

Kent Johnson, *I Once Met: A Partial Memoir of the Poetry Field*. West Brattleboro, VT: Longhouse Books, 2015. 176 pp. \$18

Every poetic community knows “that guy.” He—and it is usually he—is the gadfly in the ointment, the satirist or critic who mocks the pretensions of the leading figures of the day. “That guy” is not so much an individual talent as a singular pain in the ass. In early eighteenth-century England, he also happened to be the era’s finest poet, Alexander Pope, who in *The Dunciad* and the spoof essay “Peri Bathous” laid mock-heroic waste to his contemporaries. Three centuries later, he is known to Internet sociology as a “troll,” lurking below the line as once below the bridge.

Kent Johnson, as this second expanded edition of his “partial memoir,” *I Once Met*, acknowledges, has long been “that guy” at the avant end of American poetry. Each short section is structured around the conceit of a remembered meeting in the “Poetry Field.” The fifth reads in full:

I once met Marjorie Perloff. This was at the MLA, though I can’t remember the city; it was long ago, I think it was D.C. She is a great critic and an extraordinarily generous person. Kent, this is Bob Perelman, said Marjorie. Bob, this is Kent Johnson. Oh, so *you’re* that guy, said Bob. What guy? I said.

The next section, which recalls meeting Allen Ginsberg, has the same don’t-hit-me punchline. It seems likely there has always been more than one reason why Johnson might be known—in words attributed to Perloff—as a “horrible troublemaker.” Perhaps the most notorious dates from the mid-1990s, when he presented the world with the poems of Araki Yasusada: a Japanese poet who, despite surviving the bombing of Hiroshima, did not, in fact, exist.

Johnson has continued to be a rogue double agent in the poetry wars that have followed the Death of the Author. His archive-procedural masterpiece, *A Question Mark above the Sun* (Punch Press, 2010), proposed that Kenneth Koch was the real author of Frank O’Hara’s poem, “A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island.” The first edition met with legal threats from unamused estates and appeared partly redacted. He also seems to have had at least a mouse-clicking hand in the *Works and Days of the Fénéon Collective* (Delete Press, 2010), an anonymous PDF which began as a blog devoted to scurrilous “Faits Divers de la Poésie Américaine de Brittanique,” such as the following parable of Conceptualism:

“Ouch!” cried the cunning oyster-eater, M. Goldsmith. “A pearl!”
Someone at the next table bought it for 100 francs. It had cost 10
centimes at the dime store.

In 2009, Johnson produced his own edition of Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day* (2003)—a book comprising the typed-out text of an issue of *The New York Times*—by pasting on a new jacket bearing his name. Regular readers of *Chicago Review* will know that Johnson has serious revolutionary beef with the political amnesia of such appropriative poetics, and its “desire to be legitimized by dominant institutions” (see “Card File, or: Why Communism Looks out of Their Eyes (50 Graphs on Conceptual Writing)” in the Winter 2015 issue).

The frequently institutional vignettes of *I Once Met* continue Johnson’s favorite theme of the “Avant Garde in the Ivy League,” and play familiar games with the duck-rabbit of fact and invention (“poetic license,” he writes, has sometimes been employed in “a deepening of the genuine”). What is unexpected is how cumulatively moving the book is. The satirist, wrote Robert Graves, is a left-handed poet, and *I Once Met* is not so much a compilation of pasquinades as a series of “small and stillborn poem[s],” as Johnson calls the sweetly sincere note addressed to his son, Brooks Johnson.

The remembered meeting in Cambridge, England with the “tremendous poet Stephen Rodefer” is particularly touching in its truth to the dysfunctional and noble reality of people getting together to hear each other read verse. Rodefer, who died last year, was undoubtedly “that guy” on the Cambridge poetry scene for many years. Johnson’s pen-portrait brings him right back: “Stephen Rodefer came over and said something like...is Eager Kent trying to suck up to you so he can make it in the avant-garde biz? He walked away, smirking, drink in hand, and I followed him down to the wine box.” Eager Kent threatens violence, but all is changed to tenderness by the story of a small boy who sits in on Rodefer’s reading (which rails, Johnson-like, against “the complicities and hypocrisies and treacheries of the post-avant”). The sight of this boy moves the poet to tears due to his resemblance—Johnson learns—to Rodefer’s own son, who drowned at the age of ten. The next day, that guy and that other guy are reconciled in “awkward small talk” by the wine box, walking “out into the courtyard together, where it was cool, in the evening air.”

