

one well ordered collision among others

paintings and poetry

Steven Schroeder
2018

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steven schroeder



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cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder

cover and title page: standard time 1, watercolor on paper, 20x14 inches [2018]

Political Philosophy



standard time 2: light rain, acrylic on cardboard, 14x20 inches [2018]

impatient with your reason

...for Tom Paine's birthday

*your long habit of not thinking
a thing wrong* has me
thinking long habits

make something out of time
a body thinks it has on its hands.

not just any body, mind you —
a body in the act, in
this place, not
that

other
that is there
not here, then not

now. *time makes*
more, you say.
and I

say, more or less, what
do we mean
by we

now that time
has made us what
we are? reason takes

time like love, even when
we do not have it. and that, I
imagine, is what you had in mind

when, unsettled, you
said *revolution*

and the world turned,
impatient with your reason.



a theory of everything, acrylic, paper, and plastic mesh on hardboard, 24x36 inches [2019]

On the Immortality of Soles

*if the argument had a human voice,
that voice would be heard laughing at us...*

-Plato, Protagoras

Every time Plato finds himself at a loss
for words, his Socrates tells a likely story.
Philosophy goes on and on until it is

out of its mind, then climbs one more story
to see another thousand li. It is
not what you know, you know. It is finding

your feet. The journey of a thousand miles
begins when you put your foot down.
And it is

always beginning, always
beginning, always
beginning.

Bop

Cold could
nip the tips
of your fingers

if you took
the gloves off
at dusk today,

but Max Roach
haunts two sticks
and a plastic bucket

at a red line
stop steps
from downtown

theaters. Crowds
too cold to stop – not
bop. Gloves off,

hands put a dance
in every step
from here to the train.



ladder of ascent, acrylic on cardboard, 14x20 inches [2018]

in this absence

This season's dwelling on the long edge where
fall strips off bright leaves, slips into a dress
of dark distance that will catch sun in moments
of cold light makes the axis of the earth seem
twisted. January stirs autumn leaves between
snow patches, not snowfields, seconds of ice,
not hours and hours following hundred year storms.

Three leaves spring green lie on the way where
there is a trace like fossil steps of a dog
between leaves that lay on a way on the way
to being concrete years before. There is
moss on a stump in the park so passersby
will know north in this absence of winter.

Two squirrels dash near death as the rest of us
across a street in traffic, minding gaps,
quick as life, quick as the solace of the other shore.

