

Fifty of Dick's poems published Sept. 2020 as a remembrance (RIP: Sept. 18th, 2014)

The door in the forest

Through one eye he saw her edging
towards the door.

A wise rook, he sensed her fear.
A twig cracked.

Branches intertwined like veins.
He knew what lay ahead.

*Genius Floored: edited Ruth O'Callaghan
Whispers in smoke, Soaring Penguin, June 2014*

The pitch

Winter-layered in spring sunshine,
waterproofing long washed away,
he rubbed a stubbled chin, peered
under the brim of his battered hat,
in that vacant way he made his own.

From a pocket of his tattered coat
stared his coup de grace, a whiskered ferret,
one eye open, like the dog.
who slept on a blanket by coins
scattered in a rusty Roses tin.

This morning Jim was found
under Big Issues and tin-foiled sheet.
The dog guarding his body.
No one has seen the ferret.

The New Writer, January 2014

Picasso's retort

When the Gestapo called for tea,
an officer, looking at Guernica,
asked the master, Did you do that?
No, he replied. You did.

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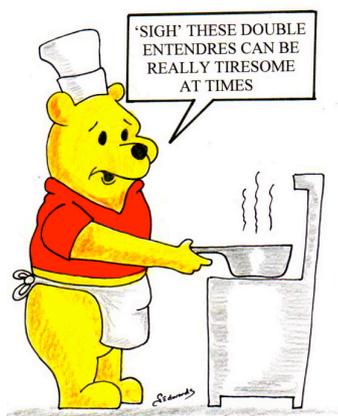


The void

Winnie the Pooh looks down,
unfolds an umbrella.
It is raining in the bedroom.
He is thinking very hard
for a bear without a brain.

The door is closed.
The room empty.
The cot and its teddy bear,
live in the room under the stairs
with the spare wallpaper:
the roll with Piglet and Christopher Robin
eating honey for tea.

Cannon's Mouth, Number 49, September 2013



Gotcha

Get it for sport not bums and tits,
big print, big headlines, big Brits,
there's nothing you can teach me, see,
'cause I read em all', watching TV.

I know the world in the time it takes
to scoff a full English,
drink a mug of tea, three sugars, mate,
the English is very important.

What Arab War? Oo's earthquake?
Couldn't give a monkeys!
Overseas aid, my arse.
We count our dead not their's.

Beggars, scroungers, disabled,
niggers, Paki's, gays;
country's overrun, mate, understand,
I hope they all die, ugly.

I'm a true Brit, through and through,
wear my Jack with pride.
It's tattooed here upon my head.
Us is everything, them nothing.

I've news mate, I'm here.
I'm just around the corner see,
sitting, waiting for the call,
waiting for my time to come.

Cannon's Mouth, 50, Winter 2013.

Squaddie blues

I used to be a squaddie.
Listen, here's my song.
I lost my leg in Basra,
I never did no wrong.
My wife took off and left me,
and she stole the kids.
The council took my home back
and left me on the skids.

You'll find me outside Waitrose now,
complete with PSD,
no need to raise an eyebrow,
no need to patronise me.
Some treat us worse than dogs,
they do, but I so love mine.
Please, please, don't walk away,
charity's in short supply today.

*PSD post traumatic stress disorder
Homeless Diamonds, Issue 22, Winter 2013-14*

Brogues

Behind the mirrored mahogany he finds her beige brogue in leather rags,
Kiwi polish still shining.

She'd enter the best room, radiant smile, perm impeccable,
blonde, tinged with grey.

Her mother's opal necklace twinkling in the hanging chandelier,
(bare bulb in the hall).

That turquoise dress, a rash moment in Jaeger's, lisle stockings,
nigger brown – he could never recall a ladder.

She'd search the Axminster for crumbs, waltz Typhoo tea and angel
cakes around the lounge.

Last worn ...Aunt Maria's funeral? Anna's christening?
He puts them back,

closes the door.

Sunday, Jennings Ward

'One dies of war, like any old disease.'
A Terre, Wilfred Owen

Frailer than her years,
she cleans the air.

Stanley climbs into carpet slippers,
shuffles a stained suit
down the long corridor
towards the shop's distant light.
It's Sunday. Locked.

Fingers roll Rizla number three,
remove a match from the red and blue
England's Glory.

He lights, inhales,
trails ash upon the linoleum,
sees his children
holding their mother's hand,
kisses each freckled cheek.

Little Anne flinches.
His son freezes.
Mother's lips touch his.

Pulling a rag from his pocket
he wipes his leaking nose.
Mother hands him a handkerchief.

Did I tell you about the Gurkha?
In the jungle he brought me tea
from a corned beef tin.
He saved my life.

From a soiled nightgown
a man whispers in his dreams.

A toothless woman laughs,
Her laughter turns to screams.

A soldier in pyjamas salutes and stares.
The family feel his eyes upon their backs.

Stanley scavenges an ashtray,
secretes fag-ends into his Golden Virginia tin.
Mother fumbles for Park Drives.

