

Poems by Gretchen Schoff

collected in 1994

## Going To See the Cranes: October 1994

*for Gretchen Schoff*

A few conversations,  
a question after class,  
a book I pressed into your hand,  
a note written in return—  
this was a modest exchange.  
I planned to attend another class when I had time,  
to send another poem when I wrote one.

Now I face Nature's correction:  
everything doesn't continue in the fall,  
like semesters and habits and lessons.  
Strange how an academic calendar can  
train you to think otherwise,  
when every other fool knows the contract we make  
can't be changed—can only,  
at best, be rearranged.

So, on the day others meet in your memory,  
I go to see the cranes.  
It's a good day for a drive.  
The river I cross catches sun in its current;  
small, white-bellied birds  
rush out from under the bridge  
over ruffled water below.  
In the Baraboo Hills the trees burn  
red and yellow and orange against an October sky.  
When I find the turn I should take,  
a row of trees turns the narrow road  
into a golden lane, paved with golden leaves.

There aren't many cars in the lot—  
it's Friday, and late in the season for tours.  
The sun warms the air and one large bumblebee  
taking its last, lazy taste of flight.  
I walk slowly down the path.  
A sign says the grassy field on my left  
should reveal some African-crowned cranes,  
but today they are not in sight.  
Instead, I see a circular house beyond,  
and then, as I arrive,  
I see cranes moving in their pens.

They emerge from tall, dark doorways slowly,  
like giant puppets,  
stilts for legs, long necks stretched out,  
feathers dripping from their sides,  
their bright eyes seeing something I don't see—  
an insect in the air, or food on the ground.  
A Sandhill's cry begins.  
A feather floats.  
From behind a hill, carried on the wind,  
comes the clatter of hidden cranes.  
Soon more cranes in cages stir, and some reply;  
I see their bristled crowns and downy throats rise;  
they spread their enormous wings;  
and then I hear them sing.  
I only know they have stopped when  
the hum of the last bee fills the air.  
I have to remember to breathe.

"You send me such lovely things," you wrote.  
I kept your note for months,  
pleased that I had given you something back,  
not that it made us close to even.  
In fact, yesterday I thought I could never catch up.  
But today, stopped in my tracks  
in a circle of color and sound  
I have perhaps found a way to thank you,  
by going to see the red and gold and black-crowned cranes  
who sing on an autumn day.

*Sandy Stark*

MESSAGES  
(on receiving a gift of music)

Spring comes quiet,  
Lilac hush, nestling's cry,  
Echo of geese in ritual V.  
This year its songs are muffled, drowned  
By strident shrieking.

Wires crackle skies with catastrophe  
And satellites, swifter than Cleopatra's runners,  
Drop bad tidings on doorsteps before battles are cold.  
Eden's colored air, once warm with yellow stars,  
Turns frozen, white with laser fire.  
Swallows grip ten thousand volts with fragile feet  
And pigeons fly hospital runs with blood.  
Atomic clocks keep heart beat,  
While restless astronomers, their empty dishes turning,  
Gather crumbs of sky fall, scraps of the first Big Bang,  
Racing against the clock of the last Big Bang,  
Hoping to hear whispers of how we began  
Before we end.

In air alive with messages,  
I wait for bird song and the small voice,  
Holding out for isles full of sweet sounds  
That give delight and hurt not,  
Wondering

Would starving Bach make music still,  
Inventing on the letters of his name?  
Would old Pythagoras catch melody  
In all the planets' turning?

And then, Oh, miracle of Yes!  
A message came.

Gretchen Schoff  
May 1982

Midnight Mass

It was for loveliness and for something missing  
For syllables rolling in the ear, Gregorian  
    angeli, gloria,  
    coeli, in terra pax,  
        Filius  
    in excelsis  
        oremus

The tangled ball spins down memory's corridors  
    St. Stephen's cold and stony elegance  
        jeweled glass

Laying its soft rainbow on snow-sprinkled shoulders  
    Haloing the lace-handkerchiefed heads.  
        Along the wooden rows

Kneel the flush-faced, pious Poles, stolid, obedient,  
    The thin as wren's bone maiden Irish ladies.  
They fold their hands like petals, wait with open mouths.  
    For the magic meal after the day of fast.

