

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Selected Poems

John Burnside

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SELECTED POEMS

John Burnside

CAPE POETRY

*E allora? Eppure resta
che qualcosa è accaduto, forse un niente che è tutto.*
Eugenio Montale, 'Xenia II'

Like me, you sometimes waken
early in the dark
thinking you have driven miles
through inward country,

feeling around you still
the streaming trees and startled waterfowl
and summered cattle
swinging through your headlamps.

Sometimes you linger days
upon a word,
a single, uncontaminated drop
of sound; for days

it trembles, liquid to the mind,
then falls:
mere denotation,
dimming in the undertow of language.

SUBURBS

Wet Sunday afternoon; after the rain a bible wind ripples the sheet puddles on Station Road; along the hedges by the girls' school an elaborate birdsong streams through the wet scent of roses, like a new form of music evolving out of water.

The spiritual history of the suburb: Dutch paintings of parrots and cockatoos, Chinese damasks, Kraak porcelains, still-lives of spices and fruits, imported rhubarb, ginger, cochineal; bottles of gherkins and maple syrup on kitchen tables, ice-cream and lemons, radios talking to empty rooms, the way they do when the director is aiming for suspense in a fifties murder film – the suburb always has an abstracted quality, like a sentence learned by heart and repeated till the words are finally magical.

At night the suburb alters. The day-long, low-level action beneath the surface intensifies, like bad wood warping under veneer: the garden is stolen by foxes rooting in turned dustbins, emptiness takes form and approaches from the centre of the lawn, a white devil, smiling out of the dark, and the realisation dawns that I live in an invented place whose only purpose is avoidance, and what I would avoid, I carry with me, always.

We used to walk in the surburbs, spying into the houses of people we imagined were rich: interiors of perfect stillness, unbearably tidy; Imari bowls and baby grand pianos; gloves on hall tables; mirrors; paintings of boats and landscapes – the people, the trimmed lapdogs, even the space in the middle of each room seemed nothing other than an

additional item of furniture, capable of being polished and insured.

In winter the suburb is Japanese. It is quiet and formal: stone tables and cryptomerias stand in the fenced yards, in tightly-stitched sleeves of immaculate snow. Nevertheless, something is missing: an absence that is only temporarily filled by the red of a post van in the lane, or the sound of footsteps crunching ice. At the edge of the wood, beyond what might reasonably be called suburb, on the already mythical rim of countryside, a pillar-box stands in a drift of the same whiteness, filling its space with a colour and solidity the suburb cannot emulate.

For this reason, the last true rituals only happen here: the inhabitants of the suburb are compelled by an attention to detail that was once religious and is now quite meaningless. The suburb has its own patterns: arrangements of bottles on front steps and scraped ice on driveways, enactments of chores and duties, conversations at gates and hedges, sweeping and binding movements, arcane calculations of cost and distance. All this activity is intended to make it appear real – a commonplace – but its people cannot evade the thought, like the thought which sometimes comes in dreams, that nothing is solid at all, and the suburb is no more substantial than a mirage in a blizzard, or the shimmering waves off an exit road where spilled petrol evaporates in the sun.

The recurring dream is also a memory: I step from the smoke and noise of a party in the suburbs, into a cool garden that smells of lilies and nicotiana; the stars are close, sparkling, cold, and I want to reach up and brush my fingers over their points. In one step I rise into the top branches of an apple tree, into the damp and the perfume,

where a girl in a white dress is already standing, half in darkness, half in the light, lilyscented, as if she belonged to the garden, and could emerge and melt back into it at will.

There is no need to speak; each of us hears the other's thoughts; through the music and voices they all run together, not just sounds, but scents and scraps of vision: lights, moths, perfumes, tunnels, streams. Half ideas: the notation of a tendency towards the circular, a neatness I have known about for years, expressed in a strange algebra of place names and symbols on road maps.

After a while, in the dream and the memory, she is gone. I walk back indoors and the kitchen is empty, except for an absence where something has just occupied my place and left a glass of milk half-finished on the table, some angel of weights and measures who passed through and has only just left - I hear its engine running in the dark, a shining configuration of old gods, Pan-Shiva, Persephone-Ishtar, the Janus-Christ of thresholds and crossings, the imprint of a child who has never come indoors and never will, who stays out in all weathers, who will never grow up or die, who is always, in all circumstances, *out to play*.

In the late afternoon, the people indoors; catspaws of light on the honeydew leaves, sprinklers surging and hissing on deserted lawns. A mile away the abandoned railway station is buried in grapevine and cherry laurel, already half-surrendered to the woods, like a temple to some forgotten god; a half mile in the other direction, stone crosses and angels stand wrapped in graveyard lichens, lithe muscle snakes in ivy, water drips all evening from a rusting tap; this is another form of the same greenness, quieter, more familiar, but what makes it beautiful is what makes it