

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.

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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.

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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.