

**Sinister Decade**

poetry from 1999 to 2009

by Ethan Jones

*“Poetry is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night, lying in bed, thinking what you really think, making the private world public, that's what the poet does.”*

-Allen Ginsberg

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## **1. a future reviewer**

who picks up this volume  
might wonder about the mind behind it

rest assured, dear reviewer,  
that the mind behind this collection  
will take no offense  
if your right-handed interpretation  
completely misses my left-handed point.

## 2. turn off the spell check

I try to find meaning in the great poets of the past  
but sometimes their words are walls

so I sneak around them and pretend  
that I too am literary  
though I stare at books  
filled with images that go so far beyond my ability to see them

what did allen ginsberg really howl for  
what light was dying when dylan thomas raged  
why was dickinson nobody  
why did whitman sing of himself

and where did the road not taken really lead

the wreck of the human  
inscrutably wasted on the sublime

where will I find my own road  
that I can take to glory  
my own delusions of grandeur  
are the very chains that prevent me from moving

perhaps I really don't have anything new to say  
perhaps the common wisdom is right  
and everything has been said already

if this is true than we might as well all die now  
because without creation all there is is destruction  
without innovation all there is is stagnation

truth lies between the pages of the great books of history  
but I don't know which pages in which books contain  
the truths that will set me on the path of righteousness  
and out of this hideous lethargic apathy  
engendered by the now

it's so easy not to care  
it's so easy to fall into it and just zone out  
so easy to just take that drive to work  
and work  
and go home  
and go to bed  
it's so easy to get excited about driving four hours to buy some cheap furniture  
and some other knick knacks  
from a big Swedish superstore

a consumer vacation  
buying ourselves a little happy  
and putting it together with a tiny wrench

yet when I rail against suburbia  
I realize that I am suburbia  
and I am railing against myself

one can only be ironic for so long  
before the irony becomes the reality  
and one is left stuck in exactly the comfortable vapidness  
that made one shudder  
when one was young and idealistic enough to think that hard

now I'm swimming in products  
and swooning for commerce  
and all I want is the latest thing  
and the newest gizmo  
and a stable job  
and a steady paycheck  
and a loving partner  
and I have all of those things  
and my life is a neat little box

still I can't help thinking that something's missing  
but I don't know what

for god's sake  
what do the bohemians really want exactly  
you need the basic things in life – food, shelter, clothing  
and the only way that modern society allows you to get those things  
is to fall in line  
be content with  
two weeks of vacation  
and a small bonus every three months  
a 401k and health insurance  
a mortgage and a car payment  
a lawn to mow and a gently roaring fireplace  
the occasional vacation  
and dinner with the in-laws  
It's impossible to do what Kerouac did  
and cross the country on a whim  
it's impractical and expensive  
not to mention difficult and uncomfortable

adventure is for people with too much time on their hands

still, I can't help thinking that I'm missing something  
that I've squandered my own future

by being a lazy, unmotivated slob  
because I am a lazy, unmotivated slob  
and it's gonna come back and bite me in the ass

I need to write  
to justify my existence  
I need people to read what I write  
I need to leave something behind  
because if I don't  
then I will never have existed

truth and freedom and all those lofty ideals  
don't matter if nobody's around for you to enjoy them with

love is life

*take me, said the skeleton  
but leave my bones alone...*  
-A.G.

### 3. below

only twelve hours  
till fretting the night  
crawls forth without its  
clothes on  
nakedly showing its ever  
the one thing it craves  
is cricketsong  
not the poison sword  
of headlight.



#### 4. This eve I walk a crumbling street

This eve I walk a crumbling street  
and seek to learn of truths discreet  
and as the lengthened shadows meet  
the sky's great embers grow more cold.

And water trickles slowly by  
in streams that have no alibi  
that follow me with burbled sigh  
and speak of what their depths enfold.

The sunlight fades from silk to ash  
and shades of umber make a sash  
I see upon this street, a flash  
of crystal in the cracks of old.

The shimmered gem enshrines a dance  
beholden to the whims of chance  
a prism trapped within the glance  
of he who sees with eyes of gold.

As blue black colors fill the scene  
I stop a while, and sit, and lean  
against a tree, whose limbs I've seen  
in tales that sorcerers have told.

And as I sit I hear the cry  
of night's frenetic lullaby  
beginning with the willow's sigh,  
the reign of moonlight soon foretold.

