

John Ashbery (1927-)

“Voyage in the Blue” from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

As on a festal day in early spring 1
The tidelands maneuver and the air is quick with imitations:
Ships, hats appear. And those,
The mind-readers, who are never far off. But
To get to know them we must avoid them. 5

And so, into our darkness life seeps,
Keeping its part of the bargain. But what of
Houses, standing ruined, desolate just now:
Is this not also beautiful and wonderful?
For where a mirage has once been, life must be. 10

The pageant, growing ever more curious, reaches
An ultimate turning point. Now everything is going to be
Not dark, but on the contrary, charged with so much light
It looks dark, because things are now packed so closely together.
We see it with our teeth. And once this 15

Distant corner is rounded, everything
Is not to be made new again. We shall be inhabited
In the old way, as ideal things came to us,
Yet in the having we shall be growing, rising above it
Into an admixture of deep blue enameled sky and bristly gold stars. 20

The way the date came in
Made no sense, it never had any.
It should have been a caution to you
To listen more carefully to the words
Under the wind as it moved towards us. 25

Perhaps, sinking into the pearl stain of that passionate eye
The minutes came to seem the excrement of all they were passing through,
A time when colors no longer mattered.
They are to us qualities we were not meant to catch
As being too far removed from our closed-in state. 30

And ideally the chime of this
Will come to have the fascination of a remembered thing
Without avatars, or so remote, like a catastrophe
In some unheard-of country, that our concern
Will be another fact in a long list of important facts. 35

You and I and the dog
Are here, this is what matters for now.
In other times things will happen that cannot possibly involve us now
And this is good, a true thing, perpendicular to the ground
Like the freshest, least complicated and earliest of memories. 40

We have them all, those people, and now they have us.
Their decision was limited, waiting for us to make the first move.
But now that we have done so the results are unfathomable, as though
A single implication could sway the whole universe on its stem.
We are fashionably troubled by this new edge of what had seemed finite 45

Before and now seems infinite though encircled by gradual doubts
Of whatever came over us. Perhaps the old chic was less barren,
More something to be looked forward to, than this
Morning in the orchards under an unclouded sky,
This painful freshness of each thing being exactly itself. 50

Perhaps all that is wanted is time.
People cover us, they are older
And have lived before. They want no part of us,
Only to be dying, and over with it.
Out of step with all that is passing along with them 55

But living with it deep into the midst of things.
It is civilization that counts, after all, they seem
To be saying, and we are as much a part of it as anybody else
Only we think less about it, even not at all, until some
Fool comes shouting into the forest at nightfall 60

News of some thing we know and care little of,
As the distant castle rejoices to the joyous
Sound of hooves, releasing rooks straight up into the faultless air
And meanwhile weighs its shadow ever heavier on the mirroring
Surface of the river, surrounding the little boat with three figures in it. 65