

Classic Poetry Series

Joanne Burns
- poems -

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Joanne Burns(5 December 1945 -)

Joanne Burns was born in Sydney in 1945 and has lived there for most of her life, never far from the shores of Sydney Harbour. Over a dozen collections of her writing have been published. Her first poetry collection *Snatch* was published by The Strange Faeces Press, Notting Hill Gate, London in 1972. In addition to writing in the conventional poetic line break form she has written extensively in the prose poem/microfiction form. She has been particularly interested in the blurring of distinctions between poetry and prose. The use of the monologue form is another distinctive feature of her work. Satiric, ironic perspectives are prominent in her poetry; sometimes she is ludic, parodic. She has a keen eye for the absurd aspects of contemporary living and culture. Her poetry also engages with the esoteric, the cryptic, and the surreal - in a quirky (as opposed to the solemn) manner. Burns has written in the lower case for over thirty years, eschewing capitalisation, which she believes imposes a 'preordained' significance on certain words in the text. She prefers a 'level playing field'.

A polished and well known reader/performer of her poetry in Australia, she first read at The Troubadour, Earls Court in 1972 - having been galvanised by the vibrant poetry reading scene in London where she lived between 1970 and 1972. Her audio recording shows how she sets up a theatre of words, easing the audience into a satisfying space between following her and cogitating on where they might possibly go. These are cogent lessons on how to exercise the imagination.

In 1985 she visited the United States and Canada as a member of the Four Australian Poets Reading Tour. Her work has been produced for theatre, radio, television. She is represented in numerous poetry anthologies, for example - *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*, *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, *The Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse*. Her poetry has been published in school poetry text books, and her book on a clear day has been, and is currently, one of the poetry texts listed for study in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate English Syllabus. Her work has been translated into German, French, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian. In 2003, along with nine other Australian poets, she participated in translation workshops at the Berlin Poetry Festival, organised by literaturWERKstatt Berlin, and supported by the Australia Council for the Arts. She has received a number of writing grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. A detailed literary biography of Joanne Burns (written by Australian poet Margaret Bradstock) appears in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol 289 (Gale, 2004).

The audio poems were recorded on August 2007 in Sydney, Australia for the River Road Poetry Series)Producer: Carol Jenkins)

Another New Year

the first week of the new year and
indolence drops in as usual uninvited:
here's lassitude like flat champagne flatter
than sorrow flat as the image of the year
ahead — a schedule of trivial and significant
failures making its prescience felt; any humour
of self parody is fizzled by the heat, an insect
voice rasps make it new make it new —
a decision to give up writing for sandwich
making seems quite positive, the first new year's
resolution approximating common sense in quite a while yet

in a slow thin panic you begin pigging out
on poetry: surrounding yourself with texts, slimthick volumes
of verse, biographies, essays, articles, interviews, as if
you're building a formidable sandcastle at low tide:
american essays on poetic truth-honesty-sincerity make
you want to puke
to burn the lot pity about the fire bans there's nothing
more pesky than the pieties of american poets doubling
as lit crits up to their crowns their laurels in
certainties and eloquence, a rhetoric that's never lost
for words, and cee-vees long as the mississippi; to grow
illiterate, mute (not to be confused with vocally challenged)
is what you crave: a big long sleep on a blank white page

Joanne Burns

carnal knowledge

outside the sex show palace,
a dreary tenement teased out
of its sullenness by the flash of
candy neon come-ons,
a carload of steroid boofs
leap out and race up
the stairs to bundy on
for the friday night long hot
shift, the A team in their
identikit satin bomber jackets,
renaissance men each at least
a spruiker-bouncer, perfect in this age
of multi-skilling

they rush to their workplace
with all the professional cool
of u.s. marines beginning an invasion
or of hitmen late
for a murder
their gym bags held tight in
a left or right fist
like doppelganger erections

in the time it takes
a junkie to spew
in the gutter opposite
they're back on the street
hands free, they head for the cappuccino
shop, walking as if they need a piss
but don't know it
while the daytime spruiker in mufti
flinty and snappy as an old cattle dog
holds the fort, barking 'have a go have a go'
into the early evening crowd

in the window of the zorro café
they sit snug as chubby
babies in high chairs,
the cappuccino kids, sucking up

the froth rising high above
the rims of their cups like detergent
foam in a blocked drain

