The Imperfection of the Eye

Steven Schroeder
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fiat lux

In the beginning when
god made heaven
and earth, it must have been

a day like this one. Gray
unrolls all the way
from sky to eye

level. Clouds settle down
around ankles while rain
rises everywhere, soaks

skeletons of new things
half done, leaves them
twisted, floods divine

mind with sudden
insight: there is nothing
to be seen, nothing

to be done but vanish
into gray so there will be
space for light when

clouds break.
prism

Nothing bends in the prism of Winter, shatters to rainbows everywhere it lights.

    Color will not be contained.

Sun sneers at spinners of apocalypse.

Worlds end in desire shattered to a spectrum beyond frigid imagination.
broken

every line a shore
where light breaks to shadow
and a world rises in your

eyes made of elsewhere
and here, made of pasts
present to color light broken
rime

cold rimes sight
where there is
no glass but

light frozen
winter hard
falling on

walkers who
think they can
outrun it.
but listen

sound, not
light, bends
on cut
glass cold

light settles
in icicles

but listen

you can hear a rainbow in it
the interrogation of light

Sun in a cloudless sky
is fitting in winter. Nothing
can be colder than the interrogation
of light unbroken, and the chill
in a blue noon survives the silver
heat of a full moon at midnight.
heavier

moonstone skipped across a river
of sky sinks just this side
of the other shore

it takes time
and an eye for it to find one
flat enough to skim the surface
without thinking itself
heavier than air

heavier than water
come to rest on solid ground
a day before moon

Moon’s absence fills
East, opens sky to silver
cold with every breath.

Sky is
full a day before moon, painting
every autumn corner cold, waning
to winter while moon reflects
and the last leaves shiver
before falling.
falling fast

A sliver of moon
anchors over three
chalk lines in blue
sky, sun falling fast.
blazing

East is full two days before moon, draws winter silver circles in autumn sky breath by breath while moon reflects a day blazing on the other side.
open

Absence streams through an open moon
a sliver shy of a circle
in the east,

paints every corner
of autumn sky winter silver
tarnished gray before it gives way

to daylight.
moonrise

Half moon is painted
on pastel blue sky
with a single stroke
of the same wan brush
that made the clouds
over which it rises,
three lines of secondhand
light that match the angle
of a high branch, a circle
interrupted by a shadow
of sky pale in the east
above southern horizon
in the hours before sunset.
flickering

Kitchen window was full of half moon hours before you said she was a smile flickering on the surface of the water. Today it is all rain coming down steady sadness over anticipation of snow

tomorrow. Children and dogs will wonder how the solid form of one day’s sad falling could be so happy you can skate on it.
flavor oscillation

Neutrinos in three flavors massed against the weight of the world could tilt an object the size of Sri Lanka to a spiritual plane five hundred miles east of where it ought to be.

The infinitude of them is enough to make you lie awake, forget

fickle clocks, keep time by watching pale moons wander.
come

Cold blue flame
at day’s extreme
burns hotter when sun
passes. Moon’s mourning
consumes memory.

    How can
she recall tomorrow’s dawn
through the misty singularity
of every morning?

    There is nothing
for the white light of mourning
save the last sunrise, which can
never come again.
darkly

Nothing stands here
between the edge of the earth
and the sun. After it burns
all day, it finally melts, runs
down sky darkly, dissolves
in sudden night. Turn, turn
and light has risen:
    harvest moon shines on
nothing that stands here still.
the east is red

This morning. Sun
smudge on horizon
where lake meets sky
vanishes behind lattice
of trees.

Salt catches first light
under chalk sky blue
under cloud white. Blue
in four shades ends

gray. I study patience
in the interval between now
and the next northbound train.
absences
whitecaps

Nothing subtle in this wind willing
winter south with battalions
of tumbleweeds. What is not rooted
moves, what is bends with it. Tall
prairie grass ripples two shades of ocher
bleached to whitecaps in this sun under
unbroken blue sky. Every sign of motion
is at ground level. Sky stands above it all
without so much as a thought of a cloud. Sun
stands head down against wind, still, throws
all its weight against mercury falling.
weather

Wind bends in slow deliberation of ash before rain, the body of a change in the weather.

