the epic opposite
poems and fragments, 2004-2013: volume ten

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the epic opposite is the tenth 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 tenth of ten notebooks and were drafted between January 2011 and October 2013. 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.

I’ve used two paintings in this volume: a detail of “a gift of fire: trace” (acrylic on canvas, 2018) for the front cover and a detail of “empty promises 2” (oil on canvas, 2015) for the back cover.

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

Chicago
October 2022
squirrel high in a bare tree
curses cold white snow
dances on it

never mind
winter mind. snow can
make nothing of it, squirrel
never goes quiet, and sun
is already climbing back to summer
on the other side of gray

sun makes a mirror city
on the surface of the river
the city on the shore
reflects the rippling city
written on water, every
plane surface a vision

night city shadows
towers of light, spirit
on the face of water
making its way in a river
night city shadows
towers of light, spirit
on the face of water
in a slow river
making its way to a body

tonight the city is
a slow river of light
making its way

in a river
to a body of water
that could be ocean
night shadows towers of light
on the face of the water,
moving there in light
now let there be a city
tonight the city is
a river of fallen light
making its way
to a body of water
that could be an ocean

night shadows
towers of light
on the face of water

moving, there is light,
now let the city be
20 January 2011

world’s on the way to ice tonight, but the river refuses to stop for it. Cold as the city is in January, light it sheds dances on living water. Snow tonight, snow tomorrow. River will take it in, flow as every river in the world flows to an ocean that takes them in, takes them in, but does not overflow.

world’s on the way to ice tonight but the river refuses to stop. Cold as the city is in January, light it sheds still dances on living water.

Snow tonight, snow tomorrow. River will take it in, flow
as every river
in the world flows
to an ocean
that takes them in,
takes them in, takes them
all in, but does not overflow
Two days after the blizzard, plows make mountains
to move every place two paths meet,
and there are people on the street with shovels
ready to deal. Sunlight is falling
steadily, and waiting has been accumulating
for a week. Snow
relaxes under a blanket of it into the gray city,
and anyone with a little time on their hands
knows it will be impossible to tell
them apart by next week.
The city will get through February as it
always has, and time will wear a path
in waiting
from memory the way dogs have
in snow, knowing
where they have been
before even though
their eyes deceive them
now.
10 February 2011

Shadow on snow could be
a leaf falling in another season
but in the universe of ice
it catches my eye by being
out of place, moving
at odds with
the drift of winter
across the tracks
ahead of the train
to catch a little warmth
beneath the bodies
huddled on the platform
in moonlight.

At the end of the line,
a pigeon warms
in the heat of not knowing
one’s place, goes
the other way, underground.
Snow is a matter of memory. 
The vocabulary of every storm 
is what can be brought to mind 
of all that was before.

This one is all 1999, 1979, 
1967 – and you have to wonder 
why the summer didn’t leave them 
loving the snow.

East of Hannibal and Lyle Lovett 
is going on and on about penguins 
when I spot a hawk perched 
on six feet of what has been 
drifting since before the blizzard began 
last week. I could have lost 
control watching for him to fly 
but you can’t lose what you never 
had. In that moment the hawk 
got nowhere and I, my mind 
on the road again, moved on past a sign 
barely visible above the snow line 
that said Louisiana 19 miles, 
thinking twice about 
where I am now.
15 February 2011

a handful of nothing that matters,
two thin strips of an old cotton rag,
pulped, lost in water –

hands dance like Butcher Ting,
arcs a screen through water like
panning for gold –
fiber finds its own way.

Making paper is all about letting go,
a poem, ready to begin again.
19 February 2011

Still without form and void,
the world is nothing
more than webs of words
woven between chance encounters.

Some god says let there be
and thinks it good, but it is
no such thing. This place
makes time
bend. Holding a cup
for the moment
of warmth more than
what it contains,
the Stones sing

i can’t get no,
and I try and I try
and I try to embrace
what is not there,
and say it is good
it is very good.
Miles and miles and Texas is undeniable and I can’t imagine thinking the place flat, thinking it one thing, when there are so many shades of ocher and brown in February north of red dirt and spring no more than a week after a year’s worth of snow.
“Comanche moon” they say, as though they remember making their way across the plains by the light of it or shuddering at the thought of someone else. But they mean no more than that it is big and bright like stars at night deep in the heart — but you wouldn’t know it in the glare of the city, full of the moon tonight, even inside out of sight of it, where crowds, still making the world flat, still see nothing but some city on the next hill.
23 March 2011

Placing the color of dry grass
on a spectrum of ochre,
I stumble upon a deer
that has not been dead
long and say “yes, that’s it” –
the tipping point at the edge of brown,
the shade death thirsts for
until, at last, forgetting, it is
no more than white bone
sun bleached, nothing like
the color I placed just now.
25 March 2011

This Machine Kills Fascists

South of Okemah, tumble down
Sunshine Corner's been boarded up a long time.
No gas, no ice, no burgers, no fries, no matter
what the sign says. Flowers that would be weeds
anywhere but here have made a place out
of every crack in every asphalt surface,
and they are in it. Vines
are creeping up the walls, taking their chances
on an inevitable opening in the roof made by
time passing, a hundred year winter, hail,
a thunderstorm last night. They like the odds. They know
Woody's not far, and they've heard he always saw a sign
as an invitation to the other side. That rust
on the old water barrel is an ink brush painting.
Brittle grass is rice paper almost white in sun.
It takes the ink well, dances with the light
that gets in everywhere with flowers,
not a weed in sight.
No one is illegal,
nowhere.
Crossing this border
where the sign says
“drive friendly, the Texas way”
I’m wondering, as I always do,
which when a warning flashes
on the dash: ice is possible,
and I think this car
has been here before, glance
at the thermometer and say
out loud, “anything is.” It’s above
freezing, barely, so it could be
a joke – but I’ve hit a bridge
in weather like this that spun me
all the way around, opened
my eyes, and I said to the other
person in the car, “it’s a miracle
we’re alive,” as it always is.
A couple of hours later, passing
the Jesus is Lord not a swear word
travel stop, I smile and think
it is good to have this much in common
with the born again sure folks
who own the place and are
scared as hell somebody wants
whatever they have bad enough
to take it from them. It’s a miracle we’re alive, as it always is.
3 April 2011

**Prairie Rehab**

It’s been strung out on progress
so long it has the gaunt
appearance of a junkie
who lost his religion
some time ago.

