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 Hollwood’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 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 smart—
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.
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 adv-
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.

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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.