Princeton learning opportunities do not terminate upon graduation. The Princeton Office of the Alumni Association routinely offers Alumni Studies courses. (See alumni.princeton.edu/main/education_travel/home_study_programs/ for their current and past offerings.) I composed the following explication of a poem by current Princeton professor and poet Susan Wheeler in conjunction with the Fall 2010 Alumni Studies course based on the undergraduate course English 133 in which students read novels, short stories and poems. In an earlier course, “Let’s Eat,” based on a Freshman seminar run by Jenna Weismann-Joselit, I was inspired to contribute “A Little Cook Book for a Little Girl” to Project Gutenberg. (See www.gutenberg.org/files/16514/16514-pdf.pdf for the text.) In another course, “Born Again: Self-Invention and Imposture in America,” we honored the professor with a tongue-in-cheek “diploma” and nice bottle of California Syrah adorned with a personalized label based on the readings and ending with “Government Warning: Consumption of Tempus Fugit Grand Cru may cause premature wisdom.”
That Been to Me My Lives Light and Saviour
by Susan Wheeler

1 Purse be full again, or else must I die.¹ This is the wish
2 the trees in hell’s seventh circle² lacked, bark ripped by monstrous dogs,
3 bleeding from each wound. We see them languid there,
4 the lightened purse a demon drug.³ Less, less.⁴

5 At the canal, the dog loops trees in a figure eight —
6 a cacophony of insects under sun. A man against a tree nods off.⁵

7 Let there be no sandwich for the empty purse.
8 Let there be no raiment for someone skint.⁶,⁷
9 Let blood run out, let the currency remove.

¹ As noted in the acknowledgments section of Ledger, this is from Geoffrey Chaucer’s Complaint to His Purse, here excerpted from Walter William Skeat’s 1896 edition of The Student’s Chaucer:

THE COMPLAINT OF CHAUCER TO HIS EMPTY PURSE

To you, my purse, and to non other wight
Compleyne I, for ye be my lady dere!
I am so sory, now that ye be light;
For certes, but ye make me hevy chere,
Me were as leef be leyd up-on my bere;
For whiche un-to your mercy thus I crye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now voucheth sauf this day, or hit be night,
That I of you the blisful soun may hère,
Or see your coulour lyk the sonne bright,
That of yelownesse hadde never pere.

Ye be my lyfe, ye be myn hertes stere,
Quene of comfort and of good companye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now purs, that be to me my lyves light,
And saveour, as doun in this worlde here,
Out of this toune help me through your might,
Sin that ye wole nat been my tresorere;

For I am shave as nye as any frere.
But yit I pray un-to your curtesye:
Ye be my lyfe, ye be myn hertes stere,
Quene of comfort and of good companye:
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

² Dante’s Inferno Canto XIII. “Second round of the Seventh Circle: of those who have done violence to themselves(suicides) and to their goods.” Wheeler’s reference is inaccurate in that it was two men, notorious prodigals, being chased by hounds (“bitches”) who broke many branches in their flight. One of the men was caught and torn to pieces by the dogs. Harpies tormented the trees by eating their leaves. Thoughts (or memories) of suicide are a central theme to this poem.

³ A century ago, the reference would have been “demon drink.”

⁴ One reviewer, Robert Mueller, states: “In ‘Light and Saviour,’ there is something like mis-sortment, and it lies partly in the quatrains formulaic …” (http://jacketmagazine.com/31/mueller-wheeler.html) but not one of Wheeler’s four line stanzas here meets the classic definition of quatrain as “a stanza of four lines, usually with alternate rhymes.”

⁵ The speaker is at a canal in despair. The itinerant man and his dog there trigger a memory of her father, who had been through some hard, unemployed times (lines 11–13, 28–29).


⁷ Matthew 6:25 (King James Version) “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?” Also Exodus 10:17–18 “For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.” The implication is that suicide is a turning away from God. See also notes on lines 34–38.
Let that which troubles trouble not.8

My father in the driveway. Legs splayed behind him. Pail beside him. Sorting handfuls of gravel by shade and size. One way to calm a pecker, compensate for stash.9 Dad! I lied.10

The man shifts by the tree and now grace11 is upon him. The slant of sun picks up the coins dropped by travelers and — lo! — grace enables him to see. The demon dog fresh off an eight barks, too, standing, struck by the man, by the coins, barks at their glare; the man reaches in scrim12 at the glint in the light and thinks Another malt.13 The flesh is willing, the spirit spent,14 —

the cloud passes over — relief is not what you think, not the light.15 Regard the barking dog now tugging at the dead man’s leg becoming bark.16

You be my life, you be my heart’s guide, you be the provision providing more, you be the blood — stanch the sore! — you be failing proportion (mete17) . . .

