

The Painter and the Poet

Joe Brainard. *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*. Ed. Ron Padgett. Library of America 2012. 541 pp. \$35.00

Ron Padgett. *Collected Poems*. Coffee House Press 2013. 810 pp. \$44.00

As a label, “New York School” never quite fit. True, the poets that fell under its purview lived and wrote in Manhattan, in the years after World War Two; but like most enthusiastic participants in the dream of America’s great city, they were domestic immigrants. The most prominent personalities of this leaderless aggregation were Frank O’Hara, a Baltimore native who grew up in Massachusetts, and John Ashbery, from Rochester. Classmates and friends at Harvard, they met James Schuyler, a Chicagoan, at a party in New York in 1951; the three writers shared an apartment on East 49th Street and soon expanded their circle to include Kenneth Koch, from Cincinnati, and Kenward Elmslie, a Coloradan. The group was first called “the New York School” in an essay published in 1962 by John Bernard Myers, the owner of the Tibor de Nagy art gallery. Myers borrowed the phrase from Robert Motherwell, who had coined it to designate those painters of his generation who were based in New York, as opposed to the School of Paris.

The poets resented the label because they felt it didn’t reflect the stylistic diversity that existed among them. Yet “school” is an intentionally vague term, distinct from “movement” in that it describes locus, not focus. In this case it’s particularly apt, because it evokes the poets’ close ties to such New York-based painters as Jane Freilicher, Joan Mitchell, Fairfield Porter, and Larry Rivers. (Myers’s essay, published in the little magazine *Nomad*, was subtitled “Every Painter Should Have His Poet.”) Ashbery and Schuyler wrote criticism for *Art News*, among other journals, while O’Hara was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Although the poets were scornfully anti-academic and often expressed themselves in the slangy idiom of city streets, they were erudite and sophisticated in their tastes, steeped in the European avant-garde. Their heroes were Baudelaire, Apollinaire, and Mayakovsky rather than American poets.

In an interview in 2013, Ron Padgett, a younger poet from Oklahoma who studied with Kenneth Koch at Columbia, pointed out that of the group's founding members—Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara, and Schuyler—three were gay, three were Harvard graduates, and all were white males. The profile did not vary much through the years. Barbara Guest and Bernadette Mayer are often added to the roster, and Anne Waldman was the director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church until her embrace of Buddhism and move to Boulder in the mid-Seventies. Academic critics try to diversify the circle further by including LeRoi Jones, a close friend of O'Hara's, and members of the Nuyorican Poets' Café, but this is an expression of good intentions more than good literary history. The New York School was primarily a white boys' clubhouse.

The first comprehensive collection of work by these poets was *An Anthology of New York Poets*, edited by Padgett and David Shapiro, which was published on January 1, 1970, the day after the Sixties ended. The book's cover—a white background with cadmium-red images of a butterfly, a pair of stemmed cherries, and a rubber ball surrounded by four jacks—made an indelible impression. The images were as crisp and clear as the illustrations in a child's alphabet book, random quotations from the visual vocabulary of daily life, devoid of both meaning and irony—the thing itself.

The artist was Joe Brainard, a high school friend of Padgett's from Tulsa. He was something of a mascot to the group. Tall and wiry, with a wide-open grin, horn-rimmed glasses, and a slight stutter, he resembled one of the gang in *Archie* comics. He was eighteen when, in 1960, he moved into a storefront on the Lower East Side with the poet Ted Berrigan, another Oklahoman. The two had met when Brainard was in high school and Berrigan an undergraduate at the University of Tulsa. After a feint to Boston and a few false returns to Oklahoma, Brainard settled in New York in the mid-Sixties. By that time he had slept with many prominent gay poets, formed a lasting relationship with Kenward Elmslie, exhibited his paintings and collages in a major show at Finch College (through the patronage of Larry Rivers), and created stage designs for plays by Frank O'Hara and LeRoi Jones.

If the New York School had a visual style, it was Brainard's. O'Hara was frequently called a poet among painters; Brainard was a painter among poets. By the time *An Anthology of New York Poets* was published, he had

designed book covers for collections by many of the writers represented in its pages. In 1963 he began a series of perverse satires in which he appropriated Ernie Bushmiller's comic-strip character Nancy. They were approximately contemporaneous with the first comic-strip paintings by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. In Pop Art the irony can be blatant or delicately submerged and subverted by painterly gestures; Brainard aimed for genial outrageousness. Occasionally he put Nancy in obscene situations that anticipated the underground comix of R. Crumb and other cartoonists of the psychedelic era.

