

SHAUN BELCHER: WRITING

SHOW MENU

Farm-Hand's Radio Complete



FARM HAND'S RADIO

Poems 1996 - 2000 OXFORD

dedicated to Ivo Charles Belcher (1932-2004)

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THE CLOUD FACTORY

THE PLOUGH REVERSED

It is a strange path we are taking,
not quite chosen, in this lurching coach.
A path between glens, burns, marshland
and wooded highland sown for profit.
We slide to rest on forecourt tarmac.

Half asleep I awoke to bright stars
and Aussie voices discussing the big dipper.
A world upside-down hung in the air
as frost built upon fern and dock-leaf.
Pennine hills blacked out the horizon.

Sleeping limbs fidgety
the motorway dragged us to London.
Midland cities slid by, blurs of neon
above industrial units shut for Christmas.
Canals lidded with ice, hospitals steaming.

The glare of each conurbation erasing stars
I sat and waited for each clear dark.
The plough faded into dawn and London,
a web of sodium laid across the estuary

glowing like track-side cinders.

Somewhere north between fizzing pylons
and cooling-towers feathered with steam
I'd stepped out of the coach
and stared at a sea of frosted tarmac,
islands of shattered ice on brigand charts.

THE SPANISH SQUIRREL

Tributaries of Ebro splash through pines,
sand-filled water tumbling by roots
as winter sunlight, bright as an English spring,
dazzles through the Parque Grande fountains.

Re-treading your past like a pond-skater,
spinning around your city, dizzy with language,
I skitter past a bronze statue
of an open-mouthed singer I've never heard of.

Grass recovering from the last scorching summer
it is still the greenest space in your parched birthplace.
Spawned amidst a tangle of Thames Valley woods
where even in summer drenched fern steams

I find it hard to take in this dryness.

A dust-blown treelessness that surrounds us.
But amidst the burning sands and buckling rails
the white tracks of the possible extend links

that spread below our circling plane
like cow-spittle dripping away from the water-trough.

Below us sheep and goats cloud remote paths
and baking lorries glint on the auto-pista.

From up here the green of the river-plain
is as snicked and trim as any suburban privet.
Beyond the treeless desert and mountains
I think of that squirrel, caught mid-air forever,
never landing.

*(Fable has it that Spain was once so densely wooded that
a squirrel could cross the country jumping from tree to tree.)*

SEA RAVENS

Climbing a shale and pine scarp
mid-afternoon. Loch Doon, July 1986,
grey clouds brimming on quarried peaks,
I left our party skimming stones

and plunged upward, breeze flicking
dust across rock, fern and bramble.
A water-smooth branch from the shore
helping me to balance.

My boots slid on pine-needles
at a plantation's eastern limit.
Beyond me a thousand acres of pine
laid out like a bed of nails.

Two cormorants basking on a ruined tower
mid-loch took fright, flapped northwards
as jets screeched across choppy water,
rehearsing for a war un-scripted, un-run.

The stick I kept, took south to England
where it lay in my dad's garage
through another war over oil and borders
then it crackled to ash, one 5th of November

THE STONE CODE

A flood plain half-wild, half mown
between timber barns and flint walls.
Places where I found violets when small.
A field of headstones, iron crosses,
(poor copies of a gentry's Celtic fashion)
is still dew-damp with river-mist.

We linger and talk
as we visit stone after stone
commemorating Belchers and Didcocks
as if the whole village was only two families
and no others had been born,
worked or died here.

Some questions I never ask.
The church register remains blank
where my grandfather's name should be.
We stand in a rich harvest of names
strung across the meadow like bales.
Cut flowers wilt in the shadows.

By a cathedral in Spain I paused
to watch students brushing dust
from row upon row of unearched skeletons.

The compressed bones of medieval monks.
Fragments of skull, splinters of bone,
delicate as a book of pressed flowers.

No markers, discovered by chance
in a restoration project,
now each was being carefully disinterred
and age, position, rank plotted.
Here my father and I and inscriptions
that reveal nothing.

FARMER'S LUNG

A cracked sepia print of a harvest gang,
pre-war, a steam-engine behind.
Five men posing for a last shot.
Behind them the fields of my youth.
A football-pitch of daisies buckling in heat,
as molten tar ebbs and flows,
sizzling across layers of dust, grain
and straw before condensing to highway.

In the Machine-Man Inn candles spit,
froth slides down glinting glass,
hard boots clack clay tiles.
Irish and Geordie accents sing
as brass darts clatter double 19
and a guest stumbles to a creaking bed.
Moonlit sheets shine like chalk paths.
Water in jug and bowl shivers.

June 1974. A dappled football twirls,
rebounds from scuffed shoes
as I thwack it against a barn door.
It bobbles away down a patched road

between overgrown verges, thickets of bramble.

Thunder clouds blacken the downs.

Barn empty, thatch sodden,
rain glints on a rusted harrow.

Beyond the mown pitch a new sewer-works
and a cardiganed figure dragging washing in.

On both sides of the river people working
and my grandad carrying bales to cattle
as workmen remove old signposts.

A region changing boundaries, losing markers.

I lever the barn door open with a stick
peer into a stale dark silence.

Easter 1996. A return. Barns revamped as homes.

The farm is now converted to a joinery,
at least not another craft centre or pottery.

My dad and the farmer, recently retired,
discuss death as sawdust speckles their shoes.

The farmer wheezes, points at his old fields
suggesting "a good dose of chemical's what's needed'
for the new nature-reserve's crop of mouldering wheat.

I have abandoned this village, followed tracks north
on the back of mass education, a 'booming- economy.

That old world of cattle-sheds and straw ricks
fades in the mirror, a shoe shed for better pay.

But some nights that barn dark returns to haunt me.

Rats screech, hares bleed, the barns canker spreads
to bronchi, leaf and stem, culled meat.

