

Poetry Series

**Stephen Jackson**  
**- poems -**

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# Stephen Jackson(2 January 1958)

My main site now is

I was trained in Psychology, Logic & Metaphysics: only later as a lecturer, artist and 'venerable media grafter'.

I've been author or editor of over a dozen books as well as a journalist whose features appeared in The Independent, Time Out, Sunday Telegraph and leading national magazines. I worked in television films, one of which won Crystal Prize at the Prague Festival; and I was cited by the Head of BBC Music and Arts as 'a writer of the Upper-First Division'.

Imagine, then, being lucky enough to find yourself landed in a near-fantasy career: and then nearly losing everything, through what some might have conceived as an accident waiting to happen? The follies of a gratingly naive love affair, I'd rather say; and of too great a predilection for disappointment at the little vicissitudes of things. At the prosaic business of living and learning from fairly witless belated mistakes - you know?

I fell through the cracks in the pavement. But it was only because of this, approaching the Millenium, that I discovered the magical potential of digital imaging to transform our preconceptions of what we imagine the world to be like. The resulting juxtapositions of my art and poetry have been described as 'fascinating and amazing' by a leading US novelist. Elsewhere these visuals found acclaim as 'hauntingly beautiful': the words as 'tight and life-enhancing'(John Hegley) , with a richness comparable to John Donne's.

Mmories of my own darker period, the fresh revelations of a subsequent sort of rebirth, offer endless avenues of inquiry as well as new and welcome pleasures. My latest book Dead People on Holiday is available through Amazon and good bookshops. It has been called 'sublime'... 'visually stunning' and it's also available as an eBook.

# A Brief Bestiary

To carry the child into adult life  
Is good? I say it is not,  
To carry the child into adult life  
Is to be handicapped.

- Stevie Smith

There are the scientists. They know how to play.  
There are the children, who know how to play and how to weep.  
There are artists, who play and who purport to weep.  
There are misfits, who yearn to play and weep.  
And, last of all, come the decent grown-ups  
Who have forgotten how to do either.  
If, indeed, they ever found out.

Why have we killed the child inside?  
Since it is better (we suppose) to forfeit joy than to  
Admit the possibility of failure. Better to do nothing  
Than to risk a humiliation of mistakes. Instead  
We'll tilt at windmills; and bind our bones with iron  
Against the breeze.

Stephen Jackson

# Anatomy

Beneath the feverish chintz of  
Someone else's living room  
I contemplate my own mortality,  
And the thought of it wearies me.

The dowdiness of blood, you see,  
Disappoints me. Especially dried blood.  
Especially viscera, reclaimed by scorched earth,  
Dry as dead love. We know what it's all  
For. We know what we  
Amount to, each of us.

But here's a book. A book "for the true book",  
Or so its authors would have said. The annals of  
La Specola, of Florence, all in wax.  
A museum, it was, of human guts. I hadn't  
Heard of it. Tussaud's the name we recognise.  
Your eternal Madame, grim and primly zealous –  
Making death masks of the guillotined nobility.  
One moment, dignity: the next, a flying cutlet!  
...As she arranged her poison peepshow (with  
The sober ostentation that marks out policemen,  
Hostesses, and, I've no doubt, the torturer) :  
As bloodied baskets tumbled in her lap,  
So too it was that quiet Italians  
Plumbed the inner man, the map.  
"Our subject has been hanged.  
The anatomy will begin."

How well they knew their trade,  
The old anatomists -  
Cutting fresh flowers from wards  
Of plagues, and pestilence, and those irrevocably maimed:  
Pregnant mothers, with hair as bright as straw:  
Soldiers, lovers, those who had succumbed  
With apoplexy in flagrante:  
Now sliced apart with deft swift knives  
Before their harvest might be claimed  
By browning putrefaction:

Melting away like jelly in  
The brassy Florentine sun.

