

Strolling Aardvarkly with Ted Joans in Paris

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Ted Joans (1928–2003) was a multimodal writer and artist who published some forty books and booklets in his lifetime and created thousands of artworks. Known for his connections to Surrealism, the Beat Generation, and the Black Arts Movement, Joans’s poetry collections include All of Ted Joans and No More (1961), Black Pow-Wow: Jazz Poems (1969), Afrodisia (1970), A Black Manifesto in Jazz Poetry and Prose (1971), Flying Piranha (with Joyce Mansour) (1978), The Aardvark-Watcher (1980), Okapi Passion (1994), and Our Thang (with Laura Corsiglia) (2001). A prolific visual artist, Joans worked across media, producing oil paintings, drawings, collages, poem-objects, and short films. His piece “Long Distance,” created over thirty years in collaboration with over 130 other artists, was recently purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

For African-American poet, artist, filmmaker, travel writer and raconteur Ted Joans, Paris held a special place in his creative imagination and in what he called his “poem-life.”¹ Born in Cairo, Illinois and raised largely in Indiana and Kentucky, Joans was from a young age drawn to the Surrealist movement centered around André Breton, and vowed one day to travel to Paris, the epicenter of Surrealism in France. While still back in the American Midwest, Joans ordered tomes on Surrealism from bookstores in New York, and devoured features on European artists in popular magazines. By his early twenties, Joans was exhibiting his own paintings around Louisville, Kentucky and was successful enough to be dubbed “Louisville’s Salvador Dalí” by one magazine—and a few short years later, he would meet Dalí himself at the St. Regis hotel in New York, presenting the master with a portrait Joans had painstakingly painted (Flemming 22–23). It was in New York’s bohemian quarters that Joans found some success as a painter, as a thrower of fabulous costume balls, and as a poet associated with the Beat Generation. As public fascination with the Beats peaked in 1959, Joans kept a hectic schedule around Greenwich Village and its environs, performing his poems, many of which are collected in his first major book of poetry, *All of Ted Joans and No More* (1961). But even at the height of his popularity in New York, Joans was constitutionally restless, and had an eye on both Europe and Africa. After saving up enough “Beat bread” from his readings, he

and his then partner, Joyce, traveled abroad to Europe for the first time (*Afrodisia* 8).

Joans recognized that he might be seen as merely following in the footsteps of previous generations of Black American artists who traveled to Paris in search of fewer social restrictions and the bohemian *bonhomie* of a culture that prized the arts more highly than the States did. But even as he would later make what he called a “strategic withdrawal from the U.S.A. to avoid further abject vicissitudes of such a racist society,” he also insisted that he “*did not follow* in Wright’s, Himes’ and Baldwin’s *Europebound* footsteps,” because his ultimate destination was always Africa (“I Too, at the Beginning”). Paris, though, was an exception to his general belief that Europe was a “cemetery,” dead and given over to monuments from the past. Even as Joans did spend the next thirty years circulating around Africa, visiting all the independent countries over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, writing a comprehensive guidebook to the continent aimed at African-American readers, he returned to Paris again and again, keeping a tiny “nest” in this or that *arrondissement* that would be packed with art he had made and objects he had brought back from his African travels. Paris was a magical, magnetic center for Joans, and it had profound effects on his creative work and on his personal life. The city appears throughout his poetry, even before he had ever traveled there. It is an important setting in his wild, unpublished Surrealist novel “Razzle Dazzle,” as well as background and character in many of the short silent films he shot over three decades. It is even subject of an idiosyncratic travel guide, “An Aardvarkian Surreal Stroll Through Paris.” In this essay, we’ll take a tour of three key poles of Joans’s Paris: André Breton, who embodied Surrealism for him, and whom Joans associates with physical locations such as Breton’s apartment at 42 rue Fontaine and the café La Promenade de Vénus, where Breton would hold court with his fellow Surrealists; the so-called Beat Hotel at 9 rue Gît-le-Coeur, where American Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs had lived for a time; and George Whitman’s Shakespeare and Company bookstore on rue de la Bûcherie, a second home to Joans where he read and performed over the decades, and where he met his final partner of eleven years, Laura Corsiglia. This is far from an exhaustive list of all the Parisian people and places Joans knew and frequented over the years, but I hope it will offer a small taste of the city as he experienced and imagined it.

