

Brittle Bones

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Also by Janet Fisher

Women Who Dye Their Hair (Smith/Doorstop, 2001)

Listening to Dancing (Smith/Doorstop, 1996)

Brittle Bones

JANET FISHER



CAMBRIDGE

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For Ray, with love

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Getting There

*It was a long way off
and she had no map
or compass nothing
but the lie of the land
under her boots
and the stars in her head.*

Chopsticks

(Room in New York: Edward Hopper)

He pretends to read the paper and I
fiddle with the keyboard. We don't bother
to draw the blinds. There's nothing to see.
Some nights when it's hot I take an axe
to that dumb head with its parting just so, the way
it catches the light, and some nights I just sit.

I once had a yen to learn piano so they sent me
to Miss Silver whose cottage stank
and she taught me the scale of C: 1, 2, 3 thumb under,
but we had no instrument at home
and I never got as far as the black notes

but whenever I hear a Chopin mazurka,
or a café pianist vamps Cole Porter,
I dream over what I've not done, like
digging for rocks in China or learning to fly.
The sky's so blue above the clouds.

Once in the street I heard a man shout
'There are no oranges in Nevada'
and it made me want to go there.

Rusholme

Someone died in this room
and someone didn't die,
heart beating like a boy on a trampoline,
or fall into a coma staring
at the porcelain shepherdess
poised, hand cupped to one ear
listening to distant music.
Someone who sat on the bed with an empty glass,
reaching out to straighten the rug.

Our Lady

You might, if you wanted, step from this window
onto the roof, walk across slates to other windows,
other rooms, or rest on the wooden chair

by the tub of camellias. The wind might be blowing leaves
across your stained boards, and always or sometimes
rain might shine on the panes and the distant trees.

She'll be out in the city somewhere
but she'll have left her scarf hanging on a hook.
A bird might pick from crumbs you'd thrown it

and beyond the houses the bells of Our Lady
might be summoning you into the clammy air.

Dream

You're in the hallway of your old house.
A door you haven't seen before
leads to a part you didn't know existed
or had forgotten: a new attic,
or steps leading to a terrace above a garden,
sunlight edging round the roof of the lean-to.
Turn back from the leaves, the sweet air, the distant cows,
and climb the stairs. There's a sofa tucked away.
Artists' folders, books, are piled at your elbow,
left a century ago when the reader popped out for a smoke.
A wooden chair, its grain like contours or ribbed sand,
a camel bag slung across a clothes horse,
a doll's house, toys, half hidden. A beech husk.
Hanging from the slant ceiling, a brass censer
sways though there's no breeze.
A fly's jagged buzz beats against the dormer.
In the wall is a small door.

Brittle Bones

birds' legs, dried stalks
a Chinese vase, a baby's wave
slivers of green on dead laburnum
tracks translucent up an arm
chalk line on a pavement, a child's logic
fingers pressing a wine glass stem
change of key on the downbeat
worn paths tracing the grass
a moon thumbprinted on a light sky
an old woman's face, her knuckles
strands of breath on a sharp morning
cracked glaze on a bedroom jug
its pattern of blue ivy and pouting lip
the roots I clutch at on the way up

Mud

In my dream I find boots in the hall cupboard
flaking mud from our last holiday in North Wales
thirty years ago—the day they all went up Snowdon
and I stayed behind to look after the baby

who's now standing beside me in his old windcheater,
the one he wore on his houseboat, hands tight on the rail
against the wind, hair frizzy with rain. I smile
and he turns his head away but I see the tears

and dirt smears on his cheeks. His hands
have dirt on them too, and his nails are broken
as if he had been scratching deep into soil and stone
in search of a treasure he had unaccountably lost.

Hope

There's no accounting for Hope, the way it catches you
like an enemy from behind, its hairy fingers
gripping your shoulders, its knee in the small of your back.
You trip, you're bound to, no one could keep their balance
though all you want is to trudge on, head down, into the wind,
arms full of the heavy parcels you've been ordered to carry.

And how can you not surrender? The hands are in fact gentle,
they didn't mean to hurt, they're the hands of the teacher
who broke your clay castle, the one you were taking home
for Mother's Day, and her smiling apology bruises you:
you know you're supposed to be angry but how can you be? Strange.

