

“Let Me at Least Be Their Witness”: Maternal Crisis and Subverting Tradition in Eavan
Boland’s “Daughter”

By

Carrie D. Lunt

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Carrie D. Lunt

Has been approved by the committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts Liberal Studies – English

At the May 2026 graduation

Thesis Committee:

____  ____

Thesis Chair, Dr. Kathryn Pratt Russell

____  ____

Thesis Committee Member, Dr. Matthew C. Carter

____ *Dr. Shannon M Cochran* ____

Thesis Committee Member, Dr. Shannon Cochran

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Abstract

In 2024, the editor of *Citizen Poet*, a posthumous collection of Irish poet Eavan Boland's essays, chose to include a previously unpublished piece from her private papers. The essay, entitled "Daughter," presents a more complete picture of the poet's motivations for her subversive work. Written as a series of fragments that reveal different facets of her influences and struggles, the essay's unifying thread is the serious illness of her child. As her baby suffered, she felt a growing gap between her lived experiences and an art that seemed to have no room for them. Through the fractured narrative, several themes emerge. Boland's evolution as a poet centered around her recognition of the absence of the authentic lives of women within Irish poetry. As she changed physical location from the literary city of Dublin to a suburban neighborhood, her awareness of this absence intensified while she was observing and participating in the routines of domesticity. Although she faced criticism from both the feminist movement and literary critics within a male-dominated culture, she incorporated domestic and maternal themes in her poetry. Boland worked to subvert poetic authority through prose essays, teaching, and workshops, and disagreed with the separatist position of some feminist writers. She included in "Daughter" four poems, "Night Feed," "Endings," "Love," and "The Journey," providing examples of her subversive approach to the both the lyric and dream convention poem. The unfinished essay provides a foundational understanding of Boland's journey to become one of Ireland's preeminent poets and illuminates her desire to be a poetic foremother to young women poets.

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Introduction

Irish poet Eavan Boland was brilliant, fiercely passionate about her art, and an enthusiastic advocate for all poets, especially women. These attributes gave her a powerful platform in Irish literary culture which she used to help reshape the critical landscape for women poets. However, her experiences as a woman and mother, which she considered central to her life, were not sanctioned subject matter when she began writing the Irish poem. Years later, her child's serious illness magnified the distance between her life and her art, and Boland's trajectory as a poet shifted. She resolved to write into her poetry a witness of women, mothers, and domestic settings that could not be ignored or diminished by the patriarchal voices policing both the subject and writer of the Irish poem. A critical understanding of Boland's determination to subvert this exclusionary authority comes to light in a previously unpublished essay included in *Citizen Poet*, a collection published in 2024 and edited by Jody Allen-Randolph. Although Boland did not live to complete the essay, entitled "Daughter," its fragmented structure provides a unique perspective into the motivations of a poet determined to deconstruct the exclusionary permission structure of the art she felt had deserted her in the crucible of her baby's illness.

Through overcoming the restrictions of a sexist literary culture in the twentieth century, Boland rose to become one of her country's preeminent contemporary voices. Describing the literary environment of the Dublin where she learned her craft, she wrote that its "roots were almost as deep as the eighteenth century," adding that it prioritized "history and pessimism and the public poet" (*Citizen Poet* 357). This "public poet" was "fixed in a romantic posture" and "cut free from all ties – domestic ones above all" (357).

Through decades of writing, advocacy, and teaching, Boland was a major figure in the effort to displace that centuries-old image of the Irish poet, opening the door to canonical acceptance for Irish women poets.

Very early in her writing career, she realized that “Irish poetry was predominantly male. Here or there you found a small eloquence, like *After Aughrim* by Emily Lawless. Now and again, in discussion, you heard a woman’s name. But the lived vocation, the craft witnessed by human life – that was missing” (*A Kind of Scar* 11). Without a sense of foremothers within the Irish literary tradition, Boland felt “the absence of an expressed [female] poetic life which would have dignified and revealed” her own (11). In the thirty-six years since Boland wrote these words, extensive recovery work has revealed a body of poetry written by Irish women throughout the decades Boland examined; however, women’s poetry was consistently marginalized and seldom published or included in twentieth-century Irish anthologies.

In their introduction to *A History of Irish Women’s Poetry*, Ailbhe Darcy and David Wheatley explain that for modern women poets, identifying foremothers can “legitimize the business of writing” (1) and create a sense of intergenerational connectedness. However, the authors acknowledge that the desire to resurrect a continuous line of women poets in Irish literature runs the risk of anachronism to satisfy a modern feminist writer’s need for mentors. In fact, the progress of women’s poetry in Ireland does not follow “a linear history” and is, the authors claim, “defined by loss and fracture” (9).

According to Darcy and Wheatley, when the three-volume *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* debuted in 1991, the guiding motivation for its assembly and

publication was the establishment of an exclusively Irish canon that would “give legitimacy and authority to Irishness itself” (9), an important literary project for a land that was in the process of recovering a sense of independent nationhood after centuries of colonization. The patriarchal Irish social, religious, and cultural constructs allowed Irish men to oppress women, echoing the intersectional tendency of the colonized to seek a subjugated class within the culture to control. Irish female writers were often easily disregarded by the literary elite, and the editors of *Field Day* continued this exclusive practice. However, the scant inclusion of women writers in *Field Day* called attention to an entrenched marginalization of their work in a male-centric literary culture. In a 1999 interview with Jody Allen-Randolph, Boland stated that this omission indicated “that there was going to be no ready-made welcome for Irish women in Irish poetry” (Boland, “A Backward Look” 9).

In her introduction to *The History of Irish Women’s Poetry*, “The Reception of Irish Women Poets,” Anne Fogarty argues that women poets in her country have inherited an environment of erasure grounded in ancient tradition, as well as “gender politics and ideological values” (24). The masculine images of the religious scribe and Gaelic bard carry the authority of centuries of acceptance in Ireland, and these constructs, over time, facilitated a strictly male concept of the poet in a national tradition. While both Boland and prominent Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill agreed that no legacy of female poets paved the way for their work, Fogarty disputes their claim. She does, however, agree that “a fractured tradition and the constant banishment from view of women poets in venues such as anthologies, monographs, and personal memoirs . . . warrants reinspection” (25).

Fogarty points out that after the publication of *The Field Day Anthology*, the ensuing controversy led to an examination of the longstanding history of excluding female writers. In order “to undo the obliterating and splintering effects of a literary history amnesiac about women’s history in all its breadth,” Fogarty contends, an “ongoing historicist exploration and feminist inquiry are required” (30). While female poets in Ireland through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at times “enjoyed fleeting recognition,” Fogarty writes that being published necessitated “fight[ing] against patriarchal assumptions,” adding that Irish women writers endured “repeated cycles of forgetting” as their works were sometimes briefly in print, then ignored by editors of subsequent anthology editions (33). Fogarty states that the recent gains in recognition of women poets, as well as the retrieval and publication of once-forgotten works “are gratifying,” but they remain “precarious and in need of continuous reinforcement” (35).

In her article, “‘A Noise of Myth’: Speaking (as) Woman in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian,” Fogarty wrote that any effort to unearth forgotten women’s texts in Ireland as part of an “attempt to recuperate and map out a specifically female literary tradition” (92) was more problematic than similar efforts in America and other European countries. Fogarty points to the “hostility of Irish society to women” (92) as a formidable obstacle to the recovery of a female tradition. In her examination of Boland’s and McGuckian’s approaches to this challenging environment, Fogarty finds that both poets are hesitant to allow their work to be associated with the politics of feminism yet are intentional about “reshaping obdurately masculinist poetic traditions in order to create an accommodating space for female experience and language” (92). They operate from an “insistence on a distinction between their real-life identities and their

fictional personae,” (93) reluctant to be standard-bearers for an ideology. Fogarty believes that the two poets’ position is one of self-preservation: “Their refusal to permit an automatic accession of their poetry to the arena of feminist politics is both a by-product of the misogyny of Irish society which allows scant room for the development of feminism, and also a reaction to the literary traditions which the Irish woman writer inherits” (93). While Fogarty sees this reticence as occupying an “intermediate zone between traditional patriarchal values and the new and potentially saving ethos of feminism,” she concedes that the poets are more concerned about the potential of a “dissolution of experience into language” through embracing that ethos (93).

According to Fogarty, Boland and McGuckian are determined not to let their work become the prototype for feminist expression in their country because they believe that the problematic Irish literary terrain cannot be evened out by “substituting a female voice for a male one” (96). Fogarty asserts that for the two poets, “essentialism poses far too great a risk” and that their “prevaricatory pronouncements are an attempt to placate the Irish literary establishment” (97). However, she does concede that a “denial of all positionality is the only means by which they can license their creativity” (97). By refusing to speak for all women, both poets, according to Fogarty, “produce a liminal literature which attempts to break down the boundaries between the indeterminacy of speaking (as) woman and the localized determinacies of women’s history and experience” (101).

