

an orchestration of silences

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

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an orchestration of silences is the fourth 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 fourth of ten notebooks and were drafted between February and August 2006. 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. This fourth volume differs from the first three in that all of the compositions are clearly marked as poetry in the notebook, so nothing appears as prose. While particular places are referenced in the text of some of the poems, only a date of composition is explicitly indicated. As a whole, this notebook, more than the first three, takes the form of a diary written in poetry on the road. The road in this case is entirely in the United States and loops from Chicago through Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee into Alabama, then across Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas into Texas and back to Chicago through Oklahoma and Missouri.

I've used three paintings in this volume: a detail of "absence" (watercolor on paper, 2011) for the front cover, a detail of "language" (oil on canvas, 2014) facing the first poem, and a detail of "in silence, in writing" (acrylic on paper, 2021) for the back cover.

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

Chicago
April 2022



17 February 2006

When the air is cold
what remains of steel
rises to signal
some momentous decision
behind closed doors,
but there is no crowd
there to claim it.

By tomorrow, there will
be traces on everything, deep enough
to trace your name in, a token
for somebody's memory.

18 February 2006

It's the crosses
alongside every
road made of the same
weathered wood
as the barns
half standing on farms
cut from aged mountains
cleared two centuries
ago now unable
to keep a family
alive, every one
draped with plastic
flowers that recall
someone who's
dead and gone and churches
that are hard
to distinguish from the
barns with names
like Calvary, called
tabernacles to make you believe
they could be tents
in wildernesses of wandering.
But they are intended
to last so long the cemeteries
around them have no boundaries.

It's the crosses
keep rising distract us
from matters at hand,
every one a marker
for some death
that makes no sense.

I'm pretty sure I'm close to Tennessee
when the billboards contain ten
King James commandments and inquire
(personal as Jesus) after where I will spend
eternity (as if I weren't already
spending it).

But I can't be
certain until cascades of ice
that tumble over roadside rocks
at glacier speed become waterfalls
on the far side of Louisville and we're
permitted to go there fast as you can in Texas.

19 February 2006

On the verge of Alabama there is
evidence of ice in the way what is
left of the storm last night bends
trees and light at the end
of Tennessee. In Nashville,
they told me to drive careful
there, and the missile that stands
on the border is a reminder
of how slippery this crossing
can be even when the road is dry.
There is a glaze on every sign,
and voices trained to go down easy keep stories close
in the etiquette of thin ice and old truces.

20 February 2006

The most remarkable thing about this planet is a winged species that has evolved an intelligent biped over thousands of years that has a limited capacity to invent and an obsession with mechanical things. While the winged beings exert almost no physical effort, the bipeds manufacture machines at a frenetic pace to move them randomly from place to place at higher and higher speeds. Most living things on the planet are unable to discern any pattern in the movement and are caught in the path of the machines on tracks the bipeds have built for them out of hard synthetic materials. The machines hardly slow at all when they hit one and the body remains fresh in the gap between the machine that struck it and the next. The winged creatures wait in trees and swoop down between machines to collect fresh meat, which they eat at their leisure on grassy areas between tracks maintained by the bipeds. The challenge is to reach a perfect balance between

intelligence and docility. The winged creatures on this planet have chosen a minimum of physical labor and evolved an existing species to their ends. The result is relatively fragile and occasionally dangerous. The winged creatures make themselves undesirable as food, allow self-regulation of the system, and count occasional losses as part of the cost of doing business. We might consider an automated variation with only limited artificial intelligence to reduce the risk of aggressive behavior. This might mean more work for us, a little less leisure. But eliminating the risk of these bipeds might be worth the cost after further study of the winged creatures, the most remarkable thing about the planet.

20 February 2006

near Chunky, Mississippi

Miles from the coast,
trees have memories in rain, dark
straight loblollies, white birches,
one in ten snapped by wind,
abandon sky bow low
to earth at improbable angles
across the grid of an old forest, a field
cleared behind it.

21 February 2006

Half a mile off the Interstate,
a Czech bakery is still
the place for local
conversation about cancer
treatment in central
Texas. But at the new
Czech Inn on I-35, all
the excitement's about McDonald's.
The kolache with poppy seed
and apricot taste a little like Prague.

Seems every road back to Texas
is peppered with signs
for microsurgical vasectomy reversal.
I'd always read this as commentary
on cultural indecision at an individual
level. But driving in a fog
from Waco to Austin after a conversation
in the Starbucks at Baylor about an
old Czech restaurant boarded up
in West, it has me wondering
about irreversible processes, money,
what we have come to cultivate.

22 February 2006

Each name contains
more stories than a human life
can hold, passed from mouth
to mouth by lovers who know them
from the inside, as characters
know a play – in pieces, in
pieces, all coherence
fabricated in wet kisses
that may prove fatal.

some kind of sign...

Rolling out of Austin
in a low fog that just keeps
getting deeper, Guy Clark sings
what sets you free. Not
poetry, no money, Townes
and Yates simmer haiku
rhyme soup out of rainbows fool
you into sunshine while things fall apart
you wait for fog to lift, put your flying shoes on,
and wonder if sky will come down
poems when you need them.

At Vereins Kirche, the question
is why this one, not
that. There is talk of fiery
red beards, guns
emptied, promises kept,
titles abandoned, most unusual
in dealing with settlers. Every wicked generation
demands signs but rarely reads them.
Entering Mason county, a formal declaration: *boll weevil*
free zone; enumeration of dire consequences has me conjuring
images of weevil smugglers, why and how we make others,
borders, get over them, what we carry. An armadillo
grazes, startlingly alive by the roadside near Comanche Creek,
inspiration to all who refuse to acknowledge extinction.

