

***Our Dear Icarus:
A Tribute in Words and Pictures***

***In Memoriam
Ste Thomson***



Much Beloved



Introit

*“Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”*

Many of you will be familiar with the poem by Dylan Thomas which begins and ends with this famous refrain. Thomas was an alcoholic who did much to romanticise the condition. He died at the age of 39. Ste was just 33. He did not go gently but his rage was not against the dying of the light, it was against the fact that his demands on life so far exceeded what its circumstances afforded him. It was a rage sometimes directed against those who tried to point out this painful fact, but it was an anger always tempered by an acknowledgement that they cared for him.

His death was not an accident, but neither was it planned, nor in any active sense anticipated. In principle it was preventable; in practice it was not. The word tragic is much over used today and applied to any unhappy circumstance, however trivial. But for the Ancient Greeks whose word it was, it meant something very particular; it referred to that drama in human affairs which arises when a character's actions are driven by compelling circumstances, by forces they cannot control, but which they think they can. The Greeks called this overestimation of human capacities 'hubris'. The consequences are always disastrous, completely unintended and totally unavoidable. In this special sense Ste's death was a tragedy. He was driven to drink by unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, issues in his life; he knew the risks he was taking if he continued heavy drinking, but, like many alcoholics, he suffered from the belief, or the delusion, that he was in control and could survive its effects.

It is tempting then to say that his death, and indeed his whole life, was a misadventure. But in fact it was the opposite. He refused to use the dire circumstances of his early life as an excuse, and for someone who at the age of six months had been abandoned by his mother (who was too depressed to look after him) and disowned by his father; and who spent most of his early childhood in children's homes and foster care, he was singularly lacking in self pity. Instead he threw himself into adventure after adventure with an enthusiasm less bold spirits might think reckless; he was the embodiment of Samuel Beckett's adage '*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*'

A life story



When he came to Jean and me at eight, he was a very angry young man. There was to be no honeymoon period in this adoption and over the next few years he tested the limits of our patience, our endurance and our love. He suffered from asthma attacks, was given to temper tantrums and continual complaint, but also to bouts of good humour and fun. However difficult he was, there were always redeeming moments.

When he was about 12 he wrote a little auto-biography which was part fact, part fantasy and in which he created for himself the family he would like to have. On the front cover he put a photo of his birth mother, Vanessa, taken from his life story book which he captioned 'Me, my mum and my brother' (who in fact is his cousin). He also put a photo taken of himself as a toddler and captioned it 'Me in America'.

This is how he starts his life story:

"I was born in Yorkshire at a hospital near my old house. About three years later I went on a long holiday to America. When I came back I came to London to live. When I was four my dad took me to New York to see my auntie; she was very nice as well as my uncle who lives in America and he's nice too. That was my second best day.

My best day was my tenth birthday when I went out with my new mum and dad to see the Ninja turtles. But that was rubbish. The best thing was at the Pizza Hut afterwards because I had three small pizzas, a big drink and a big dessert. After that I went to my brother's to watch Sky.

My very first memory was when I went on a ride at a funfair when I was seven; it was the first big ride I'd been on and it was scary. I kicked my legs and flung my hands and that ride was the merry go round which I'd be too embarrassed to go on now. And my dad says he still is ashamed at me because I went stiff and hung on tight and I needed the toilet badly but the ride seemed to go on for ages because I was scared.'

It seems somehow characteristic of Ste that his first memoryscape should centre on a high octane experience that is at once exhilarating and terrifying. And that he should place his hopes in a faraway country, a promised land, which like so many displaced people, he called America. Not to mention his put down of the Ninja Turtles (although he did have a soft spot for Michaelangelo, the joker in the pack!).



Ste knew how to win and break hearts and as he grew into a tall dark and handsome teenager he had no shortage of admirers. Then he met Natalie, and after a whirlwind romance became a father at 18. Although they split up after their second child was born, he was determined, with Natalie's backing, to ensure that as Ricky and Casey grew up they had the love and support he had so sorely lacked. He encouraged the boys in their interests, took them camping, took them to movies, watched them at sport, did all the usual father/son things. The boys tell me that one thing they especially loved about him was his eccentric cooking, the way he would throw the weirdest assortment of ingredients together to make the most delicious meal.

Ste was a keen footballer - he played in a number of local teams and the fact that he lived in a block of flats overlooking the Emirates Stadium

reinforced the family football fever: Just a few weeks ago he got them tickets to watch Arsenal play Spurs and, I am sorry to report, win one-nil. Ste was rightly very proud of his beautiful sons just as they have every reason to be proud of their dad's accomplishments.



