

THE PHOBIA CLINIC

by

David Ives

All Rights Reserved

for Martha

donna beata e bella

all love

PART ONE

The Damascus

Another time in a lowering and sad evening, being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet, a certain want and horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and silence of the place dissatisfied me; its wideness terrified me; from the utmost ends of the earth fears surrounded me. How did I know but dangers might suddenly arise from the East and invade me from the unknown regions beyond the seas? I was a weak and little child, and had forgotten there was a man alive in the earth.

Thomas Traherne
Centuries of Meditation

i.

Midway through summer, I began to be
Afraid. At first the fear was nothing. Squirms
Of something like disgust. Anxiety

Each day toward sunset. Writhing, scalding worms
Of panic in the subway, choked unease
While walking in the street. Floors felt unfirm,

Sidewalks unsteady, windows caused a quease.
All autumn I felt edgy, morbid, tense,
As fear infected me like some disease,

My prickling nerves a charged electric fence,
My heart too fast, palms sweaty. Strings of shocks
Replaced each day's pedestrian events.

Come twilight I would triple-chain the locks
But pounding terror knocked till dawn. Far worse
Than night was naked daylight, which I clocked

As nervous fliers, clutching book or purse,
Descend the endless jetway to their plane
Then strap themselves into their idling hearse.

The world or I or both seemed gone insane
As blameless objects turned to cunning traitors
And teeming visions paralyzed my brain:

Apocalyptic jaws as escalators,
Snapped wires, enforced detention, getting trapped -
Specters that obviated elevators

And made me limp up long stairs, handicapped
By apprehension. Dreading shut-in spaces,
I shunned large stores and shops, or fled them, sapped,

Yet threaded open boulevards like mazes.
In late December I dropped job and friends
As inner darkness waxed in lunar phases

Till every day was night, all ways dead ends.
Then: Easter eve I walked out on the Bridge
To put a final stop to fear. To cleanse

The world of Me. As tiny as a midge
Glued to some spider's massive, gleaming net,
I stood there shivering as in some frigid

Nor'easter. Scenery off a postcard met
My eyes as sunset gilt the great steel spires,
Our national shelf of high-prized statuettes.

Yet I saw nothing out there to admire.
I wished them gone beneath night's lowering lid,
Extinguished by apocalyptic fire.

From my panopticon, the Bridge's grid,
I studied the grim water, which to me
Seemed racing toward extinction, to be hid

In ocean, swallowed up and turned to sea.
Why. Why go on. The words rang like a shout.
Death rapped my chest like opportunity.

I climbed the rail. And then the lights went out.

*

ii.

I woke in silence and darkness, alone,
The dark so dark that it defined *Without*,

The silence like the silence in a stone.
I sensed that I was naked, on my face,
But what I lay on lay in doubt. Stretched prone,

I scrabbled with my hands, yet found no trace
Of bed, or ground, or mattress. *Nothing there*.
Suspended in a void, in empty space,

Like a magician's victim in the air,
I tried to turn, roll over and sit up,
But managed -- nothing. Some arrest, some snare

Restrained me like a fence. Panicked, fed up,
I struggled, flailed, strained, heaved, to no avail.
Some presence held me fast in its soft cup,

From head to footsoles fixed in some fine jail
Too subtle for my senses. Was I dead?
Paralyzed? Had I tumbled from the rail?

"Hello," I called, or tried to call. Instead:
Said nothing. Shouting louder than before,
"*Is someone there?*" -- I heard it in my head

But that was all. Outside my inner core
My mouth was mute. "*WILL SOMEONE HELP?*" I shrieked
In silence that was absolute, my roar

A figment, a mirage. My panic peaked
(Or so I thought) on finding that some gag
Had locked my lips so taut that nothing leaked

From me but air. I trawled for any rag
Of breath, the antiseptic atmosphere
Scalding my nostrils. Thus barraged, I sagged,

Defeated, too fatigued to persevere.
Then -- something changed. I heard an engine whirring,
A throb like some great heart, a souvenir

Of life. I gleaned a shift, felt something stir.
Then I began to move - or be moved, twitch
By subtle twitch. I felt my blood go blurring

Down towards my feet, as if to prove the pitch
At which I hung was changing. Tight cocooned,
A feeble chrysalis, I sensed the switch

Rather than knew it, through a gentle swoon
As if I were in motion, a faint breeze
As I was spirited. The velvet spoon

That cupped me rotated ninety degrees
Till I was vertical, though still without
Support, my feet on some unfelt trapeze

Within that endless cavern, that redoubt
Of utter nothingness. Then with a *click*
Behind the scenes somewhere, full silence sprouts

Again, and blackness settled even thicker,
A darkness minus even the tiniest seam
That swaddled round me like a velvet slicker.

And then a voice spoke, and I tried to scream.

*

iii.

"*ARE YOU AFRAID?*" the voice boomed from the dark,
Baritone, echoing, accented, male,
The noise so unexpected, and so stark,

Reflexively I lost control and, quailing
Within my unseen bonds, I felt hot piss
And shit pour down my legs, and then inhaled

Their stench, which rose and sickened me. "*YOU SISSY,*"
That booming voice now roared with clear sadistic
Glee. "*WHAT, ARE YOU SCARED, MAN?*" the voice hissed

And still I soiled myself from atavistic
Dread. Spasms rocked me, and I screamed against
My gag but made no head. An almost mystic

Void cored me, hollowed me, enflamed and fenced me
The while I emptied myself, heard my foul
Shit splatter somewhere in the dark. I sensed

Myself as never sensed before, and howled
Within me even as I was erased.
I was a child again, that dark the cowl

Of ignorance. And so, as if disgraced,
I hung in darkness, shivering, afloat.
That foreign voice continued its abasements.

"*I COME IN THERE, I RAPE YOU! CUT YOUR THROAT!*"
I cringed as, suddenly, hot hissing jets
Of water blasted me. The shrill, remote

Barrage almost drowned out those epithets
While I inside my phantom harness jerked
And jactitated in my oubliette

Beneath the twin assault of that berserk
Tormentor and this deluge. Soon I slumped
Again and let the water do its work.

Those warm cascading streams washed off the clumps
Of excrement, laved stinging piss, and bathed
My brow. The filth went bubbling down some dump

Or drain somewhere below me, in soiled swathes
I somehow pictured to myself with vivid
Clarity. So I hung, as on a lathe,

Available to any, riveted,
As on a cross, to Me. And then they ceased -
The jets of water stopped, and that loud livid

Voice, as if one. The darkness, a black yeast,
Appeared to swell beneath the sudden stillness,
While silence, reinstated, seemed increased.

Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop. With all the shrillness
Of sirens, separate drops fell on some stone,
Some steel, some drain, somewhere. I felt the chill

Of naked skin, but not for long. A moan
From some machine was heard, at which mild breaths
Of heated air washed on me from the zone

Beyond the dark. I smelled faint scents of meths,
Or something like them in that warming wind.
Dry smell of hospitals. Of morgues. Of deaths.

And I despaired. The zephyrs stopped their sighing din.
And then the dark hinged open on a bright
And blinding doorway, and someone walked in.

*

iv.

The upright rectangle of dazzling light
Enframed a woman's silhouette. The gate
Then angled shut once more, restoring night.

That woman's image, printed on the plate
Of dark, reversed and left an optic ghost
To sizzle, dance, and then disintegrate.

A room materialized. With it, my host,
Twisting a rheostat. The riddle of
My cave was solved. A sacrificial roast,

I hung suspended in the middle of
A mirrored cube, perhaps eighteen feet square.
Those looking-glasses obscured little of

The chamber. Dangling naked in mid-air
I saw, receding to infinity,
Myself in multiple, a shrinking stair.

Whole universes seemed vicinity
In that small space. The floor was matte gray stone.
Two yards beneath my feet, a trinity

Of metal drains, still gurgling damply, shone.
The shock, though, was myself. I hung aloft
Depending from a veritable cyclone

Of strings. My body was crisscrossed with soft,
Black, leatherlike, in-locking straps whose X's
Upheld me in a net not to be doffed

By any visible release, their nexus
Completely imperceptible to touch,
And rhyming in their multiple complexes

My body's own splayed X. If I so much
As twitched, or coughed, like a self-tightening knot
The whole thing tensed to keep me in its clutch.

My head was also fixed in this garotte,
Leaving my mouth and eyes alone still free.
My member dangled through the diamond slot

Between my thighs. Perhaps most shockingly,
A rubber plug created a black O,
A silent, stoppered scream, where there should be

My mouth. Thus, like some puppet out of Poe,
Trussed up for slaughter in my webbed, full-body
Domino, I throbbed, heartlike, as my foe

Advanced on me across the gray stone quads.
A regal woman of a certain age,
She ticked a rhythm out, for she was shod

In steep stilettos that made hard to gauge
Her actual height. August, imperious,
She looked to be gigantic from the cage

Of straps I hung from. A mysterious
Smile played about her lush, no-nonsense lips
Which, bee-stung scarlet, lacked the serious

Expression of her eyes. Two licorice tips -
A stethoscope - ensnaked her neck. A staid
Halo of taut gray hair almost eclipsed

The scene beyond her with its height. Arrayed
In a white labcoat starched as stiff as steel,
She seemed as private as a lowered shade.

Then, stopping before me, she unsealed
Her lips into a grin of dark intent.
"So tell me," she inquired; "how do you feel?"

★

v.

She asked as if I were not hanging pent
 Inside that fishnet noose, as if my mouth
 Were free to answer. Meanwhile her gaze went

The length of me, as if appraising, south
 Where unfelt stirrups underpropped my soles
 Then, calmly, north into my eyes. A drought

Had parched my throat. "Some water?" she asked drolly.
 Immediately she barked out, upwards: "*Down.*"
 The harp of wires above me hummed, unrolling

And lowering me until our matching frowns
 Were nearly level and my feet one inch
 Above the floor. Beyond her lacquered crown

I saw myself reflected. The black, cinching,
 Crisscrossing X's of my rig outplayed
 Me to a larger X, that of DaVinci's

Extended, naked man whose members ray out
 To press against the ring that forms his jail.
 Mirroring my thoughts, "*Thou hast been weighed,*"

The woman said. Indeed, in my soft mail,
 Bobbing from wires, I was reduced in status
 To meat, fresh-bagged and waiting in some scale.

"Ingenious, isn't it, this apparatus,"
 She purred; "designed to mimic human flesh,
 Synthetic leather cables - the hiatus

Between them calculated so the mesh
 Is imperceptible - restrain the patient
 With tender force within their supple crèche..."

(*Patient?* I thought.) "...meanwhile, configurations
 Of fiberoptic filaments within
 The bonds record your data. Fluctuations

Of heart rate, temperature, hemoglobin,
 And so on. Not to mention intravenous
 Feeds that supply your quota'd vitamins.

The Gulliver, we call this, from the *genus*
Lilliputianae, of course." I flinched
 As she reached out and took my flaccid penis

Into her hand, and turned and stretched and pinched
 The thing. "And don't you feel much better now?"
 She asked. (Again, how could I answer, winched

And gagged?) "All cleaned, all flushed from stern to prow?
 We call that process *The Aristotle*."
 I gathered that this woman meant the bowel-

And kidney-cleansing terror that had throttled
 Me, wringing all my insides dry. "And *why*?"
 She asked, producing a plastic sports bottle

Of water. Popping up the cap, she cried,
 "Of course!" (As if I'd answered.) "The *catharsis*.
 The purge. This chamber, just to edify you,

We call *Damascus*, after Saul of Tarsus.
 That place where we're unhorsed, unmasked, and blinded,
 Where we are rendered victims of the Parces,

Of 'God.' *Where we are not in our own mind*."
 Now letting go my member, her hand clung
 To something in my mouth, and pulled. A kind

Of shoehorn came to view, a foot-long tongue
 Of molded black. The moment she unsealed
 My lips, fresh air like wind suffused my lungs.

She held the bottle to my mouth and treated
 Me, carefully, to drafts of Poland Spring
 Dribbled between my lips. The water, heated

By her hand's warmth, still brought with it a sting
 Of coolness. Coldness, even. Ice, but mild.
 I hung there in that sculpted, womblike sling

And sucked the plastic nipple like a child.
 "Where am I?" I croaked out, my voice my mimic;
 "Who are you?" "King's my name," she said, and smiled.

vi.

"You're in the EMS ward of my clinic."
 "Clinic? You mean a madhouse? Some asylum?"
 "No. Phobia clinic." A soft, metronymic

Ticking - her watch -- undid the silence. "Phylum
 By phylum," she went on, "we classify
 The phobic, run experiments, compile them,

Do casework..." But I wasn't pacified.
 "WELL, *LET ME OUT!*" I screamed. "We aid the craven,"
 She persevered, her smug smile plastifying

And widening, "provide a phobic haven..."
 At that, I cursed, screamed right into her face.
 She paid no mind. "A bunch of phobo-mavens,

That's us," she said; "you've come to the right place."
 And then I caved, and hung there, and I wept.
 She watched me sob without the faintest trace

Of pity or surprise. I must have kept
 It up some time. When I came to, she'd shifted
 Some yards away, and paced the floor. She swept

The stone with her reflective eyes, then lifted
 Her gaze to me. "You're scared," she said, "and so
 You ought to be. Your soul is sick. You've drifted

Into panphobia, the *issimo*
 Of fear." "My drugs," I babbled, "please. My pills..."
 She held her fist beside my head, a show

Of sleight-of-hand, as a magician thrills
 Children by pulling coins out of their ears.
 My pill vial popped in view. "You think your ills,"

She asked, "are curable by *these*? Your fears
 Mere chemicals?" "Please, please," I begged. "Can't cope?"
 She mocked, as I again collapsed in tears.

"It's not our method. Abandon all dope,
 All ye who enter here." The vial was gone
 With yet another flourish. Now, all hope

Dissolved, I hung like some automaton
 Whose juice has been turned off, a marionette
 Without a puppeteer, this woman's pawn.

I jerked to life again within my net,
 However, as that deafening voice resumed.
 "I PUT MY COCK IN YOU! I COME AND GET

"YOU! FIRST I RAPE YOU, MADEMOISELLE," it boomed,
 AND THEN I *CUT YOUR THROAT!*" In desperation
 I thrashed within the tethers of my loom.

