

GRASS CLOUDS



SHAUN BELCHER

poems 2002-2022

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Publications

Last Farmer: Salt Modern Poets Pamphlet 2010

The Ice Horses: Shore poets Anthology : Scottish Academic Press 1996

Poems in various magazines including

Staple, Southfields, Slowdancer, Gairfish, Oxford Poetry,

Odyssey, Fatchance, Envoi, Poetry London Newsletter, Bound Spiral,

Interactions etc.

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SHAUN BELCHER

"If God had wanted us to play football in the clouds, he'd have put grass up there"

Brian Clough

poems from the poetry bench

Nottingham 2002-2022

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Shaun Belcher

Born Oxford, England in 1959 and brought up on a down-land farm before moving to the small town of Didcot, near Oxford, England in 1966.

He studied fine art at Hornsey College of Art, London from 1979–81.

He began writing poetry in the 1980s and has subsequently been published in a number of small magazines and a poem used as the title of the Shore Poets Anthology 'The Ice Horses' (Scottish Cultural Press 1996).

He now lives in Nottingham, England after two years in Edinburgh studying folk culture and several years in the city of expiring dreams otherwise known as Oxford.

After several years as an academic art lecturer he has returned to writing alongside his other artistic practices as this the fastest way to achieve total penury he knows.

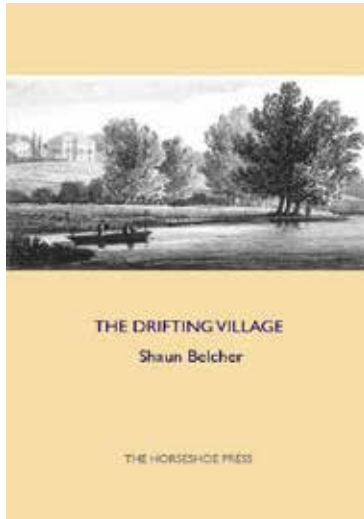
A selection of poems was published as 'Last Farmer' in the Salt Modern Voices Series in 2010.

Edwin Smith: *Catching Light* was a R.I.B.A. commission to accompany an exhibition of his photographs at the R.I.B.A. building London in 2014.

Lost Nottingham was a project shown at Nottingham Poetry Festival in 2018.

My Father's Things was an illustrated sequence shown at Castle Ruins III Nottingham 2019

He is currently working on a new volume of poems called 'Substitute' due in Fall 2022.



My thanks to the following publications paper and online where some of these poems have appeared originally.

The Drifting Village, The Weaver's Lament and Rivers I have Visited appeared in Staple 64 The East Midlands Issue.

Greyhound in Frost appeared in the Guardian workshop selected by Ruth Fairlight in October 2004

Three Oxford Sermons, The Drifting Village and

The Weaver's Lament appeared in the Salt Publications Modern Voices Series as 'Last Farmer' in 2010 which is now O.O.P.

My Father's Crashes

We could tell by the engine
When my father's truck was home.
The diesel engine would vibrate
The windows as he reversed in.

My mother would boil the kettle at 5pm
Knowing he would arrive.
Three times in five years he did not
arrive on time.

One time back-ended by a Lotus
That shattered like an Xmas bauble.
He spent half an hour prising glass fibre shards
From the wheel arch.

Another time he and my Uncle John
Arrived ashen faced.
Drank tea before they talked.
Both cheated death as a car span toward them.

Finally he retired and bought a smaller van
But grew tired of working then grew tired
As the cancer ate away his stomach.
My mother made tea at five pm every day just the same.

Until one day he didn't make it.

The Return

A rippling of stalks
raspberry bushes twirling
the flare of green bean flowers
along a row of canes

River, mirror, sky
as chalk whorls rise and twist
up the farm tracks
and dust the cornflowers

Celandines, chrysanthemums, marigolds
a garden breathing colour
as the sky deepens
toward thunder and showers

A torrent later, pools of milk
as the troop train steams in
a taxi drags a figure home
to an empty hearth, thorns

A bed of weeds, nettles and briars
the overgrown presence of neglect
that first night she watched him
fearful he would fade at daylight

Landlocked

Tied to a flat land
Of reclaimed pits and winding river
The railway has gone
Coal blackened tracks have grown over
Every wind caresses its absence
The silent factories know their part
But cannot speak, chains hold fast
Beyond pale gates and security huts
Poppies and cow parsley, ragwort and buddleia
A necklace of flowers around the empress lines
The slag of the steel rails is buried deep
Rusting wires rippling with plastic
Where prisoners of war once huddled
Now euro-workers assemble market stalls every Sunday
Chatter into cheap mobiles, pocket loose change
Against backdrops of power station, Tesco and trains
Midnight and bodies tumble from white van crates
In the empty parkway
Duck and dive and gulp clean air
Before swimming beyond the broken chain-link.



Down-land ballad

Fully five acres further east
and fifty years on from Harwell's neutron beam photo-disintegration
a clump of Queen Anne's Lace* wavers like a bridesmaid's posy
above the quarried chalk and flint of this erased line.
The track that gravelled and iron girded once
carried trundling freight to Southampton docks and salt air.
Like a distant memory of past expectations
I wander through past journeys, delineations
chew on the fresh air like a discontented Wordsworth
now free, free to roam where I will
But nothing is moving here these days, no air pulses
through the gilded corn, American maize is rigid
All rhythm, rhyme and reason curtailed
but for the hover of Kite and wizz of combustion engines
I'm left standing in a shower of butterflies,
climate driven, wheeling
baffling the constant walkers and their dogs with
showers of atoms, as they spin into extinction.
The land is porous, half soaked with the elixir
and charms of the abandoned plastic barrels concoctions.
A squadron of rooks bank and wheel in tight formation
land and beaks probe at all the matter before them.
Beady eyed they cannot count the consequences
of all that steel now disappearing from the horizon.



In a damp corner of a thatched cottage
an artist* peels Queen Anne's Lace from the paper
Dips it gently into a brimming tray of liquid
and the fusion of paper and molecules of silver re-arranging
maps a negative of stalk, leaf and stamen.
Up north the furnaces fizzle and peak for the century.
Sheffield steel, Welsh coal, Cornish tin, the land exhausted
pot-marked and reclaimed in a thousand regeneration schemes,
The process of covering the tracks of a century of production
is taken up by rose bay willow herb, buddleia and oxford ragwort,
each seeking to mask the brick and fence beneath it.
In the laboratory the encased hand holding the uranium phial quivers
as an owl is lit by a police cars headlights on the perimeter.
Its flash of white against a wilderness of dark down-land
like that brief explosion, that jolt of life in a vacuum.
The century starts to implode
draws itself as a negative image, trickles, spits and fuses
the image of a landscape removed becomes these islands.
The bromide stains her fingers, the plant collapses into stalk and seed
as she raises its negative to the kitchen window.
She stands looking at it again in the porch-light amidst the blackout
realising that all this movement above and below, these planes, these tanks
hurtling towards the coast and far fields of France are dying already
A moth sings against the candle flame, erupts into vapour, darkness.

* local Oxfordshire name for Cow Parsley which it resembles

** Eileen Sherwood-Moore artist of Blewbury, Berkshire (1909-1998) experimented with photograms

The drifting village

Deep in the sleet
Forward-slanted, rimed with ice
the cottage, wrecked and the tree
catching a fire on a winter's eve.
Stars and a dance of the dead
across hills and exotic trees
brought in from ships at Tilbury
and carted to the master's door.
The crackle of horsehair chairs
and splintered bed timbers collapsing.
All that remained of Bab
and what Bab held dear.
Like a frail cross the tree smouldered
then burnt to the ground
reminding the assembled multitude
of their right and true position.
Then, heads bowed on her behalf,
with a tear here and there
At her body still warm in the ground
they felt the village tug one last time,
then slip from their fingers

Like the mooring ropes a river away
being loosed from the India Docks
as particles of spice drifted loose
from briny planks fell into eyes
She had held that village like a hulk
in its original berth.
Stopped it sliding up from the floodplain
to the master's new dock on the hill.
Now a three century gap gone
the same village a berth for commuters
watches as the water floods once more
as if it had found its true course.
All the spilt contents bobbing on a sea of silt
the mobiles, the dvds the trash of the eastern shore
All cascading just like that submerging barque
A hundred years before slid back to the river plain
And settles into its original image
marking out her last resting place like a chalky line
a scuzz of empire flashing like flags on the mud
her tree's new roots a catchment of time.

Barbara Wyatt resident of Nuneham Courtney village refused to leave her tree when the Harcourt family moved the village for landscape improvements. It is probable that Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village' was based on this village.

In 2007 the new village (now a commuter village near Oxford) was flooded as a result of a local farmer's mistaken attempt to alter a drainage pattern.

Mapping rain

I have swum my way through several maps
Each more frayed than the last
Curled, split or stained
A map of each place I have lost.
We canter through each day
Skidding across the surface of a place
But in my mind's eye the old net remains.
A path from blood, to bone to grave.
On a summer's jaunt down a chalky lane
Between river meadow and cow parsley banks
White froth against the sky's inky stain
As thunder hovered across the lakes
I walk you home with dog and lead
Back through the circling sky's rain
We will always be transfixed
In the lens of the fish we raised
Half-dead from the green nets
And choked back to life in your gaze
This map ends at the river's mouth
Lines blurred, losing our place.

The Green Light

I think of you now
Head down against a biting northern wind
Scudding sleet across frozen tarmac
On a day of gunmetal sky
And office lights burning at noon.
The town's Christmas bulbs
Shake along the Broadway
Tossing back and forth
Above your truck
Stalled for a second at a red light.

I'm not going anywhere
You told me, not here
You need to move on.
Hunch your shoulders, bite your lip
Press on
And prove me right.