That explains
the crooked sign in the middle
of a roadside plot carefully cultivated
to let go, and I would like nothing more
than to check myself in voluntarily.
Three days of rain and there is nothing left
to fall. Nothing falls, light, for a day and blue
lulls you into dreaming this rainy season
has come to an end. But you can feel it
in gray that gathers everywhere there is
an edge, and everywhere there is an edge. Not
spring, but winter perching before it flies again.
30 April 2011

That bird singing four notes would be the one to ask about the butterfly, Zhuangzi. No doubt in his mind who is dreaming whom in this world made like every other on edge of edges. Ask if something is real and the answer is always yes.
1 May 2011

Seeking silence in every uncommon tongue
I stumble upon, it is no less
strange in this
place than in any other –
I find every other place wholly
other. The music escapes me.
Relentless. The again and again
and again of it laid to rest in
the hyphen between
a beginning and an end
lonely people touching
nothing but a name repeating
to no one again, again, “our war, our
war, our war was
different,” willing the again
and again to mean
willing again and again
until there is no doubt
the same goes on forever
absence smells like an ocean of grass
in flames
the accident of its origin is a crossroad and a map spreads out
from it, flattening years and miles to a line of people
and places you know marking where the wind took it
all the news is of things lost or not
but it’s the stories or the pieces of them you fear
consumed

no rain
present as
an absent god
in fire that was
not there

a moment before
nothing to stop it
and all you can think of
is water
3 July 2011

no small thing, this
pointing

the way
where story
thinks itself

at war with vision

without a vision
the people perish

intriguing, this
telling

stories for the dead

not how you play
the game, the game

itself, no point
piling up points

in this dark place
playing wei chi
thinking pinball
missing the prayer bell
that may just be the point,
no verb contained

though not for lack of walls
not for lack of icons

hanging on them

every icon
a crack, a crack
in everything. that’s how

the light gets in

bathed in blood, the way
the creator is
what is not here is always here. there is no there there, it is hard
to plant one green thing
out there is
America, seeing
in a circle
the city is where I am, we is that by which I am mountains have always waited
for nothing
somebody's grandmother thought a white horse is not a horse
the whiteness of the dog passes, the dog remains
my daughter’s eyes
roll at the mention
of Iowa suffering a day there
will suffice for a lifetime in poetry

around here, we pronounce that Ohio

a just word is worth
a thousand pictures
nothing always rights itself

like a river
that eats levees
the way you say
modernity ate its scholars

tadpoles are a city at your feet
trails pass, nothing in the poem

    water never leaves the sky
    every real boy lies
    in some bloody city

dry is forgetting how to love it
so long every vine withers
every prophet turns and runs
a poem is the failure of stem cells
not finished, abandoned
a failure we will
not to correct

we are
now, beginnings

crows see the light, get happy

spirit breathes
on the face of every body

of water, pray
for rain

sun, you know,
doesn’t rise at all
it stands, still
while the world turns
dripping waves of joy

take, read, this is my body

light catches everything,
contains nothing,
a blessing
9 July 2011

Decay so natural it’s not even necessary
to pause and breathe just hold on
to the only matchstick pole not broken
in this hurricane while the camera rolls
stand pat go on talking and keep the show on the air

Matter of fact autopsy of the sacrament of marriage in
a voice so Tennessee soft it covers
every sharp corner the way kudzu does till all
the world is green and you’d swear there’s nothing there
that could cut you all “smiles bland and expected as name tags.”

You see the undertow at the front door when
you open it, haint standing there like an orphan,
and you take her in because you can’t ever
leave the cold that will drown you homeless
and you know you have to keep the door open
for the spirit that will make you sway
like dancing, but it is no sin

just like the gray contempt for the sky
you call a storm edged perfect day looks
like hope, but it is no virtue

take a hard look at what you once thought love
and you won’t doubt the world is flat
no matter what they say about that oblate
spheroid shit. the edges are there all right
shrouded in time like Spanish moss
    so dense no light escapes, and it
    will cut you.

call all this shit miscellaneous
    for a laugh in a voice sweet as
candied violets full of hope
    purring like a kitten
but you know there’s a touch of winter
    behind all of it, and it’s bound to come.
Mississippi’s memory is longer than Illinois. Crossing both days after a flood, it looks like the smaller has slipped back between the old lines, while the big river lingers over absences that look from the bridge like a body of water – recalling what it was like to fill every low place thinking limits never lost waiting for another storm to remember like the last one, the one everyone in the diner is talking about today, waiting for a flood of memory.
13 July 2011

it’s a small world after all
Marceline, Missouri

They’ve rolled up all the grass
and piled it in the fields.
Sign says “Ten Mile 4,”
and I suspect the place
is twisted, wonder
what kind of beginning lies
six miles back on that road,
cross the middle branch of one
river after another, begin
to think there is none.

Then another sign:
“Walt Disney Home Town Museum,”
and the place curving back on
itself begins to make sense.
Missouri’s flooded and they’ve closed the bridge opposite Atchison. Detour winds just a touch more south than east and keeps the river out of sight, but I know there’s no way west to Kansas but over it. It ends at 116 with no way marked to the road I was on. Finally find myself on the edge of Kansas City, turn west toward Topeka and a wall of hot that’s settled on the plains this summer, cross the river wide as a lake here but not high as the Eisenhower interstate built to survive a nuclear war, settled for now until it makes its way slow to Mississippi mud, leaves bottom land rich as it always has remembers longer than folks who inch closer every year, unaware of the rhythm of the river, fight longer to keep the water in line until the levee breaks and they see the river widen as it is uncontained.

Farmers know corn thrives on what settlers forget here. They know how to wait, and the crop will be better next year than ever.
Nostalgia

Not in fact for what
was but for what never has but
might have been.
Every nostos
makes its own way
and there must always be
a trace that cuts beyond
what it is possible to contain.

