

VERBA VITAE

Issue No. 1

Black Harry

I am writing this because I have to.

You need to read this.

I need to tell you this.

I'm going to tell you about a man. His name was Black Harry. Black Harry, what a great name, and spot on. His name was Harry, and he was black. It was years before I saw him differently.

Harry's world was a world of dark shadows, deep sinister casting pits, huge ladles of molten-metal hanging from yellow cranes overhead. This world, which became mine, transformed, between times of eerie silence and the screeching noise of the cranes as they carried their potentially deadly load from the furnaces to the casting areas.

Then the dust, the dust was always present. It didn't choose between gaffer and labourer. We ate in separate canteens but we shared the dust; the dust that clogged your every pore; entered your lungs every time you took a breath.

The sparks, they weren't choosy either. When molten metal finds a cold surface; sparks, unpredictable, thirty feet through the air, sparks. Burns your clothes, burns your skin, singes your hair. They can take your sight, and did just that from a few lads.

Harry always dressed in dark blue denim overalls and black steel cap boots. He smelt of sweat and hard graft. He was hard as tungsten, solid muscle, wicked sense of humour and leading-hand on shift three. A furnace man, ex-paratrooper, and it was my job to tell him what to do.

'Young' Dave, tell Black Harry what to do? Technician; first rung on the managerial ladder. You're having a laugh. I knew nowt: fresh out of school. He'd done it for years; knew more about molten metal than I ever would; no matter how many times they sent me to college or what exams I passed.

Or, so I thought.

Ex-para, as I said, in World War Two.

'Oi bonny lad!' I hated being called that, 'Ever see that Bridge over the River Kwai on the telly?'

'Yeah.'

'See that Richard Todd?'

'Yeah.'

'That was me.' He wasn't bragging. Didn't need to - he was Black Harry.

He grabbed me once; not long after I started; held me over the furnace; held me there for ages. I couldn't get free - too strong. He laughed. Shift three laughed. Even I laughed: After he let me go.

When I heard, I could picture the scene. A routine task; remove the runner, the pipe which had fed the mould when the job was cast. Simple. Snap it off and let the crane take it away. I had seen it done hundreds of times.

We had lots of laughs.

Mad stuff - daft stuff - silly stuff. Laugh at the expense of others stuff was a particular favourite. I remember the time of the grand Electric Furnace going on. I'd be told when I got to work.

Routine.

Three men deep in a casting pit. Forty ton job; one of the

biggest, high Carbon content, higher than normal. We didn't make many.

Early hours of the morning; crane in position, take the weight on the chains, easy, steady, crowbars, easy, spanners, easy, should snap. No snap. Just a torrent of molten metal. Must have been more than ten tons. Covered the bottom of the pit. Killed instantly. No warning, no chance to run, nowhere to run. No chance. Dead. Instant.

Young Fergie was one of them. His older brother worked for Harry on shift three (there was a lot of nepotism in this Company.) Three generations in some cases; grandfather, father, sons, not to mention uncles and in-laws. All grafting in the heat and the dust.

When young Fergie died, at that exact moment, his older brother was in bed. Sleeping in bed, or shagging. He liked shagging! He used to talk about it a lot. The other two poor sods had families as well. Not any more. All three were dead. Gone in an instant. No time to think. Trapped. Like I said, no chance; Gush. Heat. Dead.

Smelt like the Pork Shop. I felt sick.

We were supposed to go to the races on a works trip on Saturday. The bus was cancelled. They sent me home. I wasn't any use. Who was? Went home; told my mum, drank whisky.

Three men dead; a mistake; a faulty mould; *cause never finalised.*

Investigated.

After much deliberation; conclusion - **accident.**

Thought about giving up the job. My mum wanted me to. I didn't, not for a year or so. Redundant in the end. Product of the Thatcher reign. Spent some time on the dole then went to University. Got a degree and wrote a dissertation on the Black Economy.

