John Burnside: *history*

Part one

There’s a curious pattern in Burnside’s poem that is so insistent in can only have happened by design. Right from the get-go many of the phrases are arranged in patterns of two: The sand and the smell of gasoline; the tide ‘far out’ and ‘quail-gray’; the people ‘jogging’ or ‘stopping to watch’ and the planes; the planes that ‘cambered and turned’. The pattern is there in the nouns - sand, smell, people, planes - as well as in the verbs or verb phrases as well as in the adjectives. Not convinced? Okay, now you’ve asked for it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The news and the dread</td>
<td>The drift and tug</td>
<td>Captive and bright</td>
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<tr>
<td>The speaker and Lucas</td>
<td>Scarcely register,</td>
<td>Nerve and line</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shells and pebbles</td>
<td>scarcely apprehend</td>
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<td>Kinship or given states</td>
<td>Gazed upon and</td>
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<td>The world and our dreams</td>
<td>cherished</td>
<td></td>
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<td>The wind and the shore</td>
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<td>Gravity and light</td>
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<td>Distance and shapes</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Silts and tides</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Rose or petrol blue</td>
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<td>Jellyfish or anemone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light and weather</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Toddler and parent</td>
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</table>
There that’s proved it, I hope. And there will be more examples. Look, for instance, at the word ‘Today’. Having established this insistent pattern of twoness we might then wonder at its significance, particularly in relation to the poem’s title. Before we do that, we’ll just comment on another feature this systematic process foregrounds; how dominant nouns are in this poem, especially concrete ones. Action is comparatively scare - verbs are few on the ground and those present are reflective, not dynamic ones. This is a poem, then, composed of things – and those things are generally presented starkly, without the decoration or modification of adjectives.

Back to the significance of this pattern. As the relationship of the grand, abstract title to the specific concrete subtitle inidcates, this meditative, seemingly loosely structured poem sets small apparently insignificant details of personal history against the backgroup of world-changing global events, in particular the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The poem also has a double perspective; it is comprised of close observation of a particular place and all its distinct components, i.e. the poet’s gaze is turned outwards. But it is composed too of philosophical reflection, in which the poet makes his thinking the poem’s subject. World wide and personal events, outer and inner experience, innocent childish and adult perspectives, Burnside’s poem is constructed upon these antitheses.

**How does the poem’s form relate to its theme?**

The sense of movement created by the free verse form seems to embody the poet navigating his way between the binary poles of antitheses. He is navigating the space ‘lost between the world we own/ and what we dream
about’. The path is uncertain and he is unsure of his steps. Hence stanzaless lines shift about, starting and ending at different points. Some are very long and almost make it right the way across the page, others are much shorter; the shortest is just one word of five letters. The poem is also metreless. So no underpinning pattern appears to regulate its movement. It's as if the ground under the poet's feet is unstable, shifting, uncertain.

Sometimes the lineation suggests the in and out movement of waves on a shore:

I knelt down in the sand
with Lucas
gathering shells
and pebbles
finding evidence of life in all this
driftwork

But even the irregularity isn't stable: At other times, when the poem moves inwards into explicit thinking and reflection, the lineation falls into a more regular pattern. Lines resolve into fixed, more solid stanzas, as in the lines starting with 'at times I think...' and later on with 'Sometimes I am dizzy'.

Sentence structure adds to the fluidity of the poem's form and the sense of potential disconnection and fragmentation. The first elongated sentence, with its multiple clauses and pile up of phrases, for example, does not come to the end of its weaving, winding journey and its full stop until over half a page and 21 lines later. Indeed the whole poem is composed of only three stretched-out sentences. Between the isolated adverb of time that begins it – 'today' - and the rest of the sentence this word modifies 'I knelt down in the sand' there are, for example, 13 lines. In between these the reiteration of the word, 'today', followed by another long pause of blankness, makes it seem as if literally no time has elapsed since the first line. Looseness, potential fragmentation, hesitation, silence, are generated too through the use of these blank spaces ably aided by the punctuation. Look, for instance, at the number of hyphens
on the first page; there are two more of these uncertain, skittish marks here than there are full stops in the entire poem.

