SELECTED ART WRITINGS
JAMES SCHUYLER

EDITED BY SIMON PETTET

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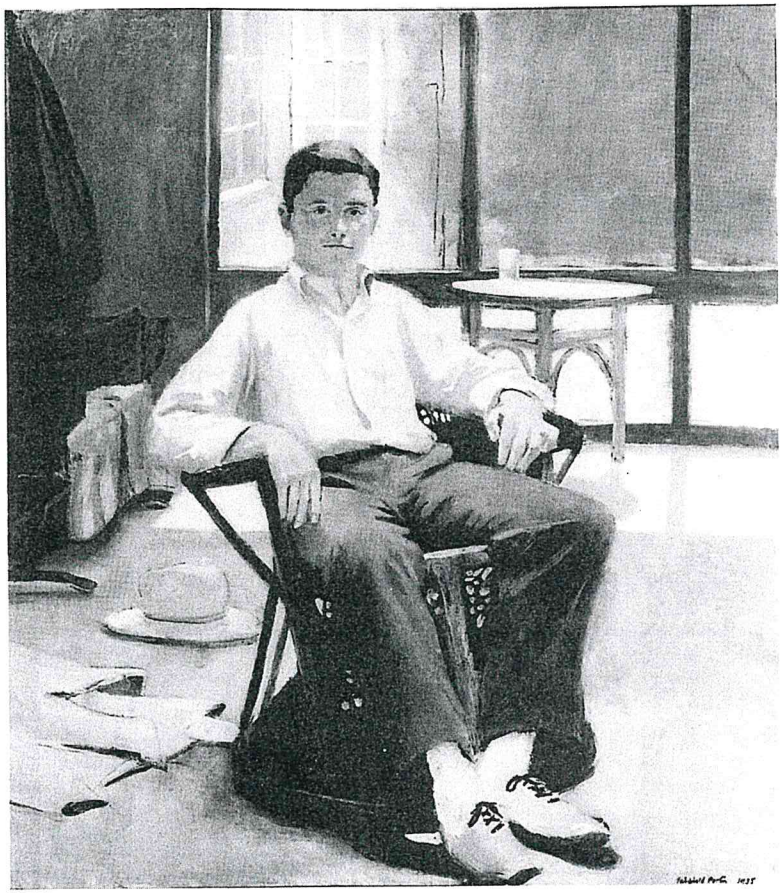


1. Portrait of James Schuyler — Fairfield Porter

Poet and Painter Overture

New York poets, except I suppose the color-blind, are affected most by the floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble.

Artists of any genre are of course drawn to the dominant art movement in the place where they live; in New York it is painting. Not to get mixed up in it would be a kind of blinders-on repression, like the campus dry-heads who wishfully descend tum-ti-tumming from Yeats out of Graves with a big kiss for Mother England (subject of a famous Böcklin painting: just when did the last major English poet die? not that Rossetti isn't fun ...). The big thing happening at home is a nuisance, a publicity plot, a cabal; and please don't track the carpet. They don't even excoriate American painting; they pretend it isn't there.

Considering the painters' popular "I kissed thee ere I killed thee" attitude toward Paris, admiring, envious and spurning, and the fact (Willa Cather pointed it out a long time ago) that the best American writing is French rather than English oriented, it's not surprising that New York poets play their own variations on how Apollinaire, Reverdy, Jacob, Eluard, Breton took to the School of Paris. Americans are, really, mightily unFrench, and so criticism gets into it: John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Frank O'Hara, myself, have been or are among the poets regularly on the staff of *ARTnews*. In New York the art world is a painter's world; writers and musicians are in the boat, but they don't steer.

Harold Rosenberg's Action Painting article is as much a statement for what is best about a lot of New York poetry as it is for New York painting. "It's not that, It's not that, It's not that ..." Poets face the same challenge, and painting shows the

way, or possible ways. "Writing like painting" has nothing to do with it. For instance, a long poem like Frank O'Hara's *Second Avenue*: it's probably true to deduce that he'd read the *Cantos* and Whitman (he had); also Breton, and looked at de Koonings and Duchamp's great Dada installation at the Janis Gallery. Or to put it another way: Rrose Selavy speaking out in Robert Motherwell's great Dada document anthology has more to do with poetry written by the poets I know than the Empress of Tapioca, The White Goddess: The Tondalayo of the Doubleday Bookshops.

Kenneth Koch writes about Jane Freilicher and her paintings. Barbara Guest is a *collagiste* and exhibits; Frank O'Hara decided to be an artist when he saw Assyrian sculpture in Boston. John Ashbery sometimes tried to emulate Léger; and so on. Of course the father of poetry is poetry, and everybody goes to concerts when there are any: but if you try to derive a strictly literary ancestry for New York poetry, the main connection gets missed.

"Statement on Poetics" in *The New American Poetry*, Donald Allen, ed., 1959

Fairfield Porter I

FAIRFIELD PORTER (De Nagy; May), one of the few modern American painters who transforms genre into high art, keys his new show to a small and perfect painting: a bowl of light violet rhododendrons with a few—three—daisies sparkled among the dark leaves on a corner of a white table against the palest of pink walls: it is at once solidly four-square and as elusively glamorous as dew. Greater luxuriance would be less stirring. A series of *Sycamores* define what "Realstraction" is not: they accede to many of the precepts that make for strength in abstract painting but surrender nothing: all-overness is not an effective shortcut but a result of disciplined observation. One in particular has the swathed and simplifying notation of form he has derived from Vuillard (and de Kooning: the washing out of upper branches, the masking in of sky to gain a distinct but equal value).

In a picture so rigorously organized, the appearance of orange triangles on the grass, a brush touch of yellow, is exhilarating, and so is the way the shake of leaves is translated into palpitating dots of paint, just enough to give all the tree a quivering excitement. In his portraits he seems always to find an intransigent straightforwardness: in the outward-looking blueness of poet Frank O'Hara's eyes, Elaine de Kooning all in red (his best portrait and a "speaking likeness"), the duo-pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale practicing, casual but concentrated, Jane Wilson elegant in pearls, a picture that is a homage to Vuillard's portrait of the Comtesse de Polignac.

