

SAMPLER

*Because of Poetry...*

*Also from Shearsman by Kent Johnson*

Homage to the Last Avant-Garde

*As editor, with Roberto Echavarren*

Hotel Lautréamont: Contemporary Poetry from Uruguay

SAMPLER

Kent Johnson

*Because of Poetry,  
I Have a Really  
Big House*

Shearsman Books

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The cover of this book is a work by Michael Basinski, former Director of  
the Poetry Collection of the State University of New York at Buffalo.

The piece is titled ‘All Because of Poetry, I Have a Big House.’

The art work is owned by Kent Johnson.

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This book is dedicated to Michael Boughn

—*patet luscus, et fortes*

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# Because of Poetry, I Have a Really Big House

—to Michael Basinski

Because of poetry, I have a really big house.  
Behind the house lives a kindly family of grouse.  
They play all around and run, and they flame  
All strange, in the specious sun. They are mild and tame,  
Of a species where the boy birds sport a mane  
Of golden fire and foil. Yes, I enjoy to go for a walk.  
I do this much, and as I walk I snort and talk  
To myself and sing, like Christopher Smart,  
On his knees, O. Hummingbirds and shrike dart  
About my head, from which sprouts a forest,  
With bats. So, I visit my friend, Ted, the arborist.  
He asks me if I want to go to the White Temple  
For a while, where they put gauze on each temple  
And bring a bluish spoon to take between the teeth.  
When I wake, after a dream, I notice that beneath  
Me the sheet is brown and wet. Yet Ted smiles  
And says, “You did good, Mr. Poet!” And then he dials  
His phone to God, and everything again goes black.  
That must be when the Giantess takes me in a pod, back  
To my house, which is filled with books of fine poetry.  
It’s funny, says me, that there is no word to rhyme with Poetry,  
Except for mongrel slants, like Popery, Coterie, and Ashbery...  
*Toiletry*, says the Giantess, the bully. Her face is umbral Mystery.  
Now, on my bed, there’s a seven-foot Neruda-faced mouse.  
But that’s alright: Because of poetry, I have a really big house.

## Poetry Will Save Your Life

is a motto I lived with for many years, well, OK, maybe around six or seven years, from nineteen to twenty-five or twenty-six. But around that time, in my mid-twenties, that is, I realized that no, Poetry will most assuredly *not* save your life. In fact, I said to myself, it is only making it much worse! I realized this by looking at my collapsing fortunes and at my various addictions, accidents, and incarcerations, not to mention the incident when I shouted a few lines from Baudelaire and drank, rapidly, a glass of Drano, which more or less dissolved my esophagus, so that I have a permanent hole cut into my throat, through which I must be fed and watered, and which makes my voice sound like an evil robot's when I perform readings, which I am invited to give no doubt much because of my unusual condition, which makes people feel obligated, as a poet "friend" once suggested, with a wink, it being well known, he smiled, that I highlighted my plight in query letters, accompanied by assurances that I knew their institution would never discriminate against people with feeding tubes. Like most poets, that guy turned out to be not so nice, and this is the other reason I know that Poetry won't save your life: All you have to do is look around you at other poets, be it in New York City or some quaint Midwestern college town and see what unkind, impolite, and self-involved people they are, the poets, mainly out for themselves and their "poetry careers," and the bigger their *vitas* become, the more unpleasant they get. My third

ex-wife once asked me, and with all her faults, she could narrow in on a topic and pluck out its essence, she asked me, “Has any poet even *once* done something nice for you *twice*, without the good old quid pro quo?” I wracked my brains on that for a while, and it dawned on me that no, despite my having done many selfless things for other poets, mostly younger ones, that none of them had ever done anything for me more than once unless I had returned the favor by doing something for them, you know, the usual things poets do, writing a review or blurb, putting in a word with an editor, inviting Joseph or Mary for a reading, stuff like that. And then, when I thought about it, and with horror, I realized I couldn’t recall having done anything for another poet twice sans payback, either. This was right before I drank the Drano, which would have been when I was thirty-six, I think, having realized a decade previously, as I said, that Poetry would never save your or my life, so just to clear up the sequence there, as I think I earlier gave the impression that I drank it in my twenties. Anyway, it was in my early thirties when I started copying stuff from Wikipedia and pasting it together and passing the stuff off as my own work, until I got caught by a mean, vicious critic, whose article got picked up by a number of major newspapers and web sites, after which the reading invitations ended, and so here I am, with my mechanical voice, writing this poem. Well, the thing to do is to just soldier on, I say, because at this point, now that I am sixty-six, what am I going to do, be a gigolo? Maybe I will write a book and title it *Poetry Will Save Your Life*, a kind of anthology wrapped inside a memoir, a phrase I saw somewhere, and which could be marketed by a major publisher as a kind of self-help manual. On the back cover will be a picture of me, with the patch over my left eye, a half-

