

*Clocking-in  
for the Witching Hour*

**By Alan Morrison**

*i. Setting Off*

It's half-past half-past nine' o'clock  
so hickery-dickery-dock  
tired eyes accuse the clock  
as if the mantelpiece were a dock  
and the ornaments that clutter it, a jury –

how many ticks to a tock?

as many as holes in this sock  
this tired nylon catch  
fished out from the rummaged-in rummaged out drawer  
and then flung back...

no pairs left, just odd socks,  
only this overworked underpaid pair left  
wrung out like old socks –

two sons left home, no mementos,  
no sideboards lined with smiling photos,  
no marriages, no confetti everafter,  
no wedding shots, no happy grandchildren, no  
patters of tiny feet – not yet,  
just long-exhausted memories,  
phone-calls like ghosts from the past,  
abandoned bedrooms, forgotten belongings,  
damp paperbacks, lampshadeless light-bulbs,  
cobwebbed beams, stopped clocks...

...sunless curtains crumpled on the rail  
like clothes long grown-out-of,  
old posters of childhood idols,  
fusty and faded,  
peeling off the walls, old smells,  
old socks...

peels his sock on, puts  
his foot back in its working skin

pats on some talcum powder, polishes  
his boots, a bit of spit, blacking spittle,  
scuff of black-polish boot-brush  
in a rush, always in a rush, always  
up against the clock,  
each reflex in time to the tick and the tock,  
each muscle, each nerve, still as disciplined  
as it was back in its service days -  
stomach in, chest out, chin up,  
shoulders back, thumbs in line  
with the seams of the trousers,  
the well-pressed trousers,  
the ironed-out, uncreased seams...

no, not the soul-lifting service  
in Curry Mallet's Somerset stone,  
gravely organgrinding holy-stone,  
free to breathe in altar-boy gowns,  
ivory white hands clasping the cross,  
infant heart beating in time to God's...  
as the tumbled headstones dozed outside  
in the silent churchyard  
their breathless loads  
long since met with their maker...

deep-etched, tired-etched, deep-engrained seams  
stitch the creases of his skin together,  
form the troubled story of his physiognomy,  
map out his face with deep depressions, contours  
and other cartographical features  
faded third-degree scars  
inherited from infant burns  
when his dressing-gown caught fire  
and he was consumed, morphined, then mummified,  
and lifted to his only taste  
of true overwhelming peace of mind  
and body...

condemned to being nervous all his life  
  
the Medieval Cathedral organ grind  
lifting him still shivers his spine...

didn't want to come back from inexpressible bliss  
to duty and heaviness and then all of this...

one last minute tug of a cigarette,  
collects his crosswords of scissored edge,

fetches his overnight bag  
packed by his dependent long-suffering  
suffering wife...

...who once had life in her eyes  
and sun in her caring face  
long before she learnt to live in the shadows  
and grimace in the unnoticed shade...  
who once had a spark of defiance about her  
that fizzled out, though not forever:  
you can fetch back the tether  
and she did buy back her wedding ring  
from the pawnbrokers that drizzling Spring...

shambling off with a meaningful kiss  
on the cheek of his pale bride for life,  
then one on the lips, wet with boot-spit,  
he heaves into the night to the chink of car-keys,  
starts the engine, pulls the clutch  
and snails his car away till daylight...

khaki and Royal Marine blue  
stole his holy youth...

He has his family tree in mind,  
a flash of happy memories as he indicates,  
a bag filled with clingfilmed sandwiches,  
crossword cut-outs from *The Independent*  
(to keep his intellect ticking over),  
a tatty account of *The Mutiny on The Bounty*,  
and a well-thumbed library issue of  
*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.

ironed of all their broadsheet creases

To some it's just another night,  
to him it's one more score  
on the calendar of his mind's grey walls  
while he serves out his time...

ii. *Clocking-On*

Pulling up with laboured breaths  
exhausted as his car's exhaust  
pants out its last to the engine's halt,  
his shift has not yet started –

sixty years has been a long shift...

he remembers his hook-nosed father back  
in fifties' Datchett telling him  
to pull his socks up when he got gloomy in a mood of doom and gloom  
and stop being a throwback Morbid Morrison  
as his father's father was before him,  
to turn his *guts-ache* music off that whiskey-whiskered Scotsman  
to the scrape of the jolted stylus  
scratching out rustic Fantasias  
of Greensleeved records soundtracking  
England's windmilling Vaughan Williams green,  
*Seventeen Come Sunday*, Tallis, sadness in his heart since youth  
thunderous Holst, *Egdon Heath*,  
tunes that summed up Thomas Hardy's  
tales of fate, mistakes, defeat...  
words which followed him through life  
with silent feet...  
to the ends of making amends  
and tethers' ends ends' meet...

and tethers' ends ends' meet...

10:00 hrs pm. Time  
for treading guard-dog grounds,  
for earning pay by losing power,  
time for eight hours clockwatching,  
clocking-in for the witching-hour...

They call him Al although his name is Andrew  
it's what they called him yonks ago his self-amalgam now is *Almo*  
in Eastney barracks, 4.2 Commando,

amongst other nicknames like Jug-Ears,  
or The Japanese Executioner  
when he was standing smartly on parade  
all creases neated-out,  
thumbs down seams, Corporal's stripes,  
slash-peaked, high-cheek-boned, firm-chinned, slit-eyed -  
they used to call him Fred...

*Roger, Charlie, Ginger Higgins,  
Terry Caterall, Tom Crabb,  
Baby-faced Rigden, Signaller,  
Per Mare Per Terram, telegraph wires,  
yomping, ciggies, black peat fires...*

He's gone round in circles like a paradox,  
(or the re-uniting of two odd socks),  
right back to that botched-up beginning,  
right back to the start – he's back in the ranks –

*About Turn!  
Stand at EASE!*

A nervous boy groomed for the clergy  
prone to morbid love of the holy  
devout as larks at rising early  
pushed into barrack-rooms too soon  
told not stuff fit for officer's groom...  
so pulled himself up through the ranks  
of sea-green berets to Corporal's stripes,  
a cap-badge Globe & Laurel, now  
a cap-badge of a Security Officer –  
never reached his rightful station in life...

no more a Civil Service SHO

and stations and class  
and belonging somewhere  
suited to his sensitivities  
is still to this day  
his private obsession...

he unjustly feels he's shamed his past:  
the silver cake-stands, clinking china,  
his grandmother in stiff-necked dress,  
his stern-moustached late father...

