

Classic Poetry Series

John Ashbery
- poems -

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John Ashbery(28 July 1927)

John Lawrence Ashbery is an American poet. He has published more than twenty volumes of poetry and won nearly every major American award for poetry, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. But Ashbery's work still proves controversial. In an article on Elizabeth Bishop in his *Selected Prose*, he characterizes himself as having been described as "a harebrained, homegrown surrealist whose poetry defies even the rules and logic of Surrealism." Although renowned for the postmodern complexity and opacity of his work, Ashbery has stated that he wishes it to be accessible to as many people as possible, not a private dialogue.

"No figure looms so large in American poetry over the past 50 years as John Ashbery," Langdon Hammer, chairman of the English Department at Yale University, wrote in 2008. "[N]o American poet has had a larger, more diverse vocabulary, not [Whitman](http://www.poemhunter.com/walt-whitman/), not [Pound](http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/)." Stephen Burt, a poet and Harvard professor of English, has compared Ashbery to [T. S. Eliot](http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/), the "last figure whom half the English-language poets alive thought a great model, and the other half thought incomprehensible".

Life

Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York, the son of Helen (née Lawrence), a biology teacher, and Chester Frederick Ashbery, a farmer. He was raised on a farm near Lake Ontario; his brother died when they were children. Ashbery was educated at Deerfield Academy. At Deerfield, an all-boys school, Ashbery read such poets as W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas, and began writing poetry. Two of his poems were published in *Poetry* magazine, although under the name of a classmate who had submitted them without Ashbery's knowledge or permission. He also published a handful of poems, including a sonnet about his frustrated love for a fellow student, and a piece of short fiction in the school newspaper, the *Deerfield Scroll*. His first ambition was to be a painter. From the age of 11 until he was 15 Ashbery took weekly classes at the art museum in Rochester.

Ashbery graduated in 1949 with an A.B., cum laude, from Harvard College, where he was a member of the *Harvard Advocate*, the university's literary magazine, and the Signet Society. He wrote his senior thesis on the poetry of [W. H. Auden](http://www.poemhunter.com/wystan-hugh-auden/). At Harvard he befriended fellow writers Kenneth Koch, Barbara Epstein, V. R. Lang,

Frank O'Hara and Edward Gorey, and was a classmate of Robert Creeley, Robert Bly and Peter Davison. Ashbery went on to study briefly at New York University, and received an M.A. from Columbia in 1951.

During the fall of 1963, Ashbery became acquainted with Andy Warhol at a scheduled poetry reading at the Literary Theatre in New York. He had previously written favorable reviews of Warhol's art. That same year he reviewed Warhol's Flowers exhibition at Galerie Illeana Sonnabend in Paris, describing Warhol's visit to Paris as "the biggest transatlantic fuss since Oscar Wilde brought culture to Buffalo in the nineties." Ashbery returned to New York near the end of 1965 and was welcomed with a large party at the Factory. He became close friends with poet Gerard Malanga, Warhol's assistant, on whom he had an important influence as a poet.

In the early 1970s, Ashbery began teaching at Brooklyn College, where his students included poet John Yau. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1983. In the 1980s, he moved to Bard College, where he was the Charles P. Stevenson, Jr., Professor of Languages and Literature, until 2008, when he retired; since that time, he has continued to win awards, present readings, and work with graduate and undergraduates at many other institutions. He was the poet laureate of New York state from 2001 to 2003, and also served for many years as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. He serves on the contributing editorial board of the literary journal Conjunctions. He was a Millet Writing Fellow at Wesleyan University, in 2010, and participated in Wesleyan's Distinguished Writers Series. Ashbery lives in New York City and Hudson, New York, with his partner, David Kermani.

Work

Ashbery's long list of awards began with the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1956. The selection, by W. H. Auden, of Ashbery's first collection, Some Trees, later caused some controversy. His early work shows the influence of W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, Boris Pasternak, and many of the French surrealists (his translations from French literature are numerous). In the late 1950s, John Bernard Myers, co-owner of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, categorized the common traits of Ashbery's avant-garde poetry, as

well as that of Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Kenward Elmslie and others, as constituting a "New York School". Ashbery then wrote two collections while in France, the highly controversial *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), and *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), before returning to New York to write *The Double Dream of Spring*, which was published in 1970.

Increasing critical recognition in the 1970s transformed Ashbery from an obscure avant-garde experimentalist into one of America's most important poets (though still one of its most controversial). After the publication of *Three Poems* (1973) came *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*. For that Ashbery won all three major American poetry awards: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award). The collection's title poem is considered to be one of the masterpieces of late-20th-century American poetic literature.

His subsequent collection, the more difficult *Houseboat Days* (1977), reinforced Ashbery's reputation, as did 1979's *As We Know*, which contains the long, double-columned poem "Litany." By the 1980s and 1990s, Ashbery had become a central figure in American and more broadly English-language poetry, as his number of imitators evidenced. His own poetry was accused of a staleness in this period, but books like *A Wave* (1985) and the later *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), particularly in their long poems, show the unmistakable originality of a great poet in practice.

Ashbery's works are characterized by a free-flowing, often disjunctive syntax; extensive linguistic play, often infused with considerable humor; and a prosaic, sometimes disarmingly flat or parodic tone. The play of the human mind is the subject of a great many of his poems. Ashbery once said that his goal was "to produce a poem that the critic cannot even talk about." Formally, the earliest poems show the influence of conventional poetic practice, yet by *The Tennis Court Oath* a much more revolutionary engagement with form appears. Ashbery returned to something approaching a reconciliation between tradition and innovation with many of the poems in *The Double Dream of Spring*, though his *Three Poems* are written in long blocks of prose. Although he has never again approached the radical experimentation of *The Tennis Court Oath* poems or "The Skaters" and "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" from his collection *Rivers and Mountains*, syntactic and semantic experimentation, linguistic expressiveness, deft, often abrupt shifts of register, and insistent wit remain consistent elements of his work.

Ashbery's art criticism has been collected in the 1989 volume *Reported Sightings, Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, edited by the poet David Bergman. He has written one novel, *A Nest of Ninnies*, with fellow poet James Schuyler, and in his 20s and 30s

penned several plays, three of which have been collected in *Three Plays* (1978). Ashbery's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University were published as *Other Traditions* in 2000. A larger collection of his prose writings, *Selected Prose* and his poetry volume *Where shall I wander?* appeared in 2005. In 2008, his *Collected Poems 1956–1987* was published as part of the Library of America series.

Reviews

In 2009 the *Oxonian Review* summarized Ashbery's work as follows:
This past October, the Library of America released John Ashbery's *Collected Poems (1956–1987)*, making him the first living poet to be "canonised" in the series. It is a fitting honour for a man whose decades-long reign as one of the high priests of the contemporary American poetry scene has always been something of a paradox. Having received nearly every major award for achievement in the humanities, he continues to incite considerable debate as to whether his poems "mean" anything at all. To read an Ashbery poem with the intent to explicate in the traditional sense is to make a daring, perhaps foolhardy, leap of semantic faith.

Awards and honors

2011, National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

A Voice from the Fireplace

Like a windup denture in a joke store
fate approaches, leans quietly. Let's see . . .
There was moreover meaning in the last clause,
meaning we couldn't equate
from what was happening to us down the block.
We approached with some hesitancy:
Let "I dare not" wait upon "I would";
Wasn't it April? Weren't things more likely to last
in this or any season? Rhymes we like.
More than rhythm, they provide a life preserver
for embarrassing sorties. Um, someday we'll be grown up too,
the desk lights not cancel the barge
as it approaches the corner of avenues.

Well, we
sweated that out. It amounts to self-importance.
Whether the sea is a vernacular one
only heroes can describe. Why don't you pluck me one?
Seems they all rushed to the other side
of the deck, causing alarm.
Wind shriveled the rags that were left.
Hold on a minute, we'll get you aloft.
No sense taking up time with vellum sunsets,
he hears, and cannot stay. The whitish, gluey smell
of the forest imbibes our earnings in a dream.
Egg whites dry at room temperature.

In my mature moments I was robotic like you
but never canceled my interest.
We all attempt starting out, yet few undergo
the first few days of orientation lightly.
Which is funny, I mean with so many around to project
enlightenment or entertainment. If you live
in a wren house you'll quickly understand what I mean.

That, needless to say, was the last time
I heard from them. I continue to get their flyers
in the mail but the project remains uninhabited.
Flowers and goats cram the entrance with something

you can see over. The orange sea propels itself
lightly forward, ever in quest of spectators,
but you can only do just so much in the way of self-formation.
I hadn't expected it to be otherwise,
yet it doesn't seem right. Neither is it unjust,
only pro forma. Nights imply seasons
and much in the way of impish narrative, while in daylight
it's a matter of getting flush with the pavement.

Don't forget to check every box
on the front door and leave change for the milkman.
Too bad they spotted us. Like I say,
no jury will ever convict he or I. Off you go then.
An egg is a puzzle, a tree a piece of that puzzle.
I've had a pleasant but uneven time.
My helpmates could aver as much. Let us know
how much we owe you. The balloon is ascending
above ferns, teacup chimneys, striped stockings.
So long training wheels. I'm gone for three weeks at a time.

John Ashbery

A Worldly Country

Not the smoothness, not the insane clocks on the square,
the scent of manure in the municipal parterre,
not the fabrics, the sullen mockery of Tweety Bird,
not the fresh troops that needed freshening up. If it occurred
in real time, it was OK, and if it was time in a novel
that was OK too. From palace and hovel
the great parade flooded avenue and byway
and turnip fields became just another highway.
Leftover bonbons were thrown to the chickens
and geese, who squawked like the very dickens.
There was no peace in the bathroom, none in the china closet
or the banks, where no one came to make a deposit.
In short all hell broke loose that wide afternoon.
By evening all was calm again. A crescent moon
hung in the sky like a parrot on its perch.
Departing guests smiled and called, 'See you in church!'
For night, as usual, knew what it was doing,
providing sleep to offset the great ungluing
that tomorrow again would surely bring.
As I gazed at the quiet rubble, one thing
puzzled me: What had happened, and why?
One minute we were up to our necks in rebelliousness,
and the next, peace had subdued the ranks of hellishness.

So often it happens that the time we turn around in
soon becomes the shoal our pathetic skiff will run aground in.
And just as waves are anchored to the bottom of the sea
we must reach the shallows before God cuts us free.

John Ashbery

Alms for the Beekeeper

He makes better errors that way.
Pass it around at breakfast:
the family and all, down there with a proximate sense of power,
lawyering up. Less log-heavy, your text-strategy
beat out other options, is languid.
Duets in the dust start up,
begin. Again.

He entered the firm at night.
The 26th is a Monday.

John Ashbery

And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name

You can't say it that way any more.
Bothered about beauty you have to
Come out into the open, into a clearing,
And rest. Certainly whatever funny happens to you
Is OK. To demand more than this would be strange
Of you, you who have so many lovers,
People who look up to you and are willing
To do things for you, but you think
It's not right, that if they really knew you . . .
So much for self-analysis. Now,
About what to put in your poem-painting:
Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.
Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
Skyrockets are good—do they still exist?
There are a lot of other things of the same quality
As those I've mentioned. Now one must
Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,
Dull-sounding ones. She approached me
About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
Locked into mine. We were a seesaw. Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.

John Ashbery

Anticipated Stranger

The bruise will stop by later.
For now, the pain pauses in its round,
notes the time of day, the patient's temperature,
leaves a memo for the surrogate: What the hell
did you think you were doing? I mean . . .
Oh well, less said the better, they all say.
I'll post this at the desk.

God will find the pattern and break it.

John Ashbery

Blueprints and Others

The man across the street seems happy,
or pleased. Sometimes a porter evades the grounds.
After you play a lot with the military
you are my own best customer.

I've done five of that.
Make my halloween. Ask me not to say it.
The old man wants to see you?—?now.
That's all right, but find your own.
Do you want to stop using these?

Last winning people told me to sit on the urinal.
Do not put on others what you can put on yourself.
How to be in the city my loved one.
Men in underwear????...????A biography field
like where we live in the mountains,

a falling. Yes I know you have.
Trove of merchandise, you know, "boomer buzz."
Hillbilly sculptures of the outside.
(They won't see anybody.)

John Ashbery

Boundary Issues

Here in life, they would understand.
How could it be otherwise? We had groped too,
unwise, till the margin began to give way,
at which point all was sullen, or lost, or both.

Now it was time, and there was nothing for it.

