

## **The Ambassador**

*All music and lyrics by Gabriel Kahane except "The Folks Who Live on the Hill", by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein.*

### **Westin Bonaventure Hotel (404 S. Figueroa St.)**

I came here as a child  
Strapped in the back of  
The station wagon.  
Inside the great concrete lobby,  
Mother and father  
Were fighting about  
Something inconsequential,  
Her earrings, His sunburn;

I padded off  
To the elevator,  
I pushed the button for the top floor.  
And we begin to climb...  
And we begin to climb...

On the third floor, an old man steps inside for a ride  
and offers up his opinions on aqueducts and irrigation  
On the fourth floor a night jar flutters in with a grin  
he chants a mechanical song  
Much to the old man's irritation

At seven we exit the shaft for the sky buildings and great birds of prey  
The old man is slapping his thigh while the nightjar praises LA

Now on nine some primordial palm tree's colonnade offers shade  
To real estate men who would swindle an elder for a single dollar  
Then on twelve I see Hollywood's Golden Stars in their cars  
They drive down the yellow brick road  
While Joseph Cotten pops his collar

On eighteen an elegant porter in linen  
Ambles aboard, looking toward the upheaval  
Says Kennedy's been shot at the hotel he'd been in  
And the old man explains a poetics of evil

Twenty-six I see the city  
As a series of fires  
Terror at farmstands and liquor stores  
And pyramids of tires

A fragile peace is reached  
When we get to twenty-nine  
While Hollywood destroys Los Angeles  
For the two-hundredth time.

While we watch the survivors sift through the scenes  
The old man explains what "pathology" means  
And we begin to climb...

Thirty-five, the menagerie takes their leave, I would grieve, but  
Just as the loneliness sets in  
The loveliest green-eyed girl steps in

We smile at each other and she takes my hand  
As the city is trembling and prone.  
All the buildings are turning to sand  
We hold onto each other and ride up on our own

And we begin to climb  
And we begin to climb  
And we begin to climb

### **Black Garden (2673 Dundee Pl.)**

In this black garden  
of carrion light,  
There is a suspension of motion and stillness  
that hollows the night.

In this black garden  
of heartbreak and wonder,  
The banks are all ablaze,  
Self-satisfied  
as they plunder.

I am alone on this hill;  
These vistas are certain.  
I may be frightened by the sounds  
Of history crying as it drowns,  
But I will pull back the curtain.

In this black garden  
I once called the selfish city,  
I try to calculate the anguish  
and the anger and all the aspirations

Of the millions who have lived here and will live in desperation,  
Who are careful and are careless,  
Whom I have cheated,  
Who thought the swindle that I offered was a salve...

I am alone on this hill;  
These vistas are certain.  
I may be frightened by the sounds  
Of history crying as it drowns,  
But I will pull back the curtain.

In this black garden  
of carrion light,  
There is a suspension of motion and stillness  
That hollows the night.

### **Bradbury Building (304 Broadway)**

Tribal neon  
On the rooftop  
Through the fog

Search lights, white dove  
Am I dying  
Am I done?

Have you known  
Anyone designed to break down?  
I was shown  
Pictures that I thought  
Were family

Hong Kong slaveship  
All the symbols  
On the mast

Gleaming squalor, decay grown taller  
Through the ceiling  
Through the glass

Have you known  
Anyone designed to break down?  
Oh, have you really known  
Anyone, anyone at all?

Like me, the dark city

Thinks its recall  
Is its own  
But have not its thoughts  
Been suggested  
in the bone?

I've seen things  
You people would not believe  
Great glittering c-beams  
Fires feeding on an airplane

All these thoughts  
Moments I've collected  
All, all will be lost  
Lost like tears in rain

### **Slumlord Crocodile (115 E. 3rd St.)**

Wake the sky!  
Burn up the chaparral,  
Light in on fire!

Break the horizon line!  
Scatter the travelers,  
Birds on the wire.

When I survey the city  
From my perch upon a hill,  
There are dark buildings  
Shrouded in fog, shrouded in still.

I would lay it all to ruin,  
I would alchemize it all to sand,  
I would watch the metropolis crumble  
To prove that I'm your man.

End this jag  
Of anger and loneliness,  
Of failure at peace.

Fill the bottle and soak the rag;  
Don't limit collateral –  
Ignite for release!

I would set it all to flame,  
I would set it all to flame,

And the laborers will crawl out  
Of the smoking windows,

And they won't know who to blame,  
And they won't know who to blame,  
And the slumlords will be  
Crocodiles before the council.

When the coastline's turned to ashes  
And the movie stars have run away,  
I will build my love a castle  
And there we two shall stay.

