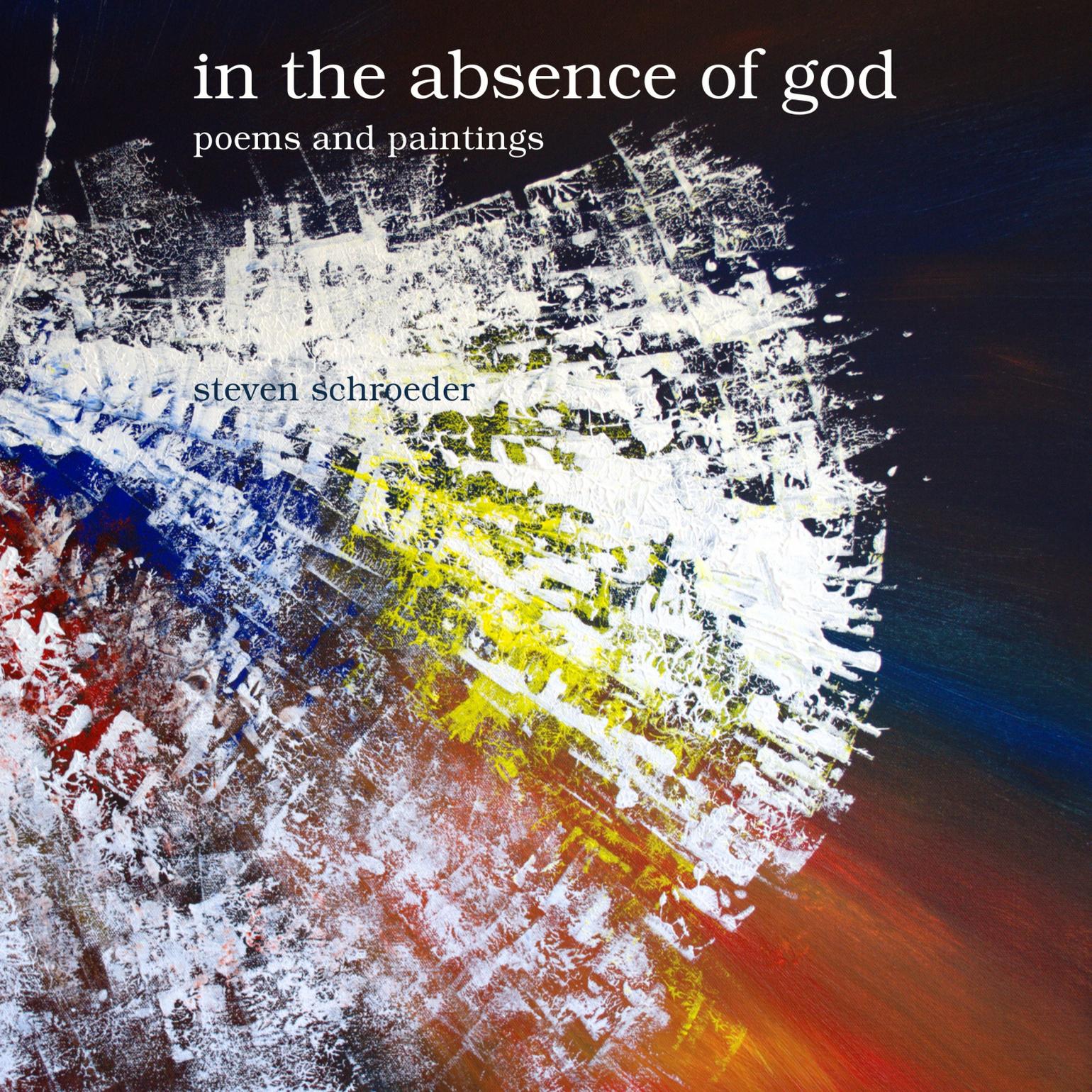


# in the absence of god

poems and paintings

steven schroeder

An abstract painting with a dark, almost black background. The composition is dominated by a large, textured area of white and light grey, which appears to be made of many small, overlapping strokes or fragments. This white area is interspersed with patches of bright yellow and blue. In the lower-left corner, there are more textured areas in shades of red and brown. The overall effect is one of intense, chaotic energy and depth.



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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder  
cover: the absolute absence of god, acrylic on canvas, 24x36 inches [2017]



## **a calling**

Phone rings, I say *hello*.  
Guy answers real slow,  
says *I wanna ask you*  
*'bout somethin' Jesus said.*

So I wait and I wait and  
I wait and he don't say  
nothin' so I finally say *I*  
*don't have time* and he  
says *that's what I'm*  
*talkin' about.*

probably right

probably God, who has been

known to make crank calls,

epiphanies almost forgotten  
now that anyone with a cellphone  
can know who's calling – and not one

word spoken

*Chicago*

*August 2006*

## **a moment of silence**

*What have you done? The voice of your  
brother's blood cries to me  
from the ground.*

*Genesis 4:10*

The world goes on  
the world goes  
on the world  
goes on

and on and on  
but music  
pauses,

not to mourn  
*our* dead  
but this

human presence  
that cannot say *we*  
without murdering its brother.

*Chicago*  
*February 2005*

## **it is not as if**

We have not acted like  
in Abu Ghraib. We  
have acted. We  
have not acted like  
in Guantanamo. We

have acted. No  
ghost of Hitler. No  
resurrection of Stalin. No  
Mussolini. No  
Franco. No  
Pol Pot. No  
recourse to dead dictators  
haunting our killing fields.

Only we  
have acted.

Our trials reveal  
who we are.

Bosque Redondo.  
trails of tears, Wounded

Knee, lynch mobs, Red  
River wars, Mi Lai,  
old maps,  
just us.