You can see it dance a storm, change its mind from south to north, break three days of heat on a line of thunderclouds.
slow

Wind freezes faster than light,
falls in great piles of snow
plows move in labored rhythm
of human commerce.

When light freezes, it freezes slow,
slow to still. Slow to still wind,
slow to still snow, slow. You lean
to the source of freezing wind, but turn
to cut light come to stop it.
in search of a candle

Wind twisted maple crown
down in a flash to the flood,
scattered remains in circles
under lines of light racing
fast white clouds against still
dark gray in southern sky,
thunder fading under steady
rain making music with the old
tin pail hanging under a broken
gutter on the back porch. You
could hear the end of the tree
through the east window when
it had turned as far as it could
for one last look at the ash still
standing before the block went
dark and every neighbor went
in search of a candle.
wind

draws itself a circle
grows cold hard shatters
scatters under weight of its own
desires, softens as it warms to earth rising
draw

Scrub cedar scratches across caliche to West Dutch Woman Draw where something that must have been like water running once cut a line on the hard surface for roots that make their way down to what’s left of it.

Wind picks up where sand does, keeps it moving while I keep an eye on the horizon hoping for mountains. Pull over, step out of the car, you’d think you could fly. Most everything does in this wind if it’s not tied down, so I keep my mind on keeping my feet on the ground, wonder if the guy driving the big rig west with an oversized load wishes he’d waited a day or two, stay awake by doing what the sign says.

Watch for water. And when it says Chance of flash floods, I calculate the odds.
not out of mind

Water travels faster by ear than eye, so I know the falls for some time before I see them by the broken steps and rusted remains of an old mill.

Not far away, there is a graveyard of old ploughs, seasonal in rust and lichen set off by prairie grass November ocher. A cat steps out of the brush to watch me watch, and out of sight the water
when I reach Nebraska

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

water slows to glass
veneer that might tempt
cautious steps if not
for sun that tumbles
tiptoe summer anticipation
over everything.

Everybody knows
it will break into
a lookingglass world
if you put your weight on it.
dodging rain

Old yellow cat keeps one eye
on passersby, one
on weather, conjures
Tatanka Yotanka dodging rain
in council once without making a move.

Ears flat, leaps standing
water, reaches far
side as another
drop falls.
organic

Steady rain leaves
pink carnage under
every crabapple.
Tulip regularities
disrupted appear
organic as dandelions
profiteering in intervals
between storm
and weeding, when
some hired gun
will come reform
ranks, sweep bodies
off beaten paths, gather
scattered flags, send
insurgents into hiding.
in tongues

Spirit-filled, rain
spoke in tongues
til morning. Congregation
got happy, shouted down
heat with hallelujahs,
lapped up words beyond
language it could not,
sated, contain.
lost cities

Rain remembers every face
it’s ever touched, Kohelet, when
it slips unseen to sea, overflows
with rivers of them, lost cities
that rise in clouds sky
cannot contain.
one fine day

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 season,
an old song local vegetation can dance.
absences

Noah, suspended
on a wave he could understand
as nothing but god’s anger
clung to his family, dreamed
he was good, thought the flood
a mirror sent by god
to confirm it, planned a world
to look like him when the dove
returned with a token
of a tree, head above water. Not
a word of death, though the air
must have been full of it, nothing
but a rainbow sign.

Tight-lipped
Noah digs mass graves for absences
that haunt the world, keeps an eye
on water.
synecdoche
dream

Geese, who remember
in flocks that stretch years
south before Winter,
know it should be cold.

Weather has them flying
in circles. And a gray down
blanket of cloud settles on
December, who

promptly forgets whether
moons and seasons are
waxing or waning
and doesn’t much care.

Yawning, he says one
way or the other
it will be cold in
time, crawls under

the blanket, drifts off
to dream sunshine in rain.
By a quarter after nine, woodpecker has put in a full shift, joined by a singer of two notes in a tree one street over.

