
Parable of Smoke

Heat rises to the sky in smoke
And infiltrates the wind.
When bad is good and good is bad
Who tells us we have sinned?

The sorcerer delved underground
And fetched a lump of coal.
He said, "This magic rock will burn.
There's fire in that hole."

He burned it in a furnace hot
And melted iron and gold.
The king rejoiced to find a sword
In majesty to hold.

His enemies fled on every side.
He conquered far and wide
And drove them into musty mines.
The people dug and died.

Forges and anvils multiplied.
The smoke blocked out the sun.
Awe, dread, delight the people felt
At something strange begun.

The priest said, "All is for the best
Although on grass you're fed.
Work hard for now. Your kin to come
Will thank you when you're dead.

An empire's glory first is built
On blood, pain and disease.
Some day our subjects' misery
Will feed us luxuries."

There came a figure none had seen,
A merchant of the world.
He knelt and to the priest and king
A silken robe unfurled.

He said, "I live by carrying spice,

Gold ingots, furs and jade
From where they are to where they ain't.
Now learn another trade.

You think your land is poor but see
What you've already got.
Take metal, water, wood and flesh,
Throw all into the pot.

Add coal and oil and methane clear—
Solid, liquid, gas.
Let these three work their alchemy
And see what comes to pass.

Out pours abundance of all things
As sure as fire makes ice.
What costs you nothing makes you rich
No matter what the price.

And here's the best part: these poor serfs
Will sell their souls for junk,
Repaying you the wage of work
In which their lives are sunk."

"It's brilliant!" cried the king with glee.
"My people, greed is good!
Make more! Make more! And don't ask why.
Loose the wealth-giving flood!"

The factories burned furiously
And churned out goods untold.
They swallowed forests, fields and streams.
All life was bought and sold.

The workers rigged a new-made world
Suspended in their shroud.
But as the smoke stirred by the heat
Ascended in a cloud,

Like bees smoked from a dying hive
The people, helpless drones,
Lay scattered on the barren ground
Staring at their phones.

—*Henry Robertson*