

MERVYN PEAKE

THE

GLASSBLOWERS

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THE GLASSBLOWERS

Mervyn Peake has also written

TITUS GROAN, a novel

GORMENGHAST, a sequel to Titus Groan

THE GLASSBLOWERS

BY

MERVYN PEAKE

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THE GLASSBLOWERS

HIS HEAD AND HANDS WERE BUILT FOR SIN

I

His head and hands were built for sin,
As though predestined from the womb
They had no choice: an earthish doom
Has dogged him from his fortieth gloom
Back to where glooms begin.

II

That skull, those eyes, that lip-less mouth,
That frozen jaw, that ruthless palm
Leave him no option but to harm

His fellows and be harmed by them.
The beast his marrow feeds must wander forth.

III

If he die this way or die that,
If he be hung or end between
Torn blankets in a rented den,
Yet his last heart-beat will have been
The knell of something separate,

IV

Fled, like the unicorn, away,
For ever gone, that was alone,
Loveless, unique as fire or stone,
Lone victim of primordial bone,
Earth's quarry with the earth for prey.

V

Hell's dice were thrown. It was not he
Who carved his brows crude beetling size
Or scooped the caverns for his eyes
Where squat the hatreds: let the wise
Recall the fanged caves of the sea.

VI

His thudding heart is drawn and driven
By rhythms as immemorial as
The tides of the moon: and dangerous,

And naked as their waves he is,
And as innocent in the shrewd eye of heaven.

TO LIVE AT ALL IS MIRACLE ENOUGH

To live at all is miracle enough.
The doom of nations is another thing.
Here in my hammering blood-pulse is my proof.

Let every painter paint and poet sing
And all the sons of music ply their trade;
Machines are weaker than a beetle's wing.

Swung out of sunlight into cosmic shade,
Come what come may the imagination's heart
Is constellation high and can't be weighed.

Nor greed nor fear can tear our faith apart
When every heart-beat hammers out the proof
That life itself is miracle enough.

**GROTTOED BENEATH YOUR RIBS OUR
BABE LAY THRIVING**

I

Grottoed beneath your ribs our babe lay thriving
On the wild saps of Eden's midnight garden,
When qualms of love set fire the nine-month burden,
And there were phantoms in the cumulous sky,
And one green meteor with a flickering
Trail that stayed always yet was always moving;
O alchemy!
The fire-boy knocking at the osseous belfry
Where thuds the double-throated chord of loving.

II

Grottoed beneath your ribs, our babe no more
May hear the tolling of your sultry gong
Above him where the echoes throb and throng
Among the breathing rafters of sweet bone;
No longer coiled in gloom, the tireless core
And fount of his faint heart-beat fled,
He lies alone
With air and time about him and the drone
Of space for his immeasurable bed.

III

Grottoed beneath your ribs no longer, he,
Like madagascar broken from its mother,
Must feel the tides divide an africa
Of love from his clay island, that the sighs
Of the seas encircle with chill ancientry;
And though your ruthless breast allays his cries,

How vulnerable
He is when you release him, and how terrible
Is that wild strait which separates your bodies.

IV

Grottoed no longer, babe, the brilliant daybreak
Flares heavenward in a swathe of diamond light.
Stretch your small wrinkled limbs in shrill delight!
Gulp at the white tides of the globe, and scream
"I am!" O little island, sleep or wake,
What though the darkening gusts divide your mother's
Rich continent
From all you are, yet there's a sacrament
Of more than marl shall make you one another's.

LOVE, I HAD THOUGHT IT ROCKLIKE

I

I had thought it rocklike,
Rooted, and foursquare,
But it was a bird of the air,
Restless, winged for flying,
Delicate and perilously rare.

II

The last of a species;
Or a last duet
Of lovers, of birds—
The last of all lyrics,
Its blue ink drying
On a poet's words.

III

I had thought that it stood
But it slithered like sand;
I had thought it founded
Like a city of stone—
But it was thistledown
Or the touch of a wand.