And if anyone should trespass,  
I'll have rigged it through with wire  
That the slightest false disturbance  
Would turn our palisade into a pyre.

I would set it all to flame,  
I would set it all to flame,  
And the laborers will crawl out  
Of the smoking windows,

And they won't know who to blame,  
And they won't know who to blame,  
And the slumlords will be  
Crocodiles before the council.

### **Veda (1 Pierce Drive)**

Take my blood and take my marrow,  
Scrape the meal from my bone,  
Pierce my heart If you please,  
With your arrow,  
But Veda, my darling,  
Come home.

Darling child, for you I labor,  
Grease and glass in my skin,  
Though you sneer, and crack wise  
I won't waver, but  
Veda, my darling,  
Come in, come in.

Sweet thing, let me dress you for bed,  
Now slip that gown o'er your head,

I'll kiss you one thousand times, my angel.  
Close your eyes, and my savage mind  
Will fashion a day when you'd be tender,  
When you'd be kind.

For you see the  
Star beneath which you were delivered  
Gave you cold-hearted pride,  
You look down on your mother who loves you;  
You take without grace— though it smarts—  
I don't mind.

If your lover has done you wrong, you  
Slipped as you gripped his gun  
And found yourself o'er his  
Lifeless body,  
Child, I'd rush to turn myself in and  
Claim that it was my sin,  
To spare you.

Yes, for darling  
In this town of light and shadow  
Dreams become crooked and low.  
If I've lost my way it was only to please you,  
But Veda, my darling, you already know.

### **Musso and Frank (6667 Hollywood Blvd.)**

I'm generally not a morning drinker  
Said the gold-tooth man to the barkeep  
Ordering his second gimlet.

The writer works at the lush life  
Out of compulsion

And oh he carves himself in two

In which we meet the sly detective  
Mixed up in a case he'll provide a getaway  
For an old friend.

He tails a drunk who's a paperback writer  
A bottle rage fighter

And oh, his lady such a pretty thing  
He carves himself in two

The morning drinker keeps them coming  
Makes a study of the ice as it cracks  
In the glass beneath the poison

His wife is dying  
He keeps from crying

Harnessing his pain  
To all the characters he's made  
And he gives each one a name  
and when he drinks alone  
he talks to them out loud  
For love's a word  
For love's a word.

The detective's on a toxic cocktail  
Two parts mistrust and one part lust  
For a certain woman

He can't resist all her wild advances  
Her tribal dances

Her husband in the next room  
As their love begins to bloom  
But he cuts their dalliance off too soon

Between the millionaire  
And the man in the mug shot  
There is an unwritten agreement  
That anyone anywhere can be bought

It is a path lined with  
blood, money, and deceit  
the brighter the writer,  
the lighter the touch  
as they offer their cunning critique.

The morning drinker's on the beach now  
Scattering the ash from an urn  
With a splash to test the water.

**Pauline Gibling Schindler (835 Kings Road)**

When we met  
At the opera

We were fast in love  
We made plans  
For a house  
He would build us

We moved  
To California  
And soon broke ground  
But that house  
That house  
It nearly killed us

First there were friends  
Who lived there as well  
And then children  
Who could bellow and crawl

But what once seemed devotion  
Soon struck me as selfish  
We holed up in corners  
And only spoke through the wall

A little joy  
A little joy  
A little joy of a bungalow  
A little joy  
A little joy of a bungalow

You were backbit by your brother  
You almost died in squalor  
But for all the estrangement  
I blessed you for this home

Now the garden grows higher  
While I grow the frailer  
And soon I'll join the garden  
As a friend of the loam.

A little joy  
A little joy  
A little joy of a bungalow  
A little nation  
A little nation  
A little nation all its own

A space for the outside



To come in

### **The Folks Who Live On the Hill (1635 Woods Dr.)**

(Kern & Hammerstein)

Someday we'll build a home  
On a hilltop high, you and I,  
Shiny and new, a cottage that two can fill.  
And we'll be pleased to be called  
"The folks who live on the hill."

Someday we may be adding  
A thing or two, a wing or two.  
We will make changes as any couple will.  
But we will always be called  
"The folks who live on the hill."

Our veranda will command a view of meadows green,  
The sort of view that seems to want to be seen.

And when the kids grow up and leave us,

We'll sit and stare at the same old view, just we two.  
Darby and Joan who, used to be Jack and Jill,  
And we will always be called  
What they have always been called,  
"The folks who live on the hill."

### **Villains (4616 Dundee Dr.)**

Why do villains  
Always live in houses  
Built by modernist masters?

Why does Hollywood  
Insist on destroying  
The city by numbers,  
By natural disasters?