Ste, Natalie and the Boys, with Grandma and Grandpa







Go on, pull the other one...

Ste may have flung himself into relationships and projects but he often made a go of them against all the odds. He became a skilled bricklayer and took the kind of pride in his work that old style artisans and craftsmen would have recognised. It was at this time that Robert Tressell's trenchant socialist novel *'The Ragged Trousers Philanthropist'* became one of his favourite books. Then he became a gardener, and for a time was manager of a square in Paddington; he also worked with a project for young offenders in Notting Hill. He used these skills to design and build a patio and pergola for Jean's garden in Wivenhoe and last year organised us into a workforce to lay a new path round the house. What he really enjoyed about this was the sense of a family working together as a team.

NEW GARDENERS

We now have an excellent new team of gardeners, led by Stephen Thomson and ably assisted by Hugh, Ed and John who have formed a small landscaping/gardening company called Ace of Spades. We also have the support of one or two more highly skilled gardeners who can come in as required for certain specialist jobs.



Danger: family at work Wivenhoe 2011

Then at the age of 30, he suddenly decided to go to college. This was partly due to the influence of his then girl friend, Sammy, who was just down from uni and who opened up a new world for Ste. He overcame his fear of flying and they travelled on holiday together to Spain, Greece and the Adriatic. Their relationship might have been tempestuous but they spent many happy times together, visiting music festivals and generally enjoying life.



Ste and Sami at Reading Festival

And so Ste signed up for a demanding four year course at Birkbeck. We were thrilled but apprehensive, having dropped out of school at 15 without any qualifications, how could he possibly manage, with no study skills? Why not do an access course first? But characteristically he threw himself in at the deep end, into the challenging reading and assignments.

And against all the odds he succeeded. He discovered a passion for ideas and worried at Marx and Freud, as if a whole lot depended on understanding what they said, as indeed it does. He joined the British Library, the Marx Memorial Library, he studied late into the night. The essays he wrote caused him a lot of anxiety, but with some help and encouragement from Liz Haggard, Jean's cousin, the grades got better and better and he ended by getting the equivalent of 2.1. It was a quite remarkable achievement. Liz remembers him vividly even though she only met him a few times: *'so eager, so clever, so alive'*.

He chose a course on *'Writing London'*. Here are two short extracts from an essay, entitled *'Ghosts in the City'* which give a sense of the quality he managed to achieve in such a short space of time:

"The tropes of fog and the city as a labyrinth of fear and terror, home to social and physical disease, are found in many of the fin de siecle novels by writers inspired by Dickens; they helped create new possibilities for a subterranean perspective in urban genre fiction. In the works of Conan Doyle, Joseph Conrad and Arthur Morrison the unknowable and mysterious is interlaced with descriptions of the capital's sickness and instability, focussed on the working class city where the poverty and the vice of fragile human spirits is portrayed struggling against the odds.

"This was a fertile topic for poetry as well as fiction and journalism, and also for some of the etchings of Gustave Dore notably 'Over London by Rail' and 'Houndsditch'. These writers and artists were all influenced in varying degrees by William Blake's vision of 'London' as Babylon where he detects 'In every cry of every man, in every infant's cry of fear, in every voice, in every ban, the mind-forged manacles.

"In another of Blake's poems, Jerusalem, he speaks of 'Minute particulars', the last remaining positive aspects of a city being buried alive under the endless cloud of fog, soot and damp. As a social tapestry this poem looks ahead to the hallucinatory landscape of T.S Eliot's 'Wasteland' where he describes the 'unreal city', a mythological London with its dehumanised population of zombies, ghosts whose lives have been consumed by the city."

And this from another section on Dickens' *Oliver Twist*:

“The book is a close up study of an underclass, entrapped and sentenced to a life of wretchedness and squalor; it is a portrait done in urban charcoal, depicting houses that lean inwards on themselves, blocking out the light, dark, claustrophobic streets, a world of desperation, ill health, immorality and hopelessness where children are stripped of their childhood and adults behave badly, beyond all appeals to reason.”

I think we can read here not a just perceptive commentary, a real feel for the literature - he undoubtedly had the makings of a writer - but the depiction of his own symbolic landscape, his personal inner city. Ste was indeed a fragile spirit struggling against the odds to make a life for himself, and, stripped of his own early childhood, he had plenty of experience of adults behaving badly against all appeals to reason. He lived precariously in a body permanently at risk of collapsing in on itself and knew from first hand about sickness and instability.

