\* C i r c l e s \*

Three Days in a Life

Arthur Chapin

I.

Wednesday

1.

A middle-of-the-road dismay

 Came over me halfway through the week

 About the midpoint of the day.

I shelved obscure desires I spoke

 To no one of, and, having had

 Myself the salvage of a lunch break

(Roast beef that hadn’t yet gone bad—

 I wolfed the portion I could eat

 And stowed in the fridge, in a glad-

Bag, the remainder to reheat.)

 Back in the woods again, I crept

 Among the pulp trees of defeat.

No climb’s so steep or so abrupt

 As measuring with level tread

 The outstretched plain to which I’d stepped

That morning from my campsite bed.

 The night before, I’d set the clock;

 Oblivion grew inside my head—

And then the beeped alarums shock

 My body from its ignorant snuggling.

 Safe in the warm and foamy shirk

Of sleep it nods—till dawn comes jiggling

 Lethe’s inflated swimming pool

 And drags me dripping from it, haggling

For ten more minutes in the thrall

 Of amniotic Heaven, as in

 A fog I stumble down the hall.

The star that rules our day has risen

 Twenty degrees into the blue

 Capacious vault that roofs this prison,

And robbed the flowers of their dew,

 By the time I sit down to scrape

 Cold butter on my toast, and brew

The black and bitter foe of sleep,

 Crushed from the beans of Juan Valdez.

 I bring myself to the bus stop

And stand there waiting in a daze

 Till the bus comes, and I get on.

 Virgil the driver nods and says

*Good morning*, with a stifled yawn.

 No room to sit: this hearse is crammed;

 And Virgil guides the thing downtown.

He drops me at a traffic-jammed

 Intersection. I cross the street

 And reach the Office of the Damned.

Over the plate-glass doors, in neat

 Lettering: *RESIGN YOURSELVES, ALL YOU*

 *WHO ENTER HERE* stands out to greet

The visitor, and the hapless crew

 Who wear their day to dusk in gray

 Rooms here, as I’m about to do.

Virgil is half a mile away

 By now, picking up stiffs and letting

 Them off.—For in the waxing day,

The numbers grow, hallways are getting

 Filled up with filers up-and-down,

 Faxes are chirping, phones are bleating,

Computer and neon lights switch on,

 And soon those well-lit pockets jingle

 With a loose change of smirk and frown:

Jokes and scuttlebutt intermingle

 Around a desk or coffee maker;

 Paper wads crepitate, ears tingle

All along each carpeted acre

 Of these eternal office spaces

 Amid grisailles of neutral décor.

Some will put on screensaver faces:

 Flying toasters or floating fish,

 Or a test-pattern’s spectral stasis;

One face will bare a phosphorous gash

 Burnt into it like a dueling scar;

 Others are desk tops, with a trash

Icon in the corner; some are

 Ragged first drafts, who barely wince

 At their misspellings, but must share

The block-style memos of their sins.

 Some spit out a misfiring byte;

 Others are blank and darkened screens,

For someone has switched off their light.

2.

The sky’s a hazy glass, and pressed

 Against it is the sun’s white knuckle.

 The hours stand waiting to be passed.

Now I must broach the Janus circle

 Where every face you think you know

 Has two sides, like a tarnished nickel:

A statesman and a buffalo,

 A human and a beast.—Among

 These double visages I go,

Suspicious of each double tongue

 That works the doubtful syllables

 On which duplicitous meanings hang;

Like one who runs a gauntlet false

 On either side, I greet each pair

 Of faces as I walk these halls.

And neither face appears aware,

 Despite its flipside’s whispered cursing,

 That the other face is even there,

But keeps inanely chatting, forcing

 A smile that tightens to a smirk

 Like that of one forever nursing

Vague grudges at their secret work.

 No matter which of her two faces

 I face, I meet the same bland look,

For both can quickly change their places,

 So that the cursing face is always

 The hidden one, whose only trace is

A growl that Dopplers down the hallways

 In the opposite direction from

 The purring sounds made by the doll-face.

And still you hear their ominous hum,

 The words behind the words she speaks:

 They cling like static to each name,

Like crackling thorns, or pylon sparks,

 But cannot be distinctly heard,

 Just as, behind the fact that smirks,

The one that scowls must be inferred

 Like the dark side of the moon, that shares

 Its secrets only with the void.

Caught sideways, though, and unawares,

 The full monstrosity’s revealed:

 One looks in horror, and compares

The doll-face, amiable and mild,

 With the harsh Punch-and-Judas gargoyle

 That glares the other way, with wild

Unbridled spite, its eyes a boggle

 Of envious daggers, and its mouth

 A twist of spittle, in which a gargle

Of slanders can be heard to seethe.—

 And thus the piteous grotesque

 Whose answers point both north and south

To any question you may ask,

 Like a nightmarish signpost, putters

 Past you blithely to her desk,

While each of the two profiles chatters.

