

ASHBERYANA

A Setting of Four Poems of John Ashbery

For Baritone
with the Accompaniment of
Trombone, String Quartet, and Piano

- I. Recitative: *Outside My Window the Japanese* . . .
- II. Scherzo: (a) *Laughing Gravy*
(b) *Dear Sir or Madam*
- III. Finale: *The Laughter of Dead Men*

OUTSIDE MY WINDOW THE JAPANESE . . .

Outside my window the Japanese driving range
shivers in its mesh veils, skinny bride
of soon-to-be-spring, ravenous, rapturous. Why is it here?
A puzzle. And what was it doing before, then? An earlier
puzzle. I like how it wraps itself
in not-quite wind—
 sure enough,
the time is up. What else do you have in your hand?
Open your hand, please. My elder seraph
just woke up, is banging the coffee-pot lid
into place. See! the coffee flows
crazily to its nest, the doldrums are awake,
jumping up and down on tiptoe, night-blindness ended.

And from where *you* stand,
how many possible equations does it spell out?

My hair's just snoring back.
The coprophagic earth yields another of its
minute reasons, turns to a quivering mush,
recovers, staggers to its feet, touches the sky
with its yardstick, walks back to the place of received,
enthusiastic entities. Another year . . . And if we had known last spring
what the buildings knew then, what defeat, it would have turned to mud
all the same in us, waved us down the escalator,
past the counter with free samples of fudge, to where the hostess stands.
This was never my idea, shards, she says. This
is where the anonymous donors carved their initials in my book,
to be a puzzle for jaycees to come, as a nesting-ground
is to an island. Oh, we'd waddle
often, there, stepping in and out of the boat
as though nobody knew what time it was, or cared
which lid the horizon was. We'd get to know
each other in time, and till then it was all a camp meeting, hail-
fellow-well-met, and the barstools

reflected the ceiling's gummy polish, to the starboard
where purple kings sit, and it was too late for today,
the newspapers had already been printed, telling their tale
along avenues, husks of driftwood
washed ashore again and again, speechless, spun out of control.
What a gorgeous sunset, cigarette case, how tellingly
the coiled rope is modelled, what perfume
in that sound of thunder, invisible! And you wonder
why I came back? Perhaps this will refresh your memory,
skateboard, roller skates, the binomial theorem picked out in
brutish, swabbed gasps. All the way to the escape clause
he kept insisting he'd done nothing wrong, and then—pouf!—it was
curtains for him and us, excepting these splinters
of our perpetual remainder, reminder
of all those days to come, and those others, so far back
in the mothering past.

LAUGHING GRAVY

The crisis has just passed.
Uh oh, here it comes again,
looking for someone to blame itself on, you, I . . .

All these people coming in . . .
The last time we necked
I noticed this lobe on your ear.
Please, tell me we may begin.

All the wolves in the wolf factory paused
at noon, for a moment of silence.

DEAR SIR OR MADAM

After only a week of taking your pills
I confess I am seized with a boundless energy:
My plate fills up even as I scarf vegetable fragments
from the lucent blue around us. My firmament,

as I see it, was never this impartial.
The body's discomfiture, bodies of moonlit beggars,
sex in all its strangeness: Everything conspires
to hide the mess of inner living, raze
the skyscraper of inching desire.

Kill the grandchildren, leave a trail
of paper over the long interesting paths in the wood.
Transgress. In a word, be other than yourself
in turning into your love-soaked opposite. Plant
his parterre with antlers, burping
statue of when-was-the-last-time-you-saw Eros;

go get a job in the monument industry.

THE LAUGHTER OF DEAD MEN

Candid jeremiads drizzle from his lips,
the store looks as if it isn't locked today.
A gauzy syllabus happens, smoke is stencilled
on the moss-green highway.

This is what we invented the suburbs for,
so we could look back at the lovable dishonest city,
tears clogging our arteries.

The nausea and pain we released to float in the sky.
The dead men are summoning our smiles and indifference.
We climb the brilliant ladder toward their appetites,
homophobes, hermaphrodites, clinging together like socks
hanging out to dry on a glaring day in winter.

You could have told me all about that
but of course preferred not to,
so fearful of the first-person singular
and all the singular adventures it implies.

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