

# JACK BUILT

by Jamie George

How do we see through things? If things are perceived and objects encountered, then what is it to see through something? The edges suggest; the void shines, diaphanous. How is our seeing constructed today, what is it we see through digitally? A form is described, but how? By a wireframe; greyed-out plane; a checkerboard. These most primary of patterns are there but not.

In *Photoshop* you go to 'File', 'New...'; next, in the dropdown, you select your page size, your resolution; you define your 'Background Content' from 'Options', you choose 'Transparent'. A plane of small grey and white squares appears. This is dormant space, ready to place a thing.

Vladimir Nabokov's thesis on the transparency of things is a metaphor. Or is it an instruction? It foregrounds the act of attention that regards an object; sinking into the surface of a thing, emptying out its history—examining the dream life of debris.

In period films it is standard practice to dress a character in clothes slightly ahead of their time to manipulate the narrative. A character changes by changing: a move from the country to the city might be highlighted by a character's new 50s outfit worn in a scene set in the 1940s. When shooting in black and white, it's common to foreground the patterns in soft furnishing. Motif, surface, and texture are critical when articulating a monochrome period interior. A checkered pattern, for instance, stands out, when colour can't.

I left the place where I grew up when I was in my late teens. Having not returned once since moving, it was an unplanned exile.

I have now lived elsewhere longer than the time spent in the village of my childhood. When I think of the place I grew up in, I envision it now, as it was; in stasis. Though when checking-in on *Google Maps*, there has been a significant modification to the house I grew up in by its new owners.

Michel Serres' book, *Statues*, first published in 1987, posits the idea of the corpse as the first object. The dead body is the first 'thing' that man encountered. In *Statues*, the body is transformed from an animate actor into an inanimate obstacle. Objects, prehistorically, signify loss. As he writes, or rather as he wrote: 'The dead body lies there, cutting into space [...] the first solid: stiff, hard, rigorous, coherent, consistent, absolutely stable.'

Do all objects have some kind of charm? Or is charm simply an echo of the promethean designer, their maker? Nabokov, concerned with the act of attention turned upon a transparent thing, considered a pencil. The protagonist of his novel finds one in a drawer of an old desk in his hotel room. He describes the status of the crappy carpenter's pencil. He discusses the compacting of carbon to form the pencil lead. His attention turns to the pencil's wooden frame. He cites a tree, a pine, cut down, stripped of its bark. The wood has been dried and planed and formed into the pencil's shaft. He states, 'we recognised the log in the tree and the tree in the forest and the forest in the world that Jack built'.

The nursery rhyme, *The House That Jack Built*, that Nabokov playfully alludes to, was first published in 1755. But does Jack build things anymore? Did Jack build my iPhone? I don't think Jack made my Nike trainers. We do, however, desire the stuff that Jack still makes: the handcrafted holiday souvenir; artisan bread; hand-dyed jeans from within the M25; period properties, or at least a property's decorative 'original features'.

Can a history shine through a mass-produced thing? Or as consumers are we part of a collective kitsch complex? Is Jack with us as we shed two tears, as we laugh twice? The first chuckle, for how cute those Nikes are. The second cry, for how we, together with all humankind, desire the pair of shoes. Maybe, Milan Kundera was right when he suggested that the prefabricated images of 'home' we collectively create, offer an escape from the anxiety of loss—kitsch as an 'antidote to death'.

Perhaps, put differently, when we encounter objects, even for the briefest of moments, we sustain a great feat of abstraction. We empathise with being an object, experience something of its function, its lexical properties, known history and unknown past. We are a part of these familiar and uncertain things. How else could we name this conjecture?

Or, put differently, how else could we name the place between two villages on a map on a rural county road, driven daily, in the county of, say, Shropshire.

Or, put differently, how can we account for the cut hair, from shaving, or an impromptu trimming of your fringe. What is the appropriate name of this stuff left in the sink, these almost-body-parts?

Or put, differently.

Nabokov was fond of the Russian word 'poshlost'. An untranslatable word, I'm told, referring to an object or sentiment sustaining the properties of being cheap, a sham, common, of bad-taste, smutty—a thing that deceives both aesthetically and morally. Nabokov felt 'poshlost' to be the Russian twin sister of the German word 'kitsch'.

The name Jack in English is related to John. As a diminutive it can also be short for Jacob, Jason, Jonathan, Jan, Johann and sometimes for James. Basically any name that starts with a 'J'. It can also be used as a female name (short for Jacqueline or Jackie). It is a surname too.

In English, the word 'jack' can also refer to many occupations, objects and actions. A shortcut to the idea of the 'common man'.

I changed my name when I was younger. Jack was on the table. I thought about taking it. Now, I have been known by my current name for as long as I was known by another.

Jack was the name of my best friend when I was a child. Jack died; we were in our late teens. He stepped off a train platform late one night, he had been drinking, no one knows if it was an accident or if he meant to step off the platform. I wasn't there; we had grown apart that year.

Jack always loved making things by hand, wood-working especially. He liked making things and stripping down motorbike engines. He was training to be a panel beater.

I find myself, recently, watching wood-turning videos on YouTube. The videos are hypnotic. Each one, and I always begin with Andy Philip's channel, begins with the selection of the base material. This is often a section of a tree trunk, a knotty-log, but can also be bits of plywood laminated together or a resin compound with wood shaving added. As the videos progress there are establishing shots, setting up the lathe, then the preparation and mounting of the wood on the machine. Next, the process of reducing the form through carving on the lathe. This bit, often sped up on the channel, is very satisfying; sometimes great plumes of material fly off the turned wood, like silly-string. Watching these videos for long enough, after I close my laptop, I feel like I've been wood-turning too, everything I look at has an echo of having been turned, transformed in to sculptures. Like a repeated pattern in negative when you close your eyes on a bright day.

At night I often redream these videos, except that the person forming the bowls is Jack, who, in the dream, has a workshop with many tools and a beautiful lathe. The oiled, finished bowls have incredibly patterned surfaces. The dreams play out like a film, always in monochrome.

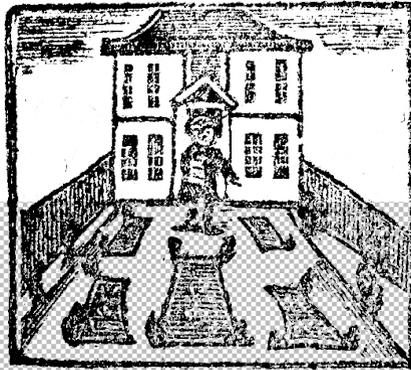
The nursery rhyme, *The House That Jack Built*, is a cumulative tale. The story in verse describes how a house (built by a character called Jack) is linked to other things and people in a local economy. Through this method the rhyme tells the story of a man 'all tattered and torn', and a maiden 'forlorn'.

Some versions of the rhyme use 'cheese' instead of 'malt', 'priest' instead of 'judge', 'cock' instead of 'rooster', and so on. A possible rollcall of variations: Cheese, Malt, Priest, Judge, Cock, Crew, Crowed, Shook, Tossed, Chased and Killed. It wouldn't be hard to come up with a good story from this list.

The nursery rhyme is reported to have been set in Cherrington Manor, a timber-framed building in Northern Shropshire, the supposed actual house that Jack built.

I grew up in Shropshire, under another name, where my friend Jack died many years ago.

HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT.



This is the House that Jack built.

Screenshot