*Chicago*

*c. 2004*

## **confession**

*we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone*

*Book of Common Prayer, Holy Eucharist: Rite II*

we conspire  
to make a we of us  
by repeating  
what we have not done  
in unison. still

we love our neighbors  
as ourselves only  
in those dark intervals  
when, hearing what we are  
saying, we hardly love ourselves

at all

*Chicago  
May 2005*



## **Mardi Gras, February 2016**

A field of ashes west of Oklahoma City  
is the most emphatic in a long line of signs

since Missouri warning that the fire danger is  
extreme. A jagged edge of charred grass crosses

a barbed wire fence, a sacrament  
on which a gospel will turn tomorrow.

*Weatherford, Oklahoma*  
*February 2016*

## **Lenten meditation**

Exposed by a week of thaw  
as furious as the two of snow  
that preceded it, the rotting  
carcass of a possum I  
step over on Cornell Avenue  
as traffic rushes by  
more furious than either  
turns my mind to Lent  
and how there is no need  
to leave the city for forty days  
of temptation in the wilderness.

No one bothers to wait  
in a high place to say  
this could all be mine  
if only I would get down  
on my knees, because they  
know every passerby  
has heard it all before  
and shrugged it off without  
a second thought, not even tempted.

Anyone who wants it all  
has been hunkered down  
in the highest place they could  
get their hands on for a long time  
while every other one has been  
on their knees just as long  
with something else  
on their mind.

Other than the sun, the brightest things  
on this walk are Yoko's lotus  
on the far side of winter  
trees that are a memory  
of what this place was  
when it was still  
unsettled and  
the cardinals  
singing spring as if  
they believe it is at hand.

An hour of walking and  
the first person to speak is  
a homeless guy who  
has been on this street  
as long as I can remember.

He always waits  
until I have nodded  
the ritual greeting that is  
in the rubrics for this occasion  
and walked on by to say  
I'd be grateful for a helping hand today  
and there is nothing to say

but amen  
and amen again.

*Chicago*  
*March 2021*

## **yom kippur**

At the end of the day that old mad mountain god  
sat down on a high mesa west of Alanreed  
and took another look at all that he had made.

He sees that he has more to answer for  
than he can say. But he knows color the way  
a potter does, dancing under hands in clay  
where *adam* goes without saying. He sighs.

And light is in his bones. He gathers  
every shade of ochre with a touch of blood  
red cinnabar in his own hands. He says

what he needs to say – not a word but sky  
that will open tomorrow as morning, with  
space and time to carry on. He cannot say  
if this is good. But he knows that it is all.

*west of Alanreed, Texas*

*September 2015*



## **after hildegard, seven songs from the symphonia**

I

Suffering wrung from the flesh he wore,  
your word clothed itself in the flesh  
of the first man. God breathed unchained in your  
suffering wrung from the flesh he wore.  
You ordered all that is in your  
heart, created all that is in your word made flesh.  
Suffering wrung from the flesh he wore,  
your word clothed itself in the flesh.

2

Circle, circling, encircling all things  
in one living way three wings: one  
soars, another springs –  
circle, circling, encircling all things.  
From earth, a third flutters everywhere, sings  
praise to you as is due wisdom.  
Circle, circling, encircling all things,  
in one living way, three wings one.

3

In the heart of the divine,  
all that is was known before  
it was, a wonder. When,  
in the heart of the divine,  
god looked a lump of clay in  
the eye and saw all in wonder,  
in the heart of the divine,  
all that is was known before.

4

Shepherd of souls, primal voice  
by which all was created,  
let it be your pleasure now to free us,  
shepherd of souls, primal voice,  
from our misery, from all that ails us,  
from that to which by sin we seem fated,  
shepherd of souls, primal voice,  
by which all was created.

5

Flowing blood that cried out from above when  
all the elements folded themselves,  
trembling, into a voice of lamentation,  
flowing blood that cried out from above when  
the blood of their maker touched them,  
anoint us, ease our weariness,  
flowing blood that cried out from above when  
all the elements folded themselves.

6

We beg you, Father, by your word,  
by which you made us full.  
Now we are in need.  
We beg you, Father, by your word,  
Now may it please you to heed  
our cry, as is fitting, to look on us and not to fail.  
We beg you, Father, by your word,  
by which you made us full.

7

Eternal God, now let it please you to burn  
in love like the love that made us  
when you gave birth to your son.

Eternal God, now let it please you to burn  
as in the primal dawn before all creation,  
and look upon this need that descends on us.

Eternal God, now let it please you to burn  
in love like the love that made us.

*Chicago*

*June 2012*

## **a sign of grace**

Every conversation about the weather  
takes a theological turn. Hot, cold,  
snow, ice – today it's a flooded sewer  
and everywhere the walk is ankle deep.

Small talk at the post office is a litany  
of winter with greenhouse gases  
unspoken. You end it with a proclamation:  
*God is reminding us he's still*

*in charge.* I say *that's sort of reassuring,*  
meaning, as I suppose you don't know,  
that seeing a sign of Providence  
in the pile of little disasters

that make a kingdom of solids liquid  
must be a sign of grace in God's absence.

*Chicago*

*February 2008*



## **proslogion**

Between the business school and  
Frank Lloyd Wright, all the talk  
is of a contest for the best

algorithm, and  
it dawns on me in  
the shadow of Rockefeller

that economists are no more  
interested in money than  
theologians are in God.

It is all about what all mean when  
they say and how to say  
that than which they

think nothing greater can be  
thought. If he were  
alive today,

Anselm, no saint, would eschew  
Divinity. His See would be  
at 58th and Woodlawn,

and he would, I think,  
think nothing  
greater.

