

Welcome to the web supplement

in tandem with the 'Dwelling Places' issue of Agenda Vol 45 No 4/Vol 46 No 1:

An appreciation of John Burnside



Ann Johnson: Old Walls

©Ann Johnson

Ann Johnson is our chosen celebrated artist in this supplement.

Ann uses oil on canvas and acrylic on paper. The oils, she says, are more measured in thought and process. Her paintings are largely about rhythm and tension, the goal to get colour, shape, tone and mark to work dynamically together. She is mainly self-taught and is an advocate of life-long learning. She has worked with two poet friends and published images of her paintings and drawings alongside their work. She lives and work in Sussex.

www.annjohnsonpaintings.co.uk

David Burns

Late Afternoon, December

For John Burnside

All day under a white sun
the fieldfares and the smaller birds
making the only stubble field
in miles of frozen plough
teem with their rake and flutter.

Time and again the sparrowhawks
sheering in over the hedge,
driving up flocks which writhe
and twist away into helices
resolved, or not, by a kill,

then fall again to feeding.
Sunset burns false-fire
on willow boles
but frost has never lifted
from under the hedge,

ice still binds, black, in the ditch,
the heron hasn't stirred
from its fluffed hunch. At close,
concentrating cold, intensifying sky,
backdrop for one last slow crow.

And from beyond the horizon,
cast up with the last of the light,
tightening around all the small lives,
the small deaths, a sense of something
more purple-black than night.

Robert Smith

The Suicide's House

Weighed down under gables
in a street laid waste by dogs
as after a plague has passed -
the stale rumour of lilies -

with a curfew too immense
for its gangling silences,

or pain of a rope tolling.

Shutters

Closed after twelve
on a strong voltage of cicadas,
arc of the bay, and roofs piled up
like dishes careering the slopes
of their own dazzle;

sealing in the lines
of hills, a stunned mule,
descending through the orange groves
switch of a road cracking its whip
across the retina;

the walls thickened
as if to offset with whitewash
the rutted patterns of the afternoon,
a scoring behind the eyelids
the breath of junipers.

James Roberts

Rain Song

She sits, her slow eyes closed
bent body slack for sleep
in the dark drowning room

wind pokes the fire
curtains draw breath
rain starts its sweeping

the roof is a river
gutters choke
windows tap urgently

she stands to turn on the light
then stops, settles, listens
to the singing in the distance

long-silent voices rise
faces glow and dim
a procession repeats

far away a pale girl whispers
hangs her hair to the mouth
of a sea-eyed boy

far away a woman moans
and a blood-smeared child
screams at a new-made world

far away a figure turns to leave
throws a curse that breaks
on a slamming door

she sits, her slow eyes closed
outside the wind is a fading hush,
wet roofs and the white moon shine.

Below

Down the starved hills
Down to the blank sea
Nothing moves.

On the stark horizon
Like lightning flying from earth
A last tree's white bones cling

The sun aims its fire
On slow shrinking waters
Steams shroud the night
Burn clean at dawn

No foot fall
No wing beat
No fire
In no eye
No breath
Only wind

Far below ground
In the cold darkness
Far below sea
In the lightless deep
A billion black sparks fire

The healing begins:
Silent beings fuse, divide
Eyeless, voiceless
In blind transformation
A consciousness rises
That will give birth
To the eye, to the voice

In time

Down to the starved hills
Down to the blank sea
Nothing moves.



Ann Johnson: Beach Birds

©Ann Johnson

Terry McDonagh

In a Doll's House

Day after day, year in year out, life after life,
you and I sit like puppets, or stand at the horizon
unable to trust our wings.

We make low, uneasy sounds behind frosted glass
or we toy with balloons
hoping to find a second wind.

Former lovers saunter along the street below
like links in a chain of empty cups –
like glitzy eyes dancing in tandem.

I had a full pipe and swagger then, but we grew
weary searching for each other in sweat shops,
data banks, meditation classes and crossfire.

You used to be a good kisser. I had my newspaper
in my tweed pocket. We were a repeat performance
turning left, left, left, left, left – only left.

My car was bigger than yours. You were
more brunette; better on the phone to
Indian summer resorts – things like that.

We've moved on to become decorations in an
earthenware pot – a place where
birds of prey can't stop laughing, and when you

think that – in our day – The Beatles sang
love, love, love,
love is all you need...love is all you need.

In a doll's house next door, a healthy boy
is getting singing lessons
to make him more tenor, to make him more base,

to suppress his love
of singing songs,
to make him one of us.