Steward of gravel18 squints up at the girl who is me. What? defensively. Out of the east woods, a foaming raccoon19 spills. Palmolive executive? Palmolive customer? Palm’s stony olives on the embankment of limestone or soapstone or

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8 The speaker contemplates possible suicide.
9 “stash” both as a nest egg put away and its colloquial use as a cache of drugs. C.f. line 4.
10 The speaker, confounding a past memory with present surroundings, has spoken “Dad!” out loud in the presence of the man resting against a tree. This wakes the man (line 14). “I lied” points to the realization that she has replaced her father with herself in the mental picture.
11 In the Christian church, sacraments are symbols of an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_symbolism)
12 scrim: open-weave fabric; [transf. & fig.] a veil, a screen, something that conceals what is happening. (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)
13 Malt liquor; (now esp.) malt whisky; an example or drink of this. colloq. (New Oxford Shorter English Dictionary)
14 Deliberately opposite of Matthew 26:41 “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (King James Bible)
15 I.e., money doesn’t help.
16 C.f. note on line 2 regarding Dante’s wood of the suicides. And, of course, the word play on “bark.”
17 mete: Apportion by measure, allot; ascertain or determine the dimensions or quantity of, measure. Matthew 7:2 “With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you againe.” (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)
18 Ostensibly her father, but see footnote to line 13.
19 The raccoon is often associated with thievery. It is not uncommon for raccoon populations to contract distemper, a disease they easily transmit to dogs, one of its symptoms being foaming at the mouth. The “east woods” suggest both Wall Street and the Orient, both of which are blamed for taking away jobs in the United States and other rich economies.
32  shale.\textsuperscript{20} Leg of the man clamped in the dog’s mouth. Mouth
33  of the man open and unmoved. Voice of the man: \textsuperscript{21}

34  \textit{Three dolls sat within a wood, and stared, and wet when it rained}
35  into their kewpie\textsuperscript{22} mouths. They were mine to remonstrate to the
36  trees at large, the catalpas and the fir, the sugar maples in the
37  glade turning gold.\textsuperscript{23} To each is given,\textsuperscript{24} one doll began, so I had
38  to turn her off. Consider how it was for me —

39  Flash of the arrow and the foam falls down.\textsuperscript{25} Three balletists\textsuperscript{26}
40  ignoring pliés\textsuperscript{27} bound onto the long lawn and its canalward
41  slope. I am underwater and they haze in the light,\textsuperscript{28}
42  but do not sound. In the arrow’s blink they start.

