



**A FLAG
ON FIRE
IS
A SONG
OF HOPE**

john sweet

poems chapbook
scarsuoitpocllud

king of kings no. 1

like fucking on shattered glass,
like you and i in the bleakest days of december
where i hide beneath a blanket of ash,
where you sing only words that have crawled through
the blood of castrated fratboy rapists

like the ocean

can't swim the length of it and
so we drown

end up alone in some terminal room
with 500,000 others just like us

sound of broken bells
beneath a faded blue sky

sound of babies crying

let them grow up to be more than the
joyless wreckage we've amounted to

medicine wheel

all blue sky & faded asphalt and then
these last desperate days of summer, this silence of
the irrelevant world seen through dirty
sheets of glass, small of gasoline & fast food,
shadows of vultures, of hawks, of minor gods crawling over
the bones of angels in a stranger's town

dogs & whores and
the sound of laughter

dali in the drive-thru lane counting out change for
something from the value menu, and
he refuses to admit that duchamp was right

says he doesn't believe in picasso anymore

and the war is over before it begins and
then it never ends

do you see?

can't waste yr whole life
worrying about the truth

a mouthful of blood is a
mouthful of blood is a mouthful of
blood, no matter who's it is

just choke it down or spit it out

peace in our time

this thought again that
reasons are not flags

met you there in the glass
walkway and wanted
only to fuck you

is there more to the story?

sometimes,
and then sometimes not

poems aren't flesh, aren't
stone or precious metal,
but they can be made
to burn

we can die in whatever
prisons the hands
of our lovers can devise

laughter and blindness
are only two options

beg, and i will
give you more

fable for the fucked and the forsaken

end of an age and
each day filled with empty grace

had to stand in the late november
sunlight for a minute
just to feel human again

uncertain parking lot of an
abandoned school, and i had to be
made to understand that my
words weren't poems

was given a flag

was given a shovel

told to start digging at the
pavement's edge but no one
would explain why

no one would acknowledge
any of the bones i found

the kingdoms
i built from them

the philosopher as a corpse in a shallow ditch

but the sun is
not the face of god

the low drone of planes
off in the distance

soft walls of consciousness and
memory that i push against
on these scorched summer afternoons

children ignorant and starving in a
land where ignorance and
starvation are rights
given at birth

more laws for greater freedom

bigger wars for better selection

what good is money, really,
without all of the bright
shiny shit it
can buy?

mask of fear: a variation

a picture of christ hung on
the wall of the burning house

is this the story you
were telling me?

not a denial of faith
but a celebration

the tears of angels
raining down on the bones
of children

a song of hands

an ocean of blood

a poem without meaning
which is
its own form of annihilation

the false king's lament

man on fire in the middle of the
street and he won't let you ignore him

wants to shake your hand

says he remembers your father

all of those drunken nights in the
whorehouses on the outskirts
of gethsemane and he
tells you your family isn't safe

he offers to sell you a gun

explains that not everyone's
truth is the truth

that not every corpse
should be lamented

offers to show you a
trunkful of murdered children
worth nothing at all

self-portrait with nude, on fire

and then late afternoon shadows and
the stuttering scratch of
leaves down forgotten streets

the shadows of lovers, of
unwanted children and forsaken saints

god and then no
god and then
all of the days i waste waiting to
see you again

an empty room filled with ordinary ghosts and
no one says we have to be here but
no one gives us permission to leave

this is called the art of standing still

this is pollock in the
seconds before his death

not acceptance but panic and
not understanding, not
ever

not ever

and i keep telling you this but
you still aren't there

and no one cares about your precious pain

writes me a letter,
tells his girlfriend she has to leave

tangled up in blue on the car radio,
says he never liked dylan

says he never liked the stones

steps onto the railing then out into the
open air above the
river but the story gets confused here

says he needs to tell it right

shows me his wrists but
they have no scars

sits on the bed in a foreclosed
room and pulls the trigger

girlfriend too stoned to move and
the kids watching tv and
that these are the last great days

the songs of angels written
across filthy walls

gotta eat gotta fuck gotta
pray but honey's too wired to sleep

paces the halls of this cardboard
house and all it does is rain

no apologies

no saviors

stabbing in the parking lot of the
mini-mart on the first
day of the season of ascension, he
lies there bleeding, asks me
if i've got a light, if i've got a smoke,
and i tell him i just want to
get back home

ask him if this is the
right story and he just smiles

sound of sirens approaching as
i push my way through the
wolves and the vultures,
and i think about sunlight

i think about my
grandfather's suicide

how blind hatred drags each of
us in all directions at once

portent

in the age of sickness
i was king,
in the year of burning
we were gods

told stories in the
shadows of swaying building,
in the back seats of burned-out cars,
and at every trailer
the women gave us their daughters

