

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of brushstrokes. The dominant color is a vibrant yellow, which is layered and textured with various shades of green, red, and blue. The strokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a complex, multi-layered visual field.

**a composition of fractions**

poems and fragments, 2004-2013: volume eight  
steven schroeder



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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder



*a composition of fractions* is the eighth of a series of collections that draw on material from notebooks I kept between 2004 and 2013. I returned to that material in 2021 with Basho and haibun in mind, as well as the prosimetrum tradition that flourished in medieval Europe. Both play off a tension between poetry and prose, and, looking back, that is what I found myself doing during that decade, when I was dividing my time among Shenzhen, Chicago, and the Texas Panhandle – and spending considerable time on the road betwixt and between. Haibun and prosimetrum both call our attention to the fact that writing itself is a journey, a practice (as de Certeau recognized) akin to walking. That is how I think of this work – as a long walk that was and continues to be a practice of meditation.

All of the texts are from the eighth of ten notebooks and were drafted between April 2009 and January 2010. Some of the material has appeared previously in poetry collections I have published since 2006, but I have gone back to the original drafts to rethink and reconfigure what appears here.

I've used three paintings and one photograph in this volume: “a composition of fractions” (acrylic on birch panels, 2020) for the front cover, “a fish out of water” (watercolor and acrylic on handmade paper, 2012) at the beginning of section one, “leaves on paving stones, Shenzhen” (photograph, 5 September 2005) at the beginning of section two, “empty promises 2” (oil on canvas, 2015) at the beginning of section three, and a detail of “first light” (watercolor on paper, 2016) for the back cover.

I look forward to joining you for a while *in medias res* as this long walk continues.

Chicago

August 2022





I  
a profusion of impossibles



24 April 2009

Birds chant matins  
an hour before dawn.  
Psalm is call and response,  
time rolls back  
to last night's rain  
does not doubt sun  
for a moment, even  
in this darkness. Cardinal  
sings lachryma Christi solo  
certain tears trilled  
as long as breath lasts  
mean Spring in spite of dark rumors  
of extinction. Bread baking fills this sanctuary  
with incense, calling to mind what will soon be broken.  
There is no answer but a song.  
There is no reason  
at this hour  
not to believe.

5 May 2009

Mockingbird schooled  
in the tree outside  
the open window of a hospital  
learns the music  
of a monitor, a sound that is a sign  
of something that is not  
as it should be. Now  
in the park he makes of it a living thing  
among living things, a drone to carry  
melodies, a gathering of birds, call and response,  
the office of the bird to sing  
the machine through the window  
of the world to life, a living  
thing among things living.

6 May 2009

Not the tone but the singleness  
of it signals how close death is.  
Not the fact but the insistence  
of it dares life to recede until  
some human presence calls it back.  
Mockingbird knows context  
is everything knows you  
have to miss a beat now  
and then to show  
you are a living thing  
a composition of fragments.  
Sing a song of death  
with the whole choir of collectors  
and it is a shadow showing  
how deep life goes, how on the edge of it  
frail human presences flicker and flare  
where life is a conflagration,  
the world burning with a thousand songs.

7 May 2009

Pale light  
falls in waves  
off moon  
a nibble short  
of full, pastel morning  
hours before sunrise,  
yesterday forgotten,  
afternoon heat  
an impossibility  
that will fall  
sudden as snow,  
cling until moon  
denies it again.

So close to desert on these high plains  
nothing stands in the way of full moon  
showering waves of cold not six hours  
after the Happy State Bank thermometer  
registered a hundred and two. Tomorrow  
it will look like rain fell before sunrise,  
but it will be no more than a trace of liquid  
light moon left. It will linger.  
There may be fog. No one will believe  
the heat, though Happy State will swear to it,  
and the young folk hired to carry bags

for customers at the supermarket  
will talk about it behind shopping carts  
piled high with produce and plastic  
on the way to the car.

8 May 2009

Cold moonlight melts slow in morning  
here, and it needs a touch of wind  
to dry and pass through a year of seasons  
by afternoon. Now it is early Spring,  
a nip of cold on north breeze  
stirring before sunrise. Dawn  
blunts the last sharp edge of Winter. Sun  
rising to summer floods the world with  
hard blue light.

9 May 2009

Two hours before midnight  
a pale reflection of someone else's  
dawn rises in the East, sudden.  
The halo is there before  
the circle of the moon,  
but there is no rose  
glow like sun would spread  
along the line of the horizon,  
only sudden moon, light as  
anticipation of morning.

16 May 2009

Moon waning half lights  
half cloudy night sky.  
You could half believe  
this dry place has half  
a mind to rain before morning.

Between dark clouds, half the stars  
shine bright as they did  
a week ago before  
the flood of a full moon rising  
swamped them. Winter  
is too comfortable in this high  
place to let go without a fight.

You can still taste it in the morning,  
and the geese sit still  
with their heads buried  
in feathers, hoping  
it will pass them by.

The best thing about a cold gray day  
in Amarillo is that the sunshine patriots  
are not out jogging through  
every stream of consciousness and not  
a cellphone in sight on a two mile walk,

just a squirrel that stops halfway up a tree  
to make out what it is I'm clicking my tongue  
for and a flock of geese grounded,  
still, lying low as if to slip below  
the last shards of Winter in the middle of May.

17 May 2009

A sliver short of half,  
moon shines through  
clouds broken,  
spent on a rare day  
of gray rain.

### **Geode**

A sliver shy of half, waning moon  
breaks clouds spent on a gray day.

Rare star  
crystals cluster  
in constellations

made strange by  
a day of rain

in a place where rain  
is measured in minutes

and every trace  
counts as  
an answered prayer.

18 May 2009

After two weeks, moon  
is little more than  
a crescent, but it is  
stronger than the bright star  
that joined it before sunrise.  
High in the morning sky, you can see  
it is more than light, a full circle  
cut from blue bleaching slow in rising sun,  
if you don't let a sliver  
of bright light blind you.

19 May 2009

Wind music never stops  
here if there is a chime  
to catch it, perpetual  
motion frozen the way  
a bird sings four notes  
or uses the sharp edge  
of a thunderstorm before  
it breaks to tread this  
restless atmosphere like  
water when it is rare,  
the closest thing to standing  
still a dust bowl can imagine.  
And here we sit in it on the back porch  
barely more than a week after  
you almost died talking  
about where you were  
during the time you lost.  
You have forgotten the respirator,  
seem surprised that every organ  
stuttered while you slept  
until they came back on  
one by one ready for another  
go, and you said next time  
you decided to go on vacation  
you'd go to Hawaii. But – you say – you  
didn't decide, and you think

the place must have been  
some in between like limbo  
you stumbled on. And now you turn  
to some old conversation in a Bible class  
I think about the age people  
would go back to if they could  
go back and they mostly say  
seventeen and we both think  
that odd. You say sixty,  
and I think that is an age I could  
only go back to if I could turn  
time and grow old in  
reverse. But I wouldn't  
because what happens next  
is always so interesting I wouldn't want to  
miss it by doing something twice even if I could  
and you remember your English grandfather  
talking about worlds within worlds  
and stretching your hand through someone  
else's universe – causing a thunderstorm  
in it I suppose and birds to tread  
the atmosphere on the edge of it  
like water. But I wander off into  
Hugh Everett, Bryce DeWitt, Schrödinger's  
Cat, Slackers, Leibniz, Anne Conway, and, still,  
wind music never stops but it's all  
an instant even when you think  
some river carries you while you turn

to live backward hoping  
to understand life forward.