Chicago, January 2012

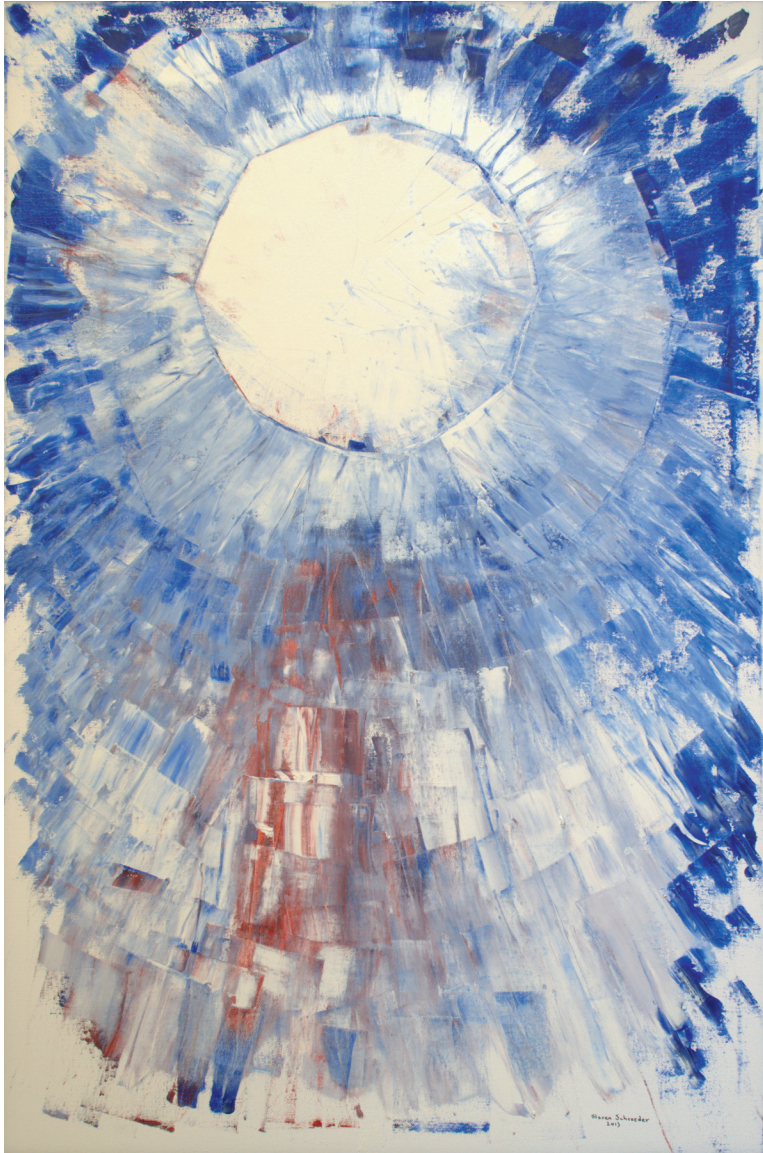
de rerum natura

Too damn hot today for anybody's spring,
but sparrows twitter revolution
at every turn while I count butterflies.

Truth be told, all but two are cabbage moths,
but the absence of every other makes me
mindful of the fragile beauty in
the fractal geometry of living things.
Every attraction is strange, like crossfire.
It is natural for old cats to follow walls,
for squirrels to stay close to trees,
for rabbits to find damp earth
in shade on days like this.

And how is this day different from every other day?
Everything underfoot is underway, and
the smallest part is making all things
new. There are hunters who track prey
by knowing where it was and where it was
before and putting two and two together until
they are where they are. There are hunters
who are prey and hunters who know where they
were and where they were before putting two and two

together. And the mass of glass on the north face
of a building rising is alive as every cell on the
surface of my skin in this withering heat.
And it will be when north wind is cold,
as it will be. And there will be another body count
Monday to remind us by the dying that the city is alive
for now and there is no reason to capitalize,
no other to be tortured for her secrets,
no elsewhere to be salvaged for its solace.



sister moon, oil on canvas, 24x36 inches [2013]

elixir of life

East is full of moon
climbing a ladder
of thin clouds.

Lake is hidden
on the far side of the city,
but Chang'e dances

on the surface
of its absence.

Every step
ripples
to the end
and back again

like autumn turning
on the end of summer.

cat,

black and white, is not
following a wall, not
laying low, not

avoiding crossfire
on a south side street
in Chicago looking

south at ease
walking home slow

days later, looking
out the window of a bar
in Missouri, I see

the same cat still
walking still

slow, home

in a time like space,
I am too slow

to be there
and here

now. cat thinks nothing
of poets watching,

collapses
in the box that is

the object of his walking
slow home still, now and then

everybody talks about the weather

Birds who sing another day of summer
out of place have no idea it's a sign
their time is up. They know a fine
day when they see one, same as you or

I. And nobody thinks about a hurricane
this far from the ocean or ice melting
in late November sunshine. Birds sing
weather satisfied nothing can be done.



event horizon 5: polar vortex, acrylic on canvas, 30x30 inches [2019]

intinction

taptaptaptaptaptaptap
the sound of water falling
back to earth before morning
light without a word. no
god says let there be.

in the street, move
debris from the drain
and the still body of the flood stirs,
rushes down, the sound of water

and earth
embracing
beneath the city

crow waits where
water pools,
still,

a spirit on
the face of it,
brooding,

drops a bit of dry
bread. takes,
eats.

the body of a new day
walking on water.

every day

cardinals sing sunrise
with the voices of angels,
but robins are the early birds
who take and eat real bodies rising
from dark earth soaked in
April showers that could not stop
for May or June. they mumble amen amen
amen again while one black capped chickadee
cries Phoebe Phoebe Phoebe
as if searching for a lost only child.

there are squirrel kings everywhere,
one eye on every other,
never far from a tree to climb
above what seems to be.

