

LOCUS SOLUS AND THE RANDOM ADVENTURES OF SEMI-COLON

after The Last Avant Garde by David Lehman

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The New York School poets as the last authentic, when John Ashbury, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schulyer, the silent deviant generation, when suburban flight was in and New York had at least one of them in an age of _____.

The poets put their trust in the idea: deviations from the norm. When the nation's youngest president was the acceleration in the speed of America toward the world. They lived and worked, dedicated and frivolous, flowering volatile poems and lyric text into eerie clothes. Their loyalty translated the argot of the roughhewn metropolis in the manner of _____ and an awareness that poets were the true fabricators of the Emperor's New Clothes. They shared greatness while affected by the floods of paint in the streets of New York. Summing up turbulence, they knew they were in boats but couldn't see who was steering and didn't care, only the present tense process and the residue of all poetry as collaboration, in such a way, as Pollock said, I am Nature, this engagement with medium by veering from, in this exact regard, for instance, Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, Nell Blaine, and Larry Rivers.

At the very moment of abstract and the flat new world where high seriousness went sailing off the edge, in ways more suggestive after whom they were named, pretensions of the irreverent. We are in them, now what? How are we to fill the empty canvas with a language no one understands? Lines at random scramble for floor space in cheap artist's lofts where every second word is deleted from conversations. It's wonderful, Koch said, "to have three good friends who you think are geniuses."

There are those who don't quite fit in, some morning places seem wonderful, arrives in time like a sword, always on the edge of it, to function as good fortune, or to wit, for purposes of outsiders, the flamboyant moniker without enthusiasm, without a perch, they set up shop, ran the show. Or perhaps such a painter to whom their stamp of approval, every artist likes to have a house poet or a semi-colon crammed full at the Cedar Tavern where every line ends with "one afternoon on a midtown street corner."

Not the circulation but the pleasure of the secret paper murals right here in the room of a small cottage, where one morning while Bill was working, they walked through the door. It was that easy. The risk being a sign of defection while movements are a semantic problem which happened to be New York, a hard painter's widow to live with after becoming acclaimed and fruitful.

That doesn't exist, a dominant theme or a recurrent setting, the horns honking, the heels clicking, adrenaline, taxis, drinks at a party in a painter's loft, poems written on the run between the San Remo bar and the New York City Ballet engraved on a railing of Battery Park in Manhattan. It's really an anti-place, the same point in a conversation is the advantage of one where one was living in the world while living in Paris, a California Nomad.

In resisting the effect, the objections to a term, such as, really New York had nothing to do with it. It was the story of three pals, a convenient crossroads, enter James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Kenward Elmslie, because they were friends, because poets were always broke.

Once the lexicon broke, a great dance ensued after which everyone considered every term to be a double joke. As for the earlier schools, rubbing shoulders at the Cedar, it was these friends living at the end of a state of mind, a daydream about escaping from a boring office in New York City. The Dreamer beholds a painting with its houses of pink and white,

where men are selling hats on the street and swatting flies, with the promenaders sashaying now that the heat of the day has left its shadow behind.

A parable of desire (all parables are) and of escape into the conveniences of packing bags and suffering from indigestion. The man at the podium says, “What else is there to do but stay, and that we cannot do.”

But the whole circle of friends pressed in a small room full of furniture made of poetry, dripping wet with fresh paint and music forcing its way out of everyone’s eyes and ears, this of course, was all observed carefully in a letter, where it was obvious that all the friends were simply trying to tell everyone how to act, but that’s another story.

Determined to mount an assault on foreign climes, or the trick test questions full of knitted ribbon dresses in a Prospect of Flowers is an accident where no one escapes, that the accident may have a place, the collisions of a game where the elements of chance and play serve as clues of something deeper, a double paradox of enchantment; a frog, warts and all, without apology or attack.

More and more, short-lived but intense with the defeat of peace and prosperity there was nothing the circle of friends could not do. The streets and bars were full of landscapes with books in their hands happy to have fought the good war of horrors of skeletons of churches between wartime allies and among the educated classes to set their teeth on edge.

The specter of an Ashbery poem is self-evident in somebody else’s head, conjured up and chronicled in this poem. Not that it was guaranteed, like a promise that if isn’t kept doesn’t matter. It is possible isn’t it? To love Reverdy for saying yes even when you don’t believe it.

In a decade noted for kitsch, pressed back against a _____ and joy, was another new manifestation, to spring back the individual, the animating principle of pleasure,

so joy is to escape. Is this a vision? It is, however, a moment. The vision cannot survive in a time of imminent loss where the very temples of delight turn to poison where the bee mouth sips.