When Joans finally made it to Paris in the summer of 1960, it did not disappoint. As a devoted Surrealist, he was long attuned to the concept of Objective Chance: “The chance encounter of beautiful people,” he wrote, “or a beautiful situation, or a beautiful image, is a whole surreal experience” (“Ted Joans, Poet Talking to Dave Kennard” 4). The idea was that by opening himself up to chance, the uni-

verse's magnetic fields would draw him to other like-minded people, thus creating the conditions for generative creation. Paris would prove especially ripe for such encounters, was what he called a "chance-filled paradise," and on that very first trip, he was astounded to spot André Breton himself "standing there on rue Bonaparte bless his heart a-standing in grey suit with grey shoes too but like a magnificent old lion—a rare maned lion—or a flesh rock of Gibraltar" ("Aardvarkian Surreal Stroll Through Paris," qtd. in Belletto, *Black Surrealist* 164). Joans could scarcely believe his luck, and introduced himself to Breton with his still shaky French.

Thus began a relationship between Breton, the philosopher-king of the French Surrealists, and Joans, whom Breton would later dub "the only African-American Surrealist."² After Joans left the States for good in late 1961 (he had returned back only briefly after that first trip, determined to live abroad), Breton's apartment at 42 rue Fontaine became a favorite haunt of his, where he would converse over tea with Breton and his wife, Elisa. In a letter later published in Breton's journal *La Brèche* in 1963, Joans explained to Breton that he was a "hipster," but defined the term like this: "a hipster is a surrealist in both his internal and external activity. He is 'in the current of things' (hip), and consequently nonconformist. The hipster dreams, but most of his time is spent in putting his dreams into reality." Joans went on to explain that the most popularly visible hipsters in the U.S., the Beats, owed a lot to both Black culture and to the spirit of Surrealism: "The white poets of the Beat Generation have borrowed the hipster attitude from black Americans. They have adopted their argot, comportment, and jazz music—all of which embody a surrealist point of view. The Beat Generation owes practically everything to surrealism" ("Ted Joans Speaks" 229-230).³ In statements such as this, Joans was insisting on—and himself embodying—links among apparently disparate literary movements or subcultures. Throughout his life, he recognized and cultivated such links, and much of his work was about exploring and teasing out connections among different philosophical and aesthetic "schools" or points of view.

That initial impression of Breton as "a rare maned lion" reverberates through Joans's poetry about his hero, including one opening "Oh, André, you father of everything": "You the only true lion of Europe that is free / from the official enslaving pedestals." This poem, found in the 1973 collection *Spetrophilia*, goes on to associate Breton with widespread, earth-shaking revolutions in consciousness, but also locates him at his specific Paris address: "Your lightning strikes everywhere / bringing its spiritual funnel of revolution. / Mr Breton of 42 rue Fontaine" (n.p.). This is an act of transcendent mythologization that also grounds Breton in a particular time and place, and when Joans mentioned Breton in autobiographical writings, he would often focus on these particulars: "Whenever I was in Paris I would phone

him and we would rendezvous at Café La Promenade du [sic] Venus” (“Je Me Vois (I See Myself)” 254). The reference here is to a café at 44 rue du Louvre near Les Halles where Breton would hold weekly court with other Surrealists, and so with statements such as this, Joans was both acknowledging the city’s association with Surrealism, stretching back to the 1920s, and also writing himself into this history.

In later years, Joans would carry on the tradition of the café salons held by Breton and other Surrealists at La Promenade by installing himself at café Le Rouquet on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, where he became a fixture many afternoons when he was in town—“*never* in winter months,” he said—and would even have mail held there for him.⁴ Joans would romanticize Le Rouquet as a place where “rare intellectuals from all over the world” would gather, and he saw it as a kind of successor to Breton’s café La Promenade de Vénus insofar as he claimed it was often frequented by “young French men and many potential surrealist women” (“Aardvarkian Surreal Stroll Through Paris” n.p.). By the 1990s, Joans was so associated with Le Rouquet that friends and acquaintances from around the world knew to seek him out there, and it was at the café where he met younger writers and artists such as Jack Lamar, whom he mentored and encouraged in the way he felt Breton had mentored and encouraged him some thirty years prior (Tramuta).

