New York City

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The light of the street lamps is particularly warm and friendly, this fall night. It pours yellow from above and cuts out glowing islands in the darkness, but its halo seems neither cold nor artificial. The trees are all shadows and rustlings, the traffic is a river, white and yellow and orange, the faces of passers-by are covered with reflections, and in the distance the towers of Manhattan loom in silence after the daytime noise and chaos. Strange to see how the city changes its skin at night, as darkness, dense and strange, gradually seeps its way into street after street, jostling aside the marine transparency of daytime.

I couldn't say which is more real: New York by day, or New York by night. Both contain within themselves something elusive that cannot always be traced back to the materiality of its origins. I love city nights for their unique charm and mystery, their way of saying yet not saying, but perhaps not even London is able to cast the same spell over me as New York. The latter walks a different walk as it enters darkness, and its nocturnal mode of being almost results in a different disposition of space, light, perspectives, and rhythms: another of the metropolis's many guises. The night and the city possess an almost irresistible magnetism that can be deceptive and, at times, dangerous: years ago it was precisely this magnetism—the irrepressible need to find myself out in the streets, crossing one after the other—that led to my being mugged in a place I knew full well I should have avoided at that time on my own, but which seemed to have taken on a magical appearance at night.

Anyway, this evening there is a large group of us walking across Manhattan from east to west in the direction of the Village. There are old friends from New York and newly arrived friends from Italy, and the lengthy stroll turns into one of those journeys where the city's various stories and many faces are assessed anew. Howard comments on the proliferation of iron railings surrounding the luxuriant gardens downtown, Marlis pauses at certain street corners and tells us how they've changed over the last twenty years, what direction the process of transformation in certain blocks and neighborhoods has taken...

Beyond Washington Square, we walk through the nighttime chaos and con-
fusion of Bleecker Street toward 86 Bedford Street, an anonymous-seeming address, no sign, no name, which actually coincides with one of Manhattan’s most legendary and little-known places: Chumley’s. During the Prohibition era, Chumley’s was among the most revered of speakeasies, and access was subject to one’s being recognized through a peephole at the entrance. The peephole is still there today, because Chumley’s has hardly changed in all these years. You go through a heavy main door, up a couple of steps, down some others, and you find yourself in a spacious wooden-floored room with rickety tables all around, soft lighting, a huge blackboard carrying details of tonight’s menu in colored chalk, a few private rooms, and then the bar counter, more steps and another smaller and more narrow room and, at the back, a second door (the old security exit) that looks out onto a quiet courtyard in Barrow Street, right behind the corner of Bedford.

The food is good at Chumley’s, and they serve excellent beer. The music doesn’t jar and the old tables come complete with carved names and phrases that tell their own stories. If you get there early enough, you can enjoy a good hour’s worth of peace and tranquility before the place fills up, and, while waiting for your food and beverages, you can follow the frieze along walls made up of framed dust jackets of early-twentieth-century classics . . . Indeed, besides being one of the most famous speakeasies, and besides telling us so much about the Prohibition era (few such places have survived: there is the 21 Club, at 21 West 52nd Street, and Palm Restaurant on Second Avenue and East 45th Street, but this remains my first choice, and it is perhaps the most genuine of them all), Chumley’s was also one of the favorite meeting places of artists not only from the Village but from all over the city (rumors even have Joyce writing some pages of Ulysses in the little room at the back).

While we sit down at a table large enough to accommodate all of us, in this place that represents yet another of the many universes to be found in New York, I hear Billy Joel singing Piano Man against the background hubbub of voices and music—more metropolitan microstories.

Getting to know New York is not simply a question of poring over its in-depth and in-width maps (its layers, its sections). No: its isolated faces, its loose fragments and time warps surround us and (with their reserved silences or boisterous chatterings) tell the city; and from these metropolitan hypertext windows one can observe important stories and inconsequential events, reasons and causes lost in time, revelations and unexpected epiphanies. Perhaps it is precisely this alternation of continuity and discontinuity—of the overall picture and the separate parts that go to make up that picture—that makes it so difficult to get a grasp of New
York and puzzle out what it really is. And so every departure from the city necessarily implies a return, for is there not always a niggling unconscious suspicion that something has been omitted? It is at this stage that the sides of the prism become as important to our understanding as the in-depth and in-width maps.

This is a city of many icons. But if I were forced to say which stand closest to my heart, I would have to opt for two skyscrapers and a railway station. One breezy, sunny morning (or one light, limpid evening), take Park Avenue from the south or from the north, and at 26th Street turn to your left or your right. Walking one block farther on you will find yourself on the corner of Madison Square Park, and there it is, poking out from among the trees—the beautiful, airy Flatiron Building. It was designed in 1902 by Daniel H. Burnham, one of America's greatest architects, shortly after his arrival in New York from Chicago, where he had worked on the creation of the 1893 World Columbian Exposition (the great fair that proved something of a watershed between the old America of the frontier and the prairies and the new America of technology and the metropolis).

The nineteen Italian Renaissance–style floors of “Burnham's Folly,” as it almost immediately became known, were built onto a streamlined steel structure, with French Renaissance–style ornamentations and warmly colored, lightly undulating rustic terra-cotta walls. Originally called the Fuller Building, its striking resemblance to a towering, narrow iron means it is more widely known as the Flatiron. Its shape also recalls that of a majestic ship's prow plowing its way northward through the chaotic undercurrents of Broadway, almost as if it were signposting the direction taken by the city in those years as it moved up Manhattan.

This particular New York spot is extraordinary: conventional perspectives are thrown to the wind wherever you look, and it suddenly feels as if you are standing in the eye of a small storm. Streets converge and radiate outward, the traffic spins about giddily, and there before you rises up this splendid architectonic object, in perpetual motion, traveling through the urban maelstrom. Here, the wind, too, has something to say and contributes a few lines to the social history of the area: in city slang the cry “Twenty-Three Skidoo!” takes its origins from the corner of Broadway and 23rd Street, where the vortex of winds used to have unpredictable effects on long skirts at the beginning of the twentieth century. Albeit in a minor key, this was something of a foretaste of what would later happen to Marilyn Monroe in the famous scene where she stands on a subway grate in The Seven Year Itch, and used to arouse the interest of numerous male oglers (who, courtesy of precisely that sharp cry, were asked to move on).

That aside, the formal beauty, the changing colors, the gradual laying bare of particular details at different hours of the day and night, the light-
ness and the movement, the unique position in which the building stands, and the sheer imaginative energy it gives off mean that the Flatiron goes well beyond the conventional attributes of a historic landmark (and, personally speaking, one of my New York passions): such is its chosen status among painters and photographers that a whole microhistory of metropolitan art could be written on and around it.

