INTERVIEW

John Burnside

Patricia McCarthy: I have called this issue of *Agenda* 'Dwelling Places'. Your poems flow so naturally and magically as if you are simply breathing them out, that they become proper dwelling places for each reader.

'Dwelling places' as such are also very important to you in the corpus of your work. Even in your new collection, *Black Cat Bone*, to be published by Jonathan Cape in August of this year, the persona (presumably yourself) wants a home but is 'stuck in the cage of his bones'. These homes can be made of bricks and mortar, landscape, places in the head or heart (such as when you read contemporary American poetry on arrival in California, you felt you were 'arriving at 'a real home' both 'familiar and strange'), the 'whiteness' of snow or the blank in your mind, even nowhere or the afterlife which you envisage as being incorporated into this earthly life. Can you comment on what seems to be this perpetual need for settlement?

John Burnside: You have raised a few points here. First, I confess that I am extremely happy to hear you say that the poems feel natural, like breath, because that is a central concern for me. It's not something I can try for – not deliberately, anyhow – but I train for it all the time, so any hint of success is gratifying. By which I mean that I tend to place my trust in the made where it feels organic, where it appears to emerge through some natural process. I trust what flows, what emerges, what shapes *itself*.

The relationship of this approach to the way some other poetries work is akin to the relationship between dwelling and a certain way of building. I do not deny that you can build something that lives by its own order, that need not be 'part of the landscape' (actually, every single word in that phrase is just a touch *out*, but I can't think of a better one without using jargon or endless and tedious qualification; I do tend to find myself overusing the phrase 'you know what I mean'). Yet, if I made such a thing myself, I wouldn't trust it. When I first read *Dao De Ching*, that was another occasion where I immediately felt at home – and I've been reading it in my mind ever since on a more or less daily basis. I want to say, though, that I see nothing exotic in it; it's not a case of falling in love with 'Eastern Mysticism', as it were: for me, *wuji* and The Dialectic are close kin, sister paradigms for how the world works, and I feel blessed by both equally.

To get to dwelling, though, it seems to me that there is something quite straightforward going on here. We have Heidegger to thank for understanding

that the real problem for humankind is our homelessness – and we have centuries of philosophical thought to thank for the recognition that, if something presents itself to us as a problem, our best answer is to embrace it. It may sound perverse of me, but the truth is that I'd rather follow the path of homelessness to wild dwelling than accept the costly shelter of a certain kind of building – building that displaces, violates and domesticates what some have called, in translation and as a kind of shorthand, *the great spirit*.

In short, the perpetual need for settlement, like the quest for the moment's grace, is necessary because home, like grace, is a temporary, sometimes fleeting thing, and cannot be *occupied* as such. Or not unless one is prepared to lose all hope of wildness and settle for the Authorised Version that mere social life imposes.

PMcC: Another sense of what home means to you persists in the feeling of the travelling towards home being preferable to actually arriving there. Other times 'the place arrives in us'. Is there a T.S. Eliot influence here? In your later poems, too, for example in the long poem 'Le Croisic' from *Gift Songs*, there are quite daringly obvious echoes of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Can you explain this?

JB: It begins to sound as if my view of home is a bit like some conundrum from quantum physics. Home is there until we try to pin it down, right? Though I think that's partly so. It's like happiness, I think. Let it happen, and you're fine, but you can't *make* it come true.

I am haunted by the Eliot of *Four Quartets*, so I have to be very careful of that. No poet I can think of does time better (though he only does it when he's not *talking* about time, if you see what I mean). How we think of time (or rather, how we inhabit it) is the key question for me. Inhabit it well and happiness of a certain very specific kind will follow. Live in the time of others – the time determined by the clocks and calendars and the decrees of the Authorised Version (also known as 'the world owned by others') – and we lose our *selves*. And I think we know this. It's just hard to admit it, because the others who own the authorised version will occasionally toss us a crumb or a bone to keep us happy. Eliot's greatest achievement, I think, is to make us see how shameful it is to delude ourselves about how time works.

PMcC: This dwelling in 'nowhere' links to your wish, always, it seems to be invisible or to disappear. Even at fourteen, you tell us in your autobiography, *Waking up in Toytown*, you wished to disappear and arrive at 'an unimaginable elsewhere'. This elsewhere must be your perfect 'dwelling place', the point of crescendo in every one of your epiphanies that occur throughout your

oeuvre. You tell us further on in your autobiography about 'learning how to vanish'. How does this tie in with your poetry in which you show an authentic self who recounts autobiographical narratives or 'stories'. Isn't there a contradiction here?

