



**how this city lies**

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

steven Schroeder  
2008



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*how this city lies* is the seventh 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 seventh of ten notebooks and were drafted between June 2008 and March 2009. 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.

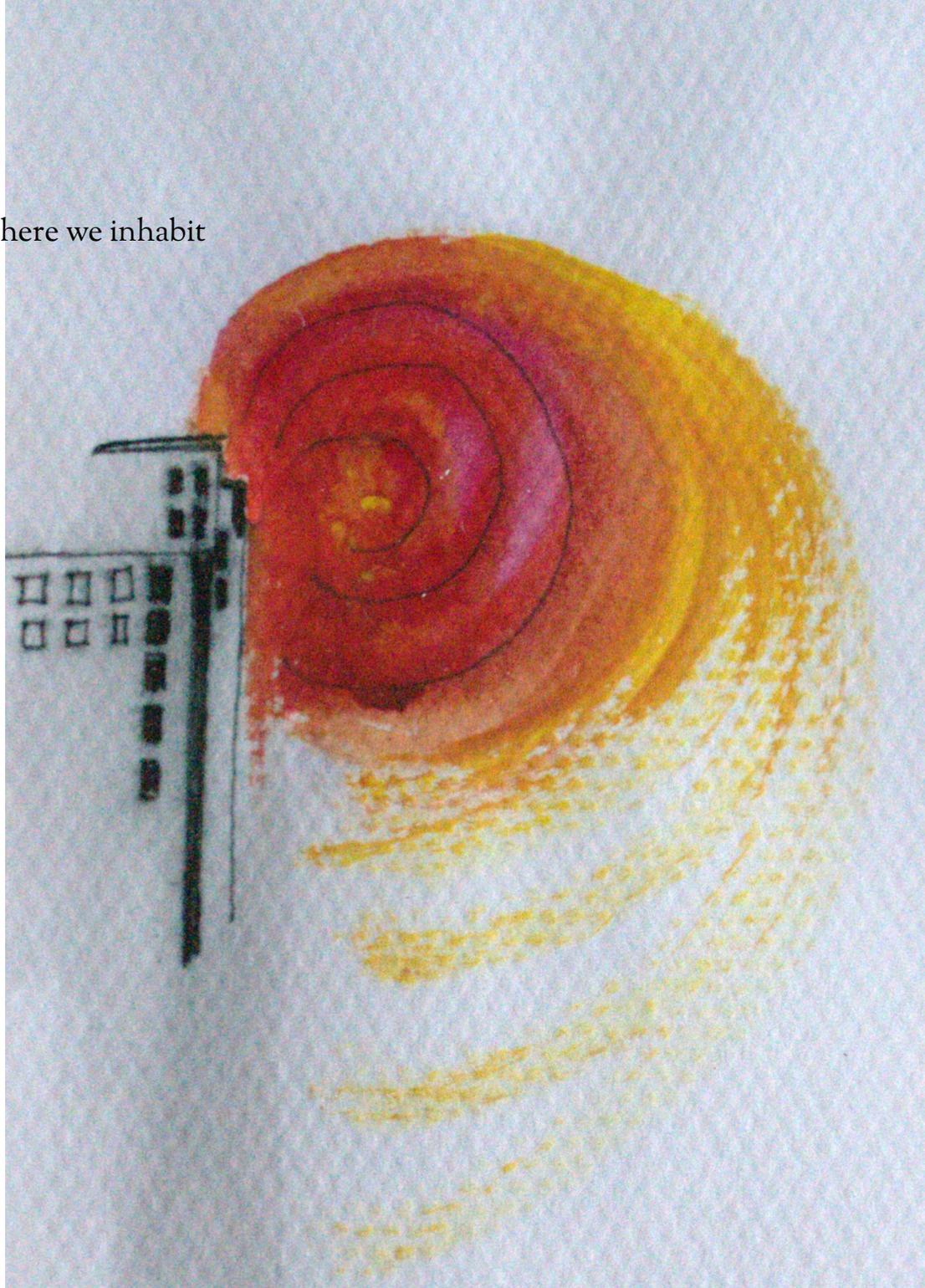
I've used four paintings in this volume: "east, rising 4" (watercolor on paper, 2008) for the front cover, "east, rising 1" (watercolor on paper, 2008) at the beginning of section one, "the only moving thing" (watercolor on paper, 2009) at the beginning of section two, and a detail of "snowdrift" (watercolor and acrylic on paper, 2014) for the back cover.

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

Chicago  
June 2022



I  
whatever elsewhere we inhabit





2 June 2008

Measure by counting steps and two people walking from one place to an other together do not walk the same distance. A woman in heels running on broken paving stones to catch a bus this morning had so much farther to go than I and no more time. Her bus was pulling away fast as she could run like running in a dream, fast as you can without ever leaving the place where you began. Even when you retrace your steps the count changes. The distance is never the same. Wandering, I lose count. I have walked for hours but cannot account for a single step. I have nothing to show for it and my wandering has gotten me nowhere like the woman, still, waiting for the bus.

3 June 2008

Trees planted when those stones were set in place have grown old beneath them. Stones have scars to show for it, broken lines that trace the progress of roots across a mortar grid too regular for life to bear. Two days ago, before the flood, crews took up dozens of them where roots had wandered to the surface, made soil explicit with roots in it and piles of them to step over. Today, roots have been hacked away. Stones will be reset, broken when life goes on; and its melody will always lie in what will never stand for the concrete cold of a simple grid.

4 June 2008

rises  
like tears  
on the instant  
wind breaks  
against morning

slips through  
the moment like  
a fault line  
opening, unexpected

falls  
gently, like  
a child catching  
her breath

dances down  
a ladder  
of convection  
rising

circles  
like living  
always half a step  
out of step  
with time

5 June 2008

At 2am, the taxi driver in Macao has enough words in English to talk politics and I have enough Chinese to listen. He asks where I am from, and I try a little Mandarin – Meiguo. He does not understand – and, really, neither do I. Why “mei,” I wonder. Like China, it always thinks itself thinking from zhong. No middle kingdom, but the center of the universe. But he knows Chicago, and while he repeats it, I think of the driver on another planet in Shenzhen who hours before patiently corrected my tones when I said Shenzhen wan kouan. But this driver’s tone is just right for now, and we both smile. He says *America is about to change Presidents. Obama.* I say maybe. He says *China, no change. Macao, no change. Hong Kong, no change. Germany, France, England all beautiful. China, no democracy. Macao, no future.* We are surrounded by casinos, and I wonder what he thinks of that, But he is demonstrating now. *Hong Kong, England, beautiful* – and he points to the meter: *Hong Kong.* To what is on top: *China. No future.* He does not have the English for doubt, and I have nothing but doubt in Chinese.

This, I suppose is what we have in mind when we say soul – not the rigid pattern of red bricks and the gray mortar between them, but leaves breaking it. Not random, they fall along the lines of branches interrupted by wind and rain and passersby. Or ants that build cities where there are gaps between them. Litter that falls among leaves along the lines of passersby interrupted by wind and rain and low branches they turn to avoid and even bricks straight in one dimension rise in another where earth shudders. If you could see the pattern before the earthquake, you would notice changes even here, many miles away.