I captained the winning team; *The Plough*, my local pub, since I was fifteen. Got my picture in the paper. I went back to his local a few months later, and the barmaid says, 'Don't I know you?' 'Nah, but you've got me picture up behind the bar.' I went to all three funerals; didn't have a black tie. Turned up early to one, straight off a shift. The rector thought I'd come to fix the roof. Should have shown more respect? They wouldn't know.

Like me, Fergie used to play pool. The best teams in the town entered.

The investigation took weeks. Somebody organized a charity pool competition to raise money for the families.

A few years later I went back home. Walked into a pub called *The Jolly Roger*, on the old A1, and bumped into Black Harry. At first I walked straight past him. Didn't recognize him. He was in a suit, still a powerful figure but he wasn't black! Walked straight past him - because he wasn't black. We had a few beers and reminisced. We didn't talk about the accident. He reminded me of how I used to let them leave work early; *job and finish* it was called. I had the authority to sign their clock cards.

On the day of the accident there were 3 cards left in the rack. They were never clocked out. Not that it matters. Not now. I can only remember Fergie's name, not the other two. Must have tried to block them out, but then again, I never have been good with names. I won't forget the smell though.

Never.

I had a game of pool with the Not-Black Harry. We played for a pint. I beat him. I remember smiling as the black went down. Steady, check the angle, draw the cue back, easy... follow through, steady, impact, click and the black disappears down the pocket. Snap! Game over. Strange what you remember.

Words of Life

It wasn't an accident.

I worked it out from what I learned at college. The weight and chemical composition of the metal weren't right. It hadn't been left to cool for long enough. They went into the casting pit too early. I worked it out. It was a managerial error; a mistake. Not an accident. I've carried this for twenty eight years.

Thank you for reading this.

I needed to tell someone.

Now it's done.

Dave Walker

Slap

Squeeze-boxed tunes roll around
the shattered gutter of the street strummer,
summonin` a survival jive.

Slap flapping necks:
squawking, talking nerves.

The crows load up on the fluff from the dealer's
corner pocket.

This is me;
aiming a mangy dog-eared, black magic mask of a
mirror at the world.

This is me;
going to the fat-man`s corner with stumbling
flashbacks

This is me;
now flat of magic, like a spirit bottle used as an
ashtray at a dull party.

This is me;
the driver now blinded.

This is me;
deafened by the magic all over again.

Am I already dead
and you cannot see to kill me?

In tune, somehow
in contrast to the sleepless 3am space
of flat nights,
there awoke in me something.

A sharpie scrawl here.
A little mouthful from the spirit bottle there.

I spat it out.

Paul Hawkins



SURRENDER

Drip
Drip
Drop.
Incessant
Chatter
Natter
Clatter
Shatters the quiet.
Cascades down
Gutters,
Falling Deep,
Take a peep,
Leap
Into my mind.

Jump
Bump
Thump
Along.
Pushing
Shoving
Barging
Through the
Long ever-winding
Corridors,
Twisting more
To reach the shore,
Pour
Out my heart.

Plink
Plink
Plonk.
Playing
Softly,
Gently,
Quietly
Through the thin
Delicate
Fingers,
Reaching height,
Gaining sight,
Light up my soul.

Turn
Learn
Burn.
Destroy the
Habit.
Tablet.
Share a bit,
Settle the score.
Silence
Descends.
No more the bender,
The Pretender,
Surrender my body.

Belinda Wood

ABOUT VERBA VITAE

Verba Vitae – Words of Life – is a broadsheet published by Vita Nova which is intended to give 'recovery' writers a wider audience.

We publish a short story and /or a number of short poems once every three months, print on newspaper sized sheets and distribute free to venues in and around Bournemouth.

If you have had an addiction problem and would like to write, come along to the Vita Nova writers group which meets weekly 5 – 7pm at the Bourne Spring Centre, St Mary's Road, Bournemouth BH1 4QP. This is a safe supportive place to develop your writing.

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