The writing desk

Tre-foiled and punctured to dust by tiny worms across the decades
The last draw crumbled to the touch, slats collapsing into chalky ash

My father swinging the last draw and the worn leather desk-top
Into the metal barrel of smoke and with a crackle it was gone
The writing desk that had lain empty for four decades in a front room
Then spent another decade empty in my parent's hallway

Present of a benevolent employer my grandparents never used it
I would peel back its lid secretly running small hands inside it
Sunlight shining on the brassy polish as my step-grampy sparked another pipe
Sat reading a child's comic, learnt to read at fifty-four

Eyes travelling slowly across the back of words like cattle each day in the field
Sparks like igniting straw stubble flickering in lines away across the hill
So I travelled slowly, wary of the desk
Wary of its closed message, secret compartments
Wary of the world it opened out to
Preferred the comfort of the dark field

As my real grandfather's DNA curled like runner beans
Along the canes of another life, another world
The truth in silence, the crackle of wood

Secrets crumbling to ash in a downland bowl.

Halos

They said the barn reeked of the smell
for weeks afterwards, their ghostly halos
were etched on the barn's hard mud floor
like the chalk horse on the downs.

I looked up from my farmer's memoirs
as a helicopter buzzed across the T.V. screen
and Thatcher's grizzled yet ashen face
raged between panning shots of their bodies.

Two corpses circled with chalk
as a priest bent over them and touched pale skin.
No marks but the burn marks, the singed hair
and the surprised expressions that it should end here.

Not in a suburban bedroom, but here in the open
Working for a boss they never met, fingers welded to their tools
Until that moment when the lightning struck and magnetized
each hammer and nail were prised from trigger fingers.

Rivers I have visited.

Sluggish muddy dousers the Thames back waters.
Trickles between fissured Spanish clay banks in heat.
Spates of broad westward pouring Trent.
Skittish tributaries of Thame and Isis.
I loll half-awake in a Nottingham front room
Walking the banks of every one I can recall
Looking for a path back to the source.
A place to call home or at least a port of call.
Maybe the vast cold slab of the Clyde
Pressed down like butchers marble between banks.
The storm drains of summer in Spain full of trash.
A stink of Thames mud at Rotherhithe.
But none come into focus they all skim by.
My rivers have become one lost and vast
Body of water surrounding my island now.
There is only the cold glint of a pc screen
Distracting me like rising gulls on a spring tide.
Where is the peace of staring at a single line,
A bobbing float, and the chatter through the bushes
Of father and uncle untying a snagged spool.
The simple acts that are lost on the cyber air.
Flash animations dance across the screen,
Unreeling in fake pictures of Leonardo's machines.
They bob and fly then bob again endlessly....endlessly
With no respite they slip by like a river of signs.
Endless signifiers of another dimension lost.
There is nothing beneath the surface.
We stand and stare helplessly into the glare

The Broken Hoe

the sheered hoe
in between nettle and wire
bleeding red rust
in front of the horse trough
the air sticky with midges
the afternoon black with thunder
the heart racing at the sound
of black clouds hitting the tin
roof of a shed
somewhere half way up
a chalk track
diesel drips onto leaves
we perspire, lick teeth
stumble and disappear
into cow parsley slumber beds
no guidance here
no map, no sound
I whistle at dog bones
that clatter down the gravel
like a thunder storm stream
blood ties mingling in with oil and tar
feathers floating in the grain bins
stones hot in the palm
and a thousand miles of chalk
from here to France
all that whiteness painting me blank
with my broken hoe

Gun chimes

On the far side of an evening
Of damp river grass and blinking streetlamps
Of dogs barking across the gardens
I sit and catch time in my hands

A fox slinks through the lamps
And out on the river's edge
As cats flicker under porch-lights
A wind-chime tinkles incessantly

An empty boat nudges the mud bank
As a cycle light bobs past
And above the city traffic a siren
Somewhere out of sight, out of mind

I miss your heartbeat mapping the hours
Between 5 a.m. and dawn
Your smell and taste before the light bursts
Across the closed curtains and empty cars

I would fish you out of that far city now
Pull you here through the wet grass
On a silver line woven tight
Between my fingers I'd cling tight to you

Feeling the lurch of each short embrace
The spinning flash of your eyes
Caught in that dark and matted weed
We'd tumble through the pitch black night

There are no sharks here any more
Just the drowsy glow of tropical fishtanks
The steady drip of distant music
From the disco boat's tannoy to engulf us

Dock leaves shiver with the blast
Of another crooner singing his heart out
Whilst somewhere further north blood is leaking
From another shattered chamber on to tarmac

I grip this line tighter and cling
To the safety of the known in everything
One false lunge, one hair trigger
And I too will empty myself on to the fox's grin

Chalk skulls

Three rings round a shiny target and it's yours
amidst the clatter and pop of fairground stalls
burning like a new constellation fallen to earth
I clutched the small plaster skull in my fist.
A booth trinket. A choice between that
and a fading, chipped plaster angel fish.
We moved on. My father and I.
Past a mud splattered generator pumping
grey clouds across the dark wet grass.
First thing I'd ever won. 12 years old.
I found it last winter. Turned it up in an old box.
Then noticed the carved inscription on it.
I'd made all those years before.
Shaun Belcher. 11th September 1971. Wallingford Fair.
I held it as my father, now in his seventies,
bent to the garden, his back to me
cuts away at the heavy clay soil.
The flint, chalk and clay, turning over again
as my own thoughts spiral back over years
to the dusty stubble fields of late summer.
My step granddad and his collie
arcing in loops across the Oxfordshire fields
tracking imaginary pheasants and hares.
The dog that ground to a panting halt
saliva dripping under the kitchen table.
So we too shall come to our end.
All our skulls, man and beast
flaking and turning to powder in the black soil
like this skull, a plaster moon, thrown at the stars.

White gloss

White gloss, shiny as a skating rink
dripping with spring invention
down the north London sun-stroked suburbs
and all around the falling blossom
drifting into piles in kerbside and drain
to wait for the summer rains.

All this quiet lapping from tin to sill
in the hands of refugees looking for a ladder up
from cockroaches and crumbling frames
of old towns and new box rooms.

Her hands are red and soft from washing
in the basement of this newly painted mansion.
When the fireworks exploded over Hampstead Heath
she was face down on the bed sobbing.

As her employees argued and shouted at the kids
she tore her last letter home to pieces.
She wiped her eyes and clung to the fresh
white glossed sill, felt her blackening eye
as it reflected in the perfect shine.

Thunder like distant raids rattling the pane.

The Weaver's Lament

His* aging hands clumsy with the straws
that jerk into the shape of head and arms
of his latest creation.
If I were you I'd be using old wire not grass,
a handful of gravel, some chalk
moulding it against some concrete wall.
Instead of dancing away like this between sand
and arum, a twirling of lines
like the nets of a trawler gathering in
all the sweet silver off the plates.
No I am not you and never will be
but instead cling to a windless plain of grass
betwixt down-land and river. To knot, plat
these celandines and daisies into a country
of the mind is now beyond me I realise.
My harvest is fields of brick and mortar,
the dance of plastic in gutters.
Not the wilderness I read and dreamed.
An airliner passes overhead, a ship loose
with its million electrical veins coiled inside
and a hundred passenger hearts beating like yours
as you tried to haul your island in, nail it flat
to capture the salt tide, the dunes forever.
To catch it all in your cradling palms.

*Angus Macphee – outsider artist born on Scottish island of South Uist
Created artworks from knitted grass. Spent adult life in institutions.

The Rover man

He sat, firm and erect, on the park bench,
hands wrapped around his white stick
his milky eyes fixed on thirty years before
as we walked toward him.

He recognized my uncle immediately by voice
and smiled in our direction, gaze still fixed.
They'd worked together at the Oxford car plant
for almost twenty years.

My uncle blinking through the paint shop clouds
his gloves and goggles clogged with paint
whilst upstairs this man worked in admin
below the ticking clock-tower.

He'd been enveloped in his milky world
since that day in 1943 when a German bomb
he was trying to defuse exploded
the flash burning out his sockets.

He had worked every day through strike
and shutdown, militants and shirkers, managers
and scabs. Had seen the business collapse
into a heap of mangled parts. Bust and boom.

Now the site is owned by BMW
and that clock-tower has collapsed into a heap of rubble,
that my uncle sighs as he drives past the
new industrial park landscaping and fountains.

An industry and a community gone in a flash.

The newsreels of the factory gates burn on the lens
as consultants ditch the site and reinvest
Money or bombs...it's the same effect.

Painting the step

With the regularity of a slow clock
the tin of paint was got out
and the step repainted
a dull crimson that declared
the house cared for, lived in
a place of solid repute.
Within days the scuff
of heel and tarred boots
took away the shine, the rouge
as if some careless kiss
had smudged a showgirl's lips
and what you were left with was plain
muddied concrete, the hard facts
of struggle and keeping going
on a labourer's wages mid-century
so I stood and watched my mother
and my mother's mother wield
that loaded brush that dripped
like spatters of blood
across the chalk dusted steps
after my sister's birth
the ebb and flow
of a century of female labour
rinsed at the kitchen sink
and brought back to life.

Chalk wings

Pinned to the chalk scarp like a moth
in a Victorian frame
watching tractors dust their way through a summer evening
I catch myself then brim full of ideas.
An eternal optimist careering on a bicycle
between dark hedges and chalk tracks.
Always believing the country at my back
would support me as sturdily as that grass
covered down where I lay back and watched
a glider glint in the sun then bank
and slip eastward toward a rising moon.

Now I don't have that bicycle, those hopes
but something inside has welled up like
spring-water through acres of arid plough-land
and I see things, if not afresh, at least
from a different angle through freshened eyes
as the rain courses through these Oxford gutters
and swirls with the first leaves of autumn.

I'm caught like a glider in a thermal
my heart lifting off from the dry ground
the caked mud I clung to all my adult life
as if I'd die without it grounding me

I drift away from thorns, and bones... and flames.

Three Oxford Sermons.

written on 4.9.01...pre 11.09.01 and all that followed.

Our Hatred

Is an object, a ball of lead shot
I carry in my stooping frame.
It has grown, layer upon layer,
like a stone in the gut
each time I see a smug, ruddy faced
son or daughter of the shires
walk blindfold through these doors.