Bees are masters
of many things; not
glass. While I wandered down
to the San Saba, two
came in through cracked windows
of my empty car. There was no
coaxing them, and clear
sky behind the back seat
made more sense than
the gap they'd entered by,
even if I'd been a master
of bee reason. Nothing to do

but roll the windows all the way
down, listen to them deconstruct
invisible walls in a low drone
modulated by their pendulum search,
following light side to side, no
need to turn aside from its clear
expanse, clear as day to compound eyes
until wind catches them and they wonder
at how far they've come.

24 February 2006

Conversation behind me is all about weapons,
and I fight the urge to turn
prompted by the ease with which voices move
between making them and using them,
the circle of the ordinary drawn from
life to death to taking it.

but we need the rain

Sky's been coming down gray
since Alabama, and even
these plains feel shut in.
Edge is no nearer now
than usual, but gray closes over
ocher like a window blue
girl can't dance open before Big Spring.

Coming in to Sterling City, signs
say *Welcome Jesus*, another points
to Robert Lee. World's been gray
since Birmingham. No apocalypse,
but an empty church with windows
broke half a mile further on.

This time, there is water
standing on roads where signs
say to watch for it, not
ice. It changes the speed
of the wheel, tempts a turn, forces
you to pull against it, against
red fields, cotton baled, scattered after harvest.

Empty pizza place in Lamesa, sign
says wait, but waitress can't
believe I do. Seems to expect me
to want something other than to be
seated, and I suppose no one comes in here
unexpected who is not lost.

26 February 2006

Ice canvases on gallery walls speak
of their own inspiration if they speak at all.
It is not necessary to prattle on about
others or elsewhere that bring them
to merely human artists whose meager
talents could not account for them.
Visions spill over mediums where you
might catch a glimpse of a divine smile in spite
of the accounting while you take divinely
inspired price tags with a grain of salt,
overlook the arrogance of the archangel's signature.

27 February 2006

On this sacred plateau, prayer flags
flutter plastic mantras on wind
off mountains, north, west
beside crystal paths of glass broken in passing.
Beyond the circle of sprinklers, light
shatters on the prisms of these
plains in a spectrum of brown
that ends in yellow grass
bleached to the edge of white. Signs
at every intersection promise mountains
where pavement ends, and it is
difficult to tell whether the path down
into a dry arroyo was cut by machines
or sudden rain. Trees cling to the bottom
of it, wise enough to know almost every
sign of water follows human presences
here and that it is still advancing. A shiny
new chain link fence divides the open field on the other
side into two claims, and the frame of some
massive building rises nearer the highway. A
mockingbird lights on a pile of blue plastic
pipes and eyes me. No song now. A moment
of silence before it flies on. Something even
smaller than I rockets across the road
after a car passes, and I count brown bottle
reminders of the profusion of spirits between

this road and the Baptist Church where
someone lectured two days ago on what
heaven would be like and the cross glows
at night for fear someone will forget it in starlight.

Off the path, I judge
the size of the dog
by the depth of the bark
but hope the gate is latched.
Not a snake in sight,
and the sound of the city
litters plains like broken glass.

1 March 2006

Dry prairie flattened near wild
fire white breaks red
where there was water, runs jagged
to the river waiting out
another drought
south of Higgins. Canyons come slow
where rivers have carried more wait
than water for years. Canadian makes its way
east, settles slow into earth spectrum
while Washita wanders.

Grass is ready to burst and when it does
you see it first in the darkening
of sky, smell it before you see the fire. Memory
darker than red earth remains when grim faced men
drive off muttering prayers for rain,
hangs like a warning over asphalt
that slips between bleached sky
and grass that wants nothing
more than a spark to be an ocean.

Plains of anticipation are suited to advent,
but waiting them out we do not want
for penitential ashes. Make a sign
of the cross with what remains
of every wildfire and pray
that God will come this time
as rain before another fire rises.

2 March 2006

Only one other walker tempted tonight by early Spring, and I
the lone survivor. Skunk couldn't turn
back a truck with what lingers
now for blocks, couldn't gauge
the speed, couldn't cross
without protection, lies now like a roadside
cross to remind passersby how dangerous
ordinary life has become. At the diner,
conversation about cancer and prairie fires,
how many acres burned when a truck pulled over.

Finally tastes like rain today, but
it will take a flood to break this drought,
more to break the habit of thinking
sun fine when prairie is beyond bursting
with it.

How about this weather? celebrates a shock of
Summer in March. Global
warming protocol is running sprinklers
on dry winter grass, praying for rain,
hoping fire doesn't take the house this time.

Stranger in the diner turns to ask
if I noticed the blue of the sky
in the East this morning, and I
remember blue is a sacrament
in this place, its depth and location
an outward and visible sign
of something to do with water
where water is a miracle, ice
when it rolls down near indigo
from mountains in the north,
three shades lighter today,
promise of rain after weeks of fire.

3 March 2006

Time runs in reverse where space
turns more slowly than abrupt mountains
like the Rockies. They slip up on
unsuspecting travelers who find themselves
between rock faces when they noticed nothing
but pine trees. Restaurants
in towns carved out of stone play lonesome
songs and paper the walls with Norman Rockwell.
Waitress in the smoking section explains grits
while Buddy Holly belts out Peggy Sue. When
she says most people don't like them
and two tables turn them down, I guess
this outpost of the Lost Cause caters
to people passing through, wonder
how Malcolm defined Missouri.

I measure my progress
across Missouri by counting
Stars and Bars and adult stores
until sign says Jesus on the outskirts
of St. Louis. Radio evangelists know
without a doubt and tell anyone
who will listen, but there's a
war of words going on – a toybox
for adults and a promise of heaven
to the pure of heart.

