

The Fierce And The Fragile

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John Burnside, *Black Cat Bone*, Cape, £10, ISBN 9780224093859;
Lavinia Greenlaw, *The Casual Perfect*, Faber, £9.99, ISBN 9780571260287

English poetry is shot through with a mingled toughness and delicacy, going back at least to Edward Thomas and shaping some of the most impressive new collections appearing today. John Burnside's *Black Cat Bone*, deserving winner of this year's Forward Prize, is certainly one such book. Towards the end of the collection is a poem both ekphrastic and meditative, 'Pieter Brueghel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap, 1565', and as Flemish painting is ruggedly luminous, so are Burnside's eerie, formally exquisite lyrics. This poem articulates an incisive compassion that lies at the heart of the collection, even in poems that inhabit territories of tragedy and sin. Each skater "has his private hurt, her secret dread", an Audenesque isolation of suffering which for Burnside is only the beginning: "we live in peril, die from happenstance, / a casual slip, a fault line in the ice; / but surely it's the other thought that matters". *Black Cat Bone* is always open to the poetic possibilities of such "other thoughts" and strange cross-currents. It is perhaps not surprising to find, then, that even in a collection facing up so unflinchingly to loss, the "other thought" here echoes and transforms *The Prelude's* famous skating scene, offering a radiant and recuperative moment of adult joy that Wordsworth could not have encompassed:

At midstream, the children play
with makeshift hockey sticks and, near the church,
a man finds the thoughtless grace
of the boy he once was
to glide free
in the very eye of heaven [...]

The poems are rich in these meticulously captured moments of being, from the boy of 'Disappointment', "standing up to his waist in a Quink-blue current, // a burr of water streaming through his hands / in silt italics", to the half-lyrical, half-raw simplicity of the union described in 'Moon Going Down'. Here, Burnside moves with a consummately assured touch between a tender rhetoric of loss (his characteristic line-breaks are a perfect formal match for such writing – "that / dove sound caught in her throat / that I thought was ours"), and a more imagistic mode: "they swarm / like bees, // a honeyslick, an / aftergloss of meadow". His formal skill seems to broaden with every book, and he is as adept with the pared, macabre beauty of the short line ("milk on her fingers, / the hurry of pain / in her eyes") as with the emotional ironies of the Pope-like couplets which conclude 'Faith', and which marvellously capture the endless surprises and repetitions of grief.

Black Cat Bone looks searchingly through from birth to death; a shifting, time-freed world where trains, films, and headlamps sit without awkwardness beside witchy talismans, ancient "billhooks and sickles", or the "sheepfolds and clouded byres" of Brueghel's peasant landscapes. Nature is an ardent and dangerous presence in these poems: a realm populated by the lost, where human and inhuman forces meet. At the end of the collection, 'From the Chinese' captures the instant of seasonal change "when nothing to see / gives way to the hare in flight, the enormous //

beauty of it", a sight working with irresistible force on the human observer.

The long opening poem, 'The Fair Chase', follows an uncertain hunter tracking an unusual beast. Burnside's reputation as a poet of immanence should not obscure the fact that this poem – and *Black Cat Bone* more generally – takes up its thoughtful residence in the moment of afterwards. The beast itself is there to produce what happens after the beast; the hunter, "alone in a havoc of signs", parses as much as he hunts, an intimate, half-baffled interpreter of everything, from his prey to his own past. 'The Fair Chase' reflects Burnside's earlier work, in which tentative encounters with dead, dying, or elusive animals evoke complex responses, yet the end of the poem opens out into a superlative new vision of the beast's imagined suffering, simplified into pure colour and yearning: "calling for the life it must have had / far in the green of the pines, and the white of the snow".

Lavinia Greenlaw is, like Burnside, an assured practitioner in the music of the unsaid, and her latest collection, *The Casual Perfect*, is keenly aware of the potency of indeterminate experience, particularly memory. "How I fetched up there we do not say", begins 'The Drip Torch', but the unexplained origins of the experience – the speaker helping to complete a "prescribed burn" – are put aside in favour of charting the images of fire-dripping:

each soft splash igniting
white as a conjuror's dove
subsiding into the earth
making safe the black path.

The opening poem, 'Essex Kiss', sets the tone of Greenlaw's collection, merging a realism shaped from clustered, spiky sense-impressions ("Chewing gum and whelks, a whiff / of diesel, crocus, cuckoo spit") with the speaker's powerful and decisive lyricism: "I will lay you down / on a bed of nettles and blackthorn. / Your body will give way like grain". *The Casual Perfect* seeks out such moments of connection, but apprehends their randomness and brevity. This is the keynote of 'A Theory of Infinite Proximity', which offers a "boundless, bright, defined" image of love's endless imminence: "To always be about to take / a step into the other's arms". 'The Literal Body' is a poem built around psalmic anaphora; mostly in unrhymed two line stanzas, each unit of text begins with "That". At its end, the poem discovers that the connections and unions looked for by speakers in *The Casual Perfect* are sought by others, but that this kinship of longing does not necessarily make them more successful. Therein lies the poem's final note of achingly intimate shock:

That the displacement of cells
is a fire in a darkened building
where against all expectation
her lover keeps looking for her
keeps taking her hand.

Greenlaw's poetry is full of doubt and thought; deeply engaged with the process of writing. The concluding line of 'Indigo Bunting' seems to halt and half-correct itself: "I mean I will not speak of this – this colour – again". The line has reached out towards the metaphysical dimensions which underlie this tiny, impeccably pure bird-poem, but Greenlaw changes her mind, tying her words to the specific and descriptive colour of the plumage. In 'Spill', poetry's exactitude (or deliberate occlusion) becomes a game: "The herring is a silver purse, / no longer a purse of silver".

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The brief quatrains of poems like 'The End of Marriage' and 'The Catch' are metrically unpredictable, altering their pace to admit half-dissonant notes. In the latter, the speaker tellingly confesses that "It's not the theme that interests me / but the variation". Greenlaw has conclusively mastered the poetry of provisionality, of sidelong looks. Like Burnside's *Black Cat Bone*, *The Casual Perfect* is a beautifully assembled collection, artistic in every sense. Burnside speaks in 'Moon Going Down' of lovers "strung like pearls on molten wire", an image that evokes the vitality and dignity with which these poets string words. Modulating between the fierce and the fragile, time is their canvas – and all of life, fair game.

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