

The Book of Joe  
By Chris Wright

I think it would be wise to write a short preface to the following little piece I wrote back in 2005 or so. This literary experiment, basically a satire, is so odd that it's clear to me most readers won't know what to make of it unless it's at least partly explained.

*The Book of Joe*, the title of what follows, has to be read in the light of the Bible's book of Job. I still remember the day in the summer of 2003 when I conceived it while sitting in a cabin in a summer camp where I was a counselor. For some reason I was suddenly struck by the satirical possibilities of the book of Job, if it were transplanted in time and space—to modern-day America. A powerful satire of the modern world could be written in the form and style of Job, if the entire spirit of the work were reversed. The initial flash of inspiration came, I think, when I realized that Job expresses the *exact opposite* spirit of capitalist modernity: where Job was naïve, un-self-conscious, righteous, self-certain, wholeheartedly pious, the modern world is cynical, self-conscious, self-doubting, secular, money-grubbing. I was fascinated by the contrast between the culture of Job and the culture of the present.

Soon the satire took shape in my mind. All the characters had to be opposites of the original ones. The noble Job had to become Joe, a debased, miserly capitalist, who is the truest representative of our age and its ideals (just as Job was of his own age). The God who treated poor Job so badly, and who in the end spoke to him “out of the whirlwind,” had to be not Yahweh, the personification of majesty and power, but Mammon, the god of our own world, the personification of the vulgar spirit of financial gain and market transactions. God's antagonist/interlocutor had to be not Satan (as in the Bible) but Justitia, the goddess of justice, who in *our* world is indeed seen—at least by the dominating institutions, namely corporations and the state (i.e., the spirit of Mammon)—as the Devil, the great antagonist of capitalism. And the characters whom Joe would talk to throughout the work (as Job did in the original) would be representative types of capitalist society, including Jim the Politician, Bob the Academic, Jon the Preacher, Dan the Lawyer, Abd the Terrorist, Jen the shallow young girl, Rob her besotted young lover, Dud the video-gamer, Meg the Activist, and Rod the Soldier. Joe's encounters with these people would give me opportunities to satirize all these types. (Even their dull names indicate their mediocrity, and highlight the contrast between the epic, mysterious culture of the early Bible and the mundane, monotonous, predictable culture of the capitalist present.)

I decided the satire would proceed as follows. Justitia, who wants to punish Joe for his many moral and legal crimes but finds that the justice system (being run by capitalists) won't get the job done, contrives to trick Mammon, who loves Joe as the perfect embodiment of greed, into letting her take away all his possessions and accomplishments. She makes a bet with Mammon that Joe will “curse him to his face” when this happens, whereas Mammon is convinced he won't, that even when he is deprived of everything Joe will continue to worship money. This, of course, mirrors the bet between God and Satan in the Bible—except that in my version it turns out differently at the end. While Job never really cursed God, as Satan said he would, in the end Joe does, finally, curse Mammon, having learned through all his experiences that greed, money, and the urge for power are indeed evil. He thus redeems himself and vindicates humanity against its basest impulses. —But I'm getting ahead of myself.

After the calamities befall Joe, his three friends (Jim, Bob, and Jon) come to comfort him. They're parodies of themselves: Jim is a lying, flattering, faux-righteous, nationalistic politician who will help Joe only if he'll get some money and power out of it; Bob is a characteristically

superficial, *language*-obsessed, caviling intellectual who misses the point; Jim is a stupid, fanatical, sinning, money-hungry priest/pastor/preacher/whatever. None of them is of help to someone in need. When Joe talks, however, we already begin to see one of the main, *non*-satirical themes of the piece, namely that *suffering can ennoble*. Through suffering we can achieve greater insight, can grow as individuals and become wiser. Compared to his shallow interlocutors, Joe starts to seem deeper and more profound, because of his suffering. As the story continues, Joe slowly rises to greater heights of wisdom as everyone he interacts with remains one-dimensional and idiotic.

Thus, one of the purposes of the work is to answer Job's original question—Why do good people suffer?—by illustrating the *value* of suffering (at least *some* suffering, not all). This theme is inspired, in part, by Nietzsche, who insisted on the importance of suffering—as have many other poets, artists, and philosophers.

At this point a Muslim suicide-bomber, recognizing the powerful capitalist Joe, comes over to kill him and his friends. He succeeds only in killing himself, though. Attracted by the bomb's explosion, Dan the lawyer approaches and offers his services in case they're needed, speaking in hideous legalese. After a silly but characteristic conversation between Dan and Joe's three "friends," Joe gives a long, despairing speech that articulates the "All is vanity!" viewpoint of Ecclesiastes. That is to say, Joe's consciousness has by now risen to the level of existentialism—which is on a relatively high plane, but is still far from true wisdom.

Next we see Joe's moronic daughter Jen, who selfishly wants him to give her money despite his obvious poverty; and then comes her boyfriend, who is blinded by his love for her. He symbolizes the Poet, the idealist, the lover lost in dreams of romance and such. Because of my fondness for this "type," I make him the most sympathetic character we've come across so far; nevertheless, he too is, in his own way, ridiculous. And yet he is important to Joe's further development, serving as the catalyst for Joe's decisive advance to an *affirmative* stance toward existence, which is on a higher plane than his previous *negative* stances. (Again, shades of Nietzsche.) Before that happens, though, we encounter Dud, whom I had to include in this satire because of his ubiquity in our society, and then Meg the activist, who denounces Joe—to a crowd that has congregated around the site—for his crimes and his greed. While I sympathize completely with left-wing activists, I can't help satirizing some of their excesses in the character of Meg. She whips the mob into a state of bloodthirsty rage, and they approach Joe menacingly.

It is at this point that we finally see a genuinely transformed Joe, who speaks to the crowd in a spirit of compassion, repentance, and love. I have to admit that this transformation gave me a lot of trouble. I couldn't figure out how to *motivate* his change from despair and negativity to love and positivity. Finally, as I said, I decided that the only way was to use Rob the poet/lover as the catalyst. The point is that Rob's pure, idealistic love for someone whom Joe well knows is very flawed, namely his daughter Jen, shames Joe out of his self-pity and his navel-gazing. Rob inspires him; and since his consciousness has already risen to a relatively universal (rather than particular and selfish) stance in its former existentialism, it is not impossible for Joe to make the leap to a universal love/compassion.

I don't know if this explanation really works. But it must be remembered that this satire is like the original on which it's based in being allegorical, not realistic. Much of the plot and dialogue is, of course, artificial and not character-driven; actually, if anything, the characters are more clearly defined and three-dimensional in the satire than in the book of Job. But it remains the case that at a couple of points, Joe's development is insufficiently motivated.

The philosophy that Joe espouses now is an ancient idealism, basically the philosophy of Buddhism and Taoism. It is, in a sense, a deeper wisdom than existentialism. But it's still not the pinnacle of wisdom or of social understanding; there is one final step Joe has to make: he has to *curse Mammon*, who is the cause of so much senseless suffering in the world. How does he reach this point? By the entrance of Rod the soldier. Rod denounces Joe's compassion-preaching, complaining that it's unpatriotic and un-American, declaring instead that *war* is glorious, nationalism and imperialism are glorious. After hearing Rod talk, Joe realizes his mistake: it's necessary to fight the *social causes* of such ignorance, the causes of misery and oppression, not merely take solace in an exalted idealism. *Struggle*, struggle against oppression and exploitation, is the highest form of love, the highest affirmation. In essence, he embraces and elaborates on the Marxian point of view, which is the peak of wisdom; and at last he explicitly curses the worship of money, thus completing his transition from capitalist to fully human being. Mammon has lost the bet; Justitia has won.

But now comes the climax of the story: Mammon thunders to Joe from out of the whirlwind that he is *nothing*, a puny human, a grain of sand, while Mammon himself—the love of money and power—is everything. And he continues thundering, depicting his omnipotence and the correlative worthlessness of humanity (which, of course, is a (half-sincere) moral judgment that the *author* is making—precisely because of the widespread worship of money), until Joe cowers and retracts his curse. He foreswears all the wisdom he has acquired and submits to the truth that humans are contemptible, that the will to own and possess is ubiquitous and all-powerful. This mollifies Mammon, who consequently restores all of Joe's former possessions and power. And so the story ends on the same note as the book of Job, but with a very different message.

You can make of the ending what you will. It had to end that way if it was to end, as it began, on a satirical note. Maybe I do think the human species is rather pathetic; but it is also a grand and splendid species that has the moral awareness to denounce selfishness and greed. The choice is ours.

The piece is full of little references, wordplays, hidden meanings, etc., some of which are more successful than others. For instance, in the first sentence I say that Joe lives in the "land of Uzi," a reference both to the biblical "Uz" where Job is from and to the submachine gun, which is supposed to be symbolic of America's (and Israel's—where the Uzi originated) violence and gun-worship. Maybe such word-games, with which the satire is replete, are in some cases over-subtle or overly "clever." That's for the reader to decide. And maybe I went overboard with the random literary references too. I thought that making such references might help give the work a broadly "synthetic" quality, as if it's summing up a whole culture or drawing lots of threads together.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this odd little literary experiment...

## The Book of Joe

### I

There was a man in the land of Uzi, whose name was Joe; and in his own eyes this man was perfect and upright, and one that held Mammon in awe, and eschewed Justitia.

And there were born unto him seventeen sons and thirteen daughters, for his ex-wives and ex-concubines had been fruitful and multiplied copiously.

His substance also was ten billion dollars, and three mansions, and a thousand employees, and a sprawling search-engine website, and great political clout; so that this man was among the greatest of the children of the West.

And though he was unable to attend his children's birthdays or to remember their names, being a pious lover of work whose mind was uncluttered with soft sentiments, he sent them greeting cards on occasion.

But when they invited him to feasts, Joe would do his fatherly duty and gorge himself on food and wine, and personify his epicurean ideal; for he had a taste for debauchery and gluttony and other refined pleasures.