In a 2001 interview with *Open City* editor Elizabeth Schmidt, Boland provides a more nuanced explanation of her unwillingness to place her poetry within the framework of feminism:

I'm a feminist. I'm not a feminist poet. I've said somewhere else that I think feminism has real power and authority as an ethic, but none at all as an aesthetic. My poetry begins for me where certainty ends. I think the imagination is an ambiguous and untidy place, and its frontiers are not accessible to the logic of feminism for that reason. (Boland, "Where Poetry Begins")

Fogarty's interpretation of Boland's resistance to a feminist separatism in her work assumed that Boland was avoiding controversy to remain relevant in a contentious literary environment. But for Boland, the work to clear space for women poets in Ireland began with subverting the existing tropes and forms from within the tradition instead of through the lens of an ideology.

One of the most restrictive forces within Irish poetry that Boland experienced was the widespread presence of the iconic feminine in the work of male poets. For Irish women poets like Boland, deconstructing the symbolic representations of women enshrined in their culture became critical to establishing women as complicated subjects rather than simplified objects in poetry. Describing this phenomenon, Boland writes:

The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry . . . women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture. (*Object Lessons* 134)

Irish writer Lia Mills agrees with Boland, identifying three female icons firmly entrenched in Ireland's lore in her article, "I Won't Go Back to It': Irish Women Poets and the Iconic Feminine." These include the "poetic muse, the virgin mother and Mother

Ireland/Cathleen Ní Houlihan” (69). In a nation dominated both religiously and politically by the Catholic Church, the Virgin Mother image is indelibly woven into the culture. Mills states that the ubiquitous shrines of Mary “serve as reminders, impossible images, models of inhuman perfection” (70) to Irish girls and women. While the “immaculate nature of this image . . . sets her apart from other women,” the societal expectation is that women should model their lives after it. Describing the images as “hollow,” Mills believes they are “far removed from the realities of life as it is lived by women on this island” (72). As an icon, the Virgin Mother aligns with the constitutional mandate that “a woman’s place should be in the home” (74), where the political world is safely out of bounds.

Mills states that the mythical “poetic muse” figure originates in the Celtic legends of the *aisling*, or dream woman, a supernatural female who “inspired Gaelic poets and patriots” (73). Importantly, poetic inspiration appears in the form of a woman, but the poet is broadly presented as masculine in Celtic folklore. According to Mills, the Celtic legend depicts a “goddess who assumes the form of a crone, [and is] transformed by sexual union with the hero into a radiant young woman, a trope for the land and fertility” (73). While a similar mythological figure exists in many cultures, Mills states that the Irish version became more firmly identified with the motherland during the centuries-long colonization, often appearing to poets “demanding justice, [and] restitution, [as] a symbol of dispossession and loss” (73).

Mills adds that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the goddess had evolved into a powerful symbol of nationhood, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, stripped of her sexuality and agency by a “new republic [that] was not especially sympathetic to women” (73).

Cathleen Ní Houlihan became the embodiment of the concept of self-sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. By “freezing [the feminine] into a programmed political form,” Mills writes, it became “difficult for Irish women writers to engage with the national canon” (74). To reinforce her point, Mills quotes from Boland’s *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*: “Once the idea of a nation influences the perceptions of a woman then that woman is suddenly and inevitably simplified. She can no longer have complex feelings and aspirations. She becomes the passive projection of a national idea” (12-13).

All three entrenched images contributed to the devaluation of the woman poet’s voice in Ireland. At the time of writing, Mills commended several poets, including Boland, who were “actively seeking to express and make visible those aspects of experience previously ignored, obscured and falsely represented by two-dimensional, lifeless, inhuman icons” (86).

But Boland remained skeptical of efforts to replace flattened images of women with modern substitutions. In “Eavan Boland, History and Silence,” Guinn Batten states that Boland was careful not to use her poetic voice to fill silences in history from “the limits of one’s singular existence” (362). Boland believed, according to Batten, that to confront the absence of an authentic historic female voice in Irish poetry through reconstruction of a separate “alternative and female body of literature” (362) put the importance of the rupture between history and a silent past in jeopardy. Batten asserts that Boland regarded created images with caution, especially when those images were forced into an accepted ideology, believing that they could carry the potential to “remove the very subject – a woman aware of the uniqueness of her own life and experience”

(362). Instead, Boland wrote to deconstruct the motives and authority of poets who used images of women as icons of nationhood.

Part of Boland's deconstruction of the male-governed poetic authority came through *In Her Own Image* (1980), a collection of poems Batten believes "sought to destroy sources of female iconography" by centering a female voice within experiences of the female body, and "shatter[ing] the mirror of a culture that idealizes 'Woman'" (372). According to Batten, Boland saw her next project, *Night Feed* (1982), as taking "a different risk: writing of domestic subjects which could allow critics to dismiss her achievement" (372). Both collections, Batten writes, allowed Boland "to put her own image at risk in her poems if they were to be true to her most troubling changes, as a woman, and more particularly, as a mother" (372).

Batten writes that in middle age, Boland "was startled to realize that she had lost her own image of herself as a poet," and faced "a quite personal encounter with silence" (373) as she struggled to write as an aging woman. In her "Anna Liffey" poems, Batten sees Boland as "dramatizing the exhaustion, and transitoriness, of a woman's image-building" in a phase of life that some other prominent female poets, such as Sylvia Plath, never experienced. However, writing to "mediate the passage from silence to speech" gave Boland the opportunity to mourn the end of one phase of life, and "find unexpected resources" as she entered another (373).

In her work to center women's bodies through all stages of life, Boland exposed the painful experiences of genuine women absent from the idealized female images projected in traditional Irish poetry. In her article, "Bodily Vulnerability and the Ethics of Representing Woman and Nation in the Poetry of Eavan Boland," Catriona Clutterbuck

examines Boland's efforts to focus on the persistent suffering of women that has historically occurred in a system of "authoritarian fixity imposed through gendered political and religious systems and through exclusivist ideologies of art" (135).

Clutterbuck believes that Boland could not accept a mute position toward "the silenced history of the invisible colonial subject" (135). Instead of brushing suffering aside, Clutterbuck states that her "poetry advocates the opposite: once surrendered to in its complexity, suffering illuminates vital human truths of our interdependence, acknowledgement of which is indispensable to tackling the root causes of injustice" (135).

One of Boland's concerns, according to Clutterbuck, is that through a "denigration of the domestic poem . . . literary gatekeepers have resisted the retrieval of women from their fixed position as 'perfect' erotic objects" (136). By marginalizing the domestic site of female suffering, Clutterbuck claims that critics can ignore the challenges to power structures it reveals:

Boland's work suggests that the domestic poem is likely to be disparaged in any literary culture which itself serves an establishment politics in which social inequality is maintained. This is because the domestic poem points to an alternative politics in the manner in which it testifies to the dignity of the everyday as generating ordinary people's transcendent meaning. (137)

Through bringing everyday domestic experience to the forefront in her work, Boland "addresses the need for truthful yet communicable witness" to the "imperfection and woundedness within our ongoing life" (138). Clutterbuck states that Boland "interrogate[s] the basis of claims by historians, politicians, and writers to speak on

behalf of those without power” when their painful experiences have been edited out of the accepted national political narrative.

In addition to creating space for the domestic sphere in Irish poetry, Boland felt compelled to include motherhood experiences in her work. In her essay, “Lava Cameo,” she writes that as a mother in her suburban home, she was “as conscious of love for my children as I would have been of a sudden and chartless fever” (*Object* 17). This love, to Boland, was “visionary” with “a power to transform” (17). However, she perceived a gap between the permissions of Irish poetry and the life of a suburban mother that would be difficult to bridge: “As each morning came around, with its fresh sights and senses, I felt increasingly the distance between my own life, my lived experience and conventional interpretations of both poetry and the poet’s life” (18). Traditional maternal images, when present in Irish poetry written by men, were often idealized, self-sacrificing, and perhaps most importantly, voiceless.

In her article, “Matrophobia or Matrocompliance?: Motherhood as ‘Experience and Institution’ in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan,” Pilar Villar-Argáiz discusses how both poets chose to challenge these traditional images of motherhood. In addition to the symbolic images of women woven into the nationalistic poetry, maternal imagery was often presented through the perspective of the conservative Catholic ideology of the new Irish Republic. Irish constitutional articles ratified in 1937 enshrined an idealized notion of motherhood within the traditional family construct. As Villar-Argáiz explains:

Women were expected to carry out their lives of service and self-sacrifice in the sanctified realm of the domestic sphere: their model to follow was the Virgin

Mary, and ideals of virtue, abnegation, and submissive suffering. The lives of women were further limited through legislation: laws prohibiting contraception and divorce were introduced, and later, a constitutional amendment was passed banning the practice of abortion. (128)

According to Villar-Argáiz, in the wake of second-wave feminism, Irish women poets like Boland and Meehan sought to deconstruct both the nationalistic and religious images of motherhood, questioning social frameworks which routinely oppressed women. Their poetry broadens the conceptual identity of motherhood from an idealized image to a more complex, nuanced maternal figure with a broad range of mothering experiences.

