

expedition notes  
(vol. 3. the UnEarthed City)

by

Mick Parsons

for my Dad,for Lonnie, and all the other forgotten heroes who taught me to never stop  
searching...

## prodigal lines

### ¶ 1

We followed the sound of the train whistle  
as far as it would carry us: through December mountains,  
snow falling on evergreens like last season's mistletoe. Then  
into the valley deep and wide,  
that kept the tread marks of shoes from years before.

There was a time  
the stars that were your eyes led us on,  
casting certain light like in childhood stories.  
We could be sure of it,  
then.

(The Faith was strong,  
omniscient. Undefeated. The  
forecast of the generals  
was optimistic.)

Since nightfall forty days ago, we are stumbling blind.  
Bourbon and prayers are no help against the coming winter.

(The saints no longer listen.)

We are on our own  
crippled by our grumbling stomachs.

We hid from the engineers  
& the ticket takers with their flashlights,  
lived on old animal crackers and stale water  
from the Traveling Freak Show. Alligator Boy didn't mind.  
He assumed we were a new attraction.

Reveling through the night, remembering it all  
to recount to our grandchildren:

In Remembrance of our lost and wandering eye  
In Remembrance of our faces long after they've fallen  
In Remembrance of these days of our Exile. Do This,

so the onlookers will have something to speak of:  
something of the quaint lives of dead folk.

¶ 2

I know in the autumn that I am home.  
Melancholy skylines behind murals of dying leaves  
and the chill in the wind  
brought on by the passing trains

(They pass without stopping;  
a notice nailed to the station door says  
there is a plague, and the city has been erased  
from every atlas and public record.)

We wander these streets  
staring through shattered windows at reflections of the crumbling city  
holding our stomachs

(sore from poisoned animal crackers)

waiting for the next drop of rain that will never come.

It is a cold, dry autumn.  
Grandmothers flock to churches to pray for sons and daughters  
who never returned from the war. They die prostrate,  
words dehydrated on wrinkled lips.

At least this year we have the leaves. Next year, they will be gone,  
& the crowds of city dwellers will rot & fight over who will be the last to be buried  
in a delicious splendor of red and yellow leaves.

## one more concise history of the world

At this moment  
dinosaurs walk the Earth—  
searching for the return of familiar landscapes.

Heavy footsteps were beat down  
into foot trails; trails stretched  
into roads,  
into curvy state routes,  
& gut rattling county roads  
cutting through where trees and deer  
then cattle and coyote roamed  
trusting the immortality of a single day  
like a childhood summer. Along the way  
villages bubbled up  
around farmer's markets, newspaper offices,  
bars and brothels  
then railroads built  
with the bones of 10 million Indians and Chinese and African Slaves

(the blood coagulates  
into red clay, iron ore,  
and steel, with which  
we have wizened the landscape forever)

learning along the way  
how to recycle the dead  
terra firma  
into cement  
into concrete  
into plastic  
& reflection-free plate glass windows

so the roads became highways  
and the villages festered  
into towns and cities. Here,  
on the banks of the Grand River  
on the ruins of the ancient civilizations of Seven Hills  
Monolithopolis was forged  
with new gutters spilling onto  
once sacred ground  
atop of where the curse of our undoing  
waits to be excavated

while the dinosaurs,  
their knees buckled from wandering  
can only resort to prayers  
and parched, strangled groans.

pg.3

¶ 1

Sloshing through the rain and remembrance  
waiting for whispered advice of dead fathers and grandfathers:

“My grandfather did it to me  
and I have no choice but to live with it. Yours did, too.  
And you must learn to shoulder the responsibility.”

The voices in my mind are more real in the rain—  
more concrete as the water wears them away,  
the sedimentary nature of ourselves washed away  
mixed with polluted water  
and the gasoline spill in the Great River.

30 gallons a minute  
floating out to sea  
with all that remains of the Kinetic Soul

strange bubbles and fire  
in black river mud.

The gray-haired City Alderman ordered the river blocked,  
and so he emptied out the cemeteries for their bones  
drafted men from homeless shelters to do the labor  
and was applauded by tax payers and civic groups  
for soothing their worries at a reduced rate.  
All cemeteries were turned into playgrounds  
and later sold to private contributors for industrial parks.

We find ourselves  
shifting through our grandfathers bones.

## Spring Fantasia (*magnificent grotesque*)

I.

The rosewood trees are in bloom;  
unseasonably warm spring winds blow the perfume  
& petals everywhere,  
makes the sidewalks look like  
one minute after a wedding procession.

Days like this  
I want to forget this place  
go somewhere without skyscrapers  
or the sound of airport traffic  
or the perennial road construction  
tearing up the new tires on our economical commuter car.

Days like this  
I want to look out the window  
draw mountains over the buildings  
erase concrete with dirt  
clean the sky with a giant squeegee  
so I can see the stars again at night  
& know where I am in universe.

