



THE CLOUD FACTORY

SHAUN BELCHER
EXCERPT FROM
COLLECTED POEMS 1981-2011

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Excerpt from

COLLECTED POEMS
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THE CLOUD FACTORY

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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.

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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.)

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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

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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 unearthed 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.

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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.)

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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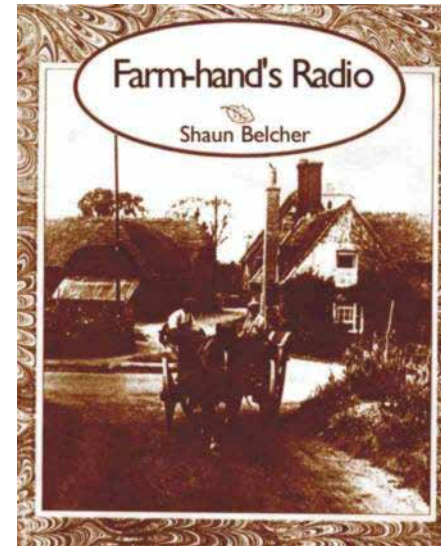


Photo shows Alfie 'Commie' Filer and 'Curly' Didcock, Long Wittenham, Berkshire 1955 .

'Curly' was my step-grandfather's brother.

Archive photo from Reading

University Agricultural Museum used as cover of 'the Rural Life Birthday Book' 1994.

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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.

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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.

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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.

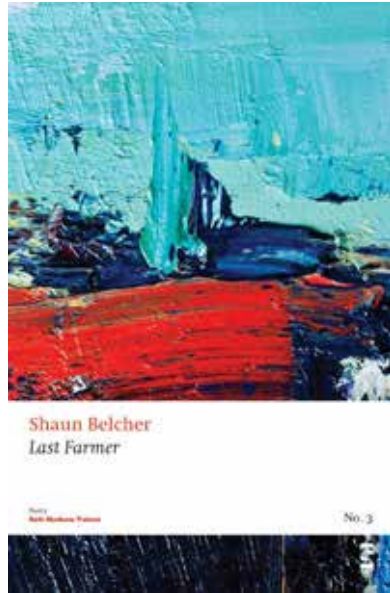
When the wind whips water droplets from those towers
across these parched fields and rows of lace-curtained houses
I am really dreaming of the might-have-been. These rusty oaks
behind the Tesco car-park that haven't even shed their leaves,

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.



Shaun Belcher - Last Farmer - Salt Modern Voices 2010

The division between country and city is fading fast and these poems document the ragged edge of our contemporary ideas of the rural and the sublime. Ever since the initial enthusiasm of early Green movement there has been a stark choice for modern farming. Factory methods or die. In *Last Farmer* Shaun Belcher documents this fading agricultural golden age that never was and shows the human side of over zealous pesticide salesmen and downtrodden rural labourers. The golden pastures that never were here fade into golf-courses and all night shopping malls.

Growing up in what used to be Berkshire before a line on the map was rewritten, these poems excavate the tragic spoiling of not just the soil itself but of those that depended upon it. Gone are the happy country swains and in their place come the refugees herded into white vans at midnight and lost at the station at daybreak. Belcher has been described as vituperative. Certainly there is an anger in these words about what has and is still being lost.

Alongside these stark tombstones to the countryside are some explorations of what growing up in the middle of England in the mid 20th century really meant. Belcher draws on rural myth and folktale as well as American popular culture so there is a keen sense of how all of this impacts on the sense of 'Englishness'. Raised but a stones throw from the glittering prizes and towers of Oxford this is the other side of the fence writing drawing on a deep sense of working-class roots that is still looking for a common tongue

“... a concern for language and for how it shapes memory and identity.”
Anna Crowe

“Belcher cannot be accused of nostalgia or pastoral myth-making but is as vituperative in tone as Larkin.”
Raymond Friel

“... the poems... individually and cumulatively preserve aspects of identity and genealogy rooted in a particular soil and way of life.....an underlying humanness.”
Stewart Conn

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Further information at <http://www.shaunbelcher.com>



Shaun Belcher is an artist and poet, originally from Oxford, now an academic lecturer in Nottingham. He has written poetry since his mid-20's, influenced by his rural upbringing as well as wider themes of dislocation and global technologies. Last Farmer is his first publication.