



sheltering in place

steven schroeder

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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder

cover: a gift of fire: spring, acrylic on birch panel, 6x6 inches [2020]



sheltering in place | acrylic on birch panel | 6x6 inches | 2020

a likely suspect

Because crows move in murders, they know
a likely suspect when they see one.
They sense lives taken the way we smell
rain on wind after a long dry spell.
On a gray day after wet snow, they
perch out of sight in the highest branches,
blanket the neighborhood with their absence,
cry from treetops like mourners keening
when wingless creatures on two feet make tracks.

They are in flight even when
they strut on the ground, looking askance
at humans passing, wondering out loud
what it is like to be so weighty
one can never fly alone.

Chicago
24 February 2020

in early March

Between the last leaf bleached by time and sun
on the longest finger of the raised hand
of a tree planted years ago in a stand
to fill the void left by a generation
lost to plague and the great mass of them
turning to earth below, the whole of nature
waits for the only act that matters,
falling out of place in a time someone
is bound to find inconvenient.

This last leaf is a being capable
of action for no reason other than
the social space between the tree's finger
and the ground beneath its feet, where, in time,
a flower out of place will rise with no idea of distance.

Chicago
11 March 2020



the masses | acrylic on paper | 14x20 inches | 2020

a hundred times a hundred

for Sou Vai Keng

A flower out of place is a weed
in the common tongue,
and that envelops every one
I have ever loved –

daffodils that blurred the lines
my father drew for them,

purple flags that inched across
the bar ditch from the beds where
my granny planted them,

Johnsongrass and bindweed
my grandpa pulled by hand
from his tomato patch
but left untouched
along the fence in back,

pincushion cactus singing
so long it's been good to know you
in the dry grass behind the house on Faulkner,
riots of dandelions in suburban lawns,

violets that rise everywhere
with snowdrops come Spring,
thistles and knapweed twining
through concertina wire around sites
the nouveaux riches will come to occupy,

lupines oblivious to every fence
flaming across some prairie
between this that and the other field,
infinite variations on the very idea of daisy,

every lone petunia that finds a way
through a crack in the pavement
and bursts into impossible purple,

and on and on and on until there are
a hundred times a hundred flowers blooming.

Chicago
18 March 2020

Chicago, the first day of the stay at home order

Still, it is spring,
and a walk is on the list
of acceptable reasons to leave the house.

I pause at the end of the block
to watch the sun rise over the lake
at my left hand. At my right, a mirror
image on the facade of a building

named for the very model
of a modern attorney general,

who served in an unelected administration
just before we began in earnest
to dismantle what we

thought beneath a nation
of high wire walkers
too big to fall.

Nobody but nobodies
fall, and nobody
knows better

than we who live around here
that nobody wants nobody nobody sent.

This city sleeps, but it is ready to rise
this morning. And there is not
silence but an unsettling

soundlessness in that. They say we
are at war, and we know what that means

for a city under siege.
We are waiting
for the fire.

Midway through my walk,
I hear the second woodpecker
of spring. The birds, like dolphins
in Italy, are taking advantage
of our withdrawal.

They are masters of the art of war.
A cop on the Midway watches
as I pass, and I turn
toward home.

And life goes on.

Chicago
22 March 2020

The Meaning of Aphrodite

[Sappho's] vision rests on important assumptions about beauty in things and the possibility of empathy and attraction between persons as being, in a sense, "all we've got."

*- Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite**

I
they say
a watched pot
never boils

but I
put that
to the test

when I was twelve
because I wanted to see
the instant

the calm surface
rolled and shattered
and a new state

burst
all at once
out of the foam

like Aphrodite
right before
my eyes

2

so I know
it is not
so

they say
democracy
is in the streets

but seeing Chicago
streets and streets
in cities everywhere

empty
all at once I
think of Aphrodite

and wait for
the other shoe
to drop.

Chicago
29 March 2020

no horizon

fog crept in last night
to soften hard edges and
hold our vision close

to where we are now.
this morning it embraces
sunlight, lays it down

gently so we can
see the ground beneath our feet
and no horizon

Chicago
2 April 2020



in a landscape: morning fog | acrylic on birch panel | 12x9 inches | 2020

masks

between you and me,
there's always something.

and we never know
what it stops us breathing,

in or out, when we
conspire in public places.

