Assortment of poems for use in schools

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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA:
Kapok Pillow

Dad was one of the ‘Rats of Tobruk’
& at home during my early
childhood
we often had our own private
theatre of war

dad going awol from work
drinking the day away . . .
to stagger home mid-afternoon
& throw missiles around
barking orders like the
RSM he never was

if we were lucky he might just
fall into bed
still in his y-fronts & singlet
& far too drunk to reach his socks
he’d gradually fill the ashtray
on his bedside table
& if luck stayed with us –
he’d likely go off on the nod

i remember lifting a red brick
alongside the veranda
one hot summer’s day after school
& grabbing our front door key

there was a strange smell when i
let myself in
a smell i couldn’t recognise –
& i panicked
i tip-toed through the hallway slowly . . .
checked the kitchen & the laundry
looking for mum then the clothes line –
but she didn’t seem to be anywhere

i kept sniffing the air
calling softly in my little boy’s voice
mum mum are you there

yet nothing came back but a smell
which i could only sense as death

after weeks of dad’s drinking
& arguments
& threats
& broken crockery
& living with the fear
i inched my way along
the passage
sniffing the acrid air . . .
& when i got to the toilet
the door was flung wide open
& the white porcelain pan was
choked high above the wooden seat with a charry mess

it gave off the smell of death
& i looked around for an axe
i thought it was my mother’s torso
my tears & wails brought him
out of the bedroom
    unsteady in his grey socks
he slurred
    ya mum’s out shopping
don’t worry about that mess –
i went to sleep with a cigarette
    i stuffed me pillow down
the toilet & pulled the chain
    it’s gone out now . . .
ya mother’ll be in soon
    go outside & get some fresh air . . .
go on

& he turned on his heels
    & staggered back to bed.

Rats of Tobruk: The name given to the predominantly Australian soldiers of the garrison who held the Libyan port of Tobruk against the Afrika Corps, during the siege of Tobruk in WW2.

RSM: Regimental Sergeant Major
TEENAGE TRAUMA:
Changing Gears

Even today over forty years rush by
at the speed of sound
each time i approach the intersection
of Henley Beach & Tapleys Hill Road

i was stationary at the traffic lights
that particular summer’s morning
sitting on my BSA Gold Flash

a screech of tyres alerted me
& then the sounds of crushing
metal & shattered glass before
the hiss & rise of steam
& though mid-morning on a
Saturday
there came a stillness then
that still spooks me even now

it was the front seat passenger from
the car with the broken windscreen
i saw first
she looked close to full-term in her
flowery smock
had both her hands cupped around
her nose
but even then i was thinking of her
unborn child . . .
until she dropped her hands & i saw
her nose was spliced across the bridge
back to her cheeks
i’d like to say i was an urban hero
    tell you how i kicked the side-stand
out & ran to her aid
    but i was barely sixteen & the flow
of blood terrified me

all i could do was click the gear lever
one-up & let the clutch out quickly
    hell i’ve seen plenty of blood
since then –
    much of it my own

i’ll never know if she & her unborn baby
made it through safely
    my only hope is they did . . .
& that she doesn’t remember that day
anywhere near as clearly
    as i still do.
CHALLENGING PARENTAL AUTHORITY:
Don’t Call Me Lad

Don’t call me lad
dad
just don’t call me lad
got more hair on my balls dad
than y’v got
or had

i’m eighteen years old man
& i’ll sink or i’ll swim
just don’t call me lad
dad
my name is James
or just Jim

& now that i vote dad
my party is green
get away with those flags dad
red & blue are both mean

y’ can roll up y’r sleeves dad
& slip on y’r tie
y’ can rant & lay guilt trips
but i’ll spit in y’r eye
yeah i grow some plants dad
but i’m keeping it cool
four’s not a plantation
i’m not such a fool

i just can’t find a job dad
year twelve was a waste
two friends have just died dad
too much of a taste

yeah i get the dole dad
though it don’t do much good
but don’t call me lad
dad

i’d work if i could

now i’m mellowing out man
this home-grown is just wild
so don’t call me lad
dad

i’m no longer a child

so don’t call me lad
dad

i’m no longer a child.
Don’t Look So Glum

Don’t look so glum mum
  don’t look so glum
was that a finger
or a thumb mum
  don’t look so glum

i’ve been out having fun mum
  yeah out havin’ fun
don’t poke out your tongue mum
  don’t look so glum

my homework is done mum
  stop wavin’ y’r gun
all assignments are done mum
  don’t look so glum

you’re old & i’m young mum
  your best days are done
dad’s been gone f’r five years mum
  don’t look so glum

yeah i’ve tattooed my bum mum
  & put a stud through my tongue
it’s not the end of the world mum
  don’t look so glum

i don’t do hard drugs mum
  i go to parties for fun
so get off my case mum
  don’t look so glum
sure my skirt’s a bit short mum
    but you can’t see my bum
don’t nag me again mum
    i’m dressed to have fun

i practice safe sex mum
    i’m not particularly dumb
i get love & respect mum
    don’t look so glum

it’s a mad crazy world mum
    & i need to have fun
year twelve is a drag mum
    three months & it’s done
yeah    leave me alone mum
    three months & it’s done.
FIRST LOVE EXPERIENCE:
Even Now