His special gift is of catching the nuance of vacancy in room, or landscape, the unseen presences that human use and cultivation create.

ARTnews, May 1958

2. Fairfield Porter Photo by Rudy Burckhardt

Fairfield Porter II

FAIRFIELD PORTER (De Nagy; January 2-31). In his present show Fairfield Porter confirms the fact that he is in the top rank of American realist painters. He has completely absorbed the influences of de Kooning and Vuillard. His only debt now seems to be to Alex Katz, in his heightened colors. Part of Porter's originality lies in a complete reliance on the freedom of his hand; within a descriptive area, a single stroke can have the aliveness that an abstract painter would demand or need. Also, there is his almost invisible mastery of structure, of composition. One notes in *On Top of the Bluff* how the redness of the foreground grass is a balancing foil to the truncated, uphill view of the house. This gift he may have acquired in part from his father, James Porter, a Chicago architect, whose houses combined an originality of plan with an exactitude of detail. The paintings this year are divided among his favorite motifs: Maine, Southampton, his family. He can return to a subject year after year, finding new aspects, trying to penetrate more deeply to the core of his feelings about it.

The Edge in the Afternoon and *The Edge in the Morning* demonstrate the variety he finds in a single subject. In *The Morning* the flat day runs up into the misted sky; in *The Afternoon* rock shapes and cloud shapes tie earth and atmosphere into a solid movement of different speeds. The Southampton paintings seem to me his finest to date: the incredible delicacy of the green in *Winter Wheat,* drawing toward the sky; the violet-hued *On the Porch,* in which the rigorous stance of the little girl is echoed by the fluted pillar.

There remains to speak of an intimist masterpiece, *Through the House,* in which feeling brings to cohesion window

3. Sycamore Fairfield Porter

frames, barely discriminable islands, the pomegranate bottom of a lantern. Porter, in the lyric solidity of his work, embodies the virtues of man: love of family, of carved fields, of the beauty of everyday. They have, after all, kindled our finest art for some centuries.

ARTnews, January 1962

An Aspect of Fairfield Porter's Paintings

> Realism is a corruption of reality.
> Abstraction is a part of idealism. It is
> in that sense that it is ugly.
>
> —Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

A critic who found nothing to like (in fact, the contrary) in an exhibition of Fairfield Porter's paintings summed up his feelings about them in the epithet "bourgeois." Or perhaps he had the taste to say middle-class, though it's doubtful: middle-class is pretty strong, but bourgeois still takes the cake, for some, as a pejorative or rather a curse.

If art in America can be identified with a class, it is hard to see what other kind than middle-class he had expected to find. The esthetic needs of the very rich appear to be satisfied by beads, pelts and used furniture (its joints cracking like cap pistols in the hot interiors for which it was not made). Those who are forced to live in racial or economic ghettos, urban or rural, have not much interest in art or in making it, folk or fine. American painting in the '30s proved that an art that describes, rather than arises from, a working class is scarcely therefore working-class art. Nor does it appear than any great degree of expressivity can be artificially induced in American aboriginal art.

The revolution in the fine arts created an esthetic situation of total liberty: "*Viva la libertà!*" which, if not the libertine evil da Ponte's libretto implies, can be—especially enforced liberty—a chilling proposition: a row of bricks laid end-to-end across the floor. "Ah! I *see*."

A natural response is a clubbing together of artists into

schools and movements, war-heads and splinter groups. Another is a moving up of the historical horizon until it is almost near enough to lean on. Not yesterday, but the day before yesterday. Is any young artist influenced by de Kooning? Ten years ago not to be was as suspect as not to be steeped in Picasso was 30 years ago. It is an admirable situation, pullulant as a well-built compost heap: a lively art world, self-oriented and self-competing, whose works are, if roughly classified, by no means graded. There isn't time enough.

In total freedom it would seem there is no place for a tradition. The tradition is what happens, and when today gets to be yesterday, it gets the boot. Stevens foresaw it as an antipathetic reduction:

> The mass appoints these marbles
> of themselves to be themselves.

But a freedom which excludes is less than free. While painting which can be called traditional, in whole or part, of course continues to be painted, its right to be considered on a level higher than that of genre—in the "mere" sense—is often questioned. It is said to be limited by the demands of similitude; inhibited by the examples of past masters; it foregoes the role that art, now that *GOD IS ALIVE and well in Argentina,* tends to appropriate for itself—that of the Prophetiae Sibyllarum: The King is dead. Long live the regalia!

Worst, it is "illusionistic," a way of painting associated with a presumed class-wish to perpetuate its values and its possessions, which were much the same.

Fairfield Porter's work places him, for the present writer, at the head of those whose paintings are of a tradition older, say, than Max Jacob's first complaint that his conversation was being plagiarized, and it may be worthwhile to consider his work in the light of these ideas.

There has been, of course, no significant or active tradition in American painting. Nothing connects Porter to Copley. If any resemblance between their work could be adduced, it would be a matter of ambience, and that more of North American light than one of society. The history of nineteenth-century American art is a congeries of ill-trodden paths ending in cul-de-sacs, where a Thomas Sully greets you with a smirk. There is no connection at all in the sense that Bonnard connects to Chardin and Watteau by an inheritance of good painting: a *cuisinage d'atelier.*

The fact that Porter is the author of a monograph on Thomas Eakins has misled some writers. It was a commissioned work, based on secondary sources (and superior to them, thanks to his painter's eye and accomplishment as a writer). A task undertaken not because of a previous interest in Eakins, but because it was an interesting task and he needed the money.

