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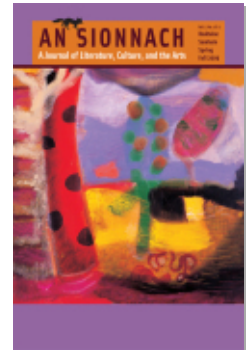
City Centre

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MARY O'MALLEY

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*Your poems are a dark city centre.
... The hotels are lit like office blocks all night.
... It's at night sometimes I drive through.*

TED HUGHES

The title of Paula Meehan's first collection, *Return and No Blame*, was lost on me until last week. Then I read again the title poem and it was clear as glass. In the poem, a girl walks into her house after a long time away, and sits at her father's table, glad to be back and gladly welcomed. The return caused me no problem, but the "no blame" was an unfamiliar concept. No guilt, was how I had unconsciously read it, and marveled at such a young woman's sureness. Last week I saw it differently. Blame is something you actively give, not something you take, and it is not the business of this essay to examine why one woman's blame is another's guilt, only to acknowledge that this poem reads as vitally now as it did when I first read it fifteen years ago, and that the first thing that struck me about Paula Meehan's poems was her sense of her own worth transmitted through the work: "My head, father, is bursting / with the things I've seen / in this big strange world." Although my own head was full of the "incurably plural" world, I could not conceive of her assuredness of such an unconditional welcome.

Paula Meehan and I came from different nations in the same country. The ways and accents of her Dublin, its conventions and geography, are as alien to me as the streets of Baltimore. I would have found my way more easily in Baltimore than the part of Dublin now known as the inner city. I don't know it, nor it me. It was an alien place in part because Dublin had

never been our city. It was where you went for the visa for America, the boat to Holyhead, a kind of station you had to do to get away. I may have started school in Monkstown Farm, near Dun Laoghaire, with its pretty mailboats and beautiful seafront, though I was as unimpressed as James Joyce with the “snot green sea” and escaped back to the West, away from the rough children of the city as fast as I could. Dublin, as far as I was concerned, was a place or state of banishment inhabited by strangers whose cruel children tormented me, whose ways I did not know. I had seen no reason in my adult life to put that early impression to the test.

In the early 1980s I used to call on people in a notorious Bairro de Lata, or shanty town, in the suburbs of Lisbon, but the estates and streets in Paula Meehan’s poems might as well have been on the moon. It was all news to me: the plague of heroin, the burning fury of people who were relegated to the scrap heap by the State, the rage, the acid sarcasm, and the shockingly irreverent wit. Nothing, it seemed, could be taken seriously for too long. Yet Paula Meehan’s Dublin had one thing in common with Conemara; both had been written about in English mainly by outsiders looking in. She and Dermot Bolger were my first contemporary guides to Finglas and Fatima Mansions, to how life was lived in Sean McDermott Street, to what Neil Young called “the needle and the damage done.”

I first met Paula Meehan around 1990. I met her with Theo Dorgan, somewhere in Dublin. I was aware of a tiny woman, like a dancer, with long black hair and a Dublin accent. We met again in Galway at the Cúirt Literary Festival, which I was very involved in organizing from the late eighties until about 1997. I may have introduced her; I certainly heard her read. She had a mesmerizing presence, her poems sounded like mantras, or invocations. Her delivery was steady as a metronome.

Our worlds were, well, worlds apart. Were they though? What is it that distinguished urban poverty from coastal deprivation? Deprivation? Yet her world was as full of life and living as mine, her youthful anger at the society we both seemed to feel apart from, and entitled to a place in, was as great, her contempt for the ruling hypocrasies burned more fiercely. I had been raised to consider the Government, and consider it askance. Its agents weren’t to be trusted, its laws had little to do with the common weal, and justice was to be found elsewhere. Expectations were low, amusement high. Our relationship with the church was equally dual, equally askance. You knew what to expect, roughly.

