

## FOUR POEMS



*George Szirtes*

### COPPER BROWN

And when it was worn smooth, a Victorian bun  
with all its features drowned, obliterate,  
a kind of pessary or wafer, without date  
or motto, when it could hardly hurt anyone,  
under a garden clod or in a forgotten tin  
along with buttons, old stamps, bits of lace,  
with its horrendous apology for a face,  
a half-cock ghost next to a rusty pin,  
it still disturbed, if only for the hands  
you knew had touched it once, its princely sum  
part of a historical continuum  
that would eventually present its strict demands,  
when it would stand there pounding at your door  
like death in the simple annals of your poor.

### THE YELLOW DRESS MY FATHER FELL IN LOVE WITH

It was the yellow dress my father fell  
in love with: skimpy in late sixties style.

My father usually works till six. Meanwhile  
the garden waits. The kitchen. The terrible  
last years in the last house in the last street.  
History has slipped off into the bushes where  
it waits in darkness like a murderer.  
The whole house has grown sticky and sweet,  
or it that just how it seems? The he comes home,  
looks from the window and sees you at the end  
of the garden and thinks: how beautiful.  
He thinks you beautiful, as she once was  
but gentler somehow as if you'd come to mend

his life or mine. And she is sitting at the table  
where light is dancing as it always does.

SPRING GREEN

*Three apocalyptic grotesques*

Think of it at the feet of a young dandy  
in emblematic Tudor costume: part  
nature, part intellect, much like the heart  
he wears on his full sleeve. Romantic, randy

and common as grass painted by a child  
in her first school, it runs down the page  
and dribbles onto the desk, an image  
of everything that is innocuous and wild...

White rabbits, mushrooms, snails, blackberrying,  
the sherbet dip with liquorice stick, pence  
in purses. He is dreaming of your hand

white as a sugar mouse, of burying  
his head in her breasts in a green nonsense  
of lawns and roses, somewhere in England.

\*

The floral clock moves round from light to shade.  
The boarding houses rattle with visitors.  
It is Brighton Rock, Sid James, Diana Dors,  
Brylcreem and Phyllosan and Lucozade.

Dirk Bogarde kills Jack Warner. The Duke of Squat  
dances with Miss Fiona FitzFollicle  
at her coming out party. A spherical  
moon is lightly balanced on the Scout hut.

The grass in Genevieve glimmers like yards  
of cloth in a tailor's shop. Kenneth More  
perspires gently in the August sun.

Along the sea-front men are buying post-cards  
of the promenade. West Indians score  
freely on a green wicket. Times moves on.

\*

A perfect greenness, everything is neat.  
I'm back in the springtime of a realm  
of primary colours which overwhelm  
desire, back at the young dandy's feet

among earthworms, beetles, between the blades  
of individual grass from which depend  
bright beads of dew. It is, I think, the end  
of the world. Birds are singing serenades

to the great chain of being for the last  
time. Someone is slicing up a cow.  
Someone bottles the spaces between things.

Life is kissing and telling, but telling it fast  
as if there were always and only a single now,  
a spring to cap and end all other springs.

#### TERRE VERTE

I

The things that grow out of earth! weird, stunted  
knobbly things with hair or other roughnesses,  
Priapic little gods, gods patched from dresses  
the doll once wore, some knuckled, some blunted  
by their emergence from the medium  
that nourished them. Roots, tubers, the carrot  
like a raw joke, all that rough wood spirit,  
earth under nails, in folds of skin, at the eardrum...  
Van Gogh's Potato Eaters, Breughel's peasant  
belching into a corner, calloused feet  
banging on a dirt floor to a harsh pipe,  
the stumpy-digit, heavy-brow, big-earlobe type.  
They come with flowers to rooms suddenly neat  
and scented, refreshing and distinctly pleasant.

Shall I play Priapus with you? Shall we find  
the old shed with its smelly newspapers,  
dead mice and dried grass? Shall we cut capers  
among onion sacks, rolling on a fat behind?

Shall we cut the crap instead? shall we get  
down to it, the deed of darkness, the two  
of us? Tell me what would you like me to do?  
Shall I play finial to your crocket?  
Needle to your haystack? Camel to eye  
of needle, pig to trough, horse to water.  
nose to grindstone with yo-ho-ho  
and a bottle of something on which to grow  
merrier still? Will you play Green Man's daughter  
to the fat hog in his reeky hormonal sty?

2

Consider the texture of *terre verte*,  
how it filters underneath the skin:  
flesh tint is drawn across it into thin  
cold layers of dew intended to subvert  
the whole arrangement by a kind of pun.  
It's beautiful to touch, is like a dream  
of water eating away, the bed of the stream  
it flows through, leaving nothing for anyone.  
Its lovely drowned face materializes  
for one moment only under green fronds  
between bars of a supermarket trolley  
then goes off underground, down an alley  
you can't enter, and surfaces in ponds  
from which a stagnant round aroma rises.

The traveller in his shaggy gaberdine,  
he has it bad. And that one with his rocking  
laptop—I wouldn't trust him. The panicking  
baby-boomer with his bald patch and faint grin.  
They're only after one thing, all of them.  
The look in their eyes tells you they're somewhere  
at the edge of a joke life failed to prepare  
them for, at the withered end of the stem  
that leads back into earth and is terrifying.  
What wouldn't they do for one moment of grace,  
one leaf curling back, brash petals extent  
and soft at the heart of an awaited event,  
for one beautiful drowned forgiving face  
to watch them in their sleep and through their dying.