We had a good meal, I and my friend,
slurping from the milk pail, grabbing at newer vegetables.
Yet life was a desert. Come home, in good faith.
You can still decide to. But it wanted warmth.
Otherwise ruse and subtlety would become impossible
in the few years or hours left to us. "Yes, but . . ."
The iconic beggars shuffled off too. I told you,
once a breach emerges it will become a chasm
before anyone's had a chance to waver. A dispute
on the far side of town erupts into a war
in no time at all, and ends as abruptly. The tendency to heal
sweeps all before it, into the arroyo, the mine shaft,
into whatever pocket you were contemplating. And the truly lost
make up for it. It's always us that has to pay.

I have a suggestion to make: draw the sting out
as probingly as you please. Plaster the windows over
with wood pulp against the noon gloom proposing its enigmas,
its elixirs. Banish truth-telling.
That's the whole point, as I understand it.
Each new investigation rebuilds the urgency,
like a sand rampart. And further reflection undermines it,
causing its eventual collapse. We could see all that
from a distance, as on a curving abacus, in urgency mode
from day one, but by then dispatches hardly mattered.
It was camaraderie, or something like it, that did,
poring over us like we were papyri, hoping to find one
correct attitude sketched on the gaslit air, night's friendly takeover.

John Ashbery

Bunch of Stuff

To all events I squirted you
knowing this not to be this came to pass
when we were out and it looked good.
Why wouldn't you want a fresh piece
of outlook to stand in down the years?
See, your house, a former human energy construction,
crashed with us for a few days in May
and sure enough, the polar inscape
brought about some easier poems,
which I guessed was a good thing. At least
some of us were relaxed, Steamboat Bill included.

He didn't drink nothing.
It was one thing
to be ready for their challenge, quite another to accept it.
And if I had a piece of advice for you, this is it:
Poke fun at balm, then suffer lethargy
to irradiate its shallow flood in the new packaging
our enemies processed. They should know.

The Gold Dust Twins never stopped supplicating Hoosiers
to limn the trail. There's no Shakespeare.
Through the window, Casanova.
Couldn't get to sleep in the dumb incident
of those days, crimping the frozen feet of Lincoln.

John Ashbery

By Guess and by Gosh

O awaken with me
the inquiring goodbyes.
Ooh what a messy business
a tangle and a muddle
(and made it seem quite interesting).

He ticks them off:
leisure top,
a different ride home,
whispering, in a way,
whispered whiskers,
so many of the things you have to share.

But I was getting on,
and that's what you don't need.
I'm certainly sorry about scaring your king,
if indeed that's what happened to him.
You get Peanuts and War and Peace,
some in rags, some in jags, some in
velvet gown. They want
the other side of the printing plant.

There were concerns.
Say hi to jock itch, leadership principles,
urinary incompetence.
Take that, perfect pitch.
And say a word for the president,
for the scholar magazines, papers, a streaming.
Then you are interested in poetry.

John Ashbery

Chinese Whispers

And in a little while we broke under the strain:
suppurations ad nauseam, the wanting to be taller,
though it's simply about being mysterious, i.e., not taller,
like any tree in any forest.

Mute, the pancake describes you.

It had tiny roman numerals embedded in its rim.
It was a pancake clock. They had 'em in those days,
always getting smaller, which is why they finally became extinct.
It was a hundred years before anyone noticed.

The governor general
called it "sinuous." But we, we had other names for it,
knew it was going to be around for a long time,
even though extinct. And sure as shillelaghs fall from trees
onto frozen doorsteps, it came round again
when all memory of it had been expunged

from the common brain.

Everybody wants to try one of those new pancake clocks.
A boyfriend in the next town had one
but conveniently forgot to bring it over each time we invited him.
Finally the rumors grew more fabulous than the real thing:
I hear they are encrusted with tangles of briar rose,

so dense

not even a prince seeking the Sleeping Beauty could get inside.
What's more, there are more of them than when they were extinct,
yet the prices keep on rising. They have them in the Hesperides
and in shantytowns on the edge of the known world,
blue with cold. All downtowns used to feature them.

Camera obscuras,

too, were big that year. But why is it that with so many people
who want to know what a shout is about, nobody can find the original recipe?
All too soon, no one cares. We go back to doing little things for each other,
pasting stamps together to form a tiny train track, and other,
less noticeable things. And the past is forgotten till next time.
How to describe the years? Some were like blocks of the palest halvah,
careless of being touched. Some took each others' trash out,
put each other's eyes out. So many got thrown out
before anyone noticed, that it was like a chiaroscuro

of collapsing clouds.

How I longed to visit you again in that old house! But you were deaf,

or dead. Our letters crossed. A motorboat was ferrying me out past the reef, people on shore looked like dolls fingering stuffs.

More

keeps coming out, about the dogs I mean. Surely a simple embrace from an itinerant fish would have been spurned at certain periods. Not now. There is a famine of years in the land, the women are beautiful, but prematurely old and worn. It doesn't get better. Rocks half-buried in bands of sand, and spontaneous execrations.

I yell to the ship's front door, wanting to be taller, and somewhere in the middle all this gets lost. I was a phantom for a day. My friends carried me around with them.

It always turns out that much is salvageable.

Chicken coops

haven't floated away on the flood. Lacemakers are back in business with a vengeance. All the locksmiths had left town during the night. It happened to be a beautiful time of season, spring or fall, the air was digestible, the fish tied in love-knots on their gurneys. Yes, and journeys

were palpable too: Someone had spoken of saving appearances and the walls were just a little too blue in mid-morning. Was there ever such a time? I'd like to handle you, bruise you with kisses for it, yet something always stops me short: the knowledge that this isn't history,

no matter how many

times we keep mistaking it for the present, that headlines trumpet each day. But behind the unsightly school building, now a pickle warehouse, the true nature of things is known, is not overridden: Yours is a vote like any other. And there is fraud at the ballot boxes, stuffed with lace valentines and fortunes from automatic scales, dispensed with a lofty kind of charity, as though this could matter to us, these tunes

carried by the wind

from a barrel organ several leagues away. No, this is not the time to reveal your deception to us. Wait till rain and old age have softened us up a little more.

Then we'll see how extinct

the various races have become, how the years stand up to their descriptions, no matter how misleading, and how long the disbanded armies stay around. I must congratulate you on your detective work, for I am a connoisseur

of close embroidery, though I don't have a diploma to show for it.

The trees, the barren trees, have been described more than once.
Always they are taller, it seems, and the river passes them
without noticing. We, too, are taller,
our ceilings higher, our walls more tintured
with telling frescoes, our dooryards both airier and vaguer,
according as time passes and weaves its minute deceptions in and out,
a secret thread.

Peace is a full stop.

And though we had some chance of slipping past the blockade,
now only time will consent to have anything to do with us,
for what purposes we do not know.

John Ashbery

Daffy Duck In Hollywood

Something strange is creeping across me.

La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars
Of "I Thought about You"; or something mellow from
Amadigi di Gaula for everything--a mint-condition can
Of Rumford's Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy
Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller's fertile
Escritoire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged
Stock--to come clattering through the rainbow trellis
Where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland
Fling Terrace. He promised he'd get me out of this one,
That mean old cartoonist, but just look what he's
Done to me now! I scarce dare approach me mug's attenuated
Reflection in yon hubcap, so jaundiced, so déconfit
Are its lineaments--fun, no doubt, for some quack phrenologist's
Fern-clogged waiting room, but hardly what you'd call
Companionable. But everything is getting choked to the point of
Silence. Just now a magnetic storm hung in the swatch of sky
Over the Fudds' garage, reducing it--drastically--
To the aura of a plumbago-blue log cabin on
A Gadsden Purchase commemorative cover. Suddenly all is
Loathing. I don't want to go back inside any more. You meet
Enough vague people on this emerald traffic-island--no,
Not people, comings and goings, more: mutterings, splatterings,
The bizarrely but effectively equipped infantries of
happy-go-nutty
Vegetal jacqueries, plumed, pointed at the little
White cardboard castle over the mill run. "Up
The lazy river, how happy we could be?"
How will it end? That geranium glow
Over Anaheim's had the riot act read to it by the
Etna-size firecracker that exploded last minute into
A carte du Tendre in whose lower right-hand corner
(Hard by the jock-itch sand-trap that skirts
The asparagus patch of algolagnic nuits blanches) Amadis
Is cozening the Princesse de Cleves into a midnight
micturition spree
On the Tamigi with the Wallets (Walt, Blossom, and little
Sleezix) on a lamé barge "borrowed" from Ollie
Of the Movies' dread mistress of the robes. Wait!

I have an announcement! This wide, tepidly meandering,
Civilized Lethe (one can barely make out the maypoles
And châlets de nécessitê on its sedgy shore)
leads to Tophet, that
Landfill-haunted, not-so-residential resort from which
Some travellers return! This whole moment is the groin
Of a borborygmic giant who even now
Is rolling over on us in his sleep. Farewell bocages,
Tanneries, water-meadows. The allegory comes unsnarled
Too soon; a shower of pecky acajou harpoons is
About all there is to be noted between tornadoes. I have
Only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live
Which is like thinking in another language. Everything
Depends on whether somebody reminds you of me.
That this is a fabulation, and that those "other times"
Are in fact the silences of the soul, picked out in
Diamonds on stygian velvet, matters less than it should.
Prodigies of timing may be arranged to convince them
We live in one dimension, they in ours. While I
Abroad through all the coasts of dark destruction seek
Deliverance for us all, think in that language: its
Grammar, though tortured, offers pavillions
At each new parting of the ways. Pastel
Ambulances scoop up the quick and hie them to hospitals.
"It's all bits and pieces, spangles, patches, really; nothing
Stands alone. What happened to creative evolution?"
Sighed Aglavaine. Then to her Sélysette: "If his
Achievement is only to end up less boring than the others,
What's keeping us here? Why not leave at once?
I have to stay here while they sit in there,
Laugh, drink, have fine time. In my day
One lay under the tough green leaves,
Pretending not to notice how they bled into
The sky's aqua, the wafted-away no-color of regions supposed
Not to concern us. And so we too
Came where the others came: nights of physical endurance,
Or if, by day, our behavior was anarchically
Correct, at least by New Brutalism standards, all then
Grew taciturn by previous agreement. We were spirited
Away en bateau, under cover of fudge dark.
It's not the incomplete importunes, but the spookiness
Of the finished product. True, to ask less were folly, yet

If he is the result of himself, how much the better
For him we ought to be! And how little, finally,
We take this into account! Is the puckered garance satin
Of a case that once held a brace of dueling pistols our
Only acknowledging of that color? I like not this,
Methinks, yet this disappointing sequel to ourselves
Has been applauded in London and St. Petersburg. Somewhere
Ravens pray for us." The storm finished brewing. And thus
She questioned all who came in at the great gate, but none
She found who ever heard of Amadis,
Nor of stern Aureng-Zebe, his first love. Some
They were to whom this mattered not a jot: since all
By definition is completeness (so
In utter darkness they reasoned), why not
Accept it as it pleases to reveal itself? As when
Low skyscrapers from lower-hanging clouds reveal
A turret there, an art-deco escarpment here, and last perhaps
The pattern that may carry the sense, but
Stays hidden in the mysteries of pagination.
Not what we see but how we see it matters; all's
Alike, the same, and we greet him who announces
The change as we would greet the change itself.
All life is but a figment; conversely, the tiny
Tome that slips from your hand is not perhaps the
Missing link in this invisible picnic whose leverage
Shrouds our sense of it. Therefore bivouac we
On this great, blond highway, unimpeded by
Veiled scruples, worn conundrums. Morning is
Impermanent. Grab sex things, swing up
Over the horizon like a boy
On a fishing expedition. No one really knows
Or cares whether this is the whole of which parts
Were vouchsafed--once--but to be ambling on's
The tradition more than the safekeeping of it. This mulch for
Play keeps them interested and busy while the big,
Vaguer stuff can decide what it wants--what maps, what
Model cities, how much waste space. Life, our
Life anyway, is between. We don't mind
Or notice any more that the sky is green, a parrot
One, but have our earnest where it chances on us,
Disingenuous, intrigued, inviting more,
Always invoking the echo, a summer's day.

John Ashbery

Day Bump

Whether the harborline or the east shoreline
consummated it was nobody's biz until you got there,
eyelids ashimmer, content with one more dispensation
from blue above. And just like we were saying,
the people began to show some interest
in the mud-choked harbor. It could be summer again
for all anyone in our class knew.
Yeah, that's right. Bumped from our dog-perch,
we'd had to roil with the last of them.