Like a fish out of  
water, she described  
your breathing before  
I arrived, and I  
pondered gulping some  
strange element with  
no organ suited  
to take what would feed  
your life from it, how  
a fish over its  
head in what you need  
to live would die wide  
eyed gasping to be  
submerged in something  
else. How strange to be  
in the middle of  
this swarm when what you  
breathe is solitude.  
You held off more than  
one crowd suspicious  
of the strange child  
I was almost always up  
to my ears in books  
breathing words they thought

would surely drown me.

I owe you a struggle  
to keep a space where  
you can be at home  
to insist on solitude  
enough to breathe  
easy while they  
fiddle with  
oxygen and  
fret about the  
danger of being  
home alone.

29 May 2009

after days of gray, sun  
so sweet tomatoes swoon

scent of lilacs and some guy's ganja  
have one thinking twice

about the whole idea of a disciple  
at second hand

floating over seventy thousand fathoms  
is a contact high.

like the bird who feels the bough give way  
but is not afraid: it's in the air that we can fly

1 June 2009

Sidewalk drenched in peony petals  
after last night's rain, seedlings lie  
low, wait for afternoon sun  
to rise. In two weeks, they will be  
strong enough to stand in it, but the only  
way to stand through a liturgy long as summer  
is to do obeisance  
to Spring.

### **Early June, Gone to Texas**

Reggae from Springfield to Springfield  
via satellite, and Jah's praises echo  
through what's left of the prairie  
all the way to the edge of the Ozarks  
while I remember times when all you  
could get on radio in these Missouri  
mountains once St. Louis ended  
was evangelists hoarse with shouting  
the excitement of being possessed  
by some spirit, speaking in tongues  
circumscribed by the line of sight,  
odd bounces, and urgent requests  
for offerings of free will.  
Sign says "Got Jesus?" and satellite radio

says "I call on the name of Jah  
and I feel secure." Bob Marley sings  
"It takes a revolution to make a solution,"  
and I feel myself going through one  
revolution after another with Lady Liberty,  
back to Jersey, on my mind. I'm traveling west, disgusted  
with politics, so of course  
I think it would be as easy for one person  
to stop a line of tanks on a city street as  
to stop an old scholar crossing mountains  
into exile. There is power and there is power  
and one person standing firm in a narrow way  
has it for a time without so much as a moment of truth.  
The question is what perfect square  
of poems comes of it, what icons, what memories,  
what silences, what cities. *Never make a politician  
grant you a favor.* Don't worry about a thing.  
One more turn of the wheel.

2 June 2009

Morning breaks. Mockingbird sings like he knows  
there must have been a billion birds singing before him,  
and he's learned every song. Because he fills  
each note with every one of them,  
the whole world is new each time he sings.

Tractor's plowing anhydrous ammonia  
into a field near Vinita  
as though this red dirt  
weren't explosive enough.  
Choking on what blows in,  
I think the smell of this stuff  
on dust in Oklahoma wind  
may be as fitting a memorial  
as those empty chairs in Oklahoma City.

4 June 2009

We are, they  
say, different  
in a crowd,  
but when are we not?  
One in five  
billion, free  
as a falling tear  
spinning counter  
to a wave  
collapsing in some  
city singing  
like ten thousand birds  
to deny the desert silence, free  
as a falling tear spinning  
counter to a wave collapsing.

if we were alone  
we would be free  
but alone we would not be

I don't know how intelligent  
one of those big black birds that clatter  
on every edge of Amarillo is – not  
a crow, but a cousin,

some sort of raven, I suppose,  
but the whole lot of them knows  
every step I take when I walk for miles  
and not one is surprised by my presence  
where squirrels and human drivers startle  
and there are fields of wildflowers that know  
exactly when to burst  
in a place where seed is wasted  
if it does not anticipate rain.

Humans pray for it, wait for a miracle, drain  
the aquifer keeping up appearances.  
But fields of flowers know  
when the time is right  
for a thousand shades of yellow  
and more red than I thought possible,  
a profusion of impossibles that outlive dry.

5 June 2009

As if dark clouds moving  
fast and pounding rain were not  
enough, siren wails until  
every dog in the neighborhood howls  
the possibility that one of those tails  
might be a tornado. Television  
meteorologist points at a computer  
simulation and repeats, insistent as  
the siren, that it all depends  
on that table cloud and whether  
there is rotation. Hail everywhere  
the size of money, and I don't see  
another soul step out into the rain  
to see if one of those tall clouds  
rolling southeast has touched down,  
see sun in open sky on the north edge of the passing storm.

6 June 2009

Two young rabbits are learning to levitate  
on the corner of the block, face  
to face, first one then the other, straight  
up, four times their height, for an instant.  
We stop, mesmerized by their magic,  
laughing at the suddenness of it, then, aware  
of the time passing, we are on our way again.

Two young rabbits learning  
to levitate on the corner  
of the block face off, goad  
each other on to four times  
their height for an instant,  
mesmerize us with their magic  
for a moment. We laugh  
at the suddenness of it, like children with  
a jack in the box when the music  
gets to *pop*, then, aware of time  
passing, we are on our way again,  
shoes on our feet, around the next mulberry bush.

Squirrel raises such a ruckus  
when the dog barks mockingbird  
flies over and perches on the fence

to study the song. It goes  
on and on until the dog gets bored  
and finds another shadow  
to bark at. We will hear it again  
tomorrow when mockingbird sings, see a squirrel  
chattering where there is nothing but a bird  
laughing like a politician at how easy  
the world is to fool.

Saturday.  
Parking lot is empty,  
so the birds pretend  
it's a lake, hang out on  
the edge soaking up sun  
and singing. There's a bobwhite  
that wasn't here when the cars were,  
a meadowlark wading in the middle of it.  
Mockingbirds don't care if the beach is  
crowded. It's all a song, and they  
live to make it new  
while Chihuahua ravens  
name the color of today's security level,  
always say something if they  
see something, and they always do.

Full moon is back, and high thin  
clouds soften the light it sheds on June.  
Hummingbird drains honeysuckle blossoms  
on a vine half dead while birds settle  
into night. Clouds are straight chalk lines  
that angle toward the horizon  
in the east at this hour. You can  
see moon's halo behind them  
signaling a change after two days of storms.  
Summer tomorrow, and we'll be back to praying for rain  
by afternoon.

7 June 2009

I have no idea without a map  
what planet that is  
above the horizon  
before morning light. It is  
bright as the moon, gone  
when sun makes its presence known  
before it rises. It is  
dust living like the moon  
on borrowed light. It moves the way  
wind moves, the way time moves,  
the way an ocean moves,  
the way grass moves,  
waves rising and falling, restless.

21 June 2009

I startled a rabbit on my morning walk,  
left him wondering how such a fragile being  
could survive this bloody city visible.  
We lay low wandering, disappeared in full view  
by mutual consent negotiated in silence.  
Over coffee, sparrows twittered a revolution,  
surprised me with a sudden crowd when  
I offered to share my morning roll with one.

