

## Poetry Series

**John Rickell**

**- 28 poems -**

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### **John Rickell (I November 1931)**

I am a countryman by nature. With my retriever I am in the country most days. Living in a small market town in Shropshire UK

I have been writing free verse since 1970 I am a singer of plainsong and Gregorian chant, which has significantly influenced my poetry. I have published a book of poems 'A stirring in the Air' with photographs by Tom Scot, a grandson, it is being sold on Ebay by SHINE, the charity which cares for those with spinabifida.

Works:

'A Stirring in the Air'

## Blackbird

How does he do it?  
His brain no more than finger nail  
Singing a scale of notes I cannot sing  
Nor can forget. What does he say? It seems he knows  
But what? Is there some communication...  
A radiating beam that strikes the tiles  
The message always clearer  
When he sings upon the roof?  
Black as night, she brown discrete, a job to do  
Keep warm and safe. Silence is the key  
Eight is late, to bed, one last egg to hatch.

If he could write would he write it down..  
All those notes without a scale, more than twelve,  
An alphabet of sounds, as random as the sea  
Would he even try? each note is sent its way,  
The thought.. if thought there be lost above the roof.

There is no past for him no future, all is now.  
No thinking in the melody but joy and being well  
Yesterday? What is that? Never heard of yesterday  
Of today doesn't even care.  
How long will it be? What is long? Is it a worm?  
A brain no more than fingernail only room for hope.

Maybe I'm wrong....  
Is there a message in your song  
Save joy?  
Do I leave a space to listen, to you kind soul?  
Your life so short...'though long enough  
Just long enough, no more.  
When song is gone so will you be gone.  
Its all you want to do

John Rickell

## **Brambles Showing Green**

Sun beams slanting through the wood  
steel sharp cold and cruel  
March fighting off the Spring  
to lose again as yester-year  
but still he tries  
his memory worse than mine!

Jack and I keep in the lea  
tramp leaves and twigs  
remnants of last year  
green leaves once and branches.  
Around trees lean and creak,  
a hundred years from now  
shall see the same  
that's if I'm here  
that's if it could be so.

Brambles showing green,  
nettles threaten in the shade,  
pine and birch and alder  
wave their fists, defy the storm  
ferns, brown, dry and waiting,  
slumber in the shade.  
I lose my hat and whistle Jack  
who negotiates a biscuit  
runs around the thicket  
proudly finds the hat drops it at my feet  
on the muddy path!  
Who cares says Jack,  
you never gave me a hat.

Watched at every move,  
tits and finches cease to whistle,  
we're not here long, peace will soon return  
the wood will struggle with the wind  
hold back its leaves and blue bells  
the clock goes back,  
tomorrow will be late  
but not in my wood,  
time infinite as ever.

John Rickell

## Butterfly trapped in a Norfolk church

Where were you last Christmas  
hiding in the dust behind the altar  
underneath an oaken pew  
patched in darker brown, not oak  
like the patch on a poor man's coat  
Proudly wrought?  
The peace of God around you  
trapped in loving kindness,  
fading altar flowers no food for you  
anxious glances to the door,  
the mesh obstructed door to keep out birds,  
which kept you in, had I not come.  
You let me take you from the sill  
filled my hand with joy  
bride-like walked with me along the aisle.  
I threw you to the sun and wind  
saw flowers tremble in delight  
shake their anthers, petals open wide  
'Feed off me' they cried.  
Who needed who the most?  
A winter fast complete....  
cold sweet charity stayed your appetite  
'til one fine day in May stirred your wings,  
warmed your heart and set your tummy gurgling.  
so glad I called.....  
I would not have prayed that day.  
there were no candles in the church  
but then I had no matches.  
You were my pray.....  
I wished you well and all your brood,  
but never asked your name.

John Rickell

## **Digitalis Purpurea**

Statuesque handsome in the shade  
of the tree wild with crabs  
tempting as of ages passed  
legends steeped in belief  
faith for those who choose.

Do I resist your charms  
embrace, kiss those purple lips  
enter the goblet, its freckles  
innocent in that pouting mouth  
bathe in the dangerous air.

Un-heed maternal warnings  
drink deep sweet intoxicants  
to calm my racing heart  
and indulge myself 'til death  
succumb as thousand others.

I must away from this seductress  
to hawthorn buds, spotless white  
who in quiet beauty promise less  
lasting wealth and silent comfort,  
the bread and cheese of childhood.

