

## Four poems of John Ashbery from the volume *Planisphere*

### ALCOVE

Is it possible that spring could be  
once more approaching? We forget each time  
what a mindless business it is, porous like sleep,  
adrift on the horizon, refusing to take sides, "mugwump  
of the final hour," lest an agenda—horrors!—be imputed to it,  
and the whole point of its being spring collapse  
like a hole dug in sand. It's breathy, though,  
you have to say that for it.

And should further seasons coagulate  
into years, like spilled, dried paint, why,  
who's to say we weren't provident? We indeed  
looked out for others as though they mattered, and they,  
catching the spirit, came home with us, spent the night  
in an alcove from which their breathing could be heard clearly.  
But it's not over yet. Terrible incidents happen  
daily. That's how we get around obstacles.

### THE BURNING CANDLE

That's what makes me feel that way.  
A brief departure from the truth,  
rejoining it up ahead: nothing to tell,  
really. We grew up inside it.

I was dead wrong about that,  
what the burning candle knew, confided  
only to a few intimates. Then it was off  
again, meaning on. Arguably, upstate

one of our business noses discerned  
the flair, realized in a flash what the  
consequences were, took the necessary  
measures slowly. Then we

all knew what the awful thing would turn out to be,  
how it would stay only briskly,  
leaving not much of a souvenir behind.  
Every face is that of a dinner guest.

Your generation doesn't have the propensity  
to figure out light. It needs what it has—  
colorful costumes, a lard sandwich. A "forgotten  
elegance." It won't get better after this.

**YOU HAVEN'T RECEIVED  
THE LETTERS YET?**

And you'll see how it goes.  
Since the day in front of you  
is a ring toss, what about other egresses?

Not looking presidential  
is what it boils down to, I told you to  
keep the pictures under your belt.

Or these words: how do you expect me  
to imagine our plight if this room has no context?  
We were here once before, that we can tell,

but otherwise all is madness and hushed  
compliance. The dog goes along the wall,  
it has finished for the day. Other tropes slow

us, action is a glimmer at the edge  
of a well. We saw and thought so many things,  
couldn't explain them even to witnesses,

charming as they were. In the end a piece of silk  
is our reward, wide as a mountain's flank  
and caked with curious chevrons.

**ZERO PERCENTAGE**

So call it untitled, but  
don't imagine you'll be let off the hook:  
The title will find it as surely  
as a heat-seeking missile locks on  
an asteroid. Down below, armies  
and oceans of taxis will squawk unfeelingly.  
The title always wins.

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