It was 1961 & i was hovering
on thirteen years of age

i was less than a mile from the
starkness of my own street with
its unmade road
    ambling along Galway Avenue –
    mid-afternoon
    the sun warming my back . . .
filtered light flecking the footpath
through the white cedars
    & young saplings reaching up
from the wide median strip
alive with the sounds of native birds

it was then i first saw Roslyn

she was twelve & a half    wore pigtails
tied with blue ribbon
    & a check dress that sat high
above her knees

i don’t know how i found the courage
to chat her up
    i think i began by commenting
on how tiny her freckles were to mine
    but maybe i’m just imagining that . . .
hell    this was over fifty years ago
we were standing in dappled shade
    a stone’s throw from Mrs Day’s
kindergarten so maybe i’d asked
if she’d gone there too

after five minutes of small talk
    all the while both of us moving
from foot to foot
    i began to make a move . . .
& in hindsight so did she

we took off hand-in-hand retracing
her steps
    looking for somewhere private

i wanted to kiss her
    & i’d made my intentions clear

i hadn’t kissed a girl before

at the time i shared a bedroom
with two younger brothers
    & when i knew i was alone . . .
i’d practice on the dressing table
mirror always careful to wipe away
any evidence

at the end of Collingrove Ave we came
across a red brick Baptist Church
    & on the side a small porch –
its white wooden doors unlocked
once inside my hands were full of her & hers with me – & when our wet tongues touched i felt my knees begin to buckle

maybe i became too big for my britches anyway – i must have scared her because she pulled away & stuttered she had to go yet promised she’d meet me the following day at four o’clock

& even now each time i pass that red brick church i keep an eye out for her just as i did that following day

& even now when i do think of her my breath quickens.
CONFRONTING A DEATH:
Like Now

i.m. Heather l’Anson
29th December 1942 – 2nd February 2019

It’s just a few minutes past
11:00am on a Friday morning
that time when people can
be seen making their way back
to work
brushing cake crumbs
from their suits & dresses
catching their reflections
in shop windows & adjusting
their clothes & smiles
buzzing on double expressos
soy lattes Irish breakfast
or perhaps the day’s conquests

it’s quiet in this room
but i can still hear traffic
rumbling along Semaphore Road

we are here to farewell one
of our own
we won’t see Heather’s image
reflected again
not unless it’s in print . . .

she’s taken off
deserted us
she’s gone to the other side
Heather was always a mystery woman
    she’d sit at Semaphore cafes
in summer sun wearing dark glasses
reading the newspaper
    a white cane & her kelpie Zita
keeping her company
    but she was always taking in
more than just newsprint

no-one she knew would get past her

*here he is* she’d say
    *gee i love those red Speedos*
*they’re just great*
    but there were other times i reckon
Heather would have rather seen me without them

like those Friday afternoons when she’d tap her cane past Lucias at the Market
    she’d spot me & stop to say
*g ee i love those red shoes*
    *they are bloody beautiful*

then as quick as she arrived
   she’d be gone

like now.
The Punter

i.m. Mark Walter Goodfellow ‘Bluey’ died 21st March 2013

Blue was a White Ox man
dead at sixty
jack dancer of the nanny goat
none of us overly surprised
it could equally have been cirrhosis of the liver
& anyway – an autopsy may have well proven it was neck & neck

i remember the first time i saw Blue have a whack

   Noel & Linda tying his arm off
in the shed at Copley Street they didn’t see me that night
in my rubber soled shoes insulated from that shit –
& anyway they were all too busy & self absorbed
& i slipped away into the darkness . . .
silently & unannounced

Blue slipped away into the darkness too thirty-five years later

though he’d slipped away on the gear a few times too he was in his twenties then –
but he woke up & gave the shit away
i can’t see the romance in it really
it turns my guts to think of
the ulcer he had in the crook of his
left arm
though he generally wore his
flanny shirts sleeve down
in those days

over his last six months
he still went up to the TAB
as often as he could
he knew the odds were
stacked against him when they
finally got his diagnosis right
he didn’t seem to care though –
always on the lookout for a long-shot
he just kept on with the punt.
ICE, THE DRUG RUINING LIVES:
True Love

I met him in the education block
at the youth training centre
    he had a mop of blond hair –
dull lifeless eyes & lay slumped
in his seat like a seal

_i’ve got nuffin ta write about_
he mumbled

_write about what you’re in here for_
i suggested

he rolled the puppy fat resting on his
shoulders & said
    _it’s juss fer robbin a store_

_you’re kidding me son_
    _how old are you_

_i’m furteen_

& _how did all this go down_

_i wen inta a servo wif a pair_
a sizzers & sed
    _givvus ya money_

_but th bloke   he juss laft at me_
it made me angry so i fort
i’d try en kill im
  i swung at his froat
but he moved back & i couldn’t
get me arm in far enuf
cos of th bars

then i had to back off
  i had ta go fer th door

the coppers got me juss down
th road

i reely didn’t no wot i was doin
  i’d been on th ice en booze
fer five days

i juss reely wanna get out now
so i can get back on th ice
  i luv it.