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We know
books

Also by Paul Farley in Picador

Tramp in Flames

The Ice Age

The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You

Paul Farley

The Dark Film

PICADOR

Contents

The Power	3
Adults	4
The New Babies	5
Force Field	7
Quality Street	8
Newts	11
The Airbrake People	12
Saturday Irons	14
Digital	15
Google Earth	16
The Circling Stars	18
The Planetarium	19
The Spoiler	20
The Cellar	21
Moles	22
Pop	23
Gas	24
Cyan	25
Peter O'Sullivan	26
The Note Produced	28

The Dark Film 29

Brent Crude 31

The Milk Nostalgia Industries 32

In the Wind 34

Odometer 35

Outside Cow Ark 36

Nostalgie Concrète 37

The Queen 39

Ink 40

Bridego Bridge 41

The Snitch 42

Creep 43

Rapid Hardware 44

Boxer 45

A Thousand Lines 46

The Mind 47

Brawn 48

Cloaca Maxima 49

Big Fish 54

The Circuit 55

Acknowledgements 56

The Dark Film

The Power

Forget all of that end-of-the-pier
palm-reading stuff. Picture a seaside town
in your head. Start from its salt-wrack-rotten smells
and raise the lid of the world to change the light,
then go as far as you want: the ornament
of a promenade, the brilliant greys of gulls,
the weak grip of a crane in the arcades
you've built, ballrooms to come alive at night,
then a million-starling roost, an opulent
crumbling like cake icing . . .

Now, bring it down
in the kind of fire that flows along ceilings,
that knows the spectral blues; that always starts
in donut fryers or boardwalk kindling
in the dead hour before dawn, that leaves pilings
marooned by mindless tides, that sends a plume
of black smoke high enough to stain the halls
of clouds. Now look around your tiny room
and tell me that you haven't got the power.

I'd look up to them looming on street corners,
or down on them at night through my bedroom blinds,
crashing home from the Labour Club, mad drunk.
After a while I decided they must be unhappy.

And this didn't tally at all with my view of their world.
Adults could float through days sole sovereigns
of everything around them, could pass through walls
of childish silence, or just take off in the *Sunbeam*.

So why did I find them at hometime slumped in their chairs
or throwing their tea up the wall? Why did they cry
on their own downstairs with the whole house listening in
or plead softly to people who weren't even there?

You think you know all the answers at that age.
You can't wait to grow up and sort them out, then go
to live in Mayfair or Singapore, wear a smoking jacket
and drink gin slings all day, like real writers do.

We pushed our notes through the floorboards of the house
for the future, before they moved us into the vans.
I couldn't see over the drawn up ramp,
so counted streetlamps. A wasp got into the back
where we sat on the settee and tried to play house.
A wardrobe kicked like a horse where it was lashed.
The smells – of bag-washes, alehouses, hot fat –
faded, then the road grew bumpier. We were led out.

Our tree – an ash – was hard to find for the first few weeks.
They all looked the same to me. Saying that seems
ridiculous now, but the nearest we'd ever been
to a tree was climbing the bunk ladder at bedtime.
Up the dancers! parents still said when the sun went down
and it took a while to adjust to the stork's-nest piles
each one of us took. Every night the moon would find
more chinks in the leaves as it moved across the sky.

But we settled in, and that Christmas was superb.
We decked our tree out in baubles and all our neighbours
did the same – the Pintos' oak, the McGuffies' fir –
and we all went quarters in on pigs that were slaughtered.
Spring smelled like a freshly peeled twig, and the birds
woke us up before it was light and our Dad went berserk.
I was only a slip of a kid, so could find a perch
high up in the crown and look out over the world.

All the green was breaking up and there was a haze
of woodsmoke over the clearings we couldn't help but make.
We helped our Dad knock together a new cradle.
Our tree creaked every night for a week in a gale.
Something was coming, it was plain to see in his face.
Bad dreams – of fire, of the end of the world – came
and I woke them with my cries, and owls took the blame,
but I knew that everything was about to change.

Force Field

Look at all the things I've wrapped myself inside:
Too quiet: put some tape hiss under this.
I was building a force field, as rough and ready
as sparrows wove their nests from bus tickets,
dog hair and cobwebs, what lay to hand,
though in my case, what came in through the eye
on winter evenings: spacemen who'd land
on hostile planets drew a line in the sand
to try to keep out monsters from the id;
Valve synths here, surely? Technicolor.
I walked to school dressed like the Ready Brek Kid.

Now knock it back: out-of-date Ektachrome.
The teacher took the window hook and pulled
fresh air into the classroom because we stank.
One kid hummed like Pig-Pen from Peanuts:
scribbly emanations. Another trailed
his two co-habiting wet Alsatians.
Many were starting out on Players or Woodbines
so there was that, too, and never forget
how feral life was lived then: rain and spittle,
ashes, cat's piss, crushed umbellifers . . .
16mm. Theatrical leader.

When weekly bath nights locked into alignment
their eve would muster such a thickened funk
the teachers gagged. That was the power we had.

Another thing we kept between us and the world.