

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

[Soundbye from Eavan Boland]

“When you and I were first in love we drove
to the borders of Connacht
and entered a wood there.
Look down you said: this was once a famine road.
I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass
rough-cast stone had
disappeared into as you told me
in the second winter of their ordeal, in
1847, when the crop had failed twice,
Relief Committees gave
the starving Irish such roads to build.
Where they died, there the road ended
and ends still.”

Alison Stagner, Host

“I’ve often said that when I was young it was easier to have a political murder in a poem than a baby,” Eavan Boland told *Believer* magazine in 2014 about when she began writing in the mid-60s. Four weeks after Boland’s passing in her hometown of Dublin, we want to celebrate the ways she drew up a new science of cartography for Irish poetry—one that included women in their everyday lives. One that depicted children, the routines of the suburbs, marriage, and then radically, that laid this map over received ideas about Irish history, about poetic form. Her poems elegantly re-charted the tensions of history, memory and legends, with the unnamed.

I’m Alison Stagner, your guest host for today, and the Communications Manager at Seattle Arts & Lectures. Because Seattle is under shelter-in-place, I’m recording this from my living room—so please excuse the audio quality. But we weren’t going to let the coronavirus stop us from bringing you *SAL/on air*, our collection of engaging talks from the world’s best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures.

It’s fitting that Boland’s last collection is called *The Historians* and, published posthumously by Norton, will forcefully undercut centuries of erasure, as is her hallmark. Even now, and perhaps more so, in this pandemic, Eavan speaks to us about the importance of the overlooked and the mundane. When we look back at this time, what will we remember most? Wood and ivy, grass and stone. And opening road.

This is *SAL/on air*.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Eavan Boland

I'm really going to read some of my work and say how it came about. And you know, without real preamble, I'm going to read a very brief passage from a book of prose I wrote called *Object Lessons*. And this is a page or so:

"In the early days of October in the year 1909, a woman entered a Dublin hospital near the center of the city. The building is still there. If you approach from the south, with the Dublin hills behind you, and you look down a tunnel of grace, made by the houses of Fitzwilliam and Merrion Squares, your view will end abruptly in this. The National Maternity Hospital, red brick and out of character, blocking the vista. The rooms inside are functional and light-eating. They show no air of that zest for proportion which was once the mask of the Augustan oppressor. October is a beautiful month in the city of Dublin, and if you turn around and you go back toward the hills, away from the hospital, the roads are narrow and gracious above the canal. The woman who entered the hospital might have passed them as she made her way to it and, if for instance, she drove around Stephen's Green, having arrived on the late morning train from Drogheda, she might also have noticed a trick of light peculiar to that time of year. In the dark corridor of Lower Leeson Street, sunlight cuts the houses in half. Halfway up the brick, the reflection of the houses opposite builds another street, chimneys and roofs and gutters made of unglittering shadow. But she might not have come that way. She might have traveled down the unglamorous back streets that lead more directly to the hospital. Fenian Street and Hogan Place, past the mills and past the Dodder River on its way to the Liffey. Up the slight gradient, which would still in that year have been cobbled. The pre-winter chill, which can be felt on some October mornings in Dublin, could have struck extra music out of the horses hooves. It isn't a long drive, but whatever she saw that morning is lost. Whatever that journey she took yielded—the child with a hoop who never existed, the woman with a red hat I am now inventing—they were her last glimpses of the outside world. And this is the way we make the past. This is the way I will make it here, listening for hooves, glimpsing the red hat which was never there in the first place, and giving eyesight and evidence to a woman I never knew and cannot now recover. And for all our violations, the past waits for us. The road from the train to the hospital opens out over and over again, vacant and glittering, offering shadows and hats and hoops. And again, and again, I visited and reinvented. But the woman who actually traveled it had no such freedom. Hers was a real journey and she never came back. On October the tenth 1909, she died in The National Maternity Hospital and she was 31 years of age and she was my grandmother."

The reason I chose that brief piece of prose is because of all the things, I think, as you get older as a poet, you look back to the shape of things that influenced you. And the thing that most influenced me was the growing sense I had in Ireland of a huge rift there, a distance between the past and history. Ireland is a small country with a compelling history. And in many ways its history formulated from, I suppose, the establishment of the state in 1920. And before that, is, in many ways, understandably, a history of heroes. But I didn't see my name or the name of people I knew in that history. And I did not think that we needed to be a nation of heroes. And so the history was the official version of who we were, and the past was something different.

The past was really that place of shadows and whispers and disappearances, which is much closer, it seemed to me, to the truth, really, of everything.

This poem was written at the time when I was trying to make out those huge differences. It's a poem called "That the Science of Cartography is Limited." And you know, it's about the fact that in 1846, in 1847, Ireland faltered under this terrible potato famine, especially in 1847. In 1847 was the first time the relief committees came over to Ireland to feed the people who by that time had a year of fever and hunger and were really weak. And they wouldn't give them food unless they worked for the food and they had no strength to work. And so, if you go to the woods, especially in Mayo and Meath, and you look down at the woods, sometimes you will see these little roads that run out into nowhere and are called "famine roads." And that was part of the work given to the people, that they should build roads. And where they stop is where those people died, who had no strength to do it. But those roads do not turn up on any map. And so we have scar tissue of Irish history but not mapped. And this was a time when I was trying to think, "Why do we not note these things?"

