

Stevie's bone of contention with the establishment was that it took itself too flaming seriously. Hence came the joy she took in seriously bad behaviour. Sometime in 1967, she made her way to the conventional fastness of rural Hampshire to stay with my parents and me for a weekend. How would it work? My father was a foxhunting man; my mother, a colonel's daughter. I was all too aware such people were often the butt of Stevie's parody. No doubt my parents wondered whether there would be a single common interest to talk about. But above all they were thinking: *What on earth's going on between our teenage son and this elderly spinster?*

Stevie initially was on best behaviour. But fairly soon the threads of conversation wore thin, and the grown-ups gazed long and hard into their sherry glasses. At the supper table, my mother cast about for topics. Soon they ran out of parts of the country known to all. Unfortunately, my parents had never been to Hull or Palmers Green. Things got stiffer and stiffer, and I wondered whether the whole idea had been a bad one. It was a question of 'meelyoo' perhaps: there we sat, eating off family plates with family silver. On the walls sporting prints and fox-head trophies hung. Stevie had a sort of hunted look about her.

'You must have been to some frightfully interesting places for your poetry readings, though...' my mother suggested. Earlier in the year, invited by Mike Horovitz to appear in a poetry and music performance, she told us how she'd travelled with a busload of young poets to Brussels. Two things were miscalculated. First, the performers underestimated the strength of Belgian beer with which they stoked themselves before the event. What rendered the confusion worse was that unlimited amounts then remained available throughout the performance. Secondly, the continental audience was not easy. The poets needed to work harder to gain approval, but were too short-sighted to even think there might be issues of understanding. What wowed a British audience turned out to be altogether alien to the Belgians.

Stevie roundly condemned the young poets. Some had allegedly performed drunk, with one collapsing comatose mid-performance. She turned to me and advised against slavishly following fashion, whether in literature or anything else. With my long hair, my progressive record collection, and even my love of Stevie Smith's work, I felt humiliated. She said I must recognise those circumstances in which good behaviour and politeness were required. My parents were relieved and delighted. Here was a good sensible woman. Poet she might be, but better their son associate with someone of her maturity rather than the drunken young. It was the year of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, everything going psychedelic, and the generation gap was an abyss.