Joanne Burns

chubby

the voice of the qawwali singer
lifts off your wig of poor listening
habits you meet with a stack
of ice cubes in an exploding
fridge spin across skies like
a valley rediscovering its dervish
wings the ceiling becomes
an empyrean of parachutes quivering
like the fountain of his chubby
throat he sings from the slender
disc above the bread board
like an accidental messiah and
the musak of the century takes to
its sickbed; arcane perfumes waft
over from the plastered walls your eyeballs
roll across the windowpanes like
surprise pearls you set fire to a
thousand travellers' cheques he
sings of the secrets in the ancient
library of your sleepy heart

Joanne Burns

Composition Method

- i) i trawled through an inner-city newsletter and assembled various phrases and fragments, 'renovating' them fairly often -
- ii) added my own images and phrases as they made their presences felt -
- iii) used a line from arnold's 'the scholar gypsy' -
iii.a) & a slessorian gesture -
- iv) referenced a billboard ad from the kings cross underground railway station -
- v) took particles from articles and ads in a business magazine or two -
- vi) and that scam email [at last put to work - tho haven't had one of those for ages] -

Joanne Burns

dependence day

the astroturf blisters, bubbles in the hollywood hills,
the forests of the world become landfill, no bushes
left to burn, to illustrate those gutsy gods
of fire, old deities grown senile on donuts
and cheap cheesyburger bites, their powers idled
away in puny farts, billions of eyes lift
to read the sky: huge fire clouds billowing
out like wild miracles, a festival at
the end of time, the aliens' spaceship is
about to arrive,

the world dances in its
deserts, gulches, dried up
streets like a mob of
extras in an old movie
marathon, nostalgia
rules the skies

Joanne Burns

Digital Recording (After Eliot)

one thinks of all the hands
that whip money out of ATMs
quick as condoms, headache pills;
that jiggle herbal tea bags in thick
mugs like puppeteers; that fill
out lotto forms on a stream of
thin white shelves; that are
dropping shaggy track pants on
the floor beside a bed, that
press touchfones more than flesh;
that vote in cardboard booths
with short lead pencils, tied
to string like small harpoons:
that tremble at the mirror too
close to the patinas of their skin;
one thinks of all the hands, burning
teaspoons in a thousand motel rooms

Joanne Burns

Golden Triangle

when the martians moved in
to alaska boulevarde they
levelled the heritage dwellings
and built homes in the shape
of ovaries; on cold frosty
mornings you can see them out
on their crazy paved lawns
gilded to the hilt doing push
ups in net singlets and
smart bermuda shorts; when
they exhale the air fizzes
with the sport of tiny lime
green triangles and their silver
beet and snow pea hedges
sway in the gulf stream breeze —
like a cocktail of fresh wind
chimes their gossip begins

Joanne Burns

how to sneeze in peace

the burden of dreaming, the bed a huge net dragging the monster octopus of story that lunges through the head at night: the corpulence of the drowning psyche. who, what, are these people, these shades, these feelings, places, likenesses, that tangle one up like a bad load of washing. this shamozzle of the long night.

tentacles shoot out new episodes, plots and subplots in the hours before dawn. who is the octopus - the dreamer or the dream. grubby stories, leviathan lore, cheap little anecdotes. you turn in the bed, and its creak documents another story. the glare, the smirks of strangers, familiar places, rearranged by the psyche's cruel interior designer. you know the loci by name but they look different. as if you are awakening from an anaesthetic.

in dreams irony does not exist, even suspicion, perspicuity is a struggle, you suffer physical pain if you try to break out of the dream. the dream and its fleshy, multifarious burdens insists you remain naïve, compliant, committed.

but for those who have been blessed with dust allergies there is a way out. if you find yourself near dusty spots in one of your dreamings try to get as close as you can to these sprinklings or mites. within breaths you will feel it coming. a huge sequence of sneezing that will blast you from your deepest slumbering, with a shower of clear ink, writing invisible gratitudes across the lightness of air.

