

**KENT JOHNSON**

## I Once Met

--to the memory of Joe Brainard and to the heart of David Shapiro

I once met the fine poet Tony Tost. He was well-structured and constructed. I really liked him. There was a painting of boats behind him. A bit paunchy around the middle, he was, but solid.

I once met Todd Sandvik. He was paunchy as well. A true gentleman and I really liked him. He had a distillery in his house. But now he doesn't write me anymore. Damn.

I once met Gabe Gudding. I really liked him. We read together. I gave him my \$300 reading fee so he could buy gas for his trip to Rhode Island. Drive carefully, I said, Watch out where you're going. Looking back on it, now, things come into better focus.

I once met Kasey Silem Mohammad. This was at our reading. I liked him. There were grad students from Brown all around. I said, Kasey, would you please pass me the salt? Go fuck yourself, you manufacturer of scandal, he said. (No, not really, I just made that up.)

I once met Jack Kimball. I think it was in a bar. He had just said he wanted to throttle me, and this made me feel bad. All I'd done was to read a sestina!

I've never met Scott Pierce. But my son has. My son, of whom I am proud, for he is very good, is an intern this summer at Effing Press, in Austin, Texas. Though you'd never know it, since Scott has never mentioned it...

I've never met Farid Matuk, either, but I wish I could. If you haven't read his new book, you should. I haven't read it yet myself, but my son wrote me and said it is pretty fucking amazing dad, he is the King, so I'm going on that.

I once met Dale Smith. We put our heads against the side of Lorine Niedecker's old house on an island in Fort Atkinson and we rested them there for a long time, and I looked at Dale and he looked at me, and we cried for a

little while, it was quite something. Then we went to the bar down the road where a small dog walked in circles on its hind quarters.

I once met Ron Silliman. We were in the Soviet Union. On the last day, in the bar of the Baltiskaya Hotel, if that's how you spell it, he said, you know, ent, something tells me we are going to meet up again. Well, we haven't yet, though I suppose in a way we have. Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian inexplicably floated above us, circling the room, like lovers in a Chagall.

I once met Marjorie Perloff. This was at the MLA. She is an extraordinarily nice 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.

I once met Ken Rumble. This was at an airport. Hi Kent, he said. Hi Ken, I said. Can I carry your bag, he said. No, that's OK, I said, I'm used to carrying bags—it's nice to carry my own every once in a while...

I once met Allen Ginsberg. This was at Orono. I had with me an anthology of Buddhist poetry that I'd edited, and since I'd corresponded with Ginsberg in the making of it, I wanted him to sign it. Oh, so \*you're\* that guy, said Allen. What guy? I said.

I once met Matt Henriksen when I read with David Shapiro, whom I also met. I stayed in Matt's little apartment in the Bronx with his lovely partner. The apartment was so small we were basically in the same room, and I snored like a pig all night, or so he told me grumpily the next morning.

I once met Erin Moure. I read first and she read second. Kevin Killian was there and also Aaron Shurin. I liked them both, but I liked Erin even more, having always been partial to Canada, a land with low murder rate.

I've never met Jordan Davis. I could have met him, but he's chosen not to come to any of my readings in NYC. I wonder why? I've always wanted to give him the secret handshake. Damn.

I once met Ammiel Alcalay, a tremendous poet and a true gentleman. We sat up all night in Milwaukee smoking cigarettes he rolled. They were skinny and looked like joints. His hair is fabulous, it looks like a lion's mane, and that's just what he was like, a lion talking, there, in a great cloud of smoke, and I could understand him!

I once met Jenny Boully. This was right before I met Jim Behrle. Jenny has written an amazing essay about Araki Yasusada. She was smart and kind in the most winning of ways. When I asked Jim Behrle if he'd like to come back

to my hotel and go for a swim, he said no thanks, I have a previous engagement.

I once met George Bowering. He had that day thrown out the first pitch at Miller Park, before the Brewers played the Astros. Later, in the fourth inning, someone hit a foul ball, and it went into the box seats and hit Bowering on the head. At the party, we talked pleasantly, and when he put a piece of cracker and sausage in his mouth, I did the same. We were in synchrony like this for about twenty minutes. There was a purple bump on his hairline. It was, it seemed to me, the bump of Poetry.

I once met, as I said, David Shapiro. There seemed to be a kind of light around his body, crackling. I asked him if he thought it was possible that someone besides Frank O'Hara actually wrote "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," and he said, immediately, like a Keeper of the Secret, No, I don't think so, because it's clearly typed on Frank's portable Royal. Well, I've discovered some things, and I'm going to be unleashing them soon upon the world.

I once met Diane Wakoski. We went out to dinner at a pizza place. She talked and talked about Tom Cruise. She went on about him for over an hour. I am not kidding!

I once met Robert Hass. He asked me what I was working on. I said, I'm working on the second Saenz book. He looked at me, puzzled, and then someone else said something and he had to go. Later, Forrest Gander said to me: Robert asked me what Science book you were working on... Well, \*that\* was funny.

I once met Eliot Weinberger. We walked around Iowa City, talking. I liked him, he was well structured and constructed. I think we talked about China and Pound and also about James Laughlin and Samuel Beckett and things like that. A woman approached... Quick, get the fuck behind the car, said Eliot. We did and hid there, crouching. It was Jorie Graham, followed by a train of forty students.

I once met Bei Dao. This was in Chile. We talked and he gave me his card. Call me, he said, call me when you get in. A true gentleman. Poets from Bolivia and Ecuador were passed out in chairs and on the floor.