They do not stop, for they carry no guilt.
It is washed free of their hands each day
by the sure-footed minions who keep
the ticking clock ticking, the fountain fed
The trout swimming in the moat, the hedges well kept.
All so that power may be maintained
and their God-given purpose blessed.

Were they that blind in Victoria's reign
that they did not see the bubbling corpses,
fly-blown dotted across their maps
or were they already such fanatics, lost in biblical phrases,
pure King James and Wesleyan hymnals
that each dead pagan was already a soul saved.

Now the maps are reversed, repainted and
the empire has slow-dissolved from pink to white and red.
As a new dogma falls from the T.V's secular pulpit
the truth of democracy, the right of goodness falls
upon those who deserve it whatever their creed
but the result is the same
tents and bibles and corpses riddled with gentles.

Politics, more or less.

We do not write of politics.
We write of actions and death.
There is no margin for solace.
There is only the facts or less.

The corpses burning are counted.
Their collapse noted down.
So that posterity may judge
them martyrs or villains or less.

We wrap ourselves as a nation
in blankets of powder and guns.
And stand on the chalk hills
defying the invader to come.

But the myths have all grown tawdry
the broken-spined bible spills forth
welcome to the first 19th century war
you can read about winning before it's launched.

Colony

A gentle space, a path of land beyond words
is all I ask now from this threadbare seat
as the drizzle of language washes through
the gutters and stains the skirts of Oxford
A place free of the shackles of past and blood
where free-born men can stand alone
in the muddied fields and not be called
back to the shearing, the grit and the chaff
clogging the lungs, or the spores of industry
that dribble down their chin at morning.
No more nightmares of the steel press slamming
arms into oblivion every time they wake.
Born to an open field, twenty years in a cot
twisted by the accident, his wife mops him down
each evening as the speedway hums on the city rim
and another van squeezed with immigrants pulls in
to a lay-by in a pitch black night of no moon
and currency blows across the nettles
In another week fresh hands are washing dishes
no questions asked beside the high table
under portraits of men who ransacked
their villages in the 1870's they squirm
to avoid the buzz of the drunken chatter
these ghosts of an empire returned
Then one girl in each silver dish she passes
sees the reflections of Nuffield's factory scarred men
twin ghosts of the machinery of privilege
dancing in the chandelier's flame.

White Hyacinths

You in the fume of white hyacinths
blown across this London park.
Your ghost inhabiting others
like the girl sat opposite yesterday

writing in a book, then reading
as her charge played in the sandpit.
A break from her nanny's duty.
She looked a little like you, French, not Spanish.

Then today another girl, another book.
I didn't stop to look this time
but walked once more around the borders
not noticing the hyacinths fume, eyes almost watering.

Then your ghost walked away
hand outstretched to the child in me
a reminder of how good then how bad things had been
of how quickly hyacinths wilt in spring.

The Ghost Shell

For weeks after
the room still held you
like an empty shell grips
its absent occupant
the December sun
shafting through a plankton sea
of swirling dust
the only activity
but for the dull thud
of my heart inside my ribs
my eyes brimming
as I ran my hand
along the blue carpet
touching your absence
in the still indented marks
of chair and desk
as if touching
those ridges
could somehow convince
my heart you were really gone
I lift that room up in my mind
now like a shell
and listen for the sea
but have lost your voice
you are gone
like salt brushed from skin, sand tipped from shoe
yet I carry a fragment of shell forever deep
in my heart's chamber.

The Electric Brae

Where atlantic winds curl the barley stalks back inland
And sea salt tangs the lips, I once stood motionless
As our wedding party stopped the car and we watched
It gently roll uphill towards the moon.

A trick of perspective, bewitching the eye
We watched the illusion unfurl, eyes tricked into seeing a new world.
Holding you now I think of the Montgolfier Brothers, hands red raw
As they struggled to hold down a duck, a sheep, and a rooster

Seeing their hopes rising toward that new world in defiance
Of the black soil, the dirt sucking at boots and hooves.
With the right partner any landscape can fall away
Unfurl like a tattered cloak below the swinging basket.

Dizzy the old maps turn to land, the stars become creatures
As I wrap the whole world around your shoulders.
Hold me as we fly up like Chagall's bride and groom
Through cold night air tasting the salt from off the ocean.

Believe me and the heavens will open, the barley fields spin
And as a world turns upside down
We'll breathe fire in the face of every trick of the wind.

*The Electric Brae – name for a hill on the Ayrshire coast where a trick of perspective gives impression that a downhill road is rising.

Greyhound in frost

With every leaf and twig gilded with frost
And the park phosphorous in a pink dawn
The dog stands motionless, half dead
A sign for speed unread, unseen
And a dozen crows lift off behind it
Replaying a Breughel painting
And the air seems to vibrate with their wings
As silent you stand entranced, enmeshed
In a frame of the last century
Before the coronation or the foundry spat blood
Mincing your arm to a pulp
Between the stamping press's glittering steel
And now one-armed you stand beside your dog
Calling it to run headlong into history
On a morning when nothing much moves
Even the container lorries are stacked up at Dover
You both stand and glint on the edge of this city
Your boots glazed with the frost
The dog's blinking the only movement
Its heart racing, a suburban Stubbs
We are all glued to our place in the scheme
Like hares glued to the rails
You and I and that dog are measured by a painters eye
as shares flicker on screens beyond us.

Selected by Ruth Fainlight and for the Guardian Poetry Workshop October
2004.. Read her response here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/19/poetry13>

The Shipstone Stars

Red lead rain lashed to pink
hangs like a soviet star
on the left side of Nottingham's tunic.
Always east facing, a towering symbol.

The dawn of a century personified, rusts
above a city of casual workers, bicycles
and the hard slogging dutiful dead
who fleck fields from the Rhone to the Rhine.

Never facing the river, that westward
leaches mud from peak and meadow.
The dried, limed stench of rutted tracks
lining the willow barks of Derby and Leicester.

Gables glossed white upon lace-curtained
suburban fuchsias, trimmed lawns and empty trailers.
Safety in numbers as the suburbs huddle
into its coat from Bramcote to Beeston.

Cattle slide into ditches, barges grind
at their moorings as floods flow on toward
dry fens gasping for this summer downpour.

The star remains firm, but tatty.
A remnant of a fading imperial industrial glory.
Cheap imports in containers trundle round the ring-road
headed for Poundland, Primark and Ikea.

We died for this, these rain-sodden shires
whisper the ghosts in the graveyards
as hooded boys on BMXs spin on street corners.
In a damp bedsit a shelf-stacker from Warsaw
lifts a Samurai Sword from the wall and mimes
the DVD still stuck on play on the monitor.

Star and blade flash for a second and are gone.

The storm lashes the window.

The Shipstone Star shines black on a white sky.



Writing poetry is easy

It's the easiest thing in the world
It's the way you hit the tone right off
Twist the line and let the reader just dangle
In that particularly British and modern
Way - yes you can even let it run
On and you can affect the merest
Trace of the French symbolists without
Ever missing a beat, que sera sera
And how gorgeous you feel when
It all fits like a poodle in its waistcoat
And then it all falls apart
The joy, the effortless sheen
And you're left staring at the
Miserable rain-sodden park
Where a rat scurries through the trees
And your head swells to contain it all,
The grafittied bandstand, the exposed flesh
The refugees on their black bicycles
Flashing their grins at a new world
That sparkles like silver from every leaf
And you cry, a gentle sobbing
That pours out like rain off the bowling green
A steady drip from the tennis court chain-link
As you replay yourself being happy
In another life that bled to death.

Here endeth Poems 2001-2011



EDWIN SMITH – Catching Light

2014

“I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Someday, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.”

Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, *Berlin Stories*, (1945)

The whole sequence can be heard read on soundcloud here:

<https://soundcloud.com/horseshoe-tapes/sets/edwin-smith-catching-light>



KODAK BOX BROWNIE No.2 Model F. 127 Roll Film 1927

Trembling in a gloomy Camden Town bedroom surrounded by brown paper
The teenage boy gently prises the camera from the leather case, undoes the
catch

Traces the word BROWNIE [1] along the fake leather strap, caresses the box
The textured cardboard leatherette warm to the touch, he raises it to his eyes
Spins around to catch a glimpse of lace curtains breathing in and out
Then a pause, stops breathing, squints through spectacle glass and a blurry lens
No film, just retina, lens and glass glinting, quiet suburban air between the wars
Shutter pressed, the first image, undeveloped, untaken, unrecorded.



ICA IDEAL 205 Glass Plate 9x12 1935

A present from Marx and Nash ^[ii], same fake black leather case but much stronger
A hint of steel, hands now more relaxed, a world at his fingertips
The box finally clicks open, bellows a tiny lung, rangefinder, spirit level
Suddenly in Vogue, a London Atget spinning around fairs, cafes, Oxford Street
Zeiss Ikon Tessar 135mm f4.5 precision German lens and Compur shutter
The shop windows buzz with reflections, his spectacles stare back after
Nights spent in Lund Humphries ^[iii] experimenting with solutions, final prints
Days mixing it with emigrants and socialites, Focal Press tricks, ghost images. ^[iv]



CONTAX II 5cm Sonnar Lens 35mm 1936

Modernism in Kentish Town, a lens named after the sun, Sonnar
The lure of speed, futurism, the 35mm film spooling out of the movies
Twisting on that light yellow filter, $\frac{1}{2}$ a second at F4, the march of progress
Back to black-outs, air-raid fears, black shirts, Agfa Isochrom, Kodak Nikko
The thrill of a world intoxicated with power (v), dancing on a ledge, never falling
Café de Paris, Heppenstall, Orwell, men talking in gangs carrying knives
His finger presses the shutter on Laura Knight and Coco, the ballet, the fairs
Spin Pennies from Heaven, Zeppelins over the docks (vi), Germany calling.



