

Of This World: New and Selected Poems, 1955-2006

Joseph Stroud

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Forty years of writing are showcased in Joseph Stroud's *Of This World: New and Selected Poems 1955-2006*. He has published only four books previously, and may not be as well known as he ought to be. The poems in this large collection—arranged not by chronology, but as a complete poem itself—should help. The collection is capacious not only in its length, but in the range of subjects, of reading evidenced in the poems, and of the mind at work and play with those subjects. There are small, smart prose poems, longer prose pieces, haiku-like poems, narrative poems, lyrics, and odes. His poems speak from around the globe: Venice, London, Santo Domingo, Guatemala, Vietnam, Santa Cruz, Singapore. Stroud enters the minds of painters such as Goya, Brueghel, and Giotto Bondone, and he pays homage to the poets Blake, Milton, Smart, Lorca, Machado, and Jeffers. It would be most accurate to say that he lives with the old poets every day. They are not mere subjects; they are part of his body of work. For example, the poem, "Bible" has both absorbed Christopher Smart and made him new: "The scorpion scuttling / from under a rock, arms wide, pincers open, wants / to embrace us—it has news, friends—the tip / of his tail bears a psalm from Isaiah."

Many of the poems own a clarity that opens to unexpected emotional depths. One would be tempted to call them Zen poems because all have a quiet at the core, but they also love the surfaces—Doo-wop music, families in the fifties, classmates and friends, the blood and guts of war, killing a skunk. Sometimes the poems are very funny. In "Writhing in Tongues," leeches are Holy Beings, "tongues of Blakean delight." The prose poem, "Old Poets Home" envisions "blind Milton watching TV in his mind." And Whitman is "still working the crossword of his Leaves, and there's Li Po trying to embrace the moon in a fishbowl. Longfellow wandering the halls in tears whispering *Remember me?* *Remember me?*, Donne proud and dressed in his shroud, but sometimes a few thoughtful, compassionate young poets will drop by with their groomed and friendly poems and let us stroke them, pet them, remember how once in our lives the poems frisked for us, barked, ran out ahead, full of energy and joy."

In a collection of this size, there will be some less successful work. "Cutting Down the Jeffery," for example, is not able to travel beyond its simple sentimental narrative of felling a beloved tree. But most of the poems are a surprise and a delight to read, authentic and rich. His work, available here in its depth and breadth, should bring new readers. (2008)

FLEDA BROWN (April 14, 2009)

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