



## Poetry Helped Me Reclaim My History: Poems of/from Photos

### Description

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### Author's Memo

Some time ago I heard a friend, poet, Cecilia Wolloch read; she said (I am paraphrasing) "I am going to read a poem written about a place. I was distracted and didn't think I noticed anything. It seemed as if I wasn't really there." When writing the poem, she continued, "I realized to my surprise I recalled many intricate details." Well, I could say the same thing regarding a decade of my life.

This decade is the culture-rich and revolutionary one of the sixties. Autoethnography comes into play as my experience or might I say re-experience of the sixties took off from the remarkable photos in "Anarchy, Protest & Rebellion," assembled by Fred W. McDarrah. What started as an aesthetic and enjoyable examination of historic photos became the subjective ride into the world of these images. These poems are an excursion into the personal, cultural and political climate of the 1960's prompted by these rich depictions.

The start was the image which was iconic in itself. The photos were from the Village Voice and conveyed the counterculture of the 1960's. I entered the photo from a "neutral" point of view, sometimes participating in the action of the scene and at other times consumed in a memory, feeling or event guided by (to different degrees) the image. The image could be of a person, event or a place or all the above.

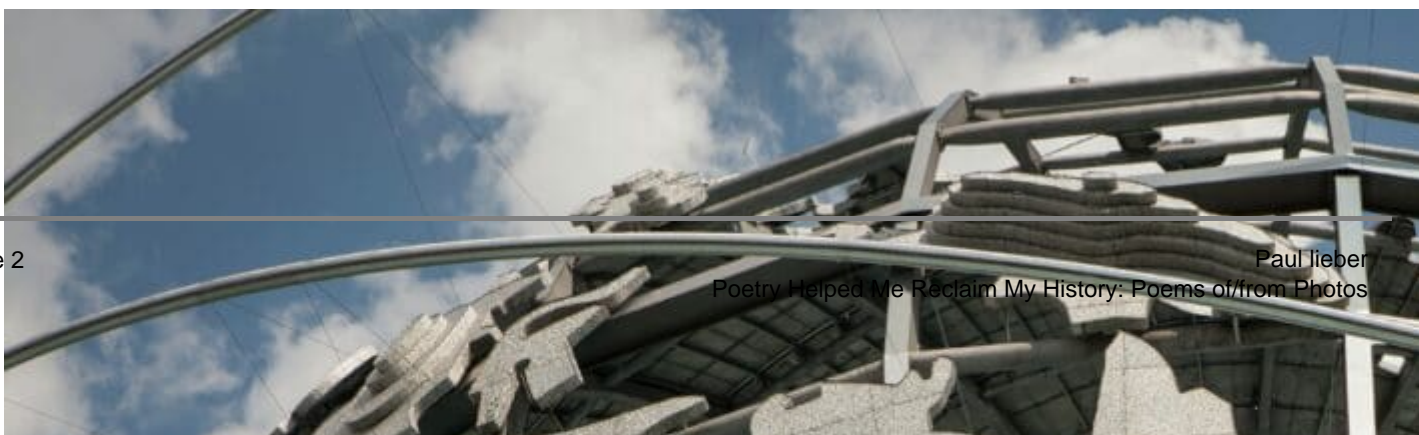
**"Autoethnography comes into play as my experience or might I say re-experience of the sixties took off from the remarkable photos in "Anarchy, Protest & Rebellion," assembled by Fred W. McDarrah.**