Small Townville

It's strange how bookshelves, phone directories
or old photos makes you think about times
that are little more than contours.

There's no doubt in my mind I'd like to have
my youth back – the youth I threw away
for a repertoire of wax candles and incense.

I'm sure I could have lived on a magic bus with
a wild woman but, instead, I oiled my bike
and polished my hair to meet choirmasters.

I sprinted up an alleyway with a shop assistant
at lunchtime. She stopped to catch her breath
by a high wall, and when no one was looking

I kissed her eyes and felt things young blood aspires to.
But when I was told of her bastard child – no one
had ever seen – I'd watch her in the shop window

from a dark place on the other side of the street.
I'd whisper her name and see her hands move
like silk. I wanted to take her to an opera; to let

our time together pass in silence. Once when
we met on the pavement, she lifted her
lavish eyes and I ducked into an open door like

I was supposed to. People knew when to smile.
A bunch of convent girls jeered from a safe distance.
I stood with lads in smoke and sweat at the church wall.

She walked past. They howled. I hid. She couldn't.
The shopkeeper and his wife thrashed her
at the church door. They'd never be late for a blessing,

and they'd no child of their own, it was said. We sang
hymns for a good while. I imagine her in a far-off land
with a photo of a boy prince spread across her brow.

Sian Thomas

This Well Holds a House

Wind the handle for the bucket that knocks at the side,
dislodging moss and brick flakes. See the steam rise
from the chimney. See, in the garden the ducks splashing
for their sops; willows thriving in the mush; cool water
for washing and drinking, or warmed in the dark like a geyser.
See the beds and chairs and tables and windows, soft
as sponges. See the laundry, never drying, where the web-footed,
wrinkle-palmed husband and the web-footed, wrinkle-palmed
wife are wringing out their babies to hang them in the shade.

Lawrence Wilson

Begin with an Ending

Alone, with lilies, candles. Horrible:
A wooden coffin, and the girl within—
No, not a girl—no, that's the history
That binds me, blinds me. No, a *woman* dead
My sister, thirty-five, two children left
Behind, a husband (sullen, lumpy troll)

Who, nonetheless, did cry, his belly full
Of beer. My mother shattered, quenched, convinced
This death must somehow be her fault, that she
Had failed her daughter somehow. Eyes cracked red
With grief, my brothers mute with shock, bereft
And angry. Lucky me—I had a whole

Half-hour to myself, alone, before
The hordes arrived, to make my peace with her



Ann Johnson: May Flowers Study
©Ann Johnson

Simon Kew

Letter

If you come this way, step lightly
as the crow, for the ice between our worlds is thin.
I wonder if you'll embrace the attenuated pleasures here

of hoar frost, rime, plumb snow-drifts by the ream,
though I'm sure you'll like the verandah's
vibraphone of ice.

I can stare for hours
at winter birch trees holding out
their life-time of eloquent gestures.

What about us? I think we're fading into mist.
I see this clearly in a murky evening's light.
Perhaps its why we couldn't photograph our love.

I won't signal our sad clowns
and we'll avoid the lakeside loons,
their hollow fluting and goodbyes-

they're always kind of blue.
It's Chet Baker's forlorn recessionals here,
silent as an owl's wing. I track him through the snow

with my piano filling up with winter,
Yesterday I heard a cymbal's white-out frost.
It happened as I watched a melody of falling snow.

And now I'm petering into darkness,
It's my Saint Lucy's Day and this dark hour
when two black eels slip hand in glove.



Ann Johnson: Zephyrus
©Ann Johnson



Ann Johnson: Red and Grey
©Ann Johnson

Abegail Morley

On the mirror's frame

a knot in the wood is blinking,
readjusting its focus. It confers
with her eye. They have a scheme.

Her teeth tilt, too heavy for her smile,
paste pushing itself over molars
sprays out from gum and lip,

and the pebble-dashed glass
and the white-mouthed woman
gawp at each other briefly.

In the morning, sunlight spins
with dust on the unpolished glass,
she knows they possess each other.

At night in the electric light
her face is bisected; each side speaking
to the other about misfits.

Love Hurts

You're wearing a wide mouth, and owl eyes,
and without even blinking, you soak up my skin –
drop by drop, as if I am evaporating
up the canals of your nostrils.
You're cherry-picking me.

You comb my body for treasure, your fingers
seeking the sweet and the ripe, the reddest red:
you pluck at every part of me.

My spine snags your hands,
my body spilling its illness for you,
staining your fingers, turning liquid
where the nails bend from the skin
and point their own way out.