On Kansas Avenue in Marceline,
Uptown Theater marquee says
Spirit of Mickey July 14 1998

Spirit has a weathered look about it,
but the Sorcerer’s Apprentice in the window
has the same smile, imagineering Main Street USA
right in the middle of it.
Sick and tired of being
sick and tired, I told
my wife I was looking in
to joining the Franciscans.
Knowing I was temperamentally
a Trappist or
anything discalced,
She said what do they
make you do
and I said nothing
then thought again
and said preach good news to
birds and she said
you do that already
and (discounting
the possibility that
she meant nothing)
I said they
preach to me. I just say
amen and all this came to mind
today when a friend reminded
me that this is Saint Bonaventure’s
day and she is trying
in his honor to ignore
little annoyances
but I suppose those
would be the ones a Franciscan
would embrace – suffer the little
you know and that got me thinking
about the mind’s journey, the
mind’s journey in, as I
recall, not up, to
God, present wherever
it was, said a preacher
of another order but
a similar mind, you left
the divine,
which could be
anywhere.
Turn. Turn.
Take off your shoes.
Every step you step
you step on holy ground.
16 July 2011

what you can’t say, sigh
what you can’t sigh, sing
what you can’t sing, dance

Red moon rises clear
as day on the edge of the city
so sweet you can taste it
from here tonight
and I think this
is where the earth down here
gets red and I hope it stays
a long long time – long enough
for all that light to fill
us with all the madness we need to remember
what a red state is
what a red state Oklahoma is
It just hangs
slow, slow shining, nothing
but light
and there’s
space enough in that
for every single one of
us to dance.
The side of the sign that don’t say nothing is the side of the sign that belongs to you and me. If you see something, they say, say something – but I say you can never say I without meaning we even when you forget.

I say look at that moon like nothing you’ve ever seen and say what you see. Dance.

Up don’t mean down and out don’t mean in unless we stand together.
Fields December yellow in July
and the heat sinks
in. Maize is good for nothing
now but turning under to feed
hope this dry
don’t settle in to stay
Heat’s the only thing growing,
and dry
17 July 2011

Fire danger fire
danger fire danger –
rhythm of the same sad wind
driving tall turbines
west of Oklahoma City
drives the sign
even a foolish generation
doesn’t need when
there is nothing but dry waiting
to burn as far as you can see
any way you turn today.

Lights on fire trucks speed the same
rhythm south to something
I can’t see burning,
but I don’t have to.

Both diners in
Weatherford are
closed at breakfast
time on Sunday,
and I consider
asking one of
the people
crossing against
the light at the
Baptist church
if there’s a
place in town
for an atheist to get a cup
of coffee. But nowadays,
atheists are fundamentalists
too, so I’d rather not call on
that name – just smile
and nod as they pass.

“...but God calls it,” says
a sign, and I wonder
why people of faith seem
determined to use
words hard fast waiting
to burn

water on the table in
Clinton without asking,
and the waitress
is asking someone
at the next table
to friend her
while some
country singer
goes on about
letting him down
easy.
25 July 2011

**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 thinking, then
laugh, because the dog just wisely posed it.
An old metal watering can hangs
at the right angle to shelter
a summer colony of polistine wasps
in a corner just far enough
off the beaten path for a civil
relationship. I left it there
long after I moved the garden
for the squirrel to drink from.
But these gentle squatters are welcome.
These sisters of St. Benedict are social
insects, but the whole convent
is a hermit like me. They
need each other, but they all
need distance, and they all
keep their distance, mostly
out of sight hoping to stay
out of mind. One
has wandered into my
kitchen this morning, lost. I
open the screen,
avoiding her sting,
and wait until she is between
it and the window. Close
the window and tap, which
sends her spiraling to find edges
until she chances upon the opening
I've made not knowing or caring who made it,
hurries back to the house she and her sisters made,
out of sight, out of mind,
their work
like a prayer
to let the world
be for now.
6 October 2011

autumn flowers know this is a dying season,
know a scene when they see one when the last leaf
settles slow on the breeze it grew green waiting for
turns turns turns the color the rose was
in summer settles on dark soil, waiting for
the next to come down slow, and the flowers know
what shade to turn turn turn to make a painting of it on
the surface of a day like summer on the edge of snow

       know this is a dying
       season know it is know
       it is not

no idea

autumn flowers know this is a dying season,
know a scene when they see one
when the last leaf settles slow
on the breeze it grew green waiting for,
turns turns turns the color the rose was
in summer, settles on dark soil,
waiting for the next to come down slow –
and the flowers know without thinking
what shade to turn turn turn
to make a painting of it, dancing
on the surface of a day like summer
on the edge of snow, know this is
a dying season, know it is,
know it is not finished.
18 October 2011

Season turns on north wind in no time. Sky darkens in the east, and you know something’s going to fall even without the rainbow. But you can count the drops on the windshield when you drive west again, into dry, and you know what rain will fall will fall behind you while all that falls on high plains ahead is sun and still more dry.

Season turns in no time on north wind. Sky grows dark in the east, and you know something’s bound to fall – even without the rainbow.

But when you turn again and drive west, into dry, you know what rain will fall will fall behind you, while all that falls on high plains ahead is sun and more dry still.
Season turns in no time on north wind. Standing on high ground at sundown while sky grows dark in the east, and you know somethings bound to fall, even without the rainbow.

On north wind, season turns in no time.
autumn

since spring first burst with anticipation
green in every single one of them, maple
leaves have been all waiting for this yellow
red dance to earth waiting, waiting, again
waiting. ten thousand single sighs circling
make this breeze, fall, knowing repetition
amplifies. no call to shout to be
undeniable: like earth waiting, waiting
to be, one, beyond counting, more than one can know.
say what?