7 March 2006

No no no no no no
no ain't no sucker
born every day
woman piles cleaning
supplies into the trunk of her
car dreams out loud with a neighbor
about some exciting far away
cardinal who has been there
(but not this year when season
never turned) sings early Spring
a little boy in a stroller
says cows eat grass
and his father says
so do machines mother
steps behind says
nothing what little
snow fell yesterday
melts in bright sun.

9 March 2006

a heightened state

If you see
something, say
something. If you
see nothing, thank God
you have eyes
for Kansas. Say
it. Say
nothing, and that,
and that is poetry.

another word

A young woman in China
recorded sex with a stranger,
and, thinking it sounded experimental, she
put it on her blog. Ten thousand
lonely people staring at ten thousand
screens listened, experimentalist
voyeurs. Thirty thousand censors
let it pass, relieved that the stranger
had taken a break from politics, taken
ten thousand voyeurs who took a break from sex
with him off the street, for free.

12 March 2006

The last time I wrote about winter
wheat, I called my father to be sure
I could make it green in the season
of the poem.

I reviewed official guides to the birds of China
before daring to name the source of a morning
song. I let a lizard pass in an odd place
once and found a reader who knew them,
a welcome sign that poems can
gather more than words.

13 March 2006

Woody Guthrie Memorial Highway

Sign just beyond the intersection
of Faulkner and the railroad
track has me singing
so long and thinking dust bowl.
It's dry. A cache of fuel
the size of Rhode Island and wind
enough to drive it to the end
of vision. They've seen nothing
like it their whole lives and know
there's nowhere to run. Just
stand in dry wind, whole offering.

Almost human, brushes
grass aside, rushes
nowhere in particular,
consumes as much as
it can while every other
living thing wonders
at its hunger
its insatiable hunger.

14 March 2006

One is tempted
to put two and two
together, but this is
so much smaller
than a fallen angel, so
much more mundane. A little
of Lucifer's pride in every
certainty and certainty
enough to light the sky
with one final
solution after another.

15 March 2006

Adams and Dearborn, old guy
disheveled as I
waves a handbill
three days before
the third anniversary of this war
drones *impeach impeach*
impeach. I smile and pass,
then turn and put a hand on his
shoulder: "I think you should add
Cheney, Hastert, all the way down the line."
I know I know I know they
tell me to say
impeach George Bush.
I do what I'm told.
I shake my head and turn no
leaflet still *...until I get rid*
of all of these, he says.
Piecework.
I stuff one in my pocket,
so he'll get paid, walk on.
Wars run together.

17 March 2006

Dream dreams, old
man, between
hurricanes and
million acre grass fires
while young men swear
on cellphones to punctuate
visions of money moving with sex while
they pace like caged
coyotes dodging curious
eyes. Never dream that this is
anything more than a sign
of matters
out of hand, out
of time, out of mind.

I confess to a touch
of relief when a reviewer
pronounced my philosophy
indigestible. It is hard to stomach
the idea of one's books being gobbled
up by analytical crowds – and to be
among the most impenetrable is to be
almost French at that last moment
of philosophical distraction
before getting on with poetry.

18 March 2006

Walls

have ears

butterflies

are spies

sex drives

wasps awol.

conscript cats

fear water

less than falling

will not descend

to suicide

incendiary bats

sleep through

human spats

dolphins never

master human

cruelty, wonder

why divers

explode

at a touch.

21 March 2006

With regard to meaning,
gestures matter
most politically. Sons and daughters might
prophesy cities of light
on the wave of an
open hand, a motion
to renounce short of renunciation, no
whispered just audible
beneath accumulation

gesture, no
less

and cities
rise

or fall on the strength of it

The sound of a landscape
sunbleached to the edge
of white, not an accent
but an orchestration of silences
how much nothing
places speech in
conversation beyond this local

22 March 2006

the word is a gesture, the world its meaning

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty

every gesture means
the world endlessly
reiterated until
hands burn still
unclean, unclean
we say to every
passerby like lepers
set apart to not infect
the world to leave
the skin of the world
intact shedding ours
as though like serpents
we might slither off
and grow it new

every gesture, full
of tending, contains

nothing
here, only
elsewhere

empty, it
would...

24 March 2006

Two male robins vogue
on an iron fence
between Winter and Spring

Startled, one drops to the grass.

Forgetting wings, he matches my pace
between the walk
and the fence until I step off the curb to cross
the alley. He stands at attention, back to the other
red breast full, satisfied by my retreat, victorious.

27 March 2006

Ethereal, voices
on telephone. Even those
most familiar. My mother muses
about where she would go
while the fire spreads, contemplating
practical matters, formulating
a theory for being
a refugee. Every
moment somewhere,
someone's mother is.

*The better the quality of reed, the less it will wander from the pitch it is tuned to.
-from a note on wet and dry accordion sound*

Five decades
and even
reeds wander. Still,
taking account
of the years, bellows
are sound, no more
than a trace of Texas
lost to time
tone wet enough
for more conjunto
than my hands know.

28 March 2006

Not one
who has not been
lonely, not one
whose heart has not
hurt for it, not one
who can prove it stronger for the pain.

30 March 2006

We've been harboring dandelions on the balcony
to tickle the cat's nose, burst
over edges in flurries
between cottonwood blizzards
and populate neighbors'
manicured lawns with generations
of summer snowflakes that
grow up repeating
old stories of a
cold touch that set
their grandparents flying,
aspire to nothing more than a high balcony
to spring from, a breeze
to ride slow to elsewhere.

4 April 2006

flavor oscillation

Neutrinos massed
against the weight
of the world could
tilt an object
the size of Sri Lanka
to a spiritual plane
five hundred miles
east of where
it ought to be. The infinitude
of them is more than enough
to make you lie awake
at night, forget to change the clock.