So, it is not easy to take your eyes off the Flatiron, but when you finally do manage to take your leave, go back in the direction you came from, head up Lexington Avenue, and walk about fifteen blocks north (yes, one does walk a lot in New York). And, there before you, complete with its slender spire, stands the distinctive Chrysler Building. Designed by the architect William Van Alen, it was finally completed in 1930 and was (if only for a few months) the tallest building in the world at 1,048 feet: shortly afterward, the Empire State Building made its appearance, and that was that. But this particular metropolitan race was already under way at the time of the Chrysler when, with a view to breaking the record, the builders of another skyscraper at 40 Wall Street made the surprise decision to add an extra twenty-four inches at the last moment. Van Alen and company wasted no time: the famous stainless steel spire that, together with the decorative work, makes the Chrysler so easily recognizable from all over Manhattan was assembled secretly in great haste and hoisted from inside the building through the dome before being fixed on top during the night. The next morning, the city woke up to feast its eyes on a Chrysler Building that soared upward to the tune of another thirty yards or so.

This is a triumph of art deco, pleasantly and roguishly kitsch and, especially when it casts its loving look in the nighttime sky, irresistibly charming. It is the apotheosis of the Manhattan building industry in the 1920s, the jubilation of an artifact (the car) that was about to embark on its long irresistible journey (check out the endless play of mirrors in the decorative work on the interior, in the splendid African marble lobby with its immense mural fresco on the ceiling, and, on the outside of the building, in the shape of radiators, handles, hubs, and fenders!). The hour of the building industry and the automobile was literally exploding on the American scene in the brief temporal crossroads that closed the decade of easy money and opened that of the Great Depression.

Beneath the winking eye of the Chrysler, walk westward a couple of hundred yards along 42nd Street and you come to the Grand Central Terminal, whose name says it all, really, what with that grand (as in imposing, magnificent, supreme) and that terminal (railhead, end of the line) that seems to reinforce still further the preceding central (and which, in New York symbology, attributes to the metropolis a peremptory definitiveness—the place where journeys end). It’s always so fascinating to
watch, study, feel big-city stations: you get the pulse of the city there, you understand something of its character and its rhythm. Even if you only spend half an hour in these vast, imposing spaces, it will help you appreciate much of what New York and Manhattan are about.

Grand Central Terminal is one of the most incredible constructions to be built in Beaux Arts style. It was completed in 1913 and has survived numerous attempts to demolish it (or, if it comes to that, to dwarf it, as Walter Gropius in part managed to do with his vile MetLife Building, which towers just behind). Three huge arches on the south facade illuminate the interior, surmounted by an enormous clock and a group of sculptures representing Mercury, Hercules, and Minerva (classicism and technology). Below stands a statue of “Commodore” Vanderbilt, the ruthless railway magnate and one of the numerous robber barons who seemed to proliferate at the end of the nineteenth century. The surface area amounts to almost three blocks, with two underground levels (the lower-level ceiling is covered in magnificent tile decorations) that contain more than thirty miles of railway track, and a host of marble ramps connecting the various sectors of what literally amounts to a labyrinth. And the most overpowering thing of all is the central concourse: the lofty vault supported by forty-yard-high columns and decorated with illuminated decorations of zodiac constellations, the large thirty-yard-high windows lending the concourse (celebrated in many a film noir) a certain solemn cathedral-like feel.

Inside and all around this deeply symbolic metropolitan location, there is the concentrated frenzy of thousand upon thousand of commuters, the intense to-ing and fro-ing up ramps and down corridors, the motionless snakes of long trains in the station depths awaiting the signal to leave, and the eloquent silence of a homeless population that has transformed the sinuous recesses of the terminal into the final resting home of anonymous shattered lives. And, in the sprawling concourse, the niggling cinema-induced sensation that something is about to happen from one moment to the next: a chase along stretches of shining marble, a flight at breakneck speed down the stairways, a stealthy retreat along the narrow communication passages beneath the large windows . . .

Then there are some very special niches within the city, where time seems to slow down as if suspended, to allow you a moment to reflect anew on the paths you have already trodden, reorganize the sensations you have felt, and think over the faces, voices, and stories you’ve come across. And one of these niches is located right here in the depths of Grand Central Terminal, and the mazelike tangle of the station doesn’t make it easy to find. The Oyster Bar and Restaurant is on the lowest level of the station, right in front of the place where the trains depart. With its wide barrel
vaults covered in white tiles, it bears a striking resemblance to a cellar (and in the summer of 1997 the whole thing nearly went up in flames: I shudder at the idea of one of the peaceful city spots I cherish most literally going up in smoke). Don’t be taken in by the restaurant on the left—a somewhat snooty establishment that offers similar fare, but probably at a steeper price. No, just to the right of the entrance, sit down on one of the stools in front of the horseshoe counters where waitresses move inside as in a diner and rush to set you up with a paper placemat and cotton napkin. The menu comes complete with succulent, exotic-sounding dishes like Maryland SheCrab Soup, Poached North Atlantic Salmon Filet, Florida Stone Crab Claws with Mustard Mayonnaise, Arctic Char Filet with Red and Black Caviar, Cajun Grilled Catfish Filet with Salsa Verde and Hush Puppies. And then there are the oysters, of course. Oysters from all over the place—Blue Point from Long Island, Wellfleet from Massachusetts, Moonstone from Rhode Island, Bras d’Or from Nova Scotia . . .

But I have to recommend the clam chowder, because the Oyster Bar is renowned for this (as well as for its unusual atmosphere). Rather than the Manhattan clam chowder (a vegetable and seafood broth, served with plenty of tomato), which might seem a more logical choice, go for the New England clam chowder (a denser and more creamy soup also of seafood and vegetables, but with milk in place of the tomato): a filling enough dish on its own, and a genuine psychophysical panacea. Then you could always finish up with the excellent rice pudding, and savor one of the wonderfully named beers on offer—Blanche de Brooklyn, Pete’s Wicked Oktoberfest Minnesota, Sierra Nevada Pale Ale . . .

I like to think that you go there when night is falling and the lights of the metropolis are coming on to cope with the growing darkness, with the Chrysler Building stretching into the violet-black sky, all pure lines and clear-cut contours. Because at this time of day it is much easier that, at the coiling counter of the Oyster Bar, beside you or in front of you, people sit that have to take the last train home. And so, while you taste your clam chowder, your rice pudding, and your Blanche de Brooklyn, you will have at hand (in the faces, in the voices, in the clothes, in the gestures) dozens of stories to imagine—rather like in a tale by O. Henry or Damon Runyon.

