

Grey Roses: A Roman Elegy

by [James Stevens Curl](#) (January 2019)



Untitled, Cai Guo-Qiang, 2017

*In memory of E U T M v H u B
Extrema semper de ante factis iudicant*

1

Fickle Spring has slipped away,
quick-footed, wanton, primed
for Summer's warmth,
and fecund land renewed.
Fresh roses bloom,
from blue Tarbellian hills
to bright Santonic shores:
they dip by flowing waters,
shading quiet shallows,
and transfigure Aquitaine.
Late, thin-veined petals,
bees-winged in dreams,
fall in perfumed Arcady:

Earth proudly shakes
her dancing, fine-spun hair.

2

But unattended now,
the gardens bring forth purging cassia,
sunk in sloth,
and over sun-drenched vases, roses lie:
evergreen, the myrtle,
with white sweet-scented flowers,
crowns her dear, familiar, lovely head.
With Fate's acknowledgement,
let me hold her fast once more,
for Death will surely creep upon us,
heavy-hooded, in the shade:
he cares not for roses,
nor her graceful lined form,
anointing rose-bowered shrines
with oils from Syro-Palestine.

3

Aurora gaily shares
her glances, red as roses,
and gifts to us
the brightly shining Morning-Star:
yet, drowsy still in overflowing Sleep,
dark premonitions of enfeebling age
creep up, flitting by on silent feet.
The time of making love has passed,
as roses fade, their perfumes far dispersed
on careless, thinning, lively air.

4

Late Summer, weary, damp, and chill,
sadly leaves our garden soon to mould,
and spiders' webs luculent with dew:

no mourner sprinkles oil from Araby,
aromatic spikenard, or wine
on greying calcined bones.
Worms lie deep in dying flowers,
so spare her cruel brambles:
stricken dumb among the hedges
under darkly sullen skies,
depart dry-eyed from here.

5

Grey now the roses, dead the garlands,
wreathed about with lifeless hair,
wash away the last of her,
and pay sad tribute
to lonely night and cold.
Pressed dead flowers lie
between the sheets,
their essence fades with passing time:
no elusive music brings delight
to satiated ears,
nor sweet scents disguise
a pungent urgency of decay.
Blest memories of roses grow dim,
to merge with far-off yesteryear.

6

Snow has fallen, hides the garden:
all is mantled, purified.
But in darkly lined rooms,
wood-fires reek the poisoned air.
Dry frail roses,
pale beneath funereal glass,
silently reproach,
and tease out haunting memories.
Stopperless, a flask gives up its secret
attar of roses grants *immortelles* a hint of life,

but false, condensed, embalmed,
recalled in ageing hopelessness.
For grey the roses are, like ash
in coldly marble urns,
grey the days, and dark long nights.
Myrtle crown, once worn on living hair,
lies confused, just as dreams
are uncontrolled.
Bitter too the dregs I taste,
as threatening harpies scream
from awful blackened eaves.

7

I welcomed wine, with tender love
in Springtimes gone, in Summer's fields,
when roses bloomed on every hedge,
and sheltered gardens gave them home.
Death has taken them, the gardens too.
Tamed roses cannot break out,
or riot through the scented afternoons:
once a ravisher, with thorny pricks,
the rose ranged wild, and overtook
the flowers, walls, and sunlit paths
to channelled water-course
and sweetly bowered bed. These were dreams,
when I would touch her fingers
holding richly hued and scented blooms,
and rapture banished caution out of mind.

8

A dark and silent urn accuses me:
grey roses, once a garland, shed themselves
about the pedestal. Inside that vessel
aching fingers search, but only fragments, grey and cold,
fall between them now.
All sense has gone: white-haired,

I think of some immortal sun-drenched field,
or shimmering garden, bee-filled then,
and long for colour, scents,
and deadly, urgent passions of another year.
Grey roses, scentless, dead:
they disturb me, tire my eyes with weeping,
and I fear them, gaze at them
with nameless dread,
as, inexorable, snowflakes,
muffling, swirling, swiftly form
a mourning-veil,
and all lies quiet,
sheltered from a long-dead world.

–James Stevens Curl 23.xi.MMXVIII

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Professor James Stevens Curl has long established an international reputation for wit combined with compassion, thoroughness of research, sound scholarship, and lucidity of style. He has twice been Visiting Fellow at Peterhouse, University of Cambridge, and is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and a Fellow of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. In 2014 an Honorary Doctorate of Arts was conferred on him by De Montfort University in recognition of his *“distinctive contribution...to the intellectual and cultural life of the nation and region.”* On the occasion of its annual Prizes & Medals Ceremony in 2017, the British Academy awarded him the President’s Medal for *“outstanding service to the cause of the humanities and social sciences”* in his wider study of the History of Architecture, covering a vast range of periods and topics, in Britain and Ireland. In 2018 Oxford University

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