

BIO:

Brittany Perham is the author of *The Curiosities* (Parlor Press 2012). Her recent work may be found in *TriQuarterly*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Linebreak*, *Lo-Ball* and elsewhere. She lives in San Francisco.

TEACHING STATEMENT:

For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your imagination will not be suddenly snatched away. —Adrienne Rich, from “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”

I like this Adrienne Rich quote because I think that writing depends on the poet’s ability to “press on”—we must each sit down with a blank page and choose to engage with our own imagination. This begins as a solitary act; then, if we are lucky, we find other writers with whom we can share our work. This is why I believe in the workshop, where each of us leaves our desk in order to talk to each other about our poems and our writing process. I believe that my job as a teacher is to help each poet enter and navigate the odd landscape of her own project, and I teach craft and form with this idea in mind. The poet is the pilot; the teacher stands on the runway and gets the poet into (and back into) the glider plane. My questions as a teacher and reader are the same as my questions as a writer—is each poem achieving what it wants to achieve? How are the formal and craft choices working to strengthen the poem’s emotion, idea or situation? And how do we reengage with the poem in revision so that these choices feel natural and necessary? To answer these questions, I believe we read, talk, revise, listen, and ask for help. We pay close attention to language and to the sound of our own voices, so that in the end, we learn something about ourselves and our writing that we didn’t know before.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS:

I came to poetry through stories. As a kid, I loved being read to, first *Harold and the Purple Crayon* and *The Polar Express*, then *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. I read fantasy and sci-fi; I wrote fantasy and sci-fi. I illustrated: wizards and sword fights and space aliens in colored pencil. When, at a friend’s middle school Halloween party, a fortune teller told me I would grow up to write romance novels, I was thrilled. Beside the novels on my mother’s bookshelf, there were a few books of poetry—William Carlos Williams, I think, and Leonard Cohen, and at least ten collections of Rod McKuen’s lyrics, all inscribed to my mother by her college boyfriend. I was certainly more interested in these mini-love-notes than I was in the lyrics. Then, around the time I turned sixteen, I had a teacher give me a few poetry books—Sylvia Plath, whom I fell in love with immediately (and “in love” does not feel like an exaggeration), Mary Oliver, and a third I can’t now recall. I joined her workshop because sitting around that table, with ten grown-ups talking about poems, felt like joining a coven—a secret society that was, in actual fact, teaching me a kind of magic. It really felt this way to me then. I would come out of those workshops onto the always-gray streets of Boston feeling as though I was learning a secret, ancient craft. I was sixteen years old and I finally felt (though I thought I was too old to feel this way) like the

wizard in the story. Poetry still makes me feel this way sometimes, though I am clearly too old to think so, and though I might someday write that romance novel.

POEMS

CRADLE

After the whitecloud
evidence has been removed
from your lungs, you
bleed in the gauze's spread sail.
All along the highway

lid-lines of turtles
new-hatched in the drainage ditch
blink in shelled moonlight.

The cars dreadlock
into the suburbs, their taillights steadily out-moving
the evening's entering in.

The glandular stink
of eucalyptus, the work-odor
of one who has fought
all night for breath.
Beside your bed, I read by the stars
your hand has penned in the pages' corners.

To think of the end now
is like being nettled to the calves,
each sting a steel sigh.

Any heave from you settles my heart.

The story is one of the unlikely
horse, road-snow
white, two-headed, bound.

It is not for you
when I lift breathing tube and lead-wire
to lie beside you.
It is not for you when I hold my mouth
to the cold barrel of your shoulder.

HABERDASHERY

Notice the clingy stink
of sea things pinned on sand.
A smell particularly
Atlantic, one unnoticed
by one like me: born here.
When they've ticked your name
off the passenger list, and you
are asked, professionally,
to board, your voice's downy
afterfeather is the first to go
in the clippings of wings, the horn,
the island fog. The fog
goes north a hundred clicks,
the captain, and you, go north.
Professionally, he checks
the compass now and then.
The gulls drop girlish
afterfeathers on the deck.
On the dock I tick your name
on the pads of my fingers.
Darling, the Atlantic will burn
your hands. Something clings
to the side of the boat.
The stink pins me to your collar.

THE CURIOSITIES

I don't believe in poetry. This might be the last poem.

The neighbor's Pekinese barks his little head off
every time I unlock the door. The lock is loose, I can turn it

with a knife. I raise African violets
like those my father used to bring me:
stereoscopic purple, four yellow fish-eyes to a flower.

They make my window
my childhood window.
There were three steeples,
and on the rooftop opposite, a wooden owl.
The seagulls never failed to be fooled.

The mourning doves in the gable woke me up, woke me up, woke me up.
I grew up and behind me my brother grew up.

"Bye-bye," I told my father.

I've been living away
on this other coast:
Mexican grackles, saguaros in the south, it snows in the mountains,
bike paths, pie cutter, sex. So many curiosities!
A bridge built to withstand earthquakes.
Earthquakes. Pencil sharpener
in a pool of wooden flakes.

My father has La Caja China ready in his yard.
A grown man could lie inside.
I hear he has shaved off his beard, which I hear
had turned entirely gray.

Because I give those flowers too much
or too little water, my lover cares for them.

When I speak to my mother, I see her in my childhood
house. In my mother's house,
here we are at Christmas.

Once I saw my father's two taupe rooms
at the Extended Stay America in a hitch of the highway's suburban loop.
This was no place to live, on the highway's suburban loop.

This was all a long time ago.

Any passersby can see me with my violets:
There is no privacy.

I keep my hair clean, and long. It ties itself up without a pin.
They say my father has a lovely house and tomatoes trellised up the porch.
But the intelligence is old.

Any passersby can see the ultraviolet blue, the little yellow eyes.

The power plant trilled white smoke from its one thin lung.
See it from the playroom window.
I chewed until polish came off in my teeth.

My father is preparing La Caja China for a hog.
His butcher has split the rib cage and laid the halves flat.

My mother held my head in her lap.
My lover holds my feet in his hands.

My brother and I listened from the breakwater.
From the Willows we heard the sirens
of Skee-Ball machines spitting out their hundred tickets,
GRAND PRIZE, when the wind was right.
For a hundred tickets: a plastic kaleidoscope, pencil
sharpener shaped as goldfish,
pirate's eye patch.

My father loads the box with coals.

Here September is the hottest month.
The flies dress the apples up in black lace.
There is no lung-fill green.

My father injects the mojo beneath the skin with a marinade syringe.
When he is very afraid, and though we are mostly grown up,

my brother asks me to lie beside him.

Father, you were right
when you said I am different now: I am different now.
Tonight you will feed your forty friends.

COURSES TAUGHT

EGL-92: Introduction to Reading and Writing Poetry

EGL-192: Intermediate Poetry

EGL-292: Advanced Poetry

ENGL-91: Creative Nonfiction

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