3.

Now for the third time since I got

 Here, Virgil passes on his way

 Down Main Street, while the aureate blot

Of the great star that lights our day

 Burns from the zenith.—Gritty and greasy

 Is the air outside. A plastic tray

Slices into the microwave; a lazy

 Turn or two, a sizzle, and back

 Out slips the nutrient; it’s so easy.

Here in the Circle of the Slack

 Where an observer should infer no

 Kind thoughts from smiles, nor turn his back,

Habitués of habit earn no

 Richer reward for toil than sleeping;

 Here small blue flames, as from a Sterno,

Cook discontentment at a creeping

 Boil, in the tin pan of the heart.

 Resentment’s incense smolders, heaping

The shrines of Tiki gods, apart

 In cubbyhole cabals.—Low-calorie

 Snack foods: what spirits will you start?

Who from the gods’ ethereal gallery

 Would lean down to inhale the smell

 Of tofu, carrot juice, and celery?

And if I climbed down from this cell

 On tough-linked sheets of terza rima,

 Would the path lead where all is well?

Where the soul’s waterlogged edema

 And hemorrhage of helplessness,

 Where ghoul-cheeks slathered with Noxzema

Of blandness and a *politesse*

 Of *eau de Whited Sepulcher*

 Can’t creep, or seep?—My noontime mess

(Consisting of that leftover

 Meat) having been deposited

 Inside my belly, there is stir

Down there, and throbbing in my head.

 I turn back to the screen’s cold light.

 Do I hear flittings of the Dead

Outside my window, venting spite?—

 Ah, they must be the strangled cries

 Of last night’s dream, that now repeat

Their undigested miseries

 Across my mind’s remembering screen.

 Out of the water cooler these

Escaped, in the office’s canteen.

 The fluid in that container glinted

 A color I had never seen,

A dark yet ghostly red. I squinted,

 Wondering if madness was my lunch;

 My nostrils wrinkled; the air hinted

At what smelled something like fruit punch.

 Two taps it had, this water cooler,

 Red for hot, blue for cold. My hunch,

In this dream, is that one’s the color

 Of anger, while the other is

 Of sorrow’s hue: spirits of choler

And melancholy dwell in this

 Translucent plastic cistern, trembling

 In terror of unwilled release.

I press the blue tap: down comes mumbling

 A sort of lukewarm drool: *I’m doomed*,

 The spigot speaks, its voice resembling

That of some spirit long entombed,

 So flat the sound, of all strength sapped.

 *I’m so depressed. I never assumed*

*My destiny was to be trapped*

 *In a five-gallon carboy.—*“Sir,”

 I asked the liquid (for I hoped

To avoid the sin that sealed him there),

 “Say by what twist you ended up

 In this odd place, shedding a tear

To brim a flimsy paper cup

 At any office worker’s whim,

 Powerless on your own to stop?”

*You task me greatly, stranger: grim*

 *It is to spill a poisoned soul.—*

 *I had a business, sir, a dream…*

*Yet I invested like a fool*

 *My trusting funds, and saw my bright*

 *Futures sink into a red hole.*

*Indictments fell… I had not thought*

 *Debt could undo so much. The glad*

 *Loud world cared nothing for my plight,*

*And in the bright Mall, I was sad.*

 *l listened to a metal muzzle,*

 *And took its word: an end was had.*

*Now, in a slack and hopeless drizzle*

 *I bleed my sorrow on command*

 *To wet a casual stranger’s whistle.—*

*As now I feel your pressuring hand.*

 *I beg you, sir: release your grip.—*

 I do as asked: once more, an end

Is had.—And now I press the tap

 Beside it. Out it sputters, hot

 And harsh, red as the spigot’s cap,

A steamed and pissy liquid threat

 To scald all rash, intruding fools

 Who force it from its cool redoubt

 And seethe it through the inciting coils

 That torture its molecules to such

 A pitch that like Cain’s blood it boils.

“What spirit are you?” I venture. *Catch*

 *My hate!* it hisses, spitting a spurt

 Of it straight at the lips through which

Words of inquiry dared to blurt.

 In the nick of time I flinch aside.

 “Why do you rage like this?” *I hurt!*

*I hurt! Murder is suicide,*

 It bubbles. *Suicide is murder—*

 *What’s the difference? No one can hide.*

*And you there, mediocrity’s martyr,*

 *Why do you let these paltry lives*

 *Cling to their puny law and order*

*Like egg yolk on a wall? Will knives*

 *Scrape off this sticky mess? No, fire*

 *Alone will do it, cleansing waves*

*Of blister and backdraft. You should wire*

 *This hole with high explosives, blast*

 *It straight to Hell! That’s your desire,*

*Your zeal: why let it go to waste?*

 I lift my palm: cut off behind,

 The last drops of the fury haste

Away, like snakes into the sand.