All the while, Brainard was furiously scribbling; supercharged by habitual amphetamine use, he filled notebooks with hundreds of pages of minutely detailed reports of daily events peppered with naïve philosophical aphorisms. In 1970 he published his first unillustrated book, *I Remember*, which defies generic categorization but might be described as a sort of prose epic with poetical aspirations. It immediately found a large, passionate readership and remains his best-known work in any medium. It is an incantatory description of the world he grew up in, middle-class Tulsa in the years after World War Two, with occasional glimpses of his adult life.

Several versions of the work exist; the one printed in *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard* comprises approximately fifteen hundred stanzas, each beginning with the phrase "I remember . . ." Most of them are single sentences, some simple and others complex, while a few are paragraph-long anecdotes. The first page reads:

I remember the first time I got a letter that said "After Five Days Return To" on the envelope, and I thought that after I had kept the letter for five days I was supposed to return it to the sender.

I remember the kick I used to get going through my parents' drawers looking for rubbers. (Peacock.)

I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world.

I remember pink dress shirts. And bola ties.

I remember when a kid told me that those sour clover-like leaves we used to eat (with little yellow flowers) tasted so sour because dogs peed on them. I remember that didn't stop me from eating them.

I remember the first drawing I remember doing. It was of a bride with a very long train.

I remember my first cigarette. It was a Kent. Up on a hill. In Tulsa, Oklahoma. With Ron Padgett.

I remember my first erections. I thought I had some terrible disease or something.

I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.

The question that persistently comes to mind while reading *I Remember* is, How artful is Brainard's artlessness? The work appears to be random, even scatter-brained, but the more the reader looks for connecting threads and patterns, the more clearly a fugue-like structure emerges. Brainard exercises considerable creative ingenuity to ward off the monotony of his anaphoral formula.

He begins his book with a dull sentence, which takes a bit of figuring out. An alert editor might suggest a more compelling opener, but Brainard doesn't want to compel the reader. He edges into the remembrance of his life, hoping more than demanding that we follow him. The second stanza touches on the mystery of sex and the awful fact of one's own parents performing unimaginable acts; the sense of the exotic is enhanced by that enigmatic parenthesis, though in fact "Peacock" refers to an old brand of condoms. Pain and death enter in the third stanza, followed by fashion, social pressure (or is it the unreliability of information?), and art. The seventh sets the place, Tulsa, and introduces Brainard's best, constant friend, Ron Padgett, himself a minor theme of sorts not only in *I Remember* but Brainard's entire body of work.

Then sex recurs, as it always does for the adolescent, and so does the family theme. The ninth stanza tells far more than it says. In his memoir *Joe*, Padgett

describes Marie Brainard as “in many ways an ideal 1950s housewife,” who “always seemed to have just baked a pie.” This stanza of *I Remember* reveals an emotional hardness in her, viewed through the eyes of the bewildered child, who escapes the painful scene through the comfort of pie. The Georgie-Porgie rhyme of “pie” and “cry” enhances the sense of irreality.

The two remaining major themes of *I Remember* make their entrance on the next page. First, religion: “I remember when I got a five-year pin for not missing a single morning of Sunday School for five years. (Methodist.)” Then school: “I remember how much, in high school, I wanted to be handsome and popular.” The latter triggers two more memories of school, both of which carry a sexual ping:

I remember when, in high school, if you wore green and
yellow on Thursday it meant that you were queer.

I remember when, in high school, I used to stuff a sock
in my underwear.

A similar gloss could be applied to almost any page. *I Remember* has thematic eddies and swells: Occasionally Brainard goes on a jag and strings together half a dozen stanzas on a single topic, but taken as a whole the book achieves a remarkably consistent randomness. Like *Finnegans Wake*, a more spectacular but not a more engaging work of reverie, it is circular, and perforce begins in the middle.

It is difficult to name another work of literature so essentially a product of its place and time. What would a Chinese reader make of *I Remember*? Or a contemporary adolescent in Los Angeles? In a hundred years it will require as many footnotes as the letters of Cicero do today. Anyone in the future who wishes to know what life was like in Tulsa during the Truman-Eisenhower years will have access to that world entire, like a scrap of frozen bone marrow from an extinct species that contains enough DNA to reconstitute the creature.

