

Handle or Straight?

A second selection by John Owen Smith

Introduction

Here's another selection of verses commenting on life as I seem to find it.

If there's a theme at all, it's probably to do with seeing the different ways in which progressions affect us.

Metrication, redundancy, getting older – it's all grist for the light-hearted pen, don't you agree?

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Handle or Straight?

Your foreigner visiting pubs in old Blighty
Is in for a bit of a 'do',
What with licensing hours that respect the almighty
And 'pay as you order', this could be all new to them;
Leaving their children outside in the car
Is clearly a thing that they hate,
But nothing's so queer as ordering beer
And being asked, "Handle or Straight?"

Now lager they've heard of, it's commonly drunk
In the countries they mostly call home,
And bitter and light they can fathom alright,
And brown ale and Guinness at least have a foam to them;
Lemonade shandy's refreshing in summer,
A drink you might buy for your mate,
But what fools Peer Gynt when he orders his 'pint'
Is being asked, "Handle or Straight?"

The games that we play may seem odd in a way,
What with crib and shove ha'penny and darts,
And the landlord's brusque style may occasionally rile
With the tone and the manner in which he imparts to them
News of the landlady's need for their glasses
When "time" has passed by and it's late;
But their memory p'raps, as they look at their snaps,
Is of being asked, "Handle or Straight?"

Yes there's nothing so queer for our visitors here
As being asked, "Handle or Straight?"

Measure for Measure

For those of us who're nearly grey,
It sometimes seems a little hard
To see things go the 'metric' way,
Inch by inch in our back yard.

With Fahrenheit we basked at eighty,
Now it's thirty in the shade;
Don't seem right, but it's not freezing
When you count in centigrade!

Old pence and shillings, weighty pieces
With us since Victorian times,
Disappeared, and in their places
Come the tiny 5p dimes.

Ten stone twelve was not so daunting,
Now I'm sixty-nine kg,
Doesn't matter, I'm no fatter,
But it's bad psychology.

Now in this, God's little hectare,
As we contemplate our lot,
Has our maker lost the acre
From his title? Surely not!

But the pub remains resistant,
Still pulls pints to quench our thirst;
Scholars of the rough right wrist can't
Contemplate a change that's worse.

By Canute! Our days Imperial
May proceed to fade and die,
As metric dictates ministerial
Infiltrate our history.

For those of us who're nearly grey
There's more to life by many a mile
Than standing in progression's way –
Look forward – be a Europhile!

A p For Your Thoughts

Before they got their last come uppance
We called two old pennies tuppence;
Now, for reasons which elude me,
We call two new pennies two pee

Digital Time

If someone says its
Twenty one seventeen, you
Know he's digital.

Friendly Mac

Friendly facility,
Applicability,
I've got a Macintosh
Stood on my desk;

Lacks one utility –
Compatibility –
Which would allow me
To transfer my disk!

Weather's New (a Villanelle)

The scene's the same, the weather's new –
Be bright or dull, be moist or dry –
Come, say today what we can do.

Seen through the window – morning dew,
The dales are deep, the hills are high
The scene's the same, the weather's new.

A walk, a trip to take a view –
Ah weather, cold or fit to fry,
Come, say today what we can do.

And now the sky's a different hue,
With rain-stained clouds about to cry
The scene's the same, the weather's new.

This green and pleasant England grew
By varied onslaughts from the sky –
Come, say today what we can do.

So pack the macs and sun-cream too,
We'll take no chances – please don't sigh!
The scene's the same, the weather's new –
Come, say today what we can do.

Key Clues

By their keys rings shall ye know them –

Twisted wood or bits of antler,
Plastic-coated children's photos,
Monograms in brass or leather,
Metal tags from famous motors,
Just one Yale or like a gaoler –
Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor,

By their keys rings shall ye know them –
So take care just what you show them!

Lies! (a potential Villanelle)

I love you the most,
I'll love you tomorrow –
The cheque's in the post.

You know I won't boast –
Don't suffer from sorrow,
I love you the most.

And to honour the host,
There's no need to borrow –
The cheque's in the post.

So let's lay the ghost
Of lies in the morrow –
I love you the most,
The cheque's in the post!

Pennies Round The Green

In childhood's days
Each year we'd raise
Some pounds in worthy cause,
And just to soak
The village folk
We'd do it out of doors.

Come early morn
At break of dawn
We'd gather at the scene,
And rain or shine
We'd chalk a line
Around the Village Green.