"Vladek," the woman said in explanation;
 "He wants you. Vladek, though, wants everyone.
 But tell me. What were you? What was your station

Up there, in life?" "In life...?" I echoed, stunned
 By that past tense; "it's not as if I'm...dead."
 "Of course not, no," she said; "nor moribund.

I mean, how did you earn your daily bread?"
 "I was... I was..." Now something in me altered,
 A kind of shame forced me to hang my head.

"I don't know why, I don't know why," I faltered,
 And stopped. "Yes, you *began to be afraid.*"
 She'd read my thoughts. I startled in my halter

As she went on, a fluid fusillade.
 "At first the fear was nothing. Petty phobias.
 Disgust, then angst, then panic that pervaded

Your life. The usual phobic mobius,
 Fear feeding fear. Oh yes, here at the clinic
 We've made new people, whole *vita nuova's*

Of just your species. We're not finicky.
 We only want...your fear." A bland mortician,
 She stood, arms crossed, with what seemed cynical

Dispassion. "Don't you see? I'm a *phobician*.
 I'll *help*. Or else, stay here, a centerfold
 On permanent, if Gothic, exhibition."

vii.

A shiver cased me in a clammy cold.
 "What kind of method do you use?" I bored,
 And was surprised to find myself so bold.

She said, "Each case is different, ward to ward
 And phobe to phobe. *Immersion*. That's our dictum.
 Each punishment (I mean each *cure*, Good Lord!)

Befits the individual, the victim.
 (I mean, the *patient*.) Mister X fears mutts?
 Well, here he has to pet the dog that sicked him,

Must learn to love it - no *if's*, *and's*, or *but's*.
 Or *else*. What's his alternative? Ignore
 His demons? Terror with a thousand cuts?

So there you have it: homeopathic War
 Against the enemy. Why rattle on?
DEL MAL QUE HOM TE POR, D'AQUELLE MATEIX HOM TE MOR.

A favorite ancient proverb. Catalan.
What makes you quail, in time will be your jail.
 So what's your choice, then? Will you battle on

Alone, or take the treatment? Well? Pass-fail.
Quickly," she snapped. Then, quailing: "I accept,"
 I said, and something in the walls exhaled.

Again I heard that hum, and my heart leapt
 As I was lowered to the floor and felt
 The ground beneath my feet. Amazed, inept,

I stood there while my skintight harness melted
 Or molted from me like some liquid vise,
 Falling away until it lay, a belt

Of ink around my feet, a sad, concise,
 Deflated heap of tangled, dull black string.
 I shivered, naked as a sacrifice.

But looking up I saw that Dr. King
 Was holding, on her proffered, upturned palms,
 A bright white garment. "Better than a sling,"

She smiled. As grateful beggars take their alms,
With trembling hands I took and donned the shift,
A simple gown that had an instant calming

Effect, indeed produced a certain lift.
She must have seen I'd somehow taken heart.
"Ready?" she asked. My answering nod was swift.

"I'm ready." "Good," she snapped; "then shall we start?"
At which she turned and, pushing at a glass,
Walked out through her reflection. I departed

Under her sway, and at the sill I passed
Myself in multiple. The mirrored door
Shuffled and folded me like cards, then cast

The deck away.

★

PART TWO

The Plath

Many have spoke of it, but none can tell what the
Valley of the Shadow of Death should mean until
they come in it themselves.

John Bunyan
The Pilgrim's Progress

I have drunk, and seen the spider.
The Winter's Tale

viii.

It was a corridor
We entered: empty, curving, tiled in white,
Doorless and windowless, and lit by horrid

Fluorescent tubes which, rather than inviting
The eye to look, discouraged scrutiny,
Their garish, pitiless glare underwriting

The dismal view and prompting mutiny.
The tunnel-hallway curved away off left
And out of sight as if to funnel me

Toward who knew what, or who. The Doctor deftly,
Securely, took my arm. I took three paces
But stopped, as vertigo unrolled a weft

Of swirling shapes that dizzied me like Mace.
I said, "Are we descending?" - for a queer,
Subtle sensation of descent displaced

My sense of horizontal, seemed to steer
Me down as if we trod some sloping path.
"You noticed? Good," approved my overseer.

Sweat soaked me in a claustrophobic bath.
"The clinic's built in spiral shape, and tapers
As it descends. We call this walk *The Plath*.

It gyrates downwards nine full times, a paper
Nautilus limned in hard concrete. Nine wards
Along the way, the cogs on our escapement,

Lie leftward of this track like bays, or fjords,
Each ward advancing the elaboration
Of fear, a note within the Tristan chord,

The unresolvable conglomeration
Of psychic noise that we call fear." And taking
My arm in hers she tugged me from my station,

Her adamant stilettos pertly making
A clocklike tick on the terrazzo floor.
But suddenly from somewhere near, and shaking

My new-found nerve, that deep voice which had roared
In the Damascus renewed its exertions.

"You cunt! I rape you, dog!" The curses soared -

Yet now the voice seemed thin, high, bland, inert.
I noticed in the lefthand wall a schism
Draped shut by two, thick, heavy velvet curtains

That pulsed and billowed in a steady rhythm
Like black, spasmodically collapsing lungs.
Meanwhile the mad Tourettish paroxysm

Whined on behind them. "Rancid turd! You dung heap!"
The Doctor whipped the curtains open smoothly.

★

ix.

A doorway was revealed within which hung --

As in some diorama -- the odd truth:
A stunted man, his legs and torso scissored
Into a narrow, gray, hermetic booth,

A mic gripped in his fist, like Oz's wizard
But with a twist. He did not see us, bent
Upon his rant, tongue flicking like a lizard's.

He howled his insults, but where his barbs went
He could not see, his cave having no window.
He vented at the dark where he sat penned,

Spiked on his stool like papers on a spindle.
"You stinking turd!" he shouted at his wall.
"Vladek," the Doctor said. The figure dwindled

As when a cur detects his master's call
And stops his barking, braced for punishment
By curling up into a trembling ball.

"Vladek, come here." The man's diminishment
Went on as he uncoilingly deployed
Himself. I saw, to my astonishment,

He was no bigger than a starven boy.
He spidered from his hole on two frail canes,
Jerking as if his limbs weren't joined. He roiled

Within a suit as black as the soutane
Of some grim priest, and I could hear his bones
Clicking like rosary beads. The broad planes

Of his mashed face collided, the nose grown
Into the forehead, eyes askew, his jaw
Eternally ajar, as if unsewn

To the unhone'd and bobbling head that yawed
Upon his neck. As he caught sight of me,
His tongue licked at his lips, his huge teeth gnawed

Themselves, his gargoyle eyes lit up with glee.
He stalked my way with some malign, macabre
Intent. "Stop, Vladek." Crushed by gravity,

Unstable as a house of cards, that knob-
Head wobbling, he then stopped, a dog at beck,
A string of drool unreeling from his gob.

"Your tale," the Doctor ordered.

*

x.

"I am Czech,"
The hunchback said, as quick as when you touch
The "START" for a CD. As if the track

Had jumped, he contradicted that. "I'm Dutch.
I am a Kurd. I'm Greek. I am Croatian..."
The words *I am, I am* were like a crutch.

My host hit "STOP" now. "Never mind your nation,
Vladek. Proceed." He said: "I was thirteen.
Of age to grow a beard, have copulation,

To hunt and earn my bread. Of age, I mean,
To be a *man*. Then in the night, I wake
In total darkness. I hear magazine.

The magazine from gun. My father shakes me,
He whispers, '*Vladek, Vladek, they have come.*'
'*Who, Pappa, who?*' - But he is gone. It takes me,

How long? One minute? I am dizzy. Numb.
But then I think, *Vladek, you are a man*.
One minute was too much. For someone drums

Upon our door. I hear a caravan
Of cars outside. I fumble for my coat.
Too late for that. I hear voices. A man

Is in our kitchen. Then shouting. An oath.
My father, cursing, crying out, 'Fuck you!'
Then I hear nothing. They had cut his throat.

And such as this, all this, happened to you?"
He goggled at me, fiendishly alert.
I realized his question was my cue.

I said: "No, never." Hearing which he blurted
Out a harsh laugh and then resumed his tale.
"They throw my Mamma down, rip off her skirt.

They rape her one by one, then they impale
Her womb, and just for fun cut her throat, too.
While I stand pissing down my legs, and quail.

And such as this, all this, happened to you?"
 Again he waits. Again I must concede
 With "No." "They find me then. They call me Jew.

They hold me on the bed, call in their leader.
'Now what's the matter, Miss?' he says; *'you scared?'*
 And then he rapes me. Fills me with his seed.

They use me like a woman. Not one spared me
 Although those men were neighbors. To my moans,
 They laugh. Two big ones then hold me ensnared

While others shatter, one by one, my bones -
 With mallets, as one hammers walnut shells,
 To see what it would do. Then they went home

And left me there for dead in my own smell.
 And such as this...?" Racing my catechist,
 I said, "No, never." "Well, then, *go to hell!*"

And with this piercing shriek, shaking his fist,
 He turned his complicated, twisting figure
 And clicked into his cell. Like thick black mist

The curtains shut. We stood, two gravediggers
 Beside a tomb. The voice renewed its broadcast
 With venomous and bowel-shaking vigor.

The Doctor strolled away while I, aghast,
 Stood rooted there as if my feet were glued.
 But, realizing my aloneness, cast

Adrift in all that whiteness, I pursued.

*

xi.

Hugging the hallway's leftward-bending arc,
I found King lost in thoughtful solitude

Before a wall of jade-green glass, a spark
Of virid light reflected in her gaze.
As I approached, her meditative, dark

Double appeared, belled out and slightly crazed,
As in a fun-house glass. Then, as I gained,
It fled, supplanted by a swirling blaze

Of tropic color from beyond the pane,
Where schools of phosphorescent, fluttering fish
Threaded Edenic, high pink coral fanes.

When I arrived they wheeled as one and swished
Into the depths. Then, edging back in view,
They nibbled emerald grass that willowishly

Swayed back and forth in placid curlicues.
Luminous minnows flashed like bright ideas.
Angelfish fanned their wings like aperçus.

"This Vladek," I addressed my guide, "is he a...?"
"A patient, and a member of my staff.
Inflicting punishment's his panacea.

Torment's his treatment. So, on our behalf,
He vents for room - or rather, booth - and board.
It's all he's fit for now." And then she chaffed:

"Unlike *some people...*" The way her gaze gored
My own a moment, I knew she meant me.
I bristled. She went on. "Fear's the reward

He passes on to others. It's the fee
That he exacts for what life's done. His due.
Some people have a right to fear, you see..."

A sudden blurring clash of neon hues
Within the tranquil tank stole my attention.
I watched with morbid dread as, from the ooze

Beneath those coral towers of rose and gentian,
 A gang of grinning barracudas rose
 As from some fourth, malevolent dimension,

Scattering fear. The guppies, discomposed
 Into a hapless mass, frantically stormed
 The pane I stood at, seeking help. They nosed

The glass, veered back into the depths, then swarmed
 My way again while their more skillful killers,
 As quick as foils, corralled the school, and formed

The victims in a herd, a swirling pillar
 They orbited like silver, snapping shears.
 The Doctor watched this nauseating thriller

Unmoved. "There are, you see, *justified* fears,"
 She said, while I, fixed on that frantic school,
 Heard nothing but "...*Tibet...Darfur...Algiers...*

Guantanamo...West Bank..." I felt a fool
 When suddenly the cyclone jerked, then froze,
 And everything went still inside the pool,

The slaughter stayed, the fish in fixed tableaux.
 "Plasma, hi-def," the Doctor said. Two clicks
 And it went blank, our images imposed

Where undersea had been, as if in pixels,
 To underscore the point of her harangue.
 My cicerone swiveled on her axle

And ambled down the hall, that grim meringue
 That swallowed her beyond its stiff left curl.
 Oppressed by silence once again, I sprang

After her eagerly, as if to hurl
 Her gruesome puppetshow to memory's
 Oblivion.

*

xii.

The corridor unfurled.

Seeing my rage, "It's not *Gethsemane*,"
King said; "I hope at least you took the moral.
Oh, come along, let's not be enemies."

"No doubt," I ventured, angling for a quarrel,
"You have a name for that," adding with gumption,
"*The Veblen*, or some such?" "You win the laurel,"

Said she; "it's called *Conspicuous Consumption*.
Or *Hi, Chum*, by my staff. Shall we...unwind?" -
Pointing the way ahead, on the assumption

That I'd go with her, she resumed the blind
Incurving path. And I indeed did follow,
Till suddenly, "*Where will I be assigned?*"

A voice cried out, and at its sound I wallowed
Exactly where I stood, chilled to the marrow.
I turned to find behind me a tall, hollow-

Eyed woman, African-American,
Barefoot like me, but naked, and she shook
As if electric waves pulsed through her narrow,

Rice-paper form. Somehow this woman looked
Familiar. Yet what made me truly boggle
Was that she wore, secured to her by hooks

Around her salient ears, night-vision goggles
Whose telescoping lenses gave an insect-
Like look to her, set in the deep-set sockets

Where her own eyes should be. As if infectious
She backed away from me, and all this time,
A penitent, she beat her solar plexus

And wailed her cry. "*Where will I be assigned?*
Where? Where?" she babbled; "*tell me. Where? What ward?*
Where will I be assigned?" The wall behind

The woman swiveled open. From that portal,
Like Gabriel, a female nurse emerged
And calmly took the woman's arms. She roared

In protest, but the gentle intern urged
Her ever on with sweet simplicity.
Then they were gone, and door and wall converged.

I felt the bite of mute complicity.

★

xiii.

"I know that woman somehow," I threw out.
 "You should," replied my guide; "publicity

Followed her everywhere. A camera snout
 Was always in her face. Our celebrated..."
 "Of course," I cried, "America's devout

Defender. Former head high chief at State."
 "Yes, she defended well -- until her own
 Wall fell and let security abate.

So now..." she shrugged; "you saw yourself. She's thrown
 By every breeze that blows. She'd cite Code Yellow
 Each evening on the nightly news. A tone

That all too well befits her now. She'll mellow
 The moment she's assigned the proper bed."
 The Doctor's words renewed the woman's bellow.