An elemental earthquake  
A furnace of a fire  
A rippling rainstorm  
Nuclear bombs or martians from the future

A dithering police force  
A mutant sprung from a cage  
A giant half man horse  
A frustrated actor on a spitball rampage!

Are you nostalgic for a time  
When you could put a face to ev'ry crime  
And the violence was as wholesome  
As it was imaginative, baby?

How would you feel  
If we moved into  
The house where they shot  
Pulp Fiction?

We'd put the nursery  
Where Uma OD'd  
A reminder of greed  
Of the dangers of  
Heroin addiction.

A cantilevered beachhouse  
With clerestory windows  
An open air sleeping porch  
Frank Lloyd Wright built a whole lotta bungalows!

Rudy Schindler and Neutra  
They had a great big falling out  
Two great architects  
Let me tell what that was all about

Is something absent in design  
Where the heart is mastered by the line  
And all you've got is the reflection  
Of what's on the outside, impure?  
Say, all these houses look the same  
The uniform of steel in ev'ry frame  
You could think about a lot of things  
Waiting for the concrete to cure.

I've been thinking a lot  
About action movies of the 1980's  
Particularly Die Hard,  
Which seems to illustrate  
So many of the anxieties

Central to a time + place:

Japanese capital  
The waning of the cold war  
Pride in a downtown  
What did they build it for?

Risen from the ashes  
of a once great neighborhood  
All the ghosts of Bunker Hill  
Who needs history  
Was history ever any good?

Are you nostalgic for a time  
When art + commerce toed the line  
When entertainment had an easy smile  
As it looked upon you, too?

Back then Bruce Willis had some hair  
He smoked in airports, no one cared  
And in the end, Alan Rickman  
fell out of a window, boo hoo

Are you nostalgic for a time  
When you could put a face to ev'ry crime  
And the violence was as wholesome  
As it was imaginative, baby?

### **The Castle (325 S. Bunker Hill Ave).**

This lonesome house in desuetude  
Under the shadow of tomorrow.  
I sit and sketch the crumbling paint;  
Bulldozers shifting loads of sorrow.

Do not mourn what must be lost.  
Don't get sentimental for history.  
The glass and steel have been embossed  
With secret messages all hidden in machinery.

The last leathered stalwart pensioner  
Creaks through the front door of The Castle  
Past its glory.  
Squinting against the sun, he considers the desert:  
The infant skyscraper adds another storey.

## **Empire Liquor Mart (9127 S. Figueroa St.)**

When the black and whites arrive  
I am lifeless on the floor,  
Crumpled dollars in my hand  
In my hand, in my hand.

The lady in the fishing vest  
Has dropped the gun.  
Who wears a fishing vest  
When they're working at a liquor store?

I float up to the corner,  
Just above the ice cream  
and the frozen food.  
I perch beside the surveillance  
Camera...

Only days after the trial  
You could feel the tension rise  
In the street and in the rhythm  
Of despair, of despair.

It was war after a while  
In each neighbor's tired eyes.  
There was nothing to persuade them  
To stand down, to stand down.

I float higher and higher,  
Friendly with the clouds  
That cover Southland...

\* \* \*

I watch the tender skyline  
Dancing, oh the terror—  
On the long night,  
On the long fight,  
Blood, glass, burnt hair.

These angry armies quick ad-  
vancing, in position:  
On the rooftops,  
In the culverts,  
Stores are sacked while no one's there.

Now two kinds of light  
From fires and fixtures  
They fill the sky—

It was never so bright  
When I was young, I was  
Too young to die.

On TV sets, in houses  
Effortlessly done in fancy colors,  
All the righteous,  
All the newsmen  
Speak of end times.

Why should they give a damn some  
Angry little black girl took a bullet?  
Lord have mercy,  
Lord have mercy  
On the ones who've done the crimes.

Now two kinds of light  
From fires and fixtures  
They fill the sky—

It was never so bright  
When I was young, I was  
Too young to die.

If I float even even higher,  
Pattern and procession are uncovered:  
Flood and fire,  
Flood and earthquake  
Keep folks unmoored.

And the occasional celebrity car chase  
Woo woo woo woo!  
Just to keep God  
From getting bored.

Now two kinds of light  
From fires and fixtures  
They fill the sky—

It was never so bright  
When I was young, I was  
Too young to die.

\*\*\*

When my Grandma was a young woman,  
East St. Louis,  
She thought the town was  
No good to us.

She took a Greyhound  
Just as far as it could take her,  
Felt her maker in the waves—  
You know, how God moves through us.

I was six years old when we followed,  
My mother was twenty-two.  
The light was magic,  
The light was true.

She thought we'd moved  
moved beyond a sharecropper's debt,  
But we were just a pawn  
In the accuser's bet.