The elegaic refrain of the book is “life is strange.” Johnson’s feeling for *lacrimae rerum* is the secret of his power as a poet, which has often been hidden behind the slasher mask of his satire. His love-hate riffs on the New York School, for example, come down to the essentially poignant contrast between their romantic whimsy and some harder reality elsewhere. Thus the brief text here about having never met John Ashbery, which moves immediately sideways into melancholic parody (“Automobiles go by in the night”) and finally arrives at the image of “a cheap velvet painting...on half a wall, in some bombed out slum, on the outskirts of Beirut.”

There is much more of such anti-imperialist bathos in *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* (Shearsman, 2008), a collection that Johnson published in the UK. Here, his affection for the quixotic nerve of the New York poets also shines through, from the dedication “to the memory of Joe Brainard”—a witty acknowledgement of the model of Brainard’s *I Remember* (1970), a prose poem of life-trivia—to the final anecdote about the Zen Buddhist poet Philip Whalen, which plays a koan-like variation on Frank O’Hara’s notion that writing a poem is an alternative to picking up the telephone:

No, No, No, he growled, The last thing I’m going to do is write an essay on the relationship between Zen and poetry. I mean, what makes you think that either one even exists? I mean, give me a break. Goodbye. Click.

Johnson’s admirable work as a “militantly anti-racist” editor and translator of (real) non-American poetries is mentioned in passing here, along with his time as a volunteer literacy teacher for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua during the early 1980s. Ultimately, however, the book’s biggest target is Kent Johnson himself, whose vanities and failings are exposed in his clumsy, unremarkable memories of “just saying hello to...nice people,” retold in what he admits is “a somewhat antiquated and affected prose that appears to be, now that I look at it, a poor imitation of the writing of the dear friend of John Keats, Charles Lamb.” One repeated form of praise on the cadenced lips of his courteous manner is that so-and-so was a “true gentleman,” and this is indeed, among other things, a deeply homosocial account of contemporary American poetry—a fact that strikes Johnson about two-thirds through, and launches him into “a kind of strained apologia for great matters that oppress my mind.”

At its best *I Once Met* is a work of profound self-critique which challenges the *hypocrite lecteur* to recognize that “gossip in poetry is...the beating heart of its habitus,” and that if we were all a little more like “that guy” in telling the truth about the frailty of virtue, poetry might paradoxically become a more civilized place. In his story about Peter Davis, Johnson rehearses some convoluted regrets about having spoken too harshly against the *Best American Poetry* as a culture-industry takeover of “the mysteries and divagations of anarchic, rhizomatic collective life.” True to the spirit of this vision, Johnson doesn’t try to reconcile the antagonism in his sign-off, but instead restates his dialectical attitude even more starkly: “The avant-garde is a rotting corpse. I hope this finds you well, Peter.”

Johnson’s most recent project is a website called *Dispatches from the Poetry Wars*. During the Republican National Convention, there was a homepage post that began:

Shares in VHS Concept Industries rose slightly on news that Kenneth Goldmine and Vanessa Plot filed a \$100,000,000 lawsuit against Donald and Melania Trump. The suit alleges that on July 19th Melania Trump appropriated without legal authorization Goldmine and Plot's trademarked concept of replicating material related to African-American topics, texts, autopsies, and First Ladies...

Etc. It's a neat structural satire. But it's not as boldly counter-avant-garde—Confessional, even—as Johnson's apparently true account of talking with Vanessa Place on the train from Princeton to Newark airport, which concludes:

I'm no less sceptical about the current version of Conceptual Poetry, no less sceptical at all. But I have to say that I came away, really, liking Vanessa Place quite a good bit, life is strange.

Jeremy Noel-Tod

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Rita Dove, *Collected Poems: 1974–2004*. New York: Norton, 2016. 420 pp. \$39.95

In 1994, at the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference at James Madison University, a well-known black poet, now deceased, turned to me after a Rita Dove reading and said, “I don't get it.” I agreed. By then I'd read a couple of Dove's books, and while I appreciated the craftsmanship, I was not overly impressed. Recently, I was talking to another poet, a white woman, about having agreed to review this collection, and when I expressed my trepidations about doing so, she asked me what I thought about all the stuff that's happened to Dove in the last few years. She was presumably referring to one of those poetry business skirmishes that are significant enough to get the momentary attention of the mainstream media. In this case, it was Helen Vendler's condescending 2011 review of Dove's editing of the *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*. But I was already thinking about Dove's career, which spans over forty years and at least nine books, so I thought she meant Dove had been recently dismissed as a poet. That isn't what she meant, of course, and my misinterpretation was simply another indication of what I myself had been thinking about over the last year and a half. That's because in 2014 I attended the third Furious Flower Poetry Conference and Dove was again present. This time my reaction was markedly different; I was impressed with the work, and her speech, though I still could not explain exactly why.