II.

But e are here, now.  
Coziness has set in.  
We are breathing deep these Spring days—but the anticipation of summer  
cannot soothe the burning sensation in my hypothalamus that tells me  
some old ghost will walk again. I hear them  
rattling in the crawl space. They sound like squirrels;  
but I know better. I could run the streets  
screaming. But my family already mutters about me,  
the madman downtown. Too much city water: genetic mutation is inevitable without a filter.  
Industrial pollution in the cochlea, cornea  
& occipital lobe  
leading to massive hemorrhaging  
& hallucinations.

According to the news at 5  
there is a team of lawyers preparing a case on my behalf—

They are renting me out to a traveling freak show to cover  
initial expenses. They gave me my own cage  
'cause the Elephant Man winks suggestively at me with his one working eye  
& boasts about the size of his trunk.  
The bird woman, legless ex-gymnast  
tried to land on my shoulder to nest.

But the ringmaster threatens  
it's only for a while; soon enough, he says,  
he'll throw me in with the rest of the malcontents.  
The lawyers advise through carrier pigeons that he only wants more money.

All the birds nest on our roof.  
They gather, exchange reports from abroad  
& make plans  
for the next aerial attack.

III.

**["Do I dare eat a peach?" –T. S Eliot]**

The season is delayed this year—  
winter holds on with the bit of her icy spikes  
refusing to let go.

We unpacked out winter gear for the 10<sup>th</sup> time  
& have left it piled in the corner. There's no point  
moving it to the basement again. All the houseplants have been brought in;  
new spring birds, confused, fly in low circles above the power lines.  
Ornithologists on the news are concerned  
because 1 out of 5 sparrows are decapitated each hour  
& the city street workers complain because the carcasses clog the gutters & sewers  
& the small pieces of bone break the belts on the street sweepers.  
One guy lost his right eye,

but he wasn't in the union so there wasn't much fuss.

A telemarketer calls every half-hour  
selling the End of Days; for a small donation {payable by credit card or check by phone}  
I can ensure my place among the sheep  
on that Day when the sky cracks open  
like eggs months past the expiration date.

They tell me they will not call again.  
But I will talk to them again tomorrow; after all, they get paid on commission.

3 weeks past Easter  
& the televangelists are scrambling  
rewording overworked translations  
misinterpreted for the prime time viewing audience.  
But the telemarketers, undeterred, have stepped up their efforts  
& opened a telethon on Public Access  
to run concurrent until Christ's return  
assuring me they are all praying for my immediate salvation.

The circus, meanwhile,  
has moved on  
left me tied naked to a half rotten telephone pole. The lawyers won't return my calls

& every afternoon the Catholic School Girls walk by,  
point, laugh  
& spit on me.

## 15 W. Market Street

Cleanly kept empty store fronts act as reminders  
of those Golden Years: those days beyond the scope of history.  
Echoes of lost footsteps on wide neglected sidewalks  
haunt the tired-eyed proprietors of the few open shops  
no one bothers to find, preferring the new mall at the interstate bypass  
to the drugs & muggings & rampant prostitution  
they talk about on the nightly news. The gutters are backed up  
with used needles, dirty rubbers, bottles of ammonia  
& empty boxes of over the counter cold medicine.  
This once cobbled One Way Street is blocked with large orange barrels.

On the corner, the historical society plaque outlines your hey-day  
bustling business in a post-war kind of way  
wives of the GI Bill waltzing to & fro the white-washed store-fronts  
while across the river & downtown  
hungry scabs riot in the streets,  
crying out  
in the name of some forgotten son or another  
buried anonymous in heroic mass graves.

The bars here are crowded by quarter to 8  
dim lights & deep shadows for morning stragglers  
between unemployment checks  
& the new instant scratch off game.

## metaphysique (poetic interlude #1)

### ¶ 1.

“There are no appropriate translations.”

- Rufus, the Order of Saint Alice

Neither philosophy nor religion  
nor metaphysic, nor science  
has been able to excise the poetry  
from these primordial bones, this spleen  
recording eons of histories forgotten,  
star maps locked in our diaphragms,  
livers and lungs. Though the stars gave us voice  
to throw back, the moon and ocean  
lend it timber and depth. Rolling thunder calls back  
meeting us toe to toe.

But these ultimatums are largely subconscious. Over the years,  
we'll forget them  
like breathing or blinking our eyes  
no longer paying attention—

deliberation sacrificed for an Empire of the medulla oblongata.

In the name of science passed off  
as metaphysic  
to replace that old time religion  
to silence these spirituals buried in these primordial bones.

### ¶ 2.

Your eyes are moons of some lost galaxy  
star maps buried in my cerebral cortex lead the way,  
though I need only to trust gravity to find them.