*Chicago*  
*October 2014*

## **worship**

High Scholastic theologians  
need phalanxes of Jesuits  
and common priests in every pulpit

to make worlds of believers  
in what they spin where airy towers  
shrug vague worship between Prairie

School museums and Unitarian cathedrals  
named for oil barons. Such worlds  
depend on smoke filled rooms

teeming with congregants certain  
neoliberal sanctuaries transcend  
politics. Smoke and mirrors

with smoke and mirrors, incense  
pleasing to gods of commerce  
who have no time for handmaidens

overshadowed by most high powers  
who should have the good sense to disappear  
with eyes averted when hands change money.

*Chicago*

*March 2008*

## **the old cannot kill the young forever**

wars and wars  
and rumors of wars

one in ten counted  
out of work by a State

where others don't count, wait,  
a vast army in reserve.

but the good news is this:  
old men dream dreams,

daughters prophesy,  
stars triple overnight,

and the old cannot kill the young forever

*Chicago*

*December 2010*

## **dandelions**

*Don't just do something said the Buddha. Stand there.*

*Daniel Berrigan*

Consider the dandelions. They sow  
on wind but do not toil or reap. They spin  
and sway in days of rain, and stand there now,

empty among yellow flowers rising  
out of every broken place where sun  
has found its way to earth this morning.

*Chicago*

*May 2016*



## **memo re a second coming**

to those awaiting the moment  
when they will in rapture  
disappear

It has come and gone

decades ago in a flurry  
of Buddhist monks determined  
to leave a Lutheran church basement  
in Texas cleaner than they found it, cleaner  
than it had ever been.

I invoked Rapture (which was in the air  
there) as easier for my daughter to take in  
than the cold hard fact

that good people doing good things  
disposed of the old shirt  
she called munga  
and clung to almost all the time.

The only thing raptured  
was a security blanket  
left for a moment

in a safe place with a leap of faith.

Your Lexus may spin driverless out of control  
one day when you disappear  
with no explanation,

but god came and came and came  
and found nothing worth carrying away  
but a rag that could remind him of a time  
he dreamed without thinking things  
could go so wrong.

*Chicago*

*August 2007*



οὐκ ἔστιν, οὐ πιμπράσιν, ἀλλὰ παῖς ἐμὴ  
μαινὰς θαῶσαι δεῦρο Κατάνδρα δρομῶ.

## **a love story**

1

A guy shows up with a dog  
after walking all the way from Nineveh,  
and your heart melts, even if he smells a little fishy.

Angel don't mean nothing. Raphael  
shows up in strange places,  
and he's no judge of character.

2

*But what about the dog?*

Some folks say they can judge a man  
by the way a dog takes to him. But this one  
just wanted to get out of town.

Dogs are as bad as angels  
about following anyone  
who doesn't kick or throw stones  
and carries the whiff of a half finished snack.

3

*And why is Sarah crying?*

She had a demon lover  
who killed seven husbands  
to be with her, then her father  
hands her over to this stranger  
who shows up with a dog,  
an angel incognito,

a fishy story about Nineveh  
and his father Tobit,  
and a cure for cataracts.

4

It's hard to tell whether it was the fish or the story,  
but something smelled so bad it drove the demon  
into the wilderness with Raphael nipping at his heels.

Alone at last, Tobias says Let's pray  
and falls asleep. After a long walk  
and a demon lover, ever after  
begins with exhaustion.

*Chicago*

*c. 2012*

## **it might be someone you need to say goodbye to**

Eurydice would be  
the first to tell you  
it's not the turning

the old man objects to,  
else Orpheus would have been  
a pillar of salt a long time ago.

I don't know how many times  
Lot's wife tried to tell him  
any man with a temper  
like that is bad news.

And she had her doubts  
about that Abraham,  
slinking off tight-lipped  
with that boy. And the look

in that child's eyes when they  
came home from the mountains,  
not a word between them.

