

# Jean Sprackland: 'Moving the Piano'

by John Field

Given the description of the piano's physical condition in line one, with rheumatoid 'damp in its joints, hamstrung and hip shot', moving's a euphemism for a trip to the great piano graveyard in the sky. With its dodgy joints and hips, this old joanna sounds more like someone's nan than a concert grand. The massive caesura hardly suggests effortless movement either. But the poem's personifications are richer and more complex than this. Sure, 'damp in its joints' reads like arthritis, and arthritis does flare up in cold, wet conditions but, unlike a medical condition, the piano's swollen joints are the result of neglected and living rough. We would never degrade the elderly like this, would we? 'Hamstrung' suggests deliberate hobbling by slitting the hamstrings in the legs. Sprackland drives language hard throughout the poem and this word's no exception. Sure, we all understand that the piano's not going anywhere in a hurry, but there's a visual quality here too: the Lyre Braces, those gleaming brass rods which hold the pedals steady, look suspiciously like tendons flapping loose.

Despite this, line two endows the piano with stoicism and dignity, as it 'still had a grubby mouthful of elephant.' It's holding grimly onto its fundamental pianohood. Back in the day, white keys were veneered with ivory which, like the 'big trees' the case hankers after, are now largely untraded (legally, anyway). This marks the piano as a hanger-on from an era when things were, arguably, better made, but ethically 'grubby' too. When the piano's frame is described as a 'spinning jenny', a revolutionary technology from 1764, it conjures images of laughable antiquity. However, take a look at an image of a first generation iPhone, and ask yourself how dated that looks. Time and death stalk through this poem: nothing is safe.

The physical description of the piano finishes at the end of stanza three, where the speaker offers us the imposing single line: 'It stank of old felt and lamentations.' How can a piano smell of lamentations (grief)? It feels as if it has sucked up more than the destructive damp in which it has stood for years. Has it also imbibed the emotional atmosphere of the generations? The word 'lamentations' also has biblical and musical connotations, as the Book of Lamentations deals with the destruction of Jerusalem, and the suffering and exile of the people of Judah in Babylon. This hints ominously at the fate awaiting the piano at the end of journey it would rather not make. Lamentations also evokes Tenebrae (shadows), an Easter service in which candles are gradually extinguished. It has musical associations too – check out the stark beauty of Thomas Tallis's Lamentations of Jeremiah. This Easter service links to the piano's desire, as it wants 'only / to be left alone in its own home, / in its own wavering patch of light // while the clamorous room fades / to a tinnitus of dust and dead wasps.' These final lines are arresting, as the link to Tenebrae casts the piano in solemn, prayerful dignity, looking to the resurrection, even though it has already become a 'dead weight' whose 'time has gone.' If you're schooled in a Roman Catholic Latin tradition, then the word clamorous continues the unstated sense of prayerfulness which closes the poem, as 'clamare', to cry, or to shout out is in the Salve Regina- Google it and you'll find it. The sound 'fades' which is gentle, if not positive, but the poem's final couplet offers us a jarring contrast, as the clamour fades to 'a tinnitus of dust and dead wasps.' In this sharply observed image of domestic decay, we all understand the violent oppressiveness of the silence, which the piano, like us, prefers to eternal darkness.

The poem ends with the word 'wasps,' an apparently pointless and painful insect, which evokes Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he asks, 'O death, where is thy sting?' but, in those desiccated little exoskeletons, the poem makes it abundantly clear that death's sting is all around us.

*This example piece was written by John Field, who writes the [Poor Rude Lines blog](#).*

*Jean Sprackland was Highly Commended in the [Forward Book of Poetry 2014](#)  
You can read her poem ['Moving the Piano'](#) here.*