"Where will I be assigned?" rang in my head.
 "And where," I asked with ginger trepidation,
 "Will I...?" "I guess we'll have to see," she said,

Chuckling with almost zestful animation.
 And understand I stood there all this time
 A barefoot pilgrim, lost to my own nation -

A "disappeared," a hostage from all the grime
 And glory of the world above. A subject
 Of rendition, imprisoned for no crime.

The woman I'd just seen had had for object
 All those same things, and on a daily basis
 Had ordered state detentions. Now, abject,

She trembled. She who'd soared was now in stasis,
 Confined by psychic not by metal chains,
 Having exchanged her Washington oasis

For this. A thousand questions nagged my brain,
 Too many to find utterance aloud.
 And then a sound distracted me, and gained

In power with every step, for I'd been cowed
By my companion's gaze and forced to move.
It seemed the roar of some tumultuous crowd.

The corridor conveyed me like a groove.

*

xiv.

The left wall opened on a startling vista
That stopped me like some visual reproof.

Below us, an arena under blistering
Lights gave upon a scene straight out of Bosch -
For naked men and women on a bistro

Circle of sand collided blindly, washed
By human waves that swept the hall from side
To side, so some were moved, some raised, some squashed

Against corralling, rounded walls. The tide
Appeared to have no rationale. Hyenas
Could not have howled more loudly, been more wild,

As each vied to present what seemed subpoenas
At bureaucratic grilles. Each person wore
Those goggles whose lenses concertinaed

Outward and back grotesquely, while a corps
Of nurses (male, this time) in bright white jackets
Herded the surging mob like picadors.

I held my ears against the piercing racket
Until my handler pulled my hands away.
The sea of bodies undulated, ragged

And roiling. The whole abyss seemed to sway,
As I did on my feet. "What is all this,"
I feebly joked; "Hell's gate? Some latterday

Auto-da-fé?" King's level gaze insisted
On factuality. "This is Admitting,"
She said; "we have a lengthy waiting list,

As you can see. And there are multitudes
For each one here prepared to pay his penny."
We watched from our superior altitude.

"I did not know fear had undone so many,"
I said. For in that pit the bodies teemed
Like termites in a new-cut log. My canny

And cool instructress positively beamed
 (I'd soon discover why). "Those infra-red
 Goggles," I asked; "what for? It's like some dream."

"These souls still walk in darkness," she said;
 "It's why we call this antechamber *Eos*.
 A word from ancient Greek..." "For dawn," I sped.

And now while we surveyed the raging chaos
 Inside that pit, "Your father had a room
 Here once," King smoothly said. A soft hiatus

And then her words sank in. My vision zoomed
 As if I too wore telescoping lenses.
 I bumped to earth, as swirling rorschach gloom

Blacked out my vision. Leaning up against
 An upright for support, I said, "My father...?"
 "Oh, yes, he was a patient here." Incensed

By her insouciance, I said, "*My father?*
 Like hell. He was the bravest man I've known."
 She shrugged: "I guess he had a spot of bother.

It happens." I went on: "He wasn't prone,
 Is what I'm saying, to fears of any kind.
 That pillar of virility? That stone?

Blue-collar steel, high-grade if unrefined?"
 "Well, would you like to see him?" - Her words thrilled
 Along my nerves, electrified my mind,

As gooseflesh lathered me in one long chill.
 "My father has been dead for nine long years,"
 I said. "I know," said she. An imbecile,

I stared. "He's down this way," she said, and steered
 Me deeper down the plath; "it's not too far."

*

xv.

Somnambulistically, I went, but feared

Now more than ever what lay round the bar
Of slowly rolling wall. Like film on sprockets
White tiles unrolled. Now doors, all left ajar,

Appeared to both our lefts. Within those pockets
I glimpsed stacked papers, shelf on shelf on shelf.
"The archives," said the Doctor; "phobic docketts

Going back to pilgrim times. One wants an elf
To order them. Well, that won't happen, I'm
Afraid." "Phobician," I quipped, "cure thyself."

"I'm glad to verify your humor enzyme's
Still working," she smiled thinly. Those dim sanctums
Filled with decayed reports ticked past like ragtime,

Exhaling dust, while in their aisles gray plankton
Fluttered from documents reduced to mold.
"Your discipline's that old?" I asked her. "Ancient.

Fear came here smuggled in the *Mayflower's* hold.
Now politicians hand it out like bread.
Give us this day our daily dread." My scold

Glanced over for reaction, but my head
Was spinning now, for in it I kept hearing
The Doctor say, "*Your father...*" while the thread

Of corridor unspooled. I felt us nearing
Something as doors left off and wall resumed.
I balked a bit, fell back half a step, fearing

Some worse. And it was now I sensed our flume
Had narrowed slightly, that the right-hand wall
Was inches closer, that the ceiling loomed

Lower a hair or two. My forearms crawled
And chilly mercury slid down my spine,
Each vertebra one less degree. Dissolved

In frigid sweat I felt King's fingers twine
My arm, and pull. The corridor's aorta
Continued tugging us, subtly inclined,

Until we reached an eyelet-like new portal:
Low, oaken, mitre-shaped. "Your Dad's in here,"
The Doctor grinned. I'd never felt more mortal

Than when she clicked the metal latch and steered
Me in.

★

xvi.

That door's ecclesiastic tone
Translated to the other side. I peered

In churchy dimness on a rough-hewed flagstone
Floor just inside the doorway while my pilot
Lit stained-glass ornamental lanterns flown

From dark wood beams. The vaulted space was twi-lit
Under their glow, which cast a somber pall
Much like a funeral parlor, or like Bayreuth

After the final chord of *Parzival*.
The place was bare except for two wood chairs
That flanked a table centered in the hall -

The table plain and maybe one yard square,
Its surface sheathed in what seemed close green felt.
The thing was functional, like prison-ware,

A convict's seat where dog-eared cards get dealt.
Perhaps most curious were the walls. Of modern
Design in polished steel, they formed a belt

That ran beneath the arches and, still odder,
Were crisscrossed with a million hair-thin lines --
The edge of tiny file drawers, each no broader

Than, say, a ring box. What these confined
Was soon resolved: my tutor opened one
And, with a pair of tuning-fork-like tines,

Fished something out. She came back toward me, un-
Folding her hand. There on her palm a die
Of dull gray metal lay, each tetragon

Engraved with runes too tiny to descry
At first. Then I made out some characters
And numerals, and soon identified

My father's name. "Go on," my harrier
Commanded; "take it." She presented it,
Forcing a card. I took it warily.

"After the genius who invented it,
We call these *lovecrafts*. This one your Dad glyphed.
He never said that he repented it."

"What's 'glyphed'?" I asked, while all this time I hefted
The thing which, leaden-heavy, weighed my hand.
"A patient can record a hologlyphic

Message which visitors may, on demand,
Request for viewing. *Do you so request?*
Gamble? Or just let lie?" she asked with bland

Disinterest. In my head, "*The die is cast*,"
Some long-dead classics teacher chanted. "Gamble,"
I said. She led me to the table, pressed

Me down into a chair without preamble,
And said: "Just drop the lovecraft in *The Eye*."
She pointed to a square cut in the campus

Of felt. My hands were stained blue, and the die
Red, courtesy of lamps by Tiffany.
"This chamber has a name, no doubt," said I.

"Indeed," she said; "the name's *Epiphany*.
Corraggio." Her fingers touched my shoulder.
The latch fell. Silence like polyphony

Reverberated in that hall.

★

xvii.

Emboldened,
I held the die above the clean-cut slit
And let it fall. Immediately colder,

I shivered as it vanished in that pit
So like a tiny grave. For, just as when
You drop a lira in the box that sits

Before some ill-lit, ancient chapel, then
A Resurrection or Last Judgment clicks
To dreary light within its storied den

While somewhere some primeval timer ticks
The seconds off, the temperature now changed.
The chamber seemed to drop, the lamps flickering

As lanterns might within some miners' cage
Plunging in free-fall down the carbon shaft,
While ghostly gleams of azure darkness ranged

About the floor, blown here and there by drafts
Contending for supremacy. Miasmic
Haze swirled in gusts from every corner left

And right, then atomized to protoplasmic
Phantoms converging on me in a mass
That merged then into one within that chasm:

A man-sized twist of fog. Now with a gasp
I watched as it engulfed the chair and altered
Itself until it sat there with hands clasped

Opposite me, and my dead father faltered
To view, his features one by one unfolding.
The figure said: "*In life, my name was Walter.*"

Hearing that voice, unable to withhold
Myself, I cried out, "Dad, it's me!" - and stretched
My hand, but it ran through him, clammy-cold.

My father's spirit, unaware, untouched,
Meanwhile continued from beyond the grave,
Condemned to tell one story only, etched

In lovecraft. "I was Walter, and a slave,"
The specter said, "to fear."

*

xviii.

A mortuary
Could not be stiller than the godless nave

That witnessed this bizarre obituary
Provided by the corpse. My father, lifting
His eyes and peering from the reliquary

Of Past, now seemed to scan the present, sifting
The air for something. Then he looked at *me*,
Right at me, or he seemed to. My heart shifted

As he said, "*Is that you, son?*" How could he
Know I was sitting there, know I sat fixed
In place as cold and still as statuary,

He who existed as a dull gray pyx
Of lead? Then he went on. "If I guess right,"
He said, "I'm dead and buried now. I'm *nixed*."

(One of his favorite phrases.) "Before I bite
The dust for good I thought I'd leave this, what,
This message for you. Bet you got a fright,

Hearing that I was here. Oh, yeah, I'd strut
Around, the bravest bastard on the block.
Captain Courageous. Mister *Hey, no guts*

No glory. Woulda been a laughingstock
If anybody knew the facts. I knew
You'd track me down someday. You'd lift the rock,

See what was underneath. Learn what was true
About your Dad. I only hope..." His voice
Broke as he choked a moment. "...only hope you

Arrived here as a visitor, free choice,
And not just 'cause..." He choked again and fumbled.
"...you had to come, like I did." His eyes moist,

He cleared his throat. "But listen. I ain't grumbling.
Hey. I'm *alive*. Right?" Looking up, he grinned
Ironically, reviving the wry, humble

Giant who'd raised me. Suddenly he thinned
Into a single thread of pulsing light,
A wire to heaven whose earthly end was pinned

To empty chair and wavered like a kite's
In blustering winds. The filament danced, flattened
Into a sharply slanted plane, then righted

Itself and dazzled like the fuzzy pattern
On late-night black-and-white TV. Abruptly
He reappeared, though haloes much like Saturn's

Rings circled him and he sat frozen, stopped
In mid-expression, blurry round the center,
As when you pause a DVD, then upped

And came to life again, a chronic offender
Getting the third degree beyond the past's
Dim, one-way glass. My lost and much-missed mentor.

*

xix.

"Hey, I'm *alive*. Right?" he picked up, and cast
That grin again beyond the grave, then swept
The future with his gaze. He said at last:

"I always knew it, from the time I crept.
I knew the fear was there. Now *my* old man
Was not like that. He never whined. Or *wept*.

But I did. He was stone and I was sand,
Compared. Aw, he was *steel*. Me? I was scared.
A cry-baby. Too scared, almost, to *stand*,

He used to say. *Stand up, stand straight*, he'd glare.
And be a man. My son? he'd say. *Afraid?*
He'd frighten me. That's how he showed he cared.

That's how I learned to hide it. *Fear*. I paid
For that mistake but good. 'Cause I was scared
More than before but *now I was afraid*

To show it. Round the neighborhood you fared
Okay, so long as you were not a wimp,
Or yellow, or a sissy. I was scared

The guys would think I was some kinda simp,
So I went in for sports, just to be cool,
The time that I was small. They got a glimpse

Of what I was? This scaredy-cat? This fool?
They woulda kicked my ass. Yeah, growing up
Was torture. *Everything* was torture. School?

I had to gear myself just showing up.
Big games, it was a miracle I stayed.
My buddies never saw me throwing up,

'Cause everything I did, I did afraid.
Then comes the war, I scrambled to enlist -
First guy in uniform, first on parade,

Just like in bar rooms I was first with fists.
First guy in battle, champ in the brigade.
I didn't fight like that 'cause I was pissed.

I fought from fear. Fired shots and tossed grenades,
You think that I was *brave* out there in combat?
I almost shat myself. *I was afraid.*

They called me hero. I was just a hat.
Without the guts to say, cut the charade.
They want a hero? Hell, leave it at that.

I came home, got a job, got nicely paid --
Though working on the iron scared me stiff.
I met your mother - boy, was I afraid.

Live with a person who might get a whiff
Of who and what you really are? It's scary.
I had to look still stronger. Like a cliff.

Impregnable. Dependable. But Mary,
She never guessed. Then she's expecting. Made
My life a hell. Afraid that she'd miscarry,

Trip, fall, I lived each day like I was *flayed*.
When you arrived I never knew such fear."

★

xx.

"I used to get up in the night, afraid

You'd died inside your crib. You'd start to tear,
I thought you'd choked on shit your Mom crocheted.
But all this time I wore this thick veneer

Like nothing touched me. Man, was I afraid.
You didn't know I tracked you like a cop
When you got your first bike. To the arcade,

The mall, whatever. Some drunk wouldn't stop,
I'd figure, hit you at an intersection.
I'd see him run you down, I'd see you drop.

I shadowed you but I escaped detection.
Cap pistols worried me. Sharp hockey blades.
And every time you sniffed? Acute infection.

Enjoy yourself! Remember my tirade?
Get out, I'd say, go find some friends, play ball!
But when I said those things, I was afraid.

Your toys, to me, were time-bombs. Streets? Pitfalls.
You did the things I said. Did not evade.
You got your share of sports and kicks and brawls,

Like every kid. But me? I was afraid --
And most of all afraid you'd see my game,
Afraid you'd see right through the masquerade.