Then folks would down
Their pennies brown
To see the line-up grow,
Until, complete,
The two ends meet –
A circle from a row.

Now you might go
'Bout that green 'O'
A hundred yards around,
With pennies large
For which you'd charge
Two-forty to the pound.

The money you
Would gather through
That circumnavigation
Was ten pounds four
Or little more,
Pray do the calculation.

In childhood's days
That sum to raise
Was worthy to be seen,
And so each year
We'd reappear
With 'Pennies round the Green'.

Ode to Work

When you're in it you deplore it,
Nine to five you slave and sigh,
Drag your feet on Monday morning,
Friday, wear the POETS tie;

Then redundancy confronts you
With a somewhat different view,
Endless hours, no mates to talk with,
Nothing meaningful to do.

In between these two conditions
There should be a compromise;
Make your mind up to enjoy life,
No need to apologise.

Work's not just the drudge's monopoly,
Keen endeavour trudges less choppily;
So let's hear it for the perk –
“W – O – R – K spells Work!”

Redundancy!

Redundancy! Despondency?
No – Rather, opportunity to
plan without impunity
the next step of my life.

Sympathy unnecessary,
certainly expect a very
positive reaction to this
turning of the knife.

Start a new consultancy,
consider the result and see
what prospects lie in front of me,
my children and my wife.

And so I'll cut the knots that tie
me to the safe, sure, salaried world,
kick the pricks that dare defy me,
see Adventure's flag unfurled.

Redundancy! Despondency?
No – Such things come along, you see,
to stimulate expediency;
At least that theory's rife!
Let's hope it's true – My Life!

But Who Cleans the Loo?

A househusband I, since becoming redundant
My time is spent largely at home –
I'm finding the chores are perversely abundant
From washing the windows to cleaning the chrome;
A househusband I, but the difference you'll find
Between men and their women is best underlined
By the fact that, whatever I'm able to do,
I never remember to clean round the loo!

What's a Job Worth?

What's a job worth any more?
Here today and gone tomorrow,
Monday your routine's secure,
Tuesday you've to beg and borrow,

One day Jack, you're in the black,
Next day comes, you've got the sack,
Where's a boss worth working for?
What's a job worth any more?

Limelight

The roar of the greasepaint, (whatever that means),
The lure of the limelight, the shifting of scenes,
The dim upturned faces, the rounds of applause –
These are the hooks – the adrenalin soars;

And you stand at that moment on top of the world,
Your sword in your hand and your banner unfurled,
Your pose struck just so – but if your luck's like mine,
You'll have found you've forgotten your very next line!

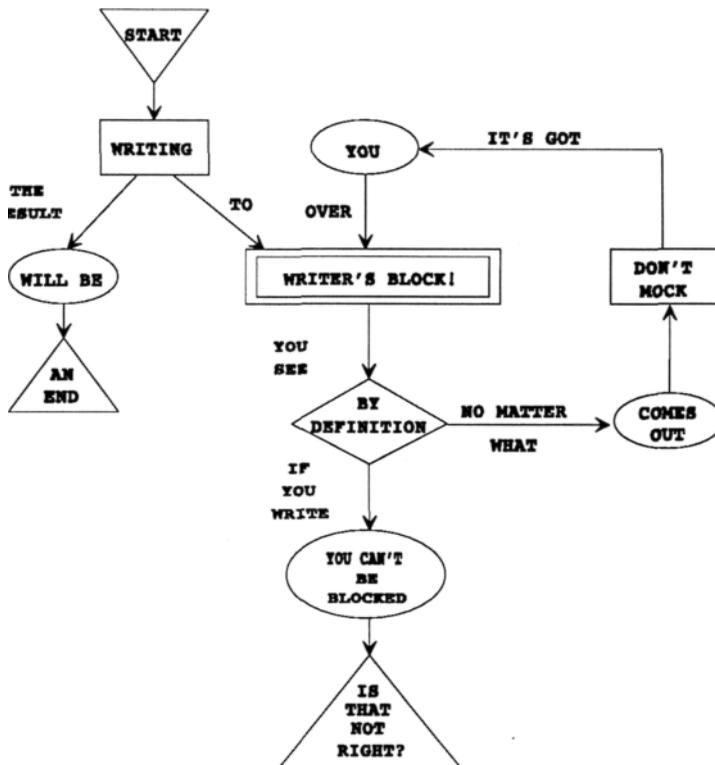
Writer's Block

Start writing; the result will be
An end to Writer's Block; you see
By definition, if you write
You can't be blocked – is that not right?
No matter what comes out – don't mock,
It's got you over Writer's Block!