In 1975 Brainard collaborated with John Ashbery on *The Vermont Notebook*, which paired forty-eight of his ink drawings with experimental texts by Ashbery, all but one in prose. It was the Master’s only collaboration apart from the novel he co-authored with James Schuyler, *A Nest*

of Ninnies. Ashbery's contributions are utterly unlike his verse. Many of them are catalogues of names and places, or simply lists of words chosen apparently at random; others show the influence of Brainard's informal, confidential style. Brainard's drawings, in their bold, self-sufficient literalism, make Ashbery's texts seem heavy-footed. A graphic drawing of a laundromat with a pure Pop feeling, à la Lichtenstein, is paired with an exercise in inanity by Ashbery that begins:

America is a fun country. Still, there are aspects of it which I would prefer not think about. I am sure, for instance, that the large "chain" stores with their big friendly ads and so-called "discount" prices actually charge higher prices so as to force smaller competitors out of business. This sort of thing has been going on for at least 200 years and is one of the cornerstones on which our mercantile American society is constructed, like it or not . . .

The jejune scare quotes, the stated aversion to thinking about a subject that the author goes on to explain, the sheer dumbness: All these are pure Joe. Yet Brainard's uninformed, self-confident narrators are presented with a finer irony, one that invites the reader to indulge a pleasurable uncertainty as to whether he's being teased. The aesthetic experience is similar to that afforded by such early Warhol paintings as his portraits of Troy Donahue and Elvis Presley, which maintain an ongoing ambiguity about the artist's attitude toward his subjects. While no one could accuse John Ashbery of naïveté, he has none of Brainard's sunny, uncomplicated optimism, and his attempt to write in his friend's voice falls flat. Ashbery once commented, "The modesty of Joe Brainard is the modesty of the gods."

The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard includes journals of trips to Vermont and Bolinas, California, and diaries of his life on the Lower East Side that brim with piquant, Pepysian details. There are a few ridiculous short short stories, closer to shaggy dog stories than literary fiction; a representative selection of comic strips; and a few finished ink drawings. The collection even includes a few poems. Some are so slight as to risk evanescence:

Poem

Sometimes
everything
seems
so
oh, I don't know.

For all its open-hearted simplicity, the poem has a touch of hubris: Brainard dares his readers not to take him seriously even as he trusts that we will.



In some ways, the hero of *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard* is its editor, Ron Padgett, who met Brainard in first grade. A class picture shows two eager, hopeful white blobs with oiled hair amid beaming rows of similar blobs. In their senior year at Central High School, Brainard and Padgett, along with their classmate Dick Gallup, started a little magazine called *The White Dove Review*. The editors solicited work from their literary heroes. They must have written good letters, for they received contributions from Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, among other marquee names. After graduation, Brainard and Padgett took their first trip to New York, where they joined Ted Berrigan; with the arrival of Gallup, they formed a sort of Oklahoma refugee community in the midst of the New York School. After they settled in the city, Brainard and Padgett remained in more or less constant contact until Joe's death from AIDS-related pneumonia in 1994. By 1981, Brainard, not yet forty, had effectively retired as an artist and writer. He kicked his amphetamine habit, but without the drug he lacked the self-confidence to create: In a word, he lost his mojo. In his final decade he lived simply and read enormously, consuming one fat Victorian novel after another.

At the time of his death, Brainard was almost forgotten outside the dissipating poetry scene of the Lower East Side. If anyone had predicted that the Library of America would one day dedicate a volume to his work—an honor as yet not bestowed on O'Hara, though it has been on Ashbery—even his friends would have been incredulous. But

after years of campaigning by his loyal friend Ron Padgett, *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard* has finally been published.

Padgett himself has been publishing distinguished books of poetry for forty-five years. When the New York School was at the height of its creative ferment and influence, Padgett was a rising young star. In 1970, when I was a freshman in college, my copy of *Great Balls of Fire* was second only to O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* for frequent rereading. The cover art was by Joe Brainard, of course: a field of azure specked with white stars, perhaps reflecting the author's sky-high artistic ambitions. (Ben Wiseman's cover for *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, which features pale yellow stars on a background of baby blue, is a close homage.) My copy was often on loan to my friends among our college's little literary set. We were impressed by O'Hara's *Second Avenue*, with its ineffably *haut*-New York cover by Larry Rivers; we dutifully puzzled our way through Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*; and Berrigan's sonnets were required reading. But we responded with instinctive affection to *Great Balls of Fire*, a cool brew of erudition and fun. I wanted to write just like Ron Padgett when I grew up.