Only there  
is the appropriate language  
beyond translation: syllables outlined in cosmic fires the only ones  
appropriate to say  
just how much I love you.

Human words aren't strong enough  
and in our comfortable silences  
I hear more of your iridescent soul  
than in all our proclamations.

### ¶ 3.

So then—  
a search for language.  
These words born in our throats are only

the squawks of babies against the deliberate cadence of eternity—  
serving only to tell us

we are not alone, to trust  
the honesty of natural rhythms  
leading back to center.

This essential humanity grows  
rooted in natural dissent  
in lives spent struggling  
against the shadows forged in the dark corners  
of childhood bedrooms

alone

against those powers and principalities  
whispered in Grimm's Fairy Tales  
and the weekly morality melodramas  
and the fear given voice nightly  
in special reports  
and rancid game show prizes

alone

never noticing through the sweat  
percolating in our eyes that all our shadows  
appear oddly the same.

## Colloquial History (Expanded)

"History as a series of conflicts" (Marx--paraphrased)

4 million people crammed in Vatican City watching the end of an era;  
updates every hour  
'tween reports of murders  
& kidnapped children  
& news of more dead soldiers in the desert. Tail end fin de siecle  
end of the millennium spillage  
Exxon *Valdez* off the coast of the cultural imagination  
leaking our compartmentalized sins back to us  
in regulated drips  
so's we don't notice the subtle changes  
on the molecular level.

The marks of our mistakes revised  
to ignore the inevitable stink of a billion plus corpses served.  
Fat, retarded fruit flies,  
low flying & unconcerned  
have the final corporeal say.  
20 billion maggots move over the hills & trails & city sidewalks  
searching for the afterbirth.

All refuge is underground now.  
4 million people in the streets  
piled like cockroaches, waiting for the procession to pass by.  
Waiting, terminally  
for some sign of the circle of life—  
something beyond the heartbeat in their ears  
to tell them  
they are still alive.

All round the world  
locked in vaults & tombs  
men in somber black suits drink grunted toasts to the dead.  
Gin & tonic & ethyl alcohol  
the drinks of choice—  
with a shot of formaldehyde for flavor.  
Alchemic possibilities  
secret societies incanting long forgotten dead tongued texts  
insecure sounds made from the confiscated ear wax of defeated peoples  
in vaulted rooms buried 10,000 feet below the surface  
wallpapered with skin left over from the Third Reich.

Here, there is no sound.  
Neither whimper nor whirl  
and all the whippoorwills have fled  
for better crumbs and higher expectations.  
The polluted air has sucked out our voices  
and it takes all our energy  
to simply breathe.

All over the city,  
thousands of bodies line the streets  
atrophied,  
sallow-eyed & starving  
stuck in the moment of the Great Consumption.  
Everyone on the streets fell where they were. Those not killed in the calamity  
people in crosswalks, random house fires, or ICU wards  
gasp & want:

wheezing asthmatics breathe while their lungs shrink more each day  
& their hearts thump mad in the ears,  
& every night they pass out  
praying on chapped lips  
to never wake up.

**caesura**

Sitting at my kitchen table, I listen  
to the sound of train whistles echoing  
at regular intervals—

(the corpses of more unknown soldiers coming home.)

When traffic stops at railroad crossings  
husbands and wives step out of rusty trucks to watch  
the 30 mile line of cars  
roll by. Geographically speaking

I live somewhere between the whistle blows  
watch the 10' clock news for bedtime stories  
to lull me into sleepwalking dreams

(wondering the next morning why I always wake up crying.)

Doing as the Pastor bids  
I pray in the streets  
lament the wide and crumbling sidewalks  
so heaven will hear;

following the example of the City Alderman  
who consults every wandering drunk, their beards  
wrangled like in the stories  
of Old Testament Prophets re-interpreted

from loose translations based on 3<sup>rd</sup> person accounts.

As the trains pass  
faceless, gray-suited attendants shove the coffins out  
for relatives or medical schools to claim. Meanwhile,  
In the shadow of the Great Monument,

safe inside the Chapel of Saint Alice,  
children are trading rosaries and bible school pins for bitter lemon drops  
bringing with them the bodies of dead cats, guinea pigs, three-legged hamsters,  
arms and legs of fathers and mothers severed by the heavy traction of tanks lining the streets

*(to keep us safe from harm)*

Kitchen tables remind me of Sunday mornings before church  
of Grandpa reading the Sports Page and smoking a cigarette (*filterless*)  
while Grandma talked about the walnut trees outside, and I read the comics  
pretending to laugh at punch lines I never understood

like sermons  
later in the morning  
having more to do with tithing  
than attaining salvation.

## New American Gothic

¶ 1. [EXACTLY ONE WEEK AFTER LAST TUESDAY, END OF SUMMER]

Rice and peas&corn and onions&green peppers and sorrentos  
are not so rejuvenating  
as I had hoped. Apartment's  
a mess. I'm a mess. Last Tuesday,  
my old age was born  
in the bend of my left knee  
and the only time it doesn't hurt  
is when it rains.