Ask what this has to do with that and there is nothing to say but what do you make of it? That would be it, then: say nothing there is to say and get on with making another time when some stranger says what again.
One occupation after another drives
the city this morning. Early, it is
a man with a shopping cart sifting slow
through what has been discarded by
people who think themselves poor. He is
followed by trucks with crews to keep them
moving. No sifting unless something gets in the way.
Trucks struggle around corners into alleys
where tired drivers abandoned cars late
the night before betting traffic
cops would sleep in Monday or linger
over coffee and give the streets
time to sort themselves out
before thinking about tickets.
Every child at the school at the end of the block
is driven, and a line of buses
17 March 2012

It’s the absence of edges, not light that makes nothing but sound visible –

blackbirds clamoring in rushes
on the bank of the creek
for sun coming soon

they know, frogs
in the same register – hard to tell which will fly in this light

but morning is rising,
the whole world saying fiat lux – and there will be when

one thing leads to another
and you come to know what lies there, where they touch
Cahokia Mounds, Saint Patrick’s Day

Sun rose on the emperor’s mound
hours ago, the one they call monks now
because some silent brothers occupied it
centuries after the builders had moved on.
Their children scattered as children do,
until nothing was left to tie them to the place
but stories grandmothers tell. Trappists
should have known an abandoned city
when they saw one, but they had in mind
a place to pray. That would be the city.
I am thinking of the backs that must have been
broken by carrying all that earth, but not
the spirits. Dig here to make a high place
there but know what rises will fall. And
the walls. The walls. What riffraff lived
on the other side, the side I am sitting now –
under a corner of the Interstate
Defense Highway system that might
as well be logs driven into the ground around
the holy places where the sun
rises when the time is right covered with mud.
What goes up must come down, and I wonder who
will walk softly on these ruins in a
thousand years, think them sacred, say
how tragic they are gone – what
grandmothers will tell stories
to tie their children to them.
30 March 2012

1
First thing: Chicago
two mallard ducks
two houses down
roost on a chimney
to keep warm

surprised by the sudden
turn to cold everyone
expects in March after
a taste of May they came
to take for granted
after three days running

now they make themselves
big, stay two houses south, waiting winter
out again

2
Then I walk the river
in Rock Island hoping
to see eagles. But I see nothing
where they are not now
but some dark wading bird watching.
Walking on the metal footbridge
over the river, Zhuangzi comes to mind,
I try to walk without putting my foot down
leave no footprints while
joggers make themselves
big with echoes
after they are long gone nowhere
to be seen

I stop, look
up the river to where it begins,
though the beginning is
as it always is
out of sight
and there are three
dark birds on
long thin legs
watching,
    as I am

Last night, I read that
if the world’s income
were divided by all the
people in the world
everyone would make
$10000 a year, and
I thought why
not? Why not those
ten thousand things
instead of all the
things that
make nobodies
of some, somebodies
of others.
31 March 2012

Last night, I read that if the world’s income were divided by all the people in the world, everyone would make ten thousand dollars a year – and I thought why not? Why not these ten thousand things rather than all the things that make somebodies somebody knows nobody while others grow rich,

    go on about lebensraum

Losing my place, I stopped at a bar in Kansas in March and was bewildered by the crowd shouting.
1 April 2012

Two old roads in low fog
burning on flint hills
this morning while sun rises
the way heat rises. Coyote scampers
across the road a few miles
before El Dorado, plain
as day. Edges sharpen
as the way leads to where
these same hills are Osage.
When I stop, wind sighs.
What remains of the fog
has lifted. I can see
how easy it would be
to get turned around in
that soft light when it gets to blazing
and take a lifetime finding a way
out of it.
Ginning cotton with a pasta machine
sounds like a Taylorite dream
to me – cheaper by the dozen,
you know, and why do one thing at a time
when you can do two more than twice
as fast? Cook cotton
al dente, allegro non troppo
so it will last – the same way
an Italian grandma, mistress
of chaos, makes pasta that goes
fast with the perfect sauce –
a little of this, a little of that.

It is a matter of taste, though
you wouldn’t want to taste it
if you want to keep breathing, which
many Chinese grandmothers
would tell you is what it’s all
about – the way you taste
the qi of a thing, the way
you let it be,
the way you
wait with the world,
with the wait of the world,
dancing.
I will rise
7 April 2012
tomorrow as
I rose today as
I will rise each day
this side of my dying,
thinking the sun has risen
when it has done nothing
but wait for the turning world
to turn, and I with it. Still.
dawn breaks. I see
daylight break. I see
the light touch of rose
fingers where day caresses
night away from sun,
where it was, where it always was

Holy Saturday

I will rise tomorrow as
I rose today as
I have risen every day and will,
this side of my dying,
thinking the sun
risen when all it has done is
wait for a turning
world to turn. And I turn with it. Still,
dawn breaks. I see the light
touch of rose fingers, day
cressing night to slip away
from sun, where it was, where it was,
where it is, where it has
been all along, burning, in luce tuam videmus lucem.

The firmament opened near Tulsa today
loosing water above to fall
to water below across half of Missouri,
and I was ready to wait it out, blinded
by rain like a wall. But the sun rose
again while I waited in Springfield,
and I drove on, no sign of rain,
they say, in St. Louis, still
Mississippian in the way
it lines the city up with a line of water.

Two days running I have seen the moon
near full in clouds on the horizon,
and I have thought sun’s
rising a matter of the dark
radiance of the moon when
it is new.
8 April 2012

**Honoring our Ancestors**

Up to our ankles in mud
on the dirt road that leads
to the cemetery in Clara,
we know the graves
have been swept clean
without us this qingming.

We can see a field of bluebonnets
on the horizon adorning every one
and we know there is nothing more
those who have gone before
desire. We stand, one
umbrella for three,
the old church empty behind us, still
living in this city of the dead,
resurrection everywhere
   in spring rain.
Easter Morning, Lafayette Park

Dandelions swaying in bright sun
can't wait till Pentecost to speak in tongues.
Messiahs all anticipation,
they rise and rise on tiptoes

to astound those looking among the dead
   for some lost love
living in light this morning.

Orange coffee mug says Good, good, good
is a registered trademark, and I wonder
if God’s tov, tov meod calls
for a class action...