In his tour-de-force poem “Chez Café Le Rouquet,” Joans imagines his friend and fellow Surrealist poet Joyce Mansour watching Joans himself “At the Café Le Rouquet / Where he sits / Afternoons of each / When-In-Paris-Day” (Joans/Bibbs 16). The poem characterizes the café as a place where Joans could lay some “‘Dies und Das’ teducation” on “old and new friends / With their books cameras etc”:

Their very presence
Causes their creativeness
To spiritually exude
Thus preventing interested
Outsiders to ever intrude
At the Café Le Rouquet (17)

The idea is that for Joans, Le Rouquet was a creative and even spiritual space where he could connect with like-minded people while still being sealed off from any unhip “outsiders.” As the poem develops, it spins out this sense of Le Rouquet as a literal, physical place to characterize it also as a kind of dreamscape where Joans can indulge in soaring heights of imaginative creation:

At Café Le Rouquet
Located in his mind

In Paris Place Charlie Parker
 Where the baobab trees
 Bebop all tunes that be
 [...]
 At Café Le Rouquet
 Where her anvil flowers
 Are licked by new rhinoceros tongues
 At Café Le Rouquet (21-24)

“Chez Café Le Rouquet” was written in 1990, and Mansour had died of cancer four years prior at only 58, so the poem is also a dirge that brings her to life as Joans imagines Mansour imagining Joans himself at café Le Rouquet, a swirling Surreal “collaboration” that harkens back to *Flying Piranha*, the dual book of poetry Joans and Mansour had done together back in 1978. “Anvil Flowers” is a prominent poem of Mansour’s in that collection, and the rhinoceros was Joans’s totem animal and emblem, so the final lines are about an imagined coupling in the physical and transcendent space of the café.

If Paris’s café culture was for Joans Surrealist in aspect, associated first with Breton at La Promenade and then his own time at Le Rouquet, Beat energies were for him concentrated primarily in one place: the Beat Hotel at 9 rue Gît-le-Coeur. This is a famous location for aficionados of the Beat Generation, because poet Allen Ginsberg and his partner Peter Orlovsky moved there in the late 1950s, followed soon by Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and others. Joans later recalled that in New York Ginsberg had mentioned the hotel as a cheap place to stay in Paris, and on that first trip in the summer of 1960, he made a point of seeking it out, and connected there with other American Beat expatriates such as Corso, Burroughs, Harold Norse and Kay Johnson (“A History of Shakespeare and Co. Bookstore”). As Ginsberg had promised, the Beat Hotel was a cheap, no frills hotel, which is exactly why it appealed to impecunious bohemian poets, including Joans. But it was also a hive of artistic activity, where Ginsberg drafted several poems, Corso wrote his most well-known poem, “Bomb,” where Burroughs had assembled the scattered “routines” that would form *Naked Lunch*, and where he and Gysin developed their influential “cut-up method,” which radically changed the relationship between the author and the text.

This was precisely the sort of place where Joans could thrive creatively, and during his stays there, he left his mark in the form of a drawing etched into the plaster of one room. Photographer and hotel resident Harold Chapman recalled the piece

as depicting a nude woman falling off the back of a rhinoceros—"The drawing was titled and signed," Chapman remembered, "'The chick that fell of a rhino,' Ted Joans" (qtd. in Belletto, *Black Surrealist* 169). The Beat Hotel closed in 1963 and this mural was lost, but Joans's vivid memories of the place survive in his later unpublished novel manuscript, "Razzle Dazzle," which features set pieces at the hotel. Real-life poets such as Gregory Corso make an appearance: he comes off as brash and blustery, bragging about his recent novel, *The American Express* (1961). Joans also discusses Harold Norse (fictionalized as "Harry Knaught") and Kay Johnson (fictionalized using her real-life nom de plume, "Kaja"), as well as other people such as Chapman and "Verta"—none other than the person later known as Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor when she published the groundbreaking *Vibration Cooking* in 1970 (as always, Joans was interested in who gets erased from "official" histories; although Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor lived and worked in the Beat Hotel, she is absent from any history of the hotel of which I'm aware).

