



Joel: After finishing high school in a small town in Iowa, I was swallowed up by the university in Iowa City for a year and half. In what I see as good move, I got that whale to regurgitate me into the desert of New Mexico, where I got my BA at St. John's College in Santa Fe, a "Great Books" curriculum which taught me no skills or specialties whatsoever, for which I am still grateful.

I got my MFA in creative writing-poetry from the University of Montana,

studying with Robert Wrigley, Greg Pape, and Patricia Goedicke. (Whiskey in hand, Richard Hugo glowered at us from a giant photo in the workshop room.) I won an Academy of American Poets first prize at Montana, and went to workshops with Carolyn Forché, Lucille Clifton, Richard Howard, and Galway Kinnell at Squaw Valley, California, and Yellow Bay, Montana. My wife and I taught at Chuo University in Tokyo for six years, returning to the States after our two sons were born. We built a house on a lake in northern Wisconsin, and I taught at the University of Wisconsin. Back in Japan now, my wife is studying Japanese in an intensive program while I teach at UMUC.

I have poems forthcoming in *The Paris Review* and the winter issue of *The Laurel Review*, and I've published previously in *The Paris Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Cream City Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Bloomsbury Review*, and elsewhere. My new poetry manuscript, *First Day*, is out at publishers this year, and I've had a few good words from editors, so I'm filled with unreasonable hope.

Joel Friederich, On His Art: I'm reading Czeslaw Milosz, again and yet again. And I'm thinking right now about a place in Iowa, where I grew up, called The Grotto of the Redemption.

There was a German Catholic priest who spent decades collecting shiny things, bits of colored glass, reflective metal, pretty stones and shells. He embedded them all in concrete mosaics, elaborate shrines, walls, arches, chapels, figures of saints and apostles till he'd filled up acres and acres.

I learned that "grottos" like this are all over, that the art world calls them Outsider Environments. A postman in a small French town around the turn of the 19th Century hit mid-life, and one day started picking up stones on his mail route. Then he started hauling them home in a wheelbarrow, and every night used the stones to build a palace he'd been dreaming about since childhood. His neighbors thought he was mad. He worked for 34 years filling his palace with over 1000 miniature temples and countless sculptures of the gods, goddesses, animals, and monsters populating his imagination. (You can see it at <http://sadtomato.net/cheval.html>)

And then there's all those obsessed lawn ornament fanatics who fill up their gardens with gnomes and windmills. And my white-haired grandmother Glessner, a frail belle from Missouri (pronounced 'Miz-zur-rah') whose tiny apartment above Main Street must have contained over a thousand glass and ceramic roosters, their blood-red combs and the lifted hooks of their fighting claws threatening violence everywhere your eye fell.

I've heard all this collecting and zealous decorating called *horror vacui*, an obsession to fill empty places. And with poetry as well, making these beautiful and useless shapes to decorate the emptiness into which we must go.

The Sea Bream

The fine meat of its back
was opened, a blade flourished
with such quickness and artistry
no calligrapher could have reproduced
those petals of translucent white
blossoming like mums everywhere
from its mid-section. It was still alive,
a small and startled thing
laid on pine in the center of our feast.
Its eyes watched us over a sea
of food as pieces of its own
birth and hunger, its last moments
nudging through a bed of kelp,
the cold silences of the Pacific
were lifted free from its back and
disappeared down our throats.

The death was a magnificent
presentation, though I'm not sure
death is just the word
because even as the flesh dissolved
to a new form within us
life continued to leap
through the hollows of the fish.

It keeps coming back that way,
doesn't it, entering the body
even after tired years
with such quickness and artistry—
your lover's eyes across the table,
devouring; your father's last look
at the station; the first dazzling
flash of light from a longed-for sea
slicing into you between pines.
White blossoms open everywhere
in my mid-section.
I am a small and startled thing.

**Translations on
a Summer Night**

What the bullfrog said:

Strange, the way you breathe
only a portion of air, not believing
there can be other dwellings, other
thickly voiced longings outside
your own transparent pleasures.
The windows you live behind,
the thin separation of names,
pausing there, listening out to
your yard's edge where the light
falling away from you begins
to fail—the translation between
us cannot be made. Not because
of memory's contrived distances,
its squalid taking apart of origins,
but an unrecognizable nearness—
my thick thrumming a remnant of
your own throat's ruins, ugly
boy with his fat, insistent tongue
you sent to the swamp to live.