Maggots drip from skulls swinging in the trees.

**(Old Thames anglers method of pre-baiting a river to attract fish.)*

TURNERS

My dad a boy, feet raised, pedals spinning,
splashing along a road under water,
six inches of Thames mud and leaves
frothing around his stainless rims.

Banks burst, road become river
he slices a line toward a brick bridge
lapped by swollen torrents.
A broil of water sweeping south from Oxford.

The pike, belly-up, wriggling on tarmac
gleams as white as his choir-boy cassock
as he clips its tail, skids to rest
and toe-pokes it toward deeper water.

Between tank-traps and crumbling fences
that road is still there, a commuter rat-run.
The astonishment has faded, the water calm,
confined by weir, lock, regulation.

Except one May morning, river misty,
when I saw a white horse standing there
half-submerged beneath willows
whilst my dad, eyes on the road, missed it.

The picture stays, sparkles still
like that fish he saw.
Somehow signalling another path
beyond chalk tracks rising to meet cloud.

Every winter trees slide into the flood,
spin toward the sea, branches churning silt.
Below us chrome wheels spin too,
reflect nothing, spokes empty creels.

THE BIRD PAINTER

A breeze ruffling the neck feathers,
head and beak disjointed
by the sudden impact,
the bird rests on the artist's table.

Having battered my way to 30
and an uneasy alliance with a press
I find myself sat in the shadows
amongst printer's ink and type

attempting to capture its likeness.
Laid flat, barely six inches long,
the vibrant green of its plumage
bright as any museum specimen,

I scrape with pencil and rubber
at an outline on white paper.
Beyond the silence of the converted stable
wind thrashes the chestnuts

and lorries spill grain as they trundle
a harvest away to the malt-house.
I stare out at the patio window
where this bird's last image was taken

one split second before impact.
A perfect shot, Audobon's negative.
Above me the printer's colour chart sang,
hues flaring like a chest of hummingbirds.

I struggle to hold a likeness
as fake Bewick's flutter on the wall.

My heart is not in it, the sun setting,
I leave the drawings, latch the door.

As I scoot my bike up the gravel path
I turn and look at the glass plate
and imagine that bird's last fatal attempt
to smash through its own image.

Instead of clear blue sky
it slithered into a reality of dust and brick.
I ended up back in my father's truck
chopping away time in a trench.

I left Oxfordshire, left pencil and paper behind
veered north, washed out my brushes
and now, five years later, return
mind sharpened, feathers bristling

to stab again at that still warm heart
of a country I only saw reflected
in a series of mirrors as I left it behind.
That woodpecker, my totem, re-animated

drills through the barren years,
all the misconceptions, to a clear, bright beginning.
I see again the roadside bushes seething
with a harvest of berries, a thousand Redwings.

THE SHADOW BOOK

In the ivied, wasp-hollow webbed
space between hoe and net
spilt the damp, yellow-stained

pages of the home encyclopedia.

The 'big book' that I pulled
down on summer Sunday evenings
as bells tolled across the village
and my grandfather smoked,

pigtails of white smoke
circling the velvet lampshade
where flies buzzed
after circuits of tea-stained saucers.

I'd be leaning against the shed's warm black tin
imitating diagrams.

Fingers contorting to 'get' the 'horse's head'
(with eye) – the difficult part,

or else the 'rabbit' or 'spider'.
A hand's shadow thrown by setting sun
across corrugated tin wall
rippling like shadow on water.

What has not crumbled or mouldered
has been swept clean or replaced.
A memory of my sister echoes off tin
and chickens still scratch up dust.

While we were playing other shadows
crawled southward, domestic spats
mixed with landlord's veiled threats
as wallflowers shivered and fumed.

The black wallflowers flap and tremble
at the first sign of thunder.
Indoors phlegm catches
somewhere in his sunburnt throat.

The dog yawns, chain rasps the table.
Saliva dribbles on bare tiles

and only the clock ticking and a shadow
creeping like a hand along the gable.

FLICKERING FIELDS

Only now, windows open,
gulls toppling, swifts twirling,
against the blue sky
can I see as clearly

as a summer twenty years back
when gliders, motes of dust, hung above me
as I lay on daisied grass
a bicycle wheel still spinning

after the ride up the chalk track.
Probably still panting from the effort
to rise beyond estate, by-pass, garage
and the razor-wired nuclear perimeter gates

to a vantage point, sun scorched chalk.
Beyond beech clumps a haze of smoke
and the faint rumble of trucks on rails.
There a silence, flicker of pasture in breeze.

Now, eyes tired, back aching
I daydream a release from the monotony of
numbers littered across a computer screen
like a hillside of baking pig-pens.

Not born to this life of accounting
for a stream of information
that bobbles by like cans in water
or flickers like fences from a train,

I lift my eyes to the window

as office blinds rattle me back into place.
The daydream of field, chalk hill, poppies splinters
and I'm left with those swifts still soaring.

Beyond this institution's walls
I can feel the streams spate,
sense the ripple of tail feathers in a thermal,
but here as papers flap lazily
I concentrate on two figures, soon I'll be 3+8.

CANALS

(for Norman McCaig)

Pigeons jink in high air,
remote, perfect formations
sparkling in April sun

as the streams seep
through reed-beds to the Thames
and a mason's chisel chips

hours away across the river.
We walk through dew-wet clover
toward a rickety bridge

and stare down at
a potter's blue glaze of fish
and our own reflections.

A lock wheel clanks
and froth spumes through timbers
lifting a barge skyward.

The past floats back to me now

lifted like cornflowers
plucked from the field-side
then buckling in our fists.

Now a barge clangs
onto another level, between tenements,
sluggish water choked with weed.