*He never could remember  
the first boy's name,  
and that ain't right.*

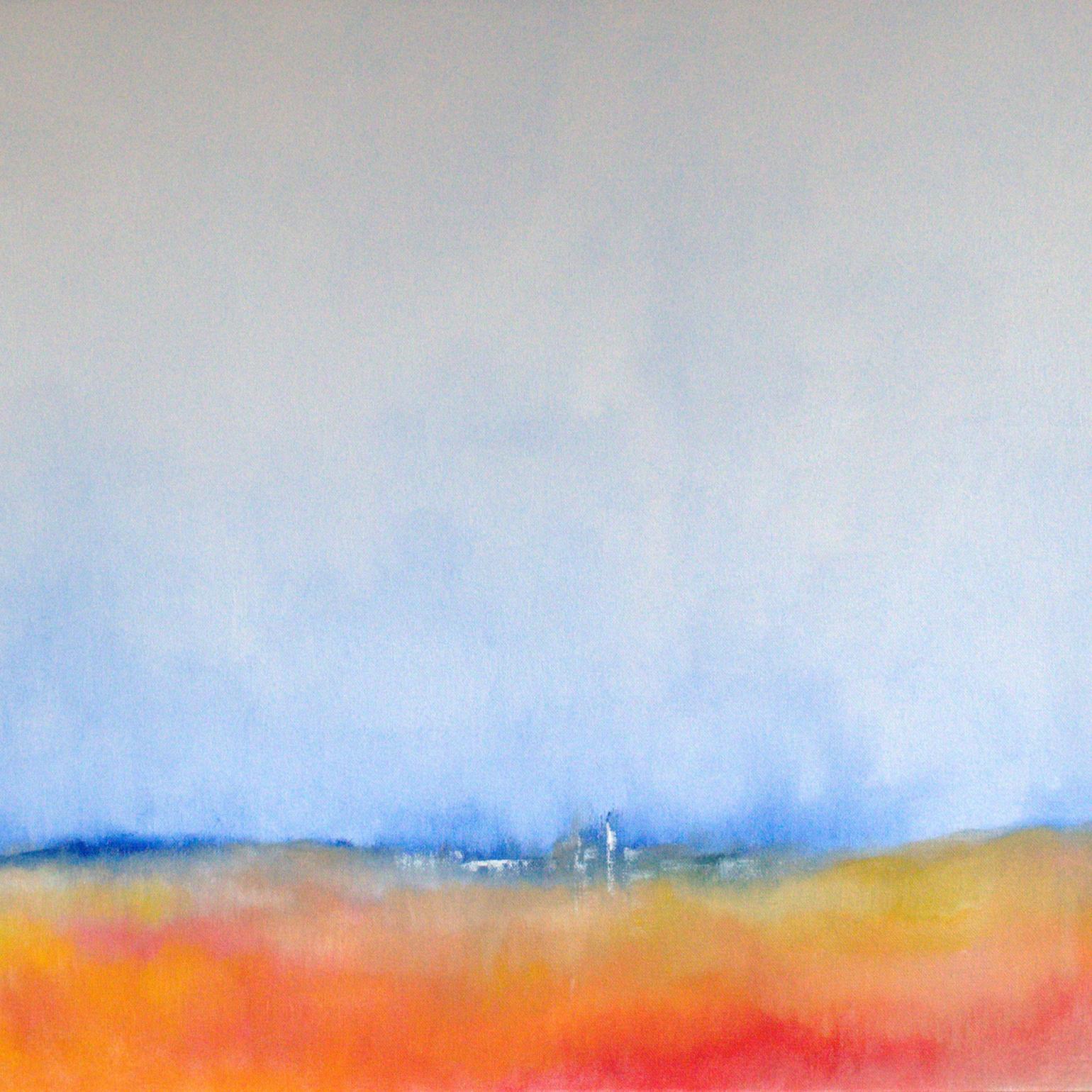
*So what if something might  
be gaining? It might be  
someone you need  
to say goodbye to.*

*And that old man's son, the one  
he always said was the only –  
didn't he come waltzing in  
late shouting "turn"?*

*They really ought to make up their minds.  
But I'm only human. I figure that means  
a hell of a lot of turning before  
I get it right. And I'll be damned  
if I'm going to traipse off without  
so much as a fare-thee-well  
when I leave my friends,  
even the ones that get  
a little carried away  
when they're on the sauce.*

