

Alehouse Rock



Keith Whitelaw

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Drawing by Laurence Calvert.

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LOYALIST WEDDING BREAKFAST, 1971.

Beery uncles big-bellied and snarly.
Mother of Empire, Queen on the wall.
Her eyeballs follow the crabby catarrhally
Wedding breakfasters having a ball.

Fellers in suits and frozen carnations.
A mole faced auntie in a brown ale trance.
Rhinestone cowboy sez: "What in tarnation
're you folks doin', git up on' dance!"

Everyone laughs at his sequined wellies.
Nobody shuffles their Sunday boots.
We're all in limbo from soup to jellies.
A haulage contractor offers cheroots,

Then someone burps like a ship on the river
Someone's going to be sick on the wall.
These are the gifts, but where is the giver?
Up there watching over us all?

Let deaf-aids shriek, let gallstones rattle!
Best man: "Silence, if you please,
For the loyal toast." And we nod like cattle
With a touch of foot and mouth disease.

The barman's asleep and the telephone's ringing.
A joke is told and, of course, it's obscene.
No-one suddenly burst out singing.
The groom proposes a toast: "To the Queen."

STRIPLIGHT

Lights on the optics
Sparkle like spectacles
After they're polished

Up on the stage
A poor little stripper
Indifferently frolics

The waitress embarrassed
In lacy white apron
Serves businessmen's lunches

Into the ashtray
A filter-tip king size
Savagely crunches

OLD SAILOR BOYS

Old sailor boys with drunken boots
sport plastic bags
court ancient hags
on the ship rats' pier

Their memories of sailing barques
and ballroom larks
and arguments with wages clerks
no longer clear

Almost ghosts in overcoats
mouthing endless anecdotes
they wander to their dormitories
like boats with ruined steering gear

STILLS (1)

A priest unshaven, a little swarthy, dark sleek hair, sits at the wheel of a black Mercedes diesel, one hub-cap missing, a cigarillo in his golden teeth.

An urchin provides him a bouquet of flowers, urged on by mama; bees are plundering the flowers' treasure and they sound to the priest like the organ at the seminary where he threw the javelin and won praise for his handwriting. He smiles expensively.

Two gunshots, then applause and hosannas; two more and silence. An unchivalrous duel at dawn. The priest administers the Last Rites to both protagonists, then drives home thinking: plovers' eggs for breakfast.

STILLS (2)

A moonlit informer, running to fat, stands in a doorway by a Gitanes poster tapping his teeth with a silver pencil. The downpour sizzles like roasting meat.

A lorry brings ruin to the rebels' cafe. Boots on the stairs and smashed carafes. Machine guns cackle like madmen or fishwives or the concierge of the cheap hotel where he cooled his heels in 1940. "Tomorrow, the warehouse

and the fever drugs." He hangs a Lucky Strike on his lower lip and turns up his collar against the war.

Rain on its whiskers and velvet suit, a cat approaches like a ten franc ponce. Stops to adore the informer's ankles.

STILLS (3)

An English June, a woman gathers roses. Over the air waves the news is of English losses, troops driven backwards to the sea; from bakelite the boat race voice resounds, grave, collected.

A motor launch scuds by and gives the river's quiet reach a centre part. A man in yachting blazer steers, his bearded face a Hemingway in later life dead ringer.

Later, perhaps, the Doctor will call (Reserve Occupation). Bridge and sherry on the terrace: a few hands won and lost in Surrey and Dunkirk.

HOLMES, GROWN OLD, RETURNS TO BAKER STREET, LOOKS BACK

The days steal by like ne'er-do-wells.
I sit with books in Baker Street,
And like an undetected crime
Cigar ash tumbles to my feet.

My long loved adversaries are dead.
They were my labours and my strength.
Spectacles magnify my eyes.
I see them at a summer's length

When life was lavish with intrigue.
I see, though I am almost blind
Within a city fabulous with fog
The friend who was the touchstone of my mind.

The years steal by like murderers in the night.
I sit with books in Baker Street.
like an undetected crime
Ashes gather at my feet.