crows and gulls are clanging cymbals.
drivers on cellphones driving crossovers
demonstrate again and again that they
have no idea when to stop.

a pair of mallard ducks watch the light,
start to cross on green, lose

their nerve halfway,
stop, caught in traffic, uncertain
what others will do when they see red.
they see the light but let it go when
they recall that they have wings.

but the clearest note is no
downy woodpecker
dancing circles
for insects
they say
have died
for what we
have done, for
what we have left undone

pentachromatic

rise one more story
without a step on nothing
other than air. leave no tracks.

see the whole of nature
iridescent, full of life,
like a body of water

rising to embrace you
in ten billion colors
when you bow your head

and dive. pity poor plodding
creatures bound to think
earth solid. fly

when they
flounder, when
all that is solid melts into air.

Political Philosophy

Dog with the look of a philosopher
confirms it when he stretches his leash taut
across the walk, forcing me to watch my step
for a moment while my eyes meet his.

Man on the other end says *sorry*, and
I say *no problem* without a thought, then
laugh, because the dog just wisely posed it.



event horizon 7: the arc of the universe, oil on canvas, 36x24 inches [2019]

Long as Life

green frog dao

Green Frog in Jacksboro is fifty
years out of the way, but I stop
for breakfast and old time's sake not
a stone's throw from Possum Kingdom

where my grandpa conspired with the Brazos
and the WPA to make a lake and stories
I still believe, never mind the waitress (who
might be one of the pretty young women

he flirted with every time we stopped
years ago for pie and coffee) telling me
the cinnamon rolls are frozen not homemade
and an egg would be better for me anyway.

My mind always wants to put this place
in Decatur, on another road to Wichita
Falls. No cinnamon roll this time
but enough old time with breakfast

to set my memory straight
for another fifty years, hungry
for books, no doubt in my mind
this road is the road to Archer City –

right road, right place, right now.

from Earth City

What do you expect from a city
called Earth? On the way
as always, I

perch as I often do
on the fringe of St. Louis
on the other side of the arch

that marks Jefferson's march
to the sea, on a migrant path leaning
west here, toward Kansas City. Slow flames

burn. A landfill a new wave of mound builders
made to contain what remains of their city's desires
burns while the excesses of old bombs buried there migrate

toward the Missouri. No Standing Rock here
yet. Just east Ferguson still burns slow.
A long line of cars, engines turning

at the McDonald's when I open
my window facing north
before sunrise.

Who knows why
hearts burn? Nothing
is contained. Another city

called Earth comes to mind
every time I stop here, on the
migrant road that runs by the place

where I grew up, between
one place and another,
through farmland

that draws hands
to harvest, not dwell on
it, passing through, no room

for a mind to stay.
Windmills almost always
turn there the way people do. Wind
knows nothing
better than most.
The sun is up now.

I am still,
on the way.

My Ride to Oz

Thunder and lightning have been making noise about something blowing in for some time, so it is no surprise when a gentle rain begins to fall in Lenexa just before I step out to walk back to my room in Overland Park. There is a slight breeze, and the quiet is not the dead silence that settles ahead of a tornado. You can count the distance to the storm if you mind the gaps between the light and the sound trailing steps behind. But now there is a siren sound that makes it hard to hear the weather, and a voice like a muezzin calling the whole city to sanctuary – but it is a woman’s voice.

I don’t know if they have added reverb to the recorded warning or if it is an effect of a cloud of witnesses scattered across the city forming a single body of sound. An authoritative voice, it says *go to your place of storm safety now*. It could have been my mother’s voice

sixty years ago when it was time to run
to the storm cellar, and I suppose
that is the point – to call to the inner
four year old in all these people
hurrying somewhere or the other in
their cars. I have walked a mile
without seeing another person on foot,
and I wonder if anyone has stepped out
to listen to the storm.

