

“... Kent Johnson has taken up arms in a seemingly marginal segment of society, that of the ‘post-avant’ poetry scene. In this theater of operations, he takes a scalpel to the formation of our ideological consciousness in a poetry that matters more and more as it maps, investigates, and interrogates just how we got where we are.”—Ammiel Alcalay

“These poems, at times brutal or pornographic, mourn the ambiguous legacies of an empire now in crisis [. . .] If, in Johnson’s work, poetry must change itself by taking that long hard look in the mirror, what shows is no merely blithe or tortured or self-referential celebration of the writing act, but an unflinching courage that demands to know how each one of us . . . is implicated in violence. Tellingly, Johnson resurrects what are in fact quite ancient formal and stylistic modes for these contemporary transgressions; his is not an *avant* that engineers a *tabula rasa* but one that looks back to the memory of our (human) race, where, as he suggests, translation comes before poetry and not the other way around.”
—Vivek Narayanan

“Like the Jews, if Kent Johnson didn’t exist, someone would have to invent him. His mind leaks nomads constantly naming world-historic hinges as if inscription were always underfoot. You can’t pull Catullus out of the ‘incubated / god, writing himself into being’ but you can pull the door open. Literature is close to fraud, evanescent and trembling in these times of incipient terror. Johnson’s approach deconstructs and exacerbates that fraud; I think of his work as returning to the (re)creation of language—political and sexual language, the languages of the last people speaking on earth.” —Alan Sondheim

“Lyrical, taut, amused, seeing, pissed. Kent Johnson’s poems make me uncomfortable. And uncomfortable in a good way.”—Hoa Nguyen

Among the poems gathered here I have found insults to my mother’s virtue first scrawled by my father on a brick he hurled through the window of our maid’s bedroom one night in 1977. This happened in Lima, a city with the weather of London and the body of Los Angeles. The glass shattering is my first memory. I was never allowed to read the brick. Was Kent Johnson our maid? I can see him between loads of laundry taking a whiff of my dirty poems and your dirty poems. Now with his new book against my breast I am pulled to the broken window and the night mist and bus exhaust and the next thirty years that will happen to all of us.”—Farid Matuk

“The blurbs are over—as hors d’œuvres. It is a question, now, of penultimate homage to the home age’s garden and of non ironic misquotation on the border of (American) poetry; Kent Johnson writes on such an unparalleled front/ier. También.”—Andrés Ajens

Also by Kent Johnson:

Poetry

Waves of Drifting Snow

Joyous Young Pines

The Miseries of Poetry: Traductions from the Greek (reprinted, UK)

Dear Lacan: An Analysis in Correspondence (reprinted, UK)

Epigramititis: 118 Living American Poets

Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz: Eleven Submissions to the War

He Pearls That We (UK)

I Once Met

Traduciendo a Saenz y otros poemas (Chile)

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KENT JOHNSON

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For D., B., and A.

You just go on your nerve.

—Frank O'Hara

EIGHT ODES FOR *THE EVERGREEN REVIEW*

KENNETH KOCH

Thanks to his poem about a garbage can lid being smashed into a likeness of King George the Third's face, my sixteen year old son is now writing poetry. This activity has recently led him into drinking alcohol and experimenting with drugs, which makes it difficult for me to say, but I'll say it anyway: Thank you, Kenneth Koch, for your marvelous contributions to Poetry.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE]

The following poem represents the first instance of a new poetic form. I have christened it the “Mandrake” (the name used for the mayapple [*Podophyllum peltatum*] by various 16th and 17th century English poets). Those who would attempt the form in the future must adhere to the following guidelines:

The first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth stanzas (all of them as a group called the “flower”) must make some kind of reference to one or two poets of a preceding poetic generation; all of the poets referred to in each of the flower stanzas must have been contemporaries of one another. The stanzas may be written in any meter, rhymed or unrhymed, and may be of any length (prose poetry is also acceptable, as this first example makes clear), but each stanza in the flower must exhibit some sense of parallelism in theme and syntactic logic to its companion flower stanzas.

The second, fourth, sixth, eighth, tenth, twelfth, and final fourteenth stanzas (all of them as a group called the “fruit”) must be rendered in prose, with a majority of these stanzas constituting quoted material. There are no other guidelines for the fruit, save that the fruit as a whole be totally dissimilar in theme(s) and tone from the flower, and that the final fourteenth stanza have some reference to the mayapple’s seasonal companion, the morel mushroom (in any of the *morchella* species).