*iii. Back In The Mess*

Back to barrack-room lavatory banter,  
tits and holes and filling holes  
and what else fits those holes...  
pensioned-off ex-Bootnecks and Navvies,  
pop-bellied, cork-eyed, used-up and lame,  
sold-out of thought, full up with sighs,  
with Shut Up Shop signs in their eyes;  
square-eyed, *Benson & Hedges*-smelling men,  
sitting in line, masturbating minds  
masticating on their tabloid cud..

*- What you reading this time Al?  
Why don't you ever watch TV?*

*- Because it's just an Idiot's Lantern, thinks he...*

*- There's a sex-murder-hate-lust-blow-it-  
all up to-smithereens-movie on tonight –  
just look!*

Look but never see.  
Because all you will find is yourself  
Looking back at me.

Blinkered Little Englanders,  
tabloid-goggling, pie-eyed, fry-up, tits-and-bum men;  
TV, satellite-dish, mobile-phones-for-bones men;  
hatchback, dickscratch, scrotum-focused pig-men;  
libido-mourning, fornicating with a pillow-thighed  
wife men;  
chain-smoking, brain-choking, beer-swilling  
balding men;  
thick-fingered, long-lingered, lung-cindered ex-  
service men...

This is no place for a thinking man  
who's moved on so far since his service days  
in his insights, not his pays...  
who's struggled on, survived life's slog  
albeit a bit broken, still bruised,  
by having been pushed in the deep end of masculine  
sweat at a sensitive seventeen  
when he lost his innocence to messes and smut,  
took up smoking, mistook love for a slut -  
lost to the jolt of the rifle-butt...

This social-chameleonism, this  
blending-in of colour, manner, affectation,  
speech and slang, expletive diction –  
trying to fit in with working-class habits  
because his own class won't let him back in.

(He's a skidder as Sociologists would call him  
and the ladder's rungs have fallen in...

*Fall in!)*

This ever-recurring repetition  
is his idea of Hell, or thereabouts,  
because Purgatory's too vague a thing  
to inflict such suffering  
a second time round...

*iv. First Watch*

Getting over-tired already,  
Thoughts growing fuzzy in the dim torch-glow –

*Halt! Who goes there? Friend or Foe?*

Not someone. Hopefully a ghost?

*Come out of the shadows you Holy Ghost!*

A headless drummer returns to haunt him  
whose footsteps he'd heard as a half-asleep sentry  
in the disused glooms of Eastney barracks  
drumming down the corridor  
the phantom beat of his hard-shoed feet  
tapping on the concrete floor                    like Blind Pew's stick  
a phantom footfall, phantasm-feet,            at the Admiral Benbo  
intent on haunting to the regimented beat  
of military discipline and marching feet...

The worst thing he can imagine  
comes close, through fatigue, to haunting him  
as he lights up his last *Superking*:  
to be sentenced to live his whole life again,  
to start from stuck-in-a-rut-stylus-scratch,  
or worse: to be sent back to serve time haunting  
all the places and faces, events and mistakes,  
ordeals and traumas, full fears, empty plates...

wishes for clean slates

to be sentenced to serve out his Purgatory  
as a misplaced self-punishing spirit,  
an unjustly shame-stricken flitting shade,  
never quite fitting in anywhere,  
a sorrowful shadow of a former self,            out on a limb in limbo  
a sobbing shapeless shifting soul  
forever on the existential dole  
until he solves its shibboleth...

is there employment after death?

sent down to haunt his own steps through life  
on the same well-trodden, worn-out path,  
clocking-in for clocking-out:  
a security guard of the afterlife  
guarding his own spiritual prison -  
an eternally centuryless sentry...

He's always been humble, vulnerable, never  
an ounce of power over his life -

to keep his home, his sons and his wife  
he's clocking-in for the witching-hour...  
forced to plod on  
till his pension comes through  
at sixty-five...  
now it's 10:42.

*v. Back On The Gate*

Watchstrap breaks, fag-hand shakes,  
a shudder shoots through him as if someone  
sometime before or since  
passes over his unmarked grave...

little tapping patters of spitting rain  
beat like small tympanum-drumming fingers  
on his cap's shiny rain-beaded peak...

He's too silent to speak.

He sucks on a humbug to the knock of his teeth.

If he were a Scrooge then just maybe tonight  
old ghosts might grant him kind insights,  
but he's more a Bob Cratchett, a classless clerk,  
a Reginald Perrin, a midlife-crisis  
misfit of suburban Surbiton,  
skin smelling of cold city air, clothes  
heaving with fumes of commuting trains,  
the ashtray spray of Undergrounds,  
sighs as long as the northern line,  
pin-stripes, grey-face, umbrella, brief-case,  
high-blood pressure, over-stressed, depressed,  
a typical It Takes A Very Worried Man man,  
sick to the pits with standing-room-only BO's  
of those who break out in polite sweats,  
reeking of rail-fumes, sucking on Valiums,

a surrogate son of Addleston

in broadsheet-folding balancing acts...

The honest, trusting and virtuous  
are seldom addressed  
by any kind hand of fate,  
Guardian Angel,  
or God up in his busy office –

The good are left unguided...

This plain man in his old soldier's tache  
has spent his life so far  
soldiering  
enduring  
bitter plights, loss of self-respect,  
striving to save his loved-ones from burdens  
heaped on him like debts -  
he's blamed himself enough and yet  
he'll blame himself more time in future  
forgetting the cards he was dealt  
weren't his to deal – he'll conceal  
his pain behind an ill-confident grin...

all but a helping hand

(A young Marine once said to him  
out on the gate one night  
he reminded him of someone  
he'd never known but would have liked  
to have known – someone of another time,  
interesting, reassuring  
like a shy, reclining old armchair or  
a true gentleman with a turn-of-the-century  
face defying extinction...)

Nicotine patches, peppermints,  
Sherbert Lemons, Firsherman's Friends,  
Valiums and anti-depressants  
is the growing diet helps him fend off  
high blood pressure, smoker's cough,  
nerves, dark depressions like  
shadows round his baggy eyes;

faint traces of tiredness faceless fate inflicts  
through ceaseless night time shifts...

his crinkled brow lifts with yawns, skin  
of its life-pummelled face stretches,  
zombified bloodshot eyes blearily focus –  
it's an interesting face,  
patterned with age and faded scars,  
forehead undulated with worry's dunes,  
smooth yet troubled dunes  
like Arabian sands where he'd once supped  
with burping Berbers and Bedouin,  
gazed in awe at Tuaregs shimmering  
through heat like mirages, dromedaries bobbing  
beneath burdens of damask-robed loads,  
groaning like grumpy old men...

like that other Berkshire sheik

had his white Berkshire skin embellished  
by Arab sun, tanned for the first time  
by its naked punishing blaze  
to tawniness of sailing days...

