

Sketches for a Wasted Youth

stat crux dum volvitur orbis

O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem

Prologue

The cathedrals of youth
are castles of sand,
empires living forever in memory
long after the tide erases
them from the earth.

As a young man, I spent my life
somewhere between
a brothel and a monastery
searching for the same thing.

There were countless days chasing Vicodin with gin;
in the absence of God, I needed a sense
of divinity coursing within.

I tasted the temptation of the tyranny of ideas.
Speak no more of bangs and whimpers;
This is how this un-world will end –
with someone's good idea.

So here I stand somewhere between a misspent youth
and the midpoint,
still not succumbed to the decrepitude of age.

The young still sing their sensual song,
and I these wild and wandering cries.

I hear holy Byzantium's bells calling, but now is not the time to
disembark; age it seems, has not left me
yet tattered enough to leave these shores.

So I linger in this un-world before the unveiling of the world
and the healing of these desires
until at last I find the first,
with mind and bone welded to empyrean fire.

Whatever can be said of that past life,
which bleeds into the present, might best be unsaid.

But, what else is there?

Silence perhaps for the unspoken truth?

Does knowledge begin with the incapacities of speech,
until love makes knowing obsolete?

Whatever can be said of natural passion, it glitters through a
broken glass of the soul's wounded motions.
Silence hears the silent and
stillness embraces the still.

Mojave

When I was a boy I traveled with my family on Highway 395
through the Mojave Desert.
Mirages danced across the open road like
broken irrigation lines gushing over a flagstone path
in an unlikely garden.
A garden lined by creosote bushes
and bisected by scorch tortured asphalt.
Off in the panorama, foreground and background grew
from the ground Joshua trees
giving depth of field to the ribbon of road
unspooling like film from a projector wheel.
Those arboreal oddities are less trees
and more old, hairy arms reaching through the sand
clutching several fistfuls of lawn clippings for leaves.
The last time we all traveled that road together
was two decades past.
I've been in the wilderness ever since.

Sometimes I still hear that highway's silent stretches
echoed under every star-scattered sky.
And I say to myself – be still.
Listen now to what you couldn't hear then:
this un-world leaves none un-ruined.
Divest yourself now of hearing
until you then can hear the music
hymned in the beginning and
reprised in the end.
Divest yourself now of sight
until you then can see the whole world
Divine, shining through the
translucent drapery of this present un-world.
Divest yourself now of touch
until you then hold the hand of every stranger
as the hand of God
and sense is restored by absence.
Remember, the self is a desert flower that
breaks into blossom after years of dormancy
and the severe gratuity of a wet winter in California.

Wait now, it will bloom in a galaxy of selves
shining on the desert floor when
the wilderness remembers it once was a garden.

I hear it said that men should raise their fists against the night.
But that beautiful rage bought them no radiance.
Whatever light they knew, they bequeath to us –
a glittered refraction through the broken glass
shining upon a midnight highway.

I say to my soul,
This is the time for darkness in the desert
Go down into it,
Let it take you up where sense evaporates
Until your vision is the Vacancy of God.
The way up is the way down.
Ascent and descent are the same motion,
your grace, this garden,
this desert of your divestiture.

Discount Theatre

Pyre, Pyre, the empire's afire on Independence Day,
projected upon the silver screen at the dollar theatre
in the town where I grew up.
A nation fears destruction more than decay,
yet both movements share the same destination.
Was it there or in Sunday School where
I was gripped by apocalypse?
Certainly the cinema evokes a grander sense of vision,
though only a sense of something more deeply sought,
or even taught by a most reverential Reverend.
Can a vision be had by the turning of the projector wheel?
Behold, I looked and I saw spilt soda on the floor
and a flickering light suspended in midair
hovering above an audience
attending a theatre that outlived its prime.
Perhaps the cinema, even a decaying one,
has become the new temple for the shuffling masses,
the citizens of empire who no longer feel transcendence
and now insist it be shown to them.
But now I sound like Augustine caviling against the theatre
lest he be moved by another but God
or live with the agony of unordered love.

Still, I am moved by a story unfolding before my eyes.

