

AS English Literature

John Burnside
HISTORY

St Andrews, West Sands. September 2001

Today

as we flew the kites
- the sand spinning off in ribbons along the beach
and that gasoline smell from Leuchars gusting across
the golf links;

the tide far out
and quail-grey in the distance;

people
jogging, or stopping to watch
as the war planes cambered and turned
in the morning light –

today

- with the news in my mind, and the muffled dread
of what may come –

I knelt down in the sand
with Lucas
gathering shells
and pebbles
finding evidence of life in all this
driftwork:
snail shells; shreds of razorfish;
smudges of weed and flesh on tideworn stone.

At times I think what makes us who we are
is neither kinship nor our given states
but something lost between the world we own
and what we dream about behind the names
on days like this

our lines raised in the wind
our bodies fixed and anchored to the shore.

and though we are confined by property
what tethers us to gravity and light
has most to do with distance and the shapes
we find in water

reading from the book
of silt and tides
the rose or petrol blue
of jellyfish and sea anemone
combining with a child's
first nakedness.

Sometimes I am dizzy with the fear
of losing everything - the sea, the sky,

all living creatures, forests, estuaries:
we trade so much to know the virtual
we scarcely register the drift and tug
of other bodies,

scarcely apprehend
the moment as it happens: shifts of light
and weather

and the quiet, local forms
of history: the fish lodged in the tide
beyond the sands;

the long insomnia
of ornamental carp in public parks
captive and bright

and hung in their own
slow-burning

transitive gold;
jamjars of spawn

and sticklebacks
or goldfish carried home
from fairgrounds

to the hum of radio

but this is the problem: how to be alive
in all this gazed-upon and cherished world
and do no harm

a toddler on a beach
sifting wood and dried weed from the sand
and puzzled by the pattern on a shell

his parents on the dune slacks with a kite
plugged into the sky
all nerve and line

patient; afraid; but still, through everything,
attentive to the irredeemable.