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STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

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Poetry Media Service

REBUILDING ARCHETYPES

Eavan Boland reinvented Irish poetry to make room for female poets.

By Carmine Starnino
Poetry Media Services

We open on a tiny flat in Dublin. A young poet sits by a window, writing. But something is wrong. The poem—eloquent, sonorous, carefully crafted—feels off. Studying the page, she suddenly realizes why, and the reason hurts harder for having been so easy to miss: she edited herself out.

“Being a woman,” Eavan Boland later explains in her memoir *Object Lessons* (1995), “I had entered into a life for which poetry has no name.” No name because Ireland had no models for writing about being a mother, daughter, or wife. Here was a cause begging to be espoused. But championing the poetic merit of “wholly female” subjects is useless if a poet is still at the mercy of inherited doubts about what she can say about those subjects. Old styles, argues Boland, can’t be trusted for shifts of consciousness. After all, by clogging the psychological channels between self and style, convention doesn’t just trick us into seeing certain attitudes as trivial, it ensures that we don’t catch on until too late. Boland’s dilemma, therefore, was intriguing: she had an open field, but not necessarily a free hand. Using existing forms to register what she felt as a woman meant tradition’s decorum police could—and did—quietly impose their own artificial perceptions. How, then, to speak for yourself? The answer was to reboot Irish poetry’s available modes, an achievement Boland clinched with two key books: *The Journey* (1987) and *Outside History* (1990).

New *Collected Poems* (which updates the 1996 collection, *An Origin Like Water*) brings together Boland’s 11 titles, along with two early poems and verse-play excerpts. The book lays bare the drama of Boland’s breakthrough, as well as the drop-off in what followed. As it is, the trailblazing is fascinating to track. A first stage—*New Territory* (1967), *The War Horse* (1975), and *In Her Own Image* (1980)—is full of false starts, wheel spinners, and wet fingers in the wind. We’re given retellings of Irish myths, intricately and audibly rhymed. We’re given allegorized landscapes and historical colloquies. Luckily, such ideas soon find sharper expression, hinted at by the arrival, in *In Her Own Image*, of a Plathian defiance:

Flaming
tinderling
I’ll singe
a page of
history
for these my sisters.
—From “Witching”

Second stage begins with *Night Feed*. Thanks to Plath, Boland’s line lengths tighten visibly, assume a curt cadence. Bishop’s influence also grabs hold, and under her intervention Boland begins to shed the notion of poetry as a staged arrangement of images and themes. Having moved from city to suburb and given birth, she now logs her surroundings—a washing machine, nappies, milk bottles—with the intensity of someone aware that an entire way of life risks lapsing unrecorded without her: “And still no page / scores the low music / of our outrage.” Fully achieved poems where we hear this “low music” (“Domestic Interior,” “Degas’s Laundresses,” “Woman in Kitchen”) tinker with a discovery that keeps its powder dry until her next book: diction as iconoclasm. Refusing to be cowed by accents not her own, Boland uses plainness (“my mother tongue”) to cut ties with the canon.

The Journey (1987) completes Boland’s aesthetic dissent, unveils a voice “hardened by / the need to be ordinary.” The poems mark time, take stock, note the hour. Pent-up, they pack in a lot: “Irish whisky, lipstick, / an empty glass, / oyster crêpe-de-Chine.” The nervous energy of so much internalized sense data leads to an exceptionally wide tonal range: satiric, skeptical, tender, impertinent. All this Boland joins up in stanzas of sumptuous clarity that practically beg to be read aloud. It’s also a clarity that trusts its own power of description, and thus feels no anxiety about being misunderstood. In this way, poems like “The Oral Tradition,” “The Women,” and “Nocturne” deliver major feminist statements that rely, for their effect, on a counterpoint of “singing innuendoes.” One of the high points, surely, of English-language poetry, and a hard act to follow.

Except that she did it again. *Outside History* (1990) is an absolute page-turner. Much of the book is given over to filling in the “sequence of evicted possibilities” that, for Boland, defines female history. Sound programmatic? It isn’t. Feverishly creative, more like it. Irish myths, those she blames for womankind’s archetypal reputation as passive, are rebuilt from scratch with entirely new ingredients. And at the heart of the project stands Boland: housewife, daughter, and mother, seeking to set “the truth to rights” as much for her own good as for her historical sisters. We get strange alter egos or speakers who, looking back, emerge with vivid, accumulated memories of a reimagined past. Shouldering much of this work is Boland’s language, which has finally caught up with its ambitions and, in its achieved state, persuasively redefines poetic originality not as virile distinctiveness (à la Heaney) but as verbal subtlety that keeps adding surprises to itself. Her vocabulary is so discriminating (“losses in the air so fractional / they could be // fragrances which just fell from it”) that each word wears the complex self-investigation that brought it into being. The result is a form that feels uniquely hers: disciplined, compressed, unemphatic, and airy. What next?