43  Decimal as piercing of the line —
44  Table as imposition of the grid —
45  Sum as heuristic apoplex\textsuperscript{29} —
46  Columns in honeysuckle cents — or not.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{20} Word play transforming from foaming through to rock, circling back to the gravel in line 28.
\textsuperscript{21} The mouth does not move, but has a voice indicates, since a ventriloquist is not in evidence, a mental
voice supplied by the narrator.
\textsuperscript{22} Kewpie (derived from Cupid) dolls date to the early 1900’s and were highly popular for decades. The
earliest German ones are prized collectibles today. Later, mass market kewpie dolls and their imitations
were used as cheap prizes at carnivals. As the early kewpie dolls only had painted closed mouths, the
reference here is to mass market generic dolls that wet themselves when small water-filled bottles are
squeezed into their mouths.
\textsuperscript{23} Poetically, autumn often refers to the closing stages of life, consistent with the probable age of a grown
woman’s father as well as that of the out-of-work man with his dog.
\textsuperscript{24} Biblical reference, likely 1 Corinthians 12:7 (2001 English Standard Version) “To each is given the
manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” and the three dolls would be the Holy Trinity with God
being the doll that he “had to turn ... off”.
\textsuperscript{25} Death or unconsciousness immediately removes the threats and indignities of the outer world.
\textsuperscript{26} Referring to the three actors: first person narrator, the man in the wood, and her father; also the three
“kewpie dolls.” “Balletists” is a gender neutral term not found in standard dictionaries but has been in use
for over half a century. Perhaps also a reference to the Nutcracker ballet as “Nutcrackers” is London
Cockney rhyming slang for testicles (knackers) and also a colloquial synonym for “ball breakers” thereby
associated with line 13. Indeed, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s other ballets “Swan Lake” and and “Sleeping
Beauty” also resonate with the role and situation of the female narrator.
\textsuperscript{27} pliés is a word play on pleas.
\textsuperscript{28} The strongest indication so far that it was the narrator who has attempted suicide, though the fact that she
is still speaking foreshadows that the attempt failed.
\textsuperscript{29} apoplex: [arch] apoplexy—A sudden loss of sensation and movement due to a disturbance of blood
supply to the brain; a stroke. (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)
\textsuperscript{30} The title of the collection in which this poem appears is Ledger, themed around economics and its
negative impact on social history. Ledger has multiple meanings, not only “the principal book of a set of
account-books used for recording financial transactions etc., containing debtor-and-creditor accounts” but a
“record-book, a register” and, in this context, the Jewish Book of Life, a heavenly ledger in which each
person’s actions are inscribed until Judgment Day.
48 *Just this transpired. Against a tree* I swooned and fell, and
49 water seeped into my shoe, and a dream began to grow in me.\(^\text{31}\)
50 Or despair, and so I chose the dream. And while I slept,
51 I was being fed, and clothed, addressed\(^\text{32}\) — as though awake
52 with every faculty, and so it went. Then: blaze, blare of sun
53 after years uncounted, and synesthesia\(^\text{33}\) of it and sound,
54 the junco’s\(^\text{34}\) chirp and then the jay’s torn caw, arc
55 of trucks on the distant interstate, your\(^\text{35}\) *what the fuck*
56 and then her call. Beside me, pinned to a green leaf,
57 in plastic and neat hand, a full account.\(^\text{36}\) I had indeed still
58 lived, and been woke for more. So, weeping then, I rose.

\(^\text{31}\) The man of line 6 (and 16) has dragged her, partly unconscious, out of the canal.
\(^\text{32}\) Word play on clothed=dressed, connecting to the man’s ejaculations on lines 29 and 55.
\(^\text{33}\) syn[a]esthesia: 1. [Psychol.] The production of a mental sense-impression relating to one sense by the stimulation of another sense, as in coloured hearing. Also, a sensation produced in one part of the body by stimulation of another part. 2. The use of metaphors in which terms relating to one kind of sense-impression are used to describe sense-impressions of other kinds. 3. [Ling.] The expression of more than one kind of sense-impression by the same word; The transfer of the meaning of a word from one kind of sensory experience to another. (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary) This in exemplified in the preceding “blaze, blare of sun”.
\(^\text{34}\) junco: Any of several buntings of N. and Central America of the genus *Junco*; a snow sparrow. (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)
\(^\text{35}\) Again the rescuer, presumably the man resting against the tree.
\(^\text{36}\) The narrator’s suicide note. Girls and women, as opposed to boys and men, were noted for their neat handwriting when cursive was an elementary school priority.
The night is deafening when the silence is listening And I'm down on my knees And I know that something is missing Because the back of my mind is holding things I'm relying on But I choose to ignore it because I'm always denying them I'm a bit of a manic when it's not as I plan it. 'Cause I start losing my head, and then I get up in a panic Remember when we were kids and always knew when to quit it? Are we denying a crisis or are we scared of admitting it? I throw them away I just want to be so much And shake off the dust that turned me to rust Sooner than later I need a saviour Stand me up, and maybe I won't be so small Free my hands and feet, and maybe I won't always fall Save me I just want to run to you. To Be Young, Gifted And Black. To Kill Your Kind. To Live Like This. Tonight. Too Low For Zero. Too Many Tears. Too Young. Turn the Lights Out When You Leave. Turn to Me. Two Fingers of Whiskey. Two of a Kind. Two Rooms at the End of the World. Understanding Women. Up the Revolution. The Lord Is My Light (SDA Hymn 515). My Savior Lives!. Our God will reign forever And all the world will know His Name Ev'ryone together Sing the song of the redeemed. Our God will reign forever And all the world will know His Name Ev'ryone together Sing the song of the redeemed Our God will reign forever And all the. Best Friend Have you heard of the one called Savior? Have you heard of His perfect love? Have you heard of the One in Heaven? 1. All day long of Jesus I am singing, He my song of joy will ever be; All the while He keeps my heart bells ringing, For His love is everything to me. Rockin' IT for Jesus!. Praise Time! Let everything that has breath, Praise The Lord!!