Then, inevitably, we come to McSorley’s—McSorley’s Old Ale House, an Irish saloon on East 7th Street, almost on the corner with Third Avenue and Cooper Square. The sign outside says “Founded in 1854,” the writings painted onto the two windows to the side of the entrance are peeling slightly, and on entering the saloon you are greeted by sawdust on the wooden floor. One of the best things, early in the morning or
mid afternoon, is the sheer peacefulness of the place as you walk slowly into the growing semidarkness of the first room. To your left, rough-and-ready round tables, big and small, a large potbellied stove, and a couple of cats sleeping on the chairs; to your right, the solid bar counter in dark, aging wood, the nineteenth-century icebox with its invitation to “Be Good or Be Gone,” the menu of the day scribbled in chalk on the blackboard, and dozens of objects hanging from the ceiling; and the other room at the back, darker and more spacious, dotted about with tables, an unused fireplace, and the kitchen and the narrow washrooms. Two waiters dressed in grey speed about the rooms, hurriedly taking orders and plucking change from a thick wad of banknotes; and behind the bar stands Geoffrey the poet-barman, and my friend Pepe (pronounced Peppi), an omnipotent godlike figure who knows and recognizes everyone, who relishes in telling you a thing or two about the history of the saloon—and without whom I’m convinced New York wouldn’t be the same.

There is a veritable folklore about McSorley’s. For a start, its walls are a kind of crash course in the history of the city and the Lower East Side and, if you are curious enough to examine them inch by inch, your patience really will be rewarded: yellowing newspaper cuttings, precariously framed antique prints, slightly crumpled sepia-colored photographs, fin-de-siècle theater playbills, maps of the area, sketches and drawings, front pages of century-old magazines featuring huge illustrations (later replaced by photographic prints), book covers, scraps of paper carrying typewritten messages and recipes, autographs of famous persons and anonymous customers, and an incredible variety of objects. All these things cover the saloon walls in a time-encrusted layer of local color, of cultural and material history.

For many decades McSorley’s was the focal point of the Irish community in the neighborhood before becoming the haunt of the radical intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century (from John Reed and Eugene O’Neill to Big Bill Haywood and John Sloan). And, up until 1970, the previous owner of the bar, an aging and somewhat obstinate fellow, forbade entrance to women. McSorley’s has been immortalized in the written pages of Brendan Behan and Joseph Mitchell, in a series of beautiful paintings and drawings by John Sloan (and also in a scene from Once Upon a Time in America, directed by Sergio Leone); articles, essays, and documentaries have also pieced together the 150-year-old story of the place. And when I feel like reading or jotting down a few things in peace, or simply letting the myriad stimuli of the city filter through my being, there is nothing better than pushing open the wooden door, saying hello to Pepe, and looking around in hopeful anticipation that the tiny semi-
circular table near the two large windows on the left is free and bathed in sunlight. I’ll take my seat, order the beers (exclusive to McSorley’s, they always come in twos, and very good they are, too), and later, if I feel like it, a bite to eat (corned beef with Savoy cabbage, for example, or roast lamb with potatoes, stew, and vegetables, or just a simple dish of crackers and cheddar cheese, garnished with the hot mustard that sits in pots lying about the tables here and there). Then I’ll just wait: for Pepe to finish polishing up the bar so he can sit down next to me for a chat, for the aging regulars to take their places at the back of the first room and read their newspapers, for Gene to tell an amusing tale from one side of the room to the other, and for the person I’m waiting for to arrive. Or simply for the light to slant in at a different angle through the window onto the carved names and words of my little table.

But perhaps the real suspension of time can be enjoyed in the small garden of St. Luke-in-the-Fields, on Hudson Street between Christopher Street and Barrow Street. I was first taken there by a friend, but we were refused entry because a movie was being shot with Al Pacino, and the crew told us to keep to the other side of the street. And when I went back there on my own some time later, it was not easy to retrace my steps in the maze-like tangle of the West Village. The church was built in 1821 (it was half destroyed by fire about fifteen years ago, but was promptly restored to its former glory), and at the time the area was one of the greenest and most agreeable places in Manhattan, and one of the most secluded: given the disastrous state of the roads at that time, one got there preferably by boat, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why it has maintained its air of separateness, suspended in time—getting there is still complicated, without precise directions.

This, too, is a corner of Manhattan steeped in history and stories. The first warden of the church was a certain Clement Clarke Moore, a man who has gone down in the city’s history for having written the poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, which begins with the line “‘Twas the night before Christmas . . .” That poem, and those lines in particular, somehow became a part of the American collective imagination, so much so that the visionary film director, Tim Burton, must surely have borne them in mind when thinking up a title for that minor masterpiece of melancholic irreverence, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The magnificent old houses in Federal style standing nearby (it was from right around there that Al Pacino crossed back and forth continually . . . ) were built more or less at the same time as the church, and it was in one of these houses that the writer Bret Harte lived at the end of the nineteenth century—one of the little big names of American literature, the author of several celebrated stories set in the California of the gold rush era some decades earlier . . .
But the garden really is something else. There is nothing straightforward about actually getting there: you have to follow quite a devious route, passing beneath an arch, walking beyond the adjacent courtyards of the primary school, skirting past classrooms and the little outside theater. Suddenly, there it is, the garden, and it is something of a maze in itself, appearing to unravel endlessly, behind the apse of the church, behind the priory, behind old walls covered in creeping plants, behind the street, behind the city. Silent little lanes beautifully kept, the area subdivided (despite the much-reduced size of everything) into four zones differing in configuration and vegetation, plants that are rare and unusual for this latitude (exposed in a southwesterly direction, and benefiting from the warm bricks of the enclosing walls, the garden’s microclimate is particularly favorable), an incredible variety of birds and butterflies (this little plot of land is, in fact, situated along one of their flyways and is an ideal stopover point), spacious, welcoming benches—the sense of having left everything else aside. You take a seat, look about you, pick up a book to read or a letter to write, and the three or four persons on the benches around cross time with you, in this niche hollowed out of the wild metropolis.

Icons, niches . . . the city prism has many sides to it, and some of these consist of genuine time warps in which time doesn’t simply coagulate in material artifacts or suspend itself in places of tranquility, but positively seems to reel backward. This is what you may experience in Harlem.

