



"Archings" Copyright 2000 Dancing Bear

Merging

Number of hunters who have had their cremated remains loaded into a shotgun shell and shot at an animal: 40

Harper's Index, November 1993

Some depart in wooden boats.
Others exit in a blast of flame,
leaving behind a small ash heap
and final request:

*Bury these in my favorite garden
Scatter me over a body of water
Toss me to the winds*

Only the sporting or the very inventive ask us
to stuff their cinders into shotgun shells
and take them hunting.

I try to understand this impulse--
I'd sooner aim them
at a clay skeet arcing overhead,
give the deceased a chance
to finally reach a target.

I try to fathom who would wish their remains
blasted into the flesh of some deer or duck--
people who enjoy hunting
not for sport but like a chicken slaughterer
channeling his murderous desires into food.
Or people unaware of their heart's whisper:

"If you *must* die, then at least
bring down another creature *with* you."
Maybe this is getting too complicated...
Maybe getting shot into an animal
is simply how these bizarre requesters
wish to say good-bye, merging
with a world they love and leave behind.

The Bet

From two hundred yards away I spot
the traffic signal, hear myself wagering
"the light stays green for me or else
my wife dies"--where did *this* come from?
At five p.m. each workday does my wife
wait by the twelfth-floor elevators and declare
"the next car going down will stop here
or my husband keels over"?
Sure enough, I sail through the intersection
--light still green--
and taste the filet mignon of victory.
But what if the light had turned
blood red? Could I have led my wife
to the cement wall, blindfold, and final cigarette?
I fondle the possibilities a while until
my sensible Honda pulls into our driveway.
My wife dashes out of the house,
throws open the car door, pins me
--her lovable assassin--
between steering wheel and front seat
in a hug. I die a little, then return:
like a body plunging from the diving board,
slicing the water with a brief *tloom*
before finding its way back to the surface,
back to her.

I Go Bowling

to feel sloppy and unimportant,
to remember to forget that I'm
overeducated and hypercritical.
Tonight I will simply
heave a plastic sphere down the waxed lane
and clear out ten wooden bottles
again and again. I join
unknown men easy in their paunches,
easy as the amber liquid
sliding down their tilted beer glasses.

I interrupt my game at any time:
to watch the woman in the next lane,
haunting valley of her breasts
highlighting the V of her halter;
to watch some pock-faced kid drop
dollar after dollar into the pinball machine
as he spansks the flippers
in a blizzard of passion.

Tonight my life will be transformed!
I'll be rewarded for knocking things down.
The letter 'X' will no longer mean
crossed-out or *rejected*
but instead *faultless on the first shot*.

Starting with a Restaurant

I like to see ice tumble into the glass
before they add the soda, before
they seat me in my favorite corner booth
where I watch everyone tramp in and out,
see people hungering, then sated.
Turning my glass of soda, I like to imagine
that only the cold-and-solid will endure:
Labrador, darkness, promises.
I like to think that my forty years of silence
has a mythic basis, like the legend of baby Moses
grabbing at Pharaoh's crown: how the terrified courtiers

forced him to choose between a dish of royal gold coins
and a dish of glowing coals,
how the boy reached for the coins
until an angel pushed his hand into the embers.
Moses jerked the burnt hand to his mouth,
seared his lips and tongue, became
the stammerer.

Nursing my soda, I like to think
I'm a child of climatic circumstance: not Egypt,
but New Jersey--Metuchen, New Jersey--
how growing up in eastern winters
I would leave my tongue print
on neighborhood metal fences, cold and solid,
marking the way home--
how the torn, frozen flesh of my tongue
sizzled with pain.

Unlike Moses,
I welcome my plodding tongue, my hesitation.
Let it take me forty years wandering in a desert--
words are the way back home.

Joel Katz

Joel Katz was born in Massachusetts and grew up various places in the Northeast. He attended college in Philadelphia, then moved to California in the early 1970's. He currently works as a computer systems analyst in Silicon Valley. His work has previously appeared in *West Wind Review* and *Fresh Hot Bread*.