Dirty dishes, beer bottles, and used coffee grounds  
scattered on the kitchen counter. The cat ignores me.  
His preferred food is not in the pantry. The sky outside  
is overcast and the breeze is cool. My knee aches  
in anticipation of the rain clearing out by rush hour. What's worse,  
the sun will dodge the clouds  
and once again  
your face will shine down—

one more reminder of things  
I can never finish.

Some days I wake up angry  
unable to remember my etiquette lessons  
lash out  
like the hurt animal I am. Because  
I cannot face down God,  
I will make tears in the eyes of his image.

Resilient echoes  
of Sunday morning television hucksters  
sermonize at my cerebral cortex  
to simply believe.  
Belief is easy—

but grace is impossible. Some falls  
are forever and in the end,  
we find Hell  
as we expected:  
in a dry township  
where all the taps pour sand from our graves  
and for all our anger  
we can't give it voice  
since our ears have been dissected in the name of Science  
& National Security.

¶ 2. [DUMBFOUNDED]

So, what's left after letting go  
after assimilating angst into longing  
when all the memories become shaded,  
somehow graffiti-like in the middle of the night  
by those vandals in the spleen crawling up  
the wide yellow boulevard of my back  
to mark over the years  
I swore I'd never forget? Those nights  
when it all seemed  
so important  
that late into Saturday night  
I sat up wondering why Sunday  
was so damned complicated, why  
no matter what, the sermon never applied—

just one more failed child of the American Dream  
fat with the possibilities  
of Regan's Cinematic Manifest Destiny  
a reconstituted republic

in the image of our fathers  
constructed out of old bones, newspaper mache'  
and those midnight emissions we were raised  
never to discuss in the open

We

the prototype image  
of the New Millennium mega menga junkies  
the landscape so different  
from the one our parents built.

We

the deadpan progenitors  
of the New American Gothic  
on the cusp of Midwestern sensibility  
sans the stretching cornfields  
& silos  
& tobacco barns  
& slaughterhouses

searching time in a linear fashion  
using the Scientific Method  
for those stars denied us  
those stars  
we dared to dream on  
in the dead eyes of all those heroes  
from public service messages  
between Richie Rich and Looney Tunes  
& the flag draped coffins  
on the evening news.

¶ 3. [BREATHE—]

Across the bridge  
acres of forgotten boondocks are burning  
bold cold feet broken  
caught beneath a capsized boat  
just an inch too far  
from kettles of limp noodle soup  
unfinished catapults made of  
cardboard  
used candle wax  
and crinkled aluminum foil  
next to the flattened rats  
beside to the great goggles  
of a forgotten statue  
given to us  
ground into memory  
as more googols of useless knowledge.

The smoke house smolders  
like cooked roast beef  
too dry to grind  
too charred to eat.

#### ¶ 4.

They labeled us  
so we'd fade away  
in the wake of fashion trends  
and market strategies... history demonstrates  
people will fight the Army  
and back down the National Guard  
but no one  
no one can fight 30 second commercials on perma-loop  
with the appropriate sound track.  
The pursuit of the ultimate CD collection is key  
to keeping the masses silent:

ears covered in headphones, drowning out the mayhem next door  
where the neighbor lady's daughter  
is repeatedly raped  
in ritualistic fashion  
by sadistic city planners and marketing VP's  
while we all shuffle on, mummified  
with cell phones that do the talking for us—

#### ¶ 5. [HISTORY LESSONS]

You can see by the architecture  
it was built to be a Grand City.

Each brick (they say)  
is hand made by indigenous peoples  
lost to history.

In the face of this failure  
we can only look back and wonder  
if the blood trail was worth it.  
Left to the cold calculations of tin-skinned accountants,  
the cost distribution, in the end,  
stands for nothing. The mathematical mean  
always deviates, the columns  
are recalculated each hour  
but there is never time to check the work  
against the answers in the back of the book.

Our Fall led us here—  
this place we've not thought to name  
this landscape without trees;  
bare rocks record the myths  
of eon old cedar and fir and algum.  
Even the redwoods our grandfathers swore on,  
they are gone. All the creek beds are parched  
overflowing with the decomposing bones of children drowned  
by their parents out of love and desperation. Too weak  
to find death themselves, they sent the babies first  
& survived on blood and salty tears  
mistaken for grief.

The first name of this place,  
unpronounceable by our tongues,  
loosely translates as *Holy Place*;  
to speak it means *Spit on the Ground*.

That first name died  
with the last breathe  
of the last baby suckling sour milk  
from the used breast of a woman  
no man would call mother.