I once met Anne Waldman. We were on a panel together about Poetry and Buddhism. We were in an elevator going down. I asked her if she would like to come to read in Illinois. Oh, of course, she said, What is your honorarium? Well, I said, it is perhaps somewhat modest, \$300 plus travel and hotel is

what I can offer, I wish it were more, I said, but it's all I have. Oh, no then, she said, that wouldn't do it.

I once met Jonathan Mayhew. This was in St. Louis. I won't here allow my opinions free rein, nor reveal private details. For he generously came to hear me read. And why should I not repay that with a momentary kindness? Yes, *Titus Andronicus* is a violent mess. But *As You Like It* is a violence of grace and gentleness.

I once met Chris Daniels. When he smiled so broadly as I read, I knew we would be forever friends. Later, at Gino and Carlo's, we tried to talk about Poetry, but they were playing The Beatles on the juke box at full volume.

I once met Andrew Felsing. I met him at the Vesuvio. We had a warm, sincere day together. And I felt close to him, like to a younger brother. But we have grown apart, and I am not sure why. And yet even this, in the ways of sorrow, is beautiful and strange.

I once met Ernesto Cardenal. We sat, smoking, with a tape recorder and a bottle of rum between us for six or seven hours. He talked quietly about Pound, Jeffers, Amy Lowell, Neruda and Vallejo, about the debate then raging around the Talleres de Poesia movement, about how Exteriorismo had been inspired by Pound's Imagism and Vorticism. Artillery rounds went off all day in the distance, and helicopters flew over every now and then, carrying Sandinista fighters to the front. Yes, that afternoon was certainly one of the highlights of my life.

I once met Mark Nowak. This was in England. I went, meditative, to the gorgeous gardens of Pembroke. The irises were in bloom. Cock-Robin hopped happy about. Peter Rabbit munched distracted on a fern. I'd met Mark years before in Ohio, at a dance where he was bouncing up and down like a pogo stick. But this was a different person, now. Oh, very different... I sat there for a while, pondering the contradictions of poetry and the impermanence of all things. I looked at my hands, and saw the age there and all 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.

I've never met Billy Collins, but once I had a dream about him. We were sitting side by side, in a kind of capsule attached to a long metal arm. And the capsule began to spin faster and faster, until my face deformed with the pressure, and I screamed for them to let me out of the capsule. I looked over at Billy Collins, whose face had now become the lovely face of Ingrid Bergman in the movie Casablanca, and he/she just gazed at me, serene, through a soft filtered hue. And I screamed and screamed until my skull, of a sudden,

collapsed like an egg shell, into a brownish dust. So now you see: You've been dead for three billion years, said Billy in her husky voice. And then I woke up.

I once met Joan Retallack. She was extremely nice. We went to The Eagle Pub in Cambridge for lunch. She wanted to know about Yasusada. I tried to explain some things but grew tongue-tied for some reason, and the more I talked the more awkward I did become. Actually, this often happens to me, and who knows why. I felt sad about this, angry, even, at my lack of ease. And I just have to say, because it's engraved in my mind, how above us, the whole while, were many dark numbers and names, burned with matches and lighters into the ceiling, by American bomber pilots of the Second World War.

I once met Hua Hsu. This was on a train from Boston. I walked through five cars before I found an empty seat. I noticed he was reading BookForum. What do you do? I said. I write about popular culture and music and teach at Harvard, he said. And where are you going? he said. I'm going to New Haven, they've invited me for a talk, I said. Oh, a talk about what, he said. Well, it's about some poems concerning Iraq which the Yale Poetry Group have, I mean has, been discussing, and also about this other work I am executor for, it's a bit controversial, a fictional author named Araki Yasusada. Oh, you must be kidding, he said, I've been teaching Yasusada for the past three years, my students really love it. And there wasn't another seat on the whole train.

I once met Andrew Maxwell. That's the Museum of Jurassic Technology, he said, pointing. The French poet in the back, with whom I was to read, said, What is theez, some exemplary of a certain joke? Later, Andrew accepted three of my poems for *The Germ*. But then I never heard from him again. In fact, I don't even know if he is still alive. Does anyone else? Write me if you know.

I once met John Beer. He had a t-shirt with the John Deere design that said "John Beer." I laughed and he laughed, too. What a delightful fellow. Mark Yakich was funny that night, but I think I got the most response. Then again, shortly after I'd finished reading, I noticed that my fly was undone.

I once met Gary Sullivan. He doesn't know this because it was a Halloween party at Alan Sondheim's, and I was dressed up like a sexy hooker. What's up, sugar, he said. Hi there, you ten-inch lollipop, I said.

I once met Aaron Kunin, after I'd read at RISD. But it was loud, and I didn't catch his name. He looked like the comic-book character Archie, but with a red afro. What do you do, I said. I study the Renaissance, he shyly said. That's impressive, I said, Would you like to come with us to the bar? No, no thank you, he said, receding into the Providential darkness, his voice soft and high as a meadowlark's: For I have a previous engagement...

I once met Elena Shvarts, a great Russian poet whom I'd published in a book I edited. The time in question is right before my first reading at Brown. I'd just come from dinner with the brilliant Argentinian poet Maria Negroni and her funny husband, a builder of suspension bridges, and was feeling quite special and content. Henry Gould 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 her mouth and going into her nose, coming out 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, drunkenly: POETRY IS A MATTER OF THE GREATEST EMERGENCY. BEWARE! She would be dead in two years.

I once met Jackson Mac Low. This was on that panel about Buddhism. I remember that he didn't say very much, nor did he move very much, really. But at the end of the evening he shook my hand and said, "Nice to have met you."

I once met Jaime Saenz. This was in La Paz. Well, actually, I met his death mask. It's very unsettling to meet the death mask of a poet you've been translating for a long time.