Still, neither of us had much truck with those half-baked notions that poetry and politics didn’t mix. We knew our Yeats, our Eliot, and our Neruda, and I held closest the poets who gave me the first urge and per-

mission: Mhac an tSaoi, Céitinn, Ó Rathaille, and Ó Bruadair. And we cared little, I suppose, for the State herself, for what Yeats called “its flamings out of the uncivilized heart,” but were concerned at the affairs of the Republic. At least it seems to me that in Meehan’s poems there is a democracy at work, a crafted and appropriate sense of the civic that never approaches the level of polemic. In “Literacy Class, South Inner City” the welts and bruises and ringing in the ears march along like the letters of the alphabet, “bet into them” as people said. Bet out of them. Her “Molly Malone” rescues a woman from a bronze with a phrase of the old song, “*She died of a fever,*” a deft reference to

her unafflicted gaze
on the citizens who praised her

and raised her aloft
who are blind as her own bronze eyes
to the world of her children.

“You will have to go outside for this one.” So begins “Woman Found Dead behind Salvation Army Hostel,” giving instructions for the painting of a still life. Still lives. The poems and the streets are full of them. Where I came from, our lost children died mostly in other countries, on the streets of London or Boston or Paris. Of drink, of exposure, mostly we supposed of loneliness. All we saw were the coffins coming home. In Dublin, they died on the streets. Mostly, we supposed, of heroin or drink. Now we know better. After all, I lived within easy reach of the Industrial School of Let-terfrack, and did I but know it, most of the children incarcerated and abused there were sent from the area known as Inner City Dublin. By order of the State. Poor Dublin children crash landed in Connemara. They truly had landed on the dark side of the moon. Our worlds were closer than I knew.

We belonged to the same nation after all. As I read her poems, I began to enter a world whose manners and ways were foreign to me, and as I read on, somewhere around *Dharmakaya*, before the end of *Pillow Talk*, her country became part of mine. This, I said to myself, sometime around 1995, somewhere between dropping my daughter off for Taidhbhearc Drama and picking my son up from football, is also Ireland. And unlike when I read about crime and punishment in the papers, about gangs and poverty and the inner city, I knew it was my country because of the voices in those poems and the way they looked at the world. Her poems integrated, as no

journalism or polemic could, a territory history had excised. I remember her talking about Sean O'Casey, about Larkin and the Lockout, about Peadar O'Donnell and Margo Harkin, whom we both admired.

Let's sketch a context. There is a photograph, taken outside the Bridge Mills Restaurant. Paula, the British poet Danny Abse, and myself, all sitting at a table on the terrace with the river rushing by almost under our feet. We are all wearing sunglasses, on one of those false Spring days that lure people back to Galway again and again. She is beautiful and at ease. Cúirt is on. Carol Ann Duffy is over to read and to record for the BBC poetry program. It was about that time we were seeing a lot of one another, flitting around the country to readings, workshops, festivals. There were long conversations, with Theo Dorgan, with Eavan Boland, with Carol Ann Duffy, and Michael Hartnett. Dermot Healy was storming through Belmullet with Force Ten. George McBeth was holding court in his house in Tuam, Michael Donaghy playing the bodhrán there late one night while my small daughter danced to the beat of it, danced round and round and Michael smiled his gorgeous smile and let her take the drum and batter the life out of it. There were children to be raised and ferried, festivals to be organized, trains and planes to be met. It was a blessed time with snatched and varied meetings and partings. And threaded through it all there was talk of poetry, books borrowed, lent, recommended, and sent.

Paula taught me about Akhmatova, I am certain of that. She was part of several evenings when talk was of Roethke and Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. Of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes and Pessoa, and we both loved Neruda. Eavan Boland gave clear and concise advice, gifts of books and of her finely honed, intellectually charged assessments. She was, I think, teaching us all. Always with Paula, talk returned to Akhmatova. She had call to the Muse. She was easy with her. I had old troubles in that department. Tsvetaeva would always be closer to my way of seeing the world, but that tutelage, those vital chats, were essential in the continuum of my writing conversation.

Meehan appears in her own early poems like some gypsy wanderer, with a gold ring, a sheaf of poems, and the world her rightful oyster. A young Bob Dylan or Baez singing her song for the traveling man and coming back to her father's table on her own terms in her own sweet time:

Blown about the planet
Till I had of it
And it of me
What we needed of each other.

This was heady and powerful for someone from another, less entitled place, certain of my landscape, uncertain of a right to lay claim.