december and cold
followed by january and rain

the priests without words

with claws for hands,
with yellowed teeth and then,
when the machine gun was finally invented,
they finally knew there was something
more fulfilling than saving lives

when the bulldozers took down
the south wall of the church,
the people trapped inside were crushed
beneath the empty weight of
forgiveness

were all of them dead
without ever having heard the
punchline

better days

and i said

*or maybe i'm a man
on fire and
you're putting out the flames*

and she laughed her
goddess laugh,

her sweet golden ass just
hanging there
above my
face

there is humor to be found in
the fate of the willfully blind

or maybe a world where
poets are assassinated for what they
say, but you and i know better

wealth and power are what really matter
in this golden age of ignorance,
teenage pussy on the internet and in
the motel rooms of lawyers and politicians and
washed-up rock stars and what are words
but crippled ideas drifting off blindly
into the poisoned air?

who has the time for
the subtleties of truth when
god and cable tv are a quicker fix?

the day you wake up dead is the
day you realize no one ever
really cared that you were alive

and laughter and meaningless joy

the storm and then the
silence before the storm that follows

pale yellow skies over car crashes
and prayers and the
steady buzz of insects

the river
where your son took his life

the hills repeating themselves
endlessly in all directions

you get tired of being told
what to do but so what?

your choices come down to a
diet of bitter shit or a
diet of starvation, and even these
are offered grudgingly

and so you live or you
die and the world keeps
crawling forward

the house on fire
becomes
the palace of ashes

call it home

dig your grave

you have a long life ahead
of you still, but
it's best to be prepared

these greyer shades of bliss

man on the radio keeps
calling for rain through four days of
copper heat and luminous white skies,
plays another song by zeppelin and then
another by zz top and do you remember thurston
moore back when we thought he mattered?

did you turn the tv off when the cameras
started showing the ones jumping
from the 95th floor?

don't talk to me about survivor's guilt

don't set me up in the
palace of sacrosanct desolation

we're dogs without leashes but we're
still dogs out here in the wasteland of this
rusted new century

we write our stories backwards
across the face of the sun

we sell the future to the lowest bidder

who among us wouldn't fuck our closest
friends over for a pocketful of silver?

like francis bacon, dreaming

wasn't going to be one of those
fuckers hung up on time & space

wasn't going to be bathed in the
blood of christ or blinded by the holy
light of some absolute god

paper said it was the last good year
but that seemed like a lie

sun felt too good for a lifetime of fear
and the gold was pure white light
running through my veins

was always cold in the house
so we lived in the forests

lived in the vast open fields of our minds

only wanted to be your favorite
poison and only wanted you to be
everything i'd ever wanted

only wanted more

and i wasn't going to one of those
assholes strung out on pain and despair

the words of the prophet
were meaningless to me

the days were all delicate filigree,
all scrimshaw and lace and
when the cops shot that kid i was
asleep in your arms

when the pills are all gone
i stop looking in the mirror

i am tired of the
addict i've become

the good-bye sound

in bitter sunlight in
early may all blue skies and
empty eyes, the heart as a vessel,
as a weapon or a wound, and i
am trying to get across the ocean

i am upstate, 300 miles away
from open water, the fields overgrown,
the freeways falling into ruin

map says we're approaching lost and
she tells me it doesn't matter

says as long as we're together
but i'm not so sure

the days are filled with too many ghosts

the ghosts have form
but no purpose

once you grow tired of putting
faith in dead men you begin to see
the true shape of the future

the actual colors that
make up every moment

crucifixion is always such an
obvious solution to every problem

the walls need to be painted
and the windows cleaned

the idea of trust
needs to be re-examined

three children dead in a fire just
five miles south of this poem but
the bills still need to be paid

gotta keep shoveling the
same shit day in and day out

have to eat have to
breathe have to remember to
lock the door behind me

anything bought
can be stolen

anyone born can be owned

there is no way to end the pain that
others want to cause you and
there is no way to avoid
so much hatred

the heart is
not always a metaphor

the present is all we will
ever know

keeps falling from your bleeding
hands and breaking on the bitter
ground and what can you
do but laugh?

there is no way to
live this life but to lose

one interpretation

open window 3 a.m. and the
distant ocean sound of the interstate

the river and the bridge and all the
silent lights flashing red above the hills

a simpler version of nowhere

a dream of infidelity and of failure
and then i was awake

was listening to your breathing

had myself convinced i was
the poison you needed most

...and maria, patron saint of sorrow

god's face w/out warmth in
july, and listen

the animal is dead and has been
dragged beneath the bridge,
but by what?