Have you brought the Football Post?
Did Notts County win?

Minutes pass.
The toll of the leaving bell
breaks the guilt.

Don't forget the fags next Sunday.

Stanley's stubble grazes mother's cheek.
The soldier clinks his heels.
She tugs the children's shoulders.
Stanley closes the curtain.

A place of no seasons

He played organ in a chapel
where no one prayed,
sang the blues long
before the Windrush docked.

The musician of Muswell Hill
listens to Strange Fruit on a wind-up.
Wherever the cell his music sings
a truth: he can still be free.

Bang ups, shake-downs,
pass unnoticed. Outside,
dominoes slam on the landing.
All he hears is Billy Holiday.

Twins

In chattering classrooms I thought of her,
said I was an only child, talked
always to her, not of her.

When we were three her personality split;
She sought out dark corners where laughter
never thrived.

I found her sitting alone in the hospital garden
under the shade of a cherry tree.
Her tired eyes met mine.

Dimpled cheeks threw me a smile. I gently gave
her sugary skin a fleeting kiss.
No words.

Comfortable in my own skin at last.
Next to her.

The day the circus came to town

Long after the applause had died,
long after the lions had roared their last,
the boy could still see the tear
in the eye of the clown,
the smear of face paint on cheek.

He clung tight to his mother.

The girl now arriving

She stepped into my life at Leighton Buzzard
on the slow train down from Crewe.
Her eyes were blue.

At Hemel she searched for messages on her phone,
rouged her lips with a magic wand.
Her hair was blonde.

At Watford the train came to a sudden halt,
she landed in my lap, nothing said.
Her face went red.

At Euston she smiled, got off the train,
her luggage tag said Thame,
gone before I knew her name.

Cannon's Mouth 51
March 2014

Marriage scenes

It was on his face.
That mask he wore.
The question always
hung on her lips.
Never asked.

It was not always like this.
She blamed herself.

Flinched at the wind in the chimney,
the front door opening
when he came home for lunch.

With his step on the upward stair
she slipped deeper into shadows.
No-one heard her screams.
The neighbour's cat,
slinked into the long grass.

Was it yesterday
that word was spoken?
In the pit of her stomach
she yearned for him.
But he was gone.

The water dog

Mr Read fumbles for his pipe.
Egg and tea tinge his white beard.

When I retired, every day was mine, every day.
I had a real water dog back then.
Threw a stick into the mill race,
Shep would dive in and return the stick
to that same place, but you see I'd moved on.

He watches the birds from his conservatory
made from a wardrobe and a creaking gate.
I have twenty three sparrows this spring,
two more than last year.

He sees a face at his window.
Jenkins, I don't want boys throwing conkers.

In King Street School his hobnailed boots
clunked down long corridors,
worn, he told the staff room once,
to let the blighters know he was coming!

Quick you boys, bring in the goalposts,
you'll need your coats on the way home.

Jenkins please put Peters down.
You boy, don't run!

He could see their faces in assembly,
new and old, like the uniforms.
I taught your fathers,
and your fathers' fathers.

Rain rattles the cracked panes.
His pock-marked hands
empty his tar-stained pipe
into a pot of dead geraniums.

He smiles.
Does me good to see you, dear boy.
Did I ever tell you about my first dog?
It was a real water dog that dog.

Lines on discovering Sir Richard Burton's tomb at Mortlake

You, to whom adventures were as toys,
explore your catholic playground now.
Above your moon and stars,
September leaves stir in the gentle breeze.
A sun, bright as any you saw in India,
shines upon your golden tent. Listen.
Children's voices can be heard,
and from the walls, a solitary blackbird calls.
Can you smell the Thames nearby?
(I'm sorry it's not the Nile).
Please ignore those alien sounds:
aeroplanes on their flight paths,
that distant horn from a passing train
the 11.25 from Barnes –
electric not steam, I won't explain.

I know it's not the Poets' Corner you craved.
Your anger seems so much louder
among your peers, whose years,
like yours, have passed them by.
Far better to be visited here away
from pomp and circumstance –
those hypocrisies of Empire –
you so despised.

Allow me to introduce your neighbours.
Aloysius Barnewall, dealer in antique books,
who sold fingered Kama Sutas.
Lady Beckett, mourning for lost innocence
beneath her portentous cross.
Lord Timbescombe, of the Light Brigade,
who fell from his horse at Balaclava.

From their porcelain shrouds,
Mothers of Mercy look down.
They sleep a thousand and one nights with you,
nights longer than any you saw in Arabia,
and, who knows, more scandalous.

Beyond the distinguished dead
Irish migrants from the Potato Famine
lie scattered in secret shade, forgotten.
They feel the same clay as you beneath their bones.
It is English, and for you, it's home.

Genius Floored: Uncurtained Window,
edited by Ruth O'Callaghan, Soaring Penguin, June 2013.

