

Poems by Fiona Benson

Still Life With Red Herrings

Paris, and you spend too much time with the whores,
trailing them in bars, able to afford only the meanest touch
in the bleak back alley, in the freezing yard.

You hear they finger each other in the dark,
use their tongues, raise sounds that are low and rough
and utterly ungovernable.

One day you wake – phlegm in your throat,
the shakes – and paint these parched and stinking fish;
here's all you think you know of whores –

the labial gleam of scales, their gills' slashed silk, their lice.
I'm bored with your disgust Vincent, Proust –
I've seen the way you look at men,

besides, wouldn't you rather be a woman
raising herself to another woman's lips
like this, like this?

Pear Tree in Blossom

This week you paint the slender little pear tree –
or *poirier blanc*, as I must learn to say –
in a mania for orchards. You bind your hands
to keep them warm and peg your easel down
in the rude mistral, but we're striking clear of winter,
taking early mouthfuls of sharp, bright air
and your blood runs clean. Nothing to do but paint
then sleep, cold as a saint in your hostel bed.

I wonder now how long you'll keep this up –
not the abstinence exactly, but the work –
tree after tree after tree, your dozen orchards blazing,
as if you'd nail down spring; and if you'll stay
to walk down pear tree avenues at dusk
pear in your mouth, your mouth sweet to kiss,
your sticky beard... Christ. I never thought I'd beg.
No matter. Here is your *poirier blanc*,
its blossom shining in the dark yard;
here, whatever sorrow waits for us, is hope.

Starry Night

you're done with your painting but still
the stars won't keep to their spheres
and the moon blurs

and the black tips of the cypress
and the steel-blue tip of the spire
stir and stir

you're drawn between Catherine Wheel and scourge –
the stars' ecstatic fires –
to the flood

a vertiginous dark which is never
done with you, old pal,
oh it would love you in its weir pond
its drowning well

Portrait with a Bandaged Ear

You show up at my door weeping, exhausted,
a rag tied under your chin like a corpse,
mumbling *cherie, cherie*. I draw you a bath,
soak your dirty underclothes, heat soup.
You sit by the fire in my mother's old housecoat
and doze. When you wake you've turned.
You tell me I stink, open every window to the wind,
throw water all over the bed as if our old love
burned, shout *whore, whore, whore* as you leave.

You show up at my door, half-cut but lucid,
your right ear healed to pearly pink buds,
the naked hole in your head flecked with wax.
You eat stew right out of the pan and keep me informed:
mannequins talk filth, they are hungry and bored,
they would like to be saved; birds ventriloquise the damned,
sins that make you muffle your head and shake.
You say you'd like to be well. You shove bread
in your pockets for later and walk back into the cold.

You show up at my door. The veins stand out
on your temples, your nose is pinched and thin.
Angels have voices that spin and shine
and must be listened to side-on; these window-box

geraniums, for instance, spilling crimson petals
on the road, are a counsel for bloodletting, leeches –
you'll interpret their signs for the world. Oh you choose them
over me then come stumbling home, three toes
lost to frostbite, a crust of blood on your upper lip

and I let you in and I let you in and I let you in –
remember the long afternoons of our youth
spent wrapped in the covers as if night would never come,
how fierce you were and clear, back then.
Now I find you stirring in the chamber pot for signs,
or stood in the kitchen, your bare blue limbs shining,
looking for knives. *Cherie, cherie*, we're running
out of grace. Men will come and ask me to confirm
your name. I want you strong and well. Please stay.

Exercise Yard

They circle the walls of this high-walled yard *en masse*.

Each man hauls the devil at his back,
they're that tight-stacked, like dominoes or cards.

Shadows lead from the sole of each boot
like the hands of a clock,

dialled in some odd, lost orbit
round a bitter, grieving planet.

Your face is accented, apart.

You're committed to the thought that there's no way out.

Sunlight is a high weak stain,
utterly unreachable.