5 April 2006

Passing a hundred cars
of carbon sidetracked for the time
being, I am reminded that it will, consumed
by fire, return to earth in air
and water and might in time be diamonds
that warm no one's hands.

At the coffee shop, I am told I cannot leave
a tip because these barristas work for the
city, not Starbucks, and it might be
construed as a bribe. What influence I could
amass in this place of power. And in the
market on my
block, clerk recognizes me as the one
who stands lost in front of the coffee counter.

Looking for your coffee, she says,
inviting a little lecture on the
superiority of African coffees,
the metaphor of wine and grapes.

She asks if it's the soil and we speak
of place – altitude, climate, water, seed,
soil, time, and heat. Nothing named but
the way it's roasted. It is a social drug, a eucharistic element.
It takes a village, a world to make a cup that warms
somebody's hands and makes
a place of communion.

7 April 2006

A single daffodil means no
less than the whole mass
of them defiant against
late Spring cold. Meaning alone
demands context, a system
of daffodils, a system
of early flowers, a system
of perennial bulbs, but it means
no less than all daffodils
standing for absent sun on this
cold gray day in April.

she says. And her
companion breathless:
every time I pass
these daffodils before her voice
fades, every one
sways her way in gap of still
between gusts, tilts
an ear to catch a drop
of wandering, holds ground, wondering
at insubstantial words,
how lonely clouds can be.

You know that song? he says, of Memphis
Blues. I laugh, say yes, of course. You know,
he says, who sang it? I think he must
have overlooked the gray in my beard, but I
can't recall which album. You want
to know, he asks? Then leaves me with
his guitar.

9 April 2006

Language that allows you to say
Pentagon and intelligence
in the same sentence with no
negative should keep you on your toes
even if it rules out Fox News
and USA Today.

Let me tell you a couple of things
about cowboys. Not that I ever was
one, but I've known a few. They don't shoot
off their mouths at the drop of a hat
or go into strange cities guns blazing; and,
for God's sake, they'd sooner sleep with
a rattlesnake than go into politics. For
linguists inclined to classification, cowboy
politician goes in the box with
military intelligence. And cowboy diplomacy
is mostly sulking off into an empty place
to mind your own business. That dead or alive
shit is all about some fool
blowin' up like a balloon when he pins a
tin badge on his jacket. For now, let
the poodle lie. None of the animals involved
in this mess give much thought to who
elected to drive cattle to Dodge City then

ship 'em off to slaughter on the South
Side. Just keep them dogies movin'
as long as the Market demands. Shoot,
if you ask questions, you'll never get anything
done.

They're right, you know.
The spin's the thing. No
dubyah in Texas, no way,
but people can't
spell the word these days without it.
Everybody knows Tom, but
say Ronnie and they're more than likely
to drift off to an age of California dreamin'...

Tom Harris – cowboy strike (1883)

10 April 2006

you say Tom, I say
Clark, say it again, I say
Harris. But if you want politics, say
Ramsey, Jose, Sissy, Ann, Sheila. Check the C Span
archives and you'll find three from two
red states on the floor the first time there were
hearings on this war, two from Texas.
Say Sheila, say Lloyd.
When I think Texas, I think Stevie Ray,
Janice, Flaco, Gatemouth, Alejandro,
Ornette, Sly, Cindy, Jo Carol, Jimmie Dale,
Butch, Joe Ely.
I think Maines before Natalie.
Phil Ochs is dead, but when Steve Earle says
the revolution starts now, I think he means it.

I've always fancied Texas red.

I think Shiner, I think Oslo, I think snow in April.

13 April 2006

Mezzo on cellphone sings
ordinary tragedy. Little things
you'd think incidental
music swell to fill
her life the way her voice
oozes into every corner of the train,
sticky sweet like a remnant
of the South, like the offspring
of a diaspora or more. There is a little
Mississippi in it, folded into
lesser voices and the rhythm
of the rail. It is all
about waiting. Suits
demand documents, documents demand
money she doesn't have, so nothing
happens, and it happens
again in her voice in the space between
this train and the other,
the listening end.
Somewhere, someone silent
makes a clearing for her voice, and she thinks
the train empty. No one here
to talk to, but there. She would
never share such intimacies with strangers,
but, invisible, we are not
strangers, we are not here, we hear everything.

Mockingbird could make you believe you'd stumbled on an aviary
with ten thousand voices.
He knows every song that has been
sung, so you know he listened
once. But not today. Today
he sings every song he knows, every song that has been sung, leads you to believe
he could go on forever,
leads you to a house of mirrors where what is here
shrinks into endless repetitions diminishing
elsewheres,
repetitions of location, I am
here, I am here. I am startled here in the
moment of a stranger's hello
before another bird settles into the same song.

Mockingbird could make you believe
you'd stumbled on an aviary
with ten thousand voices. He knows
every song sung in this place, so you know
he listened once. But not today. Today
he sings every song he knows, every song
that has been sung, leads you to believe
he could go on and on and on, leads you
to a house of mirrors. Here recedes
in endless repetitions of diminishing
elsewheres, aids to navigation. I am
here. I am here. I am startled here in the
moment of a stranger's greeting before
another bird settles into the same song.

14 April 2006

No small thing
to weep, not
for what has been
done but for what
we have done.

No place
to put your
foot down without
doing harm.

It can take years to grow
to wonder again, to know
each encounter as a new
thing. Every stranger
brings a thousand other times
to mind with names
forgotten, names
remembered, all
at once, nothing between
now and then,
no invisible lines
hold you silent
when you wonder
and you fall
into the arms of a world
strange on every face you know
you should know
because you know
you have seen it before.
And it holds you even if you
don't. It holds you. It holds you.