If I am to believe the bright orange mug
I sip my bottomless coffee from this Easter morning
on Lafayette Square, “Good, good, good.”® is
a registered trademark. Though I have faith
that oddly plural god’s tov, tov meod was
spoken under a creative commons share
and share alike license that covers such remixes,
I will try in the light of this new revelation
to avoid trinities of good or
repeat them breathless with passion
to remove every trace
of a common, leave no
suspicion
of a full stop where
there
should be a sabbath,
emphatic,
passing,
before
the next
let there be.
Banshee

It is April, but an old basset hound walks through the bar
under an Irish flag out into summer
just as a waitress whose eyes
are somewhere between Cill Chainnigh
and Dún Búinne even without the road sign
pointing the way
and there is no doubt – a bucket of fries
a sandwich and she asks if I have
everything I need. What can I say?
News drones on loud, Ozzie apologizes again
and again muted on three big screens – Futbol
at the other end of the bar, silent.
News is the only sound,
people shouting about
heat, selling cars, Roundup, fathers
home from the war for the prom. Five
screens, and I have no idea what the
score is. I think the offer of Newcastle when I ask
for dark is a test. I’m not buying anything but
one more Guinness. Irish eyes left when
the shift changed. If I am to believe the sign,
I’ll be on the road toward Kilkenny in no time.
And they promise a cooler day
tomorrow – rain in the long range forecast,
waitress changes the channel. There is music.
I still respect Fidel, and I am glad for Irish eyes on
every edge of Boston.
On Mass Ave a man dragging a blanket
walks slow against the flow asking passersby
if they can spare a cigarette. There is
a chill this April morning after a day
that could have been June, Not one smoke
trickles down as I walk on to cross the Charles,
pass the spring that feeds the tide
that keeps on rising here leaving edges
where it breaks for stowaways
who know how to lie low,
cling to scraps that take the chill off,
ask for nothing more than what
someone who has no doubt they belong
will throw away when they step inside.
19 April 2012

Powderhouse Park is covered with white blossoms that fell in yesterday’s wind, and I think laozi is thinking this is the way war is contained. An old mill drafted into service in some revolution long forgotten stands abandoned now in an empty park while a city rises.
The faint odor of the next war rises where weeds overgrow traces of armies that fell fighting the last one, making dust of bones, earth of dust, making of the difference someone thought reason to send children to die for one flag or the other.
2 May 2012

The day after May Day, we
make our way through prison
letters to spielraum and Chen,
and the first beer
on the menu is Revolution.
It’s an IPA, but I take it anyway,
grasping at straws
as though they were signs – if not I
who? if not now when?
4 May 2012

In a coffee shop on Michigan Avenue, a man
has to stop and stare and share his amazement that I am using
   a pen. “I thought no one still...” he says.

Then, in a palace that was built for books,
   a gallery documents
public spaces in decay in cities falling, fallen,
Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Buffalo, Gary, Hammond,
like the cry of a conductor on a long gone train along an edge of my life
and I am moved to tears by the vision
inside St. Stephen’s, frozen there, a witness
   still,
and I think these old cities falling are
   the martyrs of an empire that has no time
to stop, no time.
Fresh visions in every bed come spring
and the shore is lined with broken signs –
what remains of a party, spirits drained,
icons warning poets tipsy with dreaming
light on water diamonds in morning
sun not to dive. Wonder
how many thought they could
scoop moon up in their hands when
they were draining those spirits from bottles
last night before they were broken.
Roots have etched years of longing
in dust on limestone that gives way
to moss green where water
touches it, making
way slow to what it was in the beginning
the same spirit brooding, waiting for a first word
it knows can never contain a world,
knowing this is good.

Rain’s painting a slow mural on a white wall
under the drive, empty but for traces
of time.
I know, I know shaman’s sage grows elsewhere
in some mountainous region of the Andes
no doubt closer to heaven. But here salvia
everywhere is divine
in spring, and seeing all
these cousins, I see things every time.

*a riot is the language of the unheard – MLK
   a memorial to a 1919 race riot

*At the Picasso Bob Marley “Get Up, Stand Up” / Beatles “Can’t Buy Me Love”

The sort of mansions the heads of these States live in –
   set back from the street
   behind iron gates – signs warn against
   loitering, trespassing

A mosque and a BP station face off like guard towers
   at the four corners of some imagined world

Every other step interrupts a photo op

The first sign the city is occupied is a helicopter hovering
over the face of the water as I pass the tomb of Stephen Douglas.
There is yellow tape across the path to mark a police line
   just beyond Soldier Field, iron and steel fences around the museum ready to close
Two blocks of snow plows on the sidewalk at Balbo – mobile barricades.
   A crowd in Daley Plaza –
Chicago cops cluster at the corners
A line of state troopers behind barricades on the north end
Helicopter still overhead

Someone on a cellphone walks by saying “What are you guys protesting about?”

State trooper walks by with a bunch of plastic restraints clipped to his belt – reminds me of the line of buses I passed earlier at McCormick Place, waiting for people who have been detained.

Pigeons are frantic – this crowd is not as generous as the usual

One person after another stops to take a picture of the line of troopers. They have a photographer in uniform taking pictures of the crowd.

I know I know Shaman’s Sage grows elsewhere in the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca no doubt closer to heaven. But here salvia
everywhere is divine
in spring, and, seeing all
these cousins, I see things every time.

North, quiet, no sign of occupation
today. Purple clematis clings
to an iron fence. There is
an occasional flag, nothing
like the field of them
year after year on my granny’s half acre.

Mansions of the sort the leaders of this occupation must inhabit, then
a mosque and a BP station face off,
like guard towers at two corners
of an imagined world. Mansions
turn to row houses, row houses
to apartments that must be
section 8, then elegant
old houses boarded up
and a field of weeds for sale.

The next sign the city is occupied
is a helicopter hovering over
the face of the water
at the tomb of Stephen Douglas.

*People are taking signs they did not make to wave for cameras everywhere

*There are more people at Wrigley Field today

One voice after another saying the same thing
the raft is not the shore

World spinning space
to put some distance between
makes sense in time if humans occupy
every center – bees on edge
who are not interested
like swimming with sharks
is not a strange vibe. It is
a bird perching mid flight
on the only branch above the flood
without a thought
of water, without fear
when the bough gives way
and she finds herself flying again.

