.

Sir Raymond had a noble car,
A Hummer that could not go far
Upon a tank of gas.
But it was bullet proof, and bar
An anti-tank gun, none could spar
With it and hope to pass.

Mounted thus, Sir Raymond went
Beyond his turf, on mayhem bent
If anybody lay
Between his darling, heaven sent
And his desire, incontinent:

He'd have her, come what may!

What damsel would not pine for such
A passionate suitor! Nothing much
Could keep them from each other.
But before he could her clutch
And those voluminous mountains touch,
He'd have to fight her lover.

"Who goes there!" cried a stranger huge,
Eschewing any subterfuge,
Seated in his Hummer,
Dressed in a gym suit, noir and rouge,
Of silk and cashmere, made in Bruges,
Good for spring or summer.

"I'm looking for a faery queen
Named Lady Joan. Have you seen
Her anywhere 'round here?"
"My bitch is Joan, but she's no queen.
You better quick vacate the scene,
Or I'll cut off your ear!"

"If she's your bitch, get out my way!
She'll be my bitch before the day
Is over, that's for sure!
Get out your car. I'm gonna lay
You down. You got till ten to pray
And then you're gone -- no cure!"

Back and forth these puissant knights
Hurled insults, as before their fights
They long were wont to do.
Then came supper time, and lights

The Tale of Sir Raymond--103

Went on, so they put on their brights
And went at it anew.

Finally, they both went home,
Driving through the gathering gloam,
To meet next day at dawn,
When they'd decide who Lady Joan
Would go to. Both got on the phone
To get their friends by morn.

SECOND FIT

How best might I describe the crew
That with Sir Raymond went to view
The battle he would fight?
Enough to say two hundred two
Made up his fearsome retinue
From the realm of Blight.

Off they went, a caravan
Of mostly stolen cars that ran
A dozen blocks or more.
A fearsome sight that blood would ban
From any heart that saw it. Can
I tell you what they wore?

Bullet-proof vests were *de rigueur*,
And ankle holsters common were,
All filled with pistols small.
Some did knives in sheathes prefer,
As fearsome as Excalibur,
Though nowhere near as tall.

With AK-47s the cars
Were crammed, machine guns to the stars,
Though some preferred their Uzis.
And, of course, long iron bars,
Brass knuckles, bats, chains, gas-filled jars --
Sir Raymond's friends were doozies!

And how was he himself arrayed,
The doughty knight to whose quick aid
This mighty host was called?
Obeisance to him was paid,
And then he led the long parade
That far behind him sprawled.

He had no gun or knife on him,
But would his rival limb from limb
Tear with his naked hands.
His back was straight, his grimace grim,
His muscles taut, his wit, well, dim,
As he made his plans.

His jeans and tee shirt were in black
With skull and crossbones on the back,
Over "Death Machine."
His shaved head gleamed, bright as a tack,
Nor did he for deodorant lack.
His socks were fresh and clean.

His loins were girded in white briefs,
And in his pants two handkerchiefs
Stood ready for his nose.
And in accord with his beliefs,
A devil over tattooed fiefs
Upon his throat arose.

The Tale of Sir Raymond--105

Upon both arms were tattooed chains,
And on both ankles, tattooed thanes
In armor, mighty men.
And on his legs (though covered) panes
Depicting scenes from various reigns
Of dealers, now and then.

Thus arrayed for battle great,
Sir Raymond, though a little late,
In his dark Hummer led
His cronies at a rapid rate
Towards his forementioned early date,
That lesser men might dread.

But he looked forward to the test
That would bring by far the best
Sex any man could have.
At least that was his noble quest
In life, and as for all the rest,
It would not failure salve.

THIRD FIT

Now some might sing of other knights
And tell their triumphs and their plights
From tales of earlier times.
But I defer from those delights
To dwell upon the sounds and sights --

Here the bartender interrupts the narrator's tale.

"No more of this!" the bartender broke in.
"For God's sake, please! What an infernal din!

My ears are aching from your worthless rhymes!
What doggerel! Enough! Enough! At times
It seemed to me that rocking horse might go
Forever rocking, rocking to and fro,
While I, though never seasick, now felt queasy.
To make me feel so nauseous is not easy."

"Now just a minute!" I said. "Is this fair,
That only I am stopped, while others here
Can finish what they started? Why stop me?
I'm not so bad, as far as I can see."

"Then you can see no farther than your nose!"
The bartender replied. "Now, please, in prose,
Continue, that we soon might have an end
To this ridiculous tale, and onward wend."

"You asked for something wanton and uncouth,"
I said. "I tried. But to tell the truth,
I do not do so well with silly stories
And struggle with the rhymes. Among the glories
Of modern thought is this: The Tale of Mel.
And so I hope this time to tell it well.
But whether well or ill, I hope that you
Will let me finish it, as others do."

THE TALE OF MEL

There was once a drug lord named Mel who lived in splendor with his wife Pru and daughter Sophia. Like most drug lords, he was in constant and violent competition with his fellows, and ruled through a combination of loyalty and ruthlessness, as he was both feared and loved.

One day he was called to a meeting by the chief drug lord of the area, and while he was at the meeting, his rivals attacked his house in force, killed his bodyguards, raped and beat his wife, and cut off the hands and feet, the ears and nose, and the lips of his daughter, leaving her for dead.

When he saw what had been done, at first he could hardly believe what had happened, and then he was furious and wanted immediate revenge.

His wife Pru counseled him, saying: "My dear husband. You must recognize that you are simply going through the stages of grief. Dr. Kubler-Ross

long ago described them as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. You are simply at the second stage."

"Second stage be damned!" he shouted. "Look what they've done to me! Am I just supposed to wait for the stages to pass?"

"You seem to be suffering from NPD," Pru replied. "That's narcissistic personality disorder. After all, it's our daughter who is in the hospital near the point of death. And I'm the one who was raped and beaten."

"But they did it to me! Me! I was the one this was directed at! My loved ones were just the means to get at me!"

"True enough," Pru agreed. "Even so, I have more reason for anger than you. And still, I counsel patience. Anger increases your heart rate, your blood pressure, and your adrenaline. All this physical turmoil makes decision-making problematic."

"But according to Moon and Mackie, in experiments done at the University of Santa Barbara, anger makes for better decisions, not worse. The angry individual is better able to base his or her decision on cues that really matter."

"Still," Pru insisted, "most research indicates that angry people are more prone to risk-taking. I advise you to get some good advice from people you trust before you go rushing off into a course of action you may regret."

Reluctantly, Mel took Pru's advice and called together all of his lieutenants for an emergency meeting. In greeting his underlings, he made it clear that he was furious at what had been done to him and wanted immediate revenge. But the first person who

spoke, a wise old friend of many years and wars, said as follows:

"The common wisdom, my friend, is that 'revenge is a dish best eaten cold.' I counsel you for now to double your security and to be on constant alert, but not to counterattack rashly or in anger. The purpose of this attack was obviously to provoke you into a response. Don't allow it to succeed."

The majority of those assembled, however, booed loudly and shouted the old man down. Weakness invites abuse, they insisted, and any delay in answering the attack would invite another. When another old adviser suggested that war is easy to enter and difficult to exit, again they shouted him down.

Mel agreed with the vociferous majority and formed a committee to plan an attack and report back to him by the next morning. But after their guests had gone, Pru came to him, saying that she disagreed with his decision, and asking him to hear her out.

"Am I to reverse my decision now?" he asked. "Because my wife suggested it? How does that look?"

Pru answered him, saying: "First, it is better to look like a fool than to be one. And, second, there is no dishonor in listening to your wife. In fact, it is becoming more and more acceptable as society evolves. A recent study by Meghan Murphy at Iowa State University involving 72 married couples found that 'women were communicating more powerful messages, and men were responding to those messages by agreeing or giving in.'"

"Well, I'll listen," Mel said impatiently. "What do you advise?"

"Most of all, to consider your options without anger and without haste. Ziegler, Rief, Wehrner,

Mehl, and Lincoln found that people with delusions tend to jump to conclusions (JTC). So I suggest that you be wary of delusions in your decision-making process.

"Once you have looked coldly and rationally at your situation, keep your determination secret as you ask the advice of your counselors. You surely erred when you called all of your advisers into a single meeting. As has long been established, crowds act differently from individuals, more commonly anti-socially, as Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb discovered in a landmark study in 1952.

Deindividuation results in a reduction in self-awareness, in which each individual becomes less able to consult his or her internalized standards, thus becoming more open to influence by environmental stimuli. Further, Freud analyzed the influence of a leader on a crowd in terms of suggestibility, and surely your desire for revenge was both obvious and suggestive.

"You should therefore speak to your advisers singly, without signaling your own opinions, if you want good advice."

"That is good advice," Mel said. "And I thank you for it. I would be obliged, though, if now you would give me your advice on what to do in the present situation."

"First," Pru said, "I advise you to consider what you might gain or lose in a precipitate attack on your enemies. For it was clearly their intention in attacking you to provoke you into attacking them. Therefore, at least they must think it would be to their advantage to draw you into war with them.

The Tale of Mel--111

"Now they may be wrong about that, but think carefully. For if you once begin a war, it is much more difficult to come to a peaceful agreement than it would be before hostilities begin.

"Second, I urge you to consider using an Interest-Based Relational Approach (IBRA) to resolve this conflict to everyone's mutual satisfaction. What you need to do is find some mutually respected person to oversee the process of conflict resolution and have all agree on the steps to be taken. The first step is to get everyone to buy into the process and agree on the rules. The second is to gather information about the situation under dispute. The third is to agree on the problem that needs resolution. The fourth is to brainstorm possible resolutions. The fifth is to negotiate a solution that is mutually satisfactory, optimally a win-win solution."

"Pru," Mel answered. "Our daughter is in the hospital fighting for her life. Even if she survives, she'll be crippled and disfigured. You've been raped. What kind of win-win solution could there be for that?"

"That's just your narrative. You have to understand that parties to a conflict have conflicting narratives. You have your narrative, they have their narrative, and normally both narratives foreground grievances. Chaitin has shown how getting each side to listen to the other's narrative has been an important first step in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I'm sure the people who have attacked us have a narrative justifying the attack, just as we have a narrative justifying a counterattack."

"I'm not interested in listening to them. I'm interested in taking a chainsaw and cutting them up

one by one, piece by piece, while they scream in fear and pain."

"Yes, of course," Pru said. "Anger is a normal human emotion. You have to let yourself feel it. But then you have to learn how to handle it. The Educators for Social Responsibility have a five-step process that should help you deal with your anger. The first is to identify your feelings, getting beyond just happy and sad to some really expressive figurative language. The second is to identify what triggers your anger and to attempt to avoid such situations. The third is to be aware of the physical cues of anger -- rapid pulse or breathing, raising your voice. The fourth is to use relaxation techniques, such as slow and regular breathing. And the fifth is to take responsibility for your behavior by addressing the behaviors that make other people angry at you."

"What have I done to make others angry at me?" Mel asked.

"You have to answer that," Pru said. "It does you no good if I do."

So Mel thought about it for a moment. And then he called the chief drug lord and asked him to mediate at a meeting between him and those who had attacked his wife and daughter.

In the end, using a combination of the IBRA approach and Winslade and Monk's narrative mediation, the warring parties resolved their conflict in a mutually satisfactory way. The attacking party paid the attacked party monetary compensation for their injuries, a course of action that was far less costly than a violent conflict would have been. The attacked party agreed to some adjustments in territory and distribution that had originally aggrieved the

attacking party and led to the confrontation. And peace reigned in the neighborhood, which was beneficial to all parties, including the chief drug lord, who was worried about how violence might affect public attitudes towards the drug trade generally.

"You were so right about conflict resolution!" Mel said to Pru after the requisite handshakes had been exchanged. "Look what might have happened if I had retaliated! How many people would have been killed! How severely our business interests would have been damaged! I'm so glad I listened to you and then listened to them and understood their point of view!"

"Unfortunately," Pru replied, "research on the dynamic links between theory and practice in the field of conflict resolution is still at a primitive stage. There are few studies that isolate variables in practice and trace them reliably to specific outcomes in any replicative or reliably quantifiable way. I plan to publish an article soon on the success of our experiment in the field. Perhaps that will help bring the value of a resolution approach to conflicts to the attention of a wider audience."

"Yes," Mel agreed. "Perhaps it will."

THE GURU'S TALE

THE GURU'S PROLOGUE

When I had finished my tale of Mel and Pru,
The bartender exclaimed, "Dear Lord, how true!
There is no need for violence and strife.
But try to tell that to my vengeful wife!
She bubbles up with fury night and day,
And God help those who stumble in her way!
She's got a mouth to make a whore blush
And paints all with the same thick, jaundiced
brush.

I've anger issues, too, and so I'll try
That five-step plan Pru spoke of. Me oh my!
If I could have a wife like her, I'd be
As calm and patient as a windless sea!

"But, Guru, now it's your turn. You must know
A tale that might with vim and vigor go
To places we would relish, and where we
Might have a bit of fun vicariously.
I bet you've bedded plenty, and known more
Whom you could show what your sweet stick is

for!

You've got a Jesus face. What woman could
Resist that? Though I know a few who should!
But on with it! Let's hear a merry tale!"

"Well, then," the guru said. "My turn to fail.
For I would rather teach than entertain,
And by example make some precepts plain."
"Forgive me," said the bartender. "You're right.
Tell what tale you want. I ought not slight
Anyone here who does the best he can."
"Thank you," the guru said, and thus began.

THE GURU'S TALE

Many there have been whose rise and fall
Old men have used as cautionary tales,
Well-wrought types, applicable to all,
Examples of how greatness ever fails,
And fortune ever into fierce wind sails.
Pride is the chief subject of these stories
As boasts of power turn to wounded wails,
And chastened sinners turn towards Heaven's
glories.

What bullshit! Heaven's here, as many know,
And fortune is a consequence of mind.
Let's look at these examples, and I'll show
An energy of quite a different kind,
As you and I leave groveling behind.
The secret of success is strong desire.
What you want is given, sealed and signed,
Providing you have will enough, and fire.

First, Lucifer, that prototype of pride,
Rebelling against God, his given master:
Can we call, the temperature aside,
His banishment to Hell a pure disaster?
His powers as a ruler were far vaster
Than those of some sly sycophant in Heaven,
Who every moment hides what he is after:
Lying is his daily bread and leaven.

And he got what he wanted, as we see
From legend and from common sense. More fall
Under his rule than might hope to be
Saved for Heaven, if such there be at all.
Nor did he ever repent, as I recall,
Happy in his kingdom, more than equal
To God, since he keeps more of us in thrall,
As all can read who study well the sequel.

Adam, too, got just what he most wanted,
As all do, whether or not they want to know.
Like Lucifer, every moment he was haunted
By thoughts he could not put away or show.
He wanted to know good and evil, so
He did it in the only way he could:
By doing evil, so that he could grow,
And be, like anyone, both bad and good.

Next, look at Samson, that guru with long hair,
Whose love it was to foil his enemies
And save his people, dependent on his care,
From those who would their promised birthright
seize.

He also got what would his heart most please:

The Guru's Tale--117

The spot to maximize his strength and skill
Right in their temple, strategically to squeeze
Those pillars, and thus all those Gazans kill.

And Hercules? The Monk in Chaucer says
He died an awful death, and so he did.
But older than the skullcap and the fez
Is what the rabid monotheists hid --
A sane and healthy world, where gods might 'mid
Us live and love. What Hercules most desired
Was to be immortal, as Apollo bid,
And so he joined the god who had him sired.

Of Nebuchadnezzar and of his son,
Much is made of their long fall from grace.
But I have doubts that I'd find anyone
Who would not for one moment take their place,
And have ten thousand virgins to embrace.
What better fate for any virile man
Than to sow genes by millions, as we trace
Through DNA the sons of Genghis Khan?

Of Caesar and of Alexander both
Together now I tell the happy tale.
Though both died young and violently, I'm
loathe
To mourn them. For did either of them fail?
Both were heroes, hearty, strong, and hale,
Who felt the joys of victory course through
Them like hosannas! What red-blooded male
Would not die young to know what these two
knew?

THE MINISTER'S TALE

THE MINISTER'S PROLOGUE

"Hold on!" the soldier said. "Enough of this!
I know we're not supposed to boo and hiss,
But how many examples do we need?
And where does all this ancient blather lead?
I, for one, would like to hear a tale,
Not lectures that insist that none can fail,
And all get what they please by wanting it."

"Now, now," the bartender said. "You're in a snit!
True enough, we did agree to tell
Tales to pass the time, and not rebel
And say just anything we'd like to say."

"If the soldier doesn't like it, that's OK,"
The guru said. "I'll end right here. I've no
Desire to bore you all with wisdom, so
I'll pass the torch to someone else, who'll try
To please this stupid crowd, I don't know why."

"No, please, go on!" the bartender exclaimed.
"I promised not to stop you. I'm ashamed
Of what just happened here. There are plenty
Who wait upon your words." "I don't know any,"
The soldier said. "Come on! Who's next? Let's go!"

