

JOHN ASHBERY

THE MYSTERIOUS X

Bleeding on the map
Boats of the
Funds—leaders in the
—anything like that

A vague regret
But foreigners—bringing home
Horse racing
But dog racing is

You have seen them
Are they guilty?
I think the point the Captain
Impossible down—shade—

Quickly in a cove, cutting
That the channel would run
The type I had
In building a fire.

Someone on the main street
Today they're nurses
But dog racing is totally unorganized.
I didn't see how he. I

Asked jumping up. I let my hand fall
I have been assigned
My guilt was as great as theirs
All five in the room

To turn to me to be
Until that moment, seemed nothing
That one quickly. his head in the door
He was gone. I said

But I know it was my
Urged a boy across the
We repeat. I quoted from
Kneeling too, and groaning

Suddenly, and in ponds
He is sorry for his
Where we told. An afternoon,
The brothel where

Racing an objectively
Dropped to the top.
He poised them

On the balls of that
Moment later, I came
Mouth of the cave.
The camera

Shoulder
Stout-looking board
Wedged loosely
The board, unexplained

We got two of them
Apart to be
We put it behind the
Light into the cave

Making out forms of some
The odor was stronger
Through the intersection
Down the reverse slope

Hiding his hand. Which had fallen
Across the
A serious
Top of the hill. Boards which had fallen

The half-light
And I was meeting the gaze
For the third time
Through the canvas

Fastened a white handker-
His back of the belt
We followed,
Keeping our faces down

Of our target hill
Of the hill he dropped
Hurried on
Disapproving its

And we stopped it—
Working to restore
Rolled across it.
Not to silhouette himself.

We did at the same
We had made in the afternoon.
It was completely
Quiet all around us.

Though,
When we turned from our work
Then we were at our
So as

To look out from the
We could see an occasional
To move the stones away.
Was easy to pry away the

And slid my stomach across
I jumped again
Our lights as steady as
As meaning full of sound

The place seemed to have been
There should be
The year before
Still speaking in

There were a few tin
Which flowers have been
This particular
Was considered filled

And you've stopped.
Is a good center—from here to fan out
The game ending.

A loss of masculinity
Economics, as well as
Politics—crawled down to
Colored dream

That is, we green coffee
To get a break of last summer
Under wreck of
The rain sea

Impatiently black eyes
To engage in the navy
With exact knowledge
In theater, the arts,

Thrills—to assure continuity.
And to meet people
And to little concern
And in the garage—valentine

But he called out
In the same low voice.
Oh? I never saw
Glimpse of light

Ain't nobody here but
Bones. For the next few days
I worked it out—cutting
With dull and filing

Have you done to break through
In its finest form
A superior achievement
With the film he was developing

Had found us a place
If the family of nations
And even the most remote
On the lost island, a perfectly life

1959

out of the way. And the world comes clean in moments
like that for survivors. The world comes clean as clouds
in summer, the pure puffed white, soft birds careening
in and out, our lives with a chance to drift on slow
over the world, our bomb bays empty, the target forgotten,
the enemy ignored. Nice to meet you finally after
all that mindless hate. Next time, if you want to be sure
you survive, sit on the bridge I'm trying to hit and wave.
I'm coming in on course but nervous and my cross hairs flutter.
Wherever you are on earth, you are safe. I'm aiming but
my bombs are candy and I've lost the lead plane. Your friend,
Dick.

* * *

"All Kinds of Caresses" by John Ashbery was published in the Spring 1976 Chicago Review. Ashbery had recently won the National Book Award, the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for his collection, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror. Like his cohort in the New York school, Ashbery is given to painterly abstraction and to appropriations of the language of everyday life. His poetry is famously difficult; as he writes in the following poem, "It isn't absolutely clear."

* * *

JOHN ASHBERY

All Kinds of Caresses

The code-name losses and compensations
Float in and around us through the window.
It helps to know what direction the body comes from.
It isn't absolutely clear. In words
Bitter as a field of mustard we
Copy certain parts, then decline them.
These are not only gestures: they imply
Complex relations with one another. Sometimes one
Stays on for awhile, a trace of lamp black
In a room full of gray furniture.

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I now know all there is to know
About my body. I know too the direction
My feet are pointed in. For the time being
It is enough to suspend judgment, by which I don't mean
Forever, since judgment is also a storm, i.e., from
Somewhere else, sinking pleasure craft at moorings,
Looking, kicking in the sky.