So fast the craftsman had to work,  
Plundering at his transitory feast:  
Sculpting, moulding, tinting as each cadaver,  
Slippery as eels, succumbed to naked air  
Charged with the zest and vice of incense.  
Five hundred corpses (or two thousand)  
No one knows how many the project once devoured.  
Now several dozen waxworks are what's left:  
Eyes in a daze, as if in wait  
For an early-morning cup of tea;  
Or else, wide-shut, as though – because they're flensed –  
They've stumbled on the Bronx or Balham platform  
And dropped their season ticket. Timeless commuters,  
Are these; lamed and kept in aspic.

Their butchers, meanwhile, nosed out what they'd sought.  
Rationalists, seeking a moment of vindication, must like  
Jesuits make their best use of rationed time. It is significant,  
I think: their most brutal excoriation.  
It concerns a young virgin.  
They'd got her now. Every morsel of her, these men  
Owned. They'd tried her, known her, had her,  
Layer within layer. So much for the eternal feminine.  
She sprawled, bereft of angels. Soon to come, and  
Promised for the next act: maggots must burst,  
Spontaneously formed, out of her forfeited lights  
- As everybody said, and would say for the next  
One hundred years, they should.

Who came to loot, upon this silent ground?  
What mortified potential, could its wreckage speak of?  
Signor Fontana, head of those who  
Came to scavenge truth amongst old meat,  
Compelled by his voracious appetite,  
For vindication he pressed on inside  
And left in wild surmise.  
Trying to shake free the lyricism of what was mute  
(As one must always do, with natural worlds)  
Through its seductive symmetries,

Promiscuous, beguiling as they are.  
Inviting too much sense, as they must do,  
And not too little. For such must be the way  
Of all fortuitous, uncrafted forms.

What could the pieces mean?

One principle was sound to guide the  
Cutting of a blade, one uncorrupted article  
Of faith: the search "for law-like regularities".  
Stealing what had been sanctified, in  
A chancel of virgin sense, of  
Unredeemed significance. Self-effacing, the men  
Ravished, yet still with a gaze of awe and wonder,  
Before the elements could ravage, what time itself  
Must shortly pulp. Perhaps they looked for the  
Soul; which Galen, greatest surgeon of  
Antiquity, had adduced from blood vessels  
Knotted in a cow. This time there was  
Nothing. Still, it was no matter.  
To understand a dream one must first know  
The terrain of the commonplace.

Think what instead they found:

Sepulchral polypi, that threw aside their fronds to  
Embrace the sea. Banners and wreaths, arbours of  
Bone, that seemed to tower and hold tight; fingers of  
Flesh that reached like suckling mouths: or like  
Soft rooted buds, eyeless, rapturous, blind.  
Arteries and nerves,  
As tall as funerary sycamores –  
Cryptic and profligate as the rest of it was –  
And here or there a foetus, compacted like a nut  
Now destined never to unfurl, or to make good.

But materialism, you know, brings its own magic –  
Or at least, the allure of function.  
Consider each mechanism, still, within your secret  
Self: the valleys of hair attuned to make  
The most delicious pleasure;  
The sure, rococo poise to bones in a joint,  
Unknown, until some act of violation  
Brings their ensemble to the light.

Or a curve of enfolding form, voluptuous in its  
Perfection, superfluous in its rightness, needless  
In its subtlety, excessive in its resource - it does  
Not need to be so good. Florid,  
Exuberant almost...as if it's not for us  
Still less for the divine  
Yet simply, for itself.

I glimpse, through my mind's eye, machines:  
Strutting and proud upon dry dunes  
Under a blazing noon. And so I'm back  
Full-circle, with my own demise.  
It is decay that makes us human, keeps us  
Barely so. It's not corporeal form.  
All life is with us, huddled in  
Degrees of smallness.  
There is no infinite variety.  
Instead, a requiem  
Upon one note.

Stephen Jackson

# Credit Rating

## CREDIT RATING

The void beneath those sheets has been my great vault  
A cave, a subterranean system  
Where light, beyond a distant wisp  
Glimpsed through a chink of dizzying elevation  
Rarely penetrates. Here the shivers of an upper world are, mercifully, absent.  
Here, only, the damp must of Earth,  
The occasional strange music of unearthly places;  
The glamorous foreboding of being where one was never meant to be.

