

Jenny Browne
Work Sample/Poetry
Literary Arts

Sighing Fills the Air of Limbo

I wanted an unreasonable elegy for the future,
but it was time for breakfast. I wanted to draw

buffalo on the Best Western's faux limestone,
& hear their furred guts rumble back for us.

I wanted a man named Skinny to steer south
& not suffer, to hear him sing a little *Landslide*

like he does when he's alone. I wanted to know
what blood-warmed meat once paused and heaved

the clean bones I found half way down the canyon,
but *somebody ate somebody* was as far as I got.

I wanted the green glass of that distant city
to smell me on its chest. I wanted both

great armies to follow the flight paths
of migrating cranes. I wanted to be moved

but my new boots lit small fires upon my feet.
I wanted to replace the gold-plated Ganesh

in the lobby, even if it would be stolen again,
tossed off the bridge where the fish-eyed children

gathered to debate their passwords. I wanted
to change my tongue, but I just watched

the woman who daily filled the free buffet
with soft bacon & cinnamon rolls as she

shoved another sack of sweet red juice
inside the machine that glows all night.

Texas, Being

where blind catfish cruise
limestone caverns

from deeper we drink
as a man sweets tea

with a knife, stirring
all the way down

border fires making
breathing a geography

mountain cedar
floating fevers,

bones in the road
sun-bleached

possum grin just missing
the curb where she

like all the modern girls
paused to consider

her inventory of elsewheres
because we can

drive ten hours and some
how still be here

Not Our Sea

Disaster changes use of word.
-Global Language Monitor

Musicians produce sonic ones, and Wall Street analysts foresee
tsunamis of bad earnings, while Japanese kitchens roll sesame.

A word stitched in blue thread and pressed flat
to sacrum, bone once believed to rise us from dead.

So where's the baby, her smiling face stapled to trees
across Sri Lanka: *10 months, 1 small teeth, beneath?*

Swallowed whole with the rest of the fisherman's words,
leaving just *This is not our sea*. Rise and fall of a word

that sounds close to you not me, saying *his body like oil*
and then I can't see.

Taking photographs, I once found the best
angle so deck rail erased horizon line,

and sea became sky, and I'm sorry
for ever thinking it beautiful.

As in pleasing to the eye.
As my husband asking why

my pictures always have so much sea and sky.
I should really try to get a person in there.

To Have Considered the Last of the Summer Mackerel

arriving with raw insides knifed from spine and re-arranged,
bite-sized, between the fish's own head and tail, all balanced
on a cloud of shaved daikon, as symbolic of the presentation
of self implies an inner life similarly displayed for strangers

and lovers alike to choose the tender parts, touching them
to a puddle of soy sauce followed by fibrous clumps of
fresh ginger and slivered scallion, but to have considered this
particular mackerel as *like us*, and thus hopeless, forgets

how lucky it can feel to have already grown desperate
and driven fast from the new therapist's office, parking
on hot soft asphalt, walking through hot soft wind
into the Tokyo Inn and there been greeted by the stunned

guns of air conditioning and led to a low table in back,
and listen; that young couple at the next table have just
returned from their honeymoon and are eating tempura
with the girl's pale and sweet parents. The whole family

will visit the planetarium after this, innocently staring up
at a preview of tomorrow's sky, a lump in the mother's
left breast mushrooming in the dark, the father's freckled
skin ticking toward rapid metastases. And that girl can't

yet answer what the best part of her trip was, not that
her slender neck doesn't redden with it, but because
she hasn't discovered how the best parts eventually
point across the table at the worst, as the hook lip

of the big dipper points towards the north star,
one saying *you always*, the other *you never*.
Nights like these, when stars all start to look
the same, mackerel gray and slow flickering,

as an index finger hovers above the violently spun
globe, pressing down on this particular place
in memory as one presses the fish's flesh, wondering,
just how long since we've seen the ocean.

Melanoma

Pull over again and pretend to grow
as that cloudbank shouts *try me*,
as tiny red spiders fall from the trees.
In the far pasture a man seeds his own
hands with smoke. I play Bach to forget
my father's fingertips blackening
as the last morning burned.
Years in the mirror he buttoned
each day a white shirt then flexed,
fake shaking from his own strength.
From here you can almost smell
the horses getting warm.
A Palomino eating herself lame
does not pity the fallen apricots
buzzing in the Saint Augustine.
Even the wasp dragging a wolf
spider across the road knows we need
more time to be born, smeared in our
own white grease and tar, more time
with our house on fire my god
Bach like hot wind suggesting
I make a rule against suggesting
what the good part of any sadness is
too soon. The story we tell
ourselves about air begins
people can change but we don't
die from the truth after all.
The sun still hurts and I make
the hard sound a car makes
turning over when it has been
all this time running.

Not the Wedding Poem

The other bridesmaid and me, already hung over
and eating gummy banana bread, talked mostly
about war, infrared light & the danger
of trauma becoming a kind of currency
while the Vietnamese women at our feet raised
their eyebrows, then reached for the industrial
strength callous remover that looks
more like a cheese grater. The poem
I later read to the ragged circle we made
on the beach at St. Pete beach described
climbing a palm tree at sunset. No crime,
even if the tree I imagine and the tree they see
will never be the same tree. It's hard to tell
whether the crash survivable memory units
recovered from the black box chilling
at the bottom of the sea supply the tonic
for human love, or its proof. Not to get all
sentimental here, as *crash survivable memory unit*
really is the technical term and I still hoped
to give them one, words already broken
as a levee, burned & returned shiny,
smooth and unpredictable as the low fetch
of air that comes after the storm, spiraling
inward then rising up early as the bride's
junkie sister sweeping the porch steps clean
again because she is really fucking trying here.

