“The Pardoner’s Tale” by Baba Brinkman (from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*)

My story begins at a bar, where three friends

Drink cheap gin and party hard all weekend.

These men were riot-starter types,

Who spent the better part of their money on cards and dice,

Livin' the life of loose women and vice,

Pickin' fights, seduced by all seven different types

Of sins, a feeding frenzy of Vengeance,

Vanity, Lust, Greed and Envy.

Devious energy left them half-insane,

Laughing deranged like hyenas at their bastard games;

As each glass was drained and each bet was placed,

They set the pace and left space for their next mistakes,

All excessive waste and drunken rambling,

With eager hands trembling; eventually gambling

Leads to panhandling, But that's the price

You pay to cast the dice, and other appetites

Pay the same sacrifice, while the false assumption

Is they help us function, when really it's just a dungeon

Of self-consumption.

In other words, it's not worth it;

This world is not perfect, but it gets worse if

Flesh is the only god you worship.

As mortal men you

Need more than the sinews in your corpse to defend you.

But let the story continue, the same as before,

Where these three hard-core men drink at the bar.

Someone came in the door and ordered a beer,

And told a sad story they were sorry to hear;

Choking on tears, he said, "Death is a thief!

My friend was asleep and his breath just ceased.

May he rest in peace, and never be stressed;

I guess people ever need to be ready to meet Death!"

And disrespectfully, the three inebriated rioters

Proceeded to curse and debated the guy's words:

"I've heard," stated the first, "Enough about Death!

Every town is gripped in his clutches without rest.

What is it about this foe that's so scary? Please,

If an adversary bleeds and breathes the same air as me,

I can bury it! See, fellas, what I'm tellin'

You is: Death is a villain, and the rest is irrelevant,

So let's go kill him!"

When he'd said his piece,

The rest agreed, and the three friends hit the streets,

And went to seek their destiny, and provoke a confrontation,

In a drunken rage, hoping Death would come and face them.

Their intoxication made them sure of their purpose,

And fed the infernal furnace of their courage, a kernel

Nourished by these three murderous wretches in denial.

Less than a mile into their quest to put Death on trial,

They met this guy all wrapped in bandages,

An old handicapped man, with disadvantages,

And the three friends examined his bleeding flesh,

And demanded he tell them how he was cheating death.

Seeming perplexed, the old man responded with soft words,

And said, "I walk the earth like a creature God has cursed!

My lot is the worst and most desperate place to be;

I pray faithfully every day for Death to take me,

Waiting patiently, and someday he will arrive,

But in the meantime, until I die, I'm still alive."

In a burst of ill-advised pride, the first

Of the three rioters replied, "This guy

Is a spy, or worse! I guess Death is his master,

And gives him everlasting life forever after,

A benevolent benefactor, perhaps, to have protecting you,

But nothing gets a confession faster than weapons do!"

And stepping to this old man with mindless threats,

They demanded he tell them where they could find Death.

"Find Death?" laughed the old man, "Perhaps you will;

He lives under that tree on that grassy hill."

Ready to kill, with their jagged-edged daggers drawn,

The three aggravated braggarts staggered up the lawn,

And without dragging on while the story is told,

Beneath the tree they found a bag filled with glorious gold.

The hoard was more than forty-fold their wildest dreams,

And they smiled like demons, hatching violent schemes,

While the steam from their previous plan was dissipated;

They were so fixated on the gold, it just abated,

And the search for death was traded for work of greater urgency.

Now the worst of the three had the first words to speak,

And said, "Certainly it seems fortune gave us this gold

To save us from having to work and slave in the cold,

But fortune favours the bold, and to spend this treasure

On endless pleasures, to begin we'd better

Take preventative measures, ‘cause if the switch from poor to rich

Is too disproportionate, then law-enforcement will get

Suspicious how we afforded it, and then we'll pay the price,

So let's sit tight and play this right:

See, we'll wait 'til late at night, and if all is not lost,

Under the cover of darkness we can haul this all off,

But for now we'll draw straws, since we've got a lot of time,

And one of us can run off and buy a bottle of wine.”

The others thought the plot was fine, and trusted its wit,

And the youngest among them drew the cut stick,

And rushed to get booze so this could be celebrated,

As the other two plotted and whispered while they waited.

The worst delegated again and said, "Listen friend,

Let's invent a way to get paid a greater dividend.

In the end we can each have half this treasure,

If we get our acts together now and take drastic measures."

The other asked incredulously, "How can this be,

When right now we're bound to split the treasure by three?"

"Let's see," said the first with a savage laugh,

"Just imagine the third man gets stabbed in the back.

Now, I'm bad at maths, addition and subtraction,

But don't we get to split the treasure in half then?

You distract him when he comes back with the wine,

And I'll make sure our young friend gets stabbed in the spine.

The first attack is mine, then you back me up;

Just slash his gut, and add the last cut

To our friend's bad luck." And because of his greed,

The other agreed to this covetous deed.

By the trunk of this tree they waited to pounce,

While the youngest of the three made his way into town,

Weighted-down by the thought of a whole lotta gold,

Which inaudibly caught ahold of him and gnawed at his soul,

He wanted it so bad he could taste it;

Any part of it shared was like a part of it wasted,

And he harboured a hatred in his heart, and decided

Never to let this precious treasure get divided,

And guided by the shine of carnal greed,

He went to buy the wine, and then to the pharmacy,

And, sounding harmless, he asked for this black ointment

That he'd seen used in the past as rat poison,

Meaning to trap his boys into drinking tainted wine,

While at the same time thinking, "The game is mine!"

Another famous line that became his last words,

'Cause when he got back the others acted first,

And stabbed him mercilessly with vicious blows,

And since the kid was quick to give up the ghost,

They proposed a victory toast to the crime,

And both enjoyed a glass of the poisoned wine,

And collapsed, going blind, in a fit of convulsions,

Which halted their pulses and ultimately resulted in

Their spirits' expulsions

And because of their greed,

They did indeed find Death under the tree.