Snakes and ladders

Throw the dice.
A three! Avoid disease, parental splits
and disability.
Climb the ladder.

Throw the dice.
A four! Down the snake you go
through travails of adolescent woe.
Down you go.

Throw the dice.
A five! The search for truth keeps you alive,

you can't be free but you can strive.
Follow the snake.

Throw the dice.
A six! Now you're really in a fix:
divorce, unemployment, you've had your kicks.
Life's a bitch.

Throw the dice.
A one! Welcome loneliness and alienation,
You lose your self-respect,
Life's abject .

Throw the dice.
A two! Senility and dementia ensue.
There is no god.
Only you.

Throw the dice.
Another four! You're in a care home for the poor.
Incontinent and bedridden:
a welfare sore.

Throw the dice.
Another three! No undertaker's fee.
A pauper's death, solitary,
like your last breath.

Throw the dice.
A final two That's it. You're through.
No eternity for you. You're bereft.
There're no dice left.

Cannon's Mouth, June 2014

The bet

'If it was to the bookies', she laughed,
'you'd always win the race'.

And so it was Bill stood in Corals
scanning the banks of screens.
'Racing Post on the wall,
who's the fairest of them all?'
The Wincanton card, Bold Chief!
That's the one, out of Renard.

He's lightly weighted, blinkered, sod the cost,
three runners-up finishes on good to soft.
The jumpers off in five, no time to study form,
the last of his Yankee, take the race by storm.
Might be better watched, the Post advises.
Bill knew better, he hated surprises.

He joined the punters listing to the whine,
scrambled commentary crackling down the line.
'They're off!' He's bound to win this time.
Five to one too! That's a grand, a grand!
'I'll get the missus red roses on the way home'.
Red roses? We could go to Rome!

A faller at the first! Bets drop to the floor,
losers sneak out through the open door.

Lucky Landing's gone, brought two down,
Bottle Rattler and Handsome Crown.
Upsie refused at the water, Scooby Doo's gone too,
the favourite's striding out, the air is blue.

Two out. Bill hears Bold Chief's name.
Bold Chief's still has a chance to top the frame,
he's closing, closing all the time.
'Come on!' Bill shrieks, 'Come on!' Climb! Climb!
Bold Chief pecks at the last, staggers to his feet,
passing tired horses looking dead beat.

He's wilting, stumbling towards the line.
Will it come, will it come, will it come in time?
He catches the favourite, he's given his all.
'Photo Finish!' It's too close to call!
Bill holds his betting slip tight, palms sweating,
as the line-feed crackles with a final sting.

Old banger

She hides,
mileage long forgotten.
Sometimes, after dark,
I creep in,
switch on her lights,
see the sad smile cross
her full chrome lips,
headlamps dipped
in resignation.

From boot to bonnet
her shape and lines
still please.
Plush red leather
fills the air I breathe.
She yearns
for that uncorrupted time
when she wore her plates
with pride.

First Time, Issue 65, Autumn, 2013

The day Sardinians celebrated the fall of fascism

Promenading in Sunday best,
skin glowing mahogany,
generations gell like glue,
strangers too,
putting the world to rights.

Who was sleeping with whose wife?
Did Berlusconi lie (again)?
Senoritas named Maria
gossip about their lovers,
Roberto, the accordion-playing butcher
kisses the Marias one by one,
his eyes twinkling.

Choirs of miniature dogs
yelp at the three-legged Afghan
bounding the other way.
Babies, snug in prams, sleep,

oblivious to the roaring sea.
A red capped band plays,

bombastic and proud,
A priest in black passes,
arm tucked under his friend's;
Il fascismo è finito?
The priest gives his friend
a doubting look.

Old squat men sit in rows,
discussing the price of fish.
Their flat caps nod in unison.

Old Sarde casts bait
into the waves,
listens to his transistor,
knows English; Kaput,
he seldom siestas
and makes lobster pots
the old way.

Whatever brought it
and from wherever it came,
it would come again.



The Retreat

Whack!
The steepled six towers
into the blue sky.
Deck chairs scatter.
Teas are tossed.

Long-off leaps
into the patient's graveyard,
overgrown with thicket,
searches for the crimson rambler
among regimented headstones.

'Benjamin Rhodes, vagrant,
aged 22, died 1862'.
'Emma Smith, illegitimate,
aged 82, died 1962'.

He calls 'lost ball!'



A Journey (half price)

With apologies to William Mearns

Yesterday upon the stair
I met a Blair who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh how I wish he'd go away

When I came home last night at three
Saint Blair was waiting there for me
But when I looked around the hall
I couldn't see him there at all
Go away, go away, don't you come back anymore!
Go away, go away, and please don't start another war

Last night I saw upon the stair
A self-righteous ghost who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away

Closing time

Screams and banging in my head.
My twin is safe in bed.

Mother's cries from the living room.
My father's sweet perfume.

Leave the light on at the top of the stair.
Let me know, mother, you are still there.

My drunken father's climbing feet,
the torch lit under the sheet.