And here is all that a long-locked room holds for a child:  
Lost dolls, their shapes intimated in dust:  
Carpets and drapes, their purpose lost in mossy blots  
As darkness, like a stain, reclaims its own  
And old lumber, its moment for joy now forgotten,  
Is digested by the lumber of the twilight.

Above me, maybe, the songbirds and squirrels of the trees  
Keep their incantations and lucky charms  
(God spare them motivational speakers)  
And totems, too – as bower birds might,  
Or as industrious ants build catacombs –  
Anything to staunch the fatuous passage of days.  
And above them in its turn, as the firmament rises,  
The custesy-puffy clouds of half-filled hope.

You'll say men conquer mountains  
Doubtless, as two flies might conquer a window.  
Only I know the score.  
Let me keep to what I know.  
Let me be unchallenged by laughter, by the risk of seeing love crushed.  
Keep me clear of this tender-febrile garden of earthly delights -  
Attuned, rather, to the Great Prosaic of eternity.



Stephen Jackson  
November 2009

...Come to think, my life was always an opera behind sound-proof doors. A Mad Scene was bound to come along one day.

Stephen Jackson

# Day And Night

It's night, when one needs love like blood,  
And a city is an iceberg of lights,  
The air throbs, roars like a distant bear.  
The finger of one's mind, in indolence,  
Retraces the schema of old streets  
Their excess of purpose – redundant as  
Antique newsprint. I like to sense this imprint of  
Bustling, forgotten hands: the surfeit of detail in a frosted  
Frieze, or else a silent mausoleum in its zone;  
With dolls' house windows that will not surrender  
My own reflection. I like it all.

As a child, I wore my life like a nettle  
I looked out with blistery eyes  
As if a scourge (as if one scourged)  
Not wanting to be found.  
Of late, I'm more resilient.  
I watch this house of mine fall dark:  
I draw it round me.  
Outside, perhaps, a crusting of friendships  
Of issues grown pale – or rather, simply remote.

I remember now. It happened one afternoon.  
There'd been a downpour. Briefly, the clouds parted,  
And in the blaze, the city shone as if pearl  
For a moment, as if cleansed - as if life itself had been  
Cleansed - all purged, all forgiven. For a moment, I felt  
Glad to share what was soundless, timeless:  
Proud to be there.

It is my shame to be different  
But I don't know how to live in bad faith.  
I wish I could walk among the rest, be one of the rest  
Find my solace in a seamless absurdity, but rather,  
Those shackles have slipped away. For me, you see,  
There is a dissonance in one's heart, if one has purpose:  
A tension, or a null that must be fed:  
One needs to have some private absurd -  
Some folly dimly grasped, giving one the appetite to carry on;

There's nothing left, once vision and apathy melt together, resigning one,  
In lean despotic light, to be an outsider at life's busy midnight feast.  
Spare me the sun, this glazed horizon, this eternal present.  
How frivolous is life, if shorn of meaning  
How short a life, how long a day.

Stephen Jackson

# Dog Eat Dog

Out there, beyond the abyss of night  
Beyond the lightlessness that lies behind my own  
Eye – worse, my inner eye –  
A dog is howling.  
I know the black orb of its stare  
A globe of satin, you might say of it; but only if some  
Stray ray, lost in a forlorn expanse of rubble and  
Scrubland shade, could catch it first.  
Otherwise there's nothing, beyond the taint of  
Nothing, or what is arid and shattered and forfeited and  
Essence of dog. I feel the reflex of its throat:  
A taut, fortuitous clench of matter,  
Pursuing the unenlightened purpose of the flesh,  
Bellowing, hour after hour, because it cannot know better.  
An autocracy of connected nerves, blazing beneath  
The skin, like fireworks  
To an ancient purpose, spinning out the generations,  
Spanning the centuries with rank immediacies.  
There is no greyness in the life of a beast,  
No room for mitigation.