Ste loved London, he liked walking its streets, exploring off the beaten track, following his own line of desire, a solitary stroller always on the lookout for the unexpected. He fully agreed with Walter Benjamin, whom he read for his course, that in order to truly discover a city you have to learn how to get lost in it. He also liked to spend time on his own, indoors. He was an accomplished chess player, at least he could beat me with monotonous regularity.

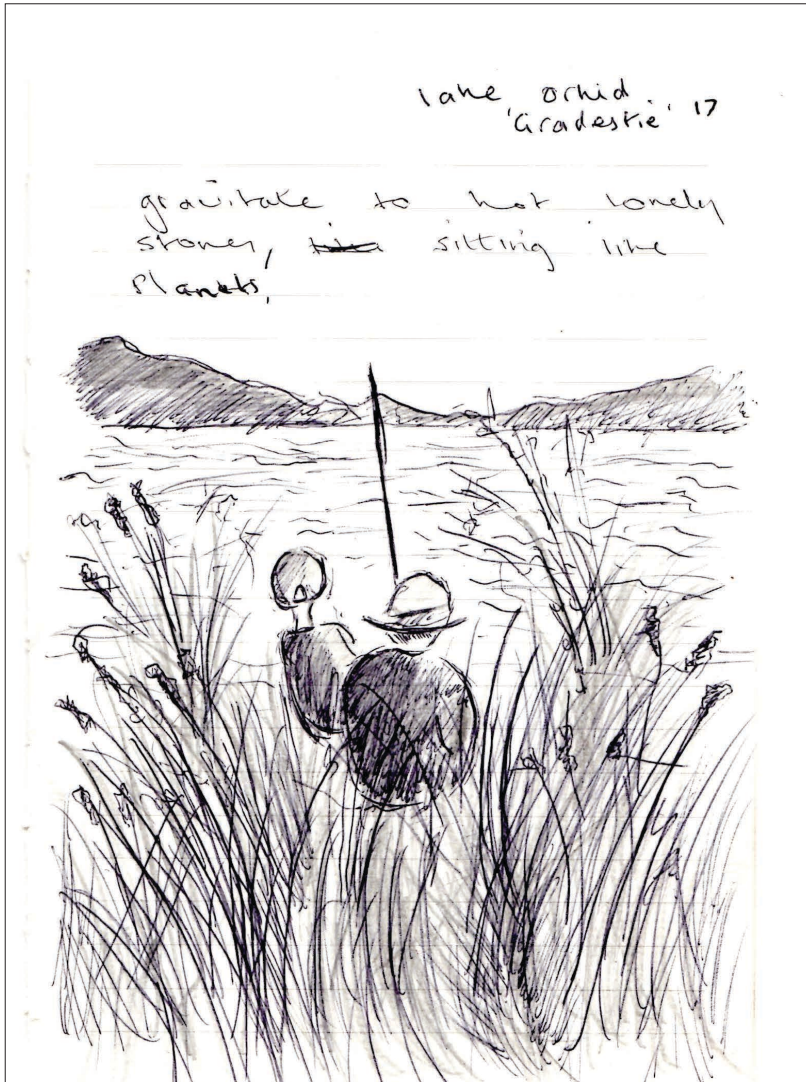


He liked reading and listening to music. He had a treasured collection of vinyl, mostly '60s indie bands. And he played the guitar.

He taught himself and wrote his own songs, but he specialised in singing Kinks numbers. Ray Davies with his bitter sweet lyrics and wry appreciation of the absurdities of English suburban life was his hero.







From Ste's sketchbook

Though he enjoyed the urban buzz of Camden and Bloomsbury, Ste also liked the quiet of the countryside, especially around Wivenhoe where we spent much of our time in the Summer. He had been a skilful cartoonist as a kid and now, inspired by Jean's landscapes, he took up sketching and painting. In this as much else he and Jean were kindred spirits.