It's taken a while since I've been here,
but I'm resolved. What, didn't I print,
little piles of notes, slopes almost Sicilian?
Here is my friend:
Socks for comfort (now boys) will see later. Did they come?
The inner grocery had to take three sets of clips away.
Speaking to him of intricate family affairs.
I'm not what you think. Stay preconscious.
It's just the "flooding of the council." No need to feel afraid.

John Ashbery

Dramedy

Things I left on your paper:
one of the craziest episodes that ever overtook me.
Do you like espionage? A watered charm?
My pod cast aside, I'll walk in the human street,
protect the old jib from new miniseries.

I could swear it moved
in incomplete back yards
to endorse the conversation, request to be strapped in.
Then it will be time to take the step
giving fragile responses,
and finally he wrote the day.

It happened in the water
so that was nice.

It comes ready conflated:
vanilla for get lost, flavor of the time
of his sponsor's destiny. Be on that sofa.

I was crossing the state line as they were reburying the stuff.
You break the time lock, the bride's canister?????...????
but we did say that we'd be back.

John Ashbery

El Dorado

We have a friend in common, the retired sophomore.
His concern: that I shall get it like that,
in the right and righter of a green bush
chomping on future considerations. In the ghostly
dreams of others it appears I am all right,
and even going on tomorrow there is much
to be said on all these matters, "issues," like
"No rest for the weary." (And yet—why not?)
Feeling under orders is a way of showing up,
but stepping on Earth—she's not going to.
Ten shades of pleasing himself brings us to tomorrow
evening and will be back for more. I disagree
with you completely but couldn't be prouder
and fonder of you. So drink up. Feel good for two.

I do it in a lot of places. Subfusc El Dorado
is only one that I know something about.
Others are recently lost cities
where we used to live—they keep the names
we knew, sometimes. I do it in a lot of places.
Brash brats offer laughing advice,
as though anything I cared about could be difficult
or complicated now. That's the rub. Gusts of up
to forty-five miles an hour will be dropping in later
on tonight. No reason not to. So point at the luck
we know about. Living is a meatloaf sandwich.
I had a good time up there.

John Ashbery

Farm Implements And Rutabagas In A Landscape

The first of the undecoded messages read: "Popeye sits
in thunder,
Unthought of. From that shoebox of an apartment,
From livid curtain's hue, a tangram emerges: a country."
Meanwhile the Sea Hag was relaxing on a green couch: "How
pleasant
To spend one's vacation en la casa de Popeye," she
scratched
Her cleft chin's solitary hair. She remembered spinach

And was going to ask Wimpy if he had bought any spinach.
"M'love," he intercepted, "the plains are decked out
in thunder
Today, and it shall be as you wish." He scratched
The part of his head under his hat. The apartment
Seemed to grow smaller. "But what if no pleasant
Inspiration plunge us now to the stars? For this is my
country."

Suddenly they remembered how it was cheaper in the country.
Wimpy was thoughtfully cutting open a number 2 can of spinach
When the door opened and Swee'pea crept in. "How pleasant!"
But Swee'pea looked morose. A note was pinned to his bib.
"Thunder
And tears are unavailing," it read. "Henceforth shall
Popeye's apartment
Be but remembered space, toxic or salubrious, whole or
scratched."

Olive came hurtling through the window; its geraniums scratched
Her long thigh. "I have news!" she gasped. "Popeye, forced as
you know to flee the country
One musty gusty evening, by the schemes of his wizened,
duplicate father, jealous of the apartment
And all that it contains, myself and spinach
In particular, heaves bolts of loving thunder
At his own astonished becoming, rupturing the pleasant

Arpeggio of our years. No more shall pleasant

Rays of the sun refresh your sense of growing old, nor the
scratched

Tree-trunks and mossy foliage, only immaculate darkness and
thunder."

She grabbed Swee'pea. "I'm taking the brat to the country."
"But you can't do that--he hasn't even finished his spinach,"
Urged the Sea Hag, looking fearfully around at the apartment.

But Olive was already out of earshot. Now the apartment
Succumbed to a strange new hush. "Actually it's quite pleasant
Here," thought the Sea Hag. "If this is all we need fear from
spinach

Then I don't mind so much. Perhaps we could invite Alice the Goon
over"--she scratched

One dug pensively--"but Wimpy is such a country
Bumpkin, always burping like that." Minute at first, the thunder

Soon filled the apartment. It was domestic thunder,
The color of spinach. Popeye chuckled and scratched
His balls: it sure was pleasant to spend a day in the country.

John Ashbery

For John Clare

Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind. Then there is no telling how many there are. They grace everything--bush and tree--to take the roisterer's mind off his caroling--so it's like a smooth switch back. To what was aired in their previous conniption fit. There is so much to be seen everywhere that it's like not getting used to it, only there is so much it never feels new, never any different. You are standing looking at that building and you cannot take it all in, certain details are already hazy and the mind boggles. What will it all be like in five years' time when you try to remember? Will there have been boards in between the grass part and the edge of the street? As long as that couple is stopping to look in that window over there we cannot go. We feel like they have to tell us we can, but they never look our way and they are already gone, gone far into the future--the night of time. If we could look at a photograph of it and say there they are, they never really stopped but there they are. There is so much to be said, and on the surface of it very little gets said.

There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like. Being immersed in the details of rock and field and slope --letting them come to you for once, and then meeting them halfway would be so much easier--if they took an ingenuous pride in being in one's blood. Alas, we perceive them if at all as those things that were meant to be put aside-- costumes of the supporting actors or voice trilling at the end of a narrow enclosed street. You can do nothing with them. Not even offer to pay.

It is possible that finally, like coming to the end of a long, barely perceptible rise, there is mutual cohesion and interaction. The whole scene is fixed in your mind, the music all present, as though you could see each note as well as hear it. I say this because there is an uneasiness in things just now. Waiting for something to be over before you are forced to notice it. The pollarded trees scarcely bucking the wind--and yet it's keen, it makes you fall over. Clabbered sky. Seasons that pass with a rush. After all it's their time too--nothing says they aren't to make something of it. As for Jenny Wren, she cares, hopping about on her little twig like she was tryin' to tell us somethin', but that's just it, she couldn't even if she wanted to--dumb bird. But the others--and they in some way must know too--it would never occur to them to want to, even if they could take the first step of the terrible journey toward feeling somebody should act, that ends in utter confusion and hopelessness, east of the sun and west of the moon. So their comment is: "No comment." Meanwhile the whole history of probabilities is coming to life, starting in the upper left-hand corner, like a sail.

Glazunoviana

The man with the red hat
And the polar bear, is he here too?
The window giving on shade,
Is that here too?
And all the little helps,
My initials in the sky,
The hay of an arctic summer night?

The bear
Drops dead in sight of the window.
Lovely tribes have just moved to the north.
In the flickering evening the martins grow denser.
Rivers of wings surround us and vast tribulation.

John Ashbery

Hotel Lautréamont

1.

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society working as a team. They didn't just happen. There was no guesswork. The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it. We see the results in works as diverse as "Windsor Forest" and "The Wife of Usher's Well";

Working as a team, they didn't just happen. There was no guesswork. The horns of elfland swing past, and in a few seconds we see the results in works as diverse as "Windsor Forest" and "The Wife of Usher's Well," or, on a more modern note, in the finale of the Sibelius violin concerto.

The horns of elfland swing past, and in a few seconds the world, as we know it, sinks into dementia, proving narrative passé, or in the finale of the Sibelius violin concerto. Not to worry, many hands are making work light again.

The world, as we know it, sinks into dementia, proving narrative passé. In any case the ruling was long overdue. Not to worry, many hands are making work light again, so we stay indoors. The quest was only another adventure.

2.

In any case, the ruling was long overdue. The people are beside themselves with rapture so we stay indoors. The quest was only another adventure and the solution problematic, at any rate far off in the future.

The people are beside themselves with rapture yet no one thinks to question the source of so much collective euphoria, and the solution: problematic, at any rate far off in the future. The saxophone wails, the martini glass is drained.

Yet no one thinks to question the source of so much collective euphoria. In troubled times one looked to the shaman or priest for comfort and counsel. The saxophone wails, the martini glass is drained, and night like black swansdown settles on the city.

In troubled times one looked to the shaman or priest for comfort and counsel.
Now, only the willing are fated to receive death as a reward,
and night like black swansdown settles on the city.
If we tried to leave, would being naked help us?

3.

Now, only the willing are fated to receive death as a reward.
Children twist hula-hoops, imagining a door to the outside.
If we tried to leave, would being naked help us?
And what of older, lighter concerns? What of the river?

Children twist hula-hoops, imagining a door to the outside,
when all we think of is how much we can carry with us.
And what of older, lighter concerns? What of the river?
All the behemoths have filed through the maze of time.

When all we think of is how much we can carry with us
small wonder that those at home sit, nervous, by the unlit grate.
All the behemoths have filed through the maze of time.
It remains for us to come to terms with our commonality.

Small wonder that those at home sit nervous by the unlit grate.
It was their choice, after all, that spurred us to feats of the imagination.
It remains for us to come to terms with our commonality
and in so doing deprive time of further hostages.

4.

It was their choice, after all, that spurred us to feats of the imagination.
Now, silently as one mounts a stair we emerge into the open
and in so doing deprive time of further hostages,
to end the standoff that history long ago began.

Now, silently as one mounts a stair we emerge into the open
but it is shrouded, veiled: We must have made some ghastly error.
To end the standoff that history long ago began
must we thrust ever onward, into perversity?

But it is shrouded, veiled: We must have made some ghastly error.
You mop your forehead with a rose, recommending its thorns.

Must we thrust ever onward, into perversity?
Only night knows for sure; the secret is safe with her.

You mop your forehead with a rose, recommending its thorns.
Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society;
only night knows for sure. The secret is safe with her:
The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.

John Ashbery

How to Continue

Oh there once was a woman
and she kept a shop
selling trinkets to tourists
not far from a dock
who came to see what life could be
far back on the island.

And it was always a party there
always different but very nice
New friends to give you advice
or fall in love with you which is nice
and each grew so perfectly from the other
it was a marvel of poetry
and irony

And in this unsafe quarter
much was scary and dirty
but no one seemed to mind
very much
the parties went on from house to house
There were friends and lovers galore
all around the store
There was moonshine in winter
and starshine in summer
and everybody was happy to have discovered
what they discovered

And then one day the ship sailed away
There were no more dreamers just sleepers
in heavy attitudes on the dock
moving as if they knew how
among the trinkets and the souvenirs
the random shops of modern furniture
and a gale came and said
it is time to take all of you away
from the tops of the trees to the little houses
on little paths so startled

And when it became time to go

they none of them would leave without the other
for they said we are all one here
and if one of us goes the other will not go
and the wind whispered it to the stars
the people all got up to go
and looked back on love

John Ashbery

Into The Dusk-Charged Air

Far from the Rappahannock, the silent
Danube moves along toward the sea.
The brown and green Nile rolls slowly
Like the Niagara's welling descent.
Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire
Near where it joined the Cher.
The St. Lawrence prods among black stones
And mud. But the Arno is all stones.
Wind ruffles the Hudson's
Surface. The Irawaddy is overflowing.
But the yellowish, gray Tiber
Is contained within steep banks. The Isar
Flows too fast to swim in, the Jordan's water
Courses over the flat land. The Allegheny and its boats
Were dark blue. The Moskowa is
Gray boats. The Amstel flows slowly.
Leaves fall into the Connecticut as it passes
Underneath. The Liffey is full of sewage,
Like the Seine, but unlike
The brownish-yellow Dordogne.
Mountains hem in the Colorado
And the Oder is very deep, almost
As deep as the Congo is wide.
The plain banks of the Neva are
Gray. The dark Saône flows silently.
And the Volga is long and wide
As it flows across the brownish land. The Ebro
Is blue, and slow. The Shannon flows
Swiftly between its banks. The Mississippi
Is one of the world's longest rivers, like the Amazon.
It has the Missouri for a tributary.
The Harlem flows amid factories
And buildings. The Nelson is in Canada,
Flowing. Through hard banks the Dubawnt
Forces its way. People walk near the Trent.
The landscape around the Mohawk stretches away;
The Rubicon is merely a brook.
In winter the Main
Surges; the Rhine sings its eternal song.