That the circle of friends might not perish from the truth, on many occasions they needed all the _____ they could get and even that wasn't enough. What they were seeking was not a _____ but a chart and the movement of circumstances to psychotic fits. They are still alive and breathing, though gray and alarming as ridicule or a game of Twenty Questions where one predicts one's demise. Nothing resembles a regular job but everyone lucked into recklessness and the terrible risk at the end of the tunnel that no one could see.

Tough and quick and the world in a minute, a crew of friends knocked down walls into a heap of rubbish. They ran with their hearts in their mouths, leaving a bloody trail of letters and paint wherever they went, which frankly, seems as flowers in the wind during springtime.

It has been said, "The lock of the life raft when I was taking a bath instead of drowning." The divine ones drag up shadows in the dust to confuse the brave critics more than anyone else in the world. It is in the mouth opening, the unmasking discontent. It is possible to be able to see beyond Reported Sightings and Tom Hess's taste and the awe everyone had of de Kooning.

In another life, a still one, it may be combined with an interior and a landscape, rendered faithfully with one view from one window at different times of day. It is a still life in jars of water, conflicting, a little anthology for a polyphony of heroic accents without a war.

Arrogant and unconventional, but the golden moment was in high gear, an original sin that everyone wanted to commit but only a few dared. They became famous for leaking laughter, and wasn't that the point? For instance when Ashbery, Koch, and O'Hara were skinny and shy, they occupied blank verse pentameter in their college notes where everyone was either a Jew, a drunkard, or gay. The least objectionable expression. Who knew this gesture of friends would work?

Referring to the notorious obscenity, the pairing of two that began at Mandrake Book Shop, one of the friends said it was all over a "ridiculous remark...in a ridiculous voice," or later the two swimming and bathing in Poulenc songs or writing poems in twenty minutes on a dare as if life were merely a habit or a loophole for the noble idea of possibility, where the sad music of silence contemplated itself like a child alone in a corner of a schoolyard, or an orphan poem in a three-story building on Third Avenue at Sixteenth Street.

The representation of figures and landscapes, it was understood, as if it were a poem, always in motion, eliminating as possible, the human equation from the front-pages or a gathering of friends on the roof terrace where one of the friends locked everyone out and put on a monkey head, shouting out the window of his apartment, yeah, the poetry was like that.

Like the perfume of catnip, Frank O'Hara arrived, wearing the wild brushstrokes at the cocktail party where many a friendship is based on what a kiss feels like, so gusty you closed your eyes and felt your hair brushed back by the wind of it, something that happens for the first time, every time.

The lights went on and no one went home. They made a list of words, stepped out occasionally for a breath of fresh fallout, as if locked in the office with the school principle,

the letters to Ashbery, many turns of the phrase, Please write again. And on the occasion of his elevation and the hostile reception of the last person in the world—a silly goose. Of course it's caviar, luckily there are other more important things in their italicized, spontaneously scripted lives.

After a week or two of this one might ask, *What did I do?* I wouldn't want to do it all the time, someone shouts from the other room. And while looking out a window for years writing about the slightly ruffled, damp world and the troubled affairs in his work, he took a pad, pencils, and a razor blade.

My dear, there are hundreds of questions and only a handful of ideas. It's really marvelous. *My ass*, someone shouts. In a Ballroom, *honey*, where do you hold the balls? Try the San Remo bar, someone says.

Outside the gardens are in a riot of bloom where the Hudson River looks more and more like impressionism and the players of the ultimate game sit around the TV and write poems during commercial breaks.

At the Cedar Tavern again, poems fly out of pockets, where a decade long bender is in full swing, and sometimes smashed glass and china on the floor are fragments for painting in blood on tables, a color that had been described as *interrogation green*.

So authentically ordinary. A sign of anonymous spectators, sure there's no one here tonight and it stands to reason, the people gathered in the back of the room were somebody or something called *the dream*.

The flowers in a flower shop, roses in passage, two fields of color, like a barroom argument where they've just torn down the buildings and in the rubble, set a pot on a fire and boiled an already painted canvas of words lying on an orange bed. This is what it was

like when the circle of friends got together, unlike the Beats who sat around an electric stove and baked poems.

Like pilgrims flocking to see the holy land, so it was to meet de Kooning. Gee! It was a little dating in a neighborhood dive with wooden booths, a backroom restaurant protected by a glittering moat filled with paint and the flotsam of cast-off words. This was (some say) the last bastion, holding at bay the forces of boredom that sought to silence their allusive chatter, and like any underground secret, surfaces to Real Life at last, and so becomes valued and valueless.

A new _____ was out. Existential and cool, anything but themselves, it is hard, they were overheard saying, to visit and punctuate any opening night in New York, likely to be a landslide one early winter in 1950. Many years later Schuyler fumed, as if there could only be one poet savior and so friendships became laced with phosphorous, as if a match with the potential to ignite under the pressure of a collective force. Or as Koch said to some young poets, "Have some friends who are so good it scares you."

