NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

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In the following essay, 'Like A Summer Of Locusts', Aviva explains how reading John Burnside's *Gift Songs* led her to write her own long poem 'Grasshoppers' (printed in this issue). When I asked Aviva how she first came to writing poetry, 'reading' was key:

My family was Jewish and quite religious so I grew up with the rhythms of Hebrew liturgy. In English, the only place to find that intensity of language and sound was in poetry. I read Shakespeare and the Metaphysicals, then discovered contemporary poetry in my early twenties. It took several years of reading before I had the courage and the knowledge to begin to write properly but when I started writing I was very lucky to find great mentors early on. I studied 'Versification' with Mimi Khalvati, who has continued to encourage and advise me. The other really significant meeting was with Fiona Sampson, who gave me an internship at Poetry Review. *For a year, I worked with Fiona for a day a week, learning from her acute eye and thoughtful editing. Mimi's and Fiona's warmth and generosity has been very important, as has that of my teachers on the MA and at the Faber Academy, but equally necessary has been the relationship with poets I only know on the page. Reading work I've loved, and using it as inspiration to experiment with different techniques, has helped me widen my ambition for my writing. Holding up my own first attempts against the work of people I admire, such as John Burnside, is a risky thing to do – especially since all I see is what's still to be achieved, but perhaps dissatisfaction is a good thing… it's certainly the most powerful motivating force to drive continuing work.*

Like A Summer Of Locusts: On Reading John Burnside's *Gift Songs*

Despite my literary critical 'death of the author' training, I order John Burnside's memoirs off Amazon. First *A Lie About My Father,* then *Waking*

Up In Toytown arrive, and I learn about a foundling father, alcoholism and violence, mental illness and dreams of Surbiton, the landscapes and bodies that people his life. What I don't find is John Burnside, The Poet. His prose has the same sinuous magic as his song yet is a different creature since, like the 'God of St Paul' Burnside is drawn to, the God of Poetry is 'no respecter of persons'. I've never met John Burnside in person. And despite some shared resonances – religious upbringings, experiences of violence, childhoods slipping on shifting truths – it isn't our histories or the acts we perform in our everyday lives that pulls me to his poetry. I relate to him not biographically, person-to-person, but in a more immediate, intimate way, for his poems aren't about a performed 'personhood' but a reaching for 'self': 'the self / that loves what it will / and watches us quicken and fade / with the passing of time'. I am drawn to 'its deftness, on nights like this, / its immutable grace' ('Ama Et Fac Quod Vis').

Reading as a writer can be a carnivorous activity. Good poems have a fizzing energy to them: like locusts voraciously consuming crops we read for the electric charge, devour it to power our own writing. I know this sounds selfish – as if writerly reading is a purely self-serving act – but it feels the very opposite: a tactile and generous relationship. This seems particularly true when reading Burnside's *Gift Songs* (Cape: 2007), the title a nod to the Shakers whose test of a song's goodness was how much of a gift it was. He presents the poems to the reader like wine and communion wafer, so that in the mouth they'll mutate into blood, into flesh. This is religion as realignment: the book deconstructs the etymology of *re-ligere* as meaning 'renewal of connection', and I find the 'gracile revelation' of 'De Corporis Resurrectione' an intensely physical one; both his language and my own epidermis simultaneously becoming more transparent, the reading itself a process of osmosis, 'leaching away through the glass / like remembered skin.'

Transubstantiation is central to Burnside's poetics for, while intellect is visceral, he sees the body as metaphor:

> as if it had long been decided
> that flesh is a journey,
> something immense in the blood,
> like a summer of locusts,
>
> or something not quite visible, but quick
> as birchseed, or the threading of a wire
> through sleep and rapture, gathering the hand
> that reaches from the light, to close, or open.'
> ('For A Free Church')

Burnside's hand is constantly outstretched, open to the reader but also receiving 'always the gift of the world'. The corporeal is an elastic concept, extending past his own physicality to the creaturely and, beyond that, to the corpus of Christian text, before finally reaching towards the horizon: 'the scent of beasts arrives;/ the biblical;// rudderless gazes/ turned to a farmer's sky.' Throughout this sequence the stanzas are elegant, the language tightly condensed, but the mind behind them is expansive.

That Burnside's poetry demands a multi-dimensional reading seems obvious from the generosity with which he reads others. In a recent essay, 'Dreaming A Buffalo' (*Poetry Review* 100:3), he uses Lucie Brock-Broido's 'Self-Portrait On The Grassy Knoll' as a call to think in technicolor and possess more than 'a black and white picture of the world'. He sees the yellow of Brock-Broido's 'mustardseed' as not just 'a genetically modified crop'; it's the 'vivid colour and fuzziness of the lived experience' and 'invokes Matthew 13:31 – "the kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field"'. In Burnside's reading of Brock-Broido's lines, the tiniest of plants booms with resonance along both horizontal and vertical axes: encompassing time and depth; the personal and the mythic. In the same way, his own poetry requires us to find the world in 'the nothing at my shoulder', a space which is simultaneously 'miracle' and 'utter void' ('Ny-Hellesund').