Lucinda Carey

Pick It Lilly

Pick it Lilly, pick it Lilly, pick it Lilly
In the Spring my sweet in the spring!

When the wind pulls hard at the sheets plying tying,
Tugging, the wind in its youthful playtime.
Bone and spirit in the spars of moonshine
Silver drenching, over reaching fingers between times,

Unreal time of fading cross shadowed currents
When the Gibbous sails high like the tide
Now in hazy zoned pink dawn light.

Oh pick it Lilly, pick Lilly
Though unknowing what your plucking
It's all forgotten, a misunderstanding
In the bustling hard market harbour.

Silly non urgent the empty shuttle jiggles in the race.
Pale shade to the wish bone fishes piled still
Slippery in the sunlight.

Lilly Lilly Lilly

Pick it in the spring my love in the spring!

Stitches and tacks needle in the waves
Ever stitching and unpicking her life
Alone in the silver silken night.

And the youthful wind, so new in its prime time,
Jaunty full of bounciness
Kisses the sighs, cooled the royal fingertips,
Tugging at the winding sheet, ruffling her embroideries.

Pick it Pick it
It seams on endlessly,
So pick it in the Spring my sweet.



Ann Johnson: The Edge of England

©Ann Johnson

Marcus Smith

Driving with My Daughter

We are moving quickly, much too quickly
to focus on the illusion of rushing lands
you survey with the keenness of an animal.
Are you studying the horizon for an end?
Do the geese flying overhead startle you
with their noisy freedom? Will how they stay
close together in the immense sky scare you
as much as the seriousness in your eyes
(brown as fallow fields are vast and empty)
frighten me with f allow recollection
of all the times I have travelled alone.
Now comes the mystery of power-lines.
Now an airoplane roars, soars and disappears.
Now a freight train rattles through wheat fields,
thumping in my heart, grinding through my belly.

In the mountains it was trees and more trees
a blur called forest. By the shining sea
wave after wave, no end or beginning.
Now you ask why so many streets and houses,
ask, 'What's this place?' as if you've always felt,
without your innocence knowing it knows,
how easy it suddenly is to feel lost
in a familiar place while somewhere else,
foreign as ancient maps, must be the home
you, like me, have to give up finding
as we peer into the view of fogged mirrors.

The Broken Gate

One hinge is rusted loose
and the gate, still pulled open,
has dug a hardened furrow,
neither keeping me out
nor inviting me in as I pass on.

I used to cross the field
to hop worn-out slats,
a thin acrobat foolish to talk
about himself and the world
he hoped to join through armchair chats.

You gave me cool, precise
advice in long glasses
of minted tea and a feeling of living
close enough to bright words
and the sophistication that passes

for life in the old and the young.
Though no longer open
to voices other than your own, you liked
a path cleared to the gate,
which even then was always broken.

Peter Davis

Oblivious Cat

You shake your fur
and a firework display of dust
erupts around you
illuminated by a single shaft of sunlight
slicing through the room.

Each floating particle, like an astronaut
now on its weightless way,
slows to drift in silence through the air.
I concentrate my focus, spellbound
by a single speck of drifting light,
extend my gaze and behold a galaxy in miniature:
now each lighted speck of dust a star
in flux with every other star
travelling the six directions
of gravity's despair

...and there you sit,
yawning with indifference
as if nothing has happened at all.



Ann Johnson: Fourth Sister
©Ann Johnson

Kevin Cahill

My Beloved

I hold you like a rotten medlar.
So good to eat. My first frost
battered you and you turned to a sop:
your dirty ulcer spooling on my lips.

I plucked you years back by the college wall:
your whey fust maundered
on my tongue. Your bolus
blossomed in my world.

Even now you burgeon more offensive –
the brown sponge of your bruise
drips on my skin, your dank spirit
extrudes on my thumbs.

When I hunger I crack your head
open like a bonbon, your volcanic cone
caves into sauce. I suck your spattered bulb
like a nude ovum.

Because you are my mistress, my *Mespilus germanica*,
my sweet stew, the phantom candy
and rot of my festering mood – floating in puce.
You are my bad bud in the bowl.

And so here I am, sitting with you, tonight, gorging
your pungent flood, your defunct molasses, your open veins.
Loving you, caressing and controlling you,
stroking your grey fur, your insensible hairs.

Suffering

Understand suffering and I will understand myself.
Understand why the girl with opal eyes and wings like light
who sits in her anchovies and wines warming the supermarket seat

is cilice and a noose of pricks. Why this one face of love
I am given – floundering in its squall line and fixed anchor
while the radioactive tenderness great as a sun

works the tills and bags my desires like a vegetable?
Packed like a corpse I walk out of there, as her
country head fritters downstream with furze and haw seeds.

