

Growing into Irish Through Galicia

One morning you wander the streets of Santiago:

Too late to turn or hide,

way-laid by sound, the raid *Invasion*

On your closed ear more than a whisper
of music flooding the *rua*,

a golden furl from the Hebrides to Africa,
caught in a summer-fired sieve.

Young men perform with *Uilleann* pipes,
bodhrán, barrelling rhythms, wrist-flex, shoulder-roll,
the music of ancient fields and isolation,
where rain drenches memory.

In the shops, you pit your native tongue
against theirs, meet a Galician poet

with red hair to her hips and the nose
of an ancient queen, full of her knowledge.

Late learner, half-blind, tone-deaf.

Not your fault of course,

blame background, the Border, the bashful *shy*

silk of English,

one language hushed by the rhythms of the other,
until this rush to the senses.

By the time you pack for home, your tongue

has lost its proud edge of English silk,

You lug new words like a swarm of bees,

(the sting of honour, a carrier at last). *of a germ*

No longer backed up against the tide,

the shell of your hearing opens,

old words roll like sand in mussel-flesh,

grit to a pearl. And you are readied

To grow hair to the hips, though your nose

is small and you have only

questions. This morning in Galicia, you are free

and know it, cross the Praza da Paz in a chant,

hear answering chords, your tongue unsprung:

it fills your mouth like hymns

rising to a vaulted roof, and filled,

you expand, singing out hellos,

Ireland to Galicia and back again:

Fáilte, fáilte, fáilte!

THE MAN IN THE GREY CLOAK

"In a certain old Georgian house you still can see
The portrait of that master who lived early in the century,
Looking straight ahead in military uniform,
Out of an oaken and ivory frame.
His hand on a gilded sword - hilt, *empuñadura*
The battle - helmet beside him -
A tall, watchful elderly man
In an open grey cloak
[That reveals] the decorations on his breast.

He owned the house and lands, and all the appurtenances of a land-
lord.

He was a protector of the law and of the Church as was his heredi-
tary right."

"Land and property, how were they given to him?"

"You will find the explanation in the history books."

"Do you think that he sent tenants into exile?"

"Perhaps not. I cannot say for sure.

But he was brave, certainly. He was prepared
To fight for the Empire in a distant land,
On the battle-field.

But [such] a deed for Ireland's sake never occurred to him.

That was the riot that the rebels raised,

The mob that spurned the law. *deaf for*

Such a deed he would not do for Ireland.

The Empire on the verge of collapse,

But that he could not foresee

nor the bicycle knights on their road to Nineteen - Sixteen
announcing a new era."

Easter Rising

trans. author.

LEARNING IRISH

Is a stranger knocking at my door
 Who might or might not turn out
 To be my grandfather, familiar only
 From photographs, anecdotes, my father
 Drumming his fingers on the edge
 Of any table, and yet not then
 A total stranger but strangely kin.
 I shyly try on his coat and hat,
 Take up his cane, and find myself
 Walking in his footsteps, out into
 The crisp November day ("Go out
 The door you came in, daughter")
 And down the lane ("If it
 Were any shorter it wouldn't be
 Long enough") to the farmhouse,
 The wind soughing in the hawthorn
 An elusive vowel teasing the consonants
 Of my new vocabulary, the red berries
 Ready to be picked ("If the coat fits,
 Wear it"). His moustache twiches
 As I wind my shoulders into the tweed
 (will my brothers call me Joseph?)
 And he raises the latch on the half-door,
 Stepping jauntily before me across
 The ray of sunshine striking the shelf
 Of empty jamjars by the fire.
 I hang the coat carefully over a chair,
 Roll up sleeves and put the kettle on
 While he whistles an air I'm almost sure
 I've heard my father play before.

stranger
comes

going to
the farm

whistling /au/

going into
the farm

decidedly

Eavan Boland

The Harbour

This harbour was made by art and force.
And called Kingstown and afterwards Dun Laoghaire.
And holds the sea behind its barrier
less than five miles from my house.

Lord be with us say the makers of a nation.
Lord look down say the builders of a harbour.
They came and cut a shape out of ocean
and left stone to close around their labour.

Officers and their wives promenaded
on this spot once and saw with their own eyes
the opulent horizon and obedient skies
which nine tenths of the law provided.

And frigates with thirty-six guns, cruising
the outer edges of influence, could idle
and enter here and catch the tide of
empire and arrogance and the Irish Sea rising

and rising through a century of storms
and cormorants and moonlight the whole length of this coast,
while an ocean forgot an empire and the armed
ships under it changed: to slime weed and cold salt and rust.