Porter grew up in Hubbard Woods, a suburb of Chicago, the Chicago of Lorado Taft, an interesting sculptor, though scarcely a seminal one. At Harvard (Class of 1928), Arthur Pope's lectures on art history turned him on—or to put it in his tutor's words, "There can be only one awakening."

In 1929-30, he studied with Boardman Robinson and Thomas Benton. The life-class drawings that he made then—or rather, the few that survive—are extremely able. They are also unmannered: they are little influenced by his teachers nor have they much flavor of their own. No doubt life class was approached as a discipline and no doubt that approach is the opposite he would himself take in teaching figure drawing: don't make life-class drawings, just draw.

But, "studied with Boardman Robinson and Thomas Benton": it would be more to the point to say, "studied at the Art Students League." Where else was there? The once rather highly-thought-of works of these artists have proved ephemeral, each

in its own way an instance of Buckeye painting: grass-roots vs. Manhattan sophisticated. A case has been made for Jackson Pollock's interest in, and reaction against, Benton. Porter on the other hand seems rather to have withdrawn his sensibility from the encounter.

New York was not altogether an artistic desert: there was, most of all, Stieglitz, and the painters he showed. Of them the most important was John Marin. From childhood Porter had spent, and continues to spend, summers on an island in Penobscot Bay.* For him, as for Marin, Maine was a state of mind, an identification. Some of Porter's watercolors of the early '30s show Marin's influence, but his enthusiasm for Marin seems to have changed to respect and left no trace. Viewed from the present, it is odd that the work of the best of these pioneer modernists—Marin, Hartley, Dove, Demuth—has such a mandarin flavor: it suffers from refinement. It grew in a frontier all right, but its roots were attenuated and anchored far away. It is not an art that begets heirs.

For a time in the '30s he was preoccupied with social and political problems. His concern would appear to have been with the content of painting (and its social usefulness) as well as with questioning it as an ethically viable commitment in a violent time—a questioning more Tolstoyan than Leninist. In brief, he acquired from this period a factual and unromantic knowledge of how Stalinism, and its affiliates and its enemies, worked: ineffectuality faced by a deadly deviousness. It has left him with a distrust of idealism, as often not relevant to what people are actually like.

His point of view for the past 30 years somewhat resembles that attributed by J.P. Nettl to Rosa Luxembourg concerning

*The subject of a magnificent new book by his eldest brother, the photographer Eliot Porter: *Summer Island*, published by the Sierra Club.

art and political action: "Any too obvious *purpose* in art—even social—meant automatic disqualification. Art was *sui generis* ... What made art timeless was not vision but quality. As a means of social change [Rosa Luxembourg] preferred direct political activity." This is not to imply that Porter was influenced by her example (he was, however, influenced by the late Walter Auerbach and by Paul Mattick), nor to force a comparison. Still, it is a quality of greatness that all may, within individual limits, participate in it by emulation, whether with intention or not.

An untitled painting, typical of these of his first mature decade, shows a young boy sick-abed: he is tucked up on a chaise-longue, viewed from the feet, not quite head-on. A mirror over a lowboy reflects a bit of the quilt in which he is nestled. To one side, an open door shows a banister, a hall and a window. A glass of milk is on a table beside the boy. The faults of the painting are easy to spot: the exaggerated perspective of the chaise-longue is a theatrical effect: it has a quality of rule-of-thumb invention, rather than that of a felt or imagined metaphor. The colors are harsh and brittle, almost unrelieved by atmospheric play. There is a feeling of too many preconceptions about how it should be composed, how it should be painted. But the image is a strong one, the stronger for its lack of sentiment: the boy and the room and the furniture are there, a coherent whole, because they have been firmly *put* there.

The paint is handled rather dryly. It does not, to quote a remark of Alex Katz's that Porter has quoted, "go across the canvas." It is a painting, like others of his from this period, which seems on the verge of a surrender to an earned truth: that it is the painting that makes the demands, and that these are other and more important than the facts of the motif or the will of the painter.

The most forceful quality in this particular painting is the

artist's willingness to be clumsy. Some painters seem able to learn by a mimicry of un-understood technique (the more billowy works of the Impressionists are especially handy). Porter's mind is more analytical than that. He had first to prove to himself that he *could* do it before he could let himself forget and really do it.

This, and the other early paintings like it, combine a distrust of, or lack of reliance on, the intuitive, letting the hand have its way, with an unquestioning instinctive feeling for what specifically are his natural subjects: the people and places he knows best. It is doubtful that he would paint well a subject with which he was not well acquainted, if only by way of a prototype. He once said to a painter who was thinking about moving away from a familiar landscape to an unknown one, "Any place becomes interesting when you get to know it." He is very much an artist for whom art is *not* (to lift one of Ezra Pound's chewier *bonnes-bouches* from a current ad) "news that stays news."

During World War II he worked as a draftsman for the government. His first ambition was to be the best draftsman in the office. His second was to get out.

Also during the war he studied in night classes at the Parsons School with Jacques Maroger, whose "recreation" of a "Venetian medium" he still uses. In *Fairfield Porter Paints a Picture* (*ARTnews*, January 1955), Frank O'Hara has given more detail of this period, along with much else that is relevant and entertaining, including a recipe for the medium.

One notes, though, on re-reading the article that several things about his way of painting have changed since then. He no longer makes the elaborate preparations before beginning a large painting, though he does at times paint from drawings and from oil sketches. In his present exhibition at de Nagy (to March 16), *Early Morning* was perforce done from a drawing: it is an early

morning view seen while lying in bed, an impracticable position in which to paint. *Porch in Maine* began as an oil sketch, from drawings of detail and from life. The oranges and the crumpled napkin posed the longest. It was further worked on, after being brought back from Maine to his Southampton studio, but with reference only to what the picture needed. The largest painting, *Iced Coffee,* was begun on the canvas, a few of the elements roughly sketched out in brownish-red. The confrontation was otherwise direct.