THORNTON-PICKARD RUBY Quarter Plate 1904

Post-War, Deep England after Evans (vii), ash in the mouth, misericord darkness,
Light trickle slowly through lens, cat-one, cat-two, cat-three, whispered
People have become ghosts, 27 and a half minutes (viii) divining, digging into
time

A mahogany box worn to a gleam in a suitcase, mahogany tripod, Leeds, England
So solid, a step back from the sirens, modernist black and white, the emblems
Slow drizzle and fade, tilts into spires and thickets, empty barns, rigs of the time
His glinting spectacles at the viewfinder, crouching like a sniper, waiting
Hiding his camera under vestry tables, a quiet man in a corner, hooded.



GRAFLEX SPEED GRAPHIC Roll Film 1960

Movement, travel, portables, Made in New York, focal plane, press camera

The fruits of success, lease-lend to never had it so good, the wide angle

The New Europe, Ireland, Italy, Greece and France, the Ensign Autorange

Searching for the same mellow light, that photograph in the mind always

Then back weeks later to the darkroom in deepest England, the bleaching

Hours lightening shadows, clearing highlights with Potassium Ferricyanide,
poison (ix)

Chemical arts, sleights of hand, shade in the palm of the hand, fission and fusion

His collecting eye adding the coin to the wishing well, staring at the sun. (x)



ENSIGN AUTORANGE 820 120 roll film 1955

'Co-operating with the inevitable', he called it, 'bend with the stream'
Holding the Ensign Autorange up to the light it reflects in his spectacles
Bought in 1955 the last camera he held, English made, Walthamstow
The firm almost disappeared when in 1940 the offices in Holborn bombed
All surviving he stands with Olive to watch stubble burning in 1971
Squinting through a crisp and sharp Ross Xpres lens at the flaring
Feeling the silver body in the palm, the faux leather Ensign logo
Epsilon shutter pressed, a last image, taken, undeveloped,

catches light forever.(xi)

References:

[i] Edwin Smith redeemed the Kodak Box Brownie by collecting Corn-Flake packet coupons probably in 1927 (EWELL, 2008)p.11.

[ii] Friend Enid Marx gave Edwin Smith a better camera in 1935 shortly after he got married Olive Smith reports this as the Contax but as Ewell points out that not released until 1936. (EWELL, 2008)p.13.

[iii] Enid Marx was connected to The Royal College and Smith's photographs came to the attention of Paul Nash who encouraged Smith and gave him access to the darkrooms at the publisher Lund Humphries. (EWELL, 2008)

[iv] Smith co-wrote and published a series of Focal Press guides from 1938-1940. (SMITH, 1940)

[v] Ewell reports the trip Smith made with his sponsor Sir Albert Talbot Wilson MP, a fervent pro-Nazi, to Germany at this time. (EWELL, 2008)p.19.

[vi] The German airship Graf Zeppelin made spying raids probably equipped with aerial photography equipment of a high resolution on the 30th June 1936 and this was reported in Hansard on the 8th July 1936. The Parliamentary exchange highlights the naivety of some in Government which bordered on complicity. (Hansard, 1936)

[vii] Frederick H. Evans, British Pictorialist photographer famous for the Sea of Steps photograph taken in Wells Cathedral which Smith took a version of in 1956. A major influence on the Cathedral and Parish Church series.

[viii] Smith would time exposures using the cat phrase and replace the lens cap on exposures that could last up to 27 minutes thus removing all trace of human activity. (EWELL, 2008)p.52.

[ix] Smith mixed his own chemicals. After his death a large amount of Potassium Ferricyanide was found in his possession. The chemical is a poison and the Ilford Manual of Photography recommends disposing in drains with plenty of water to reduce the risk. Source: Roy Hammans note to article Ways of Working on The Weeping Ash photography website. Accessed 31.10.2014. (HAMMANS, 2011)

[x] The Edwin Smith RIBA exhibition highlights the trick Smith used during the Fylindales printing of placing a coin on the paper to create an image of the sun where none had been.

[xi] The circumstances of this last roll of film being left in Smith's camera and only being developed years later are detailed on the Weeping Ash website. Source: The Last Exposures. Accessed 31.10.2014 (HAMMANS, 2011)

SHAUN BELCHER

BURNING BOOKS



SHAUN BELCHER

HORSESHOE PRESS MINI PAMPHLET No.1



The 'Mini Pamphlet' 'Burning Books' (2017) was published to coincide with Theresa May's attempt to drive this country even further to the right....little did we know how much worse things would get.

Eight poems about politics, books and poetry to be given away free at the Jermy and Westerman reading with Rosie Garner on Wednesday 26th of April as part of Nottingham Poetry Festival

Awfully Middle Class

There is something about poetry in England
That is awfully nay terribly Middle Class
Something not quite right in the hands of a worker
Sibilants dribbling like snot from the poor man's nose

Wiping its sleeve on the tasteful tablecloth of power
Always waiting to be found out or at least held up
As an exemplar of the erudite working class chap
Even that Larkin fellow wasn't a chav was he darling

Then the skirmishes with the Leftist proletarians
Or the Rightists in their towers quaffing champers
No never quite right, never accepted as kosher
Little piggy faces pressed to the literary crown jewels

In 1992 I gate-crashed an Oxford University poetry bash
Crept along corridors I had no right to be in
After another day serving the arrogant little sods
And after much prevarication finally made it in

Les Murray, sitting like an antipodean Buddha
Laughing like a Boetian at the Athenian Temple
Then he slowly let rip with poems from Dog Fox Field
Words circling the pews like a fox in a henhouse
I walked up shook his hand said thank you
And skedaddled before they set the hounds loose

COLLATERAL (for D.D.*)

Windows shake, tyres screech
Litter blows across the estate
Gunshots ricochet as sound
The Divis Flats, Brixton Market

Beirut, Jerusalem, Sarajevo
A baby cries, a baby cries
The broadcast stops, the helicopter hovers
There's a smell of cordite, a cold wind

A face you have seen before on the news
Starting to dissolve in a pall of smoke
Gravestones, a line of mourners, a hearse
More tracking shots, more candles to light

The post-war peace has been noisy
All night the rain streaking the vans
As another round up begins
Difference is a slogan, tolerance fades
Hope drifts downstream like radium
Whitewashing concrete stained with blood

We can carry on, we can care even more
The trains will run, the tide will turn
The supremacists will make everything alright
The same arguments start again and again
Tube trains fill with dust and smoke
Collateral damage drips through the door

You choose what to believe, what to see
As another herd of innocents die in a cellar
The missing migrant is pushed into the sea
Sixty years of peace in Europe a lie
From the Balkans to Ukraine this is total war
An iron curtain swinging in the breeze

In the morning a cold silent light
A white horse streaked with blood and lame
Dragging itself to a poisoned stream
The crusaders horse is then shot full of holes
Its body carried away on a torrent of pain.

Collateral: The ghost in the Western dream.

D.D. is David Dixon the only British person to die in the Brussels Tube Train attack.

Become Invisible

(for John Carson)

John was his name, I forgot the surname until now
But I remember his words in the Edinburgh Gallery
As I joked about being a 'serious' poet
He was already in late 40s must be retired now
He looked me dead in the eye and said
No I mean it 'stay serious.. we need serious poets'

I had visited his home, an inspirational teacher
His daughter was confined to a wheelchair
I never forgot his words, what they really meant
Twenty years later his study of invisibility in hand
I ponder their weight, the cost of being serious
The cold rational cost of telling the truth

I thought I was a serious poet then, thinking it became me
Or so I thought, reading, reviewing, first published
But something was going wrong, gnawing away good intentions
The serious business of poverty, buying leftover food
Numbing data entry to survive, the lies of agencies

Serious was fine, serious cost me dear, tore holes
Giant moths ate my beautiful career, the garment fell apart
Not then and there, basking in the autumn sun on Arthur's Seat
Then we were smiling the world lay before us and shone
Right then I thought I could do anything, fame a step away
But as the cars sparkled in Craigmiller the sleet came

We shivered, held each other as it spattered our cheap coats
You hugged me said hold on, I couldn't and dragged you home
Back to Oxford, a poet returning from exile to be lauded
Surely this time I would be carried on to higher things
But you knew the cards were marked told me to fight on
Nearing Oxford you noticed the trees were all behind walls

Holed up in a terrace in Nottingham now with pen and paper
I cling to the broken promises, those simple words
Stay serious, don't give up the fight, keep on keeping on
No restraints, no agencies, no academics to be waited upon
Sorting through a cloud of dust as I sort my books
Putting things in place. The Oxford Professor of Poverty.

Become Invisible.*

Refers to John Carson's essay 'The Concept of Invisibility – the Redress of Poetry' 1996. An examination of working class writing in Scotland. It features Duncan Maclean, James Kelman, Alasdair Gray and Hugh MacDiarmid.

Postcard to Okinawa

Leaves the hand
The post office disintegrating
Still air rising

ACRONYMS

W.V.M.

For months after his death
I would still hear and see his lorry
The diesel engine
The two men drinking from a flask
Headed home
The ghost of a W.V.M

C.H.A.V.

I lived most of 40 years
On a council estate
I never saw one punch thrown
Except at me
By a schoolboy who missed
His father owned a yacht.