Twin is still sleeping snug and sound,
Heartbeat begins to pound.

Leave the light on at the top of the stair.
Let me know, mother, you are still there.

Mother's head at the bedroom door,
'Stanley, they're asleep, please, no more'.

Stay mother, stay at the top of the stair.
Let me know you are still there.

Thomas the Tank Engine falls in love

In the railway shed things were growing very steamy.
The arrival of Ruby made the locomotives very dreamy.

Percy the smallest engine, puffed proudly away
Gordon, shunted in and out, hooting all day.

Henry cleaned himself, the tireless little toiler
tanked up tight in his big green boiler.

But it was Thomas who caught Ruby's eye,
as he crossed the points and choo-chooed by.

Blue was her favourite colour. He was so into pink.
He blew her a whistle and she winked him a wink.

She loved his number, one, and his stumpy funnel.
She'd love to couple with him inside a dark tunnel.

Pistons puffed and pulled up to the high wood.
Thomas admired her tender, if only he could.

Ruby's curved red buffers almost touched his.
He grew hot and hotter in ecstatic bliss.

He wanted her so much to reach the top
before his safety valves cried out 'Stop, stop!'

Back in the shed the locomotives were heartbroken.
They just looked glum, not a word was spoken,

The Fat Controller smiled. He knew what he was doing.
Thomas took on extra water and carried on wooing.

Tom Finney

It is the day of the match.
The night is falling fast.
Hobnailed boots clatter cobbled streets.

A man fills his flask with tea and sugar,
climbs into his winter coat,
puts on his black and white scarf.

A child swings his rattle around the parlour,
pockets humbugs for half-time,
pins on his club rosette with pride.

To Deepdale to see Tom play the game
with grace for £14 a week,
his only booking a third class ticket.

They devour programmes from front to back.
Tom scores. Preston win by three.
Cloth caps soar in the air.

Back home Mum's cooked pie and chips,
lights a fire in the parlour
to welcome two more points.

The child puts player stickers on cards.
Jackie next to Bobby, Stan next to Alf,
Arthur to Tom, always Tom.

That's how the game used to be.
Now its sold its soul to money and TV,
and its buried with Tom.



Take twenty eight

She didn't normally take work home.
The deadline made her forget the leaving-off shower
Soaked from head to foot, hair bedraggled,
she felt her dress wet against her pure white skin,

She switched on the record player, kicked off her shoes,
slipped out of her clinging underwear, climbed under the cascade,
shrouding herself in its soothing steam.
The deadline seemed so unimportant now.

She did not hear the rasping violins, nor see the knife.
It's steel blade tore into her soft white flesh.
She reached for the shower rail, pulled the curtain to the floor,
eyes gaping as her life sluices away.

'Cut!' cries Hitchcock, 'put it in the can!'

His Cinema Paradiso

The final hug on the platform
and he was gone,
like in the old movie.
When he came back
everything had changed,
the thread broken.

What he came to find wasn't there;
what he thought was his,
was gone.

Life after all wasn't like the movies.
The love he'd lost,
the mentor he'd not seen
while he directed movies,
a cut above the rest in Rome.
Fame and fortune followed.

He slept around, lived alone.
made movies about love,
love he had not known.

Only after Alfredo's funeral
did he understand.
The note he'd not read

left by the love of his life
in the cinema ruins, bequeathed,
like the final reel, taken back to Rome.

There he watched
the censored celluloid pleasures
of requited love,

the cuttings of a projectionist's life
retrieved from the floor
of the booth they shared.

At last felt the love he'd missed,
his heart caressed by Alfredo,
and the love he could not have.

uTube link to the Cinema Paradiso film trailer – [Here](#)

Spaces

Think between the lines
and the ends of things.
Listen to those silences
after the words we speak.
Truth resides there
on baited breath.
If we glimpse at life
through blinkered eyes
we freeze our imaginations
from breaking free.
Don't count the cost,
or it will remain forever, lost.

A little ditty on the big freeze

We had no central heating then,
back in sixty three,
it hadn't been invented yet,
for the likes of you and me.

It were right bitter that winter,
coal came to door in the sacks,
the cold chilled like a splinter,
our house was full of cracks.

The family dressed in flannelette,
we wrapped up warm back then,
mum heated just the one room,
and lit a fire for ten.

We woke to frosted panes in morning,
and icicles on our breath,
dad was a devil with the poker,
his ashes grit our path.

We shared tin baths at evening,
bedded hot water bottles by tea,
mum had scorch marks on 'er stocking,
fire's tartan from ankle to knee.

So please, no more complaints today,
our homes are warmer now,
there's enough hot air from all of us,
to keep us from the plough.

Dark lady

Before we met
life was pure monochrome,
I was there to help,
and we stuck like glue.

What would Shakespeare write
had he met you?
Could he ignite your colours,
your rainbow delight?