JB: I don't think there is. I would say that all the art I particularly enjoy involves a magic act in which the writer, the maker, disappears from the work, leaving a very precise space – a space just sufficient for the reader to echo the artist's vanishing act with his or her own.

So – why do I want to vanish? To experience the world as it is. Not as I have been trained from birth to see it, but *as it is*. Impossible on anything but a short-term basis? No doubt. A worthwhile pursuit? The only one, I'd say, under the present circumstances. It's a cliché, I know, but I don't really see much point in wishing for something else, when you can hanker after the impossible.

PMcC: To what extent is Heidegger a conscious influence in your poetry? His *Poetry, Language, Thought* focuses on dwelling in the sense of our mortal stay or presence on this earth, and on the four divinities of earth, sky, divinities and mortals which co-exist in a primal one-ness, though I am simplifying it all. His concepts seem to fit perfectly with your poetry. Or is this mere coincidence?

JB: No, not a coincidence. I began reading Heidegger in my late teens and struggled for a long time to begin to understand his vision. So his work is central to how I think about the world – but then, so is Marx, Wittgenstein, Sartre, to some extent Merleau-Ponty and Levinas and also Benjamin (with whom I engaged somewhat more recently). Wittgenstein, for example, was an obsession at one time: I remember spending about a year living in a room in Woodingdean, studying the *Tractatus* and living off scraps and milk. I'd been reading it for some time, but I didn't feel I had an overview of it (as it were) so I dedicated myself to it, reading very little else and spending whole days on a single sentence. Sartre, too, engaged me in a very similar way. Though I have to admit that the lifelong engagement has been with Heidegger – the later Heidegger in particular.

That said, I wouldn't use the word 'conscious' when speaking about this. If you do philosophy with care, it doesn't just get into your conscious mind, it affects how you walk about, how you look, how you work in a garden or prepare food. And in a similar way, it affects how we write poetry – not because we consciously think about it, but because poetry comes from our being, which philosophy changes in many subtle but significant ways.

PMcC: Another relevant book, *The Poetics of Space*, by Gaston Bachelard comes to mind when reading your poetry and its focus on dwelling. I recall (upon looking up): 'Not only our memories but the things we have forgotten are "housed" and "the house is a large cradle", including all the houses in our daydream-memories wherein inhabited space transcends geometric space'. Again, is Bachelard important to you, or is it by chance that there are correspondences between your two approaches?

JB: Bachelard is central (not just for that book, but for others, such as *La psychanalyse du feu*, for example) – and I would set alongside him others, like Tanizaki, Soetsu Yanagi, (his masterpiece, *The Unknown Craftsman*, is one I return to time and time again), Leo Marx (*The Machine in the Garden*), James P. Carse (*Finite and Infinite Games*), Annie Dillard and Gary Snyder, for their work on dwelling and what Snyder calls 'wild etiquette'.

But, while it is true that inhabited space transcends geometric space, it's also true that violated space – the space occupied by a dam on a great river, or by a factory farm, or a three-hundred-foot plus wind turbine, *also* transcends geometric space. In fact, it might be said that space and time are – perhaps appropriately – the moral battlefields of our time. We need to honour space so that the beauteous and elegant may grow there – light, shadows, a look, a tree – and we need to reconstruct our notion of time, so we don't just pay lip service to the common knowledge that linear (clock, calendar) time isn't *time* at all, but a convention. We have allowed ourselves to become the slaves of a system that metes out our days to the nearest millisecond, so it can steal from us the places – and the imaginative ways of dwelling in and appreciating those places – those that those who went before us held sacred – for very, very good reasons.

PMcC: In your early work, such as *Common Knowledge* (Secker & Warburg, 1991), and in ensuing collections, including your soon to be published *Black Cat Bone* with its mention of 'venial sin', for example, as well as in your overriding themes of resurrection and redemption, your roots in the Catholic religion that you were brought up in are apparent. How much do you value this influence in your work?

JB: Well, (northern) Catholicism is part of my personal, emotional and spiritual heritage. That is, the iconography is, the imagery and the narratives of a particularly rainy form of Christian dreaming that, for better or worse, I had to work with for a while. Though I have to say that, for a while there, I was engaged in a rather convoluted love letter to Martin Luther. I suppose I would say, if push came to shove, that, at the 'conscious' level (a clumsy

notion, but useful shorthand for *some*thing) I lean towards a Daoist view of the world, but my 'unconscious' is a mare's nest of childish and sometimes rather visceral Catholicism.

PMcC: You certainly seem to be preoccupied with the mystery of things, with the spaces between what is known, what you see and what you inquire into.

JB: I'll admit to that. I'm a fuzzy thinking type, and I accept that everything is in flux. I'm making my own small refusal to give in to a certain British pragmatism (which is also shorthand for something, of course).