I've never met John Ashbery, but I feel like I have. Automobiles go by in the night. And somewhere, huge wooden machines stand at attention in a gentle, foggy field, on the hidden side of a mountain, in a cheap velvet painting, it all akimbo and askew, yet somehow still hanging there on half a wall, in some bombed out slum, on the outskirts of Beirut.

I once met Joe Amato, when I read in Bloomington, Illinois. Gabriel Gudding introduced the reading to a crowd of eighty people or so. I want to say, he dramatically said, that I believe Kent Johnson has brought what I would call Enchantment into the innovative sphere of American poetry... Hmm, well, OK, be that as it may, my main point is that I was simply shocked after the reading by Joe Amato's foul, dirty mouth. Such language: Obscenities poured from his lips like terrible poisonous flowers! A true torrent of filth!

I've never met John Latta, but I would like to. I believe we would enjoy each other's company. We would go to the Shaman's Drum Bookstore in Ann Arbor and poke around, saying look at this, look at that. But then again, perhaps we wouldn't. I mean perhaps we wouldn't enjoy each other's company at all. And yet, and yet...even that would be OK: For after all, there wouldn't be much poetry, would there be, if everyone got along...

I once met Alexandra Papaditsas. She had a horn coming out of her head. We walked without speaking (this was her request) for a long time on the island...Yes, yes, the bay in its glorious azure, the fishing boats, for it was Sunday, bobbing on the small waves. Children from the village played at hiding in the groves and goats grazed with their bells in the rocky hills. The monastery (where she lived and toiled all her selfless days to break the code of Linear Script B) was a blinding dome of white on the mount. I don't think I've ever known such happiness as I knew that wordless afternoon on Patmos. This, of course, was before the great darkness fell...

I once met Mairead Byrne. She was very nice and I liked her very much. People were coming into the room, and what looked like a sure dud of a turnout became at the last minute an attendance success! So, are you ready for the lion's pit, she said, turning on the microphone. Oh, Mairead, I said, feeling a great urge to pee in my pants, You're such a stitch!

I've never met Ron Padgett, but I almost did. I raised my fist before his door and paused. There were cicadas screaming to death in the rich summer trees. Why ruin it, I said, and walked away.

I once met Steve Evans, though he didn't know who I was (this was at the Halloween party, where I was dressed as a hooker). Does Kasey know one shouldn't put a comma between noun clause subjects and verbs, I said, or is that just part of the irony of Flarf? What the hell are you talking about you gorgeous slut, slurred Steve, in his dragonfly wings, sloshing beer all over my breasts.

I once met Lucien Stryk. 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.

I once met David Hadbawnik after my reading at the SF Poetry Center. He was complimentary and also handsome. We talked for a spell, though I now can't recall what the topic was. Probably just small talk, the weather and such, as people are wont to do. Then Kevin Killian came up and said in an urgent sort of shush, Did you two see what Norma was wearing tonight? What on Earth could she be thinking? Why, she'd be just laughed off the campus at NPF!

I once met Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, a great Russian poet. This was in Leningrad. It was the last year of Glasnost, and there was a conference of new

poetry there. 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, Barrett facing me across the great mahogany table in a kind of late pinkish glow, dapper Aeneas in a polo shirt, looking somewhat edgy, eating little spoonfuls of caviar, as satyr attendants from the Ministry of Culture rose and offered formal toasts to the “American Poetic Friends of the Soviet Union.” Arkadii Dragomoshchenko leaned over to me and with booze on his breath said in heaviest accent, Is this a great quantity of such repulsive fucking dog shit or what? You think so? I said, my mouth full of bread and sturgeon eggs. Why, it’s the first time in my life that I feel like a real Poet. I think this is fantastic! And to my left, far away, at the far head of the regal table, was Ron Silliman, his whole face consumed by a blinding sphere of light.

I once met C.D. Wright. We were in Disney World. We’d gone there on vacation with her and Forrest Gander and their son, “we” being my wife and two boys. The three kids were nine, eleven, and thirteen, and they were each a loaded automatic pistol looking for trouble. It was horribly hot and this was the third day. We sat down for coolness in the shade of a plastic tree near the Giant Spinning Cups of Tea, or whatever they are called. Oh, please someone just goddamn shoot me, said C.D... I have a photo of her right after she said this, and she doesn’t appear to be kidding. Minnie Mouse and Goofy are standing behind her, waving.

I once met Stephen Rodefer. This was in England. It was Spring, and I was talking pleasantly to Kevin Nolan, Astrid Lampe, and David Bromige. Stephen Rodefer came over and said something like, So Kevin and David, 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. I grabbed his collar, pinned him against the wall, and said I would break his impertinent nose and worse if he ever messed with me that way again. I mean, I was really angry! OK, OK, he said, I won’t, take it easy man, take it easy... Later that day, he read a long diatribe against Language poetry and the post-avant. Midway through his reading, a nine or ten year old boy, a beautiful boy, truly, son of a Spanish poet there, it turned out, walked into the room. And I am not making this up: The boy sat down in a chair against the wall of the side aisle, about twenty feet from the stage, looked at Rodefer and smiled at him in the fullest, the purest sense one could ever give to a smile. I at first thought this must be Rodefer’s son, for I saw that he stopped and beamed a huge smile back at the boy, and when he went back to read after a few seconds of just smiling at him, while the boy smiled back in turn, when he went back to read, that is, his poem about the complicities and hypocrisies and treacheries of the post-avant, he choked up and began to weep. He wept

as he read, catching his breath in great gulps, sobbing his way through the savage invective of his piece (an invective now swathed in the soft raiment of a most powerful sorrow). And I noticed that the boy, poor thing, was totally confused and upset by this, he didn't understand (and neither did anyone!) and so he ran, embarrassed, out of the room. After a spell, Rodefer took a deep breath, straightened his back, wiped his eyes, and continued, energetically, as if nothing had happened. It was later that night I learned that his own son, aged ten, had drowned, in Paris, three years back. And the person who told me this said that Rodefer's son looked uncannily like this beautiful boy from Spain. And so I cried that night, back at my modernized room at Christ's College, a room, it was, down the hall from Christopher Marlowe's old purported room, and I cried for a long time. And the next day I went over to Stephen, by the wine box, and put my hand on his shoulder, and said, That was one fine, powerful reading you gave yesterday. And he turned and said Thanks, that's very kind of you to say. And we made awkward small talk for a while, and we walked out into the courtyard together, where it was cool in the evening air.

