

subtraction

david swann

artwork by chris aggs

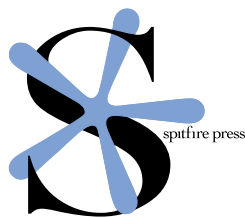


Spitfire Press, Print Shop Project, Vol. 2, Summer 2005.

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**To my Grandad, Walter Robinson, still adding to our lives at the age of 101.**

# **1**

## **Subtraction**

He'd never crossed the Thames without feeling the temptation. Now, aged 45, with fellow City workers watching, he succumbed. He threw his wallet over the rail.

It swirled away.

He threw in his brief-case. Then he undid his tie.

Finally, naked on Hungerford Bridge, it all began to add up.



## 2

### **Reservoir**

The valley was to be dammed, the village flooded. They'd taken the slates from our roofs.

The cart was loaded. At dawn, our horse would take us away.

We lay one final time in grass that would never again be mown.

Above her lovely head, the clouds passed in shoals.

### 3

#### **Dartmoor**

At dusk, a hard-pressed stranger appears from the trees beyond my tent.

He says he's hunted by Communists, that negative forces are at work on the moor: Herbivores. Women.

"These things are evil..."

The crickets whirr.

When he rushes away, horses in the next field rear up against a gate.

## 4

### **Naked**

We strip, dive into a dark lake. It's midnight in the far North, the sun high.

Afterwards we lie out, staring into the trees.

There are voices on the far shore, bearded men clambering into boats...

"What are they shouting?"

"Naked," she replies, gathering up clothes. "They're shouting I'm naked ..."

## 5

### **Amsterdam**

The city is cold. She awakes, hearing a voice.

Beneath her window, a man looks up from the deserted street:

“Please. I’m Jamaican. I’m freezing to death. Let me sleep on your floor.”

“You’re a stranger. I...”

She shuts the window, goes back to bed. Lies awake for hours, shivering...



**6**

**Infestation**

As it is squashed, the female cockroach fires a fusillade of eggs.

Each day, he scuttled to the library to escape them.

Books, though. The facts in them.

As old as coal. Immune to the Bomb.

They'd taken his kitchen. They were the blackness behind his eyes when he slept.



7

### **Division**

Her smile is pained. She suggests they see less of each other.

“So it’s over?”

She shrugs. “Maybe less is more...”

The wind blows between them. She quotes a Christian mystic: the soul grows by subtraction.

He turns away, facing the heart’s old maths: One is not a whole number.

## 8

### **Mature student**

William Blake wasn't embittered after his trial.

So he wouldn't let their taunts bother him.

But when he overheard the posh young voices through the residence walls... It brought back his divorce, the leaving of home...

"Boiler-man," he heard them call him.

He gripped Blake's book. Frowned into its beauty.





## 9

### **Arsonist**

They found him on every photograph, his face glowing.

He couldn't explain why he'd burned down the factories, had no idea why he'd gone back to watch.

When a fire engine tore past the police station, he confessed, "That's my ambition when all this is over. To be of service."

## 10

### **The collapse**

They stared into the chasm, the boy gripping his Grandfather's hand.

"Pit-props," explained the old miner. "They eventually give under the strain."

Wind ached in his seams.

Later, still coughing, he dreamed a great crack had opened in his body - dreamed he was falling into a hole inside himself.

# 11

## **After the funeral**

His last wish had been to travel through the desert.

“When I sleep now,” his lover said, “I see dunes, cactuses... I see his memories.

There’s nowhere else for them.”

Rain scoured the glass.

I looked at her.

“What am I going to do with his memories?” she asked me.



12

**Same old, same old**

He ordered me to stop the production-line. He hushed the pallet-loaders, laid down his boxes.

Silence in the bottle factory.

We followed his finger into the rafters.

“There again!” he hissed. “Floating above us. My dead mother...”

“His Dead Mother!” chanted the pallet-loaders, and went back to their difficult work.

## 13

### **Minimalism...**

She yearns for writing that gets to the point.

"Like B.S. Johnson?" I ask, quoting the great man: "Less is more – yes. Almost nothing – ah!"

"Sorry, I lost you there," she apologises. "My interest went halfway through the quote."

I shrug. "It's okay..."

"Besides – his name. All those bloody initials..."

# 14

## **3.10 p.m., Manchester to Sheffield**

They're trying to pass a baby from the balcony as our coach sweeps past.

Smoke billows. Neighbours' eyes are wide, frightened. The fire-fighter's arms can't reach...