It's not the bite that scares me most  
Nor yet uncritical love, doting without thought,  
A hopeless animal loyalty which I can't reciprocate  
(And yes, that - that alone, inane – must give me shame)  
But rather, the perfection of the bullet form  
Of a beast: a muzzle on pistons  
On flanks geared to indomitable lungs:  
Where great incisors spark to the heart's dynamo track  
Meshing with a darkness in me – that void for which I fear  
To crave: some canker within the lonely, loveless, secret self  
Of all men, one that sucks its salt from blood:  
Not prim civility, not decorous failure,  
Not lame equivocation, nor a mealy compromise –  
Not anything that keeps us sugar-sweet, and  
Acquiescent. And down there, fawning up.  
My ancestry is an iron clamour.  
Transfiguration of power  
From brute, mute bulk

Lately inanimate, or merely dead: cracked bone and marrow  
And sinew for a gouging mouth, but now  
All meshed, a frenzy of livid wire,  
A spark that burns through an age, into the scarred  
Hide of this old world, and surmounts nothing.

One day, when you and I are gone, when  
Conscience has succumbed,  
When oceans boil, and the sea gives up its dead,  
A dog will bark, beneath the furnace of the sun.  
A duet of fools they'll be: one on high, one far below,  
Raging at each other  
From vanity of self-interest, the imperative to survive.  
Two faces older than time, both in a frenzy  
At the need not to die, out to buy  
Time without end - as the life flames from each one's brazen mask.  
For, as a life closes (if life exists just for itself) ,  
All the wide celestial sphere dies too,  
Burst with the bubble of perceived things.  
For this is the celebrity of dogs: seeing all, seeing nothing.

Stephen Jackson

# Evening

As I contemplate the waste that is a living mind  
The moon, thin as a sabre, darkens in the sky.  
More slender than my fingernail  
Or so I want to think –  
As if I could truly snatch it down;  
As if my being here, and now  
Could matter more than a folly of flies  
Dancing towards the extinction of light  
On a puddle. Above me: the veins of a cirrus,  
Livid a moment ago,  
Drained bloodless now;  
Grey gossamer of a blush turned to dust.

Walt Whitman did not fear self-contradiction.  
He was large: he contained multitudes.  
So let me find a way to dignify myself and cut the loss,  
As he did -  
No more, I'll plead, than any scanty face on Southwark Bridge.  
Conspirators, we seem to be, if only in oblivion -  
Each of us slipping, by insidious degrees,  
Into an empire of levelled shade.  
My neighbour says your inner voice keeps bright, it stays the same;  
Only the flesh falls, she says. Yet even laughter thickens, wheezing  
Like a superannuated gramophone,  
Piping your chronicles of wasted time, of hollowed afternoons,  
Into ears of those who, less than ever, need to know.  
But I need to believe that the fact and act of thought  
Are more than fortuitous.  
I want to believe that somebody out there cares.  
I have to believe I have the right.

I'm a middle-aged man  
As now I never tire of saying.  
They should have told me years ago  
How consciousness is tyranny  
And how predestination sets you free.  
Let fly the caged bird  
From chattered words.  
To take flight needs no vindication.

A dance lives in, and on, and for, itself -  
Don't pull it down.  
There is no recklessness, in a dominion shorn of purpose:  
Its dynamic is serene, complete:  
Balletic tension, wrought of spontaneity and determinism  
Is what holds it fast: causeless, and requited by itself,  
All meant to be, and nothing meant at all:

As the great space of creation outpaces us all,  
It does not need us:  
If evening envelops, as it does,  
An oceanic shoal of little worlds  
- cooling like basalt, or labradorite -  
It is no matter. They will come back again:  
Unworded, heedlessly, not needing words  
After we are gone.  
Infinity does not speak to us.  
It does not give obeisance  
It will let us go.  
As the moon incises its great arc into night  
It does not die, it will return:  
And clouds, flecks that melt upon creation's face  
Will flutter still like feathers  
In their immemorial clime,  
Or fall like petals  
In the unremarked epiphanies  
Of wordless things  
Long after we have ceased to know.  
Don't fret about your own, diminishing sentience -  
The transience of it, the loss of it,  
As what has come from nothing goes to nothing;  
To be dead is no worse than to be unborn.  
So don't waste time on me  
When I am done:  
Don't reach towards my light  
For there'll be none,  
No more than from an ant burnt by a match;  
But rather, seek out the light of the world  
And find, with necessary impertinence  
Of all ephemeral, existent things,  
Your own, your transitory moment in the sun.