*Too much spirit and we all  
get crazy. You can't  
damn a man for that.*

*Chicago  
September 2011*



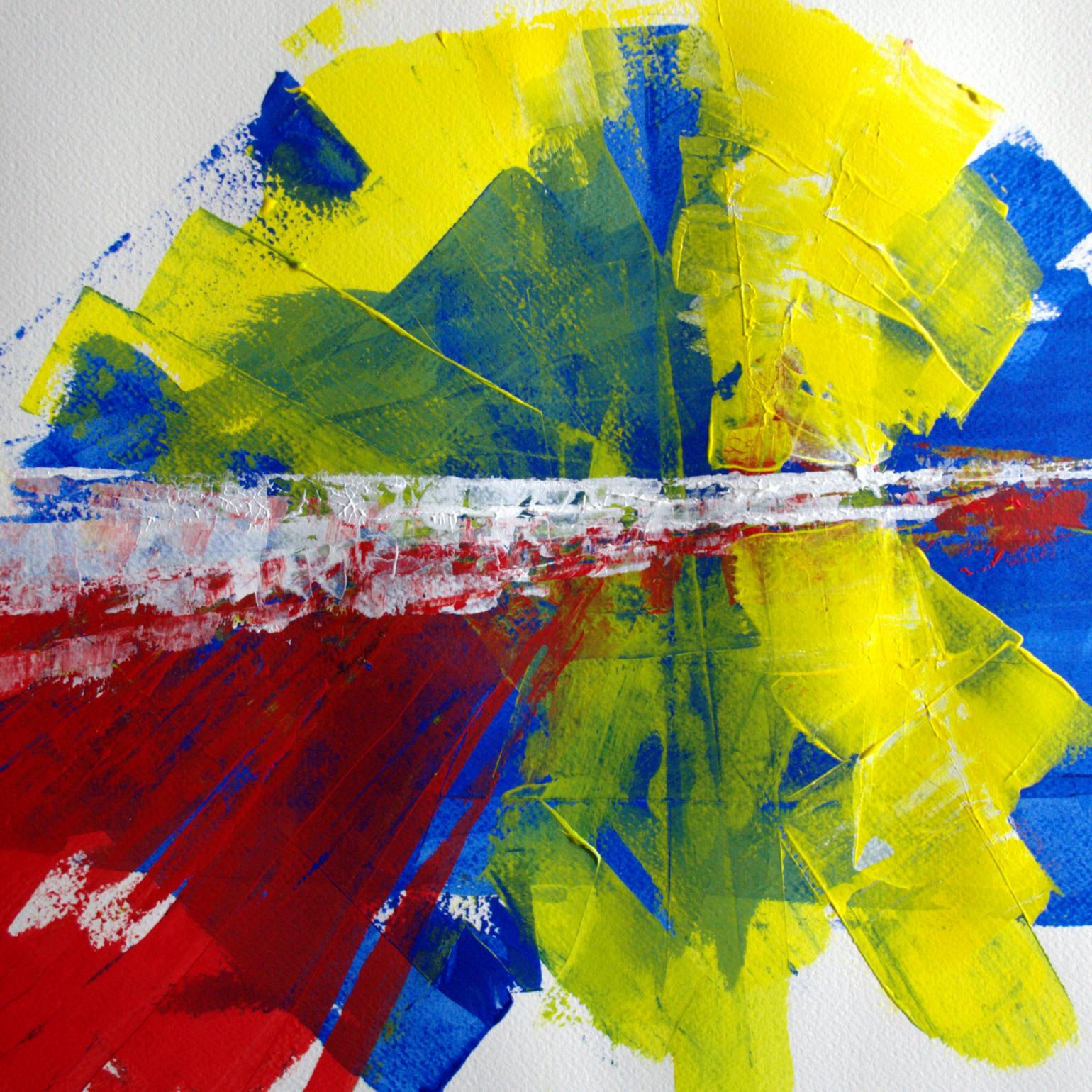
## **Jephthah's Daughter**

People say my father is a hero,  
but I can't say. All I know is he has  
always been at war. The world I know is  
women who do what must be done, and they  
don't much care what people say. I suppose  
a hero must do some other thing in  
some other place. They say he is coming  
home and that I must dance to greet him. But

I say if they must say I must, this must  
not be the world I know. I know fathers  
make promises they can not afford  
to keep. Every knee bows at my father's  
name. But I don't recall him ever saying mine.  
I will dance. There is nothing to remember.

*Chicago*

*c. 2016*



## **the voice of reason in war**

*She had never known a man.*

*Judges 11:39*

She mourned  
because she'd never  
known a man. But her father  
knew her the moment he saw her  
dancing in the street and blamed her  
for his sorrow. God, whose hands are tied,  
was speechless. He gave her  
up for his own foolish words,  
not even Troy, not even a fleet, not  
even an expectation of wind  
on the face of the water,  
an only child for a stupid promise  
to no one in particular.

*Chicago*

*September 2003*

## **A Note from St. Paul (1 Cornithians 14: 7-10)**

*it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing*

*Duke Ellington/Irving Mills*

Even soulless things that bring sound into  
being – say aulos say kithara – how  
would you know the sound of aulos  
or kithara unmarked as making music?  
And if the sound of the trumpet wavers, who  
will prepare to go to war? If your tongues produce  
no clear signs, who will know what you are saying?

So many sounds in the cosmos, nothing soundless.  
But you are talking on thin air until you  
lay your hands on soulless things,  
breathe a breath of life into them,  
give them reason to sing.

*Chicago*

*September 2011*

## **love the one you're with (a commentary on 1 Timothy)**

Whoever wrote those letters to Timothy (not  
Paul you can be certain) was  
a worried man who saw

an Epicurean behind every bush or (worse)  
a Gnostic. And he was pretty sure  
more than a few

had their hands in both.  
People, not things, had gotten  
out of hand because his old master

was not inclined to think ahead  
and let slip some ideas that had to be  
qualified if you were planning to stick around

for a while and didn't want the whole world  
to go to hell in a handbasket. It is  
a struggle for the soul

and, like it or not, this is a matter  
of politics. That is to say  
there is a city

to run, and when  
people get out of line  
it is sometimes necessary

(he thought) to be pitiless: someone  
has to be the adult in the room.

This has me thinking that Jesus (like  
Shelley and so many others)  
died young. The old,

they say, cannot kill the young  
forever. But we  
can die

trying. What we need  
to be is children

now. And  
that bit the king's men rendered love  
of money has me thinking  
what we mean

when we say we  
and just

how radical  
the soul can be.

In the eye of the king's men,  
the root is definite.  
And they

do not give a second thought  
when they say all

evil. Even a worried man  
(like Luke, who knew  
it was Paul who  
invented this  
city) can  
play.

How is this day  
(un)like every other?

He said the Pharisees were lovers  
of money (or so the king's men  
say). But everybody knows  
that is not what they  
loved. It was

what the king's men always  
call the Law, and that is  
a question.

A lover of money is a fool like every  
other lover, and you know what they say  
about a fool and his money.

It is true that as a rule  
every poet is a fool.

So one fool to another: Hell,  
Timothy, if you think you  
are in charge, play

the fool. And take a long look  
at that joke Luke told when  
he misremembered

what the Pharisees loved.  
Don't get too close to money,  
try a little tenderness, and go easy

on capitals. Make yourself  
at home, and never  
forget your neighbor is

the one who needs you (and  
you have been are now  
and ever will be  
the one).

*Chicago*  
*November 2015*

## **a parable of a sower**

Sowers sow in what is  
there, and something  
comes of it.

Birds take it,  
take worms that take it  
slow.

I take what is  
left as one miracle  
after another.

