like a prayer

Steven Schroeder
like a prayer

steven schroeder
Table of Contents

Is Not There 1
Islands 2
In Kunming 3
Imagine Alone, Macao 4
Geometry of Birdsong 5
Evensong 6
Dialogue of Civilizations 7
Autumn Gesture 8
A Song 9
A northern monsoon 10
An Orange Leaf 11
An Historian of Leaves 12
Ancestor 13
Among the Dead 14
After Ba Da 15
Whisper 16
Under Gray 17
Typhoon 18
The Undeniable Weight of Heat 19
Socialist Realism 20
Snakes 21
Shenzhen, March 22
Rain 23
Red Sea 24
On Anarchism 25
North Wind 26
Memory of Ocean 27
Matins 28
Lullaby of Frogs 29
Like a Prayer 30
I
Is Not There

Out of respect for my Chinese students, who are dismayed at my perpetual disconnection, I have resolved from this moment to carry a cell phone in my pocket at all times.

I have chosen an elegant Finnish design that incorporates the idea of North, technology divided, divided, divided again until there is nothing left to pocket, no trace of its presence visible to eyes of curious passersby suspicious of strangers who choose sometimes alone.

They will be reassured by its absence visible in humid air between shirt and skin. I will hold it, supremely miniature, by my heart, on the lookout for the ring tone I have chosen to announce to all within earshot that I am called, a composition by John Cage present in every four minutes and thirty three seconds cut from the whole cloth of absence. I will repeat “hello? hello? hello?” to see who is not there.
2

Islands

You can see where a boat has been in a line on the surface of the water for some time after it has gone. Three quarters of the earth’s surface is covered with traces of absence, evidence of unseen wind pierced now and again by peaks of invisible mountains, fragile craft ferrying fragile lives between islands that masquerade as solid ground.
In Kunming

tiny dogs who could curl
into my empty shoe patrol
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 step.
4

Imagine Alone, Macao

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 at this hour, 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. All that remains is
a play of voices.
5

Geometry of Birdsong

There is a song of six,
another of five,
one of three.

The song of six begins
at sunrise, then the
song of five.

And a song of silence
joins the song of three
beneath them.

Women sweeping add lines
across the music,
short, sharp strokes,
shadows that impart depth
to this work of two
dimensions.

Avian equation
lies on the surface
of a song,
but its music opens
deep enough to hold
a city.
Evensong

Frogs sing Evensong
in Russian style:
bass baritone weaves
a dark cathedral of damp night air.
7
Dialogue of Civilizations

Mao’s ghost cries
at the window
of a restaurant
named Xinan.

Even the Andy Warhol smile
has vanished, so there’s nothing
to see; but, still, he knows
the Hatter’s one way,
the Hare’s the other,
and we must be mad
or we wouldn’t have come here.
Autumn Gesture

Trees are showing signs
of the strain of immortality.
New leaves appear on branches
that have not known winter,
and the whole grows heavy
without a moment’s rest.

You can read it in the patterns
left by those the wind has snatched,
clusters of brown and yellow on green,
with one flaming red crescent that insists
on an Autumn gesture under a half moon
scratched chalk white in the west
this morning on a patch of blue.
9

A Song

Nothing gives such pleasure
rolled hard and sweet
on the tongue to taste it
from every angle.

A little boy repeats
it a hundred times between stops
on the bus: ya yayaya ya yayaya ya,
nothing signified, a song.
10

A northern monsoon

has tampered with the weather
in the south for weeks, spilled
liquid into it until it clusters
in tiny drops on low hills,
illusion of chill
on morning air.
An Orange Leaf

Sometimes there is room in my mind for nothing. When there is not, I settle into the prose of the world and wait.

An orange leaf falls across the lines of a gray brick in the walk, and the weight of it is more than a world in prose can bear.
Wind is an historian of leaves,
and these are timelines on paving stones
where she spreads them spectographically,
assisted by acolytes with broad brooms.
New green silent underfoot dries in a day
to the sound of crickets under quick steps,
goes yellow and red, grows brittle so
you can hear days and days in the snap
of every footfall before it settles
into the sound of brown over broken
lines that mark upheavals, ignore workers
determined to smooth it all over
with brick and mortar in cold rain
that softens time’s sound but never turns
wind from the matter at hand.
13

Ancestor

Her spectral appearance signals
my need, not hers. Coat dull
in pedestrian sunshine, she is
half-blind from living
in the bright light of perpetual bliss.
An ancestral epicure, she accepts
a stroke on the head as an act of obeisance,
but nothing other than the choicest morsel
from a human hand. Egg won’t do.
There will be fish in time.
Among the Dead

When the temperature rises, every stone here rolls away from an empty tomb.

Warm, dark damp teems with life that will not be contained, asks every incredulous witness why they look for the living among the dead.
After Ba Da

The rule of the master’s line does not guide the brush. It is the ink that flows from it.
Walking on what used to be a shore, you say this was never an ocean, and I must reluctantly admit the accuracy (though not the truth) of this suspension of poetic license. The delta of a river only aspires to sea; but half the names are hai here, and the poets who chose them were planting little Europes, not a Mississippi on the South China Sea (though Deng’s shijie is full of Americans Texas-loud talking about oil and money). As for truth, what is found there is formed of common words. If enough poets whisper ocean, they may stop the mountain filling it.
Welder scatters falling stars
among paving stones
that will be underfoot
by morning.

