



# Rivers Into Islands II

# Week 1 Highlights

- Read poetry with openness and initial trust in the poet. Pay attention to what touches or interests you. Avoid reducing a poem to what it ‘means.’
- ‘Rivers Into Islands’ is more than a book title. It reflects JK’s approach to poetry and life.
- JK’s background: Midwestern, working class, Catholic, riverine.
- In the modernist tradition of Hemingway — Cut to the bone. Writing gains power from what is not said.
- Important poem to study: ‘Church of Rose of Lima, Cincinnati.’

**Questions or Comments  
About Last Week?**

# More About Modernist Literature

- Modernism revolted against ‘poetic’ topics, the sublime (think Milton) and the high, eloquent style.
  - ‘Take eloquence and wring its neck.’ — Paul Verlaine.
  - Poets should be able to make poetry out of anything. ‘Get the gasworks in the poem.’ — David Ignatow.
- Throughout his career Knoepfle worked consistently in the modernist tradition.
- He’s modernist in his use of plain or colloquial language, and in his choice of topics, including ‘the present moment’ and ‘found’ poems
- Primarily, he is a ‘poet of place,’ and the places he writes of are anything but sublime.

# Poems of the Moment

- Many of Knoepfle's poems are grounded in the present moment, in what is happening around him right now.
- Typically they start with a description of the immediate situation.
- Some explore emotion through the description's physical details, using them as symbols that suggest more than their literal meaning.
- T. S. Eliot called such symbols 'objective correlatives,' or attempts to express particular emotions concretely rather than abstractly.
- The next two poems use descriptive details in this way.

# Edwardsville before sunrise

“Portals of Prayer”  
turns my clock radio on  
and I am consoled  
with the death of sparrows.  
The bedroom windows are frozen  
with obliterated stars.  
A spider  
embalmed in his ragged web  
since the last September  
is the king of that north.  
My wife sleeps  
a continent away.  
Under the covers  
my skin defines the strange  
form of a man.

*From Rivers Into Islands*

# For a child who lived six hours

After the morning there was no noon  
and now I leave your little white box  
among the elms here. I give you back  
with the harsh wind, howling  
of the moonstruck dog, sleet,  
rain, hail, the snow, the summer thunder,  
wings that ruffle the air,  
shapes of shadows in the deep waters.

*From Rivers Into Islands*

# Poems of the Moment II

- Other poems of the moment tackle the creative process itself.
- The description of the immediate situation may seem random, even meaningless.
- But instead of evoking emotion, it offers a gateway to it
  - Through an image, as in ‘this silent moment’
  - or through memory, as in ‘walking in snow’



# this silent moment

the furnace is humming in the basement  
there is a ringing in my ears  
and the clicking of computer keys  
and the creaking of the chair back  
outside baffled in yesterday's snowfall  
an illusion of soundlessness there  
cars drift by on the street  
as if the drivers were lost in dreams  
this empty page  
I so wanted to say something  
what has changed since yesterday  
the handsome butterfly cup  
a crack in it this morning  
it will not be thrown out  
some things should be held as priceless  
like recalling a stranger  
who went out of his way to help you  
someone you are unable to name

—From *Aloe of the Evening* 2015

# walking in snow

shutting down  
time to walk in the snow  
make footprints where there are none  
only the crooked marks of the dogs  
mooch or joe the best of dogs  
it is good coming down this slope  
the dogs have been buried  
how long now  
oh these many years  
today the leafless trees  
gleam in the morning sun  
with crowns of beaten gold  
it is not surprising  
the prints should appear this morning  
old mooch and faithful joe  
you have my meaning  
where there is no coherence  
just what is good to remember  
or to forget  
it is like this  
you go alone in the morning  
your thoughts running on and on  
until they come wagging home

—From *Walking in Snow*, 2008

# Things to note

- Here Knoepfle has adopted another stylistic quirk of some modernists — no capitalization (except for first person singular), and no punctuation.
- The line becomes the main tool of punctuation
- The effect: a further streamlining of language.
- Both poems suggest allowing the poem to take over the creative process—to find its own way to where it wants to go.
- How does the line ‘where there is no coherence’ work in ‘walking in snow’?

**Comments?**  
**Questions?**

# Poems of Place and History

- Wherever Knoepfle lived or traveled, he steeped himself in the history of the place
- This started in Cincinnati, with his rivermen's oral history project.
- Of Irish descent, he visited Ireland, published a book about it.
- In Illinois, he studied the history both of indigenous people and European newcomers.
- As a Navy boat officer and Freedom Rider, he participated in history.
- History became a source out of which he made poems.

# Three History Poems

- Brief background
- Bath is a small town on the Illinois River in Mason County. It had about 500 residents when Lincoln spoke there. Today it has less than 300.
- Okinawa is the smallest of the five main islands of Japan. It was the scene of the bloodiest ground battle of World War II in the Pacific, from April through June 1945. Knoepfle took part in the invasion.
- Skibbereen is a town at the southern tip of Ireland. The region was one of the worst affected by the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1852. An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 famine victims are buried in pits at nearby Abberstrewery Cemetery.

