

Could Someone Tell Me Why

--*para mis ex-amigos poetas*

Could someone tell me why I've never been selected for the yearly Best American Poetry? I'll tell you this: It seriously dills my pickle. I have written lots of poems, and I know that many of them have been among the best in all American poetry. At least for that year. Sometimes it seems like *everyone* has had a poem in the Best American Poetry. Except for me. Yeah, it puts my knickers in a knot. It's not like I don't have connections to the Best American Poetry. In fact, in the 2006 edition of the Best American Poetry, chosen by Robert Bly, David Villon, in his Preface, spends a full page talking about me, and he calls me "incontrovertibly brilliant." You can look it up, on page IV, I think. After that, I did emails with David Villon, who of course is the Editor of the Best American Poetry. In fact, the Series was his 1988 idea, so naturally he edits it. I've read many poems in the Best American Poetry by friends of mine in the poetry world. Well, that's not really exact. I have read many poems in the Best American Poetry by *former* friends of mine. I don't know why they're not friends any longer. It's not that I couldn't know

if I set my mind to thinking on it, it's that I don't want to think on it, because I know it will make me more bothered than a mule with a mouthful of bees. But one thing I can say for damn straight sure: They are not *former* because they were in the Best American Poetry and I wasn't. I am many things, but I'm no petty-ass Bobby Sue, that much I swear. This is because I have resolute confidence in my own talents. I know for a fact that many a poem of mine should've been selected for the Best American Poetry. That all this ungodly time's gone by without a single one of my poems getting picked is spookier than the ghost of Helen Adam at the foot of your canopied bed, holding up the severed, teeth-clacking head of Ezra Pound, say. But on the other hand it's become a kind of point of manly pride for me. In a corner of my room are all the editions of Best American Poetry, stacked in a tower, like a sculpture by Donald Judd, or Carl Chartier, the likely murderer of my fav artist, Ana Mendieta. Except it doesn't emit any light. It is just a dark tower, and in its darkness the poems of my former friends just sit there, waiting. I have often meditated on this matter: Does a poem go on existing even if it's not being read? Does its meter, let's say, still measure? What really happens to a poem, while it sits closed in the dark of a closed book? Do spirits live there? Are there sperm-like, invisible strings that stretch back from them to other poems from hundreds or thousands of years ago that have been lost, but which keep spawning poems? Oh, it makes

me feel like I'm about to have a dying duck fit. Also, as years go by, I keep coming across more and more bios in the back of the *Denver Review* that say the poet whose bio I am reading has been published in the Best American Poetry. I guess this makes sense, since the more the years go on, and the more aged I become, the more likely it is I will come across poets who have been published in Best American Poetry. Yeah, so some of the people who were my former friends are now dead. I feel bad about that, but then I think to myself, Hey, life is short and at least you were published in the Best American Poetry! No, I don't really mean that, just kidding, I've never thought that, and never would I. Anyway, as I was saying, David Villon wrote about me on page IV of his Introduction to Best American Poetry of 1999. (I had written 2006 above, but I just checked, and it was seven years before that, more proof, when you think of it, that many of "mis ex-amigos" are dead.) So then I wrote David Villon over email, which was still a novelty back then, preceded by dial-up 14th century Poets-in-Hell screams, and I thanked him very much for saying I was "brilliant," but I also mocked him in my email for stating I was the Author of an apocryphal book I was simply executor for, proceeding to tell him he was mighty dense about it all, I think I used that word. Go sit in the truck! I said. I can't remember what else I said, but it was enough for him to write back and tell me the KGB reading he had invited me to give one month from then, all expenses paid, was cancelled. After more dial-up screeches, I gaily replied,

Hey, sugar, don't let your bulldog mouth overload your hummingbird ass. Well, that's another former friend from Best American Poetry down the Tubes of Time, you could say. Life is so strange. One minute all the chairs have their backs turned toward the sun and you're getting these feelings of exaltation, and then two hours later, or whatever, you feel, I don't know, like all covered in junk and seedy, and you get very weepy for what seemed like the pleasant early years, it seems there's little consistency to life, this is how it goes, day to day. Especially when you've got MS, but even if you don't, you know what I mean? Speaking of the *Denver Review*, I received once a formal apology letter from Láird Vallée, the former editor, because they'd published a poem, in 2015, I think it was, by a prominent poet who died soon after that, the poem being an indisputable plagiarism of a poem I'd published years before, "33 Rules for Poets 23 and Under." One of the things that got me so hopping mad I could have chewed nails and spit out a barbed wire fence was that this was maybe my topmost popular poem ever, printed in a book from Iowa on teaching poetry and widely used in numerous workshops of Creative Writing over the course of sundry semesters. Many a young poet, from Bard to Southeast Missouri State University, has written most amiably to thank me for it. And then the poached poem by this notable poet was chosen for inclusion in the Best American Poetry in 2016. Well, you can imagine. I was so stirred up, I was ready to burn thunderwood and jump damn salty. Actually, it's funny, but this now reminds me of something else that makes my butt want to grind corn. I think it was 2008, and Forêt Raguyer, a former friend,

