

BURNING BOOKS



SHAUN BELCHER



HORSESHOE PRESS PAMPHLET #2

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SHORT STORY: THE LEASH

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.

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 tarn

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.

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.

Five 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 now

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

London Calling

Bright November evening 1981

Sweatbox of a venue NW1

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

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.

A Poundland Sonnet (Poundland Sonnet 1)



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

**Both these 'sonnets' were written just before the disastrous 2015 election.
We get the government the press deserves.**

A Wreckless Scheme (Poundland Sonnet 2)



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

EDWIN SMITH - Catching Light

"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)

1. Kodak Box Brownie No.2 Model F. 127 Roll Film 1927



Camden Town Bedroom 1935

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 BROWNIE¹ 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.

2. ICA IDEAL 205 Glass Plate 9x12 1935



Opticians London 1935

A present from Marx and Nashⁱⁱ, 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 Humphriesⁱⁱⁱ experimenting with solutions, final prints
Days mixing it with emigrants and socialites, Focal Press tricks, ghost images.^{iv}

3. CONTAX II 5cm Sonnar Lens 35mm 1936



Kentish Town 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

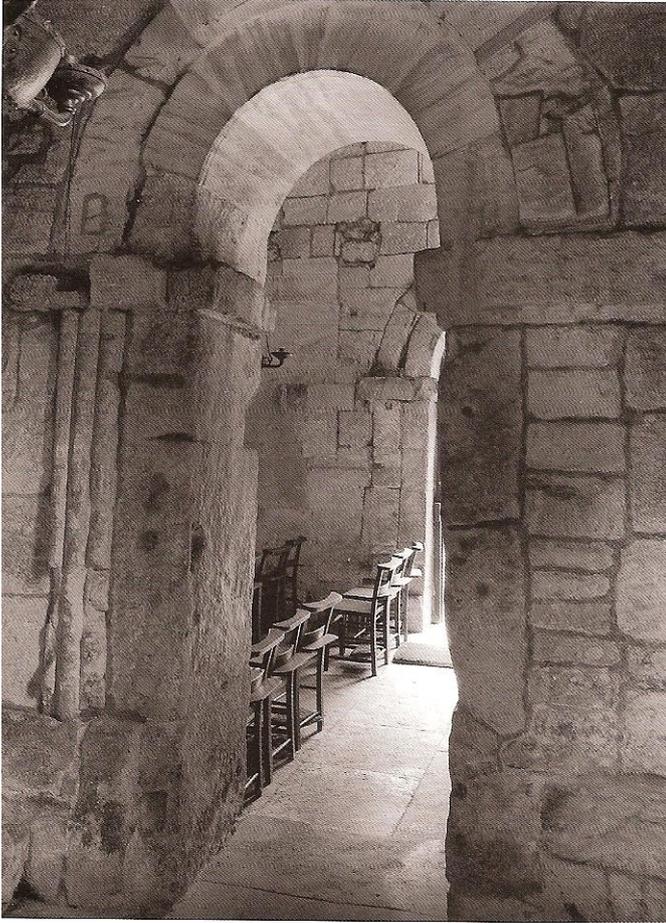
The thrill of a world intoxicated with power^v, dancing on a ledge, never falling

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.

4. THORNTON-PICKARD RUBY Quarter Plate 1904



St Lawrence, Bradford -on-Avon, Wiltshire 1950

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.

5. GRAFLEX SPEED GRAPHIC Roll Film 1960



Fylindales, Yorkshire 1969

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,^{ix} poison
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.*

6. ENSIGN AUTORANGE 820 120 roll film 1955



Stubble Burning - Last film developed 1993 by Roy Hammans

'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}
(All references below)

- ⁱⁱ Edwin Smith redeemed the Kodak Box Brownie by collecting Corn-Flake packet coupons probably in 1927 (EWELL, 2008)p.11.
- ⁱⁱⁱ 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.
- ⁱⁱⁱⁱ 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 Hindenburg 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)

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A Commission to accompany the Edwin Smith Exhibition at R.I.B.A. gallery London

Further details available at: <http://www.shaubelcher.com/writing/?p=1066>

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.

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.

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.

The Oxford Professor of Poverty

(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.

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.

He was a dear friend of friends of ours and is sorely missed.

