The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

". . . one thing that makes humans uniquely human is that we *future*, making decisions now on what we believe will make us happy later. Apparently, we're pretty bad at this. . . . And yet we *future* on. We can't help it. Future-ing is what allows us to shape our lives, an essential part of what Gilbert calls 'our psychological immune system.'"

BROWNE, pp. 16–17

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TOO LATE TO STOP NOW

JENNY BROWNE

When I write I like to listen to the same song over and over again, although *need to listen* feels a more accurate phrase. This repeated listening returns me to a place where I can see the next thing I want to say, although of course I don't mean see with my eyes, just like I don't mean *returns me to a place* exactly, although I wish I did.

Let me try this again. When I sat down to write about one of those songs, it returned me to the place where I first heard it, the place it came from and even the place where I'm listening to it now. These places have nothing in common except inside of me, which is the place a story begins, as well as where it ends:

I'm on my way to meet Van Morrison for coffee.

I text my husband from the backseat of Frankee's shiny red BMW. Frankee teaches mindfulness at Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where I have been living for several months on a 2020 Fulbright Fellowship at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry. Frankee wears square black glasses, pedals around the compact center of Belfast on an E-bike and is great company, if prone to spontaneous Zen-ish interrogation.

"And what do you have to offer the North of Ireland?" he asked five minutes into our first meeting. I'd just shoved a handful of onion crisps in my mouth.

"My attention?" I replied, my mouth still full. He nodded, but not in a way that indicated whether this was or wasn't an acceptable response.

"And did you know your own face before you were born?" I don't recall what I said to that one, but eventually I also learned that Frankee was lifelong pals with Van the Man.

Yes, that Van Morrison, I reply to my husband's surprise face emoji.

It has been nearly a quarter century since an otherwise unremarkable college boyfriend from Boston ghosted me cold while also gifting me immeasurably by leaving his copy of *Astral Weeks* behind in my boom box. My apartment that summer perched above an equally unremarkable midwestern Chinese take-out place. Each morning as I climbed out the window onto its roof to drink a cup of scalding Nescafé, I pressed play. The early air smelled like greasy dumplings and soft tar and my hopes for what the still-unfolding day might hold seemed to hinge on whether or not I'd gotten up early enough to listen long enough to hear Van Morrison sing "Cyprus Avenue" before work. The song's refrain of *way up on, way up on* worked on me—or so it felt—like a spell. One that suggested I was going to change my life.

I'd actually described my little Van Morrison listening ritual earlier in the week to students in the creative writing class I was teaching for the Heaney Centre. We'd just begun a module on *ekphrasis*, a term that commonly refers to poems written in response to other works of art. By way of example, I'd shown them Rilke's one about looking at a headless Greek statue, which, in Stephen Mitchell's translation, famously ends, *from all the borders of itself, / burst like a star: for here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life.*

"Haven't y'all ever encountered a work of art that made *you* feel watched," I asked, "something that made *you* want to change your life?" Van Morrison had been born and raised in East Belfast. It couldn't hurt to bring him up, but the students were a polite bunch who smiled carefully and laughed nervously and it occurs to me now that I was likely asking a more loaded question than I'd intended, as words like *encounter* and *watched* can still evoke Belfast's notoriously troubled past.

Despite being born post-1998 Good Friday Peace Accords, my students still breathed sectarian air, especially when it came to their educations. I recall one soft-spoken rugby player explaining that he'd "never even met a Catholic until Uni." They were third years, closing in on graduation, and so about the same age I was when I began climbing out onto the roof to drink bad coffee before biking to my work-study job folding shiny pamphlets for the Office of International Programs. I wasn't sure where I was going but it was somewhere other than where I was, and this would become something of a pattern. My students' futures loomed even more uncertain, though not in ways any of us had even begun to expect. Boris Johnson had finally managed to wrestle Brexit through Parliament, leaving details of the so-called Northern Irish backstop in flux. Most everyone believed this would be the big drama of 2020, although when my husband asked our cab driver how he imagined Brexit would change his life, he replied, "Two cheeks of the same backside if you ask me, so it is."

Yes, that Van Morrison, I reply to my husband's surprise face emoji.