Unsurprisingly, in all this local unfixedness and the global turmoil it mirrors, the poet seeks out images of forces that prevent things from drifting entirely apart, stuff which connects things together securely: The kites are emphatically ‘plugged’ into the sky; bodies are ‘fixed and anchored’; water ‘tethers’ the people to gravity; the fish are ‘lodged’ in the tide. At other times the poet himself forges these connections, as in the lines:

\textbf{Snail shells, shreds of razorfish;}
\textbf{Smudges of weed and flesh on tideworn stone,}

Here a run of sonic devices, sibilance and assonance, enhanced by the way, syntactically the phrase ‘and flesh’ can be linked to smudges or to stone, re-enforces the shared lexical field. Diction and sounds lock together to form a whole.

Extracts from *The Art of Poetry*, volume 2:
The ordinary, seemingly stable world can seem suddenly more vulnerable and precious in the light of global disasters. Burnside’s poem encourages us to value, connect to and find meaning in what is immediately around us, the world we can touch and smell and hear and see and our relationships within it. Attend to the delicate, temporal ‘shifts of light/ and weather’ outside and inside ourselves, the poet suggests. He provides us with an enduring image of how to live in this world and ‘do not harm’ in the ‘toddler’, an innocent everyman figure, curious about the world around him. We are all, the poem, implies ‘sifting wood and dried weed from the sand’, ‘puzzled by the pattern’. All we can hope is like another child, Lucas, we can find meaning, ‘evidence of life’ in ‘all this driftwork’.

If that sounds like a conclusion, it was meant to. But it isn’t. Burnside’s poem doesn’t in fact end with the lingering image of the child, but with the parents. Parents are figures of experience, more conscious of the wider world around them and Big scale History surrounding their own histories. The final line of the poem is striking and unexpected because it ends with a single adjective ‘irredeemable’. Why do you think Burnside choose this one word rather than a synonym such as ‘irrevocable’ or ‘transitory’ or over the two word pattern we have seen so dominant throughout the poem? Clearly the poet wanted a word that carries the moral sense of sinful beyond salvation as well as the idea of being beyond cure or remedy. Recalling T.S.Elliot’s use of ‘unredeemable’ about time in Burnt Norton, ‘Irredeemable’ also contains the sense of time that cannot be recovered. Hence packed into this single word the essential twoness of the poem, its two narratives of personal and global History are
finally wielded together.

Crunch Time

I’ve already implied the poem can be crunched to a couple of key lines; the one about finding evidence of life in the driftwork and the final line. It’s a long poem to crunch, so I’m going to miss out a few lines:

IRREDEEMABLE.

A poem about identity and the interaction between the personal and public world, **History** could be compared with **To my Nine-Year-Old Self, Genetics** and to **Inheritance**. Although it’s not in the **Poems of the Decade** anthology, because it was written almost 150 years agoearlier, an interesting companion piece to Burnside’s poem would be **Dover Beach** by Matthew Arnold. I don’t think it’s possible to write a ‘beach’ poem in English without being aware of this famous predecessor and, intertextually, Burnside’s poem can be read as in dialogue with Arnold’s. As well as an end of the land/ start of the sea setting, the poems share a similarly pensive mood and Arnold also uses form to suggest the movement of waves, backwards and forwards. **How, though are they different?** Arnold’s poem laments the loss of the ‘bright girdle’ of religion biding the world together; **what does Burnside find that might take the place of this holding force?** Certainly there is a spiritual, quas-religious feel to Burnside’s poem – the poet kneels in the poem, he mentions a ‘book’ of
nature and he finishes with something like a creed, but, in the end, it’s a way of thinking and being in the world that is offered as hope.