He started before the rhythm of hard soles hurrying somewhere on concrete, diesel fume stop and go of trucks so long they can’t make the turn from street to alley. Children squeeze every drop of joy they can from the interval before the bell rings. Someone breaks pavement some where. Circular saw screams with gulls in intervals of birdsong. Pneumatic punctuation will not let us forget that hand hammerers like woodpeckers and the finish carpenter next door are passé. The first car alarm and the cardinal sing together at ten over the voice of the foreman shouting orders next door. A woman’s voice drifts up from the street below. You’re probably right. You’re probably right.

But I don’t think she believes it.
all clear

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 when the time comes.
a motley dove

Three fat sparrows
spurn my offer
of crumbs from
a stickysweet
morning roll, graze
at the salad bar of grasses

in the flower bed.
Against my better
judgment, I encourage
a mottled pigeon who
has been stalking me
since I stepped out
of the bakery.

I imagine him a motley
dove, weathered
in war but still
hopeful enough
to expect something
of every stranger who
takes a seat in this courtyard.
how fragments fall

Now and then an avian artist measures silences in song, still the soul’s same music, broken new.

The whole tells the name of the bird. But the story lies in how fragments fall on silence broken.
arachne

She knows action
at a distance, silk
webbed across temptation
of my kitchen sink.
Athena draws sun
through southern sky
to sunset. Nothing touches
Arachne; and, clearer than glass,
she suffers Athena’s
sunset threads to pass.
reconciling texts

what is not there
cannot be counted
   Ecclesiasites 1:15

It is not worthwhile to go
around the world to count
the cats in Zanzibar.
   Henry David Thoreau, Walden

what is not there cannot be
counted, and there is no sense
going to Zanzibar to count
cats, though they no doubt could
be. Nothing left but to count
what is there, which would
be cats in Zanzibar if that by chance
is where you are when you are
on your way to count them.
bee

Light as flight
brushes cushion
a shade the red
side of blue, then

air, thin air,
skips yellow
green orange
gathers sweet

blue for honey.
contra Hegel

A single daffodil
means no less
than the whole mass
of them defiant against
late Spring cold.

Meaning alone
demands context, demands systems
of daffodils, demands systems
of early flowers, demands systems
of perennials. But it means

no less than all daffodils
standing for absent sun
on a gray day in April.
cat-tail

...it is uncommon to see a solitary Cat-tail without an accompanying multitude... found... in ditches, along lake borders, and in or near other permanently wet places.

Howard S. Irwin, Roadside Flowers of Texas

Cat-tail anchorites stand solitary in multitudes where there is water waiting. Unlike botanists, they know water is harder to find than solitude. Waiting is permanent. Drink it, all of you. It is the sacrament of a city of solitaries marking time.
a nonlinear equation

Ancient artists of bonsai no less
tempted than Benoit by lace
brown branches on gray
sky wrote geometries in trees,
cultivated wild poems gathered
on mountains, left no fractal theories
to contain typhoons of cream in coffee.

Brush splits nothing to life in one
line, leads eye to rest on paper.
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.
Still, ash
waves fingers
at clouds drifting

north. High cirrus anchors
blue, cumulus on cumulus
tumbles over sun.
Light dims. Ash
sways, prays,
_Spirit, come._
traces

Quiero hacer contigo
lo que la primavera hace con los cerezos.

Pablo Neruda

Pondering what Spring does
with cherry trees, Pablo,
I pass the afternoon
with a faded gladiolus
painting on white
with water

until words return.
It paints blossoms
with time that bleeds
through illusions of
nothing, leaves traces.
nowhere

On the edge of cold on
the edge of light, trees
don’t know how to dress
for this weather. Leaves
have mostly turned
and fallen.

Yellow berries
tempt birds tempted
into song by sun
half a step behind
clouds that brought
a little rain last night.