Dawn

She dances between white-washed walls,
tumbles through the winding lane
past hedgerows of sparrows and a sorrowful thrush.
Her cushioned feet slipper
past sleeping terraces, a Church of Ghosts,
and the wetland levels,
until she stops, in a single point of light,
where the rising sun meets the raging sea.

Milk bottles rattle on a distant float,
a bell chimes six, sails stir, masts creak, fishermen,
their harvest on their backs, wave away preying gulls.
Above a chorus of women gather
to price the catch by eye.

Nelly the elephant

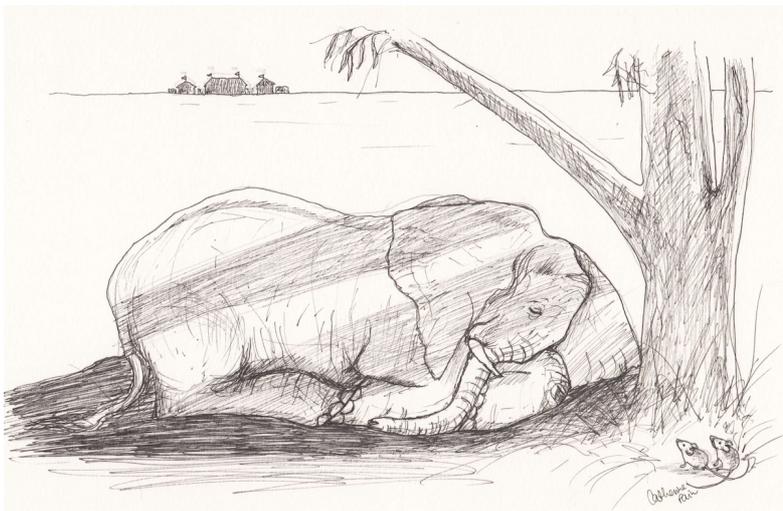
Nelly the elephant was different
her memory was just like a sieve
she could not recall where the days went
she'd lost her will to live.

Her trunk had shrunk with her libido
virility was a thing of the past
she might as well go like the dodo
extinct, alone at the last.

Her tusks were as brittle as eggshell
forgotten those passions of youth
no sight now, no hearing, no smell
but Nelly at least knew the truth.

Her time had run out like the fountain
that refuses to spout from her snout
the mice were safe now for certain
as she waits for her light to go out.

Her solitary companion starvation
calls from an old eucalyptus tree
she sighs a last sigh of resignation,
and she dies, with a yawn, on one knee.



Swallows

Swallows dance around a Gibbons moon,
feed on the wing at evensong.
They climb and swoop in whistle grace
past preening egrets on the shore.
See them soar higher, and higher still,
until we see no more.

Concessions

Now that the print is too small for my eyes,
reading the programme's a thing of the past,
now I can't hear what the poets are saying,
(why do they mumble and babble so fast).

Now I can't find where the seats have been numbered,
now that I am losing my way to the bar,
now I can't tell if the intervals over,
now I'm not sure of the name of the star.

Now I can't follow the play or the plot,
now that I find myself nodding asleep,
now I've forgotten the name of the theatre,
managements offer to let me in cheap.

Quality assurance

At school they measured our success
in red stars from one to three,
mapped our progress for our mums and dads
and anyone else to see.

Teachers loved to tick back then.
They'd place a tick from time to time,
like poetry mentors with a pen
even in places that didn't rhyme.

Now at work sly management governs
tick box people in tick box covens,
who spend the hours of every day,
tick and tocking our lives away.

Today I woke to Radio Four reporting
Britain's triple A rating's aborting.
They say we lost an A last night,
'the chancellor regrets his soundbite'.

I promise you if I met Moody's crew,
I know exactly what I'd do.
I'd place a three-star ticking bomb
in their box with great aplomb.

Genesis

In the beginning God created all living things, great and small.
They had no legs and couldn't move.

On the evening of the first day, God asked the spiders:
'What would you do if I gave you legs?'
'Spin a web of wondrous silks to catch pests', replied the spiders.
'Excellent,' said God. 'You shall have eight legs'.

On the second day God asked the insects.
'Travel the land to pollinate so life may go on', said the insects.
'Marvellous', said God, 'you shall have six legs'.

On the third day he asked the beasts of the field:
'Wander the earth in search of grazing so we can produce wool,
milk and meat', they boasted.
'How clever', thought God. 'You shall have four legs'.

God smiled. 'I am so glad I thought of legs'.
And it came to pass that for the next three days
God gave out hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of legs.

On the seventh day God turned to the human beings.
'What would you do if I gave you legs?'
'Why, what a silly question!' huffed the humans,
'We will take over the world and kill anything on legs,
including, sometimes, ourselves'.

And so God gave them two legs, but He knew
they did not have a leg to stand on.

Retirement

'Vous avez fait une difference,'
he is told at the leaving do.
A handshake from the boss
who'd only known him for two years.
'Why don't you volunteer?
Put something back?'