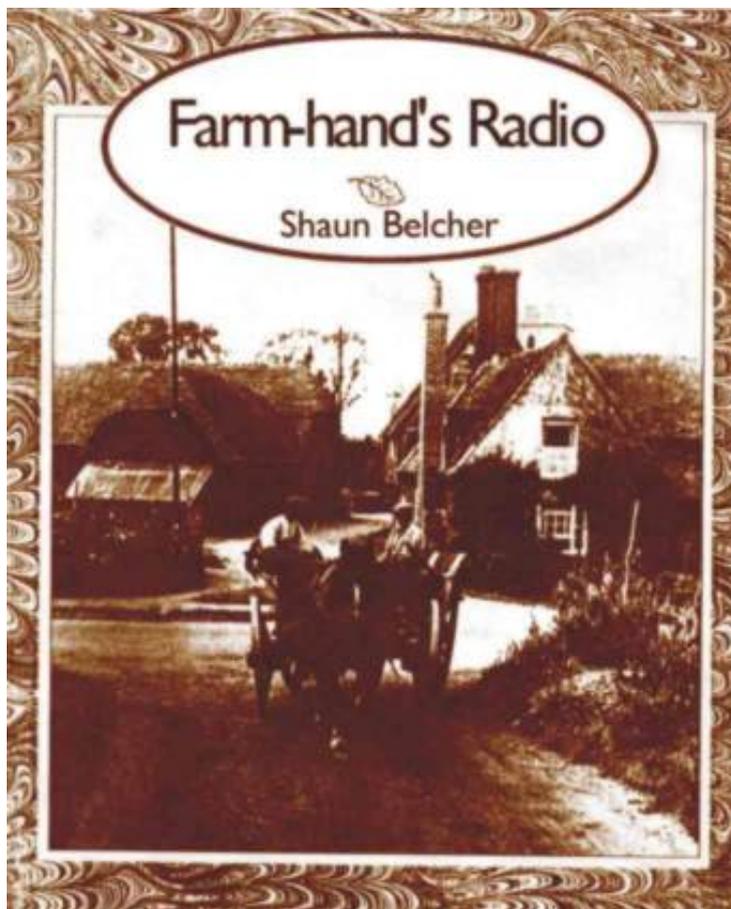


PHOTO ABOVE SHOWS ALFIE 'COMMIE' FILER AND 'CURLY' DIDCOCK, LONG WITTENHAM, BERKSHIRE 1955. 'CURLY' WAS MY STEP-GRANDFATHER'S BROTHER. ARCHIVE PHOTO FROM READING UNIVERSITY AGRICULTURAL MUSEUM USED AS COVER OF 'THE RURAL LIFE BIRTHDAY BOOK' 1994.

SEPIA

The way a cracked sump bleeds
from a tractor onto sacking
and the dust and straw sticks,

that's the way the real past
clings to these reassembled bricks
brushed clean and relaid

in neat patterns under trellis
where once pheasants hung,
blood trickling on mud.

These words are a clearing
of the wheat from the chaff,
an attempt to see clearly

chapped fingers, and inches of ice
lidding the horse-troughs
being smashed with bare hands.

A past of blistered horse-flesh
flayed by leather straps,
men head down hobbling through clay.

Now that past has been sepia-tinted
adorns a flowery birthday-book
to sit on home-county bureau.

Still harbouring illusions,
romantic horsemen at dawn,
like the Victorian print you left me.

Easier that image
than to reflect on you bent double
staggering through hail, hacking phlegm.

Horses skidding on snow

churning mud, straw, flint
into a murky brown slush.

THE WHITE CROSS

Two and a half feet
of brilliant white stone,
it gleams, freshly laid
in an old family photo.

The grass around it
still seeded dirt,
the inscription still sharp,
days after it was chiselled.

Now it is weathered
by rain and car-exhaust
tangled with briars
cobwebs and a tinge of mildew.

Somewhere my step-greatgrandmother still weeps
for the man it commemorates.
This single white cross
stands for a body lost in Flanders.

The only one for one man,
the sole casualty of this small village.
The last marker of a sorrowful
and vanished pastoral age.

His bones have splintered
under the raking of ploughshares

on some featureless plain,
somewhere that is not England.



THE GLASS WORLD OF THE BLASCHKAS

Frills of concentric glass
billow and twirl from delicate fingers
and another Spanish 'Medusa'
glints to life beneath a monocle.

In a suburb of Dresden, behind blinds,
two brothers spin 'Snake Locked Anemones',
'Trefoil Muzzlets', and 'Sand Pimplets'
onto desks polished to honey.

Then their pirouette and dance
is shipped westward sealed in wood
to the Edinburgh Natural History Museum
where they lay in darkness 1944
as the sky above Dresden
pulses with tentacles of fire.

A baby already alight
is sucked from its mothers arms.
It twirls and spins in the firestorm
beneath a hundred quivering crosses.
Then it is gone.

Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka made glass models
of jellyfish and other marine life for Dresden
Natural History Museum. Specimens are currently
on display in Edinburgh Natural History Museum
and were purchased between 1866/1913.

THE CLOUD FACTORY

Strange, to feel a country slip away,
as if a fault line was opening gently up
and sticks, feathers, stone walls and oaks
tumbling head over heels into the abyss.

Half way down the motorway I felt the change.
Walls whitewashed or stone giving way to brick.
Then the faces, fairer, redder, less open
as if caught staring from behind net curtains.

As the sun glinted across the lakes I breathed deeply
and plunged into the leafmold and chalky flint of England.
Behind me flakes of the Forth Bridge wet with dew
flapped and sailed out on the tide toward Norway.

Our van groaned on the inclines then swept into Oxford
where you noticed that the trees were encased in brick walls
and that the river was slower and inaccessible.
I clung to the family ties that made an ugly town familiar.

Lost in thought one evening passing the cooling towers
I glanced up into a rose-tinted Blake etching of clouds

the steam engulfing the cold concrete in beautiful spirals.
The flickering lights, vapours rising.

