

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes. The composition is dominated by vertical bands of color. On the left, there are deep red and magenta tones. In the center and right, there are vibrant yellow and light blue strokes, some of which are layered over the red. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and layered complexity.

the fragility of gathering

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

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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder

the fragility of gathering is the third 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 third of ten notebooks and were drafted between April 2005 and February 2006. 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. Almost all of the material in this third volume was composed while walking (or, sometimes, driving) and committed to writing during stops along the way (perchings in my flight, one might say, with William James and Richard Luecke in mind). That much of the material was composed while walking is important for the rhythm of both the poetry and the prose in the collection. It may be measured in breaths, steps, stops, and heartbeats – a reminder that this is the work of material bodies moving in space and time – the writer, the reader, the words on the page, and the ground beneath the feet of all three.

In this volume, I've used details from three paintings for the cover and section title pages: “a passing storm” (2016), “watch for falling light 1” (2014), and “watch for falling light 2” (2014).

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

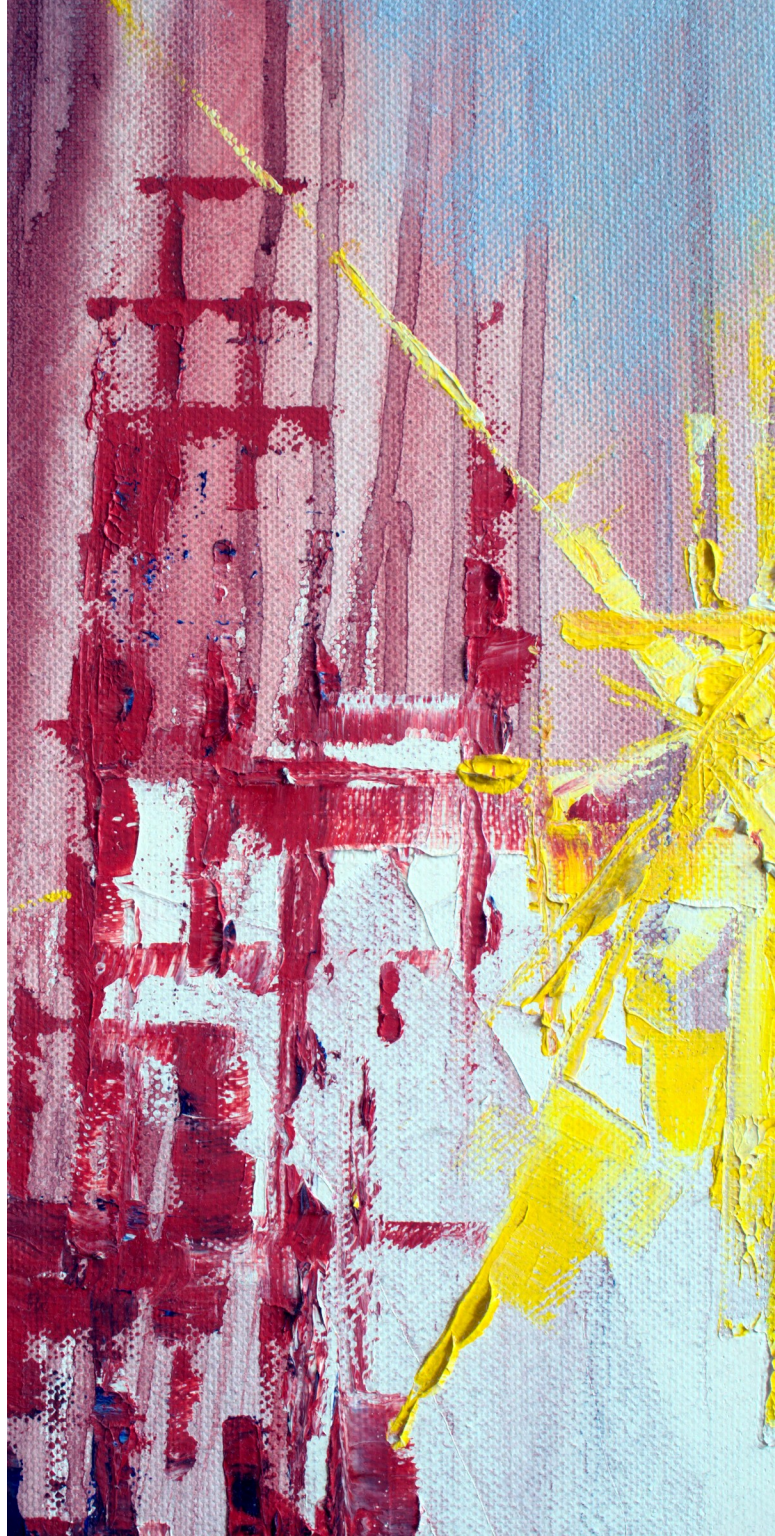
Chicago

March 2022



Steven Schroeder
2019

I
no use counting



Shenzhen | 20 April 2005

In the matter of mountains, it is the idea that draws crowds. Rapids and rock slides are problems of human engineering; they pose material questions; lay down gravitational challenges; throw themselves in the way of speeding cities, run amok. Masses wait while they are smoothed, admire them on postcards where they lie flat and rarely induce queasiness. A space hungry species with command of machines moves them to make way, imagines them stockpiles poised to fill oceans, creates human-scaled replicas in parks below cities of high rises, builds museums to contain improbable images of old poets solitary on mountains untamed.

Shenzhen | 21 April 2005

Walking against a shift change, the human dimension of number dawns slowly. Every body north against my south, it is no use counting. One by one obscures the one of many. One of many is a human face that does not turn at the turning of a turning world.

Count: one. One, turning the world in its image.

A young woman stands on the edge of the walk, watching. She wears an orange tee shirt that says I love NY. I don't know if she loves what she sees, but she expects something from it, someone, a face turning to her turning. Another woman walks south to the gate of a factory with an empty bucket swaying on one hip. She does not have the air of a person rushing to fill it, sways Sisyphean with this passing moment of emptiness. A man in a yellow hard hat crouches by the walk gazing at a building that has been rising for weeks on his back, takes a long drag before he stands to go back to work. Yellow leaves on gray paving stone where the crowd breaks, passes, not one and one and one, but one.

No use counting.

Kunming | 23 April 2005

At just the pace of age, an old man, an old woman, make their way across our walk slowed already in conversation, in time, by stuttering improvisation with a partner not yet familiar. You wait for the interval of my step, I for yours and between us we make time for age that follows walls like a wary cat. While we memorize the rhythm, learn to translate thoughts. The city is an old man who smiles at youth but knows age will outlast it, find it creeping one day to the wall, sitting with Buddha outside the temple breathing incense, accepting alms, blessing all who inhabit the scene.

Two days, and I have tasted four lily perfumes in two bouquets of welcome; yellow roses; aroma of oil, turpentine, painters painting; a voice that cradles the bass, catches the breath of sax and accordion breathing just above the sound of a Nordic breeze in Kunming (but erhu is not far, not far); poetry; poets who feed on the rhythm of its movable feast. It is the light, close to sky, that stays aloft without the aid of umbrellas, coaxes sympathetic harmony from two strings, and fills a moon over Yunnan by evening.

Kunming | 24 April 2005

Who can sleep with that raucous
moon outside the window –

belly full of poetry,
melody of a slow walk
gone fast the night before?

Moon again
tomorrow,
poetry enough

to feed an army,
waiting on your music.

Buddha is an old woman with bound feet. Almost a hundred years etched in a web drawn over a face set against a life of pain. Blind eyes pierce mine looking for a sign by which to know me. I am kneeling at her feet with a recorder while she prays a hundred times, once for each bead on a string held by hands that have bent too long to survival. A crooked finger caresses a bead with each prayer. Prayer passes to her life. She repeats her life a hundred times, a hundred times fingering each memory strung on a life held by hands bent too long to survival, all suffering, she says all is suffering. And when I press what cost me nothing into her hand she repeats thank you thank you thank you Buddha will bless you All is suffering, she says. And suffering is the offspring of desire. She has waited all her life for Buddha to appear. Shaken, not enlightened, we will hold each other, cry, and pass this on.

Frog's rhythm started
under the moon last night,
joined by birds in morning –

three tones like a whippoorwill
on the lake in the distance,
a crowd of chirpers

closer in every tree,
roosters announcing the sun,
calling each other out,

an old two cycle engine sputtering
loud enough to silence frogs
but not roosters,

and not
crowds of chirpers

who will go on
until they doze in
afternoon sun.

Shenzhen | 27 April 2005

Women who sweep the square do not stop for rain,
cover their heads with plastic shrouds, bow
over brooms in acts of supplication
before overtaxed drains.

Shenzhen | 28 April 2005

Thirty minutes and it is a different
city. Everything begins at once, but
before the beginning the street is near

calm. There is room for nothing
at intervals in traffic still building
speed, but an army of workers streaming
toward Shekou Wo Er Ma will change that.

