RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Burning Elvis

John Burnside

Contents

About the Author

John Burnside was born in 1955 and now lives in Fife. He has published seven collections of poetry and has won a number of awards, including the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. He was selected as one of the twenty Best of Young British Poets in 1994. He has published two novels, *The Dumb House* (1997) and *The Mercy Boys* (1999).

ALSO BY JOHN BURNSIDE

POETRY

The hoop

Common Knowledge

Feast Days

The Myth of the Twin

Swimming in the Flood

A Normal Skin

The Asylum Dance

FICTION

The Dumb House

The Mercy Boys

for my sisters

Burning Elvis

John Burnside

Jonathan Cape
London

Quhat have we here bot grace us to defend?

Robert Henryson

BURNING ELVIS

No man is an island.

John Donne

I DON'T KNOW why I choose to remember one thing, rather than another. Maybe whatever it was that happened turned out to be the myth I needed – the myth, or the necessary lie, which comes to the same thing: it's a Tuesday afternoon, early in the summer; it's already too hot and I've come indoors, into the shade. Idly, I switch on the television and start watching a documentary, something about America in the early sixties: JFK, the space program, the sad innocence of consumerism. It doesn't capture my attention, it's just background for a while – I even go out to the kitchen halfway through and pour myself a long, cold drink. I fill the glass with ice and mint leaves and carry it back, almost unbearably aware of myself as an isolated body in a closed space – and that's when I see her: a young girl in a light-brown uniform, with a scarlet cap, in a sun-bleached garden somewhere in Texas or Arkansas: a dark-haired girl with a bob, dancing, or playing hopscotch, half-aware of the camera. She's smiling – to herself, mostly – and she seems happy. It's not that she looks so much like Lindy; or if she does, the resemblance is superficial. It's just that smile, that sense of herself as a complicated game, and maybe it's the faded sunlight, the suggestion of a life beyond the film, a long childhood of beaches and Christmas trees that never really happened. When the programme ends, I stand looking out at the empty street: the suburb on a weekday afternoon,

clipped lawns and pools of shadow, an astonishing stillness, that moment's sense of being alone, of turning around and finding the whole thing – the whole world – is a calculated illusion.

It was spring when the Andersons moved in next door. I first saw Lindy one afternoon, out beyond the fence, where the houses back on to the old nurseries. I used to go wandering out there to escape Mother's neatly manicured garden. You could still see the odd clump of irises, the rows of shrubs laced with bindweed, but mostly it was derelict and overgrown, with wide milky puddles in winter, and lush docks and nightshades in the summertime. I liked it there, I liked the way it had been reclaimed by wildness: the sheds collapsing slowly under the weeds and the rain; the tarmac cracking, shot with mayweed, the hedges blurring, everything running to seed. I didn't notice Lindy to begin with, but I knew someone was there. It was only when I climbed the bank and looked down that I saw her, sitting among the hogweed and nettles, smoking a cigarette. She looked up into the sunlight: a thin, lithe girl with short black hair, who seemed, in that first moment, almost unbelievably beautiful. She looked at me curiously, as if I was some strange animal she had met out there among the bushes and briars. There was a brightness in her eyes, a look of expectation that made me expect something too, but she didn't speak, she didn't even acknowledge my presence, she just took a long drag on her cigarette and looked away.

'I suppose you're the kid from next door,' she said at last.

I laughed. It was funny, her calling me a kid, when I was older.

'Do you go to Saint Mary's?' she asked and, though I didn't know her, I could tell she was being somebody else, a character in a film she'd seen, cool and distant, one of the untouchables. I nodded.

'I'm in the fifth year,' I said, pointedly.

She smiled.

‘So what’s it like?’

I shrugged.

‘It’s all right.’

She stood up and smoothed her dress.

‘Well, I don’t suppose it matters. One school’s much like another.’ She looked me up and down, as if she was trying to memorise my appearance, then she smiled sweetly, and climbed to the top of the bank.

