

Classic Poetry Series

John Burnside

- 11 poems -

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John Burnside (19 March 1955 -)

John Burnside is a Scottish writer, born in Dunfermline. He is one of only two poets (the other being Sean O'Brien) to have won both the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Poetry Prize for the same book (*Black Cat Bone*).

Life and Works

Burnside studied English and European Languages at Cambridge College of Arts and Technology. A former computer software engineer, he has been a freelance writer since 1996. He is a former Writer in Residence at the University of Dundee and is now Professor in Creative Writing, Literature and Ecology at St Andrews University. His first collection of poetry, *The Hoop*, was published in 1988 and won a Scottish Arts Council Book Award. Other poetry collections include *Common Knowledge* (1991), *Feast Days* (1992), winner of the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and *The Asylum Dance* (2000), winner of the Whitbread Poetry Award and shortlisted for both the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year) and the T. S. Eliot Prize. *The Light Trap* (2001) was also shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize.

Burnside is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Burning Elvis* (2000), and several novels, including *The Dumb House* (1997), *The Mercy Boys* (1999) (winner of the Encore Award) and *The Locust Room* (2001), which is set in Cambridge in 1975, and explores the consequences of a series of violent rapes. His poetry collection, *The Good Neighbour* (2005), was shortlisted for the 2005 Forward Poetry Prize (Best Collection). He also writes a column for *The Guardian* newspaper. Burnside was a judge of the 2007 Griffin Poetry Prize. He is a member of the judging panel for the 2011 Manchester Fiction Prize, and has the same year been honoured the Petrarca-Preis, a major German international literary prize.

Burnside's work is inspired by his deep engagement with nature, environment and ecology. He lives with his wife and two sons in east Fife, whilst his daughter lives in London.

Awards

1988 Scottish Arts Council Book Award, for *The Hoop*
1991 Scottish Arts Council Book Award, for *Common Knowledge*
1994 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, for *Feast Days*
1999 Encore Award for *The Mercy Boys*
2000 Forward Poetry Prize (Best Collection – shortlist), for *The Asylum Dance*
2000 T. S. Eliot Prize (shortlist), for *The Asylum Dance*
2000 Whitbread Book Award, Poetry Award, for *The Asylum Dance*
2002 Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year Award (shortlist), for *The Light*

Trap

2002 T. S. Eliot Prize (shortlist), for The Light Trap
2005 Forward Poetry Prize (Best Collection - shortlist), for The Good Neighbour
2006 Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year Award for A Lie About My Father
2008 Catherine Maclean Prize (shortlist) for The Devil's Footprints
2008 Cholmondeley Award
2011 Petrarca-Preis
2011 PEN/Ackerley prize (shortlist) for Waking Up in Toytown
2011 Corine Literature Prize for A Lie About My Father
2011 Forward Prize for Black Cat Bone
2011 Costa Book Awards (Novel), shortlist, A Summer of Drowning
2011 T. S. Eliot Prize for Black Cat Bone

Works:

Poetry Collections

The Broon Hoop (Carcenet, 1988)
Common Knowledge (Secker and Warburg, London, 1991)
Feast Days (Secker and Warburg, London, 1992)
The Myth of the Twin (Jonathan Cape, London, 1995)
Swimming in the Flood (Jonathan Cape, London, 1995)
Penguin Modern Poets (Penguin, 1996)
A Normal Skin (Jonathan Cape, London, 1997)
The Asylum Dance (Jonathan Cape, London, 2000)
The Light Trap (Jonathan Cape, London, 2002)
Wild Reckoning (Gulbenkian, 2004), joint editor with Maurice Riordan of this anthology of ecology-related poems
The Good Neighbour (Jonathan Cape, 2005)
Selected Poems (Jonathan Cape, 2006)
Gift Songs (Jonathan Cape, 2007)
The Hunt in the Forest (Jonathan Cape, 2009)
Black Cat Bone (Jonathan Cape, September 2009)