I once met Jesse Seldess. This was when I read at his Discrete Series in Chicago. Eirik Steinhoff came up, and he sat and talked with me while they were setting up, a very nice gentleman, and I was very taken by him immediately. He asked if he could publish a few of my poems in the Chicago Review and so I said, Of course, I'd like that very much. Jesse came over with Kerri Sonnenberg, who was also very nice, and he smiled at me and asked, How are you feeling, Kent? This made me like him right away. I said, I'm feeling just fine, thanks! Jesse introduced me then to John Tipton and we nodded politely and shook hands. Would you like to go first, Kent, or second, said Jesse. Oh, I said, it doesn't matter, what is your preference, John? Well, he said, if it's the same to you, Kent, I'd prefer to go second. OK, sure, I said. I read some poems and sat down. People clapped. It was, by my estimation, a pretty mediocre performance, and my back was out, so I think I looked something like a half-opened jack-knife up there. But people in Chicago are very nice and down to earth, so it wasn't too bad, really, a pleasant day about which I truly could not complain.

I once met David Hess. He drove all the way from St. Louis to Bloomington, Illinois to hear me read. Afterwards, a crowd of people went to Lucca's Grill, a great Italian tavern. I said a few things to him and he responded in short phrases that were, all told, a kind of rhythmical grunting. I said some more things. Yet more rhythmical grunts from him... I tried to square his vocalizations with the fine brilliance of his critical writing, but to no avail. By and by, I settled in to this rhythm, grunting happily in turn. This went on for a while and I went over then to talk to Kristin Dykstra and her husband Brian, both of them wonderful people, I really liked them a lot. Around 2 AM, Gabe

Gudding and I drove David Hess back to his car, in a parking lot, which was, inexplicably, about two miles from where the reading had been. His car, a piece of junk, clicked in a death rattle when he turned the key. He tried and tried again but there was only the death rattle. So we got back into Gabe Gudding's compact car, a Yugo, I think (which, somehow, with its No War in Iraq bumper sticker was still intact), and drove back to his tiny flat. We bedded down on the floor next to Gabe's futon, which was his bed. We all grunted, lasciviously, about the women we'd fantasized about in our lives. We grunted like fifteen year-olds until about 5 AM. And then we fell, content in our friendship, asleep.

I once met John Bradley. This was at Sullivan's Tavern, in DeKalb. He has become one of my best friends. He is truly a nice and generous man, a fine poet and I greatly enjoy being with him. One time, we were talking about prosody, I think it was the meter of the Augustans and its enactments of 18th century rationality, something like that, nothing very exciting or novel. What the hell was \*that,\* said John, putting down his Pabst. Yes, sorry, I said, but I seem to have the most terrible case of the gasses.

I once met Henry Gould. I went to the Hay Library at Brown, where he works, unannounced. He came out and seemed surprised that I was there, and of course, that would be natural, since he had no idea I was coming. He was gracious and kind and he invited me out for cups of coffee. I really liked him. He was a gentleman. I had wanted to see him partly because he had recently written a parable on the Poetics list, a strange and fascinating parable involving a bull, and this had put me in mind of an old Uruguayan saying, which begins, Ojo al toro con tres cuernos [Beware the bull with three horns]. Well, I wish I could remember the rest, but I can't. But it had made me think back once to when I was 19, at a barbecue in Punta del Este, in the days before it was totally trashed by the Brazilian and Argentinian jet set. It was a big party of young YMCA members, about 25 of us, and everyone got a big hunk of fairly rare meat with the hide and fur still attached. I remember watching the 17 year-old girl I loved pick this up in her hands and chew and laugh. A kid, about the same age, picked up a guitar and started to sing a song by Daniel Viglietti, whose music was banned at the time, and everyone joined in, singing. By and by (for the neighbors had called) a black van and car both full of plainclothes cops arrived and started arresting everybody, and the kid with the guitar, who started to complain, got a long, black club across the face. The cop who was dragging away the girl I loved conveniently grabbed her breasts, and I stepped forward and yelled Hey! But then I didn't say anything more, afraid that I might get hit too. She tried to kick and punch back, but to no avail. She screamed at them that they were fascist pigs. The van drove away.... It was me and three or four 12 year-olds who didn't get taken in. I was American, so the cops just took down some info and told me to watch it. OK, I

said, I will. I took the bus back to Montevideo. About two weeks later I saw the girl back at the Y. Our eyes met and then she quickly turned away. I started to say something, but only half of it got out. Here and there I saw her a few times, but never spoke to her again. The kid playing the guitar was in for more than two years. No one died. I have no idea why in the world I'm saying this here. I know my poems, if that's what they are, are sometimes very idiosyncratic and certainly not among the most esteemed. I don't fault anyone for that. In fact, I have come somehow to even like those who don't like me! Isn't that strange? But what is wrong with me? Forgive me for this creepily personal memory! Something about not remembering the old saying about the bull with three horns draws me to recall it, and also to remember the way that beautiful girl turned her eyes from me. It occurs to me now that if it weren't for what happened then that I wouldn't be typing this now, whatever it might mean. It occurs to me that it turned me into everything that I became. I guess that sounds trite. And yes, ok, so I'm feeling a bit embarrassed, not very polished or admirable at all, aware that even this candor is another sad way of demeaning myself before all of you. O, I really did feel like jumping over the cliff. Still do, actually. I wish poetry was a parachute that worked, but it doesn't, not when the cliff is real. And I guess in the end, after all this time, after all those years of trying to forget, that's all that I have to say about that half-remembered saying.

