



As many of you know by now, Kent crossed to the other side on Tuesday, October 25th. He passed at home surrounded by his family, cocooned in their love. He has left an enormous hole behind that won't be filled soon.

To honour Kent and his work, his publisher, Geoffrey Gatza, has made Kent guest of honour at his annual Thanksgiving community dinner to which you are all invited, as well as your friends, relatives, and neighbours. Spread the word. Come feast on Kent's work.

Please download the attached menu (and Kent's poems) and visit Geoffrey's website at:

<http://wp.blazevox.org/?portfolio=kent-johnson-2022>

Love,
Mike

--

Michael Boughn

The poet [Kent Johnson](#) has passed away from cancer. Kent grew up in Uruguay. In the early 1980s, at the height of the Sandinista revolution, he worked as a volunteer literacy and adult education instructor in the rural villages of Nicaragua. From these experiences, he worked as the translator of *A NATION OF POETS* (1985), "the most representative translation in English from the famous working class Talleres de Poesia of Nicaragua."

In the 1990s, he was the central figure of one of the most famous/infamous poetry controversies of our age as the editor of *DOUBLED FLOWERING: FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF ARAKI YASUSADA*. This was initially seen as the miraculous discovery of a major 20th century poet -- a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing who was also an

experimental poet influenced by avant-garde figures such as Jack Spicer. With great excitement, Yasusada's poems began appearing in major journals and magazines. But then rumors began to spread that these poems -- which had glaring internal anachronisms -- were in fact an elaborate hoax.

As the editor of Yasusada's collection, Kent was assumed to be the author of these poems that -- regardless of hoax status -- that I found to still be strangely moving, powerful, funny, uneasy works of imaginative literature.

Kent never affirmed whether he was the author or not.

In fact, the question of authorship -- and of the relationship between white translators from imperial cultures and the exotic "others" whom these translators brought to a wider readership -- was probably the central issue of Kent's work. One day I would not be surprised to see him eventually regarded as America's problematic answer to the heteronymic maestro Fernando Pessoa.

While he spent his academic career teaching at Highland Community College, foregoing the status of larger research universities, Kent was a perpetual fly in the American poetry biz ointment.

I first crossed paths with him in the early 2000s during the wild west days of "poetry blogs" -- a brief span of time when poets sparred and built alliances and constructed reputations across various blogs and listservs.

I found myself drawn to Kent's provocations even as I found myself frustrated by him. If I found myself attacked by some more powerful poetry presence online, I could often count on Kent to come in to either defend me or to divert the attack (he was a popular target for many, many poets and seemed to relish in provoking self-serious ones).

But then whenever Kent had a new project going into circulation, I could also count on a little nudge in my inbox reminding me of how often he praises my work or comes to my aid. That paradox captures a bit of my Kent Johnson experience.

Regardless of his gleeful machinations both skewering and commandeering the attention economy of the poetry biz, I found myself very fond of Kent.

In the early 2000s I realized that my literacy in global poetics was lacking, so with characteristic humility I decided to start up what I hoped to be the most important global experimental poetry journal of the digital age, called Fascicle.

I only ended up doing three issues. But I asked for Kent's help in the first one and through his decades of connections and relationships in the translation community, we ended up enlisting 45 translators -- including (but not limited to) Rosmarie Waldrop, Jerome Rothenberg, Clayton Eshleman, Eliot Weinberger, Linh Dinh, and Forrest Gander -- to present readers with an astonishing array of new translations of global poetics from antiquity to the present day.

I think Kent's main project was to not allow the reputation-making politics of poetry careers to be mistaken for the life-saving miraculous properties of actual poetry itself. In this project of Kent's, no sacred cow was off-limits. No topic free from satire and meta-poetic instigation.

During the early 2000s, I wrote a review of a slim chapbook by Kent called *THE MISERIES OF POETRY*. As Kent has linked to this review many times over the years, I think he enjoyed my take on his project.



I'll close this remembrance of Kent with the closing portion of my review. The last paragraph -- the quote with the expletives -- is written by Kent himself.

In it, one of Kent's imagined poetry identities -- Alexandra Papaditsas -- remembers Kent Johnson himself. And it's this very interplay of satire, lyricism, politics, and ghostly identities that makes Kent's work so singular:

"Here in America, where even our best experimental writers seem to be constructing gigantic monuments to their own talents and are eager to lie beside Wordsworth in some canonical garden, Kent Johnson's project, whatever it ultimately is or ends up having been, strikes me as either the most moving, unsettling, and important thing going on right now, or as the most egregious and dangerous self-delusion in American letters.