"I'm next," the minister said. "I need to know:
Guru, have you more you'd like to say?"
"Not a whisper! Please, go on, I pray!"
"But this time, a tale," the bartender put in.
"Something with a beginning, middle, end,
And characters whom we can recognize,
That we might know our grace through their
disguise.
Something merry, if you know of one."
"You tell me," he answered, "when I'm done."

THE MINISTER'S TALE

There was a corporation that raised chickens,
Fat and juicy, broiler finger lickin's,
Tender creatures only seven weeks old,
Sheltered from the heat and from the cold,
Fed by conveyor, drinking from the tap,
With vacuums to devour all their crap,
Packed in with only one square foot for each,
As crowded as a Sunday at the beach,
And fed a mix of corpses, crap, and corn,
With nothing to do but eat from dawn to dawn,
So big-breasted they could hardly stand.
This corporation owned a lot of land,
500,000 chickens, maybe more,
A vertical trust, complete from egg to store.

There lived in one of their barns Cock A70
5473256, our hero,
Of whose dreams and fate you'll shortly hear.
Just for this tale, let's call him Chanticleer.

Next to him was A7054
73257, a friend and more,
For though the males and females were kept
 apart,
There is no way to stop an avian heart.
So these two lusty cocks would have their
 pleasure,
And soon the other's love began to treasure.

Peter was the next-foot neighbor's name.
The two indulged their passions without shame
Until one night when Chanticleer had a dream.
"I dreamed," he told his friend, "that I was free,
And at something called dawn crowed mightily,
Awakening all that slept, both far and near.
Oh, yes! It was magnificent to hear!
A symphony that shook the very hills!

"And then I dreamed that I had other skills.
I flew! Yes, flew! By flapping my own wings!
And ran across a field! And other things --
Scratching for the most delicious food!
You've never tasted anything so good!
It squirmed and ran away, but I was fast
And got it in my beak -- my beak! -- at last.

"And then I saw a goddess, so it seems,
The kind that one can see only in dreams,

The Minister's Tale--121

Who, clucking, near me came and brushed my
 beak,
Then turned around to give me just a peek
At something I had never seen before.
But let me say, I never lusted more!

"I was beside myself --" But here Pete said,
"OK! OK! I have your dream right read.
You've tapped into an unconscious collective
Deep in the genes, with imagery reflective
Of how life was a long, long time ago,
Before we came to Heaven. As you know,
Once we were wild and roamed the evil Earth,
At risk of death from the moment of our birth.
Wild canines ate their fill, and bears,
And raptors, who would take us unawares.
We were food, nothing but food for all,
Though in your dream life seemed like such a
 ball,
With goddesses to love and bugs to eat.
But let me tell you, friend, it was no treat!
Every moment all we felt was fear.

"Contrast this to what we're given here:
Manna on conveyor belts, and drink
Available as quickly as we think
We might be thirsty; temperature just right,
Electric suns to banish the drear night;
No foxes to sneak up and sink their teeth
Into our necks, or grab us from beneath
And bear us off to where they might devour
Us, bones and gristle, quick, within the hour!

"And goddesses? Yes, there were some of those,

But they cluck-clucked, as everybody knows.
You would be hen-pecked for your bit of joy,
While here we take our pleasure boy-to-boy,
Without the complex differences of gender,
As neither is a borrower or lender.
So be content and put away that dream.
The old days weren't good as they might seem."

"But wait!" said Chanticleer. "The dream went on.
Somehow I was here again, and one
Of the doors opened, and in came lots of men,
The kind that come to clean here now and then.
They carried cages, began to stuff us in,
While terrified, we raised an awful din
And ran this way and that, to no avail,
For soon they had us fifty in a jail
Cell built for five, so stuffed we couldn't move.

"Then onto a truck we went, a ride that proved
Alas! too short, for then they hung us high
On hooks, upside down! Oh, you would cry
To see us thus, blood rushing to the head,
Half stunned! But then the belt moved on ahead,
Into a brine that stunned us more, and then
Back out into blessed air again
Where whirring knives cut our heads off clean --
Oh, God! To be beheaded by machine!
And then we hung there while the blood dripped
out!

I tell you, I awakened with a shout!

"I could stand no more!" "Now take it easy!"
Pete said. "I can see you're getting queasy.
This also is a dream that I can read,

The Minister's Tale--123

A simple one. Believe me, there's no need
To fear what is but dreamwork, nothing more,
Of your subconscious. That vision that you saw
Of us on hooks, necks hanging upside down,
Was just a phallic symbol. Now, don't frown!
Think about it: What was that machine
Cutting off? You act out in your dream
Your shame and guilt at what we do each day,
Making something dirty of clean play.

"It was ever thus -- society drives
One's natural desires deep inside,
Where they fester and become obsessions,
Whereas in the light their power lessens.
Read Freud -- you'll find it there all clearly writ,
Or Melville, if your taste is for crit lit.

"But for God's sakes! Come make love to me!
And then get some intensive therapy
To rid yourself of dreams like these!" "I've heard
That dreams foretell what has not yet occurred,"
Said Chanticleer. "The mind can know much
more
Than we poor chickens give it credit for."

"Hogwash!" Peter said. "Medieval rot!
Science discovered long ago there's not
One shred of truth to psychic hocus-pocus.
Now come on here and get life into focus!"

So Chanticleer put dreams out of his head,
Taking heed of what his dear friend said.
Still, just to be sure, he found a place
Between the wall and earth where he might race

In case the dream foretold, as he suspected,
The future, rather than his guilt projected.

And sure enough, a few days later, men
Came in carrying stacks of cages. Then
Stuffed the chickens in like white sardines.
So much for interpreting his dreams!
As the other chickens ran helter-skelter,
Chanticleer made for his hidden shelter.

"Wait!" Pete called. "Why are you running thus?
How do you know where they are taking us?
Perhaps we're going to a bigger barn.
What makes you think these men will do us
harm?"

"The dream! The dream!" shouted Chanticleer,
Racing faster as the men came near.
"Fool!" Pete said, scornfully. "You'll see:
All is just as it was meant to be."

Pete fell back and soon was in a cage,
A squashed but ever-optimistic sage,
While Chanticleer soon reached his little bed
And crawled right in, ducking his small head.
When the barn was empty, the men came round
To see if any stragglers might be found.

One saw the little hole beneath the wall
And stuck his hand in. "Ouch!" he said. "What
call
Had you to scratch my hand? I mean no harm
To you, my friend." And then he stretched his
arm
In deeper, with the same result. "Ouch! Ouch!

Come on! You needn't be so mean a grouch!
I bet you have a first-rate doodle do!
No rooster crows as beautifully as you!
Come on out now, show me, if you can,
That you're the finest rooster in the land!"

Chanticleer remembered how it felt
In the first part of his dream to really belt
Out cock-a-doodle-do's so mightily
The hills shook, and he longed to show what he
Could do. But then the second part of his dream
Told him things might not be as they seem.

"Come on, my dear!" the man coaxed. "Let her
rip!
I bet your lusty crow is quite a pip!
Show me! How I long to hear you crow!"
So Chanticleer released one, soft and low.
"Oh, you can do much better, I declare!"
The man said. "But not cramped, as you are there.
Get out and lift your neck up, spread your wings,
And let us know the joy each morning brings!"

Chanticleer remembered well the kick
That he had felt, and tried another lick.
But it was feeble, cramped as was his chest.
"Oh, not like that! You sound like all the rest!"
The man went on. "Now come on out of there,
And let us hear you in the open air."

So Chanticleer came out to show his stuff,
And when his head had surfaced just enough,
The man grabbed hold of him and pulled him
out.

Of my tale's end, then, have no doubt:
Within the hour, Chanticleer was food --
Not to crow, but finger-lickin' good!

THE EPILOGUE TO THE MINISTER'S TALE

"That was a merry tale!" the bartender said,
"With meaning and with pleasure plainly wed,
That we might be the better for our fun.
I never thought that you would be the one,"
He said to the minister, "to have such lust
Between two males openly discussed.
Hooray for you, then! To capture in a tale
The full blood of life, hearty, whole, and hale,
In caricature, that we might see what we
Look like puffed out beyond all subtlety.
But now" (to the doctor) "we must move on, and
so
Please tell us the very best tale that you know."

THE DOCTOR'S TALE

Once there lived in times of slavery
A master who decided he would free
His slaves and settle them on fertile land
In a free state. He carefully had planned
This act, had taught his slaves to read and write,
To calculate, keep books, and know by sight
The native plants and animals where they
Would find themselves. Then they made their way
By cart and then by boat and then on foot
To their promised land. Their master put
Each family on a quarter section, and
Gave them tools and seed to plant by hand.
Then he left them with their legal deeds
To land and freedom, thinking that their needs
Had been well taken care of. Little he
Knew what happened once a slave was free.

One family had a daughter, Emma Lou,
So virtuous and beautiful that you
Would fall in love with her within a minute --

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--128

Sweet tempered, with a smile that had in it
The sun itself, shining in her heart,
So happy she seemed, so uninformed by art.

She moved with an unfathomable grace
And seemed to fill the boundaries of each space
With beauty and with goodness, coming from
A well whose deep delight was never done.

She helped her mother Callie in the house
And in the gardens they kept round about,
And took care of the younger children, who
Were happy to be watched by Emma Lou.

Her father, Nat, feared her beauty would
Attract men who intended little good.
And so it happened. One day, riding by
Their farm, an evil judge just chanced to spy
Emma Lou bent over pulling weeds,
Imagining her tending to his needs.

His lust was lathered by a glimpse of breast,
And from that moment he had little rest,
But fantasized fulfillment of desire
Again, again, again, an unquenched fire
That moved him to attain his wretched goal,
For he had little pity in his soul.

He hired a farmer from a neighboring state,
Where slavery was legal, to falsely state
That Emma Lou's whole family once was his,
Escaped two years before. The judge then quizzed
Him briefly on the relevant detail,
And soon the luckless family was in jail,

The Doctor's Tale--129

To appear, of course, before the corrupt judge,
Who ruled that they were slaves, and would not
 budge
Before clear evidence that they were free,
And witnesses who testified rightly
That they knew well these former slaves, and
 knew
They had been freed, swearing this was true.

One set out desperate on a futile ride
To find the master, who, alas, had died.
And since no black could testify in court,
According to the law, all was for naught.
The witnesses who knew the story best
Were silenced, and the judge refused the rest,
Ruling inadmissible their word
For reasons that were patently absurd.

In the end, the only evidence
Allowed was what would damage the defense,
And so the family soon was re-enslaved
And to the judge's hireling conveyed.

Emma Lou was to the judge then sold
As an indentured servant, and was told
Her family had been auctioned off, each one
Separately, and so the deed was done.

How bitter then her soul, with fire purged!
How pure the rage that through her heart then
 surged!
But she would bide her time. She had no lust
Except to do what now she knew she must.

At first she was but raped -- no tenderness
Or pretense of a kiss or a caress.
But slowly, as she played the lover's part,
Her acted passion touched the judge's heart.
Bit by bit he loosened up the reins
Till she at last could slip her supple chains.

One night he fell asleep right after love,
Heedlessly, an error that would prove
His last, for quietly she moved away
From him to where a letter opener lay,
Eased over to it, and, lifting it on high,
Stabbed the sleeping villain in the eye
And then the throat and then the heart. A cry
Of pain and then of horror shook the room,
And then a bloody silence. In the gloom,
Emma Lou sat weeping on the bed,
Not for him or her, but for, instead,
Her family, and the millions still enslaved,
Whose honor in that moment she had saved.

She didn't care when she was seized and bound,
Nor held in jail as the country round
Came pouring into the square. Soon a fire
Was lit, and as the lurid flames shot higher,
They battered down the door and dragged her
out.

The crowd received her with a savage shout
Of hatred that went up into the sky.

Someone with a knife took out her eye
While others beat her bloody and then bound
Her to a stake sunk deep into the ground.
They scattered wood and straw around her feet,

The Doctor's Tale--131

Then lit the fire with torches. Along the street
A cry of victory went up; the flames
Followed as she called her family's names
One by one like bullets to destroy
Their evil world, and all she felt was joy!
Yes, joy! For death was life to her, and pain
Was what it cost to be free once again.

THE SALESMAN'S TALE

INTRODUCTION TO THE SALESMAN'S TALE

"For pity's sake!" the bartender said. "How bleak
Can life get? What pleasure can we seek
In such a world? You've told a tale true,
By God! But maybe just a trifle too
True. Why would we want to hear such a tale?
But please don't mind my ranting. Let us sail
On. You," he said to the salesman, "are next.
Something light, please -- a trite but tuneful text
That takes us out of life instead of in."

"I've nothing of the kind," said the salesman.
"You'll have to hear another, I'm afraid,
That's colored black." "A modern-day parade!"
The bartender cried. "What is it with us, then,
That art should find such shit to revel in,
And not be art unless it bottom feed
And make near suicides of all who read?"

The Salesman's Tale--133

But go ahead, dear Sir -- do what you will,
Though too much truth cannot but do us ill."

THE SALESMAN'S PROLOGUE

A salesman, as you know, must live by greed,
Selling things that customers don't need.
For if he sold just what the world required,
Many fewer salesmen would be hired.

Creative selling creates what was not there:
A need so strong no real need can compare.
The customer must have this thing or that
Regardless of the consequence. But what
Might seem in each of us to be destructive
Is in the social aggregate constructive,
Necessary for economic health,
As each impulsive purchase creates wealth.

Thus my greed becomes your source of good;
The evil old become the modern should.
What was seen as living sinfully
Is how we prosper -- fools, perhaps, but free.

THE SALESMAN'S TALE

A doctor who devoted his career
To ridding life of death himself lay near
The moment he had hoped would never come:
Despite his greatest efforts, death had won!

By his bed his three disciples waited.

They, too, had spent their lives in unabated
Struggle against death, to clear our genes
Of peptides that evolved to be the means
By which each generation might survive --
But only if the one before it died.

No longer was that mechanism needed,
The species having finally succeeded
In taking over its own destiny.
But death revealed its secrets cunningly,
Not willing to be bested easily,
A wily foe, as you shall shortly see.

Just at the point of death, the master muttered
Words that one could barely tell he uttered:
"The code! The code!" he said. "The second
 drawer!"
And then he died. He could say nothing more.

"The second drawer!" the first disciple cried.
"That bastard! Holding out until he died!"
"The second drawer of what?" the second said.
"His desk, of course! The one right near his bed.
Let's hurry up, before anyone knows
He's dead. Some executor might close
The house, or rifle through his papers fast,
And all that fame and fortune be at last
Given to a dead man! While we
Are footnotes in his hagiography!"

"Now wait!" the third one said. "I need to think!
Let's go to a bar and have a drink,
And not talk with the corpse in front of us."
And so it was agreed with little fuss

The Salesman's Tale--135

That they would meet in twenty minutes at
A bar that all three knew, and, further, that
They would all equally share what might accrue
From whatever code the old man knew.

Twenty minutes later, the three were there,
Drinking to the fortune they would share --
The Nobel Prize, the patents, and the fame
That would make each of them a household
name,
Not to speak of immortality,
Life that lasted through eternity.

"To the death of death!" the third one toasted,
"And to its murderers!" the second boasted.
"Let's meet up at the house," the first one said.
"We'll just finish up -- you go ahead,"
The third one answered, pointing to their drinks.

And so the first one left. They're drunk, he
thinks.

The road up to the master's house is steep
And winding, and the canyon very deep.
Maybe they'll go over it, and I
Will have this to myself, if they should die.
Ashamed of such a thought, he started driving
Up the mountain road, his dark thought writhing
Like a cornered snake inside his brain.

Darkness fell, and it began to rain.
It took a lot of concentration to
Stay on the road, as a throbbing grew
Under his left arm -- a gas pain, surely.
He could barely see, and drove on purely

By instinct up the narrow, winding road
Towards his master's mountaintop abode.

At a sharp, blind curve he saw a sign:
"Road washed out ahead." And right behind
Barriers across his narrow lane,
Just barely visible in pouring rain.

He swerved left, then saw a gaping hole
Just to his right, beyond an orange pole
Blocking it off. And suddenly he thought:
Suppose I move the barriers? I ought
Not think that way! But there it was: a chance
Thrown in front of him. Fortune grants
Few such opportunities. He pulled
Over, shaking. Greed his body ruled
As he stumbled out into the rain,
Not so much in cunning as in pain,
And pulled the barriers around the curve
Where they could not be seen. No car could
swerve

Fast enough to stay upon the road,
But would go off the cliff. Far off there glowed
The headlights of two cars a mile apart
Coming up the hill. The disciple's heart
Raced painfully beneath his aching chest.

Something was wrong! Some giant finger pressed
Against his side! He barely got to where
He could watch unseen, then fainted there,
Seized by poison sprinkled in his drink
By the third, who quickly reached the brink
And tumbled off, down a thousand feet;
The second, moments later, a repeat,

The Salesman's Tale--137

As the first lay dying, nearly stilled,
The victim of the two he just had killed.