These perfect fictions are no more lies
than words themselves.
In this un-world there is only verisimilitude
and lies that point somehow to truth.
There is a sense in nonsense whose labyrinthine
path might at last lead to sense.
I cannot discount, in this un-world, the value of buttered popcorn
or the magical mystery of the movies,
maybe it's the only light we can bear.

O these precious lies that can only point to the truth
in the Theatre of Theophany.
If God appears at all in in this un-world
it is on a screen tattered and crumpled.
The only images to be seen must be unseen.
The only vision is the interval between
Gethsemane and Golgotha,
the garden and the grave.
This, this is the celestial bloom in the wilderness
this is the desert's victory rose
this is the apocalypse of Calvary
where the world is at last created.
For all of the ferocity of the cinema's sound
its truth is but a whisper,
For all the beaming brilliance of the theatre
it glitters through a broken glass,
Until at last the the credits have rolled
and the speakers give no sound
and the flickering lights flicker no more
and the theatre empties
and the empire lays in ruin.
All that is left is a vacant room
filled with the empyrean darkness of God.

Night Club

For the young, Friday night's rhythm is a raucous thing
when age has not turned time
into a funeral rose.
The mirror ball mimics heaven in a cacophony of sound,
a song shining in the interstellar darkness
hovering over a haze of sweat and gin.
The beat keeps the time that refuses to be kept
tourbillion encased against the grave's gravity,
but demands to be spent like it is all we have.

In a crowded club on a Friday night
there was only her and I
and the kind eyes that lifted my feet on the floor.

Time is ignorance,
a sensual dance to a sensual song
on a spinning floor in a spinning room.
Beneath the dance there is nothing but unknowing,
hidden in the motion is an abyss of stillness
cradling the frail music with tender silence.
I needed a stranger's arms gathering me in
to drink her embrace for a moment's respite
from the desiccated desire of the desert
I carried with me wherever I went.
I wasn't ready for the silence of God,
so he came to me by her
in the only way I could sense.
Her soft lips were a prayer upon mine
for a transcendence I could touch.
There was the dancing desire pulsating with passion
to find my way beyond sense by sense.
In the dance between us there was a certain sanctity,
it's the sort of holy the young feel
when time is not a broken bottle pouring
the last drops of youth upon the floor.
It's hard to say what I thought I was searching for,
in that gin-soaked haze, what can be said,
is that through a broken glass
there glittered a light of something sacred,
and she was an angel of mercy.
I searched for that moment through countless nights,
but never found it or her again.
All we had, I thought, was time,
when all we had was the dance.
All we had, I thought, was each other,
when all we had was our ignorance.
All of the song that yet abides is the silence,
all of the dance, the stillness.

Now, there is still a more riotous dance, a Bacchic revelry,
the light of all within the Enlightening,
the dance of all within the Dancing
the song of all within the Singing.
Time is no longer ignorance,
this procession has been transfigured
by the erotic language of dance closing the

distance of sense and senseless by time beyond time.
Revelation and hiddenness within the manifestation
of the vacant transcendence,
of the prismic immanence,
the spinning song of the mirrored ball
on the spinning floor where the Light is All in all.
This, this is no fleshless dance,
the Mystery disclosed
is in the Body concealed,
and the Dancer and the dancing are one.
Friday night's radiance glitters through a broken glass,
her kiss a prayer for ecstatic intoxication,
her breath respired to heaven to become breathless.
This, the death that concedes at last to deathless,
where the funeral rose and the victory rose are one,
blooming in the desert garden.
The Song enfolding the silence enfolding the singing
is the Dance enfolding the stillness enfolding the dancing,
from which all motion and repose proceeds and returns
in a syncopated Rhythm that is the Radiance of All in all.