Some friends back home in San Antonio remained understandably confused about where exactly Belfast was located, geographically on the island of Ireland yet in an administrative region of the UK. The images of a blood-red hand I noticed on flags all over town also meant we were inside the province of Ulster, which includes northern counties on both sides of the border. One medieval legend describes a boat race where the first chieftain to physically touch the land would lay claim to it. As they approached, one cut his hand off and threw it ashore.

Wash your hands well and often. A new sign had flashed on the bus stop earlier that morning. It was mid-March by then, and as we wrapped up what would turn out to be our very last class together, I glanced over to where students in the Accounting course that met next waited in the hallway. The faces of three young Asian men were framed by the window cut into the door, and so appeared pressed behind thick shatterproof glass. Queens University has loads of international students and I was accustomed to these guys lining up every Thursday. I wasn't accustomed to only seeing their eyes, or to anyone wearing disposable surgical masks, pale blue flags of a strange not-so-distant country we'd all be living in soon enough.

Van's concerts have all been canceled, Frankee messaged me on WhatsApp as I walked the long way home to our flat, cutting through the Botanical Gardens, the late morning sun making a surprising if blurry poached-egg-like appearance on the horizon. *I told him a poet from Texas was around the place.*

Frankee's next question was more straightforward than usual, if also a bit loaded: *He wants to know if you're free to meet this Friday?* Was I free? Freer than I'd felt in years actually. The weather since our December arrival had been uniformly wet and cold, but I still woke every morning with a glowing, almost giddy disbelief that I'd managed to arrive here—a new world, and not in the instant-coffee-fueled-make-a-new-life-plan-every-morning mode of a twenty-year-old who still believed she had time to do or be anything, but with the more weathered expectations of a still-married mother nearing fifty, my desires fully entangled in the lives of my beloveds. It gets harder to change your life. Or even to imagine how you might.

Together my husband and I had lost brothers and fathers, gotten and given up jobs, crashed cars and added second bathrooms. We almost lost each other at one hard turn. Closing my eyes, I can still return to the foggy morning, three years earlier, driving South Presa Street, sure I needed to burn down my life because I couldn't recognize who I was or what I had loved. When, as Seamus Heaney's translation of Dante puts it, "In the middle of the journey of our life / I found myself astray in a dark wood / where the straight road had been lost sight of. / How hard it is to say what it was like . . ."

Actually, it isn't that hard to say what it was like at all. I told my husband I felt more "seen" by another, and we began the long hard work of figuring out how to see each other better again.

Relocating our family, even just for this year, felt like a new project we could create together. It was going to change our lives, if not permanently at least *ekphrastic-ly*, providing a different window in which our faces might be reflected with new clarity against a background of different trees, the dark Divis Mountains on the horizon, and framed by Samson and Goliath, as the shipyard's immense and bright yellow cranes are known. I wanted our kids to learn the details of a different landscape that they would then carry with them, tangible evidence that their world wasn't *the* world. I didn't know exactly where any of this would lead, but I believed I was okay with not knowing.

My more personal hopes also seemed reasonable enough. I was going to walk along the real Cyprus Avenue and recognize the smell of a turf fire coming from a row of ceramic chimneys. I was going to find a traditional music session with more fiddles than flutes. I was going to wave our

daughters off to their grammar school all spring looking straight out of a *Derry Girls* episode in matching skirts, ties and wool blazers. I was going to encourage my husband off on his own adventure to buy a mid-80s Land Rover Defender he'd found online for sale in his grandfather's Welsh hometown, a massive rumbling green machine he would fix up to captain us around the rim of Scotland all summer long. I was going to let my new path home change my way of looking, a new accent change my way of listening, and new questions change my understanding of myself. Most importantly, I had time to let a new place happen to me.

I am still an English professor, but I just had to Google what to call the verb tense of the sentences I just wrote, all those that begin with "I was going to . . ." Grammarians like to refer to this as "future in the past," a way of talking about a time in which something was still in the future, even though now, at the moment of speaking, it is passed. Another way to say this is that we use *future in the past* when something anticipated does not actually occur, when an expectation is canceled.

