



A NOTE ON THE AMBASSADOR

1

Everybody knows that the best way to understand Los Angeles is through the windshield of a car. Everybody knows that the best way to understand Los Angeles is on foot. Everybody knows that the best way to understand Los Angeles is from one of the terraces of the Griffith Observatory. From a bike. From a seat on the Blue Line south of Rosecrans Avenue. From a helicopter.

Everybody knows. Among the most surprising and appealing things about Los Angeles is that, in fact, nobody does. The scholars of L.A. and Southern California most worth reading and re-reading, living or dead – acerbic Louis Adamic in the 1920s, myth-crushing Morrow Mayo in the 1930s, clear-eyed Carey McWilliams in the 1940s, later Esther McCoy, Reyner Banham, Anna Deavere Smith, David Brodsky, William Deverell, William Alexander McClung, David Ulin, Gustavo Arellano and Mike Davis – have all found a way to express some version of the same idea, that what defines Los Angeles is its unwillingness to sit still for portraits of any kind.

That slipperiness remains central to L.A.'s character. And everyone here has a surprisingly precise idea about just how long it takes to get a fix on this giant, too-bright city. Some peg the adjustment time at two years, or four. McWilliams, in his classic 1946 study *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, put it at seven: "My feeling about this weirdly inflated village in which I had come to make my home... suddenly changed after seven long years of exile."

Gabriel Kahane's exile in Los Angeles has been shorter, or at least more sporadic: Though born in Venice Beach in 1981, he spent his childhood in upstate New

York and later Northern California and his college years in New England; he now lives and works in Brooklyn. In recent years he has begun traveling more often to Los Angeles and making a study of its architecture and cultural landscape. Though the structure of *The Ambassador* suggests a geographer's rational approach – ten songs, ten addresses – Kahane's Los Angeles is a city coming in and out of focus, rather than straining for some kind of perfectly composed overview. Which is to say he has nimbly avoided the first trap this city sets for would-be chroniclers.

2

Los Angeles has no center. Los Angeles has many centers. Los Angeles has a center again for the first time in a long time. Los Angeles needs a center. Los Angeles needs its lack of a center.

On the day I was interviewed for the job of architecture critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, in the fall of 2004, the editor, a white-haired, charismatic and old fashioned newspaperman named John Carroll, warned me that the area around the office, in the heart of the Civic Center, became practically deserted in the evening. "They roll up the sidewalks at 6 o'clock," he told me. A decade later downtown Los Angeles is in the midst of a remarkable revival. If you hear about a new restaurant worth trying or a gallery worth visiting or even a significant piece of architecture going up, the chances are good it is located downtown. The renaissance is real. But it is built on a paradox. Downtown didn't begin to thrive until its wiser champions abandoned the idea that it was destined to operate as the one and only center of Los Angeles. It was only when downtown emerged as peripheral – as shadowed and

overlooked and full of potential – that it began its climb back to prominence.

Similarly the Los Angeles River, after a series of deadly floods, was wrapped in concrete beginning in the 1930s and largely forgotten (except by movie directors looking for a place to film a chase scene), despite the fact that it cuts through the heart of the city, fifty-one miles long in all. Its recent comeback was dependent on its decades of abandonment, not just as a place but as an idea fundamental to the city's understanding of itself. Los Angeles, as a whole, is like this. It regularly exiles parts of itself and, in doing so, plants the seeds of their resurgence. Its urbanism is fluid, flexible, dynamic; this is one of its great strengths.

If *The Ambassador* has a center it is "Empire Liquor Mart," a nine-minute-and-fifteen-second song about Latasha Harlins, the fifteen-year-old shot by a fifty-one-year-old female Korean shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, thirteen days after the Rodney King beating. Around that shifting and contingent mid-point spins a Los Angeles for which Kahane has clear if complicated affection. It is a city of reveries and disasters and noirish shadow, of "flood and fire" and "folks unmoored"; a headquarters for the production of post-apocalyptic scenarios that is ambivalent about the degree to which it is leaving its suburban self behind. It's a place built of lightweight, even tent-like structures by ambitious émigré architects, an ephemeral metropolis "designed to break down."

It is also a place coming to grips with its own track record of cultural amnesia: a city willing to raze Myron Hunt's broad-shouldered, serenely monumental 1921 Ambassador Hotel, where four of the first eight Academy Award ceremonies were held and

where Bobby Kennedy was shot by Sirhan Sirhan on a June night in 1968, but also self-conscious enough, as the melancholy of the title song suggests, to regret that demolition almost immediately.

3

All the clichés about Los Angeles are false.
All the clichés about Los Angeles are true.

Be careful not to reject the familiar tropes too quickly. There is value in these shiny, portable trinkets about Los Angeles. The vain city. The unfinished city. The city of experimentation, anomie, cultural and architectural enclaves, disaster, individualism-as-religion. A desert facing an ocean. Perhaps the most useful are the ones that were always reliably present in discussions about Los Angeles, that got at something persistent and palpable but never hardened into stereotype. Among them is the idea that L.A.'s most important buildings are not arranged neatly on a grid, as is true in other cities, but exist as a constellation of attractions largely tucked away in the private realm and strung out across a wide and uneven terrain.