The map Hope sketches for you with a wet finger in the dried mud
points the way you should be going but you're not ready and anyway
the map's wrong, but Hope's sad eyes pull you round
and guilt sharpens: how can you offend such a harmless creature?

Of the pains naughty Pandora released into the world,
this last little buzzing treasure causes you more trouble than anything—
gets in your way, spits in your eye, then just before leaving
shows you the future that might be instead of the one that is.

Turano

The way the trains pan out means two hours
in a border town—time to find a cash point
and lunch. This is Italy: peeling terracotta,
stucco saints chipped back to the concrete,
a door half open on a dark church.
Mary's heart is pierced with swords,
candles lit for her or those she prays for.
I have no change, my tears will do.

A restless waiter brings bulbous glasses
of the local wine; its bouquet
turns my head. You pick at bread
while we wait for risotto.
'Bread and wine', you say,
'what else do we need?'

Skellig Michael

Just the cold and the quiet
and gannets flying in long lines
from light to dark to light
across the face of the rocks
like angels seeking audience.

Sky set clear for the day,
a studded sea: you'd think
the monks hadn't a bad time of it.
Six centuries of storms and guilt—
there are many monuments to failure.

The world's mysterious enough,
laying down its legends like jewels.
Any wish could come true here.
They say walking on Skellig
can change your life. I'd best take care.

Narrow steps thin out, no handrails.
I have to imagine the beehive huts,
the high point to the east where they saw
—miracle or trick of the light—
the sun dancing on Easter morning.

The Wall

'Art — a house that tries to be haunted'
— EMILY DICKINSON

We're shivering. Draughts whisk
under carved doors, round pictures
framed in old wood of women talking.
The light won't catch us here.

I browse through the ancient bestiary
left just for us to look at. That's trust.
A dangerous animal bursts from its pages,
runs across the fields under the elm trees.

Next-door's down for the weekend
full of caesareans and melanoma. Peabirds step and point.
Even weeds have their place.

From the uneven bricks
in the barn wall
a web hangs loose.

At supper, after three bottles
we're onto nonsense about angels,
their haloes of Byzantine blue,
their emerald eyes.

Summer

*Horsetail, buttercup,
rosebay willowherb,
hogweed, hawkweed,
foxglove, vetch,
rowan and raspberry,
blackberry, cow parsley,
hawthorn, blackthorn,
sycamore, birch.*



Razzle dazzle, singed to a sizzle
in amongst the furze and thistle
breathe the heat haze, let it jostle
up your nose and round your tonsils;
dogs'll snooze and bumble bees'll
buzz and sun-bruised blooms will frazzle.



Wings of dancing insects glisten.
All things stretch and grow and ripen.

Cold Front

A promised frost, the first frost of November,
the way it stuns the air. The window
is a barrier to another room, the double

of this one, the same pictures on the wall.
Words are a static buzz. The best that can be said is
it doesn't exist but is there waiting

like the tick of a clock, an apple half eaten
in a blue bowl. Clouds settle like islands,
their shadows valleys for the moon to walk in.

Wishes

Midnight we lurch
across the Charles Bridge
lay our hands on the wishing stone.
Our wishes sink,
weighted bodies,
origins forgotten, fish food.

The Jew from Krakow,
driven by dreams, found his treasure
under his own hearthstone.
We've wandered the continent,
planned routes, crossed borders.
We rest where it's safest, out of the wind.

Let's drop a line over the parapet,
draw up waterweed
or a fish with a coin in its mouth.

Girl With Ferret

In a back street in Krakow behind the Great Square
where a trumpeter plays the fractured *hajnal* each hour
— six hundred years in honour of him who died
sounding the alarm, with an arrow in his throat—

the Museum opens once or twice a week
exhibiting a rare Leonardo: the ferret-faced girl
holding what may be a ferret, or an ermine,
from which one day someone will fashion a trim.

I'm told she was his patron's mistress, but
I believe she was a shy, slim-hipped boy
with long hair and a winsome smile
whom Leonardo found quivering in the corner

under some cloaks, clutching his only friend,
escaping the intentions of the strange men
who hung around his mother's apartment,
his throat sore with abuse and terror

and the artist scooped him up, pet and all,
into a place of safety, framing him.