This darkness which must come at last  
it cannot fell the lines we cast  
it must not quell the dreamer's mast  
held fast amongst the poets bold.

For sunset foretells not the end  
and darkness, death does not portend  
nor night the loss of beauty's trend  
for all we seek, our dreams unfold.

This eve I walked a crumbling street  
and sought to learn of truths discreet  
and at the perfect sunset's feet  
I reveled in night's sweet threshold.

## 5. America 2007

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.  
America two dollars and twentyseven cents won't even buy a gallon of gas June 12, 2007.  
I can't stand my president's mind.  
America when will we end war?  
Go fuck yourself with your Guantanamo.  
Your Patriot Acts like a fool.  
I won't write my poem till you're in my right mind.  
America when will you be rational?  
When will you take off your mask?  
I'm sick of your insane demands.  
I refuse to be reasonable.  
America pragmatism is a compromise between idealism and barbarity.  
America realism is an excuse for barbarity.  
Are you being barbaric?  
I haven't read a newspaper for months every day another editorial tells me it's ok to torture.  
America I feel sentimental about the Bill of Rights.  
America I'm still a communist at heart I'm not sorry.  
My mind is made up; there's going to be trouble.  
You should have seen me reading Marx.  
America are you going to let your emotional life be run by People Magazine?  
I hate People Magazine.  
I'm forced to read its insipid cover every time I go to the grocery store.  
It's always telling me about famous people.  
Actors are famous. Athletes are famous. Everybody's famous but me.  
It occurs to me that I am America.  
I am talking to myself again.

Asia is rising against me.  
What chance do I have?  
I'd better consider my national resources.  
My national resources consist of two computers, millions of brain cells, an unpublishable train of thought that thunders at a zillion miles an hour and should be kept in a mental institution.  
Not to mention my cat, or the millions of uninsured Americans who live paycheck to paycheck under the watchful eye of the credit reporting agencies.  
My ambition is to be President despite the fact that I'm a left-handed gay Jew.

America how can I write a holy litany in Allen Ginsberg's silly mood?  
My strophes are as individual as Allen's, more so they're all stolen from him.  
America free the detainees in your secret CIA prisons.  
America get the hell out of Iraq.  
America constitutional rights must not die.  
America when I was twenty I went to the biennial convention of the Socialist International in Paris I heard speeches by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder and Yasser Arafat walked right by me and everyone was angelic and sentimental about the workers even though none of them knew what it meant to be one we had this one party on a yacht in the Seine in fancy suits and got up on the roof and sang the Internationale clutching champagne flutes and million dollar smiles.  
Everybody must have been a hypocrite.

America you really don't want to go to war again.

America it's them bad Arabs. Them Arabs them Arabs and them North Koreans. And them Arabs.

Them Arabs want to eat us alive.

Them Arabs want to take the crosses out of our churches.

Them Arabs want to blow themselves up in our synagogues.

Them Arabs are religion mad.

They want to fly planes into Chicago. Them want to blow up their shoes in Cleveland. Them need a copy of the Koran in all of our hotel rooms.

That no good.

America this is quite serious.

America this is the impression I get from watching cable news.

America is this correct?

I'd better get right down to the job.

It's true I don't want to join the Army or flip burgers at a fast food joint; I'm near-sighted and hyperactive anyway.

America I'm putting my own queer shoulder to the wheel.

*-In memory of A.G.*

## 6. Your smile awakens within me

nothing of great import, but  
seeing the white flash of perfectly-aligned teeth  
in synchronicity with the subtle cracks that define your lips  
somehow brings to mind a curious  
ambivalence  
that can only be described as joy.  
Why these sensations persist is beyond me.  
Considering that I can never have you,  
and you can never have me,  
The sight of the piercing fire within the corona of your eye  
still mysteriously arouses my interest.  
It's funny how that is - you  
exist for me only in pictures,  
moving & still,  
and yet the subtle lines of your form seem so  
precisely what I'm looking for that I can hardly believe  
that I do not have you yet.  
Perhaps in some other time at some other place,  
as the old cliché goes,  
but I must sigh and go on my way and be content  
to gaze at you with a curiously detached curiosity  
as you sit and stare at me  
through the glass-encased silence of my computer screen.