Crouched in the dark on the stairs to the choir  
    Misplaced and alien  
    Dizzy from incense  
        I wait

    For silence to come  
For the silver cup uplifted, and the bell.

Christmas 1986  
Gretchen Schoff

Going to the Wolf Howl

Metallic stood the grass,  
The lake a sheet of tin.  
In silver woods, the crouching shapes  
Were tracings, gray and thin.  
We saw a disc of silver,  
Far away and full,  
And elemental, ocean-born,  
We felt its magnet pull.

We drew together, huddling,  
A tight and wary band  
Turned feral and familial,  
Touching hand to hand.  
Suddenly electric,  
From palm to palm, a spark  
Of tingling recognition ran  
Spontaneous in the dark.

The silver shapes, alerted,  
Restlessly aware,  
Were tracking us with upright ear  
And piercing yellow stare.  
They scented our intrusion  
In nostril flared and keen,  
And we who came to watch them there  
Became the objects seen.

A bristle grew along the nape,  
A rising of the hair,  
And wildness in the artery  
We had not know was there  
Our heads tipped back,  
Our throats pulled taut,  
Our wailing moan became a cry  
And howling spit the air.

Animal to animal,  
The wolves gave echo back,  
A dialogue of shadow shapes  
Calling, pack to pack  
Like sentinels on watch  
For enemies unknown,  
By ancient territories bound,  
Each to its silver zone.

Remarkable, the wolves and we,  
Whirled along a gyre,  
Set down upon a breathing ball  
In galaxies of fire,  
Improbably alive,  
Together, yet alone,  
In emptiness expanding  
Where moons are ice and stone.

Gretchen H. Schoff  
December 1988

For Pat & Ray  
Christmas  
1988

There are ways,  
I am told,  
To measure vital signs  
by  
Brain waves  
at rest  
alert  
Heart beat  
fast, slow  
irregular  
Metabolism  
sluggish  
active;  
also  
To calculate feelings  
by  
Chemicals  
(natural or ingested)  
Arousal indices  
(sensors on the senses)  
Geometries  
(especially triangles)  
Magnetic fields  
(positive-negative)  
Vibes  
(in California.)  
I am told  
These are tidy quantities  
and translate  
neatly to  
printouts  
sine curves  
and  
pens  
driven by machines,

which is why, in matters that matter, such as honest affinities, refusing to sell cheap, steadiness, guessing at secrets, unselfishness, having a good laugh, knowing someone will always be on your side, even when you aren't very loveable, such as when you're cranky or sick or illogical, plus all the other things that are basically messy and get endlessly listed by people like Elizabeth BB and the Bard, and get fired off to unlikely places like those letters to unruly Corinthians, etc. etc. , I always write about matters that matter, especially to people I love, by writing poems with a pencil on yellow pads, so I can erase and scratch out, and try again, and maybe get it part-way right, sometimes.

Gretchen Schoff  
December 1988

## Neighbors

Being a neighbor  
Means reading the signals:

The soap and scrub brush retirees,  
Warring with crab grass,  
Campaigning against fallen leaves  
And snowflakes--to avoid  
Being inside, battling each other;

Inflexible, bent-back gardeners  
Commanding the tulip rows,  
The petunia phalanx in uniform pink,  
Marching the disobedient marigolds  
In yellow platoons  
And jerking stragglers from the ranks;

Drinkers, overweight and hungry,  
Artificially genial, genuinely sad,  
Whose shades are drawn 'til noon  
And hang crooked, in either case,  
Up or down;

Childless couples with costly convertibles,  
Terra cotta angels and lawn deer,  
Antique weather vanes, brass eagles,  
Colored driveways and green carpet porches;

Couples' children  
Who knock over angels and deer,  
Shoot BB's at brass eagles,  
~~Snowball-weather-vanes, slam tricycles,~~  
Chalk driveways and drag mud onto green porches.