The nesting cranes cry out:

We're the lovers who survived all
your attempts to erase us, clinging
together in ecstasy, mute, speaking
only by looks—the last time we met
you were still being torn apart by
contradictions and slit our throats.
We try to speak to you—our voices
are an iron door breaking its hinges
as it shuts. Between ourselves, no
sentences, only the gesture and
touch, an enclosed world, the air
intimate with gazing—we breathe
each other and are complete. But
for you, this rasp of cut cords,
the broken whisper of non-being
into the ear of all your yearning,
how your every act is an unmaking
spilling loose from your throat,
bright rivers of rancor and gold.

The trickster loons telling lies:

Us visiting gods? No, we're immigrants
posing stiffly in old photographs,
holding still in our black hats, our pretense
of becoming your origin—our faces
are grave from destroying the past,
our stares profound with the passage
into a new garden, its casual nouns
dancing before our astonished formality.
We keep still as long as you're looking,
then cackle again with the old vowels,
returning to the same spite-filled
arguments that sustained us
for generations before your birth.
Our outbursts take over your house
like errant uncles living uninvited
in your basement, stealing the best
part of your sleep with parodies
of your love-agonies in a cast-off
idiom you'll never understand.

Admonishments from the mice:

Our busy millions, proletariats
of the underworld—remember us?
All womb and hunger, death's number
one consumables, eating our way
through God—we're factories
populating the darkness with
blinking eyes, don't have time
for your questions. Keep them
for your own kind, those giving
birth to time, a landscape still
opening out from their hands,
unfolding the visible. The large
is always beyond your reach.
The small, filling space unseen,
chewing fibers of wheat, will come
close enough for you to hear
its feet tearing strands apart, lifting
your translated body to its lips.

Triple Bypass as a Round of Golf
—for my father

At this moment when you are about to sleep,
a mask descending past your eyes, breath slowed
to a winter thickness and all of them gathered
around the small flower of light on your chest,

at this moment when you are about to fall
into the cold sleep of anesthesia, I hope a fairway
appears with a breeze riffling on the rough,
cornfields ablaze in the sharp light of 1966,
and behind you in the clubhouse, the young
wives in cotton dresses holding vodka tonics,
laughing, making salad, dancing as they move;

I hope you see past the cool invitations of pines
to the green, the putting surface stretched out
like a swelling of voices, a thin wire tensed
in the heat, plucked by dragonflies with their
up-curling abdomens, wings opening on grass;

I hope you feel sparrows at rest in your skin,
a lifting or hovering of sense in the air just
above you, your breath held in a twilight
in which the young couples you knew walk
down from their comforts into the evening
you now inhabit, a procession going into you
as if down fairways of dissolving sensation:

they become the summer you moved in, greens
deserted after the last ones made their putts
and went home—then dark spreads from fields
that were always out-of-bounds, where deer
come out like unmet friends to graze
new shoots shining in your approaches.

J.J. and the *Butoh* Dancer

When you were only one we took you
to the Star Festival at an unnamed temple
in the countryside—the wine there was
said to be fragrant and sweet. We expected
drumming and the swaying summer dance
that imitates *fulfillment*, ripening fields
opening toward August, young girls in
dyed robes unfolding fingers and wrists
as if gathering back grain to their breasts.

We hadn't expected the hairless dancer,
white clay smeared on him like the birth
paste on newborns. I'd heard *Butoh*
is about flayed ghosts, the burned shadows
of Hiroshima, the nation-state pupating
in a nuclear carapace. His abdomen,
a bowl continually filling with altar light,
his movement rising up somehow from
the groin, twisting beneath his back
as if a more primary form were waking
under the skin, not getting free but turning
in constriction while the outer body,
limbs and face, clung like a membrane,
smooth with the translucence of one
not finished, whom daylight had not yet
written with recognition. He crawled
over the reed mats, winding into turns
of long, stiff paper the priest had set out,
entering, enclosing each bit of himself
with the same unwilling, pained contractions
as mating, or giving birth, or dying, until
wholly enfolded, he seemed to disappear.

I held you the whole time like a shadow
in my lap and thought you were asleep,
but later, when the dancer re-emerged
fully dressed, as thoughtless and human as
any of us, and everyone was getting drunk,
singing, I saw you with him, climbing
on his shoulders, encircling his waist
like paper, laughing as if you'd known him
all your life, and I wanted to snatch you
away then, into the dark, wet fields.