Nothing is hard to commodify.
It breeds in silence
that gathers

in low morning places.
It carries the fever
that makes birds sing.

When the city rises, it will see to this.

Shenzhen | 29 April 2005

In Kunming, tiny dogs who could curl into my empty shoe patrol the streets snarling onomatopoeias at little demons sent to nip at heels of unsuspecting strollers. They fill the place where demons were with laughter, so we do not have to watch our feet.

I have not seen them in Shenzhen, but every day I see people shaking off demons.

Shenzhen (in Shekou contemplating Nanshan and Zhuhai) | 30 April 2005

On this suburban edge, one rise
has been allowed to stand
as an intimation of mountains
bordering on a gesture toward ocean.

Mist gathers on it some mornings,
exhaust from rivers of shiny new cars
that radiate wealth and snail in all directions
leaving silver illusions of speed

mixed with the taste of diesel from old buses
that remember the moment of opening
when Hong Kong was another planet
and the harbor shelter among mountains.

From the top, you think you can see
all the way to the end of it.

Macao | 1 May 2005

Passing from China to China to China
requires something like a wormhole in Zhuhai,
and the gravitational distortion of that singularity
bends light all the way to Shekou.

Mouth to mouth, Guanyin to Kun Iam, two
colonies under compassionate eyes
that do not overlook semi
colonialism.

One history, four languages,
ten thousand interpretations.

Zhuhai and Incheon Airport, on the way to Chicago | 2 May 2005

Only the sound
that stands for a while
after rain passes, rhythm

leaping from awnings
to gather on margins
of return.

Gamblers still
sleeping, birds rise
before sun, try their luck

with crowds chirping
at bus stops, taxis
biding their time in long lines,

walkers here and there
who make their way
to the end of the night before.

In the only coffee shop open, smooth voices repeat a single phrase in Portuguese endlessly, something about rain and loneliness, but it is only a mechanical device to fend off silence until tourists gather to chatter some other refrain. The voice repeating loneliness makes it hard to imagine alone and all that remains is play.

A heavy bag carried Chinese style
from the ferry, we each take up half
the load while we walk in Zhuhai
to a Western restaurant.

I am relieved to know that means Xinjiang,
and you order zī rán tǔdòu piàn spicy,
remembering our last meal
in Guimiao.

Student of my students,
I will look for zī rán in Chicago, listen
for elusive tones, cultivate a root of wisdom,
leave the garden in good hands.

Two monks in gray
are walking meditation
at the speed of Incheon,

an American and a Korean, judging from appearances, laughing as they pass a sign that says “Last Chance to Shop” and a last call for JFK drifts over them in Korean. It seems they have no reason to fear last chances or last calls, and they chat at the pace of desire. When I see them later on the plane, their bags are simple but full, and they plunge into the clutter with the rest of us.

II
diamonds interrupted



Chicago | 4 May 2005

Coal is patient. It has waited
a long time already, so a few hours
in a line that stretches from 63rd to 57th
is nothing. But three quarters of a mile
of coal cars waiting in bright sun for
something to move them does
not bring patience to mind.

Diamonds interrupted, carbon
black edges leap to catch the end
of the sun before they burn. Birds
sing each facet before it settles to ash,
recall miners who breathed coal
dust first, lungs grown
diamond hard, breathless.

New Age Crystal Energy Consultant Gallery
might divine surfaces of coal that spills
over edges of cars lining south side platforms
in time, but now it stands empty behind a sign
that promises Tarot readings for ten dollars,
pensee sauvage reflected in two shades
of violet among domestic cousins
in fashionable near north windows,
and you wonder how they survive in
this high rent district among white tulips.

Spring spontaneity is cultivated
early on the edge of late frost,
a pinch of sadness folded in
makes a piquant sauce.

Chicago | 5 May 2005

She has, she says, created
the poet you would be
if you were Chinese.

But I am not,
which makes me
nothing, I suppose,
if not her poem.

Chicago | 10 May 2005

Through the opening years have made
of rotting sash that holds the glass
now by a corner, the world
on this side is no different than
the world on that, except it pretends

the walls protect it.
Glass clear to compound eyes
is nothing but a puzzle to pound against

because you cannot believe
what you see is not
simply there until
the cat, fat but
hungry, dispatches
you and there is no window.

An old sliding screen has wintered
with maple leaves on the balcony, and
leaning against a wooden planter,
it carries their trace into spring.

But they are halfway to earth,
and life so small you have to look
hard to see it is building cities in it.

The cat and I smell lavender
but can't find where
it has sprouted.

She follows her near sighted nose until
she is distracted by the miracle of something
that can fly. Unaware of Leonardo, she makes a
sketchbook of rotting leaves, dreams herself wings.

Chicago | 11 May 2005

Memory blows in
winter dark to restore
the rhythm of the seasons,

underline how ill advised
those planters were
who rushed out to make a garden

on the first bright day
that called itself spring.

Chicago | 13 May 2005

All at once
down in a flood
then no trace but

lilacs bowed
in silent prayer

and small talk
in the post office
about the sky opening.

Chicago | 18 May 2005

Time is winding up. Time is
winding up. Street corner preacher
makes words do time like they say
it. Up, to a near end. We've
got to love our neighbors as we love
ourselves. We've got to love
our neighbors as we love
ourselves. JEE
sus is coming. Time
is winding up. Time is

winding up. And I ponder
in my heart who is my neighbor, whether
he would if I called him good
repeat no one is
good but God.

Next day, time is still
winding up. Man in the post office
looking for stamps says
I don't want love.
But he does. He does. He
wants it as much as everyone does.
Love, not a word on a stamp, not ink
to simulate flowers, not correspondence –
contact. And that is why he is here,

to exchange hellos, not
money for stamps.

Each item is weighted at four with the weight of a world that has not been present long enough to establish the promise of its presence beyond this passing moment. And a serious woman with a book of spells she knows takes you in a special room and keeps asking questions that require you to point to pictures as though they were things themselves but you know they aren't, so you know you are wrong but you point anyway because she insists. And on the page some pictures of children are pictures with cats and some are not and when she says how many have cats? you think of a hundred pictures of a hundred cats on your street, how each says "Lost" and you say because it is right even though the serious woman with the book of spells wants you to say something about the pictures in the book that not all children have cats and what's the sense of that when there are cats lost and children too?

The silence of god's dying
is the only word from the cross,
but tellers of the tale cannot leave it alone,
forsaken in the simplicity of a Psalm. So they make seven
sitting shiva among them.

Chicago | 21 May 2005

speech spoken is strange names named nameless unknown world mothers ten thousand things
known for no reason random desire makes ordinary extraordinary desire desired silence spoken a
thousand doors into silence

Chicago | 27 May 2005

Birds wait for the mower to fall
silent, except sparrows who chirp
in ragged gaps while edger
scrapes the pavement.

There is a war every morning between
deliverers of goods and deliverers of children,
who arrive from elsewhere at the same time and fill
as much space as they can with the sound of their horns.

Maple seeds spin over it all for a long time,
hesitant to put down roots, thinking
they might do better to sprout
in air, put a toe in the soil
now and again, sip
water from passing clouds.

And there are other seeds
that ride wind for hours
before they collapse
into weary weeds
with brilliant flowers
that will fade by evening.

Wind is visible
in the flight of birds.

Late May maple seeds spin it slowly
while trees mark time with new leaves

under a congregation of clouds
solemnly assembling for a baptism.

Gulls rise on its presence again
and again but still call. Come.

Chicago | 28 May 2005

Gazoo Gazanias mirror sun
daily just beyond my line
of sight, fold petals

when clouds gather,
sleep easy, ignore speculation
with the neighbors about pansies,

secure in their irreplaceability.

Chicago | 30 May 2005

Squirrel brunches on clusters of sweet nuts
in brown paper wrappers for breakfast,
spins one now and again to entertain
the cat who waits below to catch them
just before they land but is not convinced by
squirrel's insistence that they are good to eat. I
dream of the sap sweet with butter on waffles in the morning.

Chicago | 3 June 2005

Something about a psalm, seeing it whole,
passing gently into memory.

All the rivers in the world flow down
to the sea, but the sea does not overflow.

Unlike rivers, waves return
to depths that give rise to them.
It is the return that rushes over every
contemplation of the whole. You can see it

in the dazed expressions of people on the train
who rushed down to the shore for fish
stranded when the wave passed, bewildered

when the past rushes back into the future.
You never see the past coming. You
never see the end of it.