World spinning space
to put some distance
between makes sense

in time if
humans occupy
every center
bees on edge
who are not interested
like swimming with sharks

is not a strange vibe. It is
a bird perching mid flight
on the only branch visible

above the flood
without a thought
of water, without a sign

of fear when the bough gives way
and she finds herself
flying again.

My tab says
one revolution, one
garden burger, comes to
less than twenty dollars.

Two men in suits sit and order drinks
and the waiter calls
another revolution. I wish
I had a Karl Marx card from ... to put it on
but think it a bargain anyway.
A city deep cut in a blue mountain, and there is fire in it. Ten thousand lines cross, ten thousand souls sold, cold consumes this bright space in the presence of ice  
and ice and ice and ice and ice.

Blue rises straight  
from green desert eyes see deep in a column of light white to the bottom of it.  
Mist drops from a cobalt line to a bit of gray road visible below a shard of red mesa
A thin veil over the surface of the land
   but black cross covers everything but
   a sliver of sunset
         red rising
God Particles, Missouri

Everything accelerates
when you hit Missouri
going west on the interstate.

Sunday morning, a sign
west of St. Louis says JESUS
all uppercase, the way
a traveling evangelist says it in three
syllables when he’s working
the crowd up to the altar
call. On one side of the road,
a towering promise
of adult entertainment
in a pleasure dome –
    on the other a sign
says “eternal life, next
exit.” The road is lined
with lights flashing a warning
that the whole place could go up in flames
if you’re not careful. And even though
you don’t need to be reminded
after a week of triple digit heat, the marquis on
a Baptist church assures you
hell is real and you remember
revivals where a pitch man
who said he worked for God
could beat the whole crowd down into submission
– turn them at just the right moment and close the deal
and you think in the middle
of America you’re in the middle of a damn tent meeting
and you hope to god Oklahoma is a little closer
to heaven but you’d bet your life the difference
from one coast to the other is nowhere near three sigmas.
It’s not hot
yet, but sun
slipping over the horizon
is heavy with inevitability.
Reminds me of the voice
on the radio yesterday knowing
heat here is a matter of time
and rain is not likely.
14 July 2012

That all
the water is
sparkling seems
undeniable
in this light.
Sudden rain
takes the edge
off Oklahoma
heat at sunset.

There is music
in the rain,
in the red
horizon, in
the red dirt, in
the hands, in
the voices, in
this body of friends,
remembering.

drink it all in
you must be present to win.
16 July 2012

Morning, wait heavy
as midafternoon.
The weight of the sun,
heavier than air,
falling to earth to rise
and fall again.

Sun can fly only so
far without night
to restore it while
moon fills in
and the people
below
mark its changes
to keep time, the wait of the world.
Sign says 90° west longitude, one quarter of the way around the world, and, accustomed to mile markers that tell me how far I am from one border or another, I want to say “that depends – as so much does – on where you started and which way you are going” and ask why on earth a roadside sign on an Eisenhower Interstate on the western edge of Illinois would assume that every passerby started on the edge of England.

Doe on the berm of a two lane highway in Missouri could be sleeping if not for the look in her eyes, as though she could not believe such a big thing could move so fast, as though she still believed she could make it to the safety of the woods before the lumbering thing coming her way arrived, as though the speed and the weight could not be held together in a single thought, as though that incommensurability snapped the thread.
of her life there and then and I wondered
if the thing that hit her had the same look –
brought up short by the fragility of life –
eyes open to the end, undeniable now.
Early, a family is counting steps,  
making a game of unfamiliar names.  
A young woman with a German accent  
asks where to get off to see the city.  
It is her first time she says, but no one  
seems to know the way. She hasn’t asked me,  
but I tell her to get off where I do  
show her the lake on her map, a landmark  
or two, and tell her to ask anyone.  
When I get off, I tell her to enjoy  
her visit and wonder if I should have  
given her more guidance. But we’re all lost  
here and she could just as well have shown me.  
The best advice to a first time  
visitor is “get lost.” Lost is the way  
to see the city. I am more concerned  
about the family counting on  
the map. Maps are rough guides that make the world  
seem flat, and travelers  
are never so  
lost as when they think  
the mask is all, see  
the costume, think  
they know  
the character.
Rock Island, Going through the Motions

The cyclist who says “howdy” just after he’s passed to fulfill an obligation but reduce the likelihood my reply will add the burden of conversation with a stranger. I understand his desire not to be diverted, nod though I know he can’t see me.

The metal bridge clanking all the way across the Mississippi when a bicycle whizzes by, and the first time I turn to be sure a truck hasn’t stumbled on to the walkway.

The waves the waves the waves on rocks below the river moving the cry of a gull, the memory of a train fresh in my ears that say its passing just as I stepped out to walk the river and I am suspended now above it all until I turn and put my foot down on solid ground make my way to the Blue Cat (never once thinking it might be a fish) for a Mississippi Mocha Stout, pub fries, Reichenbach Rye,
the last of
    this day’s sun
    in and out of clouds
    on the horizon,

night rising slow
24 August 2012

If there is no elsewhere, this is it – that is to say spirit matters or it is not. That is that. That is all.

Scholars intent on the moment an I is not contained in one we or another agree they are out of time, and that is that.
22 September 2012

Sign after sign after sign says
*watch out for rattlesnakes* and so

I am watching out for snakes
on this long lonesome highway

while a long long train lies
alongside me singing a slow

low lonely tone, gray
between two poles on some

circle of sound
on these plains.