Hometown Church

The church is a theatre all of her own,
a ruined temple forever rebuilding,
playing a feature of sinners and saints –
a dueling plotline woven into a single story.
I grew up in a church that loved that old-time religion
and celebrated the saw-dust trail
trodden by lost souls looking to be found.
We sang old rugged songs about old rugged crosses
and wretches saved by grace.
And I, I was always one prone to wander,
prone to leave the God I love
like a child lost and looking for his mother
at the supermarket in the strip mall miles from home.
It is this story that taught me sin is a sense all of its own:
the smell of burnt ozone from the busted fuse,
the coppery taste of electric heat,
the buzzing sound of the blown speaker,
the crackling shock of the electrode pad stuck to the skin,
the sight of the siren swimming in a sea of fire.
It appeared to me I would ever be in the ashes,
the publican beating his breast,

staring at his shoes
sin sooted and gin-soaked, saying,
'Lord have mercy on me a sinner.'

So there I was, gin-soaked and guilty
singing those old rugged songs
these wild and wandering cries
on Good Friday with unslakable thirst.

So there I was in the Theatre of Theophany
whose drama unspooled upon an unseen screen
in a ruined temple
that glittered across the ribbon of road
that constrains all time.

So there I was, ruined in an un-world of my own making,
ruined in an un-world that was made before me
singing through my tears
in the tender embrace of Divine Vacancy.

So there I was, when Lenten hunger
was loosening its grip to the power of Spring
where the apocalypse of Calvary
irrupted within the winter of my discontent.

Images of shaded Hades flickered on an invisible screen
where the unseen wears the garb of the seen
drenching my dying eyes with second sight.

Wrapped in the silence of a funeral shawl
my gin-soaked heart awaited a miracle
a resurrected Hand to break open the grave
and bring life to the wilderness within.

Hoc est enim corpus meum

This, this my friend is Me for you
Body and Blood building a bridge
across the fiery waters of the Phlegethon,
a wilderness meal and a surety
of the transfigured desert in empyrean bloom.

The theatre of Theophany plays on in every ruined temple
featuring one title – *Anastasis*,
and the un-world is subsumed at last by the world.

Friday, that good and holy day must come first
where death is destroyed by death
and the wounded passions by Passion healed.

Then Sunday comes and the stillness becomes the dancing
and the silence becomes the singing
and the sepulcher stone stands shattered forever
and the Vacancy is unveiled forever as Presence
and sense is at last restored.

Mental Hospital

The carboniferous sludge of imprisoned sun darkened by years,
churned and cooked in subterranean hells,
until freed from its earthen clutches,
awaits modern alchemy's refining wizardry
to concoct incantations for its combustive perfection.

After years in acedia's grip,
lingering beneath the lithosphere
a spark lit the long-forgotten fuse
and launched me into the star-spun heights
among the spangled spaces of the Milky Way.

How often I have warred with devils
while chthonic cyclones conjure their maledictions
and monsters in my mind
or left me listless and snake bitten by the noonday demon.

How often I have tread water in the tyrannous torrent
of unending ideas, of incandescent ideas
of their treasonous pretense, of their vacuous intoxications
of their masquerading charade, of their maltempered reason.

These un-worlded ideas, their highest ambitions, their wretched insanities
are empire's sandcastle foundations
and the portents of the un-worlds last ruin.

Yet, the same coin flips
and shows his smiling face,
and the incendiary is transfigured iridescent;
should I also not say what is best left unsaid?

I too have dined with prophets,
tabled with Moses and Elijah
and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel,
they are my brothers in holy madness.

I too have been alloyed to their tongues of fire,
singing their dirges and uttering their ecstasies,
trodding the secret place of thunder on Sinai's mountain
to behold the Darkness of God as Light beyond light.

I too have seen the world in its singular beginning
when the sons and daughters of God first learned to sing.

I too have seen the world in its blessed ending
when the sons and daughters of God will sing again.

I too have seen the cosmic array as Song and Silence
irradiated by Act and elucidated by Repose,

circumscribed and spinning and singing and dancing
around the ever-moving Stillness.

Lettered ladies and medical men stare down their glasses
and nod in perfect incomprehension
while scrawling sibilant psycho-babble on
ignominious notepads, blissful and misinformed
to the truth that sanity is always a precarious fiction.

If there's sanity at all in the hospital's halls
it is found in the fact that pills are paltry promises for peace
it is found in the fact that this un-world leaves none un-ruined
it is found alone in our groaning for the unveiling of the world.