Joanne Burns

ipso facto

it's hard to give up the biscuits
so tightly sealed in their shiny
white packets, the cryptic
glyphs of saos and jatz: cunieform
of the antipodes; can you hear
the fall of the auctioneer's hammer
the national museum has made
a bid - we sit and contemplate
the soaring price of mothballs while
silverfish rehearse on the
velvet lounge, hear the leaves
scrape on the spidery windows jealous
ancestors plaque sandstone
walls, please treat the diaries to
ten coats of estapol and make
sure the magistrates plait the lawn

saos and jatz - popular Australian biscuits of the kind you have with cheese;

estapol - polyurethane paint, lacquer

Joanne Burns

johnny come lately

dressed down in designer
loin cloth nipples perked up
alert to the beep of her
mobile phone her johnny
weismuller mating call
(no cracking onto this
babe from anything as
naff, as obsolete as flex
cord, or liana rope, so
passé hollywood): she sucks
on her banana smoothie
holding the straw like a
poisonous dart he promised
he'd phone before one she whines
lathering her limbs with coconut
oil - if yr out there johnny get
yr groin on the line - the sun
pelts down cranky and nagging
as genital failure she needs
to chill out now into the harbour
she lopes face long and sulky
for a second a plain jane (though
a few years ago she could have
been gadget, again): she dives under
quick as a burp it's low tide
too low, not deep enough to hear
those taronga lions roar, she tears
back to her towel: it's a bore the
phone's not waterproof, she'll
have to sweat it out: give him
just - only - till four

Joanne Burns

kept busy

from our deep cool verandah we spy on the world passing by. we both wear glasses in order to pick out the details. even as children we noticed all. people would say dont like those twins they look at you funny. we were reassured. our powers had been confirmed. but that was a long while ago. now we are 60. we have lived in this ground floor flat on the main road for 20 years. it is a very suitable dwelling, and we have a satisfactory relationship with the landlord. we think he is pleased we notice his transparency. we have been here since we left our husbands who got in the way of our observations.

after our evening meal we talk quietly of what we have seen. we believe in sharing our observations in case one of us has missed something. for our eyesight isnt as sharp as it was ten years ago. though we do clean our glasses each hour and keep our hair tied firmly back in small grey buns so nothing can distract our focus. we are small women. many people do not notice us, while we are noticing them. we keep to ourselves. mother used to say to us never get too friendly with strangers they can harm you. even if they smile and offer you an hour of their lives dont tell them nothing. mother knew a lot. she always kept the bible and a cloth to clean her hands on the kitchen table within reach.

at night we take turns to sit at the window and watch. we set the alarm at 2 and 6. this way we both get some sleep. theres always something to see along this road. even at 3 in the morning. last night we saw a woman in a torn fur coat, gum boots and a beanie blow up balloons, tie them on her arms as if they were wings. she climbed up a tree, spread her arms and jumped. we think she might have injured herself. she screamed for quite a while until one of the passing motorists stopped and rang for an ambulance. we didnt want to get involved. our slippers might have gotten wet. it had been raining quite heavily.

another night one of the local drunks fell asleep on our verandah. he smelt wretched but we were pleased to be able to get a closer look at him. for several weeks we had been trying to work out a few things about him. at least we were able to see how thick and long the scar on his bald head was. we were able to read the words on his tattoos, 'dearest jean' and 'sailor boy'. we also saw a thin line thru the word 'jean' as if he had tried to cut the word out. very interesting. we scrubbed the verandah with disinfectant the next morning. it didnt take long.

we keep records of our observations in a private code in large journals. we are saving them up for the day when our memories fail us. then we can read them thru to recall the details. they are an assurance that our days have been full and

busy. we put black velvet covers on these books. they are so soft to stroke. just like the backs of our 8 black cats who often sleep like guardians in front of the cupboard as if they recognised the importance of its contents.