# Forgive Arcadia

## FORGIVE ARCADIA

Y  
ou asked me to write something today  
And all I could sense was a blank.  
Something on fiction and truth, was what you needed –  
But my truth is a brick wall  
And buildings that should be shattered  
Like crabs' claws.  
Still, this morning I woke up at five  
And wondered what would happen  
If the earth froze numb at that secret hour -  
If I could lift my hand, and make the horizon still.  
Then there'd be no one except me,  
And the birds. As the moon went out I should  
Dance and fly through emptied streets  
Away from the city's cramped horizon  
To where the great clouds raced.  
Within their wefts, or so I'd like to think,  
A sugar veil of crystals  
A flurry of icy motes, waiting to catch the sun,  
For now still dark with night –  
A gust of frozen sparks, perhaps,  
Dormant, and charged with the power  
Of undiscovered things: unformed, unknown.  
And then, having been born again,  
I'd creep back to bed, and the smell of cotton.

Last night I met a girl, from far-off lands.  
She was charming – Finnish, so she said,  
And she smiled a numinous smile  
On a clear face with peachy skin:  
Slender, and lit with an inner glow,  
Peaceful and seraphic,  
As lucid in form as porcelain,  
Or a pink sweetshop mouse.

I want to meet her again. But I'd made her up,

In a dream it seems I'd had; all complete,  
All fully formed, with a purpose, and a past  
Of her own, although she'd never been alive.  
And now she's gone with the dew.  
And now I miss her.

She was, a think, a succubus of strange benevolence:  
Beating inside, her eager heart  
That galvanised a moment of bliss made manifest,  
And found a path to earth through sleeping limbs.  
These ghosts of memory, haunting my waking hours:  
Why do you give me time, why do you lend me  
Your good aim? Phantasms that could not be,  
Specious potentialities, all unborn  
You night creatures, far removed  
From what the daylight people do, or are;  
Those sunshine ones, who own the clear air,  
And spread themselves in it; whose clamour makes  
A transient misfortune, then they're gone...  
Yet why must you, instead,  
Tend me as if I were an orchid of the gloom –  
Which, plainly, I am not?

I tried to think what heaven might be like  
For us, we creatures of blind purpose  
Fumbling (as we do) at light. Oblivion would be  
Much of it: forgetting for the hundredth time  
What we had done before, and comatose with hope,  
We should ourselves break free - like birds, or  
A flutter of petals, simply because we could.  
Nothing to fail us, nothing to expiate, nothing to  
Disappoint. Above all, freedom from shame.  
Blank-eyed, we'd cup our hands, and find them  
Crammed with sweets. Infantilism would be the  
Recommended option, that or promiscuity.  
We'd flounce like butterflies, or nose our way  
As small insectivores do, sniffing for flesh to nip  
Without remorse. Inspiring our laborious intent:  
The gaze of a cow, chewing on infinity. All animal  
Kingdoms would be ours to claim, lacking only people.

There'd be no art, no divine discontent:

No knowing laughter, and no more endeavour –  
Only the yawning promenade  
Of a world stripped of Self. Upon preened wings,  
We'd soar through canyons bright as mirrors,  
Where everything was fixed and known. Down  
We'd dive: to perch, and later, stroll an eternal pleasure  
Pier, bounded on each side by the extinction  
Of individuals. Our jelly baby guards  
(Blameless as halfwits, or as sociopaths)  
Their looks too liquid to sustain reproach,  
Would urge us safely home, and in a tract of flowers  
We'd be immured, and there we'd stick: an endless, timeless  
Moment wherein consciousness lay hanged.

Paradise, although fortuitous, is where nothing goes unplanned.  
It is predestination without fear, without account.  
Meanwhile, with brains intact, you'll promise to let me  
Face the glare of what is commonplace.  
And, in return, I'll try to be more even-handed  
In indifference.