I also think that there is more to empiricism than trusting the five (why so few?) senses that we have been trained from birth to use, by people with very strong vested interests in having us behave well. That some of those people loved us, or at least had our best interests at heart, is neither here nor there. They were agents of limitation, tasked with ensuring that the doors of perception should remain acceptably muddied.

Not a new notion, in the least. In fact, we know enough about this to accept that, on an almost disastrous scale, we see what we expect to see, what we have been told to see – which preserves certain power structures (political, yes, but also 'moral' and 'intellectual') rather nicely. I don't think that 'I' am going to make any difference, or anything like that, I just don't fancy giving in. Isn't that something akin to healthy scepticism?

Finally, though, I have to confess that I'm also preparing (or trying to prepare) for what is to come, which in my view is the inevitable collapse of a stale civilisation dedicated to the financial enrichment of a few, at the imaginative, moral and spiritual expense of the many. At this stage, *refusal* is significant: to say, yes, you have managed to damage us in countless ways with your fifth-rate socialisation (I won't say education) system and your forced work programmes, but I still refuse to accept that this way of living is inevitable – and I have one useful tool, *Imagination*, with which to continue the mental fight.

PMcC: Your collection *Gift Songs* (2007) was inspired by the Shakers' gift songs and was concerned with a free faith based in the indefinable, nothing to do with dogma. You further this in *Black Bone Cat* where you fuse old and new testaments, 'the Sanskrit of rain', the 'waking at dusk to anatomy's blunt hosanna', 'flesh and blood deities' such as an 'imp' or 'sphinx'; you invoke the old gods who 'return to the land as buzzard and pink-footed goose', who 'fail to love us' because we demand too much of them, and 'outwear' us. This, to me, seems to be an important conscious development which has been gradually happening in your poetry: the synthesis in your work of many religions, including pagan ones, and philosophies.

JB: Maybe it is Catholicism's beautiful – as opposed to one of its many dark – secrets that it preserved, (in a rather cloudy chamber, I admit), wonderful vestiges and DNA traces of the pagan. The Popes told early Christian colonisers to build their churches on the pagan sites and I suppose the intention was to overlay, and so obliterate them. But, under the floor of St Bride's – my first church – I could feel the old Celtic goddess simmering away and, growing up, I think my main task was a kind of DIY and fairly basic re-engineering project, to restore the pagan in my own life, at least, not in the form of residual 'superstitions' and 'folk customs', but as a natural power. At the stage when, like most teenagers raised in a church, I lurched around endlessly spouting half-baked atheist rhetoric, my main objection was the idea of a God with human values and habits – that struck me as an obscenely limited vision, as ugly and crass a way of thinking as a mind that can take a theme from Bach and turn it into an advertising jingle. Those were easy times – 'Man' invented 'God' to fill the gap where 'God' wasn't, because 'Man' didn't want to be homeless and alone in the universe. It takes some of us quite a while to tire of this argument.

Now, though, I tend towards the conclusion that we invent God not, as it were, to replace an absence, but to substitute something we comprehend, or something we can at least deal with, for something we cannot understand. It's the old conundrum of human patterns versus another – not higher or lower, not divine or 'natural', but single, immense and unified – Order, (Dao, if you like). Doubtless, we remake the whole world, not just God, in our own image – which is fine, as long as we recall, from time to time, that *any* order we come up with is only a subset, or a shadow, of that (not human) Order. Our saving grace is that, with a little imagination, we can be wilder and more 'natural' – more pagan, in fact – than we usually allow. Though this has nothing to do with self-indulgence or indiscipline: on the contrary, wildness is a path of rigorous unlearning and lifelong recovery from one's 'education' (socialisation). 'Most people are other people,' Oscar Wilde says. 'Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.'

PMcC: This development is furthered by your interest in animism with its attendant spirits and souls that survive physical death and accompany you as ghosts on earth (still evident in your new collection) – so that you are never 'alone' on 'the road to the afterlife'. Can you comment on your moving on from the religion you were born to which is identified narrowly to its adherents as 'the one, true, Catholic church'?

JB: I love the animists – they understand the world so much better than the monotheists and other creatures do. Animism reminds us that it's not enough

just to *accept* the cycles of life and death that individuate us; we have to *celebrate* them too. A dark celebration, no doubt, and one in which the tragic has its place, but a celebration nonetheless. Animists say: I assert and praise the world that gave me birth and then, when I die, goes on 'without' me. I can't help coming to the – fuzzy – conclusion that, while the individuated – the named, social person – isn't there in that 'without' state, *some*thing is. *The Gospel of Thomas*: 'Happy is he who already was before he is.'