Luck

Always walked this close between the rows.
Always smoked so many seeds.

You will find yourself dragging
a live rabbit

by one foot, the other kick-kicking.

Later, I tried a smaller size.

There was a time when only beggars
went bareheaded.

Brief as corn, as silk.

It made me think of Sappho saying *tomorrow*
you had better use your soft hands.

Nothing I have known ever seemed real
until I touched you with it.

The People Who Feel No Pain

I let our daughter read a news story about one
who walked months
 on a broken pelvis before she noticed it
crunching inside her like dry leaves.

and I can hear L. now
 practicing in the kitchen, holding her hands
under water
hot as she can stand it,
singing softly: *I don't care I don't care I don't care.*

When asked to define happiness half the room will
describe a quality of light, the sky required to feel right.

For a while we tried
shooting the wolves from above, the removal
 of each possible attack before it happened,
but soon enough deer forgot what they were, grew fearless
 and gnawed the aspen sprouts clean to the ground.

Last night a man paused on the ridge of my hip and stayed there,
 making me ask

for his mouth.

The other half of the room recalls learning something
 about where to build the fire

so it doesn't fill the cave with smoke.

Down in the city park someone has already tagged which trees get to stay.
Some night our daughter will want nothing more

than another's teeth in her back; in the far city, in the torn booth,
 long after last call she is saying

I really like your politics,

meaning *I want to lick your face.*

Little girl, little wolf.

The blade of the earthmover, how it
scrapes and shudders, scrapes and scrapes.

Late Fermata

and when the empty fifth of Smirnoff is again
launched from behind Jorge's high tin fence,
his garage band's fuel tank hovering

in sulfur glow, it recalls those brand new
days which seemed all sleepless night
and sounded mostly of ambulances

or applause and both woke the baby
and when I finally gave up on time
as a reliable measure of time

it was because the job of a minor chord
is to make the other notes look down
for a moment and maybe even miss

the season stuck inside watching fireworks
on TV while raccoons hissed like broken
noise machines in the trees and so tonight

with my self swollen soft as before
but in wholly different locations I can
almost believe that sky was rehearsing

for this one last shattering performance
and so lets give it up for Jorge, still holding
each note several measures longer

than expected, as if you do not live
in fear of the mountains of Spain
over which you have yet to fly.

The Impersonal You

with that fat blade of grass pressed between your thumbs, whistling
as if your life depended on it. You

who carried three ideas up into the aspen stand and kept forgetting two of them.

What remained were faces of Saudi children who'd survived
the wedding tent fire. They arrived in Galveston

wrapped in loose white bark, black eyes darting.

You see them each time the aspen shiver.

Touching one now, a scold of blue jays lifts.

You know cheat grass, sweet mallow, the cough pellet a magpie leaves.
You know which wood burns fast and hot.
You who were supposed to teach them your words

for birthday, terror, milk.

Your life never depended on it.

One of their names meant fragrant in Arabic. The god of wind
traveling in a southwest direction was by the Greeks called Lips.

You might have said they were all eyes.

Exactly, repeat the aspens, *exactly*.

Nine Miles Outside Comfort, Texas

Not cold enough yet
to freeze, but nearly

numb fingers by the time
I finish pumping

the cheapest gas,
wishing I felt more

when you touched me.
Wet trees and idling trucks,

a whole shelf of expired
pain relievers in back

and behind that the game
where you pay a hook

to drop grasping for
the tail of some bright

half-buried animal.
We keep trying

but I've never
seen anyone leave

this county with much
but stone fruit or ash

on their hands.

Boom

-Midland, Texas

In these grassless
pastures a *band*

the one who *pigs*
the pipelines clean.

Big Bear is a hitch
and *fish* the term for

what gets dropped
down the bore.

Here, horses of crude,
your heaven wheezes.

In the bar that boy
with Nashville teeth

sings all the money
back to sleep.

Asking the Glacier for Forgiveness

These folded maps show
where land and sea

once touched painlessly.
Maybe ice can explain

everything but why
the brightness hasn't

changed much
since you last woke me

with only your cleaving.
Standard practice here

to travel in pairs,
but what's standard

practice after where
my hands have cared?

I did not come by machine.
I did not come for swallows

of dead air trapped far
below black snow.

I came to put down
my big knife and eat

to know nothing
but the small country

of skin your beard
never quite reached.

Pastoral (*The First Ship*)

Joshua Shaw, American, 1840

For the painter who pinked the sky with certainty,
the sails remain slack on the horizon, smaller than
a native's hand, raised in the way that means both
bello and *no*, thanks but I'd rather not sign up

for mouthfuls of microbes and ammunition just yet.
By now weevils web the wheat, the young sailor's gums
long gone to sponge, his cough grating like a thousand
boot heels in the sand. In his diaries, Columbus repeats

*...marvelous, marvelous... I have taken possession, and I was
not contradicted.* Scooting closer to the fire
to the frame, to the name, impossible to say

contradict when there is no word yet for ship,
no idea called real estate *...todo esto, todo esto...*
all this, all this—yours to forget.

Pastoral (*High Lonesome*)

We the two-legged never
expect what can happen
will ever to us, so I'm happy
reading Virgil aloud
in thin air and fine
juniper shadows

when Liz stumbles, coughs
and pukes hard off the ridge.
*And the river spellbound stood
still listening.* And the sun
that had been all afternoon
joking of goats soon flexed

and cursed. My book jacket
insists Ferry's translations
bring "a vigorous edge
of reality" to the ancients,
but nothing of what
every apple eventually

becomes inside us, a sign
for how in love
the shepherds of blood remain
with oxygen, translating it
cell by cell
into amble and thought.

When did the rocks
over which we trip begin
to grow up? I still
carry us down and down
past blind elk bones
and all the tired bees.