John Rickell

## Felix

Old Felix came and went  
His business combs and buttons  
Ones for nits, the others brass and cotton  
To be squashed by wooden roll.  
How big his feet in sagging shoes  
How bowed his coat, herring bone and worn  
A heavy coat, a winter coat....  
In blazing June.  
A poor man, a good man,  
With eyes so blue and frank, .  
He was a tramp.

He pushed a childless pram, without a hood  
Left it in the street;  
Card-board case opened at the door  
With things to sell to Mam,  
And sometimes Dad was there.  
Had a little book of poems  
One was on a card,  
Was it his? He said it was  
No need to disbelieve  
Those eyes so blue and frank,  
His coat... so long and worn,

Slept outside, he said,  
The sweating coat in June!  
Oh! ...Yes! ...the little book.  
Was it blue?  
Or....did those eyes?  
Yes, what did they do?  
Did he smell?  
Stood without the porch, could not tell,  
Did not want to know.  
It was those eyes  
So blue so frank  
Above that coat so worn.

The war was on, buttons scarce as gold  
Felix got his from a Walmgate store,  
A corner store beside St.Deny's Church  
We passed it every week,  
But always bought from Felix.  
Lent me the book.  
Or was it given me?  
I gave it back, I wished I'd not  
He wanted me to have it.  
Dead now Felix and your book  
Lost beneath a tree,  
But not the memory of those eyes  
So blue so frank  
That heavy coat in June  
And hands that asked for friendship,

With a book.

What was in that book,  
The blue book with grubby back?  
Poems beyond my years,  
A little boy from Sunday School.  
The card began.....  
Yes, I remember now  
'My mother taught me,  
Mathew, Mark and Luke and John'  
The rest is gone, something under a tree,  
Had he sat beneath a tree to write?  
But on the card the lines were print,  
Not licked and leaden pencil.  
Kept for years, the card now gone,  
The book, I gave it back.  
Worried months in-case you did not come  
Gave it back....a great mistake,  
To those reluctant hands  
With saddened eyes  
So blue and frank  
And older coat,  
Its back more bent.

Away he walked  
In shuffle-shoe, and stooping coat  
Card-board case in tatters  
The sleeves seemed longer  
Fancy frills.....  
The herring bone had worn  
To show the lining,  
No leather edge like mine.  
Buttons there were none, but  
Stooped and arched  
The open cloth became a porch  
Against the snow and rain  
And sweating summer sun.  
I never looked to see the pram  
As empty as before?  
Soundless turned the wall,  
Proud along the path  
Its London Pride and bricks.

Who were you, ?  
Your hair was long uncombed,  
You came down Constantine  
Like Jesus Christ at Sunday school  
Christ in Constantine I thought  
(I was that age) .....  
Had trod those pavements I despised  
Gentle Jesus, meek and mild  
Looked upon a little child

Turned.....  
And walked away.

I wonder where he went?  
He must be there by now,  
Left behind the pram,  
Thrown away the case  
The book and pencil and the card,  
Left behind the memories  
Of a man who left no mark.  
Sufficient was the day....  
He had no morrow...  
Just today.....  
And that old coat.

John Rickell

## **Go slow sweet moon**

Go slow sweet moon my love lies sleeping  
her breath drifting on the evening air  
ghostly scents of recent joy;  
soft lips smile enigma to my dreaming;  
no need to more than whisper on the breeze  
the Halcyon on the muddy shore  
sleeps and we are safe;  
no need to speak, our hands entwined  
hearts combine pulses beat in unison;  
conjoined, blessed by nature's law  
let no man put asunder promises  
sworn beneath the Aspen tree.  
Owl and linnet and croaking frog  
witness our communion, bread and wine  
shared with elves and pixies,  
as half-sleep bluebells chime  
and echoes, through the branches,  
drift like petals newly born...  
two lovers sleeping, hands entwined  
beneath an Aspen tree.

John Rickell

## **I dreamed the cooling eve**

I dreamed the cooling eve  
lay on the grass from noon 'til now  
light grey clouds discrete hid me from the sun  
naked found rose deep red petals  
lying close, so close; I did not ask  
good fortune like this comes but once  
no thorns prevent my way.  
I did not pluck this flower  
she (for that I did presume)  
lay in the grass.  
We moved close, or was it I?  
yes I think it was,  
but she did not move away.  
I held her as a crystal goblet  
took her to my mouth and drank,  
petals limp in the cooling light  
darkening in the moonlight  
drew me close, emboldened  
I felt a shiver, petals strewn about my shoulder  
full awake suffocating in the blossom.  
Who was this rose? I did not ask  
sinking in the grass  
to dream the cooling eve.