Try to move with these hard blues,
These harsh yellows, these hands and feet.
Our gestures have taken us farther into the day
Than tomorrow will understand.

They live us. And we understand them when they sing,
Long after the perfume has worn off.
In the night the eye chisels a new phantom.

* * *

Linda Pastan published "The Five Stages of Grief" in the Spring 1977 issue of Chicago Review, shortly before it became the title poem of her 1978 collection. That book won the di Castagnola Award. PASTAN recently wrote to us about this poem:

I wrote "The Five Stages of Grief" at a time when a close friend's traumatic divorce coincided with my reading of Elizabeth Kubler Ross, who had defined those stages. It seemed to me that my friend's reaction to the loss of a spouse followed the stages one is said to go through when coping with one's own imminent death or the death of someone loved. If I remember correctly, the poem seemed to write itself. Later, I made it the title poem of my third collection of poetry. (That book itself was divided into five sections, one for each of grief's stages, and each poem seemed to fit magically into the right place.) Since that time, "The Five Stages of Grief" has been anthologized in a number of places, most happily for me in On Doctoring (1991), edited by Richard Reynolds and John Stone, which, I have been told, is distributed to every entering medical student in the country. The poem has also been used in the curriculum of several courses about loss and grief.

* * *

IMPERFECT SYMPATHIES

So why not, indeed, try something new?
Actually, I can think of a number of reasons.
Wait—suddenly I can't think of any!
The present is here, its birds and bees,
fons et origo of life, *folie de toucher*
that infects even the civilized classes—
none of these are a reason to “start with” life,
though some are undeniably a veiled warning
back from the precipice where love dwells
along with fetishism and nympholepsy.
No need for these not to cohabit as long as the horses
can stand it.

Downtown was mesmerized
another year. Just who are these strangers
who come on so strong?

Yet it is good to remember
one's humble origins, and reflect
on how we came to look this way.
What were we thinking all along? Who charted
this anxious *mappemonde*, barren of side roads
and identity crises?

There comes a time when the fleece
fills your mouth, but there was so much left to say.

THE RECIPE

*What did you have to go and do that
for, you fathead? Don't you ever get
tired of being noble?*

—*The Palm Beach Story*

I hope you're not listening (but you are,
somewhere).

Do you still need the handkerchief? No,
just a permanent address.

I figured the exclusionary forces were back
on a roll. The "water balloon" effect
detonated, more rainbow than rain.

You have the papers, etc. So...

Lie in that grass. It's what we came for.
Nothing could ever be that velvety again,
so close to the ground. My gaze fathoms whiskers.
It wasn't to be. We were on the wrong set
at the wrong time, even as the cameras rolled.

"You must be Mary." "No, I don't believe we've ever met."

The recipe vectored a long-ago collision by a pier
in and out of fins of sun,
now labeled and put away, with much else,
and too little of what was needed
that particular afternoon
close to the source of warmth and confusion.

Did I say it would be like this?

Don't blame me. On the other hand, if you want to,
and I could be chandler, greengrocer, fruiterer,
fishwife, all-around good guy, we can handle it,
air differences, table mutual misgivings and
give in just once to the sound that brought us here.
Why not? I'm game. Say no to nothing is my credo
and pocket-veto. All joiners are smooth, low-bidders
and incurable romantics alike.

I'll post the banns, send out invitations, polish toenails,
describe moot situations to the skeptical. You rest the same.

SLEEPER WEDDING

The bells smoking beside me,
the salad of Nevada
everywhere ankle deep,
my thirst for everything overtakes me.
Why am I with this sandwich
in open country?

Why do the dogs make merry on the shore?
The Celebes celebs attend
to what is right
and gooey.

I even brushed 'em.

The blue jays wanted to build a think tank
three thousand feet in diameter,
thirty stories below the earth or above it.
The king told me I was a master
who needed to study, but
a master all the same.
My answer was who needs kings.

And on that note
maybe we could have it a little warmer in here.

A KIND OF CHILL

He had a brother in Schenectady
but that was long, long ago. These days, crows
punch a timeclock on a forgotten tract of land
not far from the Adirondacks. They keep fit
and in the swim with lists of what to do tomorrow:
cawing, regretting the past absolutely.
That spruces up the whole occasion
and energizes them in ways they never dreamed of.
His afternoon was on a roll,
and, as with anything else, he got sick of it.
No claims to adjust. No hovering in dark alleys
waiting for a priest, or the police,
most likely, if this were the end of the fiscal year.

