



john knoepfle

prayer against famine & other irish poems

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interview

by
elizabeth smith

Elizabeth Smith: *One of the first things that strike someone looking at your poems is the absence of capitalization and punctuation. Can you explain why you use only the bare words?*

John Knoepfle: I think your Question answered itself when you used the term “bare words.” When I first began writing in the early 1950s, a type of poem that I didn’t find very interesting was crowding the literary journals. These poems were grammatically correct exercises in a kind of introspective and rather abstract rhetoric. I had evolved from that to a style that was risking more but seemed to me to cut to the quick of what I had to say. I don’t remember consciously abandoning the rhetorical props. It was just a development of my own from a highly academic kind of poem to a poem that approached the speech patterns of people I was listening to, including myself.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, poets were interested in the way poems sounded. They were trying in their poems to pick up and improvise on the sound patterns of ordinary speech. A way to catch that was to eliminate punctuation and capital letters – both late additions to the art of writing – and focus on the plain words and how you lay them out in a line and how that changes the rhythm and the emphasis of those words. I am comfortable with that – as a way of writing and of reading my poems.

ES: *In the 1950s you tape recorded Ohio and Mississippi rivermen, and have said this project helped to form your writer’s voice. In what way did it do this?*

JK: I was speaking with many experienced individuals who brought whole vocabularies with a host of precise terms for the work they did on the river. I don’t mean to say the men were uneducated. Some were highly educated and quite literate. But they were using a language that was shaped in the river valleys and on the boats from the 1800s on. It was not the language you’d find in, for instance, a Jane Austin novel or one by Dostoyevsky either. So I valued what they had to say. They gave me a place as a writer – it happened to be my Midwest.

I have to add though that when I was teaching at Southern Illinois University in East St. Louis, many of my students wrote out of an oral tradition. To understand their papers, you read them outloud. I was ready to appreciate that because the rivermen had that same kind of skill with the spoken language. At this time I was also reading works by Tudor preachers, men out of the Latin tradition who were eloquent Latinists and knew the flowers of rhetoric as handed down from the Greeks and Romans. But these men were writing before the grammarians structured the English language on a Latin base (so we can’t put prepositions at the end of sentences because Latin does not have post-positions) and before the printers, to make it easier to set type, standardized spelling. So I have inherited both traditions – the sense of English as the language of daily life and the language of rhetoricians before it was reined in by the grammarians.

ES: *Your previous writing has been rooted in the Midwest. For Poems from the Sangamon you traveled along that river valley. Prayer Against Famine comes out of your trip to Ireland. Is the direct experience of a place and people an essential part of your desire to write?*

I think that the direct experience of people and place is very important to me. I think at least for my part I try to write something that catches something special about where you are. So I was always fascinated by Cesar Vallejo's line "It is Sunday in the clear ears of my Peruvian burro." It is so simple, yet it catches so much. Or the Navajo song the women sang for the men when the nation was in captivity: "Everywhere I go, joy surrounds me." Or the wonderful lines from a medieval nun in Poland that we have through W.B. Yeats: "I am of Ireland the holy land of Ireland. Come dance with me for St. Charity." I am not sure I have ever achieved these wonderful statements that sum up a people and a place, but I try.

It is true that most of my books come out of my knowledge and experience of the places I have lived in the Midwest. Living in the river town of Cincinnati and interviewing all those rivermen, teaching in East St. Louis, living and studying in St. Louis during the turmoil of the 1960s, and finally living in Auburn, a small town in the heart of Illinois corn and coal country, have all been immensely important to me as a poet.

When I haven't written about where I live, I've written about the wonder and discovery I've felt on journeys that I made. In the 1960s I made trips through the United States from Spearfish Canyon, South Dakota, to Savannah, Georgia, as a consultant for Project Upward Bound. *Begging an Amnesty* was inspired by several visits to the western United States. *Prayer Against Famine*, of course, came from three journeys to Ireland and my personal search for relatives there. But that book also includes poems inspired by visits to Alaska, New York City and the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin. And that book, in kind with almost every book I've written, has references to countries all over the world. Place is important to me.