28 June 2009

Sun rising filters through  
the fragment of a maple tree  
lightning left to two  
petunias grown  
from seed to blossom  
a case for creatio  
ex nihilo only slightly less  
convincing than the bluebonnets  
out of place here.

The suddenness of a rose next door  
brought blossoming from the store  
does not move the way a patient flower  
rising from a burial weeks before  
does, or the forest of maple trees  
that insists through cracks on nothing  
more than dust and a few drops of rain.  
They have already mastered a few steps  
in wind that reaches close to the ground  
where they live.

2 July 2009

Two orioles perch  
in the interval between  
trucks, joggers

chatter by  
in pairs, orioles  
rise like blossoms

of yellow Columbine  
on air.

5 July 2009

In the garden under a statue of Linné, I  
negotiate a mutual invisibility pact with two  
young rabbits. We are still a long time,  
contemplating his cold gaze over masses  
of warm blossoms the day after rain. He  
moved to the south side not long after I  
did, thinking he'd be more comfortable  
among classifiers and systematizers than  
on the Lincoln Park lake front full of  
naïve Social Darwinists working on their tans.  
He settled close to social sciences and classics,  
but his eyes are on the social workers and  
the Law School,  
and he smiles a little at the thought of  
real baseball fans at his right hand  
who know the middle relief pitcher's ERA  
against left handed batters and  
can calculate the odds of a hit faster than  
a Las Vegas bookie  
and have no doubt Ozzie is a chessmaster  
even when they miss Joe Crede.

8 July 2009

I will leave it to Linné  
to classify those scurriers  
who crossed my path between  
anthropology and the place  
where God once died  
smaller than the rats I know  
but too big to call mice  
to mind. They disappear  
into vinca with no trace  
other than a rustling  
                  of leaves  
along the wall.

10 July 2009

Three crows gather after matins  
on the chapel lawn. This is  
a sacrament of the altar, god's presence  
unspoken by a congregation outside  
in quiet communion until  
    some presence surprises  
        them with something to shout about.

16 July 2009

Smooth jazz.

Red, white, and rose

California wine promises

under plexiglass

on every table

announce conversations

with a maître fromagier

on retainer for people

who love cheese.

Three words drift over

from the next table over

and over: Jerry Lee

Lewis. Somebody's

singing somebody

loves me. Maybe

it's you. Somebody on a cellphone

says "Stevie!" and I

almost turn. Now

it's something about a popular place

for second homes, from the kitchen

a woman's voice: "que?"

29 July 2009

Casual conversation drifts over  
drone of engines tuned to a river  
moving twice as fast as the one  
two blocks north, a woman's voice  
*he beat the shit out of him,*  
laughter,  
some unintelligible  
murmur.

Brass every time  
the el rounds the corner at Lake  
and Wabash, some guy on a cellphone  
dealing: *Smiley, if I've got it you've*  
*got it*, an address. Things are changing  
hands, but I still hear only one coin  
in the cup.

14 August 2009

Mid-August but pieces of autumn  
have fallen where leaves  
have turned for some reason  
other than the season, anticipatory  
fragments, unexpected, of what  
is to be, signs of stress  
where tourists gather now  
to see what ordinary things  
suddenly close to power look like,  
surprised to see that they look like ordinary  
things, unaware of the bright red maple leaf  
that has settled at a simple angle  
across the line of a gap in the sidewalk,  
nothing ordinary to make it possible to weather  
change without breaking –

leaf will be brown tomorrow  
if wind does not take it, no sign  
of life, no anticipation of what happens next.

17 August 2009

August crickets sing heat on cue  
right through thunderstorms  
on the trailing edge of a cold front  
that blew in yesterday.

It may have been the moon  
that started them singing, full  
a few days ago, waning  
to new now behind heavy clouds  
and a steady downpour.

Not a sign of them in July,  
but they settled into summer  
overnight when the calendar  
turned, and they'll stay on

to see it through September.

Sign says prairie grass restoration  
next one hundred and one miles,  
and I drift off into calibrating  
space by the passage of time. Not  
two hours of it in a narrow strip between  
fence and highway this side of a field  
of soybeans, an ocean contained

that rolled on beyond the end  
of vision three centuries ago. Unstring  
the wire from the posts that mark off  
one farm from another, extend  
waist high grass to every horizon, and it is  
almost possible to think what this place was  
– but ten thousand miles could not restore it.

20 August 2009

Blue two hours darker than you'd expect  
in the west, rain forty miles away  
between here and the horizon, and sun  
falling slow behind it. End of day  
light that could blind a traveler from the east  
gathers in one wide beam just to the right  
of the point where the road vanishes  
on a plain rising and rising to  
another mountain storm.

Nothing changes but the disk of the sun sliding into the beam  
bright as ever but scattering tonight across the rain  
straight as a stream of fabric  
some distant dancer has unfurled above her to take the place  
of water on the stage  
until it is whole it seems for hours between low clouds and night.

Nothing changes but you are in the middle of it,  
in the middle of a wall of water that kept the sun  
from burning your eyes dry after a day on a long road  
west and nothing is all you see traveling blind until someone stops  
in front of you and you turn to stars  
that danced it all from the beginning.

space is a precipitate  
of mixed metaphors  
never fully dissolved in time

22 August 2009

North of the Canadian, left turn  
at Packsaddle, where the sign says  
“cemetery” but no city living or dead is visible  
for miles except the bed of red ants at the cattle crossing,  
fields green after summer rain make red dirt  
road rolling south pop  
on both sides of a three wire fence  
that doesn’t break the line of sight  
so red rolls through green ocean to the river  
running red as the road with earth it has gathered  
on the way down from New Mexico.

This is the route gold seekers took a hundred  
and sixty years ago swimming upstream  
without stopping  
to wonder why the river was  
going the other way, without  
a thought of the river except  
crossing it if it  
came between them and the  
promise of easy money.





II  
until all cats are gray

8 September 2009

Leaves still  
break lines  
of gray  
paving stones,  
and rhymes  
brown, red,  
yellow, slant

12 September 2009

Early morning, three  
go slow against a sleepy  
river of child soldiers marching  
to someone's idea  
of a good war.  
The driver of a small car  
tries to honk at every  
one as though  
he thinks the sound will turn  
them one by one to say no; but they  
flow like water on two sides  
of a rock that has fallen into the stream  
and he inches forward at the pace  
they set. Another, in an SUV, is  
accustomed to moving people; but his  
machine is a boulder in this river,  
and slow is as fast as he can go.  
I swim upstream, thinking poetry,  
avoiding collisions, nothing  
changes.

14 September 2009

After rain, eye high dragonflies  
shimmer on the footbridge  
sprinkle sunlight like holy  
water with a blessing  
on every passing pilgrim.

15 September 2009

The edge of this typhoon  
recalls the chaos, all water  
and brooding wind,  
from which they say  
an old god in the habit  
of mumbling to himself  
spoke the world we think  
we know. I imagine  
that first word was nothing  
more than an echo some mortal  
mistook for an other  
before it dawned on him  
that he would surely die alone  
if he didn't tell a tale to pass the time.

