

John Ashbery

houseboat days

POEMS



Houseboat Days

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Publisher's Note

Long before they were ever written down, poems were organized in lines. Since the invention of the printing press, readers have become increasingly conscious of looking at poems, rather than hearing them, but the function of the poetic line remains primarily sonic. Whether a poem is written in meter or in free verse, the lines introduce some kind of pattern into the ongoing syntax of the poem's sentences; the lines make us experience those sentences differently. Reading a prose poem, we feel the strategic absence of line.

But precisely because we've become so used to looking at poems, the function of line can be hard to describe. As James Longenbach writes in *The Art of the Poetic Line*, "Line has no identity except in relation to other elements in the poem, especially the syntax of the poem's sentences. It is not an abstract concept, and its qualities cannot be described generally or schematically. It cannot be associated reliably with the way we speak or breathe. Nor can its function be understood merely from its visual appearance on the page." Printed books altered our relationship to poetry by allowing us to see the lines more readily. What new challenges do electronic reading devices pose?

In a printed book, the width of the page and the size of the type are fixed. Usually, because the page is wide enough and the type small enough, a line of poetry fits comfortably on the page: What you see is what you're supposed to hear as a unit of sound. Sometimes, however, a long line may exceed the width of the page; the line continues, indented just below the beginning of the line. Readers of printed books have become accustomed to this convention, even if it may on some occasions seem ambiguous—particularly when some of the lines of a poem are already indented from the left-hand margin of the page.

But unlike a printed book, which is stable, an ebook is a shape-shifter. Electronic type may be reflowed across a galaxy of applications and interfaces, across a variety of screens, from phone to tablet to computer. And because the reader of an ebook is empowered to change the size of the type, a poem's original lineation may seem to be altered in many different ways. As the size of the type increases, the likelihood of any given line running over increases.

Our typesetting standard for poetry is designed to register that when a line of poetry exceeds the width of the screen, the resulting run-over line should be indented, as it might be in a printed book. Take a look at John Ashbery's "Disclaimer" as it appears in two different type sizes.

proofreading, nearly every poem can be set electronically in accordance with its author's intention. And in some regards, electronic typesetting increases our capacity to transcribe a poem accurately: in a printed book, there may be no way to distinguish a stanza break from a page break, but with a digital reader, one has only to resize the text in question to discover if a break at the bottom of a page is intentional or accidental.

Our goal in bringing out poetry in fully reflowable digital editions is to honor the sanctity of line and stanza as meticulously as possible—to allow readers to feel assured that the way the lines appear on the screen is an accurate embodiment of the way the author wants the lines to sound. Ever since poems began to be written down, the manner in which they ought to be written down has seemed equivocal; ambiguities have always resulted. By taking advantage of the technologies available in our time, our goal is to deliver the most satisfying reading experience possible.

Street Musicians

One died, and the soul was wrenched out
Of the other in life, who, walking the streets
Wrapped in an identity like a coat, sees on and on
The same corners, volumetrics, shadows
Under trees. Farther than anyone was ever
Called, through increasingly suburban airs
And ways, with autumn falling over everything:
The plush leaves the chattels in barrels
Of an obscure family being evicted
Into the way it was, and is. The other beached
Glimpses of what the other was up to:
Revelations at last. So they grew to hate and forget each other.

So I cradle this average violin that knows
Only forgotten showtunes, but argues
The possibility of free declamation anchored
To a dull refrain, the year turning over on itself
In November, with the spaces among the days
More literal, the meat more visible on the bone.
Our question of a place of origin hangs
Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,
In coves with the water always seeping up, and left
Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared
On the landscape, to make of us what we could.