with whom I'd translated and trekked far and long, called me on my flip-cell, as I was finishing a fine, satisfied meal of grits and Spam. He was reading at the Geraldine Dodge Festival with a bunch of other successful poets, nearly all of whom, yeah, had been in Best American Poetry more times than Sundays in a year. Wassup, you diamond in a rhinestone world, I said. Are you US Poet Laureate yet? Well, he said, I'm in a huge tent at a reading by Noémi Valois, the best known Arab-American poet, and she just brought the fucking place down with a naked filch of your poem "Baghdad Exceeds Its Object." Say *what?* I said. Yep, I swear on a stack of 19th century Virginia Bibles, he said, with some excited anachronism. Well, I said, that sure makes me madder than a Wampus Cat in a rainstorm. I'll be goddamned. A few months later, when Forêt Raguyer was writing for the Poetry Foundation blog, he posted this famous Arab-American poet's anti-war poem next to mine and invited readers to compare for themselves. Fifty or sixty people wrote in to say how obvious it was. And wouldn't you know: Why the poem by this plagiarist poet ended up in the Best American Poetry of 2009. Oh, I was tetchier than a jumpin' frog 'neath a wet settin' hen. Also, once I read in NYC with David L'Amaury, one of my fav poets when I was a teen. This was after that bout with David Villon, Editor of the Best American Poetry, so of course he didn't come (*secundum* Pierre Bourdieu). But Jacques Marchand, an unwell blogger, back in the aughts, who'd been in Best American Poetry twice, was there. I asked him after the reading why he wrote a letter to my college President, urging, no lie, that I should be

fired forthwith. I said, So, Jacques Marchand, I will say I am so mad at you I could jump out of my pants. And in fact, I am so righteous livid, Monsieur, that I am thinking of taking off your *own* pants, and hanging you with them by your left foot from a lamppost, you homunculus elf. I can't recall what Jacques Marchand said, but he fell quite ill at ease during this tête-à-tête, very different than his "macho" online pose, back in those days, as an *enfant terrible* of the blogs, when he'd post cute photos of his penis poking up out of his briefs. David L'Amaury and I hugged and said goodbye, and that was the last time I ever saw him, though we continued to correspond over email, until he became quite upset over my book about Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, the one that suggests that maybe Koch wrote one of O'Hara's most famous poems, for which I received a lawsuit threat from Random House, signed by Jordanie Lurens, Rony Moreau, Guillaume Gossain, and Antonin Cotin, amazingly enough, all who'd been, seven times each, in Best American Poetry. Oh, that made me madder than a boiled owl. And I right said they'd better give their dark hearts to Jesus, because their butts were mine, and then I never heard from them again--even after the Times Literary Supplement named the book a "TLS Book of the Year." And you know what? David Villon then wrote an article on his Best American Poetry blog about how Kenneth Koch couldn't have written the poem I said he might have because Koch's ego was too big and he never would have been able to keep it a secret. Let me tell you, that made me hotter than the rattlesnake that married the garden hose. But then again, I just don't

know. Why does this happen to me, what is it about me that makes me lose all my friends, it's really starting to afflict me. And now that I think of it, maybe all these things are connected to why I am not in Best American Poetry, maybe I bring it on myself, causing Charles Delille, for example, to write hurting things about me in essays, or Ronald Voiture, who seemed to like me well enough when in Leningrad, when we were there together, though then, in the group-promo book he co-authored shortly afterwards about the experience, titled Leningrad, he called me and my two blameless friends who were with me "American cockroaches," which sticks in my craw like hair on a half-cooked biscuit. But that's OK, I've gotten back at him plenty for that in the years since, exposing him for the charlatan he is a few times, or so I like to think. But maybe he has the last laugh, because he's in Best American Poetry twelve years in a row, and I'm at zero. Which reminds me that once I read at Buffalo, invited by Étienne de Navarre, a nice book collector and head of Buffalo Poetics Program, who's been in the Best American Poetry five times, though he's from Canada, and before the reading we went out to a bar and he says to me, You know, Kent, Marjorie Arouét phoned two days ago from Pacific Palisades, and said, Why on earth did you ask the horrid Kent Johnson to come and read at Buffalo, what the hell is wrong with you? Say *what?* I said. She *really said that?* Gosh all Hemlock. Yep, he said, I swear on my Lolita and Prufrock, both signed. Later that evening I read to maybe fifty mostly grad students, and because my glasses had broken on the trip there, I had to read with my prescription Ray-Bans, so in this gorgeous rare-books library I looked both cool-cat and crazy as a wombat.

And because I was mad as a three-legged dog trying to bury a turd on a frozen pond, I read really fast and good. Most of the audience was young Conceptual poets, celebrants of Kerman Lalond and Venus de Kristees, this being about a year before the former did his Michael Brown autopsy bomb at Brown, a University founded on money made through the slave trade, though that doesn't seem to bother vanguard poets, and I boldly read a nasty suite that lampooned ConPo for the scam it was. When I was done, some of these hip Conceptual grad students invited me out for drinks and we had a swell time. And I've always wondered: Isn't it strange how no matter what, like during temporary cease fires in WWI, people who have been launching poison gas at each other can come out of the trenches and dance together and share chocolates and things and then return to their trenches and start launching poison gas again? And then the sun and the moon and the stars and stuff cover the quiet field, which is now full of trees and grass and is a memorial, a sacred place, where people come to think and read or just remember the people that they loved, even if they thought they didn't when they were younger, then, when they were impulsive, mysterious, and sad. I know poetry is life and death, and I could go on for the length of a book about this stuff, because I've had a whole run of it. But I'm ready to stop, now, and just ask the voiceless, simple air, because I really want to know, Could someone tell me why?