A tubercular winter breathes down your neck.

You take your time.

You've everything to regret.

Poems by Jane McKie

The Boy Who Found Fear

Boy made of sand
carries a black swan underarm
to jimmy windows, lift
all those bloody jewels
that wink in the small hours like digital clocks.
And as he crosses thresholds, lintels,
the grains of him unpick steadily
through the night,
ticking seconds, minutes
till he's caught.

The man and his wife
get home. There he is
black feathers on the floor,
pile of sand so white
it makes them remember their gold
coast honeymoon and weep.
The thieving boy, they sweep him up
into a pan, chuck him out.
He can't speak to tell them: *Stop,*
I'm sorry. A real boy at last.

I Almost Pronounce You

His face a full pink cloud.
Her face a thin fawn's skull.

Under crow-whipped blossoms
trees cherrying the pool

with confetti long drinks
sit bottoming their spirits,

dysphoric Kir Royals.
The marquee's stressed fabric,

a ruckle at her back
nothing must tear today

even soupy petals.
Straggles of onlookers

are ushered across lawns
to bear witness to strength.

Council Tractor Blocks the Road

There is a spray of grass from the giant mower
trundling ahead at twenty miles an hour.

The confetti of August on my windscreen, blades
green, blades sere. A joyous exhalation and a massacre.

Mirrors in the Pyrenees

I

The placenta of a lamb.
I almost step in it. The smell of the caul
catches, something long-dead
but still shining.

II

Griffon vultures. They wheel, send an image
of embers to the backs of my eyes.

III

A cloud of butterflies,
wings freckled with peppercorns.
They staple themselves to my hands and face
to lick the salt.

IV

A stand of irises, startling blue,
laid out on the slope. Dressed simply
for a mountain funeral.

V

Iron crosses at intervals along the pass.
I kneel because kneeling
is better than walking by.

VI

A slab of rock like an altar.
It shelters buds I can't identify,
pink stalks and low gluey leaves
like extended hands.

VII

A woman walking in the opposite direction,
red hair, the voice of a cough. She tells me
jokes in French. I realise I haven't spoken
for over a week. *My husband is behind,*
she says. *Typical man.*
I continue but don't meet anyone.

VIII

My wristwatch. Time falls from it
in black dashes, ellipses.

IX

A tiny lake dwarfed by pinnacles,
The Ibón d'Ansabère according to my map.
From a distance an emerald drop of ocean
lodged miles above sea level.
As I stride down and into it
the cold burns, warns me that liquid
can solidify. It mimics then inverts the sky.

X

The shape of my body in the lake,
distorted.

XI

The sun as it crawls
out of smallness, intensity. It readies itself to go.

XII

Descending cloud, without sound
or taste. It looks like smoke,
drifts over, rubbing me out.
The sunset a smudged red line.

XIII

The moon, never the same twice.
The stars ferocious, even in summer.

XIV

Arrows of scattered pine,
catalysts of the keenest silence.
Their grizzly branches are so hale
after the peaks, reminding me
of lungs recovered from pneumonia.
I breathe with them,
allow their delicate piercing
to usher me on.

Sunrise Over Lunan Bay

The audible clink inside a bulb
as it ceases to fire.

Glass egg. It's always a performance,
a morning like this, opals in the east
followed by a swarm of rain.

I eat a wet baguette on the beach.

Last night's wine dies in me,
last night's watered-down talk.

The sun struggles to get up. I applaud
the effort. My knuckles are raw

from forgetting to pack gloves.

When I have ideas they often stall like this
with an apology, an audible clink above
the waves, something small
ceasing to fire.

Poems by Abigail Parry

The Knife Game

Thumb

A narrow time: one summer long,
If that. Old enough to know

That we're no longer children, though
We've not yet grown into

The high, clean mountain air
Of common sense, where games like this

Would make us wince.
There are no rules as such. You spread your hand

And push the fingers wide as fingers go.
The blade stands by your thumb. You start off slow.