—and not simply by the fact that this shading of
forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
the gloom of cypresses,
is what I wish to prove.

When you and I were first in love we drove
to the borders of Connacht
and entered a wood there.

Look down you said: this was once a famine road.
I looked down at ivy and the scutch grass
rough-cast stone had
disappeared into as you told me
in the second winter of their ordeal, in

1847, when the crop had failed twice,
Relief Committees gave
the starving Irish such roads to build.

Where they died, there the road ended

and ends still and when I take down
the map of this island, it is never so
I can say here is
the masterful, the apt rendering of
the spherical as flat, nor
an ingenious design which persuades a curve
into a plane,
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,
and finds no horizon
will not be there.

This poem is, again, along those lines. It's a poem called "Quarantine." And it is very much about the past. It's a reference made in a book, which was once very widely read in Ireland called *Mo Scéal Féin*, Irish which means "My story."

At the start of the 20th century, a man—who was then an old man, he was a priest—Father Peadar Ó Laoghaire wrote a memoir looking back into the villages of the famine, and one of them called "An Gorta." And he remembered being a little boy and the story that he had heard that, in 1847, a young couple had left the workhouse—these terrible places where people went—walked back together on a bitter winter night to the cabin where they'd had such life as they'd had. And in the morning, they were found dead. It was a really terrible night and—but her feet were held against his chest. He tried to warm them as she died.

Those people last for about four sentences in that book. They have no name and they have no history. We just know them through this one moment that gleams out of that darkness. This poem was partly in my mind a reproach to the love poem, which deals so much with glamour and so much with desire, and so rarely includes these great pieces of human steadfastness.

"Quarantine."

In the worst hour of the worst season
of the worst year of a whole people
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.
He was walking—they were both walking—north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.
He lifted her and put her on his back.
He walked like that west and west and north.
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.
But her feet were held against his breastbone.
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.
There is no place here for the inexact
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.
There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.

Also what they suffered. How they lived.
And what there is between a man and woman.
And in which darkness it can best be proved.

The one other poem that I—Thank you—the one other poem that really is a poem that followed for me from these thoughts, is about the past that is not only so elusive but is also so lost. And, you know, I was just very conscious of these sorts of, you know, if we're not going to write it as history then what will be lost to us? And then, how much will we have? And I was conscious of that in my own personal history, that that would come up as a question. Not only memory but the corruptions of memory.

This is a poem called "Love." My husband, Kevin, and in fact for us both, we went many, many years ago to The International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. It's really a wonderful program. And with these two tiny children with us, both under the age of three. And one of them became really deathly ill in that city, and we truly thought she would die. And she made a wonderful recovery there, but she had meningitis and she was 11 years—11 months of age. And she made this recovery.

And then years later, I went back to read for the Iowa Writers Workshop. And you know, before I did that, I went to the bridge in Iowa City where I had met Kevin in the snow one time, when we really did not know if this little girl would live or die. And the poem is really built on this huge mystery of memory. You know, so I stood there. I remembered that day and I could see Kevin as clearly in front of me as practically that he was there. But of course, that's illusion. And so much of what memory is, is illusion. This poem is built on the great sixth book of the *Ennead*, in which Osiris goes down finally into the underworld. And his old friends and enemies come up to shout at him but the words turn into whispers because it's the underworld. And this is just a form of love and memory.

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 was 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 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.

Now the place where I wrote that piece of prose at the very beginning has a particular meaning for me, The National Maternity Hospital. I'm lucky enough to teach at Stanford University and lucky enough to teach really wonderful young poets there. But you know, it certainly would be one of my most favorite jobs ever. But obviously there is just one other. The National Maternity Hospital is right in the middle of the city of Dublin, you just can't miss it. It's, you know, it stands between you and Trinity College. If you look down, it's right there on Merrion Square. And it is, in fact, the hospital in the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter of James Joyce's "Ulysses," which is really not something the hospital likes to advertise. You're really going to go a long way through that hospital before you see a plaque to James Joyce. Anyway.

So, you know, in 1994, the hospital asked me—it was, you know, a hundred years of, they had been there since 1884. And they asked me to be their Poet-in-Residence for that year. And you know, it was a very Irish job. It had no job description of any kind. And, you know, when I was in the city, people used to say to me, you know, "What are you doing at The National Maternity Hospital?" You know, "Do you spend your time with the mothers and the new babies?" and then you know. Now, I never went near the mothers and the new babies. For one reason, which

is that my own children were born in The National Maternity Hospital and just, the last thing I would have liked to have seen when they were born was the Poet-in-Residence, so. But they did give me a room and I, you know, I'm going to read this for Amanda. It's not always and it's a pleasure to—two pomegranates in one evening.