PMcC: It could be said that you are haunted by your own images which recur throughout your different collections of poetry. Even in the imminent collection *Black Cat Bone*, these same images prevail, used both similarly and differently, as elsewhere, such as the snow, phantoms, the dead, whiteness, cottonwoods and so on; the same influences of art and early black and white film. As if they, like the presences around you, are inextricable from your existence.

JB: They *are* my existence. I would say that this is where the self who 'already was' dwells. There's a 'primitive' belief that, when we need to, we can store our soul – or one of our souls – in a stone or a tree for safe-keeping. That certainly feels like something I can relate to in my own experience. Though sometimes we store our souls in an old movie – real or imagined – where things are a little fuzzy, so they can remain there without becoming contaminated by too forceful a narrative. I have dreamed often of a reel of film, maybe the first film ever made, that still exists but is now so old that almost nothing appears when it's projected, nothing but enticing shadows and flickers. It's like reading old texts – the Pre-Socratics, say, or *The Gospel of Thomas* – where things are suggestive and fuzzy and hugely interpretable. That's where I like to dwell – in that old film. It's always running, somewhere in my mind. Probably it's people walking in snow, or damp woods, but you never really know.

PMcC: Your novels are written in the same poetic tenor as your poetry. Do you see them – the prose and poems – as a single continuum? The group of images I referred to in the question above that recur throughout your work in whatever genre seem totemic or animistic and form a kind of second skin of yours. Is this deliberate or happening at a subconscious level?

JB: Oh, I like that idea. A second skin. That *works*. I'm not really a person who does things deliberately but, then again, I'm a bit sceptical about 'a subconscious level'. In any writer who does both, prose and poetry probably come from the same imaginative set of impulses, but – and this may not be

the non-sequitur it seems – it pleases me to note that the method (if I can use such a word) of making prose and that for making poetry are fairly distinct.

How I write poetry – though not how I write prose – is pretty much what Mandelstam called 'on the lips'. That is, I don't begin with a piece of paper and a pencil, I let the poem emerge, allowing it to build up 'in my head' (as it were) and then, when the whole thing – or, for a larger poem, a whole section – has come into being, I write it down. This is the point when I have to worry about interruptions, because if something happens here it can all go wrong, but I can carry a good chunk of poem around in my head for a long time while it is still warm and malleable. The rhythm, the music, holds it there. But there's that moment when things are transferred to paper when everything changes. I don't think about line breaks or anything at the writing down stage, I just scribble it down, on whatever comes to hand, when it's ready. Then I will type it up and think about how it should look on the page – my guiding principle in this being that I see the layout of a poem as a kind of musical notation. For me, a poem in print works in the same way – the print version should allow a reader to hear the poem, as one hears a sonata or a quartet when one reads the score. To this extent, there isn't really a beginning and an end to the composition process – it's something closer to a single, if rather drawn out, event.

Prose is completely different at this level. I think, I reconsider, I make notes; I try, then try again and hope to fail better. If I lose faith, or get interrupted, I don't just walk away. I can circle back around and have another go. I can even decide things for myself – something a poem never lets me do. Now, I don't want this to sound mystical – it isn't. I'm not taking dictation from the Muse, or anything like that. But with poetry, it really is a mystery process that, if the space opens up, it happens of its own accord. I can imagine that space never opening up again – and my never writing another poem. Which is fine. But I can't imagine never writing prose again. It's something I could work at, if it didn't grace me.

PMcC: Do you see the poet's role to retain and be in touch with the primitive part of his/herself? You yourself, for example, seem to have a primitive side, as if you belong in some level of your psyche to one of those from a hunter-gatherer society. I noted the hunted 'beast', the hare and the 'oxblood' of a mouth in your forthcoming collection. Also you have a couple of poems on drug-taking which link to the trance states and hallucinations which are part of those primitive societies. The very title of your forthcoming collection, *Black Cat Bone*, is a Hoodoo talisman that confers success, invisibility and sexual power on its owner. Can you enlarge on your interest in this?

JB: Oh, yes. Definitely. I do hope so. And I hope it doesn't seem too digressive to quote Paul Shepard here. Discussing the Fipa of Tanzania, he says, 'Men are dominant. The household, like the society, is the outcome of the superiority of the purposive intellect over the feminine qualities signified by the house interior: heart, passion, privacy, loins, growth and death. Thus the intellect is seen as the dominant member of a duality, arraigned against the manifold nonrational that it overcomes by emergence and change. Speech is the prototype expression of self-activation and rhetoric is valued as an end in itself. "Any culture that insists on individuals committing themselves to one point of duality," says Roy Willis, "exposes itself to the risk that some will find the forbidden option too attractive to be foregone". So, in contrast to the polished, public persona so praised by the Fipa is the savage, interior self, the dark enemy, the wild and wilderness, all that seems resistant to the growth of the known and the corporate village.'