Index

The kitchen winces taut. There's nothing
But the pert
Tut tut of steel in wood.

The trick's to start off slow,
Precise, telic. Plot
Each secant line and then return it home.

Middle

The trick's to keep it low:
Skimming knuckle skin, out
And in, and in
 and out,
 Again.

Again.
A wicked tat, a quickening refrain,
A picked-up stitch, a knitting machine,
 A pat-a-cake,

A tic-tac-toe
That zeroes
On an
O

Ring

The trick is not to yelp.
A wince is fine, a grit, and you can let

Your open mouth bite on that silent O.

But O – that sharp, expected
Quick surprise -

And O - our rusty prints, the sticky
Salt-and-iron taste of yours and mine.

Little

And the next day, and the next,
That queasy ache -

Split nail, split skin,
Slit cuticle, two dozen little nicks.

I eat my meals in forkfuls. My left hand -
Inert, potato-eyed - lies in my lap.

But if I wince it to a fist, it's there -
The drub of blood at every scabbing point;

Two dozen hidden doors. Two dozen mouths.
They open on a secret: mine and yours.

Knife

Unluckiest of gifts, it severs ties
Between giver and receiver. By September

You're getting served in bars,
And I've been packed off to different school.

A giddy vertex, that – the point
We set an angle on divergent lives:

Already, you know how to make a boy
Do anything you want a boy to do. Already, I

Know better than to play with girls like you.

The fuss you made about your wedding veil

When thin enough, it's called *illusion*

Which will always mean to me

Claude Rains, in 1933,

Hurling his nose at the gathered crowd.

The villagers look on dumbly (as do I

From several decades down the line

One rainy Sunday afternoon).

The landlady, screwed up into her bun,

Shrieks her famous shriek. Off come the goggles,

Off, in furious rounds,

The wound-round bandage covering no wounds,

No face at all. The bobby's first to speak.

Look, he says.

He's all eaten away. A horrid phrase

And one I never could dislodge -

Not when the credits rolled, or when I learned

About mattes and velvet screens, and Rains

Fussing, claustrophobic in his suit.

Afraid of what?

Perhaps to be the first,

When the dailies ran, and to a wondered hush,

To see himself winked out

Before the eyes of the gathered crew, and by

The ruthless magic of a spectacular age.

Seeing that,

I think I might have made a certain fuss

About my being there, too.

Aquarium

I stitched jellyfish from a shower curtain, cobbled
A seahorse from eggboxes. What a wheeze, to mould sardines

From a sardine tin, and smash
A kaleidoscope for its ritzy bits

(It's a handful of hard phosphorescence
Clittering like rice in the half-open hand).

These things are reassuring. I have no heart
For the organic – its liquid frightens me.

All that slip and spill, the glissandos
And elastic vectors, mad like mercury –

The soul sucked from the tissue,
Or sneaking between two cells like a cheap trick

Seems cheap when you don't know how it's done,
The moving moment sliding up its scale. Aquarium

Has too many vowels, slipping and spilling
One into the other in its calm cool room

Of intractable gerunds.
Being's a messy business.

Give me the curt chirrup
Of scissors in card, or plastic's bright

Simple consonants. Loveliest of all,
The plane shape of a glass pane, transparent.

You've got to have boundaries.
You know where you are

With a good straight line, a well-protracted angle.
Or where you were, at least.

Invitation

Two names, coy, in their
soon-to-be-incised asymmetry.

A few polite refrains, a time and date,
a charming sounding village in the Lakes

and that is all. On the back,
nothing.

Slim and clean
as the sympathetic smile

that ends your career – a surgeon's tool -
and the thin, cool certainty that this is all

anyone wants, really – a blank sheet
and the now-you-know-better to write with.

Poems by Chris Preddie

Misshapen

Misshapen pines and firs
are thinned
on Meal Hill, as the Emperor Taizu thinned
his Chinese pines, his civil service.