John Rickell

## **I must go back**

Do roses bloom as once they did?  
did snow fall on the cypress tree  
just in time for Christmas  
and holly berries red at Michaelmas?  
and was the ivy on the wall  
sparrows' noisy chatter deep  
in the rampant leaves  
and was the garden shed still leaning  
the padlock never locked

I must go back to see the roses  
and stroke the cypress tree,  
perhaps this year at Christmas;  
make a wreath of holly berries  
listen to sparrows' noisy chatter  
from the ivy on the wall and  
find the garden shed still leaning  
and turn the padlock key.

John Rickell

## **Intruder The**

The Intruder  
The day had long since gone  
A glow to the west fading fast and sure  
Foot fall insecure, twigs snapping,  
moths and money spiders' silks impede.  
A gothic gloom weighs down  
from trees once green and berry-laden  
now in shades of black and grey.  
Honeysuckle at the woodland edge,  
memories of daylight hours recede.  
This is a world I do not know  
of badgers, voles; a secret place  
which I intrude and stumble.  
I am unwanted, no one lights my way  
here another side of life  
In which I hold no shares  
do not understand as once I thought.  
Each day I call, enjoying songs and colours  
to rival Jacob's coat, and plainsong monk,  
but never once before this night  
and never more again shall I intrude  
this dark, dank, secret place.

John Rickell

## **Is there no rose?**

Is there no rose of pure delight  
no lily white or blue bird wing  
rival to your charms and opal skin.  
Do I wake or am I sleeping,  
honey-bees in sleepy drone  
liquid sweetness from the  
lotus bloom and honeysuckle arch  
Such pure delight no rose can tell,  
is there such and do I dream?  
Leave me lie, the moss is green  
dew dispersed and night-moon's  
silver light fading with the sun.  
Blushing lily's trumpet petals  
orange stamens strew to fertilise  
with dusty grace the swelling seed.  
There is no rose of pure delight  
no lily white or blue bird wing  
to compare with honey-sweet  
and opal charms.

John Rickell

## Jigsaw

The Long Mynd heather laden high above the Shropshire plain  
awesome in its beauty; fearsome solitude when winds blow;  
walkers with two sticks, packs upon their backs  
climb green hills to gain the top.  
Where once itinerants tramped the lanes  
for work and mugs of tea, dinner in the barn,  
they do for fun and healthy hearts.

Look down the vale white washed farms and wood smoke,  
farmer's calls echoing in the valley  
a whistle and a curse, the working dogs obey.  
A jigsaw that is countryside, each piece held firm, secure.  
Horizons long and wide, summer sheep and winter snow,  
cockrels crow the day long, hens lay wild  
as children, home from school, search for new laid eggs  
bound for Ludlow Farmers' Market, Thursday once a month.  
Time stands still, there isn't even history!

Down Pontsford way they still believe in witches,  
and magic hawthorn, Shropshire Prune,  
elder flowers in a bucket, wine for Christmas day.  
The old railway out of steam the bridge leaping in vain  
across the twisted track, shelter now for lovers,  
Sunday drivers scratch the walls, sometimes each other!

I know the place by heart love its loneliness;  
the land is poor, polluted since the Romans  
who took the lead and silver, Victorians too,  
Laburnum hedges, planted by farm workers  
stolen from the lords estate in lieu of poor wages.  
The friendly locals serve good beer and ham,  
they'll talk with you, let you in with muddy boots  
But when you've gone will lock the door  
count the evening's takings, forget you ever came,  
preserve the land for yesterday keep away tomorrow.

John Rickell

## **Kingfisher The**

The Kingfisher  
Do you remember our love  
those far seeming times  
When the Halcyon  
Flew across the sea  
Calming the waves  
On which our love  
Was borne?  
Did we not give him food  
Is that why he went?  
The labourer is worthy  
Of his hire,  
But we cast no morsel  
To his care,  
And we had much to spare  
In those far seeming times

John Rickell

## **Lady and the Parasol**

She sat beneath the parasol  
white wine to her mouth.  
How I envied the goblet  
could feel the warmth of woman's lips  
memory fresh as the Chardonnay  
she sipped in exquisite calm;  
my drink was red as my desire.  
We smiled, raised glasses  
I doffed my hat, she uncrossed her legs  
and so we sat full half an hour.  
She glanced at times, I too,  
admired her light brown hair  
to her shoulders above her breasts  
heavy in her blouse, held secure  
by one lone button, pearl as was her skin.  
The afternoon droned on in the shade of Cypress;  
she confident, called the waiter  
for another glass, this time water; (it was hot.)  
she gloried in my attentions  
crossed her legs again revealing thighs  
pearl as was her skin.  
We played our game discrete as virgin lovers  
not a word between us, smiled again.  
I rose, raised my hat and said 'Hello'  
turned towards the beach and left,  
tomorrow was another day.

