

William Pillin

Selected Poems



William Pillin

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Pillin was born in Zaporizhia (then called Alexandrovsk) Ukraine to Elconon and Anna Pillin; the family emigrated to Chicago when William was 14. In 1928, he married Polia Sunockin (born in Poland in 1909), an artist and potter. During the Depression, Pillin worked for the WPA Writers Project, work that brought him all across the United States. The Pillins settled in Iowa and then New Mexico. Pillin was published in the “Federal Poets Number” of Poetry Magazine in 1938. The Pillins moved back to Chicago after the birth of their son in 1940, then moving to Los Angeles in 1948 in order to find more room for Polia’s burgeoning pottery business. Pillin’s first book of poems, *Theory of Silence*, appeared in 1949. *To the End of Time: Poems New & Selected* was published in Los Angeles by Papa Bach Editions in 1980.

Poems. Prairie City: James Decker, 1939.

Theory of Silence. George Yamada, 1949.

Dance Without Shoes. Francestown: Golden Quill Press, 1956.

Passage After Midnight. Inferno Press Editions, 1958.

Pavane for a Fading Memory. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1963.

Everything Falling. Santa Cruz: Kayak, 1971.

The Abandoned Music Room. Santa Cruz: Kayak, 1975.

To the End of Time: Poems New & Selected. Los Angeles: Papa Bach Editions, 1980.

Another Dawn. Los Angeles: Illuminati, 1984.

Air

How frugal was the mind.
that first imagined air;
our age is profligate
to waste a breath so rare,
to stifle or deny
the thinly rationed cry.

Now you who make the wars,
regard the giant stars:
airless the subtle space
from Orion to Mars:
dead... but this tiny one
adored by dying sun.

Whose total nightmare breaks
wind's silver in the lung,
hear how Mozart and Bach
patterned this thing and flung
sonatas to the arch
of sun aspiring lark.

When friends and lovers die
a stumbling fugue intrigues
to seize the kindly wind
and hold the precious cry;
how rare, and woe, how dear
this final atmosphere.

That Which is Good

That which is good is simply done
without the manifesto's noise
as Francis talking to the birds
or Leo to the peasant boys.

The socialism of the heart
is not in schedules, is in man
and what is generous on earth
is generous without a plan.

As when creative fingers roam
anarchic space in hit or miss
and suddenly discover there
a luminous caprice.

So musical this silence is!
so natural the heart's technique
like sunlight glittering in trees;
the rest is rhetoric.

Form Was a Classic Mirror

Form was a classic mirror
in any age that breathed deep,
a lens that seized the error
and made the climbing steep.

Carved from a stubborn tree-root:
engraved on a linen scroll:
a moving air on woodflute:
a dancer's capriole.

The wordsmith's strokes, clear ringing
can hush the babbler's din
when lean wit turns the stinging
reason's acetylene.

Who dances at public fairs
ignoring the stern disciplines,
groaning the thick despairs,
twisting crimsons and greens,

will he mute, their passions fade;
they will view with a wordless sigh
gulls over an esplanade
climbing the cloudless sky.

The Ascension

You, Marc Chagall, should be able to tell us
what was cremated. in Thor's ovens,
you who were always painting ascension.

The ascension of priestly violinists,
the ascension of white-gowned brides,
the ascension of purple donkeys,
of lovers, of bouquets, of golden cockerels,
ascension into the clair-de-lune.

O this soaring
out of shanties and cellars!
the folk spirit ascending
through enchanted alphabets,
through magical numbers,
lo a wandering in the bluest realm.

The ascension
(from sewers, dives, back-alleys)
of' folk-songs to the new moon,
lo the feast of lights,
lo the silences of Friday evening...

...and suddenly
In the quietude of steppes
in thin column of smoke ascending
and after that
no more ascensions.

* * *

No more ascensions!

Only stone chimneys
heavily clinging
lo the earth of Poland.
Not even a marker saying:

here the kikes
en-masse ascended.

Prelude

I fear the man of undistinguished mien
whose empty eyes are pennants of disgust,
his job a bore, his barren wife a grouch,
his purse an insult and his thinning years
a rout along the stations of defeat.

I see him where the sights and sounds are fused
in a revolving mirror which returns
wails to my laughter, laughter to my grief.