‘You didn’t see the cigarette,’ she said; then she gave me an odd wave, and walked back towards the houses.

She must have started school the next morning. I didn’t see her for a couple of days, then I met her on the street, walking home, and we started to talk. I still remember everything she said that first day, and on the days that followed. I remember everything she did, every move she made, the clothes she wore, the way she kept flicking her hair out of her eyes. After that, I started to hang around outside school, so I could casually walk her home, and we fell into a game, where she didn’t notice that I had waited, and I pretended I’d met her by accident, outside the gates, or fifty yards along the road. Sometimes we’d stand outside her house and talk for hours. I used to wonder what her parents thought, but I needn’t have worried: Lindy got to do pretty much what she wanted. Once, when it began to rain, she called out to me, as I walked away, that I should come inside next time. I remember clearly, even now, the absurd happiness I felt.

Lindy was thirteen. She was two years behind me at school, but she seemed older. She liked old Hollywood films, especially horror movies. She knew who directed what, and when; she knew the names and biographies of the actors. Her particular favourite was Gloria Holden, in the 1936 film *Dracula’s Daughter*. She’d talk about that picture for hours: the mysterious woman’s desperate longing to be released from her dark nature, the way she would tilt her head to

listen through the soundtrack for something she alone could hear, and that moment when she surrendered – the self-mocking smile, the fuzz of blood on her teeth, the slow glide to meet her next victim. Once I got to know her a little, it didn't surprise me that she liked that stuff. She liked to make a mystery of things. I sometimes had the impression she'd been thinking for years about questions nobody else even considered, and she'd moved away, into a parallel life, with its own incontrovertible logic. Half the time, I didn't understand a word she was saying. She pretended to know about science: she'd talk about microfossils, cosmic dust, theories of evolution. Sometimes I guessed she was making it up as she went along, but I'd be impressed anyway. Everything she said lodged in my mind, as if it were indisputable fact. Even now, things surface from time to time, and I realise it's all there, mingled with the memorised hymns, with Boyle's Law and the basics of topology, part of the seamless fabric of my schooldays, gathered up and put away, like one of those huge crazy-quilts my mother used to make from scraps of left-over material.

We would meet at weekends, in the nursery grounds, out by the old potting sheds. It was damp out there, in the shade; you could smell peat and mildew, and something else beyond the currant bushes and the viburnums, a dark, fenny smell, touched with spawn and duckweed – something ancient, almost primeval, lurking in the remnants of orange boxes and peat bags beyond the rotting doors. We'd sit there on Saturday afternoons, suspended in time, separated from the rest of the world by a fine membrane of must and warmth. Mostly, she would talk and I would listen. Sometimes we argued about films or music. She'd tell me I was a snob, because I didn't like Hollywood: she said art films were good, but that wasn't why I liked them – she said I liked them because they were art films. She used to annoy me some of the time, to be honest. But most of the time, she would talk about things that bothered her, like who

killed Kennedy, or what really happened to Marilyn Monroe. One day she started talking about Elvis, about how every fault was magnified in him because, for a short time, he had been perfect. It might not have mattered, if nobody had witnessed this perfection, but they had, and it had become a historical fact. She said the story of Elvis's life was like any other myth where the hero comes into being. Perfection can happen, but it can't last, because people don't want it to last. They want a crucifixion; they want the phoenix. They want the idea but they don't want the person. If Elvis had died before he went into films, they would have loved him for ever and unconditionally. But he didn't die. He lived and his perfection was corrupted. Whatever he did that wasn't perfect was seized upon with relish and disbelief by people who had never loved him anyway. She said fans didn't love their heroes, they just consumed them. She said anyone who had really loved Elvis would have helped him, by making him see that he was the phoenix, and he had to be burned. People think the phoenix story is about how everything that dies is reborn from its own ashes, but Lindy thought the real meaning was in the flames, not the ashes, not the rebirth, but the necessary burning.