John Rickell

## Lament

Why should I not love thee  
font of all my hopes?  
My dreams of thee conspire  
to keep me wake,  
I hear the owl and fox  
art thou wary too?  
I hear them in the wood  
heed not my love, heed not  
their love is false  
to die before the sun  
is risen from its bed;  
you must not share.  
They are of the earth  
my love, that they love  
I do not doubt,  
but not a love like mine.  
Should I not love thee  
my dreams of thee  
shall shattered fall  
upon this bed I lie  
my pen a worthless tool,  
no more to write or sing  
of butterflies and bees  
which long ago bore thee  
t'ward heaven to glimpse  
Elysian woods and meadows.

John Rickell

## Lichfield on a Monday

The old streets confirm its age, a thousand years or so,  
mixed in wild abandon, plaster walls and white wash  
sagging to the street, narrow windows low arched doors  
once home for weavers, cobblers, blacksmiths, candle makers  
to those in smart tall houses built of brick, not wattle,  
snobbish Georgian noses in the air, 'kerchiefs at their wrist  
lean back in haughty stance above the street, balustraded roof,  
hand-rails painted white, sash and steps, lanterns black and glazed  
brass plates beside the bell-pull each side of the blue front door.

We strolled the Monday streets noon-time in the sun  
down a step, and mind the door, into an arthritic Tudor cafe,  
beams complaining of tiles long since replacing golden thatch,  
light meal and gentle conversation above terracotta tiles;  
then to the lake, greedy ducks, children and their bread crumbs,  
passed cafes, shops and restaurants cheek by yowl and busy.  
Looking at the Cathedral, stained in soot from miners passed.

Inside the air clean, marble statues smooth and bright  
flagged nave its chairs in silent witness, looking east,  
a stillness in the air compressed beneath the vaulted roof  
pressing down our souls to impress, somewhere, here is God.  
A bible locked in a climate all its own and dimly lit;  
see the print and ancient paper; read it if you can.  
Another stroll along familiar streets clicking shutters  
the sun shining no sign of rain no clouds to spoil,  
home again our several ways,  
a worth-while day, a day well spent.

John Rickell

## Memories of Robert Frost

The path bent its way through the wood  
I'd had a choice some yards back,  
The fork, (was it the same?)  
Left and right  
Just like the hay-fork I carried.  
I'd found it further back.  
The thick and solid handle  
Of the early path, now two  
One brown with mud  
The other flat and green  
Strolled before.  
It was winter.

Who had thrown away the fork?  
It had been there a long time  
The handle black with mould.  
February now,  
Had it been discarded last fall?  
(A strange tool to find  
In two thousand five  
With its mechanisations.  
A break-down perhaps?)  
Chucking bales on a cart hard work  
I could have thrown it away,  
But I hate waste.

The sky was blue and steely  
Could see it through  
The silhouette branches  
It was three.....  
The sun shone through the trunks  
Darkness some time away  
So I took the muddy path.....  
Something wrong with the green  
What did the others know?  
Only an inch of rain this month  
There'd been five the last.

The hollow path, still damp,  
Slipped its way between  
The shallow banks  
Which promised spring and yellow.  
Above, the khaki green  
Of nervous buds,  
Telling of an early spring  
Could just be seen.....  
Winter afternoons so silent.

I was alone. Or was I?  
I knew from the 'prints  
Someone, or ones, walked before,  
And there was time for those behind.

Ofcourse the trees could give support  
I could always lean....  
At least awhile.

Looking up, redundant mistletoes  
evergreen, viable only once a year.  
The path on the woodland edge  
The centre too dense to walk,  
birds sang joy, defiant,  
Safe from hawks and me.