Both Meehan and Boland directly confront conventional portrayals of mothers in their work. While centering mothers, Meehan addresses issues such as abortion, infertility, strained relationships within families, and Catholic iconography in her poems. By contrast, Boland often presents maternal nurturing as a sublime experience, and according to Villar-Argáiz, “bring[s] the capacity for nurturing life into the public realm from which it has been excluded for centuries” (139). But this approach, Villar-Argáiz points out, is not without risk, primarily because “the qualities [Boland] values most in her role as a mother (connection and caring) are also the products of women’s social subordination” (139).

However, Villar-Argáiz sees Boland’s maternal poetry as uniquely situated between conflicting social pressures. By focusing on mothering encounters, Boland facilitates a “reassess[ment] of an experience which has been long neglected in a national tradition almost exclusively concerned with public events, such as Ireland’s political history” (141). Additionally, by centering a maternal persona in her poetry, Boland places

motherhood into the “public (political) sphere, reserved for men” (141), destabilizing the boundaries between designated male and female realms. Importantly, Villar-Argáiz credits Boland with deconstructing the myth that “motherhood and writing are incompatible activities by reaffirming the continuity between her life of a mother and her life of a writer” (141). A byproduct of Boland’s embodiment of this dual identity is an assertion of “the value of both procreation and artistic creation” (141).

While Meehan confronts the unrealistic maternal image through directly exploring tensions between lived experience and symbolic figure, Boland imbues maternal experience with an importance not recognized in the Irish culture. With differing approaches, Villar-Argáiz contends “both writers are equally subversive in resisting the passive, idealized, and lifeless icon of domesticity reified in Irish religious and nationalist texts” (143).

In her biography of Boland, Jody Allen-Randolph recognizes Boland’s maternal poetry as uniquely disruptive to static images of motherhood:

While at one level *Night Feed* was a warm-toned celebration of domestic life, it can also be seen as subversive of the Irish poetic tradition . . . The volume’s central image – an Irish mother – was clearly intended to subvert and destabilize the negatively encoded images of women in Irish poetry. By doing this, Boland was challenging the national literature’s tendency to conflate feminine with nationalist icons. (76)

Villar-Argáiz agrees that part of Boland’s purpose in her maternal poetry was to deconstruct extant images of symbolic mothers. But she adds that Boland’s “work distinctively pays homage to women’s roles as mothers in order to reassess an experience

which has been for long neglected in a national tradition almost exclusively concerned with public events” (Villar-Argáiz 141). In addition, she sees Boland’s work as a possible antidote to the “world of violence and destruction” (141) evident in the masculinist tradition.

While Boland’s poetic subject matter was not restricted to maternal themes, her exploration of the mothering experience throughout a woman’s lifespan disrupted the traditional Irish concepts of both womanhood and motherhood, a foremother’s gift to future women poets.

An Overview of “Daughter”

Shortly before her death in 2020 at the age of seventy-five, Boland returned to “Daughter,” which she began writing in 2007, this time with the intention of expanding it to book length. Perhaps “Daughter” was personally meaningful to Boland because it reveals the extent to which the near-tragic personal experience of her baby’s illness influenced the trajectory of her work. Or she may have felt that “Daughter” would be a fitting capstone to her life’s work, documenting for future poets her struggle to unify her identities as a mother and poet in a time when the roles seemed incompatible. But at her death, the project remained unfinished, reflecting an incomplete resolution of what Boland states is the central question at the heart of the work: “How did it happen that a great human experience and a great human art missed one another?” (*Citizen* 344).

At the center of the essay is the trauma of her child’s brush with death and the impact of this personal crisis on Boland’s poetic direction. At readings introducing the poems that emerged from the experience, she sometimes briefly spoke about the ordeal, but none of her previously published essays specifically addresses the fear and trauma of

almost losing her child. In her foreword to *Citizen Poet*, Heather Clark wrote that during her baby's hospitalization, Boland "realized, with shock, that she knew of no poem about a mother watching her child struggle through a serious illness" (xiii). This absence forced Boland to reconsider the focus of her work, and according to Clark, to "become a different kind of poet – one whose words commemorated and validated women's lives" (xiii). The near tragedy amplified Boland's indignation over what she felt were injustices of exclusion. Without much precedent, Boland resolved to overcome what she perceived as a lack of permissions to write from a maternal perspective.

Unlike any of Boland's other published essays, "Daughter" has the feel of a scrapbook assembled to present snapshots of thought and experience. Allen-Randolph writes that the essay represents "a major stylistic departure" for Boland in its use of a disjointed structure: "'Daughter' is composed of fragments in conversation with each other: definitions, quotations from letters, parts of poems, journal entries from her years as a young poet and mother, knit together with sections of running commentary" (*Citizen* xxi). This sporadic approach, while unusual for Boland, was deliberate. She intentionally wanted to "echo, retrospectively, the anger, irony and estrangement [she] felt as a working poet and a mother, and the incoherence [she] felt would make it impossible to draw these two sides of [her] life together" (*Citizen* 344). She writes that the "incoherence" of this scattershot approach was "intended to probe the mystery: to lead forward to a place where aesthetics and argument – at least in [her] time – refused to go" (344).

Boland's motivation for writing "Daughter" was twofold: to explore the painful gap between the art she loved and the life she lived as a mother, and to "allay that loss for

someone else” (344). Boland’s concerns about the future landscape for women poets is reflected in passages she includes in “Daughter” from two letters to hypothetical young women poets. These excerpts demonstrate Boland’s desire to share the literary landscape she inherited with future poets. According to Allen-Randolph, Boland “believed her project belonged not to a resistant present but to a future” that would be revolutionized by “an unseen future poet who would redraw these maps once more” (*Eavan Boland* 178). Boland enthusiastically encouraged women to write poetry from early in her career through workshops, teaching, and her prose essays. Acutely aware from personal experience of the paralyzing effect that a lack of foremothers produces, she was determined to leave a record that other Irish women poets could study for precedent. In these letter passages, Boland addresses a fictional modern woman poet, revealing the prejudices and limitations that almost silenced her when she was younger poet. She points out that she was aware of “a terrible, tight maleness about the poetic world” she was seeking to enter, and that she was “on guard” for critiques that were “slighting and intimidatory” (*Citizen* 357). Boland writes that the old “bardic” and masculine tradition was very suspicious of women poets, especially “that women were bringing into poetry currents of experience which would somehow make it small” (358).

Significantly, in the “Second Letter” excerpts, Boland elaborates on the distinction between the two theoretical camps that women poets of the late twentieth century occupied: those who believed that a separatist approach to changing the exclusionary poetic authority was the best path to change, and the subversive approach Boland promoted. While Boland understood the position of female separatists who

believed they would most effectively affect change from outside the tradition, she disagreed, believing that subversion would eventually transform the art.

Although the themes in “Daughter” emerge in a nonlinear way, they echo many of the issues that Boland exposed in her prose essays: the limitations imposed by an oppressive Irish patriarchal authority on the woman poet, the challenges of writing while her daughters were small and finding language for maternal experience, the shifts in her poetic priorities, and the subversion/separatist debate. The unifying thread between these themes is the serious illness of her child, an ordeal that sharpened her determination to reshape the “customs of subject matter and theme” (372) entrenched in the Irish poem. Authentic reaction to the rupture she experienced between her art and her maternal experience became paramount to Boland’s work moving forward, and she was determined to “never feel diffident again” (372) about defying the arbiters of poetic canonicity.

Motherhood and the Poet

In the introductory paragraph of “Daughter,” Boland describes a quiet summer evening in her suburban neighborhood near Dublin. After putting her two young daughters to bed, she goes outside to pick up an abandoned toy, then climbs the stairs to a room in which she writes her poetry. While the routine life of a mother nurturing her family occupies Boland’s days, her nights are often devoted to an art that for many years refused to acknowledge an existence she found meaningful. In a 2001 interview with Alice Quinn, Boland describes the conflict she sensed: “I was participating in a life that everyone else around me was living. It was a life with a lot of dailyness, a lot of durable

and true feeling. But I didn't see a reflection of it in the Irish poem" (Boland, *Eavan Boland: A Critical Companion* 127). Boland stated in a 1993 interview with Allen-Randolph that she "wanted to prove [her] life in poetry" in large part because she "couldn't find [her] life in poetry" (Boland, "An Interview" 123). As she struggled to find language for the maternal and domestic subject, she longed for women poets, and particularly Irish women poets, whom she could regard as foremothers. In the Quinn interview, Boland elaborated:

. . . I do have a sense that when I was younger, writing those poems which turned out badly, I would have been glad to have had an Irish woman poet behind me. There were great and wonderful Irish male poets, all of whom I found inspiring in different ways. It meant an enormous amount to me in a very tribal way that William Yeats was Irish. And I would have liked, I suppose, to include in that tribalism a woman as well. (*Critical* 129)

In "Daughter," Boland goes beyond this measured statement expressing both a longing for women predecessors and frustration over the cultural disconnect between a maternal life and the poet's craft, a dilemma that sometimes stymied her work:

["Daughter"] is a book about a way of life – motherhood – and an art – poetry – which has made hardly any space for it. It is about the anger and mystification and finally the curiosity which made me want to go further with that contradiction. It is about the years in which I puzzled over the fact that an unhistoric and given human experience and an old and powerful mode of expression had not found one another. The effect of this was a deep, personal loss. (*Citizen* 343)

Boland experienced conflicting emotions precisely because the world she had entered as traditional mother in the 1970s was at times both frustrating and “visionary” (*Object* 17) – a realm she wanted to articulate in her poetry but felt constrained to explore by a lack of precedent and authority. The everyday, mundane life of a woman engaged in caring for her children was not legitimized as a worthy subject for poetic exploration. In “Engendering the Feminine: Two Irish Poets – Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian,” Paul Volsik writes that the domestic space Boland occupied as a suburban mother “has consistently been seen by the tradition as unworthy because [it was] trivial—by Romantics, by Modernists, by the Movement Poets, by the Beats . . . and, it is important to insist, by many feminists” (154). Without a sense of female predecessors or canonical permissions for the domestic subject in the literary hierarchy, Boland wrestled with bringing the marginalized into central focus. Though she considered herself a feminist, she believed, according to Volsik, that the maternal and domestic space she inhabited was a “paradigm of a larger, unwritten, ‘tribal’ experience which (politically and aesthetically) deserves recording or rather reworking into the aesthetic” (154-55). Volsik acknowledged Boland’s own awareness that by writing from maternal experience, she would shoulder inherent risks including not only possible accusations of triviality, but also criticism from feminists who considered the motherhood role to be a damaging patriarchal construct. But Volsik adds that because Boland presents a “voice that would speak in a unifying way of and for the experience of the many women who experience marriage and child-rearing . . . it can also be read as a prototypical feminist act” (159).

In her article “Beautiful Labors: Lyricism and Feminist Revisions in Eavan Boland’s Poetry,” Christy Burns points out that while “Boland’s focus on nurturance and

motherhood may seem narrow to feminists who have been working to expand the range of models open to women, . . . Irish governments have been fiercely restrictive in the roles they allow women in society” (221). To Burns, the sexist restrictions of the Irish culture created a climate of necessity for any woman poet who wrote from a woman’s perspective. Burns states that simply “the act of finding her own voice, as a public figure writing out of a private, domestic space, troubles the distinction between masculine and feminine spheres of action” (222).

The women’s movement in Ireland had just begun to make inroads into dissolving the demarcation between men’s and women’s roles in Irish society when Boland became a mother in the 1970s. Unlike the feminist movement in the United States, Ireland’s nascent feminist movement was fueled by the injustices institutionalized in a culture dominated by the Catholic Church. Catriona Clear points out that Irish media could not replicate the images produced by American media of the idealized housewife that resulted in widespread discontent. “In Irish-produced media at least, Irish women were not subjected to psychological and pseudo-scientific reinforcement of the idealization of motherhood” (qtd. in Daly 181). The sense of dissatisfaction felt by many American women as they compared their experiences to unrealistic, created images of happy domesticity, explored in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, could not equally register in the Irish woman’s experience. According to Mary E. Daly, “such idealization would not have accorded well with families of five or more children” (181). Additionally, the modern conveniences that created more free time for women in post-World War II America did not become a fixture in Ireland until the early 1970s, about the same time second-wave feminism began to inspire Irish women to form women’s movements.

These early organizations were more likely to focus on issues such as the welfare of children and domestic abuse than equal pay and expanding roles for women (181). When Boland began bringing maternal themes into her work, the Irish feminist movement labored under an oppressive cultural tradition that Jody Allen-Randolph contends harbored “negative attitudes to women [which] remained hidden under a language of piety and decorum” (*Eavan Boland* 68).

Looking beyond the work of Irish poets, Boland found inspiration for bringing the maternal experience forward in the groundbreaking poetry of American Sylvia Plath. Plath’s influence on Boland’s early work is particularly present in the poems of *In Her Own Image*, a volume dedicated to breaking down the traditional feminine tropes of Irish literary culture through exploring taboo aspects of the female bodily experience. In her biography of Plath, *Red Comet*, Heather Clark contends that Plath’s “Ariel” was “the first poem in English that confronts the risks and burdens of maternity for the woman poet” (Clark 796). Like Boland, Plath struggled “to reconcile her life as an ambitious poet with her life as a mother” (795). Perhaps in homage to the importance of Plath’s articulation of the mother/poet dilemma, Boland includes in “Daughter” a passage from Plath’s *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* which describes the moment Plath’s daughter is born and placed on her stomach, “white as flour with the cream that covers new babies, little funny dark squiggles of hair plastered over her head, with big dark-blue eyes” (qtd. in *Citizen* 346). In her essay, “The Other Sylvia Plath,” Boland writes that Plath’s “motherhood gave her a sense of her own nature. Her nature in turn gave her a sense of participation in the power and mystery of seasons and arrivals” (*A Journey with Two Maps*, 159). Clark records that Boland believed Plath “changed the nature poem forever”

in a way that “pushed back against the masculine sublime and reconfigured the poetic hierarchy” (Clark 796-97).

In addition to quoting Plath, Boland includes in “Daughter” a passage from American poet Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” which addresses Rich’s inability to find authentic female voices in poetry written by women. As a young poet, Rich “wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same” (21). Rich encountered similar conflicts to Boland’s, but unlike Boland, she found the roles of mother and poet largely incompatible. After giving birth to three children within a four-year span in the 1950s, Rich was frustrated by the impact of the demands of her young family on her creative work. Of that time, she wrote that she was “writing very little, partly from fatigue, that fatigue of female suppressed anger and the loss of contact with her own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children’s constant needs” (23). Rich concluded that “to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination” (23). During the years she had small children, Rich “wanted, then, more than anything, the one thing of which there was never enough: time to think, time to write” (24).

Excerpts from Boland’s journal in “Daughter” echo Rich’s frustration, however they also provide a glimpse of her determination to not only overcome the obstacles that prevented women in traditional nurturing roles from writing, but to intentionally position herself within the domestic space in her poetry. In April of 1977, her teething one-year-old finally asleep, Boland wrote:

The evening time. The hard part of the day for me. Maybe the reason I don't write poetry at the moment is because I get to it this late in the day. During the winter I tried it differently. But so few poems came out of that. I got up early for a while. I sometimes thought I touched something deep. But there was nothing to show for it. (*Citizen* 349)

On March 11, 1980, now with two small daughters, Boland's journal entry describes the "disorder of silence" that shrouded the maternal experience and has "existed forever about sleeping children, and the world behind and around them" . . . and her hope that the "silence, or whatever it is, would give way" (356).

In an excerpt from "Second Letter to a Young Woman Poet" included in "Daughter," Boland encourages the poet she addresses to picture a domestic scene in which a kettle is boiling, the windows are covered in steam, one child is preparing for bed, and another is keeping company with a family cat on a bench. She writes, "Suddenly, this room, with its sensory world of damp and children, with your sense of the shut-out stars, the misted-over jasmine, becomes the extent of your understanding of beauty and truth. Perhaps not for long. But a moment is enough" (365).

The challenge for Boland and the young woman poet she imagines in her letter excerpts is that including this domestic "sensory world" in poetry was, at the time she was a young mother, unauthorized in the Irish literary canon. In her essay, "Reading as Intimidation," Boland writes that the experiences of motherhood "had swept away so many human doubts," but she "was left with her artistic ones" (*Journey* 62). She struggled with the "other, older learning processes which seemed in conflict with this new knowledge" and the realization that she had "subscribed to a hierarchy of poetic

subjects” that dictated whether a subject merited inclusion in a poem (63). In her role as a mother, Boland states that she “had acquired a subject. But no ready-made importance had been ascribed to it. I had to do that for myself” (63). But overcoming the doubts surrounding the validity of her newly acquired domestic/maternal subject remained difficult, and she describes a particular moment of hesitance that plagued her:

It was a split-second faltering. A moment of hesitation. Nothing more. But later that moment troubled me. Brief as it was, it remained emblematic. I would think back to it. I would remember it as a painful contradiction – that I doubted the importance of this room as a poetic subject at the very moment I was most convinced of its imaginative power. (64)

This conflict between the subjects authorized within Irish literary culture that Boland had strived to emulate and the desire to capture images from her life within her poetry became one of the most important evolutionary struggles in her creative work.

Questioning the Authority of Irish Canonicity

Among the fragments Boland includes in “Daughter” are passages from Theodore Roethke’s *On the Poet and His Craft*, published in 1965, and Peter F. McBrien’s *Higher English: How to Know Good Poetry, and to Say Why It Is Good*, published in 1931. The passages provide a glimpse into the framework of canonicity Boland received throughout her years at Trinity College Dublin. Both men had entrenched opinions about the poet’s craft that Boland most likely included in “Daughter” to help her reader understand the oppressive nature of the male poetic authority she had inherited and would eventually question.