In Overland Park, a little crowd
has gathered around the television
in the lobby, and the talk is of rotation,
wall clouds, notches in radar images,
patches of light moving on a flat map
made of pixels on and off. I chat
with the innkeeper and a few guests
about growing up with tornadoes,
tell the ones who say they're not from
around here that the most important thing
to remember is *don't panic*, then
get a cup of coffee, climb the stairs
to the top floor, open the curtains,
and watch the flag unfurl as the wind rises.
I think of my granny hurrying my sister and me

to the neighbor's cellar when a tornado ripped through
Wichita Falls, no more than a mile away, how
my grandpa jumped in his pickup to drive
across its path to reach us. He always said
*don't try to outrun it, just take note of its path,
make a ninety degree turn, and drive.*

On the television, the chatter continues.
There are spotters in cars traveling
in all directions talking on phones
assuring us that our phones will know,
even if the power goes off.

I smile, glad that I have no power and no phone,
turn the television off, open the window, turn
the lights off, watch the flag wave in
the wind, listen to the silence,
wait on my ride to Oz.



event horizon 6: first light, acrylic on canvas, 30x30 inches [2019]

what everybody knew

I have been to the Promised Land
Truck Stop in Pennsylvania coal country.

Saw a sign on a mountaintop in the Poconos
and stopped for fuel on the way

home. It brought to mind the Jesus is Lord
Not A Swear Word Travel Center,

which used to sit on the edge of Amarillo –
now closed. Open a map of Pennsylvania that contains

a piece of New York and the Promised Land is
on the right, in Pike County, to the left of Queens.

Open a map of Texas, turn
to the West Texas side,

and the absence where Jesus is
Lord was clings to the edge

of Potter County, not far from the Woody
Guthrie Memorial Highway, not

far from the Big Texan Steak Ranch,
home of the free 72 oz steak, not

far from what we called
the soap factory before they

owned up to what everybody
knew, that it was where

atomic bombs were made.
Still are. (Faster,

it goes without saying,
than they are unmade,

no matter what they say
the mission is). Open

a map of the whole
United States,

and they both lie
to the left of New York

if north is on top.

I knew a guy who did it once –
called their bluff, ate the steak in an hour.

That's Zebulon, by the way,
a general whose name lies

on, among other things,
a bluff in Iowa and a peak

in Colorado. And Robert Potter,
a Jacksonian who cheated at cards,

fled North Carolina, and, eminently qualified,
signed the Texas Declaration of Independence.

I ponder these things in my heart,
what is left, what is right,

and I guess it is always
a matter of which end we think

is up, especially when it is
hard to know (when is it not?).

I suppose what makes us
more often than not

is not knowing
we do not know,

thinking we do.

That brings Alice to mind
and the Cheshire Cat saying

you're bound to get somewhere
if only you go far enough,

and I wonder what we are
waiting for.

We're all mad, he said.

Shall we go?



revolutionary patience, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 14x20 inches [2018]

On the Day of the Martyrs of Chicago

on the eve of the birthdays of Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard

History repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

-Karl Marx

It was farce the first time, Karl. Always is.
And if you'd lived to see Mikhail and
Samuel play you would have known human
drama always comes in tragicomic form,
one variation after another on

Shall we go?

Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Look at things as we almost always do,
a passing glance in the corner of the eye,
and they seem so simple they go
without saying. Still,

turn and look again. Look them straight in the eye,
and they are subtle, bursting with complexity.

You see, time is time, not money.

But that is what we make of it

as soon as anyone works for anyone,
for the sake of commerce, and
before you know it, we think money
before time and time before persons
and there is nothing that money can't buy
and we spend most of our time moving money.

Standing on our heads, we
do not notice when
the world is upside down.

Harpo got it. It goes
without saying.

He tuned his harp slack, you know,
like a Cha'an master's guqin.
It is all music, and he said nothing
with such skill we laughed and did not forget
we were laughing at ourselves.

*The day will come, August said, when
our silence will be more powerful than
the voices you are throttling today.*

It had already come, as it does,
as it does, as it always does.

On the day of the martyrs of Chicago,
I remember those silenced witnesses,
buried like poets outside the city

walls, and I say the names of the nobodies
nobody knows caught time and time again in
crossfire. And I remember Lucy, who carried on –

how she carried on! – like Mother Jones,
praying for the dead, fighting like hell for the living.