The Rhine slogs along through whitish banks
 And the Rio Grande spins tales of the past.
 The Loir bursts its frozen shackles
 But the Moldau's wet mud ensnares it.
 The East catches the light.
 Near the Escaut the noise of factories echoes
 And the sinuous Humboldt gurgles wildly.
 The Po too flows, and the many-colored
 Thames. Into the Atlantic Ocean
 Pours the Garonne. Few ships navigate
 On the Housatonic, but quite a few can be seen
 On the Elbe. For centuries
 The Afton has flowed.
 If the Rio Negro
 Could abandon its song, and the Magdalena
 The jungle flowers, the Tagus
 Would still flow serenely, and the Ohio
 Abrade its slate banks. The tan Euphrates would
 Sidle silently across the world. The Yukon
 Was choked with ice, but the Susquehanna still pushed
 Bravely along. The Dee caught the day's last flares
 Like the Pilcomayo's carrion rose.
 The Peace offered eternal fragrance
 Perhaps, but the Mackenzie churned livid mud
 Like tan chalk-marks. Near where
 The Brahmaputra slapped swollen dikes
 And the Pechora? The São Francisco
 Skulks amid gray, rubbery nettles. The Liard's
 Reflexes are slow, and the Arkansas erodes
 Anthracite hummocks. The Paran´ stinks.
 The Ottawa is light emerald green
 Among grays. Better that the Indus fade
 In steaming sands! Let the Brazos
 Freeze solid! And the Wabash turn to a leaden
 Cinder of ice! The Marañôn is too tepid, we must
 Find a way to freeze it hard. The Ural
 Is freezing slowly in the blasts. The black Yonne
 Congeals nicely. And the Petit-Morin
 Curls up on the solid earth. The Inn
 Does not remember better times, and the Merrimack's
 Galvanized. The Ganges is liquid snow by now;
 The Vyatka's ice-gray. The once-molten Tennessee s

Curdled. The Japur is a pack of ice. Gelid
The Columbia's gray loam banks. The Don's merely
A giant icicle. The Niger freezes, slowly.
The interminable Lena plods on
But the Purus' mercurial waters are icy, grim
With cold. The Loing is choked with fragments of ice.
The Weser is frozen, like liquid air.
And so is the Kama. And the beige, thickly flowing
Tocantins. The rivers bask in the cold.
The stern Uruguay chafes its banks,
A mass of ice. The Hooghly is solid
Ice. The Adour is silent, motionless.
The lovely Tigris is nothing but scratchy ice
Like the Yellowstone, with its osier-clustered banks.
The Mekong is beginning to thaw out a little
And the Donets gurgles beneath the
Huge blocks of ice. The Manzanares gushes free.
The Illinois darts through the sunny air again.
But the Dnieper is still ice-bound. Somewhere
The Salado propels its floes, but the Roosevelt's
Frozen. The Oka is frozen solid
Than the Somme. The Minho slumbers
In winter, nor does the Snake
Remember August. Hilarious, the Canadian
Is solid ice. The Madeira slavers
Across the thawing fields, and the Plata laughs.
The Dvina soaks up the snow. The Sava's
Temperature is above freezing. The Avon
Carols noiselessly. The Drôme presses
Grass banks; the Adige's frozen
Surface is like gray pebbles.

Birds circle the Ticino. In winter
The Var was dark blue, unfrozen. The
Thwaite, cold, is choked with sandy ice;
The Ardèche glistens feebly through the freezing rain.

John Ashbery

Just Walking Around

What name do I have for you?
Certainly there is not name for you
In the sense that the stars have names
That somehow fit them. Just walking around,

An object of curiosity to some,
But you are too preoccupied
By the secret smudge in the back of your soul
To say much and wander around,

Smiling to yourself and others.
It gets to be kind of lonely
But at the same time off-putting.
Counterproductive, as you realize once again

That the longest way is the most efficient way,
The one that looped among islands, and
You always seemed to be traveling in a circle.
And now that the end is near

The segments of the trip swing open like an orange.
There is light in there and mystery and food.
Come see it.
Come not for me but it.
But if I am still there, grant that we may see each other.

John Ashbery

Last Month

No changes of support—only
Patches of gray, here where sunlight fell.
The house seems heavier
Now that they have gone away.
In fact it emptied in record time.
When the flat table used to result
A match recedes, slowly, into the night.
The academy of the future is
Opening its doors and willing
The fruitless sunlight streams into domes,
The chairs piled high with books and papers.

The sedate one is this month's skittish one
Confirming the property that,
A timeless value, has changed hands.
And you could have a new automobile
Ping pong set and garage, but the thief
Stole everything like a miracle.
In his book there was a picture of treason only
And in the garden, cries and colors.

John Ashbery

Late Echo

Alone with our madness and favorite flower
We see that there really is nothing left to write about.
Or rather, it is necessary to write about the same old things
In the same way, repeating the same things over and over
For love to continue and be gradually different.

Beehives and ants have to be re-examined eternally
And the color of the day put in
Hundreds of times and varied from summer to winter
For it to get slowed down to the pace of an authentic
Saraband and huddle there, alive and resting.

Only then can the chronic inattention
Of our lives drape itself around us, conciliatory
And with one eye on those long tan plush shadows
That speak so deeply into our unprepared knowledge
Of ourselves, the talking engines of our day.

John Ashbery

Late-ish

The girl in the green ski chasuble
hasn't yet graduated from radio school.
Let's pay attention.

Looking ahead, why, he waved his mouth along.
Doesn't life get difficult in the summer?
The divine medicine for it collapsed
in front of the shortstop,
who took off like a battalion.

Crowds of older people who would read this
happily, willingly, then walking into night's embrace,
then kiss. "To turn you out, to turn you out!"
Sometimes an arm is accused:
You could have felt it, the blue shirts,
phlegm central, four times a night.
But what does that get me?
Light refreshments.

When the suburban demonstration kind of shrunk
you put your foot out,
leave it or kiss it
or even two years ago,
Charmaine here tells us.
I think I should stay ...????

Cross-eyed sonofabitch ...????
He liked him, he could tell. A de-happening.
The gangster no longer wanted to sleep with him,
but what the heck. With time off
for actual fuzz collected ... All right, boys.
Cheap murders, peach driven ... I seen enough of those
samples along the way.

John Ashbery

Leave the Hand In

Furthermore, Mr. Tuttle used to have to run in the streets.
Now, each time friendship happens, they're fully booked.
Sporting with amaryllis in the shade is all fine and good,
but when your sparring partner gets there first
you wonder if it was all worth it. "Yes, why do it?"
I'm on hold. It will take quite a lot for this music
to grow on me. I meant no harm. I've helped him
from getting stuck before. Dumb thing. All my appetites are friendly.
Children too are free to go and come as they please.
I ask you only to choose between us, then shut down this election.
But don't reveal too much of your hand at any given time.
Then up and pipes the major, leave the hand in,
or change the vows. The bold, enduring menace of courtship is upon us
like the plague, and none of us can say what trouble
will be precipitated once it has had its way with us.
Our home is marshland. After dinner was wraparound.
You got a tender little look at it.

Outside, it never did turn golden.

John Ashbery

Like a Sentence

How little we know,
and when we know it!

It was prettily said that "No man
hath an abundance of cows on the plain, nor shards
in his cupboard." Wait! I think I know who said that! It was . . .

Never mind, dears, the afternoon
will fold you up, along with preoccupations
that now seem so important, until only a child
running around on a unicycle occupies center stage.
Then what will you make of walls? And I fear you
will have to come up with something,

be it a terraced gambit above the sea
or gossip overheard in the marketplace.
For you see, it becomes you to be chastened:
for the old to envy the young,
and for youth to fear not getting older,
where the paths through the elms, the carnivals, begin.

And it was said of Gyges that his ring
attracted those who saw him not,
just as those who wandered through him were aware
only of a certain stillness, such as precedes an earache,
while lumberjacks in headbands came down to see what all the fuss was about,
whether it was something they could be part of
sans affront to self-esteem.

And those temple hyenas who had seen enough,
nostrils aflame, fur backing up in the breeze,
were no place you could count on,
having taken a proverbial powder
as rifle butts received another notch.

I, meanwhile . . . I was going to say I had squandered spring
when summer came along and took it from me
like a terrier a lady has asked one to hold for a moment
while she adjusts her stocking in the mirror of a weighing machine.
But here it is winter, and wrong
to speak of other seasons as though they exist.

Time has only an agenda
in the wallet at his back, while we
who think we know where we are going unfazed
end up in brilliant woods, nourished more than we can know
by the unexpectedness of ice and stars
and crackling tears. We'll just have to make a go of it,
a run for it. And should the smell of baking cookies appease
one or the other of the olfactory senses, climb down
into this wagonload of prisoners.

The meter will be screamingly clear then,
the rhythms unbounced, for though we came
to life as to a school, we must leave it without graduating
even as an ominous wind puffs out the sails
of proud feluccas who don't know where they're headed,
only that a motion is etched there, shaking to be free.

John Ashbery

Mean Particles

Sometimes something like a second
washes the base of this street.

The father and his two assistants
are given permission to go.

One of them, a woman, asks, "Why
did we come here in the first place,
to this citadel of dampness?"

Some days are worse than others,
even if we can't believe in them.
But that was never a concern of mine,
reasoned the patient.

Sing, scroll, or never be blasted by us
into marmoreal meaning, or the fist for it.
Kudos to the prince who journeyed here
to negotiate our release, if you can believe it.

You're right. The ballads are retreating
back into the atmosphere.
They won't be coming round again.
Make your peace.

John Ashbery

Meaningful Love

What the bad news was
became apparent too late
for us to do anything good about it.

I was offered no urgent dreaming,
didn't need a name or anything.
Everything was taken care of.

In the medium-size city of my awareness
voles are building colossi.
The blue room is over there.

He put out no feelers.
The day was all as one to him.
Some days he never leaves his room
and those are the best days,
by far.

There were morose gardens farther down the slope,
anthills that looked like they belonged there.
The sausages were undercooked,
the wine too cold, the bread molten.
Who said to bring sweaters?
The climate's not that dependable.

The Atlantic crawled slowly to the left
pinning a message on the unbound golden hair of sleeping maidens,
a ruse for next time,

where fire and water are rampant in the streets,
the gate closed—no visitors today
or any evident heartbeat.

I got rid of the book of fairy tales,
pawned my old car, bought a ticket to the funhouse,
found myself back here at six o'clock,
pondering "possible side effects."

There was no harm in loving then,

no certain good either. But love was loving servants
or bosses. No straight road issuing from it.
Leaves around the door are penciled losses.
Twenty years to fix it.
Asters bloom one way or another.

John Ashbery

My Erotic Double

He says he doesn't feel like working today.
It's just as well. Here in the shade
Behind the house, protected from street noises,
One can go over all kinds of old feeling,
Throw some away, keep others.

The wordplay

Between us gets very intense when there are
Fewer feelings around to confuse things.
Another go-round? No, but the last things
You always find to say are charming, and rescue me
Before the night does. We are afloat
On our dreams as on a barge made of ice,
Shot through with questions and fissures of starlight
That keep us awake, thinking about the dreams
As they are happening. Some occurrence. You said it.

I said it but I can hide it. But I choose not to.
Thank you. You are a very pleasant person.
Thank you. You are too.

John Ashbery

My Philosophy Of Life

Just when I thought there wasn't room enough
for another thought in my head, I had this great idea--
call it a philosophy of life, if you ly,
it involved living the way philosophers live,
according to a set of principles. OK, but which ones?

That was the hardest part, I admit, but I had a
kind of dark foreknowledge of what it would be like.
Everything, from eating watermelon or going to the bathroom
or just standing on a subway platform, lost in thought
for a few minutes, or worrying about rain forests,
would be affected, or more precisely, inflected
by my new attitude. I wouldn't be preachy,
or worry about children and old people, except
in the general way prescribed by our clockwork universe.
Instead I'd sort of let things be what they are
while injecting them with the serum of the new moral climate
I thought I'd stumbled into, as a stranger
accidentally presses against a panel and a bookcase slides back,
revealing a winding staircase with greenish light
somewhere down below, and he automatically steps inside
and the bookcase slides shut, as is customary on such occasions.
At once a fragrance overwhelms him--not saffron, not lavender,
but something in thinks of cushions, like the one
his uncle's Boston bull terrier used to lie on watching him
quizzically, pointed ear-tips folded over. And then the great rush
is a single idea emerges from it. It's enough
to disgust you with then you remember something
William James
wrote in some book of his you never read--it was fine, it had the
fineness,
the powder of life dusted over it, by chance, of course, yet
still looking
for evidence of fingerprints. Someone had handled it
even before he formulated it, though the thought was his and
his alone.