18 September 2009

We take meaning where we find it  
and where we don't make it  
out of whatever broken fictions  
we find, thinking them news.  
If that is where myth lies, so  
be it. But nothing in the syntax  
of it is poetry, I have to say.  
Crowd after the sun goes down  
don't mean nothin' but this is  
a night city of necessity running  
liquid by day in sun that will not  
stand for its solid self until all cats  
are gray. What do you make of that,  
Chairman Deng? Workers from some  
west still shirtless after ten  
string banners that say "60"  
without a look at walkers they  
have stopped cold. One baby crying  
means more than all of it,  
and every syntax is a figment  
of some imagination some lost soul  
desperate to see what it needs  
to see, singing it like a baby crying.

21 September 2009

a gang of four  
crested birds conspires  
over pink flowers  
on my balcony  
in mid afternoon  
when all that is solid  
melts into air

butterflies I  
could never imagine  
if not here, dragonflies  
thrive on sun  
that stills everything

else. Red flags  
everywhere, breakfast  
in a luxury hotel,  
an American talks too loud  
about Minnesota and needing to lose weight,  
a man with a German accent  
cannot believe he has been here  
three times and has not learned  
to say thank you

in case I've  
forgotten, there  
is a sign  
that says  
Supreme Myth  
just before I  
come to the  
massive shopping  
mall that has  
rendered the  
line between  
here and  
Hong Kong  
obsolete

22 September 2009

## **L'Shanah Tovah**

A woman sweeping on Nan Hai Da Dao  
stops to talk to a baby in its mother's arms,  
and the rhythm of her broom gives way  
to the cooing everybody thinks every baby knows.  
Smiles say this one knows  
work has stopped for him, for now,  
and that is all anyone can ask  
of a universal language in a place  
desperate, as the whole world is,  
for a sabbath in which to  
lower the flags, lay down the guns,  
put down the brooms, and say  
of this time we have not made  
nothing more than a place  
in the world, nothing more than  
hao hao hao.

23 September 2009

From here to the city in the direction of sunrise  
nothing but cranes rising over a canyon  
snaking east to west where the subway will be.  
And this field of cranes will be city in no time,  
like the one on the horizon, like the one on  
the other side of the bay. In no time, space  
transformed into place, dwelling on it, dwelling  
there, on what was not there.

25 September 2009

Walking in this night city,  
my eyes are on the ground, where  
I doubt there is place or time  
for one foot after another. Crowd moves,  
I am certain of it. Two wheeled  
vehicles weave in and out until  
I believe two or more bodies can  
occupy the same space at the same time.  
There is no other explanation.  
A new law describes  
the effect of heat and pressure on  
objects at rest that make up  
moving crowds here. I could swear I am standing  
still, but time passes, and I find myself  
in a different place. A crowd of  
workers who have been building  
the subway break at seven for dinner  
beside the walk, but their day is not over.

Over beer, I look up, and I am surprised  
to see one star and the moon  
waxing beyond crescent two days after Eid,  
a breeze that calls ocean to mind, air  
conditioning spills through open doors as though  
it could change the climate, make the place  
feel a little like north. But it is not possible.  
Clouds have covered the moon. One star  
stands against all the light of the city.

27 September 2009

The week of National Day, Nan Hai Da Dao  
is eighteen flags wide, and lines of them  
stretch past Shekou Wo Er Ma south to the ocean.  
There is no trace of irony in the synchronicity  
of the Walmart sign, the billboard  
celebrating sixty years of the PRC,  
the orgy of consumption between. Wo Er Ma  
and Garden City Mall, the child's toy  
in the middle of it that plays "Simple  
Gifts," the young man who says "screw  
you" when I wave off a flyer advertising  
one more thing, and I  
laugh out loud because I cannot  
dream of words in any language to  
answer that.

28 September 2009

At this distance, typhoon is no more  
than a shadow graying the city, a spirit  
brooding over what is left of water.  
There are signs of it, rain and wind.  
But the thing itself only haunts, never settles.

29 September 2009

Two birds sheltered from a downpour  
on the balcony counting the rhythm  
of the rain startle at the sight of me.

black and white  
but bright  
on a gray day.

30 September 2009

Some hero's trailed a bright cord behind him  
to trace his steps across this shopping maze  
still rising where the city ravenous  
has reclaimed the sea. He did not count on  
another Theseus with the same cord  
to make a crossing where there is no doubt  
a deal could be made or a diversion  
arranged. Every stone in this city is  
planned, but there is always something. The place  
cultures possible under Chairman Deng's  
smile, and there is a gray cat on every  
gray corner, enough mice for every one  
growing fat on the leavings from some cat's  
table, keeping an eye on the tangle of threads  
everybody's trailing to show them the way home.

1 October 2009

No, Gil, it will as a matter of fact.  
It will, sixty years on, showing its age,  
for order, on small screens at the head of every queue  
on the Dao I follow today  
on the way to coffee,  
named for an ocean the engineers  
are paving as fast as they can,  
on a screen twelve feet tall  
opposite Walmart, on the  
New Era. A fact  
is no more than the  
proximate end of an act,  
as we see it here, as we see it now;  
and as we see it here, now, it does not take  
to surprises. It moved to  
a gated community  
decades ago, and private  
security keeps  
it comfortable by  
keeping the rabble  
in line. The People are  
advised to stay inside today  
to avoid causing trouble. The screen is real,  
the street staged, a dance for professionals.

*Gentlemen,  
the police  
are here  
not to create a  
disorder but to  
preserve disorder.*

Relax, Spiro.  
The cameras are rolling.  
Everything's under control.

A brown and white kitten dies  
in public, lies  
exhausted by a path busy  
with walkers. I am not the only one  
who stops, but none of us has anything to offer  
but a word. The kitten curls to sleep, grows  
thin slow on scraps and scraps of language.

A man in the center  
of the footbridge, skin and bones, he does not bow.  
He sleeps beside the empty bowl.

A young man wears nothing but a shirt tied like a loincloth  
around his waist. He waits like the black and white cat  
in the bushes by a bar, but he does not  
beg. I turn, and both are gone.

2 October 2009

## **Mao Was Right**

Women sweeping empty streets  
on the second day of an eight day  
holiday are the only heroes of this revolution.

Yesterday, the Party  
chanted Mao was right, and in this state  
this is as easy to believe as a B movie  
Cold War or the proverb that the old  
cannot kill the young. We  
give back to the leaders clearly what we  
have received from them confusedly,

The old can kill  
the young, but they would rather  
parade them on national days  
while they train to kill each other.  
And heroes of the revolution sweep  
empty streets clean while vendors  
hawk relics and icons of Mao  
with his Mona Lisa smile.