The Other Tradition

They all came, some wore sentiments
Emblazoned on T-shirts, proclaiming the lateness
Of the hour, and indeed the sun slanted its rays
Through branches of Norfolk Island pine as though
Politely clearing its throat, and all ideas settled
In a fuzz of dust under trees when it's drizzling:
The endless games of Scrabble, the boosters,
The celebrated omelette au Cantal, and through it
The roar of time plunging unchecked through the sluices
Of the days, dragging every sexual moment of it
Past the lenses: the end of something.
Only then did you glance up from your book,
Unable to comprehend what had been taking place, or
Say what you had been reading. More chairs
Were brought, and lamps were lit, but it tells
Nothing of how all this proceeded to materialize
Before you and the people waiting outside and in the next
Street, repeating its name over and over, until silence
Moved halfway up the darkened trunks,
And the meeting was called to order.

I still rememb

How they found you, after a dream, in your thimble hat,
Studious as a butterfly in a parking lot.
The road home was nicer then. Dispersing, each of the
Troubadours had something to say about how charity
Had run its race and won, leaving you the ex-president
Of the event, and how, though many of those present
Had wished something to come of it, if only a distant
Wisp of smoke, yet none was so deceived as to hanker
After that cool non-being of just a few minutes before,
Now that the idea of a forest had clamped itself
Over the minutiae of the scene. You found this
Charming, but turned your face fully toward night,

Speaking into it like a megaphone, not hearing

Or caring, although these still live and are generous

And all ways contained, allowed to come and go

Indefinitely in and out of the stockade

They have so much trouble remembering, when your forgetting

Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night.

Variant

Sometimes a word will start it, like
Hands and feet, sun and gloves. The way
Is fraught with danger, you say, and I
Notice the word “fraught” as you are telling
Me about huge secret valleys some distance from
The mired fighting—“but always, lightly wooded
As they are, more deeply involved with the outcome
That will someday paste a black, bleeding label
In the sky, but until then
The echo, flowing freely in corridors, alleys,
And tame, surprised places far from anywhere,
Will be automatically locked out—*vox*
Clamans—do you see? End of tomorrow.
Don’t try to start the car or look deeper
Into the eternal wimpling of the sky: luster
On luster, transparency floated onto the topmost layer
Until the whole thing overflows like a silver
Wedding cake or Christmas tree, in a cascade of tears.”

Collective Dawns

You can have whatever you want.

Own it, I mean. In the sense

Of twisting it to you, through long, spiralling afternoons.

It has a sense beyond that meaning that was dropped there

And left to rot. The glacier seems

Impervious but is all shot through

With amethyst and the loud, distraught notes of the cuckoo.

They say the town is coming apart.

And people go around with a fragment of a smile

Missing from their faces. Life is getting cheaper

In some senses. Over the tops of old hills

The sunset jabs down, angled in a way it couldn't have

Been before. The bird-sellers walk back into it.

“We needn't fire their kilns; tonight is the epic

Night of the world. Grettir is coming back to us.

His severed hand has grabbed the short sword

And jumped back onto his wrist. The whole man is waking up.

The island is becoming a sun. Wait by this

Mistletoe bush and you will get the feeling of really

Being out of the world and with it. The sun

Is now an inlet of freshness whose very nature

Causes it to dry up.” The old poems

In the book have changed value once again. Their black letter

Fools only themselves into ignoring their stiff, formal qualities, and they move

Insatiably out of reach of bathos and the bad line

Into a weird ether of forgotten dismemberments. Was it

This rosebud? Who said that?

The time of all forgotten

Things is at hand.

Therefore I write you

This bread and butter letter, you my friend

Who saved me from the mill pond of chill doubt
As to my own viability, and from the proud village
Of bourgeois comfort and despair, the mirrored spectacles of grief.
Let who can take courage from the dawn's
Coming up with the same idiot solution under another guise
So that all meanings should be scrambled this way
No matter how important they were to the men
Coming in the future, since this is the way it has to happen
For all things under the shrinking light to change
And the pattern to follow them, unheeded, bargained for
As it too is absorbed. But the guesswork
Has been taken out of millions of nights. The gasworks
Know it and fall to the ground, though no doom
Says it through the long cool hours of rest
While it sleeps as it can, as in fact it must, for the man to find himself.

