

The background is a painting of a landscape. The upper portion is a vast, pale blue sky with subtle variations in tone, suggesting a clear or slightly hazy day. Below the sky, a thin, dark horizon line separates the sky from the ground. The ground is a field of flowers, rendered in warm, vibrant colors of orange, red, and yellow. The brushstrokes are visible, giving the painting a textured, expressive quality. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

as murder is to crow

steven schroeder

as murder is to crow

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Steven Schroeder
2018

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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder

cover | cities of the plain I: Lot's wife | oil on canvas | 36x24 inches [2014]

title page | sky people: shattered | ink on paper | 20x14 inches [2018]

part I title page | the cold light of day | acrylic on paper | 14x20 inches [2020]

part II title page | the left hand doesn't know | watercolor on paper | 11x14 inches [2019]

peace is a necessity
war is the luxury
we cannot afford

I
the cold edge of light falling

Steven Schroeder
2020

a few words for Ismene

*This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do.
Jack Kerouac, On the Road*

A Soldier:

I want to tell you about myself.
I didn't do it. I didn't see who did it.
It isn't right for me to get in trouble.

Chorus:

*There is no place to stand here that is not
the scene of some unspeakable violence.*

Ismene:

Martyrdom can be a mark of breeding,
and in this light there is no denying
how brittle the family has become.

The last thing we need now is
a mind made hot by chilly things,
another life lost in another endless war

to make a point when there are
more points in this line
than I can count.

And to what end?

Father mother brother brother
gone by one another's

hand, a city consumed. You
go senseless sister, loved

by those who love you, and I
alone to mourn one more
cruel act of one more

who thinks he holds the city in his hand
or does not think, but does.

Chorus:

*There is no place to stand here that is not
the scene of some unspeakable violence.*

Antigone:

The city reeks. Death rises.
Every living thing lies

in the grave while dogs grow fat
on the bodies of our distraction.

Ismene:

I alone. If things
have reached this state

what can I do but hope
the ones who matter

will forgive? I am
forced.

Chorus:

*There is no place to stand here that is not
the scene of some unspeakable violence.*

Antigone:

Who thinks she holds the city in her hand
or does not think but does.

Ismene:

No matter. No
matter. Power

speaks. Cities
fall. Precipitous

action makes no sense.

Antigone:

Be what you want
to be. But I will

bury what lies
rotting on this city's streets.

You may wish it were
not. But what lies

there is like us
our mother's child.

Power speaks. Cities
fall. Be what you want

to be. But I will
bury what lies

rotting on this city's streets.

Ismene:

Power speaks, and I
will be

what we are. I am

Antigone:

forced. I am not
opposed to war. I am

not opposed to war. I am
not opposed to war. I am

opposed to dumb

Ismene:

war. Power
speaks, and I

will be

what we are.

And I can do
no other.

If my sister is condemned,
I did the deed. I am
not ashamed

to sail beside her into suffering.
The word is plain.

When people fall in deep distress
their native sense departs
and will not stay.

We share the blame.
For what we have done,
for what we have left undone.

Clever beyond dreams,
let us make the city strange.

Chorus:

*There is no place to stand here that is not
the scene of some unspeakable violence.*

*Our happiness depends on wisdom
every step along the way.*

*Great words by great men
bring greater blows
upon them,*

*and somewhere
there must have been
a time when we could have said*

*no. So wisdom comes
So wisdom comes.*

*Put the city up; tear the city down;
put it up again; let us find a city.*

*I remember all you forget.
I will die as many times
as you make me...*

four variations on a theme from an old song

1

rage, goddess, sing the rage of someone's son
who thinks himself a lord of men, a lord
of far-flung kingdoms who rages reasons
to make a feast of them, for seers who
dance the circle dance of carrion birds who
know there is no reason but hunger, who
feed on what is there, say nothing. say
nothing to make a song. sing, goddess, rage.