It always makes me smile to know that she
and Albert came up from Texas to raise holy
hell in Chicago. Albert wasn't born there, and he
had been a soldier in the Confederate army
before the world turned and he turned
to look it in the eye. Born again,
I guess you could say, in Waco.

Lucy always said she was born in Johnson County,
but the experts say Virginia now. Either way,
she claimed Texas, and I think Johnson County

was close enough to give me reason to believe
her spirit present in Jacksboro all those times
my Grandpa and I stopped for pie
and coffee at the Green Frog.

Søren said we are always in the wrong
vis-à-vis god, but he knew as well as Karl
that god died. They heard it in the same Church.

I take it as another way to say
we are always on the way.
It's the going, not the gone.

And Søren learned from Meister Eckhart
that if god is born at all it is again
and again in the soul of
each and every one,
always in the present moment.

*The self, he said, by relating itself to its own self
is grounded transparently in the power that posited it.*

Transparently, feet on the ground,
not pie in the sky. Like Lucy. Like Albert.

I don't believe the long struggle will end, Che,
and that's ok. It is as long as life. And even
if the arc of the universe is toward nothing (as I
suspect it is), nothing, as Søren said, is
better than something. *nothing*

nothing nothing, he said. *Wonderful!*

Yes. Long as life.
Between you and me,
we have all the time

in the world
to be human,
to be here now.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

4 May 2018

Terre Haute

dandelions and wild violets spill
over the low gray wall
that draws a line between
this and that and I can't tell
whether they are coming or going

but it is plain to see that one way
or the other they have crossed a line
with a wink and a nod to Big Bill
and Mother Jones

out of place on the fence
behind Eugene's house

dancing like hell
they rise again
and again

and ask why
seek the living
among the dead say
revolution here now
sing solidarity
forever



dance me to the end of love, acrylic on paper, 20x14 inches [2018]

dance

on the anniversary of Emma Goldman's death...

After I said my favorite Lutheran theologian is Karl Marx,
a friend I haven't known long yet made a casual
reference to my descending into anarchism –
one of those throw away comments
that's supposed to slide by without interrupting the
conversation, like Jimi Hendrix on muzak in the grocery store
or Janis Joplin singing under a Mercedes commercial on the television.

On the anniversary of Emma Goldman's death, within
walking distance of her grave, that's exactly how it slides by –
like an avalanche that stops you in your tracks and turns you around
more fully aware than you might wish that you could be dead

now. And then I suppose it is a descent in the sense of diving deep
to get to the bottom of things and coming up believing
with Red Emma that government is violence,
that its withering away could be

a desirable end. Yes, that kind of descent
and my mind wanders off to the Dalai Lama
telling people who thought they were following him
(though he was standing right there with them in Lhasa)

that violence is not acceptable but it's ok to pray
for an avalanche at just the right time
and place to bury the PLA.

Emma is buried by choice among anarchists and communists
who were buried like poets outside the city walls
because the city wouldn't have them. In
living her life, she almost said *if I can't dance*
I don't want to join your revolution. Close enough for me

to say amen, to descend with her to an actual world, *a real world*
with its liberating, expanding and beautifying possibilities,
not an unreal world, which, with its spirits,
oracles, and mean contentment
has kept humanity
in helpless degradation.

To earth, of which they tell us we are made,
to which they say we will return. where
every step we step we step on holy

ground, dancing the city,
in a state of being on the way,
the going, not the gone.

Dance.

Seven Types of Ambiguity

In The 1940s to Now, my mind
is an impure abstraction
that wanders back to waiting
for an oil change this morning
while an on air personality on
a television I am trying to ignore
chatters about women's safety and
an app that makes your cellphone call
the police when you take your thumb off
if you do not enter a secret code
within fifteen seconds.

A woman intent on the one in her hand
walks along a white wall where a curator
has lined up ranks of framed color and form.
She stands between me and the painting
I have been contemplating for a long time,
thinking of Empson typing on his
long march to Yunnan,

but she does not block my vision. We are
one well ordered collision, more or less,
among others, no more conscious

of the work on the wall than
oil finding its way

on solvent soaked canvas
incidental to the cyborg dance
of the whole in which this place is a moment.



last day of winter, acrylic on canvas, 20x20 inches [2018]

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

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