An abstract painting with a textured, woven fabric-like surface. The upper portion features a soft, hazy blue horizon line against a pale, greenish-blue background. The lower portion is dominated by vertical, expressive brushstrokes in shades of white and light beige, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is minimalist and evocative.

the fleeting possibility of otherwise
poems and fragments, 2004-2013: volume six
steven schroeder

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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder

the fleeting possibility of otherwise is the sixth 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 sixth of ten notebooks and were drafted between June 2007 and June 2008. 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. Many of the poems in part two are included in *a dim sum of the day before*, published by Ink Brush Press in 2010. In many cases, the poems in that collection were woven from shorter poems that stand on their own here. I hope seeing them in their original form in the order in which they were composed may shed some light on the earlier publication.

All the images (including both front and back covers) are details from “old souls” (oil on canvas, 2019).

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

Chicago
June 2022

I
thank you for your service



25 June 2007

Every time someone who's fought in some war
walks into some conversation, there is
a moment of silence while tears rise
and the rest mumble in unison
thank you for your service.

I save my tears for the senseless waste of war
and thank you for your service if you have never been there.

29 June 2007

When I learned that George W. Bush dreams of Cuba
after the good Lord takes Fidel home, I drifted off
into dreamwork and contemplated how the fantasy life
of one Führer or another has been making the whole damn world
miserable longer than I can remember. It's one more instance of the bipartisan
consensus on foreign policy – one mobster after another until dubya,
desperate, goes to the fuckin' top dog. As I said
to my eighty something father in law when he answered
“How are you?” with “I'm on my way out”: *We're all
on our way out*. That's why Fidel laughs. He's been family all along
and he knows bullies come and go and all of us
when we go we go, God or no, and we
will leave the soul of a soulless world, the cry
of an oppressed people, taking whatever
opiate we can get our hands on if it
hurts enough.

1 July 2007

Mary, Queen of China

Li Matou sought no favor but a place
to study sacred words with those
who knew where to find them. He did not mean
to draw a crowd, but there are always Inquisitors who take note of words
traded in languages they do not quite
understand; and they are as frightened by
a patient Jesuit who has learned to listen as by a friar
who accepts a sentence of silence as a gift. Unspoken,
words get out of hand, give peasants ideas
about justice that the Church would prefer to see
in the capable hands of more orderly States
that keep the rabble
in line, trains running on time, leave souls
to the hands of experts. What
does a New Jerusalem have to
do with politics?
Every State wants something
to kill the pain.
Everyone who has
something to sell wants a key to the
market. As regards opium, users always
know who's dealing, dealers always
recognize a man they can work with,
and nobody really wants a war.

1 July 2007

1

Rest now in the light of friends
who have held you in light and will hold you as long as
friends remain, as long as
they make worlds of words.
No endless struggle against
ends you've known in every beginning so far. No
restless desire to go on
past going on. Rest now.

2

In the light of this passing we embrace
absence, we embrace
this strange world that remains where you are
no more. Everyone who passes leaves
a world new to those who remain.

3

When we speak of you,
you will rise in
the world of words
where we have been friends.

4

And the children of our children will be light, as the hope we leave them
will rise and say no war, will
rise on sister
death, not war
after war.

5

Anger, goddess, sing
righteous anger, not
the senseless sacrifice
of every war.

3 July 2007

Bee opens
blossoms
one by one
while sun
looks on.

Robins sing this this
this is mine
on every corner.

Pigeons get all the attention
of children throwing crumbs
in the courtyard.

For sparrow, it is
all about timing,
waiting for an opening

to snatch something
small enough to carry.

Almost five decades
have taught me nothing
to speak of

but I know
this: patriots
always

make war with a heavy heart

so, for peace, I am
no patriot.

5 July 2007

I
can't tell you
how many times I
have seen wingless creatures
fly, and it is almost always when
they leave off thinking
how to make wings. Never
putting feet on the ground, they leave
footprints almost impossible to miss.
Never touching the ground is easy.
Not leaving footprints is another matter.
Even dull wanderers who stumble
upon them devote whole
lives to divining what wondrous
creatures passed this way
never move far from the site of it.

a few words from Meister Eckhart

Drawn by a trinity with cords
of power, wisdom, love, it is
emptiness that takes us in.

Sin makes the soul and Satan
resemble one
another. It makes
the soul an entrepreneur of intersections.

And every act of will contains eternity.

I have known social insects
to construct entire worlds
overnight in gaps
between paving stones,

time enough for whole civilizations
in spaces of our oversight.

Since the *New York Times*
made news of the Prius
as a green fashion
statement, I have
wondered what my
neighbors who drive
them to the grocery store
think I mean by walking.

6 July 2007

bee out of sight

Lobelia, near enough to blue
to make you believe blue
possible stirs in a pause between
breezes. Before the thing
itself, there is a sign of what it does
and, for now, that will suffice.

Plane passes over, sound
trailing sight, and
your eyes follow
what your ears hear
as though it were light.
When you look up, you look
ahead of the sound without a second thought
to see it.

9 July 2007

The first of three nothings is
all that is small as a nut in
the palm of your hand. And you wonder
at the birth of god in it,
at so much desire you'd think
you died the way god died, at
what could make you
envy a woman who had
her throat slashed, a man left
to rot in a public place.

six things seen in a vision of Julian

blood; the mother of god
that was and is and will be
love; all that is, small
as god makes it; that love is
what all that is made is made
for, all that makes it, all
that will; that every good
in every thing is god.

gentle fear

in all things, I saw god
does all that is done
and I wondered
what sin is.

The devil works like the devil; but
everything that is done is
well done, and sin is
nothing

When I laughed at this,
the world laughed, and
I think I saw God smile.

10 July 2007

The third heaven is the boundless delight of a spirit rising wholly from compassion, the soul of a soulless world, the heart of heartless conditions, it knows what must be done when it sees the pain it causes. Seeking solace, the greatest temptation is to cling to pain.

11 July 2007

All morning, wind has been
trying to say what it has to say
without shouting. Cat smells something new
on it, cool, an answer to summer
before the city takes the day back, a slow
start to cover the tracks of yesterday's storm.

13 July 2007

Robins obsess
on ownership; this
this this is mine this
is mine. Cardinals, cocky
in red, occupy.
Look here, look here,
look here – look look look look
Possession, they say, is
nine tenths of the law –
that, in this church, and a red hat, is
reason to stand fast and sing
until the world ends.

19 July 2007

After the flood, a gathering
of ants to mourn the passing
of so
many so
suddenly

one pauses
for a moment of silence
to wonder at the crowd passing
that did not see
the flood

does not smell
the death

will not mourn.

Economists are the Scholastic theologians
of our day, compulsive collectors
of arcane knowledge
indispensable to the workings
of a total State and its Church
so established it goes
without saying. They know
exactly how many angels
dance on the pinnacle of the stock
exchange in Shenzhen, what god
will catch them, what satan
will entice them to fly.

I must confess
to a sense of relief
on reading that a living goddess
can be forgiven
a visit to the United States
if she undergoes a cleansing
ceremony back home. *She is a normal child
and a living goddess*, which gives me reason
to hope cleansing will be made
available to all god's children
before we have fallen too far.

20 July 2007

Sparrows know
there is no
music
without rhythm, no
flash without some solid ground
to draw it on. They cede scat
to mockingbirds, fade while cardinals vogue,
but hold their own
among flickers with drums,
making marimbas of their voices.

23 July 2007

Knowing you'd spend the day
in an office with no windows,
you send me on my way
with an assignment:
Enjoy this beautiful day
for both of us. So I begin
by enjoying the poetry of receiving
sunshine in this place now
as a gift for the whole world, knowing
when the sun shines on one it shines on
everyone as undeniably as rain.
As long as one sees
pure hard light in winter,
all do. And when it rains on you,
I know the miracle of water.

Tiny signs on every tree
promise a reward for a pet starling named baby
who can't survive alone
outside. Who can? And I wonder
if I am the only one who now
addresses every bird as "Baby,"
hoping to coax it home to
the people of the sign
who cannot survive alone.

25 July 2007

A maple tree has been my master
in bonsai, with four cottonwoods
that died after two years in close
quarters and have now been
cut by a neighbor who thought
their lease had gone on long enough.

A sacred grove of seedlings
sprouted in a pile of leaves
specialize in the discipline of limits
drawn closer than a tree can bear.

They will lecture as long as summer
lasts, turn to making earth for next
year's crop when they reach the end
of moisture or a freeze deep as roots
they stretched as far as they can.

Two day's ago, a silkworm's cousin
took up residence on a leaf and began
to prune. It will leave
the body of the tree transformed when it
flies soon in a new body. And we will
marvel at how little space a whole
world takes in summer, how roots adjust
to anticipate winter and a caterpillar
who will leave a new tree when she has wings.

