

John Burnside, *The Hunt in the Forest*, 51pp, Cape, £10
Pippa Little, *Foray*, 70pp, Biscuit, £6.99
Josephine Dickinson, *Night Journey*, 80pp, Flambard, £7.50

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By Paul Batchelor

Here are three expeditions into the unknown from three very different poets. *The Hunt in the Forest*, **John Burnside's** eleventh collection, takes its title from the same painting that provided Derek Mahon with *The Hunt by Night*. The most obvious influence of Paulo Uccello's masterpiece is the renewed focus it has brought to Burnside's longstanding interest in mankind's relation to animals. Here be badgers, bats, buffalo, cats, cattle, deer, dogs, iguana, kittens, lambs, lions and axolotl. Among our feathered friends, I spotted curlew, falcon, finch, godwit, gulls, harrier, ibis, kittiwake and pewit. Burnside is less interested in fish: a herring is all you get.

In Burnside's world, the most apparently straightforward encounter with an animal can reveal unexpected dimensions. In 'Poppy Day' a butcher arrives 'with a love song / he learned from his father' – and it is this love song which provides the focal point of the poem. Without averting his eyes from the visceral nature of the subject ('the kill floor, veiled in a butterslick / circumflex of marrowfat and bone') Burnside directs us away from stock responses: 'And still the children come, to hear him sing, / his voice so soft, it's no more than a whisper.' 'Poppy Day' is one of the many short-form gems to be found in *The Hunt in the Forest*, which contains fewer extended sequences than Burnside's recent collections.

Uccello's painting exerts another, more subtle influence over the collection. Burnside emerges as the most painterly of poets, frequently suggesting a palette of abstract colours ('damp pinks and pioneer blues'), or else arranging imagery as a painter would, to balance the composition. 'Old Man, Swimming' begins as a simple recollection of a man the poet would see at his childhood swimming pool. The man has 'bachelor's eyes / halfway from grey to blue', and the poet sees him as a potential father figure: 'He was my model for years, / with his gorgeous stroke / and his lack of determination...' Their relationship does not develop into friendship, and so retains its mysterious potential over the years, until the poet realises:

...he wasn't so old,
just graceful, and lit with the years

he had carried so far:
the same age as I am today, more or less,
as I pass the municipal baths in another town

and glance across the blue-grey of the park
to where the better self I meant to be
glides quietly, length by length, to his own abstention.

The poet's identification with his secret sharer is triggered by that 'blue-grey of the park', which recalls the colour of the old man's eyes (as well as the name of the childhood swimming pool, which we'd been told was on *Parker's* piece). With an impressionistic brushstroke, Burnside grounds the moment and avoids sounding portentous or willed. It is in this sense that John Burnside might be considered a formalist: he is clearly fascinated by the way poems are *formed* – formed from language, yes, but also from the meditative silence that lies behind language; by the structures of our memories; and by colour.

Pippa Little won an Eric Gregory Award in 1985, the same year as Graham Mort and Adam Thorpe. While her poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, and her 2006 pamphlet 'The Spar Box' (Vane Women) was a PBS Pamphlet Choice, only now do we have her first collection, *Foray*: a book of delicately crafted, beautifully sounded poems about Border Reiver women, whose lot was

nothing else
but to sing and to spin,
feed the hearth its peat,

offer thin broth to ad pity the beasts
flank-deep in snow,
unchanging as the stars.

Stories about the Border Reivers occupy a space where history steps off into myth. William the Conqueror's 'harrowing of the North', continual wars with Scotland, and the Northumbrian gentry's unfortunate knack for getting on the wrong side of pretty much every English monarch, meant that the North lagged behind the rest of England in education and industrial development from 1069 until well after the Reformation. The Reivers were a symptom of this instability and lawlessness. While these circumstances precluded a sustained literary tradition, they engendered a thriving oral tradition, epitomised by the border ballads.