Wooden Buildings

The tests are good. You need a million of them.
You'd die laughing as I write to you
Through leaves and articulations, yes, laughing
Myself silly too. The funniest little thing ...
That's how it all began. Looking back on it,
I wonder now if it could have been on some day
Findable in an old calendar? But no,
It wasn't out of history, but inside it.
That's the thing. On whatever day we came
To a small house built just above the water,
You had to stoop over to see inside the attic window.
Someone had judged the height to be just right
The way the light came in, and they are
Giving that party, to turn on that dishwasher
And we may be led, then, upward through more
Powerful forms of poetry, past columns
With peeling posters on them, to the country of indifference.
Meanwhile if the swell diapasons, blooms
Unhappily and too soon, the little people are nonetheless real.

Pyrography

Out here on Cottage Grove it matters. The galloping
Wind balks at its shadow. The carriages
Are drawn forward under a sky of fumed oak.
This is America calling:
The mirroring of state to state,
Of voice to voice on the wires,
The force of colloquial greetings like golden
Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.
In service stairs the sweet corruption thrives;
The page of dusk turns like a creaking revolving stage in Warren, Ohio.

If this is the way it is let's leave,
They agree, and soon the slow boxcar journey begins,
Gradually accelerating until the gyrating fans of suburbs
Enfolding the darkness of cities are remembered
Only as a recurring tic. And midway
We meet the disappointed, returning ones, without its
Being able to stop us in the headlong night
Toward the nothing of the coast. At Bolinas
The houses doze and seem to wonder why through the
Pacific haze, and the dreams alternately glow and grow dull.
Why be hanging on here? Like kites, circling,
Slipping on a ramp of air, but always circling?

But the variable cloudiness is pouring it on,
Flooding back to you like the meaning of a joke.
The land wasn't immediately appealing; we built it
Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves:
An arch that terminates in mid-keystone, a crumbling stone pier
For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed
And only partially designed. How are we to inhabit
This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are,
In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet

Unrealized projects, and a strict sense

Of time running out, of evening presenting

The tactfully folded-over bill? And we fit

Rather too easily into it, become transparent,

Almost ghosts. One day

The birds and animals in the pasture have absorbed

The color, the density of the surroundings,

The leaves are alive, and too heavy with life.

A long period of adjustment followed.

In the cities at the turn of the century they knew about it

But were careful not to let on as the iceman and the milkman

Disappeared down the block and the postman shouted

His daily rounds. The children under the trees knew it

But all the fathers returning home

On streetcars after a satisfying day at the office undid it:

The climate was still floral and all the wallpaper

In a million homes all over the land conspired to hide it.

One day we thought of painted furniture, of how

It just slightly changes everything in the room

And in the yard outside, and how, if we were going

To be able to write the history of our time, starting with today,

It would be necessary to model all these unimportant details

So as to be able to include them; otherwise the narrative

Would have that flat, sandpapered look the sky gets

Out in the middle west toward the end of summer,

The look of wanting to back out before the argument

Has been resolved, and at the same time to save appearances

So that tomorrow will be pure. Therefore, since we have to do our business

In spite of things, why not make it in spite of everything?

That way, maybe the feeble lakes and swamps

Of the back country will get plugged into the circuit

And not just the major events but the whole incredible

Mass of everything happening simultaneously and pairing off,

Channeling itself into history, will unroll

As carefully and as casually as a conversation in the next room,

And the purity of today will invest us like a breeze,

Only be hard, spare, ironical: something one can

Tip one's hat to and still get some use out of.

The parade is turning into our street.

My stars, the burnished uniforms and prismatic

Features of this instant belong here. The land

Is pulling away from the magic, glittering coastal towns

To an aforementioned rendezvous with August and December.

