



# **A Question Mark Above the Sun: Documents on the Mystery Surrounding a Famous Poem "By" Frank O'Hara**

*Kent Johnson*

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"At the end of last year, an extraordinary work of detective criticism briefly appeared, despite legal threats. Kent Johnson's *A Question Mark Above the Sun* (Punch Press) movingly speculates that Kenneth Koch forged one of Frank O'Hara's greatest poems as a posthumous tribute to his friend. A noir-ish middle also recounts some very funny run-ins with the English avant-garde. Shame on the poets who forced its redaction and suppression." – Jeremy Noel-Tod, *The Times Literary Supplement*, including a previous edition of *A Question Mark Above the Sun* as one of its 2011 Books of the Year


*What you have in your hands is a kind of thought-experiment. It proffers the idea that a radical, secret gesture of poetic mourning and love was carried out by Kenneth Koch in memory of his close friend Frank O'Hara. I present the hypothesis as my own very personal expression of homage for the two great poets. The proposal I set forward here, nevertheless, is likely to make some readers annoyed, perhaps even indignant. Some already are. A few fellow writers, even, have worked hard through legal courses to block this book's publication. The forced redaction of key quotations herein (replaced by paraphrase) is one result of their efforts.*

In this self-described "thought experiment"—part fiction, part literary detective work, and always daring—Kent Johnson proposes a stunning rewrite of literary history. Suppressed upon initial release, this is a one-of-a-kind book by one of our most provocative contemporary authors.

"This book of experimental criticism is, at the least, of forensic interest to readers of poetry and, at the most, a study in extremes of generosity and stinginess. Whether it is Johnson (*Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*) who is generous and his detractors stingy—or vice versa—is another question altogether. The author delights in "thought experiment[s]" and provocation: his book offers readers, among other things, an unfinished "critical novella" containing a startling hypothesis about poets Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch: Is it possible that O'Hara's last poem, "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," was authored, in truth, by his friend Koch in the wake of O'Hara's sudden death by dune buggy on Fire Island? The author argues that the poem may have been written by Koch and deliberately attributed to O'Hara in an act of egoless munificence. Unfortunately, because Johnson was denied permission to quote from the (conceivably elegiac) poem under discussion, the text is full of odd elisions. As if to make up for this deficiency, the book is padded with essays by the author's partisans, who defend his critical methods, some with eloquence. Though this rarefied text will likely appeal to a similarly niche audience, Johnson's work is admirable for its imagination and inventiveness."--*Publishers Weekly*

**Kent Johnson** is the author, translator, or editor of nearly 30 books of poetry and criticism, including *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry* (Shambhala, 1991), *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada* (Roof Books, 1998), and the collection of poems, *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* (Shearsman Books, 2008). Johnson lives in Illinois, where he has been a

faculty member in English and Spanish at Highland Community College. In 2005, he was named “State Teacher of the Year” by the Illinois Community College Board of Trustees. Johnson has also received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for his translation of Bolivian poet Jaime Saenz's *The Night*.

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