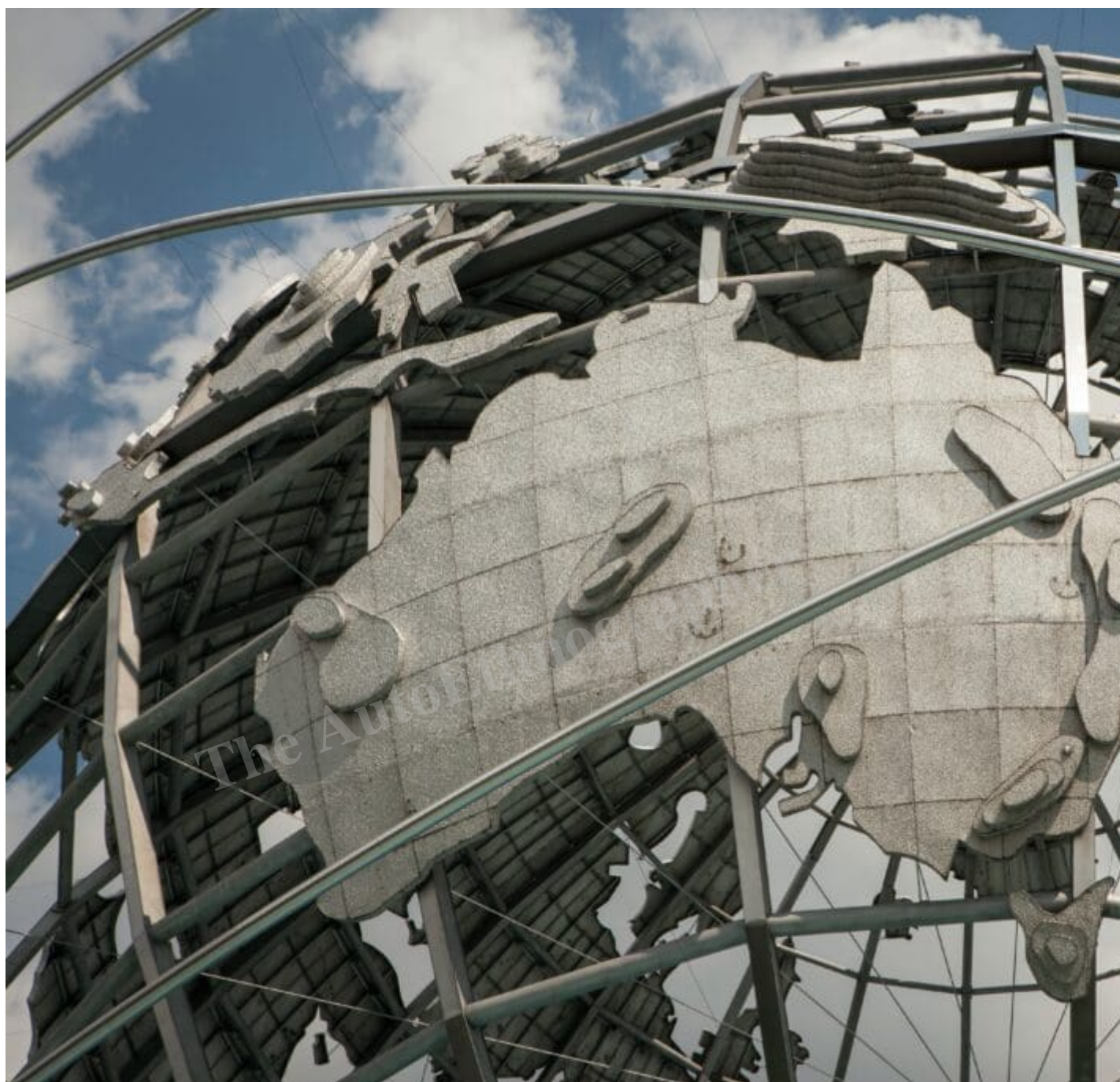
More often than not I was familiar with the location, the event or the people depicted, but like Cecilia I didn't think I was fully present. I crossed paths with many of the people in the photos. I was at several of the demonstrations chronicled in the book. There are photos of the "Bread and Puppet Theatre," a group born out of the protests to the Vietnam War. I performed with them at the Fillmore East. There are photos of The Living Theatre. I saw all their productions and met a few of the members. One member became a close friend. There is a photo of Tennessee Williams. I had the good fortune to meet him when I was performing on Broadway. There is a photo of Abbie Hoffman. I played him in a play and we later became friends.

