

## Last Farmer

SHAUN BELCHER was born Oxford, England, 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. Began writing poetry in the mid 1980s and subsequently has been published in a number of small magazines and the anthology *The Ice Horses* (Scottish Cultural Press).

He now lives in Nottingham, England after two years in Edinburgh studying folk culture and several years in the city of expiring dreams . . . Oxford. He is currently working on a new volume of poems called *The Drifting Village* and has been involved in various literary projects including delivering creative writing workshops in Nottingham prison for the 'Inside Out' project.



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*by*

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*To Ivo Charles Belcher 1932–2004  
The Last Farmer*

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

## Contents

The Nettle Fields	1
Commandos	3
Dividends	4
Cold Spell	6
Following The Map	8
Clinker	10
Cherry Stones	11
The Ice Horses	13
The Severed Tongue	15
The Hare-Lip	16
World Turned Backwards	17
Scattered Voices	19
The Stag Beetle	22
The Transfer Shed	23
Barn/Cloud/Path	25
The Empty Stair	26
Craigmillar	28
Flint Fields	29
Three Sermons	31
The Drifting Village	34
The Weaver's Lament	36



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## The Nettle Fields

We had to clear two fields  
on a bitterly cold November morning.  
We had to clear two fields of nettles

I hadn't worked with my dad for years  
but by midday we had fires going  
and my feet didn't feel so frozen.

As we cleared separate paths  
We'd find things.  
Me drums and canisters,  
him, a broken cockpit of an aircraft.

Later he said he'd expected me to bail out  
of that wedding idea long before I had  
and that coming back down to earth  
wasn't such a bad thing.

I grudgingly admitted this was true  
and even a job that made my hands sting  
could clear the air and pay off bad debts.

Later the white smoke from the bonfires  
seeped through the poplar trees  
and hung like mist over the river.

He started telling me about a German fighter  
that came down over his village  
trailing thick white smoke like silk.

Perhaps they found the pilot in nettles,  
thinking he was in Holland,  
when all along he'd been deceived by  
his instruments.

Now I'm struggling too.  
Struggling to find a common language.

## Commandos

My parents eating dinner,  
straw falling from a bird's nest in the joists,  
as a 45 mph wind lifts the roof.

It floats down onto a box of my old toys.  
An action-man complete with kit  
and bits of broken model aircraft.  
Dakota, Mosquito, Hurricane.

A gentle creaking of black felt and nails  
lifting from the wood. Breathing.

Downstairs my parents  
discussing a photo in the paper.  
My great-uncle's war grave.

Jack was lucky.  
Then he wasn't.  
His glider crumpled in a field near Arnhem  
like a puffball.  
Two days later he caught a German bullet.

It wasn't the bullet that killed him  
but the poison seeping through his limbs.

The aircraft kept spawning.

I, a silent intruder in the attic,  
slide out into the light.  
Slide away from the breathing.

## Dividends

The 78s my father bought  
seemed to break of their own accord.  
Splinters of black shellac  
bulging the faded paper sleeves.

Perhaps each crack  
took a moment with it.  
My father in tassled cowboy shirt  
setting needle on Capitol and Brunswick.

Or with my mother, before their wedding,  
practicing steps in the front room  
like they did before every dancing contest  
on the sprung dance-floor of the Co-Op.

Somewhere there are medals to prove  
that all that lace and Brylcreem  
really did spill and twirl between  
the banks of collapsible wooden chairs.

By '73 the ballroom sparkle had died  
replaced by a shop-floor of Hoovers  
that I'd slouch through as mum  
cashed in her book of dividend stamps.

Some Sunday evenings they'd play records  
as bomb and bullet crackled on TV  
trying to teach me and my sister  
the foxtrot, tango and waltz.

We'd sway between the sofa and fireplace  
to Lou Busch's *Zambezi* or Ray Martin.  
Somehow we never quite learnt the steps  
even when we stood on their feet.

That's what I remember of the early '70s.  
Tunes from the Fifties,  
and news from Ireland that filtered through  
every now and then like flashes,  
from something high up in the ceiling,  
to a tune called *Begorah* by Ray Martin.

## Cold Spell

A pretend farm lies within these borders,  
hedges, fields and muddy tracks.  
One un-harvested by contract machinery,  
unbounded by electrified fencing.

As I stand on a grass verge  
a mile of tarmac bubbling behind me,  
the horizon buckling in the heat haze,  
I begin to build.  
Wood for concrete, timber joists for steel.  
In my head a new farm appears.  
The old farm rising in the skeleton of the new.  
Concrete cladding and corrugated tin roofing  
splits and flies off over the hills.  
The Thames Water sign on the barn end  
floats like a stamp soaked off an envelope.

I am rebuilding my past in the present  
when the daydream is shattered.  
A tractor lurches towards me  
cab dazzling like a sharp scythe  
lifted from a grinder.

The driver asks me what I'm doing.  
I mutter that I used to live here  
—What, he says, in that ol' wreck.  
He doesn't believe me  
but the wary mouth under the goggles  
and dirty John Deere baseball cap  
lets go a few more words

—Don't ye go in there, dangerous see.  
I say yes, having already been in.

Standing on roots, brambles and branches  
I got to peer through a broken window  
at bare floorboards and a grate  
littered with flakes of asbestos,  
ash and plaster.

By that grate my sister entered this world  
on a cold February evening during the cold snap of 1962.

A Jamaican nurse hovers over my mother  
as firelight dances on the ceiling.  
Black hands cradle the white bundle  
as it is passed over the sheets to my mother.  
I am three years old, drawing in the condensation  
and watching feathers of snow melt against the window.

When I am asked what I shall hand on  
I shall say this.

My dowry of words.  
Fire, water, glass, ice, darkness.

## Following The Map

Seven with a toy tractor I bulldozed  
twisting tracks through the cabbage plants  
that linked, double-backed, serpentine

were added to that summer by a neighbour's son.  
A sunburnt face through the leaves, a single mole  
hanging on his left cheek like a coin or planet.

All winter we'd wait for the warmer weather.  
Wait for the muddy ground to peel and crack  
so that we could start fingers shifting mountains.

Dry dirt would blow off trowels, crumble under palms,  
grit teeth and hair and find its way into every fold  
of skin and dust the school regulation wool and cotton.

We'd jostle and race Corgi, Matchbox and Dinky  
through those hot July afternoons until light faded  
from the downs and flickered on vapour trails.

The same sky, twenty years later, rain-heavy  
threatens the seed-tunnel in this garden.  
It rattles like a broken engine, flaps like suits in cars.

Our neighbour's son now sells Porsches in Sweden  
with handshakes and brochures pushed into the palms  
of businessmen whilst I sit here, stalled again.