Finally, any “Mandrake” must be led off by some kind of brief introduction, as this originating example is (i.e., the one you are reading right now), so as to provide the poem with a kind of critical or anecdotal stem, a little bit of hollow “normal discourse” propping up the contrapuntal dissonances of theme and tone which the prosodic grid outlined above will inevitably proffer.

★ ★ ★

THE NEW YORK SCHOOL (OR: I GREW EVER MORE INTENSE)

I turned over the bottle of shampoo and Frank O'Hara came out. I rubbed him all into my head, letting the foam rise, knowing I was just warming myself up, excited by the excess of what was to come. Soon, I began to make noisy climax sounds. The scent of oranges and oil paint from a general store in the outlaw town of Shishido (with all its exotic wares) filled the stormy air.

I couldn't help it, I thought of this: *One day, a fortnight or so after my mother's death in Shishido, I was up in the hills playing with some friends. Suddenly one of them said, Look, the baby's hands are all swollen. I touched the baby, which was still strapped to my back, and screamed—it was stone cold. My friends began to panic and jump up and down, shouting, It's dead, it's dead. It felt awful having something dead tied to me, so I ripped off my jacket and dropped the baby, before joining the others as they ran back down the hill as fast as their legs would take them, shrieking.*

I grew ever more intense. I pressed the button on the shaving cream and Barbara Guest came out. I smoothed her taut-as-a-canvas-body all over my cheeks and neck and chin and then I made some hills and valleys in her flatness, using my fingers in an artistic way. The complex smell of dark woods outside the Kamakura town of Hokaisu after a sudden shower (including the eastern smells of sake, persimmon, cicada, cherry blossom, fugu, and haiku) filled the humid air.

I couldn't help it, I thought of this: *Accounts of the horror in the town of Hokaisu have the quality of Hieronymus Bosch's grotesque tableaux of apocalypse: torched villages; macheted babies in the streets; stoned child warriors indulging in cannibalism and draping themselves with the entrails of their victims; peacekeepers—mostly Uruguayans—using their guns only to drive off waves of frantic civilians seeking refuge in their already overflowing compound; a quarter of a million people in frenzied flight from their homes . . . Hundreds of thousands of Congolese have been killed in the fighting, and many more have died as a consequence of the displacement, disease, and hunger that attend it.*

I grew ever more intense. I turned over the aftershave and Ted Berrigan came out. I slapped him just as he was, all pudgy with things, on my face,

and he stung, and I yelled at him. I liked it, so I slapped him on me again, hard, and again, yet, then thrice more, and I yelled without restraint. The complex scent of medieval Kyoto filled the heavy air, and there were great wooden and paper prefectures and lots of people with feelings and fears and things like that, just running around like ants, they were, and many kimonoed poets also, their faces lit weirdly by ancient electric screens, competing for cultural capital in a big interactive board game with manifold levels, like in Go, and the stakes were high, very high, for Volvo driving academics died for lack of what was found there.

I couldn't help it. I thought of this: *I was so surprised to see the dark sky over New York with all the red flames through the window because it was only a few minutes before when the sky was blue and clear. It was all quiet and the city was wrapped, enveloped in red flames. Mr. Wakita came to help me. He asked me if I wanted to swim across the river. The bridge was burning and the river was very high. I had no choice. I could barely see by then, though. And Mr. Wakita took my arms and told me to swim across the river together with him, so together we went into the river and began to swim. Swim, you blistered dead baby, swim, he cried, though why he chose these words, I do not know. When we reached the middle of the river, I could no longer see anything and I was starting to feel faint. And as I began to feel faint, I also began to lose control. Mr. Wakita encouraged me and helped me to reach the other side of the river. Finally, we reached the other side. What surprised me so much was all the cries of the students for help and for their mothers. It just didn't stop. I couldn't see anything. All I could do was listen to their cries. I asked my teacher, I asked him what was going on. Mr. Wakita explained to me how the high school students were burnt and crouching in pain in the streets, many of them urinating and defecating openly. I couldn't see anything . . . Some called for help in vain, and some jumped into the river and drowned to death. If my teacher, Mr. Wakita, had not come to help me, I would have died in the Hudson River.*

I grew ever more intense. I squeezed the toothpaste tube and James Schuyler came out. I scrubbed him with my brush against my teeth, looking at myself in the mirror and him all white in my mouth. He tasted like old apricots or hot-house nasturtiums. I spit him out, and the smell of the futuristic city of Pyongyang, when the red calia flower (which

symbolizes the Four Eternal Qualities of the Great Leader) is in bloom in all the places of that magical city, where everyone feels gratitude and joy, even though, advanced as these comrades are, they still harbor the prejudices that this poem is not as good as it would be if it had been published in print, in one of the clubby Pyongyang venues of the day, like, say, *Fuck You: a journal of the arts*.