IV

I had thought it solid,
The sun on it burning,
A planted thing—
Love's minster, ageless,
It's a rich pipes turning
The stones to gold—

But it was slight,
Airborne and exquisite,
Half tethered, half running—
A heart-shaped kite
On the winds of the world.

V

It was a leaf of the aspen,
It was not the aspen.
A ripple of ocean,
It was not the ocean.
It was a bird on a rooted rock
And birds are rootless.

VI

And in some other climate of the heart
It stands upon a cold, illusory shore,
Or floats, O feckless,
Now and for ever
Over weird water.

DIGGING A TRENCH I FOUND A HEART-SHAPED STONE

Digging a trench I found a heart-shaped stone:
Freeing its surface of the loam, I held
It—why so tenderly?—in my grimed palm.

I let the army shovel fall away
And held the heavy, heart-shaped stone within
A cup I formed between my working hands—
As though it were a wounded bird whose breast
Throbbled delicately against my finger-tips.

And it grew heavier and heavier
Until it had become your heart and mine
Fused in a fierce embrace of solid stone.

POEM

As much himself is he as Caliban
Is Caliban or Ariel, Ariel.
I shook with jealousy to see a man
Strut with such bombast to his burial.

Loathing my piebald heart that strikes ambiguous
Chords in my breast,
I watched him spit the bright pips as he stalked
Into the darkness like a golden beast.

O, THIS ESTRANGEMENT FORMS A DISTANCE VASTER

O, this estrangement forms a distance vaster
Than great seas and great lands
Could lay between us, though in my hands
Yours lie, that are less your hands than the plaster
Casts of your hands. Your face, made in your likeness,

Floats like a ghost through its own clay from me,
Even from you—O it has left us, we
Are parted by a tract of thorn and water:
The bitter
Knowledge of failure damns us where we stand
Withdrawn, lonely, powerless, and
Hand in hand.

AS A GREAT TOWN DRAWS THE ECCENTRICS IN

As a great town draws the eccentrics in,
So I am like a city built of clay
Where madmen flourish, for beneath my skin,
In every secret arch or alleyway

That winds about my bones of midnight, they
Lurk in their rags, impatient for the call
To muster at my breastbone, and to cry
For revolution through the capital.

SWANS DIE AND A TOWER FALLS

Swans die and a tower falls.
Light crumbles in lost halls
Where effigies
Stare from marmoreal eyes
Until the masonry
About them drops away
And they are ruined
Among wilds of wind,
And light breaks in again
In vain ... in vain,
For love has fled and where it was
Mouths pain.

Swans die, and a tower falls,
And our cities hear cold bells
Toll the nepenthe
Of earth, air, and sea,
Flesh, fish and bird,
Morality and amorality,
Ploughshare and sword
World without end...
Then laugh! and laugh again
Before the end
Of our fleet span, sweet friend!
O my sweet friend!

**SING I THE FICKLE, FIT-FOR-NOTHING
FELLOWS**

Sing I the fickle, fit-for-nothing fellows
For I have known them and have heard the yell
That rattles the round base of laughter's pail.
The empty-pocket boys who ask no quarter,
For whom no childhood sings, and no hereafter
Rustles tremendous wings.
Their hollow sail
Fills with a fitful blast
As down the sea
They skid, without a needle or a star
Their careless privateer,
Agog for a gold island
Or a war
With penny pirates on a silver sand.
Sing I the way they tilt the cocky hat,
The lightning tongue that spins a cigarette
Along a slit.
The loveless eye
Like a wet pebble through the tilted glass.
I think their forebears gave the Spaniard trouble,
And in the mêlée made a job of it
With bloody cutlass.

**THE VASTEST THINGS ARE THOSE WE MAY
NOT LEARN**

The vastest things are those we may not learn.
We are not taught to die, nor to be born,
Nor how to burn
With love.
How pitiful is our enforced return
To those small things we are the masters of.