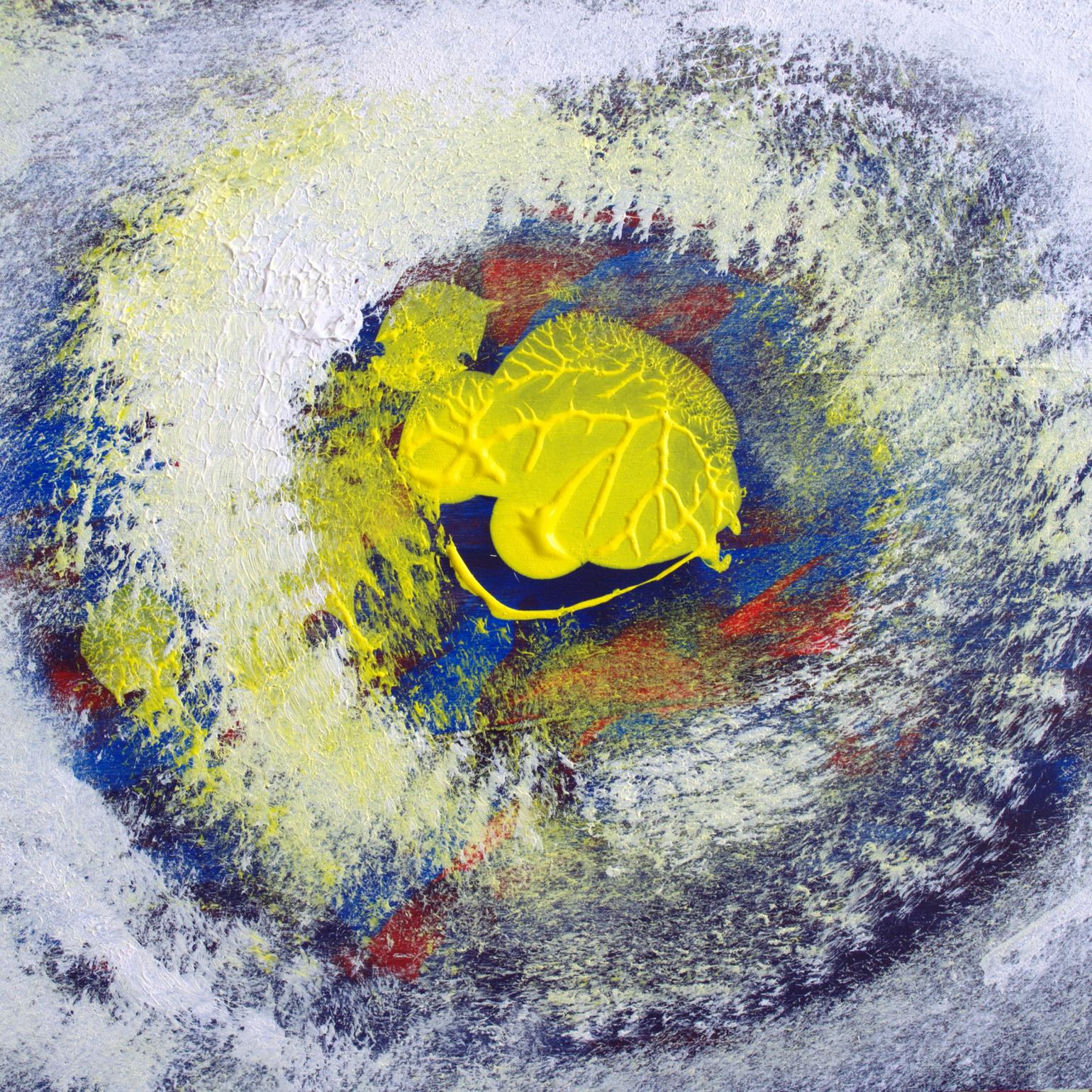
My grandfather,  
who was a magician with tomatoes,  
always threw more than he needed  
into peat pots, thinned seedlings  
before a worm could even  
dream of them, buried  
what came of them  
up to their necks  
and took the worms  
the same way the birds  
did, one at a time. He left  
the birds to the cat who only  
kept them mindful that they were  
people of air who could nibble  
fruit from earth but never  
stay long enough  
to harvest it.

That was left to us, bushel baskets  
full, more than we could use. We needed  
neighbors to take it all in. We needed  
Granny's chow chow, whole  
blocks of women canning. We fried  
green tomatoes when the weather turned.

Birds waited for Spring, when seeds  
would be scattered again. Not one died  
without some god noticing, and  
the ones who remained sang psalms  
for hard clay that could never be broken.

*Chicago*

*March 2006*



## **You don't need a weatherman**

*Oh my name it is nothin'  
My age it means less  
The country I come from  
Is called the Midwest  
Bob Dylan*

Weather in Seattle leads conversation to the country  
we come from, what a difference miles make  
between Chicago and Waukesha in Winter, jobs.

That's why the driver  
is here. *Bad times are worse  
in the Midwest*, he says.

An African accent, but I can't place it,  
and we go no further than Wisconsin  
before politics, the subject of my neighborhood

everywhere these days. *You must be proud*, he says.  
Yes, I say, *of course*, and think not Kenyan. *Not  
happy with appointments, but proud, yes.*

*And we will see. He says everybody  
cheats on their taxes and I say  
it's not taxes. It's war.*

*I'm a Muslim, he says, and I  
think we need more men.  
I'm a pacifist, I say*

*(thinking, now, Nigerian, but also Sudan),  
and I don't think we need another war.  
I'm a pacifist too, he says. And I,*

*then why another war?  
It's the only thing they  
understand. The Taliban*

*is coming back and they  
are selling drugs. There comes  
a time. There comes a time. There*

*comes a time. And I,  
there always comes a time,  
and everyone in every war thinks*

*their time right.* And I  
recall the Russians, and I  
recall the British, their

times. We don't go as far  
as Genghis Khan, but weather  
in Seattle could get us there.

He has a student loan to pay,  
a daughter six years old,  
and he's thinking he may

enlist. It's either that or back to school.  
*School or the army*, I laugh, *a tough choice, but stay*  
*out of the army*, thinking all the while how much alike they are,

how little separates Seattle weather from one more young man  
in arms. The fare is lower than I expect, and I add something  
extra. *Stay out of the army.* And then I add *I guess*

*that's not enough to keep you out, but consider*  
*it my small contribution.* We laugh. And I  
say I'll be back

in two years to pick  
this conversation up again  
if some war someone thinks  
good has not taken him by then.

*Seattle*

*February 2009*



## **on the militarization of everything**

*I cud feel some thing growing in me it wer like a grean sea surging in me it wer saying, LOSE IT.  
Saying, LET GO. Saying, THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER.*

*There come in to my mynd then music or the idear of music I dont know what it wer if I try to  
hear it now I cant only I know I heard it then. It wer as much colours as it wer souns only if I try to see  
the colours now I cant. The souns and the colours they be come a moving and I thot I cud move with it.*

*Russell Hoban, Riddley Walker*

I

*Sign says a police officer  
shouldn't look like a soldier.*

And what should a soldier look like?