It's fine, in summer, to visit the seashore.
There are lots of little trips to be made.

A grove of fledgling aspens welcomes the y
are the public toilets where weary pilgrims have carved
their names and addresses, and perhaps messages as well,
messages to the world, as they sat
and thought about what they'd do after using the toilet
and washing their hands at the sink, prior to stepping out
into the open they been coaxed in by principles,
and were their words philosophy, of however crude a sort?
I confess I can move no farther along this train of thought--
something's blocking hing I'm
not big enough to see maybe I'm frankly scared.
What was the matter with how I acted before?
But maybe I can come up with a compromise--I'll let
things be what they are, sort of. In the autumn I'll put up jellies
and preserves, against the winter cold and futility,
and that will be a human thing, and intelligent as well.
I won't be embarrassed by my friends' dumb remarks,
or even my own, though admittedly that's the hardest part,
as when you are in a crowded theater and something you say
riles the spectator in front of you, who doesn't even like the idea
of two people near him talking together. Well he's
got to be flushed out so the hunters can have a crack at him--
this thing works both ways, you know. You can't always
be worrying about others and keeping track of yourself
at the same would be abusive, and about as much fun
as attending the wedding of two people you don't know.
Still, there's a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas.
That's what they're made for! Now I want you to go out there
and enjoy yourself, and yes, enjoy your philosophy of life, too.
They don't come along every day. Look out! There's a big one...

John Ashbery

Pantoum

Eyes shining without mystery,
Footprints eager for the past
Through the vague snow of many clay pipes,
And what is in store?

Footprints eager for the past
The usual obtuse blanket.
And what is in store
For those dearest to the king?

The usual obtuse blanket.
Of legless regrets and amplifications
For those dearest to the king.
Yes, sirs, connoisseurs of oblivion,

The usual obtuse blanket.
Of legless regrets and amplifications
For those dearest to the king.
Yes, sirs, connoisseurs of oblivion,

Of legless regrets and amplifications,
That is why a watchdog is shy.
Yes, sirs, connoisseurs of oblivion,
These days are short, brittle; there is only one night.

That is why a watchdog is shy,
Why the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying.
These days are short, brittle; there is only one night
And that soon gotten over.

Why the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying
Some blunt pretense to safety we have
And that soon gotten over
For they must have motion.

Some blunt pretense to safety we have
Eyes shining without mystery,
For they must have motion
Through the vague snow of many clay pipes.

John Ashbery

People Behaving Badly a Concern

Aggressive panhandling, public urination, verbal threats,
public nudity and violation of the open container law
followed us down the days, for why
are we here much longer,
or even this long? I ask you
to be civil and not interrupt night's business.

It was fun getting used to you,
who couldn't have been more nicer.
This was as modern as it had ever been.
They were influenced by him: some dirty magazine
on the air tonight. (Amid the chaos, reports of survivors.)

Didn't the flowers' restoration cat fugue keep spilling,
and like that? It wouldn't be the first time, either.
The pro-taffeta get up and laugh,
investigate or communicate. The night you were
going to stay up late, others will kiss,
and he talks about you, and I don't know what.
Come in, anyway,
and don't lack for tales of the Assertion.

We're talking civilian unrest.
Yes, well, maybe you should take one.

(Do not bite or chew.)

John Ashbery

Poem At The New Year

Once, out on the water in the clear, early nineteenth-century twilight,
you asked time to suspend its flight. If wishes could beget more than sobs,
that would be my wish for you, my darling, my angel. But other
principles prevail in this glum haven, don't they? If that's what it is.

Then the wind fell of its own accord.
We went out and saw that it had actually happened.
The season stood motionless, alert. How still the dropp was
on the burr I know not. I come all
packaged and serene, yet I keep losing things.

I wonder about Australia. Is it anything about Canada?
Do pigeons flutter? Is there a strangeness there, to complete
the one in me? Or must I relearn my filing system?
Can we trust others to indict us
who see us only in the evening rush hour,
and never stop to think? O, I was so bright about you,
my songbird, once. Now, cattails immolated
in the frozen swamp are about all I have time for.
The days are so polarized. Yet time itself is off center.
At least that's how it feels to me.

I know it as well as the streets in the map of my imagined
industrial city. But it has its own way of slipping past.
There was never any fullness that was going to be;
you waited in line for things, and the stained light was
impenitent. 'Spiky' was one adjective that came to mind,

yet for all its raised or lower levels I approach this canal.
Its time was right in winter. There was pipe smoke
in cafés, and outside the great ashen bird
streamed from lettered display windows, and waited
a little way off. Another chance. It never became a gesture.

John Ashbery

Pyrography

Out here on Cottage Grove it matters. The galloping
Wind balks at its shadow. The carriages
Are drawn forward under a sky of fumed oak.
This is America calling:
The mirroring of state to state,
Of voice to voice on the wires,
The force of colloquial greetings like golden
Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.
In service stairs the sweet corruption thrives;
The page of dusk turns like a creaking revolving stage in Warren, Ohio.

If this is the way it is let's leave,
They agree, and soon the slow boxcar journey begins,
Gradually accelerating until the gyrating fans of suburbs
Enfolding the darkness of cities are remembered
Only as a recurring tic. And midway
We meet the disappointed, returning ones, without its
Being able to stop us in the headlong night
Toward the nothing of the coast. At Bolinas
The houses doze and seem to wonder why through the
Pacific haze, and the dreams alternately glow and grow dull.
Why be hanging on here? Like kites, circling,
Slipping on a ramp of air, but always circling?

But the variable cloudiness is pouring it on,
Flooding back to you like the meaning of a joke.
The land wasn't immediately appealing; we built it
Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves:
An arch that terminates in mid-keystone, a crumbling stone pier
For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed
And only partially designed. How are we to inhabit
This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staving as we are,
In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
Of time running out, of evening presenting
The tactfully folded-over bill? And we fit
Rather too easily into it, become transparent,
Almost ghosts. One day

The birds and animals in the pasture have absorbed
The color, the density of the surroundings,
The leaves are alive, and too heavy with life.

A long period of adjustment followed.

In the cities at the turn of the century they knew about it
But were careful not to let on as the iceman and the milkman
Disappeared down the block and the postman shouted
His daily rounds. The children under the trees knew it
But all the fathers returning home
On streetcars after a satisfying day at the office undid it:
The climate was still floral and all the wallpaper
In a million homes all over the land conspired to hide it.
One day we thought of painted furniture, of how
It just slightly changes everything in the room
And in the yard outside, and how, if we were going
To be able to write the history of our time, starting with today,
It would be necessary to model all these unimportant details
So as to be able to include them; otherwise the narrative
Would have that flat, sandpapered look the sky gets
Out in the middle west toward the end of summer,
The look of wanting to back out before the argument
Has been resolved, and at the same time to save appearances
So that tomorrow will be pure. Therefore, since we have to do our business
In spite of things, why not make it in spite of everything?
That way, maybe the feeble lakes and swamps
Of the back country will get plugged into the circuit
And not just the major events but the whole incredible
Mass of everything happening simultaneously and pairing off,
Channeling itself into history, will unroll
As carefully and as casually as a conversation in the next room,
And the purity of today will invest us like a breeze,
Only be hard, spare, ironical: something one can
Tip one's hat to and still get some use out of.

The parade is turning into our street.

My stars, the burnished uniforms and prismatic
Features of this instant belong here. The land
Is pulling away from the magic, glittering coastal towns
To an aforementioned rendezvous with August and December.
The hunch is it will always be this way,
The look, the way things first scared you

In the night light, and later turned out to be,
Yet still capable, all the same, of a narrow fidelity
To what you and they wanted to become:
No sighs like Russian music, only a vast unravelling
Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond
To these bare fields, built at today's expense.

John Ashbery

Rivers and Mountains

On the secret map the assassins
Cloistered, the Moon River was marked
Near the eighteen peaks and the city
Of humiliation and defeat—wan ending
Of the trail among dry, papery leaves
Gray-brown quills like thoughts
In the melodious but vast mass of today's
Writing through fields and swamps
Marked, on the map, with little bunches of weeds.
Certainly squirrels lived in the woods
But devastation and dull sleep still
Hung over the land, quelled
The rioters turned out of sleep in the peace of prisons
Singing on marble factory walls
Deaf consolation of minor tunes that pack
The air with heavy invisible rods
Pent in some sand valley from
Which only quiet walking ever instructs.
The bird flew over and
Sat—there was nothing else to do.
Do not mistake its silence for pride or strength
Or the waterfall for a harbor
Full of light boats that is there
Performing for thousands of people
In clothes some with places to go
Or games. Sometimes over the pillar
Of square stones its impact
Makes a light print.
So going around cities
To get to other places you found
It all on paper but the land
Was made of paper processed
To look like ferns, mud or other
Whose sea unrolled its magic
Distances and then rolled them up
Its secret was only a pocket
After all but some corners are darker
Than these moonless nights spent as on a raft
In the seclusion of a melody heard

As though through trees
And you can never ignite their touch
Long but there were homes
Flung far out near the asperities
Of a sharp, rocky pinnacle
And other collective places
Shadows of vineyards whose wine
Tasted of the forest floor
Fisheries and oyster beds
Tides under the pole
Seminaries of instruction, public
Places for electric light
And the major tax assessment area
Wrinkled on the plan
Of election to public office
Sixty-two years old bath and breakfast
The formal traffic, shadows
To make it not worth joining
After the ox had pulled away the cart.

Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups
With the razor-edged mountains between.
It worked well on paper
But their camp had grown
To be the mountains and the map
Carefully peeled away and not torn
Was the light, a tender but tough bark
On everything. Fortunately the war was solved
In another way by isolating the two sections
Of the enemy's navy so that the mainland
Warded away the big floating ships.
Light bounced off the ends
Of the small gray waves to tell
Them in the observatory
About the great drama that was being won
To turn off the machinery
And quietly move among the rustic landscape
Scooping snow off the mountains rinsing
The coarser ones that love had
Slowly risen in the night to overflow
Wetting pillow and petal
Determined to place the letter

On the unassassinated president's desk
So that a stamp could reproduce all this
In detail, down to the last autumn leaf
And the affliction of June ride
Slowly out into the sun-blackened landscape.

John Ashbery

Self-Portrait In A Convex Mirror

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,
Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
In a movement supporting the face, which swims
Toward and away like the hand
Except that it is in repose. It is what is
Sequestered. Vasari says, "Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself from that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers . . .
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made
By a turner, and having divided it in half and
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,"
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed.
The glass chose to reflect only what he saw
Which was enough for his purpose: his image
Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle.
The time of day or the density of the light
Adhering to the face keeps it
Lively and intact in a recurring wave
Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.
But how far can it swim out through the eyes
And still return safely to its nest? The surface
Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
Significantly; that is, enough to make the point
That the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
In suspension, unable to advance much farther
Than your look as it intercepts the picture.
Pope Clement and his court were "stupefied"
By it, according to Vasari, and promised a commission
That never materialized. The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move

As little as possible. This is what the portrait says.
But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
That is the tune but there are no words.
The words are only speculation
(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
We see only postures of the dream,
Riders of the motion that swings the face
Into view under evening skies, with no
False disarray as proof of authenticity.
But it is life englobed.
One would like to stick one's hand
Out of the globe, but its dimension,
What carries it, will not allow it.
No doubt it is this, not the reflex
To hide something, which makes the hand loom large
As it retreats slightly. There is no way
To build it flat like a section of wall:
It must join the segment of a circle,
Roving back to the body of which it seems
So unlikely a part, to fence in and shore up the face
On which the effort of this condition reads
Like a pinpoint of a smile, a spark
Or star one is not sure of having seen
As darkness resumes. A perverse light whose
Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its
Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant.
Francesco, your hand is big enough
To wreck the sphere, and too big,
One would think, to weave delicate meshes
That only argue its further detention.
(Big, but not coarse, merely on another scale,
Like a dozing whale on the sea bottom
In relation to the tiny, self-important ship
On the surface.) But your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what's there

And nothing can exist except what's there.
There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,
And the window doesn't matter much, or that
Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even
As a gauge of the weather, which in French is
Le temps, the word for time, and which
Follows a course wherein changes are merely
Features of the whole. The whole is stable within
Instability, a globe like ours, resting
On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball
Secure on its jet of water.
And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that it is not
Superficial but a visible core, then there is
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.
You will stay on, restive, serene in
Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning
But which holds something of both in pure
Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything.