...Mobile Mushroom parades on deck,  
sailors' whistles, white-gloved salutes,  
boundless skies ocean blue...

...sat on his marching knees  
to *A Life On The Ocean Waves*  
he grins as salty sentiment staves  
streams like Pacific seas;  
cigarette smoke tousles and sails  
out from his drumming hands;  
whistling teeth biting his nails –  
cymbal clash! of the old Massed Bands

hisses to a halt. Steady  
on the deck of the landlocked lounge he stands,

swaying side to side as if still at sea...

I see his tanned, scarred, shaky hands  
drumming his knife and fork on the plate  
despite his rhythm, couldn't be a drummer  
as a drummer had to play bugle  
and his teeth were just too big, stuck out  
too much...now he tooth-picks aft  
another hearty meal of memory  
many faded yellow years on from  
pristine white-cork Globe & Laurel days,  
long ago landlocked, anchored in the berth  
of stagnant shallows, lack of self-worth...

A martyr for the sake of sentiments  
immutably 'a soppo date' in his own phrase –  
so a perfect match for any Mister Scratch  
aficionado – the likes of Tom Crabb  
interrupted in sandstorm midst trying to summon  
Satan in his tent...  
the ironic sight of inoffensive Fred  
embodied his relieved disappointment...

his is a special type of sincerity,  
to cry so easily, so quickly...

...now Crabb's antithesis is stranded  
far from tumbled Saharan sands  
and battle-ship blue seas...

Now just a pitch-black, boot-polish, bitter,  
pitter-patter, splitter-splatter, spit-and-polish sky  
spitting down on him outside  
in dark chilly countryside...

...no welcome in wild windswept Cornwall  
for the up-rooted easterner, townie, limey,  
only bleakness  
and winter...

Devon's not much better: tumbled  
crumbled hills show no sense of duty  
to any of its stranded inhabitants,  
urban refugees...

nothing but ancient darkness,  
moody green, trampled moor,  
uneven road, jutting tor  
and brooding inspirations...

deep bleak reassuring coffin-black dark,  
deep dark dug-up moody gloom...

morbid childhood glooms  
on cosy cloying Sunday afternoons,  
tired tock of grandfather clock,  
rick-a-tick of sticking stylus  
scratching out its Thomas Tallis  
as storm cloud moods moved over him,  
no meaning, rhyme nor reason,  
buried deep as a hamlet then  
in his father's ramshackle, craggy house at Rock  
in deepest reddest Somerset,  
near flat Sedgemoor, the Blackdown Hills,  
his stifled spirit lifted times  
by *Jupiter's* pageanting trills...

idyllic *Shropshire Lad*, *Sky West and*  
*Crooked, To Serve Them All My Days* days,  
larks among untravelled ways,  
first kisses amidst the hay-stacks,  
scrumpy straight from the apple-barrel,  
cycling to school down bookish lanes,  
Rider Haggards, Allan Quartermains,  
Kipling, Kipps, Skip the crippled  
schoolmaster's wheelchair-creaking intellect  
like a scholastic Fagin grooming

his 'boyz' for knowledge pickpocketing –  
eccentric school chums; Mickey Probert  
opting out in school-tie noose  
in a moment one minute too long  
of adolescent darkness...

knights in shining armour, grails,  
black-and-white plated battlefields,  
heraldry, chivalry,  
courtly love, pedestals...

and someone, somewhere, sometime, somehow  
pining for him in a hazy glade,  
honeysuckle in her Pre-Raphaelite hair,  
waiting to be his...

from those boyhood Somersetting dreams  
to this bleak Cornish lack of means,  
from idyllic Durley Cottage  
to tumbled-down Trematon Cottage,  
frowning slate-grey face,  
lop-sided roof, wintry stone,  
crumbling out-house, rubble garden  
clambering for space  
over a concrete Morrison shelter...

from the grey stone of Eastney  
to the red brick of Bickley

Cornwall or Andover  
so he chose his best friend's offer  
of a renovated country cottage...  
ended up ruined, in debt, bowed down  
to the exhausting scourge of the quick-hand over...

About now his long-loving long-suffering wife  
once an optimistic life-loving young girl  
groomed for treading the boards,  
now careworn, grandchild-longing,  
broody for babes long grown up,

motherly-faced, shy as a mouse,  
will be checking the meter  
turning the key  
till it clicks and re-ticks  
resuscitates  
thaws their freezing cottage with  
its sparse supply of electricity –  
it's haunted, their house, so some used to say,  
not by the dead, but the existing  
in its unvisited day...

two mongrel dogs, loyal, misanthropic,  
used to be and belong here, a part of the place,  
forever barking ferociously at scents outside  
in the overgrown, shambling garden,  
or at any slight movement or creak of the gate's  
rusting hinges, vigilantly guarding  
on the paint-peeling, blistered window-ledge  
by the deep-set sunken pane:  
the black rapsallion, door-tapping Max,  
and the foxy fellow, rufous-furred,  
*couchant guardant* as their Master would say  
in seldom moments of slurred contentment  
and heraldic humour, his tired feet  
sleeping in their slipper skins –

the brother dogs, while they lived,

endured, cooped-up for fifteen  
restricted chickens in a wire-run years –  
in the scruffy confines of a fenced enclosure  
in the ramshackle front garden

straggly-maned, straddled-legged,  
wild, starved of decent exercise,  
kept their doting mother company  
whilst their Master suffered nightly shifts,  
with boundless, unconditional love;  
they comforted, protected

for local farmers annexing the hamlet fields  
with low-sweeping clouds of sheep

with the snoring weight of their mangled-haired  
heaviness, keeping her safe  
sound, in the warmth of their damp bed  
until morning light yawned through the curtains  
to announce her husband coughing home...

now in the unlimited fields of hereafter  
her husband likes to think they roam

The dogs were their only true friends  
since they moved down with their two sons to this  
suspicious-staring Cornish wilderness  
(well and truly out in the sticks)  
where an innocent man first found bitterness...  
its bad taste still in his mouth  
fifteen years on,  
coating his tongue like nicotine  
till a mouthful of toothpaste water  
swills it out till next time...