I listened, but I didn't really understand what she meant. Elvis barely existed for me: I remembered seeing his films at matinees, when I was a kid; I had a vague recollection of contained grace, and a kind of beauty that seemed remote and aimless, like the beauty of the tigers at the zoo. I knew he'd died a couple of years before, but I couldn't remember when.

'There are people who think he's still alive,' she said.

'That always happens,' I told her. 'They said the same thing about James Dean.'

She gave me a disdainful look and shook her head.

'Elvis is different,' she said.

I didn't see how, but I didn't want to argue. When it came to stuff like that, Lindy knew what she knew; she had her

own system of beliefs and theories that were too beautiful to doubt.

‘He should never have gone into films,’ she continued. ‘John Lennon said Elvis died when he went into the army, but I don’t think that’s true. It was the films.’

She lit a cigarette and stared off into space. I already knew that look: the rapt gaze of someone who lived entirely in her own world, utterly self-contained, and quite unattainable, and I believe, even then, that I had a sense of what was going to happen. Maybe this is hindsight, but I don’t think so. It was subtle, and I couldn’t have pointed to any one thing, but something about her made me suspect a complicity with what happened later. It was the way she smoked, the way she talked, the way she was never still, never at rest.

‘What we have to do,’ she said after a while, ‘is redeem Elvis.’

I laughed.

‘And how are you going to do that?’ I asked.

‘By fire, of course.’ She turned to me and smiled. ‘Do you have a camera?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come round to my house next Saturday. Bring the camera. I’ll tell you about it then.’

‘Tell me now.’

She stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette and shook her head.

‘Wait,’ she said.

The following Saturday I went over to her house at ten o’clock in the morning. It was a changeable day, but the light was good. I’d bought a new film, and cleaned the camera. It was an expensive 35mm SLR that Dad had given me the previous Christmas.

Mrs Anderson opened the door.

‘Lindy’s expecting you,’ she said. ‘Go on up. It’s the first on the left.’

Her room was a mess. The floor was littered with sequins and beads, battered toys, pieces of clockwork, dolls’ heads, old apothecary’s bottles marked *Poison* or *Acid*. There was a pin-board above the bed, covered with photographs and stills of old-time Hollywood actresses: Hedy Lamarr, Joan Fontaine, Louise Brooks, Gloria Holden. The only picture that wasn’t a still from a film was the famous Vietnam shot, the one Eddie Adams took of a South Vietnamese general shooting a prisoner in the head. It was a page she’d torn from a magazine: the prisoner, a thin man in a check shirt, has his hands tied behind his back, and his face is twisted with fear; though he isn’t looking directly at the gun, he knows how close it is. I heard later that the picture was taken at the moment the weapon was fired, at the very moment the bullet entered his head.

The other wall was covered with drawings that she’d tacked up casually with a strip of sellotape; some were rough sketches, others were finely detailed, but they were all beautifully executed. They were also bizarre. A few showed scenes from old horror movies, but most were drawings of Elvis. The one I remember best showed him in his prime, in a black leather jacket, a sneer on his lips, his hair unruly. The face was beautiful, alive, arrogant – but under the jacket there was no body, only a set of ribs and a spine, and a white pelvis fading away into nothingness at the edge of the page. It’s hard to describe – it sounds like the morbid imaginings of a teenage girl but for me there was more, a surprising poignancy, a glimpse of vacuum. Lindy told me she’d made that drawing on the night Elvis died.

The effigy was sitting in an old leather armchair, next to her desk, dressed in a cream-coloured jacket and black jeans. I didn’t know then who it was, of course: the head was a blank – no face, no hair, just an old sack crammed

with straw. Except for the clothes, the figure she'd made looked more like a guy for Bonfire Night than anything else.

'What's this?' I asked.

Lindy smiled mysteriously and went to the bedside table. She took something out of a drawer and walked over to the dummy, keeping her back to me, so I couldn't see what she was doing.