Where has it gone? It has stayed with me in one form:
the pilgrims perhaps with shells in their buttonholes and holes
in their feet feeding on something outside of this life.

The Passing Bell

Reading a little girl to sleep
feels like the grass helping.

Although big enough now
to ask about things
one tries to keep from these
all-seeing, all-hearing things,
she sits up in her cot
to ask about Goldilocks.

To ask about the hair
that is worn like a shrub's nostrum,
the spoon that is bright as a twig's flambeau,
and the why of everything just now
as it turns around in a porridge bowl,
and now, in a girl's snore.

Her snore is apple blossom,
and our book on the bed
full of pictures
is clover I think,
I think the book is
elfwort; fern; haresfoot.



Ann Johnson: Seventh Sister

©Ann Johnson

Martin Reed

Vaughan Williams *Fifth Symphony*

I see a beach, a lighthouse sweeping the darkness,
warning the convoys.

He knows these rising thirds, diminished
fifths – some such things. For him, it must
be different, the stern conductor's discipline,
building bar on bar, a structure of sound.

The tide begins its surge
to draw in all the night's inevitable pain and sweetness,
movements break upon my void and build their symmetry.

I'm happy with the passive - impressed by magic.
But I see him following a score .
His pleasure must be different,
seeing how it's done, what makes it work.
Addition or subtraction?
I envy all his human interaction,
owning such a grand design that weaves
the notes together, conjuring the moment.

But I want my haunted beach,
not fraught technique in rooms too brightly lit,
with everything forever within reach.

Bridgwater Docks

I passed the frontier railway bridge, a sooty
curve whose columns sank in swirling shallows.
Through the angled spars, I saw the clay
as grey as winter churchyards, slick as mackerel,
exhaling mist. Opaque tobacco light
came rolling off the banks. Someone fell
in here. A drowning accident it said
though no-one knew for sure.

One crane pointed
its beak round brick kilns, house-backs, garden
sheds with battered sprouts, green thumbs of beans,
to lock-gates, chomping on their weight of water.
There sat *Enid*, *Crowpill*, with the rest,
packed deck-to-deck: the luggers, colliers, dredgers,
tramps, improbably inland, all gathered
from the narrow eel of river, coiled
across the flat land, riding low with coal
and timber, shadowed, stretching ropes to wharves
by warehouses like barracks, creaking gently,
nobody aboard. I wandered back
to my anchored semi, waiting for a tide.

Charles Baudelaire

I Worship You

Translated by Jan Owen

I worship you as I worship the night sky's
great overarching vault, O silent vase
of sadness, and all the more as you take flight,
and I perceive it's you, jewel of the night,
ironically hoarding all the space between
my arms and the blue expanse for which I yearn.

I leap to the attack, I come to grips
with you like a choir of maggots over a corpse,
and I cherish, cruel implacable creature, even
that icy air by which you are my heaven.

Translation of *Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne*

Spleen: King of a Land of Rain

Translated by Jan Owen

I'm like the rich young king of a land of rain,
impotent, world-weary, full of scorn
for his sycophantic tutors and their lies.
His dogs are a bore; nothing at all can surprise
or brighten him, neither hunting and falconry
nor his subjects dying in sight of his balcony.
The bawdy rhyming of his favourite clown
can't prompt this soul-sick man to laugh or frown;
his fleur-de-lis-decked bed's become a tomb.
Still, ladies love a prince—they primp and scheme
and flaunt their flimsy gowns, but none beguile
the crass young bag of bones to crack a smile.
The sage who makes him gold can't sublimate
the baser elements in his head of state,
nor will blood baths in the Roman style
strike a spark or serve to purge the bile
from this dull corpse—like death-in-life he reigns,
with Lethe's slime-green waters ruling his veins.

Translation of *Spleen: Je suis comme le roi d'un pays pluvieux*

Spleen: Memories

Translated by Jan Owen

Memories. . . if I'd lived a thousand years

I couldn't have more. Enormous chests of drawers
cluttered with poems, love letters, lawsuits, wills,
and hanks of hair rolled in receipts and bills,
hide away far less than my sad skull.