I hold your hand and whisper, you look bewildered
for this is the strangest and ugliest place you've been.
Trust me a little longer for I am casting a net into old water
and I cannot dredge up lost coins without this familiarity.

When the wind whips water droplets from those towers
across these parched fields and rows of lace-curtained houses
I am really dreaming of the might-have-been. These rusty oaks
behind the Tesco car-park that haven't even shed their leaves,

this tepid pond covered with a layer of foam, these grey reeds,
sing with a cold air that only land so far from sea breathes.
The land gulls know that there is no return from their journey
and that the harrow's spirals are their new sea, corn their beach.

Hardy remembered the dead sailors who returned to haunt the land
in the guise of gulls wheeling forever in the dawn.
Now I too wheel around my home ground, staring at the worn edge
of people and places from whence I once came.

The lakes here are false, submerged gravel workings,
but the geese and swans that jewel them each winter are real enough
and contain how many dead souls and strange wandering intuitions.
Trust me now, trust my homing instincts, I feel the cord rewinding.

That cord looped around my neck at birth tight but not strangling.

FARM HAND'S RADIO



Zephaniah Grace was a Shepherd and Photographer from Blewbury, Berkshire who lived in the second half of the 19th Century.

ZEPHANIAH GRACE'S FIRST DREAM

I first started dreaming during the cold winter of '43

At first no-one in the village understood my ramblings. They blamed drink.

I dreamt I saw wonderous carts with no horses to lead them
and huge flies that buzzed and shone like silver above the fields.

Then I felt as if I was floating through the houses of the village.
Past the pound, the thatched walls and out onto the downs at dawn.

I felt like a small animal, a rat or mole. I could feel my claws.
Then came the thunder and the chalk paths turned to milky sluices. I awoke.

I am in fear for my life if this becomes known to the neighbours.
They already fear me for my dabbling with the chemicals and machinery.

They do not understand the flash of magnesium. The preparation of plates.
To them the whole idea of photography is of some vile invention of Satan.

I cannot blame them though for my dreaming is so real to me apparently
I can be heard across the street. Mrs Thompson has administered potions.

She is the village quack and would not let me forego this foul 'medicine'.
It has not calmed me though and the dreams are becoming more frequent.

ZEPHANIAH GRACE'S SECOND DREAM

I awoke at three in the morning in a cold sweat, screaming.
The woman across the road ran over brandishing a stick.

I saw myself as a hare with gold fur dancing through the corn.
Then an infernal engine like those rail machines bore down on me.

I was so disorientated I tried to fight off my neighbour
and only three men with strong arms could hold me like a sheaf.

They told me I was shouting about witchcraft and half-crazed
tried to escape to the road where I was going to battle the machine.

Even now I shudder at the thought of it and hear a high pitched whine
as if an animal had been trapped in its wheels.

Now people in the village have started talking about me.
They say I have a demon inside me with all my dreaming. I am deeply scared.

Others have said it is because of the infernal trickery of my flashes
and all the other machinery of the photography. They say it is devilry.

But I felt strong as that golden hare. Yesterday I saw one in the stubble.
I have tried to catch it with my camera but to no avail. I sleep ill.

ZEPHANIAH GRACE'S THIRD DREAM

Last night the torment began again and not even the medicine helped.
I was convinced I was a bird. A white crow wheeling over the fields.

I found myself lying in the muddy street outside where I'd crawled.
I awoke with a knife and fork in my hand that I'd stabbed the door with.

In the dream I'd been battling with a flurry of rats that surrounded me
but I am scared to relate this to my neighbours. They talk of me.

There seems to be no escape from these torments. I am cursed. Am I crazy?

Yet still I feel a deep joy when I vanquish these enemies.

In the village there has been much rejoicing of late. Two births. Prosperity.
No-one can remember such a good harvest and even the miser smiled today.

I will have to buy new clothes as my best were shredded in the night.
The furniture is scratched and broken from my nightd^ne torments.

Always the dream involves these silver engines and paths of gleaming tar.
Last night I dreamt I saw a huge building billowing smoke and fire.

The golden hare reappeared yet I was not it. I am becoming confused.
I am beginning to believe that some righteous force is directing me.

*(based on The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth
and Seventeenth Centuries by Carlo Ginzburg, Anne Tedeschi available from Amazon)*

St. BIRINUS.

Forking west across wet grassland,
horse fences neat as stitching bind
the downs into a fretwork pattern
of green and gold squares. In the gale hawthorn slaps tin
corrugation, dew damp, now rain wet,
with a snare-drum clatter
and the straw flicks off branches flies up into the air, flecks the tractor.
Hands red, wet, slipping on the wheel
a farmer struggles up the rutted field
driving the plough deep into fresh soil.

I'm stationary, hair blown back by the gale
letting the rain wash into my eyes
until the tractor, field, barn dissolve

in a blur of wind and rain.

I can taste salt, sea salt from west
blasted inland, cross Wiltshire,
a fancy, but then again maybe not,
no stranger than St. Birinus preaching

on that tumuli on the skyline.

Pacing a roman track, gulping in the gale
as he defied these downland squalls
clutching the sodden wool to him

and staring into a thousand miles of woodland
all gone now, sliced into rafters and beams
and the hulls of a thousand ships.

Me, a snotty ten year old with rusty gears

on a Raleigh with stickered forks,
standing near that spot and not knowing
nothing about religion, politics, trees
come to that. Just the feeling of storm

pressing against the chest, cold rain
running in streams down the chalk.

Some kind of inspiration all the same
and now reflection and the tear and crash

of generations severed, tin powdered to dust
and woods moldering from the silt
of traffic on the by-pass.

A track forking west, a raised place. This roadside verge.

Nothing. Everything he
said mouthed against the storm,
coming back later to roost like battered larks
in nests of wire, plastic and thorns.