'Follow me home  
I have tables aload with food  
Boxes dry and square  
Better than those ragged nests  
You exhaust yourselves for days  
And stick with mud  
(But of course they are  
Square and painted green  
And not in a wood)  
I love your wood, but do not envy  
My home is warm....  
The shops a yard away'

I began this walk a time back  
There's been no rush  
even so it's been too quick  
Four weeks and spring will come  
(The corn shows green)  
In the fall I shall return  
To feel the autumn sun,  
See gold and ginger leaves  
Rowan-red and chestnut brown  
Un-zip my coat, left home the gloves  
This winter wood too cold.

John Rickell

## **Pebbles**

Pebbles on the beach  
works of art, unique in every way  
random shaped wrought by waves  
both salt and fresh  
perfect asymmetry; cosy in my hand  
choose any one, hold close.  
From far away they come  
millenia in their journeys,  
here to rest awhile, roll on the beach,  
rough youth smoothed and polished.

Dogs will chase you in the foam  
others stumble, take you home,  
throw you on the rockery  
mix you with the quarry stones

Do not despair  
let me hold you, this last time  
kiss as did the waves  
which formed you as no sculptor,  
roll you in my hand, think childhood games,  
then lay you in the bed of time,  
to dream your journey, once again,  
across the seven seas.

John Rickell

## Peels Arms apple pie and cheese

The rail track once to carry  
coal from Yorkshire fields  
redundant; lorries now and diesel.  
A country walk and straight.  
The sun across the reservoir  
coats, hanging on our arms,  
this a place of romance,  
cotton long gone to India,  
stone cottages clinging to the hill.  
Peels Arms, apple pie and cheese.

Across the valley white farmsteads  
beside the Wood-Head Pass  
heavy with lorries yellow, green,  
Wispa blue and Kit-Kat red,  
steep hills, grinding gears  
as sheep quietly graze,  
and cows munch cud.

The dog looks back 'This way'?  
as we struggle with a stile,  
hid in hawthorn hedge and fire-weed pink.  
Nettles, tiny white blossoms  
frustrated behind the stinging leaves,  
never admired like the lily or the rose,  
take time to look when next you pass.

Manchester to the north not far,  
jets ply their trade to foreign lands  
writing in the sky, 'Goodbye' and 'Hello.'  
The footpath between the houses  
leads us to this scene,  
overgrown with seeding grass,  
narrow as a tightrope.

The station now a dead-end  
Glossop on to Manchester  
offices, Costa, HSBC, Next,  
so they come and welcome;  
but can't help weeping for the cotton.  
Old factories monumental dinosaurs,  
luxury condominiums, knee-length boots  
electric trams chased by BMWs.  
Then back to cosy Padfield,  
Peels Arms and apple pie.

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hid in hawthorn hedge and fire-weed pink.  
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frustrate behind the stinging leaves,  
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luxury condominiums, knee-length boots  
electric trams chased by BMWs.  
Then back to cosy Padfield,  
Peels Arms and apple pie.

John Rickell

## Rainbow

The promise arched across the sky  
no rain, but predicted,  
an apology before the deluge?  
Colours of the faintest hue  
more an echo than a rainbow.  
Billowing clouds grey and fluffy  
washed in gentle pink of morning sun  
tumbled dry by the cold west wind.  
Will it rain today? Showers, yes.  
The spectrum band so faint,  
had nature lost her nerve  
unsure in this tumultuous world  
that the promise read in Sunday school  
could not be kept?  
Was I the only one to see  
the message in the sky?  
There was no rain that I could see  
the light split red to indigo.  
Would they soon converge again  
let the day continue as of yesterday  
or had I best put on my coat  
my hat and gloves, say farewell  
to summer days until next year?  
There is more than meets the eye,  
not a simple tale of fairies in the wood.  
An echo cannot of itself combust.  
Why this message in the sky?  
From the west it comes, always from the west.

John Rickell

## Rent

Today the wood was changed, time at a cross roads,  
reluctant winter sulks, spring who has the runes  
waits in silent buds as ferns sleep.  
Birds songs incomplete, mates and loves play court  
a few more weeks to dedicate a summer's life of nests  
chicks and gaudy jay.  
This field we play each day, soon to plough and furrow  
barley, wheat and rye, when lambs begin to fatten  
Jack on his lead to satisfy the shepherd no more to fly his tail.  
I am but a sojourner...borrow every blade of grass  
silver birch and bramble;  
pay no rent, then no one asks should one ask, I have the price,  
they will not ask too much I have had a money's worth;  
invested every year in case they ask, they never have,  
I doubt they ever will.