(This is set out opposite as an example of Logical Verse)

Writer's Block – Flowchart Diagram

(Logical verse)



WIMP

Windows, Icons, Mouse and Pointer
Are the hallmarks of computing,
If you mean PC computing
Rather than the mainframe version.
See the frames, cascade and tile them;
See the icons change their colour
As the pointer moves across them,
Guided by the plastic rodent;
Now we drag an icon sideways,
Now we double-click a spreadsheet,
Open it for calculation.

Windows, Icons, Mouse and Pointer
Need a strong co-ordination
Twixt the eye that sees the image
And the hand that moves the marker,
Not a talent shared by all
The would-be users of this system.
Me? I hold the mouse in left hand,
Tap the keyboard with my right hand
While my eyes seek information
From the blinking screen before me,
Hoping that I saved it last time
Or, if not, it can restore me.

Windows, Icons, Mouse and Pointer
Marked a quantum leap in linking
Structured science with human thinking;
Human brains have left and right sides,
And this method recognises
How to cross the gap between them.
Now, however, we await
The progeny of this conception:
Talking walls and 3D pictures.
Voice control and sensors, giving
Means to make the information
Part and parcel of our living.

Pointers, Windows, Icons, Mouses,
Then you'll be in all our houses!

Play Write

Today I'm going to write a play -
Well, p'raps it's more correct to say
I'm going to **start** to write a play -
You can't write one all in a day.

The subject first - what should it be?
About a village fete! Let's see
The organiser's nightmare - we
Can title it: "Fete Accompli"!

Act 1: We see him in the morning
Setting up the stalls, and warning
Us of situations spawning
Lots of problems; splitting awnings,

No loudspeakers, cancelled shows,
Forecast rain, and so it goes.

Act 2: It's later, after those
Have come and gone.
It's near the close,

The day's events are hist'ry now,
Recriminations start, and how!
There's "stuck-up pig" and "silly cow",
And tears and tantrums - what a row!

But somehow they'll be brought to heel
And wind up in the final reel!

Dogs Are a Pain

Dogs are a pain; I'll say it again, they're a strain.
They bark in the dark, leave their mark in the park;
They insanely and vainly run circles indoors,
Scratch the floors with their claws;
Uncontrolled, they chase cats up the stairs to their lairs,
Bristling with hairs under chairs.

We're told that they're faithful and true,
It's a view that's not new;
But on days when they smell and play hell, then I tell you
The few dormant scraps of goodwill which I still have
Are chillingly slow to emerge.

So what should I do?

Just look into those big brown eyes,
The half-formed thought inside me dies.

I can't do without them, the dogs will remain -
They may be a pain, but they're stayin'.

Cats and Dogs

Cats and dogs can be
Friendly fireside companions
Or slash-lashing foes.

Deaf Daisy

When morning brings the sound of tins
And dishes from the kitchen, some
Will break down doors to get there, but
There's one who doesn't come!

Our Daisy Belle can see and smell
And makes her presence felt and heard
But, like the adder and the post,
Can't hear a single word.

Last Night

Last night I woke up with a start;
The moon was shining bright as day,
I felt a pounding in my heart
As, cold and shaking, there I lay.

A shadow moved across the room,
It moved again, I gave a shout;
A thief, a werewolf, ghoul or ghost?
Then, "Miaow", said Puss, "please let me out".

A Bitch of a Problem

I had a dog, More precisely a bitch,
We got her well mated –
It went without hitch.

I now have two dogs
More precisely, two bitches,
They terrorise horses,
They end up in ditches,
They fight with barbed wire
And the vet bills get paid ...

But I've just started thinking –
That neither is spayed,
And since ardour unchecked
Gives geometric progressions,
And numbers of dogs
Will cause certain regressions
In standards of living,
We'd better forestall
And let one largish vet bill
Put paid to it all.

I count up the benefits;
Then I think twice,
And reflect on the thought that
The puppies *were* nice,
And we don't have to keep them
(We'd sold all the others)
And not many bitches
Make such loving mothers.

And, well, is it fair
Not to give them the chance,
Even though it may mean
We can't go back to France
For our holiday trips?

Now dear reader, you say –
Will the problem get worse
Or will I get my way?