4.

Now, meanwhile, Virgil turns around

 A fourth time on the asphalt limbo;

 At the bus stops they wait; they stand;

They slouch; they scowl, with arms akimbo:

 The young tough, old *petit rentier*,

 Bag lady, student, small-town bimbo.

The star that sheds the light of day

 Groans in its dirty crystal sphere

 Toward the West, with slanted ray,

And Virgil’s thinking: *Getting here*

 *Is easy, but the long trip back*

 *Along the same route: that’s the chore.*

Out on the parking lot’s hard black

 Savannah, meanwhile, you will find

 Me tracing a slow circle, flick

After flicker of Bic-spark and

 Puff after puff of cigarettes

 Spooring the path I’ve taken, round

And round the Volvos and Corvettes,

 Trailed to the weedy railroad tracks

 By a dutiful cortège of thoughts.

The circle of my smoking breaks

 Is broken by long interludes

 Of paperwork whose inky wake’s

A dull black block of words and words.

 Sometimes my gaze will wander out

 Through the glass pane that brightness floods,

Against the current of the light

 (As salmon buck the muscling falls),

 To touch atop the neighboring height

Of a parking garage, where pulls

 And pushes of the air distend

 A flapping wind-sock. On it flails,

Inspired by breeziness to tend

 Whichever way it happens to,

 Helping the helicopter land

With pointings casually true.

 The chopper is *Pegasus*, its high

 And sacred calling to pursue

Errands of merciful urgency,

 Carrying in its belly hurt

 Bodies across the screaming sky

To where the Aesculapian art

 Will salvage whom and what it can.

 And the wind-sock also plays its part,

Guiding the bladed angel down

 To the safe circle of its stall.—

 The anadromous gaze will then return

To the screen, the carpet and the wall,

 Having mated its longings with

 Grander gyrations for a while,

Smearing the air with a roe of myth.

5.

A further fraction of its pie

 The sun has eaten as it strolls

 Across a boulevard of sky;

Like a spent penny, on it rolls

 Toward the gutter in the West,

 Scattering the sort of gold that fools

In dreams find in old treasure chests.

 Along the baked-red buildings, thin

 Shades lead the pigeon to its nest

On a high ledge.—As shadows lengthen,

 Tempers lose inches from their span

 While vehicles congeal to strengthen

Exhaustive stench: a car, a van,

 A truck, pooling their choked horsepowers,

 Prolong the acrid caravan.

Slowly the sun ticks off the rush hour’s

 Measure; the steel jitterbugs eat

 The inches.—Up the asphalt steers

Virgil to where soft cushions wait

 For the impress of my weariness.

 The TV stores a bulging freight

Of evening news it will release

 With one touch of the black remote

 Into a jaded consciousness.

The rest is easy, on a float

 Of cloudy sheets, and soothing stupor

 Pierced by the shrill staccato note

Of the alarm clock; then the copper

 Encroachments of a Thursday morning

 Will guide the stumblings of a groper

Toward the coffee, and the burning

 Of daily bread, till it is toast;

 Toward the bus stop, and the groaning

Of brakes as the long silver beast

 Comes to a halt, and takes him on,

 And Virgil nods, and down they coast

Toward the place to which he’s drawn

 Like a small metal filing to

 A magnet, as the fading dawn

Gives way to what the day must do.

 And all the gestures, all the words

 And tasks that Habit will run through

Circle his brain like asteroids.

II.

Thursday

1.

This morning’s startling event

 Is the loud flash and brute careening

 Of fire engines, three, hell-bent

To douse disaster somewhere, keening

 And honking through the intersection

 Toward some distant building burning,

And off they go in their direction.

 Virgil drives on. Time will not stay.

 We reach my stop. A disaffection

In the rear door mechanism’s play

 Makes it unwilling to admit me

 Into the sunny Dis of day.

I ring the bell. Does Virgil slight me,

 That he will not release the gate?

 I call his name, and look about me

Like one whose business cannot wait.

 I walk to the front exit, stiff,

 Pale, purse-lipped, looking neither right

Nor left, and ask good Virgil if

 Some glitch it was that barred my way

 Back there. *Look here, if you’ll just give*

*Me time to help these others, hey!*

 *You’ll get your chance.—*“I didn’t mean

 To give you grief!”—*Okay, okay.*

*Take care now.*—”Yeah, you, too.—And on

 He drives. I walk the pavement. (True

 Enough: we get our chances.) Down

From the sky’s white, intensive glue

 Already the sun’s harsh rays bore in

 On the sticky air I wade into.

