

## Bodies Of Work

STEVEN MATTHEWS

John Burnside, *The Hunt in the Forest*, Cape Poetry,

£10, ISBN 9780224089272;

Ciaran Carson, *On the Night Watch*, Gallery Press,

€13.90, ISBN 9781852354664

John Burnside and Ciaran Carson are both exceptionally prolific writers, who have made their multitudinous productivity integral to that capture of the world which their poetry seeks to make. Burnside's new book is his eleventh poetry collection; he has published seven novels and two volumes of memoir as well. Carson's *For All We Know* appeared only last year, together with a hefty *Collected*; he too is a novelist, and is also a translator. Both these new collections, therefore, further the accumulation of themes and insights, offering sets of variations upon particular worlds.

The philosophical ambition of Burnside's poetry had perhaps been most evident in his last collection. *Gift Songs* opens with a series of 'Responses to Augustine of Hippo', and closes with the immodest 'Four Quartets'. *The Hunt in the Forest* offers us several meditative 'Essays', concerning Light, and Time, as well as other discursive sequences, and several poems carrying the same title, 'Amor Vincit Omnia' (Geoffrey Hill's late work is another shadowing presence here). But the tone has darkened in this new book: one of the most brilliant group of lyrics, 'In Memoriam', charts the terrible slow death of a hospital patient. Other elegies are scattered through the book. In the presence of these specific deaths, Burnside's consistent themes of loss, of alternative selves, of the difficulties of faith, accumulate new power. Governed as they are by a persistent enquiry about the thing-ness of the body, the lyrics of 'In Memoriam' yet celebrate the normal rhythms of gathered experience. "On the surgery ward", the patient restlessly seeks to grasp at a past which is now sadly remote, nearly sealed away for ever, "hoping to catch / the ghost" of:

...that no man's land you find  
on the drive to the airport, say, or a Sunday excursion:

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a frontier of trees, or a pond at the edge of a meadow  
where something you must have disturbed has hurried aside

and left you a liverish stain in the yellowing grass,  
all feathers and teeth, and a tatter of hallelujah.

Syntax and lineation, as always in Burnside, dictate the energy and possibility of the passage, enable it to accumulate the details of the world even as it is moving further away from the patient's consciousness. As ever, those facets are not explored in and for themselves; they remain a set of possibilities from which the patient, and poet, seem curiously disconnected. One lyric from the sequence 'An Essay Concerning Time', 'Konisberg', opens with the line "The places we never visit:", and proceeds precisely to visit some of them, those places set apart from time, including the simultaneous knowledge we have that "no one is truly absent".

The unremitting earnestness of Burnside's enterprise can sometimes become a burden. Too often, the sequences lapse into the near-pretentiousness of a rhetoric about the subject, rather than revealing the marvellous potential in the subject itself. But in the elegies, and in the lyrics about aging – the moving 'Old Man, Swimming' closes the book – there are wonderful gains here upon new territory, together with the persistent, cumulative, concerns of Burnside's previous work.

Carson's *On the Night Watch* sees him, too, underpinning the energies of the book with a by-now-familiar numbers game. We are presented with sonnets gathered in three forty-two poem 'Movements' – a perfectly ratio-ed whole. The book is formally, as in other ways, a homage to its dedicatee, Seamus Heaney. For these are sonnets containing very short lines, so combining two forms which Heaney has mastered; the blank verse fourteen-liner, and the slim, arterial forms of the poetry of the *North* era. Some poems' last lines also serve as titles for later ones, enhancing the sense of cumulative interconnectedness which centres the book.

Carson wrote an intelligently sceptical review of the fatalistic implications of *North* when it first appeared, and this new book stands its ground against some of Heaney's continuing presumptions. Where Heaney had famously dug down into the turf to bring out the victims of perennial violence, Carson's work here, post-Troubles, seems more anxious to let things rest. As 'This

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Field of Eyebright' puts it: "what the coulter / turned up // beside sod / the shards // & hoards / of bones // we ploughed back / into the soil."

Ironically, though, such ploughing back leads to its own sense of defeat for Carson; in 'The Pit', we hear that "for years I have / been digging so // to find myself / no further on". As with his previous work, surveillance of the self, between lovers, in society, and through history, confines the writing – 'In whose eyes', as the non-rhetorical question of one sonnet title has it. The concern is that, in an aging and ailing body (part of the surveillance described in the poems is medical), the potential for vision itself becomes damaged. Some of the most violent and striking imagery here concerns eyes, as do some of the most beautiful and salving. Faced by a "blip" on the scanner screen, the speaker is left to ask

exactly what

it was I saw  
a shaft of light

an arrow  
driven through

the eye-slit  
of a helmet

Against such premeditative violences, the flittering recurrence of the flower eyebright, a salve against weakened eyesight, proffers a more positive, romantic, possibility. This is particularly so in the last several sonnets, where memory is linked, as a female, and a lover's, presence, to "eyesight / flowering", a recovery of insight that is also haunted by its dark opposite, since "to forget is / a common verb". Carson is gambling a lot here with the formal riskiness driving the book, and it does not always work. Sometimes the vocabulary is not varied or vivid enough to withstand the vulnerability and exposure conferred upon it by the short lines. But at other points, the writing attains a true Heaneyesque mimeticism in its ambition to deploy its form to speak "of all I have // forgotten / thence to plumb // what was immeasurable".

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