As the concentration of writers and artists in this small building should attest, the Beat Hotel was a magnetic creative center, and in "Razzle Dazzle," Joans figures it as an outpost of the new consciousness emanating from the countercultural scene in the States and blossoming around the world. In the manuscript, the crowded first-floor bar is described as a "gathering of on-the-rovers, some poets, some wanderers, some writers, some fellow travelers and some merely creeps, but all distinct in their total acceptance of themselves. These men and women were the beat generators who had gone abroad to sow their valid Americana cultural seeds, knowingly or unknowingly" (225). If one wanted to find a physical location for the Beat sensibility in Paris in the early 1960s, 9 rue Gît-le-Coeur was it, and Joans wasn't shy about advertising his connections to the place, nor about burnishing its legend as a fecund, though evanescent, creative enclave.

He would revisit the address throughout the years, long after the Beat Hotel had closed. In 1980, in the poem "Ye Olde Hysteric Replay," Joans reflects on how, after some twenty years, the spot had entered into literary lore, recalling his "Beat generated glory days":

Here after twenty years
Does he stand
In the same locale
In similar pose
[...]
Just a few giant steps
From the Hotel Beat

At numero neuf
 Rue Git-le-Coeur
 Now Ye Olde Historic
 Beat Hotel has gone (Joans/Corsiglia 83)

Six years after Joans died, in the summer of 2009, a commemorative plaque was placed at 9 rue Gît-le-Coeur, signaling that the Beat Hotel had now become an “official” part of Paris’s storied history. Installed in connection to the fiftieth anniversary of Burroughs’s novel *Naked Lunch*, in recognition of those final edits and arrangements done at the hotel, the plaque honors residents Burroughs, Ginsberg, Orlovsky, Corso, Norse, Gysin and Ian Sommerville. Ted Joans is not mentioned.

If Joans could see Paris in terms of physical locations that resonated with Surrealist sensibilities or Beat attitudes, another place he saw as a literary and cultural “magnet” was the famed Shakespeare and Company bookstore located at 37 rue de la Bûcherie (“A History of Shakespeare and Co. Bookstore”). Run by the American expat George Whitman, Shakespeare and Company was like a second home to Joans in Paris, and he frequented the bookstore from the early 1960s to the early 2000s, giving poetry readings, lectures on Surrealism and the history of the bookstore, and even occasionally manning the cash register.

In January 1991, Joans gave a lecture at Shakespeare and Company about the shop’s origins and history; with George Whitman hovering on the edges of the audience, Joans proceeded to do what he did so well in much of his creative work: braiding together apparently disparate literary and cultural movements, this time the Modernism of the 1920s and the Beat Generation of the 1950s. Delivering a lively performance where he would switch into impressions of British customs agents concerned about obscene literature, hick American border agents looking for marijuana, and Nazis shaking down residents during the occupation of Paris, Joans began by offering the history of the original Shakespeare and Company, the one founded by Sylvia Beach in 1919. Joans explains how the original bookshop was entangled with the American Sylvia Beach meeting the native Parisian Adrienne Monnier, and how the two would become long-time partners. Joans uses the expression “coup de foudre”—love at first sight—to describe the first encounter between Beach and Monnier (and he had used this same idiom nine years prior for a dual book of poetry with Jayne Cortez, titled *Merveilleux Coup de Foudre*, published in Paris by Jim Haynes’s Handshake Press).