*You must be mad, said the Cat,  
or you wouldn't have come here.*

Yes. Like that.

2

Where there are soldiers,  
something has gone  
wrong, and there  
are soldiers

everywhere.

3

If a soldier does not  
look as out of place as  
every one of us, we

most certainly are.

4

*Which way you ought to go  
from here, said the Cat, depends  
a great deal on where you want to get to.*

Another Cat said power  
comes from the barrel of a gun,  
which sounds as American as cherry pie,  
as American as Omaha, as American

as the shining path this city  
on a hill has made.

5

Not long after one of the few instances of a young black man being shot on the street in the middle of America deemed newsworthy, a comment appeared on the BBC online under an account of the incident, suggesting that America has a gun problem: *if I carried a gun, I'd be dead or in prison, because I am occasionally drunk and sometimes angry.*

An American reader replied: *There's no need to worry, because most of the people who carry guns in America are hunters. It's only the criminals you have to be concerned about.*

The Pew Research Center might consider asking on its next survey which category contains the police, tracking how the responses of the hunted differ from those of the hunters.

6

As I watched five adults on bicycles ride abreast northbound on a street marked one way southbound, the horn blaring behind me reminded me of the precipitating incident on the edge of St. Louis. Coming up behind the five on an eastbound street after going around the block, I watched them veer across traffic and continue north on the sidewalk.

They were not young Black men, so no arrests were made, no shots were fired.

7

Gentlemen, the first of our Daley mayors said,  
*the policeman is not here to create disorder.*  
*The policeman is here to preserve disorder.*

This was not a malapropism. It was  
a rare moment of public lucidity.

8

*Strength grows old. This is not the way.*  
*What is not the way ends early.*

*Where an army marches,*  
*thorns spring up.*

*The onlyest power is no power.*

Chicago

September 2014



## Three Articles

*As sin is nothing, let it nowhere be.*

*John Donne, A Litany*

I

Nothing but this  
godforsaken  
red earth blue sky  
shrouded dry  
now. I believe you  
might have spit on dust once  
to make something of it  
in passing. But  
nothing lasts.  
I'd like to see you  
do it again.

II

Dying goes without saying.  
You might say  
it's just one  
of those things

dust dry waiting  
for a sign of rain, hoping  
for a sign of life after.

III

Wonder  
what spirit  
dwells in this mud  
house after the storm passes.

*Chicago*  
*August 2011*

## **Credo**

Being a father and having known a few whose hearts I believe were in the right place to be lifted even when everything was wrong, I can believe whatever it is we think we mean when we say god could be like that: nothing but care for the children he has been led to believe he had some part in bringing to be when he can remember having nothing of the kind in mind (only loneliness) and staggered when they seem to think the world of him, to think he has some kind of power. I have no trouble understanding a father shouting burn it down when his child is dead and there is nothing he can do. I suppose whatever it is we mean by god could have made heaven and earth the way a father is said to make a child, and I know no better reason to believe the only power is no power. It comes as no surprise when the old man speaks of an only to an old friend he knows has two. These things slip one's mind when one is preoccupied with sacrifice, and that, they say, is a sign of age, to be expected in one we call the ancient of days.

And being a son and having known a few whose hearts I believe were in the right place to be lifted when they broke their mothers', when they did not do what they knew they should, when they did what they knew they shouldn't, when they had no idea what they should, what they were, what they had done, I can believe

whatever it is we mean when we say god is that too: dying young turning to friends and lovers and mothers and asking them to turn and care for one another before turning, having nothing else to do, and giving up the ghost.

Having never been a mother, I can only imagine what it is to be one whose flesh becomes an other. Having known a few whose hearts I think were in the right place to be lifted when they watched their children dying slowly knowing there was nothing they could do, I believe I can take their word when they have no words but silence because there is no word and believe whatever it is we mean when we say god is that too. And having lived in cities, I know what it is to weep on drawing near, and I believe whatever it is we mean when we say god must weep at the sight of ours. I have lived through enough winters to believe in spring even when there is no sign of it, and that reminds me what it is to wait, though there is no power in it, and I believe that whatever we mean when we say god is that too. And that, I believe, is where we begin, like gods weeping at the sight of cities we cannot imagine we made, in crowds of strangers who are our mothers and our sisters and our brothers turning, waiting for the moment to begin again.

*Chicago*

*December 2014*



ιδών την πόλιν έκλαυσεν

Steven Schrodar  
2019

## **like water**

Wind music never stops  
here if there is a chime  
to catch it, perpetual  
motion frozen the way  
a bird sings four notes  
over and over and over  
again or uses the sharp edge  
of a thunderstorm before  
it breaks to tread this  
restless atmosphere like water  
where water is a precious thing,  
the closest thing to standing  
still a dustbowl can imagine.

And here we sit in it  
on your back porch barely  
more than a week after  
you almost died talking  
about where you were  
in that time you lost.  
You've forgotten the vent,  
seem surprised that every organ  
stuttered toward stopping

while you slept until  
they came back one after  
the other ready for another  
go, and you said

next time you decided  
to go on vacation  
you'd go to Hawaii. As if  
you'd decided. And you think  
the place must have been  
some in between like limbo  
you stumbled into. Then  
you turn to some old conversation  
in a Bible class about the age  
people would go back to if they could  
go back and they mostly say  
seventeen and we both think that odd.  
You say sixty, and I think

that is an age I could go back to  
only if I could turn time around  
and grow old in reverse.  
But I wouldn't, because  
what happens next is always  
so interesting I wouldn't want to

miss it doing something  
twice that happened before  
even if I could and you remember  
your English grandfather  
talking about worlds within worlds  
and stretching your hand through  
someone else's universe –

causing a thunderstorm in it  
I suppose and some bird  
to tread the atmosphere  
on the edge of it like water.  
And I wander off into  
Hugh Everett, Bryce DeWitt,  
Schrödinger's cat, Slackers,  
Leibniz, Anne Conway, and, still,  
wind music never stops but it's all  
an instant even when you think  
some river carries you while  
you turn to live life backward  
hoping you can understand it forward.