Fiction

The Dumb House (Jonathan Cape, London, 1997)
The Mercy Boys (Jonathan Cape, London, 1999)
Burning Elvis (Jonathan Cape, London, 2000)
The Locust Room (Jonathan Cape, London, 2001)
Living Nowhere (Jonathan Cape, London, 2003)
The Devil's Footprints (Jonathan Cape, 2007)
Glister (Jonathan Cape, 2008)
A Summer of Drowning (Jonathan Cape, 2011)

Non-Fiction

A Lie About My Father (Biography, 2006)
Wallace Stevens : poems / selected by John Burnside (Poet to Poet Series, Faber and Faber, 2008)
Waking up in Toytown (Biography, Jonathan Cape, 2010)

Screen

Dice (with A. L. Kennedy), a series for television, produced by Cité-Amérique, Canada

Agoraphobia

My whole world is all you refuse:
a black light, angelic and cold
on the path to the orchard,
fox-runs and clouded lanes and the glitter of webbing,
little owls snagged in the fruit nets
out by the wire
and the sense of another life, that persists
when I go out into the yard
and the cattle stand round me, obstinate and dumb.
All afternoon, I've worked at the edge of your vision,
mending fences, marking out our bounds.
Now it is dusk, I turn back to the house
and catch you, like the pale Eurydice
of children's classics, venturing a glance
at nothing, at this washed infinity
of birchwoods and sky and the wet streets leading away
to all you forget: the otherworld, lucid and cold
with floodlights and passing trains and the noise of traffic
and nothing like the map you sometimes
study for its empty bridlepaths,
its hill-tracks and lanes and roads winding down to a coast
of narrow harbors, lit against the sea.

John Burnside

Blues

It's moments like this
 when the barman goes through the back
and leaves me alone

a radio whispering
 somewhere amongst the glasses
 - I'm through with love -

the way the traffic slows
 to nothing
how all of a sudden
 at three in the afternoon

the evening's already begun
 a nascent
dimming.

 By ten I'll be walking away
on Union Street
 or crossing Commercial Road
in a gust of rain

and everyone who passes
 will be you
or almost you
 before it's someone else.

John Burnside

Cornfield

after John Nash

Nothing is as it was
in childhood, when we had to learn the names
of objects and colours,

and yet the eye can navigate a field,
loving the way a random stook of corn
is orphaned
- not by shadows; not by light -

but softly, like the tinder in a children's
story-book, the stalled world raised to life
around a spark: that tenderness in presence,

pale as the flame a sniper waits to catch
across the yards of razor-wire and ditching;
thin as the light that falls from chapel doors,

so everything, it seems,
is resurrected;
not for a moment, not in the sway of the now,

but always,
as the evening we can see
is all the others, all of history:

the man climbing up from the tomb
in a mantle of sulphur,

the struck match whitening his hands
in a blister of light.

John Burnside

Landscapes

Behind faces and gestures
We remain mute
And spoken words heavy
With what we ignore or keep silent
Betray us

I dare not speak for mankind
I know so little of myself

But the Landscape

I see as a reflection
Is also a lie stealing into
My words I speak without remorse
Of this image of myself
And mankind my unequaled torment

I speak of Desert without repose
Carved by relentless winds
Torn up from its bowels

Blinded by sands
Unsheltered solitary
Yellow as death
Wrinkled like parchment
Face turned to the sun.

I speak
Of men's passing
So rare in this arid land
That it is cherished like a refrain
Until the return
Of the jealous wind

And of the bird, so rare,
Whose fleeting shadow
Soothes the wounds made by the sun

And of the tree and the water
Named Oasis
For a woman's love

I speak of the voracious Sea
Reclaiming shells from beaches
Waves from children

The faceless Sea
Its hundreds of drowned faces
Wrapped in seaweed
Slippery and green
Like creatures of the deep

The reckless Sea, unfinished story,
Removed from anquish
Full of death tales

I speak of open valleys
Fertile at men's feet
Overgrown with flowers

Of captive summits

Of mountains, of clear skies
Devoured by untamed evergreens

And of trees that know
The welcome of lakes
Black earth
Errant pathways

Echoes of the faces
Haunting our days.

