

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Jonathan Williams: There at the Right Moment

Jonathan Williams had a knack for persuading the subjects of his photographs to assume the damndest poses. In the yard of Russell and Mary Banks's New Hampshire home, he had me stand next to and then under a flowering hydrangea bush. This was the first time we had met! Holding his Rolleiflex in one hand and waving a freshly lit cigar, like a wand, with the other, he gave me orders: "Put on that Red Sox cap. And what's that by your feet—a cannonball, a rock? Pick that up, put it under your arm, ahh, left arm. And now hold still."

With that image I made the cut, entering the slide show and lecture that Jonathan presented in colleges, museums, art galleries, and who knows what other venues—he once gave a poetry reading in a Texas gas station—for many years, until all of his images faded in front of the slide projector's bulb into ghosts of themselves. Jonathan's book *A Palpable Elysium* is subtitled "Portraits of Genius and Solitude." It is a collection of photographs and brief texts in which I do not appear. Jonathan loved baseball, so he might accept that if the slide show and lecture were his major leagues, then *A Palpable Elysium* falls somewhere between a Hall of Fame and a partial autobiography. All of his major interests are represented: poetry and music, gravestones and their epigrammatic inscriptions, and the folk art he could always find time to pursue off the beaten track. The solitude of his subtitle is a condition that Williams paid more attention to than any other American photographer I know of.

Seen in profile on the book's cover is one of Jonathan's heroes, the founder and publisher of New Directions, James Laughlin. For commercial purposes, this portrait may not have been the best choice: the average reader will not recognize Laughlin. But this is *Williams's* Elysium. It's fitting, then, that the book's introduction is written by a steadfast champion of Williams, Guy Davenport. He calls Jonathan "a kind of teacher: the best kind," one who "knows things in a way that makes you want to know them too." Before I met Jonathan, I knew him as a poet and essayist and the publisher of the Jargon Society, and even then I found him to be exactly that kind of teacher. Every encounter with his work introduced me to someone or something new. Eventually we became friends, and over thirty years of friendship I learned much from him

A review of Jonathan Williams, *A Palpable Elysium: Portraits of Genius and Solitude*. Introduction by Guy Davenport. Boston: David R. Godine, 2002. \$30.

during lively conversations in which we enjoyed life-giving doses of what the English call Vitamin G over wine or malt scotch. In a time before the Internet, you had to go off to search out a new poet, composer, or artist. Lorine Niedecker, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and Harry Callahan were favorites of Jonathan's. I would visit Author's Ridge in Concord and see who I could find in Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery, where Mary Baker Eddy's tomb stands. It must have been Jonathan who told me that she had been buried with a phone so she could call with news of the great beyond.

Among the images in *A Palpable Elysium* is one that Jonathan and I searched for together: the grave of e. e. cummings. I drove from our home in Boston's South End to Forest Hills Cemetery in Jamaica Plain. At the cemetery office we picked up a map and specific directions to cummings's grave, but we did not get a description of the sort of stone we were looking for. We reached the right area of the cemetery but failed to find cummings. A second try, with more precise directions, also failed. We asked again and this time we found the right row and the poet's footstone with his name engraved on it. We had been looking for something larger. Jonathan focused his Rolleiflex and took two or three photographs.

Driving back to Boston and lunch we suddenly turned toward one another and spoke nearly as one, "His name, it's in caps!"

EDWARD ESTLIN CUMMINGS

In the short text facing the cummings photograph in *A Palpable Elysium*, Jonathan remarks on the irony of "the grand poet of lower case democratic liberality" being under a stone "with nothing on it but New England capital grandeur." He then mistakenly puts Forest Hills, Jamaica Plain in South Boston, though the two neighborhoods are at opposite ends of the city. A tiny flaw, but he then delivers a gratuitous slap. "I hesitate," he writes, "to ask if any of you ninteenninetyninemurkins read even one word of the master."

Did Jonathan actually believe his audience was that ill-read? I doubt it. He liked the self-appointed role of "sorehead" and public scold, even to such silly lengths. It's Jonathan being Jonathan. Since this book is autobiographical in nature, he saw no reason to be other than himself.

In his foreword Jonathan "hopes that 'professionals' will simply allow me to be the literary gent who takes the odd tolerable photograph." He is too modest. The photographs of gravestones, documents that they are, are clear-eyed and unpretentious. This photographer came to look, and he respected the facts enough to let them speak for themselves. Where else would we have seen the stones of Wallace Stevens, Charles Parker, Jr., or Howard Phillips Lovecraft? Jonathan's subtext here is wise advice: Be true to your passions and seek out what you love. There will always be a surprise, such as

the dateless stone for Stevens (who was a committed genealogist for whom dates mattered), the word “SON” (but no Yardbird or Bird) above Charlie Parker, and Lovecraft’s declaration, “I AM PROVIDENCE.”

