

SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD



J O S E P H H A R R I S O N

“That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once.”

1

GOOD FRENDE FOR JESUS SAKE FORBEARE,
TO DIGG THE DUST ENCLOASED HEARE:
BLESTE BE Ye MAN Yt SPARES THES STONES,
AND CURST BE HE Yt MOVES MY BONES.

And cursed be sexton, parish clerk,
Or any man whose dirty work
Disturbs my poor dust where it lies.
I'll see you, though through other eyes.

The dead know how to set things right
Ghosting the corners of the night,
To find and leave you cold in bed,
Your imperfections on your head.

My blessing may do little good
To those refraining as they should,
But if you thrive by doing ill
My curse will mark you, yes it will.

2

But how to reconcile
The poet of such agony and lust,
Of worldliness, rhetorical bravura,
And infinite variety of style,
 And wit, and *sprezzatura*,
 With this insipid bust

Of bluish Cotswold limestone, set in its niche?
“A self-satisfied pork butcher” (Dover
Wilson), quill pen in hand,
He looks thick-headed, ordinary, rich.
Whole worlds at his command?
The cloud-capp’d show was over.

Fears of the charnel house, of disinterred
Confusion, ossuary mix and match.
Who’s knocked about the mazard,
Chopless? Well, anyone. Without a word
Poor luck finds out the hazard,
Some clay a hole to patch.

Here lies. Commemorate,
Like any other man, the matchless bard.
Like golden lads and girls. The final stage.
“Stay passenger.” Regard the name, the date.
Trust to the living page,
And pray. The rest is hard.

3
All your precautions can’t anticipate
The odd macabre fads of future days:
The burgeoning celebrity skull craze
That led collectors to decapitate

Beethoven, Haydn, Swift, Sir Thomas Browne,
Geronimo and Goya and de Sade,
Led someone to pry up your stone, then prod
Your resting spot to find you, three feet down,

Shrouded not confined, and detach the prize.
Ground penetrating radar (GPR)
Discovers you’re not where we think you are,
At least your skull is not. To our surprise

An odd disturbance where your head should be
 (“A strange brick structure” – what’s *that* doing there?)
Suggests an infiltration and repair.
Custodians of Holy Trinity

Won't give permission for an excavation.
 With or without your head, they'll let you lie . . .
 Cue the hideous lines, the shriek owl cry,
 The sheeted dead of Gothic machination

Who squeak and gibber, cue men all in fire
 Walking the streets like portents, dewes of blood,
 These late eclipses, wing to th'rooky wood,
 Burst cerements. Lights up. Bare ruined choir.

4
 Curse or plea, it matters not.
 Greedy finds so Greedy takes,
 Scripts the coda, all mistakes.
 Mutilation of the plot

Turns romance to tragic farce,
 Mocks the poet's dying wish,
 Serves his head as on a dish.
 Mystery we'll never parse,

Clueless, bootless as the dead.
 Property appalled, the self
 Reams of paper on a shelf,
 Beauty, truth, and all that fled.

Harbinger come far too near,
 Invitation in a curse.
 Hard, now, to imagine worse.
 Like the snows of yesteryear

Constancy is for the birds.
 Greedy takes what Greedy finds,
 Casts it to the viewless winds.
 All's defunctive. Blot these words.

5
 Foul deeds will rise. The heart with strings of steel
 Will bow before the altar, flush with guilt.
 Confess your sins, though none will be forgiven,
 Not heinous theft, nor murderous intent,

Nor profit from imaginary crime.
A magpie's not a man, though black and white,
Blackness of heart, the white of cowardice
Strutting in borrowed feathers, cap-a-pie.
It's better to be vile and vile esteemed
Than not to be, however rank your crimes.

Ladies and gentlemen, *I* stole Shakespeare's head.
At some point in the past, I won't say how
– Strings pulled, palms greased, equipment commandeered –
Jump at the dark-shoaled middle of the night
I slipped past lime trees, found an open door,
By candlelight crowbarred his ledger stone,
Jabbed my right hand right through his threadbare shroud,
Fingered vermicular dust to find his skull
Then gripped it through the eye sockets and took it.
It's sitting on my desk, watching me now.