6 June 2008

Not the solid  
of a local touch  
globally imposed

you desire.  
No ground  
to take in some

pitched battle  
against forces  
of the evil

of your choosing. Rain  
you might catch now and then  
on your tongue

if you put the umbrella away.  
Surprising how sweet  
the world tastes falling

on a day so gray  
the bridge fades  
before it reaches the other side

and you here  
nothing to walk on  
but water

7 June 2008

From the bottom of my feet to the end of my vision, a grid of stones twenty five centimeters on each side so six make a walk a meter and a half wide each stamped with the regularity of a machine to look like four squares of two bricks set at right angles. But no hand set them, and they can do no more than repeat the mark the machine left – a trace of what is not there – until vision is exhausted where the road turns or it reaches a horizon. No soul in this stretching end to end to end to the end of endless iterations of the same thing, but in what breaks it – scattered leaves that do not fall at random, but trace lines of branches that overhang the walk; litter that falls along the lines of walkers. And the eyes that bend parallel lines to a vanishing point on a horizon they cannot see. Absences intersecting in the presence of an I; what life touches is alive, and only a circle of it can account for its beginning.

8 June 2008

Four young rats sample dim sum  
left in the trashcan beside the path  
the day before. They see no reason  
to scatter when I pass. Another,  
older, wiser, peers from the cover  
of low vines a few steps further on.  
When I pass again, two cats hunting turn  
at *miao* but keep their distance.  
Rain leaves something for everyone,  
but next morning I see just one rat  
fat as a pampered cat dining  
*al fresco* between showers.

Three days of rain without a break has flooded the streets with odors almost familiar – like what we know but tilted on an axis of putrefaction. Rats have come up for air, wallowed in it, while walkers who can barely hold their heads above the flood ford it like refugees crossing a river to another life.

9 June 2008

On clear days Hong Kong is a white line  
of mushrooms rising straight stemmed  
brown rimmed on a scrap of blue  
that skirts the long bridge.

Yesterday, it was a bank of dark clouds  
glowing red with the energy of three days  
and nights of rain towering over  
cities on both sides to remind  
every living thing in them how small we  
are, how little we know of a water  
planet we inhabit like insects  
on a dry leaf floating  
on the surface of a pond.

Surfacing after days of rain, fat on rich earth, exposed now to every passing bird up to carrying them  
away, they cannot go back down for fear they will be thought blind. Left alone, they will lie in the sun  
and die self-righteously enlightened while their comrades live on in the darkness of caves below.

Three fat worms drying on the sidewalk after days of rain think themselves enlightened.

10 June 2008

### **Rainy Season**

Clouds cluster on the Hong Kong side  
of the delta like habits hard to break,  
and it doesn't take much imagination  
to know this sunshine won't last.  
Thunder rolls over  
with a breeze, and clouds follow.  
In this place rain is a matter of time.  
Dry is a limit in some obscure calculus,  
a possible state in no actual world.

with Eamon Grennan's "Men Roofing" in mind...

Leave it to an Irish poet to make me cry  
with a poem about builders. *Between*  
*our common ground and nobody's sky,*  
a little girl stumbles when her mother pauses in  
sunshine on the way to shade, a woman  
waters every plant in the square  
by hand, and I recall all the generations  
that have taken pains to keep the weather  
out – like my grandfather spinning cities  
on the end of the trowel – and the others  
who have taken it in – granny coaxing  
worlds to life depending on it and farmers'  
intercessions counter the roofers with rain.

11 June 2008

Rain is sound  
soaking morning  
sleep in silence  
before I rise  
and step into it  
with an umbrella  
that is a sign  
of defiance  
more than a means  
to stay dry. Dry  
is a moment  
in a continuum  
of living water  
that will stop  
at nothing  
short of saturation.

No sanctuary for  
the chorus of birds  
that sing matins...

12 June 2008

Air  
melts in June, turns  
liquid here.

Viscous where  
cicada song turns  
air

from pure  
solid, life learns  
liquid here,

learns to swim before  
it learns to walk learns  
air

is no more  
than water, turns  
liquid here

like an insect in amber when  
fire turns  
air liquid here.

**weather: an exercise in Mohist logic**

No this is  
rain that is not  
earth air fire all water.

13 June 2008

### **Talkin' About a Revolution**

Rain must be exhausted  
after so many days  
of falling.

Better to fall  
with it, mind the gaps  
between drops that shuffle  
like tired feet after running  
all day and all night  
than to take time  
for an umbrella.

Time will not stop the rain  
and in the end you will find yourself  
drenched in it, gaps or no.

Step into a luxury hotel  
that can stop rain and time  
falling for now.

Tracy Chapman sings revolution  
sounds like a whisper  
sounds like nothing  
happened here but  
days of falling time  
and a flood with no rainbow.

14 June 2008

Steady rain for a week, but sweepers  
are on the street when they think sun should be  
rising. They hurry red earth mixed with water  
rising to edges near saturation. Tree  
has fallen where mud can no longer  
bear it, rising roots upturned beside the  
path. Grim walkers weave through a tangle  
of branches. Umbrellas wilt under  
weight of rain and rain repeated until  
they are neither here nor there.  
Masses let them fall,  
embrace the flood,  
resign themselves to water.

Water is the only rising, the only  
revolution red earth turning  
in a drain overtaxed by days of rain.

15 June 2008

How do we survive,  
you ask,  
under fascism, and I  
find myself talking  
of those who draw the circle  
tight and get on with little  
things – but thinking  
about those who have resisted  
by getting on with little things,  
drawn by the circle  
of the whole.  
We don't. But living every day  
demands that we act as though we will.

16 June 2008

Young cat, orange and white, follows the wall  
this morning, but fast. He is not secure  
in his invisibility, and it is true  
that the flurry of orange fur  
against white wall weathered gray  
could turn heads. But no one else has taken  
notice, and there is less danger in being seen  
than a young cat might admit  
first thing in the morning.

At the other end of the walk, gray tabby has no doubt  
she is out of sight slow against a low  
wall. The third eye of her ear barely turns  
when my step changes for a moment  
at the sight of her. But she is sure  
the gray cat is a figment of my imagination.  
Her ear is a periscope that turns  
on the world humans occupy, but  
she moves in a space that is not there,  
where there is no danger.

17 June 2008

Not even mist, really. Water  
so much a part of air  
it is no surprise to swim  
in it, forget to open  
the umbrella you carry  
until it has soaked you through. Sound  
reminds you time broken is  
still falling, fragments  
drumming on a window somewhere  
or a roof you think will keep you dry  
while birds who have forgotten  
too sing as though sun will  
shine in no time. Look up  
from morning coffee and the world  
is covered in it. Now it is rain.

*Health goes with love.*

*-advertising slogan on a bus in Shenzhen*

Like a warning from the surgeon general  
on a bottle of fine wine. You will not  
stop drinking it, but you cannot  
say you were not warned.