Chicago
5 April 2020

to touch each other with our eyes

Two crows take it all in, say nothing
but move on as I pass, beneath them.

Cardinals, out of sight, sing Spring,
and squills lie low as it passes,

as they do when it is no longer new.
Gulls gather on the grass in the space

that divides the boulevard that was once
the midway of an exposition of the whole

world. After ten thousand days, we might begin
to learn to touch each other with our eyes

and make a place for life that advances
when we retreat.

Sun has risen by the time I circle back,
and one heron passes above me,

gliding westward, silent,
intent on something I cannot see.

Chicago
19 April 2020

from death to death

we are children
playing at war
while life dances
from death to death,
dying to go on

Chicago
19 April 2020

Earth Day 2020

Days when the presence of the crows
consists in their not being
here make me wonder.

These days have always been signs
of weather like clouds or a halo
around the moon.

Like the color of the sky.
Crows know better than we
when to shelter in place and when

to fly.
Weather,
like politics, is

local. But everybody knows
what butterfly wings
here today mean

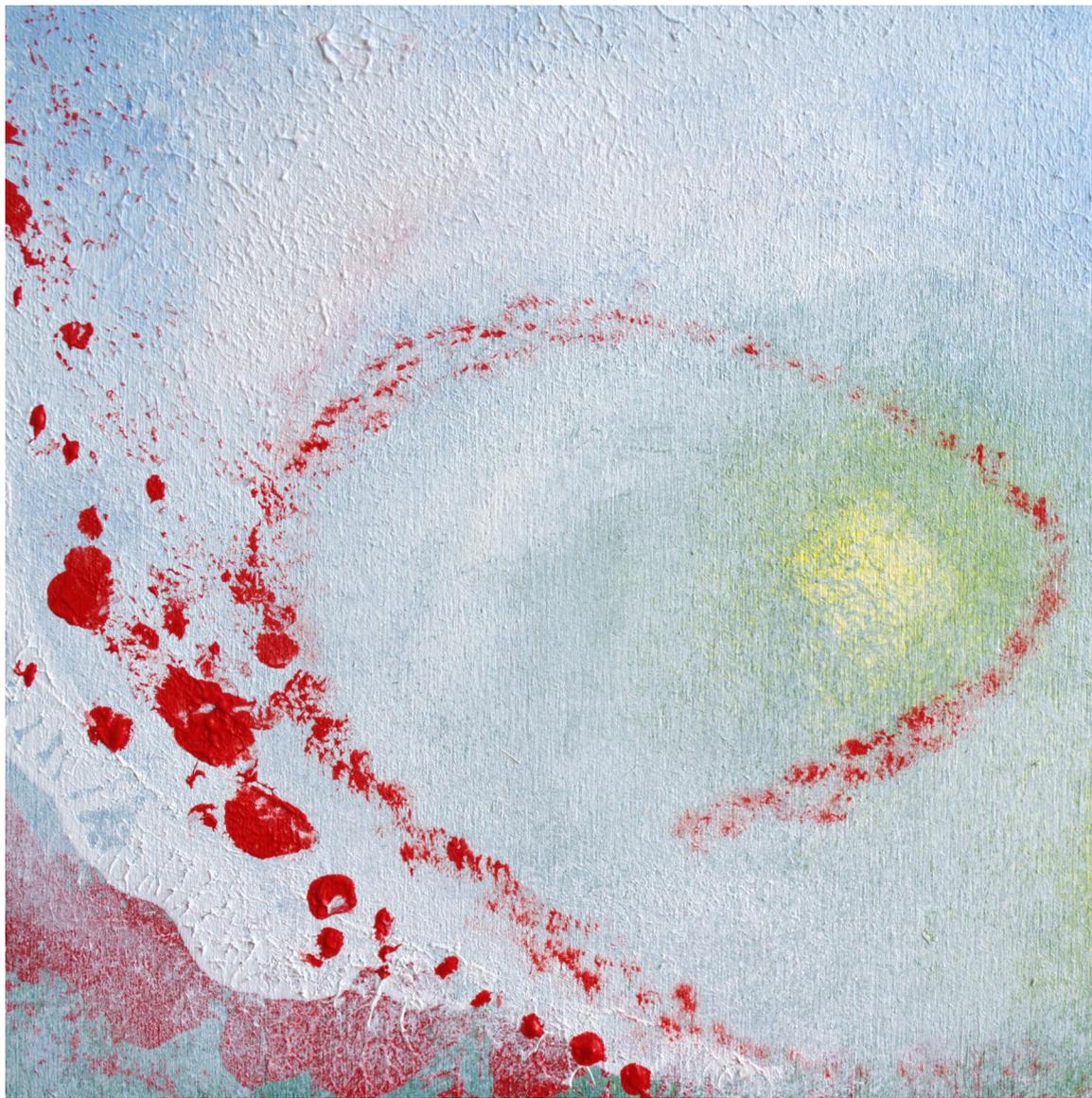
for Tokyo tomorrow.
It goes, like the crows,
without saying.