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

BUYING TIME

I've been buying time since I was born
It is what the working class were made for
No trust funds, no foreign holidays
No gap year, no kindly Aunt's dowry

My father taught me to buy time
Any chance you get son take what you can
Don't be dishonest, keep your pride, do good work
But buy time, ten minutes here or an hour there

Time is the one thing they can't take back again
My parents had to buy me into an education
So that I didn't have to buy time at twenty
My mother cleaned council offices in the evening

Just so that I could get through foundation art college
She emptied bins, sometimes my sister and I beside her
Our little wage packets just enough to keep us all going
My father would be asleep, exhausted, when we got back in

We were all brought up to buy every moment of time
So much so that even when I was older
I still thought of every dead end, crazy occupation
As another means to buying time back later

Then I hit fifty and my parents dead or dying
Time ran out, I saw time being buried in front of me
But from their grave they handed me that precious thing
They had bought their council house in the 1980s

Now that council house was worth a whole lot of time
It gave me and my sister some valuable breathing space
Gave us both the very thing we never had much of
Time, simply time, the time I'm now buying off.

SHORT STORY: THE LEASH



We cannot start from what we do not know we can only start from what we know...

The leash to the greyhound tightened around her red raw hand. Across the river the lights of the car factory flickered and bounced in the water and she finally let go. The dog hesitated, then was gone, streaking off across the frosty ground toward the derelict bandstand that was disappearing in the dusk. She watched the dog circle the bandstand and head back across the icy grass. She suddenly thought of the family car her father drove when she was a child. The memory of warm leatherette seats and chrome trim around the dashboard vividly came to mind. Sometimes it smelt of his mistress. A sweet smell that was different to her mother. She wondered about the furtive kissing and hasty meetings that must have happened in that old car. She thought of his hand resting on the back seat on another cheap night out holding a cigarette. There was always a cigarette. Most times the car just smelt of the stubbed out butts in the ashtray. She remembered the ash swirling up and over her when the door opened once and her angry mother brushing it off her party dress.

The dog bounded away then returned. She always did. Her sides panting with the exertion of a few laps of the park. One time the dog had just kept going. She went home and had taken the back of Jimmy's hand when she told him. He told her off for being 'so fuckin stupid'. The two of them spent hours in another twilight looking for the pale grey dog. About to give up she suddenly appeared from some bushes. Her right paw was dripping blood and leaving red paw marks on the tarmac path. Probably caused by a broken bottle left in the undergrowth by the drunks that used the bandstand during the day or one of the teenagers who collected there of an evening. Jimmy said he'd never trust her with the dog again. A class dog in its day so he said so he'd be walking her now. Just him. It didn't last long. After a week he gave up walking her every night. He preferred the pub and his mates after a day as a plumber's mate. So here they were again, her and that dog, circling the same dumb riverside park. The council estate behind them ricocheted to the sound of joy-riders cars and helicopters overhead as usual on a Sunday evening. She'd always liked the dog, more than Jimmy if she was honest. The dog was gentle and curled up at her feet when Jimmy shouted at her or showed her the back of his hand.

She bent forward and just managed to catch a hold of the collar. Felt the studs scratch the back of her hand as she struggled to attach the lead. Finally it was secure and she tugged the dog gently back toward captivity. They started the slow walk back down the side street that led home from the park. She watched the frost on the chain-link glisten. It was almost festive. The moon and stars above were fast being hidden by cloud as the rain clouds were coming in. The quarter-moon above flashed and then disappeared like a coin in a drain. A woman in high heels and a tight dress careered into her, obviously in a hurry. The stupid woman almost fell over the dog's lead. She shivered, just a little, then heard the first siren. Then another and blue lights flashing in the bay windows of the houses at the top of their street. Distant foreign and English voices merged as they echoed down the street toward her. She heard crying. Loud men's voice shouting. Then she saw the van. Jimmy's van. It was parked at a weird angle, half on, half off the pavement. She felt confused. It wasn't time for him to be back from the pub yet. Every Sunday evening he'd leave her cooking mid-afternoon to watch the football and be back by seven. Always. It was half past six. Then she saw him sat on the pavement head in hands, not moving. Sat on the frosty pavement with a police-woman standing over him speaking into a radio. The police-woman's hand on his shoulder half in sympathy, half restraining. As she got closer the voices became clearer but the foreign accents still confused her. The dog sensed Jimmy and started tugging hard on the leash. She wanted to go to him but held them both back.

Then she saw the bundle of rags under the front wheel. At least that what she thought it was until the shape of a small child's shoe became clear. A paramedic was cutting the clothing from the child's legs. The body was so still. She was now close enough to see a dark pool of what must be blood. Shone like a patch oil in the headlights. A woman in a long dress was being held back by a large bearded man. Other men were arriving or coming out of a local house. There was a lot of shouting in a language she did not understand. She had never talked to the people down the road. Jimmy said they were immigrants, or worse asylum seekers. Jimmy wasn't the type to mix with anybody he didn't know let alone their sort. He locked his tools away each night just in case after they had moved in. He'd heard stories down the pub. She stopped and could now see things clearly. Nobody seemed to see her or the dog. Jimmy's van door was open. She could see the mess inside. Empty beer cans, empty sandwich wrappers. She stopped dead. Heart racing. The dog dragging at her outstretched hand which was now raw from holding on. Clouds still scudding across the quarter moon and the pavement glistening white under the streetlights. She could hear Jimmy sobbing now. Something was being said to him. A policeman got out of a second police car and pushed a breathalyser at him. Head down at first Jimmy didn't see it. The sobbing was making his body rock like the dog panting earlier. She'd never seen him cry. He was the tough guy. Always. The big man when out with his mates. He did things his way always. She just stayed out of the way. Most evenings she'd spend in that dimly lit front room with the telly on. Sometimes she'd light a cigarette from one of Jimmy's smuggled packs even though she was trying to give up. Occasionally if lucky she'd treat herself to a single glass of cheap white wine from Tesco. She never got to join in the lad's nights outs. 'Girls was not allowed', that was what Jimmy said. Most nights it was just her and the dog, watching Eastenders or some shit.