À propos of composition, he once said, "The right use of color can make *any* composition work," and that in fact the color *is* the composition. He likes a coherent, unmuddy, close adjustment of values, such as he found in Fra Angelico and in de Kooning: an adjustment in which the colors affect one another within the picture, and give it the fullness of range (the light within the room, the light outside the window) which the eye so much more readily grasps than does a camera.

He paints air as light that shatters on surfaces in a spectrum that is, unlike a rainbow, consistent only to itself. One may know that the trunk of a sycamore scales off and discloses a creamy underbark, and that its shadow is stretched on grass-blades whose myriads only a computer could tabulate, but the paint sees trunk and shadow as a continuity, a brown-violet beam which has no existence out of its context, but which is the thing truly seen.

He found, after the war, that his painting had become tight in a way he heartily disliked, a result, possibly, of the drafting board and very little time for his own work. Here the Maroger medium was a help: it was difficult to handle and, to quote Frank O'Hara, "if it is fussed with or changed too much it gets rubbery and unpleasant." This is no longer true. He had to learn to go with the medium, to let it have its way and to use it as it could or would be used. An instance of what Pasternak

somewhere wrote: that life, in order to accomplish its purposes, turns our attention from itself. Thus the challenge of the mulish medium to the conscious mind helped free the hand.

The advantage of the medium is that "the paint you put on you can keep moving around for a day. It does two contradictory things: it stays wet, and it stays put." Many of Porter's newest paintings are as succulent as leaves. In *Northwest Wind* the paint has its own movement, as brushed, stirred and rippled as the windy grass, trees and water it describes. The paint is not, however, merely a vehicle for description. Nor is it that there is a harmony between matter and manner. It is that there are two distinct things, and if the island and water are, in any sense, an illusion, the paint is itself a palpable fact that holds an imprint of life and infuses life into the image. Anyway, what is an illusion?

Coming into New York City on the New York Central the train passes through Harlem. In the midst of the slums rise red brick housing developments, squat though tall. They are indeed prison-like, and it is almost impossible to see them for what they are: stacks of dwellings where people lead lives as varied as we know them to be. It is one thing knowing that to live in an ugly building is not to lead an ugly life, and another to believe it when faced with what look like machines to die in. Seen at another time, the buildings may look quite different: at dusk, when the lights come on, they may seem castles of hard-won privacy. Both are illusions. The buildings are esthetic flops, the people who live in them are the ones who look at them least, and about them we know little or nothing.

A painting has the advantage of fixing our attention on what is there, in the painting. Say, *Farmhouse,* a cluster of houses in the country. It is only what is there that is seen and shown, there are no implications, there is no interpretation. (It is the introduction of mood that drains so much nineteenth-century American painting of its vitality: wilderness equals

grandeur equals awe; or farmyard equals innocence equals native high-mindedness—so that the effect of a Caleb Bingham may be perversely contrary to its intent: farmlife equals ignorance equals bigotry). We are not *told* anything. What is seen is that out of the exteriors of things an image of life can be created: that a field is man-made and is made of dirt, that houses have the same wooden life as trees, and that their shapes complement each other: the hard and sinuous, the sloped and chunky. And the air has substance. It is the act of painting that has spread these different kinds of life on a flat surface, pulled and pushed them together until they make a fact as natural as a flaw of quartz in a rock. It is, in detail, remarkably unreal.

The painting is not a statement, nor are we invited to prefer a rural life to an urban, or a house to an apartment. What we are given is an aspect of everyday life, seen neither as a snapshot nor as an exaltation. Its art is one that values the everyday as the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge. What these paintings celebrate is never treated as an archetype: they are concentrated instances. They are not a substitute for religion, they are an attitude toward life. Their value is not one connected to class.

Class is an active relation to production between at least two groups. As E. P. Thompson puts it: "Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations in which men are born—or enter involuntarily." And, "I do not see class as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships."

These paintings have no concern with production. Their

values are no more timeless than anything else, but they are values which exist in any society, whether they are embodied or not. Their concern is with immediacy: "Look *now*. It will never be more fascinating."

ARTnews, May 1967

Fairfield Porter III

FAIRFIELD PORTER (De Nagy; February 16-March 6) shows landscapes, portraits, interiors, paintings of flowers and drawings. There is a new, or rather, greater strength of structure, a conquest of intricacy. *The Living Room* makes you feel the solid containing fact of the house in which it was painted. The scene is addressed straightforwardly, down the length of a table, into the white and yellow light and beyond the light, the dark of a fireplace and an upstairs hall. Above the fireplace a cast of a Greek relief makes one center, flanked by pink brick flues, a center that shifts naturally to a young girl who turns to look out of the painting as she rests a pretty hand in full light on the back of a couch. Her look leads back from the different depths and foci to a fat teapot within reach of the painter's hand. The tabletop dissolves the color in the rich, returning glance of a pond at evening. It is a golden painting. This subtle and exact adjustment is plain, too, in *The Bay*, where thin, barely-sunlit fog beyond the firs makes the bay itself a broad and double-edged horizon. *Six PM*, a green yard, a white house, heavy elms and a sky blending up to blue, is the place seen and a conception, an idea that makes paint and vision fit. And perhaps there is a fringe benefit from the admiration of Alex Katz in its scale, the large, flat, dense areas of closely calculated green. He has always made color "work," finding its first function is to discriminate within the color context. This discipline has lead to freedom, to joy of color. *Portrait of Lizzie* depends for its delicate brilliancy on the ensemble, and how beautiful that ensemble makes a blue ribbon, a pale straw hat with apple blossoms, a glaucous lumper, the clear gradations of pink, peach and shadowed flesh in a cheek

and forehead and the wonderful black in a thin, sharp bow. The painting successfully lacks a dominant key color; the light pink wall becomes an effulgence of what emerges: the little girl herself, with large brown eyes and a thinking-hard, maybe a little sulky, expression. This portrait accepts the expression a person posing wears as just as personal as any other, an uninsistent perception that one can scarcely not be oneself. *The Plane Tree* plunges all of the picture surface into the vast midst of the tree, making of leaves, shade and light among leaves a resilient shimmer whose depth is that of paint of ample substance. An idiomatic stroke seems unsought, even avoided as a distracting superfluity. The paint is the point, not the manner in which it is put on. *White Roses* shows it in its bluntness: white, grey green and deep yellow; it looks as though the broadest brushes were used. Shaw's dictum: the best style is its transparent absence.