Sleeping Dog _____ (a Villanelle)

What dog is this that lies asleep?
 The burg'lars all may come and go,
Why should I pay his feed and keep?
He's curled up there now in a heap,
 One eye open, lying low.
What dog is this that lies asleep?
It's not as if his upkeep's cheap,
 See his tins stacked in a row.
Why should I pay his feed and keep?
The cost's enough to make you weep,
 And this is all he has to show!
What dog is this that lies asleep?
And as I've said, the outlay's steep,
 Affecting my financial flow,
Why should I pay his feed and keep?
But then again, my pocket's deep,
I guess we'll keep the status quo.
What dog is this that lies asleep?
Why should I pay his feed and keep?

Dear Daughter

It's not so funny as it sounds,
A telephone bill of a hundred odd pounds
When previous quarters have always been
Round sixty something as a mean
And certainly have never come
To more than seventy maximum.

Then Sarah met Jon who lives down in Lee,
A distance which is rated 'B'
By those at British Telecom,
Enough to light a minor bomb
When father has to quickly find
An extra forty quid.

Now mind,

I've nothing said against this Jon,
But Sarah, she does prattle on
And it's not cheap to phone your friends
After six or a weekends
Unless you keep the message short
(And frankly Sarah's not that sort).

So let's try this – don't touch the thing
Unless of course you hear it ring!
Instead, to make your essays better,
Say it to him in a letter;
Then I won't be quite so mad.
OK now? Thanks. Yours truly, Dad.

P.S.

This message with a different name
Applies to Emma just the same!

Estate Agent

I asked a man to sell my house,
My property I mean,
 He seemed so pleased,
 He promptly squeezed
My hand, he looked so keen.

He came to look around my house,
To set a valuation,
 He and his friend,
 From end to end,
Explored the sanitation.

He took some photos of my house
From quite dramatic angles,
 Perched on the gate,
 Wedged in the grate,
Caught in the brambles tangles.

And then to market well my house
He asked me to select,
 A glossy sheet
 With quite discreet
Full-colour prints for best effect –

In all events at my expense!

So in the end my treasured house
Is up for all to see;
 And if you buy
 You know that I
Will finally, reluctantly,
Agree to pay the Agent's fee;
The man I asked to sell my house.

Pile-driving

They're driving some piles into the ground over the road,
And with each stroke my hotel bedroom judders,
I've driven some miles motoring round over the roads,
And it's no joke to lie here as it shudders.

Should I ring reception to complain about my lot?
Some folks like to make a fuss – but me, I'd rather not.

They're driving my smiles into a frowned overtight load,
Them and their piles struck in the ground over the road.

Travelogue

An airport departure lounge
is not the place
to write poetry –
There's just too much tension and bustle –
It comes out looking like this,
all lumpy.

Once on the plane, you're too busy eating –
Quick, a last mouthful before we touch down.

But here in the hotel,
there's no excuses –
A room to myself
and no distractions –
So what do I do?

I fall asleep!

The Two Telephone Trick

Two telephones stand on the desk side by side,
Each with its own sep'rate purpose and tone;
Identical colours, they nestle with pride
Beside the gilt picture frame borrowed from home.

A practical joker this April has found
A new way to spring a superlative sting;
He furtively swaps the two handsets around –
Now watch the confusion when one starts to ring!

Radio

Half a mile or so of wire
Making the potential higher
Causing increased oscillations
Rectifying the vibrations
Till at last a sound comes out
On Radio 1, it's "Twist and Shout"

Within Tent

Camping within tent, to gain
That peace and quiet, despite the rain,
Of close liaison with the earth
As, dressed in shorts despite your girth,
You set to work to pitch your camp
Beneath the trees, despite the damp,
And hammer home the pegs (oh blast,
Let's leave the bent ones till the last),
Achieving what will surely be
A haven of tranquillity
In which to spend a day or two
Just doing what you want to do.

But, just a minute, where's the loo?
And, look, there's ants all in the tea,
And, wait, you're treading on a bee!

But never mind, despite some smells
You wouldn't get in best hotels,
This is the life – renew the soul,
Sleep on the ground (but mind that hole).
Up with the cock at crack of dawn
To greet with joy each soggy morn;
Milk from the farm, fresh eggs to eat
(But who forgot the Shredded Wheat?).

There's really not a nicer way
To live (where's that mosquito spray?)
Than pitched like this beneath the stars,
Far from the madding crowd and cars.