ES: *Being regarded as a Midwestern author, though, were you concerned about leaving this area and turning predominantly to another country and people?*

JK: No. I think my previous answer clarifies that. If you're in touch with a place and the people there, you discover you are in touch with the whole world.

ES: *Your poems in this collection span boundaries of time and place, but speak of something more essential in people. What comparisons do you draw between Ireland and America, and between people of the past and present?*

JK: I'll start with your second question about the past and the present. After I taped the rivermen, I knew that I wanted to write about the past, but a very specific past. I used to say I wanted to write about the people whose history has been lost. If you look in that last volume of the local history book in your town library, you will usually find the stories of the first settlers (especially the ones who made good), the successful businessmen, the leaders of local denominations, important politicians – generals. I wanted to write about the people whose stories are left out of that book. And I have done that, beginning with the rivermen but going on to tell many other stories about all kinds of people. What I didn't know is that in *Prayer Against Famine*, I would be writing about the lost history of my own family.

Regarding comparisons between the past and the present, what you find when you begin paying attention to lost histories is the link that you needed when you began the search in the first place. With the rivermen, I found a language and a sense that the inland rivers and the Midwest itself are worthy subjects for a poet. It has been the same with every story I've told in my poems, I always find some link with that lost past, some link that I needed, though I didn't necessarily know this before I began the poem. Often that discovery becomes the burden of the poem.

In terms of Ireland and America, what I was looking for when I began that book was my Irish family. What I found, in a mass grave in Skibbereen in County Cork, was the famine – An Gorta Mor, the Great Hunger. I began to understand that the events that sent some members of my family to the United States as immigrants and probably put others in that mass grave in Cork are pretty much the same things that we all worry about today: hunger, poverty, injustice, war, the silencing of peoples and

their cultures. That was on my first trip to Ireland. And it was what made me include in the book poems about people in many other countries.

In 1998 I was in Derry and Belfast the week after the Good Friday Peace Accords. That was a stunning time. I realized that famine is spiritual as well as physical. And I saw many connections with life in Illinois – including our simmering racial, class and religious tensions, the fear we have of each other. That was just one of the many connections I found between Ireland and America, connections I had not imagined when I began the book. But I still couldn't find my Irish family.

When I finally did locate the home of my Irish cousins, it was not in Ireland but on the Menominee Reservation in northern Wisconsin. So I'd returned full circle, to my own Midwest with no easy answers but a whole universe of relatives – and questions.

My impulse with the book is that someone will find it and read it and say, "Why that must be a cousin wrote this book."

ES: *The circle of your journey is clear in the collection, too. In part one you cannot find what you are looking for. But by part four, back in the US, you "know who they were/ know they were here." Why do you think it happened that way?*

JK: It's an accommodation with reality. I didn't find living relatives that I could speak to. And I didn't get to talk to my relatives at the Menominee Reservation because they are a reclusive family even on the Reservation and because there's no particular reason for them to trust an outsider claiming kinship. As I said in answer to the last question, I'm left with a whole universe of relatives, a lot of questions and no easy answers. But that makes me much richer than I was before I began the book.

ES: *On your first view of Ireland you write "thank god for crooked lines so long in the making." The landscape of Ireland is certainly a contrast with that of the American Midwest. Did you find a sense of relief in that?*

JK: The stone walls seen from the plane that I talk about in that poem sum up a lot of things that I wanted to say, some of which I didn't even know at the time. The stones, the crookedness are radically different from the neatly squared-off fields and townships that you see from a plane over Illinois. I knew I was seeing something very ancient that I was connected to.

Seen close up, those walls are rough, but the stones are really chinked in there – flat stones, not boulders. They fit together well. They became for me a kind of metaphor for the lines in a poem. You build them as you can.