# Bath

and when lincoln came here  
that was august 16th 1858  
he felt like his age was something  
hanging on him he remembered  
surveying the town 22 years earlier  
in deep wilderness then and river timber  
how he staked out the first plat  
with his own hands he said

and these old men around him  
they were as young as himself  
27 years ago in 1831  
messmates in the black hawk war

the crowd heard him with respect  
tell all of them why slavery  
was an evil thing

bath is trailers and shacks  
and make-do livings anyway you can  
full of particular folk  
who like pink flamingos in driveways

and peonies on the lawns  
cradled in used tractor tires  
things good for looking at  
they tell you if you want to know

lincoln had six years  
beyond his stump speech at bath  
six years for the history of the world

this year in late spring  
the children will go down the river bank  
midmorning on memorial day  
as they have since the civil war

and set their little boats  
drifting on the illinois  
with cargoes of flowers

# Veterans Day

and I remember there was a woman  
sprawled on a path in okinawa  
her face in the dirt her black dress hitched  
above her knees her legs already swollen  
and the little pot that death thieved from her  
all her maternal caring  
spilled on the path beyond her fingers  
I asked the chaplain  
what would become of her  
he told me through cigarette smoke  
a bulldozer would put her under  
that was the day after easter  
no ancestral tomb for her  
no sealed gate on okinawa  
and today a day for veterans

I did not like the songs  
I heard touted on radio and television  
and in the evening watched with friends  
the documentary on surgeons in iraq  
and their faithful assistants  
and soldiers and wounded marines joking  
and those purple hearts on the bare chests  
and ill fated iraqis hauled in from car bombs  
and that chaplain with his prayers  
hoping to fit the right words for the dead

—From Walking in Snow



# skibbereen the famine pit

it was only that the poor  
were driven to the margins  
they were the throwaway people  
their little farms  
their fields of rock in cork and wexford  
even less in the townlands

there were caricatures in punch  
where have these gone  
I could not find them in ireland  
nation of twenty year olds  
shouting like animals  
from the book of kells  
when night softens the old streets  
dingle or limerick or dublin

everything is completed now  
gone back to pasture  
all the potatoes shipped in from holland  
someone has shut the evil eye  
where the famine pits  
reach to the bottom of the world

a broad green field here  
where my sons could play soccer  
and ten thousand  
tumbled in one grave here  
so many nameless bones

brickley is here surely  
and finn and mccarthy  
harrington and driscoll  
god keep you from hunger  
my great great uncles lost here  
my keening aunts my cousins

it is the way it is  
you were the lesser harvest  
once the potato failed  
the bloodless sacrifice  
when the unexpected bad time came  
wrong time famine time

champion and black skerry  
those were your favorites  
they had the deep eyes

# Things to Note

- Each of these poems begins in mid-sentence: ‘and when lincoln came here’ .... ‘and I remember’ . . . ‘it was only that the poor’
- It is Knoepfle’s conversational tone, but here also suggests that history is a continuum, one long flowing story
- Note the socio-economic portrait in ‘Bath,’ the chaplain’s search for ‘the right words for the dead’ in ‘veterans day’.
- Note humans as ‘the lesser harvest’ in ‘skibbereen the famine pit.’

**Comments?**  
**Questions?**

# Found Poems

- A prose text or texts reshaped by a poet
- Some found poems reorder the text and/or combine it with other texts. They are similar to a collage in art.
- Poets who extensively used ‘found’ material in collage-like poems include Ezra Pound in the *Cantos* and T.S. Eliot in ‘The Wasteland.’”
- Others use the words as they were found in a text, with the poet reshaping them primarily by ‘lining them.’
- Prose texts and overheard conversations were another source for poetry for John Knoepfle.

# Found Poem Example

## **This is Just to Say**

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

—William Carlos Williams

# Two Found Poems . . .

*marquette in winter camp, chicago river, 1675*

I know one of two things  
god will break me  
because I have been afraid  
or he will give me his cross  
which I have not borne  
since I came to this country

the blessed immaculate virgin  
will beg this for me  
or god will speak my death

and I will stop offending him

I try to be ready  
putting myself in his hands

pray for me and pray god  
will keep me grateful  
he has spoiled me always  
with so many favors

*peter cartwrights dream*

monday in my night visions  
I thought I went  
on a fishing expedition  
and I drew up and threw out  
many excellent fish

at length I felt that a large fish  
or something else

had got hold of my hook  
but it came slow and pulled heavy

I began to draw whatever it was out  
and behold it was  
a large mud turtle  
I awoke and lo it was a dream  
and I was glad of it

# . . . and another

*voices at breakfast #2*

oshkosh was full of those  
damn mosquitos and st louis  
it rained all week in st louis  
the heat is peculiar to itself there  
my god san diego polluted my lungs  
I didn't know what to make of new mexico  
it was the air the air  
was so clear my lungs  
were crying with peace and joy  
Ill tell you this  
when she sold her house to afros  
everybody just hated her

thought she should have  
jumped up the price at least  
so much hate I couldn't believe it  
well a little social security  
and nothing for twenty years with the company  
I cant afford to retire  
look at those egrets  
the grace the incandescence  
every time I go to arkansas  
my mother in law serves me grits  
she knows I hate grits

*From Begging an Amnesty*

# Things to Note

- Overheard racial comment in ‘voices at breakfast’
- Attention paid to religious figures in history, Marquette and Cartwright.
  - Jacques Marquette
    - Jesuit priest from France who explored Mississippi from headwaters to Arkansas River; fluent in six native dialects; died somewhere in Michigan at age 37.
  - Peter Cartwright
    - Charismatic Methodist revivalist preacher in Central Illinois; strongly anti-slavery, overtly combined politics and religion; founder of McKendree College and Illinois Wesleyan University.



**Questions?**  
**Comments?**

**Next Week: Translations  
and Social Conscience**