Strangers or burglars might be fooled,  
Misread the trickeries like lights on a timer,  
But neighbors--never.

Before we heard the news, we read the signals:  
Their cat against our legs at our front door,  
The kitchen, dark at six,  
But bedroom lights burning on through the wee hours,  
No lighted tree until Christmas Eve  
When somebody caved in for appearance's sake,  
And snow, in drifts, on the front stairs,  
Forbidding entry  
Or even the ringing of the bell.

Gretchen H. Schoff  
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## New Steps Next Door

"Come see my new back steps," you said,  
"They look like something Dali built."

Sure enough.  
One riser taller than the rest,  
The bottom step listing to the left.

"Mel's a bumbler for damned sure,  
But what can you do when you're alone  
And things start falling apart?"

But steps aren't the worst of it.  
Worst by far are night winds, different deadbolts,  
That double bed, the quiet phone,  
Little laundries, coffee by the pound,  
Spoiling mayonnaise, bread that goes to mold,  
Small toothpaste, free tickets—a pair,  
Sundays,  
Supper on a tray.

And worst is stepping away from sixty,  
Still beautiful, outrageous,  
Still willing to blow three hundred  
On perfume and a red silk dress,  
And trying to hide the garbage,  
The brown paper bags and bottles.

When the sun goes down, I see  
You, folded on your Dali steps,  
Helping your garden go to sleep,  
Making your smoky circles, remembering him,  
The roses he carried home,  
And, in the last light,  
The white of your hair,  
Wild curls, and a black velvet ribbon.

Gretchen Schoff  
2129 Kendall Ave.  
Madison, WI 53705



Considering,

considering how deliberately  
low, slithering and coiling close,  
the boa takes its eating slow,  
digesting by degrees;  
considering, too, how  
high,  
hiding,  
watching for weakness,  
the peregrine, small,  
makes its body a ball,  
falls  
streaming,  
then, saber-sharp,  
its rearing blades  
unsheathes;  
considering how the gradual,  
the fading breath, half out, half in,  
compares to instant puncture,  
and bones, tidy, in the sun;  
considering the ways,  
the sudden and slow,  
and given choice,  
though choice will be denied,  
I'd choose the sudden peregrine,  
efficient and impartial,  
the gold-eyed, peerless raptor.

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## Going Back

Cancel the snowfall.  
Burn the overloaded balsam,  
Unhook the colored lights.  
Send back, unopened,  
French perfume at 50 an ounce,  
Hundred dollar teddy bears,  
Complimentary caviar and cheese,  
Red satin sheets and fur-lined slippers.  
Unplug the glitz tube,  
Tune out the big noise,  
The big rap, big band, big choir.

Can you handle it?

It will be gritty--desert sand,  
Ragged palm and gloomy cave.  
There will be reeking cattle, dirt,  
Air sagging with animal heat.  
There will be a puzzled old man,  
A smooth-faced girl, barefoot.  
There will be terror,  
Cramping, crying out,  
Blood on a bed of straw,  
And bittersweet wrapping of a son,  
Already marked for cruel death.

Stragglers will come,  
Slack-jawed, staring, carrying  
Smelly lambs with folded legs,  
Stone jars heavy with strange scents,  
Suitable for burial,  
A clinking handful of gold  
(Kings are like that).  
Winds will come down in a white-feathered rush,  
Weird singers, voices  
High, thin, clear.

And once, in our long darkness,  
Light, light, light  
Will blaze.  
One blinding spectacular star,  
Once only,  
And all we need

Gretchen Holstein Schoff  
Christmas 1990

Walrus Meeting

On the occasion of Emily's paper, January 1991

Closed doors of the mind,  
A sleeve drawn decently down over a scar,  
Lowered lids,  
Words that skitter sidewise--  
The brotherhood of women,  
Most secret of all societies.