Beneath the old subway tunnel  
there's a mine leading to the heart  
of the ancient city. In the plaza  
stands a grand monument to forgotten days—  
the Anno Domini eroded by time and acid rain  
the sculptors hands encased in a diamond box buried  
10,000 feet below. We whisper at the silent the grave of our children  
that the worn face belongs to St. Alice  
who flew to Heaven one day  
on diamond and Plexiglas wings,  
showering shards on the gawking bystanders,  
blinding them forever.

On that day,  
10,000 prophets were born  
blind seers who wandered the streets preaching  
& healing disfigured children  
using the blood flowing from their vacant eyes  
asking only for loose change  
& sour wine.

## Reflections of You / Divine Cartography

I watched while she looked for herself in mirror every morning  
on those days she decides to wear make-up. She was beautiful...  
nothing so exquisite to me  
as the sound of her breathing  
the warmth of her body in our bed & the dreadful weight of her tears  
her fears which reminded me  
I was only a man.

During those Insomniac Hours I hoped God forgave  
she loved me too much to see my heart  
was not enough against the divine logic hounding me.

I only hope God forgives  
I love her too much  
that her heart is sacred earth  
that even while she searches her reflection for that girl her heart recognizes  
in my eyes there is no reflection but the host of heaven  
resting in hers. Her kiss on my forehead  
& I am released—

the last sensation this body feels  
is the deluge of hypothermic fits  
the chills that make my hands shake  
makes these lines run forever off track in poetic irony.

When the damned pray  
they pray for hearts like hers  
to stay alive a little longer. When I pray  
in the verse of the damned, I pray  
your heart is strong enough  
for us both. Idolater that I am I pray to your reflection:

your face in the mirror  
your face etched into my eyes like primordial memory  
when all words are unnecessary  
& the soul speaks of centuries  
beyond crude syllables & loose interpretations  
when the language is so pure  
to listen makes these poor human ears bleed tears of cranial sadness  
in the knowledge that all our beauty is false—

you've been in my bones  
since the day I was born. Unexplainable warmth / divine fire from the firmament in your eyes  
the touch of your skin  
a Pentecost in my soul  
& all that is good in me transmigrates  
leaving behind this weak & wicked reflection.

## winter blockade

### ¶ 1.

This morning, the words are coagulated in my fingertips; frozen by the gray cement winter outside. Every enclave is a blessing. The original city planners designed it to push wind out like a large funnel; the future back then was in science... an entire city built to harness the powerful wind off the mighty river and blow it east where the moneyed investor's class sits chewing on turd-shaped cigars.

I am tired of this prosthetic reality. In winter, particularly, it's easy to see the linkages holding the whole kit and caboodle together.

The last honest man I knew is dead  
buried under the eastern mountains that birthed him  
without his consent.

[But that is, geographically speaking, centuries away]

Here,  
pollution rises to the top of the frozen river, impervious to the cold  
dredging up with it  
the bones of all our children, most beloved pets and evil memories, ex-wives,  
cheating husbands, deadbeat fathers and drunken mothers.

We've learned not to notice.  
Not anymore. Better to keep our heads down  
lest the arctic wind snatches our souls from our nostrils.

A leading authority has suggested  
the increasing number of winter deaths  
is a direct result of exhaling at the wrong moment.

People have died  
suffocating themselves  
trying to keep it in.

Great mystic nihilists use pillows,  
having learned to ignore the unconscious drive to survive,  
holding the goosefeather down on themselves.

Others have their mouths and noses surgically sealed—  
but that's mainly on the west coast  
according to a special report on 20/20.

Sex and asphyxiation clubs are forming in high schools  
all over the Great Midwest, while here,  
in the Great Valley, senile riverbed farmers watch  
while their proud sons' daughters  
wrap their legs around their heads

and crawl back up the birth canal.

¶ 2.

December is the sleepy month—  
season of the automatons, day after sale,  
special markdown,  
lowdown consumer confidence  
the only reliable indicator  
whether god is laughing and it will be a good year.

Numbers are up—  
though no one is smiling

(smiling is not an objective indicator)

but analysts are pleased. Graphs appear optimistic,  
and just one more juggling of the numbers  
will prove unequivocally  
the system works.

To celebrate,  
the City Alderman has ordered closed  
every homeless shelter; sent the bums packing  
and the nuns are now serving Jesus  
one John at a time.

*/His announcement caused the market to jump 3 points./*

From every pulpit  
on every street corner in the city  
sanctioned megaphones proclaim the departure  
of al true prophets, soothsayers, and storytellers. They packed themselves up  
in 100 mile long caravans headed for the West Coast, New York, Chicago, or Philadelphia  
because they pay more per syllable.

¶ 3.

The nonstop sounds of commuter traffic  
of trains, of planes circling from delayed landing,  
of barges filled to the brim with bones, follow me  
into m dreams.