The master's papers passed to a trustee
Who sold off what was under lock and key,
But threw out junk that none could find use for,
Including what was in the second drawer.

Was it indeed the code that would kill death?
Or just the rant of one near his last breath?
Greed had got the three out of the way
Who might have known, so death another day
Ruled life, as he has done for all these years,
The tyrant whom we worship with our fears.

EPILOGUE TO THE SALESMAN'S TALE

"You live by greed, and yet you it assail,"
The bartender said, "in this old-fashioned tale.
Why not dress greed in fashionable clothes,
The dealer in delight instead of woes,
And free us to indulge our base desires?"

"I do only what this design requires,"
The salesman said, "and follow Chaucer's lead.
The tale is old fashioned out of need,
For Chaucer had the Pardoner preach against
What he himself precisely did. And whence
This need to follow Chaucer comes, I know
Nothing, but it is how I must go."

"Now you're next," said the bartender to the wife.
"Please forget this Chaucer! On my life,

I find no pleasure in this shadow tale!
Be yourself, and on your own regale
This company with a story of your own,
Not one that mimics one that is long gone!"

"I cannot help myself," the good wife said.
"But listen as I resurrect the dead."

THE WIFE'S TALE

THE WIFE'S PROLOGUE

"I've had more husbands than I can remember,
Most as cold and hard as late December,
Each the victim of my one obsession --
To get all they possessed in my possession.

For I was born to poverty and hunger,
But I was beautiful when I was younger
And long ago decided I would trade
My body for a joy that would not fade:
Wealth enough to insulate me from ill,
Earned through an acquired uxorial skill.

I married first a neighbor, at sixteen,
A man of eighty, ugly, sick, and mean,
Not much better off than we were, but
Enough to stop the gnawing in my gut.

He taught me that to get I had to give,

Tit for tat, his joy, my chance to live.
His meanness was my opportunity
To do him dirt, as you shall shortly see.

One day he had a heart attack, and I
Saw my chance -- I would not let it by.
I went right through his pockets and his drawers
As he was dying, writhing on all fours,
And then I left, with little enough to show
For three years of my life. I know, I know!
You're thinking that I had no heart. But he
Got what he deserved! He treated me
With just as much compassion as a gull
Treats a clam he's pried out of his shell!

He left me with enough to look around
For my next sugar daddy. Soon I found
A nice old man who lived for two good years
And showed me life was more than hate and
tears.

He was good to me, and I to him,
And left me with enough that never again
Would I be forced to marry out of need.

And so of both ideals and hunger freed,
I married purely for what I could get,
With neither disillusion nor regret.
And love? What is love, I'd like to know?
Passion, yes! But love? It's just a show
We put on for ourselves to prove that we
Are more than sharks in a shark-infested sea.

I was a hot one, ready for romance,
But only on the side, too wise to chance

The Wife's Tale--141

A marriage that would garner me no gain
And end only in ugliness and pain.

As I grew older, my gigolos grew younger,
Well-cooked meat to satisfy my hunger.
Now I became the mark with all the money.
But I knew better than to trust the honey
Of sex and sweet talk, orgasms and lies.
The fox knows well what trade the trickster plies!

And so I've married upwards all my life,
A skilled and thoroughly well-seasoned wife
About to be divorced. Are any here
Interested? I'm joking! Never fear,
The tale is coming -- this I promise you."

"Let's have it, please, without much more ado!"
The therapist exclaimed. "This history
Has gone on far too long. Don't you agree?"
"Not at all," said the entrepreneur. "I find
The truth a better tale. To my mind,
The lady is an unalloyed delight,
And it behooves us now to be polite
And listen to each other without objection."

"There are times when someone needs
correction,"
The therapist replied. "One needn't suffer
Silently the chafings of another,
For in politeness there's an unsaid lie
That festers in the kishkes by and by."

"Enough! Enough!" the bartender said. "Please tell
Your tale!" (This to the wife.) "It would be well

To get back underway. The time draws near
The gambling's end, and we have much to hear."

THE WIFE'S TALE

"What Men Want Most in a Wife," a reality show,
Enlisted lovely women who would go
All over the world on camera asking men
What they most wanted in a wife, and then
Bring back the answer that would be their choice,
After which the public had a voice,
Voting for the answer they thought right.

The prize, ten million dollars, though it might
Seem large, was not all that the contest offered:
The winner won a date with Simon Crawford,
The richest man in the world, on which she could
Try to get him hooked, a prize that would
Be worth a hundred billion, perhaps more,
Though the show had a surprise in store,
Which by the by you shall be told. For now,
Let's follow Nancy Lasker, and see how
She fared. Nancy was a pretty girl,
The type whose short loose skirt was wont to swirl
In a breeze, revealing lovely thighs,
The kind that drew like lodestones longing eyes.

Ah, Nancy! Not so smart, nor much aware
Of what a profit center she had there!
For seven weeks, with others on the show,
She asked strange men what nobody seemed to
know.
Some said they wanted beauty, some said love.

The Wife's Tale--143

Some said maternal instinct most would move
Their hearts; others, red-hot sex galore.

Some looked for religion, some were more
Material and wanted a large dowry,
While others simply wanted Nancy. Flowery
Praises heaped on her quite turned her head.
Yet she'd have given all to have instead
Just one opinion she could then bring back
To offer to the public. Alas, alack!
She was less sure than ever in her life
About what most men wanted in a wife.

Heading back to the studio, she passed
A beggar on the sidewalk, about the last
Person she would think might help her out.
He was an ugly, filthy, smelly lout
With unkempt hair and beard, and yet he stared
Right at her, as she wondered how he dared
To think that he could look at her like that.
And then, quick as a young and healthy cat,
He was in front of her, blocking her way.

"You have, I know, no notion what to say,"
He said to her. "In just an hour or so
You'll have to choose --" "How could you possibly
know?"

She asked, astonished. "I know the winning
answer,"

He said. And lithe and graceful as a dancer
He came up to her ear. "I'll whisper it,
And guarantee you'll win in just a bit,
But first you must promise to marry me!" "You?"
She said, incredulous. "Marry you?"

He nodded. "For ten million?" he asked. "Why not?"

I have something you want an awful lot!
It's just a business transaction, nothing more."

Well, she thought. How strange! But still, she saw
The logic in his reasoning. She had
Little to lose if he were simply mad
And whispered gibberish into her ear.
"OK," she said. "Providing what I hear,
I use, and win the contest. It's a deal."
"You'll win," he said, "for sure. And just to seal --"
"I won't kiss you!" she said. "Let's just shake
hands."

And so they did. So what if he demands
His prize? she thought. I need not give it him.
I'll simply pay him off if I should win.
And so he put his lips right to her ear,
And whispered the right choice, as you shall hear.

Off she went into the studio
And was made up and costumed for the show.
Each contestant then was asked to say
What quality she chose, without delay.
"Beauty," said one. "Great sex," declared another,
"Adoration," "love," "a second mother."

When it was Nancy's turn, she said the thing
The beggar had told her, which had the proper
ring:

"All people want the same thing -- girl or boy:
Someone who finds joy in others' joy."

Why yes, of course! the audience almost gasped.

The Wife's Tale--145

How simple! How obvious! And when at last
The public voted yes, that Nancy was right,
She won the contest. Later on that night,
She went to see the beggar, who was waiting.

"You came!" he said. "It's time that we were
mating!
I have a judge all ready right nearby."
But Nancy, quite upset, began to cry.
"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't go through with it.
I'll pay you what you ask -- don't throw a fit!"

"You promised!" he yelled. "You gave your word!
Now why
Should I give up my rights because you cry?
You got what you wanted! I'll get mine!
That's only fair, regardless how you whine!"

"Ten million!" she offered. "All! Please take it all!
Less taxes, of course." And then began to bawl:
"I'll never marry someone I don't love!"

"What crap! As I can very readily prove.
You'd marry Simon Crawford tonight, I'll bet,
Even though you two have never met!
But now you'll have to un-schedule that date
Since you'll be married to a jealous mate.

"Let me clue you in, my clueless honey:
I marry for the sex, you for the money.
You got your money, now I want my sex
Morning, noon, and night! Let's clear the decks!

"You see that long, low building over there?

Go in, and up a cast-iron flight of stairs.
Open the door at the top, and there's a room
In which you'll have to wait to meet your groom.
Now, go! I'll get the judge, and then we'll do
What I have lusted for since meeting you."

Nancy Lasker walked across the street
Towards a narrow doorway, to the beat
Of a reluctant heart. I could just go,
She thought, and hide somewhere. He'll never
know

Where I went or what became of me.
I have ten million dollars. But then she
Thought about her promise. It wasn't right.
She won because of him. And then a light
Went on inside her head. Oh, yes, of course!
She'd marry him and then get a divorce!
Simple! She'd keep her promise and her life
By being but a momentary wife!
She had money enough to pull it off.
And if he got some, well, he'd earned it. Oft
We think of ways to have our cake and eat it,
Or, perhaps, to take the rap and beat it.

Nancy fairly flew right up the stairs
And waited for her groom, all her cares
Suspended in the glare of her idea.
And then " knock! knock! -- the fateful hour was
here!

She opened the door to a huge, well-lighted room.
Far away was her tuxedo'd groom
Smiling 'mid a crowd of cheering fans,
TV cameras, flashes, two brass bands

The Wife's Tale--147

Playing "Here Comes the Bride" as down the aisle
She walked alone, too amazed to smile,
Until joined by her former scruffy beggar,
Now all spruced up and shaved. Even better,
She recognized the handsome man who offered
Her his arm as none but Simon Crawford!

Twenty-one million watched as they got married.
Twenty-one million watched them as he carried
Her into their penthouse suite and closed the
door.

Twenty-one million then imagined more:
Sheer heaven! Fantasy made real! As she
Reaped the reward for her morality.

So ends my tale, with Nancy in the sack,
Earning a large fortune on her back.
Of course it ended in divorce, though both
Knew well what their dear partner wanted most:
Someone who found joy in others' joy,
So mutually each might the other buoy.

But knowing isn't doing, and neither did,
Both finally finding joy in getting rid
Of the other, as so often is
The ending of beginnings such as this.

Which brings me to my moral: Do not be
Too dependent on morality.
For love too often winds up just for show,
While money is the one sure good we know.

THE THERAPIST'S TALE

THE THERAPIST'S PROLOGUE

All through this tale the therapist seemed wroth,
Staring at the entrepreneur, a broth
Of anger and resentment seated there
Within her long and unabated stare.

At last, the tale over, she said to the wife,
"That was an honest tale, upon my life!
For who finds joy in others' joy but those
Who find no joy in self? The idea arose
In ages dark, when priest and lord held sway
To take a person's liberty away,
As well as goods, and all that they could steal.

"But one cannot forget the commonweal,
Even as one cultivates the self
And finds luxuriant richness in the gulf
Between what is and should be. Now the greed
Of certain parasites exceeds the need,

The Therapist's Tale--149

Entrepreneurs who roam the globe to find
The cheapest labor, they do not care what kind --
Slave or free, child or adult --"

"Enough," said the bartender. "Let's not revolt
Against the rules here! Tales! We want but tales!
And not some petty payback swathed in veils!"
"Don't worry," said the entrepreneur. "I can
Play tit for tat as well as any man.
My turn is coming, in which the therapist
Will have, for once, good reason to be pissed!"

"Believe me, I'm not worried," the therapist said.
"But all of you, please, let me go ahead."
"Tell on!" the bartender said. "I'll not intrude.
But make the tale rewarding, not just rude."
"That I'll do," the therapist said, and told
The tale that now before you shall unfold.

THE THERAPIST'S TALE

There once was a successful entrepreneur
Who traveled to a faraway place to tour
Factories that made what he was selling,
Where people were too poor to be rebelling
Against low wages and pitiful conditions,
And where the government set few restrictions
On what a manufacturer might do
To make the most of his investment. Few
Such opportunities existed where
He lived, and so he came to look elsewhere.

He met his guide at the airport, a fiendish man

Who looked like an overseer, whip in hand,
In times of slavery. He had a scar
From ear to chin, and missing teeth to mar
His devilish smile. His very eyes seemed cruel,
And mounded muscle played against the cool
White linen of his boxy, well-pressed clothes.
An odor faintly sulfurous arose
From him, as though just lately come from Hell.

This fiend behaved as though he knew him well,
And they had much in common, often poking
Him playfully in the ribs, or loudly joking
About sex and women's body parts and such.

But though the entrepreneur didn't like him
much,
He saw in him a man who could control
The labor needed to achieve his goal
Of making more for less. He could depend
On such a man, and so he called him friend,
And made it seem they shared a kindred spirit,
Though he took precious little pleasure in it.

The guide then took him to a factory,
And said, "All these laborers that you see
Are from the country, landless peasants who
Would starve, were it not for folks like you --
Entrepreneurs out to make a buck,
Providing jobs for people out of luck."
Hundreds of workers hunched over sewing
machines
At long, low tables, stitching hand-held seams.
The light was low, the ventilation poor;
The pace was fast, their movements deft and sure.

The Therapist's Tale--151

"They work 12 hours seven days a week,"
The fiend said, " -- just the workers that you seek.
We meet our quota at the quoted price,
And yet each garment is inspected twice,
And any faults are traced back to the source,
Whom we fire on the spot, of course.

"We pay them just enough so they can live
To work the next day. Anything more would give
Our competitors the advantage. You would go
Immediately to them -- this we know.
And yet, of course, we cannot pay them less,
Or they wouldn't have the strength to stitch a
dress.
And so the market sets the rate of pay
At what it takes to live another day."

"How much would a hundred dozen cost?"
The entrepreneur asked. "Well, at the most ..."
The guide then gave a number so much less
Than he expected or could possibly guess
That he could scarce contain his ecstasy
At what he thought his annual net might be.

Soon the millions would be rolling in,
While all the while the workers would thank him,
Grateful for providing them with work
When otherwise they'd starve. No guilt ought lurk
Within his heart, thought the entrepreneur,
Who was quite thrilled with this stop on his tour.

"Come to the next circle down below.
The returns get even better as we go,"

The fiend said. "These are prisoners of the state
Who get paid nothing." They then passed through
a gate

In a fence with watchtowers all around,
Manned by guards, their guns trained on the
ground,

And into a low-slung building filled with men
Pulling bolts of cloth through presses. When
Each press pressed down, steam hissed out. The
heat

Was almost unbearable. Each new-pressed sheet
Burned the hand, yet the workers held it steady
As it rolled towards the cutting machine, now
ready

For blades that reached across the narrow table,
Ripping right near hands just barely able
To avoid them as they held the hot cloth taut.

The entrepreneur said, "Perhaps the workers
ought

To stay a little further from the blades."

The fiend laughed. "What's the difference? They're
not paid,

They're prisoners. One dies, we get another.

They're dead men anyway -- why should we
bother?

If not enough die here, we execute more.

We sell their organs, need to stock the store."

And then he told the entrepreneur how much
Each bolt would cost, a figure that was such
A bargain he was delighted, and soon forgot
To think about the prison laborers' lot.

The Therapist's Tale--153

And anyway, who knew what crimes they had
Committed? They were surely very bad,
Villains all, who clearly deserved their fate.
Besides, why should the citizens of the state
Pay to subsidize such evil men?
It was right to make them work, and then
To save lives with their organs! The entrepreneur
Felt positively righteous. But on with the tour!

The way lay downward towards a factory
In which children toiled. "As you see,"
The fiend said, "We need small fingers and sharp
eyes

To make these rugs, so many thousand ties
Per inch, a child can make but one, and then
Her eyesight's ruined." "What happens to them
when

They can no longer work?" the entrepreneur
Asked. "We sell them to a brothel," the tour
Guide answered, laughing. "The children do not
need

Their eyes for that! And get a good price, indeed --
More than we paid their parents, that's for sure,
Who sold them for a pittance, they were so poor.

"The best are trained for the highest quality,
Two years to make one rug. Can you see
How beautiful they are?" He took one out,
A small one, and he turned it all about,
Showing the entrepreneur how colors changed,
So close the work, so perfectly arranged.

"Such hand-made rugs are worth a great, great
deal,

But we can let you have them for a steal
Since they are made by child slaves. Don't think
That that's so bad. Here there's food and drink,
While at home there's nothing but disease.
Most would die even earlier. So ease
Your conscience with the thought that, slave or
free,
Most of us must live in poverty.
These children have helped their families to
survive,
And if they're forced to work, well, they're alive.
In the meantime you and I can make out well.
Are you ready for the final circle of Hell?"

The entrepreneur nodded, and off they went,
Down, down a twisting, steep, and dark
descent
To a river engulfed in sulfurous flames
That leaped from the boiling liquid. Men in chains
Labored on the other side, all sweaty
From the heat, naked, burned, and bloody,
Whipped by demons as they pulled huge boulders
Up steep hills, or carried them on their shoulders.