And scared that maybe we were both the same.
Still, you hit college. Found success, self-made.
While I was worried you'd go up in flames --

That just like your old man you were afraid...
When I was young, one year I carried hods
For masons, guys who pointed buildings, laid

One brick upon another. A façade
That isn't pointed will collapse. It falls -
Like me. Well, every night I pray to God

That you were pointed right, that you'll stand tall.
Remember this. Take heed, since you'll outlive me.
I only hope - oh, jeez, I'm gonna bawl -

I only hope," he said, "that you'll forgive me
If I passed all this shit to you." A hiss
Like static interrupted him. "...give me..."

I heard, and then the words: "...send you a kiss..."
My father's shade began to pale, corrupted
Into a waxwork, then into a mist.

Seized by a new bereavement, I erupted
Out of my chair, swept him up in an embrace,
I ran my arms around his back and cupped it -

But he was gone. Inside my arms, his trace
Had dwindled to a wraith-like rivulet
Of yellow fog that sank and swirled, then raced

In rippling waves across the stone marquette
And vanished like a vaporous winding sheet.
The lovecraft lay in view, the dull planchette

After a Ouija date where spirits meet,
A cubist Host on some surreal altar.
Dropped in The Eye, my father would repeat

His formula "In life, my name was Walter" --
Like some trained acolyte at Mass, adeptly
Reciting his rote lesson from the psalter.

I rolled the die, I masked my face, and wept.

★

xx.

The Doctor paced the hallway, standing post
When I emerged, or rather when I crept

Back out from the Epiphany. A ghost
Of pity haunted those cool eyes. "Good visit?"
She asked politely, playing perfect host.

"Good...? Yes," I mumbled; then: "What time is it?
Sorry I was so long..." She checked her watch.
"You have been gone exactly...yes, one minute."

She studied me, and then as if to scotch
Recidivism, she wheeled upon the spears
Of her high heels, and marched on down the notch

Of looming hallway. "Doctor, what is fear?"
I asked, then added; "at its heart, I mean."
She said: "It's our Darwinian overseer.

What else preserves our species but fear's keen
Alertness, what else helps us carry on
When faced with danger? Fear's like a machine -

Or like a virus dancing its pavane
Of replication. For *fear too feels fear*.
Like us, fear too fears death. *It must go on -*

And thus, to stay alive, must keep in gear
Our sense of danger, must work hand in glove
With mind to up the dangerous atmosphere -

Because fear functions, oddly, much like love,
Whose symptoms closely mirror those of angst.
Timor, like *amor*, gives the heart a shove.

I hope my answer answers for the nonce."
I said, "But, Doctor, *must* a phobic fear?"
I hadn't fished for such a strong response,

But she stopped dead and turned her eyes and peered
So hard I felt strands rising on my scalp.
"You've struck the heart of it," she said with weird

Intensity, and grazed me with one palp
 Upon my arm; "you've left behind the hills
 And now stand gazing at fear's highest alp.

For what you're asking is: is there *free will*.
 Soft skin, if hammered, *must* display contusion.
 If cut, must bleed perforce. The blood *must* spill.

Blood vessels *must* react. It's no *illusion*
 The blow's been struck. You see?" - I wasn't sure
 She'd answered or increased my own confusion.

"You're saying," I deduced, "there is no cure."
 "We have a theory," she mused, "among
 Phobicians, that all fears finally blur,

That they're like separate bullets from one gun,
 A single hawk, just differently hooded.
 In other words all fears, in truth, are one."

"The fear of death?" That's how I understood it,
 But King just shook her head. "You see, all phobes
 Lack one important... oh, how shall I put it,

They lack one single *element*, a lobe
 Within their, not their brain, within their make-up."
 "And what's that element?" I asked. "It's global,

I'll tell you that," she hinted; "oh, wake up."
 I shook my head. She sighed, but then her face
 Lit up. I turned, still rattled by her shake-up.

"We're there so soon?" she said, as if amazed.
 She pointed to a sign, plain as a nun,
 That hung before us, leveled at our gaze.

In dull Helvetica it said: "WARD ONE."
 My medical duenna pushed me through.
 Inside, I stopped - revolted, speechless, stunned.

★

xxii.

It might have been a giant, white-tiled loo
 And echoed from a mass regurgitation,
 For in that hall a vast, rubber-smocked crew

Of nurses served a horde of puking patients.
 Those naked souls stood over yard-deep drains
 They manned, athwart the filth, like battle stations.

Heaving and retching, groaning from the strain,
 They'd straighten, wipe their mouths, then bend like faucets
 And spew again. That movement, so inane,

Was like those rigs with dickeybird proboscis
 That bow and bring up black Cretaceous ooze
 Outside Los Angeles. I soon got nauseous,

For pools and curds of vomit were diffused
 Across my way. King signaled and I veered
 Behind her while she cavalierly cruised.

I noticed that a curious, twisted leer
 Distorted every patient's lips, perhaps
 Resulting from the stench that hovered here.

While patients hacked and coughed, lapsed and prolapsed,
 I mutely begged my guide for exegesis.
 "These wretches" (she paused midway through the apse)

"Stand hostage to *Disgust*, which, by my thesis,
 Embodies the primeval, simplest form
 Of fear. Its symptom: obdurate emesis.

What most of us accept as daily norms
 Induces in these souls acute distaste."
 Just then we passed a group, a sort of quorum

Around one sewer where they commixed their wastes.
 "Miss Noonan. Mr. Limbaugh. Mr. Brooks,"
 The Doctor greeted them and, pasty-faced,

They raised their bleary eyes with doleful looks,
 Then bent and vomited again in chorus.
 The variations that their barfing took

Comprised a vomitorial thesaurus.
 A plump, bald man stood at a brimming foss
 Not far away. We know the shopworn Horace

Quote, *Carpe diem* ("seize the day," it's glossed).
 As if he'd taken that too much to heart,
 Ignoring both me and the clinic's boss,

He brought a verve to vomiting, an art
 Most men reserve for feasting. The robust,
 Smug sneer upon his lips seemed to impart

Contented triumph rather than disgust.
 Too bad he'd often missed his mark. Unflustered,
 He stood there covered with a purplish crust

Of puke that dripped like deliquescing custard.
 Potato chips and chick peas, ballpark franks,
 A bit of undigested beef, some mustard

Bedaubed his pudgy body, and a rank
 Effluvium surrounded him. I noted
 How this man scanned the overflowing tank

Of scum before him, saying (and I quote),
 "Good volume. Excellent propulsion. Pungent,
 Too. Color, texture, all first-rate. I vote

Not one but *two thumbs up!*" - at which he plunged
 Those digits in and *tasted*, like a hostess
 Testing the dip (and very nearly lunged

Headlong into it). "Wait," I cried; "I *know* this
 Man! Wasn't he...?" "A critic. Quite well known.
 Now spill your tale, sir." At the precipice

He brinked, he merely blinked at first, and groaned
 With pleasure over some new load he'd spewed.
 Then, grimacing, and choking down a moan,

His story often interspersed with rude,
 Subgastric spasms that rippled his broad gut
 Then burbled into belches, he reviewed

His life.

xxiii.

"My ancestry and all that smut,"
 He said, "I won't go into. Hebrew serfs.
 Ignorant, unimportant people. But

They did give life to me, as body-scurf
 Gives birth to dust. Myself, I was a pimply,
 Grim, noxious child. And noxious was the turf

On which I found myself. I knew, quite simply,
 And from a very early age, this world
 Was an abomination filled with chimps

Called people. 'Human beings.' It made me hurl,
 Even back then. It was a wen, a mass
 Of noisesome pus puffed like a blister curled

To pop and spill its ooze. A foul morass.
 I soon stopped looking into mirrors, bucked
 By what I saw, repulsed by the crevasse

In my behind, by automatic tear ducts
 That blinded me with salt, by oily pores
 Condemning me to blackheads, by the fear ducts

That I could not control, by blood and sores,
 The hair that sprang from me, snot in my nose,
 The teeth inside my gums, the rancid gore

Called organs in my body, and the hose
 Twenty yards long and filled with shit that wormed
 Through me like some brown boa. My gorge rose

When people merely ate, I writhed and squirmed
 Hearing them moistly masticate some crust.
 (If food revolted me, imagine *sperm*.)

Yet I was born with a rapacious lust
 For food, a hunger nothing could appease,
 As if my body mocked my own disgust.

I ate and ate and ate, and drank the lees
 From every cup - especially of soda.
 It was the empty calories that teased

And drew me most. I ate more than my quota
Of Snickers bars and Hostess Twinkies, chips
And Cheez-Puffs, Mallomars. If an iota

Remained of Dipsy Doodle, my chapped lips
Were on it, such was my esurient yen.
Meanwhile, of course, my stomach swelled, and hips --

I haven't seen my dick since I was ten.
Swallowing my disgust I took up culture,
Wallowed in poetry, in art, like men

Who lived for beauty. I became a vulture
For music as I'd been for Musketeers.
I gobbled French, ingested literature.

At college I became a pamphleteer.
My writing proved me subtle, Jesuitic,
But only fed my nausea for mere

Humanity, which was not analytic,
Incisive, brilliant, i.e., wasn't me.
So I became..." (he gagged) "...became...a *critic*."

He jackknifed, vomiting ferociously
And nearly falling face-first in his waste,
Which hissed acidically. "I was precocious,"

He gasped, "A natural writer, my style chaste
But biting, meaty. My quick success
Was based" (his face went green) "on my...*good...TASTE!*"

He spilled another load. "I like it. Zest.
Gusto. That bit of dill. It's almost Zen...!"
"*De gustibus non disputandum est,*"

My guide intoned, to which I said: "Amen."
The Doctor sensed those sights were somewhat paining
And led me toward the exit of that pen.

"Ward Two," she said, "may be somewhat less draining."

xxiv.

So we regained the plath and walked in silence,
The hallway's width and height distinctly waning.

From time to time we passed small groups, like islands:
A patient and a nurse most often, calm
In large part. Sometimes, though, outbreaks of violence

Put inmates up against the wall, their palms
Pressed flat against the tiles and high upraised.
Others were herded by, in small pogroms.

I contemplated fleeing this sinuous maze
As doors began to open in the left-
Hand wall, revealing hidden passageways.

And from those quickly-shut but tempting clefts
Nurses - and *possibilities* - emerged.
I calculated that one simple, deft

Sidestep would free me. But that darkling verge,
And what fresh fear might lie beyond the sill,
Restrained my leap. Yet still I nursed the urge,

Almosting it perhaps ten times, until
"*Quite futile*," my companion said, her odd
Clairvoyance once more giving me a chill.

Although I acted innocent, oh God
I thought she'd seen right through my plans to flee.
"Futile?" I asked; "what is?" One more squad

Of nurses poured into the hall near me,
Revealing one last door, for after that
The left-hand wall stayed shut. "Escape," said she;

"Escape from fear. Quite hopeless..." (Rat-tat-tat,
Like that.) "...fear was our topic, I believe?"
I said, "But isn't this whole ziggurat

Designed for that? Escape?" (On the *qui vive*
No longer for an open door, I bristled
At her suggestion.) "...Or am I deceived?"

She answered with a gesture of dismissal:
 "Escape from fear? Is that this clinic's aim?
 And have you heard me say as much? A thistle-

Filled pit is easier to flee," she claimed,
 "Than fear. For fear and this great world, my friend,
 Are one" (she joined her hands) "one and the same,

The two domains identical and end-
 Less. Just review the list of phobias,
 From dogs to dark to doctors. It transcends

Enumeration. There's a phobia
 For any entity you care to utter.
 For epicures there's phobophobia,

The fear of fear itself. What makes folks shudder
 Is limitless. That, all alone, is scary.
 Note how the list, though, rhymes the world, life's clutter

Matching our fears so that the ordinary
 World mirrors, one by one, anxieties.
 And is our world not, quote marks, 'necessary'?

Let's cast aside our apple-pieties.
 If, thing for thing and form for form, our fears
 Reflect the world in its varieties,

If fear's world holds what ours does, then it's clear
 That these two worlds are single, they're ingrained,
 And thus that fear, just like the atmosphere

We breathe, is unavoidable, ordained.
 It is the X to our existences,
 And is to world as blood relates to bloodstained:

Intrinsic." "Well," I said, "then all resistance
 Is vain. We're honeybees who fear our hive."
 "And yet," she said with tempering insistence,

"We manage to endure. We even thrive."
 "But *how*, if fear keeps pushing up the ante?"
 Said she: "You know the answer. You're alive.

Isn't that evidence? Brush up your Dante."
 "Dante?" I said. - "Why, he's fear's *passé-partout*.
 They are like fava beans and fine chianti.

"But look," she cried, forestalling me; "Ward Two."

*

xxv.

We entered now an ersatz tropic jungle,
Too dense to see what lay within its purlieus -

Or very far beyond one's feet. Moist, fungal
Aromas seemed to waft from life-like blooms
That hung like curlycuing carbuncles

On dusky aloe leaves. Trick vines festooned
Thick tree trunks, disappearing in a tent
Of canopy that radiated gloom.

Real-looking moss and grasses, musky scents
Of animal, of fur and scat, enhanced
Illusion here, and piped-in roaring lent

Verisimilitude. Then, lines of ants
Yard long with small green fluttering flags of leaf
Clamped in their jaws and (gulp) a fer-de-lance

That slithered off into the broom and briefly
Hissed put me wise: *all this was real*. My guide,
Now satisfied that she'd compelled belief,

Struck off into the bush, I close beside.
I jumped out of my skin once, when a ghostly
Form clad in gauzy, billowing white glided

Across our path and vanished. The air, toasty
To say the least, had stifled me, but now
Sweat flowed in earnest. Anxious in these claustal

Spaces, continually pushing boughs
And tendrils from my face, I jumped again
When yet another specter crossed our bow,

Another, then another. They were men
And women, patients sheathed from head to toe
In hazmat burkas of diaphanous

Material like filmy white mosquito
Netting. Upon their hands they wore tough gloves,
And on their feet protective plimsoles. No

Square inch of them was left unclad, while dove-
White veils and shady helmet brims obscured
Their features. Glancing back, before, above,

They were in constant, twitchy movement. Lured
Or scared by distant sounds, they'd whirl and fret
Every three feet or so, while for assurance

(I guess) they carried large butterfly nets
Like lantern mantles of outrageous size.
Picking their way, those wary inmates vetted

Each entity they met. They sniffed weeds, prized
Up rocks with caution, poked at flowers with loathing.
Their heavy armor only emphasized

My doubtful and inadequate own clothing.
And then I heard a hum and saw a cloud
Of killer bees lay in my path. An oath

Escaped me as they wound me in a shroud
Of jet-black glistening beads bristling with stingers.
I screamed out something but they droned so loud

My cry was swallowed up. Whirling my fingers,
Flailing my arms, I clawed my head and face.
Then they were gone. Yet fear, as happens, lingered.

