

Goose Music

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ANDY BROWN & JOHN BURNSIDE



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'In dire necessity somebody might write another Iliad, or paint an "Angelus", but fashion a goose? . . . If, then, we can live without goose music, we may as well do away with stars, or sunsets, or Iliads. But the point is that we would be fools to do away with any of them.'

— ALDO LEOPOLD

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
PART ONE	
Goose Music	3
Some Notes on a Theory of Emergence	5
Nature Corner	10
Atavism	15
Insomnia	17
The Other Garden	18
Ganders in the Gardens	19
A Horse's Skull	20
On Hollow Moor	21
Eleven Gift Songs	23
Small Voices	36
Pine Trees at Five Ways	38
<i>Los ángeles mohosos</i>	39
Three Enquiries Concerning Angels	41
The Ice Pool Under the Church Tower	47
Prayer	48
Prayer / Why I am Happy to be in the City this Spring	49
Castor / Pollux	52
Fiat Nox	53
Janus—Li Po Sonnets	54
Orange	58
PART TWO	
Two Essays on the Folk Story	61
The Breaking of Waves	65
Persephone	76
Eurydice	78

Mules at Ystradginlais	80
Narcissus (Einzelgänger)	81

PART THREE

Poems of the Father	85
The Blue Hour	89
The Promise of Home	95
Homage to Henri Bergson	103
The Other Brother	108
Towards a Book of Common Prayer	115
On the Road to the Eye Hospital	129

<i>Dedications</i>	131
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Part One

the scratchings of voles,
the golden spin of minnows,
a group of roe deer silent through the woods

but, as you pull your cagoule
over head—

 in the moment
of that dark hiatus—

 she is gone,
the two geese up and running
over fresh water,

 ready for the sea—

miles to fly to feeding grounds
and hundreds more
to breeding grounds

 that spawned them,
across the great air masses,
this punishing travel,
to return and renew.

Some Notes on a Theory of Emergence

I

It starts before we see it:

coming inside from the garden, some February night,
wet snow fledging the walls and the idle

question that recurs, from time to time,
the one about birds, or frogs, or a year's worth of bees

cradled, somewhere,
in the crook of a shed, or a gable;

warm enough to harbour a beginning,
and softer than the voices that will come,

far in the wires
of this, or another, season,

still imperceptible, but all there is for now
of ripeness

and as urgent in itself

as any fruit: the glister of the seed
informing what it cancels, in a fall

that nothing can describe
until it happens.

II

Empty for miles, until
it found me, out on the plain,

and spilled its hidden freight
of light and quiver;

though how can we know that the wind
is silent till it comes across a shape

to keen against
—some animal, perhaps,

the musk ox stopped in its tracks
at the edge of a snowfall,

or something almost human in a drift
of moss and stone:

an echo in the land

becoming colour, texture, resonance;
the accident that gives itself a voice.

III

Forget the map;
forget the boundaries;

stand in the light
where willowseed blows through the wire

and listen :

 a pintailed duck
is calling, somewhere,
out along the fence

and somewhere else
the wind has taken shape:

a spill of poppies
sun-gold in the mist

and further
 on a hill-road white with stars

a man
becomes a flock of ptarmigan;

and every ptarmigan
becomes a man

IV

and here is the pattern, obeying a law
we forget:

 a winter's day in 1969;
frost on the pantry window; a father's voice

heading away from the house
where his children are sleeping

and

 suddenly
 a shadow in the self
foresees this moment: windfalls in the grass,

and someone else come out,
to taste the dark;

and this is what we still mistake
for time

—the river run; the phases of the moon;
a spill of petals folding into stone

that emptiness between the sound of rain
and something in the roof that shift and slides,

alive, for now,
 though neither bird nor beast,
but sea-shaped, salted, heavy as the tide.

v

Let me begin again in the powdered loam
I brushed aside to gather in a haul

of ants' eggs: nine years old,
a keeper of fish and secrets, I almost guessed

that everything was ordered by its own
momentum, as I rinsed away the sting

of formic acid, haunted by the maze
of angry bodies, patterns not quite seen

but felt, the way I felt the tug of things
at rest, or far at sea, lodestone and herring

tuned to the sway in the bone
that kept me whole.