The parking lot, no longer barren,

 Boasts a metallic crazy quilt

 Watched by that weary, landlocked Charon

 Stranded inside a toll booth built

 To enclose, at most, one harmless troll.

 I step onto the hot black veldt

Where idle vehicles graze, and call

 A greeting as I pass the booth.

 A mumble and a cough is all

The sad gatekeeper can unearth

 From the deep tar pit of his lungs,

 From which is wheezed a smoky wreath

To halo a vague *Hello*.—It hangs

 Doubtful in the air, then shies away

 Nebulous on its wispy wings.

I enter. There is *hi* and *hey.*

 I feel the elevator slough

 The floors. Then, like a tired cliché,

It utters me, its manners gruff.

 Around the clock-face creep the hands.

 Across the rug my old shoes scuff

Their wonted way. My brain commands

 My fingers down the long gray groove

 And carpal tunnel of their rounds.

Down there, the silvery lozenge of

 Virgil’s bus groans slowly by.

 Has an hour passed? Seen from above,

The steel roof absent-mindedly

 Reflects the sun’s increasing brightness

 Into the squinting of the eye.

Up here, in all its dirty whiteness,

 Bird dung clings to the windowpane,

 As it has clung, through drought and wetness,

Like slices of a lab rat’s brain

 Smeared on a sterilized Petri dish—

 While fingers at a keyboard strain

To align and justify a mush

 Of neutral, soporific prose.

 The bleak, anonymous white wash

Of scientific drivel flows

 Anemically as centrifuged

 Blood plasma from a hamster’s nose,

An epitaxic drool massaged

 To bring the right conclusions out,

 Tweaked and procrusteanized and fudged

So that the Tantalus of doubt

 Can’t grasp the plump refuting fruit.

 And like Ixion, turned about

On the anguished axle of his fate,

 Coveted funds, behind the scene,

 Spin on a wheel and beckon; mute

Anxieties peep from between

 The voiceless lines, that seem so sober;

 As in casinos, over the green

Baize roulette table, gamblers hover

 In hope that Fortune’s gifting finger

 Will point their way, that chips may cover

Them to the eyes, and sate their hunger

 For Victory’s cornucopian feast;

 So in the textual corners linger

Furtive, nervous careers, a taste

 Of strict, Pavlovian spittle, a hint

 Of blood spilled in unseemly waste

For the sweet pellet of a grant.

 The spendthrift slaughter of the dumb,

 The miser’s thrift that won’t consent

To share a hoard of facts: both come

 In the end to a single vice,

 And single is their final doom:

To go down to the stony place

 And lie there with the lambs that gave

 Their lives to nourish their CVs,

And share with them oblivion’s grave.

 Having extracted beads of data

 From its white-coated drones, the hive

Flings them on dung heaps of errata;

 Findings are lost amid the Babel

 Of facts, or turn out not to matter,

And arguments spring holes that bubble

 To make a logic of Swiss cheese:

 What Time’s white mice forget to nibble

Funds the research of mites and fleas.

2.

Let me pass over at a glance

 The other, usual, painless torments

 A self-respecting grind demands:

In a few brief and catty moments

 The stultifying office supplies

 Are inventoried, and their omens

Spelled out—since all their prophecies

 Are filled, like purchase orders, daily.

 Why pay the consultation fees

The Sibyl charges? Things stand fully

 Clarified, in their loose-leaf binders,

 Just as they are.—And so I duly

Detail the dreary inverse-splendors

 Of the production cycle, hauling

 Its boulder till the bolus blunders

Up to the deadline, then comes rolling

 Back down with the resounding thud

 Of an unclappered church-bell’s tolling;

The laborings of a Danaïd

 At the inboxes’ bottomless sieve;

 And, stretched and pegged across the broad

Acreage of his fiscal grief,

 His living’s bracketed liver pecked

 By tithe and tax, the Tityus of

A paycheck whimpers to inspect

 The attritions feeding bit by bit

 An appetite that’s never slaked,

As marginal losses eke a fate:

 The squeezed horizon of a life

 Thinned like a snail to gorge the State.

The stale of lumpen-hopes is rife

 In the sealed air; the bulging drawers

 That optimism strives to shove

Into the cabinet only force

 The other bulging drawers out.

 Insoluble Rubik’s Cube! These paws

Will never stumble on the art

 To slide your pieces into place:

 Always the odd piece stands apart—

As in my dream, before this brace

 Of file drawers, with their sifted duff

 Of manuscripts and yesterdays,

I stood last night, and heard a cough.

3.

