

Networks Of Panic And Longing

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“No one invents an absence,” writes John Burnside. For Burnside, presence is everything: presence is invention, presence is perception. Some natural thing – a capercaillie, a meadowlark – can “centre and stake the imagination” (in Seamus Heaney’s phrase); but Burnside also knows that natural selection yields unstable versions as well as subversions of life – much as a poet drafts multiple metaphors for one aspect of reality, and as most poems that are ever written must ultimately fail. The presences of nature have traditionally offered Burnside subject, theme, and even *modus operandi*. In this new book, those presences now also present him with adaptive forms, perceptions and language. Some of the sequential poetic forms and patternings in this book are like nothing you will have read before; while Burnside’s poetic sentences fleer over line after line with an astonishing lope of syntax and skid of reference.

Unpredictability and unreliability are in fact the most natural of characteristics, in matter as well as nature, and Burnside shows as much in the conditional philosophy of many of these poems:

Everything maps this world
and what world there is
is the current sum
of all our navigation:
networks of panic and longing,
road maps in gorse,
the river at twilight
vanishing into the sway
of cattle and bees.

There is a world’s weight of being in that line break of “...is / is...” between the second and third lines. The critic Jonathan Bate argued, in the fine ecopoetic text *The Song of the Earth*, that “poets let being be by speaking it” (echoing Archibald MacLeish’s assertion that a poem should

not mean but be); and went on to say that “our world, our home, is not earth but language”. What might we find by looking and listening to that language? What is the nature of a dwelling made of those particles called words? It can be argued that poetry is one of the crucibles, along with research science, in which language crackles and transmutes; and Burnside’s work certainly crackles. The fastest evolving species is language – poetry sets temporary dwellings on its shifting edge. I believe the main aim of *Gift Songs* is to attempt get to the heart of this relentlessly fertile reality, and find consolation in its caprice.

In another life, Burnside should have been a particle physicist at CERN (the mind’s destination of choice for many poets). Like particles on their trajectory from their particle-ghosts, these poems often show the ‘I’ travelling out from the self, or as he puts it:

– something that comes
from the dark
(not
self or not-self)

but something between the two
like the shimmering line
where one form defines another
yet fails to end [...]

Burnside is also one of the best artists of the process of human memory I have read. His perceptual world is one where we know “what it is we are losing, moment by moment, / in how the names perpetuate the myth / of all they have replaced”; and that we can do nothing about this but watch and learn, and make language that, perhaps, collapses less easily than apparent fact and perceptible reality. John Burnside never lies to us about any of this necessarily tattery business. It is why we trust him as a poet.

Accretive and adaptable, poetry is as natural an art form as memory; and Burnside is one of our most natural and adaptable poets – accretive too; for this is his tenth book, but quite his most ambitious. Previously, his poetry appeared to evolve scrupulously, yet you could identify the species by its scrutiny of the numinous; hear it by the searching, and usually calm and calming, voice. Burnside’s reliability as a poet could be “comforting” in some ways: never doctrinaire, never working with a palpable design on his readers; his close perceptions beguiled. *Gift Songs* alters any general critical

perception of Burnside; it signals a dramatic change in the ecology of his poetry, maybe some quality we could liken to what he calls in one poem a “scavenger warmth / emerging from the cold”. Eco-poetics could have been developed with John Burnside in mind; and the poet continues to supply wonderfully provisional answers within the ecology of his poems: provisional because his poems never pretend to an exact science; wonderful because nature is not exact either. Nor, for that matter, is language.

David Morley's *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* has just been published (CUP). His next collection of poems *The Invisible Kings* (Carcenet) is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for next Autumn. He is Professor of Writing at Warwick University.