there are many folks with bad legs along this road. they hobble ever so slowly up and down all day as if they had all the time in the world. they bandage their legs in different ways. some of the bandages are rather grubby. you'd think theyd wash them. there are plenty of laundromats around here. every pension day they could wash them. they could share a machine. you can fit a good deal in one of these contraptions - at least ten bandages. dear me. if theyd looked where they were going instead of expecting life to do everything for them, they wouldnt be in this predicament. we're so pleased we're not handicapped. we have only ourselves to thank. and of course mother.

pension morning is always busy. we always make sure the teapot is full by 9.30. the crowd gathers outside the bank. for at least half an hour. theres no time to get up and put the jug on for some time. they clutter the footpath. so many of them. it takes a while for us to sort out who's there. we sometimes use the journal if we cant quite locate every face. often its the only way to really know who died before the postman called. on our deep cool verandah we sit. the twins. there are no mirrors in our hallway.

Joanne Burns

Marinations

under a canvas awning, a few
metres above sea level, with backs
to the harbour the poets are reading —
their audience reclines on smooth fresh
mown lawn, swish as a cecil beaton
snap: lyric marinates the air; the p.a system
amplifies the verse right
to the water's edge, where an evening
swimmer unaware of the source of
these bardic sounds, seeing is believing, may
mistake them for announcements
at a livestock sale or a stubborn
address from a captain whose ship
is going down

Joanne Burns

Market Forces

cough up quotations

from that fossilized

string bag

of early scholarship

jute or nylon,

generic cotton

a tangled net like

dna

mutated

temporarily lost

for

words

at the inquisition of quality

communication

old

phrases parts of

speech

shoot out

into the kangaroo court

of air

□ around your mouth

as if a fine

powder

of chilli

had infiltrated

your throat

baa baa

black market

my vile hen this is

□ the season

□ of our discontinuity how can

□ a rat

□ a dog □ plate of pink

□ ice cream □ have a

media life

□ while you

□ are

□ wracked upon a

wheel

of nursery rhyme see how

you

scatter all experience

is

an arch

for jack and jill

o incey wincey

spider

thou art sick

of

mellow fruitfulness

into the valley

of drapers' shops

rides

little mary fawcett

with

beside that innkeeper's

black-eyed

daughter there's

a whole lotta shakin' goin' on peggy sue

how

is the hour when

□

we must urge

all leopard skin pill box

hats □ of the world

to look into their

□ moth holes

and □ remember the paint

is

peeling off

the painted oceans and

painted ships have

lost

their plimsoll lines

Joanne Burns

memo

if you can stand at the right angle on the front steps of santiago central library on a hot and sunny day when you are protesting against state torture; if you can stand at the edge of the group just as the riot police start to aim the water cannon at the protest, you might be able to catch a glimpse of an extremely small dazzle of a rainbow where the streams of water intersect with the sun's rays. if you can, try to notice this dazzle before you fully comprehend the force of the water. but do not open your mouth to marvel at the momentary beauty or to moisten your dry throat, or to contemplate the immensity of the state's thirst.

Joanne Burns

Nightmarketing

i.

the wall smashing ceremony via legislation stops rats running right through the
last mass grab a pollution project with a rehearsal space and win a double pass
extra roads completed inside parliament for pets on exit journeys you find it i
find it sandstone locksmith look for a grain eligibility criteria indicate notre dame
as the next premier recent cafes congratulate pedestrian driven emergencies on
fixed leases impatient beds monitor tennis bypass philosophies for a sacred heart
open air swim pools pump trees with valleys of liquor parish services shadow a
quarter million power point bureaucrats large volumes of seawater assess them
every year a lullaby of chlorine seems dirtier than childhood letterbox city
delirious with policy what gurgling miscreants choir under these streets

ii.