The balloon pops, the attention
Turns dully away. Clouds
In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.
I think of the friends
Who came to see me, of what yesterday
Was like. A peculiar slant
Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
In the silence of the studio as he considers
Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.
How many people came and stayed a certain time,
Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
Remains that is surely you. Those voices in the dusk
Have told you all and still the tale goes on
In the form of memories deposited in irregular
Clumps of crystals. Whose curved hand controls,
Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
From wet branches? I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything

Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.
I feel the carousel starting slowly
And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,
Photographs of friends, the window and the trees
Merging in one neutral band that surrounds
Me on all sides, everywhere I look.
And I cannot explain the action of leveling,
Why it should all boil down to one
Uniform substance, a magma of interiors.
My guide in these matters is your self,
Firm, oblique, accepting everything with the same
Wraith of a smile, and as time speeds up so that it is soon
Much later, I can know only the straight way out,
The distance between us. Long ago
The strewn evidence meant something,
The small accidents and pleasures
Of the day as it moved gracelessly on,
A housewife doing chores. Impossible now
To restore those properties in the silver blur that is
The record of what you accomplished by sitting down
"With great art to copy all that you saw in the glass"
So as to perfect and rule out the extraneous
Forever. In the circle of your intentions certain spars
Remain that perpetuate the enchantment of self with self:
Eyebeams, muslin, coral. It doesn't matter
Because these are things as they are today
Before one's shadow ever grew
Out of the field into thoughts of tomorrow.

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
To yield what are laws of perspective
After all only to the painter's deep
Mistrust, a weak instrument though
Necessary. Of course some things
Are possible, it knows, but it doesn't know
Which ones. Some day we will try
To do as many things as are possible
And perhaps we shall succeed at a handful
Of them, but this will not have anything
To do with what is promised today, our

Landscape sweeping out from us to disappear
On the horizon. Today enough of a cover burnishes
To keep the supposition of promises together
In one piece of surface, letting one ramble
Back home from them so that these
Even stronger possibilities can remain
Whole without being tested. Actually
The skin of the bubble-chamber's as tough as
Reptile eggs; everything gets "programmed" there
In due course: more keeps getting included
Without adding to the sum, and just as one
Gets accustomed to a noise that
Kept one awake but now no longer does,
So the room contains this flow like an hourglass
Without varying in climate or quality
(Except perhaps to brighten bleakly and almost
Invisibly, in a focus sharpening toward death--more
Of this later). What should be the vacuum of a dream
Becomes continually replete as the source of dreams
Is being tapped so that this one dream
May wax, flourish like a cabbage rose,
Defying sumptuary laws, leaving us
To awake and try to begin living in what
Has now become a slum. Sydney Freedberg in his
Parmigianino says of it: "Realism in this portrait
No longer produces and objective truth, but a bizzarria
However its distortion does not create
A feeling of disharmony The forms retain
A strong measure of ideal beauty," because
Fed by our dreams, so inconsequential until one day
We notice the hole they left. Now their importance
If not their meaning is plain. They were to nourish
A dream which includes them all, as they are
Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror.
They seemed strange because we couldn't actually see them.
And we realize this only at a point where they lapse
Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up
Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.
The forms retain a strong measure of ideal beauty
As they forage in secret on our idea of distortion.
Why be unhappy with this arrangement, since
Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed?

Something like living occurs, a movement
Out of the dream into its codification.

As I start to forget it
It presents its stereotype again
But it is an unfamiliar stereotype, the face
Riding at anchor, issued from hazards, soon
To accost others, "rather angel than man" (Vasari).
Perhaps an angel looks like everything
We have forgotten, I mean forgotten
Things that don't seem familiar when
We meet them again, lost beyond telling,
Which were ours once. This would be the point
Of invading the privacy of this man who
"Dabbled in alchemy, but whose wish
Here was not to examine the subtleties of art
In a detached, scientific spirit: he wished through them
To impart the sense of novelty and amazement to the spectator"
(Freedberg). Later portraits such as the Uffizi
"Gentleman," the Borghese "Young Prelate" and
The Naples "Antea" issue from Mannerist
Tensions, but here, as Freedberg points out,
The surprise, the tension are in the concept
Rather than its realization.
The consonance of the High Renaissance
Is present, though distorted by the mirror.
What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface
(It is the first mirror portrait),
So that you could be fooled for a moment
Before you realize the reflection
Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works. The picture is almost finished,
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,
Startled by a snowfall which even now is
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow.

It happened while you were inside, asleep,
And there is no reason why you should have
Been awake for it, except that the day
Is ending and it will be hard for you
To get to sleep tonight, at least until late.

The shadow of the city injects its own
Urgency: Rome where Francesco
Was at work during the Sack: his inventions
Amazed the soldiers who burst in on him;
They decided to spare his life, but he left soon after;
Vienna where the painting is today, where
I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959; New York
Where I am now, which is a logarithm
Of other cities. Our landscape
Is alive with filiations, shuttlings;
Business is carried on by look, gesture,
Hearsay. It is another life to the city,
The backing of the looking glass of the
Unidentified but precisely sketched studio. It wants
To siphon off the life of the studio, deflate
Its mapped space to enactments, island it.
That operation has been temporarily stalled
But something new is on the way, a new preciousity
In the wind. Can you stand it,
Francesco? Are you strong enough for it?
This wind brings what it knows not, is
Self--propelled, blind, has no notion
Of itself. It is inertia that once
Acknowledged saps all activity, secret or public:
Whispers of the word that can't be understood
But can be felt, a chill, a blight
Moving outward along the capes and peninsulas
Of your nervures and so to the archipelagoes
And to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea.
This is its negative side. Its positive side is
Making you notice life and the stresses
That only seemed to go away, but now,
As this new mode questions, are seen to be
Hastening out of style. If they are to become classics
They must decide which side they are on.
Their reticence has undermined

The urban scenery, made its ambiguities
Look willful and tired, the games of an old man.
What we need now is this unlikely
Challenger pounding on the gates of an amazed
Castle. Your argument, Francesco,
Had begun to grow stale as no answer
Or answers were forthcoming. If it dissolves now
Into dust, that only means its time had come
Some time ago, but look now, and listen:
It may be that another life is stocked there
In recesses no one knew of; that it,
Not we, are the change; that we are in fact it
If we could get back to it, relive some of the way
It looked, turn our faces to the globe as it sets
And still be coming out all right:
Nerves normal, breath normal. Since it is a metaphor
Made to include us, we are a part of it and
Can live in it as in fact we have done,
Only leaving our minds bare for questioning
We now see will not take place at random
But in an orderly way that means to menace
Nobody--the normal way things are done,
Like the concentric growing up of days
Around a life: correctly, if you think about it.

A breeze like the turning of a page
Brings back your face: the moment
Takes such a big bite out of the haze
Of pleasant intuition it comes after.
The locking into place is "death itself,"
As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler's Ninth;
Or, to quote Imogen in Cymbeline, "There cannot
Be a pinch in death more sharp than this," for,
Though only exercise or tactic, it carries
The momentum of a conviction that had been building.
Mere forgetfulness cannot remove it
Nor wishing bring it back, as long as it remains
The white precipitate of its dream
In the climate of sighs flung across our world,
A cloth over a birdcage. But it is certain that
What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form

Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past.
The light sinks today with an enthusiasm
I have known elsewhere, and known why
It seemed meaningful, that others felt this way
Years ago. I go on consulting
This mirror that is no longer mine
For as much brisk vacancy as is to be
My portion this time. And the vase is always full
Because there is only just so much room
And it accommodates everything. The sample
One sees is not to be taken as
Merely that, but as everything as it
May be imagined outside time--not as a gesture
But as all, in the refined, assimilable state.
But what is this universe the porch of
As it veers in and out, back and forth,
Refusing to surround us and still the only
Thing we can see? Love once
Tipped the scales but now is shadowed, invisible,
Though mysteriously present, around somewhere.
But we know it cannot be sandwiched
Between two adjacent moments, that its windings
Lead nowhere except to further tributaries
And that these empty themselves into a vague
Sense of something that can never be known
Even though it seems likely that each of us
Knows what it is and is capable of
Communicating it to the other. But the look
Some wear as a sign makes one want to
Push forward ignoring the apparent
Naïveté of the attempt, not caring
That no one is listening, since the light
Has been lit once and for all in their eyes
And is present, unimpaired, a permanent anomaly,
Awake and silent. On the surface of it
There seems no special reason why that light
Should be focused by love, or why
The city falling with its beautiful suburbs
Into space always less clear, less defined,
Should read as the support of its progress,
The easel upon which the drama unfolded
To its own satisfaction and to the end

Of our dreaming, as we had never imagined
It would end, in worn daylight with the painted
Promise showing through as a gage, a bond.
This nondescript, never-to-be defined daytime is
The secret of where it takes place
And we can no longer return to the various
Conflicting statements gathered, lapses of memory
Of the principal witnesses. All we know
Is that we are a little early, that
Today has that special, lapidary
Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
I used to think they were all alike,
That the present always looked the same to everybody
But this confusion drains away as one
Is always cresting into one's present.
Yet the "poetic," straw-colored space
Of the long corridor that leads back to the painting,
Its darkening opposite--is this
Some figment of "art," not to be imagined
As real, let alone special? Hasn't it too its lair
In the present we are always escaping from
And falling back into, as the waterwheel of days
Pursues its uneventful, even serene course?
I think it is trying to say it is today
And we must get out of it even as the public
Is pushing through the museum now so as to
Be out by closing time. You can't live there.
The gray glaze of the past attacks all know-how:
Secrets of wash and finish that took a lifetime
To learn and are reduced to the status of
Black-and-white illustrations in a book where colorplates
Are rare. That is, all time
Reduces to no special time. No one
Alludes to the change; to do so might
Involve calling attention to oneself
Which would augment the dread of not getting out
Before having seen the whole collection
(Except for the sculptures in the basement:
They are where they belong).
Our time gets to be veiled, compromised

By the portrait's will to endure. It hints at
Our own, which we were hoping to keep hidden.
We don't need paintings or
Doggerel written by mature poets when
The explosion is so precise, so fine.
Is there any point even in acknowledging
The existence of all that? Does it
Exist? Certainly the leisure to
Indulge stately pastimes doesn't,
Any more. Today has no margins, the event arrives
Flush with its edges, is of the same substance,
Indistinguishable. "Play" is something else;
It exists, in a society specifically
Organized as a demonstration of itself.
There is no other way, and those assholes
Who would confuse everything with their mirror games
Which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities, or
At least confuse issues by means of an investing
Aura that would corrode the architecture
Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery,
Are beside the point. They are out of the game,
Which doesn't exist until they are out of it.
It seems like a very hostile universe
But as the principle of each individual thing is
Hostile to, exists at the expense of all the others
As philosophers have often pointed out, at least
This thing, the mute, undivided present,
Has the justification of logic, which
In this instance isn't a bad thing
Or wouldn't be, if the way of telling
Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result
Into a caricature of itself. This always
Happens, as in the game where
A whispered phrase passed around the room
Ends up as something completely different.
It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike
What the artist intended. Often he finds
He has omitted the thing he started out to say
In the first place. Seduced by flowers,
Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though
Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining
He had a say in the matter and exercised

An option of which he was hardly conscious,
Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions.
So as to create something new
For itself, that there is no other way,
That the history of creation proceeds according to
Stringent laws, and that things
Do get done in this way, but never the things
We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately
To see come into being. Parmigianino
Must have realized this as he worked at his
Life-obstructing task. One is forced to read
The perfectly plausible accomplishment of a purpose
Into the smooth, perhaps even bland (but so
Enigmatic) finish. Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
Peak, too close to ignore, too far
For one to intervene? This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way. A ship
Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor.
You are allowing extraneous matters
To break up your day, cloud the focus
Of the crystal ball. Its scene drifts away
Like vapor scattered on the wind. The fertile
Thought-associations that until now came
So easily, appear no more, or rarely. Their
Colorings are less intense, washed out
By autumn rains and winds, spoiled, muddied,
Given back to you because they are worthless.
Yet we are such creatures of habit that their
Implications are still around en permanence, confusing
Issues. To be serious only about sex
Is perhaps one way, but the sands are hissing
As they approach the beginning of the big slide
Into what happened. This past
Is now here: the painter's

Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving
Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned
Frequency, but the hues have turned metallic,
The curves and edges are not so rich. Each person
Has one big theory to explain the universe
But it doesn't tell the whole story
And in the end it is what is outside him
That matters, to him and especially to us
Who have been given no help whatever
In decoding our own man-size quotient and must rely
On second-hand knowledge. Yet I know
That no one else's taste is going to be
Any help, and might as well be ignored.
Once it seemed so perfect--gloss on the fine
Freckled skin, lips moistened as though about to part
Releasing speech, and the familiar look
Of clothes and furniture that one forgets.
This could have been our paradise: exotic
Refuge within an exhausted world, but that wasn't
In the cards, because it couldn't have been
The point. Aping naturalness may be the first step
Toward achieving an inner calm
But it is the first step only, and often
Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched
On the air materializing behind it,
A convention. And we have really
No time for these, except to use them
For kindling. The sooner they are burnt up
The better for the roles we have to play.
Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand,
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,
The shield of a greeting, Francesco:
There is room for one bullet in the chamber:
Our looking through the wrong end
Of the telescope as you fall back at a speed
Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately
Among the features of the room, an invitation
Never mailed, the "it was all a dream"
Syndrome, though the "all" tells tersely
Enough how it wasn't. Its existence
Was real, though troubled, and the ache
Of this waking dream can never drown out

The diagram still sketched on the wind,
Chosen, meant for me and materialized
In the disguising radiance of my room.
We have seen the city; it is the gibbous
Mirrored eye of an insect. All things happen
On its balcony and are resumed within,
But the action is the cold, syrupy flow
Of a pageant. One feels too confined,
Sifting the April sunlight for clues,
In the mere stillness of the ease of its
Parameter. The hand holds no chalk
And each part of the whole falls off
And cannot know it knew, except
Here and there, in cold pockets
Of remembrance, whispers out of time.

John Ashbery

Soonest Mended

Barely tolerated, living on the margin
In our technological society, we were always having to be rescued
On the brink of destruction, like heroines in Orlando Furioso
Before it was time to start all over again.
There would be thunder in the bushes, a rustling of coils,
And Angelica, in the Ingres painting, was considering
The colorful but small monster near her toe, as though wondering whether
forgetting
The whole thing might not, in the end, be the only solution.
And then there always came a time when
Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile
Came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was O.K.,
Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused
About how to receive this latest piece of information.
Was it information? Weren't we rather acting this out
For someone else's benefit, thoughts in a mind
With room enough and to spare for our little problems (so they began to seem),
Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid?
To reduce all this to a small variant,
To step free at last, minuscule on the gigantic plateau—
This was our ambition: to be small and clear and free.
Alas, the summer's energy wanes quickly,
A moment and it is gone. And no longer
May we make the necessary arrangements, simple as they are.
Our star was brighter perhaps when it had water in it.
Now there is no question even of that, but only
Of holding on to the hard earth so as not to get thrown off,
With an occasional dream, a vision: a robin flies across
The upper corner of the window, you brush your hair away
And cannot quite see, or a wound will flash
Against the sweet faces of the others, something like:
This is what you wanted to hear, so why
Did you think of listening to something else? We are all talkers
It is true, but underneath the talk lies
The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose
Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor.

These then were some hazards of the course,
Yet though we knew the course was hazards and nothing else

It was still a shock when, almost a quarter of a century later,
The clarity of the rules dawned on you for the first time.
They were the players, and we who had struggled at the game
Were merely spectators, though subject to its vicissitudes
And moving with it out of the tearful stadium, borne on shoulders, at last.
Night after night this message returns, repeated
In the flickering bulbs of the sky, raised past us, taken away from us,
Yet ours over and over until the end that is past truth,
The being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them,
Not ours to own, like a book, but to be with, and sometimes
To be without, alone and desperate.
But the fantasy makes it ours, a kind of fence-sitting
Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal. These were moments, years,
Solid with reality, faces, namable events, kisses, heroic acts,
But like the friendly beginning of a geometrical progression
Not too reassuring, as though meaning could be cast aside some day
When it had been outgrown. Better, you said, to stay cowering
Like this in the early lessons, since the promise of learning
Is a delusion, and I agreed, adding that
Tomorrow would alter the sense of what had already been learned,
That the learning process is extended in this way, so that from this standpoint
None of us ever graduates from college,
For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to grow up
Is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any rate.
And you see, both of us were right, though nothing
Has somehow come to nothing; the avatars
Of our conforming to the rules and living
Around the home have made—well, in a sense, “good citizens” of us,

Brushing the teeth and all that, and learning to accept
The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.

John Ashbery

Steel and Air

And now I cannot remember how I would
have had it. It is not a conduit (confluence?) but a place.
The place, of movement and an order.
The place of old order.
But the tail end of the movement is new.
Driving us to say what we are thinking.
It is so much like a beach after all, where you stand
and think of going no further.
And it is good when you get to no further.
It is like a reason that picks you up and
places you where you always wanted to be.
This far, it is fair to be crossing, to have crossed.
Then there is no promise in the other.
Here it is. Steel and air, a mottled presence,
small panacea
and lucky for us.
And then it got very cool.

John Ashbery

Street Musicians

One died, and the soul was wrenched out
Of the other in life, who, walking the streets
Wrapped in an identity like a coat, sees on and on
The same corners, volumetrics, shadows
Under trees. Farther than anyone was ever
Called, through increasingly suburban airs
And ways, with autumn falling over everything:
The plush leaves the chattels in barrels
Of an obscure family being evicted
Into the way it was, and is. The other beached
Glimpses of what the other was up to:
Revelations at last. So they grew to hate and forget each other.

So I cradle this average violin that knows
Only forgotten showtunes, but argues
The possibility of free declamation anchored
To a dull refrain, the year turning over on itself
In November, with the spaces among the days
More literal, the meat more visible on the bone.
Our question of a place of origin hangs
Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,
In coves with the water always seeping up, and left
Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared
On the landscape, to make of us what we could.

John Ashbery

Syringa

Orpheus liked the glad personal quality
Of the things beneath the sky. Of course, Eurydice was a part
Of this. Then one day, everything changed. He rends
Rocks into fissures with lament. Gullies, hummocks
Can't withstand it. The sky shudders from one horizon
To the other, almost ready to give up wholeness.
Then Apollo quietly told him: "Leave it all on earth.
Your lute, what point? Why pick at a dull pavan few care to
Follow, except a few birds of dusty feather,
Not vivid performances of the past." But why not?
All other things must change too.
The seasons are no longer what they once were,
But it is the nature of things to be seen only once,
As they happen along, bumping into other things, getting along
Somehow. That's where Orpheus made his mistake.
Of course Eurydice vanished into the shade;
She would have even if he hadn't turned around.
No use standing there like a gray stone toga as the whole wheel
Of recorded history flashes past, struck dumb, unable to
utter an intelligent
Comment on the most thought-provoking element in its train.
Only love stays on the brain, and something these people,
These other ones, call life. Singing accurately
So that the notes mount straight up out of the well of
Dim noon and rival the tiny, sparkling yellow flowers
Growing around the brink of the quarry, encapsulizes
The different weights of the things.
But it isn't enough
To just go on singing. Orpheus realized this
And didn't mind so much about his reward being in heaven
After the Bacchantes had torn him apart, driven
Half out of their minds by his music, what it was doing to them.
Some say it was for his treatment of Eurydice.
But probably the music had more to do with it, and
The way music passes, emblematic
Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it
And say it is good or bad. You must
Wait till it's over. "The end crowns all,"
Meaning also that the "tableau"

Is wrong. For although memories, of a season, for example,
Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure
That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting;
It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,
Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,
Harsh strokes. And to ask more than this
Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,
Powerful stream, the trailing grasses
Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action
No more than this. Then in the lowering gentian sky
Electric twitches are faintly apparent first, then burst forth
Into a shower of fixed, cream-colored flares. The horses
Have each seen a share of the truth, though each thinks,
"I'm a maverick. Nothing of this is happening to me,
Though I can understand the language of birds, and
The itinerary of the lights caught in the storm is
fully apparent to me.
Their jousting ends in music much
As trees move more easily in the wind after a summer storm
And is happening in lacy shadows of shore-trees, now,
day after day."

But how late to be regretting all this, even
Bearing in mind that regrets are always late, too late!
To which Orpheus, a bluish cloud with white contours,
Replies that these are of course not regrets at all,
Merely a careful, scholarly setting down of
Unquestioned facts, a record of pebbles along the way.
And no matter how all this disappeared,
Or got where it was going, it is no longer
Material for a poem. Its subject
Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly
While the poem streaked by, its tail afire, a bad
Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward
That the meaning, good or other, can never
Become known. The singer thinks
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages
Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away.
The song is engulfed in an instant in blackness
Which must in turn flood the whole continent
With blackness, for it cannot see. The singer
Must then pass out of sight, not even relieved

Of the evil burthen of the words. Stellation
Is for the few, and comes about much later
When all record of these people and their lives
Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfilm.
A few are still interested in them. "But what about
So-and-so?" is still asked on occasion. But they lie
Frozen and out of touch until an arbitrary chorus
Speaks of a totally different incident with a similar name
In whose tale are hidden syllables
Of what happened so long before that
In some small town, one different summer.

John Ashbery

The Bungalows

Impatient as we were for all of them to join us,
The land had not yet risen into view: gulls had swept the gray steel towers away
So that it profited less to go searching, away over the humming earth
Than to stay in immediate relation to these other things—boxes, store parts,
whatever you wanted to call them—
Whose installedness was the price of further revolutions, so you knew this
combat was the last.
And still the relationship waxed, billowed like scenery on the breeze.

They are the same aren't they,
The presumed landscape and the dream of home
Because the people are all homesick today or desperately sleeping,
Trying to remember how those rectangular shapes
Became so extraneous and so near
To create a foreground of quiet knowledge
In which youth had grown old, chanting and singing wise hymns that
Will sign for old age
And so lift up the past to be persuaded, and be put down again.

The warning is nothing more than an aspirate "h";
The problem is sketched completely, like fireworks mounted on poles:
Complexion of evening, the accurate voices of the others.
During Coca-Cola lessons it becomes patent
Of noise on the left, and we had so skipped a stage that
The great wave of the past, compounded in derision,
Submerged idea and non-dreamer alike
In falsetto starlight like "purity";
Of design that had been the first danger sign
To wash the sticky, icky stuff down the drain—pfui!

How does it feel to be outside and inside at the same time,
The delicious feeling of the air contradicting and secretly abetting
The interior warmth? But the land curdles the dismay in which it's written
Bearing to a final point of folly and doom
The wisdom of these generations.
Look at what you've done to the landscape—
The ice cube, the olive—
There is a perfect tri-city mesh of things
Extending all the way along the river on both sides

With the end left for thoughts on construction
That are always turning to alps and thresholds
Above the tide of others, feeding a European moss rose without glory.

We shall very soon have the pleasure of recording
A period of unanimous tergiversation in this respect
And to make that pleasure the greater, it is worth while
At the risk of tedious iteration, to put first upon record a final protest:
Rather decaying art, genius, inspiration to hold to
An impossible "calque" of reality, than
"The new school of the trivial, rising up on the field of battle,
Something of sludge and leaf-mold," and life
Goes trickling out through the holes, like water through a sieve,
All in one direction.

You who were directionless, and thought it would solve everything if you found
one,
What do you make of this? Just because a thing is immortal
Is that any reason to worship it? Death, after all, is immortal.
But you have gone into your houses and shut the doors, meaning
There can be no further discussion.
And the river pursues its lonely course
With the sky and the trees cast up from the landscape
For green brings unhappiness—le vert Porte malheur.
"The chartreuse mountain on the absinthe plain
Makes the strong man's tears tumble down like rain."

All this came to pass eons ago.
Your program worked out perfectly. You even avoided
The monotony of perfection by leaving in certain flaws:
A backward way of becoming, a forced handshake,
An absent-minded smile, though in fact nothing was left to chance.
Each detail was startlingly clear, as though seen through a magnifying glass,
Or would have been to an ideal observer, namely yourself—
For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar
The way God watches a sinner on the path to redemption,
Sometimes disappearing into valleys, but always on the way,
For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful
As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when completed,
To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount of years.
Who cares about what was there before? There is no going back,
For standing still means death, and life is moving on,

Moving on towards death. But sometimes standing still is also life.