John Burnside

Over Kellie

If summer is conversation,
then winter is thought;

or so it seems tonight: rain in the trees
and, halfway between our house
and the neighbour's farm,

a lost ewe in the fence-wire
waits for dawn;

as I am waiting now,
for something new:

a way of thinking come in from the fields;
a music, spare and empty as a psalm,

or like a question no one thinks to ask
until the wind remembers on his skin,
a sky beneath the sky, the dreaming grass,

acres of homeland, measured out in stars.

John Burnside

Ronan

To prove that nothing
really disappears

and nothing comes of nothing,
days like these

we go down to the beach
and dig for hours

hauling up glass and creel bones
from the sand,

veins of razor shell
and drifted oil,

buttons and fishnets,
bottles, scraps of sail;

and think how our language
harbours the tongues of our elders,

Norse and Gaelic
buried in the map,

fragments of Sanskrit
shining through the hymnals.

More than we pretend
of what we do

is restoration:
dreaming into life

a world that's neither
past nor primitive,

but fresh as the cream of the well,
of some upland source

concealed under plywood boards
and nettles

aboriginal. – wine-dark,

John Burnside

Septuagesima

I dream of the silence
the day before Adam came
to name the animals,

The gold skins newly dropped
from God's bright fingers, still
implicit with the light.

A day like this, perhaps:
a winter whiteness
haunting the creation,

as we are sometimes
haunted by the space
we fill, or by the forms

we might have known
before the names,
beyond the gloss of things.

John Burnside

Si Dieu N'existait Pas

No one invents an absence:
Cadmium yellow, duckweed, the capercaillie
- see how the hand we would name restrains itself
till all our stories end in monochrome;

the path through the meadow
reaching no logical end;
nothing but colour: bedstraw and ladies' mantle;
nothing sequential; nothing as chapter and verse.

No one invents the quiet that runs in the grass,
the summer wind, the sky, the meadowlark;
and always the gift of the world, the undecided:
first light and damson blue ad infinitum.

John Burnside

Snake

As cats bring their smiling
mouse-kills and hypnotised birds,
slinking home under the light
of a summer's morning
to offer the gift of a corpse,

you carry home the snake you thought
was sunning itself on a rock
at the river's edge:
sun-fretted, gracile,
it shimmies and sways in your hands
like a muscle of light,
and you gather it up like a braid
for my admiration.

I can't shake the old wife's tale
that snakes never die,
they hang in a seamless dream
of frogskin and water,
preserving a ribbon of heat
in a bone or a vein,
a cold-blooded creature's
promise of resurrection,

and I'm amazed to see you shuffle off
the woman I've know for years,
tracing the lithe, hard body, the hinge of the jaw,
the tension where sex might be, that I always assume
is neuter, when I walk our muffled house
at nightfall, throwing switches, locking doors.

John Burnside

The Archaeology Of Childhood 1: House

If the house in a dream
Is how I imagine myself:

room after room
of furniture no one could use;

stairs leading upwards
to nothing; an empty hall

filling with snow
where a door has been left ajar;

then whatever I make
of the one room high in the roof

where something alive and frantic
is hopelessly trapped,

whatever I make
of the sweetness it leaves behind

on waking, what I know
and cannot tell

is awkward and dark in my hands
while I stop to remember

the snare of a heart;
the approximate weight of possession.

John Burnside

The Inner Ear

It never switches off; even asleep
We listen in to gravity itself.

Crossing a field is one long exercise
in equilibrium - a player's grace -

though what we mean by that
has more to do

with music
than the physics we imagine.

A history of forest and the murk
of oceans, nice

adjustments
in the memory of bone

lead us to this: the gaze;
the upright form.

Lemur and tree-shrew linger in the spine
becoming steps; a track worn in the grass;

A moment's pause
before the rain moves in.

John Burnside