## **7. get thee behind me**

walking toward the strip mall sunset  
the concrete cowboy glanced backwards  
to wave goodbye to that demented landscape  
he had so long visited  
but never understood  
finding himself lost in its gymnastic spires  
screaming itself toward inevitability  
and shrugging he continued to mosey  
the concrete cowboy  
walking away and toward  
the strip mall sunset.

## **8. bare market**

I traded my soul on the  
political stock market  
lamented the pendulum-swing  
neo  
liberal  
con  
serve  
ative  
radical poet  
I sold my shares in ideology  
bought into  
pragmatic  
fatalism  
I went from b to s  
from left to left behind  
left the status  
invested in quo  
and I'm still waiting for my divide  
ends  
lending credence to the  
current busyness cycle  
left-handed promises and  
right-minded exhortations  
a sellout crowd  
for the opening night  
of my political closing bell.

## 9. none of it is any

good  
says the grinning bearded mathematician  
I can't  
see the reason behinging  
your mad internalized rage  
directed hellmell at  
fraudulized stacksmokes  
be he whoseees three bees  
congregating  
onthebacksof  
two weary eyed bankers  
hankering for a  
cigarettesuicideplate  
hating themselves  
onestepatacrime  
for the matter that splatters  
when the three wisemen jabber aimlessly  
at the  
jabberwalkietalkie  
he screamed at the blue  
mystifying skylet  
me see the three bees  
I will spray them with  
chemicaldeath  
one banker will befree  
but the other will  
dieslowly of mentalpoison  
pumped out of  
proletarianism  
ust you use your  
powers for only  
and not for slowly?

## 10. So I was asked

to read a poem about  
peace  
honestly I don't know  
if I have it in me  
or what possible insight  
I could give  
I'm no soldier  
and I haven't lost anyone  
My only connection  
is my humanity  
burying its head in the sand  
because it can't believe  
where these kidnapers in chief  
have taken this country  
strapping us all to a chair  
in their dank basement  
forcing us to watch them  
smear our best intentions  
with their own special brand of bullshit.

## **11. when you move from Oklahoma**

to the Pacific Northwest  
you come upon a very different rhythm  
no more the sudden thunderstorm  
no tornadoes, no diving into bathrooms  
no television shows interrupted with terrifying weather coverage  
no trailer parks destroyed in seconds  
no baseball sized hail  
no wall clouds  
no rotation  
no hook echoes

instead you find a steady wetness  
a very constant, faithful, consistent, reliable rain  
a shared rain  
a common rain  
that everybody drinks together.



## 12. Mission Accomplished

A fool  
whose misrule  
misconstrued the miscreants

attacked the facts  
erasing the shame  
of unjust war

but still the rifle  
in white gloved hand  
stands at attention

and the tense handkerchief  
trembles, soaked  
in unnecessary grief

as the mute draped boxes  
silently march  
one by one

hurrah, hurrah

### 13. we didn't

fall from the  
dying towers  
in the bubbling chaos  
we saw God, the devil and a horrified man  
clutching each other  
we picked up the screams from the paper snow street  
and threw them at the moon  
but a year later they're knocking on our doors  
and sentences don't  
complete themselves  
like they used to  
and beyond the strip malls and  
plastic incoherence  
we find a turbid mind  
churning with new definitions  
and a diamond dropped  
is a tear regained.

#### **14. the dog wants a walk**

she's kind of staring at me  
with those big, giant, brown eyes  
in that way that only a dog can stare  
that imploring, pleading, stare  
I suppose in a moment I'll have to get up  
wrestle her into her leash and harness  
and trudge around the block.

#### **15. maybe, just maybe**

my dog has it right  
and the only thing that matters  
is to roll around on the carpet and make contented noises  
find a scrap of food on the ground to eat  
and learn the twelve thousand smells that make up language.

## 16. exhausted

tired of lies  
tired of seeing  
good people buy them

compromising principle  
we think we're invincible  
while the invisible truth looms like teeth  
sharp, inevitable

tired of numbers  
body counts discounted  
by the apathetic demographic

and it seems distance of death matters  
massacres at home shock us and awe us  
but massacres over there  
well, we can change the channel

tired of timetables  
fables of benchmarks  
we're all marked

our outrage redacted  
with the black marker  
of unfair  
and unbalanced news

### **17. three cheers for the serious**

overwhelming the spurious

there's a very subtle  
bubble  
on the sun

the bubble pops  
and stops the shock troops  
of infantile squawking

and very slowly  
the sun brightens

but I'm curious  
to know what comes next.