MENTAL WARD. DECEMBER

There is no celebration when they laugh
or dance to ancient records from a phonograph.
One taps a three four rhythm with a plastic fork
for bedsocked feet to do the Lambeth Walk;
brothers and sisters of the mind gone wrong,
the bandaged heart, the tongue without a song.
Someone's mother tells a mirror of her sins
in winter light designed for loony bins.

This place is like a railway waiting room
where nutters wait for trains to take them home
to someone waiting for a shopsoiled life
to take as husband, daughter, son or wife;
and chiefly it's the fear that I remember-
the phonograph, the light, a wartime tune,
how we can be destroyed in dark December
however bold we are in May or June.

WANNA COME BACK TO MY PLACE?

there's lotsa ladies who're very thrilling
hang around with blokes who are very spine-chilling
got the sexual hang-up/nobody rang up
deadbeat, flatfeet blues

i drink whisky, i drink wine
my favourite number's 69
got holes in my teeth and a speeding fine
i'm just as wild as a wild woodbine
got the deadbeat, flatfeet
bum tweak, speed freak
look at me 'cos i'm deep blues

"last year i took my hols in Hell"
my tongues got bristles and i never feel well
got the histrionic/bubonic, gimme 'nother
gin 'n' tonic/fun and frolic, alcoholic/
deadbeat, flatfeet, speed freak/don't sleep
look at me 'cos i'm deep blues

Hands and knees and booms-a-daisy
the spirit's strong but the body's lazy
news of the world is driving me crazy
got the no-one rang up/sexual hang-up
Austin Metro/oh so hetero/Woodbine/traffic fine
bubonic, histrionic / deadbeat, flatfeet
look at me 'cos i'm deep blues

COUNTRY HOUSE WEEKEND

The Roman baths are lit with candles;
white birds constantly peck at the flames.

"Look at the silly birds, Richard,
do you think they're mechanical?
Trust Roly to lay on mechanical birds!
And now he's turned the swimming pool to wax
and all the swimmers are trapped!

A little sorcery does enliven a weekend.
Gosh it's decadent in a toga!
Richard, did you sleep at all last night?
It was so cold and foggy in the room . . .
but such an atmosphere!
Oh, do put down the Investors Chronicle!
Roly's just thrown Bunty in the pool
- didn't you hear the thud?

SOLDIERS AND NURSES

The man who carved the statue for the People's Garden
began with teardrops on the face; around
her own sadness the stone-girl grew.
Nobody knew what the sculptor meant
or what he went through
in his act of love.
Soldiers and nurses promenade where
the ornamental fountain plays
its stinking waters in the air.
The final swan was sighted there.

COUNTY CRICKET. EARLY SUMMER

Bright sun. The wind is polar.
Sandaled blimps in homburgs
scream blue murder at the bowler.
"Aim at the stumps, you fat gett,
you'll hit if he misses."

Pale boy and tiny girl swap kisses.
Disapproving blokes in braces
swallow pies like aspirins.
Batsman slaps a wide half-volley
skywards to the aspens.

A swift goes helter-skelter in the outfield.

NATIONAL ANTHEM

We're gonna be British, wave the Union Jack
Smile politely at the vicar
Stab the neighbour in the back
Idolise the Fat Cat
Spitting on the duffer
Feed the peke on chicken livers
Let the children suffer

We're gonna be British, we're gonna be bored
Dying by the television
Dying by the sword
Whether we're in mansion houses
Or among decay
We're just as sweet as little cakes
Upon a silver tray

We're gonna be British, we're gonna keep mum
Hide our feelings in the cupboard
Like we're deaf and dumb
Always strong and silent
Not unlike an ox
Regular as herringbone
Regular as clocks

We're gonna be British, gonna curse the nigs
Pay the rent and go to work
For a pint and twenty cigs
Gonna curse the darkies, the Irish
And the yids
Hide the pain for fifty years
And give it to the kids

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

KEITH WHITELAW was born in 1955 in Liverpool from which he has not yet escaped,. He has not lectured in Sanskrit at an American university but he does have brooding gypsy eyes. His poems and prose have appeared here and there but not everywhere. His novel '*Tall Dark and Disturbed*' will be published when he has a good enough photograph for the back cover. This is his first book.

WINDOWS

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