

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



This Moment

A neighborhood.
At dusk.

Things are getting ready
to happen
out of sight.

Stars and moths.
And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.
One window is yellow as butter.

A woman leans down to catch a child
who has run into her arms
this moment.

Stars rise.
Moths flutter.
Apples sweeten in the dark.

Eavan Boland¹

Reflections

Eavan Boland died one week ago today at the age of 75. I met her only once, but loved her poems a thousand times over and for years. Hers has been one of the foremost voices in contemporary poetry and in Irish arts and letters specifically. Much of her work centers on an appreciation for the beautiful ordinary, and for domestic and suburban life. She has articulated, in poems and otherwise, the tension she felt—particularly as a young female poet, who was also a mother and wife—in the male-dominated literary world of the 1960s and 70s. She was called “disruptive” though as she explains, “I began to write in an Ireland where the word ‘woman’ and the word ‘poet’ seemed to be in some sort of magnetic opposition to each other ... I wanted to put the life I lived into the poem I wrote. And the

¹ “This Moment” by Eavan Boland from *In a Time of Violence*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Used by permission.

life I lived was a woman's life. And I couldn't accept the possibility that the life of the woman would not, or could not, be named in the poetry of my own nation."²

I have written about this poem before and appreciate anew what I observed earlier—the poem's present tense. One of the first things young students must learn is that when writing about literature, one always uses the present tense: the novel is perpetually unfolding, even if one has closed the cover; the poem is always the poem, even as we conclude it. And, in this case, the present tense of the poem is a strange but welcome assurance in light of the poet's sudden death that something is still happening, still living, still being. Is, is, is.

The poet draws us to *this* moment (as in, this current moment, this right-now moment, now this, now this), and “things are getting ready/ to happen” as “a woman leans” and “apples sweeten”—currently, presently— “in the dark.” I notice, too, that she places us in *a* neighborhood, rather than *her* neighborhood, or *yours*; it isn't *ours*, *theirs* or *the*. After all, dusk falls everywhere; the stars and moths appear wherever we are. I am comforted—especially now—by the reminder that though the world is enormous, we are inhabiting the same place, same sky, and something's always getting ready to happen out of sight.

Boland's small sentences are what one teacher of mine would call “one breath long”; they are rhythmic, deliberate, and remind me of a shifting but easy gaze: here, now here, now here. Each moment builds on itself until we have this one: “A woman leans down to catch a child /who has run into her arms...” And not only have we come to the longest lines in the poem, but we have reached the only moment of companionship, a kind of crest and crown.

The poem is an otherwise solitary meditation during that already-rich twilight period where we are between worlds, literally “of two lights.” But it is *this moment* (the very title of the poem), and this very embrace—as though the entire neighborhood if not the entire earth was anticipating such a reunion—that feels to me a sublime gesture and a perfect beacon of hope for us all.

What a sweet reunion it will be whenever it finally happens.

We cannot see apples sweetening in the dark anymore than we can see those on the other shore anymore than we can see the end of a world-wide pandemic. But God's hand works in the dark: apples still sweeten; and the soul is present tense.

✧ About the poet

Eavan Boland (1944-2020) was born to a diplomat father and artist mother in Dublin, Ireland. When she was a young child, the family relocated to London, where she attended school before moving again to New York. She returned to Dublin's Trinity College and became an esteemed lecturer and professor throughout the United States, notably at Stanford University, where she had taught since 1995 and where she directed their distinguished creative writing program for 21 years. She had recently moved back to Dublin

² https://www.smartishpace.com/pqa/eavan_boland/

to teach online and to be with her family in Ireland during the coronavirus pandemic. The book in which “This Moment” appears—*In a Time of Violence* (1994)—was shortlisted for the prestigious T. S. Eliot prize, one of many accolades she received during her career. Her first two collections, *23 Poems* (1962) and *Autumn Essay* (1963), were published before she was 20 years of age.



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