This poem is called "The Pomegranate." Fact recognizes something that I think so many of us here recognize, the sort of surprise of having a child who turns into a teenager. Built on the great Ceres myth where, Ceres, you know, has her child taken down to the Underworld and gets her back for half the year, which is really the myth of the seasons. Half the year, the spring and summer, she comes back to her mother. Half the year she stays in the Underworld, the autumn and winter. The child could have come back entirely but, you know, eats a pomegranate.

The only legend I have ever loved is
the story of a daughter lost in hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.
And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere. And have.
As a child in exile in
a city of fogs and strange consonants,
I read it first and at first I was
an exiled child in the crackling dusk of
the underworld, the stars blighted. Later
I walked out in a summer twilight
searching for my daughter at bed-time.
When she came running I was ready
to make any bargain to keep her.
I carried her back past whitebeams
and wasps and honey-scented buddleias.
But I was Ceres then and I knew
winter was in store for every leaf
on every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed. And for me.

It is winter
and the stars are hidden.
I climb the stairs and stand where I can see
my child asleep beside her teen magazines,
her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.
The pomegranate! How did I forget it?
She could have come home and been safe
and ended the story and all
our heart-broken searching but she reached

out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.
She put out her hand and pulled down
the French sound for apple and
the noise of stone and the proof
that even in the place of death,
at the heart of legend, in the midst
of rocks full of unshed tears
ready to be diamonds by the time
the story was told, a child can be
hungry. I could warn her. There is still a chance.
The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured.
The suburb has cars and cable television.
The veiled stars are above ground.
It is another world. But what else
can a mother give her daughter but such
beautiful rifts in time?
If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.
The legend will be hers as well as mine.
She will enter it. As I have.
She will wake up. She will hold
the papery flushed skin in her hand.
And to her lips. I will say nothing.

I'm gonna read just one more piece of prose, if I may. And because it feeds into this argument about the past and history. It was an important thing to me to think about those things. But my mother, who was really my great friend, had absolutely no interest of any kind in that, and she thought it was a complete waste of time to talk about the past or history, or try to make a distinction between them. And she never ever spoke about her family history. She had zero interest in it. None at all, no matter what I asked her. She would say those things are waste of time. And she lived, really blessedly really, near me in the city of Dublin. I used to go down, especially when my children were small. I really pressed her to know something about her past. Her mother had died in a fever ward in The National Maternity Hospital. Her father had been drowned at sea. But she didn't really provide much detail. And I knew that if she didn't, it really would be lost. And then one evening when we were talking, out of nowhere—like a door springing open—she told me a story about her grandfather, just so utterly bizarre that I was stumped. And I said to her, "Is that true?" She said me, "I don't know." So. And that, I think, was my mother's negotiation between the past and history. Here's the story. I put it into object essence, and it comes with a particular set of warnings on it.

My grandmother came from a family of millers. Sometime after the famine they left a small fishing town of Milford in Donegal. Hard pressed as they were, they must still have missed the idiosyncrasy of their own place. The sight of Mulroy Bay in February light and the main street with a steep climb up the side of a hill. They moved east and south to the town of Dundalk and there the business failed. And they moved again to Leitrim where her father was born. It was to

him that legend clung. And the way I built that legend now is the way I heard it from my mother, out of rumor and fossil fact and half memory. He was a small man, apparently, compact and saturnine in the way of many Western Irish people. If he was anything like his son, who I met for a few hours many years ago, he had eloquent and strained features, fine profile, close set and obstinate eyes, and something strained and pinched about it all, which kept him well away from beauty.

He grew up in Leitrim and sometime in his early manhood, I imagined the early 1870s, he fell in love with a local girl. I know so little about her or about him that I have to become the fictional interventionist here and say that she was, of course, winning and expressive and true to him, and that he loved her stubbornly. But there was an obstacle. She was a younger sister. And in the manner of fables, her older sister was plain and deserving, and on no account to be slighted by having the younger girl marry first. And so it went around. The parents insisted he should offer his suit to the older sister. They might have offered him inducements, but I doubt it. The inducement can only have been local custom and iron decorum. There were no dowries. These were poor people reduced in circumstance by a difficult century, utterly vulnerable to the sickness of a heifer, or a farthing's change in the price of wheat. They would have brought to bear on him the influence of local opinion and approval. He must marry the older girl, and that was that. And he was implacable. It would be the younger one, and that was all. The younger girl retained her love for him, and he for her, and finally—and now the story quickens and gets unsteady and fills with unknown passages of time and event.

The impasse yielded. Love thrived, and the wedding day was set. I have no document or certificate. I have Mary Ann's marriage certificate. Not this one. Mary Ann was my grandmother. In any case, the cool signatures of the witnesses and the sacristan could do no justice to the event. The wedding day came. It seems safe to imagine a small granite church in the middle of a townland. And the weather more than likely gray and overcast. And perhaps the turnout a bit more than usual because of the notoriety of the whole thing, the struggle of wills, and all the gossip and curiosity incurred on that account. The bride came dressed in white and heavily veiled. The vows were taken and repeated and said by the bride and the groom. And for a single moment, when the priest pronounced them man and wife, it must have seemed to him that some wound of ill luck or misadventure in his own life had undergone a miraculous healing. Then he lifted her veil. It was not the face he loved. Convention had prevailed. The family had smuggled in the older, plainer girl and he was bound to her by iron convention and legality for the rest of his life. But they had 13 children, so.