What's that? You tried it once with Jack?
Wild horses wouldn't drag you back?
You think we must be off our head?
You much prefer a soft, warm bed?

Well, strictly *entre nous* my dear,
It's all we can afford this year!

Beware, Brownies!

Sing a song of sixes,
A pocket book and tie,
Four and twenty Brownies
Are here to have a try;
Here to read you poems,
Do little plays and sing,
Feed you cakes and cups of tea
And all that kind of thing.

And So, He Came Home

And so, he came home.
Not feted; but not defeated either.
A sun king – once fiery at midday -
Now looking to his culmination
In a glorious sunset.

The past was the past.

So now, “Do in Rome ...”
And sated; no longer seated scyther.
It sunk in – no diary, no bid play -
How beautiful the contemplation
Of a pastoral onset.

But still man of action.

Now, fork to the loam
Rotated; this fresh retreated tither
Got stuck in – all miry and 'mid clay
Now pondering with admiration
On his work from the outset.

Home.

Ode to Dunbar Gulls

With profound apologies to William Wordsworth.

I motored slowly in a crowd
From Edinburgh's surprising hills,
When all at once, 'cross fields just ploughed,
I noticed someone serving grills;
So feeling like some toasted cheese,
I found myself by Dunbar's quays.

But 'ere I got myself to dine
Among the gingham tables gay,
My ears picked up a different sign
That made me walk another way;
A thousand seagulls at a glance
Were wheeling in a raucous dance.

Among the castle ruins lay
Their ragged nests and here, you see,
The gulls at Dunbar had their say
In riotous cacophony;
I walked among them to the fort
And took snaps on the film I'd bought:

So when at home I sit and try
To catch again the avian mood,
I run the photos past my eye
To recollect the noisy brood;
And then the inner camera mulls
And dances with the squawking gulls.

Darby and Joan

Darby and Joan have a rapt reputation
For doting dependence and mutual attendance;
The folks on the hill live in nice isolation,
No mass-mediation to mar their ideal.

Says Darby to Joan as he wakes every morning,
“Don’t stir yet my dearest, my side is the nearest”,
Then throwing off blankets he greets the new dawning
And heads for the kitchen to fix her a meal.

The daily delight of dear Joan and her spouse
Is in sweet dedication and reciprocation,
No words of hostility blemish this house,
Their love for each other is tender and real.

Says Joan to her Darby when dinner’s digested,
“Now sit over there in your favourite chair,
And let me attend to your needs till you’re rested” –
And as she bends over him bells start to peal.

Now Darby and Joan, all of three score and twenty,
Are hardly spring chickens, but then what the Dickens,
The eyes of a lover treat time’s journey gently,
And Darby’s still stunned by his Joan’s sex appeal.

The curve of the neck and the toss of the head
Still serve as a potion for sensual emotion,
It’s sixty-one years since the day they were wed,
But as hand touches hand it’s the same fiery feel.

That’s scarcely enough for our gruff hero’s whims,
He wants a lot more and they’re soon on the floor,
With a flailing of octogenarian limbs
They rip off their knitted wool drawers in their zeal.

Each moment of magic is gleefully cherished,
Their repertoire's vast from experience past,
And none of their basic equipment has perished,
So though it's less rushed it's not yet an ordeal.

Now you who are younger may find this repulsive,
But ask any vicar which people die quicker;
He'll say it's the straight-laced, not those more compulsive,
And he who's lust lingers lasts longer, they feel.

So Darby and Joan's reputation is rightful,
The folks on the hill can enlighten us still,
Their love for each other is pure and delightful,
And long may they live in their special ideal.

Golden

Five decades cover
Quite a lot of blessings
When you count them.

Thus Spake the Serif

When Romans cut their Trajan signs
As Latin scholars tell,
They set the standard for all Times,
And Baskerville as well.

Care not, said they, for funny lines
With ends that can't be chipped,
Good form henceforth in prose or rhymes
Will use a font that's lipped.

For you by Gutenberg one day
Was printed something dread,
It simulated handwriting
On blocks of wood instead.

The heady prospect soon appeared,
To human view displayed,
Of risers stripped and fonts unlipped –
We thought you'd be dismayed!

Forsake the serif, and forthwith
Your text will look all wrong,
A movement Underground, designed
All spindly, thin and long.

All glory be to Bookman, Times,
And Palatino text;
Dismiss the Swiss Helvetica –
Whatever will come next?!

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