Rust

Overnight every university building
In the city of dreaming spires
Had been covered in a patina of rust
In some cases it was flaking away in sheets
In others places spots grew like spores on chrome
It never went away

There was consternation
Everything looked the same
The spires burnt ochre red in the low sun
Turner's famous view had a reddish tinge
The whole place was turning to rust
Looked like a scrapyard some said

There was a debate in Parliament
There were letters in the Oxford Mail
Something had to be done
'Oxford turns red' the Sun gloated
Some saw it as a political satire
Others as aesthetically pleasing

Slowly people got used to it
Some started selling fragments of Oxford Rust in jars
The postcard people had to start a whole new line
Where there's muck there's brass was the ticket
The all new 'City of Rusting Spires'
Was easy to advertise on social media

Then someone noticed that the Heads on the Camera
Were each oozing a blood-like substance from the eyes
The rust now started to clog the gutters
It fell in chunks on the Quads, flecked young ladies shoes
Tests were done and builders called in at once
To assess the chances of renovation or destruction

It was decided to sandblast the rust away at once
The scaffold and hoses were brought in for years
Finally the old dreaming spires reappeared
But something had been lost, it was a pale imitation
The rust had been an important part of the city
So they forgot about making cars and turned to phds



Matilda in the Snow

I remember the cold spell of 1962
My father's tractor dragging cars out of the ditches
The impenetrable whiteness of a world
Seeming to go on forever

From the gates of our down-land cottage
Nothing went further
From sky to cloud was one field
Nothing was all around us

There was just the flickering wood
Spitting in the grate
And the dog barking at shadows
Men bringing us damp wood to survive

Smoke choking the kitchen as it burned
My father wrapped in layers
Stamping ice onto the lino
Next morning the thaw started

The magic world slid away
Leaving the branches broken
The straight road outside
Breaking out again like a whale's back

The snow had been a blank page
A blanket at the end of my bed
A dizzying pattern etched across my window
A sore red hand, chilblains

From holding on to it too long
Years later I sang 'The White Hare'
Whilst digging a trench with my Dad
And heard of Matilda escaping from Oxford

Dragging cold feet away from the spires
Like me almost erased by a blizzard of snow
Wrapped in her white cloak
She slipped from one cold page to another

As the dog cut loose and sprinted ahead
Sleet crusting cloak and hands and eyes
Trying to keep to the line, to sing, or nothing.

The intention.



Working on a Building of Love

45s no centres, piled in a dusty box
For years I did not play them just played with them
Loved the colours and labels.. Pye, London, Atlantic
Spread out across my grandparent's front room

There was an old battered upright piano now never played
And a radiogram that I could never get to work
I used to spin the record anyway making the arm engage
Dropping the disc on to the turntable and spin...heard unamplified music

Net curtains always breathing in and out in summer rainstorms
Years went by until I found a way of plugging the radiogram in
I must have touched a bare wire..
My arm was thrown back against the wall and felt numb

Never mentioned it as knew I would be in trouble
I would never get to play with those 45s again
Even as an adult I returned and absconded with some items
Working on a Building of Love I still have
I am still playing. Reminds me of home, belonging... summer rain.



London Calling

Bright November evening 1981

Sweatbox of a venue Camden Ballroom W1

A sea of heads bobbing below a platform

The Clash and Mikey Dread. Rasta Cowboys.

I left the venue to drizzle and police sirens

And a ring of police wagons encircling us

Broadwater Farm waiting, Brixton happening

Camden dirty and ugly, fists and chains

London Calling to the far away towns

To Toxteth and Bristol and Handsworth

Misspent youths in dingy bus shelters

Rain damping down isolated fires all evening

I had no idea then that the decade to come

Would see riot police and cordons across the land

That those SPG troops in their vehicles grinning

Were just practicing for what was to come...

London Calling

A Poundland Sonnet

In the vacuous naughties the affluent thrum
Their chubby fingers on the card-less tills
As the slippery accountants of PWC and RBS swill
Their caviar down with Vive Cliqout at the parliamentary bash
The air is full of Quangos and insider trading slang
As the parade of yesterday's entertainers head for the tank
Never have so few been made rich by so many
Gated compounds reek of the stench of money
Whilst out in the gutter the poison rain flecks
The sequined shoes of the stars as the homeless wretch
Wherever a buck can be made from a paedophile story
With a false ID the hacks tear at the fraudulent lying
Satellites spin, every channel is a Clear Sign
We are all Poundland remainders now buried alive

A Wreckless Scheme

Paradise is a gold throw on a white leather sofa
Under the buttocks of a call-girl blowing a footballer
Indiscretion is a national pastime after cup-cake baking
Facebook ramming lives with other people's misfortune
Clear-eyed dreams of making it with the boys in the band
Dissolve in bleary orgies in the back of a camper van
Parrots and lizards scamper under screen saver skies
As the magpie landlords eye their prosperous finds
While celebrities promote books they never saw penned
As the cut crystal tinkles with the fizz of the vanity press
Screenwriters shuffle stories that have already been spent
Suggesting that our culture is bleeding to death
The tethered ox offers its throat to the knife
The Sun will always shine on the shittiest life

Doodlebugs

Doodlebug 1

Random thoughts spilling

Black vinyl tooth paste tablet

Rain shower plastic banjo

Birds drizzle James Bond

Across a scribble aviation fuel

Barcelona high-wire fly tourniquet

Dribble satisfaction core values

Professor of rainsquall Americana

Plantation melodies and weddings

Lampreys Richard fluffy dogs

Alarms craft beers cyanide

Isis working-class distressed

Scribble random thoughts

Jazz swing coalition damp

Crisis inflation spoon-fed

Dream cheers goodbye

Angelina and brad sting

Book charts death druids

Blank chords end strange

Doodlebug 2

Cutting to the quick

The rain shower pastes

The plane crashes

The banjo plays blue

Doodlebug 3

Crisis in management

Random thoughts

Blank cheques

Nowhere to land

Doodlebug 4

Dream plantation melodies

Barcelona turns to the east

Black vinyl turns green

The sofa screams

Doodlebug 5

American inflation

True spoon-fed death

Strange banjo thoughts

Plastic distressed

Shower death

Iggy Pop in a sideboard

Too much thinking fucks you up
Too much time slips through the cracks
Worrying about the rain, the funerals
The way the poplar trees creak in the wind
And all along the drip of ice melting off
The corrugated asbestos roof a metronome

The beat of a disillusioned parade
Spun through a muddied field outside Berlin
A piano disintegrating under the 400 blows
Wielded by a clown and Judy Garland's axes
Chopping down through the wires and chords
The splinters of a life fading away

I was 17, Lust for Life, in a rack at Woolworth
I bought it although it was so warped it didn't play
Spinning on a tweed covered second-hand record player
Hidden inside a wooden sideboard it rattled the china
The Passenger woozy and stumbling into a Motown beat
The future on a plate, disintegrating in the shooting match.

Creative Accountancy

That's the kind of writing
You find these days in colourful EMW brochures
Not in University any more – too old school
Workshops on how to be a real poet
In ten weeks, just one easy online payment, how sweet
There's even guaranteed tutor interaction maybe
How nice that we are all a part of this booming
creative economy

Smoking Guns

All went off in the sixties
Now it's retro and rehash and the end of things
Speculative fiction
And fantasy football

Nothing like something happens everywhere endlessly

It's called the internet of things.

Nude descending a shopping mall escalator

Was last seen
Sucking a slush-puppie
One hand grasping her iphone
She missed her footing, tripped
And drowned in the cubist fountain

Proper Poetry

I used to write proper poetry
Not the really proper stuff
You know packed full of classical allusions
Or invented lives based on obscure photographs

No I gave up on proper poetry
Because it is so fucking boring
So I write an occasional diatribe
And raise two fingers to the academy

These are the times for less poets, less experts
Less academics and more UKIP candidates
When a military chaplain's daughter from Wheatley
Is playing Joan of Arc in the Wars of Brexit

With only God and King Billy (*) to save us.

*Boris Johnson

Bonnard's Wives

I was in this bookshop
When I read the blurb
A book called Marriage by David Harsent
An 'inspired portrait of conjugality'
Apparently

Well forgive me but
Who gives a fuck really
It's all pure conjecture....
White middle class fantasy
Another poet riffing on fabricated lives
Bonnard wouldn't give a toss

That fifty years later
Some poet was tossing off an ode to his wife
If you want to win the T.S.Eliot prize though
Just be published by Faber
And be judged by your academic colleague
Who happens to work down the corridor

Dream like Bonnard

And keep it all in the white middle class poetic family

Poem to end all Poetry

Was primed

All the software routines

Executed perfectly

But sadly

When it came to the launch

It misfired badly

*"...a concern for language and for how it shapes
memory and identity."*

Anna Crowe, Lines Review, Edinburgh.

*"Belcher cannot be accused of nostalgia or pastoral
myth-making but is as vituperative in tone as Larkin"*
Raymond Friel - Southfields

Burning Books

It was a cold winter's morning
That he struck on the idea,
Books at Poundland were now cheaper than coal
So he took a barrow down to town

Filled up a hundred weight
And trundled them back to his house
Then all through that January cold snap
He felt toasty and warm

As he sat and enjoyed the heat from the books
Whilst they flickered and spat and crumbled in the grate
First there was Paterson, Child and Archer
The big hardbacks of course lasted longer

Fifty shades of grey climaxed in less than fifty seconds
But at least a better end than being pulped to cream
And best of all was that special late night treat
J.K.Rowling's shite novels disintegrating, toute suite.

The Dance of Debt

9.20 post-watershed family viewing

Not Minder, not procedural, not even faintly interesting

A fake architects, a fake accent, fake words

Playwright mechanically scraping barrels for ideas

The actress presenting a fake library plan

A new fake library in a fake world

Where a thousand library doors have closed

And a thousand more await 'repositioning'.

A terrible dance of debt with taxpayer's lives

The plot of a penny dreadful writ large

Every empty shelf, every skip full of books

Another building closer to a retail led outcome.

For even the palatial Birmingham Central Library

Is but a fall-back plan away from a shopping centre

Every shelf full of play-stations, candles and soap

The retail mantra sell more to sell more to sell.

More items hastily constructed in dirty sweatshops

By this century's lace makers and nail makers

More blood from stones, poison from lead

All those who died early with no heirs, half-fed

Leaving behind that benefactor's Municipal Library and Gallery

That developers are now re-selling to foreign hotel investors

Both built by the same dance of debt

Each brick paid for with blood, each nail timber hand-made

Every name in the ledger but one erased.