And it was so, in the midst of such revels, his mind made selfless through drink, that Joe sank to the ground and prostrated himself before Almighty Mammon, and offered prayers unto Him according to the number of his children;

For Joe said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and renounced Mammon in their hearts, and embraced charity or socialism,

or become spendthrifts scornful of the Protestant ethic.

Thus thought Joe continually, when not contemplating the stock market and price-fluctuations and hostile takeovers and the prospects of his wealth.

¶ Now there was a day when the sons of God (whose name is Mammon) came to present themselves before him, and Justitia came also among them.

And Mammon said, Whence comest thou? And Justitia answered, From walking to and fro in the earth, amongst men and their follies.

And Mammon said unto Justitia, Hast thou considered my servant Joe, a perfect and upright man, who feareth God and escheweth inefficiency?

And Justitia answered, It is not for nought that he feareth God: thou hast blessed him with wealth and power and whores galore. Withdraw thy favor from him and he will curse thee to thy face.

And Mammon said, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power. Only upon himself put not forth thy hand. So Justitia went forth from the presence of God.

Now Justitia, unbeknownst to Mammon, had her own reason for heaping misfortune on Joe's unsuspecting head, to wit, her duty to punish iniquity and avenge injury.

For Joe was guilty not merely of gluttony, greed, lust, vanity, pride, and hypocrisy, but also of theft from company funds,

insider trading, bribery, and callousness to human suffering.

Often had he beheld with an unseeing eye the travails of the wretched of the earth; he had not stretched forth his opulent hand bedecked with diamond rings to give so much as a nickel to a beggar; neither had he scrupled to destroy his hirelings' lives by depriving them of their livelihood.

True it is that Mammon knew of this; but he saw not the need for vengeance, as Joe's sins, named such by Justitia, were named rather virtues by Mammon, consistent with his teachings.

Thus he had surpassing love for Joe, exceeding that for all his other creatures, and would not harm him, unless it were to appease his own vanity (as in this case).

And so it was that Justitia gathered the reins of retribution in her own hands and whipped them upon the crown of Joe's bald head.

Ordinarily, when her wrath was not inflamed, she would conjure a whirlwind of legal wrangling and due process of law;

And she would place her victim in its navel, and he would bow down his head as his fate was decided by pettifoggers and sophists.

Well knew Justitia that justice was often aborted in such cases; but Mammon bound her not to tamper with the law, its current state being friendly to his world dominion;

and when she assayed to defy him, the wrath of Heaven was upon her.

Thus, had she set in motion the gears of legal machinery to grind Joe into poverty and disrepute, her designs would have been frustrated by involute legal machinations.

Wherefore Justitia chose to deceive God, the better to know victory over injustice.

## II

It fell on a day when he was eating and drinking wine in his favorite harlot's house,

That there came a messenger unto Joe, and said, Thine employees were managing thy business for thee, as thou frolicked with yonder maiden (yea, I applaud thy taste);

And the fire of heaven fell upon them, and consumed them in a blast that shook the foundations and collapsed the pillars of thy corporation's home;

And I bethought me to have seen Arabs across the street, gazing with sinister mirth on the wreckage of thy life and thine employees'; peradventure they were Al Qaeda terrorists; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The price of thy company's shares hath plummeted, and thy wealth hath dissolved like the fabric of a vision, and thy days as a prosperous plutocrat are numbered.

While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons, informed of thy calamity, have judged thou hast incurred the displeasure of Justitia;

And to expiate their own sins they have forsworn Mammon, and deemed him a foul pollutant of civilization;

And, repentant, they have set forth on a life of charity and devotion to the principles of compassion and lovingkindness.

Then Joe arose, and rent the robes of his messengers, and flailed his fists on the oaken table before him, and fell down upon the ground, unsteady from the wine:

And he said, Naked came I out of my lover's loins, and naked shall I return thither: God loveth not him whose knees buckle beneath adversity, who embraceth an insincere apostasy or letteth hardship slay his spirit;

Fortune smileth not on him who forsaketh his principles under the burden of appalling vicissitudes;

Therefore shall I not renounce mine avarice or dissolute ways, nor my work ethic; neither shall I follow my sons' treachery by disavowing Mammon, though He abandon me who have ever served Him faithfully.

Thus Joe bade his messengers depart and returned to the pleasures from whence they had distracted him; for he needed inspiration to plot the resurrection of his corporate empire.

### III

Now it came to pass that the sons of God were again summoned to his presence, as his almighty lust for power would brook no secrecy amongst his subalterns; for that they might conspire to cast off his yoke and usurp his throne.

And Justitia came also among them to present herself before Mammon.

And Mammon said unto Justitia, Behold, my servant Joe hath shunned the path of perfidy to which thou temptedst him by the example of his sons, fearful lest he be blighted by mine ire;

Neither hath he weakened in resolve, though thou assayed to destroy his will;

And in all things hath he not wavered from the ranks of the holy.

And Justitia answered God, and said, Joe's faith is indeed mighty; but let him taste the bitterness of penury, and feel the pains of plague, and he shall renounce thee to thy face.

And Mammon said unto Justitia, Do with him as thou list; only spare his life.

So Justitia went forth from the presence of Mammon, and smote Joe's mansions with fire from the vaults of Al Qaeda, and smote his bank accounts with the malign deeds of computer hackers, and smote his body with venereal diseases;

and his privy member she smote with prolonged flaccidity.

Her fell designs prospered: Joe's hopes were slain, his spirit crippled; he bewailed shrilly his loss of manly prowess.

And his wife took offense at the noise, and said, Thou hast never had integrity; thou hast thyself reaped this evil, polluting the

land with thy whoredoms;<sup>1</sup> wherefore cease thy ululations.

Whereupon Joe answered, Thou sayest what thou knowest not. The market is a fickle god: today it doles out privation, tomorrow prosperity.

And the market is a vengeful god: if treated not with respect, it will repudiate erstwhile bonds.

I must have offended it; only *that* can explain my present ills.

Yet Joe's acts belied his feigned equanimity, for his wailings persisted through the night: and he supplicated to Mammon, that He might restore the vigor to his privy member.

His myriad wenches forsook him; the media thronged about him; and his friends scorned him.

Three alone remained loyal, whom he had known from childhood. When they heard of all the evil that was come upon him, they came from their homes to mourn with him: Jim the Politician, and Bob the Academic, and Jon the Preacher.

They sat down among the ashes with Joe as he wept.

#### IV

After seven days and seven nights, wherein each friend feared to speak lest he be blasted by Joe's anger, Jim the Politician spake, and said,

Lo, Joe, we friends of thine have sat upon the cinders of this hearth these seven days and seven nights;

Not a word have we spoken, respecting thy grief and thy right to enjoy it in silence, despite the discomfort engendered by our sitting upon cinders for a week.

Yea, we have respected thy rights, as befitteth good citizens of this our great republic, the mightiest in the earth, which quelleth dissent as the lion's roaring quelleth the whelp's yelpings;

As the sun's rays drain the desert of its rivers; as the demagogue casteth a spear through the heart of the free thinker;—

Verily, said Bob the Academic, thine analogies are not to thy purpose: for in comparing our nation to a star which reduceth rivers to their beds, thou dost not honor our nation;

And in drawing a parallel between our republic and a demagogue, thou impugnest the good intentions of our government;—

Jim! said Joe, Say thou thy point; and Bob, hold thy peace.

Joe, said Jim, we have sat with thee for seven days, and our minds wax restless; our stomachs rumble with hunger's void; and we weary of thine interminable sobs.

Wherefore, tell us thy complaints, that we might comfort thee, and thou mightst take pity on us.

So Joe recited the litany of his griefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 3:2.

## V

Let the fool perish in whom the thought is born,  
I shall devote my life to the glory of  
Capital.

Let that man's rash faith in the cash-nexus  
blind him; let it fuse scales to his eyes, so  
that his vision is clouded, his mind murky,  
his life's aspect overcast.

Let his hopes be dashed against the rock of  
misfortune and shivered to pieces;

Let them be broken and shattered upon  
collision with the iron dictates of the  
market.

Let not his lust for lucre be slaked; neither  
let his greed for power suffer consummation;  
but let his demon consume him.

Let his obdurate will guide him to the brink  
of destruction;

Let his petty wants strip him of foresight,  
that he not see the abyss in his way.

Let not his commerce with men prosper;  
neither let his assays of women thrive.

Let him know the depths of stygian woe as  
he cowereth in his den of shame.<sup>2</sup>

For I was that man: I was that fool; and for  
that have I been punished: and for that I  
curse myself.

And lo, if I must suffer, then must all men!  
It were unjust otherwise. Wherefore I say,  
Let calamities befall the wealth-monger,

equal in number and greater in intensity  
than mine own!

Let his children be fetters unto him; let his  
wife persecute him hourly, and give him no  
peace;

Let his creditors hound him, as the lamb is  
hounded by the wolf;

Let my troubles be trebled on him, that I  
may look upon his disasters and laugh, and  
thereby have relief from mine own.

Oh, why died I not from mine embrace with  
my concubine? Why did I not give up the  
ghost when I gave up my seed?

Why were the loins that I enjoyed full of  
crabs? Why the breasts that I kissed not full  
at all?

(For then might I have had ample memories  
to succor me in my wretchedness.)

Howbeit, my lot then outdid my lot now;  
for I am denied the touch of woman, who  
despise me.

Alas, that fruit was sweet! its nectar  
nourishing, its scent ambrosial! Dearly I  
miss it. My days are as years without it.

As dearly miss I the cold metallic feel of  
specie in mine hand, coursing through my  
fingers, like to a waterfall cascading  
through a crevasse.

In bygone days I might have *bought* that  
waterfall, wherewith to seduce a woman;

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<sup>2</sup> "den of shame": John Milton, *Paradise Lost*,  
Book 2, line 58.

In bygone days I might have bought the river that is its source, wherewith to charm a woman,

Or perchance to gaze at my wavering likeness on the waters, smitten with the beauty thereof.

In bygone days, life was an oyster and I a fisherman, and my dreams were so many pearls stuck in the flesh of life.

Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them;<sup>3</sup> I withheld not mine avarice from any object;

Ambition was my idol,<sup>4</sup> and I was a god among men.

Alas, it is all come to nought! Ashes only remain of my former radiant glory.

Curse the fool that I was, not to cherish what I had! Curse my callousness to the feelings of the market (verily, a *sensitive* God)!

Curse all men who yet are happy as I despair!

## VI

Then Bob the Academic answered and said,

I have assayed to understand thee; but thou speakest as the Sphinx.

Thou indictest the rapacity of the "big Bourse wolves," as Karl Marx called them (*vide The Class Struggles in France, 1850, Part IV*), though thou art thyself such a one.

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<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:10.

<sup>4</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto 1, stanza 217.

Thou decriest faith in the "cash-nexus," though it hath ever been thine own (and, I think, still is).

Moreover, thou prayest that such faith may blind the believer; yet surely thy denunciation were of greater pith hadst thou said that such faith *doth* blind the believer, and not that thou wouldst *like* it to.

Lo, what meanest thou by "fool"? That word hath manifold connotations. E.g., Erasmus of Rotterdam praised it. (*Vide In Praise of Folly*.) It would strengthen thine argument wert thou to be more precise.

Again, what meanest thou by "assays of women"? Denoteth that phrase sexual endeavors? Or merely *romantic* ones, or friendly ones?

"Commerce with men" is, likewise, ambiguous. Intendest thou *business*, or only social interaction?

Thine entire speech was plagued with obscurity. It is my contention that thou wouldst be well-advised to revise it; yea, to make it more precise.

Howbeit, I was impressed with thy quoting of Ecclesiastes (*vide Ecclesiastes, chap. 2*).

And I noticed that thou borrowedst a phrase of Byron's (*vide Don Juan*) and of Milton's (*vide Paradise Lost*), wherefore I congratulate thee.

The import of thy speech was suitable to the occasion: poignant, possessing enough pathos to pluck the heart-strings but not so much that it sank to bathos;

Somewhat malicious, as was appropriate,  
yet duly self-condemnatory;

Full of the anguish to be expected from one  
whose life is in ruins: yea, whose sole  
remaining task is but to lament his lost  
greatness.

Thus, on the whole, with the afore-  
mentioned qualifications, thy threnody  
excelled in virtue, and I approved of it.

## VII

Then Jim the Politician spake and said,

Joe, my pity for thee gusheth as a fountain  
from mine eyes;

I look upon thee huddled in the dirt,  
shaking in thy limbs, and I feel my hair age  
in color.

My soul, made heavy and a burden to me,  
trembleth beneath its own weight.

Behold, the dew-drop palpitates when the  
leaf is shaken; my heart doth the same,  
when thou art as a frail leaf.

Like Atlas, I am bent under the world's  
weight; for the sight of thee humbled is  
more than I can bear.

Such a king, mighty in deeds and spirit,  
reduced to such a beggar! The sight thereof  
trieth my strength, and maketh me to  
question my—hypocrisy.

Lo, I must be thy ballast: I fear lest the  
temptation, in thine affliction, to harm  
thyself may prove too great.

Wherefore heed thou my words, that thou  
mayst be comforted.

¶ Blame not thyself for thy torments: they  
are not punishments; they spring not from  
thy misdeeds.

They are accidents, with the significance of  
a feather's path in the wind, or the thunder  
of a stormy sea.

Lo, the world is an iniquitous place,  
wherein good reapeth evil and the wicked  
vanquish the wise; sins go unpunished,  
while virtue cometh to nought.

Thou art blameless: it is the world which is  
damnable.

Yet remember, thou livest in the one  
country wherein justice prevaieth, and the  
meek are blessed!

God loveth democracy; God loveth capital-  
ism; God loveth the poor in spirit (like thee);  
above all, God loveth our republic and its  
citizens;

And so I say, our country is great! and thou  
shalt not long be forsaken, for thou livest in  
a great country.

Other nations are as jackals scavenging our  
waste, or barnacles feeding from the whale;  
we alone govern the world and the  
universe.

And we abandon not our friends, if they be  
powerful; so shall we not abandon thee.

Thy troubles have surely blinded thee, for  
thou seest not these truths. If the Market  
doth not right thy wrongs, then I shall:

Yea, I shall write a bill to remedy thy poverty and subsidize thy recovery, like to the laws passed in support of Terri Schiavo;

(Oh, that their effect had been as intended, and her glorious life had been prolonged fifteen years more!)

But this time, I promise thee, it will achieve its object; *even* thy rehabilitation.

Thou shalt be as a sultan, with palaces greater in number than an emperor's; with hirelings greater in servility than the American masses; with harlots greater in skill than Japan's geishas!

Thou shalt be more than an internet mogul: thy works shall reach across the earth, into the jungles of Congo and the deserts of Persia;

Thy real estate shall raze the rainforests of the Amazon and tame the wildness of the Alps: it shall dwarf the grandeur of the Pyramids!

Then shalt thou turn thine eye to the past, which is now the present, and survey thy recent trials, and remember the darkness of thy descent, so distant from the brilliance of thy rebirth;

And thou shalt reflect that the sun riseth only after setting; that the rainbow appeareth only after the rain; that spring blossometh out of winter, and the young life is borne from the bloody womb;

And thou shalt then give thanks for thy fall into the valley of desolation.

Lo, I shall bring all this to pass, be it through bribery or extortion or the granting of political favors or the arranging of high-minded, productive compromises.

I ask for nought in recompense but thy sublime friendship, which giveth me pure joy.

(Howbeit, if I undertake thy salvation thou shalt contract certain pecuniary obligations.)

## VIII

Joe answered thus:

I thank thee, Jim, for thine unselfish devotion, but it availeth not.

Thy legislative brethren have personated Mammon and forgotten me: I bring them no profit, and they bring me no sympathy.

They shall submerse thy project in the swamp of committees and subcommittees and sub-subcommittees.

Moreover, orators like thee speak with a golden tongue and act with leaden limbs; I shall be dead ere thy promise come to fruition.

(And lo, I doubt not but thy demanded guerdon will be in excess of reason: I am no Midas, though thou take me for one.)

Nay, Mammon hath deserted me, and thou hast the power of an ant.

I am now but a worm burrowing in the dark of memory; the livid past haunteth me and maketh my countenance as a ghost's.

Memories paralyze me, reduce me to an avatar of regret; *even* so my soul is like the cinders whereon I sit.

Solitary images crowd in the eye of my mind, beclouded not by my tears: I perceive them in the lucency of sorrow.

Lo, my grief defieth expression.

The roseate cheek of youth smileth no more on me; the freshness of the virgin recoileth from one so aged as I.

The glittering chimeras of youth have dulled into the dun banality of truth;

Melancholy and its mask, cynicism, have supplanted boyish elation.

My life, mine achievements, are dust;—whither (let it be so!) my body shall shortly return.

Behold, such pleasures have I known as could fill an eternity of recollection; such satiety have they reached as would fill Solomon himself with envy:

The frosted crystal glass, etchings of Bacchus thereon, brimmeth with champagne, bubbly and tingly on the tongue; this have I experienced.

The Pinot Noir, enthroned in a translucent chalice, is a liquid velvet waiting to warm the palate; this have I experienced.

The tender steak, juicy as a ripe pomegranate, sprinkled with crisp cooked onion-shreds, placed beside a steaming potato still covered by its skin, its innards buttery and creamy, maketh the salivary

glands to leak in torrents; this have I experienced.

A lively conversation, without malice or competition, wherein two minds commune unhampered by dissemblance, displaying wit and wisdom, is a pleasure equaled by few; this have I experienced.

A friendship, that rarest of commodities, that ennobling affection between mutual minds,<sup>5</sup> without which life is a miasma through which one gropeth blindly, choking; this is rather a necessity than a pleasure; and this have I experienced.

The comely maiden whom one embraceth in love, inhaling her moist breath, kissing her milky breasts; the panting of bosoms sweating together; the soul's love-exalting martyrdom!: this, too, have I experienced.

Alas, but I knew it not! These were all *little* to me, and trite.

Foolish is the heart of man! which taketh for littleness all things that are great, and for greatness all things that are little.

Would that I could converse with my youthful self, though he heed me not: I would tell him, Savor thou thy diversions;

*Dally* as thou treadest thy primrose path; for thou shalt miss it ere long.

Howbeit, he would reckon not my rede:<sup>6</sup> his spirit would remain in the carnal state of his body, wherein pleasure is instinct and instinct is mindless.

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<sup>5</sup> "mutual minds": *ibid.*, stanza 216.

<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, scene iii.

Yea, mine appetites were sated, so that I wearied of them; but my happiness was sickly, for I knew not whereof I wearied.

I knew not the meaning of my discontent.

Indeed, I bethought myself rather blessed than discontented; but I knew not what blessedness is: and therein lay my discontent.

—Alas, the heart of man is an enigma: I can discern no coherence therein, but chaos only;

All is tumult and contradiction, beside which nature's violence is weak.

An eternity would not suffice for understanding: how much less ninety years! Ninety brief years!

Yea, time's pinions are swift. All my happiness was brief as a zephyr, which caresseth the cheek and is gone.

And now even the memories thereof are poisoned.

## IX

Lo, though my soul crieth out for pleasures, they are mere ornaments; erewhile, my substance was my money.

But for money, my life would have been as a yawl tossed in a tempest, anchored by nothing.

But for mine acquisitive passion, my diffuse urges would have had no rallying cry.

I would have been an orderless assemblage of appetites, conscious of no self, like to an infant.

And mine enterprises would have been infantile.

Behold, I was no *idle* votarist of Mammon:<sup>7</sup> I built shrines in His honor, wherein I prostrated myself in prayer;

I proselytized and converted thousands; I gave sacrificial offerings unto Him.

For I loved money as the philosopher loveth truth; even as Narcissus loved his reflection, so I loved money.

Though I am ugly, money made me beautiful; though my soul was leprous, I was adored.

Though I defiled Hymen's bed, money made it consensual; though I was a whore, money made me a pimp.

