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River

John Ashbery

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share his life like an old friend and in the process had given me my first gray hairs, a slightly stronger prescription for my left lens, more pleasure than I could ever tell him. And the book? It immediately became the center of a furious controversy among the handful of Americans to whom the name Malaterre means anything. Which didn't surprise me in the least, its thesis having been so totally original, unexpected, difficult to digest. Curiously, it was Pearlmutter himself who helped to settle the matter. In the review that he did for the *Yale Studies in French*, he wrote, "This extraordinary portrait of the poet as sexual deviate would seem absurd if not for the new material the author presents. His evidence from the poet's hitherto largely unpublished correspondence with the painter Blaise appears to be incontrovertible. It leaves us no choice. Professor Blum has made a significant contribution in helping to unravel the mystery of Malaterre."

It pleased me enormously. Euphoric, I considered sending an autographed copy of the book to Madame Blaise but finally decided against it. After all, she herself had told me of the countless evenings on which she had visited the poet's fifth floor apartment on the Boulevard St. Jacques. Why upset an old lady with scholarship?

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FOUR POEMS / JOHN ASHBERY

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River

It thinks itself too good for  
These generalizations and is  
Moved on by them. The opposite side  
Is plunged in shade, this one  
In self-esteem. But the center  
Keeps collapsing and re-forming.  
The couple at a picnic table (but  
It's too early in the season for picnics)  
Are traipsed across by the river's  
Unknowing knowledge of its workings.  
To avoid possible boredom and the stain  
Of too much intuition the whole scene  
Is walled behind glass. "Too early,"  
She says, "in the season." A hawk drifts by.  
"Send everybody back to the city."