Chicago
22 April 2020

essential workers

High in a tree at the end of the block
a squirrel is airing a list of complaints.
There is a proper murder of crows in
the fog this morning, and they are calling
over the two tone song of chickadees
and the garbage trucks in every alley
for the first time in days. A rabbit crosses
the walk in front of me coming and going.
Sunrise is broken into ten thousand
pieces that settle through thick fog on
workers in hard hats and yellow vests
just beginning to replace cobblestones
in a walk that will be essential when
the city, sleeping now, rises again.

Chicago
24 April 2020



the fog of war | acrylic on birch panel | 8x8 inches | 2020

political animals

Two crows settle in a tree a few steps ahead of me, silent. As I turn, one flies, calling, to a tree near the next corner on the route I follow almost every morning near sunrise. Four more skim the grassy expanse beside me, dancing close to earth, wings working the way they do when crows are on the edge of earthbound, too low to be lifted on currents that can carry them, rising. As I turn again, all six fly, sing all clear together.

Later, a neighbor writes that he saw a coyote running on 51st Street near Dorchester, a mile north of my morning walk, pursued by four crows. I wonder if there were two more, one at each turn, the same six who kept me in line this morning.

Crows are sentinels, and they know a predator when they see one.

And coyotes, unlike humans, know
when they have met their match.

Chicago
28 April 2020

coyote

When a coyote steps out of the neighbors' back yard at sunrise, just about the time their sprinkler comes on every morning, rain or shine, our eyes meet the way eyes do in cities, not face to face but edge to edge, tangents of curves that glance off each other in passing. I imagine she is a mother with pups waiting and essential work to do.

I have no idea what she imagines me to be. We are both on the way, and every other wholly other is incidental music. But the sideways glance without a word is a sacrament, the real presence of predators who have no reason to meet on common ground.

At first glance, she is a dog off the leash and only becomes what she is as she passes into what she was while I compose myself, as I do, walking. And I become what I am as I pass into her memory – a play in two acts, not a word between them.

Chicago
7 May 2020

the city lies

Sun and moon are face to face this morning,
each on their own horizon. The city
lies between them. A murder of crows flies
low, calling, mirrors their distance but not
their silence. There comes a time when silence...

But not today. Today it is tsimtsum,
and the calling of the crows is
the making of the world.

Chicago
9 May 2020

that is all

we call it new
when we become
aware it has
affected us

not what it is
but what we mean
when we say we.

what we think we
know. what we do.
what we do not

do. what we think we
do. what we think we

must. drawing a line here
and there between this
and that. like calling
a place we, lost, stumble
upon new, thinking we are where
no one has been, thinking nothing
of who or what is there, declaring it empty

when we name it, making ourselves
big as the world to satisfy our hunger.
and when we have consumed it,

we move on.
and that is all.

Chicago
22 May 2020

this is not the time

It is not raining, but I can taste the rain
before the mass of lilacs at the first turn
on my morning walk floods my senses,
bleeds into peonies that line the way
to a stand of purple flags on
a corner where two paths cross.

This is not the time of a new virus
or an old buffoon who occupies
a seat of power that amplifies his voice
until it threatens to infect the entire planet.
It is a time in which you and I are
fragments of a life that was
before and will be after.

Birds I cannot see nourish me
with song, cardinals trilling
call and response, gold crowned
sparrows, black capped chickadees,
a lone crow passing whose part today
is a rest between notes, silence
without which there would be no song.
I pass a forest of dandelions rising, delicate
flowers lighter than air that are no more
out of place in this time than you or I.

As I near the end, someone sits in a big car
behind dark windows, radio drowning
every silence and every other sound.

