



EAVAN BOLAND: SELECTED POETRY
Evening Lecture Series: English Literature
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My childhood, certainly in the London years, wasn't happy. That isn't to say it wasn't a privileged childhood, because it was. But it was fictional and desolate in an odd way. We lived in the Irish Embassy. My parents were two hard-working and very engaging people. My mother especially was a most imaginative and loving woman. She had a very unusual feeling towards the inner world of a child. She was the first person, for instance, to talk to me about poetry. Nevertheless here was this huge, compartmentalized house. And I felt thoroughly displaced in it. I never believed I belonged there. I never felt it was my home. Some of the feelings I recognize as having migrated into themes I keep going back to – exile, types of estrangement, a relation to objects – began there.

From Jody Allen Randolph, 'An Interview with Eavan Boland (1993)', in Randolph ed., *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 102.



Portrait of Eavan Boland as a child by her mother, Frances J. Kelly, from 'Eavan Boland 70th Birthday Celebration', Carcanet, 2014:
<http://carcanetblog.blogspot.ie/2014/09/eavan-boland-70th-birthday-celebration.html>

Traditionally, Irish writing has been about breaking silences. The biggest silence has continued to be about the real lives of women.

Anne Enright, quoted in Justine Jordan, 'A new Irish literary boom: the post-crash stars of fiction', *Guardian*,
17 October 2015.



Mary Robinson delivers her acceptance speech after winning the 1990 presidential election, 9 November 1990.

<http://www.rte.ie/archives/2015/1106/740071-president-mary-robinson/>

[. . .] I shall rely to a large extent on symbols. But symbols are what unite and divide people. Symbols give us our identity, our self image, our way of explaining ourselves to ourselves and to others. Symbols in turn determine the kinds of stories we tell and the stories we tell determine the kind of history we make and remake. I want *Áras an Uachtaráin* to be a place where people can tell diverse stories — in the knowledge that there is someone there to listen.

I want this Presidency to promote the telling of stories — stories of celebration through the arts and stories of conscience and of social justice. As a woman, I want women who have felt themselves outside history to be written back into history, in the words of Eavan Boland, “finding a voice where they found a vision.”

May God direct me so that my Presidency is one of justice, peace and love. May I have the fortune to preside over an Ireland at a time of exciting transformation when we enter a new Europe where old wounds can be healed, a time when, in the words of Seamus Heaney, “hope and history rhyme.” May it be a Presidency where I the President can sing to you, citizens of Ireland, the joyous refrain of the 14th-century Irish poet as recalled by W. B. Yeats: “I am of Ireland ... come dance with me in Ireland.



Mary Robinson delivers her inaugural speech as President, Dublin Castle, 3 December 1990.

Full text of the speech available at

<https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/robinson/inaugural.html>

The Singers
For M. R.

The women who were singers in the West
lived on an unforgiving coast.
I want to ask was there ever one
moment when all of it relented,
when rain and ocean and their own
sense of home were revealed to them
as one and the same?

After which

every day was still shaped by weather,
but every night their mouths filled with
Atlantic storms and clouded over stars
and exhausted birds.

And only when the danger

was plain in the music could you know
their true measure of rejoicing in

finding a voice where they found a vision.

In Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p. 203.

From 'The Achill Woman'

The grass changed from lavender to black.
The trees turned back to cold outlines.
You could taste frost

but nothing now can change the way I went
indoors, chilled by the wind
and made a fire
and took down my book and opened it
and failed to comprehend

the harmonies of servitude,
the grace music gives to flattery
and language borrows from ambition

and how I fell asleep
oblivious to

the planets clouding over in the skies,
the slow decline of the spring moon,
the songs crying out their ironies.

In Boland, *Collected Poems*, pp. 176-77.

When I met the Achill woman I was already a poet, I thought of myself as a poet. Yet nothing that I understood about poetry enabled me to understand her better. Quite the reverse. I turned my back on her in that cold twilight and went to commit to memory the songs and artifices of the very power systems which had made her own memory such an archive of loss.

If I understand her better now, and my relation to her, it is not just because my sense of irony or history has developed over the years; although I hope they have. It is more likely because of my own experience as a poet. Inevitably, any account of this carries the risk of subjective codes and impressions. Yet in poetry in particular and women's writing in general, the private witness is often all there is to go on.

Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic, 1989), p. 9.