I am watching for a snake,
but she’s as long gone as I

and the train fades, sound,
the sight, until there is

nothing but this great road going
and memories of when
we thought we were
we long before we were, long

before we saw the moon
off on the way to morning.
Sky so big it needs the whole earth
to lie down on. Paper said chance of rain
today and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
but thin high clouds say not likely. River
is out of sight, but it has broken flat
into high mesas and deep arroyos
trailing down down to where you
would think water would be. A field of maize
is green in the middle of ocher that shades
from white through the color of alfalfa flowers
to brown as brown as earth and gold
as gold as wheat at harvest time.
Mennonite Church on the edge of Perryton
reminds me the opposite of a war story is an epic about farming.
Conversation where I stop to eat is Texas Tech football, sounds like something
a Zen master might say, “Tech is better than people think. They haven't played
nobody but they've beaten three nobodies convincingly.” A word or two about
growing up here, then the conversation turns
to banks. Guy at the table says they’re thinking about buying another one. Owner of
the coffee shop in Dodge City talks about the oil boom when
I ask where all the traffic on
Wyatt Earp Boulevard is headed. I say
“hope that works out. The problem with booms is
bust” and he goes off on football salaries, says
“It’s all about managing money” and I wonder
what would be the epic opposite of that.
27 September 2012

You think yourself a moon reflecting starlight when it touches you. All

I know is the beauty of the world I see in your light leaves me

no reason to think sun brighter.
15 March 2013

Moon was smiling
last night when we
set out. Two stars
for eyes, you said,
and people would have
taken pictures of it, said
“Did you see the moon
last night?” It
could have closed
one, a wink
to remind two
walkers who haven’t
seen each other for
a long time what
a good thing it is
to have a friend
walk side by side
like...
17 March 2013

One day, not
once upon a time,
a teller of tales
made a boy a fish
and the fish wanted to be
the river swimming and the river
was a crowd of children wanting to be
an ocean – and why
not? cloud rains river
river flows to sea
sun melts into ocean
ocean is the story
that cannot contain us
but takes us in
takes us all in.

“No place
like home”
says the ad
on the back
of every
seat on
the ferry called
Tai Shan that carries me
back to Shekou, back
to the fringe of a city
that was once
like home, still
like no place on earth,
a home away from home.
Name has me
thinking like a mountain
thinking every
place like this is
no place, like home.
18 March 2013

Birds rise early, sing on
a river of traffic

making its way
to the bottom of things,
leaving canyons behind.

The city has made them
singers underground,
creatures of air
who fit songs
in dark places
between passing trains.
Sun is held at arms length
by buildings rising.
I learn by negation
how to breathe, positions
made unavailable by
a city dancing between
qigong in the square
below Starbucks and
traffic that will not stop.
The proper stance is
flowing from here
to here, knowing
when to swerve,
a matter of collisions,
a matter of avoiding
collisions – not
knowing, bodies falling.
20 March 2013

No idea where, only
a magic talisman
scribbled by a friend
on a scrap I show
the driver, who
speaks it out loud, smiles,
will not accept a tip when
we arrive. We
come when we
come, still
no idea where.

No words
now, it goes
without saying.

Nothing to speak of, but
what can not be
said. We

do not walk together,
and what I think is
heavy with the last
time, not
the time before,
but the after which
there is not
another.
Zazen

Sitting meditation in a river
flowing fast, Buddha still
smiles. They say
cross the river by
feeling the stones, but on this
busy street it is
a matter of minding
the gaps. No way but between
to dwell a moment
on this cloud of incense,
still sitting.
On a road
you think you know
sidewalks go
nowhere.
Sudden absences leave us
walking in traffic. To take our minds
off the narrow margin
between the curb
and every passing car
we imagine ourselves
one of them. We pass
two dogs lounging
behind us near
an open gate
They rise
in the corner of our eyes
we see one smiling
at the thought of making us
jump before he barks once
on our heels.
Dogs grow larger,
margins grow smaller
and unsure of their intentions
as they of ours, unwilling now
to struggle for turf, we turn back
at last before we arrive at
the beach you were sure is
somewhere on this road. Later,
still walking on earth, you
lost your butterfly
earrings somewhere on the way.

In Central, where people walk every day
without once putting their feet on
the ground, I wonder if they imagine
us walking, lost.

On the same day in another city
altogether, we wander slowly
through a long talk on cracks in neo
liberal cities where artists live. A friend of friends
says strong German beer has made her dizzy
and I look like Marx. I imagine
to change the world is a matter
    simpler than to interpret
        it, hope you are home
dreaming butterflies
        who do it without thinking
every time they
        flap their wings.
more to love than I can say
too much too fast all
conspiring takes your breath away

Walking to reach an edge where water is
you take the measure of this city on
what remains of a mountain poured over
ocean. There are traces where the coastline was,
but it has crept closer to Hong Kong – one
state, solid, two systems
intent on being
a surface you can walk on without
ever leaving the ground. We were talking
about pigs floating on a river in Shanghai
before we took to the landfill, food laced
with arsenic that makes them grow fat
before it kills them.

With demons like this,
one must name names. They are legion.
Mountain broken to make a solid state of sea
means a new river must be cut. Every river
empties into ocean and the ocean does not
overflow. Hong Kong is a water city,
Shenzhen a city of earth. No floating, it rolls
across the bay, more than a bridge.
It makes this that, does not
bridge the gap, minds it,
makes two cities one. We still
leave footprints.
26 March 2013

Abrahan went along...
Sethe went further

We were talking about time
turning on a story on
the voice of a people
rooted the way grain is
rooted in blood soaked
soil – a story of one woman
after another stepping
over a line, one woman
who took the knife took
the life of her child...

Tears burst as a storm
burst hours after dark
clouds have overshadowed
every reason to be
surprised. A simple story
simply told, a woman
unslaved as long as
moon takes to turn
once more faithful than
Abraham could not
see her children
cross the river again.
Rain sudden as lightning
bright as the city,
tears still surprise, an
angel too late for all but one,
blood soaked earth, no
promise, no Sarah laughing.
31 March 2013

on the way
yet again

to seek the living
among the dead

they think of nothing
but the weight of the stone

birds broke morning
long before we rose

sun waits
stone moves

no one says
let there be

light, again,
yet again.
3 April 2013

Jesus looming over this interstate upper case
has me thinking about a billboard
for every prophet. But
something has to be done
about the font. The point is
to stop traffic, to turn passersby
to think again, to argue over
which is first, which is last.
Jesus is all
 uppercase looming
 over the interstate
 on the edge of Rolla, and
 it pisses me off. Not Jesus –
 the put-him-on-the-back-of-an-ass- and-ride-him-into-the-city-
 while-the-crowd-shouts-hosanna- today-crucify-him-tomorrow
 quality of the sign. He spoke
 with authority, for God’s sake –
 and he said an evil generation would ask for it,
 but he was quiet. And he told
 friends and strangers present when
 he happened to be implicated in
 a miracle (as every single one of us
 is every single day) to keep their mouths shut.
 Just turn. Live as though you lived
 in the presence of god, nothing
 more: do justice, love
 kindness, walk humbly,
 nothing more.
One cart at a time until the whole
weight of it settles over the city,
we have carried this sacred space, not
god.