You get there from the south, along St. Nicholas Avenue, running almost the entire length of Manhattan, and it may well be that you’ve driven through the neighborhood with more than the usual caution to avoid any mishaps or moments of tension (giving way at the intersection, watching out for children crossing the street: routine administration anywhere you go, but not in Harlem, especially when the driver is white). And maybe there is something odd about the day anyway, grey and drizzly, bordering on the unreal. You park your car on St. Nicholas Avenue abreast of West 106th Street and, on the right, go up some steps only to find yourself projected backward into another place (New Orleans perhaps?)—another dimension, certainly. You’ve ended up in Sylvan Terrace, a short, narrow lane lined with about ten identical-looking little houses on each side—late-nineteenth-century wooden houses featuring high stoops positioned laterally onto the facades, decorated balustrades, frame windows, corbels, and friezes. The beautiful cobblestone paving and the street lamps marking this brief stretch of road all make for a timeless
atmosphere. Everything is tasteful, gaily colored, and well kept and has recently been restored by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (it seems that only one of the lodgers living in the wooden houses refused the offer of restoration; I couldn’t say why).

But don’t stop here. Go farther on past the small court called Jumel Terrace and enter Roger Morris Park (perhaps it is fall for you now, too, and the ground is strewn with leaves and acorns), which stretches its way all around the Morris-Jumel Mansion, one of the most intriguing historic landmarks in Manhattan. This solid, Georgian-style white building, complete with a large Federal-style portico two stories high, was erected in 1776 by Colonel Roger Morris. For the month of September in 1776 it served as the general headquarters of George Washington before being occupied by the English. It then became a tavern and later a farm before finally being purchased by Stephen Jumel, a wine merchant, and his wife, Eliza Bowen, a splendid former prostitute (and, if the history books are right, the richest woman in America at the time). It seems that the Jumels were also friends of Napoleon Bonaparte, and that many of the items of furniture used by the couple to enrich this mansion on a small hill facing Harlem River originally belonged to him. Mr. Jumel died in 1835, and his widow married the politician and former vice president of the United States, Aaron Burr, now more than seventy years old. But the marriage soon went downhill, and the divorce came through on the same day Burr died.

Inside, you really do feel as if you are in a time warp: hand-painted tapestries, transparent porcelain, antique clocks, and an octagonal room with views over the garden (the first, it seems, in America)—all very late 1700s and early 1800s. Outside, the metropolis of the second millennium spins all around you: traffic rushing along the fast lane of the ring road, the silhouette of Macombs Dam Bridge, the tensions of Harlem. And perhaps it is exactly out of this gap in time that the legend comes: of ghosts in colonial garb apparently haunting the mansion day and night, insinuating that the death of Mr. Jumel was not quite as straightforward as it seemed...

The contrasts in New York certainly are remarkable, both for the contradictory nature of the city’s stories and the cheek-by-jowlness of its extremes. As Theodore Dreiser wrote in *The Color of a Great City*: “The glory of the city is its variety. The drama of it lies in its extremes.” Take the Bowery, for example: I’ve already mentioned it once or twice in this book, but the time has come to consider it more closely.

This mile or so that today links Chatham Square to Cooper Square began its life as an Indian trail before serving as the thoroughfare that connected the most important Dutch farms in the area. Later it was the main
road linking New York and Boston, and finally, in the first half of the nineteenth century, it became the residential area of a New York that was still very much confined to the tip of Manhattan—a wealthy and refined area whose numerous magnificent theaters (like the Great Bowery Theater, opened in 1826) dominated the arts scene of the metropolis until about 1875.

It was about this time that the heart of wealthy New York shifted in the direction of Fifth Avenue and Broadway, marking the beginning of the end of the Bowery. Indeed, it was shortly to become the domain of opium dens, criminal gang hideouts, saloons run by retired actors, small theaters whose actors included champion boxers like Jim Corbett, German wine cellars, dime museums, and cheap attractions like sword swallowers, lion tamers, dwarfs, bearded ladies, and unlikely mermaids... a disturbing yet fascinating chapter in the history of popular entertainment in New York during the Victorian era. The nail in the coffin was the construction of the Third Avenue Elevated. Its tracks ran the whole length of the Bowery in both directions, supported by steel scaffolding that was erected adjacent to the sidewalk (the traffic of wagons, barrows, and horse-drawn trams flowed along the central section), and which cut the facades of all the glorious theaters in half (including that of the immaculate neoclassical Thalia Theater)—and which shrouded every object and living soul in dense smoke, thick shadows, and coal dust (and, often, flying sparks and drops of oil).

Immigrants from all over the world flocked to the Bowery, a volatile popular neighborhood, which also counted outcasts, tramps, prostitutes, alcoholics, and homeless people among its inhabitants. Even so, the theater flourished for some years yet: as I mentioned earlier, Shakespeare's plays were staged alongside Buffalo Bill's "melodramas of the West," and the Peking Opera took turns with Yiddish theater. This double-edged character of the street remained well into the opening years of the twentieth century and was perfectly captured in the 1912 song by Charles Hoyt, "The Bowery" ("The Bow'ry, the Bow'ry! / They say such things, and they do strange things on the Bow'ry! / The Bow'ry! I'll never go there anymore!"), the book by Hutchins Hapgood, Types from City Streets (1910), or Diamond Lil, a play set in a saloon during the last decade of the nineteenth century, written by the "scandalous" Mae West in 1928. The Bowery could boast all-night bars, Salvation Army missions, cheap brothels, and cheap hotels and flophouses for the aged and homeless, and by 1907 there were 25,000 "irregular inhabitants" living in the area, a situation that only worsened in the decades between the Great Depression and the 1950s—as is well documented by Lionel Rogosin's bleak documentary film, On the Bowery (1956), and by two exhaustive books: Alvin Harlow's Old Bowery Days (1931) and Benedict Giamo's On the Bowery (1989).
Very little has changed today. The Bowery remains suspended between different and opposing states of being and extremes. It is a wide derelict street whose past and present scars are visible to all, a series of shops and wholesale stores selling lamps, chandeliers, and secondhand restaurant equipment, rows of rough-looking, blackened old houses that readily call to mind the roguish life and ways of the late nineteenth century, squalid hotels and flophouses, abandoned parking lots, Salvation Army missions. Then, here and there, the odd small theater reminds us—obstinately, doggedly—of what this long, spacious thoroughfare (which, in spite of everything, I like to trod on a sunny day) used to be: like the Dixon Place (if it is still open) or the Bowery Lane Theater (whose program really is something to watch out for).