There is a photo taken at the "Church Disco." My girlfriend actually did work in the coatroom. In "Hollows," I was very aware of this scandal and horrible conditions at Willowbrook caught in this photo; I had been working with autistic children at the time. (not included in this group of poems) I was at the World's Fair in Queens referred to in "Subterranean," Well on and on my connections became apparent and looking at the photos ignited the realization: I played a part in the cultural and political tapestry of that time. I was not a lead player but I participated. The fusion, of both objective investigation and personal exploration was evident.

**"Seeing these photos and writing these poems helped me to own my experience.**

From Stonewall Inn to Al Pacino in his first play, to Woodstock, to the Be In's in Central Park, to cuisine on the lower east side. to Muhammad Ali and the protests to the Vietnam War, these photos explore them all with the backdrop and the sometimes, lead player, "New York City." In essence I felt alienated during that period in my life. I might have been confused or emotionally distant but I did take note of what was around me. Seeing these photos and writing these poems helped me to own my experience. We have all heard people say "poetry saved my life." In this case it helped me reclaim my history. I believe the dynamic taking place was autoethnography, a hybrid of my investigation of the 1960's coupled with my personal experience.





Unisphere sculpture close-up in New York by [Reno Laithienne](#) for [Unsplash](#)

These are poems in response to photos in “Anarchy, Protest & Rebellion,” assembled by Fred W. Mc Darrah.

Photo, p. 217

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**Unisphere sculpture by Gilmore D. Clarke was  
The centerpiece of the New York World's Fair, 1964-65**

SUBTERRANEAN

The pavilions, rides and global  
contributions attracted  
little of my attention

and I am sorry to say  
nor did man's flight to the moon.  
The concoction of this World's Fair

where the Unisphere rules—  
and still does—  
in Flushing Meadows, Queens

where for a few months  
countries got along,  
borders porous;

water fountains lit  
in the background,  
with elevated towers

lifting Robert Moses and crowds  
to heights  
left me in a crawl.

Tangled, earthbound,  
with a singular periscope,  
I tracked nothing

but myself.  
This photo cuts  
off the sign,

"Caribbean Pavilion."  
We puzzle over Caribbean Pavilion.  
Names, severed.

Meaning lost.  
I rarely wandered  
above 14th street.

**Photo, p. 252**

**Sal Mineo at a play rehearsal, August 21, 1969.**

AS IF

Sal Mineo with a cigarette hanging  
from his mouth, in an unbuttoned  
denim shirt— yes, the boy who died  
in James Dean's arms,  
the boy who followed  
him and Natalie Wood around,  
who stood for every kid  
who longed for cool parents.  
Sal said, "Hi, Paul." Sal Mineo, said, "Hi Paul."  
"Hi Paul" shot out of celluloid,  
as if we were both in Rebel Without a Cause.  
Sal, backstage, said, "Hi,  
Paul,"  
as if we were friends as  
I left my dressing room  
and although  
he was killed in the film, he seemed  
to be resurrected to greet me.  
Soon the police would arrive  
at the Morosco Theatre  
on 45th Street just west of Broadway.  
Surely they would shoot my brother Sal  
again and then hopefully shoot me.

The AutoEthnographer









Auguste Rodin's "St. John the Baptist, Preaching" in Italy by Max Avans

**Photo, p. 108**  
**Curator Frank O'Hara in the Museum**  
**of Modern Art garden, January 20, 1960,**  
**with Auguste Rodin's "St. John the Baptist, Preaching"**

FIFTY-THIRD BETWEEN  
FIFTH AND MADISON

There's Frank O'Hara in the same  
posture as the sculpture,  
hands, legs and fingers in perfect sync,  
as spontaneous  
as his verse.