3 October 2009

Full moon, two  
stars, mid  
autumn

remember  
where water  
was

no time  
to count  
stars

lanterns rise,  
settle  
while I wait  
for the moon  
to make its  
way  
back into sight

old man  
with a begging bowl  
laughs at the waitress  
who stands between him  
and Americans  
who think the beer

is cheap. She  
urges him away  
but he is sure  
someone will  
part with spare change  
he skims the cream  
and I suppose I am  
not the only one  
wondering if this  
is how you say  
socialism in Chinese.

full moon, two  
stars is all  
this sky  
can hold, mid  
autumn

we remember  
where water  
was, no time

to count stars  
that used to  
take forever

6 October 2009

An hour after sunrise, a man still  
sleeping in a raised bed  
for flowers on some grand dao  
or other surrounded by trinkets he has brought to the city  
to sell. He has planted a red  
flag with five yellow stars in the soft soil by his head  
like some explorer who has claimed  
a new world in the name of the queen who paid  
his way before he dropped  
exhausted from the journey. Early  
risers among those who live here pay  
him no mind, and I wonder  
how many buyers he will find  
when the crowds  
form. But he has  
his flag, and god knows nations have  
swarmed around smaller plots.

six living buddhas on the sidewalk  
curled around empty begging bowls, sleeping, twice  
as many taxis in the queue at Walmart.  
A bodhisattva would drop a coin in each  
    bowl,  
        hail every taxi out of compassion.  
I notice, but I pass by on the other  
    side, walking.

10 October 2009

Some memory stirs trees  
under a sky so flawlessly blue  
you could not imagine days  
all gray

but there is a touch of ocean  
on this breeze,  
the blood of it cries  
out from the ground

where it was  
where it will fall again

11 October 2009

I am no more lost in this common tongue than in any other.

Wind writes in dry leaves on gray paving stones,  
not in the short gusts of this breezy morning  
but in days of it that follow  
parallel lines until they cross  
where the eye is at its limit.

in still moments, they arc like  
rhyme across lines  
to make poems of them

a young dog in samadhi, almost  
invisible in low bushes  
beside the walk, is  
deep in meditation,  
eyes on something so  
small between his paws  
I cannot see it

he is standing  
when I return  
and there is nothing  
to him

each rib visible  
through taut skin  
a reminder of how like samadhi  
dying looks from the other side

Scavengers interrupt the slow stream of walkers  
drifting south, divert late runners hurrying  
the other way to catch buses that do not wait.

One man standing slowly examines every can  
on the street for excess. He is stunned  
by it, learns from it to disregard appearance

judging from the accents,  
an Australian and two Americans  
at the next table talk too loud  
about Filipinos they say talk too loud  
Australian mentions Tiger Woods, then  
says “your president won the Nobel  
Prize,” and one of the Americans  
says “to which I can only say  
‘what the fuck?’” to which they  
all agree and turn to two Frenchmen  
deported for drunk driving. When I leave, they  
are talking about massage parlors in Macao.

13 October 2009

It is hard to imagine how anything so good  
at slowing the world could  
be so bad for poetry.

You would think a mind emptied,  
the perfect beginner's  
mind, but there are no beginnings

in this queue, only one end  
after another

one star insists, in spite of the lights, in  
spite of the sound amplified to the threshold  
of pain, in spite of the climate control  
clawing into heat six feet beyond the  
open door, in spite of the ocean paved  
for a shopping mall called coastal even though  
engineers have worked overtime have worked  
migrant labor over time to make it inland,  
in spite of a television tall as a house  
blasting "Edelweis" against rock from a dozen  
bars, in spite of the city, in spite of it all, it  
insists there are stars, insists you can find  
north even here when there is no way to  
sail but dead reckoning

17 October 2009

Gray bird, wings white-tipped bright, cuts the leading edge  
of my walk to snatch a dragonfly from air mid flight,  
and I wonder how many fleets that omen  
would launch if a seer read it to some king intent on war.

And how many young girls  
would have to die  
if he counted every crushed magnolia blossom?

Thank heaven they've taken the flags down.  
Flags want sacrifices to make their cold blood  
flow. With the flags folded away. if no one  
has seen this, we can keep it to ourselves, walk  
a straight line of prose unbroken by omens.

19 October

Dozens of marigolds and celosia  
in separate pots arranged on concrete  
so you'd see a flag if you had wings, withered  
after two weeks of heat and sun. After  
the fact, a cadre assembles to deconstruct  
the whole, dump one plant after another  
in plastic bags, leave pots  
upended in a pile, cart it all away  
in the end, so if you had wings  
you'd see nothing.

24 October 2009

Red flame flowers on low mimosas  
blossom now, relieved that heat has  
broken, each like a brush standing, waiting  
to be dipped in ink drawn across a page to make a sign.  
They call it a change of season,  
but I can't call it fall. And I have no idea  
what else would follow a summer so intense,  
still blazing at the end of September.

I suspect it is no more than a pause  
to coax these flames open so this  
fierce climate can swallow them, try  
summer again, slowly.

25 October 2009

I am waiting  
for desire  
to renounce me  
end suffering

but desire fancies itself  
a bodhisattva of consumption,  
enlightened. It is going nowhere

until every single being is consumed with it.

A second sun in the mirror surface  
of a building to my south is so bright  
it turns me around for a moment. Sun rises  
in the east, and there it is rising  
right before my eyes. With east before me,  
I turn left to see another sun  
rising where north should be. And mirror  
after mirror catches it full in the west,  
meaning true north is walking away from sun  
on three sides. Every other turn  
in this looking glass world  
is by dead reckoning

26 October 2009

Sweeping leaves, you could almost believe  
autumn. But sun and ten thousand women  
with parasols rise to say summer. I sit outside in a corner  
of Nepal planted with a little shade on this southern  
edge of China, order aloo chana and, taking advantage  
of a foot in two worlds, Gurkha beer on Chicago time,  
talk about how the place has changed in twenty  
    years, concrete where ocean was, buildings  
    rising with the chasm between rich and poor  
sip masala tea, savoring the cream while I  
    rail against the warm embrace of a soft god.

29 October 2009

Under Nan Hai Da Dao,  
early sun one  
particle suspended among others  
in morning air, scatters  
an aura behind a line of buildings  
rising east behind me now.  
A new market expands impromptu  
on the walk separated by a dense hedge  
from the Agricultural Bank of China,  
a hundred vendors,  
piles of produce,  
and a crowd to slice through  
before morning coffee, too intent on trade  
to move, a dog on a leash stands,  
wonders what has happened to  
his morning walk.

30 October 2009

A young cat that appears  
to be dying a slow death  
has curled under  
a tree that I suppose  
makes her feel less exposed,  
though she is oddly open  
there to every passerby

old hound in the street circles, dying

vulture circles death, a sign

death circles all, waiting

brown and white cat slips into short grass  
she no longer believes she is invisible  
in plain sight, circles  
it seems she does not have  
    the energy to care, and it seems  
she must be dying  
she makes the world vanish, sleeps

cat is a circle in short  
grass, fading

I am not the only one who  
feeds her but it does  
not stop her...

31 October 2009

Fifteen stories above the street at 2 am, the city  
is still a melody that could con you into believing it is  
not a copy lullaby, counterfeit like  
the lookalikes that almost  
keep time with the precision of  
a Swiss watch. Just before sunrise,  
it's young girls in tight skirts making  
money move. No matter what the myths  
say, the old vampires in real Armanis  
don't come out to drain the city's blood till daylight.



III  
a promise of water

7 November 2009

**cloud chamber**

Don't dream of looking  
sun full in the face  
here, at the bottom of the east  
sky in morning. There is no haze of city,  
only edge to soften it. Four crows note  
the presence of my coming and going  
to it, two facts, here, where  
tracks cross.