I contemplate the bigness of our littleness,
our craving to be so big there is no room
for sister death. And I recall that this is not
the time of a new virus or an old buffoon
who sits in a seat of power that
amplifies his voice until it threatens
to infect the whole world. It is time,
and we are less than a moment
in a life that was before and will be
after, and it tastes like rain.

Chicago
23 May 2020

as if it were

Fog settles the morning after
heavy rain where grass dips, lies
low to soften the blow where
a screech of gulls gathers
as if it were a body of water.

Chicago
24 May 2020

uprisings

Last night's thunderstorms stir
uprisings of mushrooms
under the trees this morning.

Cities of ants mind the gaps.
Geese up to their necks
in dandelions attend to the call

and response of crows.
To mark the edge of that scene,
a crow flies just above my head, calling,

lands on a low branch as I duck under it. I
laugh in response, happy to be

a witness to this pentecost,
this whole of nature full of life.

Chicago
28 May 2020

a gift of robins

A screech of gulls
grazes in dandelion hay
where mowers passed yesterday.

Three crows hover before they
settle in low branches,
calling. Three

more and three again
between two turns
in the path

around the field where
gulls are making hay
with something

that was not visible when
dandelions stood tall.

Two more crows with stories
to tell balance on a bench
to make the choir

whole. And, having counted
eleven, I don't know
if it is one murder

or four or
a parliament called
to address a riot of robins.

Chickadees join every choir,
and cardinals have been
singing arias apart

together since day one. A robin
in the middle of the walk
does what robins do,

doubles in size and hops toward me, waiting,
unafraid, for the perfect moment
to fly, a gift of robins.

Chicago
4 June 2020

in a glass darkly

Two crows and six squirrels have taken the street
by the time I step out just before sunrise
but have not yet worked out how to share it
or who will speak for the sky when their feet are on the ground.

A cardinal at the top of the lamppost
on the corner is warming up for
a performance that will be in
full swing by the time I

circle back toward home –
a composition for sun and moon
and birds and trucks hauling off what we
have discarded, hauling in what we believe we

cannot live without. Moon still
almost full is setting as the sun is
rising, just visible over the lake between
old buildings but blindingly clear in the glass

north faces of new buildings that catch the light
glancing bright before my eyes. Most of what
we see we see in a glass darkly, and
even that is enough to leave me

wondering whether I am a blind seer
or simply blind, struck dumb
by the gift of prophecy in
a crossroad dealing

with devils we think we
know and devils we know
we don't.

Chicago
8 June 2020

small

An old crow scolds but cedes the sidewalk
as I pass at sunrise, settles in a low branch
for the time being. Moments later, I
turn a corner and there are half a dozen
pretending to be earthbound until I am
upon them. Then they fly, laughing raucously
as they perch in trees that line the walk. I laugh too,

quietly, thinking how small I must seem
to beings at home on earth and in the sky