Even sleeping is no escape from December.  
Winter's settling in early this year. Not enough hot toddies  
and rock salt to keep the chill at bay. All the bartenders sit,  
reading yesterday's newspaper while one lone crier sits in the back  
at the piano trying to play a funeral dirge. Half the keys are missing  
the rest are out of tune  
or held on by broken strings.

¶ 4.

Today is wrapped with inevitability, mummified  
disguised as winter snow. We settle in waiting  
(always waiting) and stocking up on liquor, bread,  
wine, and tobacco for the long season ahead. Rationing coffee  
and dried apricots for every breakfast between now and the end of the world,  
while the television informs us  
of our own recent demise.

Houses caught fire, the souls of thousands evaporate like steam;  
meanwhile, in the downtown business district, men and women  
in thousand dollar suits jump from 40<sup>th</sup> floor windows. Paramedics say  
they are falling missionary style.

Today  
we travel out  
to bury out honored dead.

It's nearly Christmas; time to crucify out daughters  
on perforated plywood crosses,  
like they made on that PBS show last Saturday. We've taught them  
since before birth not to cry—

no point in seeing that mess, too.

Childless couples desert the suburbs  
for the rural counties of their birth  
only to find it smoldering... thus is was spake  
in the days when giants walked the earth,  
cursing us to watch the apocalypse through puffy eyes.

Hermits shut up in long deserted libraries  
solving puzzles to stay the execution  
one more day.

¶ 5.

*Dreams have been disturbing of late. Always, the sun explodes into paper mache' shards. Then, in the darkness, blind hands stumble upon me, tearing my skin and eyes and tongue til I can no longer scream.*

¶ 6.

How do we carry on like this? These tears frozen round our necks like chains  
keep us bound to the earth... grounded even as our wings pull themselves free of our backs  
leaving bloody scars like tire tracks?

¶ 7.

Even the buzzards know  
this meat is too rancid for eating,  
and moved on  
to less blighted lands.

Rusted, empty troop transports keep the peace,  
while the cops crack down on single mothers  
and street preachers on the orders of the City Alderman,  
calling via satellite from Palm Springs. Turned out by the thousands,  
teenage mother feed babies with one exhausted tit  
while servicing entire squadrons with rest

(coming 2 by 2)

making sure to leave a little blood aside  
for the weekly tax collection.

*Section 3.71456, part z75*

The new law:

A PLACE FOR  
EVERYTHING

Enough to make  
OC housewives smile. They walk the streets  
with rags and cans of Lysol  
disinfecting entire city blocks in a cloud so thick  
even the cops won't go there, and the gov't pays a stipend  
for certain petty tasks along the way: infant assassinations  
pay triple.

Those of us left  
survive on moldy bread  
and our envy of the dead  
while all our embalmed hope is rolled away  
destined for another anonymous grave.

Yes. It may be time to break again for the mountains.



**Idylls of the King** [*Memorial Day '05*]

¶ 1.

The city's strangling me in my sleep— slowly  
so the coroner won't complain about the summer murder body backlog.  
His hands leave no marks. Smog leaves no fingerprints. 2 nights ago  
plastic factory waste kicked me in the right side 'til blood & water spilled  
though the Cat-Scan insists I'm fine.

Maybe a man only lives up to his usefulness.  
Maybe if it wasn't smog from the soap factory,  
it'd be a sleepy bus driver or random cockroach dander mistaken for sea salt.

Old folks make a pilgrimage to the desert for clean air:  
fewer irritants to make wrinkles & gray hair.  
After 40 years of making rubber gaskets & pink house insulation  
& giant rolls of non-asbestos death  
polyurethane  
petrol-based made chemicals  
made to make our lives better, warmer & wealthier

a little clean air  
so little to ask.

¶ 2.

The man in the bed next to me is dying, slowly.  
Waiting it out. The only people who visit him  
are doctors & nurses who look at the chart to remember his name. One nurse calls him by mine.  
He answers just the same.

Sometimes he whispers when no one is there;  
to a wife, a son, old friends. No one.

One of the nurses said (I heard her whisper)  
*he's a veteran.*

*Always so polite, says his*  
*"Yes Ma'am"*  
*& "Thank you Ma'am."*  
*& "Whatever you think, Ma'am."*

To hear him makes me sad.  
Something sloppy  
something broken in his voice  
like life finally beat him down. & for all the sacrifices  
he's left here dying alone  
in a Cincinnati hospital  
where even the Priest stays away from the colostomy smell.  
We're all doomed to be old dogs;

blind & mangy  
tick ridden smelly reflections  
of some puppy in a photo  
stuck to the fridge with a Purina magnet.  
Too old to hunt  
to rickety to play  
all there is  
is napping & dinner  
& the occasional trip outside  
to fertilize mom's retirement garden.

¶ 3.

I woke early to the sounds of medical conversation  
& the absence of you.

Alone considering karma. I know it's the city killing me. The doctors claim pneumonia  
but I know what happens in my sleep.