It rose from this same cabinet

 (Grown tall and smoky in the gloom):

 With rusty groans a drawer slid out,

And from its depths, with strange aplomb,

 A shape sat upright. Proud, undaunted,

 He hailed me from that metal tomb:

*You there, whose words perturb these haunted*

 *Halls with moist, vivid puffs of breath,*

 *Whose footsteps press with such unwonted*

*Weight on the dim rugs underneath:*

 *Who are you, and what business brings*

 *You living through the House of Death?*

*For something in your accent rings*

 *Familiar. Speak your lineage.*

 “My forebears went with the first throngs

Of faithful on that pilgrimage

 That breasted the Atlantic flood

 To this new Eden, foiling the rage

Of King Charles and his henchman, Laud.”

 *So did mine, sir. Our fathers built*

 *On the rock of piety, blood, and fraud*

*A nation gilded with their guilt.*

 *I was called Pincheon, Dr. Pincheon.*

 *He whom you see here, sheathed to the hilt*

*In steel, once dwelt in a great mansion,*

 *And kept dark secrets in his purse.*

 *Ancestral names I shall not mention*

*Are mingled at our bloodstreams’ source.*

 *Captains on land and sea, they roamed*

 *And raged at what they saw, a curse*

*That poisoned the sun’s rays, that lamed*

 *The innocence of the fertile meadow*

 *And held it, quivering and damned,*

*Over Hellfire, like a black widow.*

 *A forked lens, rooted in its faith,*

 *Sought out the Pure, and maimed its shadow.*

*How many met a gallows-death*

 *Because of what that sore eye saw?*

 *And on a flowering woodland path*

*Amid the freshets and the thaw,*

 *It looked about, and met Old Scratch*

 *And struck the old bargains with his law.*

*In those same bargains we grew rich.*

 *And when fresh laws of evolution*

 *Burst on our fusty souls, the switch*

*Was easy to that Dispensation.*

 *Darwinian prophecies came true:*

 *A profitable, pragmatic nation*

*Throve on uprootings of the New;*

 *To these we were committed as*

 *To Bedlam. Now the rational brew*

*Of science was our drug, the glass*

 *Beaker the monstrance of our faith,*

 *Experiment our sacred Mass.*

Thus spoke the gaunt, majestic wraith.

4.

“What fate has placed you here?” I ask

 “Pray tell me, sir, the reason why

 This vault impounds your haughty husk.”

*Look down into this drawer, and spy*

 *The business that proceeds herein.*

 I look, and see the space grow high

And broad, and as my eyes begin

 To feel their way through the darkness,

 I see thin figures, alien,

Green-skinned, small-mouthed, expressionless

 And beady-eyed, in clean white coats:

 There is a lab in that recess,

A gleam of Pyrex, Bunsen plates,

 A polished floor, and instruments

 Of rare device, and blinking lights.

I watched the impassive aliens

 Fix a bright halo round his head,

 Of some unearthly alloy. Tense

Was his expression as they screwed

 It on. *Let Marsyas be unsheathed*

 *By Phoebus from his skin!* he cried.

*Let me be cleansed as I am scathed!*

 *To honor Progress I have warmed*

 *This cauldron where my sins are seethed.*

*Experiments must be performed,*

 *And sacrifices made, involving*

 *Incisions… No matter. I am harmed*

*To heal. My death will help in solving*

 *Ills that still plague these aliens*

 *Despite their far-advanced evolving.*

*By the rule that homo sapiens*

 *Invokes—the power of a god*

 *Over beasts of lesser sentience*

*On evolution’s pyramid—*

 *By this same universal rule*

 *Must mankind bow its shaven head*

*And yield before the higher Will*

 *That comes from outer space to plant*

 *Bolts and electrodes in the skull.*

Sudden volts shock his nerves and stint

 His speech: his helpless features twitch.

 A gamma knife round his compliant

Cranium carves a circle such

 That in a flash the skull bone opens

 Like a tin can; skilled fingers touch

The glistening lobes, the veins’ blue ribbons;

 With virtuosity they play

 This organ: puppet-music happens

With each deft probe: they make him say

 The alphabet, spew a thick string

 Of curses, speak in tongues, and pray.

Then, bored with all this doodling

 On the keyboard of his Id,

 They walk away and leave him twitching

As best he can inside the rigid

 Stereotactic frame that locks

 His skull in place—then he is dead.

And then he lives! For the same shocks

 That put him down now galvanize

 His corpse, and startled he awakes

To smile and sing before my eyes.

 Another jolt: dead. One more buzz

 Electric and I watch him rise

Again, this techno-Lazarus.

 It could go on like this forever,

 And for all I know, it does,

The deep experiment, the clever

 Game.—And who knows what *Über*-Über-

 Puppeteer’s’ hand is on the lever

That works the wires that make *them* slobber,

 These aliens that control the men

 Who slice the beast that gnaws the tuber?