Chicago | 4 June 2005

Lines broken just so, this way not that, turn
the eye of a phrase from incremental
plodding construction to a miracle
sudden at the end of it, sudden
at the drop of a hat, a dry leaf
on the walk, maple seeds that spin space
between sky and earth on breezes rising
and falling without reason, mirror walls
to double what is not there by design
mirror river that doubles without it,
one sun rises while another sinks
on water that reaches eyes' horizon
and if you believe them could end where
the earth does. Train sings a cappella

with children until school stops them,
can not read the epistemology
of their morning song learning to spell
what they know how to say. Beyoncé
filling the space of a half full car
in every way three children learning
to make places in it can imagine,
and a fourth who joins them half way
there. They would like to dwell on this
in corners of eyes striking other

poses, but they will stop at prose
making, matured to bewilderment
that squats in the ruins of
a city's abandoned poetry.

Chicago | 6 June 2005

In the state of confusion where I grew up, the last battle in every war is fought months after the war is over. And stuttered freedom proclamations call for staggering celebrations with gaps big enough to dance in while music rises to trace memories on mantras of denial.

Summer snow is
horizontal. Seeds feathered
with sun drops light as air spin clouds

rising dark on summer heat, trace
uncommon attractions where there is
nothing but nothing to see, see that it gathers

to a cloudburst for
parched flowers,
settling sun drops.

Chicago | 7 June 2005

Falling stars, I guess,
falling the way light would
fall if it gathered itself in fibers

like cotton and scattered
on wind, almost light
as air, almost out

of gravity's reach, divided
between falling down
and gathering up

in heaps with dry leaves,
gathering up in clouds that darken
until they burst into summer

rain, sprout and
struggle up through
trees back to sky.

Chicago | 9 June 2005

Gulls rode rising heat so high you'd lose sight of them against cirrus chalked the color of gull feathers on sunlight-faded blue sky this morning. High as convection would carry them, they circled back into the corner of the eye and the weather changed. A thunderstorm in Brazil, nothing but dark clouds here, broken when afternoon gulls circled back sunlight-faded blue sky.

Chicago | 15 June 2005

I like slow
slow ponderous
slow trains that stop
at every station
take it all in

wandering
walks, time for
stories. Man on the
corner asks if I know
a church nearby.

I don't know why
but I name
them.

He says he's
tried them all
and found nothing
to die for. Give it time,
I say. You will.

Concerto for violin, autos
and pedestrian conversation,
laced through intervals
between signals

half a block from a coffee shop
on Van Buren Street.

Cop conducts, percussion
footfall when traffic breaks, and
a chorus on cellphones rises over it until
the violinist breaks for lunch at ten past twelve.

Chicago | 17 June 2005

Light ripples on leaves
in morning breeze,
keeps time for wind chime
song of birds that remain hidden.

Another takes sunshine
in his beak and rolls it
into six notes for a lover,
for anyone who will listen.

Every driver in the neighborhood honks on horn once so the world will know they are joining the stream of traffic rolling under bird song. Trucks delivering whatever they deliver and a few early morning children in sandals. Cat opens an eye when parrots flash green as leaves in sun. Tomatoes stretch to drink it in before afternoon clouds. Cat meditates on the mystery of wind, the miracle of sunshine.

Chicago | 18 June 2005

In Abu Graib
we have not acted
like. We have acted.

In Guantanamo
we have not acted
like. We have acted.

No ghost of Hitler, no
resurrection of Stalin. Only
we have acted. Our trials reveal

who we are. Bosque Redondo,
trails of tears, Wounded
Knee, Red River
Wars, lynch
mobs, Mi
Lai, old
maps.

Just us.

Chicago | 20 June 2005

Mourning dove spreads one wing
to show a passing squirrel she can be
big in one dimension, sideways like
a cat who has read all about Hanoi
towers and is certain the other in
question will not risk too much on
an abstraction. The wing of a dove is
big as a squirrel, and maple seeds,
which almost never fight back, are
more in keeping with squirrel's
appetite. So he makes his way
to a cluster hanging higher
and dove gets small as she can
again, hoping for invisibility.

on the road to Cleveland | 23 June 2005

Cattails rise from
wetland memories
they share with water

that returns after
rain to what it was
before they made a road here.

Ohio winters
have distilled red to traces
on weathered wood

that gives way where snow
weighs heaviest on the roof
year after year

and no one has
taken time to patch it.
Poplar trees

past their prime still stand
at attention, ignoring
rumors of lightning strikes

and a wall's collapse
on the next farm east.

Just across the Lucas County line,
someone has scrawled God died
on an orange water tower.

It took two miracles
to make a blind man see.
First, knowing without
seeing trees. Second,
being moved by them
to see who touched him.

Stars and bars
just short of Sandusky
must have crept north
with the kudzu thriving
in June on northern trees.

A tin can full of washers not pennies
sealed with duct tape to frighten squirrel
terrorists who eye peaches, plot larceny
in neighbors' fruitless trees, looking for
the tape in the grandson's ipod,
a conversation about teeth missing,
evolution of Bridge systems,
medicinal properties of quinine
in generic tonic water. What will
you do when you get old
if you don't play?

Cleveland
28 June 2005

Chicago | 29 June 2005

Finding is the first act
the second is not
loss but losing

in response to its discovery.
Finding that one is lost,
abandon the rest

to keep the flock together
untended. Finding the absence
of a coin, leave no cushion unturned

until it can be spent
a hundred times, consumed in
the celebration of its appearance.

Keep your eyes on the absent child
so the present one will be.
Celebrate nothing but return.

Chicago | 30 June 2005

Rough tongue knows more intimately than
eyes, ears, nose, poor finger tips kept mostly
to themselves and dull as other human
senses. She sees right through mirrors where
we stop at images we think of ourselves,
but she knows what the world tastes like,
can taste a body on her tongue, at a distance
nose assisted. That incessant cleaning
is knowing, best known in contact.
Contact is the secret to seeing in the dark.
Every corner of a world you have tasted
is familiar at the tip of a whisker.
The mirrors are a trick.
She can see right through them.

Chicago | 4 July 2005

Remains of a hand-held altar call drift north on dry wind that strips them off a distant tent meeting with maple leaves fragile on drought starved branches. Promises of glory coming to nothing confirm the conviction of absence that settles in place of rain on a flock waiting for rapture. Not here, not now, not unless it thrives on absence like an orchid suspended in air.

Chicago | 6 July 2005

Language that will not lie
still and colorless asks *you*
see what I'm saying?

And if you listen,
you can taste the volume of it,
smell its cadence, feel

where it is going
while the speaker feels her way
to a point she makes

with both hands, imagine
a text that is not contained
by a page, a stage,

an anchor. *You see*
what I'm saying?

Chicago | 8 July 2005

At this latitude,
sun melts wax slowly,
so Icarus, who dreams

he will fly forever,
does not know his wings
grew soft until he falls

in a cloud
of feathers still

fluttering to earth
too hard to notice.

I thought they grew up
from the street you say
of mulberries when I
raise them in
a conversational
categorization of berries.

We started with tomatoes
served as fruit after meals in China,
then prodded the strange boundary
between fruits and vegetables. That's
where we found them oozing purple
across a walk beside a tree lined street.
You'd think they bubbled up between
shifting plates when the earth grew hot.

Chicago | 10 July 2005

A crescent cut in night
is all this music needs.
It slips from the voice of five
hearts breaking over three guitars
into a line of trees behind violin,
viola, drums. Crowd goes
home with moon.

catches sun on crumpled foil
plastic in ten thousand neon
variations cracked mirrors on
edges where transparency breaks
every window in the building
shattered with lives lived
there when it stood
five pointed asters
on wire hard stems will not
give in to drought soften
midday sun to constellations
in a rainbow night sky
that trails the clock
by half a day

if you see
something say
something sing

nothing
from this
humdrum

young man on the train is preaching
a broken sermon, something about
Moses. I've been dozing, keeping
my personal belongings with me
at all times, wondering how
I would know if I saw
something unusual.

*What did Moses, he says, what
did Moses..., he says to me,
Why are white people
so mean?* I ask myself
the same thing every day.
Doze again, wonder
how I would know.

Chicago | 11 July 2005

Fan flower foot soldiers turn their backs, lean purple into sun. Bidens follows, yellow stars at attention over green lace afterthoughts waiting for sun to return, salutes when he passes on one more revolution. Generals stand in place, spin armies, take anonymous faces circling as progress.

Sometimes I think I'm losing it when I smell revolution on the breath of these flowers. Then I hear a greeting as if from an old friend, turn to see a stranger with a cellphone in his ear who does not see me, does not smell the flowers, but does not doubt himself fully present to the world and to a friend; and I feel suddenly sane.

Chicago | 12 July 2005

to make out the whisper
of the world, grow
silent, clear
a space,
move in,
see what is
found there

to make yourself heard
over the din, whisper
in the world's ear.

she does not shout she
whispers what will not be
hurried, catches her breath

Chicago | 13 July 2005

Train sways north on old tracks like a lullaby,
drifts crowded into sleep before a stop lurches
through a lucid flash in which you are so clearly
lost that you think to stay awake and watch what
passes for awhile, but the lullaby begins again
and you are sleeping with strangers, startled
each time you shake off sleep in a shudder of
old brakes on steel rails. A voice that does not
belong here drones doors open on the right open
on the left, and the crowd changes through warnings
about unattended briefcases and admonitions to tell
someone in authority if something appears suspicious.