Roethke, a Pulitzer-prize winning American poet and teacher, echoed the belief that women produced inferior poetry due to a “lack of range – in subject matter, in emotional tone – and lack of a sense of humor” (qtd. in *Citizen* 352). In a breathtakingly sexist passage, Roethke acknowledges that many critics accuse women poets of “aesthetic and moral shortcomings” (352) such as:

. . . the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life – that special province of the feminine talent in prose – hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar, stamping a tiny foot against God; or lapsing into sententiousness that implies the author has re-invented integrity; carrying on excessively about Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on. (352-53)

When Boland began her university studies in 1962, Roethke was revered as one of the great poets of his generation. In 2000, Boland would include Roethke’s “The Waking” in *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* which she edited with Mark Strand. But Roethke’s generalizations about the criticism of women poets in the 1960s reveals a dismissive attitude that was not uncommon among the academic and literary circles Boland encountered in Dublin during her formative student years.

Perhaps to reinforce this point, Boland quotes American poet Jane Cooper’s essay “Nothing Has Been Used in the Manufacture of This Poetry That Could Have Been Used in the Manufacture of Bread,” published in 1974. Cooper, struggling to define herself as a female poet, recalls the moment a “classmate told me he believed that to be a woman

poet was a contradiction in terms” (qtd. in *Citizen* 348). While she never married or had children, Cooper felt the pressure to meet those expectations, and the choice between the roles of mother and poet felt like two diverging paths: “I recognized, though I still did not fully recognize, the doubleness of my urge to become. What was expected of me, what I wanted for myself in the most profound ways, was marriage and children . . . I didn’t really think you could be double” (348).

In “Eavan Boland and the Politics of Authority in Irish Poetry,” Catriona Clutterbuck argues that traditional Irish literary assumptions of the twentieth century placed women writers in a subaltern position that prevented their work from receiving serious criticism and recognition. According to Clutterbuck, by marginalizing the domestic subject, the works of women who write from that experience are “equally restricted, which in turn suggests that the original material was of limited worth. Certain subjects – those which are unfamiliar and whose significance remains unauthorized within the poetry tradition – are the targets of this tautological practice of exclusion” (74).

In her essay, “Domestic Violence,” Boland questions the assumption that domestic experience, written by women, was inferior to sanctioned subject matter:

How had it happened that poetry’s historical sense only came alive when it left the house? What did it mean for generation after generation of poets that the world outside was deemed to be a horizon of moral transcendence and pastoral significance? But not a half-empty cup, a child’s shoe, a crooked patch of sunlight on carpet? (37)

In addition to Roethke's generalized dismissal of women poets, the passages in "Daughter" from McBrien's *Higher English* frame a writer's approach to the lyric poem in masculine terms. The only acceptable themes for poetry, McBrien writes, are "love, religion, and war" because they "touch . . . the fundamental, primitive emotions of mankind" (*Citizen* 363). In another passage, McBrien writes that the lyric poem is "impossible to define," but "that is not to say that definitions have not been given by men who have made a profound study of aesthetic principles" (345). Read within the light of traditional exclusions, these passages illustrate the subordination of female experience and the overwhelming acceptance of the dominant male perspective and authority.

The "artistic doubts" that lingered over Boland's writing during her first years of motherhood are described in "Daughter" as a "shadow" of hesitation based on the marginalization of domestic subject matter and the hubris of masculine jurisdiction over the canon. Boland writes that to understand this shadow, one:

. . . must follow that shadow back to where it came from – track it, chase it, close with it – and you will come to the mysterious inner chamber of the art. The old Druidic center of poetry. The place where its first authority was composed, its first permissions given and refused, its subject matter decided on. Where the poem was charged with stories, definitions" (366).

Boland recognized the exclusive authority within Irish poetry was both ancient and resistant to change. It was "over-dependent on precedent and slow to break with it," and displayed a "subtle cod[ing]" that included "assumptions about poetic language and the identity of the poet" (363). The inclusion of the Roethke and McBrien quotes in

“Daughter” illustrate the degree to which restrictions on both the writer and the subject of Irish poetry were policed at the onset of Boland’s career.

To Boland, writing through her identity as a young mother and “housewife,” against the headwinds of the twentieth-century patriarchal bias in Irish poetry, eventually became her path forward. Knowing that she might face criticism, she nonetheless gave herself what critic Clutterbuck calls “visionary permission” (“Politics” 75) to explore the themes and images presented through suburban domestic life in her poetry. Boland saw her environment, while rich in subject matter, as a “test” of her ability to transform the Irish poem:

It is certainly true that this ordinary street, of young trees and younger children, has provided me with one of the most challenging components in a poetic theme: a devalued subject matter. It has given me an insight into the flawed permissions which surround the inherited Irish poem, in which you could have a political murder, but not a baby, and a line of hills, but not the suburbs under them.

Nevertheless, I think of these as problems rather than obstructions. They test me; they do not silence me. (*Object* 204-205)

Boland believed these “flawed permissions” that dictated appropriate poetic themes could be subverted, and that admission to the tradition could be accessed through “chang[ing] its rules of admission” (*Journey* 260). She felt drawn to question the authority of a tradition that challenged a woman’s place in it: “. . . it became apparent to me that the ordained authority of the poet had everything to do with permission granted or withheld. Not simply for subject matter, but for any claim that could be made for it . . . I needed to challenge that.” (264). Boland recognized that the everyday domestic tasks

she engaged in within her home had not been “sanctioned by poetic tradition” (*Object* 252). Nevertheless, she saw the connections between these activities and the traditional subject matter accepted in the male-centric canon. She realized that although it presented a challenge, marginalized subjects could be coaxed into her work, and that to incorporate “these devalued areas into [her] poetry, [she] had only to change them slightly” (252).

Boland’s Shifting Perspectives

In an interview after Boland’s death, Irish author Colm Tóibín reflected on the transformation Boland underwent from a young writer who, through imitating the style of male poets, wrote “very highly wrought poems, [with] perfect control over meter [and] stanza form” (Tóibín) to one who learned to eventually connect her technical expertise to her female lived experience. Tóibín believed that Boland “realized at a certain point . . . that the poems were not her voice. The poems did not come from her body. They came from her learning and from her seriousness” (Tóibín). Boland’s evolution did not take place in a single moment but was the result of years of struggle against an exclusionary precedent to integrate the ontological reality of women into the art she loved.

In “*Daughter*,” Boland mentions three elements in her evolutionary arc from a largely imitative poet with technical mastery to a revolutionary poet who challenged the oppressive male poetic authority and centered women’s experiences. These significant paradigm shifts were catalysts to her development: first, an acknowledgement of a gendered marginalization as a young poet; second, a physical displacement as a young wife from the literary city of Dublin to the suburb; and finally, the artistic crisis precipitated by the serious illness of her baby daughter, Eavan Frances. Boland has

written extensively in her prose essays about the first two elements of this transition, including several passages about them in “Daughter.” But before the posthumous surfacing of the incomplete work in *Citizen Poet*, Boland had shared very little about the profound impact of the third.

As a university student in the 1960s, Boland strived to internalize the masculine poetic stance and express it in her poetry. In her foreword to *Citizen Poet*, Heather Clark recalls Boland’s satisfaction when, as an undergraduate student, friend and rising poet Derek Mahon “told [her] approvingly that one of the real strengths of [her] poetry was that you could hardly tell it had been written by a woman” (*Citizen xi*). In “Daughter,” Boland describes herself as “eager-to-please” and admits she later became “ashamed at the way that girl talks and agrees with men and cuts her cloth” (345-46). But during her teen years and as a student at Trinity, she strictly followed what she describes as an established “map” for aspiring poets to follow that included “a reverence for a past defined for them by someone else” (*Journey 17*). For years, she was satisfied with “apply[ing] herself to the craft of a stanza, or to learning a more agile syntax,” (17) and despite an understanding that as an Irish woman she “was likely to be on the margins of the English canon,” she “refused to be excluded from its questions” (18). In an essay written about his friendship with Boland, Mahon wrote, “I now realize that she was struggling to assert herself in what she correctly perceived to be a male-dominated literary culture” (Mahon 2).

Mary O’Connor notes that although Boland had a sense of being an outsider in a male-defined genre, she was willing to enter a Faustian bargain to be accepted by the Irish literary world:

And the terms, conscious or unconscious, of her bargain? Let us imagine them: “Only admit me to your ranks, and I will decently clothe my limited female point of view in the cloak of the immortal masculine ones.” Indeed, so it came to pass. Eavan Boland, producing what she later called “‘the bien-fait’ poem . . . the well-made compromise,” became the first twentieth century Irish woman to make it into the (male organized and edited) anthologies. (46)

Without yet needing the permission structure or feeling an artistic necessity to write from a female position, Boland successfully wrote favorably critiqued, gender-neutral poetry. O’Connor explains that for Boland, the price of a compromising acceptance was an “imaginary structure [that would] fall upon [her] woundingly at some point” (46). Decades later, Boland would describe her early work as the “derivative, formalist, gesturing poems” of a young woman emulating the voices of others (“The Woman Poet” 150).