He leaves the canopies untouched,
his life measured by a carriage clock.
What was it all about?
Those two score years
wasted teaching alienation and Marx,
marking the same script.

The window cleaner's squeaks
wake the bearded man with a jolt,
his dentures fall to the stained carpet.
The policeman screams once more.
The soldier clinks his heels.
Stanley's hands close the curtain.

In school playgrounds down the hill
Children's voices could still be heard.
'Let's see, let's see, where the mad will be.
I know, I know, up the hill in Mapperley.

*Mapperley is a suburb on a high hill to north of the city of Nottingham.
It housed one of the largest Victorian asylums in Britain before its demolition in the 1970s.*

Exit strategy

His blood had long since dried on rock and sand
In this wretched war, in another's land
His exit strategy was clear it seemed
We should not question, nor condemn his dreams
His relatives have been informed - so please, no fuss
Over this other Tommy, gone to dust

Shed no crocodile tears for him
His government had murdered children in its sleep
His smile is gone now; Harry's in his other world
For sake of safer streets back home
For hearts and minds that know their own
His is not the last poppy to die in Helmand's fields

He's at peace now, back in Wootton Bassett
He's left the land of bombs and shattered dreams
Where nightmares darken; his now are at an end
What did his letter say? War is organised murder
And, as his union-jacked coffin, cap-decked, passes mourners' eyes
No minister stares down with false goodbyes

To a daughter leaving home

She tells me the world is so small
that even if she gets swallowed up by global warming
she will be able to call me on her mobile.
I can see her face on my computer.
I can reach her any time I want.
I want to tell her that even in the smallest places
you can feel so alone,
that one telephone call might make us feel
we'll still have to hang up sometimes,
that every minute I don't hear her stereo
playing in the attic,
that I don't trip over her laundry in the hall,
that I don't see her tattoos in private places,
I'll wonder how she is doing,
if she is okay, if she remembers
how much she means to me.

Goodbye Mr Read

Ninety two years young
Mr Read sat on his old
and very comfortable leather armchair
Switched on the table lamp,
stroked his grizzled beard
and sighed

His fingers fumbled for his pipe
Lost in the folds of his long white beard
Worn in memory of Merlin the Magician
Now stained with tobacco
And the daily diet of eggs and tea

An east wind rattled the panes of glass
The smoke drifted upwards
In arcs of blue grey light
Here in this home-made conservatory
Put together in retirement
Out of old sheds, wardrobes and a creaking gate

He sat out the rest of his days

Does me good to see you dear boy
He said as I entered the living space
That was kitchen bedroom
Library and observatory
Here from dawn till dusk he watched
The birds in his Eden
And the goldfish glide
Between the lilies in the pond
I have twenty three sparrows this spring
Two more than last year

His eyes stared beyond the garden
And then in lost reverie he said
Oh yes, dear boy I remember
When I retired from the school
Every day was mine every day
No more timetables
Except my own
They were the best of days
They were indeed

I had a real water dog way back then
He followed me everywhere
Do you know
When I threw a stick into the old mill race
He would dive in whatever the weather
Even in snow and ice
And he always
This will make you laugh
He always always returned the stick to the very spot
Where I had stood to throw it in
But you see I had moved on

It always made me smile

Then silence
And the song of birds
Mr Read smiled again and rubbed his beard
Oh yes old Shep always made me smile
He paused and fiddled with his pipe
And gave a wise man's shrug

A deeper thought appeared
Just like the children
Just like the King Street boys

His mind was elsewhere now
Puffing his old clay pipe
Transfixed in memory
Of homework long ago
Now he was back in school

Down the glass corridors
The first school bell chimed
Among the playground throng
Of conker throwing boys
And then clink clink
The first distinct echo
It was a most familiar
Haunting sound
Heard by generations

Mr Read cometh

Be on your toes you boys
His hobnailed shoes left then right
Steps coming down the hall
Chiding and correcting
Even before he entered
The gladiatorial pit
Worn he told the staff room once
To let the blighters know he was coming

Assembly quick you boys
Bring the goalposts in from the rain
You'll need them to wear for home
Jenkins please put Peters down
You boy don't run
Quietly now in step
Go to assembly
In now run run
Inside the school hall
On the assembly stage
Mr Read stood tall and erect
To silence the boys' morning song

He cleared his throat
And began to deliver
His last fable from the past

Thirty six years man and boy
Had stood there
In the early morning light
Shining through high arches
And now here they were
Eager faces dressed in new uniforms
He opened a book of poems and read
Slowly from one of Housman's best

'Little is the luck I've had
And oh 'tis comfort small
To think that many another lad
Has had no luck at all'

A long pause

Even the caretaker was here today

His deep voice spoke in kindly tones
Looking at the silent beguiled faces
Some he had seen a generation before
Boys hung on his every word

I taught your fathers
And your fathers' fathers
Some I taught 'tis true
Did have no luck
'Tis true no luck at all
But many did
And so I hope do you
Something perhaps you learned from me
Swayed the falling of the dice