One way or another, it feels necessary. And important. The Miseries of Poetry has all the friction of a truly difficult work, one that forges a path of protest, a path for the ghosts of Alexandra Papaditsas and those like her to protest those of us who would bury them for our own glory. Papaditsas' last written words, from March of 2002, are in fact about Kent Johnson, the famous American poet, translator and provocateur:

'Even though I know that poetry is much more than Poetry, I know these are Poems we did in another time, when we were happiest before the terrorist brown color covered everything. I am going to go away now. I am going to go away, like antelopes roaming from Uruguay, where he lived as a boy. The annotations about what is gone in the moths are mine, after his death. I am sure he would disagree. But fuck him, still. Fuck him in the mouth with a great velocity. Minor lying god.'"

[Tony Tost](#)



Why I Am Not a Genius

(for Kent Johnson)

I am not a genius. How do I know that?
Most days I can hit "Genius" level on the *Times*'
"Spelling Bee" game, but that's just a game,
and I've never won a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship,
the prize that officially makes you a genius.
I've known a few MacArthur geniuses over the years.
One was my thesis advisor for the MFA;
the other week I found an old notebook
where I'd written how he told me that maybe
I should consider doing something other than poetry.
He might have been right. He told great dirty jokes.
Another was a writer I corresponded with
and visited occasionally for maybe a dozen years;
he owned more books than I'd ever seen
in a private home. He dedicated one of his books
to a recently deceased cat, including the animal's
name and birth and death dates (he was thirteen)
but no indication "H——" was a *cat*.
I was a little freaked out, since this writer's
work was shot through with NAMBLA-style
relationships: was that dedicatee a *boy*?
We had dinner with another MacArthur genius
in her Bed-Stuy condo the other week,
where the prize certificate in its faux-leather
binder was balanced on a stack of mail

on the kitchen counter. There were boxes
and boxes of her books everywhere,
translated into languages none of us could even
recognize. She writes beautiful novels, tweets
about her cat. I was in a Persian restaurant
in Kentucky with another MacArthur genius
once: maybe the biggest, sweetest, most genial
poet I've ever met. I was eating at a table
with old friends; he was in the "banquet
room" at the head of a large table
of young people, and service was slow,
so I brought him over a plate of roasted
vegetables no one at our table remembered
ordering. He seemed glad to have something
to eat. I'm not a genius, but I too love
cats, and I'm happy to be eating.
I've won two prizes in my lifetime.
One was for an undergraduate essay,
the other was the annual "Philosophy Prize"
given to the best graduating major
at my college. I feel kind of bad about that one.
There were only three majors that year; one of them
went back to New Jersey to work in the family nursery;
I was headed for a PhD in literature; and the the last guy
was off to really study philosophy somewhere—he should
have gotten that prize book, a *festschrift*
for H. P. Grice. I've never appeared in the *Best
American Poetry*, but I once sat next to



the series editor at an Indian restaurant
in Ithaca. I'd had too much to drink,
and I'd just read a ridiculous article he'd published
in *Newsweek* attacking "theory." I said stuff
I'm not proud of. I had dinner with him again
maybe twenty years later, and he had no memory
of the event, so I didn't remind him of particulars.
All of this has nothing to do with poetry.
The publisher Flood Editions sends out beautiful
postcards with portraits—drawings, photos—
of the poets they publish. Their card for Jay Wright
is simply a photograph of his double bass,
posed outside on a paved patio.
It's perfect. I've never heard Wright play,
though I occasionally search YouTube
for videos. The last time I heard him read
his poetry was in a classroom at the local
state university. Most of the scattering of people
there were undergraduates, surreptitiously
or openly looking at their phones. It might have been
the finest reading I've ever heard—long,
tender, musical, passionate. Jay Wright
is a genius, and I don't need the MacArthur
Foundation to tell me so (though they did, back in 1986).
I don't think he needs my endorsement, either.
I just hit "Genius" level on the "Spelling Bee"
this morning: the word that put me over the top
was "doorway," but the word I was happiest

to find was "dooryard," which of course I know
from Walt Whitman—who was a genius.
I like *some* games, but I am not a genius.
I don't spend nearly enough time
with my double bass. But I love my cats,
and I love eating, and I'm very fond of words.