Money and I cohabited as wife and husband: when I spent sleepless nights studying my bank accounts, I sent Money to the opera, where her luster outshone the music;

And when I regaled partygoers with tales of my success, Money played the anchorite and secluded herself in my den, minding my finances.

Our mutual devotion rivaled Antony and Cleopatra's; our loyalty inspired entrepreneurs everywhere.

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<sup>7</sup> See Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, Act IV, scene iii. This scene also inspired a few of the following lines.

Alas! what would I not have done for thee,  
Money, hadst thou not betrayed me!

And why? Did I not court thee with greater  
deference than thine other suitors?

Did I not anticipate thy needs? Was I not  
sensitive to thy fluctuations?

Thou hast cruelly wronged me. Thou hast  
acted without justice or judgment. Even as  
grim Saturn acted, so hast thou, Mammon.<sup>8</sup>

Behold, moreover, the issue of thy malice:  
my friends, base flatterers all, have for-  
gotten me.

They have left me in this Hades, with three  
non-entities for companions; yea, though  
my boils run pus and I grovel in mud, they  
have left me.

Thou strumpet friendship! Verily I despise  
thee and thine emissaries.

Alas, too late have I learned the lesson of  
Timon of Athens: Mammon is fickle, and  
friends are the same.

### X

Then Jon the Preacher answered and said,

Ye unbelieving pagans! Ye impious  
freethinkers! Ye deny the true Lord and set  
up idols in His stead.

Whereas the Jews under Moses worshipped  
the golden calf, which Aaron molded for

them, ye worship gold!—which ye call  
Mammon, and the Market.

Ye ascribe Laws thereto (though ye say,  
falsely, that the Market is the *Lawgiver*, and  
ye are the receivers); and ye believe they are  
manifest in the rest of Creation;

Yea, ye add the sin of pantheism to the sin  
of idolatry.

Behold, Jehovah forged the world in the  
smithy of His soul:<sup>9</sup> ye are therefore made  
in His image; yet ye are ungrateful.

Indeed, it seemeth that your conscience He  
left uncreated.

Howbeit, all that passeth before your eyes is  
His work; *even* the earth, ministering  
munificently to our needs: the central orb in  
the universe (and we its central inhab-  
itants);

Yea, and the waters thereon, and the skies  
thereof;

The great Sequoia, with its celestial  
ambition; the tulip and the hyacinth, which  
embroider the ground;

The leviathan that churneth the ocean's  
brine; the wingèd sprites that slice the air.

Verily, I say unto you, His omnipotence is  
matched by His infinite goodness, the  
which is evident from society's perfect  
benignity.

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<sup>8</sup> Saturn, the father of Jupiter in the pantheon of  
Roman gods, ate his children (not including  
Jupiter).

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<sup>9</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young  
Man*, the end of the last chapter.

He hath further shown it by infusing me with the divine craving for little boys: when I play with them, my soul climbeth to pinnacles of pious fervor.

(He shall surely smite into oblivion the pending lawsuits.)

Lo, all who doubt me doubt Him; and all who doubt Him are doomed to endure fire and brimstone for eternity.

He is merciful, yes; but He *really hateth* people who do not believe in Him.

All ye evolutionists, all ye atheists, all ye gays, all ye non-Christians, all ye disbelievers in the Gospel of Jon: woe betide you!

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Joe, Jehovah is wroth with thee, for thou deniest Him: thence come thy tribulations.

Yet despair not: thou wert once my friend, and I will give thee advice;

(I heard a small boy whisper it to himself as we cavorted in my church:)

Affliction is a treasure!<sup>10</sup> Till thou art matured by it, thou hast not affliction enough.

Till thou hast shriven unto God, thou art surely not riven enough.

Yea, he whose nature is catholic knoweth pain; he who is small-minded hath not lived.

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<sup>10</sup> John Donne, Meditation XVII.

Thou wert once small-minded, Joe; yet as thy body rotteth from inanition, thy spirit ripeneth inside its own womb: it shall shortly be reborn.

Thou art now as a camel, burdened in the desert of thy loneliness; thou shalt soon become a lion, and wax free.<sup>11</sup>

For the rest of you, who know not pain and live in the citadel of complacency: ye have no future, as ye have no past.

Your disdain for the Lord hath erased your names from the annals of history: ye are shadows, cast by beings that reside in Hell.<sup>12</sup>

Alas, such folly! Ye sharpen your wants on the whetstone of wickedness; ye assuage them in the tabernacle of the profligate.

Ye broadcast your sins in the voice of pride; ye multiply them with the avidity of lust.

Ye are verily destroyed.

(Howbeit, if ye donate to me a portion of your money, your fate will palpably improve.)

## XI

Western Devil!

The cry was from afar: a dark figure was running toward the pile of ash whereon the four men sat.

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<sup>11</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part 1, chapter 1, "The Three Metamorphoses."

<sup>12</sup> An allusion to the Neoplatonic doctrine that evil has no real existence; it is merely the absence of good.

Western Devil!

Sticks of dynamite were strapped to his body; in his left hand was a remote control, and in his right a copy of the Koran.

Western Devil!

He stopped a short distance from them, glared at them with the frightened but frightening eyes of a trapped wolf, and spake thus:

Are ye Joe, and Jim, and Bob, and Jon?

The men nodded.

Praise Allah! The Day of Judgment hath arrived, Great Satans! I am Abd, your nemesis.

In a few hours (depending on the length of the trip), ye shall be in Hell.

Wherein have we sinned? asked Jon.

Your sins are numberless. I shall name but a few.

Ye do not worship the religion of truth, and ye do not pay the poll-tax in recognition of inferiority;

Allah therefore commandeth (in the Koran) that His people make jihad against you.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, ye have subjugated Muslims and humiliated us: yea, ye have vastly more power than we, which is very unholy.

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<sup>13</sup> The Koran, 9:29.

Moreover, ye corrupt Muslim youth with your fashionable raiment and your addictive music; and your women do not wear the veil, but have rights equal to men's!

Moreover, ye spread evil democratic ideals throughout the holy land, thereby lowering Muslims from blessed ignorance to pernicious open-mindedness.

Moreover, ye do not flog the adulterer and the adulteress a hundred times, as Allah commandeth in the Koran,<sup>14</sup>

Yea, Jesus even *forgave* the adulteress and told her to sin no more,<sup>15</sup> whereas Mohammed had the adulteress stoned to death,<sup>16</sup> and was thus holier than Jesus.

Moreover, your laws do not decree that the hands of thieves be cut off, as is decreed in the Koran.<sup>17</sup>

Wherefore ye are evil and will suffer a grievous chastisement in the hereafter; howbeit, Allah hath commanded me to anticipate your chastisement by killing you.

I will kill myself also, for seventy virgins have been promised me in Paradise, and I am impatient.

Verily, never have I lain with a virgin: yea, women do not like me; but Allah loveth me, and I will have my revenge!

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24:2.

<sup>15</sup> See John, chapter 8.

<sup>16</sup> See *Sahih Muslim*, Book 17, Hadith Number 4206. There are many similar examples of Mohammed's righteousness.

<sup>17</sup> The Koran, 5:38.

I will make slaves of mine Houris and beat them, as Allah permitteth in the Koran.<sup>18</sup>

I will finally lie with women and not have to pay for it, and they will heed mine every whim!

Whereupon he blew himself up.

## XII

After the blood and dust had settled, and the charred remains of the Koran had floated to the dirt, Joe, Jim, Jon and Bob looked at each other quizzically.

It seemeth, said Bob the Academic, that he pressed the trigger unintentionally, perhaps due to his excitement.

He deserved to die, though, for he did not cite his references.

Verily, verily, said Jon, Bob is probably right.

Yet this Muslim's death was God's will, for he named the Lord Allah rather than Jehovah, which is His true name.

Behold, said Jim, the fate of one who opposeth our country!

Joe alone was silent.

## XIII

Soon a stranger advanced thither, arrayed in splendid raiment; his gait was as a king's.

He beheld the scene with thinking eyes; then he spake, and said,

Whereas, my name is Dan the Attorney, of Dan, Ron, Sue & Partners; and

Whereas, I must state, ab initio, that I never work pro bono, as my conscience doth not accord its imprimatur to said type of work, nor is it the modus operandi of the majority of attorneys-at-law (hereinafter "lawyers"); and

Whereas, notwithstanding the fact that the predilection, ab ovo, towards self-interest and financial covetousness is the sine qua non of the lawyer's existence, my fiduciary duty to my client ensureth that mine efforts on his behalf are bona fide; and

Whereas, concerning the matter of my professional expertise, at the present time I am not afforded numerous opportunities to exhibit it, for the reason that I am having difficulty procuring clients, such that I am de facto, though not de jure, bankrupt, and am for that reason compelled to chase potential clients down the street; and

Whereas, pursuant to my self-imposed directive to modify my methodology in such a way that it coincide with what is colloquially referred to as "ambulance chasing," I was conducting said chasing a moment ago, during which time I was made cognizant of an explosion and ipso facto determined that a heretofore unacknowledged entity had violated a provision of federal law; and

Whereas, in light of this probability I approached the (alleged) locus delicti forthwith, albeit in a dilatory manner, so as not to chance upon the alleged malefactor in flagrante delicto, since I would be acting ultra vires if I behaved in the manner of a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4:34.

courageous upholder of the law and apprehender of accused persons; and

Whereas, prima facie it would appear, from the presence of severed human limbs adjacent to the locus delicti, that the corpus delicti hath been scattered abroad and is unavailable for autopsy; and

Whereas, the significance of said unavailability is likely rendered null and void by the fact that the cause of death is unproblematic, in addition to the presence of four eye-witnesses (though I must confess that ye appear non compos mentis), as well as the circumstance that evidential material, such as fragments of dynamite and pages of the Koran, is strewn everywhere; and

Whereas, nevertheless, in the event that ye are prosecuted ye shall require representation sufficiently competent to prove that the charges brought against you cannot be substantiated; and

Whereas, ex abundantia of my good will I should be pleased to render assistance to you in this matter and utilize the full range of capacities wherewith nature has endowed me;

NOW, THEREFORE...therefore...I forget what my intended conclusion was... Nay, I remember: therefore, ye would be remiss not to employ my services. What say ye?