by who?

and so i keep spinning 'round the
twin suns of hatred and fear, and so i
listen at night for intruders while
my children sleep

i keep going over the list of people
i should apologize to, because at
25 i was hopeless, and then
at 35 i was w/out hope

it happens

the soldiers rape 70 year old women

they rape 6 year old girls

don't waste your breath talking
about humans acting inhumanely

don't waste your life
writing poems

i keep coming back to this

earthbound

in the end
we have distance

the names of saints

a room with rain
against the windows
and random objects thrown
carelessly onto shelves

pieces of my life
that mean everything or
nothing at all

truths
that i bury beneath lies

lies that i
tell without conviction

and at night
the cats walk the kitchen counters

fight on the stairs and
the baby cries out in his sleep
and i can't remember if i
locked the front door or not

i listen to the wind rattle the windows

to the clock on the bathroom wall
crawl forward one irretrievable
second at a time

and i think i may have been
dreaming

but can't remember any of it

i think i'm loved
but i could be wrong

and this is who i am
at 36
and these are the bones of indians
laid neatly around the house
i call home

these are the priests who tried
to burn the demons out of them

the soldiers who raped
the women and children

drunk and stumbling through
the blood and the corpses
and this is the car
idling across the street

the vague shadow of
a man behind the wheel
smoking a cigarette at three
in the morning

the reasons we might have for
killing each other

my hands feeling blindly
for a weapon

white light sonnet

as if i were a man
who could talk about belief

as if the children could be
made to understand that
their dreams aren't real

monsters wearing human masks
in anonymous offices

dali
with or without his hands

holds out the burning head of
christ
and all you feel is fear
and every day is grey w/ sunlight
and haze and
at five o'clock
the factory shuts down

by six
the first daughter has been raped

the first fable has been told

everything you know begins
to fade from history
into myth

variation on the song of hope

the fine art of denial

the slaughter of the innocent

let our gift to the future be failure
because what else do we know?

who is it exactly that
determines the price of freedom?

these assholes with their tattered flags,
with their religions slapped together from
bones and blood and human misery

the wealthy and the powerful and
anyone who would willingly
eat their shit, and
listen

if your god were real
i would kill him just to
piss on his grave

if truth were our only food,
we would all starve to death eventually

the politicians first, of course, and
then the priests and
who would miss them?

a cupful of gasoline is all it takes
to rinse the mouth of prayer

a handful of ashes is
more than any of us deserve

The Three Faces

i.

Waiting by the window for you because
God is dead. Waiting for God because
the window is broken. Call it a story,
and this becomes the beginning.
Hitler becomes the past, and Christ
a fading myth.

ii.

Believe in God, but break the window.
Believe in hope, but make your lover
beg. Tie her to the bed. Tie her to
the bumper. Drive, but act like you're
lost.

iii.

Believe in America, but ignore the map.
Place crosses of duct tape across your
children's tiny chests just before you
shoot them. Ignore their cries. Act like
what you've done hurts you. Bury
the bodies and drive.

self-portrait w/ wax, w/ ash & myrrh

bright blue light of
joy & despair,
first frost of autumn

shadows of houses
down dead-end streets

gift, promise, threat

god will fuck you hard
and call out someone
else's names when
he cums

like false kings growing fat
on the corpses of children

a different assassination in a
later century, but
the idea remains the same

history written lightly in pencil
in case the
names need to be changed

one small step in someone else's
idea of the right direction

you invent a cause, and then
you figure out
who needs to die for it

poem for my lover with her hands on fire

a luminous grace
beneath fishscale clouds

a moment in the middle of november

can't keep killing the same ghosts
over and over
but doesn't mean you won't waste
your whole life trying and
what would you be if you weren't a whore and
who would you ever fuck for something
other than money?

and she smiles when she asks me this
like she already knows the answer

lets me lock the door before
coming in through the window and if
all we are can ever be are dogs
then i will learn how to beg

i will bleed like christ or
 like kennedy
beneath the relentless texas sun
and we can sing the blues

we can drive to miami

we will swim to tristan da cunha

can't stop to cry over every
drowning child we find along the way

the facts

there was talk of a better world

there was a cheap motel room

a girl there i went to high school with
but i forget her name
and we were all of us drunk
with two hours left on our shift

you were hitting on the waitress
and she was laughing

a body in the dumpster out
behind the restaurant
but none of us new this

a minister's wife, and the
truck driver was just merging onto 87 south

the last good summer
or maybe this is wishful thinking

we were drunk, though,
and there was a motel room and
the waitress kept telling you
she had a boyfriend

kept saying she had a name
but she could use some more pills
and we knew where we could get them