Our coach swoops down a fly-over. The flats are replaced by a concrete wall.

Next day I can't find anything about in the 'papers.

# 15

## **Escher**

Tension builds at the 18th.

His view blocked, the midget crushes a trannie to his ear: "... and stewards are moving in to deal with the disturbance..."

He curses the imbeciles' bulk and noise.

Finally the crowd opens. Stewards march through.

They confiscate the midget's radio, order him to leave...

## 16

### **Sea-farer**

The ships were bigger than the home-town he returned to after years at sea.  
"80,000-tonners, crewed by 12 men. Foreigners, mostly. See, westerners need proper wages..."

He'd thought redundancy might break the silence.

Then he understood his own foreignness.

He stared at the wet street.

"The ocean never leaves you..."

## 17

### **The self-defence**

After thirty silent minutes, the Belgian driver asks, "Do you know the self-defence?"

His car smells vaguely of ham.

He stops on wasteland.

"Please. Teach me..."

I grab my bag, run. Turn back to see his beseeching eyes.

I cross a motorway, cursing my thumbs, thinking: Shallow graves, shallow graves...

## 18

### **Sea acres**

I awake to find a clown on our caravan's roof.

"Get down," I call.

The clown throws down water. I cringe. It turns out to be feathers.

My wife wakes, disturbed by his horn. "I dreamt our car fell into two halves..."

I shush her, listening for long-shoes above us.

## 19

1985

He'd fallen in love with a touring Czech badminton star and was secretly meeting her in motorway hotels.

That's why he picked up hitchers. To look normal.

"But they're onto me..."

The car trailing us contained three men in dark sunglasses.

"I feel so important," he smiled into the mirror.

## 20

### **A good man is easy to find**

We aren't hitching, and have drunk our money. But the driver stops anyway.

"Bears," he explains.

He says cougars are worse. "They rip out your throat..."

Midnight. The forest deep, the road dark.

He lets us out, safe, by our lodgings.

"I guess in Europe, it's people you're scared of..."

## 21

### **The Bronte Saurus**

He turns, wide-eyed, from the next urinal. We're in a pub on the cobbled main-street in Haworth. It's New Year's Eve.

He exposes the gum above his teeth: "I've got these two things pushing up here."

A wild laugh breaks free from him:

"But I don't believe in this life..."



## 22

### **Viking**

The fisherman limps as he mends nets.

I ask how it happened.

“Here. In the war.”

He points to a hole in clouds at the fjord’s mouth.

“As soon as I saw the Messerschmidt I knew it had come for me... It was the last thing I ever ran from...”

## 23

### **Hack**

After the dead squaddie's Mum slammed the door, I sought out neighbours.

"His family are making funeral arrangements," I lied.

Their quotes and photos helped me to scoop the competition.

Later, when the neighbours called, I handled their anger smoothly.

When the mother rang, she only sobbed.

It was enough.

## 24

### **Beyond**

The driver threads his car through tiny lanes under the black mountain.

“Eighteen affairs in nineteen months, she’s had, my wife. Beyond, she is. Fucking beyond.”

He drops me at a camp-site in the dark, says the forecast is grim.

An hour after he’s gone, snow drives in, hard, unrelenting.