I once met Armand Schwerner. One time we were in Freeport together. This was after we'd been in NY together, after we'd corresponded extensively around the anthology of Buddhist poetry, for which he'd served as a kind of unofficial advisor. Earlier that night, he had read sections of *The Tablets* for my little poetry reading series. Anyone who has read this work knows there is material therein that is not exactly tailored to 80-something Midwestern folk from the retirement home. Well, that night the local retirement home brought a busload of 80-something Midwestern folk to the reading. Men in suits and hearing aids and women in flowered dresses and towering, purplish hairdo's were treated to screeching solos on the shakuhachi and to fractured, shouting renditions from the Sumerian about vulvas, penises, and the ecstatic joys of drinking the urine of one's lover. I was horrified. But when Armand dramatically finished (the final word in the reading, I believe, was, indeed, "vulva"), everyone, including the seniors, gave him a great round of applause. In fact, some of the seniors even rose on their canes and walkers and clapped as they more or less stood. So that was a relief... Later, as I said goodbye to him in the lobby of the Stephenson Hotel (for he was leaving very early the next morning), he put his hand on my face and just looked at me, smiling. I think we both felt, for some reason, that this would be the last time we would see each other. Armand did have cancer, then, and so this was a kind of feeling. And he kept his hand on my face for a long time without speaking,

and this was very moving to me. He went into the elevator and raised his hand and the door closed, and that was, yes, the last time I ever saw him. I watched the numbers light up above the door, going higher and higher. Goodbye, Armand... Goodbye...

I've never met Anselm Berrigan, though I hope I will soon. I hear he is very nice and also a gentleman. He suggested that I should read at the Poetry Project sometime, maybe next season. But I sent him a copy of my epigrams book and he hasn't written back since. I suppose I could say that this hurts my feelings, but that would probably be too much information.

I once met David Bromige. This was in England, a couple years after we'd spent an afternoon together, drinking in Sebastopol. Now I sat with him in Samuel Pepy's rooms at Cambridge. He was the guest of honor at the 2004 CCCP. There were antiques all around us and portraits on the walls of men from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We talked pleasantries, while the leaded glass refracted a hard ray of light into his thin, pale head. The river flowed under the rooms; the punts with their straw-hatted boys slid on the river 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... Would you please push me to the loo, my love, said David, beside the clock, in his chariot chair. Because I have to take the kind of piss that would scare the shit out of a Saskatchewan moose.

I've never met Martin Corless-Smith, though I will soon, for I am going to Boise. I can tell he's a great guy, really nice, a true gentleman. He is also an amazing poet. I've also wanted to go to Idaho for a long time. I can think of worse ways to die than getting killed by proto-fascist militiamen while I fly-fish in the mountains.

I once met Tosa Motokiyu. He was sitting there, in coat and tie, smoking under the blue umbrella of the cafe, a book by Calvino open, covers up, before him. Oaxaca was doing its bright-colored traffic and chatter-song about the square... Would you like another drink, I said. No thank you, he said in his high, reed-like voice, I think I am fine. I am enjoying simply sitting here, looking around, and thinking...

I've never met Ethan Paquin, though I will soon, for I am going to Buffalo. And I'm looking forward to it because he is a terrific writer. And I sense, too, that he is very nice and charming, a true gentleman. Someone else in Buffalo has told me to "be ready for trouble from the audience," so that should be exciting. Well, I hope Susan Howe and Steve McCaffery come to hear me!

I once met the great Russian Conceptual poet Dmitri Prigov. This was in Leningrad. The weather was warm, breezy, spectacular. We stood outside the old, elegant Hall of Composers. The street was torn up, and the great, jagged chunks of concrete made it seem the S.S. Leonid Brezhnev icebreaker had come through. I also imagined it looked like Stalingrad, during the siege. I have a gift for you, said Dmitri Prigov, and he handed me a manila envelope. O, thank you, Dmitri, I said, what is it? I opened the envelope and peered inside. Barrett Watten, solemn of visage, leaned his head over my shoulder, trying to squint inside, too. I pulled out seven, no, nine small stapled bundles, each with a typed word or three on the outside. What is this, Dmitri, I said. Ah, he said, They are Little Coffins of Poems, and inside each is a poem, but these little coffins may never be opened, for this would be of course disrespectful to the deceased... His friend Ilya Kabakov regarded me diffidently, dragging on a cigarette, looking something like a cross between a Czarist nobleman and a shipyard welder from Vladivostok. Perhaps he daydreamed, there, of his great future work, the installation of the shattered bedroom, the ceiling blown outward, a massive rubber slingshot suspended from it, like a giant jockstrap, the work he would entitle, *The Man Who Launched Himself into Space*... Then I went inside, with Michael Davidson, a very nice man, a true gentleman, and we peered at crinkly, yellowed scores under glass, drafts of music in Tchaikovsky's hand.