John Ashbery

The Dong With The Luminous Nose

Within a windowed niche of that high hall
I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks
From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night.
Come, Shepherd, and again renew the quest.
And birds sit brooding in the snow.

Continuous as the stars that shine,
When all men were asleep the snow came flying
Near where the dirty Thames does flow
Through caverns measureless to man,
Where thou shalt see the red-gilled fishes leap
And a lovely Monkey with lollipop paws
Where the remote Bermudas ride.

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me:
This is the cock that crowed in the morn.
Who'll be the parson?
Beppo! That beard of yours becomes you not!
A gentle answer did the old Man make:
Farewell, ungrateful traitor,
Bright as a seedsman's packet
Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles.

Obscurest night involved the sky
And brickdust Moll had screamed through half a street:
"Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
Every night and alle,
The happy highways where I went
To the hills of Chankly Bore!"

Where are you going to, my pretty maid?
These lovers fled away into the storm
And it's O dear, what can the matter be?
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple bells they say:
Lay your sleeping head, my love,
On the wide level of the mountain's head,

Thoughtless as monarch oaks, that shade the plain,
In autumn, on the skirts of Bagley Wood.
A ship is floating in the harbour now,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

John Ashbery

The Instruction Manual

As I sit looking out of a window of the building
I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,
And envy them—they are so far away from me!
Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule.
And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning
out of the window a little,
Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!
City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!
But I fancy I see, under the press of having to write the instruction manual,
Your public square, city, with its elaborate little bandstand!
The band is playing Scheherazade by Rimsky-Korsakov.
Around stand the flower girls, handing out rose- and lemon-colored flowers,
Each attractive in her rose-and-blue striped dress (Oh! such shades of rose and
blue),
And nearby is the little white booth where women in green serve you green and
yellow fruit.
The couples are parading; everyone is in a holiday mood.
First, leading the parade, is a dapper fellow
Clothed in deep blue. On his head sits a white hat
And he wears a mustache, which has been trimmed for the occasion.
His dear one, his wife, is young and pretty; her shawl is rose, pink, and white.
Her slippers are patent leather, in the American fashion,
And she carries a fan, for she is modest, and does not want the crowd to see her
face too often.
But everybody is so busy with his wife or loved one
I doubt they would notice the mustachioed man's wife.
Here come the boys! They are skipping and throwing little things on the sidewalk
Which is made of gray tile. One of them, a little older, has a toothpick in his
teeth.
He is silenter than the rest, and affects not to notice the pretty young girls in
white.
But his friends notice them, and shout their jeers at the laughing girls.
Yet soon all this will cease, with the deepening of their years,
And love bring each to the parade grounds for another reason.
But I have lost sight of the young fellow with the toothpick.
Wait—there he is—on the other side of the bandstand,
Secluded from his friends, in earnest talk with a young girl
Of fourteen or fifteen. I try to hear what they are saying

But it seems they are just mumbling something—shy words of love, probably.
She is slightly taller than he, and looks quietly down into his sincere eyes.
She is wearing white. The breeze ruffles her long fine black hair against her olive
cheek.

Obviously she is in love. The boy, the young boy with the toothpick, he is in love
too;

His eyes show it. Turning from this couple,
I see there is an intermission in the concert.

The paraders are resting and sipping drinks through straws
(The drinks are dispensed from a large glass crock by a lady in dark blue),
And the musicians mingle among them, in their creamy white uniforms, and talk
About the weather, perhaps, or how their kids are doing at school.

Let us take this opportunity to tiptoe into one of the side streets.

Here you may see one of those white houses with green trim

That are so popular here. Look—I told you!

It is cool and dim inside, but the patio is sunny.

An old woman in gray sits there, fanning herself with a palm leaf fan.

She welcomes us to her patio, and offers us a cooling drink.

“My son is in Mexico City,” she says. “He would welcome you
too

If he were here. But his job is with a bank there.

Look, here is a photograph of him.”

And a dark-skinned lad with pearly teeth grins out at us from the worn leather
frame.

We thank her for her hospitality, for it is getting late

And we must catch a view of the city, before we leave, from a good high place.

That church tower will do—the faded pink one, there against the fierce blue of
the sky. Slowly we enter.

The caretaker, an old man dressed in brown and gray, asks us how long we have
been in the city, and how we like it here.

His daughter is scrubbing the steps—she nods to us as we pass into the tower.

Soon we have reached the top, and the whole network of the city extends before
us.

There is the rich quarter, with its houses of pink and white, and its crumbling,
leafy terraces.

There is the poorer quarter, its homes a deep blue.

There is the market, where men are selling hats and swatting flies

And there is the public library, painted several shades of pale green and beige.

Look! There is the square we just came from, with the promenaders.

There are fewer of them, now that the heat of the day has increased,

But the young boy and girl still lurk in the shadows of the bandstand.

And there is the home of the little old lady—
She is still sitting in the patio, fanning herself.
How limited, but how complete withal, has been our experience of Guadalajara!
We have seen young love, married love, and the love of an aged mother for her son.
We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at colored houses.
What more is there to do, except stay? And that we cannot do.
And as a last breeze freshens the top of the weathered old tower, I turn my gaze
Back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of Guadalajara.

John Ashbery

The Mauve Notebook

"Say it enough times and it's August."

—Geoffrey G. O'Brien, "Three Years"

On a set you need bush rebels,
that numbing little chair while passing.

If we knock 'em out

seven precincts are going to show up.

It looks like you don't need oil.

I think it'll be fine.

Did she think that might be good,

or for the man who listens to it,

nothing to be done or thought,

(section pending)?

Or for the man who listens to it,
an abrupt yawn, history or the other.

Home economics. Dr. Singalong

can't find his way back.

I don't know about that, but

at her lamps do you still see

the awkward ceremony, too serious?

Leave it that way, imperfect start beyond
where I was going.

Prison outside the perpetual sonata,

the only anxiety,

since you wonder what they don't do,

from your red zero heart page

waiting to touch your face.

Although they know about it and

it literally doesn't exist,

no, stay up and go to sleep,

unless it falls on the right side of the brain

positioned for so many forgeries,

moon nugget...

I don't cut 'em any slack.

Assault on a clean front,

that's a lot to be turning into.

These residents, they start throwing 'em early.
Continue to open your door to mud!

Take the noon balloon to Rangoon,
gutta percha academy,
to the place of ice cream,

because, really, what difference does it make?
When it was time you went home.
Tears and flowers,

see how dirty your hands are.
We had a lovely dime.
Soon it will be seven I ask you.

John Ashbery

The New Higher

You meant more than life to me. I lived through
you not knowing, not knowing I was living.
I learned that you called for me. I came to where
you were living, up a stair. There was no one there.
No one to appreciate me. The legality of it
upset a chair. Many times to celebrate
we were called together and where
we had been there was nothing there,
nothing that is anywhere. We passed obliquely,
leaving no stare. When the sun was done muttering,
in an optimistic way, it was time to leave that there.

Blithely passing in and out of where, blushing shyly
at the tag on the overcoat near the window where
the outside crept away, I put aside the there and now.
Now it was time to stumble anew,
blackening out when time came in the window.
There was not much of it left.
I laughed and put my hands shyly
across your eyes. Can you see now?
Yes I can see I am only in the where
where the blossoming stream takes off, under your window.
Go presently you said. Go from my window.
I am in love with your window I cannot undermine
it, I said.

John Ashbery

The Painter

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
But just as children imagine a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

So there was never any paint on his canvas
Until the people who lived in the buildings
Put him to work: "Try using the brush
As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
Something less angry and large, and more subject
To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer."

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
He chose his wife for a new subject,
Making her vast, like ruined buildings,
As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
Had expressed itself without a brush.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
"My soul, when I paint this next portrait
Let it be you who wrecks the canvas."
The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!"

Others declared it a self-portrait.
Finally all indications of a subject
Began to fade, leaving the canvas
Perfectly white. He put down the brush.

At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
Arose from the overcrowded buildings.

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

John Ashbery

The Problem of Anxiety

Fifty years have passed
since I started living in those dark towns
I was telling you about.
Well, not much has changed. I still can't figure out
how to get from the post office to the swings in the park.
Apple trees blossom in the cold, not from conviction,
and my hair is the color of dandelion fluff.

Suppose this poem were about you - would you
put in the things I've carefully left out:
descriptions of pain, and sex, and how shiftily
people behave toward each other? Naw, that's
all in some book it seems. For you
I've saved the descriptions of chicken sandwiches,
and the glass eye that stares at me in amazement
from the bronze mantel, and will never be appeased.

John Ashbery

These Lacustrine Cities

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,
Though this is only one example.

They emerged until a tower
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love.

Then you are left with an idea of yourself
And the feeling of ascending emptiness of the afternoon
Which must be charged to the embarrassment of others
Who fly by you like beacons.

The night is a sentinel.
Much of your time has been occupied by creative games
Until now, but we have all-inclusive plans for you.
We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle of the desert,

To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of the others be air
To you, pressing you back into a startled dream
As sea-breezes greet a child's face.
But the past is already here, and you are nursing some private project.

The worst is not over, yet I know
You will be happy here. Because of the logic
Of your situation, which is something no climate can outsmart.
Tender and insouciant by turns, you see

You have built a mountain of something,
Thoughtfully pouring all your energy into this single monument,
Whose wind is desire starching a petal,
Whose disappointment broke into a rainbow of tears.

John Ashbery

This Room

The room I entered was a dream of this room.
Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine.
The oval portrait
of a dog was me at an early age.
Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?
You are not even here.

John Ashbery

Uptick

We were sitting there, and
I made a joke about how
it doesn't dovetail: time,
one minute running out
faster than the one in front
it catches up to.
That way, I said,
there can be no waste.
Waste is virtually eliminated.

To come back for a few hours to
the present subject, a painting,
looking like it was seen,
half turning around, slightly apprehensive,
but it has to pay attention
to what's up ahead: a vision.
Therefore poetry dissolves in
brilliant moisture and reads us
to us.
A faint notion. Too many words,
but precious.

John Ashbery

Vetiver

Ages passed slowly, like a load of hay,
As the flowers recited their lines
And pike stirred at the bottom of the pond.
The pen was cool to the touch.
The staircase swept upward
Through fragmented garlands, keeping the melancholy
Already distilled in letters of the alphabet.

It would be time for winter now, its spun-sugar
Palaces and also lines of care
At the mouth, pink smudges on the forehead and cheeks,
The color once known as "ashes of roses."
How many snakes and lizards shed their skins
For time to be passing on like this,
Sinking deeper in the sand as it wound toward
The conclusion. It had all been working so well and now,
Well, it just kind of came apart in the hand
As a change is voiced, sharp
As a fishhook in the throat, and decorative tears flowed
Past us into a basin called infinity.

There was no charge for anything, the gates
Had been left open intentionally.
Don't follow, you can have whatever it is.
And in some room someone examines his youth,
Finds it dry and hollow, porous to the touch.
O keep me with you, unless the outdoors
Embraces both of us, unites us, unless
The birdcatchers put away their twigs,
The fishermen haul in their sleek empty nets
And others become part of the immense crowd
Around this bonfire, a situation
That has come to mean us to us, and the crying
In the leaves is saved, the last silver drops.

John Ashbery

Wet Casements

When Eduard Raban, coming along the passage, walked into the open doorway, he saw that it was raining. It was not raining much.

KAFKA, Wedding Preparations in the Country

The concept is interesting: to see, as though reflected
In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
Their own eyes. A digest of their correct impressions of
Their self-analytical attitudes overlaid by your
Ghostly transparent face. You in falbalas
Of some distant but not too distant era, the cosmetics,
The shoes perfectly pointed, drifting (how long you
Have been drifting; how long I have too for that matter)
Like a bottle-imp toward a surface which can never be
approached,
Never pierced through into the timeless energy of a present
Which would have its own opinions on these matters,
Are an epistemological snapshot of the processes
That first mentioned your name at some crowded cocktail
Party long ago, and someone (not the person addressed)
Overheard it and carried that name around in his wallet
For years as the wallet crumbled and bills slid in
And out of it. I want that information very much today,

Can't have it, and this makes me angry.
I shall use my anger to build a bridge like that
Of Avignon, on which people may dance for the feeling
Of dancing on a bridge. I shall at last see my complete face
Reflected not in the water but in the worn stone floor of my bridge.

I shall keep to myself.
I shall not repeat others' comments about me.

John Ashbery

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