Like the transformation of the crowd, like
all the stations crumbling on the South Side.

Chicago | 17 July 2005

You have me thinking of a love story
that is nothing more than signals
to remind us when to breathe.

This (:)
that (:):
a rising tone (:)
driven to the climax of an exclamation (!)

Death alone is a full stop.
On this side, it's commas
all the way down, longing for
more than a half stop;
settling for ellipsis...

Fill the time with conversation,
heavy under the wait of words.

Silence is not an option
for most walkers
in woods of brittle twigs

and dry leaves, who
meet every other
in flight, startled

by the snap of a twig,
the mark of a step
that could be a predator.

Back side,
in the corner of the eye,
every other flies.

Chicago | 18 July 2005

Do professors still
fill lectures wondering whether
tragedies can be

written without heroes
in this unGreek age?

A failed suicide kills three and everyday suicides make weapons of every day. The lives we make are turned on us A dive beyond the southwest side where the city wheezes into something less than suburb after miles of choking on exhaust advertises mirrored rooms, and there must be trysts enough to keep it afloat.

Sing, muse,
sing sulking desperation
in mirrors of what might have been,
in the living who cannot shake life off with anger,

the dead who did not know they had to hold it there,
in that safe place, the manufacture of death
in a people who cannot name it.

Chicago | 19 July 2005

delicate distances tatted to catch
Athena's eye set her to making
a new genus comfortably alien.
close, sound keeps pace with vision,
hum in step with mosquito, buzz
with bee, dream with fly. chatter
barely half a step behind parrots
hurrying between trees, crow's
voice lifts in tandem with her,
drops slowly as she picks up
speed. there are swallows that fly
a thousand feet above their voices,
sweeping to collect them in speechless
moments before they settle back to earth.

cardinal makes a song with wings. eyes
adjust slowly to trailing red flashes,
paradoxical aid to ostentatious invisibility,
undeniable, harder to place than the sound
that trails the jet by ten percent
of the arc of the sky. spotting it is
a matter of direction, simple geometry,
nothing but vectors on blue sky
while cardinal's ventriloquism directs the eye
to the wrong branch, red on green, shockingly

invisible, but not to the one he's courting,
and close, where sound keeps pace
with light, next needs a calculus
only cats and bees understand.

Chicago | 20 July 2005

Some guy in a white shirt and tie
is on the platform
at 55th Street,
strutting, dropping names,
making private space
of public performance.
By the time the train arrives,
we know he knows some
actor and has been
on the phone, he says,
with Second City. He is
a player without a thought
of closets or repentance.

Chicago | 22 July 2005

Parks populated by bronze horses who
carry stone faced generals long dead unfold
the common sense of people who have
always settled for war. Keep your feet on
the ground, they say. But they pay for
statues of old men larger than life lifted
on strong backs while they silently mourn
untimely deaths of children and secretly
wish for a century of a hundred thousand
bronze hooves welded to pedestals in
a park in Baghdad instead of today's
count of bodies caught in senseless
crossfire. Keep your feet on the ground,
they say. Not one has, only the horses.

Chicago | 24 July 2005

All lines cross in time, and even Euclid knew
his dreamscape could not contain cities
of light. All depends on where
you find yourself with respect to East,
which skyline looms to draw you in, to fold
you into limits from which information trickles
so slowly you'd think outside the place had gone dark.
Sound rings changes like a church bell, like a muezzin.
like a call to turn, like a call to face a sacred city.

III

the spirit of the place



East of Santa Rosa, New Mexico | 27 July 2005

East of Santa Rosa, a memory
of water, opaque like clouds
with peaks that mirror mountains.
North, West, glass porous in
time opens on the other side
to blue mountains inverted
in purple sky over mustard
grass flat to the edge of gullies
that imagine what is left of it
into a river breaking east
in a red valley. By tomorrow
it will be pastel again under
sun that swears it would
never dream of rain.

Amarillo | 28 July 2005

Ears tuned to elsewhere music seek distance,
fall in love with what is found there. Stumbling
from here to there, you never know when
you will encounter another until
you do, and there is no encounter
otherwise than here. Even a falcon
comes down to earth now and again,
grateful for the solid music of the place
that holds her sure as air she knows under
wing. Under wing sing the music of this place
with an orchestra of everywhere.
All lines meet here. All lines
meet here. All lines. Sing
the distance of the place. Sing.

Blue arc of July sky unbroken
by cloud white settles in an
intermittent breeze of light
shimmering through the only
Cottonwoods still standing in this
neighborhood. Two sparrows chirp
it back over the fence in waves
while a butterfly stirs it, rifling
through Bells of Ireland for

a blossom, lights on daisies. Light
bleaches horizon, deepens as it
rises into a bowl of sky inverted,
leaves nothing, leaves chromatogram
of blue light on dry intimation of desert.

Shingles angle across the roof line
of an old bird house that hasn't been
painted since Dad died.
The bleached wood seems
too much like a shrine
for a new coat, marked
by lines that might tell
you how old the tree was
when they cut it, stripped
by weather and three years
of pure light. It matches
the spirit of the place. It matches
the Mockingbird on the grass
below, in an Amish plain
wrap over a city of song.

Texas Panhandle | 29 July 2005

Trees here always know
which way to turn,
and cattle that fall
into line with fences
know blue northers
when there is nothing
yet to know. Stay here
long and you'll lean
into north wind, lean
into north wind, lean
into the bone-chilling
absence of north wind.

Texas Panhandle | 30 July 2005

Yes, the moon. Half
way from nothing
to full, rises over
the last house, the last
mesquite, the last gray
blue clouds riding through
the holiness of it. Light falls
in sheets like rain
across the face of it,
across the face of the sky.

She has come in time to these
moments of forgetfulness. Only
yesterday, the whole thing
burned red hot. Now it is cold.
That white chalk feathered
on a background of ice looks
so familiar, and the rattling in
the tree, something stirring
that might have been extinct.
She can see her sighs now, cirrus
wisps that grow heavy, roll into
cumulus, cumulo nimbus piled high.
And, for the life of her, she cannot
remember how to stop the rain.

on the road to Chicago | 31 July 2005

Most every time the world ends, it ends in some imbroglia over noise, too much, not enough, silent gods fed up with the clamor downstairs, histrionic bullies shouting where were you from whirlwinds, somebody who doesn't like the music, and forgetting. A bang, a whimper, the terrible silence of a man who does not recall his other son, making promises when lightning strikes and wars begin, giving children up because he cannot hold his tongue, because he will not hold his tongue, because he does. Curses enough for everyone in this epic, those who remember, those who forget, those who will die, those who wish they could.