The first serious challenge to her desire to continue writing this “derivative” poem came when, after her marriage to novelist Kevin Casey, Boland moved to Dundrum, a Dublin suburb she described as an unknown “hinterland” to the literary city (*Citizen* 358). Her first impressions of the suburb were grim. She missed the atmosphere of the city: “I was in a strange place. No theatres, no talk, no companionship with other poets” (347). In a conversation with poet Paula Meehan, Boland described Dublin as an “insular” city that “gave the distinct feel of being the center of the earth,” holding on to “odd snobberies and exclusions attached to living in the suburb” (Boland and Meehan 320). Although the relocation was at first jarring, Marta Miquel-Baldellou describes the move as a “transition

. . . which deeply influenced her way of understanding poetry” by mandating “a new voice that would be more in tune with her new reality” (129).

In “Daughter,” Boland writes that the “language of poetry, [and] the esteem attached to it, had exempted me from a close-up view of the powerlessness of women” (*Citizen* 348). To Boland, the routines of domestic life for suburban women in the 1970s were simultaneously depersonalizing and revelatory. Adjusting to living in a private world of suburban domesticity, she began to reflect more deeply on the systematic erasure of authentic portrayals of women through the exclusion of women writers from the canon. In “The Irish Woman Poet: Her Place in History,” Boland explains that “the life of the Irish woman – the ordinary, lived life – was both invisible and, when it became visible, was considered inappropriate as a theme for Irish poetry” (*Object* 76). An intellectual fissure had developed between the venerated poetry Boland loved and its refusal to accept the domestic subject as worthy of inclusion. In a 2006 interview with Villar-Argáiz, she acknowledged that when she began to haltingly experiment with including domestic images in her poetry, that “[it] was plain to me at a certain point that I was writing about things which were unacceptable to received notions of Irish poetry” (Boland, “The Text of It” 61). The marginalization of the domestic subject and exclusion from the canon made certain questions inescapable: “Why were these subjects so menacing to the status quo in Irish poetry? Why were they so unsuitable?” (61). Boland would later write “that when a woman poet begins to write, she very quickly becomes conscious of the silences which have preceded her, which still surround her,” and this awareness brings an obligatory direction to “her purpose as a poet” (“The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma” 18). With time, Boland regarded her move to the suburbs as a rescue from

what might have been a career writing through an inescapable pretense. In “Daughter,” she states that she “had had the infinite luck to be snatched away, by one customary life, from the temptations of the other” (*Citizen* 347).

During her first few years in Dundrum, Boland composed the poems included in *War Horse*, published in 1975. O’Connor views this volume as the beginning of Boland’s transformation from a writer within the convention to a woman poet more willing to take risks: “Boland has a foot in either camp, and surely the stretch is beginning to feel uncomfortable” (53). With the following volumes, *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982), Boland centers the female bodily experience and the quiet comforts of domestic life, respectively. According to Clutterbuck, critics generally regarded these poems as initiating the “recovery of an unproblematically representative subject-position for Irish women” (“Irish Critical” 279). Boland’s concept for *In Her Own Image* was, through female subjectivity, to begin deconstructing the female iconography and nationhood imagery prevalent in the Irish poem. Laura-Ma Lojo-Rodríguez writes that the poems come “from a female persona whose image has been brutally distorted,” requiring a process of “regaining consciousness [of] the devalued self” to find deliverance “out of myth,” eventually asserting “authority over her body image” (12). But Allen-Randolph explains that these female images “suffered from problems of control and distance” (“Private Worlds” 10). At issue was the “distance in these poems between the rhetorical voice and the experience, between the lyrical persona and the material” (10). By contrast, the poems of *Night Feed* brought together Boland’s personal experience and her poetic vision, creating what Allen-Randolph believes is “the radiantly

unified sensibility that would carry her forward” without “sentimentalizing, simplifying, or ornamentalizing [the] experience” of motherhood (10).

When Boland became a mother, first to Sarah Margaret in 1975, then to Eavan Frances in 1978, she felt the absurdity of the omissions in the “venerable, exact magisterial craft” that “had no place for the central adventure of my life” (*Citizen* 350). However, she developed a sense of community with other suburban women with whom she shared motherhood experiences. She writes of waking before dawn to feed her newborn daughter and discovering that other mothers were performing the same rituals. This realization created a sense of shared reality:

When my first little girl was born it was in the depths of winter. I would go out, in the first few weeks of her life, to feed her in the hour just before dawn. It would be dark, with a hard January bite to the air and there was always a special delight in seeing the darkness and the frost dispersed in the small warmth of the child and the light of the nursery and the animal joy of a new life. But always in those first moments of dark and cold as I went down the corridor I could look out our window and see the lights scattered here and there in other windows. And every one of those windows meant a new life, the solitary reunion between a mother and a baby in a ghostly hour. We were all alone with the miracle; and we were not alone. (“On Religion” 100)

Sharing common maternal experiences with other women in Dundrum neighborhood strengthened Boland’s desire to bring the images and emotions of motherhood to the forefront, elevating the everyday subject from mundane to visionary. While she “was aware . . . how little the disciplines of poetry allowed for that image”

because it “was too ordinary, too silent in a way,” she was determined to bring the image into her poem, and she “set out to re-think some of the exclusions of poetry which, as an apprentice poet, [she] had inhaled without thinking” (100).

Boland sensed poetry in the routines of domesticity and cycles of nature observable in her home and neighborhood. In “The Woman, the Place, the Poet,” she writes:

Now here, in front of me every day, were repetitions which had almost exactly the same effect. The crocuses under the rowan tree, the same child wheeled down to the shops at the same time every day, a car that returned home with the same ding on its bumper every night, and the lamps which sprang into symmetries across our hills at dusk in November. What were all these if not—as language and music in poetry are—a sequence and repetition that allowed the deeper meanings to emerge: a sense of belonging, of nourishment, of a life revealed, and not restrained, by ritual and patterning? (221)

Continuing his remarks at Trinity, Tóibín stated Boland’s domestic poetry “wasn’t the drama of a broken home, it was the strange ‘undrama’ of love, of domestic bliss” (Tóibín). Tóibín believed that uniting her newfound subject matter with “her original knowledge of stanza form, her original technical skills . . . was her life’s work. It was to find a tone that not only matched her voice but matched her own experience [which was] the experience of her body” (Tóibín). Boland’s conviction to write the “experience of her body,” overriding any lingering doubts about uniting her female perspective with her technical mastery, was crystallized by the trauma of the serious illness of her second daughter.

A Maternal Crisis

In the fall of 1979, Boland and her husband traveled from Ireland to Iowa City with their two young daughters to serve as fellows of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Shortly after their arrival, one-year-old Eavan Frances was stricken with meningitis and hospitalized in serious condition. Prior to the publication of “Daughter” in *Citizen Poet*, Boland had shared only brief accounts of her child’s illness and its impact on her writing. For example, while introducing poems inspired by the experience at readings, specifically “The Journey” and “Love,” she sometimes mentioned the crisis as the source of these poems. While reading at the University of Arizona in 2003, Boland stated that the “crucible” of the ordeal had “changed [her] forever as a poet,” leading her to “go forwards and backwards about what we write about when we write poetry. Why do we write it? What do we leave out and what do we put in?” (“Full Reading”). Additionally, when “The Journey” was accepted for publication in *Chicago Review*, she wrote a brief introduction which included adjacent thoughts:

Then our smallest daughter, only a year old, got ill with meningitis. She made a full recovery. But the sense of an abyss opening in front of us, which suddenly closed, remained with me for a long time. And with that sense came an increasing impatience on my part for the actions and events poetry refuses to name and record. (*Chicago Review* 220)

Prior to “Daughter,” perhaps Boland’s most detailed description of the traumatic experience was written for an introduction to “The Journey” in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics in Poetry*. She describes the sound of the train outside the

hospital room window and her baby's intravenous tube, "a beautiful, sinuous line of medication – crystal clear and amber – dripping from a plastic container into the baby's head" (187). She mentions the "sounds and flickers of the hospital corridor and the sweet warmth of the October dusk" (187) she felt when she left the hospital to sleep for a few hours. She wrote that the crisis "left an indelible impression" that eventually changed her relationship with the "elements of form" she had internalized (187). Boland began to realize that some profound experiences, like her daughter's brush with death, "ran the risk of remaining outside the craft [she] had learned and the tradition [she] had inherited" (187).

Through reflections from her journals and narrative prose, Boland provides the reader of "Daughter" a more detailed, intimate glimpse into the agonizing, helpless experience of a mother watching her one-year-old baby cling to life in a hospital room:

Our daughter did not die. But at one year and three months of age she contracted meningitis. One moment – this was the way it seemed – she was a vocal, lively baby. The next she lay, with no color in her face, in a clear plastic cot, in the Mercy Hospital in Iowa.

We were far from our home. Ireland, our family, our friends were thousands of miles away. We were alone, with our other small daughter, beside a sudden abyss.

