Old Harry

Like those trick birds
in novelty-shops bending
automatically towards a water-glass,
I see you, first thing in the morning,
bending over a bubble-tap
in a school-ground, answering
last night’s wrestle with
cheap plonk (drinking
-bout for drinking-bout), then, finally,
with drooping reddened eyes, straightening
up your black-waistcoated back,
your coarse white collarless shirt bearing
the stains of indifference.

Gripping the shafts of your wheelbarrow
we’d loaded with gravel, you begin rocking
to and fro on your heels,
building up momentum, not seeing
the lump of sandstone someone had carefully placed
in front of the wheel, at last tottering
forward in a comical toddle,
skinny sockless shanks flying…

There is enough misery in life, Harry,
to keep most of us going
forever, crusts to chew on like those
you could be seen covertly hunting
for in school rubbish-bins at lunch-time,
or cigarette-butts we’d drop, knowing
you’d be along to gather them up preciously as violets,
come knock-off time, in the evening.