'suck it and see approach' to local traffic access i am
SMITH, a miner, soliciting your consent
with respect to capital flight to the tune of SEVEN MILLION,
TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND UNITED STATES DOLLARS ONLY
the rum corps has traded up for daiquiris on the travelator at
the global happy hour bears and bulls exchange emails with
saint vitus, 'ill-marketed by moonlight' announces detective inspector
beattie bow as white rabbits invade the tank stream in another
pedestrian scam 'waiting for the spark of heaven to fall'
the scholar mutters to the library on his back

iii.

boardroom poison, the new soup for summer, cheap as money living exclusively
at the soul apartments beyond the road block; grudges against eyewear require
rebundling ditch the partnership and relocate to you-time for a seminar surprise
grind that glass like seed:

Joanne Burns

parts of speech notes towards a nuclear grammar

war is a noun and so is peace. uranium is a noun like armchair. plutonium and perspiration are both nouns and each has four syllables. bliss and terror are also nouns.

develop is a verb and so is hurry, and race, which is also a noun, like arms. another verb is explode.

beautiful and ingenious are both adjectives. they add information to nouns, e.g. beautiful perspiration, ingenious uranium.

slowly, quickly, immediately, courageously are adverbs and make verbs more interesting, e.g. they exploded courageously

they is a pronoun and takes the place of a noun. like you, we, he, she, us, them. anyone you know could be a pronoun.

and is a conjunction and as such joins everything together in one big long chain of a sentence. but in some situations it is advisable to replace the ands with a series of full stops

Joanne Burns

peerage

his body a paradigm
of tattoo husbandry he
glowers on the street dreaming
himself to be an award
winning website hawk
the phlegm of his
rhetoric towards the ground
as he poises like some
ancestral reflex to peer
into a bookshop window
jeering as if it's a
vitrine in a fusty museum
till he sees a picture
on a cover looking like
himself with a front
tooth missing so he
fists himself through
then wanders along to
an internet café
where it's hotmail
time his night
vision goggles strapped
to a hip

Joanne Burns

reading

there were so many books. she had to separate them to avoid being overwhelmed by the excessive implications of their words. she kept hundreds in a series of boxes inside a wire cage in a warehouse. and hundreds more on the shelves of her various rooms. when she changed houses she would pack some of the books into the boxes and exchange them for others that had been hibernating. these resurrected books were precious to her for a while. they had assumed the patinas of dusty chthonic wisdoms. and thus she would let them sit on the shelves admiring them from a distance. gathering time and air. she did not want to be intimate with their insides. the atmospherics suggested by the titles were enough. sometimes she would increase the psychic proximities between herself and the books and place a pile of them on the floor next to her bed. and quite possibly she absorbed their intentions while she slept.

if she intended travelling beyond a few hours she would occasionally remove a book from the shelves and place it in her bag. she carried 'the poetics of space' round india for three months and it returned to her shelves undamaged at the completion of the journey. every day of those three months she touched it and read some of the titles of its chapters to make sure it was there. and real. chapters called house and universe, nests, shells, intimate immensity, miniatures and, the significance of the hut. she had kept it in a pocket of her bag together with a coloured whistle and an acorn. she now kept this book in the darkness of her reference shelf. and she knew that one day she would have to admit to herself that this was the only book she had need of, that this was the book she would enter the pages of, that this was the book she was going to read

Joanne Burns

the library of t-shirts

in order to upgrade the community's appreciation of poetry during the international year of cultural enrichment stage 2, members of the state's library progress committee decided to establish a small library of t-shirts on which would be printed quality verse in vivid, bold colours and lettering. the poems would be selected on the basis of one of three qualities: is the poem poignant, perspicacious, or pithy.

given the respectably researched fact that the wearing of words on t-shirts expresses a deep psychic desire for an intimate union of word and flesh, (and bear in mind the way "logo" nudges towards "logos") it is not surprising that this library of t-shirts has been a great success. no one seems to mind borrowing pre-worn clothing. of course the library's washing and ironing staff maintain the t-shirts in excellent condition. even after ten borrowings the shirts look brand new. and considering the phenomenal success of andrew lloyd webber's "cats" it is no shock revelation that t.s. eliot's "hollow men" has proved to be the library's most popular t-shirt so far. in fact there are now eight copies of this shirt on loan, most in metallic or fluoro colours.