*

xxvi.

I found myself still swatting, though no trace
Of bee remained. The Doctor looked bemused.
"It's wonderful what can be done these days

With holograms," she said. "Another ruse?"
I moaned, but stopped as tremors shook the ground
So hard I fell. I cast her an accusing

Glance. "Holograms?" I said. "No. Ultrasound."
Then, as I rose, a roaring ten-foot leopard
Materialized before me in mid-bound,

Fangs bared. But, halfway to my throat, it peppered
Itself to rows of digits. Those serrated
Teeth vanished in equations. "Well," my shepherd

Barked out; "how are you feeling? Stimulated?"
"So everything," I said, "the sound of wings,
The critters...?" "Yes. Computer-simulated.

This ward elaborates the theme of ring One,
For here in Two revulsion's crystallized
Into *specific* fear of natural things -

Disgust, you might say, has metastasized
To fear of insects, rodents, water, pollen,
Fire, filberts, flu's... These patients fantasize

Nature as evil paradise, as fallen,
And see themselves as prey, as marks for microbes."
A patient stalked in view, his spinal column

A bow that kept him bent. "Arachnophobe,"
The Doctor whispered while the man in terror
Spied for black widows; "*but look at his robes.*"

Now looking close, I saw the inmate's error.
A specimen cocooned in his own web,
He didn't realize he was the bearer

Of hosts of spiders whose minute legs threshed
And spun the fabric that protected him.
Those weavers worked mere inches from his flesh

While he, obsessed, not once detected them.
The man moved off in nets of deadly gauze,
Stalking the creatures who'd collected him.

"What did I say about escape? The claws
Surrounding us are infinite, and meted
To all. We live within the lion's jaws,"

King warned. Another cartoon swarm had sheeted
Me while she spoke. I did not bother swatting,
Not caring to look foolish by repeating

My former gaffe. I laughed, at which the clot
Of "bees" shot off like an amoeboid pinwheel,
Settling some digital forget-me-nots.

"Ha, ha," I mocked. "*That* swarm," she said, "was real."
"Was *real*?" - But she had started for the plath.
"You mean those bees...?" I said. The Doctor reeled round.

"So is the world," she snapped. "You do the math."
With that, she swung a door and we returned,
As ever, to the downward, one-way path.

★

xxvii.

"Perhaps," my mentor ventured as we perned,
 "The ancient world had things more right than we."
 She walked in contemplation. I had learned

To wait on wisdom. Inevitably
 She would collect her thoughts and then expound.
 (Inevitably, nothing I'd foresee.)

"We moderns have an image, or a *ground*
 In light of which we view humanity.
 To our minds, mankind strides ahead unbound

Into the future. What inanities
 Or ills or setbacks we may meet, at least
 We're facing forward. Fine. There's sanity

In this, and hope - that age-old human yeast.
 What there is *not*, is logic. Truth. No, listen.
 The ancient Greeks, no slouches on the beast

Called Man, deployed a certain word, *opisthen*,
 Meaning 'behind you, at your back, astern.'
 It also indicated 'future.' This, then,

Is Attic brilliance. What they did was *turn*
Us all around. They knew that we don't face
 The future. *We face past*. We can't discern

What lies ahead, we only see what's racing
 Away, which is to say we see what *was*.
 They viewed mankind as *backing up* in space/time

And blindly bumping what's to be, because
 We're back-to-front in life's dark corridor..."
 "You see?" I said; "there's no escape." A buzz

Of low frustration from my monitor
 Arrested me. "That word again," she growled;
 "Do Job of Uz's three admonishers

Counsel escape? If life is where we howl,
 It's where we howl. Don't even try to flee.
 Acknowledge that misfortune's on the prowl

And it will strike unseen." "But then," (from me)
"Why live? Why bother? Isn't that the riddle?"
She stopped before a door and said: "Ward Three."

I strung along behind her, second fiddle.

★

xxviii.

Three was an auditorium, its seats
Packed full with white-gowned patients, at its middle

A stage that fanned into the hall. Its neat,
Steep rows and bell-shaped dome gave it an air
Of surgical arena. But beneath

The stage's lights lay (*strange...*) an airplane chair
Replete with seat belt, screen, and drop-down tray.
Something about the starkly-lit scene scared

Or at the least uneased me. "Shall we stay,"
My guardian suggested, "for the show?"
Indeed, this had the trappings of a play

But not a comedy somehow. Below
Those arc-lights, that lone chair looked like the stocks.
I took an aisle seat in the top-most row

And - *click!* - I jumped as something metal locked
Me in my chair: a belt with thick steel hasps
That cut across my lap. My speechless shock

Was interrupted by a scream. I gasped
On hearing "*Help! I'm gonna die! Help! Help!*"
A patient pinned in two male nurses' grasp

Was being dragged down toward the stage. He yelped,
He braced his feet, he fought, but down they dragged
Him, down the left-hand stairway like a whelp

Being taken to be gassed. The interns bound
Him in the airplane chair with crisscross straps
That gave him no escape. Thus trapped, he sagged

In resignation, trembling in collapse
While patients round me stirred like wind-blown wheat
And strained against the buckles in their laps --

As I did -- but the belts clamped us like cleats.
A perky voice from up above the lights
Chirped out, "*Good morning! My name's Marguerite*

*And I would like to welcome you to Flight
Six Ninety-Nine. At this time please make sure
Your trays are stowed, your seats are upright,*

And that your seatbelts all have been secured..."
The passenger had screamed throughout this babble.
"Stewardess! Stewardess! Emergency!"

Will someone let me off this thing?" He scrabbled
Frantically at his seat belt, but in vain.
"*Enjoy your flight!*" the woman sang. He gabbled,

He begged, he gibbered, "Please, please, please." A plane's
Jet engines whined.

★

xxix.

Beside me, "Let's review,"
The Doctor said, although my reeling brain

Was fried. "Ward One," she said, "Disgust. Ward Two,
A fear of nature. Here in Three this trend
Continues as fear deepens and accrues.

You might say that Ward Three's a subtle blend
Of One and Two, for here our patients dread
Internal states, responses apprehended

Within themselves, or what, inside their heads,
They fear they *might* feel in the right conditions.
Disgust, you see, turns inward here, embedded

Subjectively, in doubts and premonitions.
We've many actors suffering here from stage fright..."
The passenger by now had lost volition

So thoroughly he simply whimpered. Stage lights,
As if the "plane" were moving, gently strobed.
The man, like some crazed victim of a snake bite,

Writhed in his seat with gritted teeth and probed
The upper air for God. "And *his* complaint?"
I asked. "He's a trismyriadpediophobe.

At 30,000 feet this man feels faint.
But not from what it *is*, but what it *feels*
Like there. You see? It's not the fact. His plaint's

About *sensation*." Now, as if real wheels,
Huge airplane wheels, were rolling down some tarmac,
I swore I felt a rumbling. Muted squeals

Were heard from patients in the hall. Some karmic
Regrets (what had I done I ought not, what
Had I not done I should have) now came swarming

Into my mind against my will. My guts
Turned over as a twangy voice boomed out:
"Well, howdy, folks! This here is Captain Butts

*Up in the cockpit. Coupla dials burned out
But that's patched up now, so we're set to fly!
There's anything that we can do -- sing out!"*

At this, this man onstage began to cry.
"Please, stop this plane!" he babbled; "let me off!"
The whole plane lurched, and everybody shied.

"Cabin attendants, take your seats for take-off."

*

xxx.

I scrambled at my belt, but it was locked.
The engines thrummed like Rimsky-Korsakov

And suddenly we angled upwards, rocking
Wide left and right! I gasped as several G's
Pressed down my chest, then heard a hailstorm pocking

The outside of our fuselage. I wheezed,
Feeling us tadpole, right ourselves, then bounce
Through shoals of corrugated air. I squeezed

Myself into a moaning ball. We jounced
Atop a cloud, my armrests tightly gripped.
"It's just some turbulence," that voice announced,

But stopped abruptly as the *whole plane tipped!*
Lights blinked inside the cabin, air masks dropped,
Passengers screamed, and the whole plane flipped

Upside down, rightside up - and then angled
Straight toward the ground! Life vests went flying, trash,
Food trays and glasses, novels, all got mangled

As in a massive holocaust -- *we crashed.*
The world went flat-line in an instant. Null.
We were a heap of acrid, smoking ash...

Ringin' applause awoke me from my dull,
Dumb shock. The passenger was taking bows
Onstage. There was no plane, no smashed-up hull,

My fellow travelers were whole. He plowed
Back up the aisle amidst congratulations.
"I thought..." I said. My guide, with furrowed brows,

Admonished me and said, "*Imagination.*
Fear's sidekick which, like fear, cannot take lives.
Fear's only strength lies in *intimidation.*"

"But fear and fantasy," I said, "connive
To make imaginary ills seem real."
"Do throats get slashed," she said, "by phantom knives?"

"Yet we're tormented by supposed ordeals."
 "But never wounded by them. Just interpret
 The *facts*, not fantasy's air-built appeals.

Can someone slake his thirst by thinking 'sherbet'?
 If you imagine jumping in a lake,
 In truth, not fantasy, do you disturb it?"

My belt sprang open of its own and snaked
 Into some unseen holster or compartment.
 We rose and headed for the door, I faking

Composure, King relaxed in her comportment,
 Wearing her even smile like some bright emblem.
 "Disgust lies at the heart of these departments

One, Two, and Three," she said; "a sort of Limbo
 To actual Hell. Shall we move on to Four?"
 I went, and wondered what new, dread exemplum

Lay waiting for me down the hall.

*

xxxi.

The doors
To Four were scarcely cracked before my hand
Shot up to block the blinding white effulgor

That beamed out of the widening cleft to brand
My vision like a million sizzling flares.
Blinking, my head abuzz, I stood there stranded

Till: "*Here. These ought to help against the glare.*"
Something was thrust into my fumbling paw:
I brailled the object, finding it a pair

Of Alpine specs, a perfect replica
Of some my father'd had. The tinted lenses
And leather side-flaps spared my retina,

And I saw inmates like a moving fence.
"*Walk tiptoe here, don't make a sound,*" my pilot
Whispered, and timidly I moved from thence

Into the hall itself, whose air looked violet
Behind my darkling glass. The place was nude,
As were the patients. Circular and quiet,

Devoid of any ornament, subdued
In everything except the lighting grid
Of megawatt tubes that forged a mood

Of harsh interrogation, this hall hid
Nothing. Beneath its lightweb's shadeless net,
Spaced out at intervals, its patients did

A singular and ceaseless minuet.
Each slowly, counterclockwise, wound around
In place, hounds chasing tails. While pirouetting

Thus (leaving deep depressions where they ground)
They kept their heads turned permanently back
Over their shoulders. The dull shuffling sound

Those bare feet made inside each worn-down track
Was supplemented by a steady whisper
As we two slipped amongst them. "*Who is that...?*"

Who's there? Who's that...?" they murmured without respite,
Shying away as King and I drew near,
Their heads slewed round, their tensed expressions desperate.

"Anxiety," King said; "the second tier
After Disgust; Four, Five and Six's yoke.
Each patient here's a hub; the wheel is fear.

It radiates out from them in anxious spokes.
These fear, but nothing in particular.
They'd rest, but Angst delivers constant pokes.

It's all that keeps them perpendicular.
Since they're afraid of shadows, pitiless
Lights wash them. Note how turning circular's

Turned some askew." She nodded to a listless
Young girl whose head was wholly back-to-fronted,
Her periscoping neck a threaded pistil

That thinned out like screw. Startled, she shunted
Her head around another few degrees,
Saw us, and briskly flitted off, a hunted

Finch. "Have you seen their hands?" my escort teased.
I looked, and flinched, for everyone had bitten
Their nails - and fingers, too, as mice gnaw cheese.

All that remained were stumps on hands like mittens.
"They're apprehensive," my instructress glossed,
"Yet cannot *apprehend*. (This from the Latin

Apprehendere. Verb: to *grasp*.) My boss
Pressed onwards through the restive, captive host
(Grasshopper-like they sprang away from us)

And led me to a woman - no, the ghost
Of one, a faded Renaissance Madonna,
Whom I adjudged was forty-five at most

Though stooped and gray. Her eyes black belladonna,
She trudged about with beauty's sad remains
And shrank as we approached. "Emiliana,"

The Doctor broached; "your story, please. Explain."

xxxii.

"I am Emiliana Aligheri,"
The woman said. The words themselves seemed pain.

"Firenze bore me. Florence - cemetery
Of all I was. For it was there one day,
Passing beneath San Marco's monastery,

Francesco Aligheri crossed my way.
He was no sooner seen than I surrendered.
'*Buon giorn*' was all he said, my fiancé

Before the words had kissed his lips. He tendered
A proposal to my father. We wed
Three weeks thereafter, and enjoyed love's splendor

For nine long years. Then, unannounced, came dread.
One Sunday while we sat within our wood,
Books open, wine and bread and cheese outspread,

It struck. It settled on me like a hood:
A sudden stifling sense of some great threat --
Some lurking evil not to be withstood.

Francesco - I was certain - he was set
To suffer this unknown misfortune. *He*
Was target for some devil's work. 'My pet,'

He said, 'what's wrong?' and fondly plied my knee.
That was my chance to rid myself of fear.
'Nothing,' I lied. That was the end of me.

The end of rest, forever. Three long years
This sneering, snarling worry plagued my sleep:
That something horrible would engineer

My husband's death or loss, contrive to keep
From me this man I loved more than my life.
By night, instead of dreaming, I would weep.

By day I paced the floors. Thus entered strife
Into our house, which we had never known.
Anxiety had robbed him of his wife.

Instead, I pestered him. I clung. No stone
I left unturned attempting to prevent
The danger destined to leave me alone.