"What profit could I get from these poor souls?"
The entrepreneur asked. "What production goals
Are met by what they do? And who are they,
Who labor in so purposeless a way?"

"They are the damned!" the fiend replied. "And
you
Will profit nothing from the things they do,
But now will join them for eternity!"
"What?" cried the entrepreneur. "Help! Help! Why

me?"

The fiend then laughed, snapped his fingers, and
The scene just disappeared, as he had planned.

"This was a hologram," the fiend explained,
"To show you how the world was. We were
chained

To a morality that censured greed,
The engine that supplies our every need,
And brings us wealth and plenty. Never fear,
There's neither Hell nor Heaven waiting here,
No afterlife to punish or reward,
No ideal to travel ever toward,
Nothing save our own good health and pleasure.

"So come! Let's join to maximize our treasure,
And do what for our own sakes will be best,
For here the only blessed must be self-blessed!"
So ends my tale -- I need not tell you more
About the fiend and his friend, the entrepreneur.

THE ENTREPRENEUR'S TALE

THE ENTREPRENEUR'S PROLOGUE

The entrepreneur glared at the therapist,
Making very clear that he was pissed,
Shaking like a leaf with rage, and said,
"Dear host, I beg you: Let me go ahead
Of who is next, that I might have my say!
That woman there should not just get away
With slandering an honorable profession,
Without which we would be in a depression,
Starving, without goods of any kind,
While all she does is masturbate the mind,
A fraud, a parasite, and even worse!
Why can't she get a real job, like a nurse,
Or clean houses, or do something that's useful?"

The bartender replied, "Well, to be truthful,

The Entrepreneur's Tale--157

You're next anyway, so go ahead.
But just a tale, please. Enough's been said
About both therapists and entrepreneurs.
We're neither critics nor well-trained
 connoisseurs,
But we can tell a tale from a rant!
So please, now, just a tale. If you can't,
Then pass, and let another take your place,
To tell one without rancor and with grace.
Yes? What is your pleasure?" The entrepreneur
Was silent, as though determined to ignore
The bartender's request, but then agreed.

"I'll tell a tale," he said, "as all may read
Themselves of how most Freudians are frauds,
Not to speak of Jungians, and the hordes
Who call themselves Adlerians, and such,
Seducing patients, robbing them -- not much
Has not been documented. My former wife
Went to one, who ruined our lovely life,
Probably sleeping with her, but anyway
Remaking her, so one delightful day
She told me she was leaving me --" "The tale!"
The bartender reminded him. "The tale?"
The entrepreneur, distracted, said. "Oh, yes!
But who do you think it's about? I'll let you
guess!"

THE ENTREPRENEUR'S TALE

There once was a therapist, a Freudian,
Who played her patients like an accordion,
Beautiful music for her bank account,
Never professing interest in the amount

Of interest, though she knew it to the penny.

She kept her patients dependent through the
many

Years, decades even, that she saw them --
Two, three times a week. How she bore them
Was to do her calculations while
They lay in front of her, spewing vile
Accusations on all of those they loved --
Their spouses, friends, associates, but above
All their parents, those twin devils of the hell
Known as childhood -- they knew it well!

They were this or that, perhaps the other,
Because they never got love from their mother
Or their father, as the case may be,
And neither one their anguish cared to see,
Nor would they have themselves, except for her,
When in exquisite detail, at so much per --
"This is no tale!" the therapist complained.
"A tale is coming!" the entrepreneur maintained.
"Patience, please, and let me have my say!
You had yours!" "We haven't got all day,"
The bartender said, "or night, as it may be.
Please! The tale! While we are still at sea!"
The entrepreneur nodded and resumed:

The point is that they found themselves
consumed
With rage at those they blamed for who they
were,
In which they were encouraged well by her,
Never coming to a termination
Unless it was with great determination.

The Entrepreneur's Tale--159

One day, however, a patient at the end
Of his insurance decided to pretend
That next time he would pay himself, for he
Was enslaved to her. Whenever she
Was on vacation he drowned in his despair.
He couldn't even imagine her not there,
The loving witness of his inner life,
More dependable than friend or wife,
A paid, professional, long-term companion,
Sort of a mental whore, a brazen, wanton
Ego booster, who would have even Hitler
Rid of guilt and shame -- you get the picture!

He felt the anger of a rejected suitor,
Ready with a payment that would suit her.
She asked for it right off, and so he said
He'd pay her by and by, but now, instead,
He had a riddle for her. "What is that?"
She asked, annoyed. He answered, "It is what
You cannot help but share alike with all,
Yet cannot split in any way. You'd call
It an expression of your inmost feelings."

"I'm a professional," she said. "My dealings
Are purely for some ready quid pro quo."
"Oh, this is that, quite certainly." "You know,"
She said, "that love can be no substitute
For money." He answered, "It's neither love nor
loot,
But something one can't possibly divide,
That says precisely what I feel inside."

"I don't like guessing games," she said. "The

session

Is already underway. My impression
Is that you want to have it from me free.
But you must pay if you would be with me."

"I'll pay you, then," he said, and turned around,
Pulling his pants and undies to the ground,
And, jutting out his ass to the right place,
Took a breath and farted in her face.

She said nothing, made no move at all,
As he pulled up his pants and stood up tall,
Smiling like a maniac, and said,
"I hope you will accept such pay instead
Of money. My insurance is all gone,
And no one will approve me for a loan."

She stared at him a while, and finally
She said, "You obviously need more therapy.
I'll refer you to a clinic where
They charge much less but still give you good
care."

Crushed, the patient saw he was defeated,
And, standing while his tormentor was seated,
Looked down at her, helpless as a baby,
As she wrote down a phone number. "Maybe
Someday you'll be able to come back,
If you have the funds that you now lack,
And we can then resume our long, hard work."

"I know that you must think that I'm a jerk --"
He started to say. But she looked at her watch.
"You're looking for free time," she said. "Don't

The Entrepreneur's Tale--161

botch

The exit. Please, just go!" And so he went,
Thinking, as he into the woodwork blent,
Of this one tiny bit of saving grace:
That at least he'd farted in her face!

THE STUDENT'S TALE

THE STUDENT'S PROLOGUE

"Why look so serious?" the bartender said
To the student. "Is there so much in your head?
You're next, so please, indulge us just a little
With your great knowledge -- but only on the
 fiddle,
Not the violin. Some simple sounds,
Plain words, in which our English tongue
 abounds,
And not the kind of stuff you fellows speak
To one another in journals. What we seek
Is merriment and pleasure, with just a dash
Of meaning -- just for taste -- not much to ask.
So dive into your treasure trove to find
A tale more of the heart than of the mind."

"All I can do is try," the student replied.
"I have an ancient tale, known far and wide
From Chaucer's Tales, that I'll bring up to date,

The Student's Tale--163

Modernize, so people can relate,
With greater ease and pleasure than they might,
To times of which their knowledge is but slight,
When princes ruled, and women were supposed
To bear whatever wrongs their lord proposed.

"Still, a tale's a tale, and we are we,
All one in our deep down humanity.
The tale's wearing clothes you'll recognize,
For naked beauty's only for the wise."

THE STUDENT'S TALE

There lived on Sutton Place a billionaire,
A bachelor on whom women set their eyes --
Handsome, strong, well-built, and with an air
Of being somehow more than simply wise,
Perhaps some sort of god in human guise.
They all set out to win his lucrative heart,
Enticing his desire with all their art.

Yet though he oft enjoyed a bit of pleasure,
Not making any promises, he still
Reserved the sharing of his ample treasure
For someone who not yet had touched his will,
For all his many partners' wit and skill.
He did not really know just what he wanted,
But knew that by some demon he was haunted.

As he grew older, he began to think
He ought to marry and start a family.
Yet when he pushed himself up to the brink,
And all his close associates would agree
This was the one, he backed away, for he

Still had it in his head that he should wait
Until some sign might signify his fate.

One day when he came early to his office,
He found the maintenance contractor within,
And one of the workers cleaning the glass surface
Of his huge desk. She stopped and looked at him
For just one second, and blushed, as if some sin
Had raced across the highway of her mind
And into the woods to hide with its own kind.

She was a tall, strong woman, black, with hair
Cropped in tiny curls across her skull,
And features cut so perfectly, they were
As if outlined in charcoal, her bosom full,
Her movements, even cleaning, musical,
As though life were a song, and work a dance,
And one's fate might be turned by just a glance.

The billionaire stared so hard and long
That she looked up, and smiled, and said to him,
"Could it be I'm doing something wrong?"
"Not at all," he said. "Please. I'll go in
The outer office. It's too early to begin --"
"No, please stay!" she said. "I like you here.
If you don't mind. You have a lovely stare."

He laughed and looked away, self-consciously,
But then looked back, as though by magnets
drawn,
And knew at just that moment it was she
For whom he'd waited obstinately and long.
She looked back, by fear and longing torn,
And in that locked embrace of eyes both saw

The Student's Tale--165

A naked demon, angry, rough, and raw.

Again they looked away, and she went back
To cleaning, finishing the desk, and then
Gathering her things to leave, her black
Skin burning into memory. So when
She finally reached the door, he looked again
And said, "Don't go yet, please. What's your
name?"

"Theresa," she said. "Theresa Ste. Lorraine.

"And yours I know -- it's written on the door:
Walter Young III. Just like a king!
But now I have to go and talk no more,
I'll lose my job --" "You won't lose anything.
Your boss will dance to any tune I sing."
She grimaced. "Don't control me!" she ordered
him.

"Court me!" And her anger did him in.

So court her he did, as though she were the queen
And he the commoner, grateful for
The chance to win her favor, and to glean
Whatever bit of pleasure he could draw
From being in her presence, nothing more.
And though he showered her with gifts, each day
She cleaned his office for the same low pay.

This went on for months, until one night
He begged for mercy, pointing out that many
Women would such steadfast love requite,
And yet he saw from her no sign of any
Interest or affection, not one penny
Of return for all of his devotion,

Nor gain from his investment of emotion.

"Please tell me now," he said, "just yes or no,
So I may weep with either pain or joy.
I have for months endured this one-way flow --
One night a word that would my spirits buoy,
The next a look that would my heart destroy,
But never an answer to my earnest suit!
My eyes and lips say love, but yours are mute!"

For a while she was silent. Then she said,
"Sometimes I wish this love would pass from me!
For all my dreams that someday we'd be wed,
And all my joy in you, I cannot see
How we might manage in reality,
I, a cleaning woman, coarse and dull;
You, so rich, so smooth, so masterful!

"Soon you'll tire of me, regret your choice,
And be ashamed of me before your friends,
While I myself will flinch at my own voice
And bear the burden that that message sends,
Knowing even now how such love ends!
I've tested you, and you have passed the test!
But I have not -- please! It's for the best!"

"My darling Theresa!" he answered. "Your words
make me
So happy, since you've spoken of your love!
These months of torturous uncertainty
Have tested me, and made me certain of
My love for you. Now tell me how to prove
That we can be happy together, even though
We are so different. My love will grow

"As I see your spirit, brave and strong,
Meet the daunting challenge of a life
So different from your own! Now more I long
To make you my own precious, treasured wife,
The jewel of my days, sweet partner of my nights!
Believe me, your reluctance makes me more
Determined to have you than I was before!"

"Your jewel?" she said. "Your own? But I am
mine,
And ever will be, even when I'm yours.
No ownership implied! Nor neon sign
Proclaiming property! The secret cause
Of so much marital woe! Love knows no laws,
But like a cat must follow its own will,
Though it stay within its harbor still."

"Then be my cat!" Walter replied, "or what
You will!" And then he dared a kiss, which she
Returned with equal fervor, as she shut
The door to all her doubts, and happily
Let go her passion, long starved for such glee.
Soon they were married, amid much speculation,
As for one month they riveted the nation.

Who was this beautiful black cleaning woman?
Cinderella, clearly! What a story!
Marrying Prince Charming, as the common
Folk watched, hungry for vicarious glory,
Imagining themselves, with all the fury
Of empty hearts, the love and happiness
That must accompany such large largesse.

And for a few years, yes, the two were happy
As two children came, a girl and boy,
Though Theresa lived but modestly,
Insisting that although she might enjoy
Great wealth, no cheap indulgence would destroy
Her family, but their wealth would be for naught
Unless well used, as Christ and others taught.

She was a gracious hostess, and a jewel
That brought great luster to her husband's life,
Yet something in him, primitive and cruel,
Demanded that he wound his loving wife,
Abandoning this harmony for strife.
What it was, he had no thought or clue,
But in him slowly this strange impulse grew.

It began with little insults, slights
That she could feel but barely recognize;
Some arguments (you couldn't call them fights)
That festered unresolved, for all her tries;
A little discontent around the eyes
That tightened into anger at a word;
An attitude when nothing had occurred.

"What's the matter?" finally she asked
One evening when they both had gone to bed.
"You seem unhappy. Why?" And then at last
He told her what he long had in his head.
"This isn't working -- not for me," he said,
While part of him turned towards the other part
And plunged a six-inch knife into his heart.

"What isn't working? What?" she asked, dismayed.
A sudden storm swelled up, with fury filled.

The Student's Tale--169

How quickly love's sweet harmony can fade
When just one drop of dissonance is spilled,
If neither partner is in passion skilled!
Immediately, she thought that her black skin
Was what had turned the power off in him.

She waited for his answer, as in her grew
A certainty from what had been a doubt:
She knew that this would happen! Yes, she knew!
And fear within became cold rage without.
"Please let me know what this is all about!"
She said, her voice an adamant shield,
Signaling a choice she would not yield.

"I need some time alone," he said. "It's not
Anything you've done, or failed to do.
It's me, just me. I know that what I've got
Is more than I deserve -- the kids and you --
But now inside I long for something new.
Please wait for me, just until I find
What might resettle me in my own mind."

"What are you?" Theresa asked. "Man or boy?
We have two children! You are past such things!
What demon in you now wants to destroy
The happiness that love acknowledged brings,
Love that weaves our fortune as it sings?
Tell me now! Is it yes or no?
If it's yes, I'll stay; if not, I'll go!"

He did not answer, so Theresa left
With their two children, finding a small place
In a slum, of all they had bereft,
Surrounded by poor people of her race,

And leaving for her husband not a trace.
She found employment as a home companion,
Enjoying the sweet flow of her compassion.

Meanwhile, Walter, in self-inflicted pain,
Lived alone. No other woman pleased him,
No interest touched his heart. He tried in vain
To care about his fortune, but what seized him
Was bitter rage at life. No thought released him
But dreaming of Theresa and their children,
Imagining some plausible reunion.

Still, he would not look for her, but drove
Himself into a deep and lonely hell,
As though by loving her he only strove
To find something of worth to wound him well.
But of such demons, who can really tell?
Two years passed, and then he thought he would
Take the children from her, if he could.

An army of detectives soon discovered
Where she lived and worked, and found the
school
Where their children went. Walter hovered
Over them awhile, his cravings cruel,
Knowing well this woman was a jewel,
Yet wanting to inflict on her such pain
As would bring him the touch of life again.

One afternoon he took them home with him,
Telling them their mother soon would come.
Overjoyed to see him once again,
The children hugged him happily, as from
The moment that she left, his wife was mum

The Student's Tale--171

About his cruelty, and why they left
Him there, of him and of their home bereft.

When Theresa came for them at school
And found them gone, she hoped that it was he
Who'd taken them, though she knew well the rule
That wealth wins all. She called immediately,
Relieved to find them safe, and said that she
Would come to get them soon. And then she let
Herself think what might come of this, and wept.

She'd lost them, that she knew, though she would
fight
With what she could to get them back! What
more
Could Walter do to her? And by what right
Could he deprive her of her children? Law
Was on her side, and yet grief through her tore!
Never would she see them, never again!
Ahead of her she saw but lonely pain.

Anger gripped her in its hard-clenched hand!
She hated Walter, hated him! And yet
She'd loved him once. Were such foundations
sand?
Were such sweet days so easy to forget?
God! She wished, she wished they'd never met!
The demon rose in her, a puissant knight
In armor dressed, ready for the fight.

She went to his door on Sutton Place and rang,
Knowing well he'd see her on his screen.
Inside her head the righteous anger sang,
Shading at each cadence into scream.

Her face appeared on camera hard and mean,
As Walter's demon, dressed in iron, too,
Rode towards hers, lance aloft, to battle do.

He came down quickly to the door, quite white
With righteous rage, while unaware above
The children played at princess chained and
knight

Riding to her rescue, fraught with love,
Ready to cross swords and honor prove.
Face to face they came with beating hearts,
Primed to play their pain-appointed parts.

"You think you could just kidnap them from
me?"

He screamed, an echo of the very words
She was about to scream, as suddenly
She had a vision of two screeching birds
Upon a branch above the dusty herds
Of cattle being driven to their death,
Screeching, screeching hatred with each breath.

And in that mirror of Walter and herself,
She saw the ugliness of what she was
And turned away to gaze across the gulf
Between what one would be and what one does.
She leaped across and looked through Walter's
eyes,
And saw a truth that burned through all her lies.