Then of course (and this is where I really wanted to get to), there is CBGB (& OMFUG) and the Amato Opera. The weird acronym stands for Country, Bluegrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gourmandizers—a haunt that replaced a somewhat disreputable bar at 315 Bowery in 1973, a meeting place for country musicians, which soon became a temple of rock, punk, and new wave: Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, David Byrne and the Talking Heads, Mink De Ville, Television, the Ramones, the B52s, the Voidoids, and other celebrated names in contemporary music kicked off right here in this dark, cavelike venue. Graffiti and slogans line the walls inside and out, and such is the increasingly run-down appearance of the place that it ends up resembling something between a community center and a squat house (you can read all about it in Roman Kozak’s *This Ain’t No Disco*, 1988).

Leave CBGB, pass in front of the Palace Hotel (probably the most well known of flophouses for the homeless in New York: a century ago, it was Alexander’s Museum, a much-visited dime museum on the Bowery, where Steve Brodie—a hugely popular figure on New York’s nighttime circuit—used to sing, dance and perform his “monologues”), and just a few yards farther on, at 319 Bowery, you will see a small white brick building. After the black punkishness of CBGB, the Amato Opera makes for a striking contrast: another pearl in this ruined thoroughfare, another jewel in a contrast-ridden Manhattan.

Anthony Amato and his late wife, Sally, founded this opera company in 1947. At that time they didn’t own a fixed venue, but after checking out what was available in the Village (still very Italian-dominated during this period), they finally came across these premises—an old warehouse—on the Bowery. In the early 1950s it can’t have been an easy decision to open a small theater for opera buffs in one of the most derelict and dangerous areas in New York. And yet the Amato Opera is still going strong, and after all this time (fifty years!) it has established itself as one of the
most interesting and original places in the variegated musical world of New York and a recognized springboard for talented young singers and stage designers.

I went to talk to Anthony Amato, a small, peppy, bright-eyed man in his seventies, whose large feet seem to weld him to the stage. Indeed, everything is in proportion at the Amato Opera: a hundred seats squeezed into a tiny auditorium and gallery (secured with the demolition of an entire wall of the two-story warehouse), a stage barely ten yards across, an orchestra pit situated in a basement that is just about able to accommodate an electric piano and a couple of wind instruments (the conductor has to stoop), a chocolate-box–sized bar where you can get a glass of wine during the intermission (often served by the singers themselves) or enter the lottery for a ticket for the next performance, changing rooms and workshops for costume staff and stage designers on the upper floor (expertly organized in order to exploit the limited spaces as much as possible). Surprisingly intelligent solutions have been found to cope with all the difficulties involved in the organization of the stage settings: when the lights go down, the two miniature chandeliers imitate the wealthy grandeur of the Metropolitan by rising upward to announce the beginning of the performance (an amused public invariably bursts into applause), and the singers themselves bring the scenery onto the stage, magically opening and folding it up as they go—a real delight to see (not to mention a pleasurable debunking of the cumbersomeness and pretensions of the grand opera theater tradition).

Well, I spoke at length with Anthony and Sally Amato one Saturday afternoon while they were busy dispatching letters, preparing press releases, and putting the finishing touches on stage costumes. In the evening I went to see Verdi’s Falstaff, an outstanding and thoroughly enjoyable performance not only because the stage was for once so close, but also because of the general atmosphere created between the singers and spectators. On leaving, with Anthony Amato’s promise that elephants would be brought on stage for next week’s performance of Aida still ringing in my ears, it was really strange to find myself on the accursed Bowery, outside the Palace Hotel and CBGB. More New York contrasts, and food for thought.

Apropos of contrasts: Central Park. And what has Central Park got to do with all this, you may well ask yourself, mindful of Holden Caulfield as he emotionally watches his sister Phoebe grubbing about for the ring, from one of the wooden horses in the park carousel? Or remembering Harry and Sally hanging out at one of the tables of the Boathouse near Fifth Avenue? Or recalling Marianne Moore’s words: “Spring: masses of bloom, white and pink cherry blossoms on trees given us by Japan.
Summer: fragrance of black locust and yellow-wood flowers. Autumn: a leaf rustles. Winter: one catches sight of a skater, arms folded, leaning to the wind—the very symbol of peaceful solitude, unimpaired freedom. We talk of peace. This is it.” Contrasts? What has the park got to do with contrasts?

Quite a lot, actually. Originally designed by the two eminent landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1856, the park was intended to be an area where the tensions of the growing city could weaken and dissolve, an environment that would be natural but controlled at the same time. The history of this park at the heart of Manhattan, from its initial planning stages to the torments of the present day, is of great interest to those wishing to learn about the history of the city as a whole, its hidden mechanisms, its character, and its moods. And it is a story that has been admirably recounted by Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar in their fascinating book, The Park and the People (1992).

The idea for a park that would celebrate the city and, at the same time, lead to a significant rise in the value of surrounding land, was the brain-child of wealthy merchants and property owners living in mid-nineteenth-century New York. A fierce debate followed in the corridors of city power for a couple of years, but finally a decision was made to purchase the first lot of just over seven hundred acres of water meadows and craggy rocks spanning 106th Street, Fifth Avenue, 59th Street, and Eighth Avenue. In 1857 the project was put to tender and was won by Olmsted and Vaux with their “Greensward Plan,” an English, romantic-style landscape that mixed in carefully measured doses the pastoral, the picturesque, and the architectonic, with two long promenades, a terraced hillside, two reservoirs, several elegant buildings, two small lakes, about forty small bridges to connect up the drops and rises in the land and four transversal thoroughfares (East Side-West Side) wedged some yards below ground level to give the impression of uninterrupted continuity to the green expanse . . .

The first real conflict occurred—as I mentioned earlier in the book—when efforts were made to clear settlements of African American, Irish, and German people who had been living in the area for decades: entire villages like Seneca Village, with its three churches, its school and cemetery, were swept away, regardless of the fact that the land had often been regularly purchased by its residents—an act of brute force. After this, work went ahead on the building of the park.