Nobody reads from the Book of Job  
At the church where me and my grandma go.  
Nobody sees the trouble I know,  
But I know that trouble's gonna find me.

Three years later on a Thanksgiving,  
The light turned bitter;  
My grandmother didn't know  
what hit her.

We got a chill  
From the cold white sun,  
Momma found herself staring  
At the barrel of a gun.

That weren't enough,  
My uncle died too—  
Shot through the chest  
Back in East St. Louis,

So one fine day,  
My grandma lost two,  
Took me in her arms,

said, *it's just me and you.*

Nobody reads from the Book of Job  
At the church where me and my grandma go.  
Nobody sees the trouble I know,  
But I know that trouble's gonna find me.

\*\*\*

So when I say that my un-  
timely death was  
Something certain,

What I mean is  
that these tragedies  
are a kind of a family tradition.

So when I walk into the  
Liquor store that morning, bright and angry,  
In a daydream  
Of a boyfriend  
I was fifteen,

Pick up a bottle of orange juice  
And put it in to my backpack,  
Head toward the counter with dollar bills  
And she accuse me of stealing that—  
She pull my sweater  
And so I hit her,  
Put down the bottle  
Don't want no trouble—

Now two kinds of light  
From fires and fixtures  
They fill the sky—

It was never so bright  
When I was young, I was  
Too young to die.

I suppose it's no surprise  
To find myself about to die.

But how long that silver moment  
from the bullet to the floor.

That right there was a lifetime...

**Ambassador Hotel (3400 Wilshire Blvd.)**

I am the night watchman,  
I stand by the door.  
Some fifteen thousand nights  
I have stood here for.

For all of you actuaries,  
That's forty-six years.  
They'll be closing up the hotel  
When the morning sun appears.

Wilshire was a wilderness  
When they thought to build this place,  
But soon the starlets were arriving  
Like they were runners to a race.

Now twenty-one summers  
On a steep descending slope  
Since that midnight in the pantry  
When the country lost its hope.

Cut the lights off in the nightclub;  
Strip the linens from the bed;  
Tell the busboys and the bellmen,  
They better get it through their head,

That they won't be back tomorrow,  
And it grieves me to tell you why—  
The Ambassador's been bleeding out  
And now they've let her die.

A saturnalia every Saturday  
In the salad days long gone.  
Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford,  
Would be wrestling on the lawn.

I shook hands with seven presidents;  
I may have flirted with their wives,  
But my heart is in the hotel  
When the wrecking ball arrives.

Cut the lights off in the nightclub;  
Strip the linens from the bed;



Tell the busboys and the bellmen,  
They better get it through their head,

That they won't be back tomorrow,  
And it grieves me to tell you why—  
The Ambassador's been bleeding out  
And now they've let her die.

Nineteen-sixty-eight,  
I won't mention for the hurt,  
Except to quote  
the one who wrote that  
*doom was woven in his shirt.*

I am a statue in the doorway;  
There are no guests; there is no sound,  
But for the rasp of plastic palm trees  
And a seagull on the ground.

If they could bury me in the ballroom,  
I'd be content to fade away  
With the ghosts as my companions,  
Right beyond my dying day.

Cut the lights off in the nightclub;  
Hear the walls begin to sing  
Of olden days and golden days  
When Valentino was the King.

No I won't be back tomorrow,  
And it grieves me to tell you why—  
The Ambassador's been bleeding out  
And now they've let her die.

### **Union Station (800 N. Alameda St.)**

The travertine speaks of a world gone by  
Drape cut, cummerbund, wide patterned neck tie  
With mindless magazines I kill time  
In the late, great waiting room, elegant decline

A delicate man with a bird-like face  
Stutter steps next to me sets down a briefcase  
Opines that the palm tree chose to grow  
Toward the heavens when there was no further West it could go.

In the hall, in the hall

In the hall of the lost,  
In the hall, in the hall  
In the hall of the lost,  
The line from faded to forgot  
Is crossed  
In the hall, in the hall, n the hall  
In the hall, in the hall of the lost.

If Lewis and Clark made an art of the quest  
God and Nature and Indians to the West  
Is there defeat in a train from LA  
When Manifest Destiny brought us all this way?

In the hall  
In the hall

When the pilasters split to admit the sea  
The hands of the clock will be covered in verdigris  
I'll swim to the train and find my seat  
And hazard a smile at anyone who looks at me

When the Alkali flats with their cracks pass by  
Think of the color wheel, think of the Western sky  
Distant city with a distant glow  
The hall of the lost has let me go.

In the hall of the lost,  
The line from faded to forgot  
Is crossed  
In the hall of the lost.