

Jen Benka

After we entered the new Millennium, I left Milwaukee for a literary job in New York. I found my way back to my midwestern hometown as often as I could, and on each trip back, I would stop in Woodland Pattern bookstore and gallery to say hello to Stacy Szymaszek who worked there. I bought a copy of Etel Adnan's *Paris, When It's Naked* on one of those visits.

Sometime later I attended a panel and reading at Poets House that featured Etel Adnan, Marilyn Hacker and a few other poets. I wrote to Stacy about the event, telegraphing how Etel described poetry as the last place where we can imagine freedom. It seemed an urgent message to deliver.

I remember talking with Pauline Oliveros after a performance she gave at Woodland Pattern, her accordion bellows still holding a long tone somewhere in my inner ear. She was more interested in asking questions than being asked. And where Oliveros is Deep Listening, Adnan is the libretto, Deep Thinking.

After the Poets House event I asked Etel to sign my copy of her book. She wrote, "For Gen," making me French. Then she drew a vertical line down an exacting inch and wrote, "a welcome to," and underneath, "Paris." She signed her name with a crisp "E" that projects a horizontal line, also an inch, at a right angle to the other, that crosses an "A" and "d" before quickly circling back. The rest of her last name is a short line with a soft dip. It isn't, but it looks like language. In total, the inscription is perfectly geometric.

On the inside cover of *Paris, When It's Naked*, at some point I had written "Shira Brisman, the Jewish Museum," and Shira's email address. I don't remember her. I look her up online and find a biography that says that she wrote her dissertation on "How Northern Renaissance artists like Albrecht Durer began to conceive of the hand-written letter as possessing message-bearing properties analogous to the work of art."

Recently, Facebook suggested that I friend Etel Adnan.

The algorithmic "randomness" of the Internet has nothing in common with a city.

On the title page of the book I penciled, "On the subway. A homeless man gets up and exits the car. A beautiful, elderly woman dressed to the nines enters the train and takes his seat."

Etel writes: "*The rhythm of the metros becomes the city's heartbeat. Every fraction of a second somebody is crying, or shouting his pain, being tortured, selling himself, or dying. So much simultaneity of feeling.*" (p. 24)

One weekend afternoon, my friend Terry drove my friend Tony and I through Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Tony didn't have a panic attack exactly, but said again and again, "Think of all the shoes in this place, think of all of the shoes."

"*There are too many people for anyone to be needed. Keep your illusions, though.*" (p. 27)

I read *Paris, When It's Naked* on my daily commute from Brooklyn to my job in Manhattan. I felt Etel. What does it mean to seek and tell the truth? I heard her thinking in my head. The Baudelairian flaneur. The intellectual gouine. She helped me understand what and how the city was, and what and how I was in it.

Paris, New York, poetry, language. They're connected, illusory, and we are fleeting.

And in San Francisco, where I now live, where earthquakes and probability dare each other, we somehow accept living on the edge of collapse.

“I can always trust a city with bridges, regardless of the pain. There is something resembling hope, in suspension.” (p. 62)