THE CONSUMPTIVE. BELSEN 1945

I

If seeing her an hour before her last
Weak cough into all blackness I could yet
Be held by chalk-white walls, and by the great
Ash coloured bed,
And the pillows hardly creased
By the tapping of her little cough-jerked head—
If such can be a painter's ecstasy,
(Her limbs like pipes, her head a china skull)
Then where is mercy?
And what
Is this my traffic? for my schooled eyes see
The ghost of a great painting, line and hue,
In this doomed girl of tallow?
O Jesus! has the world so white a yellow
As lifts her head by but a breath from linen
In the congested and yet empty world
Of plaster, cotton, and a little marl?

Than pallor what is there more terrible?
There lay the gall
Of that dead mouth of the world.
And at death's centre a torn garden trembled
In which her eyes like great hearts of black water
Shone in their wells of bone,
Brimmed to the well-heads of the coughing girl,
Pleading through history in that white garden;
And very wild, upon the small head's cheekbones,
As on high ridges in an icy dew,
Burned the sharp roses.

II

Her agony slides through me: am I glass
That grief can find no grip
Save for a moment when the quivering lip
And the coughing weaker than the broken wing
That, fluttering, shakes the life from a small bird
Caught me as in a nightmare? Nightmares pass;
The image blurs and the quick razor-edge
Of anger dulls, and pity dulls. O God,
That grief so glibly slides! The little badge
On either cheek was gathered from her blood:
Those coughs were her last words. They had no weight
Save that through them was made articulate
Earth's desolation on the alien bed.
Though I be glass, it shall not be betrayed,
That last weak cough of her small, trembling head.

EACH DAY WE LIVE IS A GLASS ROOM

I

Each day we live is a glass room
Until we break it with the thrusting
Of the spirit and pass through
The splintered walls to the green pastures
Where the birds and buds are breaking
Into fabulous song and hue
By the still waters.

II

Each day is a glass room unless
We break it: but how rare's the day
We have the power to raise the dead
And walk on air to the green pastures!
For the clouded glass, or clay,
Is blind with usage, though the Lord
Walk the still waters.

POEM

I

The paper is breathless
Under the hand
And the pencil is poised
Like a warlock's wand

II

But the white page darkens
And is blown on the wind
And the voice of a pencil
Who can find?

THE GLASSBLOWERS

Turn of the head ... turn of the hand ... such wiseness in
These gestures of craft's ritual lies, and such
A lyric ease pervades their toil as makes
Their firelit bodies lordly as they blow.

Turn of the hand ... turn of the head ... such a rare
tremor
Of skill that weaves and winds and coils along
The giant flute they fondle, spin, and give
Their hoarded breath to, in the raddled darkness.

There is a molten language that is glass
Unborn, a poetry of barbarous birth;
It sings in sand and roars in furnace-fire;

The blowers breathe it voiceless, as they pass
Through brimstone halls and girdered aisles of ire.

Here, in this theatre of fitful light,
The dancers cast their long and leaping shades,
Their heavy feet thud on the firelit stage,
For they are dancers of the arm and hand,
The finger-tips, the throat and weaving shoulders:
Between the head and feet a rhythm of clay,
A rhythm of breath is wheedling alchemy
From the warlock sand.

Their cheeks are blown like gourds that sweat and
flush
With goblin hues, rose-gold, diaphanous,
The violet glow and the alizarine blush.

The air is full of gestures suddenly lit,
As suddenly withdrawn. The mammoth throats
Of arches, gulp the dancers, flame, and loom.
O factory fantastic! cave on cave
Of crumbling brick where shackled lions rave
And howl for gravel while their blinding manes
Shake radiance across the restless gloom.

It is the ballet of gold sweat. It is
The hidden ballet of the heavy feet
And flickering hands: the dance of men unconscious
Of dancing and the golden wizardries.
Rough clothed, rough headed, drenched with sweat,
they are
As poised as floodlit acrobats in air,

They twist the throbbing fire-globes over water
And whirl the ripe chameleon pears, whose fire
Threatens to loll like a breast, or a tongue or a serpent,
Over the breath-rod and the surly trough.