I remember this spot  
in the Museum  
when entry was free  
and I would bite  
into an apple  
from a bowl  
of Cezanne's fruit arrangement,  
stain my lips with color,

murder an innocent  
with Bruegel,

ogle women  
from multiple angles  
with Picasso,

soar in oil and clouds,

as familiar  
as the crannies  
of an alley  
where I played Ring-a-levio  
as a boy  
when my breath  
was short  
from excitement:  
the make-believe



that seemed  
so real.

I'd go down  
into the museum basement  
for a Louis Malle film  
or Goddard:  
steal a car  
with Jean Paul Belmondo,

preserve the severed hand  
in a jar of formaldehyde  
— of a dear, dead friend—  
set it on the shelf  
next to a few oblivious books  
in what's the name of that Max Ophuls film?  
No it wasn't Ophuls.  
Give me a minute...

...Jean Vigo, L'Atalante.

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**Photo, p. 100**  
**A crown of daisies, Central Park,**  
**April 14, 1968**

EAST VERSUS WEST

At the BE-IN of beads  
and acid. We are all one.

It was confusing  
with the rage

of so many years  
beginning to surface

while love climbed the bark  
of every trunk

and me dissolving into atoms.  
The lamppost as holy

as a maple tree

with ancient Indian patterns

talking about un-self, no borders,  
and chit-chat about surrender.

Everything stripped  
from the word assigned to it.

Revealed.  
The terror of last night could be

overcome by smashing dishes  
or seen in burgundy, blue

and violet prisms  
contracting and expanding....

**Photo, p. 329**

**In "three days of peace and music,"  
Over thirty bands entertained from sunup until sundown,  
August 16, 1969**

IT TILTED THE ORBIT OF THIS PLANET

The tops  
of heads, frame to frame,  
roll and sweep along:  
the festival known as Woodstock, August 1969,  
as studied as the invasion of Normandy.  
I'm not the mustached guy strolling towards  
the lens  
or the infant getting his diaper changed  
or a boy in a white T-shirt  
with his back to us.  
No, I am outside the frame in a VW Bug  
with four others, voting whether  
to continue through mud  
with two miles to go  
to this photograph.  
It's one to one.  
Lightning.  
Rain.  
Everything soggy.

Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Janis  
share umbrellas.  
The Who erupt in  
a downpour.  
Hendrix will destroy  
his guitar. The folk singer  
with the lisp is lost  
in his notes, the one  
who had the crush on what's-her-name?  
The tally is two to two. I break  
the tie to make  
the U-turn.  
I didn't know I'd  
see the film.  
I didn't know  
I'd see this photo.  
I didn't know.  
It was 1969.  
I knew everything

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**Photo, p. 17**  
**The Bread & Puppet Theatre**  
**in the first Vietnam protest,**  
**Washington Square, March 15, 1965**

The three-storied puppets,  
hands bigger than heads and gowns  
to the ground, a 1962 Mercury  
parked to the side  
with slanted front lights  
watching it all.  
The Bread and Puppet Theater  
parades down MacDougal Street.  
VIETNAM is bold and hand printed  
on the chest of a puppet,  
blind as the war,  
and inside the puppets  
are puppeteers who follow  
instructions from the creator, Peter Shulman,  
rather than a drill sergeant.  
A musician with a papier mâché-skeleton face,



meant to spook us into  
sanity, beats a marching drum.  
A fire hydrant in the lower right hand  
corner listens to the pleas for peace.  
I want to mention what happens  
under the drapes of these oversized  
puppets, how we both maneuver  
them and fondle one another,  
stroke each other's genitals  
while we protest  
while our classmates from high school  
disappear.