I dance—he mimics with ungainly step .
I love—he leers like a grinning skull.
I bid for peace—he reaches for his gun.
We walk together on our separate stars
each planning details of a desperate act.
I note his habits, haunts and set routine.
His silence is an echo of my guilt
and mocks the simple logic of my love.

Sabbath

Not the prescribed movement of hands,
not the ritual whispers
out of antique books with broken bindings,
not those you left me,
people of blessed candles,
but a certain music, a secret between us,
so that even I, a pagan in Babylon,
celebrate the Creation's completion.

I can spare but a few hours
for this evening's silence,
as I can't afford a whole day without labor;
and the hymns I sing are
alas, not Zemirot, the Sabbath hymns,
but snatches of Handel, an Anglican rabbi;
but I will praise the Indwelling Glory,
putting, however briefly, my trials behind me,
putting, however briefly, Egypt behind me.

I will not stint, I will provide of the finest.
The floors will be scrubbed, the furniture polished.
With choice meat and hallot I will praise Thee,
aye, with a double portion of manna,
with broiled fish, with a goblet of brandy.

Overlook therefore the profane, the informal.
Send Shabbath Shalom, the peace of the evening,
to us who are doing their ignorant best at this altar;
son, wife and husband
basking at twilight
in the tender effulgence of grandmother's candles.

Pavane for a Fading Memory

1.

My bitter friend whose memory spits bile,
where were you when we strolled
in the bright unrest of the City
like sorcerers with stars in our hair?
Do not betray the blue snowfalls

of its pure parks and boulevards
with shabby recitals
of giggling seductions and vulturous
tradesmen. Remember its Greek
candyshops, its big-breasted

Slav whores, its smiling profane
whiskey drinkers, its mists
sprouting sky-towers
from which doves burst
like whirlights of white blossoms.

2.

The cleansing river
coursed through our veins
winding blackly through stone forests;
a cold and chemical fluid
carrying dark rumors
of street-washings and suicides
into the Lake's incurious blueness.

At dawn, greyly smoking,
it moved past hills of gravel,
past fairy like girders,
accepting the lifting of bridges
as a graceful homage.

At cement piers we studied
its intimate currents,
dark and brutal—and nourishing
as the black bread of the people.

There are those who would betray it;
who would plant formal gardens
on its stone banks,
wiping its ancient patina
with summery trifles
of bluebells and daisies.

3.

The City sings in forty tongues
its wedding songs, dirges, lullabies,
fused together
like a moan from among the stars.

When the tired boulevards
hide in the silence of twilight
there is a sound
out of nowhere. An old man

hears preludes to death.
A young couple embraces
greedily, like misers
grasping a handful of silver.

A shirtsleeved man
leans out of a window.
On his stone lips
a bitter smile is frozen.

In the blue evening
the piano dissects a lament.
The saxophone breathes
the final sigh in a storm of tears.

4.

The City is gone, razed and rebuilt.
The same people no longer
walk on its pavements. The horses
are gone, the damp odor of stables.
The City is gone

whose gaslights punctuated our nights,
whose winds set the rhythm of our blood,
whose streets, self-luminous with a pale light,
were our asphalt meadows. We wore its shadows

as a disguise against the prying
of American uncles. We were angelic merchants
roaming the lunar craters,
exchanging illuminations like small gifts.

5.

This is a time when the wise-guys
write their memoirs of disgust
with never a tender word
for the old haunts, the old faces;
for the beautiful work-worn hands
of a Polish scrubwoman, for the life-song

on the faces of fat Jewish mothers;
for the sweet odor of seltzer
outside of Katz's delicatessen
where we swaggered on hot blue evenings,
a conclave of angelic rebels
shouting our poems of longing.

My friend , you saw skulls among the smokestacks
but we saw tulips there, golden tulips.
Your memory has become a museum
of labelled sensations
blind to -the violence in the light,

to the diapason in the air.

6.

Ambiguous memory brings to some
the half-lights and whispers of the City.
Others remember
a fistful of stone clubs shaken at heaven.
My friend, what do you remember?

You spent your nights in pretentious attics
arguing Art with nymphs and cubists.
The City died in your mind's eye
because you pressed it like a dead leaf
in volumes of memoirs, in best-selling novels.

Elegiast of forgotten streets
I trace my vowels of love
'in the dust of razed landmarks.
My phantoms are gathered
around a lamplight
in a basement where my poverty
glowed like a menorah.

