

Last Farmer

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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*

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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.