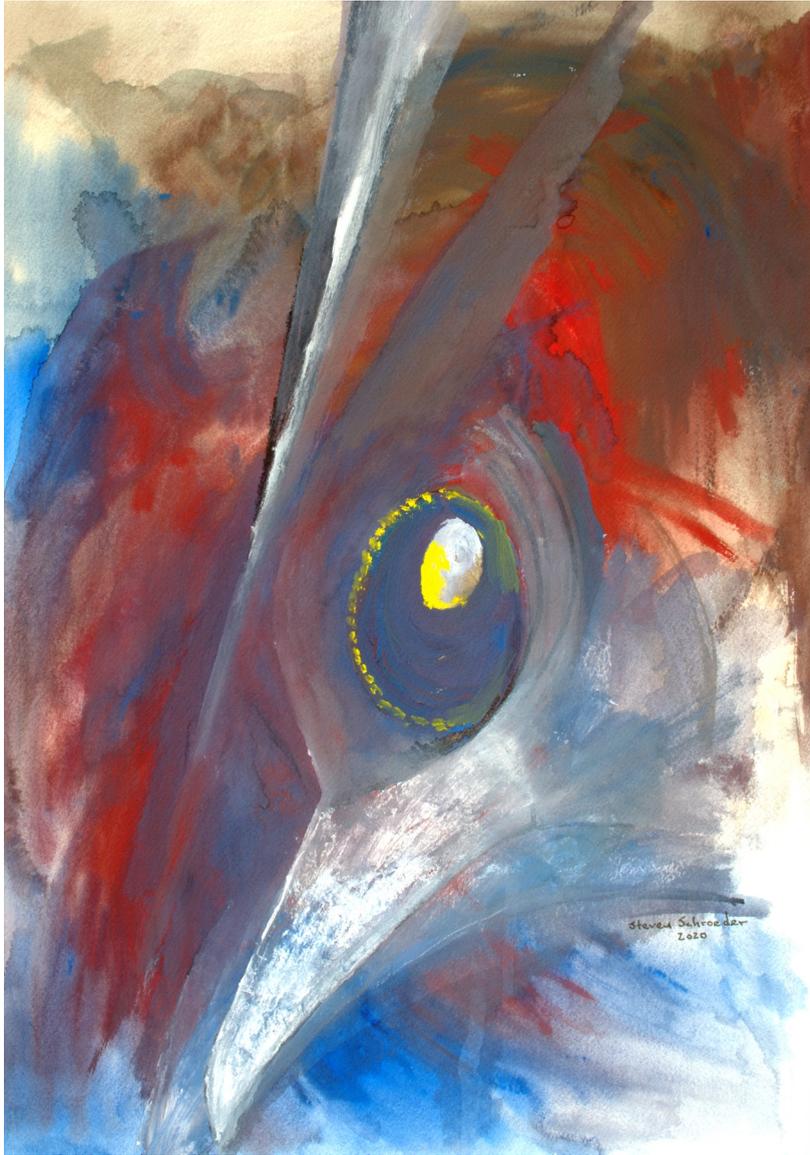
and in between. I keep my feet on the ground.
I have had decades to learn
to be old, but still

it has surprised me by demanding
that I be present by my absence.

“Chicago” plays in my head
as I walk before the city
rises. “It’s dying...

to get better.”

Chicago
19 June 2020



as the crow flies | watercolor, acrylic, and ink on paper | 14x20 inches | 2020

clinamen

for Alan Berecka

We have been dancing about a poem
you wrote, two old men chanting call and response
in the presence of something bigger than
both of us about what is

filling the streets,
seeing what we can
get our hands on
and saying that is all.

We say pain. We
say anger. We
say memory. We
say more than we can

know. But, between you and me,
we say nothing but what is
always in every street,
even the empty one

I walk today at sunrise, broken
bodies falling in uncertain times
in uncertain places, colliding
into universes we inhabit
with a vague sense

that there has to be something
on the tip of our tongue
we have forgotten to say.

Chicago
21 June 2020

democracy is in the streets

At sunrise she looks like a city
sleeping. Squirrel slips from sky
to earth on a ladder of maple
branches, rises again as I
pass – no mask, two arm's lengths,
just like the doctor ordered,
then back to earth.

A guard on the sidewalk talks to someone
who is not there, two voices, one body, distracted.

Robins stand their ground because
their memory is long. They still recall
how earth shook when they walked
and have wings to prove they
can tower over it.

A tiny bird whose name I do not know
moves out of my way but does not fly.
Crows are out of sight today,
but I can hear them calling.

Traffic flows like a river, sounds like water
rushing over rocks. Across the street
from a chapel named for some Rockefeller,
a woman in a yellow vest steps out of a truck,
laughs and greets an other I cannot see. A man
and a dog pass, and there is another man
alone, wearing a mask, going
somewhere in a hurry.

Squirrel is at the top of the ladder,
and robin is singing with chickadees
and a distant cardinal when I return. Still,
she looks like a city waiting for the sun to rise.

Chicago
25 June 2020

talking the talk

Farmer John Writes Is the Weather Your Friend ?

-Angelic Organics Farm News, Week 1, June 23rd – 27th, 2020

Gull cry just before dawn
sounds like a child,
and there is no going back

to sleep. At first light,
air is already
afternoon heavy.

Squirrels are on the ground
among branches that came down
in the storm last night.

I wonder if they are
surveying the damage
or contemplating a world

that turns upside down
every time a cloud bursts
the way we do every time

it dawns on us
how much weather
can change everybody

without saying a word.
Robin walks beside me, silent
for a time, then flies,

talking the talk the way
birds do. You see what I'm saying?

Chicago
27 June 2020



the cold light of day | acrylic on paper | 14x20 inches | 2020

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

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bodies falling in uncertain times
in uncertain places, colliding
into universes we inhabit
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stevenschroeder.org