Cat stands
at the bottom of a tree,
eyes on something I cannot see
at the top, weighs the effort
of the climb against the likelihood
of catching it, goes nowhere.
purple

Cool day in June, bee
drunk on purple
sinks in ageratum
cushion, waits for sun
to fall in with the season.
liquid

The scent of lilacs is
the same shade
that plays on eyes
in air moist with a day
of rain. Before flowers
settle into vision, you see
it. You taste it edging
your walk, minding
the space of a dwelling
beside intersections
of city streets liquid
as lilac bouquet.
synecdoche

How does she know that eyes see? you ask of the cat, who has been prodding mine open with soft paws this morning because, I surmise, she is ready for breakfast. But what matters is not knowing. It is seeing that eyes, which can with patience be moved, stand in bodies.

And that may mean something in an empty bowl between sleep and morning coffee.
the imperfection of the eye

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.
theories of color
the gray grace of rain

Some old gospel song drones on
and on about a place where
there are no clouds, and my mind’s
eye wanders off to a field of grain
in drought desperate for rain.

I think nothing
would have slipped by unnoticed
without the flash of Spring lightning on
the Plains.

A fog of sweet
by and byes makes it hard to see
the gray grace of rain making way

for nothing endless
but anticipation, now and then
a moment of blue.
later

Devil at every crossroad
tempts everyone who passes
to think they’re Robert Johnson.
Some take the bait and sing
the world blue. Others see
devils everywhere, keep
their fingers on the trigger,
shoot first, ask questions later.
nothing more

Listen to the music of rain’s language spoken in the tongue of a lover you will always desire to learn. No thought of ending, every happiness possible touches you and you want nothing more than to melt into this song.
responsive reading

Late. A cushion of cicada song lies soft under city sounds.

A motorcycle whines off Lake Shore Drive; trucks rumble west on Congress ahead of the hum of an oncoming train, voices splintered off a crowd not quite finished with evening, conversation on cell phones in the station. It is

a responsive reading, an ocean breaking on the shore of human conversation that scurries into crevices between insect voices.
round dance

to my
eye

a round dance
with a maple
tree still

making its way back
from last year’s lightning strike

dinner to the woodpecker

to slow bugs under soft bark

a natural disaster
motu proprio

The Pope had not been infallible long when he ceded the sax to Satan. Still, to doubt him *ex post facto* would be unforgivably Protestant.

And it doesn’t take much imagination to conjure a vision of Old Scratch wailing away under a window on St. Peter’s, Pius entranced when that sultry sound drifts in, lifts him right to the edge of rapture before he shudders awake, runs down to see with his own eyes, thrust his finger in and catch his breath before the horn can breathe it for him.

Spirit-filled, it is a Pentecostal instrument speaking in tongues that lifts the whole assembly on sad tones.

It can hold its breath til the world gets happy, thinks Coltrane when it says Saint John.
evidence

Memories shadow this walk where maple leaves fell when cold wind shook them from branches winter dry in Autumn, etched gray on gray by sun and rain alongside the names of two small boys I saw leave them there with sticks before the concrete set, day after traces of bodies stopped in a holocaust of heat and light before they could escape, evidence of something undeniably green before winter wind.
ghosts

In this cold, you can see ghosts of human occupation dancing off the heat of every dwelling over lamps that light the way to night blue sky where they leap to join clouds of promises to warm the world with a blanket of late snow.
knowing winter

Here we meet Winter in disguise. He knows us, though, by eyes that expose our incognito to an other who has caressed the contours of our face for years with fingers of snow so delicate they recall the whole in the smallest unveiled surface, who has recorded every particularity of light in our eyes with the penetration of January wind.

We have known as lovers know, and we know now even when we never want to see his face again.
anticipating snow

Krishna blue sky is two shades holier
than clouds that swim upstream
anticipating snow
slow in coming.

    Anxious trees glance
at watches, worried

they’ve been stood up, thinking
they got the time wrong, still
hoping for the flurry of her arrival.
March blue

slowed by nothing
still in the gap
of a window open
at the train station
sings

blue tone
cool

over silence, joins
ungloved hands that
thought winter was
done, impatient
for home.
mistaking blue

for water, they
slip in expecting a body
to hold them cool, skin on skin
and are surprised when

it burns their breath to shadow, leaves
astonished eyes open always to then

not a trace of here, not
a trace of now
nomen est numen

Cold, dry spheres, cones, circles, names, too smooth, too straight for complex worlds infinitely folded.