SPLITTING LOGS

8am, sky blue, jet trails feathering
between rooftops, grass glistens
as I kick the wood-block over
and position it beneath the chopper

the blunt and rusted blade chings
as it rebounds off a knot
then finds a split, creaking
the wood splinters and snaps

and another stick joins
the pile scattered across the path.
The scent of new wood rises
and a transparent moon above me.

Later the darkness seeped back
and candles guttered in the bedroom
shone like planets in mirrors
spun rings onto ceilings

outside the dead power station
the braziers warmed meteorite faces
and we were kids, this game
played out over our heads

never left a trace
until ten years later
the braziers flamed again
and this time I saw

the backs of council houses like mine
trampled by police horses
and heads split open, bleeding

and an adult rage kindling in damp seams.

A FENCE DOWN

A clock ticking on polished wood
through crisp lace a barricade of runner-beans
a backwater shining like a sickle blade
fresh from the whetstone

the river that was washing banks from below us
as we fished until close to dusk
then the hand burnt by the tank
of a bike left in the sun all day

your stockman's tea staining the tea-cloth
and flies swarming in the outhouse
and fields through the window brimming with poppies
as the dust swirled in the porch

plan, position, exact location
the banks crumble as I get older
the barn tears itself to pieces
and the mud buries the landing stage

even the mortar too long in the sun crumbles
and the bricks tumble in the nettles
where there were animals now there are roses
and fountains, goldfish, ornamental gates

but this morning there's the glory of scudding cloud
shooting across these borders
and best of all this collapsed fence, river rising

cows crashing across the patio, shit everywhere.

some kind of retribution for what's gone before.

THE FAIRGROUND PRIZE

Coconuts wedged in battered tin cups,
the 'chock' of wooden balls crashing against them.
Moist fingers gripping polythene pools
flickering with goldfish
as wind sliced through the rim of poplars.
Bank holiday on the village sports field
and diesel blacked white lines of an old season,
I rattled the lip of a bowl, then it fell,
and I hollered with joy,
then disappointment as the stallholder handed me a razor,
and me not big enough to reach the mirror.

That evening as the lace curtains breathed August
and pollen fell on the tiles
I swapped the razor for my grandad's comic annual,
passed on from the 'big-house',
because he could barely read.
A man who could herd cattle, tend horses,
and carry a hundred-weight on his shoulder.
I was reading better than him.

I was handed the book like a talisman,
to read through and beyond,

its pages a route through servitude, compliance
and the dawn tramp round the stockyard.

A buzzing tannoy leaking Beatles tunes on the wind.
Straw mired with the mud and slime of animals.
A red cross fluttering above the rows of stalls.
I can't distinguish the route I followed,
but every year I seem to circle the jar again,
tracing the chink of hit and miss,
coming slowly to the still centre.

Below a bobbing float.
At the centre of the marked target, a trace of fury and anger.
That bloody-minded struggle against the weight on the shoulder,
the fenced land beyond the poplars
and the cemented order.

WHITE FISH – July 1967

The Morris Oxford's cream bonnet
covered with blossom and pollen.
The weir frothing but the river low.
Slicks of dead leaves, twigs, mud
spin slow into eddies beneath willow roots.
A radio buzzes from across the fields.

Air streaked with jet trails, high cloud
as the sun sets through the bankside trees
and pigeons wheel and loop.

Then silence, just slop of water lapping
as he fumbles with her bra strap
until she pushes him away, knocking the ashtray.

Ash, cellophane, cumbled packet, butts
cover the car mat under her feet.
The wrapper twinkling like the fish
twirling to the fisherman's hand in fading light.
She watches him struggle with the hook
then the flash as it is thrown back.

Caravans light up in the park below the bridge
as a full moon ghosts into view above the trees.
They sweep the ash onto the damp grass
and light new cigarettes as the dashboard glows
the engine fires and the car trundles back to tarmac
before rejoining faster currents, different routes.

THE CATTLE WAGON

Dead Oxford English chokes me
as it choked in the crow of thousands more.

Who, stood in line, cow-towed, groped, starved
as they gave their stage impressions of the 'people'.
Always on the margins, always dependable,
awaiting their chance to be roped in, cajoled, cheated
or to get a chance to end up dangling on a scaffold

some frosty morning.

Now, blurred steeples and angels
recede in the mist of a damp evening
and the river starts to thicken and stink
with its slow fermenting brew of algae and piss.
Weed, vivid pure green slick of it
slops against the lock gates

as a cattle wagon buffets up High Street.
Hot breath misting the cold wire cages
and splatters of shit spilling onto the tarmac.
The stench of a hundred years past
wafts up the Examination Hall's marble steps
as a cleaner stoops to rinse her brushes.

I am sick with words.

They tangle like empty bottles in the slack.

I cannot chew the cud and stay silent.
Like a lickspittle, curmudgeon, or a ne'er do well.

A rat-faced hawker of ballads and filth
One day I'll fill the streets with my stench.

Meanwhile staying silent and
saying nowt is your best bet.

Stare and best of all slouch
the best defence.

BOTTLED LAND

(for Tess Gallagher)

I come from an acre of land
no more.

A patch of ploughed clay, chalk and flint
ringed hawthorn, nettles and brambles.

Wet sloes flecked with dust
dance one against the other
in my gran's wicker basket

as the first spots of summer rain
bleed the chalk dust from the dock leaves
and set the swifts twirling.

But I cannot return to that acre of land.
the blade has sliced the bare roots free
and the soil has been raked clean of flint and bone.

Where once a tin barn clattered.

Silence.

Only this ache of remembrance
distilling the seconds
drip by drip through the fingers.
It ferments in that dark sideboard
along with the sloe gin.
My distilled land turning to vapour.