"Forgive me," she then said. "Forgive me, please.
I swore to love you always, all our lives.
We should have separated, yes, agreed,
But in a way that faithful love survives,

The Student's Tale--173

As is the case with truly loving wives.
I should have thanked you for your honesty
And let you have your taste of being free.

"I acted out of anger, fear, and pride,
Without one thought of you and of the pain
You must have felt to keep such thoughts inside,
And courage to reveal them. Mine the blame!
We should have talked things out, sincere and
sane!

What was my wish? That you would choose to lie?
Who should have shared your secret, if not I?"

"The fault lies not entirely with you,"
Walter said involuntarily,
As though some long-lost obligation due
Now weighed upon his will, and let the sea
Come rushing in, impervious to his plea,
To sweep away his demon, who had long
Ruled his will and led him to do wrong.

"Yes, you acted out of injured pride,
Understandably. I did you harm.
Of free will I took you for my bride
And promised to be faithful. What strange charm
Did my demon give me? So soon gone!
Swallowed by the bitter joy I found
In hating you, by pain and fury bound.

"Forgive me, too, then! Please, forgive me, too!
And let us once again attempt to love
With more humility in what we do,
Moved by what good grace might in us move,
The best in us, that will our conscience prove,

Cruise to Nowhere Tales--174

And bring us back to where we were before
I turned away, and our sweet love restore."

So it was: The two became again
A loving man and wife, and parents good,
Remembering well their self-inflicted pain
And taking care to do the things they should,
As humankind so long has understood:
Faithful to their vows and to each other,
Steadfast as a father and a mother.

Let all couples take good heed of this,
And like Theresa put aside their pride,
Countering wrong with right. The key to bliss
Is seeing oneself from the other side,
Imagination both one's map and guide.
And may we let such stories be the eyes
Through which we see the pathways of the wise.

THE MERCHANT'S TALE

THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE

"So might marriage be for other men,"
The merchant said, "but I've got me a hen
Who'd peck my eyes out, given half a chance.
Marriage is the graveyard of romance!

"It's been no more than two months we've been
wed,
Already she has tossed me out of bed,
And has a tone of voice that's just for me --
Sarcastic, nasty, out to disagree,
As though I were the enemy, long loathed,
And she long suffering. Undressed or clothed,
It is the same with us, so much has hate
Turned off the least desire, sad to state.

"She is a lovely woman, young and pretty,
But hard -- so hard! -- and quite bereft of pity,
The opposite of Theresa's temperament.
I swear, even in Hell she'd not repent,
But curse me for the hate that put her there!

My life with her is more than I can bear!
Take my advice, my friends, and do not wed,
For if you do, you'll wish that you were dead!"

"Enough!" the bartender said. "On to your tale!
This litany of woes is getting stale.
Use your expertise on marital war,
But of your personal life -- please, no more!"

"Quite right," the merchant said. "I'll shape my
 pain
Into a tale that all will entertain.
For what might seem a rant straight from the
 heart
Becomes a melody when touched by art."

THE MERCHANT'S TALE

A professor once had long been used to bedding
Young women whom he had no thought of
 wedding.

Each semester he'd survey his classes,
Not for eager minds but shapely asses,
And always found a few who'd gladly trade
A bit of pleasure for a better grade.

Alas! As he grew older it grew harder
To find such tasty dainties for his larder,
For time was ticking mercilessly for him
While seemingly quite unconcerned with them,
Who stayed in age remarkably the same,
Although it seemed each year each changed her
 name.

The Merchant's Tale--177

Finally, a faculty committee,
Made up of mostly men, more's the pity,
Concluded that such sex was out of bounds
And censured him, it turned out, on the grounds
Of merely asking for a goodnight kiss,
An innocent request, except for this:
That he implied, or she inferred, a threat,
If he did not, at some point certain, get
His way with her (though he in fact denied
That he in any way such things implied),
He would (she thought, inferred, well ... guessed,
 whatever)
Perhaps not like so well her next endeavor.

Such evidence would clearly not convict
A dog of pissing on the street, but pricked
By conscience, other "victims" soon came forth,
Women newly militant, a broth
Of righteous fury, pain, and psychic damage,
An avalanche that finally did manage
To get our poor professor to retire
Rather than be fired. Oh, what ire
He felt at being massively betrayed!
So what if he'd occasionally strayed?

The trouble was he'd gotten unattractive,
Old and wrinkled, while his hyperactive
Female students longed for younger men,
And were less willing to surrender when
He broached the usual negative rewards.
He should have heard the angry, dissonant
 chords!

Oh well, oh well, the question was, what now?
Old and ugly, he couldn't imagine how
He'd get his daily nookie by and by,
Now that he'd been robbed of his supply.
He guessed that he'd be forced at last to marry,
Some sweet young child, perhaps, whom he could
 carry
Out of abject poverty, and who'd
Be grateful just for shelter and some food.

And then he'd send a stipend twice a year
To her family, just to make her fear
That he might discontinue his largesse
If her first thought were not his happiness.
Yes! Yes! Some child, with orifices tight,
Whom he would have a chance to break in right!

This vision grew in power before his eyes,
Making marriage seem a paradise,
That earlier had seemed a vicious trap
Laid by women to virtually kidnap
Unsuspecting men, and put them in
A little box, locked safe away from sin.
Why would anyone endure a wife,
Who'd claim one half of all one's goods for life,
When one could freely pick and choose the best,
As not a harried owner but a guest?

But now deprived of that choice, marriage seemed
Far more practical than he had dreamed,
Being that one's nookie, close at hand,
Lay waiting, 24/7, on demand.

And then there was the pretense he'd be spared

The Merchant's Tale--179

Of constantly pretending that he cared,
The lunches, dinners, dates, the evenings out,
The endless, stupid chattering about
One's lives, opinions, anything at all,
Before one could just get undressed and ball.

In marriage, of that nonsense he'd be free
And could enjoy his pleasure by decree --
No need to waste one's cunning on the chase,
Sure enough each night of an embrace.

But what if he got bored? The same old thing
Night after night would surely boredom bring.
Ecstasy's not easy to repeat.
But then, if he got bored, well, he could cheat.

Cheat? The very word now turned him cold!
How could he forget that he was old,
And that a fresh young thing might find him
stale
And soon make him the moral of this tale?

Maybe he should just give up, forget it,
Before some Jezebel made him regret it.
But all too soon desire conquered fear,
And our poor fool was wed, as you shall hear.

A few months later, he (let's call him Jan)
Was looking at some pictures that a man
Had spread out on a table in a bar
In Bangkok. They hadn't gotten very far
When Jan put down his finger on a face
That seemed to him the epitome of grace,
Sweet innocence that could not be denied

Because it welled up from the love inside.

"Hey!" he said. "That's her! How much is she?"
Of course the price went up immediately.
"Four thousand American dollars," the agent said.
"That much?" Jan cried. "She has her
 maidenhead,"
The agent explained. "That always costs you more.
You know no man has been with her before.

"She's quite unusual, a girl like that,
To reach 16 with maidenhead intact.
Her parents know the value of such things,
And of the premium a virgin brings,
Especially one so beautiful. She must
Be the kind of girl that you can trust.
I have a document from an M.D.
Attesting to her pure virginity,
Free of all diseases, nice and clean.
You'll think you're living in some kind of dream."

"Three thousand!" Jan said, knowing he should
 bargain.

"No way," the agent said. He knew his marlin,
Had him on the hook, now pull him in,
Thrashing in the golden grip of sin.

"Here is one for less." He turned the page.
"She's had few men, considering her age.
Been in a whorehouse since she was eight,
But now she's ten, really not too late
To turn into a mistress, tried and true.
Three thousand on the button, just for you!"

The Merchant's Tale--181

"No, no," said Jan, easily defeated,
Even knowing he was being cheated.
"I'll take the first one. Do you know her name?"
"Call her Mai," he said. "It's all the same."

And so Jan purchased Mai, who was delivered
To his hotel the next day. How she quivered
As Jan began to kiss her, touch her breast,
And slowly stripped her till she was undressed,
Determined to determine whether she
Was still possessed of her virginity,
And try out his new purchase in the sack
Before it was too late to give her back.

And yes! Oh, yes! She was a virgin pure.
The cries and bloody sheet said that for sure.
After, he was gentle, kissed her hand
And told her it would wear a wedding band,
Promised her a life of happiness,
Finally unnerved by her distress.
But she could speak no English, he no Thai,
And so we leave them there, our Jan and Mai.

Two years later, back home in the States,
Jan's abundant passion scarce abates.
He consumes his morsel every night,
Virility engorged by his delight,
While Mai endures his thrusts through fantasy,
Imagining a prince in love as he.

She knows that she is lucky, more or less,
Having to endure but slight duress,
A bit of nightly mauling, not so much
For room and board, an education, such

Support for her twin sisters, nine years old,
As needed to prevent their being sold.

She hated his stiff member in her rear,
His spittle drooling on her neck and ear,
The way his flesh hung flaccid on his bones,
The ghastly rasp of his asthmatic moans,
His tongue that licked her like a lollipop,
His thick-veined hands that never seemed to stop
Caressing her, as if she were his dog,
While he, meanwhile, was happy as a hog,
Young again, reborn into bright passion,
Sex night and day, with neither pause nor ration,
A cornucopia of non-stop pleasure,
Thanks to her -- his playmate and his treasure.

He thought she would be grateful just for food,
And would endure him out of gratitude,
But joy seemed mutual, or so he thought,
And so he had the paradise he sought.

Into this paradise one day there came
Jan's former student, Damian by name,
To work with him on Chaucer's fabliaux,
A project they had started long ago,
Before Jan's resignation, out to prove
That Chaucer had a jaundiced view of love.

But this was before Jan married Mai,
When he had good reason to deny
The power of love to rearrange the heart,
As is so often seen in Chaucer's art.

Before I travel further, I must first

The Merchant's Tale--183

Describe how Damian was roundly cursed
By Jan for even mentioning their work.
"I was," he said, "At that time just a jerk.
When you meet Mai, you'll understand that we
Misunderstood the glint in Chaucer's glee.

"His fun with cuckolds was a large embrace
Of all sweet love, from sex to heavenly grace,
A hierarchy we, alas, have lost,
Replaced with irony, but at what cost!
For love is one, a ladder to the sky,
As you will learn, if fortunate as I.

"But here comes Mai -- my wife, my love, my
treasure.
Now you'll know the cause of all my pleasure,
The beauty that defines for me all beauty,
The good that makes a blessing of all duty."

Damian turned to see a lovely girl
Whose innocent face made his senses whirl
As though an angel promised ecstasy,
All the more lurid for her purity.

Instantly, Damian was smitten,
As though by some diseased mosquito bitten.
He stared at her as she came up to him,
Marveling at the glow of her fresh skin,
The perfect set of her brown almond eyes,
The bit of cleft where so much pleasure lies,
The -- "This is Mai," Jan said. "And Damian,
My former student." Mai shook his hand, and
when
Skin touched skin, both felt the urge of life,

Despite the fact that she remained Jan's wife,
An urge that Mai had never felt so strongly,
For she had been initiated wrongly,
Robbed of the experience of love,
That makes of sex a song of joy, and moves
The body to a moment of pure bliss.
But of such love Mai had not one kiss.

And so those two, Damian and Mai,
As they touched hands exchanged words eye-to
eye.

Both felt as though they had been given wings,
And now like angels sang where sunlight sings!

Jan was pleased such abject awe to see,
Basking in his student's jealousy.
She's mine! He thought. And I'm the only one
Who can into her golden body come.
Others may long to, but I can with her lie
Until there's neither earth nor sea nor sky,
But just my darling with me in her arms,
While other men must fantasize her charms!

Soon Damian had persuaded Jan
That he was of his scholarship a fan,
Offering to edit the ideas
That he had come to pilfer through the years
From textbooks and some studies he had read
Before his mind had gone completely dead.

Damian came over every day
To where his dreams and thoughts and longings
lay,
But never could be with his love alone

The Merchant's Tale--185

Since Jan would never leave him on his own,
But talked for hours, now he had an ear,
Of things no one but him would want to hear,
While his poor victim furtively would try
To get a glimpse of his sweet goddess Mai.

This went on for weeks until one day
Damian proposed a clever way
To replicate The Merchant's Tale in Chaucer,
Which Jan had found ridiculous. "Of course her
Husband was a cuckold -- he was blind,
Not only physically, but in his mind.
Now I would hold my Mai's hand night and day
To make sure that she'd never get away
Far enough to boff another man.
Just try me for a whole day, if you can!"

"Night and day?" Damian asked. "And when
Mai needed the toilet? What would you do then?"
"I'd let her lead me to the bathroom door,"
Jan said, "and wait till she was through. No more
Than that would I allow, I promise you.
And when I had to go, she'd be there, too!"

"I'd like to see that," Damian said. "Suppose
You put this theory to the test and chose
To wear a blindfold for a night and day
As though Zeus struck you blind. What do you
say?"

Do you think that Mai would play along
And lead you night and day, and do no wrong --"
"How could she do wrong?" Jan asked. "All night
And day I'll have her hand in mine gripped
tight."

And so it was decided that within
The week Jan would be blindfolded, and then
See whether he could keep his honor more
Successfully than that old fool of yore
In Chaucer's tale, whose wife had in a tree
Her paramour bestrode adulterously.

Meanwhile, Damian slipped Mai a note
With all the details of his plan. He wrote
Rapturously of love for her, and of
The ways in which he'd soon express that love.

She wrote back, trembling with desire,
The two of them swept upward in the fire
That burned in their bone-dry imaginations,
Fed by their abundant expectations.

The night before the promised day of passion,
Jan demanded thrice his normal ration,
Boffing Mai again, again, again,
As though he weren't certain where or when
He'd get another chance, while she endured
His undesired bugging, ensured
Of ecstasy, pleasure, joy, and bliss
If only she could once more get through this!

Before she fell in love with Damian,
Mai had given up what might have been,
Accepting that for her sex was a chore,
And that her life would offer nothing more.

But now she had been lit by love's fierce fire,
All she felt was amorous desire.

The Merchant's Tale--187

Even as Jan thrust inside of her,
She dreamed of Damian, and felt the stir
Of what she thought she might discover soon.

The morning came before Jan could resume
His love-making. And as had been agreed,
He put on blinders, then asked Mai to feed
Him breakfast, which she did. When Damian
Came to the door, both answered, Mai with Jan,
And then they silent sat, all three, an hour,
Until Jan said, "You see? It's in my power
To guard my honor even though I'm blind.
I think I've proved my point, if you don't mind."

"It's morning yet, said Damian. "There's more,
Much more to this experiment before
We can say that you have won the game,
And blind have kept your honor all the same."

Hours more passed. Jan began to fret.
"My hand is tired. Isn't this over yet?"
"Not yet," said Damian. "But tell me, please,
Don't you need the bathroom? Mai can ease
You down onto the toilet -- I won't see.
And you can call her when you're done. Then we
Can pass the time until the evening's come,
And it will be high time that I go home."

"Not on your life!" Jan cried. "Mai will stay
With me the whole time -- all the night and day!
I won't let her go -- not for one minute!
I will win this game, now that I'm in it!

"Don't think that I don't see what's going on!

You think that I will cheat once you are gone!
You must stay all night so you can see
That Mai won't get a chance to cheat on me!

"I'm no fool -- I'll keep her by my side
Till Satan come and beg me for a ride!
Not on my wife! I will say to him,
Besting all -- even the Lord of Sin!
Take me to the toilet, Mai, and close
Your eyes when I begin, and hold your nose!"

Mai did as she was told and closed the door,
Leaving Damian outside. No more
Could he hold back from beating on his chest,
Robbed of the sweet taste of Mai's young breast,
Thinking of her chained to that old fool,
Forced to smell the vileness of his stool!
My God! He'd kill him! That's what he would do!

But then the door was opened -- Jan was through.
Mai motioned to her lover to go in,
Finger to her lips, so Damian
Slipped inside the putrid-smelling room
And heard Mai say, "I must now assume
Your position on the throne, my dear.
But modesty forbids that you be near.
As Swift says in his poem about such links,
You'll associate me with my stinks,
And then won't love me anymore. So please
Just stand right here beside the house of ease.
I'll be right out to guide you to your chair,
Where Damian awaits our presence there."

"Damian!" Jan cried. "Damian!"

The Merchant's Tale--189

Curse the day I ever mentored him!
Why did he propose this stupid test?
Now I am embarked, I'll have no rest
Until I've proven I can keep you pure
By means as neat and elegant as sure.
So I'll wait here, just outside the door.
But do not lock it, Mai! I'll say no more."

So Mai went in and closed the door behind her.
It took two seconds for Damian to find her
Breasts within his hands, his tongue and hers
Locked like wrestlers, their battered senses blurs.
Two seconds more, and Damian's pants were
down,
As were Mai's panties. She felt that she might
drown
In ecstasy and gave a little moan.