18 June 2008

A Chinese acquaintance of mine was saying to me just the other day – seems like yesterday – that English does not use repetition the way Chinese does, and I'm sure she is right. She's a friend, a close friend, a dear friend, though this is neither here nor there in terms of whether she is right about repetition. The point is, what I'm saying is, she knows what's what. If anyone would know, she would. English just doesn't reiterate like Chinese – just says it, says it, tells it like it is, gets to the point, cuts to the chase. No need to go on and on if you're on the up and up. Talk, talk, talk, but make it plain. I've said that myself again and again. And so, she said, when the poet says *xiao xiao*, we translate small. Why say tiny tiny? If a thing is small, it is small, and if it is very small, it is – well – small, small to the extreme, perhaps, but still small. And that is enough to place it on the short end of a big spectrum. If you ask “how small?” I say, “trust me, *small*.” But that is a matter of tone, another matter altogether. All things considered, when you get right down to it, that's that. But somewhere ages and ages hence, she will forgive me if, with a sigh, I think soft and soft again when she says...

19 June 2008

*-for Long Xiaoying and Li Sen*

Black cat sits  
on the stone fence  
of a temple worshipping  
birds. I do not think  
he is a Buddha  
yet. Every time  
a bird flies, he rises  
with it, disappointed.  
He has renounced every desire  
but this – to take the body  
taste the blood  
of god. But he  
never leaps,  
just sits, suffers  
birds to fly.

Morning. The city still  
sleeping. It rises  
as I walk  
on air lighter  
than the sea.

Dogs that walk the same way  
every morning speak in their way.  
Children follow them on their way  
to school. There is the same dance  
here of sweepers and qigong  
in the park. Sitting  
by the lake, I lift my feet  
for a broom, listen.  
Music rises with the city.

20 June 2008

Frogs on Green Lake are a matter  
of sound, what is not there  
in the center of the center  
of a ring of ripples in ripples near  
a lily pad. Two white ducks weave  
in and out among lotus leaves greener  
than the lake. Here  
and there a blossom rises, pink, white  
willow branches lean into water.  
Walkers clap to tap, tap, tap  
of foot on stone, slp slp slp of sandals sliding.  
Someone chants loud and his own voice answers  
from the other side. Dizi  
drifts over with mosquitoes.

Something interrupts the arc of my step  
rising, soft, the interrupted arc  
of a bird's flight, feathers  
brush my foot. Bird stops stunned on  
walk, strange perch, in traffic. If  
my touch could heal, I would take her in my  
hands. But I can do no more than hope it is  
a moment of flight, not a wing, broken.

Just this morning, I tried to explain  
tortoiseshell, and the conversation  
turned from cats to turtles to the ocean  
while my mind wandered to D.H. Lawrence.  
An orange tabby sunning on the street  
warmed to your touch between his ears. Now  
a tortoiseshell appears, a sign, but you  
are not here, and pointing means nothing. She  
is hungry enough to risk the presence of a crowd  
for the taste of a steamed bun while her sisters  
hide, dreaming of fish. Another  
day, Oliver Mtukudzi  
is feeling low while I sip Yunnan coffee  
at Salvador's and we each  
dream a failed revolution in our own exile.

21 June 2008

The park is full of people raging  
against silence. It is  
a kind of meditation, this breaking  
the smooth surface where day begins  
by shouting across the lake to hear  
your own voice answer, carrying  
a radio with you so you will not get lost  
in the sound of the world when  
the chatter stops. Fish break the surface of  
the lily pond when something they can eat  
skates close on it. Ducks scoop what they need  
off the surface, gliding. The crowd raging  
in the park prepares for war. It is not day that breaks,  
but the silence that precedes it.

22 June 2008

**morning**

Quiet but for the dog that reminds me  
I don't belong here. Rooster announces  
sun. Cat intent on something in the alley  
glances over his right shoulder but does  
not let his concentration go.  
It will be hours before the street wakes up.  
Now it is sleeping, the city beyond it.

A dirt path just wide enough for an ox cart  
breaks off a road not much wider. A boy  
at the far end sees us walking and calls  
"hello." He starts for the road but runs back  
when we turn. Young dog picks up our pace  
and seems to think he might follow us  
to whatever elsewhere we inhabit,  
but he turns, contained, by the time  
we reach the edge of the village.  
He has no reason to believe beyond possible.

The whole population of the village  
gathers at the door of a house  
where a man squats with a makeshift scale  
and a basket of wild mushrooms. He is  
sorting them into a bucket a woman holds  
in the vortex of the gathering crowd.  
Fingers turn them this way and that for  
a better look, while she sifts through  
to find the right cap for each stem. You say  
the more color the more poison.  
The basket is a riot of earth tones.  
I wonder what visions those fingers have seen  
caressing the flesh  
measuring the poison  
striking a balance  
between what could kill you  
and a soup to die for.

A hollow in the stone  
forest, a conversation  
of four frogs  
each in his own pond  
every call echoes  
while it waits  
for every other response.

I don't think dancing under a rock  
that has balanced in the same place  
for almost two hundred years  
proves anything. A young girl  
contemplating marriage should  
demand more if she is looking  
to beat the odds.

23 June 2008

Bird practices

the only English word he knows  
but can't quite master the els.

Something like the beginning  
of a laugh – hu, hu, hu, something like the end  
of a refusal – NOH, OH, OH, something  
unfamiliar in the middle: hu  
\_OH, hu\_OH, hu\_OH, hu\_OH. Sparrows  
whistle criticism but never try  
the sound themselves.

They know their limits. Cicadas resonate  
to the frequency of heat. No greeting  
in their song – just the steady humming  
of an old amplifier that has taken  
power for a signal and made it sound.

In a village near Kunming, two boys  
fall in with our walk, listen  
in to our talk, but cannot place  
the sound of it in a language  
they know. One must be a scholar  
of ancient Greek. He repeats  
what I say: bababababa, on his way  
to naming me what almost every villager  
in every village since Athens has named  
every other stranger. To his friend, in words  
I do not know, he must have said *they talk so fast,*  
*but it sounds like nothing,* while I go on  
bababababa, bababababa.

24 June 2008

Sun's set in after weeks of rain  
and it's still coming down  
hard enough to make every river  
overflow with it. Heat rises in  
floods the way water does  
falls in long slow storms  
of anticipation from clouds of light. Flat roofs collapse  
under the weight of it, and you can see  
people with buckets and brooms dumping  
anticipation and light over the sides  
while enterprising engineers think about  
how to fill oceans with it and architects  
draw plans for tall buildings where  
there is no land, certain they can make them stand  
on nothing more than will be, and no god  
to confuse their language already beyond confusion.

Nothing common  
about ground  
below nobody's  
sky, but there is  
something to be said  
for keeping the rain  
on the other side,  
keeping this side  
dry. This  
is this  
that is  
that and it goes  
without saying  
a white horse  
is a white horse  
not a horse  
of a different  
color.