Expendng all my energies, I spent
Our love. And he took all upon his head.
Afraid he was somehow at fault - he went.

He left me. Disappeared. Thus all my dread
Of losing him ensured that he was lost.
Thus I, who sought to save his life, am dead."

★

xxxiii.

Emiliana Aligheri crossed
Herself and re-began her fretful trudge.
Still hunched against some unfelt, inner frost

She cast her eyes back anxiously, to judge
If what she saw behind her was a threat.
The Doctor touched my arm. I couldn't budge.

"Keep moving," King whispered, and I let
That cicerone guide me to a cot
Where interns were affixing serviettes

Onto its gruesome tenant - or on what
Remained of him. And seeing him, my gorge rose.
Imagine someone so corrupt with rot,

The whole face is corroded, mouth and nose
Decayed away into a gaping hole,
A torso so destroyed, so decomposed

Its innards lie on view within its bowl,
The guts and heaving heart on grim display --
A science project from the Grand Guignol.

Legless and armless, still the body swayed
As if to look back over some lost shoulder.
That leprous body by itself conveyed

Its awful message, but my guide and scolder
Addressed it: "*Speak.*" The head rolled, lolled my way.
That mouth, that pair of tremulous eyes smouldered

To tell his tale. "In life I was *distrain*,"
That rotted hole gagged out; "eaten by fears,
I lessened as I grew. Now a mere X-ray

Of what I was, I feel the hectic shears
Of anxious horror vivisecting me.
In time I will be nothing but two tears.

Remember me." His words affected me
So terribly that salt blurred my own eyes.
The sight emboldened him. Correcting me,

He said, "No sympathy. *Live otherwise.*"
They pulled a curtain round to do some service
To palliate his ordeal. Meanwhile, the timid lives

Of circle Four still spiraled on - a nervous
And purposeless perpetuum mobile.

★

xxxiv.

The corridor had narrowed, its recurvous

Nature apparent now. The sloping wheel
Of floor and walls and ceiling lay ahead
As tight-wound as a curling apple peel

That mimicked Ward Four's futile, circling tread.
Before this helical faux-Guggenheim
I brooded on the paradox of dread:

That it could commandeer and, over time,
Subdue you, *though you were the fear's own source*.
This bleakly self-destructive paradigm

Unsettled me. Why, somewhere in the course
Of terror's genesis and efflorescence,
Did we not graze a switch that must, perforce,

Turn off the fear, or mitigate, or lessen?
Was there no automatic Default key
Short-circuiting emotions whose quintessence

Was bust? Just then the Doctor halted me
In mid-reflection, saying, "You're perplexed.
Is it the way fear so assaultively

Attacks its host without being firmly X'd?
That, though we ought to stop -- we don't, or daren't?"
I nodded, feeling not a little vexed

At turning out, once more, to be transparent.
"Self-preservation is a modern myth,"
Said she; "we view its obverse as aberrant

Because we've all been kinked by Adam Smith
To think we always act for our best ends.
Capitalism's become our heart and pith,

The selfish optimism that says Man tends
To do what guarantees will save his skin.
Not so. The history of the world, the bends

We've taken, Western civ's immortal sins
Stem from a *disregard* for benefit.
We're psychopaths who've slaughtered kith and kin,

We've fostered War and have augmented it
 With weapons aimed at mass annihilation.
 Our own annihilation. *Dig a pit*

*And we'll jump in, seems Mankind's exhortation.
 Please, let us taint our air and strip our soil,
 Eradicate whole species, let us station*

*In pristine forests foul rigs dripping oil,
 Let's drape our dying seas with Styrofoam.
 Is there no benefice that we can't foil,*

No way that we won't sully our own home?"
 My hostess paused to darkly contemplate
 The next stark link of coiling catacomb.

You would have thought her gaze was full of hate
 For all that place contained, that morbid lair
 Where Rhadamanthus might pontificate.

But when she smiled at me and prinked her hair -
 That's when I knew: her aim was not to cure me.
Her darker purpose was to keep me there.

Coyly, she even winked, as if to lure me
 Into a better mood, to soothe my stress,
 And even touched my cheek to reassure me.

From some compartment in her frigid dress
 She trawled a lipstick and a compact mirror
 And, brushing down her coat, daintily pressed

The crimson to her lips. What could be clearer?
 She'd had her way with me, her dull, kept boy.
 "You're almost half-way now," she said, austerer;

"You'll get a treat" (as if I were her toy)
 "After we've done Five and before doing Six."
 And then she added, in a brilliant ploy:

"That is, *unless I leave you there.*" The Styx
 Was not a bloodier red than her moist, gaudy
 Orifice. I stared as two expert flicks

Of beveled scarlet finished off the bawdy
Work. Snapping compact like a pair of jaws,
She entered Five, but leveled first a naughty,

Haughty, complicit grin. What gave me pause
Was not her vampire smile, or how she'd wined me
With draughts of ginnish fear, but this dread clause:

Where would I be assigned? Once she'd consigned me
(And this nagged, too), what chance of an escape?
Was I a prisoner? Who could ever find me,

What Theseus unravel such a rape?

*

PART THREE

The Climacteric

Fear and I were born twins.

-- Thomas Hobbes

xxxv.

Five was the opposite of Four. The room
I entered, low and windowless, was draped

In feeble, flickering, bluish-purple gloom.
Vague, solid forms were scattered, fixed as pylons
Upon the floor, like monuments, or tombs.

The hissing whisper of her slithery nylons
Was all the sound there was as King went snaking
Amongst those blobs. Uneasy, I filed on,

Soon catching up and almost overtaking,
Eager to finish and be out of there,
Where life apparently had stopped. Forsaking

Silence I spoke, but found the sound impaired.
"Take this." King's voice, like mine a low-pitched hum,
Struggled against the leaden, deadening air.

Her hand transmitted something on whose drum
I found a switch and, *fiat lux*, light flared
Like reason in that moratorium.

Soft inmates basked in Barcalounger-like chairs.
As puffed as unbaked dough, inert and sexless,
They had that too-much-television stare.

"This is the midpoint of the clinic's nexus,"
King said, her voice alerter in the light;
"It's Mid-America, it's flat as Texas,

It's middle-brow, it's L-I-T-E *lite*.
I'm speaking metaphorically - yet not.
You see what's here." Her flashlight beam took flight,

Dotting those obese inmates on their squat
And bier-like beds. "Ward Four's proclivity
Was Angst. Well, Angst-times-two's the Gordian knot

In Five: these inmates fear *activity*.
Here, Four's anxiety becomes concrete
And general dread becomes captivity:

Agyrophobes, who'll never cross a street;
 Ablutophobes, who have a fear of bathing;
 Ruminant carnophobes, who won't eat meat;

Ophthalmophobes" (the Doctor's tone was scathing)
 "Who don't like being stared at; optophobes
 Who don't like staring; phobes who'll brook no swathing

(Habiliophobes, they're called) in any robes,
 And dishabiliophobes, who won't undress;
 Cerebrophobes, who fear their frontal lobes

Will fall apart from thinking. Taking tests?
 The big taboo for testophobes, while dipso-
 Phobes flinch from drinking. Fear of making jests?

Gelophobes. Chorophobes will not calypso
 And deipnophobes not dine. Dromo-'s dread running,
 And oeno-'s drinking wine. The list is ipso

Facto debilitating. They'll fear punning
 And jumping, dating, mating -- any action.
 Now here they lie in twilight as if sunning,

In exemplary existential traction.
 Movement, for them, is madness, malady.
 Their lives, a course in willing stupefaction."

To spur a patient to vitality,
 King nudged one, who let out a ghostly moan.
 "Arise now, Alf," she said; "sing us your ballad."

★

xxxvi.

"What got me," Alf said, "was a *fucking phone!*
A Sony mobile. Alice bought the thing.
Instructions for the memory alone

Was twenty pages, ten to set the ring.
You can do anything: get notes, send e-mail,
Use it to learn French, make it do a hand-spring.

You just can't *dial* the fucker. Goddamn *Grail's*
Less complicated. I say life's too short.
What'm I gonna do with it? Learn Braille?

Computers, all that crap, they're not my fort.
You think I'm gonna Tweeter? That's for twits.
All *I* need is my Castro davenport,

The Super Bowl in full HD, and Schlitz.
How'm I supposed to learn the phone?" Alf said;
"The pieces from it came in fifteen kits.

Then 3 a.m. she wakes me up in bed
And smoke is everyplace. The house is blazing.
Huge flames are swimming at me up the bedspread...

His strangely staring eyes grew dull and hazy.
"I couldn't work...the phone..." Then lethargy
Descended. King moved off amongst the maze of

Patients which, sarcophagal effigies,
Topped their own graves. She sighed. "*Rien à faire.*
The living dead deserve no eulogies."

Thus ended our brief visit.

*

xxxvii.

A portière
And not a door surprised me in my path:
A cryptic, figured curtain with an air

So secretive, I swiftly did the math,
Recalling King's assurance of a "treat" --
But also Vladék's sociopathic wrath.

What lurked behind those runic folds? My feet
Stayed fast, uncertain. "What's the matter? *Scared?*"
Thus scolding me, my guide pulled back the sheet.

A comfy little dressing room was bared,
Replete with bathroom, toilet, armchair, couch,
And vanity. I entered, unprepared

For simple sanity, but had to crouch
("Humility," said King) to pass the gate.
Once in, though, I perceived this room debouched

On nothing. King, as if to illustrate,
Stepped in behind and snapped the curtain shut.
Cornered, all primed for an attack, irate -

"Is this a trap?" I said aloud. "Tut, tut,"
She laughed (I'd never heard that outside novels)
And sank down on the couch, her arms like struts

Across the back. "What's wrong? It's not a *hovel*.
It's *cozy*" - as she crossed her knees and smiled.
(Did she suppose I'd kneel, and beg, and grovel?)

"And what," she asked, "of *these*?" Then I saw, piled
Upon a chair in laundered stacks, my clothes.
The things I'd worn when on the Bridge, my self-styled

Death suit. My shroud. The shock of seeing those
So routed me, fear like formaldehyde
Ran drilling through my veins, and froze.

The shirt and trousers of a suicide.
Some empty, folded underwear and socks.
Two shoes lined up and polished, purified

Of death, and yet not quite. The paradox
 Of someone gone, yet not. The missing person
 Was me. Now lifting up a plain brown box,

King said, "We've other clothes, if there's a curse on
 Yours. Maybe you've grown out of them...*since then*."
 Her chaffing, mocking tone just seemed to worsen

My trance. "*Fixation*. That's a hint, my friend,"
 King added - lo, and cured me with a glance.
 Like that, those clothes became just that again:

Familiar fabric, a jacket and pants
 As worn by men. Accordingly I doffed
 My tunic as if hosts of biting ants

Had swarmed it (though it was unearthly soft)
 And, casting it aside, took up my shirt.
 With unaccustomed modesty, King coughed

And dropped her gaze and idly brushed her skirt.
 And having laced my shoes up double-quick,
 I stood all braced to go, each nerve alert,

But Doctor King stayed put. An acting trick?
 "No doubt," I urged, "this chamber has a name?"
 "Indeed," said she; "it's called *Climacteric*."

She spoke with grim-faced seriousness. No game.
 She balanced that brown box as if to heft it.
 "And if I hadn't dressed? Had quit my claim

To these old clothes?" "You never would have left it."
 She overturned the box and let it fall.
 The thing was empty. Then as if bereft, it

Tumbled and lay still like a widow sprawled
 Or crumpled on the floor. And that was when
 King rose and, pushing at the papered wall,

Revealed a swinging door: the plath again.

*

xxxviii.

In Six we faced a warren of cubicles.
Black, polished steel, like prison cells but open

Along their fronts, tight-packed, no cuticle
Of space between each stall, away they mazed
Like circus booths in some inscrutable

Amusement hall. Unmerciful, pale rays
From sad fluorescents lit the unbeguiling
Lanes, so arranged that every cryptlet gazed

Upon its opposite. King led, I filing
In tandem close behind. Cells passed like combs
In some grim hive. King greeted them all smiling.

In one, a former champion Superdome
Player pouted, pondering his loss of vim;
A meganova starlet lacking ohms

Reprised her Oscar speech far from the swim;
A once-acclaimed first-novelist sat slumped
And doodled lists of winning pseudonyms.

Like animals in pets shops who'd been dumped,
Or mangy tigers in some run-down zoo,
They posed like Rodin's "Thinker" - only Stumped.

And then a stranger form halluced in view:
A cell like CBGB's that contained
A woman with an intricate tattoo.

It spawned like heebie-jeebie's from a stain
Upon her forehead spelling "NADA," spread
Down past her eyes in fretwork webs, then rained

Into a Celtic network from which threads
Of vivid technicolor marionette strings
Descended to crochet a chain of zeds;

From there it bled down into Saturn-rings
Around her breasts, down over thighs and calves --
Indelible black fishnets -- patterning

Her livid arms like toxic, Gothic salve.
 So many cheap gold loops curled at her nostrils
 She seemed a spiral notebook, and Zouaves

Could not outdo her costume: thick, colossal
 Government-issue army boots; a frou-frou
 Outlandish skirt; a Disney watch; a hostile

Sharp-studded leather halter that pooh-poohed
 All wooers while still brandishing her spillage.
 With greased-back lampblack hair, with one tattoo too

Many, this woman stood for pure East Village -
 But à la thirty years ago, while she,
 Despite the junk and thrift shops that she'd pillaged,

Was 45 or so. She stared, while we
 Regarded her in her blank voodoo stillness,
 A Walkman feeding punk-rock PCP

Straight to her skull. Anaesthetized by shrillness,
 Like Kafka's penal prisoner wearing text,
 She represented *something*. What her illness

Might be specifically left me perplexed.
 I looked to King, but her gaze, too, opaque,
 Gave me no purchase. Searching what was next

I lurched along with King now in my wake.
 Then one amongst those souls on exhibition,
 Like the real thing amongst a host of fakes,

Brought me up short, and with me my physician.

*

xxxix.