He sat down
A few nervous coughs rippled across the hall
A boy with shiny satchel
Holding a brown paper parcel
Agitated climbed the steps

We wish you luck sir
He said and put the parcel
In his headmaster's hands
Mr read opened it
The Origin of the Species
By Charles Darwin

Well well
How did you know
I wanted this
Thank you all
Thank you all
So much

The sound of boys clapping filled the hall
The gowned staff stood and applause rang
Down the corridors beyond the playground
And into the cobbled streets
Just like the children
Just like the King Street boys

And then he was back with me
Back from his hall of time
Old Jack saw the little boy again
He'll be grown up now
Running a bank no doubt
He laughed and emptied
The contents of his tar-stained pipe
Into the pot of dead geraniums
And looked at the birds beyond the glass

His hands
Pock marked with the ravages of age
Looked down in his lap
And turned the pages of a book
Charles Darwin The Origin

Did I ever tell you about my first dog
It was a real water dog that dog
He said

King Street was the boys' entrance to his school, the girls entered through the adjacent Queen's Street

Saturday morning pictures

A tanner to get in
tuppence a lolly,
butterkist for threepence
damsels in distress,
rockets on string
the Merciless Ming

Flash Gordon suspended
in black and white
over the ravine
looks a gonna
in the final reel
next week.

Hero and heroine
will be united
by a kiss.
Topper and Sparrow
play cowboys and indians
on the way home.

Sparrow sharpens
the end of an arrow.
I think we hung him
upside down
over an open fire
didn't scalp him though.

A Cock and Bull tale

Every town has at least one.
Ours stands on the corner of the lane,
underneath the burnt oak,
tall, gothic, like all the others.

From the chatter of the Cock and Bull
you can just make out the house,
silhouetted in the fog.
A dog howls. Tread closer.

Rumours of ghosts and things
that go bang in the night,
a load of cock and bull,
that's what they said in the tap room.

See the Popplewell's bent shadows
walking candles from room to room,
looking for tannery shillings
behind soiled lace curtains.

In the garden cow's ghosts bellow
and paw the ground, but, don't light up,
there's methane deep in those pits.
So that's what happened to the bull?

Maybe. It's been that way ever since
Pete the Astronomer in his short trousers,
kindly asked the Popplewell's
if he could use their reflector telescope.

That's how Pete tells it, anyway,
or is it another Cock and Bull story,
like his holiday home in the Med,
and his yacht moored in Monte Carlo.

Advent

She bought herself a calendar
and counted down the days,
with memories of Christmases
sharing the Milk Trays.

Now she was alone at home
Bert was long, long dead,
the kids just used the phone now,
no need to cook a spread.

So she got a tin of salmon
and opened a tin of peas,
last year she sat with gammon
and ate it on her knees.

The cards grow fewer and fewer
like the knocks upon her door,
the rosier seems their future,
her's has become a chore.

Remember the old saying,
better to give than receive,
stop your selfish grousing.
visit on Christmas Eve.

Postcard from Sardinia

You can fry an egg on the prom.
All the poodles have lost their fleeces.
Even the shade seeks the shade.
Only the nuns keep their old habits

The hug (after Tess Gallagher)

I arrived half way through the poem.
There was this woman see standing outside Asda
reading poems, I mean there in the street,
there she stood reading bleeding poems!
It was a rant about supermarket expansion I think
so I thought I'd stop and listen.

There was this queue see for the ATM,
then, out of frigging nowhere this couple stopped,
his arms were round hers, then something strange happened,
you know really strange,
this geezer in a thick winter coat walked by,
string for a belt, and this woman -
that's right love, the one with the bloke -
suddenly grabs this geezer and holds him tight.

Well he just stood and stared
and there she was like, hugging him
as if he was her red hot lover.
How weird is that?
I stood there, you know just amazed,
this woman still reading her poem,
ranting on, and then I felt like,

Here give me a bleeding hug too, me duck,
Give me one of those?'
And after the geezer hugged her back,
like they were in a vice,
she smiled, wandered off towards the trolleys
leaving her bloke standing there looking on,
like he hadn't felt a hug in ages,
and the funny thing, you know,
the funny thing was,
this woman reading the poems,
she'd noticed not a thing,
just rambled on and on, you know.
But no-one was listening to her.
Me? I just watched the geezer
in the coat and string
go pass the trolleys and mince off
towards the Red Lion.

Mind you he had a skip to his step now.
Lucky sod.

The woman

The woman finished her sandwich,
rose from the park bench,
picked up her book,
didn't give the black cat a second look,
and began the walk home,
past the hairdressers who quaffed her perm,
the pub snug with its fire and pint of stout.

She didn't notice the children
riding bikes up the cobbled street, nor the man
sheltering in an alley from the steaming rain.
'Hello luv', said Mabel, from twenty three,
but she didn't respond,
just shuffled on up the hill,
along the terraced houses.