Outside History

There are outsiders, always. These stars –
these iron inklings of an Irish January,
whose light happened

thousands of years before
our pain did: they are, they have always been
outside history.

They keep their distance. Under them remains
a place where you found
you were human, and

a landscape in which you are mortal.
And a time to choose between them.
I have chosen:

out of history into myth I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.

How slowly they die
as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late.

In Boland, *Collected Poems*, p. 188.

I don't know that people can realize – and why should they when they have the difficulties of their own environments? – the level of discomfort and anxiety and a small side-lining of grief that happens every day in a country like Ireland, where lives are torn apart, and you are also a life with a small contribution to make. Where the witness is never big enough; where the eloquence is never great enough; where no rhetoric meets the situation; where no event saves those people. The sense of helplessness is genuine, and the sense of some mute, unexpressed malaise about it gradually becomes a larger and larger sense of things. Everybody in Ireland knows what it is to turn off the six o'clock news for another small funeral of more defenceless people whose futures have been torn apart by individual assaults. And it is very difficult, given the size of the country, to feel distant from it, and given the nature of the situation, to feel close to it. So you live in degrees of corruption and compromise which are hard to communicate except to those people who live in them all the time themselves.

From Jan Garden Castro, 'The Voice of Eavan Boland' [interview], *Tampa Review* 10 (1995), pp. 35-38; reprinted in Jody Allen Randolph ed., *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 116-121; p. 117.

Love

Dark falls on this mid-western town
where we once lived when myths collided.
Dusk has hidden the bridge in the river
which slides and deepens
to become the water
the hero crossed on his way to hell.

Not far from here is our old apartment.
We had a kitchen and an Amish table.
We had a view. And we discovered there
love had the feather and muscle of wings
and had come to live with us,
a brother of fire and air.

We had two infant children one of whom
was touched by death in this town
and spared: and when the hero
was hailed by his comrades in hell
their mouths opened and their voices failed and
there is no knowing what they would have asked
about a life they had shared and lost.

I am your wife.
It was years ago.
Our child is healed. We love each other still.
Across our day-to-day and ordinary distances
we speak plainly. We hear each other clearly.

And yet I want to return to you
on the bridge of the Iowa river as you were,
with snow on the shoulders of your coat
and a car passing with its headlights on:

I see you as a hero in a text –
the image blazing and the edges gilded –
and I long to cry out the epic question
my dear companion:

Will we ever live so intensely again?
Will love come to us again and be
so formidable at rest it offered us ascension
even to look at him?

But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.
You walk away and I cannot follow.

[. . .] a lifetime's conjuring with tone, conjuring with the pull between plain statement and pure soaring possibility, with the tension between the minutely personal and the effort to find a myth or a governing sense of shared experience.

Colm Tóibín, 'Myth and Experience: The Poetry of Eavan Boland', in Siobhan Campbell and Nessa O'Mahony eds., *Eavan Boland: Inside History* (Galway: Arlen House, 2016), p. 52.

The Lost Art of Letter Writing

The ratio of daylight to handwriting
Was the same as lacemaking to eyesight.
The paper was so thin it skinned air.

The hand was fire and the page tinder.
Everything burned away except the one
Place they singled out between fingers

Held over a letter pad they set aside
For the long evenings of their leave-takings,
Always asking after what they kept losing,

Always performing—even when a shadow
Fell across the page and they knew the answer
Was not forthcoming—the same action:

First the leaning down, the pen becoming
A staff to walk fields with as they vanished
Underfoot into memory. Then the letting up,

**The lighter stroke, which brought back
Cranesbill and thistle, a bicycle wheel
Rusting: an iron circle hurting the grass**

Again and the hedges veiled in hawthorn
Again just in time for the May Novenas
Recited in sweet air on a road leading

To another road, then another one, widening
To a motorway with four lanes, ending in
A new town on the edge of a city

They will never see. And if we say
An art is lost when it no longer knows
How to teach a sorrow to speak, come, see

The way we lost it: stacking letters in the attic,
Going downstairs so as not to listen to
The fields stirring at night as they became

Memory and in the morning as they became
Ink; what we did so as not to hear them
Whispering the only question they knew

By heart, the only one they learned from all
Those epistles of air and unreachable distance,
How to ask: *is it still there?*

Boland, *A Woman Without a Country* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014),
pp. 3-4. Listen to Boland reading the poem at

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/25/the-lost-art-of-letter-writing>