The hunch is it will always be this way,

The look, the way things first scared you

In the night light, and later turned out to be,

Yet still capable, all the same, of a narrow fidelity

To what you and they wanted to become:

No sighs like Russian music, only a vast unraveling

Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond

To these bare fields, built at today's expense.

The Gazing Grain

The tires slowly came to a rubbery stop.
Alliterative festoons in the sky noted
That this branchy birthplace of presidents was also
The big frigidaire-cum-cowbarn where mendicant
And margrave alike waited out the results
Of the natural elections. So any openness of song
Was the plainer way. O take me to the banks
Of your Mississippi over there, etc. Like a plant
Rooted in parched earth I am
A stranger myself in the dramatic lighting,
The result of war. That which is given to see
At any moment is the residue, shadowed
In gold or emerging into the clear bluish haze
Of uncertainty. We come back to ourselves
Through the rubbish of cloud and tree-spattered pavement.
These days stand like vapor under the trees.

Unctuous Platitudes

There is no reason for the surcharge to bother you.

Living in a city one is nonplussed by some

Of the inhabitants. The weather has grown gray with age.

Poltergeists go about their business, sometimes

Demanding a sweeping revision. The breath of the air

Is invisible. People stay

Next to the edges of fields, hoping that out of nothing

Something will come, and it does, but what? Embers

Of the rain tamp down the shitty darkness that issues

From nowhere. A man in her room, you say.

I like the really wonderful way you express things

So that it might be said, that of all the ways in which to

Emphasize a posture or a particular mental climate

Like this gray-violet one with a thin white irregular line

Descending the two vertical sides, these are those which

Can also unsay an infinite number of pauses

In the ceramic day. Every invitation

To every stranger is met at the station.

The Couple in the Next Room

She liked the blue drapes. They made a star
At the angle. A boy in leather moved in.
Later they found names from the turn of the century
Coming home one evening. The whole of being
Unknown absorbed into the stalk. A free
Bride on the rails warning to notice other
Hers and the great graves that outwore them
Like faces on a building, the lightning rod
Of a name calibrated all their musing differences.

Another day. Deliberations are recessed
In an iron-blue chamber of that afternoon
On which we wore things and looked well at
A slab of business rising behind the stars.

The Explanation

The luxury of now is that the cancelled gala has been
Put back in. The orchestra is starting to tune up.
The tone-row of a dripping faucet is batted back and forth
Among the kitchen, the confusion outside, the pale bluster
Of the sky, the correct but insidious grass.
The conductor, a glass of water, permits all kinds
Of wacky analogies to glance off him, and, circling outward,
To bring in the night. Nothing is too “unimportant”
Or too important, for that matter. The newspaper and the garbage
Wrapped in it, the over, the under.

You get thrown to one side

Into a kind of broom closet as the argument continues carolling
Ideas from the novel of which this is the unsuccessful
Stage adaptation. Too much, perhaps, gets lost.
What about arriving after sunset on the beach of a
Dank but extremely beautiful island to hear the speeches
Of the invisible natives, whose punishment is speech?

At the top of his teddy-bear throne, the ruler,
Still lit by the sun, gazes blankly across at something
Opposite. His eyes are empty rectangles, shaped
Like slightly curved sticks of chewing gum. He witnesses.
But we are the witnesses.

In the increasingly convincing darkness
The words become palpable, like a fruit
That is too beautiful to eat. We want these
Down here on our level. But the tedium persists
In the form of remarks exchanged by birds
Before the curtain. What am I doing up here?
Pretending to resist but secretly giving in so as to reappear
In a completely new outfit and group of colors once today's
Bandage has been removed, is all.

Loving Mad Tom

You thought it was wrong. And afterwards
When everyone had gone out, their lying persisted in your ears,
Across the water. You didn't see the miserable dawns piled up,
One after the other, stretching away. Their word only
Waited for you like the truth, and sometimes
Out of a pure, unintentional song, the meaning
Stammered nonetheless, and your zeal could see
To the opposite shore, where it was all coming true.