### **18. the fundamentals are elemental**

the sentimental is detrimental  
and reality is a tease

nothing is quite what it schemes  
and dreams don't make sense  
in the cracked morning mirror

but the effects  
of such nocturnal delirium  
seeping into our skin  
might be akin to an  
anesthetic balm  
shielding us from sharp corners.

## 19. Queen of the Past

These haunted halls we've walked before  
alone and unafraid  
We travel now, our footsteps sure  
into the silent shade.

The mirror, cracked, reflects the light,  
Enshrouded dancing motes,  
While dust-caked windows once stood white,  
Piano, void of notes.

I glance ahead and glance behind  
at cold unyielding halls,  
Searching, seeking, yet to find  
that spark that life enralls.

And looking left I see a space,  
A room of fleeting sound,  
A past encounter leaves its trace  
on cobwebbed dusty ground.

I turn and face the open door,  
It beckons me within,  
A glitter glimpse upon the floor,  
I stoop to find a pin.

A simple thing, a trinket, yes,  
This dusty trace of spark,  
But it remembers one caress,  
A scent of warmth in dark.

And keeping hold this crystal drop,  
This fiery haunting eye,  
My echoed footsteps find their stop,  
I look upon the sky.

The darkened panes reveal the trees  
long dead that shake like bone;  
In stagnant wind they move with ease,  
Macabre, they dance alone.

I turn back to the silent space  
and look upon the void,  
This endless hallway I must face  
my mind cannot avoid.

Of opened doors and doors left closed,  
regret I but a few,  
And with new thoughts and questions posed  
my footsteps start anew.

Enveloped in white satin gown  
your shadow floats with me,  
The dancing dust your ghostly crown;  
Queen of the past, now free.

## **20. flowers with budweiser roots**

in the dirt bed  
flowers  
planted, no doubt, to attract the eye of a customer  
lie listless  
some crushed  
cigarette stems  
budweiser roots  
and above it all a sign  
"no littering or alcohol on these premises."

## **21. and I'm just sitting here thinking**

my ideologies have been deconstructed  
my ideals have been parsed  
I become fractional  
I am focus groups and polling numbers  
I believe the media  
even as I mock them  
I fear what they tell me to fear  
even as I scoff at sensationalism  
I sink into comfort  
even as I fight complacency  
I fall into sleep  
even as I struggle to make a point.

## **22. This**

dangerous cloud  
of apathy  
creates entropy

potential energy  
demands empathy

limits eliminate the state  
of debate

there is something to it

screw it – just  
be the free one



### 23. cliffhanger

shadowed and insecure  
she stands  
ready  
poised for the jump  
all eyes focused on her trembling form  
below her waves break  
she closes her eyes against the glare of the pounding sun  
as gulls fly around her  
waiting for her to soar with them  
the moment stretches  
and contracts  
arms flung outward  
feet leave the cliff's face  
toward the crashing waves  
head first  
she hits the water  
dives underneath  
comes back up  
    a perfect 10.

## **24. wine**

there's a transparent sweetness  
to a glass of wine

a mellow amber flavor  
cold, sharp, relaxing

after the taxing  
delirium of the day.

## **25. saturdays**

there are few things better than  
sleeping late on a saturday  
it's a day without capital letters  
a day without starch  
a day when the sun is warm cotton  
and the distant mountains  
invite you to climb them.

## 26. watching the dawn on the hood of a car

feeling that bond that only connects when the breath of fire touches the  
blue horizon  
and looking over at each other we'll scan the sky for the last lone star  
and claim it as our own  
if only I could see it through the zirconium haze  
but clutching your hand I'll look anyway  
and look at you and smile  
and we'll laugh it off as a silly reminder  
of how silly this world really can be if it wants to  
this is an odd sort of age we live in  
full of explosions, death, chocolate sundaes and Lucky Charms  
and cherry red volkswagen beetles  
it's only the loneliest ember that never evolves into a poet  
and only the loneliest poet that never evolves into light  
and only the loneliest light that gets lost under the bedsheets  
on a cold Sunday morning  
and despite the oily residue covering its darker spots  
I've still got this feeling the world will be alright.