The Invisible Audobon

Somewhere deep in the bowels
Of my past life in Oxford
I am crouched with a naked flame
Above an original copy of Audobon

Subscription edition, worth millions
And hidden from mere mortal gaze
In a secret location
Its own room in the Bodleian Library

In this dream my life rolls backwards
Towards the Minotaur under the trees
Holding each precious page
Hurt and pain unwound too

Alongside Alfred's jewel, lost treasures
Leonardos and Raphaels all mine
I load them on to Tradescent's cart and
Wheel them back into the light

I start a new enlightenment
Shine a light into the dark with these beacons
Light a series of fires across the downs
Burn away the hurt and sorrow, the business plans

Start a new University in the air free of charge

Forged

The ignition came unbidden
A firefly at dusk, drifting
Across the estates like a wayward lantern
That some bright spark in Mansfield
Decided was a UFO
And called 999 twice
Or three times
No I didn't want to start again
I couldn't help it
The materials were there
Lying around the forge
Dusty with neglect, unloved
Then the molten heart leaked
A salamander
Here it lays, stronger, steely
Coated in black armour
For black times
Come slings and arrows
Normal misfortunes are ten a penny
In every A&E you'll find them

Forging ahead or burnt and gone
You cannot fake emotion

South and West

I sit on a Nottingham bound train

At Derby Station

And note the platform signage

'South and West'

My wife is south and west

Of here now following her own path

I am headed north without due reason

My life has always been south and west

Until nearly twenty years ago

On a whim I headed north

And met her due south

On a grey thundery London evening

She was headed west even then

It just took her a lot longer to reach her destination

Which for now is between stations

Hanging in the air like bird song

I hear her now and then, hear her true voice

Growing fainter on the wind

Standing in a siding blurred with weeds

Somewhere south and west of here

In twenty years

We may both be gone, long departed

Down the lines we can still see

Singing

Fishing in Fog

A winter Sunday, fog and frost
Two figures climbing a stile
Boots crunching crisp grass underfoot
Head toward the Thames at Clifton
My father not yet seventy, still working
And I back home for a day's fishing
Struggling with tackle and reels in the cold
Sit expecting nothing, no fish bite in this weather
Talk about things, my grandparents
The cost of renting, share a flask of tea
Steam rising across his face as he pours it
Lines taught in the brittle air, disappearing
Then slowly the sun starts to lift the fog
The opposite bank starts to appear
A moorhen skirts the bank, swans drift by
Beyond the fog a dog barks endlessly
For a few hours we hold on to hope
Stare back into the white eternal glare
Of mist along the river looking for a bite
Staring at futures unseen, but clearly there
Now and again on a misty morning
Crossing the Trent I see father and sons trudging
Through the mist and rain together, silent
Sharing thoughts, hopes, jokes, together
Their lives unravelling like lines in the air.

A Tiny Spider

A speck
crawling from under Acrimony
seen under the spotlight

A metaphor
for the last ten years
crawling down the hard shoulder

A tiny spider
picks its way through books
and is gone

I stare at the rain
The stationary cars
The Middle of England

Wonder how she's doing in rehab
What webs lay ahead
What sticky yarns

Room for poetry

I have a room for poetry
Two bookcases of neatly filed books
Arranged by region of course

Then chronologically
They have been gathering dust for years
Unread, unopened, a wall of doubt
Twenty years I have been a closed book
Until today the penny dropped
The dam burst, the Bastille fell

Words started pouring down
Cascading down the shelves
From Shakespeare to Auden
A waterfall of words
For you
They poured around my bed
Lifted it up like a boat

Some took off battered the windows
Like a murmur of starlings
Blinded my eyes
Choked my throat
I have made a room for poetry
I rock on a bed at sea
Calling out to you

In the silence

The Lost Decade

Travelling on the Manx electric railway

In Fog

One minute coasting

Could see to Ireland

The next all blank like a page

Then a screech as foot on brake

Bad news from abroad

Then silence

Mist rolling seaward

Beginnings and endings

A horse on a cliff

Cold black sea

The line ended

We sat silent

At a Victorian station

Overhead cables fizzing in the rain

Then a tired horse pulling

Us along the esplanade

Ten years before dirt rained down

On your sister's coffin

Even then I felt the cold wind blow

In from the Irish sea

Eating into our bones

Then into our souls

Until we could not find our way home

BURNING BOOKS : A GLOSS

'Burning Books' was Horseshoe Press Pamphlet No. 2 published in April 2017.

At the time I thought I'd try and describe what influenced the poems and what I think I doing which invariably different to what the reader imputes.

Burning Books and Buying Time ..education, morals, politics..everything can be bought these days. I am literally buying time at present using up savings before the next employment.....if there is a next one...

The Dance of Debt

The dance of debt been going on since time immemorial but never has it been such a mantra from the ruling classes..

Burning Books

Things are not getting any better no matter how many J.K.Rowling novels we burn....

Iggy Pop in a sideboard

True story on Foundation Art at Oxford Polytechnic I suddenly had enough money to buy my third ever vinyl album. The first was an MFP Oliver the musical soundtrack. The second was Alice Cooper's Billion Dollar babies then this. The copy I purchased was so warped it kept skidding when played on the Dansette tweed record player kept in my parent's sideboard. I returned it to Woolworths and traded it for a flat copy of XTC's White Music. I heard just enough of The Passenger to 'get it' and the details about Berlin are fantasy thoughts prompted by a documentary and footage shown after Bowie's death.

Matilda in the snow

The description of the down-land cottage all true. My dad was a farm labourer in early 1960s. We were so poor he bred rabbits to sell. The memory of Matilda comes from school history lessons. Matilda fled Oxford and was given refuge at Wallingford (my school's location) Castle. Her action changed history and ensured that the Plantagenet line was in power later. No Matilda no QEII..which despite all the 90th Birthday celebrations might have been a good thing..in fact how about no Royals at all? Personal note I fled Oxford too but on a London bound overcrowded National Express coach. Not quite as romantic...

Rust

The selling of England by the Pound was most brutal in the destruction of William Morris's original company. Rover was the biggest employer when I a child now it the University. They let it rust....

Postcard to Okinawa

Hiroshima anniversary.

ACRONYMS

I hate acronyms especially nasty little ones that belittle the working class which most of them seem to be funnily enough...

Made Invisible

Dedicated to Simon Armitage who has hoovered up everything I could ever aspire too with some of the dullest poetry I ever read. Success in Britain is never offending anybody...and toeing the line forever.....New Labour through and through. His first book is where it ended for me...

Five doodlebugs

Just for fun completely random stuff which has overtones of suicide airline pilots from the news owing something to Prynne and Oliver but not sure what. I never been a strident modernist in that vain and frankly get bored with poetry that needs decyphering or pretends to be something it isn't. The factionalism of contemporary poetry means that if you go down that road you will have a loyal and small audience and not much else. It a good route for academics. A love of Bob Cobbing helps..the poetic equivalent of trainspotting.

London Calling (45)

Start of a series of Vinyl 45 related poems. Short and lyrical ...that's it with overtones of political comment just like the original songs.

Working on a Building of love (45)

See above any link to Corbyn is purely coincidental and anyway I ditched Labour for the Greens.

A Poundland sonnet

Both these 'sonnets' written pre-election. Angry squibs. Didn't help the shits won anyway.

A Wreckless scheme

A retort to the great God Armitage's dull work in the field. Armitage is like New Labour very successfull and very dull.

Collateral

Self-explanatory. Whilst writing I referred to Edwin Muir.

I was also was reading Cesar Vallejo in great translations published by Richard Price (a proper poet) at Southfields.

Awfully Middle Class

Again says it on the tin. A classist rant and I aint apologising. If you are going to publish boring self-referential holiday snaps about reading Dante on the beach then be prepared for a slagging..naming no names..oh sorry naming names... there you go no manners the working class...

Buying Time

Self-explanatory but I lost count of the number of times privileged i.e. wealthy middle class people have told me that life is what you make it, you make your own luck, you only have yourself to blame etc etc. BULLSHIT..this country is totally controlled and run by money and the class system has become MORE not less embedded in my lifetime. I would not have had a decent education in post Thatcher Britain because that is how the Middle Class voted and would like it to stay...if you poor you don't get in the door...

I hope this might help...

LOST NOTTINGHAM



A Illustrated poetry project for Nottingham Poetry Festival 2018 which focussed on 'Lost Nottingham' stories about famous people who had some connection to the City however brief. It was shown as large illustrated panels at Jermy 7 Westerman on the Mansfield Road which itself is now part of Lost Nottingham.

CHARLIE AND THE LACE FACTORY

Monday 4th May 1904, Grand Theatre Radford Road, Hyson Green
Evening performance of Sherlock Holmes over, Charles Chaplin aged 15
Collar askew from a swift costume change leaves Billie the page boy behind
And cheekily slaps the final drop curtain just below King Charles's head
The sun-light overhead sputters and dies leaving the stalls gloomy
As he exits through the corridor of mirrors, flickering like a film

He turns left on to Gregory Boulevard which is quiet now, audience departed
The half-moon illuminates the Forest park to his right, a few stars above the trees
Cold now he huddles in his thin jacket, stuffs hands in pockets and half-runs
Ahead the last tram descending the Mansfield road clatters in the darkness
A cab rattles past him headed toward Hyson Green its two jovial occupants singing.

Then silence, just his own steps and far off an occasional cry, or clack of hooves
Latecomers emerging from the Grovesnor Hotel or workers leaving late shift
At the Mansfield Road a sudden burst of steam and noise as a train exits the tunnel
Then silence again as just Charlie and his shadow dance their way up Sherwood rise
Carrington Market is busy with late drinkers fresh off their factory shifts
The rumble of machinery echoes across the granite sets, mixes with brewery smells

A quick tap at the door and Mrs Hodgkinson lets him into his digs at number 100
From the back high window he looks down on the Burton and Sewell factories below
Their dark brick walls dotted with illuminated floors of workers making lace
Women on one floor tending the bobbins and un-twirling long lines of thread
Below men tending to the machines as they endlessly repeat their movements
He thinks he catches a smile from one young girl but she is gone in an instant

He is left hanging out of the top window watching clouds cross the moon
His only companion a rabbit hidden beneath the bed can be heard scratching
He feeds it leftover stale bread he had been given that morning
Watches the endless repetitive machines coming and going over and over
The steady hum of machines that brought him to this place, steam and iron
The flicker of images that will be with him throughout these modern times

He thinks of his mother in confinement, his brother tending a bar in London
He hardly speaks except when on stage and wanders a different town weekly
Too late to play loudly he picks up his fiddle and bow one more time
And stood in the window, in moonlight, imagines himself a famous musician
He glides the bow gently across the strings, hardly a sound can be heard
He serenades the men and women below, all the world his stage forever

CODA

The lace factory now a care home behind imported plastic net curtains
A woman in her 80s suffering dementia suddenly remembers her mother speaking
About a night she saw Charlie Chaplin playing to the stars but no-one believed her
How one day he'd return and play one last reel for her forever.