I couldn't help it, I thought of this: *The fourteen young soldiers of the Al-Quram Division, all of them descendants of the NSA-created Royal Court of Pyongyang, mummified by the dry heat but otherwise intact, were found in their sand bunker, crouched and huddled, fetus-like, in a corner, their hands pressed to their ears, their mouths wide open, lips pulled back over their teeth, each in near identical pose and position. Blood from their mouths, ears, noses, urethras, and rectums was caked thickly to their uniforms and bodies. They had been killed by the cumulative force of the Daisy Cutter concussions.*

I grew ever more intense. I turned the button on the deodorant stick and Joseph Ceravolo came out. I slid his bald head back and forth under my arms and began to sing a romantic lied by Harry Partch as arranged by Pauline Oliveros. The aroma of an oil refinery in the twelfth century town of Ishido filled the air, and beneath its huge candled fires, tail-finned cars moved silently in a long slow line, and homeless people, expelled from their lands by the evil Lord of the School of Quietude, with only wooden shingles to cover their private parts, lay motionless under rows of ultra-violet lamps, their necks bizarrely contorted until buds of brown buds sprouted all over their fluorescent bodies, and these, after a time, caught fire as if of themselves; thus, the homeless people perished in this way, giving off the most theatrical screams. They almost sounded like people on fire, jumping from great, towered heights far away in the future, kicking their flame-licked legs the whole way down, you know what I mean, don't you, David Shapiro, you with your spine full of elms, each elm full of little wrens, each wren making a song of green and mauve weather in the elms in your spine, but wait, that's not possible, how could a person have a bunch of singing birds in his spine, oh shut up Joe LeSueur, you pretty geisha boy, end of stanza.

I couldn't help it, I thought of this: *Mr. Giap and his buddies, all illegal immigrants from the town of Ishido, had eaten some rare fresh meat that had suddenly become available in the local market in Saigon one day in 1969, he recalled. Then the U.S. military police came around asking whether anyone had bought that meat in the market. Some American soldiers who were hungry and full of drugs had raped and killed the boy and cooked some of his meat with a flame thrower and eaten it and then sold the rest to the local merchant, and we bought it from that merchant, Mr. Giap said. He added that he had heard that the American soldiers had been punished for the killing and the cannibalism, and that one of them was widely known throughout the U.S. military in Vietnam as an experimental poet of the highest order. This just goes to show you, said Mr. Giap, tersely, that avant-garde poets can appear anywhere and sometimes be very, very bad people. Later that day, Mr. Giap flew to a secret location to address an emergency meeting of the 19th Sector NLF Urban Command.*

I grew ever more intense. I turned over the mouthwash and Kenneth Koch came out. I swished him around and gargled him, making the sound of a drowning Prince in the false 18th century Kingdom of Formosa (the name given to Japan by the infamous forger George Psalmanazar). He (Koch) tasted of secrets and codes, of pre-Socratic papyrus and pussy willow, of communion wafers and coleslaw. The smell of baseball, synesthesia, and Ron Padgett's funny tiny feet bound in purple silk spun by worms grown in trailer truck laboratories furnished by U.S. government Programs for the Arts made an overdetermined smell like (for these are the smells which the pleasures of peace provide) the smell I smelled in Leningrad in 1989, when, wedged between Barrett Watten and Ron Silliman, I entered the closet-sized cloister of a Shinto temple to look at the mummified middle finger of the Russian saint Nishiwaki Junzaburo under glass. We looked at each other sidelong, like fish, each hatching our private plots, pretending we weren't looking at the other.