31 July 2007

Morning sounds
like desire too large
to make the turn
between places
where people
I have not met
gather what
they can of the world
into circles
of living
that keep them
occupied. It has to move
back and forth
a thousand times
angling to slip
between brick
walls droning its reversals
while someone late
for something
sounding like
immobility imposed
calls attention
to nothing
shattering under
still
against desire. Nothing

moves, and a breeze
that recalls
last night's full
moon cool on water
makes maple leaves
shudder. Parrots
chatter to another
tree and unseen
neighbors draw
circles of sound,
a city rising.

1 August 2007

Just sit
silent long

as it takes and China
will come on the song

of some bird
whose tones

carry so
much more

meaning than
words I know

or whatever flurry
of passing desire

triggered his music
in a tree within earshot

feather soft fingertip
tangibility of sound

touch so light
you'd think nothing

of it if you could, but
still, it moves you.

For the masses eagerly
waiting for the moment
when they will disappear

in rapture, I have bad news.

It came decades ago
in a flurry of Buddhist monks
determined to leave
a Lutheran church basement
in Texas cleaner than
it had ever been. And I
invoked Rapture as easier
for my daughter to understand
than the brutal fact
that good people doing a good thing
had thrown her security blanket out.

The bad news is that the only thing
caught up in the Rapture was
a security blanket.

Your Lexus may spin 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.

4 August 2007

Broken trunk of maple memory of lightning remains
to remind anyone who thinks
to look that weather changes
things. And every leaf
of every flowering plant in every basket on this balcony
turns to remember sunlight. In the
interval between the first deliveries
and neighbors rising, it is just possible
to hear a flicker drumming. But it will
not last. We occupy the world
with sacred noise, and we will not stand
for any sound beyond the rattle
of our prayer wheels, supplications for more
punctuated by endlessly amplified annunciations
of what is ours and must not
be touched. Cat takes it in until
she can no longer hear a bee that is nothing
more than a ripple in purple flowers
between breezes, then she retreats
in search of cool quiet, something between
her and shouting August sun.

5 August 2007

If astronomers at Cal Tech are not just seeing things under the intoxicating influence of Abel 2218's gravity bending light, the light of the first word flickering before there was anyone here to say it has only just now reached the stars at the edge of the universe, less than a million years from the moment it began and you have to wonder what word might still shed light at that distance of whether a reader of thirteen million years might be more aware of silence on a distant horizon.

6 August 2007

He was a liberator
of metal and stone from edges
made sharp by heat or years
and years of breaking
under pressure. In
every single slab quarried
from beneath some mountain
he saw a dance of circles
in circles, smooth curves
to right metamorphic angles,
memory of a liquid time
when they could move, of a time
when they were molten hot. This one
recalls energy like every
other, Fermi no
more than a name dropped
some time before the IED
they dumped on a distant
road from Enola Gay.

7 August 2007

Falcons turning between the edge
and the river a thousand feet below
know how to wait for wind

to bring them to mind
a thousand miles away
where a breeze rises

on an edge of stifling heat
and clouds a thousand feet above
that wait for rain

and you to fall
into the river of them
when the world turns.

8 August 2007

In the real presence
of water on morning grass,
there is evening rain. Not
the memory of something
you did not know, only
rain, now, where it is not raining.

13 August 2007

Eighteen death masks in a plastic bag
on a welcome mat surrounded by shoes
might lead you to believe someone
in this place survived a mass murder
of crash test dummies – or wonder
what masked ritual of shoes is
in the making on this doorstep. It is a matter
of time, keeping victims alive
for treatment. Is the hero the one
who breathed a few breaths once
for a dying man or the one who drags this shit home
to wash it before the next?

16 August 2007

Something in the way the world moves
under low gray clouds after slow
rain pierces a body, nails the soul
to it. The whole bloody mess
says the world feels like I
do, never dreaming the world
dreamed it in the first place.

17 August 2007

We think we know we think because the world
thinks so intensely and us part of it finally it is
not possible to sleep through the heat of it.
Coming to ourselves so suddenly we think
it must have been something we did and we
can't stop shouting look here look here look here
look look look look like cardinals making fences with our voices.

18 August 2007

After seventy years, an oak window
settles into earth moving with some remnant
of the memory trees have, abandons
carpenters' squares to make space
paper wasps discover like hollows
in any wood living where they
make themselves at home. Glass opens
at a sagging sash to make an opening, still
a puzzle to wasps who've lived with it
for generations. They want to believe
the testimony of their eyes, are surprised
at how impenetrable a barrier can be
when they can see where they want to go
from the wrong side of it, die trying to retrace
steps to return where they began and begin again.

24 August 2007

In the presence of a dying like this,
you are light scattered when a star
collapsed, the last to escape the gravity
of it, come to rest on eyes that have been
thirteen million years in the making.
Haunted by dying that will be theirs,
they do not know they see by
what has been dead a long time
when it dawns on them. They expect to be
blinded by the nearness of a living star
tomorrow, but the one that died is
in their eyes tonight.

Sudden is nothing but
a conversation interrupted, broken
into with premeditation or on a lark.
Even petty larceny precipitates
a story that makes one thing lead to another
and now this.

I can remember when loud conversations
on the street with people who were not
there were considered grounds for
forced political reeducation (though we called it
commitment then because by god political
reeducation is for commies). Now every
conversation on the street, satellite assisted, is
with someone somewhere other than here. And
speaking of commies, we used to threaten to reduce
the world to a radioactive wasteland
even the cockroaches would find challenging because
they blasted propaganda from loudspeakers on every
corner like a red stain that always started somewhere.
We threatened neutron bombs but
held out for privatization.
An all volunteer army
weaves an all-American
network of nukes now,
neutralizes populations
who occupy mostly intact buildings.

27 August 2007

Sign said “these workers deserve better,” and I stopped to consider the linguistic significance of a sign that would be true anywhere it signified.

Unless you wish to be so thoroughly Lutheran as to claim no one deserves. But then it is necessary to turn to the matter of work and the free grace that raises the facade on this church rather than the fact of its crumbling. The two men holding the sign did not mean to talk theology when I asked what it was about – a gesture to scaffolding rising as though it had been erected at Babel: “those are non union workers.” Playing Paul’s jailer, I said, “what can I do?” and they said “write.” A theology of vocation in a neighborhood of churches with crumbling facades: “do what you are whatever the state of the towers. Work and expect better.”

31 August 2007

After three years nesting between a torn screen
and the glass of a south window
in my kitchen, paper wasps are lost
when new windows, screens intact,
replace old oak with cold fiberglass.
It seems odd that workers placing windows
in odd old openings with enough care to leave no space
unsealed would not stop to admire the skill
of this little colony. But they discard the hive,
scatter the wasps, who gather later in a circle
on a new screen, impenetrable, making plans
like any circle broken by disaster. They will,
I suppose, move elsewhere now, somewhere
wood still breathes and leaves
a wasp sized opening they can crawl through to shelter.
But first they mourn those lost with the hive,
months of work, a trust broken for some
idea of progress.

2 September 2007

I am committed to nothing
for Spring. I will join the ceremony of an empty
tomb with the green eucharist of a desert
moistened by late snow and March
thaw. Listen.

There are rainbows where light
falls right on what you thought empty.

14 September 2007

Leaves sing a new song at the first
sign of Autumn, stir when September
breeze rises. Still summer green,
they are getting ready to fly.
They will turn when
frost touches them, flame
before snow, fall among thieves
on this dangerous road, and turn again
while time passes on the other side, no
hope of a Samaritan attending them before Spring.

17 September 2007

Autumn lies
the way a disease
lies newly discovered,
under signs we have not yet learned
to read with confidence as symptoms. Leaves
pale, but you cannot be sure
they are turning even when
some fall on a breeze intimating
cold. A man has fallen
on the path in a heap, sleeping (I
almost said old man but stopped
at the thought that he
is the same age as me); two dozen
Canada geese, waiting
to fly, an interval of sun
and I forget which way
on a day suddenly warm
the season is turning.

21 September 2007

Two swallows dart between
eight parallel tracks
and a jet lumbering
straight for the lake
before it makes
a ponderous slow turn
toward one coast
or the other. A single
cloud gathers itself
in a line straight
as a rail rolling
east over water.

22 September 2007

Waves break, rainbows
under a thousand jewels
that pass in seconds
under full sun to nothing
more than dampness
dark on gray rock. A city
rises on an edge it thinks
the center of it all. It thinks
it will stand a thousand years
never dreams it is nothing
more than a trace
some wave left
when it shattered
a rainbow on gray rock.