When I came to write "Domestic Violence" I was very, certainly wanted to revisit one of, really, the darkest times in Irish history, probably the decade of the 70s. When, you know, the great hopes I think we had had, certainly in the 60s when I was a student, that our differences would become our strengths, had not happened. And in that time in the 70s, for the first time as the civil violence in the north spread, we would turn on our radios and our televisions and see these heartbreaking funerals that were to last for the next 20 years. Irish people killing Irish people, the worst nightmare of that country. When I went back later, I thought to myself, of, how the private life and the public life mirror one another in these ways you never see at the

time. How the quarreling husband and wife mirror that huge fracture in the national life, which is also in humanity. When I went back there I certainly saw it differently than I saw it at the time. And this is the poem "Domestic Violence."

It was winter, lunar, wet. At dusk
Pewter seedlings became moonlight orphans.
Pleased to meet you meat to please you
said the butcher's sign in the window in the village.

Everything changed the year that we got married.
And after that we moved out to the suburbs.
How young we were, how ignorant, how ready
to think the only history was our own.

And there was a couple who quarreled into the night,
Their voices high, sharp:
nothing is ever entirely
right in the lives of those who love each other.

In that season suddenly our island
Broke out its old sores for all to see.
We saw them too.
We stood there wondering how

the salt horizons and the Dublin hills,
the rivers, table mountains, Viking marshes
we thought we knew
had been made to shiver

into our ancient twelve by fifteen television
which gave them back as gray and grayer tears
and killings, killings, killings,
then moonlight-colored funerals:

nothing we said
not then, not later,
fathomed what it is
is wrong in the lives of those who hate each other.

And if the provenance of memory is
only that—remember, not atone—
and if I can be safe in
the weak spring light in that kitchen, then

why is there another kitchen, spring light
always darkening in it and
a woman whispering to a man
over and over *what else could we have done?*

We failed our moment or our moment failed us.
The times were grand in size and we were small.
Why do I write that
when I don't believe it?

We lived our lives, were happy, stayed as one.
Children were born and raised here
and are gone,
including ours.

As for that couple did we ever
find out who they were
and did we want to?
I think we know. I think we always knew.

This is a poem from that sequence of *Domestic Violence*, which is a poem of the garrison. It's something that is difficult to live down or live away from even when you are third generation Irish as I am. The memory of Dublin as a garrison city. And you know, the problem about the garrison, I mean, in many ways we have come further than that, I hope. But the problems about the garrison in an occupied city is they bring all good things with them. They bring silks and swords and dances and luxuries to a poor country. This is called "How the Dance Came to the City." The famous and bitter level of seductions of Irish girls by British soldiers and the memory of that.

It came with the osprey, the cormorants, the air
at the edge of the storm, on the same route as
the blight and with the nightly sweats that said fever.

It came with the scarlet tunics and rowel spurs,
with the epaulettes and their poisonous drizzle of gold,
with the boots, the gloves, the whips, the flash of the cuirasses.

It came with a sail riding the empire-blue haze
of the horizon growing closer, gaining and then
it was there: the whole creaking orchestra of salt and canvas.

And here is the cargo, deep in the hold of the ship,
stored with the coiled ropes and crated spice and coal,
the lumber and boredom of arrival, underneath

timbers shifting and clicking from the turnaround
of the tides locked at the mouth of Dublin Bay, is
the two-step, the quick step, the whirl, the slow return.

Tonight in rooms where skirts appear steeped in tea
when they are only deep in shadow and where heat
collects at the waist, the wrist, is wet at the base of the neck,

the secrets of the dark will be the truths of the body
a young girl feels and hides even from herself as she lets fall
satin from her thighs to her ankles, as she lets herself think

how it started, just where: with the minuet, the quadrille,
the chandeliers glinting, the noise wild silk makes and
her face flushed and wide-eyed in the mirror of his sword.

As I said, my mother was really my great hero and this poem is for her. My mother loved domestic objects. She loved cups and pots and pans and—and all of those things which really disappeared in our time. All the things I remember from my childhood in Dublin, when I was a little child in our kitchen in winter, just gone and replaced. And it made me sad to think of, you know. There's no environmentalism for those things. Nobody saves pots and pans. Nobody cares about them. But I did. And I remember them. And this is called "An Elegy for My Mother in Which She Scarcely Appears."