Her head was shaved. Antibiotics were dripped into it. For days she seemed lifeless. The small head, the brain, the centers of sight and retention I had hoped to fill with language, images, memories, were all under siege by one of the great killers of children. (*Citizen* 361)

Writing almost three decades after the trauma, Boland could still describe the details of the room:

Two windows, one straight ahead and one to my left . . . the color of one blue chair in the corner deepened and glowed in the shadow. Beside her were the machines, tubes, drips she depended on. Her cot had a clear, plastic roof. On it lay an inert bear we had bought in Chicago, a dark brown splayed out shape. There was an open space behind me, beyond which was the nurses' station. And then those windows, through which came the mournful sound of the Rock Island line, and the sweet air of a midwestern autumn, growing quickly colder. (364)

At the University of Arizona reading, Boland confessed that she thought her baby would die in Mercy Hospital. In "Daughter," she describes sitting in the hospital room, "looking for the child I had known, looking for some recognition from her. Neither were there" (361). She imagined her baby's "small, straight spine . . . under attack" (364). Boland "struggled with a sense of complete despair," and was distraught as she thought of the "treasured beauty and importance" of a daughter she "stood to lose" (362).

A flickering candle in a jack-o'-lantern Boland observed on her walk from the hospital to her apartment was a haunting reminder of the tiny flame of life struggling to stay lit in her daughter's body. She recalled: "I turned my head away from the wavering, the fragility" (361).

Finally, when a nurse informed Boland that her baby had smiled, she observed that the timing of this nighttime smile coincided with "a full autumn morning in Ireland" (365). It provided comfort to Boland as she thought, "in some part of her [daughter's]

wounded body, her memory, her infant sense of time, it was an Irish morning that she first began to recover in” (365).

After the family’s return to Ireland, Boland’s journal entries describe both the lingering physical and emotional effects of the crisis. Watching her youngest climbing into and out of a chair, she notices the “gap in her hair, where they cut it away, is almost closed” (354). Weeks later, she writes, “There is still a gap where the skin of her head shows through her hair: eggshell fragile. Five months ago – and nothing but that and dreams to remind us that the horror was real” (360).

For Boland, this agonizing maternal crisis exposed a glaring gulf between a tightly regulated poetic subject and underrepresented experience in Irish poetry. The hospital room fixed in her memory became a site “where the plates under [her] life had shifted” and a “part of [her] relationship with poetry had ruptured” (372). While Boland felt “powerfully attended by the spirits of other human beings” (370) who had experienced similar ordeals, she felt abandoned by poetry. She realized the things she had witnessed “had no pre-existing shape in poetic language” (371). Although Boland was a studious devotee of poetry and spent hours reading and memorizing poems, she found it “remarkable” that “not a single line of poetry, not a single poem, came to [her] mind or memory in that terrible solitude” (372). Reviewing the lives of poets and writers she admired, Boland found very little evidence that those who experienced child loss felt authorized to include the experience in their work. Boland wondered, “What prevented them? They were feeling men and passionate artists . . . [y]et they complied, in their own work, with this erasure” (372).

Heather Clark maintains that when Boland encountered that “darkest hour” in her baby’s hospital room, “she hit against the limits of not just the Irish poem, but of poetic convention itself” (*Citizen* xiii). Clark writes that “she knew she had to expand those conventions . . . [t]his great invisibility needed to be redressed” (xiii). To do that, Boland felt the “only way forward was to subvert those [poetic] forms . . . to force them into the inclusions they had shunned” (371). The boundaries of poetic authority that had previously caused Boland to hesitate, to have what O’Connor referred to as “a foot in either camp,” (53) no longer felt intellectually honorable or possible. The ordeal had led her to the conviction that she “would never again feel diffident about the canon or its customs of subject matter and theme” (*Citizen* 372). The thematic material of Boland’s life, the private world of children and the suburbs, had never seemed to her trivial, but rather inappropriately marginalized and minimized. The language of poetry, which she felt could gild the truth in highly ornamental language, had missed the reality of the terror she had experienced. Boland became resolute about including that event and the wide range of maternal experience in her poetry: “In that [hospital] room, I was still a poet because I was always a poet. But I was primarily, with every particle of my mind and personality, a mother” (372).

Subverting the Inherited Authority

Boland argues in “Daughter” that the traditional poetic authority she encountered as a young poet could be followed “back to the secrets and mysteries of resistance and priestly ownership” (*Citizen* 358) which dismissed the lived experiences of women as intellectually insignificant. This assumption was based, according to Boland, on the sexist

notion that women poets had “not lived the lives which fit them to be the central, defining poets men can be” (358). Conversely, by virtue of their engagement with the public sphere, men were “acculturated by art, history, power . . . to control the relation between the inner and outer world. Not only to control it. To define it also” (358). But after the illness of her daughter, Boland could no longer overlook either the existing control or the limiting definitions. However, neither could she completely dismiss them. She writes in “Daughter” that she “became a poet to the accompaniment of poetic forms re-structuring my world even as I read” and recognized that the customary exclusion of her world in those poems “had also once written it” (371). In her essay, “The Rooms of Other Women Poets,” Boland admitted to having “something of a double vision” as she considered the poet’s authority: “On the one hand, the realization that the poetic past is a necessary engine of authority. On the other, the knowledge that a poet’s resistance to that authority can also be vital” (*Journey* 38-39). This dichotomy began Boland’s search for a way to combine her respect for the foundation laid by tradition and a desire to expand the permissions within it.

Though she had become “skeptical of the very structure of the Irish poem” (*Object* 191) and the power of its authority, Boland did not believe it was irredeemable. In her tribute to Paula Meehan, she contends that the exclusions in the tradition must be confronted: “the lack of the voice and vision of women left certain elements of Irish poetry static, unchallenged” (*Journey* 220). To challenge the art, Boland advocated for constant critical scrutiny by the artist: “Poetry should be scrubbed, abraded, cleared, and re-stated with the old wash stones of argument and resistance. It should happen every

generation. Every half-generation. In every working poet's life and practice" ("Domestic Violence" 37).

Boland was not alone in her desire to expand the male-imposed limitations. She described two approaches emerging among her cohort of women poets who were focused on catalyzing change: following a separatist path or subverting the tradition from within. In her 1995 essay, "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma," Boland argues that a separatist position, one that discounts the constructs of the established patriarchal poetic tradition, inhibits women poets' ability to affect meaningful change within the art:

Separatist ideology is a persuasive and dangerous influence on any woman writing today. It tempts her to disregard the whole poetic past as patriarchal betrayal. It pleads with her to discard the complexities of true feeling for the relative simplicity of anger. It promises to ease her technical problems with the solvent of polemic. (18)

In "Daughter," Boland writes that "separatists saw form itself as offering the oppressor's language to women poets – tempting them towards a place where the erasures . . . were so ingrained that the whole project of form could only be corrupt" (371). But Boland contends that the traditionally-trained poet could not completely distance herself from the form: "I could not do it. I believe as poets, as women, we are constructed by the construct. If form is the poisoned chalice, then we have drunk out of it already" (371).

In an interview with Eileen Battersby for *The Irish Times*, Boland further explained her objection to the separatist viewpoint:

I'm not a separatist – I've never believed women poets can walk away from the body of poetry that exists. In the powerful debate which exists in and out of the academy, I agree with those who think the real opportunities for women in poetry lie in destabilizing the canon, not separating themselves from it. Besides, I have lived in the ambiguity as a woman poet of deeply honoring the work of male poets while at the same time wishing to contest some of the assumptions around that work. (Boland, "The Beauty of Ordinary Things")

Although Boland was determined to subvert the authority of Irish poetic hierarchy through her poetry, essays, and readings, her early efforts to include domestic themes in her work often met with resistance, sexism, and even snobbery. According to Sarah Maguire, at the time Boland began writing, "men editors, reviewers and poets had an almost exclusive stranglehold over what was published and considered to be acceptable" (62). Maguire described these men as "white male middle-class heterosexual Oxbridge graduates . . . interested (unsurprisingly) in poetry which reflected their own social experience" (62). Allen-Randolph recalls a 1986 reading at which Boland presented her poems in "an angry, defiant voice," perhaps reflecting both the defensiveness and obduracy that she needed to persevere. Allen-Randolph stayed after the reading to speak to an established male poet who had opted out of hearing Boland. When she asked him why he chose not to attend, he replied, "Have you ever heard of something called the middle class? Middle class crap about babies and houses?" ("Afterword" 123). Allen-Randolph also recalled a backhanded compliment she heard from another male poet, who called Boland "a first-class mind in service to a second-rate ideology," and a university professor who dismissed her work with "[t]here's a market for it" (123). Boland was

aware of the criticism but remained persistent. In her 1995 essay, “The Irish Woman Poet: Her Place in Irish Literature,” Boland writes that the generally accepted belief was that poetry written by women poets was for a marginal and exclusively female audience: “The assumptions implicit in that language were that women wrote poems merely for the constituency of women, and about it. But that these poems were not to be considered binding upon, or subversive of, the mainstream of Irish poetry” (76).

