



## Black Cat Bone: Poems

*John Burnside*

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### **Black Cat Bone: Poems** John Burnside

John Burnside's remarkable new book is full of strange, unnerving poems that hang in the memory like a myth or a song. These are poems of thwarted love and disappointment, of raw desire, of the stalking beast, 'eye-teeth / and muzzle / coated with blood'; poems that recognise 'we have too much to gain from the gods, and this is why / they fail to love us'; poems that tell of an obsessive lover coming to grief in a sequence that echoes the old murder ballads, or of a hunter losing himself in the woods while pursuing an unknown and possibly unknowable quarry.

Drawing on sources as various as the paintings of Pieter Brueghel and the lyrics of Delta blues, *Black Cat Bone* examines varieties of love, faith, hope and illusion, to suggest an unusual possibility: that when the search for what we expected to find — in the forest or in our own hearts — ends in failure, we can now begin the hard and disciplined quest for what is actually there.

Full of risk and wonder, *Black Cat Bone* shows the range of Burnside's abilities, but also strikes out for new territories. He remains consistently, though, one of our finest living lyric poets and each of these astonishing poems is as clear and memorable as 'a silver bracelet // falling for days / through an inch and a half / of ice'.

### **Black Cat Bone: Poems Details**

Date : Published July 7th 2015 by Graywolf Press (first published September 12th 2011)

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Author : John Burnside

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## From Reader Review Black Cat Bone: Poems for online ebook

### Henry Johnson says

Only okay, the words just don't flow :(

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### Amanda says

There is a vigorous life in the lyric of these poems, something like a ripeness of age with the remaining strength to enjoy and tackle a physical task (I picture snow shoveling).

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### Ben Doeh says

It's hard reviewing poetry collections. They're rarely masterful all the way through, and this one isn't an exception - the five stars is for about 2/3 of the poems.

Still, Burnside has captured many extraordinary angles on human experience, and written more direct poems than ever before. Few recent works achieve this acuteness of experience.

For that reason, it's not a book for the squeamish - see the misreading in the review below mine.

(\*SPOILERS\* ahead)

The opening poem, which might superficially appear to be a celebration of man's primal hunting instinct, is in fact a more complex portrait of the guilt of shooting a fox (how could you read "Everyone becomes / the thing he kills / - or so the children whisper, when they crush // a beetle or a crane-fly in the dust" as celebratory?) and how it coexists with the semi-creaturely thrill of the 'fair chase'. (also see <http://bit.ly/xKip05>). As such, Burnside has moved away from the esoteric and ecological focus of his earlier work to concentrate on our most troubling relation with nature - the animal within.

The second segment deals with how our aspirations change over time: - as children, we're encouraged to believe happily everafter is the dream ending, but later we want "a lifelong Reich / of unexpected gifts and dolce vita, / peach-blossom smudging the glass and a seasoned / glimmer of the old days" - a heady blend of easy rewards, uplifting states of nature, and nostalgia. The "fend-for-yourself" ideal of children's books gives way to love of passion, faint dissatisfaction with "the rent / and kidskin" endured together in marriage.

The third segment 'Black Cat Bone' is full of blues poems, haunted by hurtful or hurt women (perhaps treated too abstractly), the urge to kill (with a Browningsque murder, theft of a bobcat's soul, a fox clenching a dead thing in its teeth), the mysteries of birth and death. Above all, it reams the places where we're vulnerable and dangerous.

The final part, 'Faith', is more typical Burnside territory - dealing with our strangeness to our selves, our uneasy faith in home as if "a man might slide towards an old / belonging, momentarily involved / in nothing but the present." It closes this daring book with a carefully calibrated sense of the impossibility of return.

All in all, an immensely rich and rewarding collection that I'm certain I'll come back to.

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## Michael Shockley says

While the imagery used in this book of poems is crisp and craftsman-like, it tends to get repetitive pretty quickly. I am not sure if the cover art is truly a justification for this author's apparent obsession with ice and snow, as he dedicates an entire ekphrastic poem to the work in the final part of this book; by then, the effect is diluted, because the reader has dealt with all manner of derivative themes throughout the text. Though the themes, imagery, and (even!) choice of words throughout this book remain relatively consistent, the book's composition is somewhat unbalanced; we are first treated to a long poem, followed by two small sections of shorter, mostly homogenous poems, followed by one last section in which the author's decision to experiment results in the text closing out with a bang. While the final section certainly shakes the doldrums out of the reader with some of its more daring stylistic and thematic choices, it lacks the tautness and cleanliness of the midsection, establishing that whatever the author gains in one section, he inevitably loses in another.