PMcC: Is Jung an influence on you at all? For example, in the long poem, 'The Fair Chase' (from *Black Cat Bone*), the 'beast' that you kill might well represent the dark side of yourself, in Jungian terms: your shadow, and any muse, such as Helen who died young and whom you hardly knew, your anima. Tying in with this, it is interesting to note that in the poem 'Oh No, Not my Baby' in your new collection, a woman 'seemed more song than woman'.

JB: I've not read Jung for years. But then, Jung is a ubiquitous if sometimes unacknowledged influence isn't he? In the atmosphere, as it were. Or in the water. Like fluoride.

PMcC: What other muses do you have? Are they the ghosts and phantoms, 'the limbo people', who preside alongside you, and haunt your autobiography and your poems?

JB: Are they muses? I wonder about that. I am a chronic insomniac, which means I spend a good deal of time consorting with ghosts and phantoms, but they are very good company, much of the time. Sometimes, I fear, I allow myself to think of them as better company than the living, flesh and blood creatures of the day. Which is wrong, in many ways, but those night folk are wonderfully unpredictable and there's an elegance to them that I can't help but admire.

Though I'm not sure talking like this doesn't over-emphasise the human in the world of my imagination – which is, in fact, populated by all manner of creature, many of them only half-human, and some wholly animal, vegetable or mineral. Not to mention scents, patterns, shadows, numbers. A scent can

carry a good deal my way – *L'air du temps*, for example. I have to confess that Nina Ricci is very significant for me – I have no idea why. It's not some simple *psychological* thing – my mother didn't wear *L'air du temps*, for example, while she prepared for a Proustian night out – it's something far less analysable than that. I once went to Chartres and they had an exhibition there of Nina Ricci fragrances through the ages. I stumbled upon it; I didn't know it was going to be there. It was like heaven. Stained glass, catacombs and Nina Ricci. What could be better?

PMcC: Your father, too, is important. Tell us more about him.

JB: My father was a foundling, it seems, who turned up on a doorstep during the General Strike of 1926. Not a good start in life, especially in Cowdenbeath. Growing up, he was passed from one family to another, as far as I can make out, but I don't know much more than that. Naturally, this history made him difficult to live with.

His great gift was that he was a wonderful liar. I sometimes wonder about that. I am suspicious of people when they talk about 'the truth' – often, this just means 'factual', which isn't the same thing at all – and that may be a symptom of my having spent my childhood in a house where 'the truth' was always in doubt and, at the same time, some necessary fiction – the lie that always tells the truth, as it were – was being contrived, from wisps and fragments of event, imagined or 'real'.

I confessed to being a fuzzy thinker, earlier, and I feel that may be an asset, some of the time. Some of the time but not all of the time. It worries me when people say something is true – if they are talking about simple facts, that's fine, but we all know that most things aren't as simply factual as this society wants to make out. We all know that, yet we pretend we don't. We pretend that some uninterpreted 'truth' is possible – and that's a political choice, in many ways. It means some people can be said to be right about things that nobody is ever 'right' about. Who tells history wins power – so maybe the first task is a retelling of history, and a review of what we think we mean by 'truth'. I think Pontius Pilate said that.

PMcC: Is this invisibility you claim to seek – 'as breath spills out and comes, time and again, to nothing – neither echo nor lament', and, 'The only gift is knowing we belong to nothing' (from *Black Cat Bone*) – influenced in any way by the writings of Krishnamurti, or the mystics? Or does the innate inclination or yours to lack a self in a state of nothingness hark back to Sartre and the existentialists?

JB: 'Nothingness haunts being.' Now *that's* a bon mot.

I haven't read Krishnamurti for a long time either. My 'mystic' of choice is probably Simone Weil. The Simone Weil of *La pesanteur et la grâce*, for instance.

Maybe I've been a little misleading though, on the self. It's not my inclination to lack a self; I just don't want to have a fixed self, something to get attached to. I want to live – and die – as fully as I can, and 'self' could well get in the way of that. I seem to recall, too, that 'God is no respecter of persons'.

PMcC: Just as well you say that, since it could be worrying if you were to see your poetry, in future, striving in that more abstract direction, somewhat akin to Laura Riding's aims, to achieve this invisible, unnameable authorship and this nothingness. Is the 'whiteness' in the mind, constantly referred to by you, a place ultimately beyond the world of images and poetry?