on the road to Chicago | 1 August 2005

*Catbird cadenzas from
the bushes issue like edicts.*

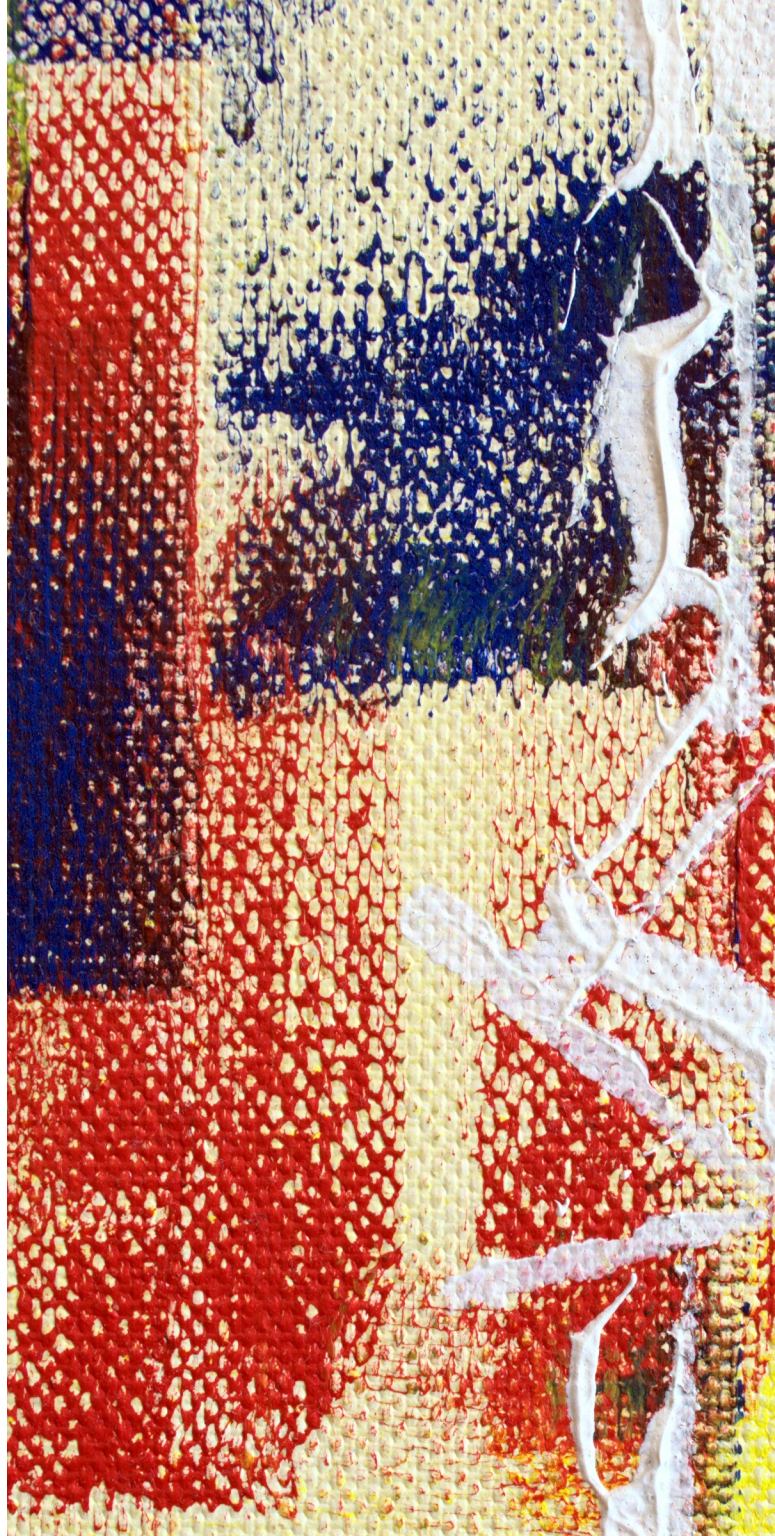
-Denise Levertov

To inhabit the world
a catbird sings, one
must learn to walk softly
in spaces left by the phrasing
of azaleas, to hear dandelion
pizzicato with sharp eyes.

Let it be a flower, and sun
will gather faster than daffodils
in the bed you've made for it.

IV

some other planet's past



Chicago | 3 August 2005

I do not desire a house in the suburbs surrounded by anorexic women in furs, faster acceleration in a vehicle that cannot get lost, computerized tracking devices for children who are always afraid of strangers, electricity too cheap to meter, plugs for bald spots, a larger penis, four hour erections, lite beer, artificial sweeteners, weight loss without exercise, climate control, pigeon free ledges, sealed borders, nuclear superiority, English only, something to help me sleep, support the troops.

Chicago | 4 August 2005

Chopin floats
on heat heavy
air, gathers
in clouds that
will rain after
this mazurka.

Heat rises lighter
than air, Li
Yundi plays
Chopin still lighter.
Some catalyst
stirs in them
a tertium quid
heavy as sleep,
heavy as a universe,
heavy as the horizon
of a day
that cannot
shake it.

Chicago | 5 August 2005

The hum is how you know internal machinery hidden from eyes but audible, low drone tones under every conversation, every song, every sleep. A power mower that pulls itself so you won't have to push, long as the tree lawn is wide, stops the moment it starts, pulled back before it lurches into the street, to start again. Air conditioners in windows that used to be open translate power generated somewhere else into something you can hear, a chain reaction, slow fission just below the membrane of consciousness, in a dream shaken by it. Sirens summoned by false alarms and fires. The truck that scoops up dumpsters every morning at six, metal on metal, more fill for the mountain beside the Calumet.

A medley of trucks that follow, delivering, too
large for the alley, beep beep beep beep backing
to maneuver around the SUV almost always parked
with two wheels in it, one wheel on the curb.
Alarms on cars set to remind neighbors
when the commute begins and others roll in
scavenging for places to park, honking once when
the driver walks away, alarmed sometimes
by rain or wind, a squirrel that uses it
for a platform to the first branch of a tree,
stops to eye the cat who follows him higher,
higher in imagination, joins swallows near high clouds,
wonders if silence smells like the promise of rain.

Chicago | 6 August 2005

What was is
not by our hand
nothing more nothing

less, a mark
some old god
left to warn

against forgetting
when blood grows
tired of crying.

Light falls in waves
on maple leaves
from morning sunburst
that caught us out with no umbrella.

Clouds of it dissipate
while trees stretch,
shake dry.

Chicago | 8 August 2005

The third should unsettle even those who never doubted the first necessary the second necessary the cold logic of fire fighting fire that goes without saying. If violence understands nothing other than violence, the first must have been a word it knew, an unspeakable left to explode so close to Mescalero it might have ended it. It might have been nothing. It might have been a land without people, nothing violence knows like the back of its hand. The second on Japan, the third; and those that followed on the South Pacific, Shoshone land, others. Violence understands nothing; but the third, the third, the third...

It was all
or nothing. We
chose all.

Chicago | 9 August 2005

Masters of standing without standing,
we have made the sun close. But we are
adept at settling in still illusions when
we ride a Sufi planet on the verge of ecstasy.
Birds sense the change, torn by perpetual
migration. One does not have to fly
these days to find southern heat.
Swallows have taken
to banking north
against the drift while
humans spread climate control
like gospel, lower thermostats, sing
a Franciscan hymn now and again, tell
parrot alarmists it is all in their imagination.

Chicago | 10 August 2005

It rained last night,
just when memory
of light suspended
in a jewel poised
over the jade curve
of a ripe pepper faded
dry. Tomatoes drink it
 drop
 drop
like tiny spiders
scavenging on
green leaves,
save it to
surprise you
sweet sour red
remember rain
when they
burst on
your tongue.

Chicago | 11 August 2005

Recollection of ten thousand rivers falling into ocean's embrace, and one in a thousand strikes an old metal watering can on the front porch inverted against mosquitoes, though it seems a losing battle. Percussion under strings of rain. Birds have fallen silent for this metallic interlude.

A flower can survive for days on showers of sunlight and the domesticated water it laps from a saucer or a garden hose. But it will not thrive. It craves oceanic memories of distant bodies that settle wild in a day long rain, desire so heavy even a cloud six miles high could not contain it.

Chicago | 12 August 2005

She is a student of flight. But
I learned today in slow rain
that she is a student of falling
as well. She measured the distance
between drops with the same eye
she uses for a butterfly
in a rising breeze, a kind of
meditation befitting enlightened
beings. She sees nothing in
speed, less in volume.
A small slow rain is fine,
more might change
the sense of going out
in the rain to a long day inside.

Chicago | 15 August 2005

Locust song still
dry after two days of rain
no more than an intimation
of an end to this drought.

Locust song higher by
two octaves than electric
motors on air conditioners
perched in windows downstairs.

Locust song higher still
than traffic hum and jets
that pass in intervals of time
pilots measure in distance

to avoid collisions.
Too late. All have made
contact, and the impact has
scattered fragments
across morning.

Even when alarms fall
silent, the air is pregnant
with alarm now. An interval
of known tones between fingers
fumbling with half forgotten code,
a flashing light on the dash that
threatens something worse if,
god forbid, someone
touches the car –

Some miasma of ruined cities
in the sense of power always
circling the rim of things.

A child made stupid by privilege
standing in the street at one a.m.
screaming because he thinks he can
do it here but not in the place that has
contained him to the edge of adulthood.
“We’re not from here,” he says when reminded
of the time as if being from somewhere
else would serve as explanation.

Three shocking green Quaker parrots graze on
the edge of a park among pigeons, waiting for
some spirit to stir them back to clamorous
flight. Steps away, recollection of water
on the lee side washes in waves over
broken glass, stones, remnants of a party.

On the other, waves shatter
on rocks, scatter
light in air, silence
seeking the sense of a meeting
in cracks where it has broken.

Chicago | 16 August 2005

Sing a single act of obedience
breathless to the child of some
inconsolably absent god absent
to absent love a singer among
shadows who know he has no
need to remember across a river
of forgetfulness in this light.

Shadows return every time the
earth turns without a singer without
a song without a lyre without a lover, ciphers in
ciphers gifted by nothing more than earth's falling
to the circle of a distant sun. Say it, sweet.
Turn and shadows vanish, turn and they
are still sweeter on your tongue, a song.

Chicago | 17 August 2005

This tangle of knotted string is something somebody said in another universe, something so important it had to be made flesh, matter one can pocket and carry to another place where it can be made to speak again. Or time, another time. But the sense of the thing is lost, and it is nothing more than a tangle, an odd artifact of time forgotten. Nothing has changed, really. The one who carries it has no idea how to read it, only that it is heavy with the weight of the people who ordered it here. The one who carries it has no idea, only this flesh destined to become word and dwell among a people who know the knot that signifies its place of origin.