The servant pine-needles
sing aloud, though wind-flagged trees are examined, failed
and in all their imperfections felled.
They need us less.

Misshapen firs and pines,
tree-nymphs to themselves, sing to the Emperor Song Taizu,
Great Ancestor. Not one repines

as we repine on Meal Hill. What we start from
is their sylvan separateness from us, that we've to use
to make for ourselves some shape or form.

Itineranti

Midway and more, ebreo e musicante,
Jew and musician, I bear a shouldered viol;
I am the East-West vagrant, viandante,

making a music (gigue) that will avail.
We shall be painted on an umber ground
for a ground bass, a brown on which we travail

all Europe. The pink sky is a dancing ground
(chaconne) of suns and halfmoons. An onion dome
turns in the distance, Christ-go-Mary-go-round

on a red sun-copied plain. To play for a dime
makes shape and order. Merely to walk (andante)
is belief that peace shall come, at random.

I am the Miriam itinerante,
Miriam-go-round. I bend into the wind
as the bass viol or cello concertante

bends to the player. I hold a baby, wound
in mummy white, curved as the halfmoons curve
over my shoulder. Midway, you never warned me,

Jew musician, how each place ever recurs,
old Troy, the roads Alexander rode,
where Charlemagne sleeps. I have seen the oxbow curves

of the Somme like hoops go round. I wear rosered
for the rosy halfmoon. Ebraica e migrante,
I am the curve of kindness on our road.

I am the baby, halfmoon shape,
half moon, poised on a hip, on a hope
of peace. Bebè, bambina-go-round,
I am carried as an ayre above the ground,
over the heaps of history. I am Astyanax
thrown from the wall of Troy. On Kristallnacht
I broke like a shopfront. In Sarajevo
I starved in a cellar. Sorrow-I-Have,
go round, go round like a hoop or a hope.
So said the baby, halfmoon shape.

Jacqueline reading

How your reading figure draws to mind
a curve at your back, angles
at your midriff, hips and elbows, an equilateral triangle
under your knees, the slope of your lap
and the ever continuing line of the thinking mind.
Jacqueline reclining, how every tangent and loop of you
is drawn to your book, a book on
illhumoured humans, matter I'd turn the abstract curve of your back on.

Goodhumoured hens I sing, seven Rhode Island
reds, triangular forms
that tip and tilt at grains on Charity Farm.
No – not hens, not even Carola's
that caroller of hens, or Emily's seven highland
henriettas – I sing of a beautiful construct, Euler's
equation, I sing like a swain
his sonnet, how e to the i pi is equal to minus one.

Let Euler's e be the base of the infinite exponential
curve of your back; let i ,
that unit we barely imagine, be you, though I
barely imagine your complex plane;
let pi and I be constant, though I'm not transcendental.
How your inclining figure, like Euclid, would explain
we too may touch the abstract,
make in our humours an artefact, a sign of the absolute to which we are attracted.

Halfgod

No, not such a no-use burden on the earth –
rather, the earth

bears you up on her body-curve. Unburdened and upheld,
with all your anger exhaled,

mindful
how every organ of your body, even the full mind,

is safekept in the bone-cove or safehold
of the body – you have already with every breath, inhaled

force
for the outcome you wish to enforce.

The earth herself in her passage will heel over
and turn on her heel

even from you, halfgod and great runner. Whatever closes
the doors of sense and art and love, discloses

the door that lets you into the afterlife.
Human after all,

there you will meet the singers of Troy, from the first
who sang your anger, to Michael the shanachy of Belfast,

there on the machair of the blest, inheld
like sea-marram heeled in.

Sarah

Sarah rodeo-rides (yippee) on her farm quadbike
instead of the Holme white horse. 'No longer a bareback kid

or the White Goddess or bare Godiva,
I'm an ATV diva.