"What was that?" Jan called. "Are you alone?"
"Just a cramp," she said. "I'll be all right.
I'll take a little laxative tonight."

So back they went hot at it, those young two,
Their mouths together joined as though with
glue,
Damian now buried deep inside
His lover, who no longer could abide
The silence and gave out a cry of joy,
Then another as the desperate boy
Pulled her harder onto him, and harder --

"What was that?" Jan cried. "Now go no farther!"
He ripped his blindfold off, opened the door,
And screamed at the salacious scene he saw --

His former student buried in his wife,
His helpmate and the treasure of his life,
His wife all limp upon him, having just
Had her first orgasm at his thrust.

Instantly, the tableau came apart
As Jan, still yelping, held his aching heart.
"What have you done to me?" he kept repeating.
"Nothing, my dear, nothing," Mai said, seating
Her beet-red husband on the toilet top.

"Why did you cry out to me to stop?
I was having cramps, and still have some --"
(As Damian slipped out as he had come)
"-- and need more time in here. You should not
be
So jealous --" "I may be old, but I can see!
I saw your lover in you to the hilt!
Now there's no putting back the milk that's spilt!
My life is ruined, ruined, that's the thing!
Here's where I want to put my wedding ring!"

He opened up the toilet, but then Mai
Slammed it down again. "No need to buy
Another wedding ring. Let me explain
What happened to you, and so ease your
pain.

"As is well known, all scientists agree:
We tend to see what we expect to see.
The eye is ever subject to the mind,
Which, never eager to be left behind,
Sees what is not there, before the eye
Can tell it what it actually did espy.

The Merchant's Tale--191

"So did you, anticipating wrong,
See what you expected all along,
Turning cramps to orgasms, and arms
To someone ravishing your dear wife's charms.

"But as you see, there is no lover here,
Just you and me. Now, please go have a beer
With Damian, who's waiting in the study,
Your former student and your bosom buddy,
While I attempt my colon to relieve.
And, please, from now on doubt what you
perceive."

Which Jan did, for the remainder of his life,
Trusting not his eyes but his young wife,
Determined to retain connubial bliss
Even if it meant his wine was piss,
Drinking it with relish, though somewhere
He had to, had to realize what was there.

So do we all protect our happiness
By being blind to what might cause distress,
Deciding not to see what we have seen,
Cuckolds all, nor wit nor will might wean.

THE MERCHANT'S EPILOGUE

"Yes!" the bartender said. "That is so true!
Such scheming wives we all are subject to!
Marry, and quite soon you'll see The Switch:
The woman whom you married is a bitch!
Which is to say, she is herself, not who

You thought she was when she first married you!

"My wife was beautiful and loved me so --
Until our wedding night, when off she'd go
Into complaints that I was this and that,
A browbeater, a bully, and a brat,
And she could take no more! (This only hours
After we were wed -- so soon it sours!)

"So now she is obese and loud and coarse,
A woman I'd be happy to divorce
Except for our three kids, on whom I dote,
For whom I slave long hours on this boat,
While she, my nemesis, is on her back
Supplying other men with what I lack!

"I know I'm not alone in my despair:
Of married folk there's many another pair
Undone before the marriage vows are cold --
But that's a tale far too often told!"

THE MAYOR'S TALE

THE MAYOR'S PROLOGUE

"Madame Mayor, it's now your turn to tell
A tale," the bartender said. "You must know well
The wily ways of politics and power.
There's plenty there to while away an hour,
Though I would rather that you take less time
Since soon enough the gambling's end will
chime."

"I'll speak of love and marriage," the mayor said,
"But from a woman's point of view. You've led
Us to believe that women are to blame
For putting out too soon love's lambent flame.
But men are far more faithless, there's no doubt,
As in this next sad tale you'll find out!"

THE MAYOR'S TALE

Candace was still virgin at eighteen,
Innocent by choice, and not too keen
On being just a notch on some boy's pride,
Not loved sufficiently to be a bride.

Although she burned with natural desire,
She knew how to mitigate that fire
By letting it burn awhile, for time would tell
How much a suitor loved her, and how well.

She had learned this lesson from a bird,
And lest you think this statement sounds absurd,
Recall with what good sense a parrot speaks,
While crows make tools of wires with their beaks.

Aesop's crow put stones into a cup
To bring the level of the water up
To where he could put down his beak and drink.
Now who says that an animal can't think?
As recently was proven, when a crow
Did this in a lab, as all well know.

Birds marry, cheat, divorce, and mourn their dead
Just as we do, as is often said,
And feel the pangs of passion and desire,
The joys of parenthood, the inner fire
That welds two into one, so that we see
Never one, but two, where e'er they be.

And they can speak, albeit in songs and cries,
Which translate into truths and also lies --
Yes, birds lie as we do, for the same

The Mayor's Tale--195

Reasons, both utility and shame.
But enough of this -- all know it all too well!
Back to Candace -- I have a tale to tell!

One day as she was walking through a park,
A place one wouldn't frequent after dark,
With thickets that could hide all sorts of crimes,
She heard deep moans, so pitiful at times
That she was moved to search for who might be
Crying out in pain so piteously.

She searched in places dangerous to go,
Driven by anxiety to know
Whether she might alleviate the pain
That would such grievous wailing sustain.

In a little while she found a hawk
In such distress that she could barely talk,
A female falcon bleeding from her breast,
Perched on a branch far from any nest.
As she cried she plucked hard at her heart
As though she meant to tear her breast apart.

"Dear falcon," Candace said. "Please, what might
be

The sorrow that you suffer in that tree?
Pray come down and perch upon my shoulder,
And tell me of your pain. Though you are older,
Perhaps you will find comfort just in sharing
Your story with a listener who is caring."

"Oh, what's the good of counting down this
sorrow?"

The bird replied. "I won't be here tomorrow

With any luck. My heart cannot long bear
This burden! But my tale I would share
In hope that you might well avoid my fate,
If for saving you it's not too late.

"You look so kind and innocent, I must
Warn you of what men you shouldn't trust.
Ah! If only someone had warned me!
But to the tale, as you shall shortly see.

"I was young once, and innocent as you,
All hot with desire, but very mindful, too,
Of all the snares that men put in our way
To have their fun, then leave before we lay
Our eggs. But we can't hatch them on our own,
For we must eat, and they will die alone.

"It takes two to raise our little chicks,
And long, hard work, so schemers use their tricks
To make us think they love us, all the while
Lying through their beaks! Oh, how they smile
And flatter us! To make us think we were
The very pitch of grace! Such words would stir
A stone to longing! And they seem so true,
Coming from a male point of view,
A mirror in which we ourselves can see
Precisely as we always dreamed we'd be!

"I must admit, I lusted after those
Who courted me with poetry, not prose,
Who trembled with desire for my love
And played so well the music that would move
My heart, while I danced tipsy to their tune,
Drowning in the liquor of their swoon!

The Mayor's Tale--197

"Of course in time I fell in love with one
Who seemed so handsome, strong, and full of
 fun,
So much in love with me, so quick and sure,
He seemed he could be nothing less than pure.

"I gave myself to him, and thought no boy
Again could bring me to such perfect joy.
And so we were a pair, I thought for life,
And went to build our nest as man and wife.

"But just as he was so in love with me,
My lover was enamored serially,
Truly, truly passionate about
Each present love in turn, wholly without
The need for artifice, though well he knew
He would move on as soon as he was through.

"We had not hatched our first ill-fated brood
When he turned nasty, in an ugly mood,
Irritable with having to supply
Our chicks with food, asking himself why
He'd gotten so entangled in my snare,
As though I were the one who put him there!
Oh, God! It was so painful just to hear him
That soon I couldn't suffer being near him!

"But we took turns at guarding well our nest
While the other hunted without rest.
It's hard, hard work to raise a hungry brood,
To supply ourselves and them with food,
While those romantic males, good for love,
Poor husbands and providers often prove,

For all they would pursue is their own pleasure,
And their own happiness is all they treasure,
Loving till the ecstasy is done,
Then looking, looking for another one.

"As my far-roving husband did, and when
He found another willing, virgin hen,
He disappeared, leaving me alone
With eight young chicks to manage on my own!

"Ah, my dear one! Listen to my tale,
And learn to recognize those who will fail
To do what's right once love becomes for life,
And what was once a wench becomes a wife.

"For those who will excite the hottest lust
Are those who vanish quickly when they must
Do their share of drudgery, while they
Who might not women's hearts so quickly sway,
Are likely to make husbands good and true,
Their bonds of glory ever to renew!

"But you cannot imagine my despair
Since you are not a bird. Just see me there
Waiting by my nest for his return,
Waiting, waiting, waiting, just to learn
From a passing friend what he had done,
Nesting somewhere with another one!

"What was I to do? My chicks cried out
With hunger! And as for now I was without
A mate to watch the nest as I found food,
I had to leave my chicks for their own good,
Circling back and forth so I could see

The Mayor's Tale--199

Whether they were safe. But presently
I spied a tasty squirrel on the ground
And dove for him. I could not look around,
But took him in my talons in the air
And turned to see my chicks no longer there!

"Ah!" I screamed. "Oh, no! Please no!" and
dropped
The squirrel to the ground. Time just stopped,
As though the clock were shattered at that hour,
And so would read forever. I flew to scour
The area around my nest and found
Some tell-tale feathers scattered on the ground,
Evidence of massacre, but none
Of my poor babes survived -- not even one!

"Then how the hatred filled me like a fire,
And I flew out to find that wretched liar
Who talked of love undying for his pleasure,
While all he cared about was joy and leisure!

"Days I flew until I found him near
Another female hawk, his latest dear,
The two about to breed another brood
For him to abandon! I could not help intrude!

"Stop!" I cried, 'or it will be too late
To save your chicks from my poor chicks' sad
fate!

This cad abandoned me, as I am sure
He's done to many an innocent and pure
Virgin, who believes his loving lies,
And gives herself to still his plaintive cries.

"He loves himself alone, and females are
But mirrors to his solitary star,
Proof of prowess, proof that he exists,
Something he's not sure of without lists
Of conquests, since his soul is so alone.
Save yourself! His heart is made of stone!"

"Off the female flew, and so he turned,
Oblivious to the hatred he had earned.
'Sorry!' he said. 'I see your jealousy
Has turned your vicious temper against me.
What have I done? Would you have me stay
With you when love is gone? Why, I pray?
You want me to pretend my love for you,
To murmur lovely words that aren't true?"

"I pledge myself to an authentic life,
A value even higher than a wife,
And would for both our sakes be honest, so
What we see will be what we will know.
You should be grateful for my honesty,
So you might also live authentically."

"Our chicks are dead!" I cried. "So much for your
Excuses! Now between us there is war!"
And so we fought until I broke his neck,
And he fell bleeding from the skies, a wreck
That did not touch my sorrow, not at all,
For I felt nothing as I saw him fall.
My grief so swallowed up my victory
That vengeance held no bit of joy for me."

The bird flew back upon her branch and cried
As though all torn to pieces deep inside.

The Mayor's Tale--201

"Please go!" she said to Candace. "Leave me now!
But if you care for me, remember how
I suffered, and avoid my tragic fate!

"And to your fellow females please relate
This tale of perfidy and fatal woe,
That they might in time this harsh truth
 know:

That men whom women lust for love them not.
So do not listen to romantic rot
But look for men who mean the things they say,
And who, though they seem dull, at least will
 stay.

Now go, and do not seek me out tomorrow!
Only death will mitigate my sorrow."

Candace blew the bird a kiss and turned
To leave, taking to heart what she had learned,
Remaining virgin till she was mature
Enough to judge the lure within allure,
And when she married virgin, married well.
That is all – I have no more to tell.

THE FARMER'S TALE

THE FARMER'S PROLOGUE

"Well said!" the farmer cried. "I, too, hate those
Who dress themselves up in romantic clothes
And scheme to steal a girl's virginity,
Then hand her off in shame to men like me!
Real men are husbands, passionate and true,
Who bear the burdens of this life, and who
Are faithful to their vows. Such there be,
As in my tale you will shortly see."

THE FARMER'S TALE

Agesino was a farmer who
Produced fine crops no matter what he grew --
Everything organic, grown by hand.
He was a faithful lover of the land.

Alas! For years he had no other love,
No woman who his eye and heart might move,
For all the men who helped him were, well, men --

The Farmer's Tale--203

This coop was full of roosters, not one hen!

Long he toiled from sunup to sundown,
So many years, eventually he found
Himself near elderly and still alone,
No wife or children, parents long since gone.

And so he looked around to see if any
Women were nearby. There weren't many
In the tiny village near his farm,
And those there were exuded little charm.

He had at last resigned himself to being
Single, given the choices he was seeing,
When a young and lovely woman came
To visit him. Delfina was her name.
She was a student of organic farming,
Anxious to grow food, though without harming
The ecosphere, and tasty food at that!

Agesino saw right off the bat
She was the one for him, but in despair
That such a pretty girl could ever care
For him, he did not even try to talk
Of love. Each morning early they would walk
Through his fields as he showed her how
To shape the land and plant without a plow,
To nurture nature, not to intervene,
But merely with deft hand to set the scene
And then let nature work its wondrous way.

He seemed so wise and loving, in one day
He had won Delfina's heart, so she
Decided to remain indefinitely,

Courting him – he was so shy – until
Both virgin lovers had at last their will.

Within two months they married. Seven more
Brought a son. As though there were a door
To happiness, Agesino walked right through,
Entering an Eden wrought anew,
Where innocence reigned once again supreme,
And life became for him a waking dream.

Delfina for a few years felt the same,
And lived a life unblemished, without blame,
Loving in her husband what she would
See in herself, a person kind and good.

But presently into the garden came
A seductive snake, Alejandro was his name,
A romantic lover, whose memory could not hold
All he had seduced, whose blood ran cold
(Though he could make it hot enough by art),
And whose tongue played music on the heart.

This Alejandro was a hired hand
To help Agesino clear some vacant land
That he had bought just lately from a neighbor
For little more than a pittance and his labor
To turn a junk-strewn thicket to a field
That would in time a healthy harvest yield.

Agesino treated all his hands
As family, making on them no demands
That he did not as well make on himself,
Sharing meals and evenings, that the gulf
Between the men and master, while still there,

The Farmer's Tale--205

Might find a bridge that such a load would bear.

Thus the snake found easy access to
The garden, where he soon began to woo
His victim with whole-hearted admiration,
First with glances, then with sweet oration,
Practiced words that many times had brought
Precisely the dark pleasures that he sought.

For life was joyless, aimless, soul-less, dead
Unless he could pursue some maidenhead
Or undermine the virtue of some wife --
This to him was what brought life to life.

He could not help it, evil though he knew
It was, no more than some drug addict who
Lived only for the rush upon the brain
That eased his constant existential pain.

Delfina, too, was drawn to him of need,
The young wife of an older man, a breed
Much prone to an adulterous desire,
Their husbands meager fuel for such fierce fire.
Soon Alejandro's glances were returned
As both caged animals with passion burned.

And then a note: "You can't be satisfied
With such a husband! I cannot abide
To see you so when I am half insane
To kiss your breasts, or perish of this pain!"

This note he'd used successfully before,
And so he thought he'd try it one time more,
Slipping it to her while passing by,

Which Agesino happened to espy.

Yet to his wife he would say nothing of
What he had seen, trusting in her love.
Time and patience were his usual tools,
For he was tolerant, though not a fool,
And willing to believe eventually
Good would out, if one would let things be,
As nature would take care of human need
With just a bit of stewardship and seed.

Delfina, though, was like dry tinder lit
By Alejandro's words, her normal wit
Consumed by fantasies of ecstasy
In Alejandro's arms. She couldn't see
What was right in front of her, her brain
Full of scenes of love, again, again.

Still, she did not answer him. He wrote
Again, and then again, an urgent note
That gave at last to dreams a time and place
Where they might share the joy of an embrace.

Now she trembled with delight and fear,
Knowing that the reckoning was near,
And she must choose her duty or desire.
She could not bear to live life as a liar,
And yet with hunger she could scarcely stand --
For Alejandro's lips, his tongue, his hand,
His manhood thrusting into her, his burst
Of joy within her! God! He was the first
Who'd turned her from her love of that good
man,
To share whose life had been her only plan.

And so she did the only thing she could,
And bared her heart to him, as well she should.

"My darling Agesino," she began,
"You know well that you're the only man
I've ever been with, nor had I desire
For anyone else. But now a wildfire
Has swept right through me, driven by a wind
From some forsaken place within my mind,
And I have lust for someone else, one who
Has nothing for him but that he is new.

"He's neither good nor kind, nor just nor wise;
In fact, he's just the sort I should despise,
Yet all I do is feel unwanted lust
And fantasize his love because I must.
I cannot sleep or eat or even think.
And now I must confide I'm on the brink
Of going to him. This I'm telling you,
That you, my love, might know of me what's true.
I love you more than ever, please believe
Me! I cannot possibly conceive
Of life without you! That's precisely why
I tell you this -- I would not live a lie."