Off to the side, relaxed and green

 In their exclusive fellowship,

 These scientists nibble on their thin

Hors-d-oeuvres, spread on a microchip:

 Neurons culled from their stock of humans,

 Cured on a Plexiglas coverslip.

Then, answering to some lofty summons,

 The Doctor shrinks into his drawer.

 I close it tight, with all its omens,

And walk away from the sealed horror.

5.

The sun, the sun, the blinding, burning

 Sun is barking its dog-star dazzle

 Garishly through the haze; and, scorning

To keep one post for long, or muzzle

 Its brilliant gall, it bursts the cloth

 Of cloud its singeing fire-spokes frazzle

And shoulders its way along the path

 That slopes into the afternoon.

 And in the light’s insoluble math

Eyes puzzle at windows, looking down,

 Up, or across, and quietly graze

 The tendered answers of the town,

Torched here and there into a glaze

 Of livid, sparked reflection by

 The random arson of those rays.

While salvos drop down from the sky,

 Virgil’s plying the asphalt waves,

 Braving the brunt and rivalry

Of bumpers, till the bus arrives

 At the foot of the hill that leads

 Up to the house where someone lives

A life I must call mine.—He heads

 With effort up the steep, as if

 Some purgatorial strain pervades

The action, like a ritual grief

 Whose cleansing force is a wan hope.

 Tomorrow is another leaf.

He turns it over in his sleep.

 The dream-worm inches underground,

 Shuffling the topsoil in his grope

For any good that might be found.

 While, falling from the unconscious sky,

 A spill of needles pricks the land:

Pin-light from distant nebulae.

III.

Friday

1.

Friday, good Friday—an exhaustion,

 A juvenation, dust and yeast—

 Walks like a nude, primeval Christian

From the livid leaven in the East.

 To the sky’s lily pallor it pins

 A mystic rose with petals creased

By martyrous crimsons. The air thins

 As it expands, and brightens, too,

 And this is how the day begins.

Beneath a broad and beaten blue,

 The sky models its azurewear

 Above my head as down into

The street I go, to smoke, and stare

 Into the distance while I stand

 Beneath the sign whose painted flare

Of sunshine parodies the grand

 Prime symbol that enlightens us.

 I grind the butt into the ground

And mount the steps into the bus.

 Brief greetings are exchanged between

 Virgil and me; then, as he does

Five days a week, as he has done

 For thirty years or more, he steers

 The wheezing metal Geryon

Back into traffic, with its gears

 And muscling pistons whining. Skill

 Of hand and footwork guides the fierce

Riveted monster over hill

 And hollow, past the river, round

 The corners, pliant to his will.

It leaves a trail of smoke behind;

 We pick up riders as we go;

 Like licorice spools, the streets unwind.

Downtown, lined neatly in a row

 Like dunce-caps, orange traffic cones

 Shepherd the vehicular flow

Around the bricks and dusty stones

 Of the construction sites, and guide

 Us to our several destinations.

I thank good Virgil for the ride.

 *Take care*, he says, and off he drives.

 The office is a beaming bride

This Friday, and a brilliance lives

 In the clear windows of her eyes;

 The sun, a groom, sends down in waves

The morning glory of his rays.

 And my eyes, too, are all attention,

 My heart a lamp of shining praise

In the elevator’s brisk ascension.

2.

Makeshift, festooned apotheosis

 Ribbons the walls with bright galore,

 And Janus smiles from both her faces.

Along its length the office floor

 Hums with festivities afoot

 In honor of the Editor,

The Presence in the candid coat

 Whose day of birth it is today.

 The conference table is a gloat

Of viands fit for a gourmet:

 Fine wines of noble purple gleam

 In bottles… On a silver tray

Is spread a god’s ambrosial dream:

 Brie and baguette, and caviar,

 Slices of salmon, pink spring lamb…

And twinkling like the morning star

 Are the eyes of Leah the Devoted,

 Active to prime the works of cheer,

Fluttering around us, dedicated

 To making the details just so.

 This day is to be celebrated

As pious choirs in candle-glow

 Sing the solemnities of Mass,

 And fragrant round the table grow

The praises, with the tinkling brass

 Of jokes, like incense from the censer.

 On the cake, a delicate lace

Of lettering spells out, like the answer

 To a prayer, his simple name.

 Appreciative Rachel lends her

Voice loudest to the exhorting hymn.

 Over the frosting’s squiggled Staff-

 Of-Hermes symbol, the flames dim,

Then die in smoke, as with a puff

 The Eminence blows the candles out.

 Now hands applaud, and voices laugh.

Around the table and its cohort

 Of glitter and flavor, do we make

 A living emblem of a sort,

Perhaps a rose such as might wake

 At dewy dawn to the sun’s greeting?