He has withdrawn the fire-flute from the jaws
Of cruelty, has gathered at its tip
A lemon of ripe anger, has become
A juggler spinning fire, and when he puffs
The hollow rod, his hands are spinning still
As burgeons at its lip the dazzling fruit
That burned the lips of Adam, yet more fair
Than the bleediest apples of that Orchard were.

See, it is spinning through the shadowland
Shaped like a sphere or giant worm of flame,
A slug of light, a snake, or fruit of air
According to the wisdom of his hand.

O you have juggled with an Element
And tamed its heart—the sands and the flames are now
This delicate transparency that clings
To its last, fleeting tincture. Naked and white
It lies at last, snapped from the rod, among
Its delicate echoes on the factory floor,
And what was molten, tinkles; what was twisting
In dragon wrath is calm and twists no more.

POEM

I

What panther stalks tonight as through these London
Groves of iron stalks the strawberry blonde?
Strung through the darkness each electric moon
Throbs like a wound.

II

She tinkles tombwards to the lilt of coins
Down avenues of globe-stars: as she prowls
On heels like stilts, those castanets of doom
Waken the ghouls.

III

Threading the lights and shades, her kerbcraft shames
The ingenious leopard, but her legacy
Of lore is dangerous as is the goose-flesh-
Surfaced sea,

IV

For now the inverted tombstone of a starched
And ghastly shirtfront shines like wax beneath
A lamp as something sidles to exchange
A blade for breath.

V

Where Swallow Street and Piccadilly join
It moves through half light with a slithering sound
And leaves a penknife in the seeded heart
Of the strawberry blonde.

WHEN TIGER-MEN SAT THEIR MERCURIAL COURSERS

When tiger-men sat their mercurial coursers,
Hauled into shuddering arches the proud fibre
Of head and throat, sank spurs, and trod on air—

I was not there....

When clamorous centaurs thundered to the rain-pools,
Shattered with their fierce hooves the silent mirrors,
When glittering drops clung to their beards and hair—

I was not there....

When through a blood-dark dawn a man with antlers
Cried, and throughout the day the echoes suffered
His agony and died in evening air—

I was not there.

ALL EDEN WAS THEN GIRDLED BY MY ARMS

All Eden was then girdled by my arms.
The snake, the lady, and the sharp white fruit,
The rhododendron sky and the foam-like plumes
Of dappled fowl that down green zephyrs float.

O wild, wise garden, palpable you lay,
A metamorphosis at my breastbone burning.
The lioness and the white lamb at play
For the last time across the diamond morning.

Within so small a noose my girdling arms
Held you, my sweet, and yet the noose was doom—
Doom in the brain, doom in the ringing limbs
When branches broke and a gold bird flew home.

WITH PEOPLE, SO WITH TREES

With people, so with trees: where there are groups
Of either, men or trees, some will remain
Aloof while others cluster where one stoops
To breathe some dusky secret. Some complain

And some gesticulate and some are blind;
Some toss their heads above green towns; some freeze

For lack of love in copses of mankind;
Some laugh; some mourn; with people, so with trees.

POEM

My arms are rivers heavy with raw flood,
And their white reaches cry though flesh be dumb,
And I am ill with sudden tenderness
For him—I had not known that such duress
Of thorny sweetness fell to fatherhood.
Arms can be torrents; little creature, come
And in the river-banks of my caress

Find you a coign for conies, or a nest
Under the overhanging of my head
For wildfowl, or curl here, ah close, and be
In hearing of the tides that flood in me,
And listen to the boulders in my breast,
And dare the compass of my arms, nor dread
The pools of shade they spill for you, so gently.

How vernal, how irradiant is his face
Lit up as though by stars or a quick breeze
Of lucent light that nowhere else abides
Save in his features, lambent like a bride's,
And more unearthly than my crass embrace
Can share or hope for now ... the rivers freeze...
And my idiot arms fall, heavy, to my sides.