we were gods and
we were diamond eaters and we
didn't hear about the body until we
woke up two days later

opened my eyes and looked at
the girl next to me and
she smiled

she said she remembered me

passed me a bottle and then
walked to the bathroom
and opened her wrists

little tremors

and what she said was
it's all just fucking and so why
waste your time talking about making love?
and i was tracing my fingers over the
tattoo on her stomach

said her last boyfriend had told her
she was a pig, and she pressed her face into
my chest and laughed

said *that feels good* and
spread her legs wider as i found a rhythm,
and then she said nothing

made the small sounds of dying stars

smell of magnolia
rushing in from everywhere

child murdered to avenge the death of a murdered child

and so fuck your
useless concept of god with its
ragdoll body stuffed with the feathers of crows,
with its head of a rabid dog, its hollow
head and its eyes gouged out
and fuck the words of empty righteousness
and faith that spill like shit from your
ignorant mouth

fuck everything you believe in and fuck
everything you stand for and then fuck you and
then fuck you and then fuck you

i will dance with such undiluted joy on
your sad little piss-stained grave

shine

all gods are the same in the
room of murdered children and
all are useless

faceless

imaginary friends that cast
no shadows, but the stench here is
overwhelming and democracy
has failed

the blame is mine and the
blame is yours and what happens
to us when the ideas of
hope and honor can
no longer be sustained?

how exactly did we end up at
the mercy of butchers
and wolves?

rainbow, in shades of grey

in the morning i was me again
and god was dead
and i was sick of hearing *i love you*

was sick of saying it of
holding the words back just to hear
you beg but i did it anyway
because the horse was wounded

had been whipped blind by a man
who dreamt in black and red and
when you asked me about my
grandfather's suicide all i
could do was laugh

when the first soldier was killed
we still thought the war
could be won

i turned the stereo up louder
and the sun was too bright and
all of the tires on the car
had been slashes

all of the front doors in the
neighborhood
had been smeared with swastikas

all of the reasons we had to
hate were made to sound noble

were brightly colored gifts
wrapped in the flesh of
children we had yet to name

who am i if not your enemy?

opens the door, shoots
the first cop in the face and
then the other and then
deeper into the woods

a house on fire

a young girl's body found in
a muddy ditch
up on burnt hill road

we have been running for
better than 20 years now and
we are nothing if not lost

the war refuses to end,
refuses to be won, and the
soldiers all use pregnant
women as shields

the priest forces the
boy to his knees

says everything worth
doing is worth
doing in the name of god

makes it sound like
the holiest of lies

song for someone else's christ, lost beneath the bitter sunlight

and then you and your god
walking naked and lost
through a town on fire

the known and the unknown and
the 3 a.m. suicides

the radio static that fills our heads

this dream where my father
hates me,
and then waking up to rain through
a hole in the roof

blood in the bathroom sink

have we reached that point yet?

no existential revelations,
no profound truths,
just the need for medication

just the medication
wearing off

the gift of vision turned inward

see yourself as you truly are,
and despair

nembutal singalong

in the silence of
defeated houses

in the absence of rain

luminescent grey skies seen through
warped panes of glass, distorted
flight of birds, of falling angels, and
in the room of murdered children
there is always room for
one more tragedy

is always one more old man with the
DTs crawling through one more
overgrown and garbage-filled
back yard

can't change the past and
can't relive it and so we start to
look around for other options

dog on fire in a vacant lot

sound of teenage laughter

and it means something
of course
if you do nothing

small boy crying on the sidewalk and
all i have to offer him is a cup of blood

girlfriend's stepfather tells you he'd
fuck her himself if he was
fifteen years younger

laughs and hands you a beer and
when the dog tries to run
someone shoots it with a .22

june becomes july

poison from the factories on the
other side of town turns the bones
of all the sleeping babies to dust

call it progress

wait for the punchline

the idea of freedom in a
nation of assholes
will always be a troubling thing

broken obelisk

after the storm,
cautiously and with only the
smallest taste of optimism, the one who
says she's the daughter of christ,
the house with the broken windows,
with the dead child

how many years wasted believing
sunlight was a sin?

how many meaningless days trans-
formed into empty years?

long afternoons spent carefully
phrasing your questions to god and then
the rest of your life waiting for
answers that never came and
do we laugh at ourselves now or
at the starving?

do we build our kingdoms on the
corpses of those we've slaughtered?

in the end there is nothing but
holy land waiting to be defiled

fuck you, christian soldier

crowd will drag this man from
his car will beat him to
death in the street in
front of his wife his child will applaud
their courage and we are all here and we
are all laughing are all singing are
all so fat and happy in this
age of glorious
despair

A FLAG ON FIRE IS A SONG OF HOPE

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