Priests climb the ladder of our backs. We
wait. They say it is necessary the way
war is necessary the way our children
are weapons in some campaign their reason
devised to contain our dreaming. I dream
while I drag another load to make the mountain
higher, and I know I am as close to god as
they when I step on this holy ground, here
below or there, where they say it has to be,
and I hope to leave off making mountains of somebody
else’s madness some day, if only I can find the words
in which to say no.
Squills and daffodils
spill over barricades
of law abiding flowers
until lawns with signs
that warn they have been
treated sweep them
under a rug and huddle
behind iron fences
with gates locked. Mosque
exchanges a knowing glance
with the BP station on
the corner, a long discourse
about which corporate
bodies are held personally
responsible for private
acts contained in the silence.
Christ the King listens in
on the edge. Fences begin to sway
where Muddy Waters lived,
and the sidewalk is a mosaic
of broken glass glittering in
sunshine. Most cardinals
stick to the score, but song
sparrows have been jamming
since sunrise. Spring
cannot contain itself
today, and when
a young guy strolls
by strumming a guitar,
I can’t help wondering if perfect
love might be possible after all.
7 May 2013
	sun never stops to ponder
what some random angel says

in his heart. Still, busy
making shadows to dazzle

crowds two flights below,
he leaves reflection to the moon,

makes light, goes
nowhere fast as ever.
“it’s like yo’ eyesight, like yo’ eyes,” says
a guy walking the other way, and I know he is not
talking to me but I have not yet disentangled
conversation from the proximity of physical bodies
and I find myself thinking nothing I know is
like your eyes. Someone shouts something
I can not understand from a passing
car and I know it is not personal but it
pierces my dreaming and I am still trying
to make it out when I pass someone in a
hazmat suit fishing under the Clarence Darrow
Memorial Bridge while birds I cannot identify
noisily occupy highrise housing set aside
for purple martins. A tiny yellow
bird pursues a brown one four times
his size that does not think to turn. Still,
it is plain to see there is nothing like your eyes
and no reason to try to make out what
anyone is saying when everyone is talking
to someone who is not there. You see what
I’m saying?
26 July 2013

1
Sign on the road to El Dorado. Three full stops. Says All. Right. Here.

Coyote crosses the road
every time I
pass this way,
a sign
for a corner of an eye,
right to left right
before my eyes under Jesus
big as a billboard can contain.

2
Esteban still leaves crosses
everywhere, and
they look bigger
every time

someone dreams of gold.
6 September 2013

Wars and wars and rumors of wars drone
on and on. Red lines, boots on the ground, mind
on days of shock and awe.

Surgical strikes by underpaid workers
slow fast food in every corner
of the empire while commuters
in search of morning coffee seek
alternatives and pundits worry

a pause
will
slow
the next war.
Show Me

Sign seekers have got themselves in a state. Cross the river and every place one road runs into another is a promise of paradise. It’s JEsus JEsus JEsus “consider a five contiguous state secession. Missouri Oklahoma Texas Louisiana Mississippi.” WWJD? At first glance, I saw “succession.” That had me tracing routes across a corner of Oklahoma Ozarks into the bayou buried alive in the blues well before I’m swamped in Louisiana zydeco and Mississippi loblolly pines still broken from the last hurricane. Takes me back to the potbellied sheriff just outside of Jackson who pulled me over not long after I grew my beard in college in the last century decades before the turn of the millennium and checked the trunk for drugs. Lucky for me, the trunk was empty and he didn’t have any on him, so he let me drive on through Memphis to Chicago. And now my mind is on Jackson now, and I wonder if the people of that Missouri sign follow
election results. Carve this plot just right
and it could be the homeland lost socialists
have been longing for. Consider how
blessed the poor could be in a place like
that. Turn. Check to see whose face is on the coin, then
cast the first stone whenever you
    think the time is right.
Two things my mother told me the day before
she turned eighty-four –
she woke up on her seventy second birthday
with “The Land Where You Never Grow Old” in her head
and five years ago when we thought she was going to die
she heard a song she did not know playing
again and again. She could not call it to mind, but
I asked her to hum it if it comes
back to her and send me a recording so I can write it down.
It will, but she won’t, because she does not
talk to machines. Her heart doctor asked her
if she remembered when she was bleeding in
the hospital and she said no. She said she
remembered going in, and she remembered
waking up: she asked if we had been playing music.
He thought she’d forgotten, but she told me she
wasn’t there. She was in that song,
and a doctor of the heart (of all people)
should understand that. He asked
about bleeding because he was changing
her medication, but he

had memory in mind, counting
backward from a hundred by
threes or some such thing. One
would think where the heart was would matter

most for one who cares for them and what song is in it when.
She said she always had a song in her heart and had always
wanted to work in a flower shop and make hats.
  My sister and I drove a day between
    us to bake her a four layer lemon cake with buttercream frosting and
  another day in opposite directions back
    to our distant lives – and now, in the
    middle of it, a message on a machine, word of another
death in the family, and I think now I can
  hear that song.
Steven Schroeder is a poet and visual artist who lives and works in Chicago. More at stevenschroeder.org.
Sky so big it needs the whole earth
to lie down on. Paper said chance of rain
today and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
but thin high clouds say not likely. River
is out of sight, but it has broken flat
into high mesas and deep arroyos
trailing down down down to where you
would think water would be. A field of maize
is green in the middle of ocher that shades
from white through the color of alfalfa flowers
to brown as brown as earth and gold
as gold as wheat at harvest time.
Mennonite Church on the edge of Perryton
reminds me the opposite of a war story
is an epic about farming.

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