BLACK BARNs

Black barns littered my childhood like abandoned cars
or sinking ships clinging to the skyline.

They moaned as sleet skidded off their rooves
creaked as horses sheltered under their rusted beams.

But now they slip into disuse, foam with patches of nettles
or disappear completely under hawthorn and bramble.

Some days I catch a glimpse of one still in use
as I travel southwards toward my parent's house.

Its beams still upright, tin roof still sound
and a gleaming tractor being cleaned by the farmer inside.

It stands like a mirage as the agrobusiness combines
and contractors lorries squeeze the rest of the land dry

and of course it only stands there for a minute
then I open my eyes.

THE GRAIN BIN

I can still taste the grain bin.
Feel the rasp and chink of the tin mug

against the steel bin.
Still hear the clang of the lid
as a cup brimming with barley was pulled out.

I'd plunge my thin boy's arms in next to my gramp's
as he stooped to fill it again and again.
I'd feel the liquid grain swallow my fingers
as it flowed around me,
the dust billowing onto my hair.

Then he was away
to spatter the hens with their feed
as I stayed to play,
pouring handfuls back into the bin
watching it pour down like water.

As I grew up I heard stories.
How men drowned in grain.
One slip inside a silo and you were gone.
Breathing barley instead of air
and swimming in a thousand tons

Sometimes I had nightmares,
saw him spilling from the bin,
his eyes and ears choked with barley.
Dead as a plucked hen, just laying there
as they tried to pump the grain out, air in.

Silent,
watching the moon,
these trees

I rewind the dial
on my grandad's radio.

A dial like a compass or target,
Helsinki, Paris, Geneva, Madrid..
circling unknown cities
listening to distorted voices.

Here, now, in the Spanish bar,
loud voices and pinned to the wall
a radio its dial pointing homewards
Athens, Stockholm, Dublin...London.

The din at the bar grows louder
as the home team scores
and a globe is picked from the net.
Outside trees, a full moon

and air filled with the buzz of insects,
the crackle of leaves underfoot, like straw.
Holding your hand I stare across the city
lights flicker like cinders in a burnt field

as my grandad slumbers and I spin the dial
and trawl across Europe, Barcelona, Lisbon, Rome....

THE GREEN TRACK

Fringed by parsley and nettle
and the rattle of stock gates.
Stretching a mile toward a river
and half way along an old pill-box

now barb-wired and green with moss.
Its gun-slits boarded up with tin adverts
for Cadbury's chocolate and motor-oil.
Behind a rusty tractor, fences, farmhouse,

We'd walk the green track on Sunday evenings
My family, my grandparents and the dog.
My gramp always whistling the dog to heel
as it chased off after pheasants in the hedge.

The green track that led straight as a die to the river
which shone like silver in the evening sun.
As we talked pleasure cruisers would float by
bouyed up on the fields of corn.

Id hack at nettles with a stick
as these 'invaders' from the city slid through our world.
By the time I was sixteen I could hit their hulls
with a well-aimed fishing lead

But I never saw the invisible enemies
the pesticide leaking from a can in the hedge
the planners drawing topping and tailing that green track
and worst of all the learning, learning to be polite,
learning never to question the drawing of lines.

THE PEASANT POET'S GRAVE

(for William Neill)

Every weekend they come back
usually in estate cars or mini-buses.
Wending their way up the track
to this riverside cemetery

Half an hour to walk around,
take a couple of pictures, eat snacks,
then back on the bus
and off to Windsor or Stratford or..

Never once noticing that slight ridge
where the poor of the village rotted away.
Noting only the bell-tower, the arranged flowers
the flock of doves and clotted cream.

But that was the peasant poet's grave too.
The powder of his bones, the thread of his jacket
all that's left now save an amended line or two
in a townie's anthology of country verse

But return to that ridge in the grass
as the shadow of the tower starts to creep
or when the grass starts to glisten at dusk
and you 11 find the sharp-eyed fox gnawing at a dove.

FLINT FIELDS

It all gets pissed away
like the drizzle of old Alf relieving himself
at quarter to midnight against the barn.
The hiss and froth of beer against tin. It all seems so pointless.
The dragging of the harrow over flint and chalk,
chemical pellets scattered like shot
whilst maggots seethe in the dangling crow's ribs. This is a rich land grown poor
through centuries of tilling and reaping.
Generation upon generation sucking at the soil
until now we force plenty with additives and pesticides.
The bags fume in the barn's rusting carcass.
When it runs out the chalky soil will dribble from the hills
like semen. They knew it forty years back,
bent double, mulching horse manure into the potatoes.
Half-hearted protests waved aside by fertilizer salesmen
intent on reaping the highest bonuses. Now the barn's lung has collapsed inward
onto a stench of absent pigs and
the water tank is filmed with diesel.
Ditches brim with drums; lids leaking.

Drivers stare out their windscreens
at brimming fields, fizzing in heat
cloaking dry dirt beneath.

FOXES BARN

The black barn by the cross
where he lay hidden for three months

blood from the pig carcass
dripping through the slats

and all the time
the sacks of rotting meat
swaying above the river
dripping maggots to the fish.

His eyes became hollow
like the remnants of horse skull
lapped at the river edge
before crushed by cattle hooves.

He measured days in the stench
by the tolling of the church bell
until finally a hand rattled the chain
and he emerged blinking

into a daylight that singed
like the pigs skin.
His hair was grimy with feathers and dust
and his beard lousy.

The china bowl chimed with water
as the landlord helped him into the room.
The font had been turned to shot they said
and been blasted deep into Marian hearts.

He clutched the bowl to him and shook
as horses galloped past the windows.
They were headed west toward the mountains
leaving headless torsos to stain the water.