Agesino took some time for thought,
Dismantled by the truth that she had brought,
For truth it was, of that he had no doubt,
And so he needed time to figure out
What might be the wisest thing to do,
Once his rage and jealousy were through.

He loved Delfina still, and pain apart,

Was grateful she had bared her anguished heart,
For she could easily have cheated him
And secretly enjoyed her lustful sin.
But now that she had told him: What to do?
The ground of life had shifted, now he knew.

"My dear Delfina," he at last replied,
"I am so happy that you haven't lied!
Of course the truth is hard for me to bear,
But in the end, I'd rather be aware
Of what is in your heart than live my life
With someone who's a stranger for my wife.

"I know that I am old and cannot be
The man you need. Please understand you're free
To do what makes you happy. But beware
Of those romantic men who do not care
For those they might seduce, since that might
mean
They could not vanish quickly from the scene,
But might be forced to play the grownup man
By what they feel for someone other than
Themselves. Misogynists all, they play at love,
Loving whom they hate, as time will prove,
Using women for their passing pleasure
And then abandoning them, while those who
treasure
Them must watch with painful indignation
Their lover's naked self-humiliation.

"So do not give yourself unless you're sure
The one who takes you feels a love as pure
As yours, as mine for you has ever been.
This you owe yourself." From his chin

Ran drops of tears streaming from his eyes.

Delfina, too, as you may well surmise,
Wept at these words bitterly, and said:
"My darling husband, would that I were dead
Rather than inflict on you such pain.
I ought not play at life. But I would claim
This chance for ecstasy! This once I must
Seek out the unmarked boundaries of my lust!"

"So go," he answered, "go and do your will,
Knowing that your husband loves you still."

Perhaps there are of you some who would say
No man would send a wife he loved away
To have sex with another. Wait and see!
The outcome will persuade you presently.

Delfina went to meet her lover, but
With half a heart. Her husband's goodness put
Her lust out in the sun, where it would dry,
And in the merciless heat begin to die.
Her heart was full of sorrow for his pain,
And so it was reluctantly she came
To meet her lover at the appointed time,
Repenting her still-uncommitted crime.

"Alejandro," she began when they had kissed,
Holding him back firmly by the wrist,
"There's something I must tell you before we
Begin to take our pleasure. I couldn't be
Myself and live a lie, and so I told
My husband of our plans." Alejandro rolled
His eyes with an incredulous disgust.

"You what?" he said. "You what?" And all his lust
Ran out of him like liquid down a drain.

"I hope you didn't let him know my name!"

"Of course not!" Delfina said. "I wouldn't do
Anything that might cause harm to you."

"What did he say?" Alejandro asked, relieved.

"He thanked me for the truth, and though he
grieved

To hear of my desire, said that he

Would love me still, though I might faithless be."

"The gutless fool!" Alejandro said. "Come here!
Now we can have at it without fear.

With his permission, let us have our way,

And make mad love till sunshine says it's day!

Then send you home to him, the coward who

Could not, even in pain, say what is true:

That he is full of jealousy and rage,

And would, if honest, keep you in a cage,

Or murder you if you step out of line!

But all the milksop does is weep and whine!

"I'll show you what a man is!" And he pulled

Her towards him, by rage, not passion, ruled,

An anger that welled up, he knew not why,

From inner charities he would defy,

That turned against the woman in his arms

And made it spite to decimate her charms.

But she pushed back, now weeping, and then
cried,

"Let me go, please!" as violently he tried

To rip her shirt and bra off, bent on rape,

The Farmer's Tale--211

Knowing that his prey could not escape,
And, guilty as she was, would never scream.

But still she fought, as though in a bad dream,
And wept, and begged for mercy, till his rage,
Too, turned away, and limping left the stage,
Done in by what dead love could come to life
To save the honor of the helpless wife.

"Thank you," she said as he let her go.
"I've wronged us all, all three, as I well know.
But I must ask you, please, to go away.
And since I am the cause that you can't stay,
I'll give you four months' wages, so that you
Might look for work without constraint undue."

"You'll give me money now to disappear?
I don't need your money! Never fear!
I'll go away, all on my own, since I
Need no bribes! But look me in the eye
And say that you don't want me!" So she did,
And for one moment there was nothing hid
Between them, both the evil and the good.

Alejandro shuddered, as he should,
And turned away at last from what he saw:
Himself in her forgiveness -- truth too raw
To let him keep the luster of his lust.

And so my tale ends, as end it must:
Alejandro left; Delfina came
Back to Agesino, all her shame
Washed clean in his acceptance of her whole,
And love not just for body but for soul,

The two as loving after as before.
That's all I have to say -- I'll say no more.

THE SECOND NUN'S TALE

THE SECOND NUN'S PROLOGUE

At this point, though the gambling hadn't ended,
Some gamblers drifted in, in search of friends.
The nun's companion came and soon intended
To tell a tale. "When the farmer ends,
I have one that God's own message sends,"
She whispered to the nun, "Cecilia's tale,
That should touch many a soul, should I prevail."

"But you must wait," the nun said. "There's a list
With just one person still, as I believe."
"That person will give way, if I insist,"
The second nun replied. "You can just leave
It all to me. I know you can't conceive
Of being rude in God's own interest, though
The tale may save some souls, as well you know."

The farmer finished; the bartender then said,
"We have one more to tell a tale, then all

The telling's done, and we may move ahead
To judge or not the best, as is my call."
"But wait!" the second nun said. "A favor small
I have to ask, for those who've come in late.
We, too, might have some tales to relate."

"That may be," the bartender replied.
"But we don't have all night. We could go on
Forever as more gamblers come inside.
So let's just do what we've agreed upon --
One more tale, and then the telling's done.
It's your turn," he concluded, turning to
The buyer. "Now the telling ends with you."

"But wait!" again the nun said. "First let's see
Whether we agree with what you say.
Let's vote instead of acting by decree,
And settle this the democratic way!"
"Here! Here!" some said, just newly come from play,
Not knowing much of what was going on,
But hearing words they all agreed upon.

"OK, OK," the bartender agreed.
"How many wish to hear this woman's tale?"
A lot of hands shot up, so that indeed
It seemed the loud protester would prevail.
"And how many not?" It seemed that side would fail,
Since what had been a group was now a crowd,
Becoming swiftly boisterous and loud.

"Tell your tale and be damned!" he cried,
Then realized that she was a nun and blushed.
"I'm sorry, Sister," he apologized,
Seeing that the bar was suddenly hushed.

The Second Nun's Tale--215

The second nun just glared, her enemy crushed.
"I'll tell my tale now," she then intoned.
The bartender sat down again and groaned.

THE SECOND NUN'S TALE

This tale is true. It happened to a friend,
A nun, Cecilia, named for that dear saint
Who died for Christ a martyr, and whose end
Was so bloodstained, it used to make me faint,
Though she endured it all without complaint.
My friend was named for her, born on her day,
And so she died in that same saintly way.

In a Muslim country she served Christ,
A nurse among the poorest of the poor,
Nor was one Muslim in her care enticed
By word or deed to feel a faith less pure,
But all her work was to the body cure
And leave the soul to worship as it would.
She touched their hearts only by being good.

For fifteen years she toiled thus, through wars
That came and went like thunderstorms, while she
Treated all alike, and shared her stores
With all who hungered, giving equally
To all sides. None more giving could there be!
She was loved by all whom she had served
Those many years – a love she well deserved!

In time, however, though not by her desire,
A few whom she had helped came to believe,
Drawn like moths to her internal fire,
That faith in Christ would all their sins relieve,

And so they hungered for that sweet reprieve.
They begged her to be baptized, and confess
Their sins, that they the true faith might profess.

This she refused awhile, knowing well
The penalty was death for all who strayed
From Islam to another faith. Her cell,
Containing but her cot and cross would fade
As in distress she to her Savior prayed.
"Dear Lord," she said, "please guide me in this
choice!
My way is crooked. Let me hear Your voice!"

It tore her heart to think that souls that would
Be saved must be by Christians turned away.
All she meant in life was to do good,
Yet here the good and bad on both sides lay.
For if this were found out, crazed men would slay
Converts and converters both, while all
The missions in that country soon would fall.

She thought of Saint Cecelia, her namesake,
And knew for her the choice would be quite clear.
Life was little with a soul at stake,
And death for Christ was something she held dear,
Rejoicing as her martyrdom came near.
But now the Church was waffling on the claim
That none could be redeemed but in Christ's name.

Cecelia had been sent with orders strict
Not to proselytize, but only to
Do good to all, and warned not to be tricked
By spies into conversions she would rue,
And would impugn the good that she might do.

The Second Nun's Tale--217

Cecelia prayed to Christ all through the night.
Near dawn He spoke and bathed her in His light.

The next day she told those who wished to be
Christians of what Christ had said to her:
That if they prayed to Allah fervently
And were good Muslims, He would not deter
Their entry into Heaven, but it would stir
His heart with love for them, just as it would
For all who loved God and in life did good.

For God loved all who loved Him and had faith
That they would find salvation in His heart,
And even those who thought He was a wraith
And in the life of spirit took no part,
All were loved and could be saved. The art
Of love of God had many signs, she said,
And Christ would know them when He waked the
dead.

These Muslims then were satisfied that they
Were saved by Christ though they were Muslims
still,
And to both Christ and Allah they would pray,
Knowing that through both they did God's will,
So long as they did not do others ill.
They would be Christians, but they understood
This compromise would be for their own good.

Years passed, the wars grew worse, until there came
An army of the purest of the pure,
Who said they did jihad in Allah's name
And of the Truth were absolutely sure.
They had for all life's ills the only cure,

Devoted to the triumph of Islam
When all the world would live by the Koran.

Hating Christians, they set out to find
A villager who might betray the nun,
Saying she and others of her kind
Had proselytized among them. But no one
Would bear false witness against her, or would shun
Her hospital until one child, enticed
By candy, said his parents prayed to Christ.

Ah, then! Through torture and the threat of death,
These parents did eventually give way,
Naming all who would, under their breath,
To Christ their Lord as well as Allah pray,
And so did all that little band betray,
Who soon were rounded up and tortured, too,
Till all did just as they were told to do.

Cecelia often spoke of Christ, they said,
And openly disparaged the Koran,
Told how Christ would come to wake the dead
And save those who believed in him, but ban
All Muslims from his heaven. Not one man
Or woman could be saved but through Christ's love,
Which she would often from her Bible prove.

Nor did their lies end there, but they averred,
Hoping their tormentors thus to please,
That she made them repeat what they had heard
And pray before the cross upon their knees
Before a nurse would tend to their disease
Or dress their wounds. Nor would she give them
bread

Till they affirmed that Christ rose from the dead.

Thus the jihadists got what they might need
To prove Cecelia tried to proselytize,
With testimony false that soon would feed
A frenzy in the country round. The lies
Became the truth, as those who long had ties
To Christians quickly severed them from fear,
And no one to Cecelia would come near.

Then out of Hell they came, these infidels,
To seize Cecelia, rape and torture her,
Face her with her followers in their cells
As they affirmed what never did occur,
And said they'd been abused, as well they were.
She looked straight into her accusers' eyes,
Burning through both innocence and lies.

"God forgive you!" she said to them, "as I
Forgive you and will pray for you. Your sin
Will be washed clean by love, and by and by
We'll meet in Heaven, spiritual kin
Joined by faith in God and love within.
For the Father and the Son I gladly die,
And here and now forgive you for your lie."

At this they wept, and some tried to recant,
But they were quickly slain upon the spot.
A few, possessed by fear, began to rant
Against the nun, repeating what was not,
And cursed her that they might improve their lot.
But when their captors said that they must spit
Into her face, they could not stomach it.

So they as well were slain, and then the nun
Was dragged before a camera and once more
Asked if she'd converted anyone,
Which she again denied. Forced to the floor,
She said she now knew what her life was for,
And thanked God for the chance, a piece of dust,
To die for Him, as now she knew she must.

She asked God to forgive those who had raped
And tortured her, and those who even now
Prepared her for beheading, as they draped
A hood over her head, and had her bow
Down to them, and like a willing cow
Stretch her neck that they might easily
Find the place where they might set her free.

"Forgive them," then she prayed, just as the knife
Entered her thin neck with a great stroke.
But instead of taking her poor life,
As though it found a rod of steel, it broke,
Its shattered pieces hot and veiled in smoke.
"Allah be merciful!" they cried in fear,
Leaping away, afraid of coming near.

Cecelia bled profusely from her neck,
Lying on the ground in shock and pain.
She used her shirt to keep the blood in check,
Pressing hard upon the open vein
Until she could somehow advantage gain.
Eventually, the bleeding slowed. She lay
There unattended, and began to pray.

"Dear Lord," she said. "I do not know what You
Intended by this miracle, but please

The Second Nun's Tale--221

Give me strength that somehow I might do
Your will." And then she got up on her knees
Slowly, and by delicate degrees.
Seeing which, her torturers soon fled,
Not knowing if she was alive or dead.

The camera was still rolling as she knelt
In front of it, as if to it she prayed,
And when she raised her head, the bloody welt
On both sides of her neck was well displayed,
Deep chasm into which a mouse might wade.
Next door three jihadists watched the screen
Rapt with wonder at what they had seen.

"Forgive them, Lord," she pleaded once again.
"They know not what they do. Perhaps someday
All people will know love, and in Your name
Be good to one another. This I pray."
And then she died, and out of camera lay.
The three jihadists watching were amazed
At the miracle on which they gazed.

They came into the room as to a shrine,
As did the shepherds on a Christmas night,
Looking on what happened as a sign
Of something that did all their deeds indict,
Something more than which belief was right.
And then they prayed as Muslims pray, but to
A God the nun Cecelia also knew.

THE LAB TECH'S TALE

THE LAB TECH'S PROLOGUE

There was silence when the tale was done,
Nor was there much desire in anyone
To speak or offer up another tale.

Hoping that this time he might prevail,
The bartender said, "Now we should move on
Before the vast majority are gone,
And end this game. It's getting rather late --"

But once again someone shouted, "Wait!
I have a tale that I would like to tell,
And I have been assured I tell it well.
It's about a --" "Please! We've had enough!"
The bartender implored. "All this new stuff --"
"A vote! A vote!" immediately was heard
From those who'd no idea what had occurred,
But had from gambling recently come in,
And, restless, wanted something to begin.

"Just tell your tale!" the bartender, disgusted,
Shouted out. A tall young man adjusted
His pants and tucked his shirt, then stepped right
up
Before the crowd and raised an empty cup.

"Water!" he shouted. "Water! I need some water!"
The bartender then filled it. "Now a quarter!"
He held his hand out, swung it left and right.
"Come on, come on, now we don't have all
night!"

Someone put a quarter in his hand.
He plopped it in the cup. "Now I had planned
To make a million dollars down below,
Gambling. But as sadly we all know,
The odds are all against us. But suppose ..."
And here he put a finger to his nose,
"Suppose, as with the alchemists of old,
I could turn this quarter into gold?"

Silence, as he paused theatrically.
"Of course I can't," he said. "But seriously,
A modern version of the ancient scam
Exists, as I will tell you if I can.

"I worked for what would be an alchemist
Searching for the secret catalyst
That would turn water into energy
Without one bit of input. As you'll see,
You simply put two wires in a cup
And to some sort of meter hook them up.
One is copper, the other one is zinc --

Oh, yes! It's quite as simple as you think!

"This water then becomes a battery
That runs any device you want for free.
Two cups will run exactly double, four
Will increase your output that much more.
Ten will run your house, ten thousand will
Run a warehouse, factory, or mill."
"Really?" someone said. The audience laughed.

"Please!" the lab tech said. "He isn't daft.
Getting energy from water is
Done already by electrolysis.
The only problem is that you get out
Less energy than you put in. No doubt,
The equivalent of alchemy right now
Is getting more than you put in. And how
My boss did this is the subject of my tale,
After which the trick will be on sale."

THE LAB TECH'S TALE

Once there was a scientist who dreamed
Of saving the world. When he was young, it
 seemed
Quite possible to find the perfect cure
For poverty and hunger. He was sure
The answer lay in finding energy
That would be safe, clean, plentiful, and free,
The engineering simple – just a kit
That anyone could use. He thought of it
As a child in school where he had learned
That water was made of fuel that could be burned

The Lab Tech's Tale--225

And oxygen, that all such fuels require.
My God! he thought. Then water's frozen fire!

And from that moment he became obsessed
With what he dreamed that H₂O possessed:
A genie in an ordinary glass
Whose liberation he would bring to pass.

He fantasized that like a monk he would
Devote his every moment to The Good,
Living sparely, even after he
Had made his Nobel-Prize discovery,
Using his vast fortune to supply
Kits to all who could not such things buy,
Until each rural factory and farm,
School, house, office, hospital and barn
Hummed with power, absolutely free.

This was what he dreamed his life would be.
And so it was, at least the part before
He made his great discovery. The more
He slaved and sacrificed, the more he would
Ignore himself to serve the greater good,
Eating little, living in a room
Resembling a tiny, airless tomb,
One set of clothes to wear while one would dry,
No family, lovers, friends, no gifts to buy,
Just work, work, work, to find the alchemy
That would turn water into energy.