In the time that has passed since that bright morning when Frankee and I confirmed our plan to head out past the sparkling waters of Belfast Lough and on to where the steep Antrim coastline peeks from beyond the Culloden Hotel to have coffee with Van the Man Morrison, the legendary singer has nearly gotten himself canceled, at least in the social-media-speak sense of the word, for writing and performing COVID anti-lockdown songs. I get it. I was going to go to his concert in Derry. I miss seeing live music fiercely, and worry for the livelihoods of performers and those who depend on them, and I'm also not listening to these new songs.

But I have been listening to "Cyprus Avenue" again, if a different version this time around. The BBC calls *It's Too Late to Stop Now* one of the greatest live albums ever made. During the summer of 1973, The Man toured with an eleven-piece group known as the Caledonia Soul Orchestra. At some point, he took to ending these shows with "Cyprus Avenue." The live recording is an inspired, improvised, and ferocious take that goes on for nearly ten minutes. You can hear the crowd's excitement from the beginning. The piano twinkles jazzy if a little restrained, biding its time. *All the little girls rhyme something / On the way back home from school. / Then the leaves fall one by one by one by one by one / Call the autumn time a fool.*

What does it mean to call the autumn time a fool? I didn't get to ask Van Morrison that question, but I thought of it often as I played the song on repeat, obsessively, every evening as I walked my dogs past a stand of Cypress trees on the San Antonio River as weeks of lockdown dragged into months. Texas' deciduous Bald Cypress are different than the evergreen variety that grow in Belfast, with rooty elbows and long needles that turn a deep red before falling, seemingly all at once, come winter. Herons and cormorants roosted on the bare branches, their reflections opening and closing on the river's surface.

I likely told my Belfast students that the word *ekphrasis* comes from the Greek for *description* and was originally a rhetorical exercise of close attention, one designed to recreate the experience of an object for an audience that was not there to see it. And probably also that painting developed as an art intended to depict, and ultimately preserve, what would soon be lost.

I am here to see you is what I heard myself say as I paused to watch the birds yet again, my throat tightening with grief. And maybe this is a version, if still insufficient, for what I was trying to say to Frankee way back when he first asked what I had to offer. It is also what we say with our bodies when we linger before a work of art, or enter a room where a loved one waits in a hospital bed. Except so many cannot see their beloveds. Except I can barely stand to watch my new freshman students back in Texas trying to impress one other on Zoom like eager, awkward birds. How fragile they seem, how lost. It has begun to feel like we are living through a time devastatingly full of what some call *ekphrastic hope* as we attempt to recreate the canceled world: classes, relationships, concerts, plays, exhibitions, graduations, weddings and funerals, and also that we believe we somehow can.

Most days I still struggle to walk beneath the weight of all we have lost, and so I've taken to repeating that one line: *I am here to see you*. Dearest masked friend and dearest masked stranger, dearest future fear and dearest dumb regret, *I am here to see you*. I say it again, and in the saying I have slowly and painstakingly made a new ritual that is changing if not my life at least my days, of which a life is made.

But isn't a life also made of the future you imagined? And what are we to do now, if that is what we call this in-between place when the future still feels dangerous, if not impossible, to accurately imagine?

I once read a book called *Stumbling Upon Happiness* by a Harvard psychologist named Daniel Gilbert, who suggests one thing that makes humans uniquely human is that we *future*, making decisions now on what we believe will make us happy later. Apparently, we're pretty bad at this. I couldn't find my copy but I did come across Malcolm Gladwell's (?!) Amazon review which echoes what I remember of Gilbert's argument on the

objective failure of human imagination, "We're far too accepting of the conclusions of our imaginations," Gladwell writes, and "Our imaginations aren't particularly imaginative." Another way to say this is that our versions of the future—and the past for that matter—mostly resemble the present. We unknowingly add and subtract details without realizing how different things will feel when they actually happen. And yet we *future* on. We can't help it. Future-ing is what allows us to shape our lives, an essential part of what Gilbert calls "our psychological immune system."

But I was going to. I've also come to believe that future in the past is the verb tense of the pandemic. The unfinished sculpture. The virtual happy hour. The great incomplete sentence of 2020. *Yeah, my tongue gets tied / every time I try to speak.* And that's the line in "Cyprus Avenue," the turn when the live version of the song really starts to feel like the moment we've been thrust into. Van Morrison stutters dramatically, enacting the act of feeling silenced, uttering a series of *ptts* and *tssts*, sounds not words. Or at least this is what I hear now, and what I see, and what sticks in my head as I struggle to process—and maybe even more to name—what has come to feel like profound grief for something that hadn't even happened yet.

