

THE DRIFTING VILLAGE

Shaun Belcher

THE HORSESHOE PRESS

The Drifting Village

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 title 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.

He is currently working on a new volume of poems as part of a multidisciplinary art project called 'Backwater'.

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.

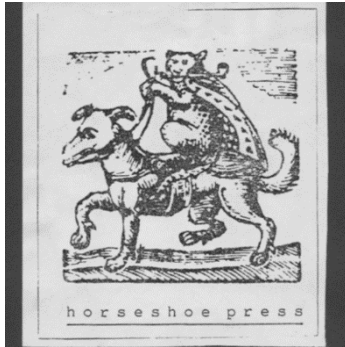
Further information about Horseshoe Press Pamphlets available at the Horseshoe Press website:

<http://www.horseshoepress.co.uk/>

or contact info@shaunbelcher.com

This document is available under a Creative Commons All Rights Reserved licence at Scribd:

<https://www.scribd.com/user/32775973/Shaun-Belcher>



Collected Poems 2000-2011

1. My father's crashes
2. The return
3. Landlocked
4. Down-land ballad
5. The drifting village
6. Mapping rain
7. The green light
8. The writing desk
9. Halos
10. Rivers I have visited
11. The broken hoe
12. Gun chimes
13. Chalk skulls
14. White gloss
15. The weaver's lament
16. The Rover man
17. Painting the step
18. Chalk wings
19. Three Oxford sermons
- Our Hatred
- Politics more or less
- Colony
20. The electric brae
21. White hyacinths
22. The ghost shell
23. Greyhound in frost
24. Writing poetry is easy

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 Fainlight in October 2004

Available at: [The Guardian Website](#)

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. it can be read on the [Scribd](#) site.

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.

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

Mispent 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.

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*

*** Eilleen 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 each word
Like they were his 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 blood 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
and cut away at the heavy clay soil.
The flint, chalk and clay, turning over again
as my own thoughts spiralled 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 the 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 New York 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.

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.

EDWIN SMITH Footnotes and Bibliography