*piskies never grant a wish  
so turn your cheek from the Cornish kiss  
oh that fickle Judas kiss  
the Judas kiss of the Cornish*

*vi. Clocking out for Tea and Biscuits*

...clocking-out for half-and-hour's grace  
for a frozen-boned fag-break  
pull of the face  
bite of stale sandwich  
sip of steaming tea  
in hand-warming mug, replaying  
of used-up memory...

Sixty now but still not free,  
no more than when he was seventeen,  
smartened up for first inspection  
on the parade-ground at old Eastney...

You can keep your Kipling and his *If*,  
there is no *If* about it;

put away your *Plain Tales From The Hills*  
for the plainer truth of things,  
and you can leave the dampstained *Allan Quartermain*  
on its dusty study shelf,  
for Rider Haggard's straggled-haired  
self-deprecating hero's lost incarnation  
has ended up a pensionless Security Officer,  
forgotten, discarded, obscured like Jude,  
destined to regard himself as a Failure...

He named his son Alan  
after his childhood idol, one I,  
or maybe after Alan Breck

The Defendant finds himself guilty  
of his own powerless misfortunes  
and hereby sentences himself  
to see himself as a Failure...

...to be haunted by long-sold ghosts  
of old pawn-brokered family heirlooms...

*vii. Out of Clock-Time*

...again...  
it's an interminable 12:10 –  
well into the witching-hour...

tock, tock, tock, tock...

thoughts on tracing back his tree  
into fathoms of late family memory  
keep his frustrated intellect tick-ticking  
into the empty early hours  
like the noiseless thumping of the heart  
whose necessary valve-like motion  
makes him feel weak and ill:  
to think our lives, our thoughts, emotions,  
feelings, souls, experiences  
rely on this pump, only exist  
up until it decides to desist...

pumping, pumping  
pump, pump, pump, pump

...Parker, Wilkinson, Ogle, Asgill...

William Charles disinherited namesake  
from his will for stooping in love and status –  
if he'd not then this brow-depressed,  
damp-jumpered huddled muddled man  
might now be Baronet of Asgill House  
on the banks of Richmond by the River Thames...

...a further sip of genealogical tea...  
further still into the mists of hereditary  
pasts, to the mysterious Mr. Asgill MP...

house of his ancestor, Lord Mayor of London  
for whom that gold coach was made,  
his family's Dick Whittington...

ah! now there's a cryptic ancestor if ever he  
traced one, a Who's Who/Great Irish Eccentrics  
entry way back in the musty 12:17<sup>th</sup> century:

John Asgill, Honourable Member for Bramber,  
an intellectual insect stuck in amber,

another scatty escatalogical Mad Hatter  
like Roger Crabb the habidasher

antinomian, antediluvian,  
anthropomorphic Roundhead-cum-Puritan,  
legalistic libertine who interpreted the  
Bible with his lawyer's eye, literally,  
pioneered his eponymous theosophy  
on Man's ability, by legal right,  
to translate to the afterlife

before the time of his natural death, if he so wished;

Translation he called this curious clause,  
believing that Man did not have to die...

did not have to die...

deep, discontented sigh...

he breathes out tousling clouds of smoke...clouds  
Translated Asgill claimed would transport those  
who, in legally-binding piety, chose  
to translate to the afterlife  
before their natural time  
for Christ died for our sins

so we might live forever...

beyond the end of the tether...

when Asgill breathed his last  
whilst pamphleteering, procrastinating,  
proselytising another clause,  
they christened him, mockingly it seems,  
Translated Asgill, a man of dreams,  
but metaphysically limited means,  
or so it seems, no more...

sometimes in pitiful hours of doubt,  
mental darkness, lack of faith,  
Gethsemanite state of mind,  
tear-stained, slurred with lager, he  
wished he himself could opt  
for his ancestor's get-out-clause,  
crawl on a cloud and spirit off  
to eternal peace...

How can I know how his Heaven would be?  
Perhaps it would be Datchet  
or adolescent Somerset,  
head full with chivalry and untested beliefs  
cushioned in his mother's lap,  
his Mammy, our Nana, who appeared to him  
the day she passed on as an apparition  
glowing, smiling, breathless, shining,  
saving him from a motherless son's  
bereaved from of despair...

in Wuthering Heights  
Linton's was so different to Cathy's;  
one calm, sedate and motionless,  
one wild, restless, constantly  
moving with raging grass  
and somersaulting cloud  
like one of Vincent's landscapes

...she saved him once before

when was only four  
smothering him with the protection  
of her body on the floor  
lest German bombs fall...

The dead are everywhere:  
in our thoughts, emotions, feelings, faces,  
tired love making, dreams, desires,  
ideas, looks and moods, but most of all  
our memories – so immortality  
is true, not just in living genes  
but in moments of private remembrance  
of long passed-on loved ones or friends...

...until the last human passes on  
most of us, save the lost recluse  
will earn our immortality, whether it be       cosily cosseted in his snug solipsism  
in other peoples' backward looks  
or the mothy pages of life-embalming books...

*viii. Amber Alert*

An old-fashioned specimen caught in amber  
alert, frozen in tiredness of time...  
long, drawn-out, worn-out sip of tea,  
quick drag of singed fag, back on gate,       thoughts ticking out of clock-time...  
out in rustic Devonshire darkness  
of old doom-laden dour Dartmoor,  
sleep-starved slough of the witching-hour...

pale-mooned, dim-beamed, patting jumper-arm,  
pitter-pattering peak cap purgatory,  
outside till half-past late when dawn  
yawns and draws the blinds of night  
for day to listless sunbeam in,  
bruise the sky with a smudge of cloud  
till that magic hour, that over-tired,  
thought-sedated morning pardoning –  
he'll stand in the chattering sentry box  
by the ink-blotted gate  
and simply wait...

sounds:

salivating pants of guard dogs,  
malformed whispers of sleeping trees  
rock-a-by-babying their boughs,  
hollow whistling of blustering breeze,  
soulless groans of distant cars  
purring over-tired engines down lanes,  
frosty bite of bitter airs  
on his crinkled skin...

(Silent shoulder shrug of stranger...)

- *Can I see your pass?*

- *Then I can't let you through,  
Whoever you are, friend or foe,  
Can't let you through...*

those are his orders – note in his book:  
man without pass tried to get in.  
Refused him. 01:15hrs am.

Who was it?

