

1975

Oleum Misericordiae

John Ashbery

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Farm III

Small waves strike
The dark stones. The wife reads
The letter. There is nothing irreversible:
Points to the last sibilants
Of invading beef and calico.

Pretty soon oil has
Taken up the place of
The dark around you. It was all
As told, but anyway it never came out just right:
A fraction here, a lisp where it didn't matter.
It has to be presented
Through a final gap: pear trees and flowers
An ultimate resinous wall
Basking in the temperate climate
Of your identity. Sullen fecundity
To be watched over.

Oleum Misericordiae

To rub it out, make it less virulent
And a stab too at rearranging
The whole thing from the ground up.
Yes we were waiting just now
Yes we are no longer waiting.

Afterwards when I tell you
It's as though it all only happened
As siding of my story

I beg you to listen
You are already listening

It has shut itself out
And in doing so shut us accidentally in

And meanwhile my story goes well
The first chapter

endeth

But the real story, the one
They tell us we shall probably never know
Drifts back in bits and pieces
All of them, it turns out

So lucky
Now we really know
It all happened by chance:
A chance encounter
The dwarf led you to the end of a street
And pointed flapping his arms in two directions
You forgot to misprize him
But after a series of interludes
In furnished rooms (describe wallpaper)
Transient hotels (mention sink and cockroaches)
And spending the night with a beautiful married woman
Whose husband was away in Centerville on business
(Mention this wallpaper: the purest roses
Though the creamiest and how
Her smile lightens the ordeal
Of the last 500 pages
Though you never knew her last name
Only her first: Dorothy)
You got hold of the water of life
Rescued your two wicked brothers Cash and Jethro
Who promptly stole the water of life
After which you got it back, got safely home,
Saved the old man's life
And inherited the kingdom.

But this was a moment
Under the most cheerful sun.
In poorer lands
No one touches the water of life

It has no taste
And though it refreshes absolutely
It is a cup that must also pass

Until everybody
Gets some advantage, big or little
Some reason for having come

So far
Without dog or woman
So far alone, unasked.

Suite

The inert lifeless mass calls out into space.
Seven long years and the wall hasn't been built yet.
The crust thickens, the back of everything . . .
Clustered carillons and the pink dew of afterthoughts
Support it.

This was to be forgotten, eliminated
From history. But time is a garden wherein
Memories thrive monstrously until
They become the vagrant flowering of something else
Like stopping near the fence with your raincoat.

At night, orange mists.
The sun has killed a trillion of 'em
And it keeps stretching back, impossible planets.
How do I know? I'm lost. It says its name.
The blue-black message at the end of the garden
Is garbled. Meanwhile we're supposed to be here
Among pine trees and nice breaths of fresh air.

Snow was the last thing he'd expected,
Sun, and the kiss of far, unfamiliar lands,
Harsh accents though strangely kind
And now from the unbuttoned corner moving out,
Coming out, the postponed play of this day.
Astonishing. It really tells you about yourself,
The day made whole, the eye and the report together, silent.