LETTERBOX

Dear *Chicago Review*,

In Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young's "Numbers Trouble," in the most recent issue of *Chicago Review* [53:2/3], Eileen Myles is quoted as follows:

I found out a few years back that for many years the recommendation from John Ashbery that I had been using opened with the language: "Eileen Myles is a militant lesbian." I sent it for jobs where I definitely knew people on the committee. Finally a total stranger at one of those institutions that maintain recommendations told me on the QT that I shouldn't use it. I managed to get my hands on it and I was stunned. That's when I felt totally outside the poetry community, 'cause I realized that no one protected me. Nobody thought it was politically offensive or destructive. They probably thought it was funny.

I have always liked Eileen and admired her poetry and thought that I had written her a positive recommendation. I'm enclosing a copy of the letter so that readers can determine if it was "politically offensive or destructive."

Poet, militant lesbian, critical gadfly, and unsuccessful 1992 presidential candidate, Eileen Myles has been shaking up the downtown poetry scene for quite some time, including several years as the director of Saint Mark's Poetry Project. Her political activism and uncanny knack for making people feel uncomfortable and awake have sometimes obscured the fact of what a fine poet she is. Indeed, her poetry often works in diverging directions, chanting softly and beautifully the harsh if humorous realities that combine to make whatever life a poet can piece together today. I have observed her teaching, and noticed that her mere presence seems to electrify an eager group of students. She's always sharp, always there—a valuable asset to any teaching institution.

John Ashbery
New York, NY

ELLIOTT CARTER & JOHN ASHBERY

The Origins of *Syringa* (1978)

360 West 22nd Street, 7-M
New York, New York 10011
2 March 1975

Dear Elliott,

I have been encouraged to apply for a grant from the Composer-Librettist Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, and was wondering if you might possibly be interested in collaborating on a vocal work. This might be a libretto, a song or a group of songs, or a work in which poetry (as well as the voice) is treated as an instrument in a group of instruments. I feel that such a treatment might be possible since I think that my poetry somehow has the logic of music rather than that of poetry.

I realize that you probably already have many commissions, especially with the Bi-Centenary coming up, and I of course don't know whether writing for the voice interests you. At any rate, if the project is for any reason impracticable, please don't feel hesitant about saying so. I feel it is rather presumptuous of me to suggest a collaboration between us; my only excuse is that you are my favorite contemporary composer and your music has been a great inspiration to me. Incidentally your Brass Quintet was one of the most beautiful new pieces of music I have heard in a long time.

I look forward to hearing from you. My very best to Helen and yourself.

Sincerely,

John Ashbery

§

Dear John,

Forgive me for not answering your interesting proposal at once. I have kept putting off the reply because I found the prospect of the collaboration you propose very stimulating. I am at present setting some poems of Elizabeth Bishop in fulfillment of a commission for the *Speculum Musicae* and I can see that the matter of a musical presentation involving singing and texts needs to be rethought, but how? I, too, am an admirer of your poetry and could imagine that we might join in something absorbing. However, in starting to write you each time, I find there are so many practical, etc., aspects, including a jammed up next year or two for me, that I have decided that we should talk the matter over before going any further. I don't have your 'phone no. Mine is 929-1618, would you call soon and let's make a date.

Very best wishes,

Elliott Carter

March 30, 1975

§

June 2, 1975

Dear Elliott,

Here are my dramatic works, or most of them. They all date from the 'fifties. (I am working on a play now, though). Sorry the type of "The Compromise" is so small. The page had to be reduced to fit the XEROX machine.

These are very different from my present writing, and I don't think any text for our collaboration would bear much resemblance to these.

Best,
John

§

1. = 60

lared flare. the horizon has seen a share of the

most with, with "on a" ... nothing of this

is fully a part to me. Their joining ends in music much as used

more more easily in the wind after a summer storm and is happen in

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SIRINGA 1978 E. CARTER

Manuscript sketch of *Syringa*, August 12, 1977.

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4 polka quickly told him

SYRINGA
1978
R. GAUTHIER

leave it all with you like what you

who walk at a dull pace few care to follow, except a few birds

Manuscript sketch of *Syringa*, December 19, 1977.

ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΗ P.3

His noon and rival the tiny, sparkling yellow flowers
Crowling around the brink of the quarry, encapsulizes
The different weights of the things.

But it isn't enough
To just go on singing. Orpheus realized this
And didn't mind so much about his reward being in heaven
After the Bacchantes had torn his apart, driven
Half out of their minds by his music, what it was doing to them.