Between 1857 and 1859 about 20,000 laborers set about the task, using more gunpowder than was employed during the Battle of Gettysburg, carrying off something in the region of 71 million cubic feet of earth and rock, planting about 270,000 trees and shrubs, and digging out the massive,
irregular, round reservoir to the side of the already existing rectangular one. Central Park was inaugurated in the winter of 1859, and four years later it moved farther north for a total of four blocks, up to 110th Street, now accounting for 843 acres of land. From that time on, a new phase opened in the park’s history. The first decade was dominated by an air of exclusiveness, since only the wealthy New York elite (complete with its horse parades and carriages) were allowed access. Strict regulations were imposed to ensure that working-class people were excluded: collective picnics (a Sunday caprice among the Germans and the Irish) were forbidden, and wagons and carts (the main means of transportation for small shopkeepers taking their families to the park on Sunday outings) were denied entry. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century did the city’s combative working-class movement succeed in gaining permission for concerts to be held in the park on Sunday morning, while at the beginning of the twentieth century the entire way of running and experiencing the park was modified following the emergence of sprawling immigrant quarters like Harlem and, later, Spanish Harlem, around its northern boundaries.

But the conflicts didn’t finish there. Around the end of the 1920s, it was decided that the old rectangular reservoir should be drained, but there was less agreement over what should be put in its place: some favored the building of a sports complex complete with swimming pool and playgrounds, while others wanted the area transformed in compliance with the dictates of the “City Beautiful” movement, advocating the construction of a huge square and a promenade that would link it to the museums situated all around the park. The argument was settled by the arrival of a third faction made up of landscape architects and conservationists who imposed the creation of the so-called Great Lawn, in between the Ramble and the Reservoir (immortalized in many a film, The Marathon Man starring Dustin Hoffman to name but one). More tensions and more conflicts were to follow, including the debate over the opening up of further traffic thoroughfares and the building of parking lots inside the park. And, more serious and complex still, the problems deriving from the increasingly multiethnic composition of those frequenting the park during the day or at nighttime, or the grim metropolitan violence that sneaked its way in among the pathways, down beneath the bridges, along the lakeside . . .

While you wend your way about the woods, avenues, and lawns (but not after darkness falls, I beseech you!), between Harlem Meer with its peace-loving fishermen and the Rowboat Lake with its clumsy oarsmen, among the statues of Mother Goose or the heroic dog Balto (who managed to get some medicine to an ice-imprisoned village somewhere out in the sticks), and while you listen to the hypnotic music of the carousel or
gaze idly at the winter ice rink, walk about the vivaciously colored Conservatory Garden or hasten your step through the unnerving Warriors’ Gate (which warriors?)—while you wander about this boundless rural expanse, New York remains with you all the time, poking its head out from among the trees and hills, a constant and almost sentrylike presence reminding you that you are not in another (otherworldly?) world, but right there, in the heart of Manhattan. Then, try to feel its complex history, that interweaving of economic-financial interests and pressures from below, regulations imposed by powerful elites and attempts at negotiation on the part of the excluded majority. Try to feel the history of a “garden within the metropolis,” which was created with a view to warding off the threat of tensions and social divisions: but which, during the past 150 years, has unpredictably and paradoxically come to be their dark mirror, in the depths of its green beauty. Because at times the city seems to shudder, swell out, and, in the end, explode. The contrasts and tensions turn into riots: the long sequence of clashes between groups, communities, and classes that has left its mark on New York over the last two hundred years, and—in the frenzied vertigo of few hours or days—does much to repudiate the notion of harmony and the surmounting of differences that lies at the heart of American ideology.

The history of the New York riots is a real history in itself, and each individual episode puts the metropolis in a new light. In April 1788: enraged at rumors that corpses were being removed from their graves to be used for anatomical dissections, five thousand people marched on New York Hospital: for two days laboratories and offices were thrown into total confusion before police fired on the crowd, killing three demonstrators. In 1793 and 1798: repeated protests against certain well-known brothels soon changed to something like a popular insurrection, in which—well beyond the fortuitous cause—merged widespread frustrations and discontent. Something similar occurred on Christmas Day 1806: a street fight between Catholics (mostly consisting of newly arrived immigrants from Ireland) and Protestants (mostly native New Yorkers) turned into an out-and-out battle. During the course of the 1800s, these riots took on an increasingly social character, even if this may not have been immediately apparent. There were the longshoremen strikes of 1825 and 1828 and those of the weavers in 1828 and the stonecutters in 1829; then there were the “flour riots” in 1837: and on all of these occasions, Manhattan streets swarmed with demonstrators who often ended up fighting the police and local militias.

Then came the famous Astor Place Riots of 10 and 11 March 1849. Supporters of the American Shakespearean actor, Edwin Forrest, interrupted the performance of his English counterpart, William McReady, at the Astor Place Opera House. Crowds thronged the square opposite the
theater, and when skirmishes between opposing factions started to reach the boiling point, the police and local militia intervened, guns ablaze: thirty people were killed and fifty injured. In July 1857, on the other hand, the forces of law and order were obliged to back down in the wake of the furious violence unleashed by two enemy gangs—the Bowery Boys and the Dead Rabbits—as they brought downtown to its knees during two days of urban guerrilla warfare. Just a few days later the Kleindeutschland Riots broke out when police tried to quell a brawl in the German quarter of the Lower East Side: one person died and there were quite a few injured.

But the most frightening instance occurred between 13 and 17 July 1863, with the Draft Riots. In the middle of the Civil War, a new law was promulgated allowing those who were able to pay a tax of three hundred dollars to avoid the draft, and the Irish—the poorest and most heavily exploited community in New York—wasted no time in attacking police stations, arsenals, and wealthy citizens’ houses. What began as a gut response to an openly class-biased law then turned into something far more race-oriented: the African Americans were attacked, beaten, and wounded around the city, some even lynched and hanged from trees and street lamps. Midtown Manhattan was in flames, and only the intervention of the police, militia, and heavy artillery prevented the situation from deteriorating further. In the end 125 people were killed, although some sources put the figure at closer to a thousand.

Post–Civil War disturbances took on an increasingly social character. In January 1874 various organizations, including the International Workingmen’s Association (the First International), called for a mass demonstration in the heart of the working-class and immigrant Lower East Side: the meeting was broken up with incredible violence by horse-mounted policemen in what history books have called the “massacre of Tompkins Square.” More violence followed during the strikes of sugar refinery workers (in Williamsburg) in 1886 and, between January and February 1895, of Brooklyn railroad workers (which probably inspired the long “strike chapters” in Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, 1890). Clashes between strikers and the police were common throughout the opening decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the years of the Great Depression when numerous demonstrations of the unemployed were broken up in Union Square and the surrounding area.