Good Friday

I recall the death of god in an airport
under construction in Arkansas
with an Irish Red brewed in Little Rock
alone in a fitting crowd that may
not know what it's doing, may
call for a father to forgive them
even if they do not shout
a prophet to the cross today.
Televisions ricochet
from Ahmadinejad to Bush to a man
apologizing for a shooting, the woman he shot
sobbing in a wheelchair. Everyone else knows
who has no right to exist, and
I can imagine nothing but an empty
tomb, no reason
to look for the living among the dead who rise
only to hear the scoop on
Samuel Jackson, Snakes on a Plane.

15 April 2006

Horses on North Michigan
put their heads down, pull
tourists, wear blinders so
they will not be distracted
by what is left or right. They
never lift their eyes to full moon
skimming over buildings
on the lake unaware
that she is marking time
in the interval before they wane.

20 April 2006

Woke up dreaming about the end of the world
this morning. You were on the phone asking
after the melting of the moon, whether
you could still swim in it. But sun is
rising faster than we can imagine and everywhere
is slow going through their double viscosity,
meringue clouds streaked with thick orange
yolk whatever had been waiting to be born of it
nothing now but an embryonic weight growing
hard, an abortion of prodigious proportions
speeding sulfurous to stop you, stop you breathing,
and, in the end, we think no.

25 April 2006

Casual observers think cats
in windows watch worlds
pass. But cats have no interest
in passing worlds. They are
othering, keeping an eye on the other
side. Inside, they look out. Outside,
they look in. Eye always on the other
side, the other side.

28 April 2006

Sky bowl inverted
to keep water above
above water below
below can hardly bear
the wait of a future
spilling over into
rising past already
lapping at coastal
cities built on
possibility reclaimed.

2 May 2006

Steady rain leaves
pink carnage under
every crabapple. Tulip
regularity disrupted
appears organic as
dandelions profiteering
in the interval between
rain and weeding when
some hired gun will
appear to reform
tulip ranks, sweep
the bodies out of sight,
and send dandelions
back into hiding.

3 May 2006

Nothing more than who
can be
heard where
when, nothing other
than the sound
of power, measured
by difference
between silence
imposed and the assertion of it.

Choirs of internal combustion repeat it in two cycles,
while choruses of local compressors chant incantations against global
warming, climate
controlled conversations
over coffee and
Kyoto petitions etched in steel belted prayer wheels while
other people's children trim strong
grass from suburban sidewalks
cleared for the sake
of appearance, cleared
to mark spaces where
invited guests can park until
curfew, cleared to keep
the rabble in line.

4 May 2006

Gautama, I think you have no idea
how hard it is to separate
things from the desire for them.
Full lotus placid smile etched
on brittle surface of delivery trucks
washing in waves of desire over bird song, dogs
barking, children gathering every shred of sun
before the school on the corner takes them in
for the day reminds me of the drunken
Cubs fan midday on the Ravenswood who
shouted *why are you so fuckin' serene?* in
my face, one of those Zen puzzles you can
answer with nothing but silence, not a
single flower, the hint of a smile.

Now and then an artist measures silence
in song, still
the soul's same song
but broken
new. The whole
tells the name
of the bird
but the story lies
in the way fragments fall
in silence broken.

6 May 2006

All at once
oceans to the far
edge of vision moons
all over it cascades
light as air. World waxes
full tonight.

10 May 2006

Unmistakably, the sound is
the sound of something
being moved, urgently,
to the accompaniment of gulls
and children crying
out in languages
beyond my meager powers
of comprehension. Spirit filled,
they speak in tongues over waves
of engines turning over
a turning world turning
weary to another Spring.

Swallows circle
with more
purpose
than cars below
but you need better
eyes to discern it.

17 May 2006

Sky dances to earth on maple seeds
when the time is right in spring, in
a sparrow posturing for another,
making himself big as he can for
another present he knows
but cannot imagine, she
dancing smaller to another branch,
not sure he can be trusted,
both trusting nothing other
than wings reliable as wings
maple seeds ride taking a chance on earth
in an asphalt world all anticipation
of roots to hold them down while they
make their way across years to sky, another dance.

19 May 2006

the eye is the last to know

Lean against the pole between
the tracks, and you can feel
the train receding until
it almost comes to rest before
the next one comes and
it quivers back to life in time
with air that brings word
to your ear a moment later.

25 May 2006

Conductor's tone is more eschatological than emphatic when he doubles the next stop to last and final, leaving you to wonder if there used to be space between to squeeze through. Passengers resigned to their fate hold outside off on cell phones, cover ears with machine.

2 June 2006

She knows our excess
would suffice for more
than her family alone,
and it pleases me every time
I see her secure
enough behind the mask
she never removes
to give her attention
wholly to our devices
for securing it even
after it has been discarded
but not quite fully consumed.

It is customary to regret
at a certain age, to lean hard
on things undone, wish it had been
otherwise, make a crossroad
of a space with no roads
where deals can be done, souls
exchanged on handshakes for something real,
anything but this, anywhere
but here, anytime but now.

Raccoon paces on the closed lid
of a rusted dumpster this morning,
walking meditation on hidden excess.
She knows me as a neighbor but is
glad I do not call her name.
She winters in the chimney,
grateful for a share of heat
through a wall that keeps cats
out, babies in. She is
the type of neighbor you acknowledge
on the street but never invite to dinner,
not so forward as the squirrels who
expect you to stay and chat, she
is happy with benign
neglect that closes flues
but does not cover chimneys and
never invites her but forgets sometimes to
shut the door on the leavings of last night's party
does not force her with humane traps to wilderness
outside the city's common good.