Umber clouds roll  
over sky that has turned  
night blue since  
I last looked up from the page  
waiting to be turned.

25 June 2008

### **Immersion**

This city  
goes toe to toe  
with the old Baptist  
preachers who  
insist you  
have to be  
buried in  
living water –  
and here, to be sure,  
you have to do it over  
and over and over  
again until you're  
shouting Hallelujah  
and praying for  
a break in the clouds so  
you can see the light.

you tell me  
there is a fine  
for picking lichi

from these trees

I ask what would happen  
if I caught one  
as it fell

and you say  
it would be  
too late

then. no reason to wait  
pay the price  
or keep walking.

## **Lolita**

*(a meditation on the hero)*

No surprises  
here, nothing  
but miracles.

A bagpiper  
on the square  
in woolen  
socks and kilt  
only a hero  
could wear  
in afternoon heat.

Everywhere  
the sound  
of people  
walking  
on water

and I think  
an overbearing pear  
might just meet  
its match in  
the delicate  
blossoms  
of a crabapple.

26 June 2008

Rain leaves

a record of its falling

after a storm passes

– lines of shocking

green that interrupt

the grid of the walk

turn yellow dry

slow to brown.

They are not random.

Lines of leaves follow the wind

that brought them down

on rain. The spectrum

from green to brown

is a history written

in passing on stone.

27 June 2008

Sparrows have had enough  
of rain. They've invaded this  
gazebo to preen on rafters  
under an almost dry roof.

Damp rises even where rain  
fall is broken. Ruffled  
feathers contain it. Like  
the pages of a book

that curl around the music  
of their words and will not lie  
flat where everything they'd hoped  
to hide has been washed out of them.

28 June 2008

That water is  
a soft thing is  
a lie. Listen  
to it hammer  
on the roof, hard  
as steel in this  
storm while sparrows  
cover in the eaves  
and every other  
bird falls silent.  
It has a sharp  
edge, and it is  
hard to be sure  
it will not cut  
through the fragile  
tile of the roof  
the way it cut  
to bone when south  
lit the fuse this  
morning.  
It burns right through  
umbrellas, fills  
lungs, laughing  
at the thought that  
drowning is  
a slow settling

into sleep.

It is more like  
being bludgeoned  
with an axe  
and nothing you can  
do to soften  
the blows  
except hide  
like sparrows  
who know they  
are powerless.

29 June 2008

You must not imagine rain  
liquid. It falls hard  
shatters, showers  
shrapnel. You will spend hours  
digging splinters of it from  
flesh exposed when it  
burst on a crowd  
that contained you,  
unimagined.

30 June 2008

Leaves finally despair of inscribing rain  
on the surface of this walk. They fell in waves  
when rain fell, lined up with prevailing wind  
so you could read it in their lie as you  
stepped over them. But another wave fell  
and the simple lie of leaves became  
a palimpsest with layers to decode.  
A reader of leaves stepping over these  
sees a confusion of rain falling  
in riots of color. Sweepers, who  
have no patience for history, are  
hurrying them into clusters to be  
carted away before they dry. Readers  
of leaves see riots of color, confusions  
of rain falling, refugees swept aside to make way  
for the business of the present.  
Readers of leaves can no longer say  
whether this fortune they see is future or past.

A break in the rain. Man in a suit  
and tie stands on the edge of the garden (on a hard path  
where there is no danger of mud on his shoes)  
with two gardeners who know every plant  
by name.

He stretches his hand over the scene, issues orders  
and rebukes the storm. Gardeners wait,  
eyes on broken limbs and fallen blossoms,  
hope this break is long enough to outlast the boss,  
give them time to get their hands in the mud  
to see what can be done.

the memory of something that cannot be  
remembered repeated  
year after year  
and the only ritual of celebration I can bear  
is the giving of some gift to friends lost  
in memory of their own.

it is like recollecting your own death  
from some future like any future as yet not  
neither the future nor the memory but still  
you insist.

and the only sign of your absent brother  
tears you have been holding back for years  
you cry instead anger at what you cannot say  
sorrow you have to take on faith  
because you cannot put your finger in the wound  
and none of us can measure the distance  
from here to the end of this misery.

1 July 2008

Sun is out and the street  
is full of it, but the heat  
of the place is the mass  
of bodies moving. No use  
turning upstream. You are less  
likely to drown if you embrace  
the current that embraces  
you until you wash up in some mall  
where the opiate of choice is shopping  
to kill the pain and control the fever.

this  
is this  
that  
is that  
there  
you have it  
this is  
not that  
that is  
not this  
but how  
do you say  
how do you  
say how  
do you say  
that without  
pointing  
there that  
this here

2 July 2008

When they tell me old men  
who use big brushes  
to write in water  
on public walkways  
do it for exercise, I am astounded  
at the calisthenics of rain.

Old men copy ancient poems  
passersby know by heart  
in delicate calligraphy  
that will last until water  
turns to air under the influence  
of time and sun. Rain

writes new poems  
in furious lines  
that saturate the world  
leave traces after floods  
that remain on the tips of our tongues  
though no one can say what they mean.

3 July 2008

First sound after birds this morning  
a kitten crying eight floors down. Seems  
we hear bird song as a sound of joy  
but the mourning of the kitten has me  
thinking of lost souls endlessly repeating  
what we need in languages  
that can never say it. Walk an hour  
in any direction and you will encounter  
more iterations of desire than you can count.

Two sparrows make a song  
somewhere between hunger and desire,  
same as the city rising  
steps beyond this park, same as locusts  
everywhere, same as the child pushing  
his grandmother to the limits of her patience  
so he will never forget where it is  
draw it as the line by which  
he will always judge the difference.

Look east and you'd swear you could see mountains  
on the far side of the bay. climb them  
dreaming Qomolangma  
and you'd still be so close to ocean  
the gravity of it would make you think  
flying out of the question. Ocean  
will not let you forget you live  
on water. Even mountains float on it.  
Coral at two thousand meters  
is a sign the sky's a trick.  
You imagine yourself above it all,  
but every open space is ocean floor  
waiting on seventy thousand fathoms.

Look east and you'd swear you could see mountains  
on the far side of the bay. Climb them  
dreaming Qomolangma, though,  
and you'll still be so close to ocean  
the gravity of it will make you think  
flying out of the question. Ocean  
will not let you forget you live  
on a liquid planet. Even mountains  
hover like spirits on the surface  
of water. Coral at two thousand meters  
is a sign the sky's a trick in this place.  
You imagine yourself above it all,  
but every clearing is ocean floor under  
a wait of ten thousand fathoms or more.

4 July 2008

A woman who has had enough lies  
on the walk between two climate controlled  
malls as though it were a womb and she  
waiting to be born. Sun has been up  
an hour and already heat is so heavy  
each step must be willed separately  
against the whole weight of it. She  
has been carrying the dirty blanket she  
lies on for days wrapped around what little she  
has, piled behind her head now. Walkers step around her  
hurrying somewhere without taking  
notice, getting to work on time, meeting  
deadlines, keeping  
things moving, waiting  
to be born again.