AND ARE YOU THEN LOVE'S SPOKESMAN IN THE BONE?

And are you then Love's spokesman in the bone?
For there's a raging orator whose yell
Startles the sleeping jaw from ear to chin.
If you are he, cease cryer! for too well
I know your voice—and what it is you mean.
And there's no need to tell me what I own,

For it is love I own, and you must go.
Your voice along the victim jaw-bone stuttering
Has stabbed its message dry. What need is there
To add so crude a pain to all the fluttering
Madness of the heart—O orator!
Silence your voice: you serve no purpose now.

FEATURES FORGO THEIR POWER

Features forgo their power
To quicken or darken:
Cold and exact they lie
Where there's none to waken.

Only the fluttering dies.
The motionless mouth,
The brow, and the upturned eyes
Have their separate death.

The living tear and the lashes
Black and wet
Immemorial are
In the grief they stir.

The love and the anger live
But are far away:
Life was so nervously wove
Through her delicate clay.

More rare ... more rare
Than thought can well hold
Were the dawns and the dusks of that zephyr'd head
That lolls in the cold.

Most far ... most far,
From the white host now—
Its guesthood ended, the flower
Floats from the bough.

**AN UGLY CROW SITS HUNCHED ON
JACKSON'S HEART**

An ugly crow sits hunched on Jackson's heart
And when it spreads its wings like broken fans
The body of his gloom is torn apart

Revealing sea-green pastures and gold towns
And tents and children climbing to the sun
And all the white and crimson of the clowns.

But Jackson knows no secret way to turn
His tongue into crow-language, nor to plead
His right to pastures, tumblers, and gold towns;

The sullen fowl is witless that it broods
Upon a human heart, and that its wings
When spread disclose his childhood in a flood

Of spectral gold, where fleeting vistas float
Their dappled meads and vales through Jackson's
heart.

POEM

He moves across the bleak, penumbral shire,
His body smouldering with long diamonds
Of silver, yellow, and of sea-green fire,
And at his heels are hunger's restless hounds.

Skyline to skyline—darkness. In his hands
Nothing to hold, and in his eyes no light.
He is the harlequin of broken lands
Wandering forgotten through the martial night.

FOR MAEVE

You are the maeve of me as this my arm
Is the joined arm of me; the heart within
Which I have heard so long yet never seen
Is thus—like these, you are my fount, my limb—
Yet more than these: you are the maeve of me.

Birthbed or deathbed, cradle and grave of me.
What is there that I lack? Yet what have I
More palpable than the immuring sky?
I can be lost in a familiar realm,
The more my knowledge the more lost to be
In all you are who are the maeve of me.

THE REBELS

By devious paths the rebels make
Their way to centres of revolt

And nests of insurrection shake
With wings in cities half asleep.

From tired homes with burning heads
They stumble into days of mist:
Snapped is their childhood's anchor-chain,
The helm shakes, and a tide is running.

The time for solitary journeys
Among minds. The time for anger.
Suddenly the natural rebel
Finds himself among the firebrands.

Received, he lifts his head, and finds,
In some dark centre of revolt,
He is more lonely among pard
Than when he cursed his parents' love.

I HAVE BECOME LESS CLAY THAN HAZEL- ROD

I have become less clay than hazel-rod,
For to the great lake of your graciousness
The tremors bend:
And the diviner's fist, my double-yard
Of earth's become, to clutch the alchemies
And make an end.

Unless the warlock loose the straining
Rod, the emerald hazel cracks
Death at the palm.
Unless your shrouded waters bring
Love's climbing wave, wherefore this stick
Of splintered doom?

POEM

With power supernal dowered
The eagle whacks its way
Up streets of gale.
The tiger, sinew-powered,
Tears at the dappled prey
Its claws impale.

Through waters opalescent
The wavering squid proceeds
To sunless hunting-grounds.
Thwarted at the senescent
Moon the jaguar speeds
Among the mounds.