Some wandering Samaritan  
come to wend his spectral wayfare here  
to this humble punished man,  
offer him a helping hand  
out from this life of nightly trial,  
of sleep-starved shifts,  
of clocking-in,  
poorly paid by a Private firm  
for eight hours' guarding  
remote and snoring Naval barracks  
or red-brick Bickley till morning...

surrounded by blacked-out moors,  
ghostly looming tors  
glowing white like giant moths in the dark...

rough crags of rock wind-bitten as

his torch-lit tired face...

what a lonely empty nothing place this is  
this is,  
what a lonely empty nothing space this is...

space void oblivion blackness  
starlit blackness  
strange lights in the sky unidentified –  
trying to get to the heart of the matter  
only leads to broken nerves or worse:  
o b l i v i o n...

dozing planets...Holst must have turned  
in his orbit when they discovered Pluto

stars sparkle faintly in night sky  
like sleepy dust in his bloodshot eye  
of yellowed white like a broken egg  
spilling into an omelette...

broken eggs, spilt yoke, spilt milk  
of human kindness spilling  
pilling  
pitting  
pitying  
spitting  
tipping  
down – 2am drizzle drums to rain,  
bucketing down on guard dog grounds  
where his soggy dog-end fizzles out, hisses  
near where the guard dog old Jock pisses  
sopping his feet through the hole in the spit-  
and-polish, black-polish boots  
shuffling about in shadow puddles...

frozen hob-nailed toes...

like Scott's –  
frost-bitten, self-christened failure  
along with self-sacrificial Martyr Oates  
and his immortal legend:  
*I may be gone for some time...*

isn't always spoken but mostly thought  
unintended like most suicides  
committed in mind, not in deed,  
mostly without knowing it  
one opts for one's oblivion...

...frozen toes rub together  
resuscitating each others' leather-  
skins to thaw in damp soggy socks..

slow, tocking, stopping clocks...

stopped clocks  
are his fatigue-defeated thoughts...

time to drift off...snooze a while – no!  
must stay awake – force eye-shutters open  
which should be shut tight at this wintry hour –  
just for a few minutes, mind's brief lie-in,  
only kept *compos mentis* by  
the impossibility of warming up  
in his draughty, shivering sentry box,  
his cold wind-creaking vertical coffin,  
coughing now, he's coughin'...

call of duty, early reveille  
shoots through his closed lids  
like cold air through a throbbing  
tooth wakes him up with  
a battlestations' trumpet start!

churning up muck of smoker's cough,  
custard-coloured rivulet seas  
running in the tissue's creases  
like flooded arteries...  
too much cigarette smoke, nose  
bunged-up, chest catarrh-clogged throat  
tickling, no lozenges can keep the moat  
of mucus from pouring forth and frothing,  
better button-up top of coat,  
rub shivering hands together  
stinging with cold, he's getting old,  
had his basinful of coughing,

rain in his tissue-creased face

being out in the cold...

typically bleak Westcountryside weather...

sometimes he feels at the end of his tether  
at the end of a shaking cigarette...

oh to cope, to cope –  
why did life and circumstance ever necessitate  
that word to creep into our diction?  
what a funny, troubled world it is,  
descendant of its cousin 'hope'  
whose absence tends to necessitate  
it's necessity...

through consonantal drift...

- *Father, what's the point to life?*

- *To cope son, to cope*

- *But why do we need to cope?*

- *Why do we need to need?*

All he's learnt from being is to cope,  
to endure (a lesson the forces taught him)  
such has been his life's purpose –  
his own special expertise,  
this connoisseur of coping,  
this paragon of self-punishing...

*an innocent victim of the Furies  
oh! save me, save from being chased  
by the Furies –  
said Swellfoot and Orestes...*

maybe we should each be content  
just to be, however we be,  
whether well or insufferably...

There is a special place in Purgatory  
reserved for those who wallow in  
melancholy and self-pity –  
thus spake Virgil and Dante...

There's something smothering, powerless  
to the unconditional side of love

that martyrs itself, heaps such high  
self-expectations on the heart, force-feeds  
its loved ones with a heavy weight  
of paralysis, shame, dependence...

simply too much to live up to...

An evangelical peddler said  
to a friend of a friend of mine  
wouldn't it be nice if everyone  
in the world could love one another?  
To which my doubting friend of a friend  
of mine expressed his horror  
at this possible universal spell:  
No – it would be terrifying  
and my idea of Hell...

suffocating

but how worse would our world be  
if Christ hadn't sacrificed himself  
to save us from ourselves?  
and preached to love thy neighbour  
and turn the other cheek...

beatify the meek...

he's spent his life turning his other cheek,  
forgiving others while trying to seek  
forgiveness from others, forgiveness from debts,  
but forgiveness has no return save itself,  
so left him bankrupt, in all sense broke...

seems good's no longer legal tender...

but remember...

there is a time for breaking down  
and a time for building up...

*ix. Time for the Nightly Trial*

Translated of the Bar takes up his place:  
ghostly pale-faced prosecutor,  
skin like curdled junket,                    quakes  
his ageless voice, spits out dust  
clearing his organ-grinding chest:

I will draw the jury's attention to  
those salient points in my descendant's life –  
on the following familial inquisition  
I instruct Counsel to advise...

- When was your first 'nervous lapse'?  
for want of a better phrase to sum up  
the un-sum-up-able?  
Or shall we say, the occasion of  
your first 'spiritual insight' sir?

- I was filled-in in a Plymouth man-hole  
for being peacemaker, trying to stop  
two Bootnecks beating each-other up...

- And the second?

- When Daddy died, whispering in my ear  
with ashy breath, in a tone as alone  
and distant as the grave, *My son*  
*all I've ever taught you is wrong...*  
Put himself up on trial on his deathbed,  
puffed up with pillows, pasty-faced,  
thought his bedroom was a courtroom,  
so he said,  
dreamt a jury had condemned him shouting  
*Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!*  
Tough as old boots, straight as laces, Daddy,  
battled through Somme, Passchendale mud,  
Flanders fog, formidable horseman  
nerves like steel    only cried

when horse died fell from under him  
death screech drowned screeching shells  
blaze of flares...

-...the third insight?

- When Mammy died, felt like world's end,  
everything to me, my sun and rain,  
I remember her gently tinkling  
on our piano *Rustle of Spring*...

Mammy, my breakfast, tea time, elevenses,  
my warmth, my faith, my mental snugness,  
my self-esteem, my love of life...  
until...

-...until?

- Helen Parker claimed my heart  
mere fifteen when first met her  
smartly pressed in my full dress  
on that airless train clattering back  
from barracks to home in sunny Seaton,  
Catholic schoolgirl uniformed  
in chocolate-brown with mustard piping,  
pure driven snow, thornless rose,  
schoolmate of tomboy little sister...