ARTnews, February 1968

4. Anne and Lizzie Fairfield Porter

Fairfield Porter IV

Fairfield Porter's 1974 show at Hirschl & Adler Gallery took up two floors and, definitively, proved what a perceptive few had known for quite a while: in realist painting, there is Fairfield Porter: then the others. Precisely in the sense that, in Abstract and Action Painting, there is de Kooning, then the others. That show had everything: portraits, still lifes, flowers, landscapes, seascapes. And more. Perhaps the best was a large painting of his daughter Elizabeth, practicing the guitar. She is seated, one foot on a stool. Behind her, a small lighted Christmas tree, to her right, a diagonal view into a parlor with a completely different light source. The corner of an oriental rug. That painting is so complex, so rich, and the use of color! To the uninitiated, it must look so easy, as though he'd put a canvas in the living room and painted the painting. No. He made sketches, endlessly; variations of the compositions, details ad infinitum. Finally he went to his studio and got to work: slowly, steadily, laboriously, lovingly, he painted it. Weeks passed. Finish. He looked at it. To him it looked dead. So he stretched another canvas, got to work and painted again. He was right. The picture came to life. But color. There was a small painting of pure yellow evening primroses backed by pure pink wild roses. I didn't know whether I wanted to steal it or eat it. "Two floors? And not one dud?" No, not one.

Porter's first show years and years ago had many strong paintings that made it in many ways. But not color as color. (I'm thinking of Giorgione, not of some minor Impressionist garbage). What he did know, inside out, was about tonality. Now, he is a great colorist. Much has been said about Porter and Vuillard. It's

true. He sees that the later so-called academic paintings are in fact masterpieces. I have seen more or less all of Porter's and none resembles a Vuillard. The big decisive influence (tricky word) happens to be Tintoretto. You may not see it, but it's there. "He's an Intimist." "Landscapes." "Flowers." "Penobscot Bay." etc. Fairfield Porter can paint anything he chooses.

Catalogue note from the *Centennial Exhibition of The Art Students League*, 1975

Twins on the upswing: there are more people.
A regular Shriners' parade of funerals.
But there are not less people.
There are more people
of all sorts, conditions and flavors.
Getting to shake each
by the hand takes time.
Not more though
than abstracting the grain of dust
from each raindrop. Starfish
have no sense of time, at all.

Poem

How about an oak leaf
if you had to be a leaf?
Suppose you had your life to live over
knowing what you know?
Suppose you had plenty money

"Get away from me you little fool."

Evening of a day in early March,
you are like the smell of drains
in a restaurant where paté maison
is a slab of cold meat loaf
damp and wooly. You lack charm.

3/23/66

It's funny early spring weather, mild and washy
the color of a head cold.
The air rushes. Branches
are going nowhere, like the ocean,
spring salt unstopping sinuses. Winter salt doesn't.
Everything just sitting around: a barn without eaves,
a dumpy cottage set catty-corner
on its lot, a field with a horse in it.
A plane goes over, leaving its wake,
an awakening snore. A truck
passes, perceived as a quick shuffle
of solitaire cards. And the poor old humpy lawn
is tufted with Irish eyebrows of onion grass.
A chill on the nape smells frowsty
the spring no more awake
than a first morning stretch
and no more asleep. Growing
and going, in sight and sound, as the fire last night
looked out at us reading *Great Expectations* aloud
and fled up the chimney.

Industrial Archaeology

Early May (a late spring) a field
of clover and rust where jungles
in June will hide a perilous adit:
many fall, none recover. So much
for West Virginia. A tangle of string,
clamps and catches: a "Braquette"
a name not long to be known to fame. (If you
have to ask, you can't have it.) Ingenuity
so recent in our history
naturally there is a marginal plethora.
Still, Yankee know-how plants
tomatoes in metal sleeves (old king-
size juice cans) attractive
of beneficent electricity. So much
thought of in Emmaus, Pennsylvania.
(Why didn't you ask?
It entailed no risk.) "From your drawing
your find appears a piece
of a stamping machine. It is of no value
other than sentimental." Old wooden

of a dulled and distant point,
a day like a gull passing
with a slow flapping of wings
in a kind of lope, without
breeze enough to shake loose
the last of the fireweed flowers,
a faintly clammy day, like wet silk
stained by one dead branch
the harsh russet of dried blood.

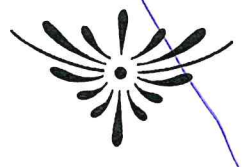
Salute

Past is past, and if one
remembers what one meant
to do and never did, is
not to have thought to do
enough? Like that gather-
ing of one of each I
planned, to gather one
of each kind of clover,
daisy, paintbrush that
grew in that field
the cabin stood in and
study them one afternoon
before they wilted. Past
is past. I salute
that various field.

FROM

THE HOME BOOK 1951–1970

(1977)



A Grave

While we who wished to help stood helplessly by,
a stranger, whom we neither knew nor loved (saw,
simply, as one of our kind), sank from sight,
drowning, gave up what we value most, our life.

If then between the shifting ocean and sky,
in whose two blacknesses he had seemed the flaw,
had been driven and drawn, tearing night from night
to show us his death's beyond, and ours, a knife!

which did not happen. His agony,
we who stood and watched the threatened promise kept,
could not share, even in fearful sympathy.
Searchlights moved upon the uninjured ocean.
Now he was part of that lighted blackness, slept
in what the screw of our ship set in motion.