Rather than construct a narrative or select evocative images, Little attempts something riskier by foregrounding the women's voices. In doing so, she breathes an astonishing intimacy and immediacy into the poems, for she is able to fix a figure in a landscape with a single phrase: 'The midden is wonderful with stars' or 'my mouth's sour / with its tin spoon taste of rain'. Some begin with the occasions that would have prompted singing and ballad-recitals, such as fairs and truce days or the singing of lullabies; but the best spring from stolen moments of contemplation in the women's lives. I quote 'Eyebright' in full:

Toward evening
rain will come from the west

gathered in a snail-shell's
neat pearl thimble,

resting in cups of eyebright,
settling on button stones and sprung moss;

pleasing rain, with the scent of thunder in it
from the next valley

where a bed sheet lies unfolded on a hedge,
Noah's ship, box-like, above the waters.

The spare music is characteristic of the collection, as is the elegance with which the poem moves; its single sentence taking in a broad sweep of the horizon. However, upon first reading it, we are unlikely to realise that the poem is about imminent danger: bed linen would often be displayed to warn of approaching Reivers, while eyebright is a medicinal herb and an aid to eyesight. Purists will object that the reader is unlikely to know this and will have to rely (as I did) on the notes at the end of the book. But 'Eyebright' is spoken by a woman whose life depends on her ability to identify just such allusions. The poem is telling us – very seductively – not to be seduced by the beauty of the landscape or the music of the language. *Foray* contains many such beguiling moments, and is a first collection of care, intelligence and unusual ambition.

If poets can be said to have an ur-narrative, then **Josephine Dickinson's** would surely be *The Quest*: it is this that gives her work its driving and driven quality, and its distinctive mix of the personal and the mythological. In *Night Journey* the quest is three-fold: there is an inner journey through grief, a cosmic journey (in terms of astronomy and the Classical mythology associated with stars and planets) and a physical journey through Dickinson's home territory (she lives on a small hill farm in the high Pennines).

Exact co-ordinates are thin on the ground, so everything is interrogated for significance. The opening poem begins by asking 'What were you thinking as you wintered the books?' and continues asking questions:

The crude handwritten book marks? Or was it more
the pupal bullion that no-one before
had touched you wanted to hatch as currency
to use, exchange, compare and admire?

The bewildering urgency of the address can have a claustrophobic effect, but the tumultuous music of the language and the incisive imagery draws us on. While the interrogative mode occasionally overloads ('Do your stars eat meat? If so, do they kill in silence / to avoid attracting the lions?'), there are also many moments of equally charged clarity, as in the closing lines of 'Silly Hall':

Under the trees

there is always the hidden
and the more hidden,
there is always water
rushing towards water.

The most successful moments occur when Dickinson marries these two contending impulses in her work; I think this happens most often in the single lyrics rather than the sequences.

The quest motif also accounts for the importance of place-names in Dickinson's work. *Night Journey* stakes out its territory from Scarberry Hill to Skelling Moor, from Dove Cottage to Silly Hall. The collection ends with 'Spells of the Raven', an incantatory paean to place, which draws on local folklore and balladry:

Who provides for the Hrafn his food?
Appleby Street and Kirkoswald.
Skinny brae and paradise clough.

Yet shall I run in the red scar berry.
Summer will come and the thorns gan merry.

Neither followed nor alone,
I'm gan hyem to the Eden.

Split a speel and I am there.
Lift a staen and I am there.

It is surprising that a poet so rooted in place, and who extends a tradition of English mysticism, should be largely overlooked at home while being championed so strongly by American poets: Michael Donaghy noted Dickinson's 'arresting, occasionally breathtaking craft' and Galway Kinell praised the 'raw suggestiveness' of her language. Rawness and craft are usually seen as oppositions, but this is one of many paradoxes that Dickinson is able to embody. Her poems offer the reader formal turns and linguistic textures they won't find anywhere else, and to read her is to be immersed in a rich symbolic world that feels full-blooded, lived-in and actual.