I couldn't help it, I thought of this: *In the Kingdom of false Formosa, a young girl, perhaps eight or nine years old, climbed out of the burning car in which her mother, father, and sister sat dead, their open-eyed bodies on slow fire. In shock, she walked around in tight circles, her fingers hanging by nerves and skin*

from her hands. She did not cry or say anything. She simply walked in circles for about five minutes, an impassive look on her face, until she slowly knelt and curled up in apparent sleep on the street, the shooting continuing above her body for another twenty minutes or so. During that time, she bled to death.

I grew ever more intense. In an outhouse on the hills of Nokaido, I wiped myself and then I went to the sink and depressed the pump on the hand soap dispenser and John Ashbery came out. I scrubbed his essence into my hands and began talking to myself in tongues. Because I was stimulated I pressed out some more of him, and rubbed him all over my calves and thighs, making some hoarse shouts. The fragrance of small birds and large flying machines fabricated of paper and piano wire filled the damp air; the machines were flying from Paris to New York, but the birds, it appeared, were migrating in the opposite way.

I couldn't help it, I thought of this: *I went morel hunting with my son the other day on the hills of Nokaido, his last spring before he leaves for university, he once swathed and strapped to my back, his life now completely other and superior to mine, his handsome looks, his clear mind, his at-ease-in-his-skin mien. And at the top of the hill we found about three pounds of beautiful big mushrooms. Looking at him walking in the woods, hearing him shout out that here's another one, oh, look, father, here's another one, me looking at him, thinking the most sentimental things and shielding my tears from his view: How is it possible the years have gone by like they have and that I will never get them back? How is it that this world is so full of suffering and hurt? I guess when you think about it, I thought, rubbing my drippy nose with my silk sleeve, the left sleeve, where the baby snow crane is raising his wings against the half-moon, well, I guess I've been pretty lucky after all, enjoying the pleasures of calligraphy and sake in all the surplus time the labor of others has more or less made for me. Some of us are like rain, and others of us are like the thirsty ground, and others of us are like parasitical mushrooms, especially poets, and that's just the way things have come to be. The truth is that I felt like running back down the hill as fast as my legs would take me, shrieking, seeking I do not know what. But I gathered my composure and turning toward him said, in deep fatherly voice, Ah, that is wonderful son! The gods of the forest are smiling upon us today.*

WITTGENSTEIN (OR: THOSE WERE THE DAYS)

Thought is surrounded by a halo. All of a sudden, someone paints a picture in order to show how he imagines a theater scene!

—Ron Padgett

It was spring—Primaverus mysteriumus!

Down at *The Eagle* we took turns making him fly around the room. (Russell and Keynes were already KO'd in the loo.) Then, one of us hung him up by the back of his gown against the board. And then another of us cooed, like a boy playing a girl, "for thus sings he; Cuckoo. Cuckoo." And then we had some shots and some stout, and spoke like men do. And then we took out our dart cases (lacquered and dark, like the compacts of sluts) and aimed. We aimed inside the rules of the game that is named: "*Why Is There Somethinge Rather Than Nothings?*"

O Pembroke, with your portrait of Spenser and your Chris Smart Room!

O Christ's, with your portrait of Marlowe, the pederast and spy!

O King's, with your massive green and your flowers and punts and your red-hot poker with which the insufferable prick threatened our Popper!

POETRY BLOGS (OF THE FOURTH GENERATION) IN ZÜRICH

I was having dinner with Francis Picabia, Kurt Schwitters, and the Count of Lautréamont. Some other minor poets of the pre-war years were there. A slave boy from the Spanish colonies loyally fanned the room. Lautréamont was dead, of course, and his boiled body was being served in thin slices stuffed into baguettes the shape of small pods which characterize the genus *Asclepias*.^{*} Everything was going famously: Picabia was making Vvvvvvv sounds, holding the severed wheel of his crashed Belogna; Ball was flapping his papier-maché wings at top velocity; and Man Ray's three mistresses, with their pointed, penitent hoods, were sipping absinthe and whispering mysteriously near the lime tree. Then it happened that Breton gave his ten year old, bowl-cutted son, Aragon (a clique-herding brat affecting the most pompous equanimity), a slice of the Count's perfectly shaped derrière. The child swallowed and immediately commenced to gag and retch, his little hands going to his throat, like the hands of a shot head of state, and he turned violet throughout the whole area of his slightly pudgy body. Nadja began to ululate, and Breton began to blurt primal commands, his shouts seeming to come from elsewhere, as if the hand of some Other were up his spine. The sounds coming from the child were those of crows, or something else I cannot yet name. In this moment of crisis, I did not choke, nosiree, I did not: I sprinted over and performed the maneuver I had brought with me from the future, the *Heimlich*, as it is known, wrapping my arms around the bug-eyed munchkin, squeezing and lifting his rib cage with all my might in five rapid thrusts. It worked! There on the parquet floor, writhing, covered in a film of slime, was a baby shark. "How on earth did *that* get into him?" cried Lacan, in his ballooned pantaloons. "I don't know, but I could give a shit," growled Gertrude Stein. "Pass the butter."