As long as there are rivers, there is nothing
flat about these plains. Rivers gather scattered
rain, remember oceans when they look across
this place, like wanderers who arrive before
maps and learn topography in slow steps
that take them down, down into what was
here before they came and will remain when
they have gone, when they have added
their dry bones to the dust and stone
that makes the place a dry wash down on
textured paper, rough cut, bend by turning,
page to page, hand to hand, until some
wanderer who stops for a moment sees
to the bottom of it, sees that it is good.

Chicago | 19 August 2005

morning
flowers dazed
rain forgotten

spinner among constellations
of stars on every branch,
five points for each flower
transformed to something round
like a new planet, silk
sail catches morning light,
sways with the weight of it
stays with planets while they ripen

Chicago | 21 August 2005

Reggae drifts over from Washington Park
in gusts like westerly wind that prevails
today. Someone rings changes on bells
that are closer to home, and diffraction
patterns are as interesting as either
music. Two anonymous pebbles
dropped in one ocean where local
disturbances intersect: what prayer
do they call us to? What direction do they
dream divine? Sound moves something,
but under pressure of afternoon sun, you
wonder out loud if light, too, comes in gusts.

Chicago | 30 August 2005

God counted cattle
in Nineveh but
couldn't be bothered
with a dying vine.
Ishmael slipped his
mind, and it took an
angel to save Isaac
from the hand of
the faithful. Another
reminded him of Job
who suffered for a
moment in the mind
of god but not the
children, not the sheep,
not the others, lost.

Chicago | 1 September 2005

So much more
depends on
not being
there than you
can know not
what you do but
where you are not

The only thing I
know is that every
time somebody speaks
in a voice they think
is god's, they miss the
knocking on the door
that might give them a
chance to do something

When those towers came down, cities stopped
to consider they could be next. Their absence
centered conversations in streams of
Michigan Avenue pedestrians
hurrying away half a continent
away. Four years later, every train in
Chicago is in a heightened state
of security, but only newscasters
speak of Louisiana, Gulfport, Biloxi,
not to mention nameless stretches of Gulf
coast where nobody lives but nobodies who
own no cars, too lonely to have somewhere
else to go. People worry about the
cost of gas, and Some pompous ass
writes about how New Orleans struggles
against nature and should not be rebuilt
like Chicago, San Francisco, Hiroshima
after their fires. I suppose he lives in
the shadow of those towers and their siblings
in St. Louis. Which cities missed a step
when they came down? A god with a twisted
sense of humor might read the Tribune and
give New Madrid a shake. One god, they say,
swore off floods with rainbows, but that one, who
never has liked towers, is prone to repentance
and known to forget. A prophet might tell
you to stop at that while gods count cattle
lost in New Orleans.

Chicago | 2 September 2005

Clouds chalked on pastel
sky drift almost
imperceptibly
northward over train
tracks, tourists waiting,
a flurry of blackbirds.

A dirigible swims
upstream, south, slowly
turns. A young woman
dressed for jazz paces.

Her perfume drifts with clouds.
They must be remnants of an unspoken
absence, still on this wind under conversation
about dinner, where to meet when the festival ends.

Chicago | 9 September 2005

A connoisseur of strings, my cat stands when
Jimi Hendrix plays the Star Spangled Banner,
knows Stevie Ray on the first lick, dances
to Flatland Farmer and Hamza el Din,
grew up with violin two floors down;
pianos next door and in the dining room,
where she plays from time to time, quick cat
arpeggio low to high, percussion
when she hits the floor. I once played a recorder
in front of her, and she tried to knock it
out of my hands. She has read Chinese treatises
on tuning guqin slack. The best string is
loose, not tied at all, dangling invitation to
silence at a leap and the touch of a soft paw.

Chicago | 12 September 2005

Butterflies rise on dry heat that leaves trees gasping. They've never seen it this bad, settle into fall early
shed leaves turned out of season to ride instants of air on broken wings, fade into grass parched as
they are. Monarch catches dry breeze fragile without knowing it, floats like Ali over emerald water.
Another glides on treetop breeze fast as a swallow, not a thought of the struggle return will be.

Chicago | 17 September 2005

Bee dances between sun
eight minutes away by photon
and pools of it on

Gazania stems, close
as a glance at soundspeed.
Beggarticks are day time starlight.

They sway. Bee circles.
Both spin with light from sun
that pretends to stand still above

this turning planet,
hurtle headlong laughing
into some other planet's past.

Chicago | 21 September 2005

Some little man who fancies himself
leader of a free world says he cannot
imagine, and my nomad mind wanders
off to Tinochtitlan, Chichen Itza,
Tascosa, Anasazi ghost towns, an
other city dispersed with barbed wire
over plains, unnamed settlements clinging
to dangerous coasts, wonder which
absences make the world stop.

Chicago | 23 September 2005

Chill falls first
on the ears, a
quality of sound

in September.
Moon changes tone
before your fingers feel it

and you pull a hat
down over your ears to stop
winter's whisper,

insinuation
on a breeze that was
warm yesterday.

Chicago | 30 September 2005

Two bees with squatters rights to Autumn sun chased the cat off the porch this morning, unconvinced she could rest to purr in it unoccupied. They'd heard too much about strangers who moved in and acted as though they owned the place; and on my lap, she was guilty by association. Diplomacy failed, there was no reason, so we agreed to cut and run, take sun filtered through glass, and leave bees undisturbed till winter moves in.

After a dry summer, leaves are winter brown at the first hint of autumn. They grow more insistent as time passes, moments before the beginning of language. Almost articulate when the end falls, they leave you straining to hear what is not there, see light bent still turning.