The men stared at him.

What? said Jim.

Whereas, the preponderance of evidence in this instance—

Stop! said Jon. I beseech thee, in the Lord's name, restrain thyself! Leave Latin to the mass, and tediousness to the academic.

We do not want thy services; get thee to a nunnery.

Nay, said Dan, I see that ye are in trouble, for your home is a pile of ash. What hath transpired here?

Erewhile, said Jim, this man, named Joe, had no equal, but was sovereign upon the earth. Yet his house, and his wealth, and his life have been utterly destroyed, blameless though he is.

Jon declareth it the work of a wrathful Jehovah—

Heathen! said Jon. He is merciful! Merciful!

—Howbeit, I believe thou art right, Dan: he is "non compos mentis."

Dan, however, seemed as if suffused with sudden beatitude: his mouth and eyes were contorted in an avaricious grin.

He stood transfixed in silence, in thrall to an epiphany; a minute passed ere he was able to speak.

Nay, he said, Jon may be right. Such malice is consistent with Jehovah's modus operandi.

For years I have watched Him operate with impunity, terrorizing the innocent; His crimes have ranged from petty theft to mass murder.

He is the Godfather of Godfathers; His minions never know for Whom they work. He liveth in the shadows; only His "angels" ever see Him.

Lo, He is clever: never hath a trace of Him been found at a crime scene; and no one will testify against Him.

Alas! it hath been a trial for me to suffer His mockery, knowing I could be celebrated forever if I brought Him to justice!

And now, at last, an opportunity hath arisen!

Thou hast nought to lose, Joe; thou must testify against Him. And thou as well, Jon: thou art our expert witness.

Behold, the damages are material; we have four witnesses; we have a strong case. So we shall bring litigation against Jehovah.

With luck, His reign of fear will end, and, more importantly, we shall become rich men!

Fools! said Bob. Jehovah doth not exist. Christianity is but a slave morality, born of *ressentiment*. (*Vide Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals and The Antichrist.*)

That is what He wanteth you to believe, said Dan. When He is subpoenaed, thou shalt have proof of His nefarious existence.

But the men looked at Dan askance and were silent.

#### XIV

Joe's head was bowed; he raised it sadly and spake thus:

Ye are liars and knaves and hypocrites; yet ye are self-deemed gods, and your sayings are songs of self-worship.

Lo, ye are no better than this zealot who hath slain himself; for prejudice hath manifold guises, and self-murder need not be violent.

Yea, ye are like unto the man who revileth that which he is, and becometh what he feareth most.<sup>19</sup>

Yet ye are exalted among men: for fools esteem the foolish, and liken them to the wise.

The world loveth flatterers and sycophants, and the mob loveth only itself.

The good man is outcast; the truthful is slandered; but the charlatan is celebrated:

For vain motives move men. Yea, vanity is the star which guideth man's orbit:

History is but a spiral around vanity, ceaseless and without meaning; vanity alone is its lodestar.

Lo, I have lost my taste for the company of man, for it is insipid; I avert mine eyes from his face, for it is ugly:

(Yea, my spotted flesh, pallid and lice-ridden, is pure by comparison;)

and I will hearken not unto his misery, for he hath himself planted the seeds thereof.

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<sup>19</sup> See Job 3:25.

—Sorrow hath hardened me to sympathy: I perceive man in his foul nakedness, and I abhor him.

He is both the vulture and the carrion whereon it feedeth; for he preyeth upon himself.

He is both the fly and the mantid which consumeth it; for he prayeth as he partaketh in filth.<sup>20</sup>

He is a contemptible thing, useless and vain, rough-hewn from animate dirt.

Behold, in these seven days have I unlearned the notions of the rabble; in their stead I have been filled with truth:

Truly, all is vanity! Men trouble themselves over trifles, and life is empty strife.

Earth is an atom of clay illumined by an atom of fire; the two wander through infinite space till they are extinguished.

The cosmos is a void encompassed by itself, wherein galaxies span oblivion in their random excursions.

Life hath no reason, all is chance; and death is the portal to nothing.

The world is a hateful farce, full of bombast and gesticulation, acted by its spectators.

I am sick unto death.

## XV

Know ye not the vanity of your ambitions?

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<sup>20</sup> The praying mantis is so named from the posture it adopts while hunting.

Ye consult your petty whims religiously, as if ye hope to find therein supernal truth.

Ye spin your little webs like the three Fates,<sup>21</sup> as if destiny itself lay in the balance.

Ye revolve about yourselves like self-turned suns; truly, ye are solipsists, and self-interest is your horizon.

Ye desire fame, and wealth, and power, and love, but ye question not the reason; neither do ye foresee the end:

Time shall devour you, and death shall overtake you; and it shall be as if ye had never been.

Your joys shall dissipate; the fountain of your youth shall wax desiccate: and the wellspring of your happiness shall dry up.

As ye die ye shall sigh, "Alas! it is ended! Nay, it hath never been! It was a dream; who dreamt it? And wherefore? —Swiftly as the peasant's scythe hath time mown my life."

Not a shadow shall remain of you; not a memory of your exploits, nor a marker of your death:

For time shall no more be recorded, and man shall perish from the earth.

There is no hope for you. All is vanity.

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<sup>21</sup> In Greek mythology, the three Fates (daughters of Themis, the goddess of necessity) determined everyone's destiny. Klotho spun the thread of (an individual's) life, Lakshesis determined its length, and Atropos cut it to bring death.

Have ye not beheld my disasters? I have fallen from heights ye approach not in your dreams, to depths ye conceive not in your fears.

I am metaphysics made flesh: the universal in the part. I am the despair of man.

What hath befallen me awaiteth you; and my fate belongeth to mankind.

Wherefore strive not; care not; live not, and die. All else is vain.

—Alas, my daughter Jen approacheth. Harken unto her words if ye will hear mine own borne out, or plug your ears if ye will keep your sanity.

#### XVI

Jen was a maiden (or perhaps not) of seventeen years; she had emerged from a car parked on the street.

As she sauntered towards them, the men gaped at her body with drooling eyes; for her breasts were inflated with implants.

They might have mistaken her clothes for her skin, so tight were they. Her face was hidden beneath sundry hues and layers of makeup.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, said Jon, this damsel doth tempt the flesh.

Howbeit, she is too old for me.

Upon seeing her father she spake, and said, Dad, why dost thou philosophize? Thou art, like, not a philosopher.

I heard thee say something about “medi-physics”; what is that? Is it, like, some theory doctors have?

Nay, I care not. I am here to discuss mine allowance, which I would fain have; for thou hast not given it me in three weeks.

Yea, three weeks! My God, I am not a monk! Thinkest thou I live in like a convent, or that I eat twigs and berries?

How can I go shopping every day if mine allowance is once a month? How can I follow the commandments of *Cosmo*?

How can I be beautiful without the appurtenances of beauty?

Wouldst thou have me spurned by all the hot boys? And by all the cool girls?

Thou art like so rich! Why so niggardly?! Give me some of thy money!

Quiet! said Joe. Hast thou not eyes? Seest thou prosperity here? Or seest thou not poverty?

Seest thou not thy father reduced with grief, that he is scarce a man?

Alas, thine eyes are fixed steadfast on thyself.

Nay, said Jen, I am not selfish! I have like so many friends, and a boyfriend, and he loveth me!

He buyeth me earrings and bracelets and satin lingerie, and we are happy!

Howbeit, I need mine own money, for he cannot buy me everything; he might resent that.

Moreover, I am poor compared to Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan and many others; and despite my plastic surgery, they are still prettier!

Truly, *thou* art selfish: thou sharest not thy money with thine own daughter! Like, what a miser!

I hate thee!

#### XVII

A young man came forth from the car and approached the group.

He took Jen's hand in his, kissed her, and sang unto the men his Song of Songs:

Is she not delightful? Is she not a thing of beauty, ever full of joy?<sup>22</sup>

She is the rose of Sharon, rougèd with the flush of love: the petal's hue upon her cheek, the pistil's spire that of her hair, the inmost blush within her eye.

She is the downy dusk, pillowing the sun; soft as tufts of cloud, deep as sky-thick crimson.

She is the mist that is dawn's sister, hanging betwixt two worlds: floating over earthly tears and under pale infinity;

Lost in waning moon-cast shadows and gauzy clouds of light.

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<sup>22</sup> See Keats, *Endymion*, Book 1, line 1.

The shaded alcove sheltered by the silky myrtle is her home; the mossy bank beside the murmuring river is her bed;

Ivy-tendrils and flower-canopies serve as her coverlets; and stridulating crickets sing her lullabye.

She is a nymph, a Naiad, who dwelleth 'midst the tarns on Mount Parnassus:<sup>23</sup> for Apollo stole her from her native Arcady, smitten with a beauty that out-Daphned Daphne.<sup>24</sup>

Her presence maketh the mundane to wax mirage-like, as a fog of heat distorteth desert air:

All that is unloved, unlovely, and unlovable is melted out of mind, and only iridescent shards of love remain.

What need of Cupid's shafts when one's beloved hath eyes that pierce the heart? What need of artifices, base manipulations, aphrodisiac contrivances, like those employed by the Olympians?

Indeed, what need of myths and gods when one's beloved is a demi-god herself?

I need nought but her. The world could end—a flood could overwhelm mankind,

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<sup>23</sup> In Greek mythology, Mount Parnassus was sacred to Apollo and was the home of the Muses (daughters of Zeus).

<sup>24</sup> Daphne was "the first and fairest of [Apollo's] loves," a nymph who spurned his advances. See the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 1.

drowning all but us, as happened to Deucalion and Pyrrha:<sup>25</sup>

I would not care, if I had her. For love is stronger than reason.