City of shadows and of the gradual
capitulations to the last invader
this is the final one: signed in water
and witnessed in granite and ugly bronze and gun-metal.

And by me. I am your citizen: composed of
your fictions, your compromise, I am
a part of your story and its outcome.
And ready to record its contradictions.

Witness by Eavan Boland

Here is the city—
its worn-down mountains,
its grass and iron,
its smoky coast
seen from the high roads
on the Wicklow side.

From Dalkey Island
to the North Wall,
to the blue distance seizing its perimeter,
its old divisions are deep within it.

And in me also.
And always will be.

Out of my mouth they come:
The spurred and booted garrisons.
The men and women
they dispossessed.

What is a colony
if not the brutal truth
that when we speak
the graves open.

And the dead walk?

4 Daughters of Colony

Daughters of parsons and of army men.
Daughters of younger sons of younger sons.
Who left for London from Kingstown harbour –
never certain which they belonged to.

Who took their journals and their steamer trunks.
Who took their sketching books.

Who wore hats
made out of local straw
dried in an Irish field beside a river which

flowed to a town they had known in childhood,
and watched forever from their bedroom windows,
framed in the clouds and cloud-shadows,
the blotchy cattle and

the scattered window lamps of a flat landscape
they could not enter.
Would never enter.

I see the darkness coming.
The absurd smallness of the handkerchiefs
they are waving
as the shore recedes.

I put my words between them
and the silence
the failing light has consigned them to:

I also am a daughter of the colony.
I share their broken speech, their other-where-ness.

No testament or craft of mine can hide
our presence
on the distaff side of history.

See: they pull the brims of their hats
down against a gust from the harbour.

They cover
their faces with what should have been
and never quite was: their home.

A DREAM OF COLONY

I dreamed we came to an iron gate
and leaned hard against it.

It opened.
We heard it grinding slowly over gravel.

We started walking.
When we began to talk
I saw our words had the power to unmake history:

Gradually the elms beside us
shook themselves into leaves.
And laid out under us their undiseased shadows.

Every phrase of ours,
holding still for a moment in the stormy air,
raised an unburned house
at the end of an avenue of elder and willow.

Unturned that corner
the assassin eased around and aimed from.
Unsaid. Undid: *Once. Fire. Quick. Over there.*

The scarred granite healed in my sleep.
The thundery air became sweet again.
We had come to the top of the avenue.

I heard laughter and forgotten consonants.
I saw the dumb shine of epaulettes.
I turned to you.

But who are you?

Before I woke I heard a woman's voice cry out.
It was hoarse with doubt. She was saying,
I was saying—

What have we done?

A Habitable Grief - Eavan Boland

Long ago

I was a child in a strange country:

I was Irish in England.

I learned

a second language there

which has stood me in good stead –

the lingua franca of a lost land.

A dialect in which

what had never been could still be found.

That infinite horizon. Always far

and impossible. That contrary passion

to be whole.

This is what language is:

a habitable grief. A turn of speech

for the everyday and ordinary abrasion

of losses such as this

which hurts

just enough to be a scar.

And heals just enough to be a nation.

Eavan Boland

The Mother Tongue

The old pale ditch can still be seen
less than half a mile from my house –

its ancient barrier of mud and brambles
which mireth next unto Irishmen
is now a mere rise of coarse grass,
a rowan tree and some thinned-out spruce,
where a child is playing at twilight.

I stand in the shadows. I find it
hard to believe now that once
this was a source of our division:

Dug. Drained. Shored up and left
to keep out and keep in. That here
the essence of a colony's defence
was the substance of the quarrel with its purpose:

Land. Ground. A line drawn in rain
and clay and the roots of wild broom –
behind it the makings of a city,
beyond it rumours of a nation –
by Dalkey and Kilternan and Balally
through two ways of saying their names.

A window is suddenly yellow.
A woman is calling a child.
She turns from her play and runs to her name.

Who came here under cover of darkness
from Glenmalure and the Wicklow hills
to the limits of this boundary? Who whispered
the old names for love to this earth
and anger and ownership as it opened
the abyss of their future at their feet?

I was born on this side of the Pale.
I speak with the forked tongue of colony.
But I stand in the first dark and frost
of a winter night in Dublin and imagine

my pure sound, my undivided speech
travelling to the edge of this silence.
As if to find me. And I listen: I hear
what I am safe from. What I have lost.