

GEORGE SZIRTES

Prose Poems

Two of Four Houses

The first spoke. What I see is a house, or the idea of a house, enormous and unknowable in its full extent, a house in which rooms only partly reveal themselves, in which mirrors are to be walked into, pictures disappeared into, in which chairs and beds are big enough to swallow you entirely. I can never see any part of this house, not one room, not one corridor clearly, only as a patchwork of dark and light (chiefly dark) containing isolated angles of objects or furniture. Its smell however is overpowering, and it has a music too, comprised of creaks, whispers and snuffles; rain on glass, branches on windows, someone yawning, someone singing in a kitchen, someone listening to a radio in a distant room, a music always elsewhere. There are rooms here with walls so damp you are guaranteed to get rheumatism, and floors so rotten it is dangerous to step on them. In the dark there are rusty old tins waiting to cut you. Some rooms are so filled with hatred you can smell it across a stairway. I couldn't begin to number the attics and cellars; the pantries, privies and vaults; the kitchens are far below. There is no outside to this house. Nature is purely notional - a breeze that blows in through an open window, books that show men clinging to precipices or rafts, buckled across wires or lying in pits. Every so often a shudder passes through the fabric: the house is bending with some erotic dream. You touch your flesh and you know it is distended. You taste salt. Here and there you might glimpse couples huddling together, holding hands or shouting hoarsely at each other. You might see one cradling the head of the other, feeling a pulse, passing from a room carrying a bedpan or a towel.

The second followed. The house I want to tell you about is much smaller and much more specific. I have only seen it once but know about it through my mother who lived there. The first thing you should know is that it overlooks a park with a skating rink in it. The skating rink lies over the road and the house itself is built into a hill-side. It is therefore possible to stand at one of the upper windows, or on the narrow wooden balcony running along the top storey and see through the bare trees of the park directly to the pond which was always frozen over in the winter. From the house the figures on the pond would appear small of course, scarcely distinguishable from each other, but if they knew you were there, watching them (a single figure at a window or on a

balcony, especially a figure expected to be there, is much more likely to be identified) they would sometimes turn to you and wave broadly, with exaggerated gestures, maybe because they knew you well or thought well of you, or because they simply wanted to be amusing, to amuse you in particular and their friends in general. Waving from the pond must have been a consciously significant gesture. From the window or balcony you could follow the line of trees leading away from the pond towards the frozen band-stand, lit by a small lamp post (who knows who you might see there, they didn't wave), and beyond it, past the transverse ditches to the street at the end (hardly visible) where you knew you would find the theatre. So theatre, band-stand and pond would form a triad from the window and this was the park's attraction. You think of this house as something to look out of rather than live in. Living in it proved uncomfortable, almost disastrous, for the part where the house lay below ground was damper than it first seemed when the house was bought one summer. The smell of damp emerged only slowly in the late autumn, but it persisted and intensified throughout the winter, well into March. Then smell gave way to an aroma, a drift of lilac and honeysuckle but by the summer the only smell remaining was the gentle burning of cushions left too long by open windows in the blistering heat, and perhaps a distant and discreet odour of excrement from heaven knows where. If the house had a peculiar magic it was only because all old houses have it, especially in strongly contrasting or moving light: in summer dark splinters crannied among the bright slabs; in spring and early autumn the thin shifting patterns as clouds are driven across the window or boughs twitch or buck in the wind, and in winter in the movements of gas- and fire-light.

And then came the third.

And the fourth.

A Hermit Crab

As people age and die something in them hardens and yearns for survival. It is the ego seeking to ward off completion. Look at the faces. The bones emerge, the nose juts, the cheekbones drop into angles. This is the ego emerging, stating its hard and impossible conditions to time, who is certainly not going to listen. Nevertheless, one man tells jokes till he bursts, another reads aloud to his friends, the words settling in the folds of his skin and clothes. Both men hear their words and feel assured, if only for as long as they continue talking, that they are still the active element in their lives. The rock shapes the wind. The rock emerges from beneath the flesh. But the spirit? Moss on the rock, oil in the water, a kind of deposit like salt. I watched a hermit crab scuttling in a pool at Holkham. It assured me to fit the words 'hermit crab' to this tiny particle stumbling to and fro. In the beginning was the Word. The word scuttles to and fro. Language solidifies and emerges from the waves.

The Memory Man

The touch of other people's fingers is perhaps the most intimate of contacts when solicited: to sit at a table and touch fingertips with the person opposite may be to recreate the spark of creation, it has such an exploratory mutuality about it, focusing, as it does, the whole nervous system into five points of concentration. Magician utters spells into magician: self rides on skin, fingertips develop velcro surfaces, part velvet part fur, cats leap from fingers in a shock of adrenalin.