I knew we had to grieve for the animals
a long time ago: weep for them, pity them.
I knew it was our strange human duty
to write their elegies after we arranged their demise.
I was young then and able for the paradox.
I am older now and ready with the question:
What happened to them all? I mean to those
old dumb implements which have
no eyes to plead with us like theirs,
no claim to make on us like theirs? I mean –
there was a singing kettle. I want to know
why no one tagged its neck or ringed the tin
base of its extinct design or crouched to hear
its rising shriek in winter or wrote it down with
the birds in their blue sleeves of air
torn away with the trees that sheltered them.
And there were brass fire dogs which lay out
all evening on the grate and in the heat
thrown at them by the last of the peat fire

but no one noted down their history or put them
in the old packs under slate-blue moonlight.
There was a wooden clothes horse, absolutely steady
without sinews, with no mane and no meadows
to canter in; carrying, instead of
landlords or Irish monks, rinsed tea cloths
but still, I would have thought, worth adding to
the catalogue of what we need, what we always need
as is my mother, on this Dublin evening of
fog crystals and frost as she reaches out to test
one corner of a cloth for dryness as the prewar
Irish twilight closes in and down on the room
and the curtains are drawn and here am I,
not even born and already a conservationist,
with nothing to assist me but the last
and most fabulous of beasts – language, language –
which knows, as I do, that it's too late
to record the loss of these things but does so anyway,
and anxiously, in case it shares their fate.

Eavan Boland

I want to finish here with a poem. I am, I think, you know, I have indeed written poems about marriage. But you know, I think if you're married—I'm a longtime married to a great husband—you always want to write a real poem about your real marriage. This is a real poem about my real marriage. It's called "Thanked Be Fortune." And I hope there are people in the room who recognize what I say. Kevin, my husband is a huge book collector, and therefore we had many, many contractual agreements about where these books would go or wouldn't go. And on every single one of them failed. So, you know, when we were first married, all those books came into the house and began to creep up the stairs and went into every room. We agreed they wouldn't, and finally, of course, and in our bedroom. And one day when I looked up at the shelves over our heads, you know, all of them seemed to be about the grisly deaths of men and women. You know, terrible love affairs and terrible things. And so I wrote this poem, "Thanked Be Fortune," is of course, from Thomas Wyatt's great line, and —

Did we live a double life?

I would have said

we never envied

the epic glory of the star-crossed.

I would have said

we learned by heart

the code marriage makes of passion — duty dailiness routine

But after dark when we went to bed

under the bitter fire

of constellations—

orderly, uninterested and cold,
at least in our case—
in the bookshelves just above our heads,
All through the hours of darkness
men and women
wept, cursed, kept and broke faith
and killed themselves for love.
Then it was dawn again.
Restored to ourselves,
we woke early and lay together
listening to our child crying, as if to birdsong,
with ice on the windowsills
and the grass eking out
the last crooked hour of starlight.

Thank you very much.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Alison Stagner, Host

We'll be back for more of Eavan's poems in a moment, but first, I wanted to tell you some quick ways you can engage with SAL programming, no matter where you are. Our remaining spring events for our 2019/20 Season will be presented virtually, with Min Jin Lee, author of the epic Korean-Japanese novel, *Pachinko*, on Monday, June 15, and historian Carol Anderson, who will deliver an urgent history—and present reality—of voter suppression in America. \$10 digital passes for both events are available now at lectures.org. And, for a summer of reading fun, we encourage you to join our free reading program Summer Book Bingo, which we present every year in partnership The Seattle Public Library. Adults and kids play along from May – September to be entered in a chance to win fabulous prizes—download your board at lectures.org Now, here's more from Eavan Boland and SAL Associate Director Rebecca Hoogs.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Rebecca Hoogs

Thank you. If you have a question, I invite you to pass them to the ushers in the aisle. A review of your *New Collected Poems* called you the love child of Yeats and Sylvia Plath. Are these the progenitors you would choose?

Eavan Boland

Well, it certainly would come as a surprise to the pair of them! No, I think that they're two poets that I have great admiration for and were very important poets to me. But I haven't seen myself in any odd family relation to them.

Rebecca Hoogs

Could you speak perhaps about your love for Yeats?

Eavan Boland

Yes, I mean, I think Yeats was the really first poet I read very intensely when I was 16 or 17. I know a lot of people must feel this about the people they read. But I had been out of the country as a child in London and in New York. And I came back, when I was 14 or 15, to Dublin and went to a boarding school there and finally began to read William Yeats' work. And was, you know, astonished at the effect it had on me. That, just somebody wrote these beautiful poems out of this city that I came from, but they couldn't really decipher because I hadn't lived there as a child. And I mean, it was partly placed to begin with, but of course, it was also his great spirit. And you know, I have never, I mean, sometimes you read poets and you love their work and you lose them a bit as you go on. I haven't ever lost him.

Rebecca Hoogs

You spoke in an interview of the disappearance of Edna St. Vincent Millay from the canon. And I wonder if you feel that there are other poets who have faded because they're off the radar perhaps of the dominant poetics or because they have suffered what you call "the mechanism of erasure."