Men gather at sunrise
to place them in meticulous
patterns over a cushion
of sand. They will settle
in years under the weight of all
that passes this way, and only
the clearest eye will catch
splinters of starlight under gray.
Typhoon

Wind rose this morning, and rain fell hard enough to bring down branches. But solitary leaves lay still in places where rain did not reach, broken on the edge of a typhoon that remains only a dark possibility for now but turns every conversation about leaving to a litany of ways to reach Hong Kong when the ferry stops.
The Undeniable Weight of Heat

I have had occasion of late
to contemplate the undeniable weight
of heat. Not a particular hot
thing that would tip a scale, but
heat itself, which searches out
the permeability of everything, settles right
into its bones, transmutes it
to gold or something that
is weightier still. Still, it
can no longer lift its feet.
And so it can do nothing but wait
for rain or what passes here as Winter.
Socialist Realism

for Jessie

Over vodka and *vareniky* at a sidewalk cafe
near Deng Xiaoping’s landlocked flagship, we
drift from Akhmatova to Ba Da Shan Ren without a word
of Marx. I lean back to catch the moon between clouds,
more than halfway back from new, full
of promise.

Moon is cliché in cities of realism
where a sigh is just a sigh, but better to drown
in twice reflected light, Li Bai, than live to claim
a corner of a souldead world that cannot draw
a breath without a machine.
Snakes

More and more at dinner,
my father and brother fought
over pictures in the paper.
The potatoes watched them
with a frightening number
of shriveled eyes...

Bob Hicok, “Early History”

Sign in Chinese warns
that there are snakes
on the mountain
and the path is dangerous.
I put my boots on in English
and ignore it.

My students,
baffled by a thousand
shriveled potato eyes
watching a fight
over pictures
in the newspaper
at dinner remind me
that eyes are hard
to translate, and
the body follows.
Shenzhen, March

and a few sad leaves settle on waves
of melancholy that sweep them over
the walk in an arc to mirror the curve
of each, gaunt, just green, weary of wind
and rain and toxic air, inexplicably
dry in atmosphere so heavy with damp
it seems we are living in a cloud. And
every face is another leaf that has fallen
on paradox grim with hope on gray days
under moments of sun that must rest on
the same wind. This is a young city, but
it is busy with old eyes. It breathes short,
shallow, agéd, gasps for air but fears
the poison of a deep breath, cannot bear
one more fit of coughing.
Rain

not worth the effort
of an umbrella
hangs for days
between sun and gray
sky that glows
with its impatience
but will not break, twists
every page of the world
with damp. Even
the morning song
of the birds wilts
with waiting to dry
when sun appears.
When the old man finally reached the end of his patience after twenty minutes at an intersection waiting for traffic to part so he could hobble the few steps across the last lane standing between him and the sidewalk on the other side, he extended his cane in front of a truck, which stopped as he stepped into the road the way the Red Sea must have stopped under the crooked staff Moses lifted, egged on by a god who spoke in riddles from burning bushes: reluctantly, horn blaring, big enough to stop everything behind it while the whole host that was with the old man crossed before it swallowed up the army behind him.
On Anarchism

Overlooking locals everywhere, blind trailmakers miss crossroads, do not know when they deal with the devil, lose souls, trade without a thought. Reason enough to be wary of sublime emptiness in their accounts—

not sublimity, accounting.

The sublime is in eyes, the devil in details—
a blank on a form for the color of your eyes because no government can see them.
North Wind

North wind came down to Beijing to meet me and November when we flew in together. He only stayed a moment, but I could tell he had been here before. Trees that lined the boulevard remembered their last encounter and blushed when he kissed them while November and I looked on.
Memory of Ocean

Sun disc rounded by haze of desire that hovers over every city when it is young rests orange on a breeze cooled by a memory of ocean this morning, spreads as it rises mirrored in every window that faces east, so there are a thousand sunrises above the western horizon and a bird to sing each one.
Matins

Gray stacked days deep,
sun’s memory cannot penetrate it.
Chill flashes from pavement
with each soldier’s step, rises
in exhaust from ancient trucks
and bright cars driven by wealth
that doubles in frantic mitosis intent
on outpacing death. Thermometer lies
that it is not so cold,
but people everywhere are huddling
against blizzards and dreaming of fires.
Sun’s memory cannot penetrate it; but
birds see through gray, sing matins at sunrise.
Lullaby of Frogs

A lullaby of frogs
on the edge of a city
that seems intent on
making the whole world
a gated community
for humans is a sign
of hope, with coyotes
and cougars in Chicago
suburbs.

The ragged cat
I met going out
this morning, well-
versed in economics,
pointed with her whiskers
to the absence of mice
and assured me that
all cats are good.
I smiled and winked at
all the mice who did not sing
last night and were good enough
to remain out of sight.
Prayer beads cut from their string, they
lie in an arc cherry-pit brown with a blush, remnant
of the rough red skin that contained
them, discarded now in a pile on gray pavement.
The arc is so smooth you’d think you could
scoop them up in one hand unbroken and
repeat a mantra over them, but there is no invisible
string to hold them, so one would not
follow another and they would scatter from your hand
the moment you opened it into another arc to entice
another act of devotion. Some minor god
wandering this street early in the morning
has devoured the sticky sweet flesh
that surrounded them like a prayer
and is smiling now, sated.
Steven Schroeder is a visual artist and poet who lives and works in Chicago. more at stevenschroeder.org