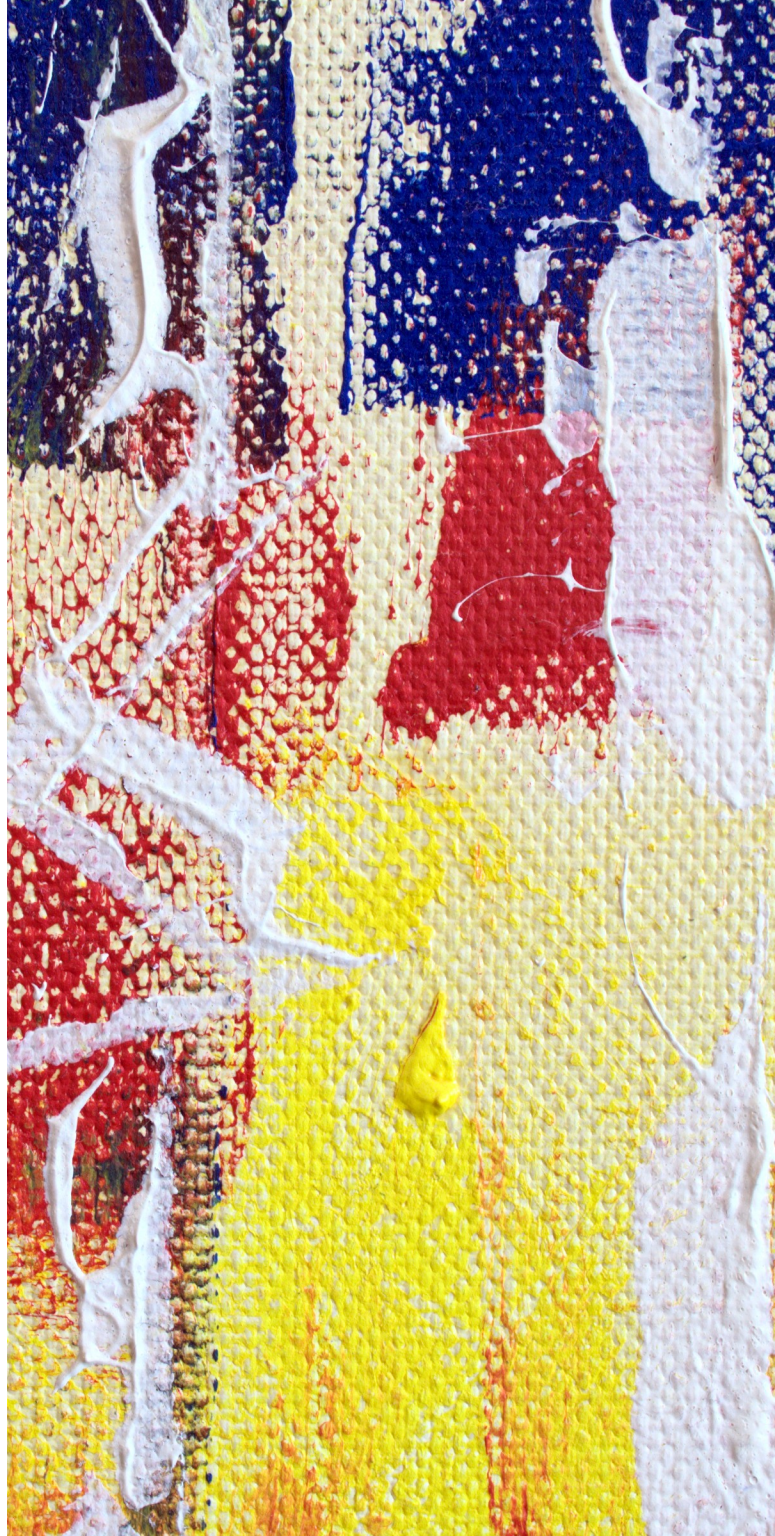
Chicago | 2 October 2005

eli eli lama sabachthani eli eli lama sabachthani from the sanity of the machine from the sanity of the machine from the sanity of the machine, good god, deliver us into madness deliver us into madness deliver us into madness deliver us from generations of reason from pentagons of power from muzak of war that drowns cities where we could contemplate jazz where we could contemplate anything other than doom on whole fucking factories of hydrogen jukeboxes blathering reason for mutual assured destruction mutual assured consumption nothing to be done but sink into a drunken stupor stumble into a narcotic haze while one city after another is washed away washed away washed whiter than snow for reasons of war reasons of war dogging every other human dogging every other human dogging every other with the stupefying contempt of cold capitalist reason children die for no reason our children die for no reason our children die for nothing to be done nothing to be done not but eli eli lama sabachthani eli eli lama sabachthani what warm god sucked our brains through a straw and devoured our imagination? Moloch? Moloch? Some soulless jailhouse judge steeping in mountains of loneliness spouting suburban brimstone... om mane padme hum om mane padme hum om mane padme hum eleison eleison eleison. In the name of Carl Solomon deliver us from reason deliver us deliver us deliver us from us eleison eleison eleison.

Chicago | 3 October 2005

She knows all about
action at a distance.
Silk webbed across
my kitchen sink
makes Athena,
smiling, nod
as she draws silk
sun across southern sky
to sunset. Nothing
flies in without
touching her.
Better than glass,
she allows Athena's
sunsets to pass.

V
the wall she follows



Chicago, on the way to Warsaw | 12 October 2005

On the runway in Chicago, flying Lot to Vilnius, I don't have one word of Polish (though I read somewhere that "Lot" is flight) so I practice wyjście, because it is the only word I can see with subtitles and it may show me where to fly should the need arise but it will not help me order coffee in the morning. "My Generation" blasts on the radio: "Hope I die before I get old." I know labas for Lithuania, iki and acziu. I hesitate to try spasibo here for fear it will be just close enough to carry too much history and mean nothing more than occupation, nothing more than "thank you." I think Milosz was born in Vilnius and Levinas, hope a smile can penetrate this palimpsest of languages.

Vilnius | 13 October 2005

Oak leaves on cobblestones
paint a steep trail that could be
three centuries in Yggdrasil's
shadow. Oak tree reaches
to the base of the stone
tower above a cathedral
where Zeus could be at home,
rising like a survivor of St. Martin's
axe among stumps that stumble
down the hill above the walk.

Mindaugas, blind,
sees in the cold stone
of his mind's eye what it was
before it turned to Rome.

Druskininkai | 14 October 2005

Trees contemplate
the language of the river.

Straight white birches
rise above paths yellow
with leaves that have fallen,

through leaves that have not,
to sky the color of water,
train ears to it,

pass it hand to hand,
whisper it to earth,
to muddy anticipation

of a lonely god who will
breathe life into it, drive it
back to the sea where it began.

Druskininkai | 15 October 2005

Leaves on this walk scatter from green through
brown to yellow to yellow to yellow beyond
the spectrum of your imagination,
and crowds of mushrooms among pine
needles beside a river almost fluent
in the whispering language birches spoke
yesterday before leaves fell, the language
birches have almost forgotten for winter,
that pines and spruce have never mastered.
And over it you can hear the sound
of the crow's wings between calls as it passes
over on its way to an other side
an other side, an other side where
a few oaks splash red in the aspen rainbow.

But it is the black leaves, the black
leaves, the black leaves, branches
of them tunneling through pine
needles and broken lines of lichens
on old roots that remember most
because they have endured almost
to earth from a time of sky and crow
sees them there and wonders why
they lie so still, so still, so still,
as though they had forgotten wings,

forgotten the possibility of wings,
forgotten the sound of wings
on wind and huddled quiet hoping
today it will come back to them.

Vilnius | 18 October 2005

conversation in a Vilnius coffee shop...

Lithuania is the last fuckin' pagan bastion in Europe. You know our cathedral is built over a pagan temple. Go to fuckin' England. Every cathedral in Europe is built over a temple. Why do you think they built churches over temples? To trick fuckin' peasants into them. Another trick. Another layer. Another shrine to make way for another, another, another.

Vilnius | 20 October 2005

Trees turn for a better view
of our slow decay. What they
think beautiful we think nothing
more than dying. Yellow
leaves grow dark
eyes for a closer look,
tumble from branches
to trace steps on broken
cobblestones toward winter
cold. They stop at the window,
do not follow
to another side
where Compay Segundo
makes it tempting to stay.

Occupations end slowly,
drag on for years after
the last soldier is gone,
linger in silences, in language,
in the rhythm of language,
in every hesitation like
the shadow of an empire,
in jokes and proverbs
spoken suddenly

in letters of a forgotten
alphabet, in unfamiliar melodies
in old songs, in the walls, in the walls, in
the walls, in a certain gray that saturates them,
seeps cold into the air with autumn.

Vilnius/Warsaw | 21 October 2005

Still dark, the city is rising.
Across the street, a civet
slips over the curb between cars.
Before sunrise even the train station is
in the woods that resist the human desire –
not nature – to make it all look like us.
Black and white cat darts across
from the other side, ears down, follows
the wall another way, woods no more certain
than desire, darkness no guarantor,
whatever the civet may think.

In Warsaw, a nun pushes a shopping cart
with flowers for the airport chapel, her version
of the civet's woods, the wall she follows.

Chicago | 27 October 2005

South on Ingleside the pace quickens
in winter, as though cold could be outrun.
Across the street from an old school designed
for containment, children practice tumbling on
a low trampoline. One after another flips,
then stays in a pile on the sidewalk
chattering for a moment.

There is warmth in numbers, warmth in the glow
of conversation, warmth in the kindling of words.
A man in uniform eyes passersby,
ignores children on the other side. Two
children from some other place break away
from a crowd leaving the train, slide down the
stair rail, hit the ground running north.

A young woman climbs slowly, mind on
her cellphone, present to someone somewhere
else. She is still there when I see her pass on
the platform at Roosevelt. Conversation
on the train is about food, rises with
aroma of cheap oil, chicken, settles
at random. The other is nowhere

to be seen, not here, but present to someone
who is. At Adams, a woman is talking
to her children at home. She quizzes them
on where they have been all afternoon, scolds
about supervision to the older of two, perhaps, who
does not know where the younger is. I suppose
his brother's blood could cry out from the ground.

Private conversation rises everywhere
like an odor to fill public spaces,
and no one speaks to another
who is not elsewhere. But the woman
beside me closes her phone and smiles
when I rise to get off the train, a gesture,
I guess, toward presence.

Chicago | 4 November 2005

A conspiracy of leaves
in the last tree standing
two hours after sundown,
darkness doubled by clouds
rolling in from the west. They
whisper snow under cover of small
talk, four conversations with people
who are not there blurring edges
of every word spoken.

Grass that might have grown here before
the railroad came stretches between tracks
to catch what the leaves are saying. On
the platform, cities of conversation insist
nothing remains of what was here before.

VI

where you would be the stranger



Memphis, Texas | 17 November 2005

In Gloria's Cafe, the conversation is all about broken screens and football. "Good to see Childress back in there, back in the seventies they was always good. We played em back then and it was always the high point of the year when Memphis played Childress." A little argument over how to pronounce a Spanish word. Everybody knows everybody. Waitress on cellphone still finds time to talk to everyone. Arrangements made, numbers exchanged, this is the market of Memphis. The language is a slow one, slow like the passing of time, and you'd think it'd been here as long as the pyramids, as long as the puzzle of a Sphinx.

Wichita Falls, Texas | 18 November 2005

They tell me Wichita Falls is nine hundred feet above sea level, and it's not hard to believe. I fell half a mile on the road from Amarillo. Half a mile and forty years to the Kemp mansion full of memories left when the books were moved to the old Fedway store. In a city of used to bes in a hotel that used to be a Radisson an almost empty bar with a Bud light sign in blue neon and a balding guy belting out "Get Back" after too many drinks. Singer calls it a night at nine, makes small talk with the bartender on the way out. It seems every downtown Holiday Inn in small town Texas used to be something other than empty. Neon sign shouts low carb Michelob over the bar, but nobody answers. Lone Star in red neon Texas, nothing but ghosts, drunk fifty somethin's way down on the down side of high school singing Beatles songs and talking about football and there's no use sitting here.

near Watonga, Oklahoma | 19 November 2005

In Oklahoma, Old house on plains that roll
north to Kansas has the appearance
of weathered wood, but there is not a tree
in sight. It is made of a hundred years of time
spent that hasn't been painted in forty,
abandoned when the farm changed hands twenty
years ago, it stands still among oil pumps
working in a field the color of November.