A horse may become a chalky hill figure,
court-huntswomen will ride in Dior shades or fragrances by Hilfiger,

but I give you a quadbike for a sign.
Though utile as a ute, let it signify

the making of shapes
with its trailered load, or its own track and trail, or driven sheep,

any artefacture or forming. The bale of haylage
that I bring by horsepower and haulage

is a sign of all I bring to bear
against those impositions I used to bear.'

Poems by Anthony Rowland

The Siege of Minorca

Europe ripples around this island
with Egyptian vultures, patient as the siege
of Fort Sant Felip, where I, John Murray –
our future as thin as Minorcan garrigue –
muster Lepanto and Xorigeur gin.
After Canavall and Canavant factions in Maó,
the road was paved with Kane's wine and seed
until the lynching of Admiral Byng
pour encourager les autres. Now the red globe
is a bleb on cannon exits to the sea
and our former deep water anchorage.

The stone curlew's reptilian eye catches
and holm oak, dwarf palm and carob
withhold their sap. My dream fevers
are of *sepia*, *fresas* and *gambas*
where anchovies torture the headland.
The bee-eater bubbles its pruuk
among barrack graves open from dawn 'til dusk.
The Tramuntana buffets with spicy wind
as clouds patch our mud. Nights draw meteorites.
Dim torches cast my death in momentary snow.

Libya

Economies brake on the crude prices,
the complicity of Libyan oil:
meet me at the reception of the water point,
the pump kid fuelled with Masarati dreams
where clouds form like afterthoughts above the logs,
coal and petroleum spirit. The office,
spick as a PIN, attends your balance and rewards.
Tubes anticipate the wireless pumps:
the nozzle pipe sucks air to a vacuum
before the clip click, fills with the corpses
of fossils compressed with mud and sun
then heated and cracked in refineries
to grades of kerosene and diesel pumped
for invisible trucks that fuel the night.

Liberty Street

Macey's citified sprinklers cool models
working bikinis for your future jeans
while hawkers flog disaster off Broadway
with bites of images consuming the event
where the past is sky and prime estate:
these memorials' signature pools
are now clearly visible but do
not bring soil, cell cultures or snails
into Liberty Street. KERB YOUR DOG.
Hardhats snapple in annuated footprints.

No bushel experience here: the Staten lights
recede the ferry with its wake gulls past
Kioshk, Pagganck and Little Oyster
to an Island scrap-yard where the towers end
in a transferred zero of melted steel
and workers' tears. The bridge cinches the Heights.
In Bodies, full-on organs are preserved
in disturbing Chinese polymer-nerves.
Corporate headquarters shadow walkers
and Wall Street stiffens its Buttonwood lip.

Libeskind's wedge of light may yet not flood
pieces of high-heel shoes, a pair of metal,
as clear as the night is long. Span
the cables that spider the lattice to Ambrose
and Peking piers, the handshake
of Brooklyn. WE KNOW IT'S CALLED RUSH HOUR
but it is unlawful to cross the solid line
into understanding under NO STANDING.
Uptown, a trio of bald blue clowns
stretches the limits of performance art.

The Natural History of Cockroaches

Jul 9th, 1755

Gleads kite the Saxon meers and marching hoopoes breed
but streams yield nothing but bull's head or miller's thumb;
the teams of ducks, widgeons, and multitudes of teal;
owls like dogs that hide what they cannot eat.
Three gross-beaks in my fields in the dead season,
shot with my dreams of swallows on the Isle of Wight
instead of cock snipes piping and humming to seed.
I have had yet no opportunity of procuring mice.

Aug 1st, 1759

I pass the trappers and thrusters with loaded corves:
I had rather look than go in pulpits. I write
rain, ecstatic as a solo. The hood-mould
shows water on the bulwark's central mullion
but the covert of eminence is truly beech,
most lovely of forest trees: glossy, pendulous,
beyond unmellow clay and crumbling black malm.
It seems the bees do not resent my large speaking trumpet.