Hers are the poems of a city childhood, where youngsters ran in packs, shared cigarettes and secrets. She rebelled early and never followed a pattern. Yet in *Painting Rain* she revisits that childhood, the widening spirals of family tragedy, with wisdom and grace. Her recent poems have an Eastern steadiness, a sense of the earth, and are marked by a certain Buddhist discipline and acceptance. Not so much a Yeatsian belief in a mystical symbolist reality, closer perhaps by far to the symbols and king magic of Ted Hughes, or the cool grace of Gary Snyder.

I did not intend to write of Paula Meehan like this. I intended a more distant examination, of the verbs I could never have found the courage to use, the body scrubbed and scrawny in her instructions for cooking herself in a stew, even the poem I would have wanted to write but couldn't, "It Is All I Ever Wanted." I intended to write a measured appreciation, and I have measured that appreciation over the years, as writers do.

Then I came across something Robert Hass quotes from Czeslaw Milosz, in his essay "Reading Milosz": "The problem of the Baltics is more important for every contemporary poet than are questions of style, metrics and metaphor." Milosz wrote that in 1953 and I would say that both battlegrounds are negotiated in the vexed and miraculous way that questions of style and subject interact, such complex and risky farings are part of every poet's mornings. But Milosz has a point, never more underscored than at the present moment.

Then I read Paula Meehan's new collection, *Painting Rain*. To write and formally hold what cannot but must be borne is the final challenge to a poet, and she confronts the darkness and wins over it. This is the forge, the blacking shop. Where the pattern we never managed to follow follows us. And this Ireland is certainly my country, every field a site, a housing estate.

"Death of a Field," a witness poem of quiet insistence, is reminiscent of Mary Oliver or Theodore Roethke in its calm certainty of tone: "When the notice goes up: Fingal County Council—44 houses." The power is in the number. Forty-four, not one. Line by line she names the birds, the vetches and worts and flowers and holds the field in the poem. All the more poignant, because a poem is not, as Meehan knows, a field. Which leads us to Robert Pinsky, to his book of critical essays, *The Situation of Poetry*, in which he puts forward the idea that the problematical relation between words and things does not change between one time and another and that however much the stylistic responses vary, the philosophical situation or the circumstance remains the same. "For present purposes," writes Pinsky,

referring in this context to the persistence of certain Romantic ideas and expectations, “the most helpful terms have been to do with words and things, and the problematical relation between them, which is the relation between forms and events: at times, between ourselves and the happenings of life, our souls and our sensations.”

It is this relationship that I find useful to examine in relation to Paula Meehan’s work. To this end, then, it is at last helpful to look at the word hoard, the treasure chest a poet dips into, those verbs she uses: fiddling, hoke, yoke, hump, toke, rune and scry. Flence. And the nouns: token, snake, pans, pins, winkles, and all the named flowers, especially the wild threatened ones, teasel, thistle, sloe, and dock. And Mother, mother, mother.

There is a relish in the vicious I both admire and flinch from: in “Malice Aforethought” there is something of the unadulterated spite of a character from “Cré na Cille,” that modernist masterpiece in Irish by Máirtín Ó Cadhain, where the shades converse in a graveyard in Conamara, in language which eviscerates and serves up each newcomer spitted linguistically on spiked nouns, hissing adjectives and served with a relish of pure spite. The comedy and the tragedy are in the language. This is also true of “Would you jump into my grave as quick,” which I saw explained on a school website as “in this poem Paula Meehan wants to control her love life” and who would argue with that!

It is as if Meehan’s argot has been purged of its Victorian proprieties, sifted and heated to mold it into some shiny tensile metal, fashioned into a fit tool for the job in hand. Her formal decisions are always interesting, whether musically led or pared almost to the breath. “Kippe” finds her burrowing into the primitive,

crawling in sunlight
over my own shadow

dragging my bundle of hides
my bundle of skins

dragging her wounded self into a word, the little house of language. Neruda again comes to mind. In the introduction to *Cien sonetos de amor* he writes in his dedication to Matilde Urrutia: “Out of such softened relics, then, with hatchet and machete and pocketknife . . . I built little houses. . . .” It is as if Paula Meehan has, in this latest collection, been driven back into the refuge of language, back, in this poem, to a single word, and has found that word enough.



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