I did not become a poet when I grew up, but rereading the poems now vividly reminds me why I aspired to do so. This stanza from "Tone Arm," as deeply engraved in my brain at eighteen as any lines by Edgar Allan Poe or Robert Frost I had memorized for recitation in class, gave me a tickling caress when I reread it:

You people of the future
How I hate you
You are alive and I'm not
I don't care whether you read my poetry or not.

Phrase after phrase of *Great Balls of Fire* retains a just-so, unimprovable quality. The book is manifestly under the influence of O'Hara in its confiding tone and flippant wit. Padgett slips in edgewise his deeper theme, a hatred (as opposed to the usual fear) of death, edged with enough irony to make the experience a mordant pleasure.

Other poems are sophisticated conceptual divertissements. "Falling in Love in Spain or Mexico" will be funny as long as foreign-language textbooks use idiotic dialogues:

A handsome young man and a veiled woman enter. They stroll slowly across the stage, pausing from time to time, so that their entrance coincides with the first spoken word and their exit the last.

JOSE: I am happy to meet you. My name is José Gomez Carillo. What is your name? This is my wife. I like your daughter very much. I think your sister is beautiful. Are you familiar with the U.S.? Have you been to New York? Your city is very interesting. I think so. I don't think so. Here is a picture of my wife. Your daughter is very beautiful. She sings very well. You dance very well. Do you speak English? Do you like American movies? Do you read books in English? Do you like to swim? To drive a car? To play tennis? Golf? Dance? Do you like American music? May I invite you to dance? I like to play tennis. Will you drive? Do you live here? What is your address? Your phone number? I am here for four days. Two weeks. One month only. Would you like a cigarette? A glass of wine? Anything? Help yourself. To your health! With best regards. Many happy returns! Congratulations! With best wishes! Merry Christmas! My sincere sympathy. Good luck! When can I see you again? I think you are beautiful. I like you very much. Do you like me? May I see you tomorrow? May I see you this evening? Here is a present for you. I love you. Will you marry me?

GIRL: *(She lifts and throws back her veil, revealing her face, which is extraordinarily beautiful.)* Yes!

THE END

When I was eighteen, I loved the way Padgett’s poetry manages to be self-consciously literary and learned without being pretentious, and I still do. His poem “Birches” begins by satirizing Robert Frost:

When I see birches
I think of nothing

In retrospect, these lines may be a trifle heavy-handed—one might even say collegiate, a quality imperceptible to collegians—but they still make me laugh. A poem called “Joe Brainard’s Painting *Bingo*” initiates the clever exploration of the formal potentialities of verse that Padgett has continued in his later work. It begins:

I suffer when I sit next to Joe Brainard’s painting *Bingo*

I could have made that line into a whole stanza

I suffer
When I sit
Next to Joe
Brainard’s painting
Bingo

Or I could change the line arrangement

I suffer when I sit

That sounds like hemorrhoids
I don’t know anything about hemorrhoids . . .

Padgett was a master of the late-twentieth-century technique of mixing high and low culture. Boccaccio and Lautréamont rub shoulders with Gene Autry and Lash LaRue, Gris and Seurat with Jerry Lee Lewis, the source of the book’s title. Despite its facetious, even frivolous tone, *Great Balls of Fire* displays both versatility and virtuosity. It has a poem in polished French, “Le Mouvement de César Franck,” and a group of short odes on the Italian

Futurists, Fiat, Mussolini, and Giuseppe Ungaretti; Italian prose translations of the latter are published in small print at the bottom of the page, mimicking the style of the foreign-language poetry anthologies published at that time by Penguin. Several poems experiment with dispersing words across the page in the manner of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*. There are a few miniatures, precious but not cloying, such as "December," here quoted in full:

I will sleep
in my little cup

Padgett's *Collected Poems* reveals a stylistic and thematic consistency throughout his career. His recent poems possess the same insouciant charm as the early work, if not always as much invention. Some of them seem to resume conversations interrupted a decade before. This poem about pure form appeared in his collection *Tulsa Kid* (1979):

Haiku

First: five syllables
Second: seven syllables
Third: five syllables

Another miniature, from *You Never Know* (2002), is also titled "Haiku" (though it is not one, or even close); it would feel at home in *Great Balls of Fire*:

That was fast.
I mean life.

Actually, it sounds very much like Joe Brainard. In Padgett's most recent collection, *How Long* (2011), he pays pointed homage to his friend's most famous work. "I Remember Lost Things" begins:

I remember getting letters addressed to me with my name and street address, followed on the next line by the word *City*. Which meant the same city in which they had been mailed. Could life have been that simple?