The weight of your absence  
turns in my dreams to mountains  
to the rock that forged your fingers. I dream of you  
of a winter home between your thighs  
of eternal spring sunshine in your eyes  
of autumn in arms, like colored piles of leaves  
of your heartbeat the beacon sending me home.

Hospitals have learned to kill us  
one blood sample at a time.

The man next to me is named Stanley. All they will say of him is all they know

*"Ain't that a shame..."*

¶ 4.

One day a year to remember  
though we don't know it is we're remembering.  
It's just another holiday  
& some poor somebody's gotta work  
'cause I'm here on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor.

On TV, the President laying down one more wreath  
on one more anonymous grave in Arlington National Cemetery.  
Some young man's American Dream of dying  
larger than he lived. The warrior's immortality dream  
we've heard since Gilgamesh.

Cultures that survive  
understand the importance of everyday life—  
still breathing means something. Taking one more breath

counts an eternity.

The city's overcast today. Even the sun doesn't burn through industrial blowback  
the sludge pumping through the heart of the city  
keeps us alive to drain our souls drip dry. The best views  
are of 3<sup>rd</sup> generation impressionist painters  
all soft light & pastels  
sitting garden motifs unpeopled  
& unblemished.

¶ 5.

I felt my age today. To be an adult is to be fragile;  
to see the first glimpse of mortality.

The weight  
weight of years  
weight of obligation

obligation to be myself  
    myself poet  
    myself husband  
    myself father  
    myself man  
    myself alive.

Obligation to live  
    to the great experiment of a life lived honestly.

/symbiosis/

¶ 6.

*a.*

So I'm not dead—  
not yet & I never even got a chance to thank you for the ride.  
My childheart skipped a beat lying on that stretcher  
waiting for the news. Faceless doctors  
& severe-tongued nurses  
slithering around  
saying nothing. Whispering hiss-like at crude jokes only they understand  
offered up by an internist with a penchant for buggering boys in the supply closet.  
With some patients, he doesn't even wash his hands after  
& 'accidentally' gives emergency prostate exams. Evil bastard, that one.  
His name is the name of a nightmare demon I dreamed 20 years ago  
before you were here to protect me.

Visitors always come somber  
& before there's time for a shower. 3 days unshaven & greasy haired  
makes the experience more dramatic.

IV's & oxygen tubes  
designed to scare the patients into health  
as their families fall near to death.  
The eyes all guarded  
conversations light & pointless  
cocktail chit chat without the booze to make it worthwhile.

Love & caution—  
quiet steps  
subtle realization  
you're not 16 anymore. Obligation at the heart of manhood  
fused like igneous rock centuries underground  
forged by lava and flood water. Obligation to live for the love of others  
stronger than the desire to burn out.

**b.**

These tales come down to us through the ages  
& replay on the evening news:  
stories of heroes dying  
remembrance full in hand  
immortality in a 2 ½ second shot of some soldier's picture.

The way we'd rather remember them...  
since they took the cameras out  
so we'd never know how things really go.

These tales come down to us  
stories of brave fathers standing tall... a better way to remember them  
rather than the frailty of the last breath. Dying childlike,  
early in the evening.

¶ 7.

Weight of love & obligation  
tundra hearts  
this inner geography upended by the tremors in your tears  
vast wasteland  
endless worries sprout like weeds  
like endless carnivorous vines  
snaking 'round my ankles  
up my inseam & inside. They devour my intestines whole  
unnoticed in the night floor nurse  
or the early morning X-Ray.  
(though my blood is so thick, they use a sump pump to take a lab sample.)  
This is nothing new. Doctors whisper,  
make clicking sounds in their cult language  
sounds like laughing. Natural instinct tells them  
when to squeeze the weak, feed the convalescent fears of wives, mothers, & daughters.

The lunch cart brings in a shriveled hotdog on a bed of wilted lettuce. The milk carton,

3 weeks past expiration, has the face of some missing son—  
gone since '82 from some satanic ritual abuse. Somewhere, the parents keep  
those elementary school pictures, imagining the lives of other parents  
who kept their kids safe  
from rock music and role playing games  
& what it might be like to see a college graduation.

¶ 8.

The vines have taken over my backbone.  
Now in my sleep I slither up the halls like a boa constrictor.  
Every morning, I wake with the taste of fresh blood in my mouth.  
My arms & legs are heavier each day. In my dreams, I see grassland  
bleary eye intoxicated by the smell of chloroform  
& ecstatic photosynthesis. During the day the world loses more color  
goes black & white.

Residue, like newspaper ink, is everywhere—

my hands, my eyes, covering the television  
screen, your face, your eyes.

Every landmark is covered  
like a fire's burning somewhere we can't see  
so all the city's covered in ash  
& mourning.

