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I Once Met by Kent Johnson: A Review

I Once Met: a partial memoir of the poetry field, by Kent Johnson. Green River, Vermont: Longhouse, 2007.

Kent Johnson's latest book, *I Once Met: a partial memoir of the poetry field,* is an expanded version of a 2007 chapbook of the same title. The book consists of 102 vignettes, each detailing an encounter with a contemporary literary figure. Together, they compose a Pointillist portrait of an international poetry scene as exciting as anything found in Beat Literature or the novels of Roberto Bolaño. Indeed, the scene Johnson lays out is as theatrical and full of personality as our cherished imaginations of the Lost Generation, Surrealist Europe, the Paris of Rimbaud and Verlaine, the Romantics' Lake District, the London of the Cavalier Poets, or any of the fabled literary worlds we regret having missed, having been born too late.

The book begins with the following vignette:

> I once met the superb poet and scholar Dale Smith. This was in Wisconsin. He is a true gentleman. We put our heads against the side of Lorine Niedecker's homestead cabin, on an island in Fort Atkinson, and we rested there for a spell. And I looked at Dale and he looked at me, and we cried for a little while, it was quite something. . . .

Deep feelings and connections to a literary heritage pervade the memoir and work together to create a life that is full of meaning. In some of Johnson's meetings, the ghosts of great writers add significance to otherwise ordinary encounters, and so open the way to disproportionately intense perception:

> I once met Chris Daniels. He is one of the great translators from the Portuguese, a brilliant man, a real gentleman. This

> was in San Francisco . . . we tried to talk about Poetry, but they were playing The Beatles on the juke box at full volume, something about which Jack Spicer himself, sitting exactly where we were, had once famously complained. . . .

Or this scene, in Pembroke:

> I looked at my hands and saw the age there and the lines of my own complicities. And I pondered some more. Leaving, then, I paused to admire the portrait of Edmund Spenser in the Great Dining Hall: Genius author of *The Faerie Queen;* dark polemicist for genocide in Ireland.

Or, lastly, this, from a meeting with David Bromige in Cambridge:

> There were antiques all around us and portraits on the walls of men from the eighteenth century . . . The river flowed under the rooms; the punts with their straw-hatted boys slid on the river and under the rooms. There were purple and yellow flowers along the banks of the river, and small yellow birds, too. Isn't the river sliding under the rooms lovely, said Cecilia, his wife, handing me a glass of wine, with all the flowers and the birds? Yes, I said, it certainly is, and I felt as if history were moving like a river beneath me, or through me. . . .

The constant reference to poets of the past not only establishes a lineage from which meaning (in letters and in life) can be derived and within which purpose can be achieved, it also evokes the hero-worship that ensorcells young writers as they frantically scribble their juvenilia. At the same time, references to complicity and genocide are hardly wide-eyed or naïve, and this bifocal perspective bonds the memoir by "a curious tension between innocence and experience"—words used by Marjorie Perloff to describe the book *I Remember* by Joe Brainard.

I Once Met is dedicated to Joe Brainard and has more in common with *I Remember* than just the voltaic charge between innocence and experience, and the repetition of a titular, embarking phrase. Like Brainard, Johnson employs a process of accretion to construct a "partial memoir," which is hardly a wonder of literary engineering, but which, in its simplicity, is eminently readable. And, as with *I Remember,* the process transacts across independent fragments that may not

necessarily feature the memoirist as the protagonist (*I Remember* "is as much about everyone else as it is about me and that pleases me," Brainard said) but that all share common origin in his memory.

In addition, the language of *I Once Met* follows that of Brainard and the New York School in its breezy, disarming style. Johnson often writes as if thinking out loud, as in the paragraph about meeting Henry Gould:

> It occurs to me that if it weren't for what happened then that I wouldn't be typing this now, whatever that might mean. It occurs to me that it turned me into everything that I became. I guess that sounds trite . . .

Johnson goes further in his homage to the New York School by obeying the precepts of O'Hara's jokey manifesto of Personism when he addresses the reader as a correspondent, as he does in his remembrance of Andrew Maxwell: "Later, Andrew accepted three of my poems for the *Germ.* But then I never heard from him again. Does anyone have his number? Write me if you know."

The tone is not irreverent nor the request far-fetched, given the few degrees of separation found across the readership of poetry books. Johnson, like the New York School poets before him, recognizes the poetry field's insularity and chooses here to celebrate it so that poetry can go about its business with a light heart.

But there is more than homage in this playful, thinking-out-loud style. There is a moral component that, to borrow from the preoccupations of the New York School, points to a kind of Zen attitude. Improvisatory style implies a belief that everything will be ok in the end and works in contrast to a traditional style behind which a calculating intelligence carefully plots words and their effects, betraying a mentality as goal-oriented and stressed about the future as any middle-class American who fetishizes end products and sacrifices the processing present for a pre-made future, or as any writer who obsesses over literary prizes and place-taking within the literary field.

