

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]