severed ear, and a tube coiling like a vacuum cleaner chord out of my throat. Or maybe no chord. Maybe just the hole. I don't think there's ever been an Author photo with a gaping neck hole, and it would surely go nicely with the title.

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# It's Hard Being a Famous Poet

1.

[THE POTLATCH GIFT]

It's tough being a famous poet.  
All your privacy is gone. It's  
enough to drive a person crazy!  
Even when people are not coming  
up to you at pharmacies or liquor  
stores and asking for an autograph,  
they are giving you sidelong,  
foxy glances, or purposely stepping  
into your line of sight and pressing,  
quickly, a dark and gristly substance  
into their pouty mouths, then  
(after counting to three) gagging it  
back out, into blue, condom-like  
objects, just to get a piece of your  
chock-full time and attention.  
Granted, those who do the gagging  
trick are not normal, common people;  
they are other poets. But this does not  
make the distraction any less annoying,  
not least when they approach you,  
smiling, all nonchalant, holding the  
squid-thing out to you, as a species  
of potlatch gift.

2.

[THE SHOWER]

It sucks being a famous poet.  
All your time gets taken up on  
the phone or in answering emails  
from people asking for a blurb,  
and stuff. It's totally tiresome! Even  
when young, sexy people aren't  
pounding at your door in Paris,  
where you're on a grant, you'll be at  
the Tuileries, let's say, just walking  
around, and someone dressed in a kind  
of gold-leaf foil will invariably rush up,  
yank your head back by the hair, and  
snap a selfie with you. It's sort of like  
when the skies over the medieval  
college town, where you've been invited  
to read, in a vast dining hall, open up and  
soak you in this stuff that is like sooty  
sweat from the Great War, though when  
you look at your hands and feet, they are  
a viscous condom-blue, so that you have  
to go back to the dorm and take a shower,  
in a common shower room, with a bunch  
of students and profs with brass chorus  
masks who have followed you there, and  
you take a shower with all these naked  
people in masks who are looking at you  
and chanting something you can't even  
understand, you know what I mean?



3.

[THE “EVERYTHING IS SO BEAUTIFUL”]

It's taxing being a famous poet. All your energy gets completely sucked up. It's so frustrating! People are always asking you for letters of recommendation, or inviting you to do readings, or to teach in Summer Retreats at Napa, or Naropa, or Naples, Florida. It's exhausting! Not to mention the ceaseless invitations abroad, where you have to give even more readings than you do in your own country, and then do long interviews with the press, which is censored in some of the places where you get invited, by people wearing small blue condoms on their fingers, and where many poets are in jail, and their books are banned, and even more people get thrown in the slammer for reading them, though that doesn't stop you, for you are a famous poet and must strive to stay that way, countless folks are counting on you, and plus, the honorarium is just too good, it's more than even the Poetry Foundation pays, so you go and you say, in this interview, published in a sanctioned magazine of one of these countries, where dozens of poets and artists are locked up, that “Everything is so beautiful.” Though after a while the pressure just keeps piling

up in your head and soul, so you try to find ways to get around the ridiculous demands on your time and space, the way it all drains the spirit, and so you go to this reading in your honor, and you read this long poem that you've copied from the autopsy report of the poet Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize guy, who has just died in jail, from liver cancer, except you move, for effect, a line from the top of the report to the end, which is a line that says his genitals are unremarkable, which is something the censors sort of like, and they invite you back next year, too, to tour with some of the still-living legends of the "Language movement."

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