They neglected to put the moon away  
when they rolled up the sky  
last night. Pale  
on pale blue in  
wisps of cloud,  
it waits out sun.

A hundred blackbirds speaking in tongues  
have descended on a gathering of water  
in this dry place for a revival.  
Every single one gets happy  
and no one goes  
unbaptized in this priesthood of all birds.

10 November 2009

Fog that clings close to morning draws  
a thin layer of red earth over cotton  
on the straight line of every horizon,  
risen pink to such impenetrability  
yesterday's hundred mile vision is less than  
a mile today. What you see on the road ahead  
always comes out of nowhere.

Close, there are  
rows, straight – or circles,  
the weight of which  
is expected  
to keep good dirt from flying.  
At a distance,  
cotton appears  
in the compound  
eyes of reclining earth, cloud watching.

I just rolled in to Water Valley, Texas,  
and the sign says Spring Avenue.  
But mesquites have not stopped twining roots  
and prairie grass the color of dry is  
unconvinced – no idea of green  
where there is nothing but  
a promise of water.

11 November 2009

Bronze in the park behind Vereinskirche  
recalls the only treaty never broken  
here. John Meusebach kneels, presenting a peace offering.  
On Santanna's left, there is a plaque  
to remember Admiral Nimitz,  
a native son. On the right, Lyndon  
Johnson, a native of the county. Black cat  
with one bronze paw, coffee and cinnamon  
fur, has been waiting in the flowers  
between the poles of this paradox.  
She is missing the tip  
of her left ear, but  
she is at peace. She  
walks me through the  
park without a thought  
of war.

13 November 2009

Sun that has fallen  
slow to the bottom  
of the sky is the same

red as the very  
tip of prairie  
grass here.

But sun, on fire,  
will smolder  
over the line where

night rises,  
while grass fades to sky  
black where the moon does  
not touch it, where  
it does not burn.

14 November 2009

In a fog all morning until  
Doug Sahm sings me out of Austin  
with Texas blue sky. Over coffee,  
small talk and the sound of cannons  
at Fort Hood, miles away. At every stop,  
men in uniform with their families  
and I think there is an  
occupation with a history.  
Radio experts and man on the street  
callers can't understand the sudden violence.

16 November 2009

wait, goddess, wait for anger  
to burn to a fine ash of boredom  
and little murders committed by rote

when every living thing will join  
a machine and it will be  
no lie to call any piece of it

a target. every battle  
will be a ritual of one thing  
and every thing will be a battle

killing will come as no surprise  
dying as nothing but. no  
violence will surprise

there is a song in that: sing  
no. sing no. sing no hero who does  
nothing in this blood wedding.

19 November 2009

thinking follows thing  
thought – first thought  
second – best thought  
after the fact

the fact is no  
thinking with no thing  
to follow

the thing is  
one thing  
follows another  
without a second thought

thinking follows thing  
thought – first  
thought second –  
best thought  
after the fact

the fact is no  
thinking with no  
thing to follow

the thing is one  
thing follows another  
without a second thought

25 November 2009

Man sleeping on a concrete bench  
between a great way named  
for a southern sea that grows  
smaller and smaller as engineers  
in charge make it solid ground and shops  
intent on seeing that the world is small  
must have grown tired of looking for work  
in this place made for making money. It does,  
and he dreams. But his sleeping here  
can only be denied if you look  
    the other way. Eyes open, there is a man,  
exhausted, sleeping on a cold bench in the  
    shadow of wealth, in the shadow  
    of a world that does not know it is dying  
    of consumption

Every atom aches  
for you with no reason, no  
reason. no reason. You are, that is all. I  
am nothing without you.

27 November 2009

A puppy tied outside the bar next door  
whimpers, and I turn. Without a word, world  
turns on one loneliness or another  
on the sound of it, the cry of a child  
surrounded by two women (no denying  
two women can surround a child crying,  
though it takes armies of men, one shouting  
orders and blowing the whistle he wears  
to prove he is in control). Two women  
and the words between them and the child is  
contained. But the cry cannot be denied.  
Puppy still strains on the leash, and all these  
chairs arranged as if for conversation are  
empty. The music from the bar next door  
is longing in a language that is not spoken  
here except by children who love to roll  
the sounds together on their tongues, taste  
the infinitely inconceivable  
possibility of a being thinking  
in some language other than the one  
they know. They laugh when one apes intelligent sounds  
when this pale ghost they have encountered  
makes some strange sound as though it were language,  
like the puppy straining on the leash,  
and now the music rolling out of the  
open door behind me is rap, anger

rhyming ho's while the lights on a Christmas  
tree in the wrong place glitter. Who knows  
what dark beast slouches toward Bethlehem?

28 November 2009

**drivers**

sound space the way  
bats echo, streets  
make their way,

this city nothing  
but one after  
another, crossing

The poet says you never know  
what is out of your head

climbing the mountain, mind  
your step, the heart of the matter

29 November 2009

**Hong Kong, First Sunday in Advent**

On the Island line  
nausea is a sign  
of the pandemic mass  
of humanity alone.  
One loneliness  
is next to nothing.  
Ten thousand times,  
ten thousand times,  
the weight of it crushes  
solitude, rushes  
to embrace one more  
ritual of consumption.

5 December 2009

Would we be better off without  
language? Would we be better  
off without all of it? Would we be  
better off if we cut the heart out, disposed  
with words, skated on  
the thin ice of one extreme  
or the other, speechless?  
Would we be poets of silence?  
Would we have nothing to say?

6 December 2009

One dog and a thousand birds sing  
the world back in the first hour of morning  
with no more than six notes among them.  
Moon is already gone, so these must be  
the last notes of matins, the end of an act  
of prayer, the notes on which the world turns,  
waits for a blessing, waits to be told to go  
in peace. Behind me, the sound of water.  
Pieces of a chant drift over from the temple  
with the hum of motorcycles now and then.

I sing the silences, wait.

Everyone wants  
peace, not the things that make for it.

Standing on a busy street in  
the middle of a festival  
where there has been  
talk of politics, you say  
wouldn't we be better off  
without language, and I  
want to say language is  
what we swim through  
after music to silence,  
but in that moment thin as  
the past, thin as

the future, I cannot find  
the silences I need to form  
the words, say nothing, wait  
a wider space between

Rise slow the way sun  
rises, skimming surfaces  
of cities that know  
no way now  
but up. We both need  
an hour more than before  
to scale these walls to dawn,  
when vertical light will sprawl  
to every corner of a world  
still horizontal.

10 December 2009

Driven to distraction  
by a circus in Copenhagen,  
we grow blind to the climate  
summit assembling on this  
Bin Hai Avenue entrance ramp,  
where carbon footprints grow  
the way tracks in fresh snow  
grow when the day warms  
after sunrise. In daylight,  
they lose direction, melt  
to nothing but the earth snow  
occupied. And high wire  
rhetorical acts in Oslo  
notwithstanding, war will not end  
war. War will not end  
until every soldier learns to say no.

The only thing I have in Texas  
is a past, and that is  
undeniable as America, Jack. All that road going  
nowhere. Hell, highways have always  
been weapons, and this place,  
full of seekers settling, is  
full of them. Fuck the State. Fuck the Department  
of Homeland Security. Fuck the SS. I have

determined that today's security is blue  
and I intend to make a rainbow  
of it before the week is through.