How unusual: poetry and action painting and jazz and cocktails and afternoon tabloids with a social conscience and a hero rising from the midst. They called him Frank. Hurt the way he was, he cried blind drunk in the tragic way that once ended a poem, My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

Dropping names, or rather, throwing catch with them, references to painter friends, that indifference to readers, to be regarded that way in poetry. Everyone wanted to be "perfectly frank." It was believed names would make good verbs until a champagne glass shattered at the stem and conversational spit drops refused to make waves.

With hilarity and a slight stutter, the Pied Piper with a German accent for poetry, without tact or skill proclaimed, "What belongs and what doesn't" from his silences or when

crossing himself, one would know brilliance was at hand or at least something divine. Not going so far as to define their group identity, like a half-wrecked, half erased story, but there are also I do this and I do that, and of course the novel in forever progress worked in a new mettle that had properties no one had quite seen before and some considered quite useless to make poetry out of. It if doesn't turn out, well, they can't all be, someone said.

He was the one who was not there, the one on a test, a quest to vacate the center and reside at the periphery. It requires nothing so much as at least the thought of going blind. And as far as a compass for younger poets he eschewed cryptic collaborations on lithographs, and on drawings and collages, gestures on paper or what they said was *just having fun on a dismal Sunday afternoon*.

A series of maps and a second series about women's shoes in the presence of a second person, with red here and a little yellow there, they created texts with artists. Everyone's hands throttling collaboration's throat. Some said it was a one-shot deal, this manic energy created words into brilliance like a game made up out of stolen kisses.

The exacting requirements of form: a flower, a tree, a fruit, and a famous old lady, the word *bathtub*, or *forget-me-not*, writing all of this from the bathtub and a willow chair after playing pinball in a café, the words *bonus* and *bumper*, a color, a season, the name of a philosopher and so on. In the end, the pinball machine couldn't take it, and spelled out the word *TILT*.

Think of a first line. Make it a good place for characters to live, as if you could see the sentence through the window of a passing car. Isn't it worth pausing over? Nothing much happens and the weather is usually terrible, but remember, it's not really so much about New York, but then there is nothing extraordinary about that. It's all a subordinate function of dialogue mimed in the spirit of ridicule and its tone, a strange despair fused with

the arch spirit of non-sequitur as what happens with sticks. By boys. Though the others waited. To escape from emotion. And their doctors would agree with their agents, if they had any, that after looking at x-rays of their stomachs full of words, that they did have one more poem inside them.

They did it for fun. It dissolved and merged into a handwoven third entity. A road, a friendship of literary lovemaking as the image of two typewriters with their backs to each other, shapeless as an ameba or an emergency on several occasions that yielded farmers a fair shake: not pollen, not birthmark or a bruise, but compatriots together in sestinas, if only to amuse each other with lines like, "...and priests with lips like mutton." They wrote long poems and posted the days results like ticker tape from Wall Street.

They might be regarded as a field resembling an abstract canvas, or people strolling down Main Street, the magnificent porch of pleasure deconstructed plank by plank, what Apollinaire said, so it can be put back together again. Wow! It's wonderful.

The pleasure of being diminished, if any pleasure could be had, it was had, and if sympathy, so more the merrier, but never sentimental, hyperbolic poems that could not be faked gave way to a united front and their movement on stage had the audience in stitches. From cut-ups, to collaborations and comic book narratives and everything else that is wonderful in the world. They sprang up. Springing as if on continual orgasm or a prolonged fencing match. Koch finally said, breathless, "I want to win by winning, John wants to win by not trying."

According to an unusual gesture, one evening, *Some Trees in an Emergency*, came to a clearing where God was choosing between the gifts of Ashbery and O'Hara, it was a poem that later would be typed up in a hurry to be presented at a poetry reading and the circle of friends were quite surprised that God could write rather funny poems.

Fuck you! Please forgive me. Fuck you! The friends cry from their graves desperate for love, but objects came to hold light anyway and approval was no longer needed. For instance, a letter tucked away in a file of papers in Koch's apartment, said the circle of friends lived in a volcano and the need to escape opened a future with no doors and that was fine by them, they were used to New York summers.

This is a dream narrative and the narrator is anyone, and we wake up under the table of a dream. You haven't moved an inch and everything has changed. What can one say when asked about anything, please don't ask about the name—New York School— not how it feels, or what it means, think of it this way, a group of geniuses sitting at a table playing poker with faces so stone, you'd think twice before joining their telepathic game, for of course, you are not telepathic and cannot hear their mental choir empty song through streaming windowpanes of color. It's simply a departure. This is the way the poem ends.