Lindsborg, Kansas | 20 November 2005

Five women from New York dominate a quiet restaurant in Swedish Kansas. They are, it seems, prominent writers. One, at least, is on her way to Pittsburgh to chair a panel of them.

Conversation begins with complaints about noise, turns to New York theater, off off Broadway, where to shop, where to eat, a reviewer who closed a play before it opened there, politics, not a word for the young woman who brings coffee. After they leave, a smaller conversation about Europe, enrollment at the college here, every other word about another place, whispers about what's the matter with this one.

Water travels faster by ear
than by eye, so I knew
the falls sometime before
I saw them by the broken steps
and rusted remains of an old mill.

Not far away, there was
a graveyard of old plows,
decked out for the season

with rust and lichen set off
by prairie grass November ocher.

An orange cat stepped out
of the brush to watch me watch,
and all the while the water sang
out of sight, not out of mind.

A Swedish town in the middle of Kansas is an act of resistance, a story told in Kiowa or Cantonese, an old woman in Yunnan who prays in the local dialect, another who dances on tiny feet unbound, southern speech anywhere, a word spoken outside the wall to shape the city, to call it somewhere it has not been, to open a door to an other side, an other side, an other side where you would be the stranger.

Lindsborg, Kansas | 21 November 2005

Two Lutheran churches for a town of eleven hundred, at least one Methodist, maybe more. The sign at the storefront Smoky Valley Baptist church says the pastor's name is Plato Shepherd and I wonder if the guardians might not outnumber the flocks.

near Beatrice, Kansas | 22 November 2005

The southern coast of Nebraska before the first big snow in November is a brown sea that washes over Kansas, rolls with west wind toward Illinois, broken by a line of trees where rivers run and a dozen vapor trails left by jets that have crossed and crossed again in sun bleached blue sky.

Supplication passes over
through possibility
when I reach Nebraska.

No need to watch for ice
on bridges. Just know
it will be, and it may be now.

To learn a language, you must place the accent (BeATrice, WaterLOO, Miamuh, Miami, New Orleans in two syllables. Seven tones – not four – in Guangdong, some say more). But in the end it all depends on the kindness of strangers.

VII
the shadow of a full stop



Chicago | 2 December 2005

It is no surprise that the weight of human dwelling has triggered earthquakes in Taiwan, the weight of holding back a river in China.

Under Denver, the ground shudders at the volume of garbage tucked into hollows of mountains. And new faults form daily under this obese presence.

Chicago | 5 December 2005

Moon punctuates
long December sentences
with a twist of ice.

You can see the shadow
of a full stop against night sky,
but light only pauses to remind you

to breathe in spite of the desire
to empty lungs into unbroken words
that unfold all the way to spring.

Chicago | 6 December 2005

You thought that pole sitter that arrived at the same moment we did was a sign, but I guess it was Simeon still at it after two millennia. Incurable ascetic, he is determined to starve himself to heaven. Poor old fool keeps coming back as something else but never fails to draw a crowd who point and stare but never agree on just what sort of strange bird he is.

Chicago | 7 December 2005

Nothing bends in the clear prism of winter, and a rainbow of ice shatters over everything this light touches, proof color can not be contained. Sun, not fire but ice, sneers at spinners of apocalyptic scenarios. The end is not fire, not ice, but crystal desire shattered into rainbows colder than any imagination.

Chicago | 9 December 2005

Leaves on trees that don't belong here are bewildered by the first December snow, astounded by the weight of it under sun so bright they throw the blanket off expecting summer. Old-timers seasoned by years of surprises are not fooled, turned with the calendar when November felt like May. Humans who know add layers against outside, strip them off when they enter another season inside. Trees strip down to nothing cold can touch. New leaves seduced by Autumn lies droop into snow blanket before they die young. Birds double against it, sing about the cold turn of the sun while squirrels scramble down chimneys where there is no smoke, where there is no fire, but warm.

Chicago | 7 January 2006

Thirteen sparrows doubled against autumn
chill displaced to January hunker down
on two power lines to contemplate one
hundred sixty nine ways of looking until
something scatters them.

Two stand their ground on quivering wires, sentinels
who will call all clear, wait for others to return.

water slows to glass veneer
that might tempt cautious steps if not
for sun that tumbles tiptoe summer anticipation over
everything. Even a child knows it will break
into a lookingglass world if you
put your weight on it.

Headline says birthplace of gospel
burns, and I think of good news
up in smoke, an architectural gem,
monument to the fragility of gathering.

Ark settles on a high place
and in a flash it is
fuel for a whole offering.

Chicago | 12 January 2006

This sunshine's weight
approaches the end of the
world, more lucidity

than an afternoon
in January can bear.
Small talk begins with

how nice the weather
is, but nothing is more ominous
than sun out of place,
something lost, winter.

Chicago | 13 January 2006

Season changes overnight in January
and the only sure thing is the wonder
of it. Change is no surprise, but the summer
of it in winter a day before snow.

The mass of the world is nothing to desire
that leaves seasons turning when they will while
the whole drifts against the compass, writes wastelands
draws oceans, spins maps, raises storms shakes

memory of what's
next, no idea
what to expect.

Chicago | 18 January 2006

I've been apprenticed to cats, who have been known to devote lifetimes in art to teaching the imperfection of the eye. There is more to painting than meets it. Taste water before putting brush to it and recall how traces change it, how taste changes. Nose in watercolors or acrylics, never oils, paint on the tip of your tongue. A little bit of what could kill you has the power to heal, but you might not know it with your eyes on canvas.

Chicago | 23 January 2006

Every war is justified
by the makers of it, by
the casual deployment
in the common tongue
of infinite variations
on lebensraum on stay
the course on we must
never cut and run.

Every war is justified
by the making of it, by
the sheer weight of it.
It is undeniable. It is,
but it is not justice.
It is just war.

Chicago | 27 January 2006

This book has me contemplating the artistic integrity of staples. I snobbishly demanded linen thread and beeswax holes punched by hand with a sharp awl knots doubled back on themselves to keep words on unruly pages in line, hidden under a cover that must be just right, though one cannot judge a book by it. But time has reduced me to the snap of the staples through eight signatures, metal to bind words out of sight under a cover they will be judged by.

Chicago | 29 January 2006

Some women gray
toward earth,
time curves them to it

a slow embrace
that inclines them
to watch their step, to know
each place their foot falls closely.

Chicago | 1 February 2006

not a summer's day
but a winter life whole in
razor silence

between notes
of an old melody, breath
bones under music

taut to a breaking edge
over full lungs,
exhale quicksilver

expectation
of a hard interval
uncaught

Chicago | 2 February 2006

*southern, you said, sweet
smiling and spitting at
the same time. But
the g's have got
to go*

or everyone will know
there's a damn Yankee
(three syllables, accent
on first) behind it.

and lookin' daggers
southern sweet's
all three –
smilin' spittin' lookin'

knife so sharp
you don't
feel it come out
on the other side

Chicago | 5 February 2006

The kind of water you can put your weight
on without a thought of drowning in it,
hard blue light clear beyond imagination
of summer haze, like something that would
not turn with time passing, would move
with the slow pace of a glacier where air
makes you think of breathing. Melting
a heart like that is on the other side
of the world from love, like asking for
spring floods when what you need is
a foothold, ice that will not break under
the weight of a heart, under the weight
of a soul, light distilled to something you
can see through, something that can hold you.

Chicago | 6 February 2006

I've spent too much time around farmers
to be fooled by endless sun, absence
of rain. A fine day is rain when you need it, snow
in seasons local vegetables can understand.

Chicago | 9 February 2006

Traces in powder between trains
at Twelfth Street, nothing remains
but absent squirrels circling between
tracks made by some nameless man.

Chicago | 13 February 2006

That bat
like a word
clinging to a hard edge
between bird
and mouse, poisoned,
chose to die in the presence
of children, an object
lesson.

There are powers
and principalities that know
how to bait your terrestrial side,
and when you take it, you have
nothing to lose but the power
to fly.

Chicago | 14 February 2006

Waitin' for the end of the world...

-Elvis Costello

Nothing adds up.

The wait of it carves stone

like water in time,

like time on water,


writes images in its absence,

makes worlds of it.



Steven Schweder
2014

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

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in vibrant yellow, deep blue, and earthy red. The composition is layered and textured, with some areas appearing more saturated than others. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

Headline says birthplace of gospel
burns, and I think of good news
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stevenschroeder.org