-...did this sunnier insight last?

- a year on from that first train journey  
was punished for loving her: a possessive  
mother poisoned her mind against me...

- Hence your third dead-end?

- Yes, but Daddy sorted it out,  
spoke up to her parents, shifted the cloud,  
soon after we married, for better, for worse,  
for richer, for poorer...

- Which brings us neatly...

-...betrayal by my ex-best man, best friend,  
best Bootneck mate who nicknamed me Fred,  
who brought me down to a low I've yet  
to clamber out from...an over-stressed



freeze and sneeze in dusty damp beds,  
buy second-hand clothes, breathe second-hand  
breaths, hear asthmatic sons wheezing  
in cold damp nights pull blankets over  
my despairing eyes...

and wish to be dead and forgiven...  
(not alive and forgotten...)

wish for nothing more save peace,  
for someone to come rid of him of the lease  
of this crumbled, tumbled  
nadir that served as home  
where no person visited  
no post arrived,  
save bills, repossession threats;  
interminable chain-mail of debts...

their own little House of Usher  
crumbling symbiotically around them

in-between a morass of number-littered papers  
heaped up on his listing desk  
like problems piling his obsessing brow,  
nervous fingers punch away  
at buttons of a faulty calculator,  
deducts outgoings from his pauper's pay,  
joint of his cellotaped NHS glasses  
slowly unhinging away...

barely one penny to rub together,  
forage for coppers in the nether  
glooms beneath the torn settee,  
some washing-up liquid to scrub old tender,  
bit of brush-scrub, spit and polish –  
Will he come through it? Heads or tails?  
hunched in the dark dog-ending away  
he nibbles his half-bitten nails...

so little means, so much to pay...

outgoings, outpourings,  
outworkings, outgoing,  
occasional outings to old stately homes.  
National Trust coupons  
of this family of famishing  
under-fed tea addicts...

we all have our vices, even the meek  
smoke cigarettes they must eek  
like meals for the seven day week,  
so weak a feeling to live on this diet,  
weak as twice-drained tea bags...

*some instructions for the meek:  
simply turn the other cheek  
and if you've used up both bruised cheeks  
and there's no more left to turn  
just maybe it is time to learn...*

The Good go unguided,  
unappreciated, forgotten, overlooked,  
and so the good often go ignored,  
or mistaken for weak and ineffectual,  
chip-shouldered, self-pitying, pitiful,  
worse still for the downtrodden good,  
but no one can fathom out or tolerate  
the victim of fate,  
the man trampled underfoot by hardship's hooves,  
who tries to stand up but is knocked back down  
through no fault of his own –  
no one can sympathise with this man  
who turns the other cheek from those  
who strike him down to powerless throes  
of poverty  
with unprovoked blows...

no one, because no one wants to think  
anyone's poor through no fault of their own,

for then it might make them change their views  
when they see our society only lets them choose  
not to put on someone-else's shoes..

It seems all we have the power to choose  
are our views...

it's enough to make you want to tear it all down  
but the rebel without a clause, the clown,  
the left-wing thinker, all down the pan,  
rinsed of ire, down the kitchen sink –  
this is the age of the anxious young man...

scuff of cold split-open shoes  
stamps out hissing fag-butt – watch  
ticks to half-past two...

*x. Last Lag of Flagging Nostalgia Till Dawn*

Tired eyes read same line again.  
Time to fold back the top of the page  
think on his mother's side again:  
the Asgills, thinkers, pink-gin tippling  
respectable, bespectacled intellectuals  
with a turn-of-the-century Humanist edge...

Tired eyes read same line again.

who foresaw walls come tumbling down  
through the subversiveness of patience  
waiting for the time of the system's  
suicide, as their namesake Fabius  
(as long as no hair spills in with the milk  
from the hairshirts of their ilk) –

Revolution could just as likely come  
with tea parties as with a gun...

devoutly Methodist, Baptist, well-read,  
March Haired, Mad-Hattering nattering chattering  
crockery-clattering Bloomsburystyle,  
well-heeled, clean-cuffed, clear thinking minds

receptive to new, untested ideas...

(My great grandfather, a Fabian,  
never missed a single meeting  
to discuss best ways of feeding  
empty bellies of the down-at-heel.

Privately he ate his meals  
in his study, apart from his kin:  
he couldn't stand the sound  
of other people eating.)

...fuelled on empathy, cosy Socialism,  
armchair safe-and-sound Salvationism  
in William-Morris-wallpapered rooms;  
milk-skinned sincerity, pristine white  
as porcelain vases by Pre-Raphaelite  
firesides; crested tea spoons, silver  
service, chink of china tea-things,  
clink and clank of antique crockery,  
buttersunk crumpets, cakes and tea,  
cultured cant of seminal left-wing  
papers crumpled by apostles' slippered  
feet taking their Gospels literally:  
*Give to the poor and thou shalt be free –*

so well-heeled hands together for prayer:

well, selective interpretation maybe...

*Keir Hardie, Aneurin Bevan,  
Attlee, be thy names,  
Thy Clause Four come, thy bill be won,  
In the party as in Tony Benn,  
Give us this day our daily Left  
Forgive us our desperateness  
As we forgive those who campaign against us,  
Lead us not into dissention,  
But deliver us from Gaitskell,  
James Ramsay MacDonald,  
The Power of the Tory,  
Forever and ever,*

*Bevan.*

Forgive us our debtors  
as we forgive those who debt against us –  
forgive them, forget them, forget ourselves,  
his personal motto indelibly etched  
in his mind from his mother's side – *sui  
oblitus commodi* (forgetful of one's own  
interests – whatever they may be...)  
scrolls quite altruistically  
beneath the crest of a Sphinx...

*Q: What creature goes on four legs in the morning;  
Two legs during the day;  
Three legs in the evening?*

A: The worker who begs on all fours for a job;  
Gets up on two to paw for his pay;  
Limps with a stick when forced into leaving.

Socialism (now there's a thing –  
partly of nostalgia  
as well as wishful thinking),  
it requires too much concentration,  
doesn't work, apparently,  
Capitalism: unquestionably,  
at least for the majority,  
after all those dispossessed  
aren't worth speaking of...

All men are equal, dad's dad used to say,  
*But some are equaler than others –*

...are they?

(his father once took a horsewhip to his arse  
on an occasion when he asked him

Are they?

if he was working-class...)