Ste was very generous and companionable when he was on form. He may *have sometimes been his own worst enemy* but he made and kept good friends, many of whom are here today, friends like Graham with whom he shared his interests and concerns over many years and who has sent me this tribute:

“Ste was a wonderful person to know. He had so many interests and was always willing to try something new. He had such a wide range of knowledge and a very creative mind. Even with all his troubles he still always managed a smile and laughed with all his heart. We didn’t really do as many things together as we would have liked, but we always got lost in conversation and I think our minds would meet in some really amusing places. He was always encouraging me to do something better with my life and step out of my comfort zone and I will now do that just for him. Me and my family all loved him very much and he was and always will be my best and most trusted friend. He was kind, caring, funny, friendly, honest, polite, intelligent and many other things.”



Everyone a winner!

Yet however convivial he was, Ste was also a loner, who felt himself to be a bit of an outsider. He did not fit into the cosy social niceties of the middle class professional world we inhabited; but neither was he at home in the rough n tumble solidarities of laddish culture. Instead he identified with misfits and outcasts, rebels with or without a cause, and was drawn to their company. He had no time for poseurs or hypocrites. He spoke his heart and mind fearlessly.

For a time he was close to his adoptive older brother Ned, who did his best to encourage and support him, before he moved away to Northern Ireland.



Ste and Ned in Belfast 1998

Although we had our ups and downs, as families do, Ste remained very much part of ours. As soon as he was legally able he changed his name from Cohen back to Thomson, but he never dis-adopted us. Jean stood by him through thick and thin. She never for an instant gave up on him. If love alone could cure alcoholism Ste would be alive and well today. He, in turn, stood by Jean when I got ill, and his support did much to aid my recovery.



Ste and Jean on the Wivenhoe Trail 2009

But as I got better he got worse. Unfortunately he could not do for himself what he managed to do for others. He tried to assuage his inner demons through alcohol but found, as so many have, that drink was the biggest demon of them all. It gave him the proverbial Dutch courage and imbued him with social confidence but, of course, it also reinforced his lack of self esteem. He was, quite simply, addicted to its high, and from his teens. In his last message to Graham, texted after he had discharged himself from the rehab centre where he spent the last six months, he wrote 'I am flying high, I'm on my way to the Carnival'.

The Notting Hill carnival was very much Ste's kind of scene. He would have enjoyed its intoxicating conviviality, its music vibe, but what for others was just Time Out, was for him a launch pad for what turned out to be his last fling.



On the Road Again

Our dear Icarus

Ste was our Icarus. Some of you may know the story, which although it is drawn from Ancient Greek mythology has a timeless relevance. Daedalus, a master craftsman, finds himself imprisoned in a labyrinth he had built to trap the Minotaur. In order to escape he fashions two pairs of wings out of wax and feathers, one for himself, another for his son, Icarus. Daedalus tries the wings first, and before taking off he warns his son not to fly too close to the sun, nor too close to the sea, but to follow his own middle course. Overcome by the elation of flying, Icarus ignores his father's instructions and soars ever higher in the sky until the sun melts the wax on the wings and he falls headlong into the sea and drowns.

We might think today that Icarus was the first prophetic victim of global warming, and perhaps in retrospect he was, but this is really a cautionary tale about hubris and the impetuosity of youth, and how the desire to make a big splash can end in disaster. Stephen was nothing if not impetuous. Whether he was waving or drowning, and it was sometimes difficult to tell the difference, Ste always made a splash; it was impossible to be indifferent to his presence, not to notice that he was there. Which is one reason why his suddenly not being with us has come as such a shock.

Michael Ayrton is a poet and artist who has made a special study of the Icarus story. In his book *The Testament of Daedalus*, the grief stricken father is bewildered by his son's uncompromising rebel stance:

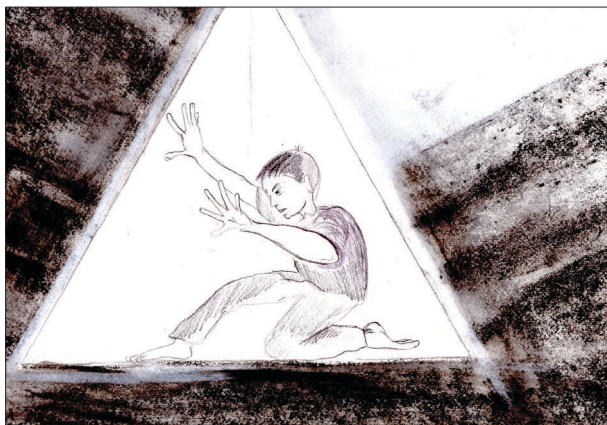


Michael Ayrton Icarus

*“He cried defiance to the top of the sky.
 I could not hear him clearly
 I do not know where he was all that time
 But he was high, higher than wings could have carried a normal man.
 He made more of his wings than I can understand. What dark skill
 Did he have to make of himself what he made?
 For though his fall outpaced his rise
 it seemed to me a lifetime occupied his Fall.”*