Learning the history of those walls gave those crooked lines many more meanings than I had imagined when I first saw them. They aren't like the walls in Frost's poem "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors." Especially in the west counties they are testimony to a seaboard culture that goes back generations beyond measure. I like the – for lack of another word – strange privacy that they give, a protection for the fields of farmers that we have lost with our megafarms in the Midwest and our habit of destroying.

The stones are so plentiful, the building skills so persistent, you can't tell sometimes whether a wall was built in neolithic times or just last year. They are signatures of generations.

Some of those walls were built during the famine. They had no function except to make work for the Irish poor so that they would pay at least in labor for any food relief given to them. By the time I finished the book, "thank god for crooked lines so long in making" was carrying a much heavier burden than when I first wrote it down. So that what those walls represent is something held in trust and in a strange way, for myself and other visitors who come back to Ireland for families that they cannot find.

But the more I understand about the Irish landscape, the more it takes me back to Illinois again and our own version of famine and plenty. In my generation we watched tens of thousands of acres of the richest farmland in the world given up to shopping malls, the corn cobs of the last harvest scattered along the edges of parking lots for cars parked at fast food restaurants. The prairie-fed loam here in Illinois goes six feet and more to the clay.

So I'd say at first I felt a sense of wonder at the Irish landscape, and then a sense of discovery that took me back to my own Illinois landscape.

ES: *As you mention, not all the poems in this collection are about Ireland, but they are all related through their emphasis on communication and the links between people, and often on the violence they depict. Are there other reasons why they would be considered "Irish Poems"?*

JK: We know the famine and the vicissitudes of the Irish so well that what happened on that island is a kind of template for future disasters. We can recognize the same patterns in the fate of 14 million Ukrainians who starved to death because Stalin wanted to convert their land into communal farms or that at present there is hunger in Ethiopia and imminent famine in Sudan, disasters which surely could be alleviated if the energies of the international community could be combined to address these situations.

Survival, too, is a subject of this book – the survival of my Irish immigrant family, the birth of my granddaughter, the lines for the miscarried child who will not be forgotten.

Cultural survival, again something I could not have imagined when I began this book, became one of its subjects: the festival of traditional singing in County Clare, the dance of the Inipiut, the Menominee's successful struggle to preserve the ancestral deep woods – and the knowledge they shared, at great price, with the U'wa of Colombia.

I wrote about my search for my family in Ireland, and these turned out to be the themes I found.

ES: *Prayer Against Famine begins with your sadness that you have no knowledge of your great grandmother. Was it this that made you want to rediscover your Irish ancestry? Why this point in time and not earlier?*

JK: For a long time, because I knew so little about my mother's family, I kept my Irish identity through music. I like traditional Irish music, learned the songs and played them on the harmonica and the fife. When I began to research my family history, I was able to locate the burial records for the Brickley plot in Calvary Cemetery in New York City. I found the names of my uncles and aunts and also of an Ellen Brickley, who might be my great grandmother or a great aunt. She is the person I imagined in my poem. These discoveries made my journeys to Ireland inevitable.

ES: *You write that there is something basic and handsome about man that you like, and that you try to rediscover in your poems. Much of Prayer Against Famine, though, is concerned with sadness, death, and the inhumanity that people are capable of. Has your view of humanity changed?*

JK: My poems have always focused on sadness, death and inhumanity because that's what I have seen around me. After all, I've lived most of my life in history's most violent century, and I've experienced brute force and personal loss myself. But I've also focused on "something basic and handsome about man" because I've also found that in the world around me, many times in response to what is most brutal and reprehensible. There are many of those responses in Prayer Against Famine, including the Book of Kells. What I think is that my view of humanity hasn't changed so much, but it has expanded. The same goes for my sense of the brutality and chaos in our universe.

ES: *It's true that the sadness in this collection is tempered by characters who bring happiness to others, and your penultimate poem includes the line "when there is nowhere to go/ it is possible/ the healing will begin/ you have to believe this." Is this ultimately a hopeful collection?*

JK: The poem referred to is based on the International Peace Novena, and the nouns in that poem are all from the prayer of St. Francis. That's why we have no alternative but to believe these things are possible.