

Houses without Doors by Peter Straub. New York: Dutton, 1990. A Review by John C. Tibbetts

Each of the characters in Peter Straub's collection of short stories, Houses without Doors, flees by a back exit from some kind of intolerable private reality. In their journey into madness, some find themselves trapped, wedged into an ever-narrowing circle of diminishing options and opportunities; and others are transfigured and disappear into an ever-widening sphere of glory. For all of them, however, there can be no return. Their lives have become--to borrow the lines from Emily Dickinson--

. . .the house without the door--
'Tis entered from the sun--
And then the ladder's thrown
away,
Because escape--is done—

Mr. Straub has waited a long time to produce this, his first collection of stories. A successful novelist since 1973, with the popular novels Julia, Ghost Story, Shadowland, and Mystery behind him--all noted for their vast, sprawling organizational schemes and cumulative sense of horror--he now turns to a form demanding a greater compression and concision. The results are admirable. He has produced here his most important book, a compelling--albeit disturbing--read.

At first glance these thirteen short stories (six tales interspersed with seven brief "interludes," as they are called) seem a random sampling of contemporary horrors--atrocities in Viet

Nam ("Blue Rose"), the sexual abuse of children ("The Juniper Tree"), a serial killer ("A Short Guide to the City"), abortion ("Mrs. God") and an assortment of quirky obsessions--like the man who literally buries himself in a room filled with baby bottles ("The Buffalo Hunter") and the business executive who one day goes quietly mad and takes a magical taxi into another world ("Something about a Death, Something about a Fire").

However, to pursue Straub's own metaphor, the partitions between these stories, characters, and incidents are paper-thin--as if these "houses without doors" are also, in effect, houses without walls. For example, the murderer in "Blue Rose," Harry Beevers, reappears as the unnamed serial killer in "A Short Guide to the City." Beevers' wartime atrocities--the slaughter of Vietnamese babies--find a parallel in the abortion that haunts William Standish, the college professor in "Mrs. God." Standish's eventual regression to an infantile state, in turn, is reminiscent of the baby bottle fetish of Mr. Bunting in "The Buffalo Hunter." Everything, in sum, is interrelated, fragments torn away from a greater whole.

As we perceive this pattern--something akin to recognizing the internal rhyme scheme in a poem--we sense an odd sort of yearning, as if these separate pieces each retained a trace memory of their former union. Straub finds his key metaphors for this

in fables and fairy tales. For example, in "The Juniper Tree"--the title is an allusion to a story by the Brothers Grimm--a young boy is so traumatized by episodes of sexual abuse that he rejects the experience altogether, in effect splitting away from it. "I could not remember what it was that I remembered," he explains from an adult perspective; "only that there was something to remember." He dreams that his body has been cut into pieces and buried beneath a juniper tree--"and the cut-off pieces of my body called out to each other and wept because they were separate."

Haunted by a repressed reality, but blocked from confronting it, Straub's characters wreak public and private havoc. The wartime atrocities of Harry Beevers and the serial killings of the unnamed murder in "A Short Guide to the City" are, in Straub's universe, violent responses to fragmented identities. "In violence," Straub writes, "there is often the quality of yearning--the yearning for completion. For closure." By contrast, Mr. Bunting in "The Buffalo Hunter" turns inward toward self-destruction. Driven by his infantile fantasies, he locks himself in his room, covers the walls with hundreds of baby bottles (from which he sucks large quantities of liquor) and loses himself in the hot-house imagery and fabulous characters of books by Luke Short and Raymond Chandler. The printed page leaps up at him and he plunges headlong into its delicious, seductive world. "Everything you see, touch, feel, smell, everything you notice and everything you think, is organized

to take you somewhere," declares Bunting. The trip will prove fatal.

Straub is taking many risks in this book. Many readers will be baffled or dismayed by its characters and incidents. The image of the bottle-sucking Bunting is ludicrous. The incidents of sexual abuse in "The Juniper Tree" are graphic and repulsive. Harry Beevers' sadistic torture of his brother is painfully explicit. And Professor Standish' torturous descent into madness creates a queasy uneasiness that is most disturbing. ("Like sweat or semen," writes Straub, "anxiety is a physical substance that pours from a self-replenishing well.") Moreover, an exotic, Jamesian kind of ambiguity lurks beneath the book like a pedal point in a work of music, or like a great, unseen engine that mutters beneath the sidewalks.

Yet, we read on and on, entranced, like the hero of "The Juniper Tree," trying to make sense of the blazing tapestry before us: "[It is] a large and appallingly complicated vision I must explore and memorize, must witness again and again in order to locate its hidden center." Although we hope, like Bunting, that "everything important" lies there, we also fear, like Standish, that there is only meaninglessness--"like the whorls of a beautiful pink and ivory shell that wound deeper and deeper into the glowing interior until they came to--nothing."

Miraculously, the book is transfigured by Straub's magical prose, which explodes like fireworks in the dark. A strange light is everywhere. A Viet Nam veteran gazes out of the

window of his tidy neighborhood and realizes that the lawns and elms are "only a picture over the face of a terrible fire." Visions of madmen "boil with underground explosions and hidden fires." Images on movie screens bloom with suprarreal intensity, "deepening and widening out" in the dark. Words in books "glow." The strange, unnamed man who appears in the opening and closing vignettes that frame the book possesses "a strange illumination," a light "of which he was absolutely unaware."

What is the meaning of this light that shines just beyond the pale reality of our "shrunken and diminished" world? I hesitate to even try to answer for fear any interpretation of mine will seem facile and superficial. Indeed, as is surely apparent by now, it is difficult to compress this book into the cage of a review, to sail a lasso over its movements, to capture with a lens its peculiar light. If you are like me, you will find it a revelation, although you will be hard pressed to explain precisely why. Better to refer you to the crowning glory of the book, the story entitled "Something about Death, Something about a Fire." It was written many years before the present volume was collected, yet it is the best thing here and nicely compresses into a scant four pages the essential core of Straub's achievement. In the story, we watch Bobo the Clown enter the circus tent in his Magic Taxi. Who is Bobo and what is a Magic Taxi? Hold on. "At this moment the audience falls silent, as if hypnotized," Straub writes. "You feel

uncertain, slightly on edge, as if you have forgotten something you particularly wished to remember." Bobo wears a funny suit and blats a little horn. "His painted figure is so akin to ours, and yet so foolish, so theatrical in its grief, that we are distracted from our own memories." What does he do? We don't know, or we don't remember. There is just a sense of a beam of light that shines "like a transparent wire" into our eyes. And then there was something about a death, something about a fire. . . . We awake as if from a trance, "drawn up out of unhappiness by our love for this tinted waif." But there are tears in our eyes. . . .

Again, we ask, who is Bobo? As an observer in the story speculates, Bobo may once have been an "ordinary man with an ordinary job", a man like any of us, trapped in his own separation, his own blank reality, his own House without Doors. One morning on the way to work Bobo found a Magic Taxi waiting at the curb. "[The Magic Taxi] was his destiny," concludes the observer, "entirely unforeseen, black and purring softly, pregnant with miracle."

Somewhere within this book, somewhere in the midst of its horrors and its dreams, somewhere waiting for you is that Magic Taxi. Take it at your own risk. Like all the other journeys in Straub's stories, it goes to a place from which there is no return.

John C. Tibbetts