I remember the first time I heard Joe read from his *I Remember*. The shock of pleasure was quickly replaced by envy and the question, Why didn't I think of that? Aesthetic pleasure comes in many forms and degrees, but envy comes only when you wholeheartedly admire someone else's work. Envy of the talent of a person you love is particularly beautiful and invigorating. And you don't even have to answer the question.

The piece falls short of its model. One of the most salient qualities of *I Remember* is its lack of explanation—Brainard just remembers. In his imitation, Padgett follows Joe explicitly, even to the point of beginning with a memory involving the postal service. Yet in the final sentence of the stanza he states his sentimental conclusion, that life has lost the blissful simplicity it once had, in blunt terms that vitiate its impact. In the second stanza Padgett explains and overexplains himself with vaporous generalities. We recall the stanza of *I Remember* that introduces Padgett: “I remember my first cigarette. It was a Kent. Up on a hill. In Tulsa, Oklahoma. With Ron Padgett.” Brainard's snapshot expresses love for his friend more persuasively by avoiding the word. The adolescent axiom of their generation that a special bond is formed with the person you smoke your first cigarette with is left implicit; any explanation would diminish the specialness.

Padgett published an oblique, more effective homage to *I Remember* in *Toujours l'amour*, the collection that followed *Great Balls of Fire* in 1976, when Joe was healthy and at the height of his creative powers. “Wilson '57” is a long poem (over two hundred lines) of school-day memories, which are triggered as the author leafs through his junior high school yearbook. Padgett and Brainard had not yet become friends by 1957, so Joe is never mentioned. A methodical poem, it seems to follow the yearbook page by page. It begins with images of the school's administrators, class officers, school council, sports teams, band, librarians, and yearbook staff. One member of the staff still exerts an erotic fascination on the poet, namely

Madelyn Grove, a tall and lovely
gray-eyed beauty who spoke so softly

no one ever heard a thing she said
and didn't care, she was so pretty. She jerked
me off in the lobby of the Hotel Hilton in Chicago
in a dream two weeks ago.

Then Padgett introduces us to his classmates, “beginning with Jayne Adair, pages of rows of faces / framed in squares,” and concluding with

Howard West, who hid his chips
under the table when he played poker, who
joined the Air Force and rode through the air in a jet;
Jim Wise, who fell in a hole; Lynn Yelton,
whom a few years later I would find attractive, too late, alas.

These faded snapshots retain only the most poignant, subjective features; the poet is gathering relics of his own life, as reflected in chance encounters of his adolescence.



The poets of the New York School wrote to the moment, and mostly for themselves and their friends. As a result, few of them have enjoyed robust posthumous reputations. When my life as a reader and writer began in the 1960s, Frank O'Hara was a god of poetry, accepted among my literary acquaintance as an unquestioned master. Yet even he has declined to a relative obscurity that seemed impossible at the time of his death. Many of his books, including the collected and selected poems, have gone in and out of print; his brilliant, witty letters still await publication. At a literary conference in England ten years ago I mentioned O'Hara before a select audience of British poets and literary scholars, and not one of them knew his name. Shocked, I rustled up a copy of “The Day Lady Died,” his tender, exciting eulogy to Billie Holiday, and read it to them. They were moved by the poem, as most readers are. Yet when I said that their being unaware of Frank O'Hara might be compared to American readers not knowing who Philip Larkin was, they genially dismissed me as a cheerleading Yank.

Writers' reputations rise and fall for reasons that have little to do with literary quality and sometimes nothing to do with the interests of ordinary readers. Yet among the academic canon-constructors who have supplanted critics as the dominant curators of literature, the relative majoriness and minoriness of poets, particularly those of the twentieth century, is a matter of life and death. No one could persuasively argue that Joe Brainard is a major writer—and what of it? Literature, after all, is not a tournament; you don't have to give up Henry James to read Ronald Firbank.

Publishers, however, are ruled by just such considerations, which usually translate directly into sales. Coffee House Press is to be congratulated for making Ron Padgett's poetry available in a big, handsomely produced volume, which will be sought out by all his admirers who can afford it. Yet the Library of America has in some ways performed a more significant service by rescuing Joe Brainard from obscurity with the publication of a definitive collection gathered by his faithful friend. Now if only someone would reprint Padgett and Shapiro's classic anthology—or, better yet, commission a new, comprehensive collection of the poets of the New York School.

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