Burnside seems to be constantly reaching for the intangible, searching for the numinous in lack and absences: 'the gap between darkness and light has already vanished/ […] all that remains […] / is the scent on his skin, a scent he mistakes for the spirit.' In 'Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction', Wallace Stevens suggests 'not to have is the beginning of desire'. In Burnside's universe it seems fiction and faith are inextricably linked, and desire becomes a driving force. One of the epigraphs to the collection is a quotation from another American poet, Rodney Jones: 'Fiction's inside like faith. / It doesn't count unless you believe it, and / you don't have to know it for it to be the truth.' There are inner truths here, in invisible spaces, but for John Burnside they are located and framed by the body, 'and what the body offers of itself'. His other epigraph is Genesis 32:29, when Jacob asks the Angel to 'Tell me, I pray thee, thy name.' Jacob's search to pin down divinity results in a different naming as his own is changed to 'Israel' – one who wrestles with God. The philosophical exchange is located in a corporeal one; this episode happens after the Angel has prevented Jacob from continuing along his path, and in response Jacob and the Angel have physically fought, swopping blow after blow.

For Burnside, the body is essential as a frame for 'any journey, any secret thing / that passes in the dark and flits away: / not self, but history; not self,

but place'. History and place can be found in other bodies as well as the human one, in 'chapel and harbour and hearth' and also 'in everything in between: the sea and sky' ('Le Croisic'). These liminal spaces are the ones I'm drawn to; I inhabit them alongside Burnside, 'till all the dreams we had / were dreams of water' ('By Pittenweem'). Burnside's gifts of song – of dreams, water and the body – acknowledge the subjective nature of our distinct experiences as individuals, but reach beyond that, attempting to touch another consciousness while holding in tension an awareness that the attempt is both creating a fiction and containing deeper truth. I read his *Gift Songs* and write one of my own: 'Grasshoppers'. It is drawn from my distinct experience: I am a woman, and one writing out of a Jewish not a Christian tradition; my lands are neither Scotland or America, but England and Israel; the liquid that holds my dreams has a more limited reach – bathwater rather than 'the firth'. If, like Burnside, I see 'the body as metaphor', my body is a contested and occupied space with shifting boundaries. Yet despite our differences, there's a freedom he gives me: to allow the personal, the infinitesimally small, to hold big political questions. And what I learn from him about craft is that it's important to frame the metaphysical, the existential, within a carefully controlled form. When I try out his stepped lines, suddenly there's a vertical drive down the page… an openness blows into my poem, thoughts spin out radially rather than following their usual, linear, path. I am unsure how to handle this and turn back to Burnside's work, to trace his subtle perceptual negotiations and learn by mimesis.

'Saint Nazaire', the first of his Eliot-inspired 'Four Quartets', opens with plane leaves drifting around the Catholic church, 'freeze-dried, silent, wrapping-paper brown'. Burnside begins with the thingy-ness of things, locating his ideas in closely observed concrete details in a way that would satisfy even William Carlos Williams. The leaves take us to the landscape: 'they gather in the nooks between abandoned / hair salons and shuttered pharmacies, or swirl around in broken alleyways / till everything is powder'. Suddenly the natural is jammed up against the urban, the whole lot disintegrating, 'leaves and stalks / and sand-drift, all / *in pulverem*'. And with the Latin phrase we immediately shift register: the powder transforms into the dust of death; walking alongside us through the 'windless innertown', with its 'breeze-blocks, mongrels, smashed glass' is the Psalmist, calling out supplications on behalf of the poor. Yet not everything is pulverised, what stays intact are 'the rock-cress in the kerbstones and the char-black /ganglia of fallen Judas pods'. I look up the meaning of 'ganglia' – synonymous with 'clusters' in computer-speak, it leads me to imagine bundles of black wires, plant-life taking on the hardness of a plastic artifice. What has 'fallen' (even the verb returns us to the Bible) are seed pods from the 'Honesty'

plant, known for having the appearance of coins – the allusion is to Judas Iscariot and his thirty pieces of silver. Money for betrayal: a body of wealth gained, a betrayed human body wracked with the pain of a tortuous death. So now I'm back to 'ganglia', used anatomically for a mass of nerve cells, and my own nerves are jangling at the sheer guts of the man! For here is an instant, painful, political comment on our modern consumerist society and the inequality of suffering it has produced, through an intricate and finely-tuned network of religious reference and description of place. Burnside's gaze is that of an insect's multi-faceted eye, each surface refracting light along a slightly different dimension, building up a far richer vision than that perceived by my own convex lens.

Burnside isn't afraid to challenge his readers, to trust us to follow his diversifying threads, allowing us to go outwards from the poem by following his exegesis of Biblical texts, then drawing us back in, forcing us to read ourselves into the worlds he's creating and to parallel his eisegesis with our own. This is the very opposite of ambiguity; permitting his poems this kind of mystery requires utter precision of language. In search of an equally accurate music, I edit my writing over and over again, but find I'm living with constant dissatisfaction. I begin to acknowledge that this is not just caused by my inability to fully realise Coleridge's requirement of 'the best words in the best order' but a longing for, and fear of, the revelatory contact of opening my 'self' to others. There is white space here for the readers to read themselves into, but what will they – you – make of it? I am comparatively new to this kind of writing and suddenly its demands seem absurd, its rewards painfully uncertain. This is poetry as extreme risk. So, for perhaps the first time, I go back to John Burnside not for challenge, but for reassurance that it's worth it, take comfort in his 'rule of the tundra':

> the logic of the wilderness that says
> where nothing seems to happen
> all the time
> what happens is the chance
> that something might.
>
> ('Five Animals')