 And isn’t the healthy surgeon—spick

And span in his white raiment, meeting

 All smiles, all praise, with deprecation—

 A modest sun himself, whose lighting,

For all its unassuming fashion,

 Dazzles the eye, it is so clear—

 Or puzzles it, with practiced motion

Along the precincts of its sphere,

 Surrounded by its dominations,

 Powers and thrones, and golden fire?

Jovial, Lucullan ablutions

 Coax the last stigma of complaint

 From souls, and what is left is patience;

Till the soul rises, cleansed and pliant

 To win the recommending smirk

 Of its advance, however faint.

Now a word from our sponsors: *Merck*

 Of manual fame: *Du Pont*, whence Tridil™,

 Whence strict Vincristine’s™ healing work;

*Lederle*, of Haloperidol™;

 *Geigy*, who wafts us fresh Brethaire™;

 *Abbott,* maker of Placidyl™;

I mention *Nutripharm and Pfizer*

 As well, and *Glaxo*, and *Parke-Davis;*

 *Central,* who makes all Theoclear™;

*Corning*, so staunch and vitreous—

 And those divisions who with one

 Strong voice can sing: “We’re *Beatrice*!”

Before the interested sun.

3.

Management’s blossoming, but labor

 Is wilting. Nothing moves so slow

 As the clock-hands, when lunch is over.

When has the traffic down below

 Seemed farther away, of less concern

 To me its loud, litigious flow

Than now it seems, in its dark burn

 Of fossil wastes, that rutted groove

 Addicted to its own return?

And from a point still higher above

 This tiny, fat blue wandering sphere,

 How must the earth look, in dissolve,

From the swift craft the aliens steer

 Into their milky asterisks?

 Rotund little centrifuge, who scour

Such prayers and curses from our husks!

 Each day you separate the goat’s

 Blood from the sheepish plasma; whisks

Of weathering rinse our globuled fates;

 Do residues of words endure?—

 Call them your wept precipitates.

Look at your Pyrex threshing floor,

 So black where asphalt carpets park,

 So cracked where mountainous buildings soar…

Who made this shambles of your ark?

 Maybe those small green angels tote

 Some remnant specimens, a flake

Of salvage to their distant port;

 My only vessel is a poem

 Where safe sham animals may sport.

There is a poem out there, an emblem

 Launched by NASA, flying or floating

 Somewhere through time and space: it’s Adam

And Eve, hands raised in peaceful greeting—

 Or is it a Pharaoh’s tomb and curse?

 *Shalom*, farewell, forever receding?

Does the star-map of our address

 (That invitation, stowed on board)

 Point back to a gutted childhood house?

The sense lies latent in the blurred

 Light years… In a dazzling screen of fire

 I see your ambiguous futures breed,

O parent-children, wizened pair

 Who were earth’s Purgatory once:

 Adam and Eve… You’re in whose care,

Safe in what transgalactic haunts

 Where dangerous and endangered species

 Lie down together? Something wants

A willed-life refuge, a force that washes

 The ancient saline sea of tears

 From the drowned meadow of our wishes;

Where, fed on its own pharmacopeias,

 The heart’s hurt, murderous martyr rests.

 Faint on the screen of these ideas,

Celestial conservationists

 Watch from the margins of that haven,

 Concentric round those conscious beasts

Saved from the charnel gravity oven.

 Call them control gods in a dream-

 Hypothesis that’s never proven,

These gods, superhumane to farm

 And pasteurize our hurts and evils

 In a mild stereotactic frame.

(If offices, jails, and hospitals

 Were half as kind, who would not sue

 To be confined within their walls?

If this is punishment, then so

 Is Heaven.)—On these plastic keys

 I type the wiry, bounding halo

That girds the sober ecstasies

 Of the recovering miscreants there, as

 They walk the Garden of Therapies.

With wan smiles they trade the drunk-stories

 Of History between sips of water,

 Shuddering at those dubious glories:

Exile, and sacrifice, and slaughter…

 But here the spirit’s anvil-burden

 Lightens, until it doesn’t matter:

Reward is telepathic, sudden,

 When, from a green, vestigial mouth,

 A Word irradiates this Garden,

Adam and Eve, with beads of Truth;

 In beamed neutrinos of a Blessing

 Your dendrites bloom with shocks of youth;

Word without words, it needs no guessing:

 *Life Without End.*—There is no other

 Happy ending.—Switched off, the amazing

Screen goes blank. Outside, shadows gather.

4.

The star that slumps into the West

 At evening has begun to do

 Just that—but in the streets, unrest

Holds sway: we hunker in a stew

 Of smoke and sweat; despite the terse,

 Punctual klaxons, a stagnant slew

Of backed-up cars, sits, stinks, and sours

 On freedom’s brink. Friday’s fried egg,

 Left on the hot hood of the hours,

Has hardened like a shriveled dug.