JB: I'm not one for striving, which is probably a stroke of luck. I'll go wherever the line takes me. I'm not being flippant, or argumentative, when I say that I don't think of a future, and I don't have aims. I don't think poetry ever has a future, only a present. Which is, I think, a Good Thing.

PMcC: Again in *Black Cat Bone*, you claim, with nostalgia and a sense of loss, that all your childhood seems a fiction. Isn't this one of the tricks of memory, particularly when a past is quite a long time ago? Many of your childhood memories are in Scotland. Does this mean that Scotland, where you now live, has become a fictional territory for you? And if so, does this give you a freedom? Or is it more than that?

JB: Oh, Scotland has mostly been fictional territory for a while now. Not just for me. Though I don't see the protagonist of *Black Cat Bone* as me, or even as an alter ego. A persona, yes, but only a version of me to that extent. For example, I don't believe I'm much given to nostalgia.

The Scotland where I live now is constantly under threat. If you live in the country, it's quite shocking to see how feudal it is still, how big landowners and local worthies are quite happy to lord it over the rest of 'the community'. Rural Scotland is, in many ways, a gift to David Cameron's hideous 'Big Society' notions – it's full of people who would trade everything – the land under our feet, the sky over our heads – for a sizeable enough subsidy or a tariff. I moved to Scotland from Surrey thinking I was going to a place where the rudiments of, or at least a fondness for social justice and a civic sense were still being upheld against the Thatcherite assault (and there are enclaves where such things are still being debated and fought for) but not in the

beautiful Scottish countryside where so much of my work is set. There, the deal has been done. Unless we have *serious* land reform – now – the damage will continue to be done. We need much more public ownership / regulation of the land, we need to support sound land management practices (in which wildness plays its part) and we must demand an end to subsidies and 'feed-in tariffs' that take money from ordinary taxpayers and energy consumers and hand it over to big landowners and land management companies. We need environmental policies designed by people who know and understand the issues, not by crowd-pleasing politicians. I'd include all political parties here, including the Greens, whose support for, for example Big Wind, violates at least one of the original pillars of the green movement, (social justice).

Have I strayed from the subject? Maybe. But when I consider these questions, I am reminded of one way in which art 'matters' socially. Any work of art, however small, is a model of order, a world view. It proposes an alternative to the disinformation and lies that permeate the atmosphere we grow up in from infancy onward. The territory of my poems isn't the fiction; it's the map that has all the lines of ownership and privileged pillage that is a fiction – and a bad one at that. And the way I would define 'lie' is exactly that: a bad fiction.

PMcC: Presumably your love of the land, for its flora and fauna, stemmed from your time in Scotland, then later in Northamptonshire. In your forthcoming collection, for example, I notice your detailed knowledge. You use such names as 'alstromeria', 'a pintailed duck'. How careful a study have you made of botany and biology? And how much does science inform your work?

JB: I have studied botany, especially taxonomy, in an 'amateur' fashion. I like the amateur scientists, the ones who operate out of 'pure curiosity'. Some of them work in university labs and get paid; some go on field trips for their holidays – and I have to confess that too many of my 'holiday's have turned into field trips of one sort or another. (The great American fiction writer, Andrea Barrett, is wonderful on this subject, by the way.)

On the other hand, I wouldn't say that using the correct (folk taxonomical) names for a specific flower or bird is *scientific* – it's just accurate use of the language. If I mention 'cotoneaster' or 'arctic tern' in a poem, it's because that is the plant or bird that has to appear there, in that particular representation of the world. Substitute 'holly' or 'swallow' and something else is going on. It's just about giving the metaphor the best chance I can of working in someone else's mind. A reader, or a listener. And I think poetry should value the specific and the actual very highly indeed – because the powers that be are pretty intent on our settling for the generic, and the virtual.

PMcC: Can you comment on what you think of the way you are frequently interpreted as 'a nature/eco' poet and, as such, 'prophetic'.

JB: Ah. Yes. Eco. Can you think of any other term that has been so thoroughly and insidiously colonised in recent years? By all kinds of folk. Eco is the new 'New!' the new 'Fresh!'. Big Wind wants us to believe their turbines are 'green' (they are not, and they draw investment and research away from what could be environmentally beneficial). The supermarket shelves are full of 'eco' products that, while removing a thick coat of grease and grime from your cooker or kitchen counter, still somehow manage to be 'environmentally friendly'. How about 'organic' farmed salmon? How about feed-in tariffs to landowners and businesses for 'renewables' that are paid for by poorer energy consumers, (roughly quoted from the feed-in tariff website: *If you don't put up your own renewables, you'll be subsiding someone else who does*…. That must be heartening to a flat-dweller in Leven or Leicester)? The green 'movement' has become one more refuge for fatcats and windbags – and it needs to be re-taken by deep (dark) ecology thinking.