His kind have waited a long long time  
for that clank of the letter-box for News  
from Somewhere, Morris's Utopia  
or a plain old prophet's Parousia...

dig up those Diggers' digs  
in England's green and peasant land...

The People sold their Prophet for Profit.  
Who would have thought? Who could have stopped it?

*Socialism  
is a Dodoism  
like love and truth  
and idealism  
for we have lost our vision...*

Dodos, flamingos,  
remembers pink flamingos  
before his eyes when beaten up  
outside a Plymouthian night-club  
playing *Pretty Flamingo*...

*God, dear God, why make us believe  
The Left is in the right  
When it has a massive clumsy body  
And wings too small for flight?*

*/That only Love is Might*

Especially the left-wing.  
Oh for wings! If he's a Daedalus  
lost in his own Labyrinth of self-blame  
let me be his Icarus  
tumble into flame  
burn out before I suffer just the same  
in all but name –  
the reproduction of these betrayed and trusting lives  
must be obviated somehow...  
I'm falling into his martyr's trap already –

*Left, right, left, right,  
who is wrong, who is right -  
about turn...quick march...*

it's just too uninspired and easy to be bad:  
I've always favoured the path of more difficulty...  
so I resolve to just grow old and childless  
and deprive my doting mother of more doting food –  
this is no world to bring innocents into  
to be corrupted either by self-gain  
or bitterness of loss –

*there is no colour grey,  
only innocence twisted  
or so some say...*

better be a Scobie: make your own cross  
to bear and sacrifice yourself on,  
to damn yourself  
for love of God...

*There is a time for building up  
and a time for breaking down...  
There is a time for nailing up  
and a time for chopping down...*

But what of the family name  
if his sons don't sow their cautious seeds?  
What will be left for us  
but wills left to charities,  
and empty deeds,  
old possessions and heirlooms filling up  
the indifference of other peoples' rooms  
ignorant of their inanimate sentiments  
buried with us in unvisited tombs?  
Or anonymous crematoriums  
where our scattered ashes fade  
into the unmarked grass  
in the unmarked shade  
of trees without tributes...

their untapped inanimate animism

there must be something more  
therefore...

this my father clings to as he  
shivers imperceptibly  
like a good, well-disciplined sentry,  
sighs and coughs as his watch shows  
the time is half-past three.

Not the time to think on ancestry.  
The time to build up  
on hobbyish thoughts,  
to stimulate the mind out from tiredness...  
but his only hobbies are heraldry,  
tracing back the family tree...

like a little hobbit  
without his Gandalf  
gold moon rampant  
sable sky turns azure...

time to kill, so much time to kill,  
time to kill time  
somehow  
    there is a time for killing time...  
but what of time lost?  
time stolen? time gone?...

vapours of fog envelop him once more  
mists of clock-time, clear and reveal  
a ghost of ancestral past...

Translated Asgill is conjured again  
like a Genie from an uncorked bottle,  
dusts himself off in his cobwebbed chamber clothes,  
stays a bit to pontificate in his cascading wig,  
snorts some snuff, splutters up dust,  
then vanishes back into the mist  
swallowed by early hour fog  
as his behumbled descendant continues his slog  
through to the next slotheful hour...

*about this time  
some are snoring snug in beds  
some are busy dreaming dreams  
some are making love  
some are still up talking  
some are sinking pints  
some are lighting up fags  
standing out in the pouring rain*

*enduring the cold, the time, the  
strain...*

*xi. Dream Reveille*

04:00 hrs am. Amen:  
only another hour to go  
till he can clock-out and soldier off home...

homecoming once had the ruddy-faced  
yeoman fireside painting about it:  
the dogs' tails thumping on the carpet,  
a father freshly thawed sniffs in  
cigarette symbiotic with fingers,  
face mapped hardship-shaped –  
here was home, bare but warm, austere  
but kind, shivers of love huddling up  
to a waning flame, white as frost  
sprinkled outside on the lawn...

the old clock stutters its welcoming  
and the lounge ghost sighs out breath  
interpreted as a draft. The dogs sit excited,  
expectant, their frisky tails fanning the air –  
they whine and fuss for exercise,  
snort and gabble, scuttle, skid  
on peeling lino, scratching patches  
of concrete on the kitchen floor –  
their food is cold now but they want more  
to barter over; to annexe off.

Summoned by their master's cough  
and the incitement of jangling leads,  
they tumble and scratch with mad anticipation  
at the battered old wood front door,  
claustrophobic pining for space  
and the panting scratch and scarper of paw...

...now home to a damp, cold-water-bottle bed  
with only one warm patch in it:

the impression his wife has left who's gone out  
to plod by foot to clock-on  
till her punishment finishes at 2pm.  
Post-Meridian – Post-exhaustion.

That morosely comforting homely picture  
still seems so distant in his dreamful mind;  
notices his watch still tells the same time...  
or maybe it's stopped? No such luck, fat chance,  
the second-hand plods the deceptive distance  
of a whole wilderness-like minute.  
Sneezes (you never sneeze once:) and sneezes.  
Time makes its own limits,  
passes as fast as it pleases...

blows his nose in over-used hanky,  
then in a used tissue that looks like  
an excavator's powdery find;  
sucks on a mint to the knock of his teeth,  
at half-past four sighs with relief:  
time for another tea-break.

Hopefully his fellows aren't so awake  
as to use up his precious reading time  
gassing on about anything that comes to mind  
which invariably involves their dodgy health,  
houses, motors, sexual stealth,  
wives and satellites, tabloids, soaps,  
and whatever other nullities help these  
beer-bellied Behemoths cope...

Topics of the more myopic of optics...

*empty kettles  
empty kettles  
steaming away  
hissing away  
whistling as they come to the boil..*



to be a Civil Service office Mr. Kipps,  
a commuting, sighing, pin-striped Reggie Perrin),  
but he'd be that parish vicar he was suited to be,  
a life in which his unsung strengths  
would have best been used,  
his fellow man best served,  
a *To Serve Them All My Days* style life,  
peace and quite in uninterrupted study  
surrounded by his books, genealogical charts,  
Vaughan Williams' records, slow tock of clocks,  
not sat hunched over at a makeshift desk,  
in a flown son's cramped abandoned bedroom  
huddled over bills, eyes following the clock,  
haunted forever by 9pm  
when it's time for a flustered luke-warm shower,  
for boot-polish thoughts on giving in,  
clocking-out only to clock back in  
half a day later...that old quick swing...  
half a day later  
half a pay later  
half a life

later

he prays God's merciful to him next time:  
offers something different for his soul than the grind  
of a term existing instead of living,  
no peace of death, just haunting  
himself for infinity, a shadow of  
his former stride, a perpetually  
self-punishing life-haunter for  
the fact he only haunted life..

spare me, he thinks, from a same fate recurring,  
offer me a new beginning  
on level ground where we all have power  
to choose our course, no more servitude

not a Born Again charlatan vicar  
Smythe who tried to convert his  
eldest son and Catholic wife  
through hamper alms  
which mysteriously arrived  
left on the doorstep as silent  
donations as if these benefactors  
were ashamed of the more  
practical side of their canting  
Christianity...