I once met the fine poet, Howard McCord. This was in the forests of southern Ohio. It was May, and the stream, down the hill from Brian Richard's zinc-roofed shack, was running clear. We loaded our automatic weapons (there were various kinds for our pleasure) and shot, in a clearing, at dark human silhouettes for half an hour, perhaps it was more. Then we went back and drank some whiskey for brunch, primed the compound bows, and walked down to shoot spawning carp in the stream. We shot about twenty fat ones just for fun, leaving them for bear, and kept the biggest, a fifteen pounder. What a fish! Brian, a true gentleman, fed the entrails as a snack to the hogs out in back and put the head in the smoker for human delectation. He filled a big tupperware bowl with the exquisite, slimy roe and placed it in the fridge for breakfast. Then we got out our antique muzzle loaders and went out to shoot deer at salt licks Brian had placed at secret locations. This was illegal, it being out of season, but we are talking out in the boondocks here.... Howard, a very nice man who was my dissertation advisor in college, a true gentleman and scholar, blew a hole the size of a baseball in the skull of a young doe at thirty feet from his stand. Brian gutted the deer with swift aplomb (wrapping the liver and putting this in his daypack), and we took turns carrying the beautiful animal back, where it was hung to bleed-out from a pine. Later, the sun going down, we watched porn on Brian's satellite TV, while we picked at the carp's head, not quite done, yet still oily and fine, and ate the new liver,

sauteed with bacon, fiddleheads, and wine. 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 of 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.

I once met the famous Nicaraguan poet Daisy Zamora. This was at the height of the Contra war. She was dressed in battle fatigues. We were in the gardens of an expropriated mansion in Managua, now the headquarters of the Sandinista Cultural Workers' Association. Perhaps you would like to translate some of my poetry sometime, Kent, she said, sipping the rum & Coke brought to her by a male maid, her black, lush hair cascading most dramatically under the cascading bougainvillaea. Perhaps I would, I said. Would you, Daisy, I said with a wink, translate some of mine. Perhaps, I will, she said. Let's first see, however, she said, if we can win this fucking war... Years have gone by, and the world is a very different place. Now Daisy Zamora is a regular at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. Dressed in fashionable versions of traditional vestments from her land, she intones her nostalgic verse to great crowds, who sit rapt and are moved to tears. And all the dead, whose blood so little time ago seemed so heroic and fresh, are by now virtually forgotten.

I once met Raul Zurita, a great Chilean poet. This was in the restaurant of the Orly Hotel, in Santiago. Only the day before, he had undergone a minor, but discomforting kidney stone operation. It is so nice to meet you, he said, smiling at Forrest Gander and me, and to have this opportunity to talk with one another. His face was of stunning visage, long and narrow, a great sloping brow, a nose to beat all Roman noses. He grimaced in pain, here and there, while softly talking, drinking his herbal tea. A thoroughly elegant and delightful man, a true gentleman. The restaurant was full, and it seemed everyone was looking, furtively, his way, whispering: In Chile, poets are highly regarded, true personages of the culture. They are regularly appointed to Ambassadorial positions, or are even sometimes elected President. And Zurita is very famous in Chile, in part because he has written the most massively scaled poems in human history: in the air with smoke-trailing planes, in the desert with bulldozers. Poems of kilometers in height and length. Poetry Land Art, as it were... I know the following questions are only tangentially related to this entry, and even more, that their sudden presence will be seen as somewhat irrational, but they've just popped into my head, and I want to write them down before I forget: I wonder who the tallest avant poet is in America? I wonder who is the heaviest? I wonder who has the largest feet? I wonder who has the largest bottom? Yes, for factual details, especially those for which questions have never been posed, those strange details which shyly secret themselves for all time from statistical view, those odd quirky noumena

that exist yet don't exist, oh, these shimmer in their hiddenness with an aura of strange sublimity.

I once met Brooks Johnson. He is my son. He is brilliant, compassionate, wise, at ease in his skin, clear and humble in ways I have never been. A true gentleman. I think they call it getting your genes from your mom. I wrote a poem once about an evening we spent fishing together, which was published in a magazine. I am sorry I have not been the father to him he so richly deserved. And I am sorry I have embarrassed him here, in saying that. But you see, that's Poetry, and who knows its needs or its nature? No one does, my son. And I wonder if I've been waiting, all of my life, to write for you this small and stillborn poem.

I once met the great poet, editor, and translator, Clayton Eshleman. This was in Ypsilanti, at the first conference of *Sulfur* magazine. I was twenty-eight, or something like that. It was a long time ago. I said, Your poetry and translation have been very important to me, Mr. Eshleman. And *Sulfur* magazine, I said, this to me is the greatest magazine of all time, thank you for what you do, it's really meant a lot to me. Well, he said, if you're serious, send me a check for the complete run and write an essay about it all. If you want to be a poet, you can't just flatter people and expect to get something out of it. Put your money where your mouth is. And then he walked away and started talking and laughing with Michael Palmer and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. And it's only now that I can see I should thank him for that heartbreaking rebuke.

I once met Jed Rasula. This was at the MLA, many years back, a few years before he punched Clayton Eshleman in a car, breaking his jaw and knocking out an incisor, I believe, an event little known in American poetry. He'd published an essay in *Sulfur* and I'd responded with a critique that was published there in the journal's "Noticings" section. He was very gracious about my riposte, very complimentary and kind, a true gentleman. We sipped scotch at the Hilton Hotel bar, surrounded by academics doing their business. We talked about reading early Wallace Stevens to our young children and delighted in the fact we'd both done so. How did your interview with Stanford go today, I said. I think it went just fine, said Jed. I can't now recall much else, but it was a most pleasant talk. And then we said goodbye. The first Gulf War would soon begin.

I once met Andres Ajens, a great Chilean poet. This was at an abandoned gold mine, high in the mountains around Andacollo. The sky was a blue I'd never before seen. He talked, and as he talked his hands fluttered about above him like startled, exotic birds. So we are poets, my USA-poet friend, he said. And we have toasters and cars and email and pills for sex. Because about three hundred years ago five thousand slaves died in this poisonous pit...