Then to lay it down like a load
And take up the dream stitching again, as though
It were still old, as on a bright, unseasonably cold
Afternoon, is a dream past living. Best to leave it there
And quickly tiptoe out. The music ended anyway. The occasions
In your arms went along with it and seemed
To supply the necessary sense. But like
A farmhouse in the city, on some busy, deserted metropolitan avenue,
It was all too much in the way it fell silent,
Forewarned, as though an invisible face looked out
From hooded windows, as the rain suddenly starts to fall
And the lightning goes crazy, and the thunder faints dead away.
That was a way of getting here,
He thought. A spear of fire, a horse of air,
And the rest is done for you, to go with the rest,
To match up with everything accomplished until now.
And always one stream is pointing north
To reeds and leaves, and the stunned land
Flowers in dejection. This station in the woods,
How was it built? This place
Of communicating back along the way, all the way back?
And in an orgy of minutes the waiting
Seeks to continue, to begin again,
Amid bugs, the harking of dogs, all the
Maddening irregularities of trees, and night falls anyway.

Business Personals

The disquieting muses again: what are “leftovers”?
Perhaps they have names for it all, who come bearing
Worn signs of privilege whose authority
Speaks out of the accumulation of age and faded colors
To the center of today. Floating heart, why
Wander on senselessly? The tall guardians
Of yesterday are steep as cliff shadows;
Whatever path you take abounds in their sense.
All presently lead downward, to the harbor view.

Therefore do your knees need to be made strong, by running.
We have places for the training and a special on equipment:
Knee-pads, balancing poles and the rest. It works
In the sense of aging: you come out always a little ahead
And not so far as to lose a sense of the crowd
Of disciples. That were tyranny,
Outrage, hubris. Meanwhile this tent is silence
Itself. Its walls are opaque, so as not to see
The road; a pleasant, half-heard melody climbs to its ceiling—
Not peace, but rest the doctor ordered. Tomorrow ...
And songs climb out of the flames of the near campfires,
Pale, pastel things exquisite in their frailness
With a note or two to indicate it isn't lost,
On them at least. The songs decorate our notion of the world
And mark its limits, like a frieze of soap-bubbles.

What caused us to start caring?
In the beginning was only sedge, a field of water
Wrinkled by the wind. Slowly
The trees increased the novelty of always being alone,
The rest began to be sketched in, and then ... silence,
Or blankness, for a number of years. Could one return
To the idea of nature summed up in these pastoral images?
Yet the present has done its work of building

A rampart against the past, not a rampart,

A barbed-wire fence. So now we know

What occupations to stick to (scrimshaw, spinning tall tales)

By the way the songs deepen the color of the shadow

Impregnating your hobby as you bend over it,

Squinting. I could make a list

Of each one of my possessions and the direction it

Pointed in, how much each thing cost, how much for wood, string, colored ink, etc.

The song makes no mention of directions.

At most it twists the longitude lines overhead

Like twigs to form a crude shelter. (The ship

Hasn't arrived, it was only a dream. It's somewhere near

Cape Horn, despite all the efforts of Boreas to puff out

Those drooping sails.) The idea of great distance

Is permitted, even implicit in the slow dripping

Of a lute. How to get out?

This giant will never let us out unless we blind him.

And that's how, one day, I got home.

Don't be shocked that the old walls

Hang in rags now, that the rainbow has hardened

Into a permanent late afternoon that elicits too-long

Shadows and indiscretions from the bottom

Of the soul. Such simple things,

And we make of them something so complex it defeats us,

Almost. Why can't everything be simple again,

Like the first words of the first song as they occurred

To one who, rapt, wrote them down and later sang them:

“Only danger deflects

The arrow from the center of the persimmon disc,

Its final resting place. And should you be addressing yourself

To danger? When it takes the form of bleachers

Sparsely occupied by an audience which has

Already witnessed the events of which you write,

Tellingly, in your log? Properly acknowledged

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