Jonathan quotes the master Henri Cartier-Bresson: “Photography is pressing a trigger, bringing your finger down at the right moment.” This embrace of precision together with chance speaks to his strength as a photographer. The portraits of genius, of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Paul Strand, Stevie Smith, Harry Partch—in fact, all of the portraits in this book—have an unfussy rightness, capturing the right moment in which the subject collaborates with the photographer. Some of these people he knew well: Lorine Niedecker has the plain beauty of her poetry; curmudgeonly Edward Dahlberg appears genial in his ascot; Louis Zukofsky is smiling and severe; of Basil Bunting, you can imagine passersby exclaiming, *Who is that?*; and Guy Davenport, intelligence in the tilt of his head, his shirt bright where morning light shines, sits at his desk with bookshelves behind him. Jonathan liked his subjects out of doors, and he preferred to shoot in color; that’s the way he has Williams and Pound, those heroes whom he journeyed to see. They look away from the camera, not friends but eminences. With close friends he loosened up: Paul Metcalf, on whose books the Jargon Society lavished its attention, appears to stab his lower lip with a pitch fork, making a demented Grant Wood pose; Simon Cutts stands hands on hips, shirt open at the throat, a working bloke in front of his Coracle Press bookshop; and the beautiful painter Sandra Fisher laughs joyously on misty Howgill Fells, in Cumbria, England.

Standing out to me are three photographs of poet-friends whom Jonathan knew in San Francisco in the 1950s. Jonathan posed Robert Duncan in front of what looks like a painting by Clyfford Still, a backdrop he and Duncan chanced upon in an industrial neighborhood. Duncan is unsmiling, hands in pant pockets, a dangling forelock emphasizing his broad, intelligent forehead. In his text Williams tells the anecdote of Duncan appearing at his railroad flat on Christmas morning and announcing, “Well, here I am, I’m your Christmas present.” You believe that the man in the photograph did just that.

Kenneth Rexroth’s portrait is the first in the book. He’s in profile, wearing a double-breasted jacket like one of Damon Runyon’s Broadway characters, and he looks toward the 7 in a large 7 Up advertisement. Jonathan’s text here is one of this book’s best, full of memories and anecdotes, including Rexroth’s tall tale that Al Capone had given him the racetrack suit. The photograph catches the show-off and ham in Rexroth, who also once claimed to have read all of Wittgenstein before Wittgenstein had been published in English. The one night I spent with him he spoke of “Tom” Eliot, “Bert” Brecht and “Bobby” Dylan. That’s the man in the racetrack suit!

I have seen few photographs of the poet Jack Spicer, and none as compelling as Jonathan’s. Spicer stands on a huge log at the bottom of a towering log pile

somewhere in Mendocino County, California, in 1954. I think of him snarling on a bar stool, keeping his crew in line at the Place or some other North Beach bar. Spicer is taller in this photograph than he is in my mind's eye, and he has a dour expression. Perhaps he feels as out of place as he looks. Every time I look at this photograph I come away with the odd sensation that I'm missing something, that Spicer has eluded my gaze.

The short texts in *A Palpable Elysium* are entertaining, rich in anecdote and humor. In them I can hear Jonathan talking. The folk artists in the book make me regret that Jonathan never published the book he often discussed about Southern folk artists. In this era of greater attention to outsider artists, it makes little sense that Jonathan could not find a publisher to underwrite what the evidence in *A Palpable Elysium* suggests would have been a witty, uninhibited, and refreshingly non-academic addition to the historical record on homegrown American surrealism. Jonathan was something of a folk artist himself. In another *sui generis* book, *Blues & Roots / Rue & Bluets*, which pairs his short found poems with photographs by Nicholas Dean, Jonathan "concretized" road signs and graffiti that he encountered on his journeys by car across America:

U NEED JESUS GOOD BUDDY

ROX FUR SAL

ASS IS NICE

There is more delight in *A Palpable Elysium*, but I have written the appreciation I want to write. This is what led me to do so. Last year I attended a book fair in Manhattan to represent Pressed Wafer, the small press I direct, and to meet my colleague, Michael Russem, the publisher of Kat Ran Press. He shared a table with the publisher David Godine, whom I had last seen at the door of our Boston home when he called to pick up Jonathan for what Jonathan hoped would be an evening with potential angels. In the course of talking about Jonathan, who met no angels that night, David and I began discussing *A Palpable Elysium*, and he told me that he couldn't give away copies of the book. I was surprised that a book of this character, absorbing and pleasurable every time I chance to leaf through it, hadn't found readers. Neither of us knew why this was the case.

My first thought, as I suggested above, is the book's cover. That dark cover, with James Laughlin in silhouette, unrecognizable but to those who knew him, might have been a reason at least for poor sales in bookstores. Had Jonathan's portrait of Pound or of William Carlos Williams been on the cover, the book's fate might have been otherwise. Another consideration is the

book's packaging. Had the book not been shrink-wrapped, a browser could page through it and be captured by the images. But as Jonathan knew too well, good books go unnoticed and unread. How many reviews did *A Palpable Elysium* get when it was published?

It seems right that Jonathan, who discovered so much and was happy to pass on the good word, left this book to be discovered by those who aren't being nourished by our current visual culture of Facebook, Instagram, and other imaging platforms. May this notice alert murkins avid for the world of "genius and solitude" that Jonathan created in this book. "Them that wants it" are those he wrote for. "I can only hope," he added, "that we find 5,000 to 10,000 illuminati who like it enough to buy it." He heeded his friend Joel Oppenheimer's injunction, "Be there when it happens, write it down." Now it's up to you and you and you, just making your way out from under that bush with the blue hydrangea flowers, to record the moments.

William Corbett



William Corbett, 1975. Photograph by Jonathan Williams. Courtesy of the Estate of Jonathan Williams and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.