City, you haunt me like a tolling
on the wind; for if I return
the streets would not know me
nor the doorways answer my greeting.

Piano Lesson

Across the keyboard your small finger rove
collecting little flecks of flame and foam
to indicate that all your etudes were
well hammered home
by the exacting Mlle. Irene
who censors every move.

You know dynamic signs and chords by rote.
Your trained facility allows no lame
arpeggios or stumbling tremolos.
Yet far from aim
of the grave Masters, a green innocence
obtrudes on every note.

The Masters whose obsessions stun the air,
who speak to skulls, whose brooding conjures storms!
What does my angel know of their gaunt griefs?
Faithful his form
to staff and stave; but what notes indicate
the heartbreak and despair?

And so I curb my fatherly conceit
to find a certain virtue in your style.
There's plenty time for greatness; and I hope
that for a while
your music shall continue somewhat green

Isadora

Hallucinatory, like a theatrical twilight,
is her passage. Everything
has to be danced; all the surreal
ironies and horrors; the poverty
which always pursues her; going to school
with leaking shoes and a hungry stomach;
the fires; the earthquakes;
the trial by love, the death by water.

She dances through Russia, a bacchante of
Revolution.

She dances in Athens: "Here I shall open
my college for priestesses I" She dances
her pregnancies, she dances her passion:
"I enclose my lover as a sea over a bold swimmer!"

Everything danced!
her drowned children, her suicide-lover.
She floats across nations
on her scarfs of twilight and shadow,
freed from corsets, sans les pointes
et les cinq positions,
her movements a threat, a subversion!

Pursued by a fugue of fire and water
she scatters herself on the winds of the world
until ambushed one day by a red scarf
that hangs like a streak of blood
from her throat to the turning axle.

The Amazing Avaunt

The time-obsessed Mr. Avaunt
who serves all the vagaries
of Zeitgeist
(its unpopular becoming
the popular, its minority
becoming majority),

who loudly proclaims
that yesterday's twilights
are cliché
and yesterday's thunders
are definitely
passé

suddenly found
that his head and trunk
disappeared
into the future
with only his posterior
remaining in the present

nervously wriggling,
frantic
but unable
to overtake
his fourth-dimensional head.

She Set Him Free

She set him free
from the silence of velvet grottos .
into jazzy caves where cavorting couples
grimace and gesture
dumbly, like mimes caged by a spotlight.

She set him free
to stare at the bosoms of leaning waitresses,
at the illuminated sex of a billboard starlet,
at the eye-full girlies on magazine covers.

She set him free to be devoured
by the sleek silhouettes in neon doorways,
by maenads with frozen mouths
in whose smokey eyes
are petrified landscapes
where the moon stains with lime
vast heaps of slag and ashes.

She set him free
to curse his artesian manhood,
to walk without hope on the aphrodisiac boulevards.

Ballade

I hear a rune it sighs it rages
a moan runs on its parchment pages

where black snow falls

Witch-waif witch-wife in the grove
give me a penny's worth of love

where moon-moths cluster

The witch-waif smiles the witch-wife teases
the witch-wife yields her wide-eyed kisses

where the moon-blinded cock rises

Bemused the muted rune-lute sings
of darkness and lewd whisperings

where dawn crawls on tree-tops

The witch dissolves in tears and laughter
and disappears among the rafters

where thirteen crows screech and vanish

At night among the weeping boughs
the love-inflicted venom glows

where night-lamps flare like blue roses

Witch-waif witch-wife in the well
may your soul return to hell

where the eyes of the damned smoke like
untrimmed wicks

I hear a rune it sighs it rages

The Death of Professor Moriarty

I hunted him like a relentless fugue
in the baroque taverns of the waterfront;
sewers and slums and spiteful alleyways.
And when the crawling enigmatic fog
dimmed viaducts and arclights, we pursued
our deadly game of tag, with every bend
and every door a risk.

A hundred times

I saw him shot and stabbed, drowned in a bog,
poisoned or burned to death, A hundred times
I thought to dance a jig upon his bier;
only to see him soon at some swank tea
talking to bankers and to diplomats,
charming to the ladies, a complete gentleman.
Who knew my foe as the arch-criminal
whose crimes were subtle and grotesque, untouched
by greed or lust but improvised
in purity of uncorrupted art?