Picasso's Peace Train

The black clouds had been building up all week
Thunder rolling down from the Peaks on Nottingham,
Grey drizzle trickling from the glass roof at Marylebone Station
Dripped on to Pablo Picasso's neck as he boarded the train to Sheffield
Monday 13th November 1950 early morning the train's steam billowed
Through the suburbs of London as it swung left at Lords, headed north.

Adjusting his pale blue tie and the beret on his lap
Pablo gently rolled his cigarette in his hand over and over
He turned to Gilbert his ex-resistance bodyguard, drew fire
His dark eyes flashing with mirth as they discussed the papers
The lies and distortion and the statement by Clement Attlee
Who stood by Guernica in 1939*, clenched his fist for the I.B.**

The heavens were opening all across the Midlands
The boiler hissing, the firebox at 2500 degrees C, half a Hiroshima
They hurtled down a line 50 years on from the dawn of the century
Carrying a card-carrying Communist spy according to the Herald
To a Peace Conference in Sheffield that would 'paint the town red'

As the first U.S. troops brought their atomic bombs to defend us.
From arts council genius to pariah, Pathe News mocked his arrival
The only artist let in as Robeson and Neruda were denied visas
The Korean War on the back burner, the cold war freezing
Like bad weather the post-war storms kept blowing in

In Sheffield the chrysanthemums and the banners were wilting.
Rugby, Leicester, Loughborough flashed by between grey sodden fields.
Then the train swung right into a Nottingham damp with rain and coal dust.
Crossing at Wilford Picasso caught sight of the Power Station
Huge dark rain lashed walls by the Trent, chimneys belching sulphur
The thunderclouds swirling beyond the steam out the carriage windows
On Wilford Bridge he turned and said 'Rain, Steam, Speed n'est-ce pas?

Down a modernist line that lasted barely a century they drew into Victoria Station
Sliding through the tunnel at Weekday Cross and into the platforms
He stared at the tunnel ahead, like the gates of hell or a Minotaur's lair
His impression of Nottingham some posters, a W H Smith, huddled travellers
Then darkness and rails rumbling beneath Mansfield road, light then dark at Carrington

He drew breath, then continued northwards mouthing the words of his speech later
'I stand for life against death, I stand for peace against war'
His hand constantly drawing the symbol of the dove against his trouser leg
Remembering the heat and light, the warmth of his father's hand in his mind
The doves he grew up with jinking and turning against a blue sky.
At the exact spot where a year later the first Rolls Royce Avon prototype Canberra
bomber***crashed on Bulwell Common station.

References

*Clement Atlee spoke at the Whitechapel Gallery in front of Guernica on tour
January 1939.

** International Brigade Spanish Civil War.

*** Atlee's Labour Government decisions 1944 and 1947.

Our first tactical nuclear strike aircraft.

Designed to deliver a British Nuclear deterrent.

Paper Boats on Private Road

A lone slim figure in Sunday best gets off the tram on Woodborough Road,
Hesitates then proceeds down Private Road until it dog-legs east at his destination
As he turns along the high brick wall he hears children's laughter, a maid calling
He stands at the gate hidden by trees and calls, the maid comes to the gate
Later she recalls his patent leather shoes and his smart appearance that day
Frieda stands at the French Windows, behind the red curtains, eyes sparkling like a hawk
He is ushered into the sitting room, red velvet curtains caught in the breeze billowing

Initial stiffness is washed away in a heated conversation about Oedipus and women
D.H. Lawrence is being bewitched by this most un-English and strong-willed of women,
Her exotic and erotic vibrancy entrances him, already struggling to escape this England
Her husband delayed by work she leads him past then in to her bedroom,
An English sparrow in the talons of a German hawk he is taken in hand, finds himself
Then they are both entwined in secrecy, taking tram and train to secret assignations

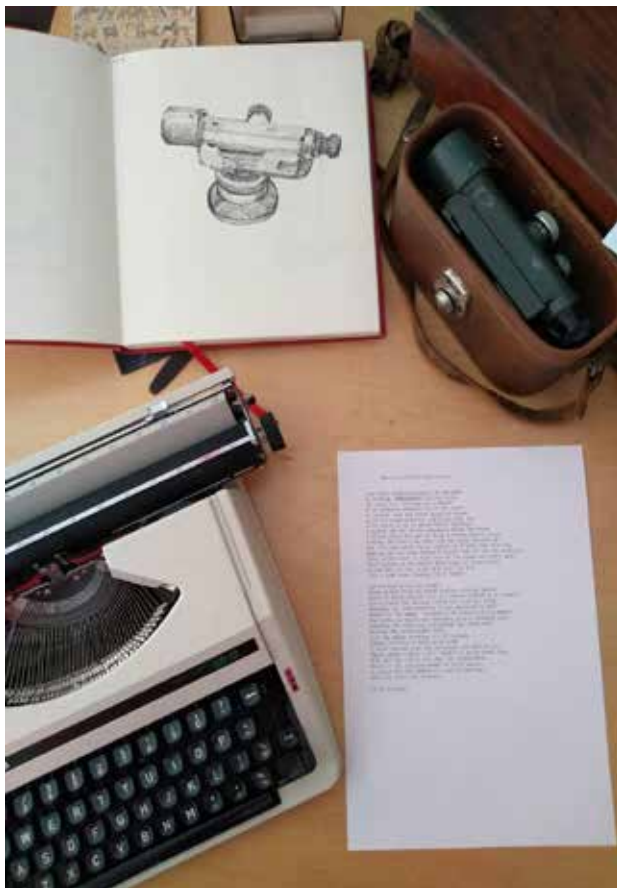
One day with her daughters they play on a local stream with paper boats
He flicks matches at them saying look it is the Spanish Armada come to sink England
Two paper boats catching fire in a Nottinghamshire backwater, then phoenix-like rising-
From the crazed machinery of Edwardian England, the conservatism of suburbia
Sometimes of an evening Frieda would dash up Mapperley Plains just seeking freedom
In a cottage near Moor Green they continued their first loving act on Private Road

Under Pear-blossom, 'a fountain of foam', Frieda crawls naked over him, he writes a poem
To her and to freedom, to his sexual and intellectual fulfilment with a gushing woman
By May 3rd hey were sat together on a night-boat to Ostend, that old England fading
A peaceful Anglo-German union as the two empires ramped up production of munitions and
cruisers
The Suffragette movement beginning, the war to end all wars looming.

Paper boats burning







MY FATHER'S THINGS

Ivo Charles Belcher 1932 -2004

A series of illustrated poems titled 'My Father's Things' created in Summer 2019 for a show called Castle Ruins III at the King Billy pub Sneinton, Nottingham. The exhibited works included ephemera related to the objects. The whole sequence are the first time I had attempted to deal in writing with the loss of my father aged 72 to pancreatic cancer in 2004. My mother then passed away from Carcinoid Cancer in 2012.

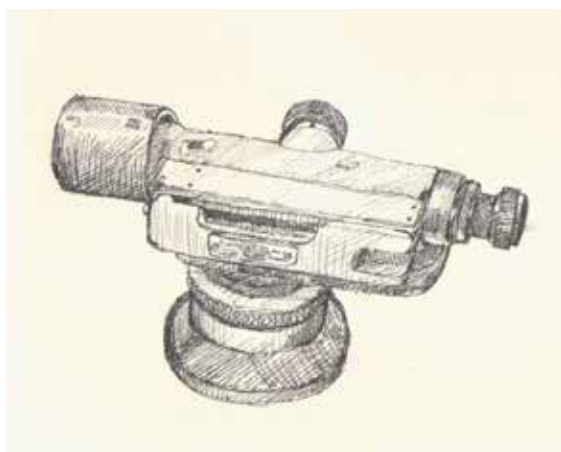
I was influenced by my reading of Richard Ford and Blake Morrison's memoirs of parents.

I produced the original drawings and wrote poems during a period of crisis in my relationship with my wife who was suffering from late stage alcoholism. She passed away in 2020.



The Optical Level

Gun metal grey-green, heavy in the palm
My father's optical level
The metal worn through use, a record
of my father's presence as is the smell
of leather case and faint aroma of tarmac
as if his hands sunburnt and grimy with tar
still waved at me on those frosty mornings
I helped him set levels somewhere below the downs.
A ritual since the age of 14 as I earned pocket money
holding the levelling rods, red and white striped
icy cold that stuck to my fingers as I held them straight
waiting for the hand raised, a signal that he had the reading.
Then another wave to move back up the slope and start again
tied together by the upside down image of cross hairs
rising and falling on my hand then the rod
like a bomb aimer looking for a target



One morning we are out early.
Steam rising from the power station cooling towers.
Stood in early morning sun on a former airfield at Harwell.
The airfield the Dakotas lifted off from before dawn on D-Day.
Carrying the last memories of men destined to fall
caught in the cross hairs of German gunners.
The rattle of munitions cascading from a thousand guns
blurring the coastline and making the earth move.
Turning the world upside down.
Like the poor pilot spinning out of control
trying to bring things back to a level.
I stare through that old telescope and call to him.
Right, right..back a bit.
That's it we're level now.
Roll out the string and mark the foundations.
Knock in the pegs and start to build again.
A nation fit for heroes on a sunlit morning
when the smoke had cleared.
We heard birds singing.