'Finished,' she said.

The dummy had become Elvis. It was wearing one of those masks you could buy from joke shops, the kind that covered your whole head, and just had pinholes for the mouth and eyes. It looked quite realistic, I suppose, for a piece of moulded rubber.

'It's not that great,' Lindy said. 'But it doesn't matter. By the time we're taking the pictures, it'll look like real.'

I nodded, but I wasn't convinced. As far as I could see, it was as good a likeness as it was going to get.

Lindy's mother went shopping around eleven. We waited till she had gone, then we hauled the effigy through the house and out the back door. Or rather, I did. Lindy carried the camera. On the way, she ducked into the shed at the end of her garden, and emerged carrying a large red petrol can.

'We'll need this,' she said.

As we walked, she explained the plan. We would take Elvis over to the potting sheds, where no one would see. Lindy had found a stake out there, which we would use to support the effigy while it burned. When it caught fire, I had to start taking pictures, and I couldn't stop till she told me. I was pretty nervous. If somebody came, it would be difficult to explain what we were doing. They might think we were starting a real fire. Needless to say, I did all the carrying. Lindy walked on, a few paces ahead, talking non-stop, to keep me distracted, so I wouldn't chicken out.

'Did you know Elvis had a twin brother?'

I didn’t answer. I was holding the effigy round the waist, so the mask was a few inches from my face; every time I took a step, the legs banged against my knees and I had to keep stopping to get a better grip.

‘It’s true. His name was Jesse Garon. He was stillborn, I think. Or maybe he died soon after he was born. Elvis’s father put him in a shoebox and buried him in an unmarked grave, somewhere in the woods in Tennessee.’

She kept talking till we reached the potting sheds, then she found the stake and pushed it into the ground. She pulled some twine out of her jacket pocket and I helped her tie the effigy to the stake, so it was almost upright. The top half of the body slumped to one side, and she fussed with it for a while, till she got it straight. It didn’t look much like Elvis to me; it didn’t look like a person at all. Lindy had tucked the top of the mask into the collar of the jacket, but there was still a brown patch where the sacking showed through, and there was something less than life-size about the figure, a slackness that reminded me again of the guy at a bonfire. Still, Lindy seemed happy enough.

‘Is the camera ready?’ she asked.

I wound on the film and offered it to her, but she shook her head.

‘It’s your camera,’ she said. ‘You do it.’

She took a good look round and, when she was certain nobody had seen us, she splashed the effigy with petrol. For a moment it shivered, as if it was about to fall, then it burst into flames as Lindy tossed a match and leapt out of the way.

‘Go,’ she shouted.

I started taking the pictures. Seen through the lens, the burning figure looked more real, more like a person. Amid the smoke and flames, the mask became a face, and I moved in closer, as the body twisted and crumpled, trying to catch the image of burning flesh that was almost visible for a moment, before the material blistered and fizzled

away. It was incredible. It couldn’t have lasted more than a minute or two, but I really believed I had caught a glimpse of the real Elvis, the Hillbilly Cat, the Elvis Lindy wanted me to see.

‘All right,’ she said, as the body fell and started to burn out. ‘We’ve got enough pictures.’

I turned and looked at her. My face was hot and flushed from the heat of the fire, and I felt exhilarated. All of a sudden, I understood what we were doing. I understood everything. I looked up: small white clouds were drifting across the sky, but right above my head there was a gap, a patch of deep, mineral blue, like the colour of lapis lazuli when it is moistened and warmed by the breath. I felt dizzy. At that moment, there was no way of distinguishing between me and Lindy and this patch of sky. Everything was seamless. I looked at her.

‘This is amazing,’ I said.

She shook her head and smiled sadly.

‘Let’s have a cigarette,’ she said.