Stephen Jackson

June 2002

For Jan

Stephen Jackson

# Happy Hour

It is the big black before an execution,  
Dark enough for him to feel the texture of a sound.  
Fresh from an alcoholic stupor (giving a strange,  
Recluse's keenness to the senses) : the tart aroma of  
Soiled bedding, of his own stifling breath,  
Bestowing a certain intimacy with his own extinction.  
In the street, an urban fox shrieks – without passion,  
The capacity for dread being peculiar to Man.

The lions and zebra mooch past each other,  
Knowing that occasional slaughter is a  
Transaction to be undertaken: briefly,  
Perfunctorily, when and only when occasion demands;  
An instance of necessary drama - no more - in the  
Indiscriminate torpor of a dusted, saffron noon.  
For Nature is strictly in the nature of a business.  
It's humankind, that feels the sting of personal affront.  
A folly of our egotism, and the social clamour  
That gossips, pitiably, behind our eyes.

You've got to admit it: there's not one experience  
That is not better when he's pissed.  
For then, and only then, does one stand  
On the brink of specious possibility; can one ride,  
With rising courage and purpose, the coat tails of  
Mystics and brutes – a happy hour  
Worth vomit, ruin and shame - to race  
On flailing legs the blind, primeval track of the jaguar.

Sobered, he's back in his box:  
Each day the waiting prelude to a murder, to his own  
Murder, conceived and rounded in his mind's eye  
...Leaving one to contemplate the vain encumbrance of a  
Mind; and the benediction of good, cheap plonk.

An afterword:

Poe's inebriation was a mnemonic means, a method of work, a method drastic and deadly, yet appropriate to his passionate nature. I am told that he did not drink as a gourmand but as a barbarian...as if to commit an act of murder, as if something in him had to be killed, a worm that would not die.

- Charles Baudelaire, writing on Edgar Allan Poe

Stephen Jackson

# Mud Love

Love should be like a hatchling butterfly:  
Tearing free from worn-out skin,  
Bursting with new blood its once-crushed wings, and  
Ready to surpass the sky.

But middle age brings whiskery lust, for us  
Or feathery, like dust - gristly with intimacies:  
Mumbled in judicious teashop undertones, to a furtive  
Crumpling of nylon macs, or pitched against a public  
Squall of brats.  
Either way: you know you ought not to be there,  
Caught in the light. You ought to know better.  
Shouldn't be out, not at your age, where you can be seen and shamed.

Decrepitude is melancholy: warm, dark, moist -  
Primal, I suppose; like your abode before you were even born.  
What inner child survives, in me?  
Ah, mine wouldn't die.  
Mine didn't grow.  
It reposes, clenched fist of a foetus that it is, gripping  
My life's misjudgements, binding them tight.  
A lifetime's chatter fills my ears.  
My silence is big enough to swallow worlds.  
Yet still I need to feel another's hand.

Addled love is a clock cranked backwards.  
A crab scuffling sideways  
Writhing, worming pinkly on a skewer like a caterpillar:  
Awaiting resurrection as a soft-boiled egg  
To be absorbed into the dark belly of the earth.

Stephen Jackson

# My Mother's Death

My mother, as usual, judged it best.  
The day before her funeral, in a gibberish of legs,  
A fly refused to die on her bathroom sill.  
Out of its time, come February, but still  
Raging against the dying of its light;

My mother's house (corporeal husk of one now cool to the  
Touch) retained its warmth: my destination, in a six-hour  
Journey into loneliness. My plan had been: she might be  
Ashamed to die, if I stayed camped beside the hospital bed  
Or else she might draw energy  
From me, by some osmosis, fanciful or futile – anyway,  
It didn't happen. She chose her moment  
(Waiting until, for an instant, I'd slipped aside)  
And then she slipped away herself.  
"Peaceful," one's supposed to say; though I should  
Call it moribund. I knew I'd seen her scratch, and moan,  
Cognizant, at least of her distress, struggling to be comfy:  
Until, in the wingbeat of an insect, nature betrayed her.