Jul 14th, 1789

The Saxon's wolf-month: the floor sweats in wet weather
and when the lavants flood, corn will be expensive.
The blattae were almost subdued with fly-water,
surviving for weeks without heads. Tubbed and pickled
a fat porker, then culled some scummings for rushes.
Parties of ousels canton on the Sussex downs
and the goat-sucker or churn-owl jarrs on a bough
while the Bastille storms into history and Selbourne.

Poems by Emily Wills

The Breaker

doesn't even notice your flailing weedy
skinbag of a self – it rips you off

all upside, flat-earth, beach-and-back-combed
notions of being grounded, vertical

or weighty. You might as well be bladderwrack,
or wreck or whiteboned cuttlefish,

mere plankton in the rough of surge and scour.
No second skin, just membrane separates

these two salt fluids, its and yours. The watery roar's
imagined – more of a sea-deep holy distance

plugs your unearthed ears. You're flotsam,
wastage, wipeout in this riptide suck

and undertow, this vertigo dull green and white
of somersaulting light. You wish for fins and fronds you pray

for gills, as air leaks from your useless lungs you crave
a liquid oxygen, a gush a froth in passages

fine-tuned to breath, in fleshy cavities all suck
and gasp. With eyelids mussel-clamped, you watch

your emptied limpet shell of an attempt cast up, the surf
receding on this grey particulate shore.

Rehab

When I learned that the arctic woolly bear caterpillar
survives its excruciating habitat

by a lifetime of alternately binging and freezing
I thought of you

how each time the blood and guts ice up
before the inevitable heartbreak
pause—

then resurrection
into another gifted summer
barely enough to cram in all that sweetness

before everything predictably
repeats

until, so many times distilled, you too
might spin some thread of yourself
into a tight corner, chew your way out

and fly, over the thousand waterfalls
over the sunlit frost.

Knots

followed my *Homemaker* badge, and Sharon's *Hostess*,
long before *Commonwealth Knowledge*,
a tentative half-hitch into Swallows-and-Amazons
in our creasy blues, those useful ties
bandaging our necks. Unlikely to flag up
anything but laundry, we could still daydream
a hitch of sailors, as we hunched,
chafed and unravelling, miles inland.

True loves, clinch knots, we were hookline
sinker, sheepshanked, monkey-fisted, tussling
the reverse-eight-noose – only to be used,
our Leader said, for yoyos. But in Sharon's guts
the knot she couldn't share pulled tight,
unpickable with bitten nails, in dread
of the test, when the only right over left
was a slip and wrong and four months gone.

A backpage sneak to those terminal knots
the strangle snare, the hangman's hitch
more *mercy full*, more quicksnap the neck
than the gallows knot she bungled under the bowline trees
making a granny of it, saved – if you could call it that –
by the time she called me *a boring kid* and bunked off
with the scouts instead, who could tie them all
blindfold, and for real, so what was the fucking point,
of even trying?

Thought For The Day

The egg's unnamed translucence, miraculously
coagulating into its predictive noun.

The quick slice, toasted, of all those metaphors
yeasted and unleavened, grain and fire.

How this morning's yellows – sunlight, butter, eggs –
are good for you again, if you live long enough.

Enduring the weathergirl's well modulated drizzle
which is never as wet as it looks through glass

with a glance ahead at all the things we'll miss,
we zip into proofed reflective skins, then off
and quickly, before Today ploughs on.

The Last Supper

Some people can find music in anything.

Take Leonardo's masterpiece: apparently, if you read the loaves of bread and various hands from right to left on a stave composed of the table's five horizontals, you find the score of a requiem, in three-four time.

And that unlikely botanist, decoding the DNA of the Common Thistle, who idly plotted the sequence of base pairs into some musical software

and discovered a tune, a thornless salve to background some kind of healing – hot stones, expensive oils, an upstairs room –

such cryptic, half-remembered fragments scored into our palms like nails.