The humming-bird, suspended
Above the bloom, its wings
Invisible, sucks.
A wounded snake has wended

To water that makes rings
While its cold throat works.

I have nor scale, nor pinion,
Nor limbs with thews of steel,
Nor head of gold.
But my imagination
Is tropical and real
As the pen I hold.

AND THEN I HEARD HER SPEAK

And then I heard her speak
And her shrill voice shattered
The alabaster of her brow's
Rare symmetry:
And her loveliness seemed to crumble, and break,
And nothing mattered—
Though I had seen her head turn suddenly
Like a naiad's—and then, her voice:
And the magic was scattered.

Yet now, I find in me
That it has been resolved,
This discord, for an edged
And more fantastic beauty has evolved
As when a shark's fin rips the satin sea.

POEM

It is at times of half-light that I find
Forsaken monsters shouldering through my mind.
If the earth were lamplit I should always be
Found in their company.

Even in sunlight I have heard them clamouring
About the gateways of my brain, with glimmering
Rags about their bruise-dark bodies bound,
And in each brow a ruby like a wound.

AN APRIL RADIANCE OF WHITE LIGHT DANCES

An April radiance of white light dances
From the long silver pastures under Pendle,
Dances from grasses, glances
Among the uncurling leaves I'd fondle
Were my hands moth-soft, slight
And light as a petal:
But they are heavy bone and blood and clay
And are too clumsy for this faery day

Of exquisite and shimmering
Foliage and tremulous wing.

Too coarse, my hands among the delicate marvels.
Too coarse my brain while the deft day unravels
Coiled april's foliate thread: too coarse my heart,
For as I tread the immaculate lakes of dew
I know it to be rotten as the lung
Of an old miner; yet, the pitman's throat
Cages the Cambrian thrush, and through
My turbid heart it may be I can fling
Across the face of war this song for you,
Of naked spring.

ABSENT FROM YOU WHERE IS THERE CORN AND WINE?

I

Absent from you where is there corn and wine?
You have gone out of the leaves, out of the sunshine:
My spirit sickens and the air is brine-
Less.

II

Absent from you—absent from sight and sound—
Clouds are but clouds and the ground is only the

ground;

Say you that birds yet sing? Or that the heart is bound-
Less?

III

A light has fled out of my bones and from life its
rhyme.

Gulf'd in a failure of love I can hear the chime
Of childhood's bells, forlorn, as I wander time-
Less.

THE FLIGHT

While watching the sun sink
Bleeding like Duncan: while marvelling
At the imagination's brink
Upon this thing—

This going down of a murdered
And soundless star,
My mind sped
Suddenly far

From me; it ceased to be mine,
It fled
Like a spirit over the rim of my brain
To a zone of the dead

Where the Murdered-
In-Legends lie
With their dazzling wounds that burn and bleed
Through history.

THE HEART HOLDS MEMORIES OLDER THAN THE MIND'S

When beauty rides into the hollow heart
It is as something that comes home again
As though for anchorage; or like a reckless
Prodigal returning to his father
Up dappled aisles of immemorial cedars.

When a great beauty silences the heart
And holds it spellbound, it is recognition
Of something half remembered, long before
Atlantis was, when love was the wild fruit
We fed upon in golden climes forgotten.

TRUTHS HAVE NO SEPARATE FIRES BUT FROM THEIR WELDING

Truths have no separate fires but from their welding
Flames rise, and when the incongruous is found
Not to be so, then, if the gold's no gilding,
Great tombs take wing
From what was burial ground.

The eye, the ear, the intelligence, the spirit,
Through cornucopias of living dream
Veering unburdened, find the heart inherits
The matrix through a drawing in of threads
To the bright destination of a sunbeam
That burns at stairhead,
Flowers in the gloom,
Glowers in the wine
Or, where a field of bread
Sways its pale head,
Creates the sudden signature and sign.

[The end of *The Glassblowers* by Mervyn Peake]