Poem

I do not always understand what you say.
Once, when you said, across, you meant along.
What is, is by its nature, on display.

Words' meanings count, aside from what they weigh:
poetry, like music, is not just song.
I do not always understand what you say.

You would hate, when with me, to meet by day
What at night you met and did not think wrong.
What is, is by its nature, on display.

I sense a heaviness in your light play,
a wish to stand out, admired, from the throng.
I do not always understand what you say.

I am as shy as you. Try as we may,
only by practice will our talks prolong.
What is, is by its nature, on display.

We talk together in a common way.
Art, like death, is brief; life and friendship long.
I do not always understand what you say.
What is, is by its nature, on display.

At the Beach

On the Fourth of July at the beach,
the kids from the next cottage
lit sparklers. As fast as they
ran, they seemed from our porch
not to run fast at all. (Spark
stars wavering, the detonating
waves, a hot sky, little wind.)
We sat on the porch in the dark
after the last sparklers, each
speaking in turn till the wind
rose, then went in ourselves.

Self-Pity Is a Kind of Lying, Too

It's
snowing defective
vision days and
X-
mas is coming, like
a plow. And in the
meat the snow. Strange.
It all reminds me
of an old lady I
once saw shivering
naked beside a black
polluted stream. You
felt terrible—but
the train didn't
stop—so. And the
white which is
some other color or
its absence—it
spins on itself
and so do the *Who*
at Leeds I'm playing
to drown the carols
blatting from the
Presbyterian church
steeple which is
the same as fight-
ing fire with oil.
Naked people—old,
cold—one day we'll
just have snow
to wear too.

A Picnic Cantata

I

I feel funny today
but you know what they say:
falls to the floor,
comes to the door.

Who is it you think
might come to the door?
Not the laundry man,
it isn't Monday.
Not the meter reader,
they don't work on Sunday.
Not my cleaning lady,
it isn't Friday.
It might be a mailman

to tell about, especially the stirred
up faintly feverish from too many covers
or too little air kind.
Still, you were there,
in a dream awakening
if not laughing, smiling.

Joint

Veal and mushrooms, wine, a too pungent salad
—like eating anaesthetic—
I do not believe in the legends of food,
I believe in the food.
It is not what carrots are like,
it is the carrots.

The wildwood aisle in church has chapels
of mussels and carrots under arches,
of breasty beets with dirt in their hair,
are lit by strings of lemons
and by fat votive candles in stubby glasses,
smoke and shine of leaves and glass.

"I think we rich should get down on our knees
and thank God we have money."

How the seafood smells, and eels,
how they taste (fried) and lie
in their tank like striated muscle.
Burlap bags of rice
that try to stand, not kneel,
sit open-mouthed and spill
splendor in grains between cobbles.
These sacks will go empty, folded like clothes,
to the country and come back in cart-loads
of frisky cabbage
and of tomatoes, red and gold.
Wine runs in gutters,

sour as sweat, sweet as melons
holding seeds like thoughts
or with seeds in their flesh, like sensations.

Lucky who have to eat
and drink, such as stimulating coffee,
slower than water,
that coats the cup if good and strong.

Jelly Jelly

Summer apples, showy and sugary, mealy and touchy
a finger bruise on the thin skin
brown and silently reproachful as your wife's black eye.

But if September apples ripen
and the sun coats the sights with crinkling sheets
of cold while the waves come yapping
something about "wine dark"
evening primroses in clefts of rocks they lap
in a space labeled, "August 27th, 1965
pay on demand," why then it is
September
when pebbles turn, shedding a summer snow
of salt, palely glowing in the first fall beaches.

The wind is pendant-breasted as a naked Swede.
A frosted fox grape shows
where a bird shat as it ate.
Blackberry canes arch and obtrude big nipples.
And the chaste tree blooms.

Back before I made the egg test
I thought the world as flat and very like an elderberry umbel
full of round juicy people winking and waving,
crying "Hi!" and "Meet you in the jelly!"
or "Under the lid of an elderberry pie."

West Virginia. She smiled
and sipped her Miller's.

8/12/70

In early August among the spruce
fall parti-colored leaves
from random birch that hide
their crowns up toward the light—
deciduously needle-nested—
among the tumbled rocks—a
man-made scree below a house—
a dull green sumach blade
slashed with red clearer than
blood a skyblue red a first
fingertap, a gathering, a climax

Light from Canada

for Charles North

A wonderful freshness, air
that billows like bedsheets
on a clothesline and the clouds
hang in a traffic jam: summer
heads home. Evangeline,
our light is scoured and Nova
Scotian and of a clarity that
opens up the huddled masses
of the stolid spruce so you
see them in their bristling
individuality. The other
day, walking among them, I
cast my gaze upon the ground
in hope of orchids and,
pendant, dead, a sharp shadow
in the shade, a branch gouged
and left me "scarred forever
'neath the eye." Not quite. Not
the cut, but the surprise, and
how, when her dress caught fire,
Longfellow's wife spun
into his arms and in the dying
of its flaring, died. The
irreparable, which changes
nothing that went before
though it ends it. Above the wash
and bark of rumpled water, a gull
falls down the wind to dine
on fish that swim up to do same.