These latter "literary sins" receive occasional and brief censure in *I Once Met* as Johnson recreates the dialogue of certain encounters, but they are far from the focus of the work. Given the amount of effort Johnson has expended to critique and satirize the lit-world manifestations of capitalist psychology in other projects, it is a relief he does not spend himself railing against them here. It is refreshing that he concentrates instead on the positive aspects of a salubrious alternative; and indeed, this is where the work soars.

> I once met the inimitable poet Howard McCord, whom I've previously mentioned. This was in the forests of southern Ohio . . . Howard's tales of his Green Beret adventures in Laos were incredible but true, heads on stakes, and much more . . . And when we were sated by all this, we went out to the cool porch with the whiskey and beer, and gazed at the stars, and read, taking turns, from the translations of Arthur Waley.

Or this:

> I once met the wonderful poet and translator Lucien Styrk. This was in Illinois. It was summer, and we sipped tea and read Zen death poems under the stars to each other, on his porch in DeKalb. And then somewhere there was a sound, like a cup or a vase shattering in the night. And there was a silence for quite a long time . . . And then a car alarm went off . . . And a man, across the street, began to shout and swear . . . And an ambulance siren started up far away . . . And a deer, with impossibly huge antlers, ran across the yard and vanished into the trees.

What comes across in these and dozens of other vignettes is a life intensely lived, dedicated to poetry, and full of travels and friendships born out of the love of literature and impossible without that love—and so, by most people's standards, impossible.

There is much impossibility in these tales, yet they'd ring true to any poet because any poet has had a similar taste of the improbable. On a train from Boston, Johnson finds an empty seat, notices the man next to him is reading *Bookforum,* and begins to chat, only to learn the man is critic Hua Hsu and has been teaching Johnson's *Yasusada* in his class. Johnson concludes the vignette, "And there wasn't another open seat on the whole train." Similarly, it's thanks to chance seating, this time on an airplane, that he meets Jinx Nolan, who knows all about Johnson because she is daughter of Sidney Nolan who painted Ern Malley, a poet who didn't exist and who inspired Johnson in his meta-literary adventures: "and you have to admit it's pretty strange that we should be sitting next to each other, 30,000 feet up in the air. . . ." Yes, as Johnson says again and again throughout the book, "Life is strange."

But the strangest and most compelling impossibilities are the poets themselves, filled as they are with eccentricity, vitality, power, and passion. They do not hold a dying candle to famous poets of the past, but stand alongside as rivals.

> I once met Elena Shvarts, a first-power Russian poet whom I'd published in a book of late Samizdat experimental writing I edited. This was in Providence . . . I'd just come from dinner with the brilliant Argentine poet Maria Negroni . . . Henry Gould, whom I will mention again soon, was standing by the lectern next to a small woman, a woman who glared at me like an assassin, as smoke issued continuously from her dark-lipped mouth. Kent, this is Elena Shvarts. Elena, this is Kent Johnson. Her hair was very black and she was quite pale. She looked at me very sternly, sucking deeply on her long, brown cigarette, the smoke coming out of her mouth and going into her nose, coming out of her mouth and going into her nose . . . She was doing circular smoke breathing! Then she jabbed at my chest with her fingers, almost setting me on fire and intoned: POETRY IS A MATTER OF THE GREATEST EMERGENCY. BEWARE! She would be dead in two years.

From this and other meetings, one ought conclude nothing other than our era stands as a worthy rival to the eras of the past. It is an era when poets can do things and go places like the following:

> I once met Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, a great Russian poet. This was in Leningrad, a place I'd earlier mentioned. It was the last year of Perestroika, and there was a conference of new poetry there, the first truly open international avant-garde literature event in the USSR since 1922, or so, in fact. One thing I will never forget from that simulacral city in reverse is sitting in a vast hall in a vast, ornate Czarist building made all of marble, crimson-draped windows towering to the ceiling, looking out onto the Neva, swarms of cherubs fat and hot for Aphrodite above. . .

As these uplifting accounts accumulate, the potency of their effects increases; and the effects are inspirational and curative. Edward Gibbon wrote, "There exists in human nature a strong propensity to depreciate the advantages and to magnify the evils of the present times," and Edward Dahlberg noted the same, adducing that even St. Augustine believed that the human race was dwindling, that olden towns were fabled to be founded by giants and that the size of men was decreasing. But *I Once Met* is a potential antidote to the skepticism, cynicism, and hand-wringing over the current situation of poetry; it is a jarring reminder that the present is very much worth living—a good thing, that.