John Ashbery Poems

Some Trees

These are amazing: each
Joining a neighbor, as though speech
Were a still performance.
Arranging by chance

To meet as far this morning
From the world as agreeing
With it, you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try

To tell us we are:
That their merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may touch, love, explain.

And glad not to have invented
Some comeliness, we are surrounded:
A silence already filled with noises,
A canvas on which emerges

A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
Place in a puzzling light, and moving,
Our days put on such reticence
These accents seem their own defense.

A Man of Words

His case inspires interest
But little sympathy; it is smaller
Than at first appeared. Does the first nettle
Make any difference as what grows
Becomes a skit? Three sides enclosed,
The fourth open to a wash of the weather,
Exits and entrances, gestures theatrically meant
To punctuate like doubled-over weeds as
The garden fills up with snow?
Ah, but this would have been another, quite other
Entertainment, not the metallic taste
In my mouth as I look away, density black as gunpowder
In the angles where the grass writing goes on,
Rose-red in unexpected places like the pressure
Of fingers on a book suddenly snapped shut.

Those tangled versions of the truth are
Combed out, the snarls ripped out
And spread around. Behind the mask
Is still a continental appreciation
Of what is fine, rarely appears and when it does is already
Dying on the breeze that brought it to the threshold
Of speech. The story worn out from telling
All diaries are alike, clear and cold, with
The outlook for continued cold. They are placed
Horizontal, parallel to the earth,
Like the unencumbering dead. Just time to reread this
And the past slips through your fingers, wishing you were there.

Paradoxes and Oxymorons

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don’t have it.
You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

This poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot be.
What’s a plain level? It is that and other things,
Bringing a system of them into play. Play?
Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know it
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.
It has been played once more. I think you exist only
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren’t there
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.

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 Sweet’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.

**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.