Safe in the lockboxes of pride,  
The scrapbooks of privacy,  
Are gardens abandoned,  
Pearl and white rose weddings  
Round babies in lace,  
Dance programs and diplomas,  
And images of men,  
Passionate, cold, caught by the lens  
In their watchchains, mustaches,  
And self-confidence.

When minutes are read, years hence,  
No trace will remain of the sense of the meeting.  
How could stylus record the sound  
Of the key in the mind's door,  
What we saw when the sleeve fell back,  
Or the momentary meeting of honest eyes?  
The secret code broke open, settled in silence,  
And became a poem.

## Visitors

A January Thursday,  
Windy, gray and plain.  
A wooden floor. A lilac branch  
Clicking at the pane  
As if to make announcement  
Of someone at a door,  
Awaiting recognition,  
As real as bush and floor.

Emergence entered gradual  
As shadows in the room  
Or images developing  
From long-forgotten film.  
Location lay in question.  
Sense was set aside.  
It seemed that categories leaked,  
That yardsticks were defied.

I groped for some dimension,  
Searching for its fit  
As though trying on a glove  
For finger length and width.  
Its skin grew close around my own;  
Its palm so urgent moved,  
I slipped into the rhythms  
Of company I loved.

Fire glowed without a hearth;  
Invisible pianos played.  
On braided rugs, a spaniel dozed,  
While coffee cups were laid.  
My father's hands felt young and warm;  
Light lay red on mother's hair.  
An uncle rolled his shirtsleeves  
And pulled on a cigar.

Such easy conversation!  
The past and what's to come  
Were fastened on a pin of time  
In equilibrium,  
Like seesaw on its fulcrum  
In perfect balance swung,  
As natural as breathing,  
As comfortable as home.

*John S. 1970*

## LAST LAP OF SUMMER

Face down, eyes fish-goggled,  
Gliding out into the slippery tube,  
Watery silence, and blurry light,  
Dancing crazed, reticulate.  
Reach and stroke,  
Breathe in, blow out,  
Follow the black, bottom line  
To the X--midway.

Touch, turn, flip over,  
And return  
Face up,  
Breathing autumn,  
Hands slowly sculling now,  
Legs lazy, eyes never so clear,  
Fastened on clouds, night hawks,  
Signal flags, fading light.

The last reaching out, the stretch  
Toward tile, cold to the fingers,  
And the finish line.

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## A DAY AT MAO'S TOMB

At nine a.m., in his mausoleum.  
A room as tall.  
And wide as galleries in great museums  
He lies, formal, very small,  
In neatly buttoned uniform.  
A stiff mandarin collar holds  
His face in place, except for folds  
And creases where the jowls, gone slack,  
Have fallen back.  
On either side, in rigid lines,  
Huge urns hold topiary pines--  
Regimental, clipped and shorn,  
Identical in size and form.

Slowly shuffling along the green glass  
Of polished marble floor,  
Every hour, thousands pass.  
They move in single silent file.  
Lightly fingering the twisted strands  
Of golden rope that mark his space,  
All the while, staring  
At the wild eyes forever closed.  
The murderous hands.  
Fat, waxen, prayerfully, piously posed.

The doors slam shut at four.  
Young soldiers, surly peasants  
In cheap uniforms, and white lace gloves,  
Take up the stand as sentry.  
Backs to the door, they begin to shove.  
Brandish their guns, push back the crowds.  
Full of themselves, crude,  
They begin to shout:  
"No more entry."  
No one allowed."

Safely hidden from view  
Are the crews who come at five:  
the clever chemists  
the careful taxidermists  
the pruners and waterers of trees,  
The masters of illusion and all the specialties  
That keep the dead alive.

Long before ten, at Tian-anmen--  
nothing but the wind,  
paving stones.

and Mao's painted face  
looking down

MOON VIEWING ROOM

ANTIQUARIAN

Rosewood traceries.  
Blue and white echoes. Sky. Moon.  
A thousand years. Ghosts.