No place here
to dispose of the body
so the ceremony must be
a wedding

fragments of a sermon
drift across the path
how we make conflicts worse
by dwelling

on them. It could be
about the beginning
or the end of love

Where the sidewalk meets the street a poem
scrawled in white on new concrete

exist. flair
 why not?
a few words broken from a conversation
in the shade

*did I tell you the Texas Chainsaw Massacre
actually happened in central Wisconsin?*

but who would believe it if it weren't set in Texas?

26 September 2007

Full moon broke into Autumn
last night and painted half the leaves
gold, light broken on the walk,
so morning came looking down
to avoid sharp edges.

Summer has not quite finished,
but what is left of rain before dawn
is cold enough to make your fingers
think Winter when you cut flowers.

3 October 2007

Hawking newspapers on Michigan Avenue,
young guy can't believe there's no money
changing hands, says *c'mon y'all*, falls in
next to a couple walking north, matches
their strides, leans in to the guy's ear
like he's whispering some confidence
to a friend, spins to meet a new
crowd. *Nice suit, nice suit*, mirrors
the stride of a thirty something in gray,
could be trading trading tips, turns
to walk the walk with three
young women dressed to kill,
hasn't sold a thing by the time
I finish my coffee, but he's talking the talk
to people who are there without the aid
of a hands-free cellphone.

8 October 2007

Crow insists sun
means August
and it seems
every trace
of Autumn melted
in yesterday's heat. Squirrel
examines cut branch
on the slow dying maple
tree that used to span
the balcony, a land bridge
to the continent of a flat
roof too far to jump. Workers
left a trace that is good for nothing
but memory. Count the rings
and you can calculate the years
it grew before they took it down
and left the crown shattered
by lightning last Spring. Nothing
has changed, but the tree is
growing absent one piece at a time.
Crow insists August. Squirrel
takes a close look at the trace
years left on the edge the saw made.
Crow's lost track of time.
Autumn will be hard enough
to cut again by Friday.

17 October 2007

On the north side of the river, buildings
rise for people who deny the possibility
of dirt. After rain, a cadre called up against
mud pushes it back with hoses and brooms,
redistributes Fall with gas powered blowers until it gets out
of hand. After dark, path is empty
except for a whole cupcake that hurries west, big
as the rat that carries it.

Behind windows that overlook the river are the normal people
the cop on the train had in mind when he
said some other all the cops on the train knew
should wear a sweater in summer
instead of turning the air conditioner off and
opening the doors. Train was full of cops in dress
uniform with opinions about climate control
and the university being in the real estate
business joking that the south suburbs were unprotected
and laughing at the lame antiterrorist announcements.

I used to take some comfort in the
thought that rats and cockroaches would
survive after all the normal people
were gone. But the rat with the cupcake reminded
me how much they depend on each other.

When the buildings crumble and the trash
is gone, they will go in search of
the excess of some city still
undead, following the
cadres looking for a shadow to
pitch a tent in out of harm's way.

23 October 2007

The new Atlantis
is a plastic island
of excess gathered
where no one goes,

unintended consequence
of the packaging of desire.

5 November 2007

I see no reason
to doubt leaves fly
as my cat believes when
cold clear Winter
breathes them alive
after Summer sleep.
She dances them down
while gravity looks the other way,
watches for another breath
wonders why people only
think of resurrection in Spring.

6 November 2007

cloud is the only thing
between jewels
on a tree Autumn
turning stripped
and shadows
of leaves clinging no one
could take for a diamond
when sun catches them

7 November 2007

Wendela passes under the bridge
as I pass over.
A tour of the city amplified for a crowd
drifts across
a deck of empty chairs and three
tourists who wonder at the architecture of cold.
It could be matins at Canterbury,
a tree turned
to winter with three leaves clinging
to some gospel memory they think
promises more time before the first freeze.

15 November 2007

I know Fall by sight in Arkansas, not
touch. There's no need to dress for it
now. Every tree knows the season
has changed, but sun, for a moment, has forgotten.
Trees have put on colors
that would make you think of fire in another
place. But here now, the color of fire in passing trees
is all the cold there is.

17 November 2007

In East Texas, trees stand at attention,
eyes on Tennessee. No more than one in
three turns when the season
turns. Pines have no idea life stands still
some winters, can't imagine sun
in December slipping through bare brown
branches touched by nothing, nothing green to take it in.

18 November 2007

As far as the eye knows, two
black birds again and again
until they fill half an acre of asphalt
they must think was spread for their arrival
from the city on a Sunday morning before shoppers.
But the ear thinks it knows twelve varieties
before it has walked a mile. A mockingbird
chuckles in a low tree, and there is no knowing
number. A single mockingbird is a chorus, and
if there are two, they are a choir massed
for chorale with flocks of blackbirds
and idling trucks at the green grocery store
make a rhythm section. A soloist
taking a break has found something green
at the door of the deli, where we exchange pleasantries
before I go in for migas, bagels, cream cheese,
no meat in migas but you
have to ask in Texas, what menudo is,
and music to take you back to a time
before it all went to shit.

20 November 2007

Back porch chime renders
wind's edge in a language of four
tones, but it cannot translate coming
cold. Wind turned this morning,
and north will settle sure as sun
over cirrus feathered on pastel south by week's end.
Chime is the order of an edge breaking
so you might think wind the sum
of its tones, but leaves know
there is more to the sound of it, more
than the yellow butterfly that makes its way
from one tree to the next not
on wind but on what is between, what
chimes omit, what smuggles snow
under sun still thinking summer.
It will come when it always comes, and, astonished,
people who've lived here for years
will feel the same snow that
has fallen year after year for the first time,
wonder how it could happen here, how
it could happen now, wonder how
they can wait for sun to come again,
warm themselves in winter around
the promise of its coming.

21 November 2007

Thanksgiving Eve

Edge into Winter at Joplin, where rain
begins at the end
of a gray day.

By Springfield, it's thinking
snow – but not yet.

A walk in it slows words
a step short of freezing,
liquid on the verge of ice. Chill fades.

I doubt it's solid enough for snow in the morning.

22 November 2007

When the question is distance, the answer
is time. In the middle
of the afternoon in Lincoln, Illinois, I am
seven hours from morning, three from the end
where this drive began. Nowhere
is a week and two thousand miles.

5 December 2007

First snow
finds its feet
in December, first
every time it falls.

Drivers slide by
stop signs astonished while walkers
scatter to find snow legs. Still
nothing on the other side of the river
for the man wrapped in a blanket
who's been standing in place for days asking for change.

Light changes everything
changes. Clouds
break before snow

stops, and
you find yourself
blind looking

like sun
on what's fallen.

11 December 2007

Soot's drawn wind in snow
three days and rain's
cratering what remains
of it on the edge of ice. Crow
hunkers down on a high wire,
takes it all in
without a word,
finally flies.

12 December 2007

Rage, goddess, sing
rage to contain all
the wars that have
ruined some city
in the name of one god
or another.

Make an epic of it,
make a book of it, make
a library of it, line
after line to break them
make us (undeniable)
come to light, raise the walls of a city
where none was before, raging
for order, falling
for rage, raging
to found a city that will never fall.

The last word broken,
no funeral will be the last word.

No one can tell a war story
like someone who was not there.
Homer was just another Greek bearing gifts.

25 January 2008

Snow only whispers until it lies
under every step falling. Its voice
changes under the weight of passersby
until it is ice.

26 January 2008

Gray squirrel

gray branch

gray clouds

gray city

February afternoon

gray twilight

in which all cats are gray.

5 February 2008

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 weather 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,
thinking, as I suppose you don't know,
that seeing a sign of Providence
in a pile of little disasters

must be a sign of grace
in God's absence.

6 February 2008

The glorious indecision of rain
that has finally crossed the border
into snow after a day of traveling
furiously is an invitation to praise
hesitation, the fleeting possibility
of otherwise before Aeneas
founds Rome on the body of Turnus
and the slow slog of wet snow
on two days of rain turns
hard, taunts each sure step
falling toward humility.

17 February 2008

Between stories, a way
opens like a question.
There is no doubt this is
America. You can see it
in the curious juxtaposition of impatience
with immobility – city
at a standstill, no discernible difference
between the parking lot and the traffic jam
that stretches beyond suburban
fringe. I can't stop wondering
whether this is the green Manhattan
Project some environmental Oppenheimer
proposed after a commute this morning.

Waiting for ice in February,
I've been driving west fast
hoping to be somewhere
I want to be
before it forces me
off this road where every broken tree
remembers. I've never known waiting
to be still. Always fast
as ice, fast as
whatever comes after
it passes.