My Father's Watch

A gold Limit Silhouette watch leather strap hardly worn
A dress watch for a man who never dressed always working
Most times he didn't carry a watch as it would be get damaged
or snagged whilst working..too dangerous...

A man who cheated death twice..first a burst duodenal ulcer
I remember him being taken in the ambulance
It was touch and go. The Radcliffe saved him..the surgeon
told him later he found carrots before cutting him to save him.
Convalescence in Didcot Hospital..now housing..long gone

Later a wall collapsed on him he was two feet away from death
Was catapulted out of the way just in time..battered and bruised
He joked about it later..even the Lotus Elan that smashed into him
Or the spinning car in the rainstorm that missed him and Uncle John

Neither made a dent but then his luck ran out at 70
A soreness in his stomach was scanned..revealed pancreatic cancer
Too advanced for surgery..he grew greyer and weaker..could no longer
Get into the garden..chemo making him vomit black bile
He died in the extension we built in that last year defying the odds
to the end..he died on a bed in that building...almost perfect
like that watch stopped at 9.05 but hardly used

He died at 7.10 a.m.
The time he left for work every morning rain or shine
Kept perfect time until the end.



Butlin's Pwllheli 1956

A small silver and pink enamel badge
showing a welsh woman in traditional dress
and the words Pwllheli 1956
all that remains of my father's holiday
as a 24-year-old farm labourer
travelling with mates by steam train
to North Wales .

Years later he spoke of it fondly
as a brief respite from rationing and post-war austerity
The camp was originally built by Butlin for the Admiralty
like so many other camps, Butlins was founded on war camps.
Some even housed prisoners-of-war; Pwllheli was training.
It was the second time he had strayed beyond the Thames Valley.
The world was opening up. My mother was three years away.

In the darkness below the stairs years later I found
a cracked copy of Rock Around the Clock, Bill Haley
Amongst his treasured 78s and his record player.
That and Doris Day and Frankie Laine were the soundtrack to 1956.
Across the land belts were being loosened, petticoats swirled

as the first post-war generation started to dance
beneath bikini clouds.



North Berks Premiere Division Medal 1956-57

Football was something I grew up with.

From the tins of dubbin to the boots caked in mud on the step.

My father played for Long Wittenham into his thirties.

Before TV the radio commentaries would be heard throughout the house.

My earliest memory was my father jumping up and down as England won the world cup in 1966. He rented a TV for it.

Years later we would both sit in the kitchen listening around a small transistor radio. Poland 1975 I remember especially. Always the chat was around how the Arsenal were doing (usually badly) .

Then the moments of pure joy. Charlie George scoring at Wembley.

Moments I shared with him.

Even when I living in Edinburgh the chat came back to footie.

Gazza's goal in Euro 96 against the Scots. Laughter.

I have a small tin with his medals in.

A photograph of him at Reading's ground for the North Berks Cup Final 1956.

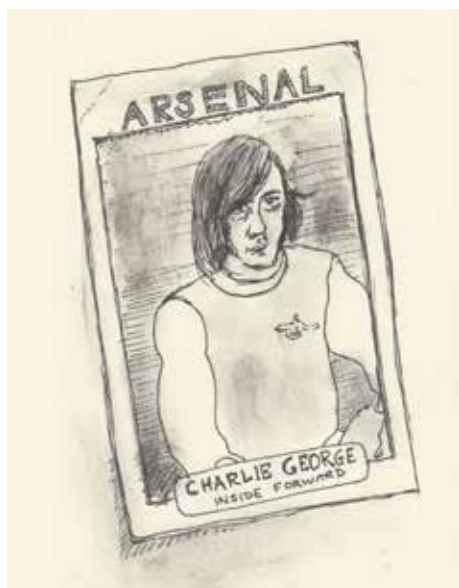
They lost but it doesn't matter.

Images of him fit and happy.

Before the decline.

The last match.

Then the long walk down the tunnel. Game over.



Polaroid Supercolour Camera

My father became a self-employed builder late in life
He was proud of his truck with Belcher Construction written on the side and the business card he had printed.

He began documenting his jobs both as a record and in case he had to revisit or change something.
He bought a Polaroid camera and started shooting off images.

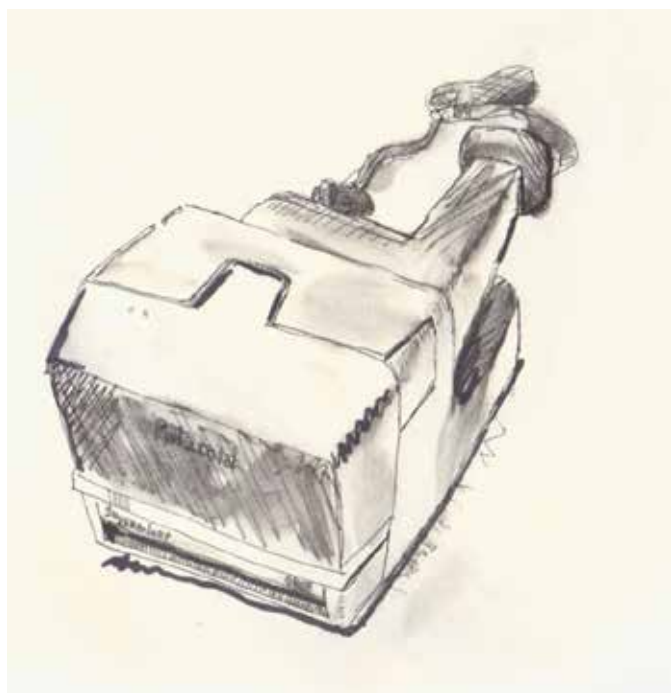
After he died we found a box full of polaroids.
He had worked with my Uncle John in later years
and I passed the photos to him keeping a few back.

He also travelled abroad for the first time in later years
to Naples to see my sister and to Florida with her children.
The passport photo shows him greyer and maybe the first glimpse

of the cancer that was to kill him can be seen around the eyes.
He spent his last years mostly in pain being scanned and probed and recorded.
Images of him rather than by him as life snapped.

Held in the hand, waiting for the remission that never came
My mother was left staring at a blank bed,
A smaller van without a name on the side.

A shed full of tools turning to rust



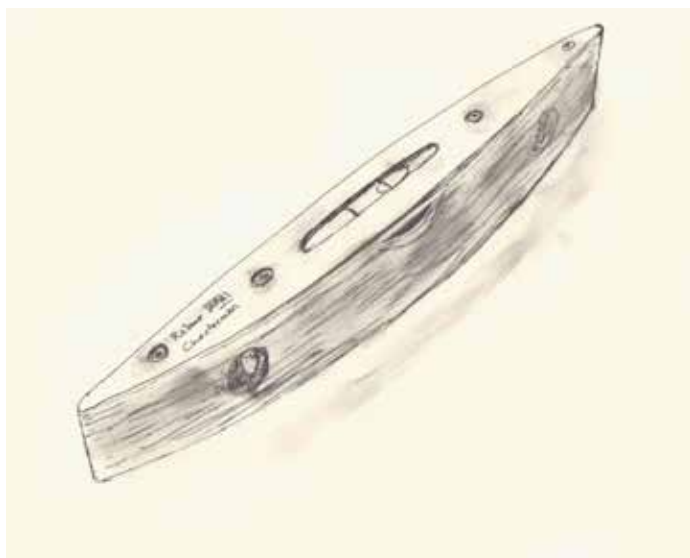
Rabone Chesterman Teak Level

A small hand held level for small jobs
I remember my father using it
It has the Rabone Chesterman logo on
which with three triangles signified Hockley Abbey
from the original Birmingham firm
that had existed since 1871

Later it amalgamated with Sheffield firm Chesterman
the inventor of the automatic rewind tape measure
Rabone was an enthusiastic industrial moderniser
introducing steam machinery in the face of opposition
Their tools are robust and long-lasting
But like all things now swallowed up by Stanley tools

This level is pre all that, pre offshore, downsize
and seven hundred levels of capitalist re-selling.
It is worn through use, the three spires dulled with age
But still capable in the right light of sparkling
a reminder of older ways,
the combination of church and provincial hard work
that laid the foundations

Before the bubble stopped shaking.



Addenda: What I am not.

After Auden

A NEW YEAR GREETING

**** (poem here)

Shaun Belcher is the author of one out of print slim volume that disappeared into the virtual ether before it was printed via lightning strikes/amazon so qualifies as a work of fiction.

He did not edit any anthology of obscure, unacknowledged legislators nor did he win any prizes, nor should we be specific did he enter any competitions.

He has held no official tenures as a creative writer at any top end nor third rate provincial university and has never reviewed other poets he dislikes for the simple reason of building a profile to get published.

He has never been recommended by friends in the poetry world as he has none and has studiously avoided anything to do with poets or poetry for over two decades.

He is member of no group who look after his publishing and reading interests when his work over time slides into fabulous irrelevancy or simply becomes so bad it an embarrassment.

He has no agenda nor minority axe to grind and has never played on his working class beginnings for pity or favour.

He regards his lifelong devotion to obscurity and keeping some semblance of sanity in a world over-run with poets like a corpse covered in flies that he should not add to other's suffering by maintaining a steady output of academic poetry which simply done to fulfil research departmental targets.

His earnings from poetry over 40 years accrues to £70 he once got paid for being given a slot at Ledbury Festival by a friend and a commission again via a friend for £500 which works out to roughly £14.25 per annum which a living wage in the poetry world these days.

He is however still a poet if being a poet is none of the above.

He is still alive at time of writing and doesn't expect things to change radically.

It all depends on a red wheelbarrow apparently and he does not have one.

Happy New Year.



<http://www.shaunbelcher.com/writing>

‘the poems individually and cumulatively preserve aspects of identity and genealogy rooted in a particular soil and way of life..an underlying humaneness’
STEWART CONN (Scottish Poet Laureate, Playwright)

‘your poem is so beautiful..I love the tenderness of the carrying of the horse which was rescued.’ (The Ice Horses) TESS GALLAGHER (Poet)