3 June 2006

In this matter of darkness there is no drawing near. In time, an instant is all that contains it. A god's *fiat lux*, and it is not here. But there is absence, never far. It is in the air before *fiat*, the absence of dark, filling the lungs of God with the matter of light, no more than a word, no less. You may think you've lived in light, but it is the sound of God's breathing whistling in the dark, frightened as you of ghosts, at what lies in still between this breath and the one that will not come. This matter of darkness draws every last breath in.

7 June 2006

Lover's quarrel beneath my window
is one more fragment of inconvenience, broken
on the hard edge of a voice that knows no
private space for conversation. *Res publica*, it is
an interruption, gathering with car alarms,
a bullhorn in a park somewhere, ten thousand
overlapping trivialities impervious
to hospitality; and it might be
the sound of a heart breaking under
one more heavy step than it can
bear after a Spring thaw.

13 June 2006

Celebration of
syncopation, two
years late stutter step
proclamation says
freedom, makes you want
to shout Texas is
undeniable
undeniable
slow like a stone in
the pocket of a
suicide who
takes the ocean in
her arms and waits.
Slow the way it dawns
on us
to own human
human.

Celebrate Texas two step
everywhere with something slow
like barbecue and remember
the old man laughing
when he said *Honey, you
can't give us somethin'
that was already ours.*

16 June 2006

Light as flight
on flower cushion
a shade on the red
side of blue, then
air, thin air, skips green
yellow orange gathers
blue for morning.

Ventured out today
among tourists in search
of silence. Every second
line of every guidebook points
to it, between Frank Lloyd Wright
and Rockefeller, quaint faux Gothic
quads and real bookstores. I catch
a glimpse of it through cellphones
when someone who is not here
speaks and someone who is pauses
to breathe. All the talk is about it
and there is an air of anxious
anticipation, rumors it may appear
outside the museum, that they
may open the doors of the library
long enough for it to walk out
into the waiting world, to be
the noise on a crowded street.

Swallows are still
in pastel blue
chalked white waiting. I swirl
among flowers on earth
breezes a thousand feet
above their silence.

17 June 2006

Papier mache puti
dangle in an artificial
breeze while the ant
on the other side of
the window appears
suspended in sunshine. Thirsty
carnations jump when they see
the garden hose, lap up
water, stretch for more,
stand tall until sun
wilts them again.

As if one stroke grew tired of its character and decided
to defect decided to join another poem, decided
to seek sanctuary in a foreign tongue,
translated, muttering unreliable
miracles of alphabets and time
that would not dream of looking
over its shoulder into a future more
certain than any past could hope to be, a life
no longer than an ink spot makes
its way decisively to the top of the page, leaving
range after range of mountains rising
through Li Nan's translucent tears,
calling to mind the power of a pen striking
through lines that could end it.

18 June 2006

The first time I saw the statue
of liberty, I was sitting in the Jersey
Diner with a friend
who called her to my attention,
standing there with
her back turned
like she was about to wade on
into Manhattan.

Cold stone face turned away from the old woman
in my friend's church who played the
numbers of the hymns religiously and
tithed every time one hit. Gambling with
the church year, she had a Lutheran sense
of grace that didn't so much
yearn to breathe free as to
get the rent paid before the landlord
put her out. She had no doubt God would
rise in ordinary time, so
the invitation of a statue
didn't much interest her. And I thought about
the faith required to call a place like
this a garden state. Faith like that
could survive the cold shoulder.

20 June 2006

after wind

Every pole snapped, lines
on dry grass so you wonder
if the weight of words
grew too much to bear. Trees
that knew how to bend still
stand, not hard ones
that thought they could stand
straight against it. The only way
to stand here is to lay low, give when wind blows.

22 June 2006

Pablo, pondering what Spring does
to cherry blossoms, I passed the afternoon
with a faded gladiolus painting
mostly on white with water.
It paints blossoms with time
that bleeds across illusions
of nothing, leaves faint traces.

Tears rise on the sharp edge
of every moment, and I
can't bring myself to look
over my shoulder into a future
full of them. Life is lived
backward, looking forward
into a fluid past
misunderstood one fragment at a time.

23 June 2006

No, Søren, I think
our best guess
is that we backed into this mess,
eyes forward on pasts
with which we fiddle
obsessively until
they suit us.

26 June 2006

Cool day in June, bee
drunk with purple
sinks in ageratum
cushion, waits for sun
to catch up with the season.

Bee knows indigo
addiction, slips
through its spell
to blue
bittersweet for honey.

Bee settles
through indigo haze
to bittersweet blue, dreams
honeycombs.

28 June 2006

One day, you smile
when friends surprise
you by their presence; the next, not.
Absence is always on the tip of your tongue, but
it takes your breath away. You
insist you will not
stand for it, but there it is. There
it is. There
it is. It is not
dying, but word of it,
another body spoken on a mountain
of corpses silence cannot
begin to climb.

One voice stills.
The whole planet
falls silent.

5 July 2006

in traffic

on the 4th, nobody
moves. Angry
repetition over fumes
like racing engines standing
still drones under Stevie
Wonder singing why he called. Someone who is
not from around here says
do you know where
the fireworks happen? while his
partner drifts off next to him.

9 July 2006

Thinking of jc
who put his arms
around all of it, I listen
for music in drone
of air conditioners
through every open
window. When
breeze rises, trees
slip through with a few
notes of bird song, and
I wonder if cagey mockingbirds
who know there is no noise
have learned to hum.

13 July 2006

The wonder is
how quickly
you can slip into silence
where there is water –
or a semblance
of it, the presence
of its memory
working its way home.

Two thirds
of the earth's surface,
not at home, never homeless,
covers noise mercifully
moving with the memory of it.

All but a third
of the surface
of sound is
an ocean of silence.
Rivers carve canyons
of desire in what remains,
rise in floods at the sight of it.