You say we are Buddha, meaning  
America, meaning before he stepped out  
into the world, meaning before he was  
Buddha. But it is worse. We are blind  
as Siddhartha in luxury, but we think  
we have seen it all.

Ten thousand bodies moving the same way  
at the same time for the same reason  
turns me. A man sweeping the street  
who saw me walking this morning whistled  
and licked his tongue the way some people do  
when they see a stray dog or some animal  
in a zoo, hoping to provoke a response  
but not expecting language.

This is why I assume every cat on the street is a buddha,  
address every dog I meet as “sir”  
or “ma’am,” listen to birds, attend to  
the music of locusts and the dance  
of butterflies, wonder about humans,  
and they respond in kind, creatures like  
I am, each a product of a whole  
universe that revolves around  
every one of us, always  
expecting language.

Stopped today to watch  
two black butterflies  
circle each  
other up and down  
a dozen flowers  
before I went back  
to walking  
wondering why  
not how we  
perfect systems  
for forcing people  
into what we  
dislike most. What  
I wonder would  
the world be if we  
spiraled around  
each other the way  
black butterflies do  
with no caterpillar  
memories and no  
tomorrow to occupy  
minds spiraling  
like bodies on air.

6 July 2008

By half past nine, the only sign of poetry  
is a random stroke here and there on the walk  
that has not evaporated. And the shape of it,  
absences arrayed so you know a poem  
was written there in water, know it is not now.

Rain settles in  
today like a traveler  
who has been  
away too long  
to send me off.  
It plans to stay  
this time, as though  
it hasn't always,  
as though sun  
were something other  
than a pause,  
as though it has been  
abroad, as though  
we'd pined in its absence.

16 July 2008

If we have learned nothing  
else, we have learned  
this: tremors  
are predictable.

When and why  
unfathomable, that  
they will  
come, not,

always at a time of inconvenience.



II  
like blackbirds



## Epiphany on the anniversary of Trinity

Henry Moore's mushroom  
casts a long shadow.

I skirt it between small talk  
at the Post Office  
and coffee alfresco

at a museum where it dawns on me  
that I should have said  
you're not there yet

instead of chatting  
with the clerk  
while I wrote an address  
in a shaking hand  
about getting old.

When I see how we have deprived ourselves  
of solitude and silence,  
I am not surprised that  
some people think poetry  
in crisis. There is nowhere else to think it.

22 July 2008

Someone's planted a garden  
in the shadow of a high fence  
on a porch that is all shade.

Two plastic pots contain  
tomatoes in a dark place. Green  
could be a sign of desire's  
triumph over reason, but the fruit of this  
possibility lies only in the mind  
of someone without sun craving salad.

And the arc of each tall plant  
is toward the moment sunlight  
slips through a gap in the fence  
some time after noon,  
bodies  
crippled by the way  
we contain desire

1 August 2008

because we hope  
saying what we have not  
done will make a we of us  
we repeat it. still,

we only love  
our neighbors  
as ourselves

in those dark intervals  
when – hearing what  
we are saying –  
we hardly love ourselves  
at all

we conspire  
to make a we of us  
by saying what we  
have not done.

we repeat it. still

we only love  
our neighbors as ourselves

in dark intervals

when, hearing  
what we are

saying, we  
hardly love ourselves  
at all

11 August 2008

when making memories of Milton  
in what remains closely affiliated  
for now, there are precedents

the matter  
of the scroll, the body  
of it

a temple  
consumed  
in memory

present, given  
must go

there has to be  
a cross, flesh  
and blood  
tabernacle  
where one  
makes deals

hypodermic  
last rites  
settle slow  
into a State  
of rest

perpetual peace  
all but the execution  
all but the executioner  
all but the power  
of the State

new owners  
disinfect  
the place

pile relics  
on fire

forget  
death smell

submit to nothing but  
the glory of God  
in another form  
of the same state

what matter  
will fuel fires  
to make way

for this shrine?

17 August 2008

End of an alley  
stage, high wire moon flood  
light, you want to hear  
the Max Roach poem  
I should have read  
on the first anniversary  
of his passing. Bop  
may be hard, but  
it goes down smooth  
sweet on your tongue  
and he ain't dead when  
five friends on the edge of a street  
on the edge of a city remember when  
they saw him and  
Miles Davis too.

*Enjoy your life*  
someone says  
in parting. That's  
what the poem is for,  
not past still passing.

22 August 2008

Left leaning yuppie children jet to Beijing  
for half a dozen snapshots with a banner  
made of lights before they are arrested,  
and I think of all the people I've seen  
posing with flags. I add them to the others  
friends on vacation have sent  
of the bird's nest all lit up  
at night, think light is the only thing  
a camera can see, one of countless things  
we can't. Everybody's trading  
evidence of light, attaching it to messages  
by the gigabyte like massive denials  
of darkness. I am trying  
to imagine them as guests  
of the Chinese government, patient cops  
who do this because it is their job, puzzled by  
ceremonies of light staged half a planet from home  
over some dry imaginary. I am trying  
to imagine them on the flight to New York,  
satisfied. I am trying to imagine the place  
where they parked their cars, trying  
to imagine a drive to some suburb (it could be  
New Rochelle, where Tom Paine's ghost is  
wondering how it came to this). Trying  
to imagine parents bursting with pride  
at their conviction, trying

to imagine Tibet free, trying  
to attach evidence of light to a poem  
at the speed of it in darkness where I do not see it.

23 August 2008

The only surprise when Spring ends in August is that a time of surprises has survived a summer without an invasion invited by indignant locals who demand order be restored. Weeds overrun the place in a Spring that goes on this long. If you don't put a stop to it, there will be free jazz and electric guitar in the presidential palace. Cultural revolutions need brakes. The powers that be need time to rebrand them before they get out of hand. Keep the poets in their place. All tomorrow's parties will make the masses believe in change that turns just enough to keep Spring surprises in line.

26 August 2008

the incarnation of a god is evident  
in memory that appears out of place

a toddler reaches for what used to be  
an old man's prayer beads

and believers know  
he has come again

in this body

I am content  
to know any child

who reaches  
for prayer beads

dangled  
before her eyes

could be  
a living buddha

27 August 2008

She  
must have been a bee  
keeper before  
she was a cat

nose to nose eyes  
narrow  
to see  
what a bee sees

know  
the pattern  
of a flight

composed as much of still  
as of motion

30 August 2008

Sign promises flashing lights when  
an animal is present, but I know  
it is a lie because I am close enough  
to read it and there are no lights  
flashing. You can't believe  
everything you see  
on the road here. Barns tumble  
down on farms in Indiana  
biding time between cities  
laced together by highways  
full of trucks that say  
they are expediters – but  
they don't say what.

Highways full of expediters  
slash page after page of eye high  
corn, lines of birch here  
and there and deer  
graze near tumbledown barns.