Michelangelo, it was, who said that death meant nothing.  
It had no hold, so long as we held on  
In the mind's eye of the living. But it is love  
That has no span, no currency, beyond an extant memory.  
Each age recedes beyond remembrance  
And our maimed minds are all that's left for reckoning.  
Oh yes, let's cling to the detritus of forfeited lives  
Like a lost child. Let's hoard the memories, the papers  
And pictures yellowed as pulled teeth. Let's fight,  
As an infant fights off sleep, and frightful dreams - thinking  
We might forestall time's withering recession.

You'll tell me: Death is the hard edge  
That whets a life, and hones it into shape.  
Tell me how a dozen figures stand behind each living face:  
How, in our dust, an unborn forest lies asleep.  
Tell me of death's necessity, how winter must  
Precede each spring; say, Let's be grateful for  
(However briefly) sentience can rise above

This surge of all-enveloping darkness:

Yet I have lost my dearest friend,  
The warm spark at my core is up in smoke.  
I shiver with the cold, the cold of bones.

Stephen Jackson



# One Last Time

I thought, before they cut her phone off,  
I might leave a last message.

One for the ether: one that not a soul  
Would ever hear. "Goodbye, old girl.  
I wish you well."

It grieves me that she fades. I am dismayed  
That nothing can be done - now she has gone  
Where all our roads converge; or rather,  
Where they entrail themselves.  
There you find the foetid knot  
That poisons all our purposes,  
Debasing them, rendering them baseless,  
Making a cruelty of our consciousness.

There's no nobility to old age. There is no self at all.  
No heroism, surely, amongst those who are dying:  
Heroics imply choice, not helplessness.  
Instead, declining life is a quest for salvage  
Against inevitable shipwreck: doing what can be  
Done, saving what can be saved, before one founders.  
They know, of course. The dying choose their words  
To please us, then they doze. Whose bedside manner  
Is that? The dying are there for us: writing off debts  
That we cannot repay, words it is too late for us to say,  
Absorbing our composure, our denial, and the lies of our  
Upright, grown-up lives - in gentler, distant eyes.

I didn't make my call. I knew it was in vain,  
But that's not vanity. It was, maybe, my fear  
Of (if engineers checked the line, and found me on it)  
Making a fool of myself (for so my petty suburbanite's  
Shame forced me to reason) but, worse:  
What if the number were already dead  
Giving me the infinite rebuttal of a numb tone?

Look at the set of a dead face.  
Its muscles smoothed, its profile young again.  
They say repose has brought it peace, but  
That's not so. Listen, and sense instead

The silence of oblivion, the null of longest night,  
The sigh of stars, like candles, going out.

Stephen Jackson

# Persistence Of Vision

he span of his gaze was so great  
He could not see the generations come and go before him:  
Flickering, quicker than motes on a sunbeam.  
Growing, rotting, burning at a supersonic pace;  
Flitting between the squares of a chessboard garden  
Too fast for the eye to catch.  
Their monuments lasted a moment longer  
Before melting, like sugar in rain.  
Yet these he applauded:  
Having watched great cathedrals rise and wither  
Like convolvulus or runner beans -  
A mite colourless (he would have approved more exotic  
Blossomings) but worthwhile enough. He wondered if  
Perhaps they grew from seed; or rather, who pollinated  
Them, so that their brief lives might be perpetuated,  
And to what end. Before him, belligerent continents  
Waged war or else, supine in defeat,  
They ebbed and flowed, passive, upon the tide.  
He would have liked to eavesdropp on their treaties  
And entreaties: but they spoke too hurriedly, and in a whisper.  
He yearned to confide in intimacies, and  
He was reconciled to being alone.

In truth, they had begun to weary him.  
They knew no wisdom, and their refusal to learn was  
Irkesome. Clearly, this was home to the most  
Rudimentary thought. Had he been young (had he  
Remembered what it was like to be young) he might  
Have wept with disillusionment. As it was, ever the stoic,  
He watched the terrain crumble further into ashes,  
And clasped his arms tight against the onset of  
An eternal winter.