Yea, though the world is a waste land, cruel as the bone-cold rain of April, love hath the power to renew it—to bring lilacs out of the dead land.<sup>26</sup>

O love, I love thee! Truest and purest of intoxicants! Condition of the soul's full nakedness! All joys are due to thee!<sup>27</sup>

Thou art the music of the spheres: thy strain is woven through the universe, its arrangement ever a duet.

Dulcet as the nightingale's warble is the tremor in my heart...

—Alas! it craveth song, my darling; wherefore, hear this paltry song in unaffected language, which I wrote for thee yesterday:

*The Blessed*

I wake up happily beside your back,  
Its naked shoulderblades as near as dusk.  
They sway ever so lightly as you breathe—

A motion imperceptible if I  
Didn't know so well the rhythms of your body.

You're sleeping; I can hear the whisk of breath

<sup>25</sup> Deucalion was the Greek counterpart of Noah; Pyrrha was his wife. See *ibid*, Book 1.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land."

<sup>27</sup> See Donne's "Elegy XX: To His Mistress Going to Bed," line 33.

From out your nose—the quiet rush of warmth

Warming your upper lip (perhaps a bead Of moisture lingers there)—it sounds just like

The sighing of a distant breeze! So quiet....

To think that sound could be so quiet, and yet

Be heard! Or is it my imagination?

Perhaps I am so rapt that I imagine....

Your hair is knotted on the pillow, tangled

In piles tickling my lips, which kiss

The strands in bunches (since their counterparts

Upon your face—though longing to be kissed—

Are turned away and inaccessible).

Clichéd it is, but....I inhale your hair.

It is a kind of secret, guilty pleasure, Which I permit myself occasionally.

And then I touch your back, a timid finger

Afraid to mar the skin, which looks as if It's made of fairy-tales solidified.

How can there be such symmetry in life?

—Except....yes, I see an auburn fleck

On one side of your back, right near your neck.

It's almost hidden by the hair; to touch

It I must move the tousled mass aside

—Though slowly, carefully. You mustn't wake.

Who knows what dreams are passing underneath

Your darting eyes (for surely they are darting,

Bird-like, as I have seen them do before)?

Oh, how I'd like to see your face right now!

A glimpse only....perhaps of just the dimple

That bunches up the right side of your face

(It's deeper than the other, prettier).

Or maybe just your lips—or your eyes,

Those sapphires that I sometimes dream about.

But I must lie here restlessly, in rapt

Anticipation of the moment when

You'll wake. To look into your droopy eyes,

To be the being they see first, as sleep

Still clings to them.... Your sluggish smile will be

The answer to my expectant grin. And then

Together we will sit outside, beneath

The dogwood tree, and watch the setting sun.

### XVIII

Shut thy noise-hole, Rob!

The voice was that of Dud, Jen's brother. He also had come forth from the car.

As thou spewest thy mawkish slobber, he said, we are missing "Fear Factor" on TV.

(Tonight they shall eat spiders, I verily believe!)

We have already missed "The Simpsons," but behold, it was a rerun, thank God.

Later is a new episode of "Trading Spouses"; though it is an infantile show, I enjoy it, for I like passing judgment on pathetic losers.

Yea, for this reason do I cherish all reality television.

We also must see "Law & Order"; and afterwards we shall rent a movie, perhaps *Dude, where's my car?*

Lo, I nearly forgot! The Knicks are playing the Bulls tonight! That hath priority over all else!

I cannot savor the spectating experience without beer, wherefore we must buy some on the way home.

And when the game is over, thou and I, Rob, can play "Grand Theft Auto." (I bought Playstation 3 yesterday.)

Jen shook her head and laughed, and said, Dud, thou art like the epitome of like childishness.

How is it possible thou art my brother?

Video games and TV are thy life! Daily thou sittest on the sofa with thy tongue hanging from thy mouth, and thine eyes as a dead man's.

Nay! said Dud; video games are tools of learning! They improve hand-eye coordination!

And TV is interactive! It is like unto a book: as poetry is to Rob, so TV is to me.

It speaketh to me; it giveth me knowledge; it maketh me to think; and if it wax boring, I can change the channel!

Yea, it is a dream-world, wherein all women are beautiful, all life is thrilling, and all conflicts are brief. Would that it were reality!

How *pleasant* would life then be!

Still, I am content to live upon the couch  
and drink beer, and idle away mine hours  
in fantasies, as a poet.

XIX

While he was thus speaking, a congregation  
had come unto the place where sat the four  
men, even unto the rubble whereon they  
sat.

The sound of the Muslim's death had  
drawn them; as they beheld the blood and  
entrails, they were well-pleased and happy.

And Joe looked upon them and was silent,  
his face thoughtful; he forebore to speak, for  
that he was thinking:

His brows were knitted closely, like to those  
of a man who knoweth not himself, and is  
in doubt.

The murmurings of the congregation waxed  
louder; clamor rose for a speaker, whom the  
rest might emulate:

Yea, what the speaker commanded would  
the mass gladly do, as a muscle hearkeneth  
to the brain's command.

Dan the Attorney said he would summon  
the police;

I shall sue you all, said he, for disruption of  
the peace and for harassment.

But they heard him not, for their voices  
were raised in prayer to the skies:

Lord, we thank Thee for Thy bounty, and  
for the body Thou hast given us draped in  
death's mantle;

We thank Thee for its blood and charred  
bones, and its severed head;

We thank Thee for the ruined house, which  
showeth Thou art indeed mighty and merciful;

Yet we long for a man to declaim unto us, to  
shape our thoughts and cloud our senses,  
that we might forsake reason and complete  
Thy work.

Suddenly a voice was heard to say, I am  
that man! Make way!

The congregation parted and a young  
woman walked forward:

Her hair was short, her clothes torn, her face  
unsightly; but her posture was proud.

XX

I am Meg the Activist, she said, and I will  
give you the thing ye ask for.

For behold this man here: his name is Joe  
and he is wicked as the serpent.

(The people gasped.)

I know his works, for they have oppressed  
me; I know his evil, for it is plain on his  
face;

And I loathe him, for he hath lived a life of  
venality.

He despiseth the claims of the multitude; he  
loveth nought but his greed.

He hath funded tyranny, founded new kinds of exploitation, played friend to the vilest of men.

The earth seethes, battles rage, solely on his account!

Children in Thailand sweat their lives from their pores for a dime a day because of this man!

He is responsible for the destruction of rainforests, the pollution in the air, the corruption in politics!

Global warming is his fault alone, and he hath caused it with malice aforethought.

Moreover, despite his wealth, he hath not tried to stop the spread of diseases like AIDS, nor given of himself in any way to charity.

(A man in the crowd said, Lo! He is not *God!* He is but the creator of an internet search-engine; blame not the world's ills on him!

No one listened, however, for all were lost in thought of their rage.)

Yea, when the poor have cried, Joe hath not wept, for he is *ambitious*: he heedeth only his morality of power.

It is also due to him (and his conspirators) that my girlfriend and I may not marry, for he hateth gays and plotteth against us.

In short: we must expropriate him, who hath expropriated mankind! Only then shall there be peace on Earth.

Man shall be brother to man, and woman wife to woman; and we shall make love, not war.

The innate goodness of man shall flourish, as it did ere civilization was born.

Wherefore let us tear this devil's limbs from him!

## XXI

The people knew not whereof she spoke, for her words were long: howbeit, the sight of the Muslim had filled them with sanguinary lust;

And their wrath had been kindled against Joe, wherefore they approached him menacingly.

He stood up: yea, he stood for the first time in seven days, sturdy on his feet despite his hunger.

And his sudden height made the crowd hesitate in its advance, bethinking itself whether its righteousness outdid its fear.

Yet Joe raised his hand in peace, and looked upon the people in gentleness; and his face was peaceful.

Good people, he said, noble and kind; what Meg hath spoken is true.

In erstwhile days I was iniquitous, and rotten as a disappearing corpse.

I was as a dead pharaoh imprisoned in his bejeweled sarcophagus.

I knew not joys in life but that they were dreams of pyramids; and I cared not

whereon my pyramids were built, nor what they destroyed.

Neither saw I beauty in the earth: for I trusted nothing and mistrusted all, and yet beauty *is* trust.

Yea, and trust beauty, for it hath not the ugliness of deceit.

Now I look around me and see beauty where once was suspicion, and light where once was shadow;

And though my regret runneth out mine eyes, and I am full of regret, yet I begin to see peace.

My friend is no more mine adversary, my daughter no more my shame: and my life is no longer un-lived.

I bethink me on my former enemies, whom once I wished dead: but now I pray for their prosperity.

My mind casteth a net of forgiveness, and all whom I see are forgiven; and all I see is beauty.

Yea, and love! Even in the brows of the angry, and the eyes of the wicked—I see inner love:

love like to the moon's love for Earth, and the lion's love for her cub, and the tulip's love for the bee.

I see that I have lived in vain, for not till now—yea, not till this moment, forged in pain—do I know what it meaneth to live.

And verily, I have thee to thank, Rob! Thy love-song turned mine eye from sorrow:

For in the weakness of despair, and in the chaos of despair, I clutched at the beauty of thy words,

And I saw them addressed to my daughter, and as I considered them they were a help to me.

I know well my daughter's weaknesses; I know her soul is shallow as the Caribbean shore, nor hath its limpid beauty.

I know her mind is opaque, reft by pop culture of understanding;

Yet I see, Rob, thou lovest her not the less for that. Thou art generous of thy love, as I was never generous of my wealth.

Thou art even as a saint who loveth man in all his spottedness, and hath compassion for all the world below.

And truly thou hast shamed me, as love must ever shame sick despair.

I say to me now, Look upon this boy's cloudless brow, serene like the dawn; look at his full eyes, placid like the dawn:

Seest thou his peaceful mind? Seest thou not his tranquility, oceanic and fresh? He loves: he knoweth truth.

For truth is compassion, and cosmic suffering; and we are one in compassion and suffering.

We are one in truth; and if thou rend the veil of Maya, thou shalt see we are one. There is no two, there is but one.

There is but vasty love and cosmic pain— life and death, river-running time, rest and restlessness, time cascading over pools of time.