The first racial disorders of the new century got under way in the Tenderloin in August 1900. As for Harlem, the ghetto exploded for the first time in 1935, and in a *Nation* report on those events (which concluded with three deaths), black poet Claude McKay wrote: “One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street is Harlem’s main street and the theatrical and shopping center of the colored thousands. Anything that starts
there will flash through Harlem as quick as lightning. The alleged beating of a kid caught stealing a trifle in one of the stores merely served to explode the smoldering discontent of the colored people against the Harlem merchants.” The ghetto was again engulfed in flames in 1943 (six people died during a revolt that probably inspired the closing apocalyptic scenes of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 work, Invisible Man), and throughout the troubled 1960s: in 1964, 1965, and 1968, when widespread unrest in the area was accompanied by the Columbia University student riots. And at the time of the 1977 blackout: when the whole city was plunged into deep and symbolic darkness, and thefts, robberies, and property seizures occurred. Lastly, in more recent history: the veritable nighttime uprising in the summer of 1988, in Tompkins Square Park, as demonstrators protested against the expulsion of the homeless encamped there and the imposition of a curfew in the park, and were quashed by mounted policemen, badgeless agents, helicopters hovering overhead (a few years later, the decision to evacuate some East 13th Street squats led to the appearance of an armored vehicle, no less).

Complex, multifaceted situations buried in the depths of the city, its history, and its culture: that you cannot (must not) forget as you walk along Broadway or Fifth Avenue.

Robert Moses died in 1981, yet his presence continues to loom over the metropolis, rather like those cartoon characters astride building tops, legs apart and arms crossed—symbols of absolute power and of the nexus between politics and finance, and yet another side to this city’s prism. It’s worth reflecting on a moment.

With his appointment as parks commissioner of New York City in the 1930s, Moses began his own very personal rise to power: autocratic and centralizing in the extreme, at one time he held down no fewer than twelve public appointments. But he soon decided to branch out beyond the (undoubtedly meritorious) task of opening parks all over the metropolis, and turned his hand to bridges (like the Triborough Bridge), housing estates for middle-income families (like Stuyvesant Town), and, most importantly, from the Second World War onward, highways, ring roads, elevated trains, and expressways.

In 1946 Moses became the city’s construction coordinator, and as such he set about revolutionizing and rebuilding Manhattan and its environs especially for the automobile, the new grand reality on the American landscape. In the years to follow he built the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Cross Bronx Expressway, the Staten Island Expressway, and the
Verrazano-Narrows Bridge; then he added an extra level to the George Washington Bridge, and, if the locals had not protested, he would have cut a swathe through downtown Manhattan with an expressway abreast of Broome Street. His way of thinking was akin to that of Napoleon III’s minister, Baron Haussmann, who gutted entire working-class districts only to replace them with wide tree-lined avenues where, in times of trouble, barricades were more difficult to erect and troops easier to maneuver.

Of course, Moses was not particularly worried about potential insurrections (even if, as we have seen, they weren’t that rare); rather, his projects and megalomaniac visions were ruled by land rent and by the up-and-coming social role of the automobile—a triumphal view of post–Second World War America. Even so (or maybe even precisely because of this), he obtained results similar to those of Haussmann. Indeed, every ring road, bridge, and expressway implied the demolition of working-class and immigrant neighborhoods and the dispersion of their former tenants to the four winds; during succeeding decades a good part of the infamous slum clearances that did away with the sight (but the sight only!) of urban degradation was the work of Moses.

Understandably, the master builder of New York was never really a great favorite with the man on the street. The straw that broke the camel’s back (provoking an extremely violent and ultimately victorious resistance) was the plan to cement over whole areas of Central Park to build mega parking lots (accompanied by repeated instances of contempt for Joseph Papp’s staging of Shakespearean plays in precisely the area which had been targeted by Moses). In the final chapter of his All That Is Solid Melts into Air (1982), entitled “In the Forest of Symbols: Some Notes on Modernism in New York,” Marshall Berman writes that, in reply to his numerous critics, “Moses appealed plaintively to us all: Am I not the man who blotted out the Valley of Ashes and gave mankind beauty in its place? It is true, and we owe him homage for it. And yet, he did not really wipe out the ashes, only moved them to another site. For the ashes are part of us, no matter how straight and smooth we make our beaches and freeways, no matter how fast we drive—or are driven—no matter how far out on Long Island we go.”

And this, too, is part and parcel of the history and stories of Manhattan.

As are the sprawling murals, frescoes painted onto building walls all over Manhattan, but especially visible in those neighborhoods off the traditional tourist circuit—those awkward places of the metropolis you have probably been advised to steer clear of: the Lower East Side, Harlem, El
Barrio, the Bronx . . . Not a surprise, because it is precisely here, in the midst of urban degradation, that the undying vitality and will to survive of those who live there encouraged the creation of these incredible works: a triumphant blend of forms and colors climbing their way five or six stories up the side of crumbling tenement blocks or spreading themselves out for dozens of feet along the wall of some disused warehouse, telling a story as they go. Storytelling, yes, that passion for narration that is so much a part of American culture (and which doesn’t involve narrating to an unknown or neutral public but, rather, to a community that can share the narrated experience or which, through the storytelling, is encouraged to share it), and which here is translated into magnificent murals. Once you are in New York, you simply cannot afford to miss them: because they tell you the story of the city—the arrival of the immigrants, the workers’ struggles, daily life in the neighborhood, the difficult dialectic between origins and the New World, the dreams of the present and the memories of the past, the faces of those who have disappeared and the street crowds, the thousand-and-one odd jobs and the kids’ games, the different languages and cultures, and survival in the metropolis . . .

Behind these murals is a long tradition stretching back to the 1930s and to the muralist schools of artists like Diego Rivera, Thomas Hart Benton, and Reginald Marsh. And they often are the product of a combined effort on the part of artists and ghetto kids, of community centers like Charas/El Bohio and specially created bodies like CityArts (whose murals have been beautifully examined in Toward a People’s Art [1977], a volume by Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, and James Cockcroft). They have names like New Birth, Women Hold Up Half the Sky, Seeds for Progressive Change, Afro-Latin Coalition, Chi Lai /Arriba /Rise Up!, Crear Una Sociedad Nueva, Arise from Oppression . . . Or perhaps one should say they had names like this, because the history of murals in New York is not without its downside, rather like that of the city’s gardens. It’s the sad story of La Lucha Continua, one of the most fascinating murals I have ever seen, taking its origins from a creative vision of Maria Dominguez—an enormous fresco binding together New York and Puerto Rico, yearnings and disappointments, headstrong survival, the past and daily lives. It was brutally covered over with a coat of white paint when the building it graced (on Avenue C, on the corner with East 9th Street) was refurbished for its middle-to-high-income residents: further evidence of that arrogant process of gentrification that refuses to tolerate the historical memory of neighborhoods subjected to the whims of real estate.