3 September 2008

Old man's pace is set  
by the weight  
he carries against a stuttering stream  
of what he might have been,  
bewildering. Nobody  
has time for a sign, but they  
are all waiting at a frantic pace  
for something. And I am  
an old man out of breath wondering  
what on earth it could be.

### **First thing in the morning**

Cat has her head under the bookcase  
looking, it finally dawns on me, to  
get me down on the floor to see  
as she can sprawling among piles of books  
nothing but dust and imagination.  
Nothing but dust and imagination  
is a counter to the pace  
of people late for something they hate  
but think so necessary to the functioning  
of the world that they will threaten  
to run over anyone who gets in their way.

The post office is a line dance  
of people who cannot wait standing still, who change lines  
when they hear a promise of waiting somewhere else.  
At the front of the line, I remember the cat's  
imagination and wait slow as I can  
for a smile precipitated by some nothing of small talk.

8 September 2008

I rise like light before sun, set out  
the way some moon would that cannot shine  
without reflected light. It does not rise  
in the east but on every mirror surface  
it can find before the horizon, and it is  
in the air so you can taste it long  
before your eyes. On the lake, it ripples  
south with water, away from the city  
rising on the far shore.

9 September 2008

Sun rises in the East, sudden, but not  
light. Light rises on every high thing  
opposite that catches sun before  
it reaches the horizon, ten thousand moons  
mirror sun before the fact. But when  
it comes, it spills over the edge into  
waves that scatter mirrors from horizon  
to shore, break on rocks, and spring  
toward sky.

September air recalls December  
before sunrise. Cold edge of memory  
numbs your toes, has you thinking  
about heat, prepares your  
eyes for winter light.

16 September 2008

Zinc white on half inch white bristle  
brush, full circle on background just two  
shades bluer than zinc, an arc of green  
on each side of a gray line, rainbows  
parked on both sides. Dazzled by sunrise,  
you could miss it. Turn, and the reflection  
is more than the shadow of light rising.

26 September 2008

Geese fly west  
in waves  
on a late September  
morning. Two together  
make a flock, gesture  
to the vee of their familiar  
formation. You can see it  
in their voices  
wondering south  
out loud in weather  
still too warm  
for urgency. Squirrel  
has moved into a hollow  
in the wall. Cat knows  
the sound of his feet. It looks  
the same as what she sees  
when he climbs out  
through some opening  
into the world and  
scrambles down  
to drink from  
an old bucket  
hanging on  
the back porch.  
Seasons change.

There will be snow.

You can see it on the edge  
where morning rises.

15 October 2008

### **Sukkot, Chicago**

Almost Autumn poplars almost  
yellow. Sugar maples would rather be  
safe than sorry, stand out red against blue  
spruce and green ash that still hold summer fast.  
I almost remember to carry a coat  
in case the season changes while I am  
out. But I still have on my summer mind,  
green as those trees with their backs to winter.  
The city sleeps, but it does not slow  
for cold. If anybody's talking  
about weather, it's only to say it is,  
to bow to it, almost like an impersonal god  
that squats on the margin of a grand system,  
almost all the proof you have reason  
to expect. It could never contain itself  
even if it died trying.

15 October 2008

Clouds don't have much interest  
in gathering, so it rains when  
they collide by chance,  
shower hard enough to slow  
traffic – but not long,  
and big rigs make up time  
when the rain lets up, bide  
it when it makes them blind,  
think of miles as money  
lost, dream empty roads  
and cloudless skies to the other side  
of Mexico and back.

16 October 2008

Plain as the nose on your face, no  
need to open your eyes to see  
bats under the Congress Avenue  
bridge before sun breaks through  
low clouds on a gray Austin morning

at rush hour. No need  
for a map or ears like a bat to see  
how this city lies. Cross  
Cesar Chavez with a young guy  
who looks like he's been pushing  
that wheelbarrow most of his life.

Street people are snowbirds, so  
the climate suits them. Youth and wealth  
spiral into power like light, and every person  
who isn't living on the street is carrying something  
urgent in a briefcase. You'd know

eyes closed it's a city  
by the sound of it. Eyes open  
signs say *no loitering*, but we  
do it anyway. I can pay,  
so I have coffee al fresco

at the 1886 Bakery and a waffle  
shaped like Texas. I try to imagine  
traffic as the sound of a river, think it is  
the law of the land that corporations must be  
treated as persons but more than half the people  
I pass walking this morning are not,

remember Tom Harris,  
save Oldham County for last.

17 October 2008

Moonrise, and city lights  
pale west of Austin.  
By day, you'd think whoever  
wrote this script had read  
the same books as everyone  
else. But moon changes  
things. The cats may all be gray  
till sunrise, but this  
manuscript of stars  
through high, thin clouds  
is like nothing you've read  
before. It is a sacred text.  
You may recite it,  
but no one will write it again.

Still in the west midmorning, moon  
no longer dominates the sky. Stars  
have moved on, no matter what they say  
about earth turning. Night  
goes slow. It clings  
beyond the edge of broad daylight.

23 October 2008

Nothing much but anticipation  
rising among highways stacked  
for a city ten times this size.  
Roads were on the ground when  
passersby expected to pause  
for what is found there. Now  
they float among church steeples  
so travelers anxious for elsewhere  
can pass over interruptions  
of in between, nothing but shadows to the shadow  
city below. Most drivers have no idea  
how close they are to the left hand  
of a crucified god where that steeple  
rises. He bows his head over  
empty pews that still recall west sun  
through stained glass before

14 November 2008

Every small town in Minnesota  
is a line of headlights blinking  
red in answer to a signal  
that marks the passing  
of a train making its way  
in rain to Seattle.

We see them with their backs turned.  
Whole populations must be waiting  
in dark cars, in dark houses, in bars  
under neon lights that promise  
exotic places, deliver local spirits and  
enough noise to prove  
to anyone that happens along that they  
are not alone.

On the train, we think  
we've made good time when we see  
Pioneer Press long before  
we are supposed to arrive. Cellphones  
open, and passengers call to make  
connections. I am already waiting  
for the bus. Lines of freight trains  
on sidings remind us who owns these  
tracks. Conductor  
tells a story about a collision to keep us  
in our seats, but we rise to wait while  
tracks are switched by hand, and we

roll into the station almost on schedule.  
I stop to look at the full moon but still  
catch the bus. My absence  
means nothing to the train, which goes on  
dividing small town into this side and  
the other past sunrise this side of Fargo –  
and the bus would have been there without  
me. There was no need to call: in the Twin Cities bus  
is ubiquitous as god – they tell me – until the bars close.

Armies have been deployed to see  
that we don't get too close,  
a perimeter drawn wherever  
paths might cross, worlds  
depend on this, that,  
no place for the other.

17 November 2008

**Empire Builder, Politics, 2008**

Eight hours without a break, three voices fill the whole space of the car from St. Paul to Chicago. Not a conversation. A conversation has doors and windows, but there is no way in to this but out. Three voices euphoric about a new President, three veterans, three for a war...