Silence would have been  
a blessing, but I think that curious god  
fearful (as the powerful  
almost always are) was not  
in a blessing mood. And we  
could choose to bless  
the world with silence,  
but in the image of that strange god  
we do so only when we conspire to tell the truth  
in silent intervals between words.

12 December 2009

The verticality of it counts more  
than number, but number is enough  
to make you think there is no place  
unoccupied. But in this place  
where the odds are good that you will touch someone  
if you extend a hand in any  
direction, everyone seems to have  
mastered acting as though they are alone,  
as they are –  
more people alone  
than anyone can count,  
a city of monads,  
windowless, rising, a city rising

Seems the *New York Times*  
is aghast at extramarital  
sex, which still  
sells. If you like it,  
better put a ring on it. No wonder  
Rowan Williams clicks his tongue.  
Move outside these lines  
and the congregation might get happy.

all the cats lie low  
while these human cities  
rise and rise and rise  
and I wonder if civilization  
means nothing more than  
making yourself an easy target

13 December 2009

After all, that is why the State  
involves itself in marriage  
in the first place – to control  
where behavior takes place.  
Behavior out of place  
could lead to dinner  
with prostitutes, intercourse  
of one kind or another with  
tax collectors, and gatherings  
of scruffy disciples raving  
about god in widening circles  
of friends.

What kind of church could you  
hope for under conditions like that?

Of course you are right, Gautama,  
about desire. But I wonder  
if you have really understood  
suffering, our teacher.  
Give up bitter,  
sweet goes with it. Only  
a prince once sated can be satisfied  
with that. The snake understood what sweet fruit  
can do.

14 December 2009

One surprise was enough for Gautama.

Eyes open, life closes: every surprise

a birth, every birth a death, so

one surprise fills an entire life, and there is

no Gautama to be surprised, no

desirer desiring, no desire, suffer

no desire.

open eyes, close

life – each surprise

satisfies a life

complete, life

begins, eyes open

open eyes, close

life – surprise

satisfies, life

begins, eyes open

15 December 2009

When bees tending blossoms  
every day in morning  
cease to be a surprise

when seven cats who  
live next door appear  
out of nowhere all  
anticipation every time  
I open my door before breakfast  
and I do not laugh

when a dozen mottled leaves  
shaken loose by wind  
break the lines of paving stones  
and I do not see a poem

when the three note song that bird sings  
ten thousand times a day does not  
make me smile, I pray

for some profound suffering  
to make me catch my breath  
mouth open, taste the sweetness  
always fully present  
under every passing bitterness

19 December 2009

Eyes wide, a little girl turns  
on steps where  
two figures dressed  
in silk off white dance with swords  
while three rows of sixty  
year old women in ordinary dress follow.  
But she is looking at me,  
descending two at a time  
on a diagonal near her,  
and in that moment  
passing in the presence of her eyes I know  
my unexceptional self is a spectacle.

21 December 2009

Going nowhere fast, the economic miracle of masses rising looks like a traffic jam from where I stand this morning. On foot, it is all about timing, slipping through gaps on entry ramps where cars speed to a bottleneck, wait, slipping through gaps in power somebody's labor made.

26 December 2009

From exile, you make your way  
to the absence of your childhood  
in the place where I am now, and I see  
the place without you and know loneliness  
is composed of what is not there,  
dark matter that passes through  
everything except what cries out of the depths  
for a long time, waiting to be touched  
by what might be a sign of something  
no one has ever seen. I look at armies of workers  
sent into this city to build what was not  
there and see the absent child at home  
in exile, see what made you who you are.  
Sorry absence passed through you leaving  
loneliness, I am grateful  
for the dark stuff that made all this  
radiance possible. And I am ready to go down  
for a long time for a trace of what might  
be that faint impression of your smile, absence  
passing through me with the turning of a turning world.

29 December 2009

A child I imagine must be no more than six  
in clothes no shabbier  
than mine races across  
the street from half a block away  
to fall at my feet  
because my white face means  
I must be rich.

It is necessary  
to be reminded of such  
imperatives. His father  
must be steps behind  
alms bowl in hand, knowing  
it is necessary  
to teach his child to bow  
if the family is  
to survive. Both repeat  
a phrase I do not know,  
but I know it is a plea,  
and I know each time  
I say "sorry" it gives them hope  
that I will find something to give.

It is necessary  
to become stone faced silent.  
It is necessary. It is a war of necessity.  
It is necessary.

It is necessary  
necessary  
necessary necessary.  
A war of necessity,  
a necessary war.  
You cannot imagine.

1 January 2010

Two days before the end of a year  
we count by circuits of the sun  
every child on the street knows  
it does not make. More than  
thirteen billion circuits the sun  
does not make, most before  
it was there to make them, more  
before we were present to be  
circled, before the turning world  
we occupy, and, still,  
we turn while the moon  
takes her own sweet time.

Two Uighur men on  
tricycles stop to lift the ponderous  
beasts over the curb, turn  
in steady rain and offer me a ride.  
I say no and walk beside  
them for a time, having the kind  
of conversation strangers  
have when there is no common  
tongue between them. I try to tell  
them the rain is good, a gift  
of Allah, and we are nothing but  
smiles and *hao hao* until we part at  
a crossroad where they turn to stop  
under a bridge so someone else can

be soaked by Allah's gift, and I go on  
my way rejoicing in collisions that make  
light possible in a world  
where matter, mostly dark, mostly  
passes through you.

On the day itself, when we declare it new,  
a song from "A Hole in the Head" rolls  
over a holiday crowd, wave after wave,  
    running before time takes their  
        dreams away, an endless river.

3 January 2010

Clusters on every corner beg alms, some  
on retainer to businesses that occupy space  
on the street government certified for a price  
that gets them papers. Others go free-  
lance, paperless. Those who work for businesses  
with papers always have paper to give,  
directing passersby to buy buy buy one thing  
or another. Those who do not have bowls  
that ring with the sound of a coin now  
and again, and you can imagine a soul  
flying from purgatory; but it is harder to imagine  
the paradise it flies to. Televised, the revolution still  
promises to build it for workers on earth;  
but workers beg alms, dream of being  
owners, cannot imagine this as it is in heaven.

4 January 2010

When you say you have no home,  
I think the trace of sadness  
in your voice is not a sense of loss  
and nothing to lose in your eyes  
means they are always dancing  
when I try to place the laughter  
in them that was always there.  
I have no idea what it is I have been  
looking for, but here you are, and this  
place needs you more than you know.  
No this or that, but here  
you are, and I am no place,  
out of my mind with the  
absence where your eyes were.

6 January 2010

## **Epiphany**

Dying, not death  
inspires fear. A cruel joke  
that something as common as feeding  
our lives fills them  
with dread. No wonder we imagine  
a gracious god showing us  
how, dying against the raging of the light  
so we can see the radiant dark of night  
that is nothing but a resting place  
in a journey that goes on. The road goes on.

8 January 2010

Yellow crescent on gray stone  
breaks the line where it falls and the form of a poem  
comes to mind – not the thing  
itself, but the thinking  
of it, the coming to be  
where the eye of the mind  
and the eye of the world  
meet and see new  
light between them.