One night he came to me in Baker Street
and, pointing a gun to gain the interview,
said: "We are getting old—and so much left
to do! Such schemes, such luminous intrigues!
Sherlock, you always thwarted my designs.
The time has come to play one final round.
Winner take all—and one of us must die!"
I saw him standing there in sombre cloak,
his eyes profoundly dark, his hands
like vast wings resting on his hips. Then he was gone.

That night, from hedge to shadow-colored hedge,
I followed him until I had him trapped
between the gasworks and the grey canal.
His derringer misfired. My dagger found his heart.
And with his final breath he said to me:
"Sherlock, what now? Who will dog your days

and haunt your nights with stratagems and wiles?
Against whom will you pit that marvelous brain
or essay forth into precarious night?
And will you be content to find release
from boredom in cocaine and violins?"
He laughed and, choking on his laughter, died.

This time so surely trapped in death!
And looking at the suddenly faded moon
I knew that I was trapped as well.
I, deacon of the local church,
subsisting on a small annuity,
a proper man adored by aging maids.

Locked in my desk
are my mementos: magnifying lens,
the snub-nosed thirty-eight, a violet vial
of a rare venom and a crumbling map
of London sewers.

And the years go by...
And I look up to the fading skies
hoping to conjure vital presences.
"Moriarty," I cry out, "return, return!"
but I hear only the wind
that once had whispered nameless threats
in dusty warehouses and oil-sleeked wharves.

The Sparrow

for the memory of Edith Piaf
She sings inside herself—n'est-ce pas?
for the way of life is sometimes gay, sometimes sad,
and the quivering tongue
is a trill of brimless joy
or a scream silently flying in the wind.

In a voice that weeps without tears
she campaigns for tears.
She bears witness to l'amour. She sings
of those whose names are written in blows;

of little coffins buried in snowdrifts,
a winter sacrifice to an April passion;
of women sitting alone, whose glasses of brandy
are salutes to foolish vows, to betrayals;

of lamplight in a window whose yellow finger
beckons to the seaman: "Hello, boy, you come with me?"
of the dishevelled bed reached through sour hallways,
of the bed among cracked wallpaper flowers,
of shoes and stockings flung into a corner.

She sings in the pale winter sunshine
that not to be loved is to be worth nothing.
She sings of the unloved women
waiting to feel on their hair
the glowing fingertips of someone's desire.

She sings, in a rush of darkness,
of mysterious triumphs
when, secluded by moonlight,
lovers nest on the winds of their passion;

of servant girls and workmen in patched garments
on rooftops or under Seine bridges

whose thighs and tongues make a pact
against death and despair.

Her ulcers sing, her bones
wracked by arthritis
sing, her torn tissues
rise from the bloodstained arena of traffic
and sing: “Je ne regrette rien!”

An old piano dies with her
and ascends to the heaven of sad Pierrots,
a boulevard of twilights,
of furtive doorways, cafes and bistros.

Under a streetlight
the sparrow sings: “I don’t care,
I don’t care—as long as you love me!”

Lines on a New Year's Eve

1.

Year's end: an indefinite zone
when shadows of memory unroll
like an old silent film
of people and houses grown old,
old and seedy and grey.

I think of landscapes
blurred by nightfall,
of fog, winds, empty spaces.
Time, my love, will erase us
like a whisper on a tape.

2.

Strange thoughts on this night
of benevolent conjectures
of days and nights to come.
Crowds dance on public squares.
Strangers speak to strangers.

They move past our window
to lose themselves
in a raucous symphony
of the street, all gay tonight, all
magicians of a new dawn.

3.

Moment of moonlight-tinctured
mind, when it is good
merely to sit with you
in a darkened room, to feel
time breathing on our skin, to hear

the endless resonance of time

as you and I, the festive crowds,
musicians, dancers, all
fall, fall
into the funnel of eternity.

Night Poem in an Abandoned Music Room

I lay quietly listening to some musical rabbi
expound his angelic lore
when I heard a conflicting piano
from an abandoned music room.

From this room, for ages
the silent refuge
of moths that fly into houses at night,
I heard a haunted mazurka
as if an ancient player piano
started up
after decades of silence.

I entered the vast room with its odor of moist loam.
Three women I saw whom I've loved,
still handsome but with faces tired and lined.
Four men were there whom I counted as friends
and they had a bewildered look in their hollow eyes.