Not a bad book of poems, but not great either. It's short, and maybe worth your time to read on a cold winter's day.

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## Jaimella Shaikh says

In a disturbing and thought provoking collection, Burnside explores the natural and the numinous. The poems teem with animals - fireflies, snakes, broken birds and unnamed quarry and humans 'as animals' or 'feral' in love.

Burnside captures nature - a depression in the grass 'where something had lain / in a fetor of blood warmth and pollen', an owl living in the 'moss and curvature / of nightfall'. Yet he also pins down what is unseen or left unsaid - the hunted creature that is killed but unidentified, the 'giggle' of a hyena in a bush and mysterious footprints in landscapes muffled by snow.

This collection rewards rereading. At times I felt like one of the characters on Brueghel's painting, merely skating on the surface. But every time I returned to the poems they yielded more, as I went deeper under the surface, like the 'silver bracelet / falling for days / through an inch and a half / of ice'.

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## Jody Mena says

"We have too much to gain from the gods, and this is why they fail to love us,  
turning away, like parents who cannot conceal  
their disappointment, knowing, from the first,  
that we are doomed, as they are, to a stark  
momentum: something hidden in the grass  
outwearing us, who never know our fates,  
and drowning them, in abstract, like the dreams  
they once replaced, in waves of moss and ivy."

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## Meredith says

I haven't read much poetry since I got out of school over 20 years ago. I loved this book, and I think it would be a great introduction to poetry. The imagery was dark and spooky and it gave me chills. Actually at times it made me chuckle. I will be requesting more of his work from the library system, since this book was the only one they had. I want to own this book when I can, because it would be great reading for Halloween.

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## Kris - My Novelesque Life says

### **BLACK CAT BONE: POEMS**

Written by John Burnside

2015; 80 Pages

Genre: poetry

★★★1/2

This is my first, but not last poetry collection by Burnside. I enjoyed most of his poetry and his storytelling element.

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## Sienna says

Last week I tried to describe John Burnside's way with words — and the allure of those words — to my husband. *"The only gift is knowing we belong / to nothing."* This involved some hand-waving and muttering about burying those hands in moist, mossy earth and withdrawing them to discover worms among the hand-held loam, feeling not repulsion but a deep sense of satisfaction as life and death blur, suddenly indistinguishable. I failed (of course I failed), but believe I began in the right place by turning to nature in search of a poet who understands that we cannot always understand.

*Black Cat Bone* alludes to the magic of hoodoo. It begins with a murder. There's enchantment in the killing, the killer lost, the kill unknown and unknowable, time side-stepping any efforts to keep track of it, to make sense of what has happened, and leaving the killer close to death. There's respect. There are ghosts. They never fully reveal themselves, nor do they ever disappear, not completely. And they tell such stories. This 2011 work won the Forward Poetry Prize for best collection and the unexpectedly controversial T.S. Eliot Prize; it hardly needs a lesser word-crafter to extol its virtues. Instead I will share a few favorites and suggest that you, too, dig your hands into the ground and marvel at what you find in them, and inside of them, when they retrieve these pages.

On the Fairytale Ending

*Begin with the fend-for-yourself  
of all the loves you learned about  
in story books;*

*fish-scale and fox-print  
graven on the hand*

*forever  
and a tiny hook-and-eye*

*unfastened in the sweetmeat of a heart  
you thought would never grieve  
or come undone.*

*May; and already  
it's autumn: broken gold  
and crimson in the medieval*

*beechwoods, where 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.*

#### Moon Going Down

*I have a dream.  
She's in an attic room  
with someone else,*

*hands in her skirt and that  
dove sound caught in her throat*

*that I thought was ours.  
She's with him now, she bends into his kiss*

*— and when she slows his hand, they swarm  
like bees,*

*a honeyslick, an  
aftergloss of meadow;*

*easy and damp,  
though not without a trace*

*of venom, they are pure  
as animals and*

*selfless,  
like the rhythm in the heat*

*that, now and then, mistakes itself  
for hunger;*

*and blessed, strung like pearls on molten wire,  
to bell and cry beneath a hunting moon,*