There is poetry in the fractions of it. Ten thousand senses bloom beyond containment. Rivers undiverted, water’s memory floods, every fragment a universe, every fragment every silence broken.
a gospel

I know some people who’ve met Jesus and take it personally, like they think somebody’s died and made them god. I believe it was the serpent who made that promise. He still has a good eye for an easy mark, and we fall for it every time, leaving god lost in some garden muttering *where are you?* while we rave on about things we’ve built on sacred mountains where we could swear we saw something transfigured and figured we’d better nail it down then and there while we had it for a hot minute in our little minds.

Jesus, you know, is nobody like you and me. And there’s no telling what mountain he’s camped on now.
an epic of Gilgamesh

How did Humbaba know it was madmen who sent two crazed lovers to kill him at home in the Cedar Forest? You don’t have to be a seer to see who’s in charge. Five thousand miles of bad dreams end with god’s voice from the sky and nothing to say. Intimate friends fancy themselves invincible, slaughter wild things, hack down sacred groves, set off for the end of the earth, can’t keep their eyes open. Gods swarm like flies made cruel by boredom. Snake’s the only one with sense enough to eat berries and slough off old skin.

All men are liars, but some monsters see right through them.
epic

Most every time the world ends, it ends in some imbroglio 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, who makes promises when lightning strikes or wars begin, who gives up children because he cannot hold his tongue, because he will not hold his tongue, because he does 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.
fast

No more than one in three drivers on these Nebraska backroads raises a finger from the wheel now when they meet another lonesome in passing on this expanse of nothing but middles in middles, no edge until one eye or another fixes on the bottom of sky where it has settled in a space left by the few who still remember to lift it for strangers passing.

Someone whose job it is to paint a line from where the road begins to where it collides with sky has let nothing get in the way and lay down a long graveyard where you’d expect pavement from one end of the world to the other, no stones, here and there a wooden cross and a spray of flowers, rituals dim as memory, sun and moon both full staring across it at midday. The kitten who set out to cross it lies still on the white line that marks the berm, could be sleeping, and there are lines of skunks under carrion birds all the way back to Auburn flattened to the contour of a long middle that ends abruptly where it seeps liquid through six shades of blue distance spattered cloudwhite above turtles who thought they could fly and bigeyed cows who used to think they’d seen it all but can’t imagine nothing happening fast as it does here, fast as it is now.
chain reactions

Nuclear devices detonated in out of the way places east of Pyongyang, east of LA, set off chain reactions in discourse difficult to contain.

Modify “government” with “dangerous” and you are guilty of redundancy, a crime against plain speaking if not humanity. The half life of rhetoric makes plutonium look easy to contain. Keep an eye on the one that has used them. Keep a hand on your wallet. Remember:

no matter what they say about peaceful applications, all government is fissile material.
a psalm rises

rolls from depths of expectation abandoned, pauses

in memory, returns, returns, brushes over every contemplation

of a whole. You can see it in the eyes of people who rushed down

to the shore for fish stranded when time’s wave caught them,

bewildered when past rushed back to future. You

never see the past coming. You never see the end of it.
theories of color

one: deception
red green blue white
lie bends light
to what is not
there

two: addition
yellow magenta cyan
black, primate eyes
see mirrors of rainbows

three: subtraction
cats taste sticky wet paint
insects put their bodies in it
pigeons prefer birdseed, dream

colors beyond imagination
Steven Schroeder grew up in the Texas Panhandle, where he first learned to take nothing seriously, and his poetry continues to be rooted in the experience of the Plains. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Concho River Review*, *the Cresset*, *Druskininkai Poetic Fall 2005*, *Georgetown Review*, *Karamu*, *Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Poetry East*, *Rhino*, *Shichao*, *Sichuan Literature*, *Texas Review*, and other literary journals. His most recent collection is *Fallen Prose*, published by Virtual Artists Collective in 2006. *Six Stops South* is forthcoming from Cherry Grove Collections.