The crystal chandelier was dull with insect droppings and dust.
A single candle
flickered on eroding walls.
I pushed aside the rotting curtains
hoping to see children playing on the lawn
but a thick fog
concealed and silenced the world.

Pianos lost in memory,
a tremor
in a room vast and empty.
The desire
for yet another dawn!

I wept and I cried:
"It can't happen, not now, not like this!"
and my words were a mist on the wind.

I lay silently, waiting, waiting...

Night Poem With Blind Nude

Mesmer, a gentleman illuminati,
touched the eyes

of Maria Theresa, the blind pianist.
She was nude. Dark smoke

over a delicate cleft
ripened his limbs.

*

It was autumn, the trees
fretting and furious,

shedding their leaves.
He stroked her eyelids,

the features of her form.
There was a silent downfall

of softest air. She breathed
deeply, opened her wide eyes

hovering on the brink
of darkness

studded with visible stars.

*

She sighed...
half sigh, half moan—

blinded again!
Mesmer's passionate touch

restored her vision;

as his passion waned

so did her sight.

I trust that in her blindness
she was content to touch

the lineaments of the world,
to improvise a magical cadenza

from the sure knowledge of her fingertips.
Mesmer, the spent lover,

wandered, no doubt,
between musical rages

and lunar declines—
everywhere to find

windless dark and silent night.

The Intellectuals

1.

Lord, I'm fed up with the busy spiders
and their tenuous spit of thought,
who, lacking the stuff for a quarto
lose tenure and lecture appointments.

They fatten their purses
by spreading confusion
among wide-eyed gudgeons.
They see nothing

but their own grimacing faces
in a delirium of mirrors.
Most of all I suspect
the rare sincere ones:

the pale moon-masters
with eyes like well-lights.
What on earth are they saying?
Their whispers faint in the distance.

2.

With an acknowledgment to Moishe Leib Halpern
Listen, my beloved son:
I worked all my life like a dray-horse.
This house and a measure of savings
will cushion your future;

but if ever I see you moon-struck
with a notion to write a paper
on Whither This? or The Future of Something,
so help me, I will leave my possessions

to a Society for Simplified Spelling

or some such fuddle. Dear offspring,
take up wine, venery, gaming—
not theorists, not dialecticians!

The Bulldozed Promenade

On summer evenings we took magical walks
on Western Avenue from Melrose north
and lingered so as not to miss
the swallows above the carpenter's shop;
the antique store with a stuffed owl
and Roman coins and a bronze nude
holding a lighted globe;
the aquarium where rainbow minnows wove
ultramarine designs; the TV shop
where sixteen color sets depicted
sixteen simultaneous homicides.
There was a Baedeker of cooking smells:
borsht parlors, pizzarias, taco stands.

One evening taking our stroll
we were the stunned observers
of stucco dust over a gaping hole!
A wrecked Baghdad! A bulldozed promenade!
Where was the electric fixtures window
with a prismatic spray of chandeliers?
The locksmith, Chinese laundry, doughnut shop;
the daredevil kids on tricycles;
and the girls, high-heeled equilibrists
munching a MacDonald hamburger?

Gone! the noble patina of an aging street
and throb of a hundred livelihoods!

Only a giant sign:
ON THIS SITE EXXON WILL BUILD.

...where now stands an oleatic dump -
plate glass and plastic greenery,
a neon shroud imparting a graveyard face
to every passerby.

May you be trimmed by Bedouin scimitars,

who Exxonized our urban pastorage
leaving us to breathe
Pleistocene air of decayed dinosaurs!

Realities

Mostly I want to be left alone
in my home, my refuge,
to pursue without distraction
musical and linear purities
in a world of vanishing purities.

I lock my doors, I bar my windows,
I take my telephone off the hook.
I want to regard the Realities
as one from another planet.
I am prepared to ignore

the ghosts of asphalted flowers,
the harsh sound
that muffles the song of the wind,
the chemical breath
that obscures the clear moonlight.

Behind my sheltering wall
I will create my own moonlight.
So I said to myself; but the Realities
like a black vapor
that dims the neons of the mind

enter through invisible cracks...
and I forsake
all the gentle lights of my life
and run out into the streets
fists clenched, shouting a curse!