I once met Ronald Wallace. He was a nice man. This was in Freeport, during his New Formalist stage. It was the question and answer period after his reading, and he said to the audience, a bit patronizingly, I thought, though he probably didn't mean it that way: As Robert Frost said, said Ron, Writing poetry without meter is like playing tennis with the net down. I raised my hand and said, You know, Ron, forgive me, but I've often wondered in what way poetry was ever anything like a game of tennis. Things were a bit uncomfortable after that. Luckily, someone else was driving him back to Madison.

I once met Lucas Klein. This was when I went to talk and read at Yale, the same day as my strange meeting on the train with Hua Hsu. Lucas is a magnificent young scholar and translator, a true gentleman. Later, after the event, which was quite pleasant, we went to a bar with some people, including Richard Deming and Nancy Kuhl, fine poets and editors of Phylum Press. I liked them immensely, they were really great people. By and by, I had to catch my train, and so I hugged Lucas on the sidewalk and said goodbye. I could tell that we would be friends forever. My goodness, said the cab driver with a turban on his head, Wasn't that fellow you just hugged most friendly the actor Tom Cruise?

I once met Robert Duncan. This was in Milwaukee, and I was just becoming curious about poetry. He had just read at Woodland Pattern, and I was—amazing though it now seems—one of five or seven people in the audience. Robert, this is Kent, said Karl Gartung. Kent, Robert Duncan. One of his eyes was looking at me, while the other, his glass eye, looked elsewhere in the distance. He was wearing a large, dark hat and a great cape, too. Well then: Why did you come? he said, in a kind of thousand year-old growl. I was, I believe, 20 or 21. I don't know, I said, I think it was your poem, "Oftentimes a Meadow Is Permitted to Come Back to Me"... It is wonderful, I sometimes read that poem to myself out loud. I have it in an anthology called *The American Poetries of the New*, I said. You mean *The New American Poetry*, said Karl, And the poem is called... Yes, yes! I interrupted loudly, That's the title of the book, *The New American Poetry*! And then I said, Have you also written books, Mr. Duncan, because I would like to read more of your poetry. He slowly turned (I can see it plainly still) his hatted head towards Karl. He was, more or less, in profile. And his glass eye now stared, very oddly, straight at me. And I don't really recall anything after that.

I once met the great poet George Kalamaras. This was in Freeport. He looks exactly like (I am serious) Weird Al Yankovic. A beautiful man, a true gentleman. We talked about how we cut our teeth in poetry: on the Eastern Europeans, on the Latin Americans, on the Chinese, on the Japanese. And every time we mentioned a poet or a book we'd read and loved it became

apparent we'd read it at about the same time and in a sequence and relation that was uncannily synchronous. Freaked out, almost embarrassed—like when you see someone on an elevator who looks uncomfortably like you—we shook hands and said goodbye. Goodbye, Kent, he said. Goodbye, George, I said.

I once met Corina Bedregal, a fine Bolivian poet. This was at the house of the fine Bolivian poet Humberto Quino, a man of astonishing capacities for Chivas Regal, a true gentleman. Corina is the widow of Guillermo Bedregal Garcia, the Rimbaud of Latin America, who died at 20, after meticulously and bizarrely foretelling his death in two poems. Corina told me of the close friendship between her young, dead husband and the late Jaime Saenz, one of the major poets of 20<sup>th</sup> century world poetry... Yes, she said, in a voice that made me think of a music box, Yes, my Guillermo and Jaime used to do cocaine in large quantities, this was what they did, and then they would talk and write and argue at their voice-tops for days on end! They were so sweet together. Oh, they loved each other like father and son... I smiled at her, enchanted. Someone cranked the volume. Numerous Bolivian poets began to dance in a conga-line, pulling down their pants and shaking their bare buttocks in delight.

I once met Yoshimasu Gozo, the great avant-garde Japanese performance poet. This was at a restaurant, after his reading in Providence. We were introduced by Hiroaki Sato, the great scholar-translator, a true gentleman. Yoshimasu Gozo stood: I KNOW WHO YOU ARE, he shouted, of a sudden, as loud as he could, silencing the long and elegant table of guests. And then he bowed, formally. AND I KNOW WHO YOU ARE TOO, I shouted back, as loud as I could. And then I bowed in return. There was some silence... He bowed again and I bowed again, in return. And then Hiroaki Sato began to clap, slowly. And everyone else at the long table began to slowly clap, too. And then we bowed again, and everyone started talking, and that was that.

I've never met Aaron Johnson. He is my younger son. He is beautiful, compassionate, deeply creative, sad, brave, true to himself and to others in ways I have never been. A young gentleman. By day, with abandon, he climbs towering cliffs, or speeds down winter mountains headlong, heedless of his life. By night, alone in his room, he makes drawings that are so complex, I am amazed. The killing love I feel for him, I've never been able to rule. And on either side of the screen between, our backlit shadows awkwardly move... I have heard him cry, and he has heard me cry, too. I hope that we will meet one day. Maybe we won't, but I think, really, that we surely will.

I once met Ben Lerner. I was talking with a seminar class at his university. All the young students were very smart, very smartly dressed in a Banana

Republic sort of way—except for Ben Lerner, whose name I did not know at the time, and who wore a tight old t-shirt with holes and dirty jeans and tennis shoes so ripped they seemed barely attached to his feet, brown hair unkempt, wire rims, but with tape to hold one of the lenses in, and he kept adjusting them as he spoke in a torrent of brilliant remarks, peppering these with difficult questions to me, to which I offered elliptical replies, to which he sallied with more brilliance, pushing me deeper into my thought, and this went on for quite some time, until the professor said, Well, class, this certainly gives us much to talk about for Monday! And I remember he and I walked together down the stairs and out into the quad, where there were statues and birds and students and things, though I can't now recall what we said, but I remember he was very polite, a sweet, actually somewhat shy young man, barely nineteen, if that, and I remember, too, that later, after my reading that night, he came up to me, more disheveled than before, and gave me a paper he had written on Yasusada and said goodbye. In about five years, he would be a Finalist for the National Book Award.