OLD CHINA ARISTOCRAT

Walls. One of tiles, blue.  
Three of sky. White moon...quiet...  
Idleness....poems.

PEASANT

Blue-white sky. Moon--far.  
Carved chair, softest silk, sweet cakes,  
Plump hands, tea. Envy.

FIREFLY

Lotus. Shadow fish.  
Darting lights. Pool of blue sky.  
White moon, floating--high.

ENTREPRENEUR

Tiles! Good market. Cheap  
To copy: blue/white:Hong Kong.  
(Sky and moon won't sell).

## BERLIN IN SUMMER

July. Iron lampposts throwing cones  
Of pale light through lindens  
Along the avenues;  
A middling hotel  
In less than middling condition.  
Outside, a light evening rain  
Thumping on the awning,  
Freckling the sidewalk;  
Inside, a desk clerk, yawning,  
Waiting for the clock  
To turn eleven.

An empty lounge, lumpy chairs, a television  
Droning to no one--a late night show.

Around a table, panelists seated together:

    a white-haired hausfrau  
    a bald-headed businessman  
    a priest  
    the well-dressed host  
    three skinheads in black leather.

Civility lasts no more than a minute.

Then they're into it.

The camera shifts from wide angle, zooms in, pans

    the housewife, mascara streaked, in tears,  
        showing her years,  
    the businessman, face contorted,  
        one hand trembling like a leaf,  
    the priest, nervously smoothing his hair,  
        appalled, mouth wide-open in disbelief,  
    the skin heads, earrings swinging,  
        teeth bared, screaming, hate blazing in their eyes,  
    the neutral host, so, so professional,  
        registering fake surprise.

The desk clerk, hearing the noise,

Leans against the door frame, watching.

"I'm not sure I'm catching

What's going on," I say. "What's the fight about?

How long does this program last?"

The desk clerk shrugs.

"How long? Probably forever.

What's it about?

The future. I guess, and the past."



## Signs and Wonders

At night, the oaks are edgy,  
their voices tinged with fright  
like whispers in the hallways  
when illness is abroad.  
Daylight seems distracted,  
whitening, growing thin;  
fleeing birds catch the wind,  
crying in their flight.  
Always in November,  
just before the freeze,  
the garden wears an empty look  
of nervous vacancy.

Sensing subtraction, defying reason,  
I go down on my knees  
to lift collapsing flowers,  
shivering golds and reds,  
from their icy beds.  
To ward off shock, I bring comfort,  
powdery peat, good clay pots.  
I offer water, resettle their blooms,  
then carry them like cold abandoned children  
into warm rooms.

Within a week, they are dying;  
leaves wither, reds descend to brown,  
as finished as the season  
in their growing.  
And yet, with winter coming on,  
it helps to watch their going.

Some habit of mind, quirk of the heart  
impels us to futile rescues,  
doomed from the start.  
Signs and wonders, old as Eden,  
drive us to play for time,  
to counter loss, snatch at reprieve.

Once rites have been performed  
and time reserved to grieve,  
bright cells that late were flower  
go willingly to dust.

Our rituals give shape to grief,  
stamping the plain with royal seal.  
Old forms defy coincidence  
and requiems give sign  
that here, though blazing brief,  
were beauty and significance

## Resurrection

So few the fields of passion flower, so rare  
Their lavender, that finding them comes close  
To finding love--a stumbling into purple glow,  
Surprise, discovery in the here and there.  
Where robin guards its blue in stillest down,  
The feather barb and beak and beaded eye  
Begin to stir with possibility,  
Uncurling, warm inside the azure rounds.  
As cold as bronze, the bulbs in icy chill  
Are startled into waking by a steam,  
A pulse transforming bronze to tube of green  
And papery shell to golden daffodil.  
To seraphs, poised to roll the stone away,  
The lily's bugle blows its reveille.

*For Perry - the flower lady  
Green*