## still lifes and landscapes

### ¶ 1.

Our Promised Land is dull under this late morning haze  
distant outlines barely seen  
through miles of toxic smog from the soap & plastic factories  
on the north side of the city.

Work-a-day slave ethic  
the click-clack of stilettos on office floors  
while outside, 40 stories below  
another tragedy's unleashed in the name of Imminent Domain  
& the sound of shiney shoes scraping blood caked cement.

No one knows we've lost this campaign  
to beat the valley down  
like a cruel master breaks an old dog  
then leaves it limping in the creek bed to die.

No one knows  
but the civil engineers / chained in subterranean cubicles  
damned to designing monstrosities  
for to save the city at the taxpayer's expense.  
Sweating over blueprints written in virgin blood  
for a few minutes every night  
closing their eyes to find a dream of that sinful / beautiful sun, bottle of wine  
& the sweet smell of the blanket after an afternoon picnic sexcapade.

The city rests on 40 mile wide pillars  
made of dead bones,  
the remains of frozen mastodons,  
& sinews of nameless saints whose faces wore off in the last cave-in  
when the 7 heroic statues tumbled from the 7 hills  
& the avalanche buried the first 10,000 settlers mid-coitus.

### ¶ 2.

All our possibilities luminate under a purple perma-neon glow  
casting long shadows,  
horizontal arms stretching skyward  
fingers dwindling towards invisible stars we know of only from bedtime stories  
& pictures in ancient texts.

We send these faithless prayers skyward  
weak admonishments from parched lips  
carefully using the correct words  
in these last, few moments  
before an exhausted & dreamless sleep.

### ¶ 3.

These sights were foretold long before our arrival.  
At the gates of the Eastern Mountains  
our forebears received visions of this looming apoplexy

but lacking our contemporary terms  
they interpreted them figuratively  
& cut their way westward to avoid a slow death in southern swamps.

¶ 4.

From this distance, everything works in some cosmic order—  
all the movements of all the feet on jaded crosswalks  
some grand waltz. Chaos comes when you're close  
when you're rubbing your nose in the inevitable shit  
resulting from all this—

dancing.

Never coordinated, I,  
I, whose feet were born to amble  
never ceasing, even in my sleep. I've stopped being surprised  
where I wake up. It is enough to simply breathe another day. Life is a matter of delegation.  
Leave the work for the parts best suited:

feet walk  
hands hold  
eyes ogle  
head avoid truth / 'til the last possible moment

& always trust the feet to do the dirty work.  
The mud here soaks through my journeyman sandals  
cakes my toes in thousand yr. old blood  
that the muddy water never quite cleans.

Asbestos debris falls from the tops of our Babylonian Towers:  
Impossible stairs to the sky  
hoping to find the remains of Jacob's ladder  
in proof of all our industry. We made God over in our own image  
& now there's nothing more to do but watch the crumbling afterbirth on the evening news.

A fleet of barges in the river  
carry away the refuse we don't want to consider  
to be dumped anonymously  
somewhere deep in the Atlantic.

¶ 5.

All the evidence was here—  
the distance calculated with New Math  
all the supplies marked & recorded  
we begin our quest with clear conscious.

From the East  
we traveled West—

searching for the endless forests  
the river running through it  
the gates of the Eastern Mountains  
& the 7 Majestic Hills

somewhere, A fertile valley

a Vacation Bible School Genesis  
new beginnings  
where we can walk naked  
& be unshamed of our shortcomings  
forgetting out ancient knowledge of good & evil  
& be whole again  
swaddled in our innocence.

Since God does not create anymore  
we will build for him / in our image  
'cause we know from Old Testament Tradition  
that blood is the only appropriate offering

'til we hear that voice  
telling us we are good & faithful servants

even as the morning haze burns off  
broiling us alive.

## last legs

### ¶ 1.

I've spent my 10 years finding the way back to you—  
the soft geography of your body  
rolling hills & valleys deep in the recesses of your soul  
ages of the earth, centuries of love & learning in your bones  
like rings of trees  
like layers of rock

all that is you is eternal.

& in the lost valley of your eyes,  
your arms, your thighs  
I am revived by the cool comfort  
a person only feels when they are home.

### ¶ 2.

This world is not yours—  
this one I've built of cement & gravel & steel  
these smoke stacks filling in the sun  
are not yours. This cacophony & chaos  
& hunger & hate

are not yours.

Though my bones are world weary  
& some days my heart is beaten down  
& all I see are long shadows of the coming winter

in your embrace I am innocent again.

Across this muddy lake covering whole cities  
this submerged reality walking tip toe  
between oil spill stained waves

back to you

feeling 'tween my toes  
the lives of cities submerged  
the sound of bubbles  
last breath of memory. Echo of civilization  
lost to the next generations  
history suffocated under progress

rubbing the callouses off my feet  
leaving them fresh for my arrival home  
to you.