It was a *grande dame* holding court. The faces
Around her, those displays of inanition,

Could not bedim the private, bright oasis
She ruled with her wide gaze. Like some Sumerian
Deity carved on an obsidian basis,

She scanned the air for *devotées*. Her Aryan,
Dyed-gold *bouffant*, stiff-lacquered into horns
Along her clamped-tight, Main Line jaw, planarian

Lips creamed and pressed, her spindle-thin wrists thorned
With jewels, her body clad in cardinal red,
Feet shod in ritzy moccasins adorned

With crests, her bird-legs sheathed in thoroughbred
French silk, her antiqued chair a fragile throne,
She reigned, and had no ilk. And yet a death's-head

Stare - weirdly wide, stock-still - undid the tone.
Its fixity was scary. "This is Nan,"
Said King. Nan's cranium, like radar, homed

Around to trace the noise, and, having panned,
It stopped. The stiff, restricted rictus widened.
I'd seen that picky smile amongst the clan

That haunts the Café Nosidam and, frightened
And trying to evade that glare, stepped back.
Nan sensed my move. Her zombie, tucked eyes tightened.

"Welcome," she gushed, to stall while she ransacked
Her memory to determine who I was.
She knew I wasn't from among her *claque*

But doing - *noblesse oblige* - as royalty does
She held a finger out for me to shake.
"Where have you *beeen*, *chère âme*? And what's the buzz?

Tell all. I hope you're past that *hideous* toothache."
(By now she'd taken me for some dim swell
Who sent her, every Christmas, English fruitcake.)

"Have you seen Oscar? Kitty? John, Adele?
He's priceless, isn't he, and she's so darling.
We met them going through the Dardanelles..."

"*Stop, Nan,*" King interrupted. Almost snarling
At the impolitesse, Nan turned her beak,
A well-brought-up but predatory starling.

And that was when I saw the fear, the weak
And quivering creature underneath, rough-shaken
From some gay dream. "What do you fear, Nan? *Speak,*"

My guide commanded. Nan obeyed, yet quaked
Like some poor lost gamine. "Sleep," she pronounced.

★

xl.

"And why?" King asked. Nan's manicured nails raked

Her forearms and, as she crushed back the flounced
Lace cuffs, revealed blood crusted in long stripes.
The pain kept her awake. "Nan, *why?*" King pounced.

Nan said: "What, miss the latest? Miss the snipes,
The dirt, the chit-chat over bridge, the gossip?
And miss long lunches at Goulue, the hype

About whoever's hot? Suppers at Osip,
Oh, What's-his-name, from Katmandu? His *après-*
Theatre parties?" Spouting like a faucet,

Nan poured it out. "Not *go*? What would they say?
I just don't see the point of sleep. For why
Must we lost consciousness eight hours a day?

And then you wake, and...all is *changed*. You lie
In bed as Nan and rise up...*different*, older,
Ruined perhaps, or sad. Why, people *die*

During the night. No. No! I turn my shoulder.
What in the world could Nature have been *thinking*?
Pourquoi sommeil? *Pourquoi*?" Her fingers, mouldered

With spots, wagged round her eyes (which stayed unwinking)
To banish all such melancholy thoughts.
And then I saw why Nan was so unblinking:

Her eyes were stapled open, lids kept taut
By wires, her dessicated eyeballs cracked
Like desert flats. That's how that staunch queen fought

Sleep's siren song. She was insomniac
By choice. "If anybody asks, I'm here,"
She cried; "Yes, Nan's still here! The Almanach

De Gotha lists my name. Did the Amir
Happen to call? He's such a *nice* man..." Nan's
Skull pivoted, her lean hands locked, her bleared

Gaze scoured the void for visitors, then - trance.
She had forgotten we were there, a stony
God blessing *tout le monde* with her blind glance.

King said: "She's dreaming." In mute testimony,
Nan, like an icon, patron saint of Morpheus,
Blazed on in her lost well. My cicerone

Signalled to me. Like Mercury and Orpheus
We two descended deeper into Hell.

★

xli.

"Who's there?" - The shriek came from an orifice

Just down the row, and woke me from Nan's spell.
Though feeling surer in my new apparel,
I stopped and gawked before the relevant cell.

It was a man in fly-blown drag who'd caroled
In thin falsetto tones that anxious query:
A celebrated former mayor and herald

Of anti-terror blocs, the never-weary
Front-man for red-state pol's and hard-line hawks.
Now here he was, not even a Valkyrie

But more some eerie kewpie doll with locks
Of curling blonde and double-barreled chest.
In pink chiffon, emitting high-pitched squawks

Of glee (about his tatty frock, I guessed)
He primed before a shattered looking-glass
Upon a filthy poof. "Well? How'm I dressed,"

He simpered to his image; "do we *pass*?"
Then, two-faced as Tartuffe, his visage darkened.
"*Kill! KILL the fuckers! Shoot 'em in the ass!*"

Oh, we've been *bad*," he sighed, as if he hearkened
Elsewhere; "Yes, Mom, we promise we'll behave."
(Just then I wondered, what's that line from Larkin

About your Mum and Dad?) "Be brave. *Be brave*,"
He muttered and, with dentures gamely clinched,
He fixed his make-up in his upright grave,

With lighting courtesy of David Lynch.
Then suddenly - with his *toilette* complete,
His faded formal smoothed, his nylons cinched -

He saw me. "Who are you?" he barked; "what street,
Which city spawned you?" - batting his black lashes,
Adding effately: "Don't be indiscreet."

I said: "My cradle was amongst the ashes
And burning sulfur of the hectic mills
Of South Chicago, where the trees and sashes

And walks were powdered with red dust that spilled
 From smokestacks fuming night and day - where garish
 Blast furnaces which since then have been stilled

Lit up the nighttime sky. Between the parish
 And school of the Immaculate Conception
 And great St. Mary Magdalene, whose bearish

And decent people with but few exceptions
 Babbled a mix of Polish and our tongue -
 That islet was where I had my inception.

There, people lived unknown and died unsung.
 I sing them now." "*Throw all those freaks in jail,*"
 That harpy bellowed from his fetid lungs.

His talons gripped his tuffet just as red-tailed
 Hawks hook their razor claws onto a branch.
 I feared he'd swoop down past the unseen pale

Of his dank cell and buzz me, but he stanch'd
 His wrath and sat, a vulpine battle-axe
 Out of deKooning playing *Streetcar's* Blanche.

"What news," he asked, "from *there*? The income tax,
 Has that been lowered? Is there war outside?
 Strikes? Student riots? What about the blacks?"

The words rolled in an incoherent tide,
 As that mad *strega* fixed me with his stare.
 "I'll have you pretties! I'll have all your hides!

Deprive me of my due? Ha! Not a prayer!"
 He shot up, then, a lean transvestite stork,
 And fluffed his wings and crowed, "WE ARE YOUR MAYOR!

And Fear's my state - as great as *all New York*!"
 His cheeks had flushed beneath his flaking rouge
 And glowed with the consistency of pork,

His eyes as black as the canals at Bruges.
 We left to his constituents that zealot,
 As red with rage as un-converted Scrooge.

xlii.

The next cage held a celebrated prelate,
Gowned, too, but in a chasuble of white.
He prayed in cape and slippers of soft velvet -

But facing backwards in his pew, quite tight
(Indeed, pushed right against) the rear wall's plaster
So still he might have been a stalactite.

Thus Six rolled on and on, and, moving faster -
"So have you guessed this ward's subsistent theme,
The essence of its fears?" inquired my Master,

A hinting, glinting, intimating gleam
Of answer in her eyes if one could read them.
"The clothes seem key," I mused; "they're like extreme

Disguises. Costumes..." "That's because they need them
Just a child in costume wants a mirror.
Good God," she snapped, "the signs are there. Just heed them."

"Anxiety..." I posed. - "Good. Getting nearer." -
"You said that it's the basis of the wards
From Four through Six, so this must be severer

Than those two. Four was dread, and Five abhorred
Activity..." "Ergo?" said my explainer.
The answer came to me like a reward:

"Not *self*? Not *essence*?" "Yes. It's a no-brainer.
These patients dread *what makes us human beings*.
For Nan, it's sleep, mere sleep, that has detained her.

Our faded punk Lolita, unforeseeing
She'd get neuralgia, traffics in tattoos
And dated Rock nostalgia, guaranteeing

She'll lack a rock to stand on. Her taboo
Is Time. Our schizo Miss Bo Peep's a case,
For whom the ugly fact connote a crime.

His homeliness, his hairy legs and face,
Our shifting culture wars, life's incoherence,
Its pace - all these he thinks he can replace

With artificial 'prettiness.' *Appearance.*
You see how well that tactic's helped him cope.
(Nixon was here, along with some adherents.)

It's *Change* they all fear - our starlet, pope,
Our football champ... I needn't rattle on.
You understand their existential mope.

Now let's begone."

*

xliiii.

Like an automaton
I trod the plath again, whose swirling vortex
Mimicked my mind's own whirling cyclotron -

Indeed, it seemed some great cerebral cortex
We were descending, coil by coil by coil.
My Virgil there, as resilient as Gore-Tex,

Discoursed on something urgent while we toiled
But nothing seemed to penetrate my mind.
Her fertile words were spent on rocky soil,

As this alone: *Where will I be assigned*
Consumed my brain. The plath was thinning fast,
Meanwhile, from artery to vein, its blind

Curves whipping me along as in some vast
White centripage. The floor felt steeper, too,
As gravity engaged my knees and pressed

Me ever deeper downwards through the mew
Of steadily encroaching walls impelling
Us onwards toward some fated rendezvous.

Mad, inexplicable alarms dispelling
What calm I'd gained blocked all attempts at thought.
I felt I'd fly amok. I felt like yelling.

"...you see my point," said King; "or have you caught
A single word I've said?" - My face my traitor,
Too petrified to speak, too overwrought,

I flushed bright red. My prestidigitator
Sighed: "Panic?" Yes, I nodded. "Well, it's apt,"
She said; "for Panic, like the pia mater -

The third and deepest membrane which holds capped
Our spinal cord and brain - enfolds the theme
Of Seven, Eight and Nine. Panic holds rapt

These inmates who inhabit fear's extreme."
We'd reached a pair of massive cast-iron gates.
Despite their thickness, high-pitched shrieks, mad screams

Of stifled pain transpierced their metal plates,
Assailing us before we'd even strode
Inside. And then, before I could debate,

My host punched in some secret entry code
And signed that I should go in first. I did,
At which the very air seemed to explode.

★

xliv.

It was as if I had removed the lid
 On chaos like some latterday Pandora.
 But here there were no dregs of hope. I'd slid

Into some seething corner of Gomorrah
 When Yahweh torched the cities of the plain.
 The chamber only lacked their flaming aura

And wreaths of drizzling ash. Instead, a rain
 Of icy water showered from the ceiling
 As if to cool these inmates' inner pain.

Yet they, all unaware or else unfeeling,
 Went crashing round or threw themselves about.
 Some simply stood and stared. A number, kneeling,

Wheezed curses to the air with gasped-out shouts,
 Hoarse, Lear-like curses or, wheezing in tongues,
 Babbled mere gibberish. With whips and knouts

Some flogged themselves, rasping from wheezed-out lungs.
 I noticed crucifixes, horseshoes, worry
 Beads, bronze Ganeshas, prayer wheels, patients hung

With garlic, tarot cards, formerly furry
 Rabbits' feet and crystal chains. Some wheezed hymns,
 Some chanted, one man like a one-man jury

Hissed "*Guilty, guilty, guilty!*" - synonym
 (It seemed) for "*Shantih, shantih, shantih.*" Priests
 In collars davened like Hasidim. Grim-

Faced rabbis wheezed from the Koran. Like beasts,
 A clutch of Buddhists far from Om brayed
 In gasping panic. South, north, west and east

All stood united, not because they prayed
 As one, not out of sympathy - but horror,
 And for one reason: they were all afraid.

Now something seemed to change as we explorers
 Attained the seventh chamber's lower end:
 Fewer berserks, an end to the disorder,

Indeed we passed past bedlam to transcend
Its terrors, to what seemed a much less manic
Area.

*

xliv.

King paused where the two halves blended.

"Thus Seven-A. And what, you ask, is Panic?
Disgust and Angst mixed with *imagination* -
A lethal brew that makes the world satanic,

That demonizes things, removes relation
While filling all interstices with fear.
This baseless hyper-intensification

Results in - well, behold. An atmosphere
Of high emergency, impending crash
As fantasy goes manic, domineered

By catastrophic images that flash
Too fast for sense. Your mind, on red alert,
Mints endless horror stories, hence you thrash

Amidst imagined dangers and convert
Our facted world into a magic kingdom
Where black cats bring death that rabbits' feet avert,

And sorcery replaces simple thingdom.
Folks flock to horoscopes, and bottled djinns.
Boxed in, they think a lucky charm will spring them."

"That *wheezing* sound," I said; "does that fit in?"
"Analyze screaming. What's hid underneath?
The body clawing for some air, some wind.

Flee '*demons*' day and night and you can't breathe.
This is why asthma is the typical
Affliction of the panicked, they who wreathe

Their lives in wild, apocalyptical
Fables. But now let's glance at Seven-B."
And moving in from the elliptical

Thick-padded walls, we reached a heavenly
Rest stop set in the center of the ward.
The rains went fizzling out and light now leavened

Shadow. Mad cries ceased and apparent concord,
A peaceful kingdom seemed to lie ahead
As we two ventured on to where a horde

Of inmates gathered in dead silence, spread
 Across the chamber's nave. And yet so silent,
 So still were they, I felt a somber dread

And nearly wanted back the A-half's violence.
 Their palms outstretched, arms cruciform, they knelt
 Like angels on a grave, a monkish island.

Yet they weren't clad in habits or in pelts
 But shirts and shorts and flower-patterned sneakers
 Like some canasta party from the Sunbelt.

Their pastels only made the tableau bleaker.
 And all this time they stayed so strangely still
 Bernini's St. Theresa seemed to shriek

Compared to them. I felt a rippling chill
 At their weird fixity and at their spooky,
 Locked, Nan-like eyes. "This, too, is panic. *Shrill*,"

Said King; "extreme, irreparable, and kooky,
 For here the panic transfers - onto God."

*

xlvi.