In Joans's telling, Beach's Shakespeare and Company was a key physical site of literary Modernism. He regales the audience with the story of Beach publishing James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), thus gifting the world one of its great works of literature. He explains that the bookstore was frequented by the likes of Joyce, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and André Breton, and characterizes Sylvia Beach as "a very strong individual, a woman who believed in freedom and liberty." But then Joans begins to braid together the history of the Modernist writers with the history of the Beat writers. After Monnier's suicide in 1955, Joans explains, Beach was in a state of despondency, and one day happened to wander into a newish bookshop at 47 rue de la Bûcherie called Mistral, run by George Whitman, who was then in his early forties. As Joans has it, Mistral was already becoming to the Beats in the latter 1950s what Shakespeare and Company had been for the Modernists in the 1920s. Allen Ginsberg had recommended Mistral to Joans, Gregory Corso liked to hang around the shop, and Whitman would put people up for free when he could—"writers, poets, and pretty girls," Joans quipped. Sylvia Beach died in 1962, and in 1964, Whitman renamed his shop Shakespeare and Company to honor her legacy and the earlier bookstore. Whitman wanted to continue what Beach was doing, Joans says, insisting that, in his view, Whitman even went "beyond" what Beach had done, turning the new Shakespeare and Company into a Paris "institution" with the Beats as the original writers-in-residence, just as the Modernists had been at Beach's shop.

Beyond the way Joans framed Shakespeare and Company in terms of literary and cultural history, it was also important to him personally, not only as a lifeline where he could read and ideally sell a few books, but also as a fertile ground for those chance encounters that so shaped his poem-life. There are many tales of his encounters there over the years, from the time he was manning the register and met David Gascoyne, poet and author of *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (1935), which long been one of Joans's go-to books on the subject, to the time he acted as what he called a "sergeant-at-arms" when Anaïs Nin did a crowded event there. But it was no doubt an encounter that would occur just ten months after the lecture about the shop's history that would matter most to him. In November 1991, Joans experienced his own coup de foudre when he met, by chance, Laura Corsiglia, a young Canadian art student. An unlikely pair on the surface of things, the two were struck by the bolt of love at first sight—and wound up together for the next eleven years, during which Corsiglia became Joans's muse and artistic collaborator on a range of projects, from countless collaborative drawings to the book *Our Thang* (2001), a collection of poems by Joans and drawings by Corsiglia.

These three poles of Breton and café culture, the Beat Hotel, and Shakespeare and Company only scratch the surface in terms of Joans's relationship to and understanding of Paris. His sense of the city was deep, multifaceted, and sinuous—it was a palimpsest for him, so that when he strolled the streets like a latter-day flâneur, visiting favorite cafés, parks, museums, and arcades, he saw numerous literary, aesthetic, and cultural histories overlain on one another, versions of the histories he described of the Modernist and Beat energies on rue de la Bûcherie. The best window onto Joans's vision of Paris is probably his 1990 guide to the city, "An Aardvarkian Surreal Stroll Through Paris." It is far from a convention travel guide—and in fact, Joans admits a tension in the premise of a guide in the first place, because he prioritizes aimless wandering as a way to be attuned to Objective Chance: "To stroll or not to stroll, and at what pace, tread, clip, stride, gait etc is no longer a question to be pondered in Paris, for each individual volition is the condition that automatically prompts spontaneous strolling" (n.p.). Strolling is key, and the guide is divided into sections: "Bold Stroll," "Strolling Around Aardvarkly," "Strolling On Around Rhinolike," "Okapilike Persistent Perambulatory Stroll." Joans had seven totem animals: the rhinoceros, okapi, tapir, aardvark, platypus, echidna, and pangolin, and each for him had different characteristics that might be applied to different kinds of strolling around Paris, so to stroll like an aardvark might mean keeping your nose close to the ground and savoring small morsels, while to stroll "Okapi-like" might mean to amble slowly, in no particular hurry, as you take in the city's sensual delights.