1 December 2008

mist rimes  
trees freezes  
mid air crusts  
last night's snow

so you  
can follow  
a walk  
with your ears

a rabbit's been  
on this stretch  
before me,

frozen traces  
of it  
soften under  
new snow

3 December 2008

My back porch rail is  
a staging area for sparrows  
planning their approach  
to the feeder next door.  
No bird on a wire  
balancing act, it is  
wide enough for half a dozen  
of them side by side, so  
it gives three of them in a line  
time to think  
before they dive into the crowd  
and snatch something to carry away.  
There are plenty of seeds  
in the feeder. I give them pause.

6 January 2009

River so still  
between ice  
and flow  
you'd think  
you could walk  
on water  
but one  
step and all the in  
between that is  
all you have to stand on  
slips off to the next river  
and the next and then  
the one  
that has a toe  
in an ocean  
half a continent away  
and you are over your head in it

20 January 2009

The white woman in San Francisco  
who tells a black stranger she is  
sorry for slavery is haunting me.  
If an old black woman had not sat down  
beside her, would she have said it? Was  
it a confession, and did she expect absolution?  
Or penance? Five hail Marys  
and don't let it happen again? Or that  
will be ten next time. Perhaps it was  
in the nature of a transit authority  
announcement: the train has stopped  
momentarily because five centuries  
of slavery is blocking the track. A crew  
is switching by hand and we will be  
moving again shortly. Sorry for the  
inconvenience. If Flannery O'Connor  
were writing this story, the old black  
woman wouldn't say it's ok honey  
everything's changed now.  
How hard is it to be sorry  
for slavery? It's like saying I never did like  
that guy Hitler. But I want to know what  
we're going to do...

3 February 2008

February river is winter  
hard. Star  
light has bored a hole  
moon will spill through  
in no time. Sky  
will fracture under the weight of it  
become a Mondrian mirror  
of river ice, flowing  
to the same place in the same time  
before a crowd of them gathers  
to watch it go.

10 February 2009

Last night liquid  
hurried through a hand's width  
where ice had  
begun to warm  
to what it might have thought  
was Spring. Tonight  
there is a river of it  
rolling west with winter  
ice that could be a remnant  
of a time when the whole earth  
was cold. But it is what is  
left of yesterday, and it will be  
back when ice and a hand's width  
of water thinks again tomorrow.

12 February 2009

Ice broken by a thousand rivers  
that started years ago on some rise  
after a Spring thaw but ran dry  
and spent months waiting empty to begin  
again. On again off again they  
stagger through frozen fields  
cut here and there by  
lines not two cars wide that must  
mark boundaries of dry fields under snow.  
Snake River gathers what is left of all of them,  
wanders south at the easy pace of a gap between  
high plains and mountains rising west.  
One semi struggles  
on a highway eight lanes wide  
against the rise  
at half the speed of water that goes  
the other way, bound to a road  
that never looks askance, never thinks  
to turn and follow a slope in a gap like water.

13 February 2009

Haze half softens half moon  
light hours before sun  
rise. Light moves like water  
at the pier. Tower  
of blue moon blends with pale,  
swims out to meet a boat passing. At this hour  
weathered wood is the color of water, every  
step a confession. I believe, I  
believe, help my unbelief.

16 February 2009

Two weeks ago you would have thought  
this surface hard enough to bear  
your weight without giving way. But  
even then the river flowed  
in a gap where water ran  
faster than February cold.  
Tonight, the river flows all gap,  
and you know you'd need a raft  
to go from shore to shore  
if there were no bridge, no ice  
thick enough to stand up to  
a walker with his mind on the far shore.

18 February 2009

## **East of Eden**

air is heavy with knowing it has been a bad day  
for skunks. Drunk on false promises of Spring,  
they are staggered  
by the speed of the end approaching.  
They turn to leave traces  
of their passing, sulfur scent  
at every crossing where some deal has been done.

It's eighty degrees, and the sign says  
watch for ice. So dry the whole place  
is ready to burst into flame, and signs  
say watch for standing water.  
That and the fact that only one draw  
is called Dry reminds me  
how deep faith is in Texas. Guy dressed like a preacher  
with a silver cross wanders into the deli  
on Sixth Street to strike up a conversation  
about kosher with someone who speaks with authority.  
"You keep kosher and you  
wear a cross? I find that offensive." "Are you  
Orthodox? Orthodox love Christians." "I don't  
give a shit, but that offends me." "You  
hate Christians" "Just get out of here.

Your presence offends me.”

Preacher rolls away on a bicycle  
and I wonder if the black shirt he’s  
wearing with denim jeans is polyester.

I remember the time someone at my table ordered a blt here.

What kind of person orders a blt at a kosher deli?

And what’s it doing on the menu?

She kept saying it tasted funny. And

I think it all tastes funny.

When I leave today they’re playing “It’s the End  
of the World as We Know It...”

and I feel fine.

22 February 2009

There must be a hundred blackbirds  
stretched across the line  
that carries the signal  
at Sixth Street and Red River.  
They gather every time  
traffic stops and rise in clouds  
when the light turns green, going on  
and on about how this city has changed  
since they moved down. There is  
a diamond lane for musicians  
unloading, and most of the  
west bound cars drive in it.  
Lanes for poets are unmarked,  
because we perch like blackbirds  
chattering over traffic on  
any lane we can find to unload  
before rising in clouds  
when signals change,  
thinking “then”  
in the corners  
of our eyes and  
saying now  
it’s not the same  
it’s not the same  
it’s just not the same.

## **You Never Know**

At table around some beautiful South Carolina  
stew so full of meat just looking at it feels like  
I've broken a vow, I can't stop thinking  
of a Sichuan hotpot in Chengdu. When I told  
the servers there I was a vegetarian, they first said,  
"I'm so sorry." But when I assured them it was not a disease,  
they asked for the story and brought plain vegetables,  
watched me snatch peppers and peanuts  
with chopsticks before they slid into the boiling  
pot, then brought a plate of doufu and peanuts  
to add to vegetables for protein and saw  
that every plate with peppers passed within range  
before the meat was cooked into them.

Every promise is a sacred  
thing, and the story makes it so.

The number of stories is more than all  
the beings that have ever lived or ever will. So  
you always have to ask. But here at this table I say  
I am a vegetarian and there is silence. Server just says  
no when I ask if there's an option. A few moments  
later, she offers vegetables and rice; but one bite  
of each and I know they have been dipped from  
the same pot everything else has been boiling in. That  
South Carolina stew is a feast for the eyes, but it  
only knows one promise and doesn't think to ask

for stories that go without saying. I suppose that's  
what the poet means when he says "you never  
know in South Carolina. It has 'South' in it."  
Everybody knows the story, so nobody bothers to ask.