Now threading through their ranks, by choice or fluke

King touched a lady clad in goldenrod,
A man in lime. The couple came to life
Like wind-up toys and raised their hands in odd,

Pantomimed prayer. "Have mercy," wheezed the wife.
"Who are you?" asked my guide. "The Lord's condemned,
The living damned, the devil's chosen," fified

The husband, and the couple trembled, hemmed
By fear, still frozen, with eyes like pistols cocked.
One scarcely knew wherefrom their voices stemmed.

"Praise God!" the woman shrieked, but more in shock
Than any kind of joy or exaltation.
That's when I saw their eyes had turned to rocks.

They'd atrophied, were stone. In supplication
I looked to King but she ignored my plea.
"Your greatest fear?" my guide inquired. "Damnation,"

Said they as one. "Your wish?" "The same. For we
Are nothing," said the lady, "we can hope
For nothing but for judgment." "Which will be--?"

"This hour. This moment." And their raised hands groped
And clenched and vacuumed space in tortured writhing.
Their faces, meanwhile, searched like heliotrope

The air above their heads for sun. No tithing,
No prayer, no charity, no penitence
Could save them. They were grass that wanted scything.

"HAIL! HALLELUIAH!" gasped the denizens
Of Seven-B - a cry that froze my marrow.
We left them there, bereft of benisons,

And threaded toward the exit through the narrow
Passage they left. King stopped before the gate
And turned for one last view, while I, still harrowed

By that eruption which so seemed like hate
But should have tokened joy, could not look back.
"Panic, at heart," said King, "is fear of Fate,

Of *what must be*. Necessity's attacks,
For these poor souls, come falling fast. They run -
But life for them's an endless cul-de-sac."

"They're blind," I noted. - "Yes, their martyrdom
Welcomes such blights. Remember: *you'd* be blind
If you stared at the center of the sun

As they do, day and night." And then she signed
For me to take the lead before her. Wary,
I found my way to where I knew we'd find

Our road again.

★

xlvi.

The plath, a capillary
Wrapping the chambers at the clinic's heart,
Just fit us two now. A lost cemetery

Could not have been more still as, scarce apart,
We hiked down to the massy doors of Eight,
Where King pulled back a step to let me start.

As we went in, a roar of shouted hate
Greeted our entry - whether aimed at us
There was no way to tell. Loud, crazed, irate,

Echoing screams percussed and repercussed
Within that deafening hall, its maddened clangor
Rendering it a second Tartarus

As insult, racist accusation, anger,
Invective, sexist slurs, political
Disputes and theological harangues

Combined into a vast, thesitical
Cacophony, a choral ode to scorn,
A Babel of abuse. Uncritical,

King walked along as if that clamorous bourn
Were some pacific vale - that is to say,
She took a liberal approach and warned

Me only with her eyes to mind my way.
Like One, this ward was tiled and, like it, stank.
But here no high-domed vaulting overlay

The place. The ceiling hung so low it sank
To where I felt I almost had to stoop -
Small wonder, for the patients there were ranked

At floor-level, and singly, not in groups.
Instead, each yard or so, six-foot-deep slots
Were set, and upright in each pipe-thin scoop

A person had been inserted like a hot
Test tube into a rack. One size fit all,
So some were tall enough to see, some not.

But seeing those I saw I was appalled,
For they were hardly human anymore.
Mole-like, unindividual, with cauls

Of slimy membrane, sexless, raceless, nor
Equipped with eyes, their ears mere stunted lobes,
Those things were lipless, faceless mouths that roared.

I knew right off these were the xenophobes.
Anonymous as viruses they bleated,
Extending, as we went, their pates like probes,

Seething like escargot when dropped in heated
Butter, and shitting in their holes like babies -
Whence came that stench, for what those things excreted

They trod like grapes for wine.

★

xlvi.

A fear of rabies
(Although my guide and I, in that place, towered)
Made me retreat along the line, or maybe

Repulsion at those things that barked and lowered
And snapped around my ankles. None attacked,
However, for good reason: they were cowards.

"Faggot!" I heard, and "Dago! Honky! Black
Communist motherfucker! Catholic! Jew!"
Still Doctor King ignored those maniacs

As epithets shot out and spittle flew.
The ward seemed endless, black hole upon hole,
Until, as in Ward Seven, we two drew

Into some farther, stiller space, no soul
(Apparently) around us. My rabbinic
Guide paused, to dilate on our mad patrol.

"You might say Eight's the core of this whole clinic,"
My guardian said; "that was Eight-A we passed,
Somewhat more rowdy, more - what - Jacobinic

Than B, which lies ahead..." At that, she cast
Her gaze back toward the horror-show we'd witnessed,
Then on. The Bible's sad ecclesiast

Could not have looked more grave. Ward Eight-A's witless
Chaos seemed nothing to the forward view -
A gloomy wood with pillars of the brittlest

Frailty for trees, like starved black yews.
My guide said, "Xenophobia is the mold
For every fear. It comes - no news to you -

From *xenos*, Greek for *strange*. But *xenos* holds
A wealth of meanings, such as *alien*, *stranger*,
Foreigner. Thus all xenophobes are cold

To anyone who's *other*, who's a changer
Of what for them's the norm. As with all mobs,
Their world is made of X. All Y's are danger."

And then we broached that gloomy wood, macabre
And leafless.

★

xlix.

No birdsong. No sunny shafts
Of light. Occasionally, though, a sob

Or something like it reached us, and chill drafts
Moaning amongst the pillars made me shiver.
We parted low, fine fog like rivercrafts.

Just then I heard a voice, a whispering quiver:
"I would... I would, but..." Just those words. "I would..."
And then I saw a ghost, a solemn sliver,

A naked man who wandered in the white hood
Of his own misting breath. He backed off, face
Toward me, as if thus stalking he withstood

All contact. Paler than his frigid trace
Of icy breath, he swiftly slunk away,
Sighing his words out like a spray of Mace

And saying, "I would, I would, but..." Now, astray
Within that forest I saw other pale
Phantoms like him, frail as *papier mâché*,

Each backwards, each reciting that same stale
Formula of polite, empty regret:
"I would..." The air itself seemed to exhale

Those words like some soft bodiless motet.
Then, further on, beneath a tall black tree
A woman sat in lonely silhouette.

As with the others there, a filigree
Of white mist wreathed her in its atmosphere
Like Saturn's frozen rings. And, seeing me,

She spoke my name. "You're here," she moaned, "you're here...?"
Her words were turned to glittering, stony frost,
An icy wall of tiny, quartz-like tears.

And edging slowly off she soon was lost
Amidst the starved and solitary trees
Where paths emphatically were never crossed.

*

1.

King's arm hooked mine. "You know Diogenes
Went searching with a lamp for wisdom. Well,"
King sighed, "these souls are his antitheses.

They flee it, fleeing love. And that's their hell."
(Just then another wintry phantom eased
Into the shadows, fleet as a gazelle.)

"These philophobes prefer the arctic squeeze
Of single life to the warm vise of marriage.
Oh, yes, they'll take a cruise ship to Belize

And bake in rows on Bali, but disparage
Commitment as if love were lunacy.
So here they shiver in this gruesome, arid

Wood - like-minded but fighting unity;
Nude but not offered; naked, not revealed;
Alone within their own community.

Their skins are ash because their blood's congealed.
They don't respond to speech because they're deaf -
They know the human voice creates a seal

Of sound of which they'd rather be bereft.
Nine waits. Shall we move on?" Like silver solder
She shone. I turned to go. She was more deft.

★

li.

The plath had narrowed to a chute no broader
Than my two shoulders. Light was nearly doused.
I was on point in that defile, my prodger

Close on my heels. My breath, a twitching mouse
Of graying steam, went nosing up ahead
As if to scout out fodder, or some house

That might be friendlier, and less cold. Dread
Pervaded me. I felt I'd seen the worst,
For what could be more desolate, more dead

Than Eight-A's hateful lunatics, more cursed
Than Eight-B's heartless ghosts? The floor a ramp,
It shoveled both my host and me, unheard

Us through a doorway, past some threshold. Damp,
Soft soil was now beneath us - the black, creamy,
Fresh-turned loam of new graves. Without a lamp

We met the low-hung twilight of a dream:
Ward Nine. And understand, this whole long passage
Had been in silence. Anything -- a scream --

Would have been welcome there. What did it presage,
King's taciturnity? It seemed some omen.
But, inked in fear, what doesn't seem a message

Sent from eternity? One scries each moment
For meaning, reads the entrails of each sound
And riddles objects for secret bestowments.

Then I saw something crawling in the ground.
In dirt as black as glistening poppy seeds
That now erupted into tiny mounds,

Some squirmy, opalescent millipedes
(Or something like them) burrowed in the sod
Amongst a few, dry, stunted, withering weeds.

I heard a groan, a hiss, a low "Oh, God...!"
It was as if a graveyard plot had spoken.
They were the cries of those on whom we trod,

For now I realized the earth was broken
Not by insectoid worms - but eyelids, lips,
Bits of bizarre physiognomies that poked up

Just long enough to see us. Back they slipped,
Swiftly reburying themselves like mussels.
Before one face could totally eclipse,

King said, "*Your story*," and the humus rustled
As at my feet a monstrous man emerged,
So sere he seemed to lack red corpuscles,

Dwarfish and bent, with worming eyes that surged
Six inches from his face, wriggling like leeches.
Those writhing tentacles twined and diverged

As if to see and then un-see us. Screeches
Came from his mouth-parts while the thing regressed
And wrung its fingers as if it beseeched us.

*

lii.

"In life, I *needed* fear," the thing confessed;
 "I loved it. Loved the dread, the constant tension.
 I did a lot of drugs but fear's the best.

The whole world feels alert, alive, there's *tension*.
 Anxiety toward sunset... Scalding worms
 Of panic in the subway... Not to mention

The way the ground goes crazy - floors unfirm,
 Sidewalks unsteady, windows give this *quease*...
 It's like you're in some slasher flick. The *squirms*

You feel when fear kicks in like some disease?
 So I turned into this, since I liked dread -
 Something to scare myself, create unease.

A living Halloween mask for a head,
 A dragonfly haunting some somber flume,
 I joined by my own choice the living dead.

Now this morass is where I lie entombed."
 Then something spooked him. Scuttling like a prawn
 He found his hole and vanished in the gloom,

Though at the spot where his grim burrow had yawned
 I saw two glassy spots of phosphorescence,
 Betraying the pit to which he had withdrawn.

Around him lay some other quivering crescents,
 The fetally-curved creatures in the holes
 Where other inmates hid. Their iridescent

Eyes weakly gleamed, like map pins of lost souls.

*

liii.

"Ward Nine," said King; "the phobophiliacs -
For whom fear is essential to their role.

This ring holds our most hopeless maniacs,
Incurables who *need* fear, *want* despair,
Whose frozen inner lake breaks every axe."

She gazed about and said: "This is *my* lair.
My ward. My home. This graveyard is the glade
I come to every night, to drink its air.

But I'm worse off than these dull souls. *I trade*
In fear - inflict and savor it, induce
Anxiety, disgust... *Are you afraid?"*

She asked abruptly. And (it was no ruse)
I answered: "No." For somehow I felt bathed
In grace, sensed some serenity, a truce

With all my fears, as when a flier swathed
In anxious worries over the Atlantic
Sees sky and ocean blend in blue with wraiths

Of inexplicable white light - when panic
Leaves him and all at once he just *agrees*.
I wanted what came next. I wasn't frantic,

But eager, treading gloom like the Dead Sea's
Salt water. Buoyed up, I said once more, "No,
I'm not afraid." King stepped up close and seized

My wrist and peered into my eyes. "You know,
Then, our next stop?" "Nine-B," I said. "Lead on,"
She ordered dryly, carbon eyes aglow.

I turned toward the obscurity where wan
Light dwindled into nothingness. I walked
Straight into it. And then the light was gone.

*

liv.

The darkness now was palpable. It caulked
Sight just like Goya's thick, impastoed black.
Whispers and moans abated. My host stalked

(I knew by sense) directly at my back.
My feet moved surely in the crumbling earth -
As sure as if they somehow knew the track -

Till I heard: "Stop." We'd reached an utter dearth
Of light and sound. Oblivion. A void.
I felt King near me. Her voice touched by mirth,

She asked: "You know my secret, then?" Still buoyed,
I answered, "Yes." The word sank like a stone.
Now I smelt sulfur as a flame destroyed

The dark and King blazed into view, a zone
Of sputtering amber light around her features -
Except it wasn't King's face, but my own.

And then it wasn't me there, or my teacher.
The lab coat fell away, revealing sleek,
Thick, rat-like fur. The fingers of the creature

Extended into claws, the ears grew peaks,
The shoulders heaved out upwards, arms unfurling
To two black wings. The jaws turned to a beak

From which a foot-long tongue extended, purling
In the dark air between us, licking space.
Then that thing spoke, lips (what had been lips) curling.

"So now you know the fear all phobics face,"
It hissed. "Yes. Life," I answered. Then it roared:
"And what they lack?" "Yes. Patience, which is grace."

"And are you ready," asked that minotaur,
"To be assigned?" I nodded, answering: "Yes."
A wind blew out the match as if some door

Had opened. Walls dissolved. Dark deliquesced.
I found myself in open air again
As, all around, a landscape coalesced.

★

lv.

The city, Easter morning, 3 a.m.
The moon still floated high, a radiant raft,
But night was waning. There it blazed. *Ward Ten*:

Building on building, each like some gray lovecraft
Spun out, a die on earth's frayed green-felt table.
Yesterday's papers flying in their draft,

Lone riders drove beneath the Bridge's cables
Under an arched epiphany of sky.
I stood back where I'd started out this fable,

Amongst the city's nighthawk passersby,
The beggars, cyclists, patients on the mend,
Suicides searching for a place to die...

I felt the nighttime and the morning blend
And breathed in air with spring and summer crossing.
A single ferry left its slip to wend

Its way and seemed afloat on nothing, tossing
Upon a void it parted like a blade,
A sparkling toy perched on funereal frosting.

I turned and went my own way, unafraid.
Beyond the Bridge's gates the world's bazaar
Awaited me, all gaudily arrayed,

And as I entered, as I crossed that bar,
I sensed myself alive in that great city
Bejewelled by a trillion fading stars.

- end -