SPANISH CHRONICLES

Also available online through the
Poetry Library Magazine database
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THE GIVEN GROUND

Mountain water coloured with mud
spills around uprooted trees
yellow water full of bones and gravel
drags seawards through bare fields.
Collapsing walls held by roots and branches
finally topple in a spray of soil
into the cloudy water
as gravel banks shift and reform.

From Fraga northwards the light slipped away
and the land soaked itself in darkness,
roads sparkling with truck lights.
The thin soil gave way to green
and the woods grew thicker by the passing mile.
A derelict barn, a ruined castle on the heights
as we entered rock outcrops, uncultivated slopes,
and the hoe gave way to the gun.

Windscreen still pulsing with passing lights
small towns glistened and were gone.
A strip of bare wall, a lit bar or auto shop
or a blazing garage on the outskirts

before the night seeped back in.
I tried to find my bearings on a map
but drifted back to sleep as your brother
followed his memory. I dreamt of England.

BLACK BULLS

I'm listening to American Music
sat at a Spanish typewriter
as rain pulses across the Monegros
and the Ebro, swollen with storm
throws trees and rocks at the desert
as it scours a snake through Aragon.

Throw a book in these waters
and it'll be pulped and shredded
before it has reached the paper factory
a couple of kilometres downstream.
As the dawn light rises above the mountains
carreteras sparkle and writhe.

Any road out of Zaragoza will take you into dust
past a roadside motel with twenty trucks bathing in this light.
There are no signposts, just the gentle curves of the roads
between identical hills of scrub and rubble.
A black bull gently rusts to red
and I squint at black words fading from my pen.

SUEÑO

I didn't marry you but I took your language for better or worse
and now I carry a heavy bag full of American slang, realism
and musical clichés that slow me down as I try to absorb meaning

from this romantic culture's blood and stone surrealism.

I keep my heart well hidden under an English duvet of dollars
whilst here hopes get dashed like blood across marble steps.
Whitewashed and glaring like a noon-day village street
there are walls here I'll never cross over.

Better men than I painted them on bloody afternoons
after their frail utopian ideals were sliced to the root by blunt blades.
Burdened by an Oxford past of limestone, ermine and false victories
I feel enlivened by the air of freedom from servility.

I run up the hill looking for the moment when the shutter falls,
looking for the wind, the cierzo, that can dry blood in an instant.
It is curling through the hills, picking holes in liars tongues.
creeps through my sleeves and around my passionless gut.

One day like Cromwell I'll go back to Oxford and circle it with another noose
and lob words like cannon shot into the quadrangles and gardens.
Then we'll be married on a High Street whitewashed and full of geraniums
as the ghosts of the International Brigade march past singing.

BRIDGE OF STONE

Five years ago we slid across this bridge at dawn
after a long hot drive from Barcelona.
I kept waking up on the back seat to see factories
flaring orange against the black hills.
As we entered Zaragoza I saw the basilica lit up
by floodlights that caught the dust swirling in from the desert.

I woke with that dust in my teeth, sweating
whilst you lay there perfectly cool and calm.
We carry our countries in our blood, habits, instincts
that carry us back to the same places in our dreams.
Now I catch you sleeping again; winter, the Ebro rising,

I'm not sweating but still the air here tastes different.

Every winter for five years we have swung back across the bridge
circling your past through the sparkle of christmas lights.

Words have crept into my vocabulary as I struggle with Spanish
but I still get caught like an uprooted tree on the double r's,
tongue snagged against the bridge supports whilst you sail away
floating on the native rhythm of your language as I submerge.

I stare at the back of another car doused with torrents of rain
as tail-lights burn in the wet roads and palm trees swirl.

I stare at the roads as they flood easily,
a summer's dust and dirt clogging the drains.

When we met I was washed away on a torrent of affection.

Now we stand on the bridge five years on
wind catching dust, staring into a flood that moves beneath us.

PIGEON HOUSES

(Parque de Castillo Palomar)

As spring rain dripped from the pines
we sat and drew the remains of that Edinburgh dovecote
ruined from years of neglect, the laird long dead
and the estate he owned now a nature reserve
carving a green swathe through the council estates.
Joggers ghosted along the woodland path.

Vegetation so rich we slipped on the damp moss
as we clambered over the storm-wrecked pines
with hardly a care for the green around us.
Now we walk on this park's threadbare grass
nurtured by municipal watering
and sit in a café built around a tree too precious to cut down.

Walking there today, a compressed spot of green in a yellow city
I saw a boy carrying a couple of birds in tiny cages stop,
and on the steps of another ruined castle, gently water them.
Too precious to be released they flashed in their gilt cages
as my thoughts spiralled back toward meadow and dovecotes
and a patch of grass, and my father scything an unkempt green.

SKELETON AT THE PLOUGH

*Inspired by the reading of 'The Painful Plough' edited and selected by Roy Palmer.
A collection of folk songs and ballads related to agricultural labouring in the 19th
Century.*

*It also contained passages from 'The Autobiography of Joseph Arch' a ploughboy
and later MP who helped form one of the first Agricultural Labour Unions in 1872.*

ORAL HISTORIES

Idiot retrievers of a fantasised past
clutch their sticks and bells to their hearts
and dance their idiot dance of the fully researched
on the steps of the fully refurbished authentic bar.

The lineage is correct, the cut of the trouser ordained
by quality researchers, a scholars parade
with pockets full of photos and oral history tapes
they advise on the correct parts to be played.

While sitting inside in his usual place
as the decor changed from formica to pine(stained)
sits the last repository of the old folk ways
sticking Elvis on the jukebox to drown out the charade.

When the music finishes he bicycles back
to his damp two room crumbling estate pre-fab
whilst the Morris-dancers climb into Volvos and Jags and
wheel out of the car-park blaring out Fairport tracks.

THE CHAINED BOOK

(Bodleian Duke Humphrey Library has chained books)

I am illiterate, dumb, cleft palette
and trussed up like a bale.