Despite his insistence that visitors to Paris stroll spontaneously, still there are countless points of "surrealist interest" in the city, and the goal of "Aardvarkian" is to introduce readers to Joans's sense of the city as a palimpsest with rich strata to be unearthed. In this regard, Breton's *Nadja* (1928) is a key precursor, as that book takes readers on a highly personal tour of the city as it is connected to the literary, artistic, and cultural past while also being connected to Nadja, the enigmatic object of Breton's obsessions. "Aardvarkian" develops this model, offering Joans's own idiosyncratic map of the city. And unsurprisingly, Joans frames his own guide via Breton himself:

Start (if you desire) at Metro Blanche Line #2. . . . Start strolling from the metro toward the left to the Rue Fontaine. It should take you more or less 142 normal paces for you to arrive in from of number 42. It was 42 rue Fontaine on the left side of the street that served as the home of André Breton. He dwelled there from 1922 until 1966. Other surrealists that had once had the same address was Paul Eluard, Toyen, Lamba and a few lesser known. If you desire have a photo made beneath the number 42 sign or just close your eyes and turn yourself around several times.

Much of the guide proceeds like this, explaining how to sniff out places of “surrealist interest,” recommending actions and behaviors that might serve as appropriate tributes, and then also advising readers where to find the best food, drink, and company. The guide ends with two lists of places: “Visit!” and “Do NOT Visit.” In the “Visit!” column are places already mentioned, and many others, while he urges readers to avoid touristy hotspots like the Champs-Élysées, Arc de Triomphe, the Panthéon and the like. This divide is echoed in Joans’s 1976 poem “Why I Shall Sell Paris,” which details all those same parts of touristic, commodified Paris that so many visitors see to the exclusion of other aspects of the city:

I shall sell Paris / All its arrondissements / All its famous and infamous monuments / All its ‘théâtres et spectacles’ All its ‘cabarets artistiques’

All of ‘gai Paris attractions et principaux cinémas’ with

All those do-nothing jive ushers demanding money as you enter

[...]

All of its fallen arches and Arches of Triumph

[...]

All of its awful towers and Eiffel Towers

[...]

I shall sell the biggest jive boulevard in the world: Champs Elysées (*Teducation* 112-113)

For Joans, such touristic highlights were indices of how the city already “has been sold” (114), and so he sardonically claims in this poem that he wants to get in on the action. In “Why I Shall Sell Paris,” he admits that “I shall keep the poetic bookshops for myself,” which returns us to spots like Shakespeare and Company, and the long list of places of “surrealist interest” he details in “An Aardvarkian Surreal Stroll Through Paris,” places he wanted to preserve in art and share with like-minded people.

“Paris is marvelous,” wrote Ted Joans, “the world capital of desire” (“Aardvarkian Surreal Stroll Through Paris” n.p.). He’s using the word “marvelous” here in the Surrealist sense, as that mysterious, ecstatic state where dream and waking life merge, where reality edges into Surreality, and he loved the city for its potential to activate the marvelous in his poem-life. As I’ve suggested throughout this essay, Joans’s connections to Paris were deep and varied and unfolded over the course of many decades. Although I’ve only touched on some highlights here, I hope it is clear how and why Paris was one of Joans’s long-time creative homes. And I hope, too, that as Joans’s life and work are further excavated by scholars, art lovers, fans and friends, the extent of his connections to the city come into clearer and deeper focus, and

we begin to understand more fully how he also influenced the city that gave him such creative nourishment.

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Notes

1. This essay draws on and supplements my book *Black Surrealist: The Legend of Ted Joans* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025). Interested readers may want to consult that book for a fuller account of Joans's life and work.
2. See *Dictionnaire Général du Surréalisme et de ses environs*, edited by Adam Biro and René Passeron, Presses Universitaires de France, 1982, 226.
3. The excerpts from Joans's letter to Breton have been translated into English in *Black Brown & Beige*; the excerpts, in their original French, were printed as "Ted Joans Parle..." .
4. Ted Joans, inscription in *Dies & Das* (1984), Collection of Author.

About the author

Steven Belletto is the author of *Black Surrealist: The Legend of Ted Joans* (Bloomsbury, 2025), *The Beats: A Literary History* (Cambridge UP, 2020), and *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (Oxford UP, 2012). His six edited books include *The Cambridge Companion to Jack Kerouac* (Cambridge UP, 2024), *American Literature in Transition, 1950-1960* (Cambridge UP, 2018), and *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* (Cambridge UP, 2017). He is the Francis A. March Professor of English at Lafayette College, and an editor of *Contemporary Literature*.