Even as we can reach more of those attractions without cars, even as Los Angeles haltingly grows more public and better connected by mass transit, this sense of the city's cultural, political and architectural landmarks as stars in a mostly dark sky remains useful. Think of *The Ambassador* as a guidebook to that Los Angeles, a map marking just ten locations but expansive enough to accommodate the great, telling distances between them.

— Christopher Hawthorne, April 2014

BLACK GARDEN
2673 DUNDEE PL.

for Ruth and Cooney

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.

BRADBURY 304 BROADWAY

for Rutger Hauer

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, oh have you really known
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, like
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.

for Mike Davis

Wake the sky!
Burn up the chaparral,
Light it 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.

VEDA 1 PIERCE DRIVE

for Joan Crawford

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 off 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.

EMPIRE LIQUOR MART

9127 S. FIGUEROA ST.
for Latasha Harlins

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 advancing, 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 fuck, 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 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
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...

MUSSO AND FRANK

6667 HOLLYWOOD BLVD.

for Raymond Chandler & Philip Marlowe

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 his 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.

Oh, her husband in the next room
As their love begins to bloom –
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,

He's scattering the ash from an urn
With a splash
To test the water.

VILLAINS

4616 DUNDEE DR.

For Thom Anderson

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 beach house
With clerestory windows
An open air sleeping porch
Frank Lloyd Wright built a whole lot of bungalows!

Rudy Schindler and Neutra
They had a great big falling out
Two great architects –
I'll tell you 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 1980s,
Particularly *Die Hard*,
Which seems to illustrate
So many of the anxieties
Central to a time and 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 and 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!

AMBASSADOR HOTEL

3400 WILSHIRE BLVD.

for Arthur Nyhagen

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 on 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.

GRIFFITH PARK

2800 E. OBSERVATORY AVE.
for J.T.

You're on the porch amidst the pith
Of seven rotten oranges + regrets that
You unraveled after pulling them off the tree.

I drove through cardiac traffic to get here,
Bodies hanging out of windows, gunned the
throttle,
Killed the bottle, all so's not, so's not to see.

My head was a sledgehammer.
The lawns were impeccably manicured,
But the council found a blade
Was out of place and that there'd be

Hell to pay, today,
I'm here to exact revenge
On behalf of all the overwatered greenery.

My luck, my love,
Survived the blast from up above.
Her hand, her touch,
We'll soon find out what's left of us.

You'd been underground for most of seven years,
Since the studio wars went nuclear.

They brought Mitchell from the nursing home
To negotiate détente.

And in the aftermath they crawled out:
Game show hosts and actors,
Holy ghosts and pastors,
Corn fed boys in leather, and an
Alcoholic aunt.

Mankind, mistrust,
The balance sheets had all gone bust.
But my luck, my love,
We'll soon find out what's left of us.

I wanna take you to Griffith Park.
I hear the radiation's falling.
We'll put a blanket on the overlook
And watch the half-life neon crawling.

Though the leaves have all turned black,
I'll put sunscreen on your back
And we'll hike to the observatory.

And when we get through with the park
I'll take you to the movies
Though they haven't got concessions
Or a picture on the screen.

And we will dance the darkened theater,
And playing it from memory,
We'll run through *Kiss Me, Deadly*, and
We'll laugh about the ending
As we pantomime each scene.

UNION STATION

800 N. ALAMEDA ST.

for W.G. Sebald

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 in elegant decline.

A delicate man with a bird-like face
Stutter steps next to me puts down a briefcase.
He 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, in 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 L.A.
When Manifest Destiny brought us all this way?

*In the hall, 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 I'll 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, 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, in the hall
In the hall, in the hall of the lost.*

THE AMBASSADOR WAS PERFORMED AND PRODUCED BY
Casey Foubert, Matt Johnson, Gabriel Kahane and Rob Moose

Additional musicians:

AOIFE O'DONOVAN *background vocals on tracks 3 and 4*

HOLCOMBE WALLER *vocals on track 7*

SHARA WORDEN *vocals on tracks 2 and 5*

Mixed by *Casey Foubert*

Engineered by *Alex Venguer*

Mastered by *T.W. Walsh*

Assistant Engineer: *Henri Bardot*

VIOLIN I

Jesse Mills, Colin Jacobsen, Anna Elashvili,

Caroline Shaw

VIOLIN II

Rob Moose, Nick Kendall, Ana Milosavljevic

VIOLA

Jessica Troy, Christina Courtin, Gillian Gallagher

CELLO

Jeremy Turner, Clarice Jensen

TRUMPETS

CJ Camerieri, Gareth Flowers

FRENCH HORN

R.J. Kelley

TROMBONE

Mike Boschen

TUBA

Marcus Rojas

TENOR AND BARITONE SAXOPHONES

Hideaki Aomori

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Studios, Brooklyn, NY; 2nd Story Sound, New
York, NY; Casey's house, Madison, WI; Gabriel's
house, Brooklyn, NY; and Holcombe's house,
Portland, OR

All songs written and arranged by *Gabriel Kahane*
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BILL COONEY & RUTH ELIEL.

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