20 February 2008

Road falls south through unbroken red
dirt till desert rises on the far edge of it.
Nothing holds it down but miles
of irrigation. Still, tractors stir
cyclones of dust that turn and turn
then scatter to desert that would meet
them here if the water ran out. Cotton lies
abandoned like snow where it fell
at harvest time, white under blue pale
with the patience of a desert waiting
for the wells to run dry.
Here and there a house
tumbles down into a field
but for every one there is a church
standing and not a sign of Jesus
in this place that does not end
with an exclamation.

25 February 2008

Approaching San Angelo, two
China Draws feed the Concho
with nothing that falls
steadier than rain.
North China, China,
and I anticipate South. But there is
no trace of it on this road.

II
we wait



3 March 2008

Just a glimpse of mountains
from the train and the city
in lights already. I have come
to think of it as a moment
on the way to China, not
the thing itself; and I wonder
at southern cold, machine
cold too efficient
for a tropical edge
in March.

4 March 2008

No smoking no naked light...

(on a ship in Hong Kong Harbour)

No naked light on an oil tanker
in Hong Kong Harbour is a preemptive
confession. When it burns (as it knows
it will) light will be clothed
in the aftermath of it, sun
will become an object of desire,
imagined brilliant on every
morning horizon, possibility
not illumination
in what it scatters formless
on the surface of these waters.

5 March 2008

East, moon crescent star
city, sea,
time, sun, haze
softens red so you can look
it full in the face without
fear of blindness, morning.

6 March 2008

First light, nothing
but the up and down
of straw brooms in the hands
of women who will
never surrender
to the grime of the city. Traffic
is already building, a stream that for now
is not much louder than water. Trucks
will see to that, blaring horns
at every delay – and there are more
as the day goes on. Birds sing
a song of six notes, punctuate
brooms, fade behind horns
as the day grows warmer.
Machines making a new world new
yet again sing fours, metal
on rock, excavating.

7 March 2008

Chairman Mao was just about half right
when he said women hold up half
the sky. I think, as I follow one
with dark hair who carries a straw broom
over her shoulder like a rifle, marching
with a liberation army that has won
another morning battle in a war with this city
of infinite grime. She has worked for hours
by the time traffic builds and women in tailored suits
race to catch buses that will take them to offices
where men move money. Another
who has worked for hours waits at an intersection.
She carries a child who would be
too heavy if he were not her child,
if every child were not her child, then runs
to avoid cars whose drivers have no time
for signals. Here and there, dogs and children
run for joy; but these women
growing old too fast run because
they have to catch a falling sky.

8 March 2008

Emphysema, Slowly

Morning, you can look the sun in the eye
with no fear of blindness. Every driver
here on the way to someplace else has come
out of a cave this morning, knows more daos
that go nowhere than you can count, needs no time
to see shadows. It's shadows all the way;
this light does not change a thing, rises
with ten thousand buses, ten thousand trucks.
Cars couple at night, double while the city
multiplies, penetrates breath by breath, is
two when it is extended again, then four,
eight, and soon there is more than ten thousand
times ten thousand lungs can breathe. Every river
of it flows into some sea and the seas flow over us,
until we cannot breathe.

11 March 2008

Walls flow like rivers here
slow to sea that backs away
from a city growing unfamiliar
fast. Waves of them marked
by towers that have less
to guard than when
they saw that nobody crossed
nothing on the city's edge, lost
in landfill and bridges. In the gardens
of the rich you can smell
roads where rivers ran. Now
that the oyster farmers'
huts have given way to tents, you know
they will not be here long – and
the ocean would not know the place
if it swept past walls to where it was.
Rich people hound the sea,
and a wall rises with their
dwelling on each new coast,
leaving traces of what was
out of place under layers of a young
city growing old.

13 March 2008

Some portion of every walk waiting
some fraction of every step,
before it falls, each time
it falls the length of a journey on foot.

Where paths cross,
bodies resist red
but every road is a multiple of falling
even when the light changes.

Qigong in the park goes nowhere, savors
the wait rolling on its tongue, saves
the walk for some other time.

A woman in black
with long black hair
waters every plant
on the square by hand.
It takes hours.
She addresses
each by name,
and they all bring her flowers.

Polytonal bullfrogs make a splash
when I pass on the edge of the lake. They
could be Tuvan, growling gravel harmonies.

14 March 2008

Pink and purple petunias mass with masses
on Baoanlu waiting for buses that pause
in fleets where signs promise they
will stop. People in suits
burst from nowhere, sprint to catch one bus or the other
leaving. Patient petunias are never late.
We are waiting like people gracefully posturing in the park, not waiting
for the bus. On a side street
of abundant shops a crowd of people and dogs
has gathered on edges to watch an old hound
circle in the street, dying, silent. He may
have been hit, though there is no blood. He may have
chosen this place to die. He may be dying here by chance.
But I have no words
to ask what happened. The dogs,
who have no more words than I, tell me more than
the people who do. There is nothing to be done.
The old hound circles, circles soundless –
no words for what happens. Some of us, staggered
by how easy it is to walk away from dying
where there is nothing to be done, will.
But the crowd will watch until the old hound dies, waiting.

15 March 2008

Sing

No call to deny some Messiah
three times when the world is nothing
but denial. There is no denying
what must be done, Gautama, when
suffering bursts into flames at Jokhang's gate
circles silent with a dog dying
on a forgotten street in Shekou. No
denying the world denying power
to turn. No denying the world denying
power to act. No denying the world
denying power to speak. No denying
the world. In the beginning, no word. No denying
the first stone cast by someone who is not
without sin. No denying Spinoza.
The stone falling would think
itself free if it could think. If it could
sing, it would sing a song of freedom, fall
harmless at the feet of an army
no less an army when a soldier, bloodied
by a stone, steps from the ranks. The stone falls
harmless, singing. There is no denying the song.

17 March 2008

Seventeen yellow crescent leaves arc across concrete gray
interrupted by a green shoot that fell from the tree
this morning. It will turn to brown in time, no
more premature than the arc it interrupts, no more than
people passing. All falls, all
turns in time. Anna, the age that turns us
is no more cruel than a lion making a meal of a gazelle.
Rivers turn. The long arc of the universe
turns toward nothing.

No more than the ripples after every moment when
the silent State breaks the surface of ordinary life.

18 March 2008

Gray tabby slips under a chair at the empty table
next to mine, silent, waits for me to notice.
When I do, I say the only Chinese words
I know that might be of interest to a cat.
She smiles at miao, blinks at the mention of her
name – but kitty kitty is fine, too; and she
doesn't mind small talk in English. She is
polite about the cheese I offer from my
pizza, but she does not touch the corn.
I suppose she would prefer meat, but she
appears to be here now for a presence.

20 March 2008

Late

No gaps between cars
turning. Bus drivers
would kill for the time
it takes to cross two lanes
on foot. Bicycles weaving
take place beyond their numbers,
keep walkers on their toes.

Dancers in the park have
already gone. No time for circles now, no
place for poses that go
nowhere. The old woman on the walk
doesn't even lift her bowl. She knows no one
has time to bend and drop a coin.

21 March 2008

-Xinhua quotes a “living Buddha” in a northwest province as condemning the violence in Tibet

-George W. Bush defiantly defends the war on its fifth anniversary

-Peace activists support the troops

There are living buddhas
on every side of every war. Nothing
they do changes the coming into being
of it, the passing away of it.

Passing away catches the eye: bodies
count, the slow awakening
of corpses piled high while cities burn.
Ten thousand buddhas see
what is not there
after the city has died. But not

anger burning slow under
occupation, not
impatience at the slow
curve of a twisted universe turned to justice
one in ten thousand buddhas chants,

resigned to the slow
of a world still
turning, all the time
in the world is occupied
with no. States
line up living buddhas
like barricades, tip them like buses in burning streets,
check body counts, silence, what is
out of line, contain slow burns offstage, so
nobody shouts fire until
the theater is nothing but ashes.

22 March 2008

I come to China to learn
to walk away. Gray
kitten on a branch beyond my reach
cries, and I cannot coax him
down. He knows there is nothing
I can do,

so I walk on, and he falls silent.
I'd like to think he found some comfort
in my voice responding to his cry,
but he is still treed, and I have done nothing.
The world is no less dangerous
for my words. He will tell his story,
put his feet on the ground, when the time is right.

Now that the world is safe
from the likes of Jeremiah
and Geraldine,
liberals
can sleep sound
wrapped in flags
and put away the dramamine.

The most important thing
is that no one rock this ship
of state. Original sin
is a fine slogan in the right speech,

but heaven forbid anyone
suggest the sinner be damned
for it. Who reads Jonathan Edwards
in this enlightened age? We don't put prophets
in pits. We put them in the attic with crazy aunts, listen
to profits, keep our eyes on that prize.