Third stage. Boland, now teaching in the U.S., tries to catch the slipstream of her last two books, and nearly does it with *In a Time of Violence* (1994). I say “nearly” because, alongside exemplary poems like “Lava Cameo,” we find a high number of strained epiphanies. Most of these can be blamed on thematic doggedness: a poet desperate to find the sorts of moments that throw up the big questions. But while *In a Time of Violence* has some good pieces, *The Lost Land* (1998) and *Against Love Poetry* (2001) arrive with their innovatory force entirely mislaid. Boland has become someone who knows what she’s known for, and overindulges expectations. This is what happens, you realize, when the message runs on after the music for it has fallen away. Boland is eager to take her place in literary history, and portrays herself accordingly. At the end, she curates a return visit to that long-ago desk, now occupied by another young woman. “I wrote like that once. / But this is different. / This time, when she looks up, I will be there.” True, but tuneless.

Carmine Starnino’s newest book of poems, *This Way Out*, is forthcoming from Gaspereau Press in spring 2009. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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Submissions sought to:

Star

P.O. Box 29
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S.A.S.E. for returns

--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or libelable material.

Words You Can Use:

Aventurine: This is golden or green flecked glass, perhaps mica chips inside quartz.

Batophobia: When you have a fear of high places, and a horror of being close to high buildings, then you have this problem. It’s not what you thought, is it?

Consuetude: A custom that has been established is this.

Gastrolater: A person named this is known to eat like a glutton.

Chance

There is a slight chance,
Although it is no one’s fascination,
That I have become entranced in the way life works.
For instance,
The dark ages have come,
And those who lived suffered.
Yet, we are the generation who live with no worries,
And we are the people who have come to not remember
the past,
We speak only of the future,
And of what it foretells.

The difference between that and I,
Is that I speak and think only of the past.
The reasoning is because the future frightens me.
As weak and preposterous as that sounds,
I am more afraid of what the future beholds,
Then I am of being trapped in a sand pit with snakes.
There is a truth behind that, though.

“I am not scared” is a childish and deliberate misuse of mental ability.

The brain does odd things in such a manner that I cannot explain.

It is a task that I have no interest in observing,
And although I have no interest in observing the future as well,
I will enlighten you in surpassing this and explaining my future self.

My future self has no explanation.
I cannot tell you what I will be,
Why I will be that,
Where I will be,
Or who will accompany me on my life journey.
All I can say is I will not be here.
Here is just a small page in my novel,
And I plan to finish up this novel with a story worth telling.

My present self has no will to create my future self,
Although a great tragedy will unfold,
I have no reason to want to know what future I will have.
And though my future is wild and unpredictable,
My present self will remain tame under the laws of nature.
My reasoning is self explanatory,
Then again one’s perspective can only go as far as their mind,
Until it arrives at another’s mind.
The confusion sets in,
And sanity is tested.

Written by Brenna Coffman
Baird, Texas

American Life In Poetry

Column 216

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Judy Loest lives in Knoxville and, like many fine Appalachian writers, her poems have a welcoming conversational style, rooted in that region’s storytelling tradition. How gracefully she sweeps us into the landscape and the scene!

Faitth

Leaves drift from the cemetery oaks onto late grass,
Sun-singed, smelling like straw, the insides of old barns.

The stone angel’s prayer is uninterrupted by the sleeping
Vagrant at her feet, the lone squirrel, furtive amid the litter.

Someone once said my great-grandmother, on the day she died,
rose from her bed where she had lain, paralyzed and mute
For two years following a stroke, and dressed herself—the good
Sunday dress of black crepe, cotton stockings, sensible,
lace-up shoes.

I imagine her coiling her long white braid in the silent house,
Lying back down on top of the quilt and folding her hands,
Satisfied. I imagine her born-again daughters, brought up

In that tent-revival religion, called in from kitchens and fields

To stand dismayed by her bed like the sisters of Lazarus,
Waiting for her to breathe, to rise again and tell them what to do.

Here, no cross escapes the erosion of age, no voice breaks
The silence; the only certainty in the crow’s flight
Or the sun’s measured descent is the coming of winter.

Even the angel’s outstretched arms offer only a formulated

Grace, her blind blessings as indiscriminate as acorns,
Falling on each of us, the departed and the leaving.

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