Let me begin again,

just as I did that summer afternoon,
rain in the dust and the old pattern leaching away

pure revelation, like loss,
or the turn of the tide,

the hum in the bones of my wrist
and the itch in my fingers

promises still to be kept,
in an infinite world.

Nature Corner

'As writing, lyric is freed from the human clumsiness of speech, and in this freedom it is possible to imagine the voices of nature beyond the human.'

— DREW MILNE

I

Something from the classroom's edge
encroaches on us, as if on angels' wings,
fattening itself in our imaginations—
the promise of a metamorphosis
we long to share. The Cabbage-Whites
lay the neat tesserae of their eggs
beneath a scaffold of twigs and leaves.
Daily we observe and measure, sketch, record;
estimate how many eggs will hatch;
how many of the grubs may toughen up
impossible skins to leather cocoons,
glutted on greenery; their pupal pods
suspended by silk threads, each holding back
the secrets of a graceful transformation.

II

As martins slip out of a lazuli sky
alive with the play of migration, we thread
our way across the mud towards the byre,
your steps braiding with mine. The birds
return above a patchwork map of hills,
of rivers, deserts, coasts and plains,
to build mud nests beneath the eaves
and feed their growing brood, their wisps of need.

The martins scintillate the air to heat ripples.
Aerial artistes, they weave the cords that link
a gnu's back and a cow's. How can we wrest
their secrets from them; know where they are
in their bodies? Together, we watch them nest,
their arcs of flight vibrating in our fingers.

III

Bugling in flight, the greylags leave in V's—
two grey scarves trailing in the wind.
They run across the water; lift into the breeze—
'You have wings on your back. Wings!'

The geese hang by threads of their own making,
over scalloped fans of lakes until
they come to land in an *elsewhere*, bowing
to gravity, inexorably, like apples.

IV AS THE TIDE SUCKS OUT AT DAYBREAK

the splash and waft of washed-up kelp
reveals black rocks that fling slant edges high.

From our rug beside a radiant gorse
we hear the grating cackles of the shag roost;

great fulmars and tussock birds squabbling
on ledges, while pipits unwind their songs.

Through spray-haze the combers arrive,
over the rotten timbers of the vessel—

her engines failed, her punctured hull sunk—
in search of the treasures that hang like grapes,

bunched in blue on her sand-banked flanks:
the thrill of finding; the mystery of prizing open;

everybody focused, underneath the spell,
locked into the morning hunt for mussels.

V IN CONVERSATION

This is the season of rut. Low pitched whines
rise to high crescendos, falling grunts.
Along a wooded stream, a Sitka black-tailed deer
noses the white skin at his mate's behind.

From aardvark to zebra the tongues of the kingdom
are wagging. We have made friends with the trout
spawning in the late Spring melt of water
that swells the brawling streams.

On a slate ledge higher on the hillside,
a goat choir sings the praises of the mountains:
'A garden is good as a prayer.' Sometimes, isn't it
just like everything wants to stop and talk?

Atavism

When chestnuts bloom and gardens
are fragrant
 with lilacs,
your mind,
 filled with pictures
taken by your eyes,
 cannot forget
the frescoes of chance;
the incomplete mosaics of forever
that bring us here;
 the actions of earth
that move great rocks;
ancient fauna
 traversing land bridges,
their bones and spoor
 hardening
in reed beds
 and layers of silt.

You can almost hear the grass
growing;
 touching something
in the snake of the spine—
this atavistic urge to find a home;
a pattern in the accidents.
 Our prints
are not the only ones ever
to mark the riverbed and saltmarsh;
to find themselves
 preserved
 by falling ash;
to be set in concrete
 on the boulevard.