Eavan Boland

It's a very interesting question what survives and what gets to be read and what is continually read. I think coming from a different country from the United States, that there is, in fact, a great difference between the canon and the tradition. That the canon is a very important and, has always been there to designate in every age, certain importances, but also certain exclusions. The tradition is a completely different thing. The tradition is one person who stands beside another person and says, "You have to read this. I read this wonderful poem, you mustn't miss it." And people read these poems and hand them from, you know, one to the other and remember them. And that tradition dominates over the canon. But it takes time to do so. Millay is a loved poet and a quoted poet, but she was not canonical in the 50s or 60s in the normal ways that's understood. I don't think that was to do with Millay as a woman poet at all. I think it was to do with the rise of modernism and the fear, of which modernism had mistakenly, I think, of the so-called "popular poet." And I think Millay suffered in that frame.

Rebecca Hoogs

I wonder what the next generation of Irish women poets are writing about. Are they following in your footsteps? Do they have similar subjects, different subjects?

Eavan Boland

They have their own feet in every possible way. And so, no, they're writing about wonderful things. I mean, a poet I particularly admire in Ireland is pulling me in. And I mean, she, you know, is writing this wonderful series of poems about the destruction, really, of a lot of the things in the new Ireland. I think there are a lot of subjects that both women and men are

writing about there. I think that, you know, the new Ireland will put pressure on poets to reconsider who they are.

Rebecca Hoogs

That leads to my next question, which was, in our current day and age, do you have a sense of, or — who or what are you afraid is being erased, or forgotten, or lost? You know, you've talked, you've written so poignantly and you read some of these poems tonight about individuals from your past or your country's past who didn't matter and so were forgotten. Do you feel that there are types of people, or subjects, that are being similarly lost today?

Eavan Boland

Yeah, I think they always are. I think it's a condition of life and art. I mean, I actually think that one of the most interesting things that ever happens to a young writer, every young writer— but I'll just put it in the frame of poetry—is that something happens to them. And for that moment, they think, "But it isn't important enough to be made into a poem." And if they can get past that moment, then they'll be the poet they want to be. But there's always erasure happening from the lives people live, from the way they think they should construct the past. Most people will say that the past that they value is always being overwritten, is always being lost. There isn't any way of keeping it. It's the nature of time. What the poem can do is take an experience at the moment and shelter it from the erosions of space and time and make it, in some ways, safe from that. And the poems I read that I love, I think of them as being safe from space and time.

Rebecca Hoogs

As you mentioned, you spend half the year in California. Do you consider yourself an expatriate writer?

Eavan Boland

No. I don't consider myself an expatriate writer. Not at all. I mean, I don't belong to the great generation of exiled writers, who really were the 20s and 30s in Ireland, nor the expatriates. I go back to Ireland every 10 weeks, and there is now a nonstop flight from San Francisco to Dublin. It works against the expatriate. Well, so I mean, no, I don't. I think expatriate and exile are terms of the psychologies of estrangement from a country. California is a majestic state and you know, I don't—I try not to think of Dublin when I'm in California. I try not to think of California when I'm in Dublin. They're both very compelling places.

Rebecca Hoogs

Has living in California influenced your writing?

Eavan Boland

Well, it's made the hinterland around the writing very rich. It's filled it with new questions. California has a great literary tradition, a great poetic literary tradition. You know, "In What Hour" by Rexroth, it means a lot to me that that comes out of the city of San Francisco. In these

environs some of the very big questions in poetry in the 20th century were raised. So I can weigh those questions differently than I might in Ireland, you know. But it's a hinterland, I think.

Rebecca Hoogs

Speaking of literary tradition, what is it that makes Ireland such a poetry-rich nation, and what can be done in America—or at least parts of it—to make it a more natural home for poetry, a place of inspiration, acceptance, nurture and celebration of poetry?

Eavan Boland

I'll try to answer, Rebecca, it's a big question. But, you know, I remember the— for many years, and still, the *Irish Times* sponsors these kind of wonderful literary competitions, the *Irish Times*. And they get whoever is around to judge them. And one year I was judging the poetry competition. So we got a wonderful poet and gave them the prize. Conor Brady was then the editor of the *Irish Times*, an absolutely excellent editor of a very divine paper. And he turned up to, you know, host the party. And you know, when Conor came in, he said—and I certainly never forgot this—he said, "You know something, we in the *Irish Times* have finally worked out what makes Irish poetry Irish poetry." And what we worked out, he said, was that although only 10 percent, you know, of the Irish people read poetry, 45 percent of them write it. And, you know, it is completely and utterly true. So you know, it is really—

Rebecca Hoogs

I think it's the same here, too. Given the rapidly changing face of Ireland today, do you think Irish women poets have a role to play in continuing to challenge and redefine what it means to be Irish in the 21st century?

Eavan Boland

Well, I think we have to be careful about that. I mean, I think we had a long struggle as a people with one person saying, "I'm more Irish than you." And I very strongly associate myself with Roddy Doyle and those writers who Roddy put on the *Playboy of the Western World* with a Nigerian Christy Mahon. You know, which everybody really, really liked that, and we love that. The country's changing. New people have come into it. I was saying to people: There is now a bus every Friday in Dublin, God bless us, which leaves from Dublin to Warsaw every Friday. In my day you couldn't get a bus there from Dublin to Bray, but now it goes to Warsaw. So, you know, the entire face of that country is changing. And so, I think we want to be very careful not to say there was an Irishness that was better than another Irishness. We don't know ten years from now what the Irish writer will look like. I mean, the thing about James Joyce was that's what he did and that's what he said. You know, "non serviam," he wasn't going to serve the omens of the past. He wasn't going to say, you know, there's only one way of being Irish. And Beckett the same. And I think you have to think that one of the strengths of Irish writing is it has been open to change. It has been open to new voices and it needs to remain so.