25

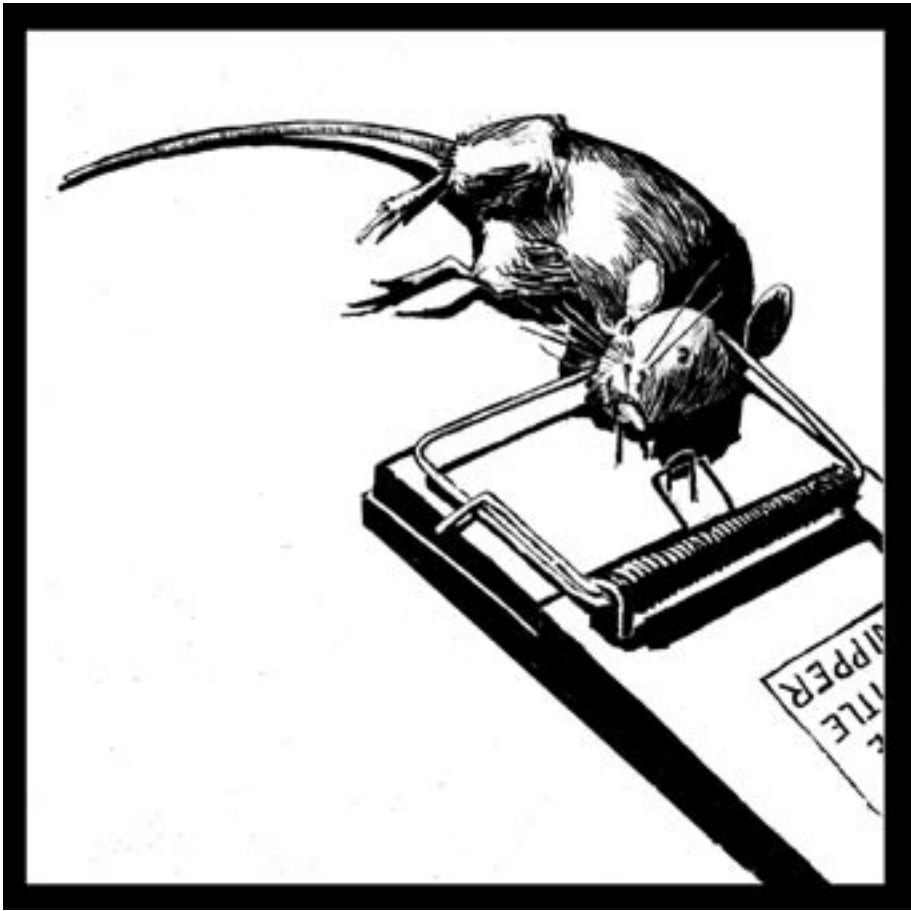
**Tarkovsky the otter**

Lonely, sleepless, he vanishes into a late-night cinema.

Some double-bill by a Russian with a lovely-sounding name. Hard to follow. Full of trees and rivers.

Around him, in the dark, he's aware of men with girlfriends wrapped in mysterious scarves and bonnets.

The winter is going to be long. Russian.



**26**

### **Escape**

Banged-up in a pad with no power-points, the lifer cherishes his thermos-flask, the last source of comfort.

But the jail's wild tonight - lunatics screaming, every clown on the landing flushing his toilet.

Even the flask, noisily creaking and groaning...

He curses its broken seal.

Curses the steam for escaping...

## 27

### **Torment**

Occasionally, our neighbours' agony quietened. Then we crushed our ears into cups, trying to separate their arguments from the din inside our heads.

When they split, we were lost for a while. We stared at the wall we'd shared, surprised to notice the hoops there, the circles so angrily printed.

## 28

### **A box of skin**

“Tell you what she did once: cut all the skin off her feet, loads of it. Then she put the skin in a box. She did it with scissors. It was a skin box, she said. She wanted to save it up and give it him. As an offering, like.”

## 29

### **The scar**

Beyond the garden, the burned French girl guides my fingers to her scar.

It pours from neck to fingers – a scarlet flash, melted and frightening.

“Ici,” she whispers.

I watch, amazed, as my hand roves the burnt places.

“Velvet...”

We sway with the grass, watching breezes come down the fields.



**30**

**Guitar-assisted lift in Denmark**

Six German tourists in a four-person car – but our guitar-ploy works. They stop!

They're all laughing.

“Three weeks of fasting,” they explain. “Only saunas and juice. But just now we ate! It feels tremendous!”

Their bodies glow against us.

We sing for them. They describe their meal.

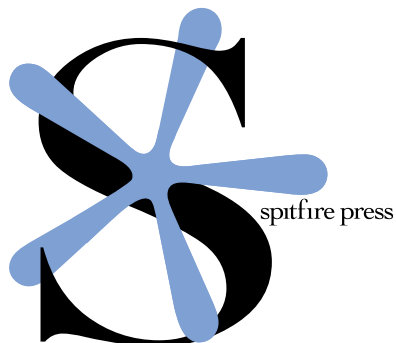
The sun shines.





David Swann (in 50 words): raised in Accrington, England, up the street from the author Jeanette Winterson. His jobs have included journalism, toilet cleaning, and a writing residency at HMP Nottingham Prison. He now lectures at the University of Chichester. His stories have gained success in many competitions, including three successes in the Bridport Prize.

Chris Aggs studied English literature at Oxford University but the drawings in the margins were usually more interesting than his essays so he took up Art instead and finished his training at the Royal Academy in London. But that was years ago and now he teaches for part of the week at University College Chichester and spends the rest of his time painting and making prints. He exhibits regularly in London and elsewhere - you can see a selection of his work at [www.ag.gs](http://www.ag.gs)



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