John Rickell

## **Sculptor The**

If I could sculpt my love,  
search for finest porphyry,  
I would spend my life and carve  
fit for Rome or Athens to rival  
all that they display, then  
weave a coat of finest silk  
dyed in purple, rich and royal,  
clinging close as skin  
to hide you for myself.  
Not for you the gaping crowds,  
the need to hide your nature  
you would sit as oft you do,  
thighs relaxed and honest  
smiling eyes and mouth,  
thoughts, desires as my own.  
The Opal and the rose unfurled,  
petals soft a stigma at the heart  
beckon, tempt my confessing passion  
hid beneath the leather of my apron  
dusty with the chisel strokes,  
as I seek your form within the stone.  
Then with all my might and memory  
between those thighs so cold and pure  
I would spend my days remembering,  
know I could not simulate the joy you give,  
each fold inscribed upon the stone  
sincerely wrought yet cold not warm.  
Then discard my conceit and blade  
return the stone to whence it came,  
to weather in the rain and sun  
moulded by a skill more rare  
but with a love not less.

John Rickell

## Serenade

It comes again, yet again,  
In the night again and yet again.  
Do you hear? You must listen.  
There again, please listen,  
music never man wrote,  
no scale competes nor pen recite.  
Bamboos in the evening breeze?  
Perhaps, even sky-lark whispers?  
Wish I knew, would tell, too good to keep.  
Surely you hear.. this is real  
too real for imagination imagine.  
An air pulls at heart-strings, come close and share.  
What is this air de cour and its strophic repetition  
that stirs me from my rest.  
Do you hear it in the night?  
Share this music never man wrote.  
No scale competes nor pen recite

John Rickell

## Shropshire in January

The Shropshire lane makes its uncertain way  
Passed the old school house at Pennerley  
Untaught for many a year,  
The children now with siblings of their own.  
Passed the old mine shafts  
Where lead and silver long since ceased.  
Crumbled walls where once  
A poor man kept alive, but just,  
A family far too large for comfort,  
Where a thousand dug the earth.  
Nothing to be seen....pulled down  
No more silver no more lead no house remains.  
The old school, a wild-life centre  
Where walkers read the walls,  
Histories with blurred photos  
Grey as life once led by children  
Sorting stone from silver-ore.  
When Romans came they found the ore  
Made pipes to teach us plumbing,  
Kept the silver for themselves.  
The land polluted now with lead  
Struggling birch, heather and ginger bracken  
Black with autumn whinberry for pies and puddings  
The slow road, climbs, uncertain,  
Avoiding steeper slopes right hand bends and left...  
Pot-hole hazard warns the car take care! .  
Bleaker now the hedges broken only wire to keep the sheep,  
Not much money in this land fit only for romantic rich,  
Or farmer locked in poverty.  
The day is cold, not a soul in sight.  
Splashing higher up the hill  
The road swings left and narrows,  
Mind the tractor this road is his  
Go back to town you townie!  
The mountain range spikes the sky  
The Devils Chair barely fifteen feet  
(But once a mountain range older than Himalaya  
Worn away by time a million years and more,  
Or so I'm told)  
East-ward, watch the clouds, woolly purple-grey  
Feather-light upon Long Mynd hills  
Green against the pale blue sky.  
Quiet, no birds sing, no trees sway the breeze  
Heather stiff and low, grudging shakes a little  
Miles away Wales is west, in mists,  
Housman's coloured-counties, south.  
We are alone the dog and I, walkers long since gone,  
An hour more it will be dark, frost is in the air.  
Time for home and cocoa but Jack says no,  
So I stay and watch him sniff the scents.  
Mobile phone ashamed to ring in my jacket pocket.  
So home an hour's drive down uncertain lanes

And think of arguments, the fights that bent its way  
Two hundred years ago as hedges sprang, divisive.....  
Centuries slipping by, houses, brick, not cob  
Plastic windows and no thatch.  
Forgotten now those children,  
Scratching lessons on a slate,  
Weighed down with lead.....and poverty,  
Who took their skills elsewhere.

John Rickell

## Sleeper Bridge

The little bridge is simple, crude,  
Old wooden sleepers from a railway track  
Which carried thousands I've no doubt  
On holidays to sea-side towns,  
Or coal for kitchen fires, washing boilers,  
Children drying on the hearth.,  
Keeping out the snow.  
Now rotting spans the ditch  
Enough for dog and man.

You'll not find it on the map  
Or Tom-Tom screen  
Too small for their attention,  
But every day we come this way  
Anti clockwise walk the wood  
Listening to the birds,  
Shaded from the noonday sun  
When last it shone!