 Pent-up motility’s frustration

 Grits its gear-teeth for lurch and jag;

Bumper-curses enmesh the station

 Wagons and the hatchbacks in gross,

 Inching aggregates; screeched aggression,

Submissive postures, spurts of gas

 And adrenalin prick the fight-or-flight

 Of wheels, and stress their steering egos.

Having escaped that jangling riot,

 I’m home at last. And is it good?

 The bruised dogs of my feet grow quiet.

Pregnant with its gestated brood

 Of daily news, the TV spills

 The ongoing pangs of this wide world.

A lightning-swift conatus pulls

 The effortless gaze into whatever

 It sees there on the screen, in shoals

Of beamed electrons, flying over

 The parceled globe on wings of Hermes.

 Take in the unctuous palaver

Of the Evangelist, his armies

 Of sheep filling the stadium;

 Over the planet’s epidermis

Cut in a tingle to the dome

 Of a white mosque, and crowds at prayer—

 Or to another stadium, home

To rallies held in North Korea:

 See horrid flowering crowds compose

 Crowdflowers to worship an Idea,

The abstract ideological rose

 Armed with the thorns of actual Power,

 Gunpowder incense for the nose…

Satellite eye, in sleepless scour,

 So farseeing, and so short-sighted:

 I cut the cable of the News Hour.

Go, float away down the benighted

 Sky, trawl the planet in your scow;

 Consider yourself uninvited

To this small living room, for now.

 Tonight, tonight, I’m in the mood

 For entertainment. Let the show

Begin!—The black cassette I prod

 Into the slot tears a bright rift

 In blankness: through it, Hollywood

Pours on my eyes a shining gift:

 Two hours in Klieg-light Heaven, star

 After star-burst as the angels lift

Me in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.—

 Plush in an air-conditioned breeze,

 A Maxfield Parrish candy bar

In hand, my gauntlet run, I ease

 Into my seat, with a long *aah!*

 And watch Brando fall to his knees,

Lift up his face and cry, *STEL-LA!*

5. *Coda: My Fiancée*

The stove is cold. I light a fire.

 Winter has crept upon us, slow

 As old men move in evening air,

Pale as the snow piled up below

 The windowsill, sad as the ghost

 Of what was buried long ago.

Sparse twigs click together; frost

 Has etched the skeleton of breath

 On windowpanes; tussocks lie glossed

In glimmering coats; and one small moth

 Of firelight flutters on a rafter…

 When we have reached the aftermath

It comes to this: what follows after?

 For day’s crimes, is there crepuscule

Forgiveness? Is the bitter laughter

Revisited where it left a smile,

 Archaic now, with the faint curve

 Of something steeped in time awhile?

The sun, which in its casual swerve

 Gives life—gratuitously allotted—

 Brief, sparked commotion of a nerve—

The *sun*… Yes, let it be repeated,

 This flourishing word, once more today.

 The earth’s awry. Your heat’s abated…

Still may you burn in what I say,

 Just as before, with that red coal

 And singeing syllable I pray

Will always kindle when I call

 Your name.—Reach down, quicken this slab

 Of speech, that it may utter the all

Of what you bring, the senseless throb,

 The perfect splendor, wrong and right.

 In a dark room, a curse, a sob

That puddles in the depths of night:

 I have been cruel, I have told lies.

 Love found me cold. How shall I slight

My sum of sins, and the hurt cries—

 This glacial truth I cannot skirt?

 I dig my way through snow and ice.

Helpless to hide, or stand apart,

 I turn to you: shed warmth upon

 These stiffening limbs, this freezing heart.

Show us ourselves; let it be known,

 This world that strives against its grain;

 Show us the damage we have done.

Night spills and spreads its ghostly stain,

 Negating all illumination.

 I’ve watched you burn the shadows clean

Till fiery-golden incarnation

 Stood solid, steeped in prism blaze…

 Cleanse in the full of your ablution

The ragged margin of my days.

 When bone is splintered from its wish

 The prayer beyond all prayer is praise.

Let it begin here, at the finish.

 Now, when the light is spare and bleak,

 Something may happen to replenish

Amazement at the soul’s daybreak:

 Suddenly a world. A flash. A feeling.

 Suddenly a child begins to speak.

I hear her walking now, in falling

 Of snow like rice grains, up the white

 Stone path, past the great poplar, calling

Out of the shadows. Every light

 Shines forth to guide her here. And let

 The fire burn far into the night.

It should be like this, early or late,

 It could be like this… Don’t the stars

 Leave all their lights on? And the wait

Is eager when love climbs the stairs.