Gulls

Gulls
loudly insist on indefensible rights

Spruce
gather together on spindle shanks

Queen Anne's Lace
tip platters at perilous angles

Hawkweed
all sneeze at the same time

Rocks
go back to sleep

Birches
grunt as they scratch themselves

Stumps
grow old in hospitableness

Moss
free of dandruff

FALL AND WINTER

September

Swimming in the memorial
park pond smells of a dog

or just wading up and
down on trucked-in sand

oaks do their stuff
a dressy pine

and a kind of a mantid
that inspires respect

it isn't an insect with
only four legs when

its pincers snappily fold
back Danilova/Yastrzemski

that's it in September sun
two of its legs are like—you

know. Arms

Evening Wind

October hangs in grape
bunch lights among the leaves
of a giant tree whose leaves
are not unlike grape leaves:

a plane tree, or a sycamore?
The wind comes up the water
as water from a faucet
runs across a palm, the palm
of your hand, the water turned
on gently or broken into
cool molten wooly glass
by an aerator. And each
responds by his or its
own bending to it, tall tops
of hedge move all in a sideways
way, the grass (it begins
to have its matted resting
up for winter look) is freaked
by shade and quartz grit
bits of light, a pear tree
rocks at its roots and from
the eyebrow curves of branches
or under them flutters absurdly
its leaves like lashes. And I
am troubled by hatred for
the dead. Wind, you don't
blow hard enough, though
rising, in the smoky blue
of evening, mindless and in love.
Or would be if the wind
were not above such thoughts,
above thought, in fact
of course, though coursing,
cool as water, through it.

A Vermont Diary

November 1

Slowly
the dried up pond
fills again. The blackish
a white and wordless
dictionary
in which brush
cut, piled and
roofed with glitter
will catch and burn
transparently
bright in white
defining "flame."
So long, north.
See you later
in other weather.

Late afternoon.

Another sky that looked snow-bearing breaks up and sunlight falls hit or miss on the hills.

Country living. The Pyrofax (the gas which the stove burns) began to give out the day before yesterday (you can tell it's running out when you begin to smell it: spooky). So Kenward went to the Co-Op and called for new tanks, which were to come that afternoon or, at the very latest, yesterday. Still no Pyrofax.

Tomorrow we return to New York, a long drive, and the next night, a big birthday party (mine).

A Stone Knife

December 26, 1969

Dear Kenward,
What a pearl
of a letter knife. It's just
the thing I needed, something
to rest my eyes on, and always
wanted, which is to say
it's that of which I
felt the lack but
didn't know of, of no
real use and yet
essential as a button

box, or maps, green
morning skies, islands and
canals in oatmeal, the steam
off oyster stew. Brown
agate, veined as a woods
by smoke that has to it
the watery twist of eel grass
in a quick, rust-discolored
cove. Undulating lines of
northern evening—a Munch
without the angst—a
hint of almost amber:
to the nose, a resinous
thought, to the eye, a
lacquered needle green
where no green is, a
present after-image.
Sleek as an ax, bare
and elegant as a tarn,
manly as a lingam,
November weather petrified,
it is just the thing
to do what with? To
open letters? No, it
is just the thing, an
object, dark, fierce
and beautiful in which
the surprise is that
the surprise, once
past, is always there:
which to enjoy is
not to consume. The un-
recapturable returns
in a brown world
made out of wood,
snow streaked, storm epi-
center still in stone.

Two

men in Arab robes
and hush puppy shoes
outside a pet shop
pass two others I
take or mistake for
addicts and there goes
one handsome in
the chinless wonder way
and of a dark descent
who stops and looks at
a street sign, turns,
hesitates and goes off
like the actor one often
feels: "Frowns,
looks at watch, goes
off" and in the sky
cloud words melt
and all run together.

May, 1972

Soft May mists are here again.
There, the war goes on.
Beside the privet the creamy
white tulips are extra
fine this year. There,
foliage curls blackened back:
it will, it must
return. But when?
A cardinal enchants me
with its song.
All war is wrong. The grass
here is green and buttoned
down with dandelions. A car
goes by. What peace. It—
the war goes on. Fleeing

For Bob Dash

on his birthday

The first three roses
opened up today, the outer petals
carmine, the inner, rosy pink.
The Old China Monthly Rose.
I send you their fragrance.
To you there where the tulips
are over, the clematis in bud
(I hope), where four plum trees
center four vegetable plots,
the rows so straight, and at
angles to each other—a Dutch
conceit? A pinwheel effect,
steadied. The lilacs here
stand in lilac glory, cornucopias
from Persia. And a white one too:
to you I send their staunchness
in beauty, to you there where
the paint on canvas flows
in sunset foldings, in branches,
rooftrees and powerlines that
catch the light. Dark strands.
The artichoke you gave me
sends up two strong and prickly
leaves. It will contrast nicely
with the soft-cut tree peony
leaves beside it, rising to tower
with its thistle blossom. To you
I send this contrast that is
harmony in all you make and do.

Song

I'm about to go shopping.
It rained in the night.
The cat is asleep on a
cup, like the coffee
here at my right hand.

A Held Breath

Dense dark day, two sun chairs
sit on the lawn in the rain.
Which stops. A mist comes to
roost in leafy intervals of
trees over-burdened in mid-
September. It still seems far
from turning time. August,
where did you go? The water
globes that are mist hang with
a look of permanence. Down the
street houses go soft in it,
color smears on water color
paper. A frowzy day, cool
and clammy. The typing paper
is limp as the skin on the
face of someone old you fondly
kiss. Summer leaves, in un-
seen ripenings, readying
to fill the air with falling.

Sunday

Pears hang on the tree by stems.
Three people cross the yard
and two of them are strangers
though not to each other, a
man and his wife. That much I
know about them. More than about
the white jet trail which inter-
sects and mixes into cloud. Slices

me up, tiny spring flower
late, late in dour October.

"From the next . . ."

From the next room
the friendly clatter of
an electric typewriter.
Flies buzz in the window
pane. It is their dying
season. The house
is painted gray. The fields
befuzz themselves with
milkweed silk. By the
pond, a beaver gnaws
a tree. Those teeth, so
keen. The road winds
down the hill to here
then winds down further.
The woods are brown.
The sky is gray. What
incredible silence on
this hill surrounds
the friendly clatter,
the buzz of dying.

Standing and Watching

Standing and watching
through the drizzle
how the mist and further
edge of pond merge
into one grayness, a color
called drained-of-blueness.