This is a simple task.....  
Walking in a wood across a bridge  
Too small for cars and rotting as I speak.  
Who cares for this?  
Why do I tell you this?  
Tomorrow may never come,  
But if it does and the sleepers fall  
None will care, but me.

I cannot jump the ditch,  
Take away the bridge  
Or never build it.....  
We shall have to go right round,  
Or shout across the gap  
To tell the flowers and the ferns  
We'll call back later...  
Round the other way.

Just four bits of wood  
Dropped across the gap  
No rails to stop one falling  
Greasy in the rain, hidden when it snows.  
A bridle way, childhood magic,  
Pooh sticks, splashing pebbles  
Water-vole and rat.

This an ordinary wood  
Few will know it's here  
Fewer still to care  
But here we talk with nature  
Commune in simple words  
In country terms.  
The fading timber logs

Delicate and mortal,  
Welcome muddy boots!  
More conversations than in town  
Despite its mobile phone and internet  
The papers and the crowded jostle.

John Rickell

## The Hut 1

I heard the blackbird  
Shiver in the wood  
Gold beak tight closed,  
Ginger bracken fronds tinder dry,  
In the trees raucous crows  
Were silent too,  
Nests half done, no sound of work.

The clock said six  
But the light had gone,  
My footsteps cracked the twigs  
Blown down in last week's storm,  
Alone I walked..Took care,  
Respectful of the woodland's mood.  
The woodman's hut. metal-clad,  
A chimney still intact,  
Door frame and window space  
No door no window pane.

Who was here and when  
Chopping wood and felling trees?  
Or burning charcoal  
Trapped in smoke,  
Damping down the flames....  
Swollen cancerous nose....  
And puffing on his pipe.  
The rippling walls and roof  
Corrugated sheets, rusting, silent.  
I ran a stick along the walls  
But the tune was not the half  
Of childhood games on city rails  
And there was no one here to wake,  
No need to run away.

The chimney stack in brick  
Propped up the gable end.  
Inside, the hearth lay bare  
The bricks were black  
It had been used, but when?  
The soot, as silent as the day,  
Hung with insect wings.

What did this place say?  
Oh yes it whispered,  
But even in silent evening light  
I was none the wiser.  
The old man, if that is what he was  
Had left no trace  
Perhaps had nothing much to leave.  
This shed was never even his....  
Like me had silence to himself.

I found myself nostalgic,  
The cold got to my bones  
The light was low,  
Birds more sense than me  
Had long since gone to bed.  
The rabbits too and squirrel.  
Romantic dreams....a poor man  
In his stable  
Heavy coat for eiderdown  
Candle-lamp for light.

It was time to go  
I turned, left the hut  
Half wanting to repair it,  
But nostalgia is a dangerous mood  
My home is warm  
My coat's hung in the hall  
Duvet on the bed and much, much more  
Electric light.....I could go on.....  
I can afford to dream....

John Rickell

## The Hut 2

Again I walked the wood,  
As almost every day  
Absorbed its mood  
Mildly changing with each day.  
The sun at dawn, shafts of light  
To send the owl to bed  
Wake the trees, unfurl the ferns  
Wipe away the morning dew,  
My gloves safe in my pocket  
Un-zip my jacket to the morning air.

The dog and I are not alone  
He visits friends,  
Comes back when I whistle  
Must run miles  
As back and forth he gallops  
Chasing phantoms in the sun.

I stop before the hut  
Step into the past,  
Feel him in the corner  
By the crumbling hearth  
There is no 'hello' to greet me  
He does not need me there  
We are years apart  
His life long since gone  
The fire cold and black.

A shiver down my spine  
I turn and call for Jack  
He never comes inside  
Never tells me why  
I suppose to him it's just a hut  
An old man by the hearth  
No rug to chew a bone.

The sun is higher now  
The chill gone from the air  
Crows cawing loud and friendly  
The robin by my side  
Did I hear a squirrel?  
Badgers gone to earth.  
Across the bridge and ditch.  
Its railway sleepers rotten  
There's been no rain,  
No water for Jack to drink  
We have some in the car.

Time for home and breakfast  
'Farewell old man, I'll come again  
Maybe in the evening  
But can we talk?

Tell me of the charcoal,  
The hurdles that you made  
Pheasant suppers, snares  
And rabbit pies  
The awful cold in winter  
Gleaning kindling in the snow  
Looking in the windows  
On your way to home.'