If there's sanity at all in the hospital's halls,
it is in the truth of our tears,
in our wild and wandering cries
while we cling to the funeral rose
that became our victory at the apocalypse of Calvary.

Madness has always travelled near me –

I've been touched by empyrean fire
and scorched by sulphurous pyre
and burned electric in my bones bound,
jarred, jolted by its liminal live-wire.

I've been there, drugged out of drugs by better drugs
while taking fellowship among the dregs.

I've taken supper with souls who found courage to confess that all
the light we know glitters through a broken glass
shining in the starlight scattered highway
unspooling from the projector wheel across our desert garden.

I've sat in circles while we sung our woes
bought by wine and gin and fistfuls of Vicodin,
lamenting the bridges we've burned
believing perhaps some bridges might be built again.

May I ever be numbered among the company of the damned;
only the damned can be redeemed
when the destructive pyre at last burns out
and we dance unburned in the brilliance
of Transfiguration's unrelenting fire.

May I never, never forget that the line
between delusion and inspiration
is a beautiful blur in the un-world's flux
of sense and nonsense that ever, ever spins
within these wounded passions.

Only when the world appears and the Passion has his way,
arrayed in the panoply of empyrean Love,

showing forth his Physician power
will the passions' pyre be put to peace.
For now, there is only the waiting in hospital halls.
For now, there is only dispossession and divestiture
in the wilderness garden bisected by the only
road the un-world will remit, veiled by the
darkness and desiccation of the desert.

Humboldt Park

The knifing winds of November
cut the air of an amber lit afternoon in Chicago.
These are the bruising streets of blacktop and broken glass
that breaks boys into men
and makes them into brawlers.
Towers of commerce rise in the East along the Lake,
but on the West Side it's hard to muster the
courage to look up toward a life
that lies beyond grasping hands.
I hear their voices in the silence,
crying out into the void
for a God that left these streets long ago.

This, this was when the madness of a mad world
touched me for the first time
in the back alleys of Humboldt Park.
I was a bible college kid living in a bubble,
a comfortable enclave in a city
that knows little of comfort.
A gust of wind caught yesterday's news
and the dead rattle of yesterday's leaves
in a whirlwind that never leaves these streets
and never yields them a placid moment.
I see their eyes, the vacant gaze of children who
cannot see the past, or the future through the ever present
blur of bullets ripping the afternoon air.
It's a crushing concession for a suburban kid to concede
that the city leaves none un-ruined,
they're born without bootstraps
still we insist if they just persist
they can pull themselves from the teeth
of these iron jawed streets.
Their daddies are gangsters,
their mommas turn tricks,

they've seen the heart of darkness
that the un-world refuses to see in itself.
Our little bible classes on Saturday afternoon
felt like a bandage on a broken bone.
All that was left for me was to make their voices my own –
a desperate cry into the Vacancy for a Light
that glitters through the broken glass
that litters these city's bruising streets.

When I embraced a frightened child in a moment of terror
was I not diminished by his tears
or entangled in his fears
so that they become my own?

If he is forever damned,
then so am I because my arms
were an open door to my heart
that I can never, never close.

If he is forever damned
dangling like a spider
over the pyres and horrors
of hell's hot mouth
then I am bound by love to burn with him.

Hell would be a better place
than the bliss of a heaven
that would make me forget a boy
whose courageous rage bid him to baptize
this un-world with his tears of incomprehension.

If all shall not be well
and any manner of thing be left to ill
then the the funeral rose signifies only failure
and the victory rose cannot flicker transfigured fire.

If all shall not be well
then the Vacancy of God is mere emptiness,
the Darkness of God mere void,
and the sepulcher stone remains unshattered.

Yet I trust,
ex tenebris lux,
soon, soon a radiant sun shall shine
when the sons and daughters of God sing again.

Yet I trust,
that the apocalypse of Calvary
cannot ever end in failure
or consign even one forever to the void
when the pile of each and all is made complete.

Yet I trust,

when the funeral rose is welded to fire,
empyrean petals for each and all
shall gently fall upon the streets of Humboldt Park
and all shall be well and all manner of thing be well.