Stephen Jackson

# The Poet Speaks

You treat world history as a mathematician does mathematics, in which nothing but laws and formulae exist, no reality, no good and evil, no time, no yesterday, no tomorrow, nothing but an eternal shallow, mathematical present.

Otto Hess, on current economic theory

WHO ARE YOUR ROLE MODELS?

Oh, an eclectic bunch of relics  
And hard to circumnavigate:  
Sir Thomas Beecham (No, don't ask)  
Groucho Marx, and Harpo.  
John Stuart Mill and Dr Johnson.  
Jonathan Swift, alongside Saki.  
Hogarth, he's in there somewhere;  
Shaw, Wells, Russell, a dash of Blake -  
Quentin Crisp and Katherine Mansfield.  
Bugs Bunny. Above all: Albert Steptoe.

KINDLY GIVE A THUMBNAIL PORTRAIT OF YOURSELF.

A living fossil, susceptible to flattery.  
A cynical and saturnine curmudgeon.  
An ageing and eccentric bore.  
A decrepit homunculus.  
A tortoise steeped in a peat bog.  
A polyp in the bowel of material production.  
A senescent blatherer of overheard indiscretions.  
A gadfly. A Grotesque (and not even Rococo) .

WHY DO YOU CARRY ON, CHURNING OUT REAMS OF NONSENSE?

Because I believe that consciousness is a curse.  
Because I believe you have to let me make the best of it.

YOU WASTED YOUR YOUTH ON PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY. WHY?

So as to arm me with a lifetime of vaguely ominous platitudes.

YOU HAVE A CERTAIN SUPERFICIAL EDUCATION.

WHEN DID YOU RESOLVE NOT TO BE AN ACCOUNTANT, A FINANCIER?

Let me see. That would be...when I read the research, showing that economists

thought the same way as people with an Antisocial Personality Disorder. "The ramifications of Game Theory", didn't you call it?

WE NOTED YOUR SELF-AGGRANDISING GLIBNESS.

Mea culpa! If I'd spotted the gravy train younger, I could have made a flea-sized television pundit for our coffee-table classes.

A PUDDLE OF SELF-LOVE BEING YOUR DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC: WAS THERE NO PLACE FOR YOU AS A FASHION DESIGNER? AN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER? A CELEBRITY? A SOCIOLOGIST?

Do you know: all of a sudden, I feel quite proud to stick just where I am.

Stephen Jackson

# The Roof Of The World (For James)

There you are, as I was at your age,  
A solitary child in your teeming realm  
Far from the shimmering torpor that I see - this  
Province of flowers, in radiant mourning.  
For you invisible choirs hold their breath:  
They crowd, in secret awe, between the  
Crack electric wires of this late-summer  
Garden. For sharp as saws, taut as a  
Tendon ready to snap, its dried and shrinking  
Stems. Rhythms of anemones, ragged hollyhocks,  
The flame-haired helenium,  
Attuned, for you, to music of another plane,  
Where what comes new for you is ripe and bright.

I saw you, with blooms high above your head,  
Testing yourself in fresh and unknown space:  
Crashing, with your toes, a wake in gravel seas  
- As I did, at your age;  
Leaping the boulders of your  
Grandma's rockery - islands and isthmuses,  
That float now on the white mists of an evening,  
Where tattered mariner-moths, fugitives  
In umbral velvet, scud and skim:  
Where greenbottles, bloated and dissolute,  
Lay fulsome in their dying dream.

You told me, you were jumping over the top  
Of the world - the same phrase that I used  
When I was eight. Little nephew: don't become a  
Slave within the cell of your perception, as I did;  
Be like the panther that bounds, unfettered,  
Unbound, though grievously captive:  
Be our Prometheus, unafraid of necessary loneliness,  
Bringing fire to the dwindling compass of our cage;  
Seeing for the first time...where I, instead,  
Watch stagnant, involuted forms  
Preludes to a redundant nocturne -  
Profuse and blowsy, a dusted reliquary -  
Inert as adult thinking.

Stephen Jackson