Of course this had been done, but with one lack:
One put more power in than one got back.
The current one would need to separate
The H₂ from the O was far too great.

But this did not deter our scientist,
Convinced the problem was the catalyst
Required to produce a current strong
Enough to move the process right along.
And so for years, decades, he tried many
Minerals and alloys, but not any
Seemed to be of measurable use.

One day while reading a typically abstruse
Article on ionizing water
And twiddling absent-mindedly a quarter
Between his left forefinger and his thumb,
Wondering whether he was simply dumb
Or the author of the article an ass,
He dropped the quarter into a small glass
Of water recently electrolyzed.

About to rescue it, he realized
He might have left the current on, and checked
The voltmeter, whose filthy face was flecked
With grime from years of dust, grease, oil, and
sweat.

Twelve volts, it seemed to read. Too much to get
The quarter from the glass. And so he turned
To switch off the transformer before he burned
His fingers diving down to save the quarter
Drowning in the glass of salty water.

But wait a minute! The transformer wasn't on!
Where was the current coming from? Upon
His heart there lay an ingot of pure gold
Preventing it from beating. He turned cold,
Icy, trembling, too afraid to touch

The Lab Tech's Tale--227

The voltmeter, the transformer, the glass – too
much
Shot through him in that instant to contain,
His ecstasy indistinguishable from pain --
For where had those volts come from but from
water
Catalyzed by his rambunctious quarter?

My God! My God! My God! he kept repeating,
Unaware his heart was hardly beating.
I've done it! But how? And what precisely were
The steps that made this miracle occur?

Quickly he scribbled notes upon the page
That earlier elicited his rage:
Proportions of the salts in distilled water,
The nickel-to-copper ratio in the quarter,
The distance between the copper lead-in wire
And the zinc wire leading out. He was on fire!
He scarcely was aware what he was writing.
Would he – should he – dare another sighting?

He leaned over towards the voltmeter and saw
Again twelve volts. Thank God! He looked once
more.

Twelve volts again! It was, it was, it was true!
His mind leaped towards what he had to do:
Replicate it first, and then again.
Then vary salts and volumes, noting when
It stopped, the electrolysis complete.
And then a thousand times repeat, repeat.

And then, before pursuing publication,
He'd submit a patent application.

Millions, tens of billions this was worth!
Not to speak of freeing the whole Earth
And all its beings from their slavery
To filthy, hot-house, high-cost energy.

Just three years later, or no more than four,
A shorter time than ever seen before,
In consideration of his age
And that his great discovery set the stage
For universal wealth and equity,
Peace, health, freedom, joy, and dignity,
A Stockholm audience would turn its eyes
On him, the winner of a Nobel Prize!

He fantasized his speech, which would be short,
But would touch lightly on the things it ought:
Like all those years of selfless sacrifice,
Of loneliness, a life not very nice,
But, yes, sublime in aim and quiet passion,
And rich in ways unknown to flesh and fashion.

Of course the breakthrough was an accident
(Describing in some detail the event),
But one that happened at a place and time
Where there was someone ready to refine
It into science, replicable and sure,
His method painstaking, his purpose pure ...

By this time he had put himself to sleep,
Exhausted by his unexpected leap
Into greatness, wealth, and recognition.

Morning found him in the same position,
Having barely moved for many hours,

The Lab Tech's Tale--229

Dreaming of bouquets of fancy flowers
Sent to honor some success or death,
He wasn't sure which one. He tried his breath,
Relieved to find it working, so it seemed.

Then some success. But what? He sensed he
dreamed

Of some discovery, a sudden breakthrough
That – wait! -- now he scrambled over to
His voltmeter to see what it might read,
Remembering all, believing nothing, greed
Gripping him for the first time like a pair
Of pliers, pulling him near panic by his hair.

It's mine! he thought. But there it was - it wasn't --
Just what he might hope it does, it doesn't --
The meter was at zero, but he saw
The same dark spot of grease he'd seen before
Spotched across the twelve. Oh, God! So that
Was it? No Nobel Prize? No billions? Nor at
The age of seventy-three a chance to win?

As though his disappointment were a pin,
And all those years a balloon that kept on filling,
He burst right there, just burst, no longer willing
To follow his obsession any longer.
A wasted life! The sense of that grew stronger,
Grew into anger, into determination
To salvage something from this brute frustration.

Thus idealists turn their cherished dreams,
Corrupted, into calculated schemes.
If he could not get energy from water
Catalyzed by what was in a quarter,

He yet could get some greedy fools to think
That what they saw was real, and so to sink
Some money into it, so as to be
In on this new source of energy.

Yes, that was it! Then all was not yet wasted!
Once the sweet ambrosia has been tasted,
It isn't easy to relinquish it.
And so our scientist used all the wit,
So long and fruitlessly on good expended,
At last to serve himself. It all depended
On some reliable source of energy,
So well concealed no prying eyes could see,
And then the pretense that things must be kept
Absolutely secret. The whole plan leapt
Into his mind at once – the invitations
Marked “Top Secret,” the mini-free vacations
In posh resorts, the secret, closed-door sessions
At which the pitch was made, the morning
 lessons
In chemistry and physics, then finance
Seasoned with the flavors of romance,
And in the afternoon aggressive closers
Going after prospects like bulldozers!

He needed an immoral electrician,
Part techno-geek, part bona fide magician,
Who could rig up the apparatus so
The mini-solar battery would not show.
You know he'd hire the first poor slob he'd see,
Who, as it happened, turned out to be me.

What happened next is better left unsaid.
The scientist – unnamed – alive or dead --

The Lab Tech's Tale--231

Managed to make millions from his scheme
And so fulfilled a portion of his dream,
The portion that he could. The other part
Was far beyond ability or art,
An alchemy much like the one of old,
Which tried to turn base metals into gold.

But you can fool your friends with this small kit,
Just as we did our investors. Wit
Combined with shameless chutzpah will ensure
Success in life as long as you're not pure
And undermine yourself. The causes of
One's woe are ever honesty and love.

Just \$15 each! A buy! A steal!
And all your friends will swear that it is real!
Come one, come all! I have only a few!
Hurry, or there'll be none left for you!

THE BUYER'S TALE

THE BUYER'S PROLOGUE

The lab tech quickly was surrounded by
A crowd of would-be shoppers, which was why
The bartender shouted, "Buyer! Tell your tale!
And at the end we'll share a glass of ale,
Since we will be the last ones listening."

His large, round face and chin were glistening
With sweat; his appetite for tales was gone.
Besides, a few loud gamblers who had won
Were at the bar demanding drinks, and so
The bartender was right then on the go.

The buyer looked around to see if any
Would listen to her tale. There weren't many
Of us left, although a few came round
A little table at the rear, and found
Good company enough to listen to
This final tale that I shall tell to you.

THE BUYER'S TALE

I knew a salesman once who had a wife
He doted on, the one thing in his life
He cared about, he was so much in love --
Too much, in fact, as I shall shortly prove.

For life is often less than one might hope,
And love serves fate as just the sort of rope
One needs to hang oneself. This wife of his
Was nothing much to see, as often is
The case with such obsessions, being he
Was just as unattractive as was she.

But he was grateful for her, his best friend,
Who would, he hoped, be with him to the end,
His lover, helper, sharer of his life,
All he ever wanted in a wife.

And she loved him – at least to him it seemed --
And did for him all he'd ever dreamed
With gusto and with relish in their play,
And pleased him in every possible way.

She was a generous person, gentle, kind,
Good-natured, courteous, funny, quick of mind.
It made him happy just to think of her,
But when he saw her, he was happier.

Unfortunately, he often had to go
To visit customers whom he would show
The latest line of goods. While away,
He missed his sweetie terribly each day,
Thinking of her near incessantly,

Wondering each moment where she'd be,
Though not one bit afraid she might be cheating.

First, he thought such thoughts were self-
defeating,
Destroying what was beautiful in life,
The love and trust between a man and wife.
Second, his wife was good and pure of heart,
Incapable of playing such a part.

And third, he knew that most men found her
ugly,
Even as he found her soft and snugly,
Which was a blessing since he knew it meant
That she would tempt but few to the attempt.

So he rested easy in his love,
Being, as he was, as certain of
Her honesty as he was of his.
But one can never be certain of what is.

One day while he was raking leaves, his neighbor
Invited him to break off from his labor
And have a cup of coffee, which he did.

After fiddling with the sugar lid
While talking about nothing, his neighbor said,
"For quite some while I have had to tread
Uncomfortably on treacherous ground with you.
I can't keep silent forever. For what is true
Is like a fire that will eventually
Burn through all walls. And so it is with me.

"For several years now when you went away
A man would visit sometime during the day --"

The Buyer's Tale--235

"My house?" "Yes, your house, for several
hours --"

"Perhaps he was a repairman." "Bringing flowers?"

"Flowers? Then perhaps he was a florist!

I sent her flowers regularly!" "He kissed

Her at the door, many times." "He did?"

His neighbor nodded, fiddling with the lid.

"The same one?" "Yes," his neighbor said. "The
same."

"Did you by any chance find out his name?"

"No," his neighbor said. "Nor could I tell

You much about him, not seeing him too well

Through these curtains. I know that he was

fat

And squat and had a bald spot just like that."

He pointed to the back of the salesman's head.

"Are you sure it wasn't me?" the salesman said.

"Afraid not," said his neighbor. "But for years

I've kept this to myself because of fears

That I might be intruding where I shouldn't.

But seeing you so happy, I just couldn't

Bear to hold the truth in any longer,

Not at all afraid that I would wrong her,

Having seen so much so long a time,

But that I would wrong you, a far worse crime.

Ignorance is bliss, as is often said."

The salesman then wished that he was dead,

For dying was far preferable to this.

All he could see was that quick doorway kiss,

Again and again and again, as though a knife

Were twisted in him, sparing him his life

That he might be dismembered on and on.

All he wanted now was to be gone
Where he could gather up his scattered soul,
And so with that one uncontested goal
He thanked his neighbor for the information,
Assuring him of his strong approbation
For the choice of telling what he knew.

And then he staggered out into a new
World with neither happiness nor hope,
Without a thought or clue how he might cope
With living all alone with his despair.
Oh how he wished his loving wife were there!
But she was gone, gone, gone, and in her place
Was someone strange with a familiar face.

Of course he told her of the accusation,
And she admitted to her fornication,
Telling him she loved him very much
But long ago lost pleasure in his touch,
Not having an orgasm all those years
Except with her new lover. So in tears
The two divorced. The wife remarried soon
Her lover of the occasional afternoon
And went on happily with married bliss.

The salesman, however, long would miss
His former happiness, although the pain
Over years would leave and come again
A little duller, duller, till it died
Along with what of love was left inside.

Ah, me! he thought. What good did knowing do?
Happiness, I should have chosen you!
I should have held my ears and closed my eyes!

The Buyer's Tale--237

I should have hated truth and valued lies!

What good is truth, that ever ruins joy,
And all that one might cherish would destroy
With knowledge cold and vicious, hard as stone.
For those who know must ever be alone!
I wish, I wish, I wish I never knew!
And so he lived and died, as many do.

THE SHIP CHAPLAIN'S TALE

THE SHIP CHAPLAIN'S PROLOGUE

By the time the buyer was finished, just she and I
Were left at the table. And feeling rather dry,
I called to the bartender to bring two gins,
With which, I joked, to wash away our sins.

"We're closed," he said. "You'll have to leave
unshriven."

And in a moment we were being driven
Out of there. "Just a minute!" I cried.

"Weren't you the judge?" But he replied,
"The host in Chaucer never said whose tale
Was best. So why should I? Besides, I fail
To remember many told among the first,
Nor could I tell you which was best or worst.
And anyway, it's time to go to bed."

"But Chaucer added one more tale," I said,
"Ending his great masterwork in prose,
A sermon that would make a preacher doze."

The Ship Chaplain's Tale--239

"Well, here's the chaplain coming by the door,"
The bartender replied. "One tale more
Won't matter much. So please, come on back in.
We'll ask him for a colloquy on sin."
"And wash it down with gin!" I quickly said.
"With gin!" he agreed. "And then it's off to bed."

The buyer said she was tired and went below
To join her lover. The chaplain agreed to go
Along with our little Chaucer imitation
And give a theological oration
On the seven deadly sins as we all three
Sat round the table drinking happily,
I and the bartender gin, the chaplain port,
Preaching as requested for our sport.

THE SHIP CHAPLAIN'S TALE

In Chaucer's time, the Seven Deadly Sins were deadly because if you were guilty of them and not confessed and forgiven, you would be condemned to eternal death, meaning Hell. Other sins might require you to spend some time in Purgatory, but for these sins there was no expiation.

In our time, the Seven Deadly Sins are what make society function. Take a look at any ad campaign. What does it play upon? Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Envy. We attempt to profit from any possible human weakness. We prey upon addictive behavior. We encourage Sloth. We stoke Wrath. Just listen to any radio talk show. If we want to sell products that happen to be good for people, we tell them that they can be gluttons without worrying about it.

What are the largest and most profitable businesses in our society? Sex. Gambling. Addictive drugs, legal and illegal. The perfect products. They ensure their continued demand.

The deadliest sin of all, the kingpin of deadly sins, is Pride. If you did a poll, I would guess that 99% of all people polled would say that pride is a good thing. Most people would be shocked to think of it as a sin. The notion that anything at all should be more important to you than you is foreign to our thinking.

But as any addict knows, that sin is the source of all the others. You've got to be humble to know that you are sinful by nature, and that the only way you can rescue yourself from sin is to reach out for help. But how many people in our society know they need help?

So if you don't believe in Heaven or Hell or any sort of afterlife, why are these sins? Some of them, we can agree, are obviously self-destructive. Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, and Wrath come to mind. And Envy is no fun, so it, too, is self-punishing. But what about Greed? What's wrong with that? Without Greed, how would our capitalist system work? Who would invest? How would anything get done?

Greed and Pride are the two main sticking points when you talk about sin in modern society. They don't hurt people. They help people. They're necessary. Why should they be considered sins?

The only answer has to be within. They are self-punishing spiritually. What you lose is beauty, a richer sense of self within the whole, connection, relationship, love.

Love, most of all. The loss is no less incalculable

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for not being apparent. You don't know what you're missing if you never feel it.

Not that people in Chaucer's time were any less sinful than we are. Far from it. But they had a framework into which sin fit. Chaucer's pilgrims were on their way to Canterbury to beg forgiveness for their sins. That was the frame for his collection of tales. And for their lives. People were sinful, but they were also pilgrims. They could be saved and granted eternal life. They were loved. Each one was a precious eternal soul in the eyes of God, Who suffered personally on the cross to save them.

We're on a cruise to nowhere. That's the frame for this collection of tales. We are sinful but there's no salvation. There's no God, no forgiveness, no love. We're on our own.

In a few hours, it will be daylight and we'll be ready to turn around, having gone nowhere, seen nothing, just existed a bit longer in the midst of meaningless emptiness.

If there's going to be love, it's going to have to come from us. If each soul is going to be precious, it's going to have to be precious to us. If there is going to be any salvation, we are going to have to help save one another.

And if that's the sin of Pride, well, we have no choice. But the new sin of Pride has to be the sin of thinking we can be who we are alone. That we are not responsible for one another. That goodness can be purely individual. That love can be limited.

We have no choice but to believe that we can help one another be better.

I leave you with that hope.

Goodnight.

THE AUTHOR'S RETRACTION

You who have read these tales, all or in part, if there was anything that pleased you, I ask you to remember that their true author is Chaucer, whose imagination and wit are what invigorate them, while I have merely given them modern settings, making whatever changes might have been necessary to place them believably in our times. I have ridden on the great man's shoulders, and it is my hope that you have enjoyed the ride as much as I have.

If there was anything that displeased or offended you, I ask that you attribute it to a defect of my skill, and not of my will. For though I have neither Chaucer's talent nor his art, I did my best to convey just a hint of both to you, and insofar as I might have failed, the fault is entirely mine, and is in no way Chaucer's, whose masterpiece I commend to you, if you have not read it already.

And if there was anything that bored you, I hereby disown it entirely, as in the Hebrew prayer that disowns all leavening that was inadvertently missed in

the Passover spring cleaning. For had I seen it, I would certainly have burned it before the sacred hours of your reading began.

As the bartender says in the General Prologue, a tale may be “beautiful or base,/ Long or short, with farce or fancy full,/ Just as long as it is never dull.” I hereby disown, retract, and apologize for anything you might have found dull, my only consolation being that you were free to skip over it. Hopefully, there were also passages that touched your mind, your funny bone, or your heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Gordon, a poet and retired as an English professor at New Jersey City University, holds a Ph.D. in English and American Literature from Stanford University and a B.A. in English from Queens College of the City University of New York.

His poetry and fiction can be found at his Web site, Poems for Free, at <http://www.poemsforfree.com/>.