As I put the finishing touches on this book, a number of beautiful 1930s murals by Hugo Gellert on the walls of the Seward Park Houses in the Lower East Side are at risk of being destroyed. Many local activists and historians of American art and culture have joined forces to save them,
and (who knows?) if you visit New York in the near future, you may well make it in time to see them.

This story of disappearing murals is hardly new to the city: in 1931 Diego Rivera was hired to paint a large mural in the Rockefeller Center lobby and came up with a sort of “dream of the millennium” (Peter Conrad), a fresco that would narrate the Promethean human existence as it emerges from darkness toward the future. Rivera launched himself into the enterprise with great enthusiasm, and the mural grew and grew as it made its way across the Rockefeller Center walls. But then, when the mural was already completed, he made a blunder: in among the faces known and unknown populating his work, he included a portrait of Lenin. The people responsible for the project asked him to remove it, but Rivera would not comply and was promptly invited to leave. His great mural was immediately struck out: more New York stories.

There is always room for the odd bizarre coincidence in this maelstrom of a city. The same afternoon I finally managed to find again the garden of St. Luke-in-the-Fields, my obstinate wanderings led me to the red Victorian Gothic-style castle of the Jefferson Market Library. It was built according to the designs of Calvert Vaux and Frederick Clarke Withers in 1874–77, on Sixth Avenue abreast of West 9th Street—one of the key corners in the Village—and was originally intended to be a law court, complete with a built-in jail and, to the side, fireman’s barracks and a market.

A small exhibition of tiny art books by an artist called Susan Rotolo was being held there on the ground floor: notebooks filled with inventions, flickering memories, drawings, impressions, materials taken from everyday life, tickets, and photographs that had been cut out, touched up, and glued in. To my immense surprise, there in the middle of one of these books was a photographic sequence whose final shot I instantly recognized: a young couple, walking affectionately arm-in-arm down a small snowbound street in New York, cars to the left and right, fire-escaped tenements in the background; he, with his light brown buckskin jacket, hands tucked into jean pockets, head bowed slightly forward; she, dark coat, long reddish-brown hair, a simple and slightly dazed smile on her face, huddled up against his left arm and shoulder—the cover of Bob Dylan’s second LP, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*. I went over the sequence again and realized that the “she” nestling up to Dylan was not Joan Baez (as I had so often imagined in my youth when looking at the cover—so sweet and tender), but probably the author of those small, magical art books.
A few evenings later I happened to go to a Tibetan restaurant on East 9th Street with my friend Arthur Tobier (a local historian of the Lower East Side), his wife, and a couple I had met briefly some years before: he, an Italian TV cameraman, she, an Italo-American artist. At a certain point of the evening we were talking about Queens (“nothing there . . . urban desolation . . .,” an impression confirmed by memories of the three days I had spent there many years ago), and the artist told us of how she was born there and fled the place as soon as she could, heading for the Village at the beginning of the 1960s. I asked her what the Village was like at that time, and she spoke to me about it at great length: the crooked lanes, the villagelike atmosphere, the tiny Italian stores, the gloomy, dusty cafés that Ginsberg, Corso, and Kerouac already haunted. And then, with great nonchalance, she added that she had been Bob Dylan’s first fiancé—a rather strange feeling, to be told that, in a Tibetan restaurant, in October of 1997.

I looked at her, and then, only then did I actually recognize her. I started laughing and told her everything—the exhibition, the LP cover, my adolescent hypotheses on that “she” and the surprising New York coincidence. And so Susan Rotolo started telling me about that cold, snowy afternoon up and down Jones Street, taking photos for Dylan’s album . . .

The many-sided prism, the myriad combinations: all of them, taken together, say, reveal, and tell. Of course, it isn’t always easy to put them together, work out the right combinations or join up the dots. It isn’t easy, but it is necessary if one wants them to make sense—as parts and as a whole—together with the maps in-depth and in-width. On writing these words, I am reminded of some lines from Chinarown, the long (and as yet unfinished) poem by Fay Chiang, a Chinese American poetess who lives and works in New York, and who is a very close friend of mine—lines that have accompanied me through these years of exploration all over the city:

All hours of the day and night
I have coursed these streets
like the memories
coursing through my veins
holding on to them
like charms—
a child’s wish—
that someday they
would make sense. . . .
Chumley’s is by now packed, and it’s time to leave. Outside, this New York Friday night is inundating the Village streets, and moving about as a group is like swimming against the current. We decide to go over to the Nuyorican Poets’ Café, where the famous poetry slam takes place every Friday night. The poetry slam is an exhausting poetry competition that seeks to recapture the tradition of the juegos florales they used to hold in Puerto Rico—a runway show of local beauties and poets challenging one another. But we really can’t face the idea of walking as far as Alphabet City on a night like tonight, and on the corner of Bedford Street and Seventh Avenue, we hail a couple of cabs.

They will lose sight of one another, these cabs, navigating their way through the nighttime rivers of Manhattan traffic, but then they will meet up again in the midst of an urban setting that, despite its desolation, is dear and familiar to me. And we will all meet in front of the ordinary-looking entrance and the scrawled sign of the café, founded in the mid-1970s by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, tutelary deities of the Nuyorican poets together with Pedro Pietri and the maestro of them all, Jorge Brandon, a genuine metropolitan bard, el coco que habla, “the talking coconut” (in order that his poetry—never handed over to the press—might continue to be heard, even when he was tired, Jorge had planted a tiny tape recorder inside a hollowed-out coconut). More than ten years ago, the Café moved to its present address here on East 3rd Street, between Avenue B and Avenue C—roomier and perhaps less adventurous than the original long, narrow bar on East 6th Street between Avenue A and Avenue B, which witnessed the birth and full flowering of Loisaida . . .

We will be welcomed by the offhand brusqueness of Julio, the stocky bouncer, and after handing him our five bucks we will exchange a few words about who’s here, who’s about to arrive, and how the evening’s going . . . On entering, we will walk up to the massive wooden counter at the bar and say hello to Algarín and Lois Griffith, Steve Cannon and David Henderson, the protagonists of a poetry scene that, after rising first in the Lower East Side, Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, now envelops the whole of New York.

Then we will make inroads into the half-darkness of the large, high-ceilinged and bare-bricked room, where we will be immediately greeted by the unstoppable laughter of Pedro Pietri and the sweet smile of Sandra María Esteves. We will join them for a drink at one of the small tables, and wait for the poetry evening—the new poetry slam—to begin.