But I did get to meet him for coffee. I even ate several of the bracingly sweet Northern Irish fridge-bake desserts known as "fifteens," so-called for the number of marshmallows, crushed biscuits and candied cherries you dump together in the food processor. The Man is in his mid-70s now and has long trimmed the epic '70s sideburns that fronted the Soul Orchestra. His leather-brimmed fisherman cap and skeptical eyebrows made me miss my own father, or what he might have looked like had he lived long enough to come visit me in Belfast.

Frankee had warned me that Belfast's most famous son isn't exactly known for his charm, and he did seem plenty ticked off about his shows being canceled, but mostly he was kind, even sweet to me. We talked about poetry, and when I asked him which of his own writing he was most proud of, he didn't hesitate. "What I'm writing *now*," he said. "Now that I'm old enough to actually know something. It's hard to be other people's nostalgia."

As we walked outside to take a picture, I leaned in closer to give him a kiss on the cheek, and he made a joke about "giving them that old Scientology smile." I look at this photo now and shake my head. Was I trying to kill Sir Van Morrison? Of course not, but wasn't what was going to happen already happening? The cautious Asian students? The weird hygiene warning at the bus stop? A known case of coronavirus already at Queens? Families from the girls' school already en route home from spring break ski trips in Northern Italy? The virus was here and was going to be here, and it would change all our lives, and in saying this I can't help imagining the young strutting lion he was on stage in 1973, pacing back and forth as the band waits for his sign, all the guitars and the drums and the strings hovering in anticipation as he lowers his arm and ends the song, if not a version of the world, with a final great shout: *It's too late to stop it now.*

At one point, Frankee slowed to point out some murals on a towering iron "peace wall" built to keep Protestant and Catholic sides of neighborhoods apart. Many of these walls are still functional, and perhaps still necessary. You can cross over during the day, but not at night, another detail I find myself wanting to describe whenever I hear the words *social distancing.* I also can't help wondering if this corner of the world was somehow better prepared than others, having practiced distance, resistance, suspicion and grief for hundreds of years.

And I think then of my sweet Irish students, leaning forward in their seats, reading Rilke and trying to imagine their lives differently, now stuck with a version of the past becoming present again. But is this not also the essence of the *ekphrastic* urge, the attempt to represent an experience

> How will any of us describe where we went this year and what we saw this year? Will we even recognize ourselves?

Still we talked of meeting for breakfast the following week, but then, on the way back to South Belfast with Frankee, I glanced at my phone and found an urgent message from the U.S. State Department suspending all Fulbright programs worldwide. We would need to make arrangements to leave as soon as possible. I turned the phone over and looked out the window as Frankee drove all the way up Falls Road and back down the Shankill, playing impromptu black taxi tour guide, pausing at an alley where his cousin had been taken, shot during the Troubles. Friends and colleagues closer to my own age, no matter what "side" they grew up on, all had some version of this story, a pervading sense of connection via loss, so much that Belfast often seemed a place wholly devoid of nostalgia as I was regularly reminded of how bad it had been, how much things had changed, how I wouldn't even recognize the place.

How will any of us describe where we went this year and what we saw this year? Will we even recognize ourselves? What will we call the constellation of all who have been lost?

for another, to bridge the gap in time and space with language, knowing it is likely impossible, but still trying, a kind of *future-ing* even? Once I knew "Cyprus Avenue" as a song about possibility because it found me at a time when all the futures I imagined still felt possible. Now when I listen to it, I see a working-class Belfast kid crossing a fancier tree-lined street than the one he lived on, and the glimpse of the beautiful girl he was going to talk to. If he hadn't been stuck with where he was, and with who he was, as we all are. But still he made me feel it. Mostly, though, I think about what Van actually said, the feeling he had of being trapped by other people's nostalgia, by our longing to return to a place, a home that no longer exists, or perhaps never did.

Jenny Browne is the author of three collections of poems, Dear Stranger, The Second Reason, *and* At Once, *all from the University of Tampa Press. A former James Michener Fellow at the University of Texas in Austin, she has received grants from the San Antonio Artist Foundation, the Texas Writers League, and the National Endowment for the Arts.*