I once met Franz Josef Czernin. He is Austria's most famous living poet, which is strange because he is thoroughly experimental. We were drinking pints at The Pickerel in Cambridge, with Tony Frazer, a wonderful poet, editor, and translator: a true gentleman. We were in a booth, and on the old, oak wall above us there was an ancient print of the youngish John Milton in his days as censor and second-hand executioner for Cromwell. We had been there a long time, talking and laughing, and I remember looking at him and saying, Franz Josef Czernin, I would in ecstasy wash your feet with my hair! He lit a cigarette, looked at me for a spell, blew a ring of smoke, and muttered something to Tony in High German. What did he say, I said to Tony, his translator. He said, said Tony, that he really likes you, but that he's glad you aren't doing the driving.

I once met Carl Rakosi. This was in 1992, at Orono, after I'd presented a paper about Louis Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*. I'd just published an essay on Rakosi in a fat book about him, from the National Poetry Foundation, wherein I contrasted his prosody with that of Wallace Stevens, a topic that on the surface of it, seems admittedly a bit ridiculous. I'd had a few drinks at the cash bar right before and was feeling fine, quite confident, at ease in my skin. Young man, I just loved your talk, said Rakosi, already then 90 years old, I believe. Good job. And I know Louis would have been totally delighted... I smiled. Well, thank you, Mr. Rakosi, I said, That certainly means a lot to me. And I thought it showed promise, too, said Charles Bernstein, out of nowhere, somewhat assertively extending his hand to me. I'm sure this is a great moment for you, to meet Carl Rakosi, isn't it? I reached out, squeezed Bernstein's hand, looked him in the eyes, and said, Yes, it certainly is, Charles. And one day, when you look back on things, you'll realize that this was an

actually great moment for you, too. I laughed, casually, and Rakosi squinted his twinkling eyes and laughed merrily, as well. And Armand Schwerner laughed, and Michael Heller laughed, and Keith Tuma did, too. And so did Marjorie Perloff, though I noticed she caught herself and stopped. Bernstein looked at Bob Perelman, who'd been on my panel, and then at Barrett Watten, who had asked me a long question involving Schoenberg, dodecaphony, and Russian Formalism, and then at, I think, Bruce Andrews, and said seargeant-like, OK, let's go to lunch. And so they did, very unsmiling, out the door, the four in a kind of platoon line. And Carl Rakosi grabbed my ear and tugged at it, still giggling, like a grandfather lovingly teasing a suddenly found bastard son, one with a small attitude problem, but showing some promise, nevertheless.

I once met Tom Raworth. This was in England. It was Saturday, and we walked from his house for a long ways, looking for a pub that wasn't too crowded. He seemed like a nice fellow, as did his friend, Iain Sinclair. I remember that as we walked, we often had to stop and wait for the spouses of Raworth and Sinclair to catch up a bit, for they fell far behind, small spots of pink and brown far down the river's edge, their cigarette smoke hanging like little island weather over their heads. Finally, we came to a Guinness sign and some chairs. I bought everyone a few pints and even paid for everyone's lunch, and this seemed to make them happy. I knew, of course, that Raworth and Charles Bernstein had been good chums for many years, so perhaps this accounted for what I sensed was Tom's sheen of reserve. By and by, we said farewell near Trinity College, and pleasantly enough, it seemed to me. Cheers, mate, said Tom... Six months or so later, when Jim Behrle violently attacked my book *Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz* on his blog, Raworth wrote in a comment that said, in full, WAY TO GO, YIMMY!

I once met the superb poet and editor Geoffrey Gatza. This was in Buffalo. I think he is one of the nicest people I've ever met, really, a true gentleman. After my reading, we drank and smoked with some other poets in a bar called The Founding Fathers. I'll never know why, of course, but Susan Csaszar left Hungary suddenly, in an air balloon, late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her boyfriend, frantically firing the flame, had only yet touched her virginal breasts. They (she and her boyfriend, that is, though the pronoun would seem to refer to her breasts) floated over the border, which was green and brown, littered with broken wheels and the bodies of the dead. They landed in a burned-out town, hired a carriage, and at night ate goulash in a small hotel outside Vienna. The men ate in the dining room and the women in the kitchen. Her imperious mother came to visit: I wrote on the blackboard, Welcome Madam Csaszar, our favorite Magyar. There had just been a terrible storm, like a war, and the branches of the city's trees were scattered everywhere in great piles of vegetable matter, a true Arboreddon, one might say. We wandered into a

used bookshop, a beautiful place, and I bought Geoffrey an intact two-volume biography of Keats by Amy Lowell and added a slim volume on the naval strategies of American commanders of the War of 1812, for his lovely wife, Donna. Books which sat, in the middle of our table, in a funky Chinese restaurant, where power had just that day been restored...

I've never met Philip Whalen. I never will, of course, not in the flesh, in any case. After he died, I've heard, his robed body was laid out in the meditation hall for three days or so, as is the tradition when a Roshi dies. And because it was summer and it was very hot, they put bags of frozen raspberries under his back and buttocks and legs. I always thought that was a beautiful touch... Anyway, to get to my story, I did once call him on the phone to ask that he write an essay for a book I was editing. This was many years ago. 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 either one even exists, for fuck's sake? I mean, give me a break. Goodbye. Click.

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