The most important thing
is to maintain our innocence.
We believe they have no reason
to hate us. And we know we have no time
for stories of those otherwise occupied.
Being the change we seek, we
would like to believe this story
could be told nowhere
else. We would like to believe
history is bunk. We would like to believe
those who do not learn from it will be fine.
We have always preferred Horatio
to Jeremiah. If her name had been Geraldo,
she could have been a star.

Most cats here have nothing to say.
Most say it wisely walking away
when they meet strangers on the street.
Between them, they are making space for a city.

23 March 2008

Xinhua's Good Friday sermon
on yellow hat doctrine
informs the Dalai clique
that Buddhism is nonviolent,
and I wonder if the Chinese press
will break the news about Easter
to the Magisterium Sunday
and – later – publish a pocket guide
to Sharia for Rowan Williams. Occupations
turn on stories, turn on telling, turn on tellers, turn
on cropping, turn on cuts, turn on silence
imposed. They do not turn on whether
the deer turns on the lion. Nothing
for an army to do in the face of anger, rocks,
and IEDs but to fire. Nothing
but resignation for a buddha watching.
All is suffering.
The source of suffering is desire.
Renounce desire.
Wait.
Occupations turn.
Wait. Turn.

24 March 2008

*if you've been carrying pictures of Chairman Mao,
you ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow*

Contemplating the pain
that must surely follow
the curses of the old man
I pass on the street in Shenzhen
with pockets empty of change,
I wonder why the very idea of America
has people chanting it
over the graves of Jefferson
and Chairman Mao.
They prescribed a revolution
for each generation. But
chanters who bark USA at rallies
expect the dais to be saturated with flags
and will not hear of revolutionary rhetoric. That is
all over now, and the poor old fools who spout it
out of place are mostly harmless
anachronisms tucked safely away in prisons
or churches. The San Diego columnist
who put Jose Angel Gutierrez
in his place and assured the world
Barack Obama would not turn
into Stokely Carmichael (Kwame
Ture goes without saying)

is the first sign of the power of the curse.
No change in this begging bowl, no change
in the world. Teddy Roosevelt is more likely.
I drop a coin in the next beggar's bowl.
Nothing changes. La lucha continua...

25 March 2008

I come to China for the light, gray
soft through everyday
fog. The fog of every war settles
on this coast – power,
speed, sound
cities grow thick
with it, slow
to the chill consistency of honey,
set. Everything moves at the sticky sweet speed
of deliberate light, still time. Some days sun
glows dull through clouds
waiting to rain gray light
that will fill low paths
looking for a way to ocean
they remember where
these roads are. Some days
it shatters into ten thousand
red shards on subtle
mist, scatters across a whole sky
yellow to red, settles
finally to earth as dust
some god might spit on
to make a new man
to be fruitful and multiply

bodies of gray light on dry land
he names so the god will know
how to address them.

I come to China for silence in a wall
of sound. There is no
denying the fire in Lhasa
I have no words for it.

26 March 2008

Today the rhythm is rain's, stepping
on umbrellas that change the ways
people collide. The city
will not stop for it, but umbrellas
demand a different dance on narrow
steps. Rain rearranges
yellow leaves on red stones, makes
the music of dry brooms liquid, shortens
my walk. When clouds break, sun will
slip into the softness of it. Rising late, it will
yawn and stretch across the whole cushion of the sky.

27 March 2008

Gateway, Hong Kong

*For a whiter
porcelain like
complexion,
cultivate
surfaces
that shatter
when dropped, keep
on high shelves
where nothing will touch them
until some special guest comes,
handles them
with care over
conversation
that is
oh so polite
in public*

I come to China for the leaves, always
Autumn. Kowloon in March, water
mirrors gray sky. They drop
green yellow orange red white
as the water of the fountain
swaying with waves

passing, milling
wherever there are edges. A brown one
falls in the center, bobs, does not appear
to move; but it is clinging to the edges of a
crowd an hour later, earth
tone patch of sienna.

In Shenzhen, they scatter songs across
every walk, over the drone of paving stones,
ragas for all hours with the birds who
will sing for concrete eaves when the trees are gone.

They have drained the pond
where the flamingos stay. Still
birds turn the heads of passersby
with their singing. A woman
stops to find the one
at the park's entrance and a dozen
others follow her eyes
up to a peculiar song. One
bird sings the absence
of a pink crowd always present.

28 March 2008

I come to China for the children
who say *hello* for the sweet taste
of two els when
they roll them on their tongues.
They never answer my poor
ni hao ma; but I can taste
the sweet *hao* of their laughter.

4 April 2008

Qingmingjie, 2008

Low gray could be mistaken
for the weight of souls that have gone
before, but it is light as April in Oklahoma,
and blackbirds on every side street sing sun
that will be along by afternoon. Du Mu
must have found his tavern
hours ago, but it is too early
for sorrow here, and rain looks more like hope
than tears in eyes
accustomed to dry wind
down from mountains.

5 April 2008

Two days after steady rain, redbuds
work damp earth with green fingers
kneading pink flowers of it.

Sky contains no sign
of rain today, but
rainbows scattered on the Shawnee road
dance a sacrament
of its body rising.

8 April 2008

Five billion inner peaces perfectly
synchronized might prove simpler than a truce
negotiated on some battlefield.

Clusters in every clearing here go through
motions while the city is still drowsy
with morning. A woman kneels for a talk

with a white dog that has been a few steps
ahead of her and must have committed
some infraction that escaped me. He takes

the lecture with a smile and a drooping
tongue, eyes on the walk where there are people
to watch. Every morning, there is a wall

of carcasses to step over where a truck
backs to the edge of the sidewalk
to unload. Over these dead bodies

in and out among the living, every walker
dances on the delicate edge of qi
that gathers from all sides. Like the woman

dancing with an imagined sword under
a sign that says Hangzhou Cuisine, like the birds
dancing songs over the noise of the city rising,

like a single moment dancing in the clearing
of a truce negotiated on some battlefield.

9 April 2008

All the birds massed in trees
at sunrise coalesce
to one at the end of a long walk
who sings a song made of all
of them, each note refined to no
more than it must be,
morning rising rendered
simple in a canopy
to cover it all: singer,
song, child who turns to watch a woman
laughing, yellow cat crossing
open space who wills himself
invisible, an audience of one.

11 April 2008

signs

Rat scampers across the path
between dogs who take no notice
and walkers so early they have nowhere to go.
Someone left a treasure of styrofoam
and a late dinner half finished last night, and he
found it before the sweeper.
Days like this add up to a calendar
that proves the year is his.

12 April 2008

Black dog likes the sound of my feet on paving stone,
picks up the pace of the walk I take every morning, falls
into it today, slips on a new
step, dances a universe
he might inhabit, tries it on for size, turns at the voice
of the one he does, pauses
until it catches him again, knows
the goddess by her step, settles
home again until another dance
draws him in.

13 April 2008

I come to China for the tricycle flower garden
that pedals past on a claustrophobic boulevard
in Nanshan after a Sunday walk, palm tree almost tall enough
to shade the rider on the leading edge of a dozen
potted plants in red and white, fragrance of lilies
snaking between buses through the crowd waiting
for a break in traffic to slip through before the light turns.

14 April 2008

Bougainvillea

The one that fell
draws the eye more
than clusters pink
touched by blue
standing above lines
of green on straight stems.
They take blue in, nod
to common people, but
the one that fell
cannot bear
the weight of it. The weight of it
embraces the whole
flower, cannot stop
at something so light
as the short end
of an imagined spectrum, insists
on the dark surface
of a table waiting
for morning coffee, on
paving stones, on
gaps that open
onto earth waiting below
every line of sight.

15 April 2008

No wonder they turned the plane around.
Five passengers speaking a language
the others don't understand
is enough to make anyone
suspicious. They might have been
Tibetans. Who knows what strange song
they may have on their persons
lurking in their unfamiliar words?
And we have known for a long time
what a song can do to a city in the wrong hands.
These days you need a visa to be
reincarnated. If some past life is
going to come around to haunt the present,
by God, its papers will be in order.
We will secure our borders.
Languages we don't understand will not be tolerated

16 April 2008

Old woman with a begging bowl rises
when the crowd rises
waiting for a bus

to take them places
where money moves. Her smile says
she knows excess

will spill
if she waits

she lifts
her bowl
I pass

she drops
a poem
in mine

we wait.

18 April 2008

Step across this border
and there is a narrow street
moving at the speed of a city
in three languages
at the same time

no time
to change
the ceremony of the place
you have been

no way
to say
the place you hope to be
a driver can

follow. The way
is always in the hands
of strangers, the destination
always friends
where time
to know the place
always present
is taken

a dog on a street that has not yet risen
barks furiously at strangers too close
to the unfinished building
he occupies

alone.
He will exhaust himself
when numbers make strangers
familiar

and sleep while I

look at the big picture
from a coffee shop
on the 38th floor
where dogs
are silent
and cities
move at the speed...