Rebecca Hoogs

Is Brigit, the Celtic Goddess of Poetry, honored by the women poets of Ireland?

Eavan Boland

I certainly—You know, I'm not sure about that question, so maybe I'll pass on it.

Rebecca Hoogs

The context for your poems provided by preparatory comments tonight made them seem much more personal, magnifying their power, and gave them more meaning. Have you or other poets ever considered publishing a book of poetry that includes such preparatory remarks to each poem?

Eavan Boland

It's a very interesting question. You know, I probably would give the puritanical answer and say: No, you don't want the prose besides the poetry. But wouldn't I love to read a book like that, you know, by Keats? Of course you'd love, you know, you'd love somebody to stand beside you and say, "This is what I really meant." You know, but, I don't know that that's really, you know, what you're meant to do. You know—

Rebecca Hoogs

The best American poetry does that a little bit.

Eavan Boland

Yes. And I love that. I mean, I love to have that thing beside me that, you know, is your kind of Virgilian guide through it. But I have to say that the poems I've loved and I've kept, that I've kept in my mind, have been without guidance.

Rebecca Hoogs

What are your children doing lately?

Eavan Boland

Well, that's a good question. They—both my daughters are in, I don't know if you'd call it? My younger daughter is a commodities trading investment banker. And I said to her, you know, "When we were young, neither your father nor I knew the meaning of one of those words." Anyway, so that's what she's doing. And my older daughter is a senior executive with Accenture, with the main client as Microsoft in the city of Dublin. So I'm in a—it's a completely different world. And, you know, and we, you know—I had the great pleasure once of meeting Michael Yates, who was the son of William Yates. He was a wonderful man, Michael Yates, God rest him, and he was very available to talk about his father. And you know he told me all these wonderful things about his father that, you know. His mother put a roast chicken in the room once, I remember, and she said when she went out, "Willy, pay attention to the chicken." You know, and he turned his back, of course, to talk, you know, to his friends, and when he came back the cat was sitting with the chicken. But I said to him what was the old rumor, which is you know, the thing of when I think of bankers, you know, that it is said that William Yates signed his checks "Yours sincerely, William Yates." And I said to Michael Yates, "Is that true?" And he said, "Probably." You know, he probably did that. So that was the pre-financial city, yeah.

Rebecca Hoogs

At the end of "Domestic Violence," the poems begin to meditate on age. And you've written elsewhere about plastic surgery. With the American culture's focus on youth, I wonder if you feel that the older woman is being erased from society, or what sort of violence is being done to women as they age?

Eavan Boland

I think that has been a question from the beginning of time. I mean, I think it's a very interesting question that you have. What is it that societies do when people don't seem as useful to them or as material to them? You know, Ireland, which had a very difficult relationship with the Catholic church and indeed women who had a difficult relationship with the church. It was my mother, who in many ways contested some of the church, who would say to me: In some ways the Catholic church were the first feminists in Europe because they advocated a life for women beyond childbearing. I mean, we have to think of both men and women as they grow older in societies that value youth. But it's not a new story, that. You know, one of the reasons that I was so anxious about the division between history and the past is because that will make the story of Ireland a history of heroes, history of strength. And therefore the people who barely survived, who lived their lives in terms of vulnerability and the extraordinary, just clinging to survival. Those people get erased. And it's not that they're older, it's that they're not strong. It's that they're not valuable. I think, you know, poetry, the arts— these things constantly have to commend to societies those values that are not visible and immediate.

Rebecca Hoogs

I wonder if you could talk about the difference between politics and art. Some would call your work both political and feminist. Yet you would not call yourself a feminist poet or a political poet. How, and maybe, why would you separate the concerns of the feminist from the concerns of the poet?

Eavan Boland

Well, I mean, feminism is—I've been a feminist since, you know, I was 20 and the Women's Movement began in Ireland. And, you know, women could not serve on juries, the marriage bar existed, women were fired from the public service the day they got married. These were legislative inequities that were taken to the European Court. They were not things that affected women, they affected all of a society. And, you know, I think I said this to a class today. You know, I remember when I belonged to the first, sort-of, level of the Women's Movement, going home to my father and saying, you know, "Women can't sit on juries. In fact, they could if they owned property and only 2% of Irish women do." And my father said to me, "Why would women want to sit on juries?" You know, and I was so taken aback by the answer. My mother, leaned very much to the feminist position, said to me, "Don't worry about that." She said, you know, "When I was in Paris, a man said to me: Women are too beautiful to vote." So, I mean, there was this long journey of the society through that. I'm not a feminist poet, because although feminism absolutely commends equality toward society and commends the consideration that equality is never for one gender or the other. It is for all. It isn't women that are affected if they can't sit on juries, it's everyone who was accused in a court system. But, I

think that, you know, poetry begins where all those certainties end. Poetry begins in this equal world of ambiguity and imagination and uncertainty. And you cannot leave those certainties however right-minded they are. That isn't what art is.