And shimmering through the world are endless beads of time, death-engendering.

Yet time doth hide the Dionysian oneness which we are:<sup>28</sup>

Wherefore I say, Let us leave time; let us leave small self-intoxication to the beasts:

And let us drown ourselves in timeless love.

## XXII

Erewhile I despised life and sought pleasure only, time-bound pleasure and self-advantage;

I shunned sorrow and suffering of every kind, and chased ambition's tale for its immortality.

I withdrew from time and shut mine eyes to death, as a child afraid of the dark.

I saw not that death is inescapable, that fame and wealth are flaming comets in the sky; and death is in every moment.

Neither knew I the value of anguish, nor its necessity: for pain is man's mirror, wherein he seeth his soul.

Insofar as he knoweth himself, he knoweth pain: for death is life's substance, and man is time.

Yea, he who would shield his eye from time would shield his eye from light, and live in a cave:

And shadows would he inherit, and illusions, and endless mitigable suffering.<sup>29</sup>

Wherefore let us not shun time, neither sorrow; let us know ourselves and be ourselves.

Let us accept life, as this poet hath accepted my daughter: and let us love all, all that suffereth and wasteth away,

All that beareth the burden of living, which is dying; all that is born to die.

Only then shall we transcend time and space, which splinter life so that it pierceth the heart of man, and maketh his heart to bleed.

Yea, only then shall we know the calm of peace, and truth.

Be calm, I say, be constant in thy love and love all equally, for all is involved in all: and nothing there is which needeth not the whole.

And if a man love himself, he loveth therein the world; for the world hath formed him, even all its elements.

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<sup>28</sup> See Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, as well as Schopenhauer's treatise *The World as Will and Representation*.

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<sup>29</sup> An allusion to Plato's myth of the cave. This whole passage, by the way, echoes Buddhism and Taoism.

And if a man hate another man, he hateth therein himself; for his essence is of a piece with that man's.

Individuality, I say, is mere appearance, as are time and space: for time and space are as the petals of the flower of individuality, making it what it is.<sup>30</sup>

—Lo, all this knowledge fell into my lap, plump and ripe, as I gnashed my soul in despondency;

But these strange gems of philosophy gleam all the more radiant for their alien origins, far from Western lands.

The West, I think, is over-fond of the earthly trappings of life; we immerse ourselves in life's tumult and seek ephemeral consolations.

And so happiness is like an eel, slithering from our desperate grasp: for the world is too much with us.

We are too attached to things; yea, we are barnacles stuck on our possessions, which buoy us even as we drown.

We must detach ourselves from things, and from our selves. We must look past appearances, peer into the hidden essence of nature:

For only then shall life's vicissitudes affect us not.

### XXIII

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<sup>30</sup> Schopenhauer called time and space "the principle of individuation."

Lo, man's table of values<sup>31</sup> is corrupt, rotted through from termites and maggots.

It supporteth not the weight of the world's banquet, but sinketh and falleth under the weight.

Wherefore we need a new carpenter, who shall build a new table: and this table shall have integrity.

And behold, its integrity shall consist in *authenticity*: for their authenticity is the value of values, and authenticity is the highest value.

Truth is the highest value: self-truth, self-realization, and cosmic understanding.

Being one with oneself, one with nature, not at war with one's fellows: such is the gospel I preach.

And listen not to the music of your possessions, for it is dissonant, and it maketh you dissonant within yourselves.

But listen to the melody of your soul, and hearken to it: thus shall ye be at harmony with yourselves.

¶ Now, formerly I thought life absurd. I said in mine heart that time and chance are life's substance, and man is nothing.

Life hath no meaning, I said; death happeneth to all, and Earth is an atom in the universe.

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<sup>31</sup> A Nietzschean term. See section 9 of the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Man is out of joint in his world: he is as Sisyphus, condemned to push his boulder to no end.

Wherefore is the world, and wherefore man? To what end suffer we, who are mortal?

But such questions, I see now, cannot be answered, and should not be asked.

If life is a mystery, we ought to celebrate this and not bewail it. It is a blessing, for it holdeth man's interest.

Life is a miracle, never to be understood. We can but imbibe Wonder until we are drunk on it.

And in the meantime we ought to live well, not in despair: we ought to live as we see fit, staying true to ourselves joyously.

We ought to embrace life as a lover, and love its sorrows, its joys, its mysteries: for then shall we know fewer sorrows, more joys, and more wonderful mysteries.

Think not that the world is terrifying and vast: but know that ye are a part of the world, as a spot of paint is part of the mosaic,

And know that ye are bright as a supernova, and as beautiful; and that ye shall never die, being a part of life.

For in death there is life, even as in life there is death. The two are inseparable, one and the same.

Ye are miracles, people. Be like children, and commune with the ineffable.

#### XXIV

But Joe's words fell upon ears of stone, and no man understood him: but all stood still in dumb astonishment, as though a wall had fallen from the sky and stopped them in their path.

They were not angry or impatient, but only nonplussed: their blood-wrath having been blocked, a vacuum filled their souls.<sup>32</sup>

Howbeit, Joe's gentleness of temper, his warm lustrous presence (like unto the crimson-textured sun in purple twilight), his soft-cajoling words, the time-deceiving wisdom which echoed in his speech—all these things had made the people suspicious of him:

They saw he was not one of them, wherefore they loathed his speech and wished him dead.

A man came forward from this mass, sure of step and dim of eye; his raiment was of mottled greens and browns, drab like the dirt, the hue of death itself;

And he stepped in front of Joe and, bloated with pride, spake unto the gathering.

#### XXV

Fellow Americans! he said, I am Rod the Soldier! Hear my name and bow down before me!

And the people bowed and prayed before the neon(derthal) god they'd made.

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<sup>32</sup> See Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, the first paragraph of section 3.

Thou art our Savior! they cried; for thou comest not to bring peace but a sword, and to spread the American Way of Life!

Hallelujah, and praise be to Imperialism!

I have come from Iraq, said Rod; from the just and necessary war in Iraq, where I slew inhabitants in scores (much aided by my machine-gun).

Verily, video games are a poor substitute for the real thing.

And as I beheld the ruins I had wrought, the collapsed buildings and the muddy blood-puddles, I was moved in my soul.

For the blood was real, the bullets were real: and the death-shrieks in the dark were real.

And when I stabbed those men in the battle of Fallujah, I saw the life pass from them with the blood, spurting like the blood.

Yea, there was chaos all around, everywhere! And the noise was deafening, as if Armageddon had come!

(The crowd stared at him tensely, suddenly full of doubt—but clinging to his words like a leech.)

And in the war-sown chaos, I looked around me in a silent moment—like unto the moment in *Saving Private Ryan* when Tom Hanks scans the beach in astonishment—

and in that moment I felt like God surveying his creation, and, like God, I saw that it was good!

(The people cheered, full of relief.)

Yea, it was good, it was noble—but most of all, it was exhilarating! I felt *alive*, surrounded by death!

Moreover, each man I slew knew the wrath of the United States, and felt the hammer-blow of justice!

Each severed head redounded to the glory of our nation; each explosion proved its greatness.

Wherefore I echo the old truth, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!*<sup>33</sup>

This man here, though, called Joe, is of a different mind. He preacheth peace and love, harmony and brotherly love!

He esteemeth not glory or country; he esteemeth only temperance, lovingkindness, and other soft virtues—anti-American traits!

He is indeed a traitor: his words dilute the patriot's ardor, and corrode the foundations of the state.

His highest good is a tepid love for all living creatures; but my highest good is to follow orders:

And that is the highest good of all patriots.

It is ours not to make reply, nor to reason why; ours but to do and die.<sup>34</sup> For the true American doth not think for himself,

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<sup>33</sup> "It is sweet and dignified to die for one's country." Cf. Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est."

But he knoweth by instinct that America is glorious, and that to die and kill for what is glorious is itself glorious!

And he will gladly slay all enemies of the state, first among which is this philosopher Joe!

XXVI

But Joe answered and said, Friends, this man's speech hath made plain to me mine errors.

Peacefulness and equanimity are not enough, for ignorance is an ever-growing mountain, which hath a planet's inertia.

Its movement cannot be halted without fierce determination, and the might of many Samsons.

Now, verily, this worship of the State is a detestable idolatry, which profiteth no men but those in power.

What is the State, indeed? Effectively, the government. But what is the government? The rich and powerful.

Democracy, like God, is dead, at least for now: government is neither *for* nor *by* nor *of* the people, but only of the rich.

Think ye the rich care aught for you, or for your troubles? They do not. They heed only their morality of power: they do what flattereth their power.

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<sup>34</sup> From Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

For I once belonged in their ranks: I once swam in riches as in a sea, and drank of money as of water.<sup>35</sup>

I floated above the people's daily cares in my silver bubble; and my bubble's prismatic surface bent life's rays so as to dim the truth.

Why then flatter ye the rich with your nation-worship? The nation is a fiction: there is no such entity with singleness of interest,

But only discord, class war, mutual distrust, and lives that are solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish.

Verily, there are a thousand Americas, not one; and each person is, for now, an atom, which striketh others but doth not bond with them.

Our enemy is not a man or group of men; it is the social order itself, which maketh all of us each other's enemies.

Indeed, a man hath become his own enemy: for he scorneth his fellows' brotherhood, which his deeper soul doth covet devoutly.

And so he ensnareth himself in himself, and maketh of himself a fetish.

—Behold: as the young man hath a hero, beside whom he despiseth himself, so the modern person is a golden fetish to himself.

He is his other, a self-hateful Narcissus: whence overfloweth discord into the world.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Job 15:16.

Conquer self-estrangement, then, and its social causes: therein shall ye conquer your enemy.

And nation-worship, God-worship, money-worship shall cease: man shall not lower himself and raise his creations:

Neither shall he be slave to his property, nor wolf to his fellows, but he shall master his transparent fate.

He shall, that is, be *authentic*, undivided in himself, nor divided from his fellows.

## XXVII

But we must battle the acquisitive spirit and the preachers of acquisitiveness: we must war on capitalism.