Since my first memories are of living in a street whose name may be translated as 'gardener street' I will call my detective Gardner. His shadow, his fellow prisoner, will call himself Gardiner - the name as misspelt on an official looking brown envelope in his jacket pocket - though we cannot know whether that is his real name. Gardner begins to wriggle his fingers under the biting rope and touches the shadow's right middle finger. He is naturally startled. At first he cannot tell whether the finger is that of a man or a woman but the shock makes him freeze. He becomes aware of the other's breathing, his warmth, his voice saying something, telling him to push, to push away. Where are they? In Gardener Street of course, though they do not know this. Gardner pushes with all his might. The shadow pushes. There is a door in front of Gardner, a tall dark brown affair in a simple dark brown case. He doesn't know what is behind him. They wriggle in their seats, make counter movements, push, pull, get the rope to rub against the chair backs. Slowly it begins to loosen, now they can rock away from each other, now their ankles find an inch or two to kick in, their elbows work free, they are afraid of toppling. As their shoulders move forward they are like a bud opening, a heady blossom unfurling on a floral carpet into the smell of furniture polish and the sound of a piano downstairs, on a radio. Now Gardner has an arm clear of the ropes and is busily undoing the rest. He kicks like a baby, cuts himself here and there, and finally does topple forward, painlessly, against a settee with its soft upholstery, free at last.

This is the easy part, I tell her. I can envisage the room, the door, the carpet and the settee. I can furnish the place, no problem. I can smell it, move through it, turn its noises on or off, adjust the volume control, swivel my eyes left or right. It is after all only virtual reality, a room in the head. All rooms are rooms in the head, she replies, even real rooms, but I can see she's interested. Well, presumably she could turn me on or off, adjust my volume, get up now and walk away. Only, I plead, there are real things with real distances between them. Too theoretical, she answers. Precisely, I retort. How far have I distanced you already, I think regretfully, how deep below the story lies the

real story? Where, in this high hall with its high music, does tangible life begin?

Is Gardiner good or evil when he tells Gardner about his father? Tells him that his dad was a slim short man with a careworn face, that he smelled of tobacco and old women? Is it good to know that he, the father, was a furtive boy sliding between aunts, listening to old men with white beards and bad breath dying in over-decorated, over-stuffed rooms; that Gardner himself only remembers this because at some moment it became clear to him in a conversation, and crystallised if only for a moment and for ever. He could tell Gardner anything. A naked boy is cowering under a table, he says, he feels the air on his skin, especially the parts usually unexposed and this feels good, because under the table he can see socks and shoes and ankles moving away from him into worlds of their own, leaving him alone with the air and his hands on the carpet. He tells Gardner what was written on his third year school report, who cornered him in the playground in the junior school and punched him, describes his nose bleeding. He could be making it up, of course. You make it up. It is not what happened but the fact that the shadow seems to know it that is of consequence. I think it is best that you should sense a touch of evil about Gardiner. You should suspect his motives. It is, after all, suspicious. Who would go to such trouble to find out about you? Do you like it? I ask her.

She likes the evil. Everyone does. Gardiner is certainly malevolent. But what can he want? What is the plot? Why be a shadow and attach yourself to someone in this way?

You have to feel the natural proportions of the enigma, play it out at full length.

I tell her that when I look out of my window every morning I see the same bicycle leaning against a lamp post. It has a lot of plastic bags hanging from the saddle and handlebars. It is like a pale, milky, distended bunch of grapes, ballast to hold a life down. That bicycle is a life but I rarely see the life it belongs to. It arrives early and leaves sometime in the afternoon when I'm not looking. It is an object of frustrated fertility, a symbol parked right outside my door with a real man on it, moving, on what, from here, seems to be a pathetic daily circuit. I could go out and touch the bags or push the bicycle over. I too could be malevolent. But why start a chain of events I know nothing about?

The Hands

Her movement had an exaggerated grace, a flamboyance that was poetry and gross hyperbole at once. It was the same with her handwriting. She held the pen high up the barrel and waved her wrist about, whipping each word into at least one unwonted flourish. Even now, as she stood in the dock, the hands were arching and flourishing, out of control, straying to her forehead, plucking at her hair, pinching and twisting her jumper. And still it tantalised.

Perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps it was herself she tantalised. There was every reason for this. Both her intelligence and her beauty had the same wild, ragged edge. She was vulnerable, and who can resist that? Not the magistrates sitting at their bench. Not the rougher deities of Holloway prison. Not all the mothers of the world in their professorial chairs in the wailing universe.

And the hands had their own life entirely. They were never prisoner's hands, but hands all by themselves, in their own circle of air, the circle they were just now describing so flamboyantly.

Magic

There is only the one magical story which breaks in your hands as you examine it. It is the only life you know. Take down the snowing globe and shake it. You see skaters on a pond in a civic park at the end of an avenue of trees, skating round an island, past a bandstand where no one is playing, where no one has played for years. The magic is only the magic of ice melting, of skaters balancing on thin metal blades, concentrating on their skating, not on what lies beyond the park. What lies beyond the park is unknown.

Here the sun collapses and folds across the cover flung across the settee. It is far too soft and you sink in it so deep you might as well be sitting on the floor: it is a sagging bag full of sunlight, almost organic, pulsing and yelping with light. You too would find it beautiful. In fact you could be sitting here instead of me.