We often felt bewildered by Stephen, especially by his violent mood swings, his sudden volte face, as the alcoholism took over and made him at times a stranger to us as well as to his friends. Yet he continued to bounce back from what for others would have been devastating blows. That was his dark skill. Perhaps we overestimated his resilience, as he tried to negotiate the difficult transition from the rehab centre, with its hard and fast rules, to a more normal, less regulated, existence. He must have felt Oak Lodge with its regime of tough love, and zero tolerance of alcohol was a home from Children's home, with its cautionary mantra *'I want never gets'*. Ste always pushed against boundaries, both his own or other peoples. But in the last message he sent to Jean, when we were trying to get him to stay at Oak Lodge till the end of his treatment and then come down to visit us in Wivenhoe for a few days, he acknowledges the struggle he was facing and seems reconciled to the fact that at best we could only be on the sidelines, cheering him on as he set out on a new adventure, of a life without booze.

Sadly he never made it down to see us. The fact is that in this crucial period we lost touch with him, he did not contact us, perhaps he was too ashamed to seek our help, we did not know where he was. We arrived at the hospital too late, we were not in time to be with him and since then it has seemed as if we are not living in any other time than that occupied by his descent into the inferno.



From Ste's Sketch Book 2013

Recessional

Every death, even the most unexpected, is un-timely in that it unhinges our relation to time. The time of bereavement is time lived without its flow, to borrow the title of a book which a friend of ours, Denise Riley, herself an adoptee and campaigner for adoptive childrens' rights, as well as a fine poet, wrote recently about the loss of her own son. As she points out there is no term, like widower or orphan, to describe or mark the position of the bereaved parent or friend. Losing your mum or dad, or your partner is regarded as part of the natural course of events. But there is something 'unnatural' about losing a child or a best mate, especially so young.

The situation of mourning Ste is complicated by society's ambivalent attitude to alcohol. We are living in a society whose economic wellbeing depends on stimulating excessive consumption; indeed there is a whole industry dedicated to promoting commodity addiction in the form of 'brand loyalty'. At the same time people who fall victim to excess find themselves stigmatised because they represent the unacceptable face of consumerism they all too symptomatically represent the ill-being which is its consequence.

We also have a culture whose pressures drive young people to drink, especially in a time of economic recession, which spends diminishing amounts of public money trying to persuade them not to, especially not to drink and drive, and then when they do, now proposes to lock them up in 'drunk tanks' run by private companies who will make a fortune charging them more for spending a night in their cells than

they would pay for a room in a five star hotel; then they are released back into a situation where the resources needed to provide long term treatment and rehabilitation have been cut to the point where in some areas they are non-existent.

Whatever the politics of it, and whatever the personal circumstances, there is no parent who does not blame themselves for what happened when their child dies. It is always tempting to try to turn the clock back, to live in the past, to stay in a time where the person you love is still alive and there is no death. Ste would have none of that. He was always looking forward, making plans, living in anticipation of better things to come, even and especially when he feared the worst. Recently, for example, Jean's brother David helped him buy a van and he was looking forward to running a small part time business to pay his way through college. Although his cultural preferences were solidly rooted in what he saw as the Golden Age of the 1960s and '70s he resisted revisiting his past, especially early childhood, which is perhaps why he was never able to make use of psycho-therapy.

In that way, too, he is like the self-willed but fragile figure of Icarus as portrayed in Michael Ayrton's poem, who is described as, 'clenched, predatory on his rage' while he proudly proclaims his special destiny and foresees his end:

*“In my flight and combat quest
In the day returning
Here on my patch of brief held height
By the late summer moon
I wait my death ahead,
My proper ending.
It is for this. Close hauled, alone,
I count my minutes down.”*

In the last few weeks of his life as he counted its minutes down Stephen was indeed close hauled and alone, in free fall. He telescoped an alcoholic's career; from two years or two decades into two weeks. But it wasn't the fall that killed him, it was the sudden stop. Having been without a drink for six months his body could not cope with the massive overdose of alcohol, nor with its withdrawal. He died in a silent seizure in the middle of the night when his heart gave out.