Maui

Somewhere in the middle of the azure sea
islands, green and brown and black rise
like the backs of primeval turtles
who belched forth beauty
from belly-born fire,
Wrapped by endless horizon
like the possibilities of love,
Filled with birdsong symphonies
at fire-lit dawn and pyre-burned dusk
echoing in salt-sky airs.
How could I have known when I held her hand
on the extruded stone of of a lava cooled cliff
over the sapphire swirled Pacific that in the un-world
love's fire bends like stone to silence?
Whether by death or dissolution,
the hearts we hold so dear
spin inexorably toward the breathless moment
where there's nothing left to say.
And all that stood between us,
or ever would long after love's venture
was indissoluble incomprehension.

Love is a sensual song spinning in our ears,
a defiant dance into the stillness,
an ignorant voice into the void
that the soul can't help but sing.
If it is a foolish thing, teetering on the edge of a cliff
I sing that song in praise of love's folly.
If I had known the goodbyes whispered in her eyes,
courage could not have kept my feet fast
in the silence that stood between us.
If I had known the goodbyes whispered in her eyes,
I might not have offered my vow into the vacant sky
not knowing our children danced in her graceful gaze.
In white garb wrapped resplendent
she was a vision of a shining world
peering through the translucent drapery of the un-world.
And there I stood at aisle's end

before the island plunged into the Pacific
in youth's blessed ignorance
ready to walk a road we all must
bending always to an abyssal silence.

And there she was, doomed and blessed
to trod the same tracks beside me,
venturing the un-world's tried and true road
of love that cannot but end in failure.

Yet no failing love is vain, or doomed as it were
to silence or soil heaped over the grave,
it is, as one has said, destined at last in the coming world
to be transfigured according to another pattern.

So give me your pain, I give you my grief
as we bequeath our incomprehension upon each other -
see it glitter upon broken glass strewn about the midnight
highway unspooling from the projector wheel
that spans this island and the dark desiccation of the desert.

So give me your doubt, I give you my fear
and we will fail together,
our alienation is a silent song into the Vacancy of God,
our incomprehension is the funeral rose.

So give me your anger, I give you my hurt,
the song must end in silence,
the spinning dance must spin no more.

The hope of the young must be utterly spent,
there is only so much time
pouring on the floor from that broken bottle,
yet it shall to pour anew in the endless flow
of eternity's everlasting youth.

Let us balm our broken hearts with this truth,
the Dance awaits in abiding stillness
for now the Song is silence
until the last island crumbles into the sea
only to rise again in an unveiled world.

Love is the funeral rose in this Theatre of Theophany
that must blossom into victory
when Calvary's apocalypse has rent asunder
and unraveled every thread of the veil
which now stands between us.

Let us wait and walk this desert highway alone together
until this ribbon of road has played its final act
and we join the empyrean company
and with our children, dance forever young.

Epilogue

So here I stand at the midpoint
 where the sand of this young empire
 is carried away by the waxing sea.
If youth is an alabaster bottle, let me break it in extravagant waste
 upon those feet that carried the cross to Calvary
 until the truth of these tears are utterly spent.
Speak no longer of brothels or monasteries –
 they are shrines to a common longing.
Speak no more of ideas –
 their whimpering bangs will bang no longer.
Speak no more of a past that bleeds into the present
 or of passions, these too shall pass.
Speak no more of the incapacities of speech –
 soon Love will lend its fire to these words.
Speak no more of Vicodin and gin or paltry pills,
 the un-world remits no relief.

Linger now, for a little while in these hospital halls
 walk now, for a little while upon the midnight highway,
 sit now in this ruined temple until the world at last appears,
 until the theatre empties and this empire lays in ruin,
 and all that lingers is the empyrean Darkness of God.

Cling now to the funeral rose,
 it alone is victory
 blossoming in the desert garden
 where all is well and all manner of thing well.

Sit now with desiccation and desire
 until the stillness becomes the dancing
 until the silence becomes the singing;
 Anastasis has shattered the sepulcher stone.

For now there is only the waiting,
 there is only the walking
 down the ribbon of road in this un-world,
 unspooling until it ends at last.

Silence hears the silent,
 stillness embraces the still.