

Black Cat Bone

John Burnside

Cape

£10.00

69pp.

By Paul Batchelor

First published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, No.5670, 2.12.11

Black Cat Bone opens with what may be John Burnside's finest single poem. "The Fair Chase" is set in a folkloric world in which the men of the village are hunting a mysterious beast; the speaker, an innocent, has been allowed to tag along. Lagging behind, he chances on the quarry, and feels himself change at once from "last among equals – flycatcher, dreamer, dolt" to being "finally / true to myself, / with the body and mind of a hunter". But when he pulls the trigger, his identity undergoes a more profound transformation: the hunter becomes the hunted, and he lives out his days in a state of quasi-existence, haunted by the beast's cries:

calling for the life it must have had
far in the green of the pines, and the white of the snow,
where I am hunting, hunting even now,

hearing that cry
and turning my head,
for an echo.

Burnside has long been associated with suggestive, flickering imagery, and there is plenty of that in *Black Cat Bone*: "Amnesia" rhapsodises "fuzzed / daguerreotypes / of motion / and those long / exposures / when a man / is almost there...". He is also known for his willingness to risk a vatic tone: "We have too much to gain from the gods, and that is why / they fail to love us". In his best poems, these familiar features qualify and complicate each other. This is what happens in "The Fair Chase": in a brilliantly counterintuitive stroke, the speaker's journey from innocence to experience brings him only greater uncertainty, and the poem accordingly grows both more authoritative and more "fuzzed" as it progresses.

The mixture of fuzziness and authority is not always handled so adeptly. "On the Fairytale Ending" strikes the key-note of the collection in a single image that is both incisive and rueful: "a tiny hook-and-eye // unfastened in the sweetmeat of a heart / you thought would never grieve / or come undone". The combination of viscera and delicacy is beautifully judged; but the poem ends by resisting the intelligence all too successfully in a flurry of qualifications: "our shadows come and go, / no darker / than the figures in a book // of changes, / till they're hexed / and singled out / for something chill and slender in this world, / more sleight-of-hand / than sorrow or safekeeping."

Black Cat Bone forms part of the project of self-assessment that Burnside began in his memoirs *A Lie About my Father* and *Waking Up in Toytown*. Where "The Fair Chase" draws on folktales and allegory to accomplish this, the eponymous central section turns to the blues. The blues insist upon the need to pay for one's sins, which usually take the form of compulsive over-indulgence in alcohol or sex or both. Burnside has been candid about his alcoholism, drug addiction and serial adultery; but rather than apply the brutal logic of the blues to such behaviour, he explores the more theatrical (but comparatively rare) folk-blues motif of murdering your loved one on the

riverside for little or no reason. We follow the speaker from birth (“I lie squalling in a slick of blood / and moonlight, seventh son / to some man's seventh son”) to the act of murder (“It wasn't personal; I only saw / the logic in the moment of my bidding...”) to his bafflement afterwards: “I wake, in the cage of my bones, / on the same cold ground.”

Throughout, Burnside is as skilful as ever at alternating blank verse rhythms with his own rangier music, but the sequence does not quite convince. Perhaps the blues mentality is simply at odds with Burnside's own, for if Burnside's *ur*-narrative is the quest, his *ur*-subject is the home. He has described his work as a philosophical exploration of the process by which “home” comes into being: “The right way to dwell is to constantly examine the making of home: where and what are its bounds? how do we belong there? what do we consume, and what do we have the right to consume in this place?” Conversely, the resolute individualism of the blues keeps the focus on the things that wreck a home, and on escaping rather than belonging.

That *Black Cat Bone* has been awarded the Forward Prize for Best Collection is welcome (and perhaps overdue) recognition of Burnside's place as one of the most gifted poets writing today, something amply demonstrated by “The Fair Chase” and several of the book's shorter lyrics. Elsewhere, however, there is a little too much fuzzing and scumbling, a few too many “mezzotint // epiphanies”, for this to rank alongside his earlier, marvellously coherent volumes *The Myth of the Twin* (1994), *The Light Trap* (2002) or *The Good Neighbour* (2005).