Tree trunks flow up from the ground  
with the grain of the sky  
and you wonder  
if this picture  
was turned.

They pick up the red  
earth, the yellow leaves, the blue  
sky, run to a pool of green where  
a crown spreads  
    and many minds rest  
        in it, moving.

10 January 2010

All these worlds cross in such fullness  
you are gasping for air, certain  
your heart cannot contain them.

Every world you can imagine,  
every world I thought I knew, in  
rainbows on canvases you will

soon let go. And I may hope  
to stumble upon one bringing  
another world to light

where I never expected it, and you  
will ask why I am laughing, even though  
you know what I will say,

one more sacrament, sweet  
as the divinity of your dancing.

Wandering through a crowd in a festival of tulips,  
we are drawn to the ones that have begun to fade.  
A stand of straight green stalks, a strange attractor  
for a crowd circulating, cameras in hand, seeking  
the perfect specimen, stops us. I have no idea  
if I dream the butterfly

crowd or the crowd dreams me, but you are  
the only strangeness that draws me here,  
gazing at a mass of fallen petals that have turned  
the flowers so the world has to turn to see them right  
while we wander to four petals on pavement  
hoping for nothing more than the light of some  
imperfect surprise.

You cannot imagine seven years in a place  
without learning the local language, and all  
I can think is how slow every local  
comes to me. A blade of grass  
takes years while language waits,  
and I am surprised by silence.

13 January 2010

No denying the slow, the slow  
strangulation, the slow  
proliferation, the slow  
consumption, the slow  
coagulation, the slow  
occupation, the slow  
the slow, the slow. No  
denying the slow  
mass, the slow  
destruction, the slow  
settling of what remains  
of a fire somewhere, slow  
burn leaves the slow world  
breathless, leaves everyone  
wielding a weapon,  
driven to distraction, struggling  
to breathe what the fire has not burned.

money is stacked as high as the odds  
in these casinos, and every dog  
on the street is wearing a dinner jacket  
before crowds gather for dim sum

14 January 2010

Between folds the wholeness of before  
and after into a body waiting to spring  
into another between what was and all  
that could be. The mass of before and after  
has no weight. There is nothing  
to what will be, but could be  
is the weight of the world,  
what every thinking being carries.

Bird on the top branch of a palm tree  
in autumn chill has been singing this  
with the doves all morning.

**you ask if I believe in miracles**

peel a ripe banana slow, taste  
the marvel of its design with your eyes  
slice it into a clear glass bowl  
so you can watch it darken a little  
with anticipation  
wash blueberries, two handfuls, one  
by one, feel each sweet sphere burst in your  
imagination  
add them to the bowl surprise after surprise  
where they can share their blue laughter

with what has been waiting there  
that will suffice, but you can go on:  
a handful of raspberries, touch every rough difference  
with the smooth surface of blueberry memory  
    as you wash them  
add them to the bowl and let your mind taste  
    its slow indigo turn,  
blackberries if you wish, clusters of  
    spheres deeper than blue,  
mangos if you have them, papaya, sweet  
    enough to taste at a distance  
now a big spoonful of strong strained  
    Greek yogurt, living to slip into the embrace  
    of all that has been waiting  
take, eat, and  
there you are  
no need for some  
elsewhere god. Yes.

15 January 2010

Suddenly, a crowd,/ all eyes  
on the sky,/ and we search  
for reasons/ in the direction we think/  
they are looking./ Finally, we see/  
lights dancing off low clouds/  
and a voice says/ it was a symphony/  
after the fact/ we never saw walking/  
against the crowd./ Stars at our feet,/  
we get drunk on the city,/ watch  
moon on water,/ walk on air,  
look for openings

Suddenly, a crowd,  
all eyes on the sky,  
and we search for reasons  
in the direction we think  
they might be looking.

Finally, we see  
lights dancing off low clouds  
and a voice says  
it was a symphony  
after the fact  
we never saw walking  
against the crowd.

Stars at our feet,  
we get drunk on the city,  
watch moon on water,  
walk on air, look for openings.

21 January 2010

Tonight it is a river again, not  
a Mondrian of broken ice in  
three layers from crystal  
through isinglass  
to the white opacity of a glacier  
that should take millennia  
to move down the mountain  
that is otherwise  
like the river missing between  
banks yesterday. Now  
it is a river moving, not  
frozen in time.

27 January 2010

Cold clear light  
so hard it can  
bear the weight  
of a walk  
across the city  
that never finds it  
necessary to put its feet  
on the ground, edging  
over the surprise  
of a river  
that is not frozen  
today, ice melted  
by the habit of sun  
more light than heat  
    in January  
        when light is solid  
        and all that is solid  
        melts into air.

a man on the street in arctic cold  
shouts "have a *blest* day"  
at every passerby  
until I come  
to believe it  
imperative

he does not have an alms bowl  
but his hat is on the sidewalk  
in front of him  
and I wonder how  
his ears are holding up  
against the cold

no one is willing  
to take the gloves off  
long enough to fish a dollar out

the upturned hat holds nothing  
after a long time on this busy street,  
but he is going nowhere  
in spite of the cold

and I think he is shouting  
past passersby, wrapping himself  
in the sound of his voice the way Jacob wrapped himself  
in fur to fool old blind Isaac into bestowing  
a blessing, though in this cold that could be  
the stew he traded Esau for a shot  
at pulling the wool over the old man's eyes,  
hoping this day to be blessed.

now I find myself  
thinking of that cherry  
loner, lonely in a pair,  
you say fell  
from a warm  
cake with  
a cold heart

wishing for the chill  
your touch would send  
up and down his spine

hoping you will  
hold him, alone  
in your hands, never lonely

29 January 2010

Almost full moon frozen  
over a river almost ice.  
Water moves under a surface  
slowing to solid beside  
a circle that has not yet forgotten it is  
water that mirrors the moon  
in every one of ten thousand waves, tempting  
a poet ten thousand times  
to lean over the edge of the bridge  
and scoop up every single one

but it is the one alone above the water  
that tempts me, because it has me thinking  
of you shying away from the crowd.  
If I drown,  
    it will be in night blue sky  
        reaching for the blue rose there  
            I think is you, alone.

Almost full moon frozen  
over a river almost ice.

Water moves under a surface  
slowing to solid beside a circle  
that has not forgotten it is

water mirroring the moon  
in every one of ten thousand  
waves, tempting tipsy poets to bend

too far over the edge of the bridge  
hoping to scoop up every single one

but it is the one alone above the water  
that tempts me, because it has me thinking of you  
shying away from a crowd. If I drown,  
it will be in night blue sky reaching for  
the blue rose there I think is you, alone.



Steven Schroeder is a poet and visual artist who lives and works in Chicago. More at [stevenschroeder.org](http://stevenschroeder.org).



**Sun that has fallen  
slow to the bottom  
of the sky is the same**

**red as the very  
tip of prairie  
grass here.**

**But sun, on fire,  
will smolder  
over the line where**

**night rises,  
while grass fades to sky  
black where the moon does  
not touch it, where  
it does not burn.**

**[stevenscroeder.org](http://stevenscroeder.org)**