^{*} *i.e.*, *Milkweed*

POEM UPON A TYPO FOUND IN AN INTERVIEW OF KENNETH KOCH, CONDUCTED BY DAVID SHAPIRO¹

1. First of ill, I fell in love.
2. I could, of course, go on and on.
3. The gapeseed trees leaned down; the humors of a flying thing broke swith in a deafening whoosh.
4. Well, certes, this just shows our tholen souls have been braided everywhen as one.
5. And therefrom, the sun shone down thro the missled hole upon the praying ones and.
6. It was full of smoke in that dome, fore the days of no smoking.
7. I remember those good old days, whilom it was me, and Will and Ben and Chris and the wholesome lads of the laste avant-garde.
8. And always, eke, that tother, the girl whose number was a misterium to me.
9. She blew out some rings and did say: It seems I am losing my trellis of thought, rushing with you through this tunnel of trees, whitherward our fate we canst know, nor whencesoever we have come, nor usward what speeds.
10. For there are coins where once there were our eyne.
11. I liked the little hussy that way, naked but for a brassiere, how she could say the darndest things and with such casual mien, as if a kind of chord falling from her spine were plugged into some vast background dump of language.
12. (Exaltingly, eftsoons, I sawed her in the sweven of the flowering trees. She was a plane girl, really, ilke, fain and yare, with wings all swoopstake on her thorax plus eyne of tinsel shillings. Stilled, I lived her with all my might, chasing a horse amain into the sun. You'd never know it now from my face. It was more archaic than it now seems, was more like the sun. Stained and morning-breathéd, we woke in Atocha, to puissant concussions alow the ground.)²

13 (a). My nickname at Christ's College was "Beuys"; I spent five years in its crucifixed sanatorium, whence, a foil upon my temples, great voltage did floode my soiled bodie.

13 (b). But, anyway, to continue and for exemplars: Please observe how in this amber light the prints of the figs are perfectly preserved and.

14. Not to mention that the one whose name is Love is in the form of a faucet.

15. And should it seem at the end of every verse that I am washing my hands of the people and cranes whom I have hammered into this foil for fun, well, then that is the way of the silly sun.

16. Lit from within, as if the fractures in the loveliness were intentionally stressed to the point where it all might just come apart, but not yet qwuite.

17. Peradventure, as if to illustrate, the giant exchange student from the colonies entered the foiled room.

18 (a). Roman and ebonied, eyes whited by the burn, he cried forth and broke the spell:

18 (b). How come is a bus in a desert on fire, he did say, gardyloo.³

19. Prithee, thee, quickly, now, break thro this water! (unidentified female voice in the room)

20. For don't you know, dude (the giant continued), that's what your hair will be: Flames shooting upward until you wouldn't see because it were so high up there.

21. I know it sound incredible, somedeal, OK?

22. And I know you be sad and happy at a great flip-flop velocity.

23. But I shit you not: Stop clapping, hug your kin, and look immediately to the sky.

¹ In 1972, in the library of Pewaukee High School, in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, I opened, for no particular reason, a copy of *Poetry* magazine, ca. late 60's, in which happened to be featured David Shapiro's 'Poems from Deal.' I was 16, and I read there that Shapiro had composed the poems when he was 18. I had never read poetry like this before (I'd read little poetry, period), and I mark that encounter as what "turned me on" to poetry, thus changing my life. (Whether I should thank Shapiro with all of my heart or send him a very powerful letter bomb is a question I often ask myself.)

² For what the coincidence is worth, this poem was published at *Jacket* Magazine the day before the Atocha Station train bombings in Spain. *Jacket's* esteemed editor, John Tranter, can verify this odd detail.

³ Translation, in all instances, approved by The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.