17 July 2006

Thinking the world
altogether too Hegelian,
she puts her body into Marxian
analysis. Four feet in air, back on
solid ground, she sees
a world on its head righted.

21 July 2006

Think nothing
of it, nothing
of the weight
of it. Nothing
of the wait
of it. Nothing
tips the scale
on the other
side of it. But
it settles on the surface
of a poem, settles through
the crust of it, through layer
after layer, patient
for the hunger at the bottom
of it, more patient than
the heavy things that
slip fast across
the surface of it
forgotten. And your eyes
rain into ravines deeper
than memory but still
there, still hunger
under surfaces you
thought hard as time.

23 July 2006

In the event of an erection that persists longer than 4 hours, the patient should seek immediate medical assistance.

-Pfizer Labs, revised Viagra label

One and a half million
for a cross to break a record
set on a lonely stretch
of interstate west of Groom
means five millennia
and the curse
of Babel have not cured us of our
erectile dysfunction. Knowing
something of divine humor, I will not
be surprised if the curse this time
is a common language, five thousand
years of understanding what our neighbors
mean by what they do.

26 July 2006

Whirlwinds on every corner think their voices
divine enough to shout the world down. What surprises
is the wisp of human dust that rises here and there silent, never
asks where you were when.

27 July 2006

Mistaking blue for water, they
slip in expecting it to carry them
and are surprised when its embrace
takes their breath away, leaves
astonished eyes open to the end, then
not now.

31 July 2006

Silence laps up sun
on days so hot light
can't contain them. Night
falls and they spill it
in cricket song on
moonbeams, heat's voice
'til dawn restores it
from sound to sight.

3 August 2006

Spirit filled, rain
spoke in tongues
'til morning. Congregation
got happy, shouted down
heat with hallelujahs
lapped words beyond
language until they could
hold no more, sated.

Listen to the music
of rain's language
spoken in the tongue
of a lover you will always desire
to learn. No thought of ending,
every happiness possible
touches you and you
want nothing but to
melt into this song.

Rain remembers every face
it's ever touched, Qohelet, when
it slips unseen to ocean, overflows
with rivers of them, a lost city
earth cannot contain.

Two stars look on
while you gather moon
beams, set them on green
beds to mirror sun
in Fall,
wax full
where black earth embraces blue sky.

8 August 2006

She wanted to shout
it, to shout her place
as mother in a line
that defined what it
contained by waiting.
The baby in her arms,
the little girl underfoot,
would not suffice.
And so she lectured
her daughter on
personal space,
filling a public place
with private authority,
repeated her name
like a mantra, contained.

9 August 2006

Growing up at the end
of the world, I read
as a child that you gambled
on whether your desert demonstration
would reach it. No doubt
about Mescalero, which vanished
into the narrative initiated there
in a mid-July flash before Hiroshima
give em hell Harry swearing
they were military targets. Nagasaki
the first casualty was the ability to see
what it did to the neighbors, to see
how one lie leads to another until
the whole atmosphere is ablaze
time makes more converts than reason
and in a world of true believers
ordinary people are willing
to pay to keep the explosions
contained somewhere else. They will not
stand for that kind of violence
here, only slow dying, poison
laced with enough opiates to kill
the pain. As long as it is
elsewhere. Harry knew
his audience would understand
if he emptied his guns. He gambled on

human incapacity to trace the chain
more than three steps. Keep the curtain
drawn, the machine out of sight, always
say *that* war and the chain will be unbroken. You
have not yet lost your bet.

14 August 2006

Gray morning fights back tears,
fears they will reveal
how fragile this hovel is on the edge
of distance. A tremor
of time and it collapses,
spills ocean over the place of
memory. What remains of absence
quivers for days,
aftershocks settle
through all that passes for solid
ground. It shifts like water.

No rain has fallen
in a flood since gray
settled from sun
before morning. More than the world
can contain, absence
rises, floods, lifts no
ark to the last mountain
of a new world
in the arc of a rainbow's promise.

16 August 2006

As long as humans gather in Prague
coffee shops to ponder the planetary status
of Pluto under stone faced Jan Hus
steps away from Tycho's bones,
I will dream it possible our
humanity may survive its wars.
We do not have to go to Prague
to dream of Sedna and Xena icy
at the limit of our imagination,
rush to Pluto under the siege of classifiers,
Charm a twin and welcome
an asteroid into a system we learned as children.

No doubt, we have power
to dream worlds. Today I will listen
to the neighbors' dog who has the good sense
to cry and the patience to teach
any stranger who will stop to listen

20 August 2006

Even in August, you can taste traces
of winter on a north breeze. Cool edge
makes clouds crisp under summer sun, and blue
always retains an idea of north
it recollects at any latitude
where a congress of clouds convenes.

22 August 2006

Three fat sparrows
refuse my offer
of crumbs from a sticky sweet
morning roll, graze
at the salad bar
of grasses in the flower
bed. Against my better
judgment, I encourage
a mottled pigeon
who has been stalking me
since I stepped out
of the bakery. I imagine
him a motley dove,
weathered in war but still
hopeful enough to
expect something of
every stranger who
takes a seat in this courtyard.

23 August 2006

she said

Something about power
drawn back to make space
for light like morning curtains
in a window on the east. Before light,
a word already knows it by name.
The sound of it spoken
coaxes night sky to morning.
Nothing before word but absence
of power. No absence and world is still born.

25 August 2006

An ocean of cicadas waves
against a lamentate
and I cannot tell
where the greater sadness
lies. The dry swell
of a piano
can hold its own
against any plague,
but there is no telling
the beauty in this
orchestra of signs. Not wrath, loss.
Ten thousand gods sing what we will never recall.