Standing and watching
how the maple leaves
fall, lightly pelted by
drizzle, and turn
in air, to lie scattered,
drained, not quite of color there.

The Green Door

"We could try it,"
Ralph says to Harold.
The men are working
on the ell, a new
wing for an old house.

Out the window, the land
drops rapidly away
in wooded undulations and
fields and one larch
there turns to its own gold.

Out another window, one
bare tree laces its limbs
next to a maple which
still has half its leaves
on. Maple gold, not larch.

A plane goes over.
Ralph and Harold hammer
somewhere beyond a
green baize door. Even
the door has its story.

Many moist days, nor
is the end in sight.
I haven't seen the beaver.
The pond, the air, is still:
only the plane, only the hammer.

tears at my heart. Rip it open:
I want to cleanse it in an icy wind.
And what kind of tripe is that?
Still, last night I did wish—
no, that's my business and I
don't wish it now. "Your poems,"
a clunkhead said, "have grown
more open." I don't want to be open,
merely to say, to see and say, things
as they are. That at my elbow
there is a wicker table. *Hortus*
Second says a book. The fields
beyond the feeding sparrows are
brown, palely brown yet with an inward glow
like that of someone of a frank good nature
whom you trust. I want to hear the music
hanging in the air and drink my
Coca-Cola. The sun is off me now,
the sky begins to color up, the air
in here is filled with wildly flying notes.
Yes, the sun moves off to the right
and prepares to sink, setting,
beyond the dunes, an ocean on fire.

Good morning

morning, or heartache. In
the night it rained
it misted. The walks
are dark with it, the grass
is thick with it. In
resignation I
doff my walking shorts,
put on elephant hide,
or Levi's. Bitter coffee.

Rae turns to me and
speaks her rage
but gently as a gentle
woman would. The night
nurse means well, is
something else jabbering
loudly in the hall
at night. An over-
ripe banana. I have yet to learn
to speak my rage.

Where I go books
pile up. Constable's
letters, Balzac,
Afternoon Men. It's
cool enough to
shut the window. So
I do. Silver day
how shall I polish you?

Song

The light lies layered in the leaves.
Trees, and trees, more trees.
A cloud boy brings the evening paper:
The Evening Sun. It sets.
Not sharply or at once
a stately progress down the sky
(it's gilt and pink and faintly green)
above, beyond, behind the evening leaves
of trees. Traffic sounds and
bells resound in silver clangs
the hour, a tune, my friend
Pierrot. The violet hour:
the grass is violent green.
A weeping beech is gray,
a copper beech is copper red.
Tennis nets hang
unused in unused stillness.
A car starts up and

whispers into what will soon be night.
A tennis ball is served.
A horsefly vanishes.
A smoking cigarette.
A day (so many and so few)
dies down a hardened sky
and leaves are lap-held notebook leaves
discriminated barely
in light no longer layered.

A Name Day

for Anne Dunn

You know da Vinci's painting of
The Virgin sitting in her mother's lap,
Bending and reaching toward the child:
Mary, Jesus, and St. Anne: beautiful
Names: Anne, from a Latin name from
The Hebrew name Hannah. The sun shines
Here and out the window I see green, green
Cut into myriad shapes, a bare-foot-
Caressing carpet of fresh-mown grass (a
Gift from Persia, courtesy of D. Kermani),
Green chopped into various leaves: walnut, maple,
Privet, Solomon's-seal, needles of spruce:
Green with evening sunlight on it,
Green going deep into penetrable shade:
What is that one red leaf? It's too
Soon, it's only late July. I'm frightened,
Anne, my mother, who is eighty-six, just
A few minutes ago had some kind of slight
Attack. I held her and said, "Put your weight
On me, put your weight on me." She said,
"I can't stand it." She won't let me
Call a doctor: my brother and his wife
Are out of town: they know better than I
How to handle her. I think—I hope—I
Pray, that it was just an arthritic spasm.

Beneficent St. Anne, look down and
Protect us. Mary, sustain us in our need.

Here it is all so beautiful and green:
There where you are it is night, big
Stars, perhaps: do candles flare as
You and yours gather to celebrate
Your name day, there in pungent Provence?
What would I like to give you?
Beads, a steel rose, a book?
No, flowers, roses, real roses
—Maréchal Niel, Gloire de
Dijon, Variegata di Bologna,
Madame Alfred Carrière, Souvenir
de la Malmaison, Georg Arends,
Prince Camille de Rohan: or,
Maybe better, homelier,
Canadian columbine, rusty red
(Or rather orange?), spurred,
Hanging down, drying, turning
Brown, turning up, a cup
Full of fine black seeds
That sparkle, wake-robin,
Trillium, a dish of rich
Soft moss stuck with little
Flowers from the woods—
Bloodroot, perhaps
Rose pogonia, sea lavender
And, best of all, bunches
And bunches and bunches of
New England asters, not blue,
Not violet, certainly not
Purple: bright-yellow-
Centered, so many crowded
Into vases and bowls that
The house seems awash
With sea and sun. (My
Mother is better: I hear
Her cooking supper: the throbbing
Of my heart slows down.) I
Wish I were there with you,

Back

from the Frick. The weather
cruel as Henry Clay himself.
Who put that collection together?
Duveen? I forget. It was nice
to see the masterpieces again,
covered with the strikers' blood.
What's with art anyway, that
we give it such precedence?
I love the paintings, that's for sure.
What I really loved today
was New York, its streets and
men selling flowers and hot dogs
in them. Mysterious town houses,
the gritty wind. I used to live
around here but it's changed some.
Why? That was only thirty years ago.

Blizzard

Tearing and tearing
ripped-up bits of paper,
no, it's not paper
it's snow. Blown side-
ways in the wind,
coming in my window
wetting stacked books.
"Mr Park called. He
can't come visiting
today." Of course not,
in this driving icy
weather. How I wish
I were out in it! A
figure like an ex-
clamation point seen
through driving snow.