The thrushes and spatter of sparrows are more
vocal than me.

The words I had are sunk in the mud,
splintered off the cart-wheels rim.

Vowels are trickling from the sacks
letters seeping through the grain seive.

Out on the down-land ridge clouds bleed
their icy message through the beech trees.

Ice lodges in my hair, crisps my eyelids
freezes the reins to the brittle leather.

When I return in a blizzard to the horse trough
I can see a new page of words.

Cracking along the yard's frozen surface
page after white page folding out, field upon field.

And me and this horse, unwritten and
unread, its slow moving script.

We crawl along the spine of the hill
writing and rewriting ourselves under our master's hand.

THE SKELETON AT THE PLOUGH

Rattling more than the clack of brass and leather
the skeleton at the plough is my grandfather

bones clicking inside his muddied boots
fingers twisted inside the reins.

The horse trudges off line, its teeth champ
as the skull sways silently with the tossing head.

They move on through the biting hail
steam rising from the horse's dribbling piss

turning the straw back under in perfect lines
to corrugate a whole field in an afternoon.

Later, stood by the barn door, tapping his pipe out
a knot of tobacco drifts away like tumbleweed.

I turn to smell the aroma of Rolled Virginia,
can see the tobacco catch and glow in the bowl.

Then I open my eyes to a late sun
and a five-bar scoring lines across his gravestone.

THE CLEARING HOUSES

I am afraid of my own writing.
Stumble and shake at the path it is clearing
between nettle-bound sheds and
broken down fences.

For each unexamined wreck of a house
roof blown open to the wind
reveals an ash-pit
of the missing or unknown dead.

This village is an icy vault
of severed tongues and bludgeoned servants.
The ones who feasted on fly-blown fish
and stone bread.

Slicing with the scythe and hook of pen
bundles of lies crisp with the convulvus vines.
Bridled horses and stooping peasants
pass the black framed windows

time after time after time.

Tracks

Homeless I shake
with the bitter cold of leaving
until now
delving into the rich, moist earth
that spills from the mole's tongue
I feel the tremble of lives
dragging off through tunnels
toward the wells that
bubble up into song.

Blind I fall on the beat
and tremor of heart and lips
singing out for the harvest
like a mole returning along
the path I created
guided by the vibration
of barn door, clack of tin roof
or like a fly circling the quiver
of trapped paws.

A congregation of gentles*
gathers in the cathedral
of a deer's carcass.
Harvest home.

(**gentles* = *maggots*)

THE BEAR PIT

Council grass-cutter smooth
the sliced hay and clover ferments in warm bundles
in the crest and dip of this depression
a hundred yards short of the churchyard entrance.

The old building has fallen to dust
living only as a memory of a shadow at dusk.
Here the cocks once beat a flurry of blood and feather
and the shackled bears were unchained.

Later those bears danced, shifting in their chains
as the first generator spluttered into life under the chestnuts.
Then it was teeth and claws, a rowdy entertainment of
blood soaked pelts and simple wagers.

The clay beneath this hollow has drunk
up its four hundred years of dripping blood.
It has fed into the roots of every blade of grass
that now lies as smooth as fur
a cloak of lost bets, shattered bones and fears.

The Straw Parliament

Can poetry re-ignite the lost
like that bundle of straw
clasped in your hand
one mid-summer evening
beyond the mist of riverbanks
and silted eddies
where pleasure steamers buffeted
the landing stages.

Talking to the dead now
I whistle your dog back
from the cemetery

through the sweet-peas and gravel
of redevelopment
and half expect the glint of your pipe-
a bowl of lit tinder-
ash falling and flecking
your waistcoat.

If it can ignite then let it whoosh
down these heaped rows of spent corn
until it has written its black lines
across hill after hill
page after page.

Yeats said all a nation needed was
a cemetery and a library.
Your shelf held comics unread
too difficult for many –
this village's unlettered silent tongues
are my tiny nation's library.

The cemetery is dark tonight.
dew-damp with river-mist
as the ghost ferry clanks its wheel
and the bales are brought home.
We carry them one by one
to the site of our new parliament.
Ghost rioters dance
the reel of the surrendered ideal to
the clack of the Squire's boot and sword.

“Suppose I ask a man whether he thinks it is an easy thing to drive a straight furrow over a ten-acre field . . . why it is hard work as painting pictures”

(Thorold Rogers. Agricultural Union Meeting. Oxford 1878)

The sun streams through the Alexandra Palace windows.
Below cars glint on the North London roads
as I dribble pigment down the course weave
of a bare white canvas.

Not knowing that every pencil line, every brushstroke
was no more than craft, no more impressive
than the lines my father and my father’s father
had drawn across acres of Berkshire soil.

I was going up in the world, beyond all that
a big city boy with letters to his name.
Exhibiting would bring a better life
away from the sucking mud.

On that summer’s day in 1978
it was still as fresh as a blank canvas
no failures, no missed lines
no blurred ambitions, no paint unrun.

So marking targets with an artist’s eye
I picked out the far trees and set a line.
Then started to spiral upwards in my fruitless career
like a pheasant with
a farmer’s trigger finger close behind.

FIREBIRDS

*“A man with the weight of many masters
on him learns to be dumb and deaf and blind,
at a very early hour in the morning”
(Joseph Arch)*

The squire's sons are dancing on the college lawns.
The farmer's sons drinking in the Oxford bars.
But our bones are restless
beneath this sodden clay, the twisted roots
our ghosts clammer at the stone walls
our eyes flaring with each firework flash.

Every year before the laws condemned it
the fireworks of college balls would be surrounded
by a greater ring of stubble fires
as the labourers celebrated the harvest.

A reminder lest we forget
of the flash of Cromwell's artillery
like the embers flickering in the cold black ash
across the empty downs.

Like tinder for firebirds
our ghosts tend the college lawns.

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