She reached her front door,
red like the blood ran in her veins,
she inserted her key nervously,
stepped on the mail on the mat,
ignored meows from Fluffy her cat,
and collapsed in the kitchen alone,
head in her arms, and wept.

She removed spectacles wet with the rain.
Listened to the birds cawing outside,
her horse chestnut croaked with crows,
slug slime trails criss-crossed the patio,
house flies buzzed around sticky fly paper,
a wasp swayed in a spider's web,
rain streamed down the window panes.

She stared into the glare of a glistening sun
peeping from behind the heavy grey clouds,
but only the sun trespassed in,
no-one else knocked at her door.
She heard the children playing outside,
scribbled a note in black ink on a scrap of paper,
went to the cooker, and turned on the tap.

The Lamps

Slowly, like a butterfly's first flight
The lamps at dusk flickered bright, alight
Glowing like fireflies in the dead of night
Deepest red this Easter in their Catalan shrouds
As if a hundred blushing lost souls at Mass
Promenade forever until their nightmares pass

Above the bastions and the dreamy waters deep
A nightjar sings the waning crescent moon to sleep
A stray dog bark stirs the feral cats awake
And from the long dark shadows of the night
Beyond the sea's edge an old ship bell chimes
To greet each new dawn with lovers' rhymes



Dementia blues

At break of day she awoke to find
More of her life she had left behind
Was it seven by day or seven by night
Who was that in the mirror
What a fright
Will the carer come by today or
Was that her in the half light of yesterday

Now her mind drifts towards a void
That distant land where confusion and fear reigns
A place apart far, far away
From the normal every day of memory
Of cherished thoughts
Of friends forgotten
Of blitz and firestorm
And children who once had names

Towards that shadowy place
From which strange figures come
Before they are robbed of sense and shame
She sits disoriented upon her bed
Staring at sepia wedding pictures on the shelf
Who was that handsome uniformed man
Was that Fred

Muddled memories keep meandering back
Old schooldays
Homes in Cheshunt
Brothers and sisters long gone
What were their names
Childhood dreams
An old song lines forgotten

From the mantelpiece
More strangers stare down
Was the kettle on
How did I forget to cook and knit
Where's my stick
Why can't I remember
Who I am

Shot at Dawn

Was it false alarms you heard
Above the last cry of the dying
In No Mans' Land

Had you fallen asleep at your post
Was it cowardice
Had you cast away your arms

Had you been disobedient
Was it shock at seeing your friends killed
Had you deserted from the line

What made you flee from the barbed wire
What drove you from those hellish shells

All reasonable questions
That can be conveniently asked
From the safety of the next century

Your corpse is pardoned now
Back in nineteen sixteen
No one at your court martial then heard you

Manacled tied to a stake
You met the firing squad at dawn

In the mud of this desolate land
Where no birds sang
You refused a blindfold

Twelve rifles fired at the envelope on your heart

Each trigger finger shaking
Thinking they could be next in line

Twelve bullets ushered your soul
Into the great unknown above the Front

Three hundred and five souls like you
Were shot at dawn sons of our shires
Recruits and veterans a few had
Lied about their age their fears
Ignored by those who judged them

Used to slaughter
The regimental chaplain
Kneeled in the mud
Braver souls I have never met
He said with a trembled prayer
But no Gods were left to hear

In the distance
all along the Front
The guns rumbled and the war
Ground on and on and on.

Love Linda

It was a showery day in June
The larks sang as I pedalled in
For another day facing a bureaucracy
And then I saw you from afar
By the office door trim flaxen haired
You stopped and stared beyond my gaze

But I could only gaze helplessly at you
Before this blinding light
Before this sight
My life had been pure monochrome
You brought colour to fill
My black and white empty world

Of hopes long since lost for a love so true
As I found that morn in you
You rid my life of doubts and fears
Your smile seduced me deep into your soul
True and steadfast like your laughter lines
They made me abandon my careworn ways

You came with children four not mine
And a husband who brought you tears

But we survived

On the Walls of Aragon

*There are many versions of this poem in Dick's archives.
This version is the one I chose as it was read at his funeral.*

Wedding bugles beckon bride and groom
Here where the old town lives and loves
Here where a meditative peace resides.

By deep seas still as time
Above ebony fishermen feeding bread
To the flashing silver harvest of the sea.

White laced she stands on Catalan walls
Gazing beyond the cormorant priested shore
Here where my heart is full and free.

Here where my anguished soul breathes anew
Under her quilted sky and iridescent sun
Where church bells chime their ancient anthems.

Here where an old world meets a new
Here upon ramparts a sentinel nightjar sings
At sun-fall a thousand lanterns light.

Upon church and walls in limbo
Their lustre burning bright
Shining.

As we promenade the setting sun
Here where people seduce the moon to sleep
With Mirto.

Here where sea and chattering voices meet
In the shadow of a sleeping giant across the bay
And starfall shimmers on the midnight tide.

Here our elusive friend Tranquillity
Enchants and entreats us back
Beyond the walls.



With great affection

John