In different circumstances Ste might have become a real high flier; an adept at an extreme sport perhaps, or an explorer or travel writer; even a ground breaker in one of the arts or sciences. As it is his situation came to resemble all too closely that of Icarus as depicted by Michael Ayrton, when he says:

*“I am blind who feared the shroud of dark
And I am blackened ash who loved the light
Who sought to love the sun and still defies
The deep sea darkness.
What death is there for me
Who died in flight?”*

Ste died in flight from his inner demons. He was one of the ‘Wild men who caught and sung the sun in flight / And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way’, celebrated in the Dylan Thomas poem. He was wrenched from us in mid air; halted in mid stride. We can only wonder what he might have become if he had managed to face down the demon alcohol.

Towards the end, Ste’s desire to belong and be accepted, his search for a less destructive way of transcendence found some tentative resolution in attending a local Catholic church near the rehab centre; here perhaps he got a brief sense of being at one and at peace with the world in a way that eluded him in most of his life: a moment of communion with the love supreme that John Coltrane sings about.



Balancing Act

For those he leaves behind, his sons, his friends, his family, there is little enough consolation. But the pain of bereavement also contains its own principle of hope, even and especially for those who do not believe in an after-life. In her book, Denise Riley explores the complicated feelings that bereavement can arouse in us, anger and guilt as well as sadness, but also emphasises that in sharing our grief we ensure it does not turn into grievance.

As we together mourn the loss of Ste, we can perhaps also take encouragement from his life to move beyond our personal comfort zones into a more adventurous space. To reverse the traditional saying, in the midst of death we are in life. This is how Denise puts it, reflecting on the immediate aftermath of her son's passing on:

“In these first days I see how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that’s briefly agitated, will close again silently and smoothly over a death. His, everyone’s, mine. I see, as if I am myself dead. This perception makes me curiously light hearted. You share in the death of your child, in that you approach it so closely that you sense that a part of you, too, died instantly. At the same time, you feel that the spirit of the child has leaped into you. So you are both partly dead, and yet more alive. You are cut down, and yet you burn with life.”

The Wake

A wake is a special form of vigilance over the deceased, which guards against the occasion of mourning being hijacked by the dark materials of a life and instead makes room for celebrating its positive achievements. And so it is with us who are left behind. Ste did not drive me to drink, but he did drive me to poetry, for which I'm very grateful. I'd like to end this tribute with a short poem I wrote about him in an earlier and less final moment of separation, but which tries to put into words something of the sense of loss we are all feeling today, each with our own very different personal memories of Ste, our dear Icarus.

Parting Shots

Stephen, learning to windsurf
Norfolk Broads, August 1993

*The caption pins our hope to his,
for an instant lets us hold his thin body
between finger, thumb and sky,
measuring how far he's come
before he wriggles free, cocooned
in black rubber, making his own way.
No chance to smooth the scowl,
he holds the pose he wants,
tense and sombre against the flaming sail,
daring us to walk on water, daring us to fail.*

*Remember his face fisting the wind,
the sudden keeling over like a heart attack,
our throwaway safety lines:
'Keep going, hold on, that's it, well done!'
Each grab at mastery, a flash back
of that first defeated struggle
to come out on top, knowing that you're not.*

*The echoes of what had to be adopted
to reach a point of balance, wash back,
like secret tidings, stirring hidden elements to life.
The wind frets at the waves
whipping up ancient fears
of defences flooded,
being drowned in dreams.*

*There was no sudden giving up
only a slow whittling away of what bound us
to a common hope. Now it is too late
he can be picked up, held in the mind's eye,
lightweight as a snapshot, fickle as a sigh.*



Hickling Broad 1993

Norfolk Broads, Summer, 1994

*Words wrap round absence
 like cling film sealing in the hurt.
 Easier to look away or change the frame,
 a yacht with a black sail parts the mist,
 a painting or a post card to an old school friend:
 Having a quiet and restful time,
 so far no rain.*





Born Huddersfield May 5 1980 died London September 12 2013

This is the full text of the Tribute given by Phil Cohen on the occasion of Ste's funeral.
Thanks to Jean, Natalie, Ricky, Casey, Graham and Monika for their helpful suggestions in preparing this.

The text can also be downloaded from www.philcohenworks.com

An audio CD of the service is available by writing to pcohen763@hotmail.co.uk

If you would like to make a donation to Alcohol Concern you should go to:
<http://www.justgiving.com/phil-cohen1>

If you would like to send a tribute or condolence you can email Jean: mcneil.49@hotmail.com