John Rickell

### The Hut 3

The wood was heavy, green,  
The clock said seven  
Thermometer, twice the same.  
Wenlock edge in blue-green mist  
Ten miles distant, seemed much more,  
Dawn had been at five  
The chorus, silent for a moment,  
Silence like the sea shell  
On the bed-room mantle-shelf.

We had not walked our wood  
For ten long days.  
When last we came  
The ferns were shy, pale green, unsure,  
Now bold they brushed against my legs  
Soaked my shoes in dew,  
My trousers too were wet,  
The sky was blue, unhindered  
Save for two white clouds  
Fading in the morning sun.  
Forecast..... sunny hot.

I did not pass the hut this time  
Jack, impatient would not wait  
Reluctant, went ahead.  
I stepped inside.....  
There is no door,  
(I've told you that before)  
What was a door is on the floor  
A step to let me in.

The silence in the hut  
Was not as in the wood,  
(Its sea-shell gentle hiss  
Breathing in the ear)  
The tone was changed,  
Somehow back in time.  
Through the unglazed window  
I saw dark clouds.  
There was no wind that day  
But the walls were shaken  
I looked around the room  
Everything in place.....  
The fire-grate on the narrow wall,  
Still there.... corner to the right.  
Cobweb veils across the ceiling.  
Felt cold, uneasy, did not belong.  
My day was gone.....

It was then I saw them,  
Heard them hold their breath.  
An evening tryst.....

Turning quickly, said goodnight,  
Back to the morning sun.  
Who they were I did not know  
But tried a guess.  
Lovers, many years ago?  
How had they met?  
A village dance perhaps?  
Across a bar and lousy war-time bitter?  
Slipped out 'Won't be late 'she said.  
Jean her name? .....perhaps  
A ploughman's daughter?  
Could have been.....  
Eighteen, newly widowed,  
Conscript William... older...  
Dead and all their dreams.  
'We regret' it said.  
The telegram screwed up  
On the kitchen floor.....  
Him? ....A William too,  
But Bill for short.  
A gunner in an aircraft's tail  
Far from home, America.  
Both scared by the plight of war.

The broken door was then in place  
They closed it shut and quiet  
In the corner by the hearth  
They leaned the steel clad wall,  
They needed each and took..  
And did what lovers always do  
When wearing heavy coats.

I walked away along the path,  
Jack in front as usual.  
Bluebells, campions, nettles,  
Said hello in babel voices  
And so we went, as always.

That night we called again,  
Did not stop this time  
In case they'd call again  
(I think I would...  
And so would you!)  
Whistled Jack into the car  
Drove down the lane  
Pulled in the car-park lot  
Leaned the bar  
The same.....  
Said hello to William  
Birthday-boy today.

Named after Dad he said

Killed in the war,  
Mum never remarried.....  
I looked at Jean  
(she's often there)  
Grey upright and handsome  
How old?  
We never ask, not polite.  
Where had I been she asked  
'In Jessop's wood, with Jack'  
'Ah'  
'You know the place?'  
'Yes I know the place'  
'The hut still there?'  
'Yes I often look inside, '  
'The cast-iron hearth still there? '  
'Cracked, but the walls are firm and safe'  
'I bet there are tales to tell'

She said no more.....  
Looked me in the eye.  
She knew I'd guessed.  
I felt ashamed,  
Until she smiled.....  
Cast off the grey and wrinkles  
Her golden youth returned  
The heavy years of toil cast off  
Her breasts now firm.  
She was in his arms again,  
Let me share the joy,  
Let me share the secret  
Only we could know.

John Rickell

## Where Oxlips Meet

From the midnight wood  
elfin beauty not of earth  
moulded by another hand,  
divine yet not of Heaven.  
I am wake and cannot sleep  
came to watch the stars  
beside the pool reflecting  
as daylight fades.  
Did I sleep? I do not know.  
She strode my body  
naked innocence, not of earth  
yet not of heaven.....  
From the midnight wood  
a world I scarce know,  
I hear the badgers' gossip  
their whispers tell me little,  
enough to know there is a world  
free of avarice and guilt  
where oxlips meet in parliament  
and bluebells chime the hours.  
She stooped to kiss my brow  
her breasts gave suckle to my lips  
dark hairs beneath her arms  
darker shades upon her thighs.  
My will was gone, she bid me wait  
guiltless took me to herself  
such as this I never knew,  
save in boyhood dreaming,  
She took her fill of me  
and rose.. one last glimpse,  
dark hairs and innocence,  
and was gone.....

John Rickell