Impressions or snapshots? This calls for some texture: someone is gently feeling round your face as you sit in the kitchen, looking out unaware, blue, your mind skating along a razor blade itself like a skate. Now hands move down the stripped pine walls and across the early sixties kitchen furniture: the vulcanite, the hard jagged blacks whites and oranges of post Picasso modern, everything spiky, wire ornaments, stylized African heads with brilliantly coloured hats, aggressively glazed and fluted salt and pepper cellars with matching coffee cups and saucers. A fridge ballooning like an American caravan, a cabinet with sliding doors for glassware (I find these in Salvation Army shops now, the cheapest items in store), melamine and formica in dogtooth check on bright wood. Since this is the early seventies, it already wears a graveyard look. Your hard black hair is lacquered. You have Raphael Soyer reproductions on that deep green papered wall. Your furniture is G Plan, your tape recorder a massive Grundig, your television is on rental from DER, the radio pricks its ear to Hilversum. Altogether, it leaves you so vulnerable, that you appear almost frail (you only weigh seven stone anyway), in need of protection (but those teeth can bite and those red red nails can certainly scratch), and lovable (though lovable is not precisely the right word). Lovable is wrong: you are loved, passionated, just as you passionate, but only through the mask, that hard, tragic Greek mask that goes so well with these brassy fittings which effuse such hard optimism about the times but also an equal and opposite defensiveness in case that optimism fails.

Loving Mickey

The last time I saw Mickey his eyes were smaller and further back but I liked him even more than some twenty five years ago, the day he was knocked unconscious by big Kas, the moody Polish student in the course of a wrestling match arranged impromptu on the stone cellar floor. Kas simply dropped Mickey on his head and I remember he sat up, took an astonished look round at the rest of us, then passed out. We took him to hospital where he recovered but perhaps the whole thing was symptomatic.

Great misfortune is shaming in its force. Big Kas was melancholy because he was graceless and he knew it. So when he dressed in black it was to harden that melancholia into an image that might strike at someone's heart the way a knife would, sharp and terminal. Only he was nowhere near as dangerous as a sharp knife. In years to come he would get a job in an office or a school and his misery would soften, ripen and bring forth little shoots of lesser misery. And in this respect he too is important. He takes his place here next to me as I am speaking this and feels angry and sad at the same time. It is something to feel these things. And I am making him feel them though he doesn't know that.

But it was Mickey my heart bled for. There was something beautifully simple about Mickey that spoke through his troubled eyes which were never not troubled. The trouble was a product of that which I have just described as simplicity. But you know better than to trust me in these matters. Mickey was straight. Mickey was trustworthy.

Mickey married a beautiful girl with dark hair, and I don't know how, but eventually they made each other miserable. It happens. She cried so much it changed her, or washed away the part people fall in love with. The new self was efficient. It attracted money and those with money. It was also desolate. Mickey had stopped caring. That was when I was in love with Mickey. But then we all were. Love, we felt, was beautiful and simple.

Pisanello

What is this restraint, as hard but as tensile as wire? Where is nature in this, and where is vision & value? There is texture of life, an understanding that it is rigorous, courteous, amenable to the soul via the intellect, and that the intellect allows for miracles, courage - and that, in its worship of abstracted particulars, it regards itself as a discrete part of nature.

But there is also a feeling that creatures are miraculous machines - and that being so, we ourselves might create such. We are potential gods and makers of great organic contraptions. The mechanical revolution will be an elegant, aristocratic affair. Our very oil will be descended from blue-veined deposits. Our fuel will be ideas bred at high altitudes.

From the yo-yo, to the hawser, to the wind-up watch on our wrists, our tensions will be calibrated to a nano-technological standard. We will invent the uplift bra and a device for producing heavy water. The micro-circuitry of sonnets and the horse-power of the spring-loaded mousetrap will advertise our capabilities to the stars, which have hitherto been deaf, but which, henceforward, will hear us down long invisible tubes, antennae and rotating discs. When we doff our hats there will be decapitations. When we take a deep breath bodies will be defenestrated from the windows of Central European public buildings.

War will be aesthetic. Blood will spout in blade-thin arcs across fields measured by pulsions. Under the fields the bones of the dead will knit like pieces of living meccano. The clicking-noise you hear is the bones conspiring. The grass is singing madrigals. Cavalcanti and Dante go walking through the wood of suicides.

Shopping

Shop till you drop. C'est un bon marché. You gotta shop around... Never mind the sheer physical sensation of the thing: the entry into the heated room, the ambient noise with or without music, the small grid map of the layout, the trance-like drift round corners and down alleys, the touch of the potentially desired object, the shift towards the formal personal encounter by the till, the opening of the purse or wallet, the passage of metal and paper one way and the passage of the object of desire the other. One can bundle this lot up into an ideologically hot package such as 'Consumerism' but that is already to have sorted and solved it into the broadly didactic file.

I think of the micro-life of shops. The great consumers of wood, of dust. The explorers of high-class droppings. The silverfish along the shelves. The spider gathering bargains in his old-fashioned net basket.