This society is inauthentic, self-divided, a slave to itself and its laws of economic movement.

No man steereth his life, but he is steered by fortune's invisible hand; and his world is strange to him, and unjust.

For the wicked person prospereth, and his works increase his renown; but the righteous man prospereth not,

For he is locked in a stockade and mocked.

Yea, he is handcuffed to the bars of bitter solitude, and mocked by his peers.

For righteousness hath not a home in capitalism. It is an anachronism, not only superfluous but counterproductive.

And democracy, too, like righteousness, is dangerous, unnecessary, and nearly im-

possible: the people, the wage-laborers, must have less power than the élite.

¶ Behold, in capitalism the multitudes toil in poverty and hunger. For Capital is a cruel taskmaster.

The West hath for centuries enslaved the world and murdered its people for the sake of one more dollar; and things do not change.

Injustice cannot remedy itself, but its nature is to worsen with time and the centralization of power.

Its reforms through the years have been cosmetic: behold the state of Africa, South America, most of Asia, and the multitudes within all lands.

They sweat and toil and bleed for food, as their masters lay waste their lands; and "democracy" availeth not.

Wherefore we must overturn the system. We must change the world, so that money is superfluous and greed hath no dominion,

And man is no longer lashed to his possessions and broken thereon, like a prisoner lashed to the wheel.

We must, therefore, deliver mankind from economic scarcity, which breedeth money and greed, and war.

Only material abundance can deliver us from evil; only science and reason can deliver us from scarcity.

Not until the springs of cooperative wealth flow abundantly<sup>36</sup> shall humanity fulfill its destiny;

Not until society inscribeth on its banners, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"<sup>37</sup> shall there be peace on earth.

For then money and the State shall wither away, and democracy shall flourish.

And machines shall no more erect walls between men; and wealth shall no more be the touchstone of worth.

And possessions shall no more be as persons, and persons shall no more be possessions. But people shall be free.

#### XXVIII

Then Mammon answered Joe out of the whirlwind, and said,

Who is this that gainsaith greed through words with knowledge?

Fondle now thy loins like an investor in the throes of speculation; for I will depict the power of Mammon.

Where wast thou when I planted empires across the earth? Truly, thou wert not a speck in nature's eye.

Where wast thou when Sumer sprang forth from an economic surplus, like Athena from Zeus's head?

Who built the pyramid of Giza, or the Great Sphinx? No pharaoh, no slave, but I alone.

For whose sake are wars waged, or dynasties founded; and who breathed inspiration into great Alexander?

My stage is world history, from the nomads of Asia to the oligarchs of America: thou art brief like an insect.

Thy works have the weight of dust in the wind, and they contend with a grain of sand for insignificance.

Canst thou with thy breath plant railways, or grow cities? and can thy breath level empires?

Hath love for thee alone made men blast granite quarries, and bridge Alaska with an oil pipeline?

Did love-of-Joe create the St. Lawrence Seaway, or impel the conquistadores to heights of heroic cruelty?

No! Love of money, love of power, is alone responsible for everything.

For my sake only do men subjugate the earth and slaughter their fellows; and I give them strength to subdue their own humanity.

I can give a mouse the power of a lion, wherewith to bend men to his will: behold Rupert Murdoch, and Donald Trump, and other such mice-become-lions.

I can alter hierarchies of nature, and make great what is small; I can reverse the order of things, and make order from chaos.

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<sup>36</sup> From Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

Behold: in the beginning was scarcity, and hunger; and from those wretched seedlings I have remade the world in mine image,

With the commodity as the foundation of society, and money as its pure form—the lubricant of social intercourse.

And though thou thinkest history is over, and my dominion at an end: verily, it has hardly begun!

The past is not long, the future is eternal; and my kingdom on earth is in its infancy.

My highest glories await me: and theirs shall rival the majesty of all creation.

#### XXIX

Lo, I shall shortly re-carve the face of the earth, and re-draw the lines of the continents:

For my minions have polluted the earth, and warmed its climate, which shall wreak revolution on man's little cosmos.

Millions shall perish, as in Noah's flood; your beloved "new world order" shall become a second Atlantis.

And then shall begin the reign of war, of global war: and it shall be my finest hour!

I will make the earth my mirror: anarchy and power-struggles shall be the naked law,

And each man will guard his plot of land as a tigress guardeth her young.

Then from the rubble shall rise another Rome, another Caesar, and Huns, Goths, Gauls, Franks, Vandals;

And Charlemagnes, and Tamburlaines, and Genghis Khans, and Suleimans; and civil wars, and genocides, and slaveries, and holocausts.

And thinly veiled capitalisms, and socialisms, and tribalisms, and globalisms: all, all shall go on, forever, until the sun swalloweth the earth!

For I am the one god, the sole god men believe in: I, Mammon, the Eternal One—the Will to Possess.

Thou wert indeed right, Joe: life is absurd, and history is absurd: it hath no meaning but me.

Ye are blades of grass, ye humans, and I am the wind which stirreth you; and I am the foot which trampleth you;

And I am the sunlight which sustaineth you, and the soil wherein ye are planted.

There is no *telos* of history, as there is no rest from me: for I am the way, the truth, and the life;

And behold, the truth shall make you free, should ye follow it as Rupert Murdoch hath done (in whom I am well pleased).

He who walketh in my footsteps, with will and knowledge, shall be as the mighty eagle, which owns the heavens in its solitary grandeur.

And I ask for nought in return but that he  
shun idols, be they named Compassion,  
Love, Generosity, or whatever.

Then the fate of mankind shall not burden  
him; the deathless cycles of pain shall not  
oppress him: for he shall have bought his  
happiness.

And as the walls of civilization fall around  
him, and the bleatings of the downtrodden  
rain as from the heavens, he shall be  
unencumbered:

In his stately pleasure-dome in Xanadu he  
shall perch himself, aloof from the tears of  
the blighted.

XXX

But thou, Joe, thou trafficker in pity, thou  
hast cursed me to my face, and transgressed  
against me.

Flightless insect, thou hadst temerity to  
mock my law, which is hoary as Hammur-  
abi's Code.

My law is as durable as Stonehenge;  
thinkest thou it can be undone, or forgotten  
like the wind?

I make the earth tremble, and I revise its  
lineaments; I hasten geological change.

I place my footprint on the dust of the  
moon, and plant a flag therein; and my  
fingers reach through the solar system.

I am as the black hole at the heart of the  
Milky Way: for life turneth around me, and  
I am the gravity of civilization.

Moreover, all thy modern comforts, thy  
sumptuous American lifestyle, the miracles  
of technology that prop up American  
power,

And the inexorable whirlwind of science  
which hath blasted every nation in the  
world, shivering every monolith of  
ignorance and religious illusion,

Subverting every authoritarian ideology,  
scattering abroad the roots of democracy,  
which sprout as luxuriant weeds;

And the thought-patterns of individualism  
and equality, so cherished by you  
Americans, with their progeny feminism,  
socialism, multiculturalism;—

In short, everything people esteem in the  
modern world:

It all hath its origin in the power of the  
profit-motive, and of the capitalist mode of  
production, with its relentless expansion of  
the productive forces.

For, as capitalist enterprise spreadeth its  
dominion, the multitudes flock to cities,  
seeking employment;

And since they inhabit slums together, they  
develop a class consciousness and begin to  
fight for equality;

And intellectual spokesmen appear, both  
bourgeois and proletarian, who trumpet the  
millennium: *rights*, universal *rights*, equality  
and liberty!

(*Bourgeois* rights at first—political equality  
of the propertied classes, freedom to have

property, an inviolable right—and then *socialist*.)

Liberalism and democracy spread like conflagrations, even as capital and political power centralize, thus propelling technological and scientific conquests;

And the movement for equality spilleth into sex- and race-relations; and religion waxeth ever more impotent (notwithstanding fanatics), since it is superfluous to economic life;

And the world is created anew—solely because men crave profit and power.

So thy mind, Joe, and thy body, and thy newfound species-conscience, and thy very being hath grown in my fertile soil.

—Verily, Joe, I am thy father. Wouldst thou kill thy father? Thou needest me.

Nature hath decreed scarcity for all time, wherefore ye humans must ration your goods; and so I am immortal.

Resistance is futile: embrace yourselves, love yourselves, and so make permanent war.

### XXXI

Then Joe answered the Lord, and said,

Ere now I did not know, Mammon, thou wert an actual being, like unto a god; but it surpriseth me not, for thy power is awesome.

I know that thou rivalest the sun in thy power, especially in modern times, and that thy power passeth understanding.

If thou smite billions of people and destroy their lives, it is not my place to question thee;

But I should rather rejoice for the few men upon whom thou bestowest all thy gifts: for they have truly *inherited* the earth.

Behold, I am vile; thou hast made me abhor myself, as thou makest mankind abhor itself (and rightly so).

Men arise and pass away like leaves, but greed and selfishness have no end.

¶ And it was so, that after Joe had spoken these words, the Lord said to Jim the Politician, Bob the Intellectual, and Jon the Preacher,

I have contempt for you, because ye have neither knowledge nor dignity;

And while Joe, too, hath not dignity (for that he is a man), at least he hath knowledge.

Therefore ye shall be the servants of Joe the Capitalist, like all your brethren, and offer up your minds to him.

And if ye stray from your appointed paths and disobey my commandments, ye shall be exiled from society and forced to live in a barrel, like Diogenes the Stoic.

So Jim the Politician and Bob the Intellectual and Jon the Preacher did as Mammon commanded them.

And Mammon restored Joe to the oligarchy, giving him twice as much as he had before.

Then came unto him all his brethren, and all his concubines, and all his former friends: and they secretly bemoaned his good fortune, but comforted themselves that he had been miserable for a time: everyone also bribed him, which sealed their friendships.

After this lived Joe a hundred years, due to the wonderful healthcare his riches bought, and he saw his sons and his sons' sons be raised up like their forebear. One of them even became president of America, although by then the country was a province of China.

So Joe died, being old and full of vice.