19 April 2008

Typhoon mumbles something
about coming to Guangdong
in a language of waves
and steady rain that grows
stronger as the day passes. It hangs
offshore, shuffling its feet like a tourist
running out of time
torn between sights
the guidebook says must not be
missed, keeps talking
rain that has everyone carrying
umbrellas and anticipation, thinking
about what needs to be tied down
when the wind finally rises.

Waiting is the only element
essential to a storm. Water
is not, though it adds drama
pooling through closed windows
at the ferry terminal when
a typhoon approaches, and
waves of it rolling when
the ship gets underway
could make you believe
it's the main thing. A

little boy who discovers
a puddle inside to splash in
is sure of it. Fire goes electric
to keep the shop vac roaring, but
a little flood creeps across the floor in spite
of it while the sign tells us what we already know
of time and the Shekou ferry: *waiting*.
It is not like the gaudy display
of a Spring thunderstorm lighting the sky
so you'd think day nothing but a series of gasps
between intervals of night, but there is no
denying it. Earth is composed
of waiting. The gravity of it leads you
to expect turbulence no matter where you fly.

20 April 2008

Sweepers dispose of remains
of a storm that brushed by yesterday
in receptacles
that were not
designed to withstand hurricanes.
What is left of the edge of one
is out of sight by seven,
but you can see it in battered flowers
clinging to plants in containers
that line the boulevard. On side streets,
bougainvillea blossoms outnumber brooms,
cover the walk like a carpet, but I
seek out gaps like stones across a stream
or step into the street between
bicycles and cars. They fell
before rain, still
fall; so they do not count among
remains. A vanguard
uncontained, they wait
for the storm to spill over again.

21 April 2008

Cold hard
as fact
rat flat
under the wheel
knows perfectly well
death has always been closer
than the interval
between one breath
and another
when breath stops
and your heart
to think
about the next
beat, close as it is
now. Tail curves to shadow
the arc of the body
in one dimension, like a wry smile,
says *just wait, you'll see.*

22 April 2008

Four hours before sunrise, two
songs. A bird stretches
four notes across the tops of trees
between buildings, then
rushes four more into the time
of one, eight notes in five beats. Something
sets off a car alarm. Horn sounds senseless
twelve times loud, stops, long
enough for a driver to run in
and out without bothering
to turn it off. Bird waits
until I am certain I know
the pattern of his song, then stops
at four. We laugh
at this surprise of silence.

24 April 2008

Street corner alchemists are at war
with buses. Diesel makes things move; but they
mix it with simples to distill
metal so pure it will stop things
at their scene of wheels and carts and fire, home
passersby can smell where air is heavy
with elsewhere. Bicycle barricades
direct traffic under the noses of cops who think
they are in control. Hover over it and it is an eddy
in the steady stream of this diesel fired city. On
the ground, it is a moment that will not stand for no.

No one goes anywhere for any reason
but for love, drawn
by circles of friends, driven
by circles broken, there is no place
but this.

25 April 2008

A different turn at the beginning of a walk
and the universe turns, not
parallel but so close eyes that peer from the cover
of a bush where crossing makes an intersection
know me and I can catch a glimpse through them
of how much terror can be folded into a few degrees
and a view closer to the ground. Someone shouted *gweilo*
when I passed yesterday, and I smiled
but thought *this is true*. I haunt the place,
and the little boy in battle fatigues
who cannot believe the apparition goes on
staring when I smile at him and wave;
but his mother smiles like me, and I imagine
Cheshire cats, immaterial in the mirror
of Xianggang I stumbled across this morning when the
universe turned and I turned a step behind it.

Bent a little toward the earth, a woman
with silver hair smiles a greeting
to a dark haired woman still
bending who could be her granddaughter.
Words gentle as the woman's
smile pass between them and they turn
to return to separate
walks but not until the woman
with silver hair puts her hand on
her granddaughter's elbow and I think
something has been handed on
that will hold them together.

26 April 2008

Half a step out of step, butterfly
always flies against prevailing wind.
Lifetimes in the place, and she still
does not know the language. She cannot
put the silence between words out of mind.
She stumbles on it every time she flies, a sort of
falling. Sparrows have told her
a thousand times she would be fluent
if she could only fall without the silence
in mind. They have no ear for nothing,
but she is sure the music would die
without it. She is fluent only
in what is not said. Every staggering
flight is a conversation in it.

A little girl kisses the plaster chef
who stands in front of the coffee shop
on the lips with a passionate embrace.
Unmoved, he laughs a frozen laugh
with her mother, who knows a thing or two about love.

Two rats playing
in bushes beside the walk
barely take note of my passing,
a pause to determine
I am nothing
but a harmless voyeur
looking for a sign
in the ease
of their movement
that makes sense of
the uneasy movement
of the world. A dog
or a cat would
demand an adjustment, not an old
man who mistakes them
for a sacrament.

27 April 2008

A perfect arc of six leaves breaks
the pattern of paving stones, all
parallels and perpendiculars
monochrome under a rainbow
of falling weather. Six leaves
in seven colors, every one a chance
encounter of two pigments
and ten thousand variations
in a climate that never seems

to change. Acid rains etch
new patterns on old stone, sun
bleaches what is not
in shade. Trees send roots
in all directions, add fault lines
to herringbone, lift stones
out of settled planes. These
artists work in three dimensions

or more. When I stop
for coffee, strangers at the next table
are discussing complex systems. What are the odds
I will hear Mandelbrot
in a random conversation after
admiring the art of chance operations
on a long walk? Nothing alive is
perfectly parallel.

Only death abides perpendiculars.

28 April 2008

For What It's Worth

Kempinski Hotel Shenzhen

There is a parallel universe
steps beyond every intersection.
A thousand Hong Kong malls have blossomed
on the southern coast, deposited
with Pearl River silt where oysters
used to be the closest thing to gold.
No one has to cross a border now
to consume but invisible
sleepers at bus stops
between luxury hotels, and
the city is consuming them first.
Eight in ten are illegal,
but experts have no doubt
they are rich. The cream is so thick
even the peasants are swimming in it, and
the only social problem is money
management. The safety net of choice is
an investment seminar for migrant laborers.

Pay no attention to empty shelves and asphalt fields
where there used to be rice. No surprise when
“For What it’s Worth” drifts from muzak
over my third cup of coffee.
Something’s happening here:
this is the future.

29 April 2008

We go through motions of memory
here, but May Day conversation at McDonald's
is more likely to turn to American Idol
than Haymarket if it turns to America
at all. Someone may have something to say
about thugs at CNN, but today's Internationale
is a medley of pop songs to shop by. Albert and Lucy
are no more on the tongues of common folk here
than in Forest Park. No idea
of an uprising. No idea
there were cadres
in Chicago when St. Petersburg was still
waiting for dreamers to dream dreams. Three days off
for the middle class to shop while workers who
keep things moving keep moving, still
waiting. Forgetting is a motion of memory.
Silence still speaks softly.
La lucha continua.

30 April 2008

The time will come when our silence...

At Shekou Walmart, street lamps
wave red flags, and nobody gathers to sing
the Internationale. They've rounded up the rats
on Nanhai Da Dao for the holiday, and
Garden City Mall has cautiously conspired
to mass pink flowers in the ocean of red
that lines the escalator outside Starbucks.

Words are still
louder, but silence will
not stop speaking.

1 May 2008

A boy sleeping on the sidewalk, in the shadow
of something new he has come to build
on a boulevard lined with red flags for May Day,
exhausted. A woman washing in a fountain
in the park where she lives. A cop
shooing an old woman out of a plaza
the way he would shoo a dog (but dogs can stay
if they are with the right people). A State
that could unleash a virus on a community
without warning, without reason. A State that did.
Five centuries or more of unpaid labor. A bomb
dropped on civilians with no warning. A politician
who solemnly declares it was a military target
thanks God for the science that made it
possible. People who speak of lost innocence
when someone strikes back. Politicians
draped in flags. Fifty million dollars
a month for an office when people are hungry.

Welders working late on May Day
create a light show for crowds
passing eight stories below.
Streets in morning
are full of night people
who take sparks in stride without
a second thought for dry leaves
where weather always falls
and nothing is likely to burn. Heat
and humidity slow everything sweltering
to a mellow pace. So
no one cares when the pianist in the bar
misses a note now and then. They catch her
drift, and the general idea of a melody
is all they need for now.

2 May 2008

Leaves fall
with rain. Pools
splash yellow
when children
jump in them. Brown
green red yellow waves ripple
when each car passes.
They finally soak right in
to your skin and you feel
what trees feel when
they reach for rain
on days like this, and
every green thing is smiling.