*Amarillo, Texas*  
*May 2009*

## **like a song**

My mother was born on the West Texas  
edge of East Texas in one of those small  
settlements where people passing through  
from one life to another stopped because  
they'd had enough and got a mind to stay.  
The stars were so bright there they  
stayed with you seems like forever,  
like a song you can't get out of your head,  
and she could hear it her whole life.

Her mother taught me that strength has nothing to do  
with size and next to nothing to do with power  
and Mom learned that from her too.  
Granny could coax any flower  
to bloom anywhere because she called  
every single one by name, and all  
she had to do was say kittykitty  
to have every cat in earshot at her feet  
waiting for something good, same  
as her garden. Mom always told me  
her mother's father was born  
within the sound of Bow Bells  
and he talked to her about parallel

universes when she was a little girl, told her  
if you stretched out your arm you might be reaching  
right through someone in the universe next door.  
She never forgot this, and it gave her children  
room to grow. Her father saw his father die  
when he was four, killed when his horse stumbled  
and rolled over him. He taught me to be at home  
wherever you are but never let yourself be stuck  
and he was always moving, like a river, even  
when he settled down. He went where  
the work was, and Granny made a home  
for him and for my mother and her brother  
wherever they perched for a moment  
here or there before flying again.

My mother was baptized in a river in Mississippi  
because the water had to be living,  
and she was old enough to remember  
the preacher holding her head under three times,  
like the old Hank Williams song, but (thankyoujesus)  
she came up three times too – dying enough  
to see life whole and know it is a gift.

She got a diploma from a high school in Wichita Falls,  
but she graduated from the school of that long flight

with her mother and her father and her brother  
and always liked the school in Oklahoma where they  
let her take two English classes instead of English and math  
best. It made her mad when they made her take just one  
English then summer algebra in Wichita Falls.

She missed a year of school somewhere along the line  
and almost died, but she never dwelt on that. We  
didn't learn about her failing kidneys until  
she had another brush with death years later.  
My mother had a brother who she loved  
because he got the joke and was always ready  
to share it with anyone anywhere, just like Grandpa.

I have no idea what church Mom  
and Dad were married in, but I know  
they went to hear Gene Krupa on their first date,  
and I remember driving them downtown in Amarillo  
to hear Tony Bennett when Dad was dying.  
Mom went to church with Dad and  
brought me and my sisters along, and  
that meant being Lutheran.  
But she always said  
the Baptists had better songs.

Mom was a bookkeeper, but she was also  
a keeper of books. I often wondered if all that time  
she spent working with numbers was a demonstration  
that she really hadn't needed that summer math class. She  
could keep books with her eyes closed. But she  
read books eyes wide open and was known  
among librarians for the big bags full she carried home.  
She knew books were wings and encouraged her children to fly.

She was Postmaster at Boys Ranch, and  
she was a quilt maker and she was a dress maker  
and she was a hospice volunteer. And she loved to hear  
her pastor go on about some Greek word in Bible study and  
to hear the organ play in church on Sunday and to sit with her dogs  
and her cats and her books and to watch the world go by  
and she could arrange a beautiful bouquet from  
even the most forlorn armful of flowers.

I remember hours passing with one of us  
sitting at the kitchen counter while the other cooked  
and how those roles reversed as time went by and how she saw  
right through politics to the heart of the matter  
and how her heart was as good as they come  
and how it carried us then and carries us  
now no matter the distance doubled

and doubled again by a dance of death  
that does not end and I can see stars like a song  
I can't get out of my head and still the universe dances  
as though our lives depended on it, as though we had a mind  
to stay and I can hear her say "just put me in a cardboard box and  
float me down the river," and the river flows as every river  
flows into the sea and the sea does not overflow  
and time is not the river but the sea

flowing like a city,  
like a song.

*Chicago*

*January 2021*



## images

cover: the absolute absence of god | acrylic on canvas | 24 x 36 inches | 2017

page 4: absence | watercolor on rice paper | 15 x 12 inches | 2011

page 10: revolutionary patience | acrylic and watercolor on paper | 24 x 18 inches | 2018

page 16: a gift of fire | oil on canvas | 20 x 20 inches | 2017

page 22: via crucis | oil on canvas | 36 x 24 inches | 2016

page 28: i thirst | acrylic on birch panel | 12 x 9 inches | 2020

page 31: a gift of fire: Cassandra | watercolor and ink on paper | 20 x 14 inches | 2018

page 37: cities of the plain 1: Lot's wife | oil on canvas | 24 x 36 inches | 2014

page 39: Jephthah's daughter | acrylic on paper | 14 x 20 inches | 2018

page 49: corona 9 | acrylic on birch panel | 12 x 9 inches | 2020

page 54: power comes from everywhere | acrylic on birch panel | 12 x 9 inches | 2020

page 59: it is finished | acrylic on birch panel | 12 x 9 inches | 2020

page 64: seeing the city | acrylic on canvas | 24 x 36 inches | 2019

page 73: the arc between two deaths 5 | ink and watercolor on handmade paper | 14 x 11 inches | 2017



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



we conspire  
to make a we of us  
by repeating  
what we have not done  
in unison. still

we love our neighbors  
as ourselves only  
in those dark intervals  
when, hearing what we are  
saying, we hardly love ourselves

at all

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