I don't think we need prophets any more, though (if we ever did). We need action. Three things 'people could do' right now: i) energy: refuse all support to wind energy unless it's wind-and-water, insist on a non-subsidised, *demos-controlled* energy industry and begin serious work on energy conservation and truly sustainable research ii) scrap all subsidies that are not related to the production of quality food, social justice and / or an enriched sensual and cultural and playful life iii) oblige landowners and businesses to clean up the mess they have made of our rivers, land and seas and repossess all violated lands, while working towards a phasing out of land 'ownership' in its present form.

Poetry may well have a place in this work. But only if it's radical. It's not enough to say how pretty cowslips are and what a shame it would be if we lost them. It's a philosophical question, not a matter of public relations. Heidegger says his work is about a search for a new way of thinking. Deep ecology thinking – something my first, rather dismal stabs at 'eco-poetry' characterised as 'dark green' – asks us to put the natural order first, not because we want to 'save the planet', but because it *is* the natural order. Nature offers no home, as James P. Carse once remarked, so humans have to create their own order to survive – their dwelling places, their provisional and constantly negotiated 'homes' – but if they don't do this within the context of that natural order, then disaster will follow, as disaster follows all acts of hubris. Poetry can remind us of this – but, as I say, it's a lifelong philosophical matter, not just a bit of research and a grant application. I still think of myself as a dark green. I'm not in any way prophetic though, and I'm wary of anyone who

is. I am also obliged to add that I do not see myself as having succeeded, or contributed to the possibility of success, in any of the objectives – not so far. I travel hopefully, however.

PMcC: As to your mentors – Rilke seems to me to be one (for example your angels relate to his as pagan, earth-bound creatures), as well as Milton, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and James Joyce with his epiphanies similar to your own. We have already mentioned T.S. Eliot. Do you feel their presences when you are writing? What have you taken from poets of the past, and which poets do you admire today?

JB: I'm a bit surprised by your mention of Joyce, but I cannot deny the rest. I'd add Marianne Moore, Montale, Celan, Paz, Saba, Lorca and Jorge Guillén to that list, and there are quite a few others.

The poets I admire today are many – it's a very rich time for poetry, I think. In the United States, there are maybe too many fine working poets to name. I'm lucky to count a couple of my favourite American poets as friends and they constantly bring other poets to my attention. So last year, while I was on a visit to Michigan, Linda Gregerson handed me a book by Nick Lantz, (*We Don't Know We Don't Know*) which was a *revelation*. Allison Funk introduces me to new work all the time and I feed back my own suggested reading from this side of the water. It's a long and rewarding conversation.

PMcC: In *Black Cat Bone*, further subtle developments can be detected. The usual images are more surreal, more eerie. Childhood memories become like vignettes of an era, recalling Larkin. You take more risks, too. For example, you deal very delicately with a failing marriage which becomes a damaged bird: 'we failed to mend/ that feathered thing we brought in from the yard/ after it came to grief on our picture window.' In another poem, the groom at a wedding (yours?) is 'a corpse-groom with his 'moth-eaten bride' who is 'a marzipan doll'. The occasion is meant to end 'in sugarcraft and satin'. It is this 'sugarcraft' , 'candyfloss' and 'candy', 'the sweetmeat of a heart' or sweetness that is hinted at many times in this collection but is accompanied by a fear that it overlays something sinister. This is reminiscent of the dangerous 'honeydew' poison in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*. Characters in the poems become more than themselves, developing into allegorical and universal figures such as 'The Well-beloved'. Moreover, you are not afraid to shock such as the poem shrugging off the killing of a woman which is merely like drowning a kitten: 'a little thing', 'it wasn't personal'. There is the 'giggle in the bushes,/ then a shudder'. And the omni-presence of an undefined other who now is perhaps another self: 'someone else is close beside him, other

to his other'. There is always the danger that prevails: 'we live in peril, die from happenstance,' a casual slip, a fault-line in the ice'. Not much going for us with our angst.

JB: Well, I see what you are saying here and, of course, I can go along with it – though only up to a point. The wedding in 'Black Cat Bone' isn't mine; it's the dark, reverse image of the mystical marriage that ends all good comedy. It's also the shadow of marriage *as institution*, that grotesque condition in which love becomes a legal contract and husbands and wives are set upon one another as instruments of the overall machinery of conformism and social control. In that model, as I see it, the husband's job is to help render his wife less the woman she could be, just as it is the wife's task to help make her husband less of the man he might have been. My protagonist wants to imagine a free marriage of bodies, souls and minds, but he cannot escape the institution's unspoken rules of limitation and denial, just as he cannot shed his own conditioning, pride and lusts. I would venture to suggest that he is one of the bachelors who strip bare the bride – a process neither erotic, nor liberating. And the bride is a caricature of sugar and spice and seven veils of lace; she's not an actual woman at all.