Rebecca Hoogs

Speaking of art, your mother was a noted painter, as you've mentioned. And paintings or etchings frequently appear in your poems. Did your mother's craft influence the way you look at things or depict things in your work? Or how you think about representation?

Eavan Boland

What influenced me most about my mother was, I think, something slightly different. My mother was an orphan on a ward of court. And left school early and went to college of art, famous college of art in Dublin. Won a scholarship and went to Paris. And, you know, so when—I was her fifth child and I remember in the house that when my mother painted. Painters, really especially in Northern European countries, especially in countries like England and Ireland where the day is short in the winter, painters really just care about the light. You know, how much light will they get to paint? And that was always the question of my mother, you know, what sort of light was it? How much light would there be? How much could she paint in that? That made a huge impression on me. Because poetry, of course, has built something which I have no particular relation to: the idea of inspiration. No painter would sit around waiting for inspiration. And that, you know, their life would be gone by the time they got it. You know, so that sense of the discipline of an art that didn't just wait for that, but had this practical, committed thing. That made a great impression.

Rebecca Hoogs

You mentioned this morning that you always have a "top 10 best poems of all time" list.

Eavan Boland

Yes.

Rebecca Hoogs

What are some of those poems? And are there any contemporary poems on the list?

Eavan Boland

Well, the top 10 is a rather ancient list. The top 10 poems that, as I said, when I teach my students at Stanford, I teach a big course called Poetry & Poetics. And, you know, I always want to say to them, you know, "This is the first of the top 10 poems." I'm always hoping they're going to say to me—but they don't, they say, "What are the other nine?" That's always what they do. But I think the top, top poem for me will always be William Blake's "Tyger, Tyger." And the reason is because it's this great, great poem that doesn't come out of anything exact or real. And I did say to the class, I went to see his great drawings of the tiger. And of course they're not tigers at all, you know. He never saw a tiger, and you know that the faces of his tigers all look like dogs or teddy bears or you know, I don't know where he got them. There weren't a lot of tigers around when he was writing. So, and yet he manages to write this

absolutely essential poem of power and vision and strength. You know, when, you know, "When the stars threw down their spears and watered heaven with their tears," you know, this magnificent poem. So to me, you know, that great visionary quality—it's not a poem built on technical sophistication. It's built on this extraordinarily powerful vision. And you know, I think it reminds you that the poem can come from anywhere. That you look at a great poem and you don't say, "How beautiful that is." You always say, "How true that is. That's so true." And I look at the "Tyger, Tyger" and I think how true that poem is. You know, there are the other nine that I have.

Rebecca Hoogs

What would be—what would we be surprised to know about you?

Eavan Boland

Oh, that thing that you would be surprised to know about me, which is, you know, the really lost part of my life, is I am a huge techie. I can build computers. Nobody at Stanford wants to know that. As you can imagine, Stanford University has its own interest in this matter. So yeah, I am completely techie. I'm an early adopter. I love all that stuff. I think it's right magic and nobody wants a poet who does that. So, that's what it is.

Rebecca Hoogs

We have time for one last question. In April we are hosting Edward Hirsch at the Poetry Series. And the two of you have just completed an edited volume on sonnets. And I wonder if you could tell us about the project, and also perhaps why this audience should come to hear Mr. Hirsch read.

Eavan Boland

You have to come and hear Eddie Hirsch. He really was—Eddie Hirsh and I set out on this really privileged project called, it's now called *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*. And we collaborated on that. It was really a magical collaboration for me. I mean, Eddie can talk to you about it. But you know, we did a lot of that from email. We did a lot of it. But Eddie had all these wonderful, wonderful ideas in that book. There's a section in that book called "The Sonnet Goes to Different Lengths." These are all the sonnets of 16 lines, 19 lines, 18 lines. I'd write back to Eddie and say, why is this sonnet—anyway. So, you know, and he is so erudite and so wonderful sense of humor, and just a great spirit. A wonderful poet and a great spirit in poetry and he really, with ourselves, we brought that project forward. Here was this little piece of poetic real estate, you know, just 14 lines. I think it's Edna Millay who has that beautiful opening sonnet: "I will put chaos into 14 lines." You know, and, you know, here was this little piece that had been such a wonderful vehicle for poet after poet after poet. "The Cross of Snow" by Longfellow, these extraordinary pieces of work. And we were delighted to do that until we got the permission statements. We were rocked back on our heels, but never mind, we've gone through all that. And so it was a journey for us, from that 15th century right up to the 20th, in to that extraordinary adventure that these 14 lines have been for poetry. It's a real family history of poetry.

Rebecca Hoogs

Thank you very much.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Alison Stagner, Host

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