

Letter From New York

REVERSE SHOPLIFTING

Jason Schneiderman

Greetings from Brooklyn! We're back in the season where there's a poetry reading almost every night of the week. Poetry events in New York seem to follow the academic calendar – woe unto the event organiser who unwittingly tries to compete with the AWP conference or the Dodge festival. It also seems like everyone I know is having their first book taken, publishing their first book, or putting out their second book. I just went to an absolutely packed party for Saeed Jones's first book (someone told me that his book is already in a second printing, and I make it a point to repeat gossip, but never to verify it – that would be unseemly), and I'm looking forward to the party for Thomas Dooley's first book. Sometimes I have pangs of fear that my own career is unfolding a bit slower than I would like, but I find that inclusion is far and away the best proof against jealousy. Perhaps name-dropping is the second best proof.

One of the drawbacks of New York City is that you lose perspective on the world. I get all of my print news from publications with "New York" in the title: *The New York Times*; *New York Magazine*; *The New Yorker*; *The New York Review of Books*. Every once in a while I subscribe to *The Economist* or the *London Review of Books* for a touch of balance, but then I let them lapse when they pile up unread. *The Economist* has very small type! Every place that I've ever lived (Maryland, Germany, Russia, California, Texas, England) has been self-involved, but the rest of the world participates in New York's narcissism. I'm never quite sure what is big in New York and what's big in the world, but if it happens here, it's usually national news.

The upside of New York, of course, is that it's an embarrassment of riches regarding pretty much everything involving the arts. There are poetry readings almost every night, and the truth is that it's much harder to get an audience in New York than in places where there are only poetry events every month or so. Amazing poets can be heard for free in intimate venues. I was at a Frank Bidart reading in Brooklyn earlier this year, and there were maybe twenty people there. The Q&A felt like a personal audience with the master. My college is a ten-minute walk from Poets House, and yet I rarely go more than once a month. When I first moved to New York, I felt a bit panicked about missing things.

Now I sort of enjoy the wastefulness as a form of luxury. It's like I can leave the mink on the floor because I have oh so many furs.

Still, there are things that go away, and then I miss them. I'm still in mourning for the Wilde Boys, which was a wonderful community of gay male poets, which slowly grew to include gay women, and then just people of poetry, though really it was gay boys (bois?) at its core. It made *The New York Times* (see?), and developed a bit of fame for Alex Dimitrov, who founded and ran the salon. I'd love to revive it, but the truth is that I can't throw a party to save my life. I hosted one of the early Wilde Boys gatherings, and I tried making Sylvia Plath's favourite recipe – tomato-soup cake from *Joy of Cooking*. The cookbook suggested marshmallow icing, but I made way too much, and when I put it on the bundt cake, the overall effect was of an oversized, glossy, frosty-white sphincter. I'm quite good at throwing dinner parties, but more than ten people, and it's an absolute horror show.

On the upside, we have a new institution: The Bureau of General Services, Queer Division. It's a gay bookstore/event space that is literary, queer, naughty, and smart in exactly the right proportions. It feels like the personal library of someone who just finished a PhD in queer history with a focus on poetics and theory. The shelves are made of planks and boxes, and it's wonderfully homey. They have an amazing 'zine collection, and every time I go to an event there, I slide one of my own books onto the shelf, so I can see it next to all my favourite poets. I suppose it's actually a form of reverse shoplifting. Maybe I should do that at every bookstore I frequent.

I've been thinking a lot about the 'End of...' arguments from the late 90s. You remember Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art* and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*? The arguments weren't so much that these abstractions had actually ended, as much as that they had reached a natural end in their evolution (an imperfect metaphor, I know). History was just supposed to be the spread of democracy and capitalism now that the Soviet Union had collapsed and proven socialism to be bankrupt; art could be anything, so um, just enjoy what you like. I keep wondering if we're at the 'end' of poetry, or if poetry, like the novel, is just sort of going to be the same thing for quite some time. I really love what's being written now, and I think it's quite good. But it never feels like a break, or a striking out in a new direction. Even Flarf felt less like an innovation than a confirmation of the clearly defined field of play. I don't mind the idea of poetry 'ending' – it just terrifies me that my work might end up on the dust-heap of history as the dreadful thing that came before whatever the coming true break is. I don't want to be some stodgy traditionalist wondering what everyone thinks is so great about this Pound fellow.

Still, I'm not the only one thinking about poetry. John Ashbery's work in e-book form made the front page of *The New York Times* (below the fold), and I

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turned on the radio last night and recognised Marie Howe's voice as she was interviewed on National Public Radio. Poet Terrance Hayes received a MacArthur 'Genius Grant', and everyone's abuzz about that. *Poetry* magazine is still wonderful. *The American Poetry Review* is brilliant. There was a huge turn out at the Brooklyn Book Fest, despite competition from the People's Climate March. I just missed (again) the poetry showcase at Poets House, in which they display all the books published in the past year. Perhaps it's living in the writer's colony that is Brooklyn, but it seems like a good time for poetry. Once, I was even recognised in my local coffee shop. If things like that happened more often, I would bother to keep a diary.

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