2

rage, goddess, sing rage to contain every war
that has ruined some city in the name of one god
or the other. make an epic of it. make a book of it. make
a library of it, break line after line to make
light come to us. raise the walls of a city
where there was none. rage for order.
fall for rage. rage to found a city

that will never fall.
the last word broken,
no funeral will be the last
word. no one can tell a war story
like someone who wasn't there.

3

rage
first. last,
burial.
who is
not, not
who is,
there
makes war
what it is –

arrows a distant deadly archer lets fly
for the tears of every one with sparkling eyes,
every one with eyes, a feast for dogs, for birds, for
seers who scan their flight, who will not speak for fear
some lord will rage another burial where
birds will fly to feast. no reason,
goddess, no reason,
a plague.

nothing to say,
say nothing.
sing rage,
goddess,
sing.

rage.

wait, goddess, wait for anger to burn
to a fine ash of boredom and little murders
committed by rote, for every living thing
to join a machine. then 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 ritual of blood.

nothing to sing about

after Cao Song

War everywhere.

No one knows

peace. Power

is nothing

to sing about.

Every hero's fame lies

on a bed of bleached bones.

some hunger

πάντα κατ' ἔριν γίνεσθαι
Ἡράκλειτος

Every dancing bird dancing the slow circle of the circling globe knows
the force that turns and turns and turns to dying – rage
the circle dance of carrion birds who know

what sets gods trembling: nothing lives forever.

They smell corpses where life struts and poses. Dogs danced
the dance waiting for blood before they slipped into the circle of it
seduced by fire and a dry place to rest easy. They still
smell blood where war surges (an ocean
by other means, not
a city).

Circle dancers know what gods are

afraid of. They burn for it
more than for the journey home.

They laugh out loud at prayers
rising for an end, knowing

it is all war, all end, all ending, endless circle
waiting to feed some hunger they know but cannot contain.

a circle dance

I

They say we
make our
selves of stories

then fashion
stories of our selves
to wear when we go out. I

see why
they
settle

on that circle.
The sense of an ending
(a beginning) makes the middle

seem
a shelter
from the storm.

2

That brings to mind
the old barns I

see
every time
I make my way

out of the gray city
where I have lived
so long, fading fast.

One old story some say
they believe has god being
born in one of those old barns, one

living being among others,
in a cloud of witnesses,
nobodies nobody knows,
huddled on the edge of town.

I think of the kind of crowd I'd find
in a barn like that in the country

where I grew up
in the middle of nowhere

when something unexpected
blew in from the north.

I guess this story makes god's presence
like finding an alligator troubling the water

in your living room after the hurricane's gone
and the flood's subsided just enough so you can
go home and survey the damage.

Where I grew up,
clouds are empty promises,
and the tree of life is the tree that lies
low and has the deepest roots. So it would have been
a tornado and a rattlesnake, no
water to speak of.

But you get the point. Powerful
but lost, and even if it is your living room
you are wise to keep your distance.

3

I like to think telling a story
like this might click with folks back home
who name a book, cite chapter and verse (say
Proverbs 29:18), and figure you'll know
exactly what they're talking about.

Where there is no vision, you know,
the people perish – and that bit about vision
is music to an artist's ears. It reminds me to circle

back to the peripatetic story of stories they say we
are. I find some truth in it when I
think of Cui Hao
climbing one more
to see a thousand li.

That's what they mean when they say plains eyes,
seeing what is far so clear that what is near
fades and you find yourself here
now at a loss for words.

A li was the distance from one side of a village
to the other, and that is about as precise
as a pace or a foot – about as precise

as you need it to be if you
are setting out to walk the walk
in a city of a thousand villages, not

talk the talk of a tower that rises above it all.

4

This anthology of anthologies is
an architecture of fear that has us climbing
story upon story to overlook village after village.

What I have in mind
is more like a dance than
a story, more like a score if it is true

that you can sing if you can talk
and you can dance if you can walk.

More like a dance you'd dance
with a goddess before they
turn her into a saint
and send her
off to a convent,
like a song of songs,
like a dance with no end.

