

Story for performance #751
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One evening a week I have supper in their garden with my friend B and his family, who live on the hill above the port. The history of that quarter is of a fall from grace. It begins with some medieval prince covering the hill with flowers and ends with a fashionable suburb where the prices now reach European levels. Everyone who's anyone lives there, diplomat or businessman, or in the case of B 'cultural ambassador'. The flowers have long gone. The cheaper streets at the base of the hill, drenched in a rich sunset light, are lined with wrecked cars.

'Not that we mind,' B's wife told me, without a hint of irony, the first time I arrived for supper, 'because they're really rather lively and attractive, almost art. All the different colours! And people use them as storage, their houses are so small.'

The end wall of B's garden is rough-plastered a shade of terra cotta. On to the plaster a previous owner has painted a *trompe l'oeil* gateway a little less than life size, opening on to a trodden-earth path through a wooded landscape. The path leads away along its flat sine curve into distant hills planted with olives. Secondary growth is applied as a mist of green, while the trunks of a hundred trees, very slim and straight, stand away from the path like spectators.

On that side of things, it's morning perhaps. At this distance it's really quite hard to tell. You're too aware of the brushstrokes, the stipple. The effect is best gained not from the garden itself but from B's kitchen, sixty feet away. From there the faded quality of the paint blurs everything together, turning the garden into an extension of that mysteriously inviting path, a merging effect heightened by the ivies which spill thick and glossy over the wicker fences on either side. Plantings of arum lily, fuchsia and false orange lead your eye to the small acacia tree artfully overhanging the gate itself.

For a moment, especially in twilight, it can have a brief magic.

This evening, as we sit out in the garden waiting for his other guests, I tell B:

'The door in the wall was an icon beloved by late-Victorian and Edwardian alike. The symbol of another life, of lost opportunity, or of opportunities not fully taken. If you pass through the door, the story goes, you cannot be anything less than changed. If you don't pass through it, you still cannot be anything less than changed.'

'Choice, here, offers a fifth major compass point, an unnamed direction or plane. It's the plane of nostalgia, and of nostalgia's inverse, a kind of weightless but abiding regret.'

'Bloody hell,' B says. 'I bet you can't repeat that.'

'Don't tease each other you two,' his wife tells us. 'The children are bad enough.'

Her three older girls are in bed, but she is having a problem with the youngest. 'Ella, if you can stop crying now,' she says patiently, 'Ella, if you can really get control

and stop crying, I'll give you a big bottle of milk. But if you don't I'll only give you half a bottle. All right, Ella?'

'If I were Ella,' B whispers, 'I'd be pretending to get control now and take revenge later.'

'Bide her time then get revenge on all adults,' I agree.

'Don't be so bloody horrible,' warns Ella's mother.

All afternoon the children have worked hard to personalise the gate, surrounding it with art of their own, bold, determined representations of people and stars in unmodified poster reds and yellows, done directly on to opened-out cardboard boxes left over from their recent move from Europe. They have propped their pictures up around the door in the wall like mirror portals, entrances to quite different kinds of imaginary worlds—lively, jarring and expressionistic. Ella's efforts are particularly determined. Later I will write, 'These worlds of hers are not alternatives to anything. Instead they are real, explosive acts of creation.'

The air is warm and soft. The other guests arrive. We talk, we laugh. We eat beautifully cooked fish and tabouli.

Trompe l'oeil is a con, and not much of one really. Everyone who sits in B's garden that evening is grown up enough to relish this. They would never call the view on the other side of the door a 'world' or insist that, to function as art or even as a mild joke, it successfully suspend their disbelief. After the youngest child has gone at last to bed, the adults smile and stretch and help clear away the supper things. They go to the end of the garden and gently collect up the children's art to protect it from the dew. 'Aren't these wonderful? Aren't they so energetic?'

Then they yawn and smile, and say goodnight to one another, and one by one pass through the gate, under the unpainted transom with its moulded flowers.

For a moment I watch them run away into the trees, calling and laughing softly. I leave them to it. In the harbour the tide is down, there's dark algae on the surface of the mud. A swan sleeps amid the yellowing fibreglass litter between the moored boats. I look back at the hill and, parked round its base, all the wrecked cars. Before each one ends its working life, it has already become so patched and repaired that every panel is a different colour. Pea green. Talbot blue. Maroon. Rich yellow of city sunlight. Their wheels are gone. Their seats are long gone. They are held together with bits of string or leather belts, and full of obsolete TVs, hat boxes, bales of clothes, bags of cement!

I've lived with a lot less intensity since I arrived here. You might say that was age, but I would have to call it self-preservation. If I felt things as much as I used to—if I allowed things to take their proper space inside me—I'd be in trouble.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by M John Harrison.