*seisaktheia* I sigh!

of clocking-in for the witching-hour...

*x. Release*

06:00hrs am. Amen.

All men

are free to clock-out  
snail back home  
in muttering cars  
down empty roads  
to beds warmed by  
impressions of wives –  
time  
to sink into pillows for six hours,  
dream of better things  
than shifts and punished lives...

## Clocking-In for the Witching Hour

Composite parts:

- i. Setting Off
- ii. Clocking-On
- iii. Back in a Mess
- iv. First Watch
- v. Back on Gate  
*per mare per terram*
- vi. Clocking-Out for Tea and Biscuits
- vii. Out of Clock-Time
- viii. Amber Alert
- ix. Time for the Nightly Trial
- x. Last Lag of Flagging Nostalgia Till Dawn  
*The Sound of Eating – Riddle of the Sphinx – MIGHT*  
*–Ecclesiastes II*
- xi. Dream Reveille
- x. Release

Complimentary pieces:

*Sui Oblitus Commodi*  
Dole & Genealogy

## *Sui Oblitus Commodi*

*(Forgetful Of One's Interests)*

I came to know my father's parents  
through dandelion recollections  
scattered in a Crematorium.

Found John in a photo: hook nose cushioned  
by cavalry moustache; listened intensely  
to his crisp voice, faint but distinctive,  
slicing through hissing speakers  
interspersed with clattering crockery  
in his second wife's porcelain hands:

saintly Lily, preserved in sepia  
snapshot from Heaven's after-flash;  
those soft grey eyes epitomize  
*sui oblitus commodi* –  
she lived a secret in that stark  
cottage at Rock; a grounded angel  
scrubbing the floor, chained to chores  
as a suffragette to railings:

fluttered into strictness' ether;  
coached in contradiction by  
a Fabian father who dined alone  
throwing Baptist scraps at the poor;  
inherited his sentiments (and  
sensitive stomach) sweeping her  
socialism under a patch of carpet.

*My country right or wrong* rang hollow  
from the pipe-propped mouth  
of her patriotic husband,  
a splinter of rhetoric lodged in him  
like a papery Kipling battle scar;

no stomach for Sassoon as he  
had none for his son's *guts-ache* music.

She: no stomach for selfishness  
in her domestic soldiering;  
the strain of countryside solitude  
wrung her fibre: nerves took on the  
jolt of housebound bomb-shock (triggered  
by doodlebugs she'd body-sheltered  
her son from in wartime Windsor);

no outbursts, just shattered silence,  
obsessions cobwebbed about the cottage  
of her thoughts; fear of blindness,  
formless impulse hurling her  
from mental cliffs – the phobia fed  
off her fear of dying, her love of life,  
as she fed off her colic tripe.

She laboured on to know one grandson,  
witness the birth of a second,  
held him in thin, bone china arms,  
hushabying under thundering breath.

Perhaps a little of the light in her  
brushed off on me before it passed:  
I share her sensitivities,  
phobias, foibles, beliefs,  
yet these in-grew as I grew out  
from childhood's idolising of  
her husband's disinterred ideas:  
subordination of the self  
for the nation – in that sense  
a different ideal still deserving  
*sui oblitus commodi*.

## Dole And Genealogy

1

The fireplace littered with Carlsberg cans  
he sits, disconsolate.  
Concentration fills his face and hands  
as his hobby gropes to compensate  
for his neglected state.

2

From chair to chair he'll stumble  
mapping out our family pasts;  
in fogs of nostalgia he'll fumble  
through fictitious fests.  
Traces the line the light casts.

3

The dimming light. Dull evening glow  
displays his only pride:  
our ancestors' names, row on row,  
dead before his time, although  
he feels they're tutting by his side

4

judging him. Tries to appease  
their disappointment in him  
by tracing them ad infinitum  
far into his fantasies,  
fizzing cans and full ashtrays.

5

I find him foraging for childhood,  
lost to sleep in stolen pasts,  
kept quiet where memory graves are his food  
for hope, a stale bread that lasts  
till shattered like plaster-casts.

6

What use is love? Over us looms  
a quiet Catholic God, silent, aloof  
from our penniless misfortunes,  
old invisible heirlooms  
flogged long ago to keep this roof  
of poverty's brooding proof.

7

Can I convince my mistreated father  
God is on our side  
when all his prayers have brought an after  
of comfortless dark?       Time and tide  
long passed on the other side.

8

In creeps a torrid afternoon  
of brief self-pitying;  
more motherless sobs fill the room,  
nothing can lift the onus of gloom  
cast over the sound of a grown man crying.

9

I pity the prowess with which he heaps  
more shame upon himself  
as he lumbers his father's damp-warped books  
onto the listing shelf –  
sad tributes to a faded wealth.

10

More than any other member  
of his forgotten family tree  
does he personify the motto  
*sui oblitus commodi\**  
obscured through verdigris.

11

*I've done my duty, I'd done my best*  
he mutters into a mirror  
repeating this and all the rest  
that still he is no winner  
but definitely a sinner -  
always self-accuser, never self-forgiver.

12

He goes to sleep and dreams of more  
sleep; cuts adrift from the shore  
of consciousness. The more he copes  
the more he reeks of cigarette smoke  
that fogs the fact his nerves are broke –

13

and what chance did his nerves have  
when at the age of three his skin  
was blistered to the third degree?  
Sixty years on his hands aren't ready  
to keep their cigarette fingers steady.

14

I see his eyes are blurring again  
back to blood-shot bleariness  
while the whites are slowly yellowing,  
and I see him trace the family name  
back to the safety of the past –  
but how long can nostalgia last?

15

...long as the lamplight puddles the pages  
of photocopied parish records  
he trains his straining sight towards –  
and as the light begins to fail  
his mind will slowly gather sail  
and trace the print like mental braille.

In the dark, he'll bite his nails.

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*\*forgetful of his own interests*