Everything turns on turning.
You remember Lot's wife.
All she did was turn
to take a backward glance

to catch a glimpse
of her home,
the only world
she'd ever known, burning.

It could have been a grassfire,
almost human in its desire,

sweeping down across
the Flint Hills over
El Dorado.

But you wouldn't hole up
in an old barn to survive that.

You'd follow animals wiser
in such matters, hoping
for a flood of absence
where there is nothing to burn,

knowing now what Heraclitus saw
in fire – and Frost, weighing it
against ice in the end,

thinking both are like
the cold edge of light falling,

knowing if you live now
you can't die forever.

II
a composition for the left hand



like wars,

Chicago | 23 February 2022

pandemics end
when people begin
to step over the bodies

and get back to business, as usual,

when people stop
counting, and the disease
comes to be just one more note

in the drone of commerce.

what is essential is not
the worker but the drone.

as for the disease,
make nothing of it.

everybody knows nothing
matters more than

we can possibly imagine.

like wars (part two)

Chicago | 26 February 2022

nobody but nobody wins.
one surrenders, the other struts.
but the same war settles on both, settles

on all like drizzle in fog,
the kind that makes one wonder
whether it comes down from the sky

or up from the ground. no
matter. you can hardly call it rain,
so you don't think to open an umbrella

until it dawns on you
that you are soaked to the bone
and the world is over its head in it.

it lays its hands on everyone,
like white noise that hisses
until it passes as silence,

as presence under the drone
of commerce. when
people stumble

over bodies again,
they will imagine another

war, another disease. but it is
the same one that has been
in us all along. when

people stop counting, one will surrender,
the other will strut, and it will go on.
it will go on. it will go on
and on. nobody

but nobody wins. nobody always wins.
and nothing matters more than

we can possibly imagine
everybody knows.

a discourse on war

Chicago | 6 March 2022

1

Every war is a war of choice,

but everyone
who chooses a war
says it is a war

of necessity.

2

Of necessity,
every war is a war

of words.

3

If a war is a war of necessity,
there is nothing to do but suffer it.

But every war is a war

of choice.

4

Every body count
counts some bodies,

not others.

5

Count them,
count all of them.

6

All turns
on what we mean
by “we,” what we think

must be possible.

7

If peace is possible
war must not be necessary.

It is politics, by all means,
and politics is a war of choice.

8

Never let the world forget
peace is an art of the possible,
a composition for the left hand.

It must be possible.

a war of necessity

Chicago | 12 March 2022

A war of necessity is a war
the rich and powerful have chosen
to impose on the poor and oppressed,
whose children will be consumed by it.

The old will unfurl it
over the broken bodies of the young
without a second thought.

There will be praise songs.
Nobody will write them for the few
who say no at the beginning,
when we still can.

A war is a war is a war.
Sing nobody's songs.

one more turn of the wheel

Chicago | 17 March 2022

“Trotsky!” scrawled in red on a gray wall along the path I walk in Chicago on the first day of March when the season has just begun to consider turning in spite of everything has me thinking of Richard Rorty’s wild orchids in New Jersey.

A mile further on, a young woman and a tiny child still learning to walk stop at every spring bulb breaking through the soil to make a joyful noise and do a little dance.

This reminds me it is Mardi Gras, and I laugh out loud when I turn the corner and see a circle of snowdrops blooming, response to the child’s call, a psalm emphatic as the fading memory of any old revolutionary considering one more turn in spite of everything.

And, still, learning to walk, in spite of everything, I dance a little.

only a god

Chicago | 14 June 2022

Two white pigeons pretending to be doves
huddle on a black iron fence, just above
rubbish that has washed up on a sewer
grate where it waits to demonstrate again
how insignificant the god who calls
on the next passing storm to flood noisy
neighbors into silence is. After the storm,
water stands in low places, still, waiting
for the next great wind to stir.

Only a god, some old philosopher said.
But he meant nothing, it seems,
more than a matter of time,
waiting for another
storm to pass.

general order 3

Chicago | 19 June 2022

Take freedom as an instance of the good,
toward which all things aim, draw a line through where
you are today and where you were the day before, and nothing
will fall on it that matters most on the way to freedom,
not an army marching but a river flowing to the sea.