10 March 2009

Slow rain falls so  
straight you'd never know  
each drop is a circle  
if you didn't wait  
to see it spread across  
the smooth surface  
of the river  
all the way to  
the sign on the far shore  
that says *No Wake* as though  
any one of ten thousand  
collisions could be  
so gentle one would  
not necessarily follow.

slow rain falls so  
straight you'd never know  
each drop is a circle  
if you didn't wait  
to see it spread across  
the smooth surface  
of the river  
all the way to  
the sign on the other  
shore that says *No*

*Wake* as though any  
one of ten thousand  
collisions could be  
so gentle one would not  
follow of necessity

The intersection of a line  
of rain with the plane  
surface of a river after a thaw  
is a circle in a circle in  
a circle to this edge and the other then  
an arc after an arc after an arc fading  
through all the circles it crosses  
on the way to making this of that  
as long as it lasts.

12 March 2009

Snow today is as lost as sparrows  
shivering on the edge of the roof  
next door, and both are  
bigger than life with air  
that makes them warm,  
makes them vanish before  
they touch cold ground still  
making its way to Spring.

Full moon peered in through west window  
this morning, and sun is still  
shining through gray clouds  
that slipped in with daylight  
but haven't quite covered the sky.

21 March 2009

Like any great road, it begins  
with a monument to what is thought  
power making its way  
through the emptiness of its imagination,  
filling it with restlessness. Then  
a sign that says nothing  
but Jesus. At every exit, a church,  
a gas station, and an adult video superstore.  
No different from the West Side, where  
every storefront promises one spirit  
or another. Here, it is something  
to keep the big rigs moving, a place  
to leave traces of libido that might take your mind  
off the road, a place for god to wait  
until all these lost sheep wander home.  
It's god, you know, that's waiting alone in darkness, weary  
wondering why they have forsaken him,  
no place to go, so he'll just sit and see what happens next.

Sign advises caution  
approaching a controlled prairie burn  
and I think as I pass miles of grass reduced to wide charcoal berms  
this is what we've come to. No fire,  
just a slow burn, contained, while one war  
after another runs its course as if it were a river.

25 March 2009

It's no surprise that every second stop on Sixth Street is some kind of mission; but I've circled the center of this sad city today, and I'm in no mood for a sermon on the end of days unless it's wrapped in a Samuel Beckett play or I'm giving it. So when the owner of the deli I stumble upon comes down from the roof to unlock the door that led me to believe the place was open, I look at the menu, take note of the Bible verses on the wall, and hope I can get out of the place with nothing more than coffee and small talk about late March snow Friday. But talking about the weather here means talking about how dry it is, and that leads to prayer. I saw the sign about praying for rain when I walked in, but it turns out there's going to be an actual meeting, and I suppose they won't let anyone out of the tent until they've opened a window in the firmament to let the water above pour in. And once the window's open, it's a short step from prayer to a click of the tongue and a knowing comment about how they have laid it out this way and we're near the end of time, just living out prophecy. Today, I can't help myself and say and who are they. Well it's all there in Scripture the owner says and I say what's all there and who are they? How we just have to wait 'til Israel takes over, he says, and they are like the three richest families in Amarillo running everything here. And I say where do you get this stuff and he says it's all right there in Scripture and I say so you read Hebrew? You read Greek? And he says as a matter of fact and brings out Strong's concordance to show me he has Hebrew in the house and I say this isn't Scripture and he says it's like a dictionary and I say if you're going to go off about what's in Scripture you ought to take the time to learn to read the language it's written in and he says so you've studied Hebrew and Greek and I tell him a hell of a lot more than I should if I want to get out of there without a sermon. He says it's like a dictionary they put together when King James wrote the King James Version and I say oh come on. King James didn't write the Bible. He just happened to be King of England when he got people together to translate and I get up to pay for the coffee. I'd already made the mistake of mentioning Chicago more than once and even doing time at an Episcopal seminary and he said I don't know man – being exposed to all those religions is dangerous and I said what religions and he said just different religions and I didn't even think it was worth the effort to try to tell him Episcopalians belonged to the same religion he did and besides by now I wasn't

sure so I said do you ever talk to folks who belong to different religions. Do you ever listen? Do a lot of Muslims come in here? Buddhists? He said they pretty much keep to themselves. And I guess now I know who “they” are. I say I think you ought to try to talk with folks and have a serious conversation whenever you can and he starts spouting numbers that mark verses in Galatians and says we’re living in the end of days waiting for God to come and I think maybe this is Beckett after all and want to say think, Lucky, think. But instead I talk about how we’re fighting two wars we shouldn’t be fighting and the crowd of men waiting down the street at the day labor place for a crappy job and how we might try doing something about that and he says what do you suggest and I say I think Micah had it right do justice love kindness and walk humbly with your God and he says where does the “do” come from and I probably say Jesus Christ out loud while I dig out two dollars and tell him to keep the change and he might think for a moment he’s converted me but then he says I’m sorry we don’t see eye to eye and I say I’m not sorry about that at all but I am sorry we can’t have a serious conversation and he says have a blest day and I say peace and I hope your business thrives while you’re waiting for the end of the world. He locks up and I get back on the road.

26 March 2009

For three days, they've been talking about  
a March blizzard while the temperature hovered  
around late April. Every tree has budded  
up to the far edge where the city touches  
a barbed wire fence meant to contain nothing  
but a field of prairie dogs and mesquite trees. One look  
while a jackrabbit startles at my stopping  
and the warning that's already turned  
to a watch is as close as  
you can get to a sure thing. Mesquite trees  
know Winter, and they know when time  
has stepped over the line into a Spring  
that has no more of it on the far side. Clouds  
have gathered in the east, and some are  
drifting over off the mountains from the west.  
North has not gone blue just yet, but  
the wind is picking up and I expect  
it will. Tomorrow will be  
January cold. Fruit blossoms, shocked, will drop,  
and folks will say *how strange* while  
mesquite trees shake their heads and  
dance on gales, wait  
for the last snow to fall before they put  
their Spring green on and settle into summer dry.

27 March 2009

Half a mile to the end of the city,  
where there's nothing to break north wind  
but four strands of barbed wire. By the time  
you've walked it, you know wind's heavy enough  
to make knee high drifts with snow that will slow  
your pace once you've added another mile  
of west, south, east, back to where you started  
to walk. Every drift of this March blizzard  
waits for the first footprints, though wind  
has stripped snow to ice here and there,  
revealing palimpsests of tracks, a history of morning  
walks and fleeing rabbits. Birds that were here  
yesterday have gone into hiding. They will sing  
memories of blossoms when they return  
with Spring tomorrow.

28 March 2009

Nothing is still here  
long enough to measure  
snowfall. Wind  
wrote a history  
of the blizzard in waves,  
settled in drifts  
that hide the edge  
of the road. No one's  
ventured out in it  
this morning, so every step  
marks a new trail  
on a way no one's  
occupied as long as  
wind can remember.

29 March 2009

You might think sudden snow  
an April blizzard blew in  
got those sad daffodils  
scattered sullen in dry grass  
where drifts piled high as the fence  
two days ago. But they'd come and gone  
by then, leaving nothing but the corpses  
of the first Spring flowers for  
two days of cold. Dried heads impaled  
on straight stalks can't frighten the second wave  
of Spring, drinking Winter into rainbows  
waiting for tomorrow.



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



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