

From the Other Side: John Burnside

"I was suffering from heart failure. Long story short, they thought I was going to die, told my wife to 'prepare for the worst'. In hospital, while I was 'on the other side', as it were, part of a poem came to me, out of nowhere (I have no memory of composing it)."

This is poet and novelist John Burnside's poetic exploration of his near-death experience following heart failure. Profoundly serious, and yet extremely trippy - he recalls bizarre hallucinations, after being rushed to hospital with breathing difficulties, which resembled William Burroughs' Naked Lunch.

This was followed by the realisation that he was dying. And in something John compares to an out-of-body experience, he watched his naked body as if it were a slab of meat viewed through a movie screen. Then an entirely different, deeply profound encounter after his heart stopped - an experience that was less religious and more akin to a psychedelic trip.

From his garden in Fife, two years on, John explains the impact of this near-death experience (NDE) on his life and work today. He reads part of the poem that came to him while recovering in hospital, from his recent collection Learning To Sleep. He shares a brand new work inspired by his NDE and anatomy lesson paintings, in addition to recalling beloved poems by Arthur Rimbaud and Emily Dickinson which have taken on new meaning.

Dr Penny Sartori also provides some medical context for John's experience. She is a senior lecturer in adult nursing at Swansea University and worked in intensive care for 17 years, where she carried out extensive research for a PHD on NDEs.

From Radio 4

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Because I Could Not Stop for Death performed by Susan McKeown and The Chanting House

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