When it floods, people will say
it has been diverted. But do not be
deceived. Its course is to the sea, every
flood a memory of water. Keep your head
above it, and nothing looks like you remember.

This is what matters most on the way to freedom
(an army in retreat, broken; a flood of refugees
that moves the way a rabbit moves when it knows
a predator is closing, fast, scattering broken lines between
this and that and here and there and now and then hoping
the predator will drown in it or grow bored; survivors
of a shipwreck, clinging to what remains, fragments
floating on a memory of water). Nothing
falls on it, and, between the lines,
broken, a proclamation
in accordance with
what you know to be true,
undeniable as Texas,

all slaves are free... an absolute equality.

Hold fast to this, say it goes without saying. Say it again. Say it until Texas says it too, holds it, undeniable, as Texas.

body counts (a parable)

Chicago | 1 October 2022

On this planet, pandemics end when a critical mass (let us call it “a silent majority”) stops counting bodies and begins stepping over them. The leader of the free world says the pandemic is over because he doesn’t see anyone wearing a mask, a friendly reminder from an elderly uncle (about whom we might have said at one time or another who died and made you president?) that what we say depends on what we see and what we see depends on what we say. And that reminds me of a story. One person after another on a well-traveled road steps over a stranger robbed and stripped and left for dead because they have important business to attend to. And no one in their right mind would dare disrupt the supply chain by interfering with that. But another stranger who everybody knows (if you know what I mean) belongs to the class of the only good one is a dead one stops and sees to the living body of the one left for dead. The body counts. Business goes on, as usual. But not the world.

You see what I’m saying?

on the 35th of May

Chicago | 4 June 2023

for sou vai keng

I

Sister moon slipped through my kitchen window
late last night when I was stirring something
sweet – pecans sauteed in a splash of honey,
oats and coconut toasted golden brown
in butter, a handful of raisins dried
in the sun. She caught my eye when I turned
and said she'd spoken with you earlier
and had come to let me know that you are
fine. I saw you plain as day and smiled,
thinking that means the world, for now, is too.
Sister moon went on her way, and I chopped
an apple, mixed it with a handful of blueberries,
then stirred them together in the butter
still on the bottom of the skillet where
the oats and nuts had been. I gave them time
to soften a little and blend, then scattered
the pecan and oat melange on top
and sat down to enjoy them by moonlight.

I think of silence, how it still speaks
louder than the voices throttled by one
state or another here and there, now
and then, again and again, and in my
mind's eye I see a painting you sent, one
in a series you'd named "plays and days"
in defiance, you said, of Hesiod.

I love the work and am reminded
that Kahlil Gibran said work is love
made visible. I have not lived with Hesiod
as I have lived with Homer, obsessed
with rendering the first word as it should be.
But I have often thought of him as
a co-conspirator in writing
the epic opposite wars that never end
and treacherous journeys home from them,
an epic of farming, tending the land, not
making a wasteland of it. This is the way
the world ends, and in the light of sister moon
I think in spite of everything it will be well.

Yesterday was the anniversary
of my father's death, and in the light
of sister moon I smile remembering
that he never stopped being a farmer.
And I know every day marks the death
of countless fathers and mothers and
daughters and sons and sisters and brothers.
But the old cannot kill the young forever.
We are large, we contain multitudes,
and, simple as grass, we go on
making love visible, the first word
and the last, as it should be. All
will be well, all will be well, all
manner of things will be well.

as murder is to crow

Chicago | 19 June 2023

I

a murder settles in tall trees in spring
closer than any time in my memory.

they sound like a city (which is, you know,
to human as murder is to crow). they

know what they have seen demands to be
told without delay. robins interrupt

morning songs to make way for the news.
cardinals hold their tongues for the time being.

sparrows on tiptoe shake, ready to break
into one note songs, waiting.

2

I recall a young child who used to burst
from the building across the street
every morning crowing.