PMcC: Yet there is the aim (is it yours?) 'to be momentarily involved/ in nothing but the present'. This surely links to the 'paying of attention' in the moment, the emptying of the mind in meditation. And your growing detachment, your speaking with an 'I' that isn't an 'I', in accordance with the words of Wallace Stevens that you quote: 'If the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice talking, the voice is always that of someone else'. Are all these adjustments and developments deliberate?

JB: As I said, poetry's concern is with the present. That is, with eternity – which we experience as the 'present moment'. The other stuff – the institutional, the conventional, the socialised spaces – is a matter of linear time, but I think poetry is not. Poetry, for me, is one of the means by which we dispute the imposition of linear time, just as metaphor disputes the notion that the world consists of subjects and objects experiencing one another in various kinds of atomised relationship. Poetry is a heightened way of saying, *Look how thoroughly we are all in this together*, and it's only a seeming paradox that the lyric creates its own, apparently isolated space. It's a space carved out away from the Authorised Version, where the sheer continuum of the world becomes audible and tangible – but it's a space that, while I may have experienced it initially by myself, I shape and craft, after my fashion, for someone else to share.

PMcC: Then there is the question, always, of song. In 'Death Room Blues', a new poem, you write: 'Before the songs I sang there were the songs they came from, patent shreds/ of Babel, and the secret/Nineveh of back rooms in the dark'. The songs, like the undead, mill around you, along with the images that repeat and repeat themselves with no escape.

JB: That sounds a bit ominous. Well, 'no escape' does. And I'm not sure of what answer I'd want to make to this other than to say that 'self' is something we can put on hold for a time (as any meditator knows) but it's not something from which one can escape, not entirely. So what then? There's only a sense of 'no escape' if you want to escape in the first place. I love these songs and images – I even love the nightmares that are my own. I don't want to escape from them.

PMcC: In terms of technique, there is a change in this new collection. There are far fewer stepped lines than in your more recent previous collections; occasional random rhyme, some syllabic lines, some longer lines, and free verse often. Is there a special significance in this?

JB: I don't know. The music of a poem is dictated by the poem itself – all I can do is make mistakes in the transcribing, as it were, and so obscure, or muddle, that music. I hope that doesn't happen too often here, but notation has always been an issue for me.

What I can say is that I've been rereading Marianne Moore a good deal over the last couple of years. That may have had some effect. But I've been going to Saba and Montale too – and Pound. Early Pound, mostly. I can't claim that I've been doing anything deliberate in these forays into familiar and strange territory but most worthwhile things that happen to me happen by osmosis.

PMcC: Has your self-avowed 'apophenia' – seeing patterns or connections in random or meaningless data – been helpful to you as a poet and novelist, or a hindrance?

JB: It's hard to know. The older I get, and the more 'in control' I like to think I am of my mental weather, the more I see that I have never known what it is like to be close to 'normal'. That is, I've always seen the world the way I do and, when that happens, it's hard not to think that other people are only pretending when they claim that they don't see it in much the same way.

I don't mean this flippantly. I find the social world endlessly perplexing, which is probably why artworks – things I make myself, things made by

others – play such a central role in my life. Shepard again: 'Art may have begun and continues to serve as the means by which the gap between the natural order and the human order is bridged'. I guess I more or less 'get' the natural order, but the human order – as I presently find it, in the late stages of consumer-capitalism – is something I have to work on.

PMcC: Now I would like to ask the questions Alan Stubbs formulates in his essay further on in this issue of the journal, as they are questions many readers, including myself, would like to ask. You have probably answered a few already. How do you write? Every day? Do you hear a music that decides on the length of each line, and on the rhythm? Do you know where each poem is going to, or what exactly it is about when you begin?

JB: It would be such a pleasure to write every day! I think I probably would if there weren't so many interruptions. I don't want to repeat myself about how 'composition' works for me, but I would just say again that I'm not the deliberate type, I just feel my way, in the present moment, and see where it takes me.

PMcC: Perhaps we should conclude with what would seem to be an important dwelling place for you, as expressed in *Black Bone Cat*, in 'the rollright in the mind', 'touched', as you say at the end of your autobiography, 'with the holy and unexpected blessing of the flyer', singing to us, on and on.