a couple of the more entrepreneurial of the library's progress committee members are leading the push for diversification of the library's poetry program, into neck to knee anti-uv swimwear, with maybe slessor, shelly and stevie smith prints for starters; and into underpants, with their multiple attractions.

while the committee feels both these garments could increase poetry's appeal, they are worried about the practicability of adding these garments to the t-shirt poetry collection. would many members want to borrow preworn underpants, however compelling the poems' cadences and metaphors; while the wear and tear on the swimming costume fabric via chlorine and salt water would perhaps be too great. however they are interested in marketing and selling these articles from a stall in the library's foyer. the only committee member unenthusiastic regarding this proposal is an optometrist who has raised the issue of eye damage if the typeface of the lines of verse on the underpants were too small. a solution in the form of large print haikus is being considered.

Joanne Burns

Traffic

it's still the same, signs on the grass
say don't feed the fish, instead of
don't eat them, still the same tired old
sports star tropes, failed golfer falls
on his sword, shakespearean high jinx on
the links, how could he be such a loser
with forty million dollars in loot his
hound's toothed fan heartily burps, new
golf courses still consume asian
farmlands mad cow disease is still
on the cards, just don't eat the fish
or feed them, ensuite bathrooms are
still being constructed there's so
little time for church, family's still
a noun, like nest of tables, to covet:
a home still provides for its
family of cars, even if everyone's
anxious to leave they all still
want somewhere to park, lie
perfectly still on the tarmac
your poem is about to be heard
its peristalsis leisurely, and
loyal as pop up toast, a grecian
urn still sits unravished in the gift
shop window behind the six pack
traffic's roar, its proprietor ms salome
sitwell snores into her pocket sized
koans, the figurine of the milkmaid from
Shropshire drops on her face to the floor
and still
the rain still falls

Joanne Burns

untitled

she had more friends
than you could fit
into the back of a truck

that's why she didn't mind
leaving them parked
on a cliff edge

while she went
for a stroll
with the brake in her pocket

Joanne Burns

Watchdog

i

under the house in the soft
brown soil you lean
against bleached wash
tubs wringing parrot
bright holiday clothes,
the cold water on your fingers
delicious as an Italian beer
in a long heat wave, and the
outside ferns obscure
the strength of the sun's fierce
blaze through lattices of shade;
in this cool private world
the intimacy
of the moment seems
immense as you turn
with your full buckets deep
piles of packing cases
removalists' boxes in storage,
murmur like totems from travellers'
secret trails

ii

the sweet silence of
this under-the-house shadows
you pegging out
your clothes, a residue
of water trickles up your
arms as you offer
your tipsy face like a brazen
bride to the fiery sun
glazing the lawn the
mango tree chthonic
green you swoon into
greek no universal
myth thoughts of ultra
violet rays are obscene
at a time like this —
the flowery end of your sarong

lifts, a kite in a sudden
breeze, and a grasshopper
lands on your wrist

iii

the watchdog, oshi, short for
ocean, rushes round the deck, he
hasn't seen a cane toad,
it's the beep of the new computer
game sending him into a spin —
mandalay towers, a sixty floor
hotel, where fifty mini-robo tourists,
programmed for cyber-shark fishing
and promptness, pulse crimson —
their ten second elevator's failing
to come, while dion and cora evans,
couple forty three
in the honeymooner suites, require
urgent help with a new condom
machine

iv

disoriented, dazed
inside upstairs you rush to
be of service just like a
mighty mouse, and trip
on the dog's ball, the
cordless phone then slam
your elbow virtually
through the screen, you hear
the rumble of an earthquake
hundreds of tiny graphics
tumble hurtle megametres of inches
to the ground the ceiling
fans the hills hoist still
spin so languidly round and
round is this paradise
lost or paradise found

Joanne Burns