Memory is something mineral, a deposit that builds up over years. It has nothing to do with the past; it’s entirely a matter of what is wanted in the present. Yet I’d like to believe, in some objective way, that that was the happiest summer of my life. Burning Elvis had created a complicity between us; I felt we had shared something, that we were similar, bound by a common spirit. I started smoking, to keep her company. We would meet by the sheds: Lindy would bring a packet of Sovereigns, and we would lie on our backs, staring up at the sky, smoking and talking. I suppose I’d begun to think of her as my girlfriend, though neither of us had ever said or done anything to justify the assumption. I wanted to touch her; I wanted to kiss her face; I wanted to unbutton her blouse and stroke my finger lightly along the ridge of her collar bone. She would wear a short blue skirt with white polka dots. Her legs were golden; her thighs and

arms were covered with a soft silvery-blonde down that I ached to touch. But I never did. Maybe I knew she would refuse me: the only way I could keep alive my fantasy that we were virtual lovers was to stay behind an invisible line that she had somehow drawn between us, without a word or a gesture that I could recall.

One afternoon, towards the end of the holidays, we were out on the other side of the field, sitting in the lowest branches of a spreading maple tree. There was a pause in the conversation and I looked at her. It was the one time I came close to crossing the line, and Lindy must have read my mind, because she slipped to the ground suddenly, and looked up at me.

‘Do you know Kiwi Johnson?’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘Kiwi,’ she repeated. ‘Kiwi Johnson.’

I nodded slowly. I remembered Kiwi Johnson all right: he’d been in the fifth year when I was in lower school, and I didn’t like him. Nobody did. He was one of those boys you see in the corner of any playground, pretending he isn’t there. I could tell, just by looking at him, that he thought he was different from the others. He wasn’t excluded, he just didn’t want to join in. In games lessons, when the captains were choosing teams, he was always one of the last to be picked, not because he wasn’t any good, but because he resisted selection. Whenever a team captain looked in his direction, he would stare back coldly, as if he was daring the boy to choose him, and the captain would move on, taking Pig Lee, or Specky Aldrick, rather than face that malevolent gaze. It made people resent him. Usually, if a boy was picked towards the end, because he was fat or effeminate, or generally despised for no good reason, he would run into line quickly, grateful to be chosen at all. Those boys were always on the alert, ready to accept without protest their apportioned share of humiliation. They knew they were despised: they were always fussing, trying to appease

everyone at once, making silent promises with their eyes, to try harder, to be what was wanted. Kiwi Johnson stood apart from all that. He made it clear that he didn't want to join in – if it hadn't been for the teacher, he wouldn't even have bothered. Yet when he was forced to take part, he played with a cold, deliberate brutality that surprised everyone. It was a kind of challenge. In one football game, Mr Williams made him play forward, instead of his usual position, at left back. About halfway through the period, someone accidentally passed him the ball directly in front of the net: he paused a moment, looked at the opposing goalkeeper, a small, wiry boy called Manny Doyle, then he punted the ball straight at his head. It was a cold, wet day. Our year was out on the other field, about a hundred yards away, but we all saw Manny go down. Later, he said it was mostly his fault – he'd seen the ball coming, he just hadn't ducked in time. Kiwi didn't say anything, he only glanced round at Mr Williams, as if to say, *now look what you've made me do*.

I used to wonder how he got the name Kiwi. It wasn't a nickname: there was no affection in it. There was no real venom either, but it was still an expression of dislike, like some of the names we gave to teachers, and nobody used it to his face. Once, Des Coffey followed him around the playground, taunting him, and they were obliged to fight. People who remember nothing else from school can still picture that December afternoon, the week before the holidays. In those days, we had rules; there was an underlying code that prevented anyone going too far, so the damage was always more imagined than real. But this was one of those occasions when the rules might not hold, and everybody was excited. Nobody had ever seen Kiwi in a fight before, but most of us thought Des would win. He was in Kiwi's year, but he was much bigger, and a famous dirty fighter.

The two boys met outside the gates and fought for fifteen minutes in a drift of falling snow. Usually, when a fight