*they come together; live; unwarranted;  
a braid in every touch, a flame for longing.*

### The Soul as Thought Experiment

*Some days, it's enough to stand your ground.  
Wind on the road and that coal oil and mackerel sheen  
on everything you see; the wet*

*leylandii turned in the rain, like the fur-lined gaps  
in children's books;  
the blood eyes in the wall  
no longer what you feared, but sweet as love*

*and feral, like the soul you disallow  
to call this home.  
It's winter now, and late in the afternoon,*

*but though it's a long shot, you still believe someone will call  
from far out in the hills, the moonlight falling  
sidewise through a casement, as she speaks*

*of history and colour, celadon  
and murrey, and those days of ironwood  
or gingko, where you cannot help but think*

*of kinship, at the point where snow begins  
on some black road you thought was yours alone,  
made bright and universal, while you listen.*

Postscript: This was my first attempt at reading poetry on the Kindle. While the format did not detract from my enjoyment of the poems themselves, I certainly missed that awareness of the shape of each piece on the page. Clumsy analogy notwithstanding, I think poetry should be tangible, held in hands that have more work to do than button-pressing. The best poems are surely page-turners — and not because an e-reader has cut them off with a single line to spare.

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### Clare Hutchinson says

Read most of this in one sitting in the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. A wild, strange book of

excellent poetry. Going to need to get ahold of my own copy!

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### **Gail says**

Everyone becomes  
the thing he kills  
– or so the children whisper, when they crush

a beetle or a crane-fly in the dust,  
feeling the snuff of it bleed  
through the grain of their fingers;

'The Fair Chase', 9.

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### **Ben Dutton says**

John Burnside's new poetry collection, *Black Cat Bone*, has been winning awards all over the place – the Forward Prize, the T. S. Eliot Prize – and seems almost in danger of becoming overpraised. As far as I am concerned, the volume cannot be praised highly enough. John Burnside had always been one of those names I had heard, but never read. Earlier this month I bought his novel, *The Summer of Drowning*, which I've yet to read, and then I heard about his poetry. I'm glad I started with his poetry – he is a poet of some considerable depth and dark beauty. There is a bleak determinism to his verse, a sense of lives hollowed out on the margins of society, of lives lived in the shade of darkness. He is learned, but accommodating to outsiders. He is powerful, without being overbearing. The best of *Black Cat Bone* speaks to the human condition, illuminating it in strange, unorthodox ways. It is a poetry collection to be read more than once, to be studied, for it is through the rereading of such work that we discover the real truth, hidden just behind the lines. A wonderful collection, much deserving of its praise.

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### **Hellen says**

Huh, I can enjoy poetry.

*I love my love with an X*  
and here she comes, now, now,  
stealing across the fields and creeping round  
to feed  
my mouth  
a sweet spot in the dark  
she thinks is safe  
until I drink her in.

(Hurts Me Too)

\*\*\*

I wake next day, at first light, bleared with the sense  
of having been someone else,

not in the dream so much as in  
the fit between sleep and waking,

the true self walking away, through a woodland clearing,  
the air so still, it seems he's chanced upon

an old belonging, something he couldn't believe  
till now.

*Safe sweet home, sweet home, through that shinin' star*

And I wake, in the cage of my bones,  
on the same cold ground.

(Bird Nest Bound)

\*\*\*

At the back of my mind, there is always  
the freight-line that no longer runs  
in a powder of snow

(Hearsay)

\*\*\*

Out in the dark, over the snow,  
a barred owl flits  
through the cottonwoods, slow  
and far in the distance, no matter how close

to the window it comes, its pit-black call  
more echo than threat, where the mind is a hall  
and thought is the voice  
of another.

(Insomnia in Southern Illinois)

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## **Kate says**

I think I have just been #burnsided!!!

Stunning, atmospheric, clever, sad, disturbing, so good! I read every poem dozens of times, there is so much in each one.

I need more.

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## **Gemma says**

This collection is wild and unnerving with a clear love of landscapes that seeps out of the pages and makes me homesick for places I've never been.

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