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Horn&Hardart Times Square New York circa 1939, public domain

Photos, pp. 174-175

The last Horn & Hardart, West 57th St.,  
June 19, 1960

GONE

I was beside myself to hand a dollar bill



at the marble booth at the center of  
the cafeteria and witness the Vegas-like  
agility of Mary, who shuffled coins like cards,  
tossed twenty cool nickels my way.  
Here are photos of the gold gargoyles,  
marble, glass, and the spigot with the head of a dog,  
tongue hanging. Just crank the handle  
above and, for five nickels, place your cup under  
for coffee, then proceed as four nickels  
will open a small glass door where pies  
prostitute themselves. Temptation is legal  
and these cream pastries, chocolate  
and lemon meringue, parade behind  
the see-through windows. Take your pick  
in the automat where men wear hats  
and eat off trays and kids like me  
were off our leashes. Baked beans,  
macaroni, slot machines and swinging doors.  
Touch what you like for a few easy nickels,  
everything within reach as we skipped  
from showcase to showcase. There's  
a grilled cheese sandwich. Dripping.  
There's Bessie putting the third nickel  
in the slot, eye level with apricot pie.  
She wears a wool jacket, her hands  
are still chilled, but so eager.

**Photo, p. 63**

**Hot knishes all day long at  
Avenue C, November 7, 1964**

**BROTH**

We're on avenue C and 6th Street,  
"Knishes 15 cents." A man with a coat  
to his knees grasps the handles  
of his cart on a cobbled street,  
gloriously irregular in its line-up of stones,  
six blocks from where my grandmother  
lived on 12th Street between B and C,  
that tenement apartment tucked

in the 3rd floor walk-up where I'd enter  
into a museum of smells  
with the samovar on a top  
shelf, as seductive as the casbah,  
and a bathtub in the kitchen;  
a bowl of chicken soup,  
with an occasional eggshell  
lost in broth, welcomed me.  
This is the Lower East Side with fire escapes  
above treetops, always above,  
witnesses to the changing demographics.  
Not burnt, please. Is it fresh?  
Who made these? Hot but not too hot.  
A kasha one, please. Yes, with mustard.

**Photo, p. 90**

**Tim Leary sits with Allen Ginsberg and Richard Alpert  
at the Fillmore East, 1966, the event was  
a "psychedelic, religious celebration."**

STAGELIGHT

Tim greeted me at Millbrook,  
his LSD farm in New York

and he stood like a waspy god  
in sandals, as friendly as a senator

and he had my teenage vote.  
At the Fillmore I watched him

describe playing baseball, how acid  
slowed the pitch and in the stitching

of the ball he found the history  
of the game, contemplated the peace

it embodied, the angles it celebrated  
and he had time to reflect

on the Big Bang as he swung his bat  
with perfect timing and swung his bat

in harmony with the rotation  
of the planet and with his swing

creation was explained and so much more...  
Mic in hand, legs nearly crossing,

Allen Ginsberg to his left,  
while bombs dropped

on Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam  
and darkness

in this photo except for them.

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Mohammad Ali by Nelson Ndongala for Unsplash

**Photo, p. 1**  
**Heavyweight Champion Muhammad Ali**  
**in basement of Madison Square Garden,**  
**March 16, 1967**

ROPE-A-DOPE

Ali in a robe, leaning  
on the ropes, fatigued,  
the year he refused induction,  
his mouth closed.  
My father would love  
his closed mouth  
free from braggadocio  
and rhyme, as unimpressed  
with Ali as he was with me.

I remember when  
I said Johnson and Nixon  
were the same, thinking of  
the blood in Vietnam,  
and my father spewed disgust.  
Was it really disgust at  
his father who deserted  
or his mother who deserted  
her sanity or me who deserted  
his opinions?

I met Ali in Santa Monica when  
there was peace in the east and  
he was shuffling and dancing.  
I leaned like him on the rope  
outside the ring and he smiled  
and waved me in.  
I said I like it outside  
then climbed over the rope.  
Ali circled. I didn't think he even  
noticed my presence.  
He flicked a jab and followed  
it with a light hook and a cross;  
I did the rope-a-dope and he  
recited: you're a good learner friend,  
but you will be out in the end  
and that's all I remember.

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