27 August 2006

Late, a cushion
of cicada song lies
soft under engine sounds;
a motorcycle whines off Lake Shore Drive; trucks
rumble west on Congress
ahead of the hum
of an oncoming train, voices splintered
off a crowd not quite finished for the night,
conversation on cellphones in the station
It is a responsive reading,
an ocean breaking on the shore.
Human conversation scurries
into crevices between insect voices.

29 August 2006

Nothing to count on
in the middle of things
but what is not
there, Kohelet. Nothing
is certain, and nothing
is more important for
dust bound creatures
desperate to know
the end better
than beginning.

Time and chance
govern all, and all
that happens remains
a mystery. All
wisdom can desire
is nothing

What is not there
cannot be counted
and there is no sense
in traveling to Zanzibar
to count cats, although
they no doubt can. Nothing
left but to count what
is there which could be
cats in Zanzibar
if by chance the cats
are there and you
counting at the same time.

Phone rings
I say hello
guy answers real slow
Says I wanna ask you
about somethin' Jesus said, so
I wait and I wait
and he don't say nothin' so
I say I don't have time..
and he says that's what I'm
talkin' about

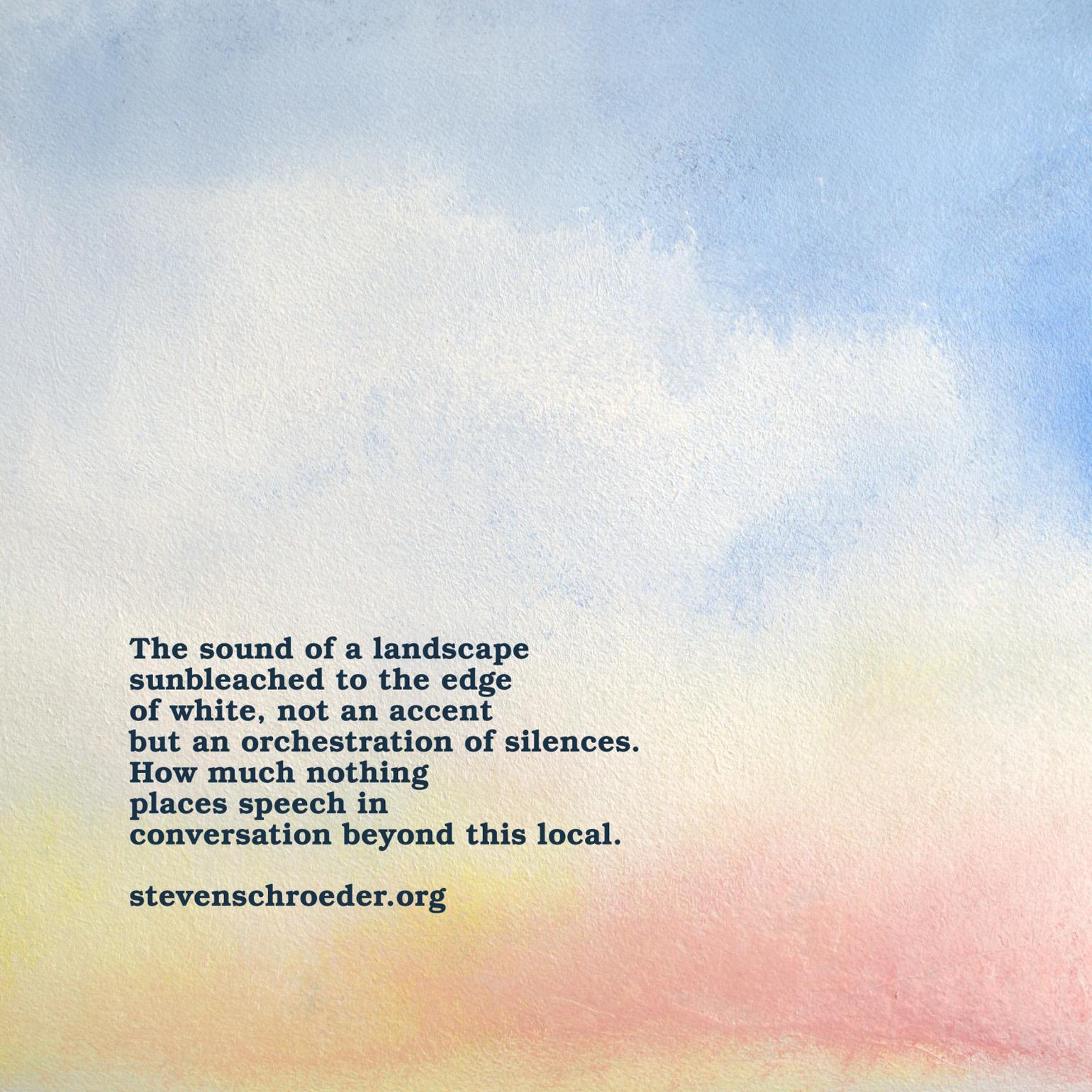
probably right, probably God, who
always talks in riddles

I said thanks, hung up the phone,
got on with life.

30 August 2006

Bartok ripples from second story
window on 57th Street. Driver fancies
himself a member of the ensemble,
concerto for piano and
car alarm. Piano fades under
SUVs impatient to make the turn to Stony, drivers
who want nothing more than to fly from the city
to tomorrow. I fall in with the rhythm of
an inbound train two steps at a time
so I will arrive when it does, settle
in for a ten minute lullaby,
wander off into another song.

Steven Schroeder is a poet and visual artist who lives and works in Chicago. More at stevenschroeder.org.



**The sound of a landscape
sunbleached to the edge
of white, not an accent
but an orchestration of silences.
How much nothing
places speech in
conversation beyond this local.**

stevenschroeder.org