

# Twelve River RIPPLES

## Favourite Poem



### **New Year Behind the Asylum**

by David Constantine

David Constantine has explained on the radio that the speaker in this poem is his mother, telling him about an occasion that happened before he was born. The 'he', of course, is his late father.

I love the way that the slightly disjointed narrative conveys the awkwardness felt by each of his parents, his mother in particular. An unease which will no doubt be felt by the reader too, given that the condition of the unfortunates in the asylum is described in such uncomfortable detail, with no sugaring of the language.

There is a feeling of utter truthfulness about this poem, that makes the humanity of the final stanza all the more powerful.

*Rob Lock*

## Favourite Poem cont.

### New Year Behind the Asylum

by David Constantine

There was the noise like when men in droves  
Are hurrying to the match only this noise was  
Everybody hurrying to see the New Year in  
In town under the clock but we, that once,

He said would I come our usual Saturday walk  
And see it in out there in the open fields  
Behind the asylum. Even on sunny days  
How it troubled me more and more the nearer we got

And he went quiet and as if he was ashamed  
For what he must always do, which was  
Go and grip the bars of the iron gate and stand  
Staring into the garden until they saw him.

They were like the animals, so glad and shy  
Like overgrown children dressed in things  
Handed down too big or small and they came in a crowd  
And said hello with funny chunnering noises

And through the bars, looking so serious,  
He put his empty hand out. But that night  
We crept past quickly and only stopped  
In the middle of the empty fields and there

While the clock in the square where the normal people stood  
And all the clocks in England were striking twelve  
We heard the rejoicings for the New Year  
From works and churches and the big ships in the docks

So faint I wished we were hearing nothing at all –  
We were so far away in our black fields  
I felt we might not ever get back again  
Where the people were and it was warm, and then

Came up their sort of rejoicing out of the asylum,  
Singing or sobbing I don't know what it was  
Like nothing on earth, their sort of welcoming in  
Another New Year and it was only then

When the bells and the cheerful hooters couldn't be heard  
But only the inmates, only the poor mad people  
Singing or sobbing their hearts out for the New Year  
That he gripped me fast and kissed my hair

And held me in against him and clung on tight to me  
Under a terrible number of bare stars,  
So far from town and the lights and house and home  
And shut my ears against the big children crying

But listened himself, listened and listened  
That one time. And I've thought since and now  
He's dead I'm sure that what he meant was this:  
That I should know how much love would be needed.