I listened then until they were out of earshot,
wonder if this murder is here now
to fill the void created by their absence.

humans building something that cannot wait
cut heads with crows, perched
at the peaks of buildings
that line the street.

crows fly in time.
robins return to call and response.
cardinals improvise betwixt and between.
sparrows sing for their supper.
murder settles in tall trees.

tohu wa-bohu

Chicago | 13 July 2023

Every tall flower is at prayer after yesterday's storm,
and I want to believe this act of devotion will be
enough to bend the long arc of the universe to justice.

But I can imagine Peter saying *me me*
call on me, then feeling at sea
after a few brash steps

when the wind stirs
on the face of the water,
heart in his throat, wondering

if this cosmopolis was platted
with chaos for a measuring stick,
a jumble of stones, a planet burning,

and no one at hand
to say let light be.

the father of the hydrogen bomb addresses the future in Bowling Green, Ohio

Chicago | 6 August 2023

on stage, an old man
huddled over a microphone
sinks under the weight of nine
decades into a straight-backed chair
at a conference in Bowling Green, Ohio.

the past,
which exists,

he says, can be
established

with certainty,
but not

the future,
which does not.

the present,
which goes

without saying,
settles like ash

drifting from a slow fire,

an event from which a cone of light
emanates, spacelike, a world, burning.

arrhythmia: four echoes

Chicago | 12 August 2023

I

a murmuration inches down the screen,
not one starling in sight.
what catches my eye is
a rhythm of absences,
dark intervals rippling
behind the edge of the arc.

2

a swoop of swallows
circling some days still
on warm air rising, some days
beating against stiff wind,
one swallow diving now
and then against the grain.

3

a quarrel of sparrows
in a bush, keeping time,
rhythm breaking where all
by some chance operation fall
silent, a ragged edge
in a wall of sound.

4

a dissimulation of piafs settling
on a tree-lined street,
a heart whispering

just let me catch my breath,
sudden silences signaling when
to put your foot down.

morning song

Chicago | 14 September 2023

I

murder sings a raucous song as fog burns
off at the end of dreams and i appear
to rise as the sun and the city do
when earth turns its back on sister moon.

i think i have known these crows
a long time, and the city seems
familiar. but they are new
as the morning and me,

each alive with its own seemings

2

hummingbird stops to give each daisy
a peck on the cheek but lingers
with every blossom of balsam, still
in perpetual motion, treading air

the way a survivor treads water.

In “a few words for Ismene,” the words “I am not opposed to war... I am opposed to dumb war” spoken by Antigone (except for the last word, “war,” which is spoken by Ismene) are from a speech delivered by Barack Obama at an anti-war rally in Chicago in 2008. Later in the same play, the chorus speaks a few words (“somewhere there must have been a time when we could have said no”) from Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and repeats a couplet (“Put the city up; tear the city down; put it up again; let us find a city.”) from Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems*.

“nothing to sing about” is a loose translation of a poem by the Tang poet Cao Song remixed as an English poem.

T.S. Eliot and Julian of Norwich haunt “on the 35th of May,” as does Walt Whitman. The final stanza quotes Julian and paraphrases both Whitman and Kahlil Gibran (as well as a popular slogan associated with remembrances of Tiananmen Square).

“tohu wa-bohu” draws on the two places where the phrase תהו ובהו appears in Hebrew Scripture, the creation account in Genesis (also quoted in Jeremiah) and Isaiah 34.

I started writing “the father of the hydrogen bomb addresses the future in Bowling Green, Ohio” after meeting Edward Teller at a conference at Bowling Green State University in the 1990s but returned to it (and “finished” it) in 2023 on the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. My reference to “ash // drifting from a slow fire” is intended to call to mind the experience of downwinders in New Mexico who were in the path of fallout from the first nuclear explosion, the Trinity test (16 July 1945) at White Sands, near Mescalero.

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

**War everywhere.
No one knows**

**peace. Power
is nothing**

to sing about.

**Every hero's fame lies
on a bed of bleached bones.**