Some say it was for his treatment of Eurydice.
But probably the music had more to do with it, and
The way music passes, emblematic
Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it
And say it is good or bad. You must
Wait till it's over. "The end crowns all,"
Meaning also that the "tableaux"
Is wrong. For although memories, of a season, for example,
Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure
That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting;
It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,
Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,
Harsh strokes. And to ask more than this
Is to become the toasting reeds of that slow,
Powerful stream, the trailing grasses
Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action
No more than this.

Then in the lowering gentian sky
Electric twitches are faintly apparent first, then burst forth
Into a shower of fixed, cream-colored flares. The horses
Have each seen a share of the truth, though each thinks,
"I'm a maverick. Nothing of this is happening to me,
Though I can understand the language of birds, and
The itinerary of the lights caught in the storm
Is fully apparent to me.
Their jousting ends in music much
As trees move more easily in the wind after a summer storm
And is happening in lacy shadows of shore-trees.

ὄσπερ γὰρ φίλα βότρυς, ὡς με φάνηκε
ὄσπερ ἐν τῇ
ἀλλὰ καὶ μὴ γλίσσασα ρίαν, λίσσεν δ'
ἀδύνα χρὸς τῆρ ἱταλιόθραυκα,
ὀπταίται δ' ἄλλοι ὄραμα, ἐπιρρο-
θεοὶ δ' ἄκουα.

Ἔσοι βαρὺ μ' ὁ λυσιπέτης ἴσως.
γλυκύτερον ἀμάχανον ὄραμα.

ΣΤΕΡΗΜΑ ΤΥΠΟΣ ΣΩΖΩΝ

ἀφοῖ δ' ἔδωκε
ἴσως ἦτορ ἀλλόθεν ἐλπίδα δὲ ἴσως
μαλίνω, ἀποσπασμένων δὲ φύλλων
αἶμα κατάρου.

Ἦρι μὲν αἶτε Κυδωνίας
μαλίνες ἐρρόμενοι ῥοὰς τ'
ἐκ ποταμῶν, τῆρ Παρθένω
ἀκροὶ ἀπάρτου, αἶ τ' ἀναμύθε
αἰθέρων ἀκροαίωσιν ὄσ' ἔρροσιν
οἰνάρου βαλόντων. ἀφοῖ δ' ἔρροσιν
ἀκροαίωσιν κατάρου ὄραμα-
δὲ τῶν στερητῶν φύλλων

σὺν τὰρ Κυπρίους ἀλάστει μολ-
αίωσιν ἔρροσιν ἀμύθε
ἐμφορῆσιν πύθων φύλλωσιν
ἀμύθεσιν ὄραμα.

Ὀρφεὺς ἀπέβη ἀσπασμένω
ἢ Ἄδου,
φύλλον δὲ.

Love has unbound my
limbs and set me
shaking, a monster
bitter-sweet and my
unmaking.

Saving the seed of fire

Cool waters tumble,
mingling as they go
Through apple boughs
Softly the leaves are
dancing. Down streams
a slumber on the drowsy
flow, my soul entrancing.

In the spring quinces and
pomegranates are watered
by the river, in the un-
defiled garden of maidens
vines grow with shading
vine-leaves. For me Eros
gives no season of rest,
and burning lightning
and freezing winds a
scorching frenzy sent by
the Cyprian strikes with
fearless force attacking
the heart.

Orpheus
they sent back with failure from
Hades, showing him only a wraith

ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΗ P.4

now, day after day."

But how late to be regretting all this, even
Bearing in mind that regrets are always late, too late
To which Orpheus, a bluish cloud with white contours,
Replies that these are of course not regrets at all.
Merely a careful, scholarly setting down of
Unquestioned facts, a record of pebbles along the way.
And no matter how all this disappeared,
Or got where it was going, it is no longer
Material for a poem. Its subject
Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly
While the poem straggled by, its tail alive, a had
Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward
That the meaning, good or other, can never
Become known. The singer thinks
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages
Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away.
The song is engulfed in an instant in blackness
Which must in turn flood the whole continent
With blackness, for it cannot see. The singer
Must then pass out of sight, not even relieved
Of the evil burthen of the words.

Stellification

Is for the few, and comes about such later
When all record of these people and their lives
Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfils.
A few are still interested in them. "But what about
So-and-so?" is still asked on occasion. But they live
Frozen and out of touch until an arbitrary chorus
Speaks of a totally different incident with a similar name
In whose tale are hidden syllables
Of what happened so long before that
In some small town, one indifferent summer.

