



like a prayer

steven schroeder

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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.

3

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.

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.

6

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.

II

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.

An Historian of Leaves

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.

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.

14

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.

15

After Ba Da

The rule of the master's
line does not guide
the brush. It is the
ink that flows from it.

Whisper*for Jessie*

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.

Under Gray

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, aged, 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.

Red Sea

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

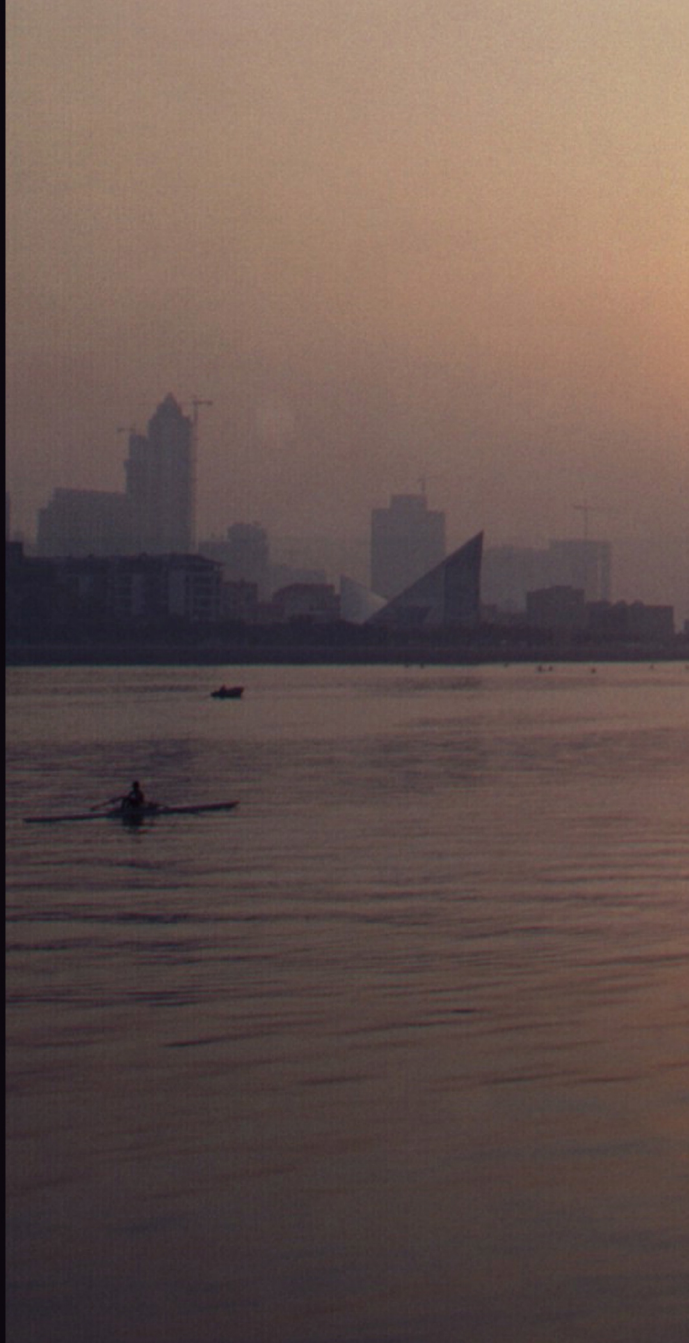
A lullaby of frogs
on the edge of a city
that seems intent on
making the whole world
a gated community
for humans is a sign
of hope, with coyotes
and cougars in Chicago
suburbs.

 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.

Like a Prayer

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.

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