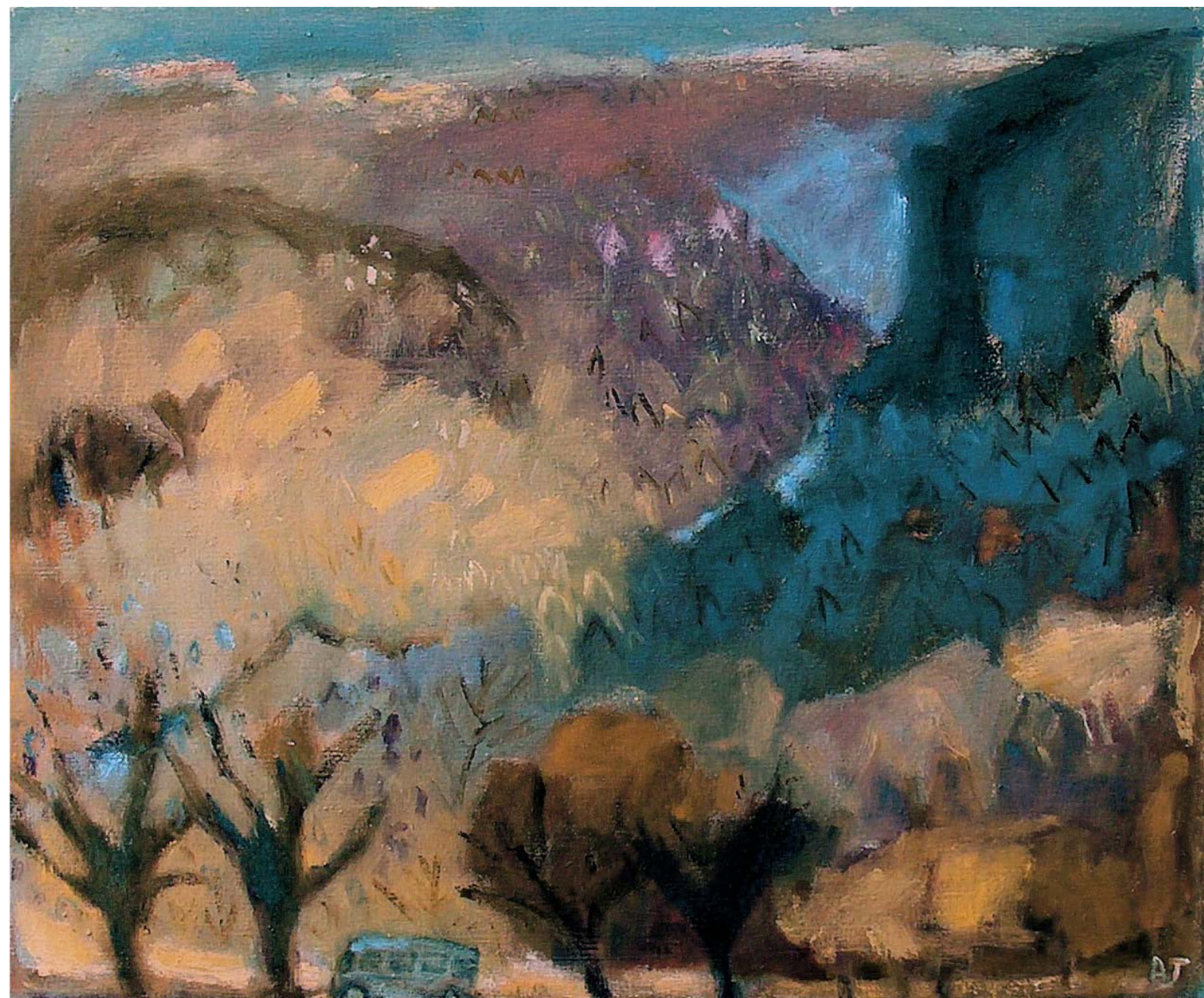
It's a pyramid, a catacomb chock-full
of more cadavers than the common ditch.

—I am a graveyard moonlight dreads to touch;
long lines, long desperate worms trailing remorse,
devour my dearest dead to eat up loss.

Dead roses everywhere: I'm an old boudoir
with dated fashions strewn across the floor,
and only pale Bouchers and plaintive pastels
to breathe the scent of empty perfume bottles.

Nothing's as slow as the day's halting tread;
under a snow of years with flakes like lead,
the fruit of dull indifference, ennui,
takes on the taste of immortality.

—Henceforth, living flesh, you are no more
than a granite block wreathed in nameless fear,
an ancient sphinx forgotten by mankind,
drowsing behind a screen of driven sand,
unmarked on any map. Fiercely alone,
you chant your dirge to the last rays of the sun.



Ann Johnson: Towards Penrith
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