All of that had just changed. A third police car passed her and an ambulance pulled in behind. She couldn't quite take it all in but like the clouds above her things were changing and

moving on. The dog still tugged hard on the lead trying to join in the action. Suddenly there was a burst of activity and the child was lifted into the back of the ambulance at the same time as Jimmy was finally pulled to his feet and led to the second police car. There was a small bundle of rags left on the pavement soaked in blood. The second car disappeared with Jimmy. The ambulance left and there was just the first police woman inside her car now talking to her radio. She got out and started winding blue and white tape around Jimmy's van and up on to the pavement. She felt like she'd been watching T.V. Nothing seemed quite real. This was not the kind of thing that happened to her. Everything had a dull routine. Now this. She eased the tight lead on her fingers to try and get some circulation into her frozen fingers. The dog continued to pull at the leash. It was getting agitated and started to bark. She had to do something. Instead of walking past the police woman she turned and hauled the dog back towards the darkened path and the park where they'd come from. The dog sensed something had changed. She did too. She tried to take it all in. She wanted to be in their front room as if nothing had happened. Back in that dimly lit space with the dusty cheese-plant, the dodgy video player and the telly. She walked back around the park in the exact same pattern as before. She even pulled the lead off the dog but she just stared back at her and didn't move. She shouted 'go on...off you go' but nothing. She gave up knelt down and held her tight and re-attached the collar. She could feel the dog's heart pounding through its bony chest. She knew things like this happened to other people but she still couldn't relate it to her and Jimmy. She remembered her mum used to say....'you don't know what you don't know'. It had never made any sense before. She started crying. She led the dog towards what used to be home.

She started to think about the child. Was it dead. Was Jimmy in really big trouble? What was happening? She was shivering from being out in the cold too long. Turning into their street again she saw the police woman driving toward them leaving the blue and white tape flapping around the van. She summoned up the courage to walk past on the other side of the road. The bundle of rags was still on the pavement glistening with frost under the street-light. She started to feel sick. She passed the house the people had come out of earlier. All the lights were on and she saw men talking in the front room. There were even more men than she remembered and more people arriving as she got to their front door. The key turned easily for the first time in months. She usually had to wrestle with it. The door swung open. The main light was on. Jimmy must have been back whilst they were at the park which was odd. Suddenly she could smell stale ash and the sweet smell of sex just like in her father's car. Maybe she was imagining it. There were a couple of empty beer cans on the table. She didn't remember them being there earlier.

She felt sick and let the dog go, still on its lead, then ran to the bathroom and vomited into the toilet bowl. She looked in the mirror. She wiped the blur of mascara from round her eyes and rinsed the taste of sick from her mouth. She stood there listening to the familiar sound of the dog lapping water from its bowl downstairs. She'd left the front door open and could hear foreign voices from down the road again. A siren could be heard but far away. Somebody else's problem. Finally she went downstairs and closed the door. She sat for what seemed like ages looking at the cream plastic receiver on the wall. It never rang. Suddenly she went to the kitchen and fed the dog, grabbed some packets of crisps from the kitchen cupboard and went back upstairs to the bedroom. It took ten minutes to cram her few clothes into the old holiday suitcase. Grabbing her thickest coat she started explaining to the dog why they were leaving. She picked up the trailing leash and pulled the dog after her. They passed the blue and white tape, the frosted van, and the now stiff and frozen bundle of blood-stained rags and were gone.



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Horseshoe Press Pamphlets
HPP No. 1 : The Drifting Village Poems 2000-2011
HPP No. 2: Burning Books 2016-17

Shaun Belcher was 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 poem of the Shore Poets Anthology 'The Ice Horses' (Scottish Cultural Press 1996). *A selection of poems was published as 'Last Farmer' in the Salt Modern Voices Series in 2010.*

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.

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He has been involved in various literary projects including delivering creative writing workshops in Nottingham prison for the 'Inside Out' project and is a member of Nottingham Writer's Studio.

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.

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