After an hour of steady rain, every
drop is a perfect circle for an instant
on the surface seeking every other
until it finally pauses and
a mirror of water
rests on paving stones.

3 May 2008

Time is money, efficiency is life.

-sign, corner of Gong Ya First Road and Nan Hai Da Dao

Only a foolish generation
asks for a sign when the air's thick with them
with no one asking. A sign of the times
is a sign of money. Taylor won
every revolution of the century
just ended. Lenin and Deng led revolutionary
vanguards that made the world safe for technocracy.
Repeat time is time time and time again; throw yourself
like a little tramp into the gears; wander aimlessly when you have time (not
money). But the fact remains:
"Where Have all the Flowers Gone?" is
a melody for muzak with Pete Seeger's voice
muted between "Five Hundred Miles" and "Feelings," and
the engineers have inherited the earth.

4 May 2008

Where Gong Ye Qi Lu
crosses Nan Hai Da Dao, a man
writes in water on the walkway
that echoes Nan Shan's
silhouette walking south
to the harbor. I step lightly
between characters, glad I looked down.
This text will not last, but I don't want to be
the one who crushes it without a thought
before it rises silent into air.

6 May 2008

There must be a thousand ways
to book a poem. A long one alone
between covers warm
on the coldest night. A crowd
of little ones on linen
paper you want to hold
without thinking about the words
or what they mean, just the fact
of them leaving an impression
on fine paper so the letters are there
for your fingers as much as for your eyes.
Blocks of rooms where they can stay
like crowds at a family reunion taking over the whole
hotel and you the only one who isn't
related by blood, but you're there, so
you might as well share the feast.

8 May 2008

China roses forgotten yesterday
while flags were showered on the boulevard
below in preparation for the flame
passing are on their feet again to wave
red with the crowd that
has not yet appeared

but will. Half an hour after dawn and there is
already heat enough to make them wilt
but not until the procession has passed.
There are fires to light, and this heat will not
stop them. Near the harbor, music is Chinese
for once, and the breeze has not forgotten
there was an ocean here not so long ago.

Since pinyin so often arrives toneless
and I so often compound toneless
with tone deaf, the ear's universe
of meaning is almost as wide as
meaningless but for the rhythm of it. Speakers
of putonghua never mistake the late
Party Chairman for a cat, but I
do with regularity and with joy,
delighted that every cat I see on the street
with an Andy Warhol smile

could be a ghost like me wondering
how on earth it came to this.

It is not about politics, but every person
who stops on the street for a photo
to prove she or he was here
stands under a flag. One in three
has a red rectangle with five yellow stars
on a cheek, and the boulevard
is lined with them. A cluster
of young people gather around a speaker
and a drum raising fists to chant in time
with the beat and three large flags that wave
in front of them. A man makes a video
of the torch on a television monitor
by the walk, pointing his camera at it,
filming film so he will have the story of a story
to take home. Not politics, a story of a story,
all about being draped in one flag or another.

11 May 2008

I have never seen a corrupt official
gathering breakfast in the gaps between
impatiens on a morning walk. These rats count
on them for scraps; but they work
for a living, consult their watches for lost time
when I interrupt their routine. They avoid contact.
One never knows what a stray on the street might carry.
These fat rats are petite bourgeoisie joggers
at five in the morning. They have learned
to avoid strangers, watch what they eat, wash
their hands again and again to keep pandemics at bay.

14 May 2008

no doubt
in my mind
butterflies dream

but to tell
a butterfly
from an angel

is no easier
than a dream
from a dreamer

and god voices
rise on any
wings they please

it is wise
to leave dreams
undisturbed

one never knows
what will vanish
when they are broken

15 May 2008

One death
spoken

again

again

again

again
requiem

absences
are more than
the wings of every bird
on earth can bear
nothing flies
lives
depend
on
death
unsaid

one death
spoken

again

again

again

again

absence and absence and absence
more than the wings
of every bird

life depends on death
unsaying
say it
say it
nothing flies
requiem

There was a young woman
who made her bed
under a footbridge in the park.

She is gone, like the bird
outside your window
the day after a storm.

16 May 2008

All that climbing to forget a mountain
is no more than an emblem
at the intersection of ten thousand
floating lives. We tell ourselves the place
we stand is solid ground while we count corpses
that say it never was. It never
has been. Under the weight of all
these broken lives whisper *war*
is the luxury we cannot afford. Our lives
depend on fragile performances of humanity
fleeting as the floating mountains
on which, always disappointed, we always stake them.

Bird dances
on the roof
over my head. *This*
is how to fly,
he says, even when you think
you have a place to stand.

After the apocalypse
we prepare for floods
because we know
all about gods and promises

17 May 2008

Sticky flags make faces in the crowd
an ocean of red laced with yellow
stars, every head that bows or nods a flag waving.
Every parade makes its own army, and flags
underfoot the day after this one are reminders
that an army rarely knows what it is
walking on. A week after they have fallen,
they are gone. Their not being there is a sign.
Flags take place as though they have always been
in it, but in the end women on their knees
scrape remnants off paving stones
so no one will walk on the flag without thinking.

Stones set in sand just days ago have settled
into earth so you'd think they'd always been
there. Zigzag gaps mortared solid
with mud the rain made and a week's weight
of crowds still settling in this place
frame a careful herringbone of paving stones
cut by hand by men who could
have placed them straight without
the string they staked to make a line.

18 May 2008

Locusts have come on the scene, and the music
has changed. They rattle dry castanets
in trees, and birds fall silent while
the rhythm settles in. Now and then they
add a chorus, different than it was before
the locusts came. They always sing the same
song. Time changes the music.

Locust song is one dry wave
after another, rolling over the square
where a young couple waltzes
and an old man does tai chi. All three
smooth sharp edges. When the locusts pause,
a bird drifts over singing and sun
samples dry waves, tastes
heat that will be everywhere when the breeze dies

19 May 2008

Rain arrives as ordered on the first day
of mourning, gray sufficient
for thirty thousand, counting, silent, counting.

They say birds vanished,
left the sky
without song before the earth
broke on the crest of a slow wave
rolling plains into mountains. The whole world
shuddered at the immensity of silence.

Far from the center, birdsong
and voices on cellphones contain
what is left of silence, weave it into webs
to calm the earth shell of a rolling ocean
we have mistaken for solid ground.

20 May 2008

A couple strolls hand in hand
in the long dusk of Spring, hoping
it will never end. They will make love
in every language they can imagine before the night is
over. An old woman who cleans the rooms
where men gather power by day dreams
about a moment's rest before she rises again
at dawn to cook and then to pray
before she goes back to sweeping up
the debris power, privilege, and
living always leave. She is
glad the train is cheap and runs on time,
but she wonders if the work will end
before her strength ends. An old man
sits on a bench in the cemetery, thinking
of friends. Slogans shout peace, freedom,
a house in some suburb, the subtle dictatorship
of Capitalist machines. Uncle Joe
sleeps like a baby, shares a dream
with every suit on the other side of hard
cold torpedoes waiting to annihilate desire
in explosions he commands but does not hope to understand.

John D. scours sermons for clues, dreams
oil. They dream power.
Peasants rise,
poems are
written, some philosopher
somewhere is writing differences –
Fascism, Stalinism, Mussolini
is dead, Stalin and Mao safely tucked away
in tombs where the State can keep an eye on them.
Even Ezra Pound. The world goes on.

21 May 2008

All public celebration
canceled for three days
of mourning, but the trees

on Nan Hai Da Dao
cannot resist a confetti shower
after rain. They scatter

yellow rainbows where
we walk, remember
the dead but dance for

the living, shower
each going on
with flowers.

They have lived after
seasons of dying before.
They know ends

are fashioned from fragments
gathered in the shattered
middle of days that will not last.

Cat's eyes
are all bird
until his name
turns him.
Bird flies.

22 May 2008

A mound of fried doufu
has scattered across the walk
from a bag a young boy
is hurrying somewhere, one
of three, two intact, balanced
against a tree. He steadies them
with one hand while he gathers
the doufu with the other
into the broken bag. Two men
watch, and passersby
step around without slowing
down. Two birds consider
looting but opt for the leisure of
what he leaves them when
he is satisfied the bag is full. They live
in a city of excess and know there is no need
to fight for what has fallen at their feet.
I wonder what diners
will say later about the subtle
seasoning of this dish,
how it tastes of the city that has formed it.

23 May 2008

Sun is everywhere after
days of rain. Not
a point of light,

dawn is a flood
that has been
waiting for a dam

to break.

24 May 2008

Locusts sing heat
today. The weight
of it is meant
to remind me
air here is as
heavy with words
as ocean with
water. You could
drown in it, but
you can no more
take one word in
hand than you can
divide the sea
into drops
that compose it.

