

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.