ἔσπερ τῆρ γυναικῶν
ὄσ' ἦν ἴσως ἀσπῆρ δὲ οὐ
δύναται, ἀπὸ μαλίνων φύλλων
ἀδύνα, ἀπὸ τῶν ἀσπῆρ φύλλων
καὶ οὐ τῶν ἀσπῆρ
τῶν ἔρροσιν ἀμύθεσιν

ἀφοῖ καὶ ἔδωκε
ἴσως ἦτορ ἀλλόθεν ἐλπίδα δὲ ἴσως
μαλίνω, ἀποσπασμένων δὲ φύλλων
αἶμα κατάρου.

τῶν δὲ λυσιπέτης ἀμύθεσιν
ἴσως ἦτορ ἀλλόθεν ἐλπίδα δὲ ἴσως
μαλίνω, ἀποσπασμένων δὲ φύλλων
αἶμα κατάρου.

Ἦρι μὲν αἶτε Κυδωνίας
μαλίνες ἐρρόμενοι ῥοὰς τ'
ἐκ ποταμῶν, τῆρ Παρθένω
ἀκροὶ ἀπάρτου, αἶ τ' ἀναμύθε
αἰθέρων ἀκροαίωσιν ὄσ' ἔρροσιν
οἰνάρου βαλόντων. ἀφοῖ δ' ἔρροσιν
ἀκροαίωσιν κατάρου ὄραμα-
δὲ τῶν στερητῶν φύλλων

σὺν τὰρ Κυπρίους ἀλάστει μολ-
αίωσιν ἔρροσιν ἀμύθε
ἐμφορῆσιν πύθων φύλλωσιν
ἀμύθεσιν ὄραμα.

Ὀρφεὺς ἀπέβη ἀσπασμένω
ἢ Ἄδου,
φύλλον δὲ.

for whom he came: her real self they would not
bestow, for he was accounted to have gone upon
a coward's quest, too like the minstrel that he was,

all things I move
you cannot step twice into the same stream.
he likens the universe to the current of a
river.

and soon, while he played shilly on his
lyre, he lifted up his voice and sang, and lovely was
the sound of his voice that followed. He sang the
story of the deathless gods and of
the dark turns, "how at the last they
came to be, and how each one
received his portion. First among the gods he
honoured Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, in his
song.

ΦΕΟΣ, ΔΟΥ, ΙΟΥ
στίλλου, κομίζου, ἄσπερ τῶν μαρτύρων σου.

σῶμα, σῆμα.
τῆρ ψυχῆσιν -

ΣΤΕΡΗΜΑ ΤΥΠΟΣ ΣΩΖΩΝ

ἴσως ἦτορ ἀλλόθεν ἐλπίδα δὲ ἴσως
μαλίνω, ἀποσπασμένων δὲ φύλλων
αἶμα κατάρου.

Ὀρφεὺς ἀπέβη ἀσπασμένω
ἢ Ἄδου,
φύλλον δὲ.

Saving the seed of fire

Body is the sign
of the soul.

Of Isis and Uranus were
born the children Osiris and Typhon;

σῶμα, σῆμα

Drafts of the *Syngia* libretto by Elliott Carter, with poem text by John Ashbery in the left column and Greek texts of the Orpheus myth in the right column.

NOTE

I was privileged to meet Elliott and Helen through the painter Richard Hennessy in the late 1960s. I had been a huge fan of his work for some years before that, and after we met I think we mentioned the possibility of collaborating on a work, but nothing came of it. Then a friend told me of the composers and librettists grants given by the National Endowment for the Arts, saying that it was seldom applied to since not many people knew about it. Our application was successful, and Elliott and I set about trying to write a suitable text, but each one I showed to Elliott seemed to interest him less than my poem “*Syringa*,” which had already been published. It occurred to me that that was of little consequence compared to the possibilities Elliott might see in the poem, and that the foundation would hardly object to this detail in light of the prestigious work that was sure to result. Indeed, no one ever asked us to return the award money and *Syringa* remains one of Carter’s key works, which I shall always be happy to have been part of.

John Ashbery

This note, originally commissioned by the Amphion Foundation, was published along with statements by many other artists, friends, and colleagues in a pamphlet commemorating Elliott Carter’s life and career on the occasion of his death in 2012. Both the note and the letters published on pages 114–115 are copyright © 2014 by John Ashbery. All rights reserved. Used by arrangement with Georges Borchardt, Inc. for the author.

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