If you do not become
a fish, you must
learn to swim,
or you will drown in it.

25 May 2008

Bai tou wong sways
on the long stalk
of an orange canna. There is
something to eat at the base
of the flower, and his
song stops while he turns his
attention to consuming
it. Locusts go on. Another
bulbul sings unseen while the sound
of a Chinese flute drifts
over from a loudspeaker
hidden somewhere. It goes
without saying the bulbul
is live. Some note in the songs
signal there is an old man
like the one swaying silent
singing – but not a trace of a flute player
waiting in the wings.

In the beginning,
every breeze is
a spirit moving
on the face of water. This
heat undoes, crushes
everything to chaos that might as well
be primordial. Breath lifts a corner of it, says
let light be now before heat begins again.

26 May 2008

Five million
is not as hard as one
who has taken shelter
under a walkway
that leads from
an English garden
to a fortified highrise
promise of luxury.
Five million is a puzzle
for an engineer, distant
as a collapsing star, a
cipher of equations in
a book of equations,
a design problem in
a textbook for the next
hundred year storm. One
in shadows is an
other, undeniably
fragile as oneself.
One and one and one and one
on and on and on and on.
Not five million.
Five million one
at a time, everyone
displaced, displacing.

See her
and you are
homeless as
any buddha.

Advisory: Avian Flu

Watching sparrows
snatch flying things
I cannot see
from air so thick
they swim in it, it is
hard to think of them
as death threats. This patio
is insect free. The birds
beating wings
fast as they can
to be still for
the moment
necessary to
pluck an
insect
from
a light
are fly fishing
virtuosos,
a morning floor show

worth the risk.
They tap dance on
the translucent
roof while
mayflies
chant there is
no pleasure
where there is
no danger.

27 May 2008

A woman walking
on paving stone.
Ten thousand cicadas
crouching in trees.
A mourning dove, distant.
Sparrows that cannot sit
still chirping, Bai tou wong high
in a palm tree. A ship
announces its presence
in the harbor. Call and response
of foghorns, while a ferry
sputters to life a block away.
Some man on a cellphone
deals in Cantonese,
heat so intense
you can hear
its low drone
under
the whole scene,
two birds dance on translucent
fiberglass over my head, tapping
a tune like dancing on my grave.

28 May 2008

Mountain rises clutch by clutch to an elevation
that would give a Sherpa pause. No grand plan
to build a tower, no god scrambling speech
to confusion for fear there might be real power
in it. One thing at a time. One thing
at a time. One little thing after another
one thing at a time. Not one thing
worth watching. Everything is harmless,
nothing relevant. Time comes when
all at once it is a Qomolangma of consumption
crawling with tourists impatient
with guides who still think the damn thing
sacred. Now and then the altitude
makes a climber swoon.

The rest step over the body, unaware
nothing really matters. They bought this
stairway long ago and know koans
are nothing but holes in walls riddled
with them, every single one large enough to crawl through.

God, disenchanted
with this heaven,
is contemplating a move, but
there are no buyers in
a market as depressed as this.

29 May 2008

You know heat will break if only
for a moment when a line of palms
planted in this garden sigh and sparrows
fly under the eaves. When it breaks
it sounds like thunder
on the far side of a mountain; and you'd
think you'd heard the end of it
when fragments fall
like rain on the roof between
taps of a sparrow's dance on landing
there. But it is a flurry of expectation
more than rain, and heat settles again
when sun pulls back clouds
to take a closer look.

30 May 2008

When locusts begin to sing dry morning
songs that mean sticky heat you have to wade
through like waist deep water, rats disappear.
They know a flood when they see one, even
if the sound of it is a field of clattering
bones so there's no denying the life
has gone out of them. They scramble out of sight
to higher ground where there are machines
to keep the heat in check and leavings
to live on. Scientists who study DNA
to find a next of kin are mistaken.
What we see in the mirror of our genes
may look like a chimpanzee; but turn quickly
and wherever you are you will catch
a rodent, not a primate, in the corner of your eye.

31 May 2008

Be careful with your head is a small sign
that appears where someone fears
you might bump it. But a little heart for
a head in a tight space
is always worth bearing in mind

xiao xin tou

mind
the gap
a little heart
for the head

that is all

signs

mind the gap
a little heart
with your head
no exit
that is all.

1 June 2008

that bird did not choose you when
she nested in flowers at your window
but when she flew

ninety thousand miles is nothing
to your heart
wind beneath wings
blue sky behind you too perfect for clouds

dry laughter of cicadas
rises on morning heat
distant turtle dove chuckles

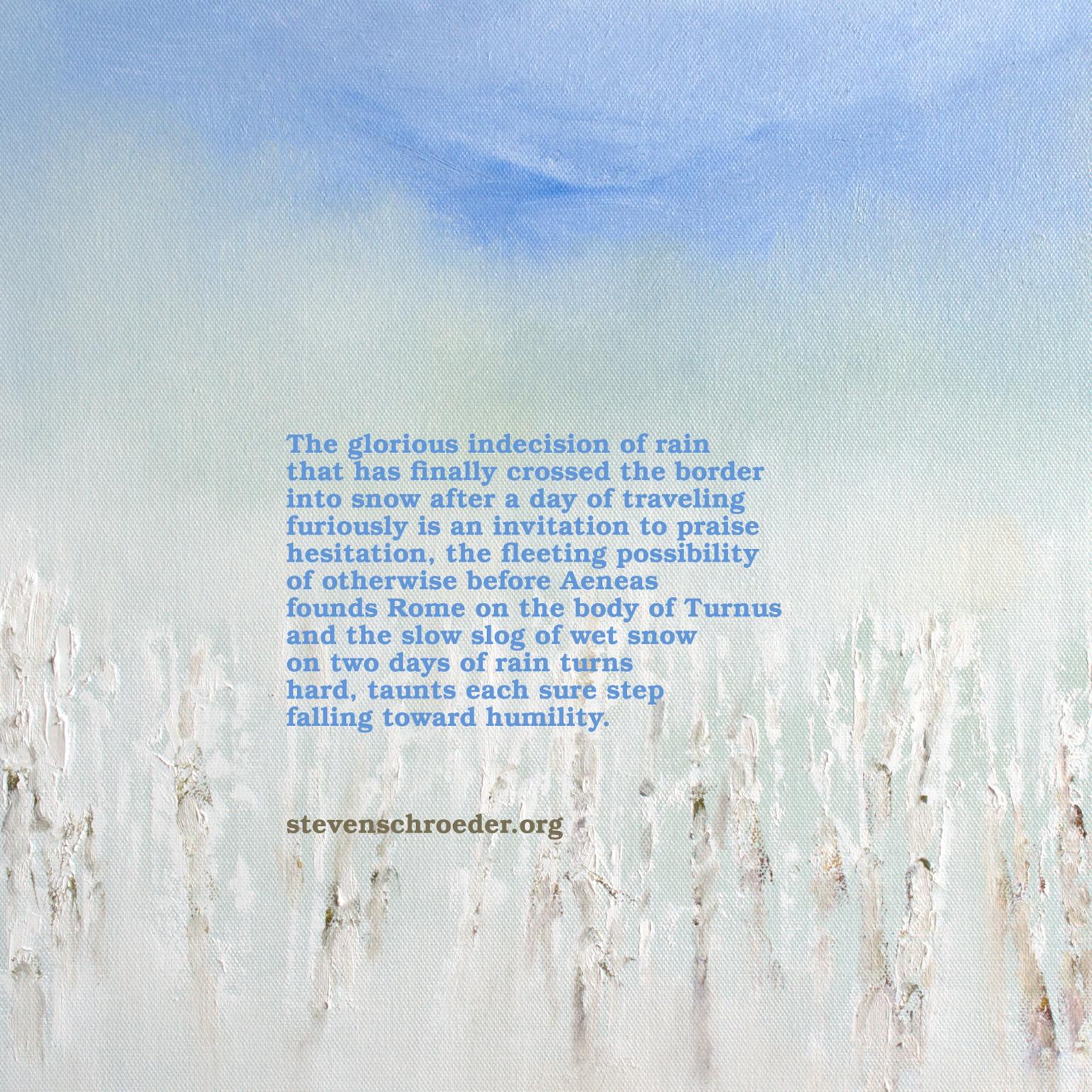
so many ways to fly
a nest is no more
than the passing
body of an absence

empty, she flies

wind below
blue sky

dry
cicada
laughter

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



**The glorious indecision of rain
that has finally crossed the border
into snow after a day of traveling
furiously is an invitation to praise
hesitation, the fleeting possibility
of otherwise before Aeneas
founds Rome on the body of Turnus
and the slow slog of wet snow
on two days of rain turns
hard, taunts each sure step
falling toward humility.**

stevenschroeder.org