Guinn Batten maintains that confronting these assumptions created in Boland an ambition which “converted resentment, frustration, and even confusion into goads for writing her most memorable poetry” (364). The illness and recovery of Eavan Frances, events that inspired some of Boland’s noteworthy poems, created a sense of her own “authority of some understanding” that she struggled to name (*Citizen* 370). She considered her baby’s hospital room a “place of ordeal and grace” where “an art can be learned” (370). At her child’s bedside, she “had no chance to learn the craft,” but “learned something about the art” that changed her trajectory as a poet. This new self-authorization prompted her to press the limits of inherited authority that she felt provided “no pre-existing shape in poetic language” for what she had experienced (371).

Boland’s subversion of the Irish poem began with deconstructing the ornamental feminine icon and female symbol of Irish nationhood with 1980’s *In Her Own Image*, followed by elevating a domestic perspective in *Night Feed*. She placed women in the doorways from which they could observe suburban life, often extending these observations into the realm of political meaning. She entered venerated forms obliquely, defying pre-drawn conclusions. In her biography of Boland, Allen-Randolph writes that

“her revisions of the poetic self as the figure of a woman – contemporary, domestic, maternal – destabilized the hegemony of the male voice” (106).

Boland stated in the 1993 interview with Allen-Randolph, “[w]hen the history of poetry in our time is written . . . women poets will be seen to have rewritten not just the poem, not just the image. They won’t have just rebalanced elements within the poem. They will have altered the cartography of the poem. The map will look different” (“An Interview” 130). Boland’s subversive work played a pioneering role in expanding the boundaries of that map for other Irish women poets to explore.

The “Daughter” Poems

At the time of her death, Boland had selected just four poems to include in her unfinished “Daughter” manuscript. The choices reveal her desire to counter the position taken by Adrienne Rich that caring for young children inevitably suppresses creativity. Instead, she offers the possibility that, according to Allen-Randolph, “[motherhood] could also be . . . a state where poetry was renewed” (*Eavan Boland* 71). Boland wrote that her life as a young mother “was lived through ordinary actions and powerful emotions” that needed to be brought into poetry: “. . . the more ordinary a day I lived, the more I lifted a child, conscious of nothing but the sweetness of a child’s skin, or the light behind an apple tree, or rain on slates, the more language and poetry came to my assistance” (*Citizen* 312). Although both Rich and Boland found the daily parental interruptions challenging to their creative work, Boland claimed imaginative territory within poetry for maternal life and suburban setting. By contrast, Rich felt that “to be

maternally with small children all day in the old way . . . requires a holding-back, a putting aside of that imaginative activity” (Rich 23).

In her 1993 interview with Allen-Randolph, Boland stated that she “came to think of [herself] as an indoor nature poet” (“An Interview” 124): “. . . my lexicon was the kettle and the steam, and the machine in the corner and the kitchen, the baby’s bottle. These were parts of my world. Not to write about them would have been artificial. Those objects were visible to me. They assumed importances” (124).

Under the “Lyric” heading in the “Daughter” essay, two poems from Boland’s 1982 collection, *Night Feed*, illustrate subversion of the traditional lyric poem through foregrounding the maternal voice, experience, and domestic setting. Allen-Randolph contends that positive critical reception of Boland’s *Night Feed* established the suburb “as legitimate a landscape for Irish poetry as the canals of Dublin, the towns of Gaeltacht, or the shipyards of Belfast” (“Private Worlds” 16). In both poems, Boland connects the natural world to the maternal one, expanding the definition of the nature poem through both the setting and the speaker’s proximity to the action. These poems, “Night Feed” and “Endings,” include imagery, symbolism, and personification of natural elements which connect the reader to the inevitable cycles and renewals observed in nature.

In “The Dream Convention” category, Boland includes two poems directly inspired by her experiences in Iowa City: “Love” (1994) and “The Journey” (1987). She considered the dream convention to be “the grandest and most hubristic of the poetic conventions,” and she felt a desire to remake it, “to take the form and make it tell [her] story” (*Citizen* 374). The Underworld dream of Aeneas in Virgil’s *Aeneid VI* is

foundational to both poems, particularly the brief mention of children who died in infancy:

At once are heard voices and wailing sore – the souls
of infants weeping, whom, on the very threshold
of the sweet life they shared not, torn
from the breast, the black day swept off and plunged in bitter death. (Fairclough
426-29)

In “The Journey,” Boland subverts the mythic dream convention by replacing the epic hero with a mother who is shepherded by the ancient poetess, Sappho, through a vision of the Underworld. According to Andrew J. Auge, Sappho is an appropriate guide because she is “the mother of all lyric poets, the progenitor who stands at the origin yet at the margins of European poetry” (138).

Instead of a mother, the hero figure in “Love” is Boland’s husband “with snow on the shoulders of [his] coat” (28) on the bridge over the Iowa River. The poem is a loving tribute to the partner who strengthened her during their daughter’s illness and an elegy to the lost passions of young marriage. The ordeal of her sick baby was Boland’s Underworld, a place “out of which our memories and spirits would have never emerged if our daughter had disappeared there” (*Citizen* 367).

“Night Feed”

In an excerpt from “First Letter to a Young Woman Poet” included in “Daughter,” Boland describes her feelings after writing “Night Feed”: “There was no joy in writing a poem like ‘Night Feed.’ I finished it one summer afternoon. No joy. But maybe

something aggressive and solid. As if I was trying to teach lyric poetry a new word”
(*Citizen* 350).

“Night Feed” consists of five stanzas, each with seven lines. The opening lines of the poem establish the speaker as a parent coming to her child in the early morning hours:

This is dawn.

Believe me

This is your season, little daughter.

The moment daisies open. (*Citizen* 351-352, lines 1-4)

The speaker equates the beginning of day with the budding life of her child in her nursery. The first stanza continues to blur the lines between the domestic space and the natural world: “The hour mercurial rainwater / Makes a mirror for sparrows / It’s time we drowned our sorrows” (5-7). Boland’s use of alliteration in this stanza (“dawn,” “daughter,” “daisies,” and “sparrows,” “sorrows,” and “moment,” mercurial,” “mirror”) as well as slant rhymes (“mirror,” “sparrows,” “sorrows”) imbue the poem with a sense of quiet musicality that continues into the second stanza as the speaker is united with her baby:

I tiptoe in.

I lift you up

Wriggling

In your rosy, zipped sleeper.

Yes, this is the hour

For the early bird and me

When finder is keeper. (8-14)

Enjambment in lines 9-11 creates pauses that emphasize the movements of the mother and baby, and the end rhymes “sleeper” and “keeper” give this stanza a loose rhythmic pattern within its free verse structure. The imagery of the “rosy sleeper” and “wriggling” baby are more reminders of the freshness of new life. Folksy, proverbial phrases in the final lines of the stanza add an unsophisticated, simple tone that underscores the universality of maternal, possessive feeling: “Yes, this is the hour / For the early bird and me / When finder is keeper” (12-14).

As the speaker feeds her baby, the climactic action of the poem, she is overwhelmed with a realization that this nurturing act elevates her. There is a recognition in these lines that the unseen, quiet moments of life are humanity-affirming.

I crook the bottle.

How you suckle!

This is the best I can be,

Housewife

To this nursery

Where you hold on,

Dear life. (15-21)

As the mother finishes feeding her baby, strong images of a “silt of milk” and her baby’s “birth-coloured eyes” add texture to the poem. End rhymes (“offended” and “ended”) and consonance (“milk,” “suck,” and “wakes”) add a sense of finality to the action:

A silt of milk.

The last suck.

And now your eyes are open,

Birth-coloured and offended.

Earth wakes.

You go back to sleep.

The feed is ended. (21-28)

In the final stanza, the imagery evolves into a softness, with a quiet, peaceful, and profound sense of reverence for the sunrise moment the mother and child have shared.

The transcendent feeling of the exchange between the speaker and her child begins to slip away as the moon and stars fade into day, as does the speaker's sense of purpose.

Personification of natural elements, the moon and poplars, again link the outdoor natural world with the nature occurring inside the home. The "losing face" and "fall from grace" end rhymes reinforce the finality of the moment:

Worms turn.

Stars go in.

Even the moon is losing face.

Poplars stilt for dawn

And we begin

The long fall from grace.

I tuck you in. (29-35)

In brief lines with sparse language evocative of a hushed nursery, Boland's poem of human connection subverts the lyric, bringing a private, maternal experience into the public realm.

“Endings”

If “Night Feed” is a quiet celebration of maternal nurturing, “Endings” is a melancholy poem in which the speaker laments the end of her childbearing years and foresees a time when she will no longer fulfill the nurturer role. By including both poems in “Daughter,” Boland presents a complex picture of the wide-ranging emotions that accompany motherhood. A journal entry Boland includes in “Daughter” mentions the feelings of despair she grappled with as she confronted the end of her childbearing years: “. . . I won’t have another child. Part of me is that thing nature hates: the broken temple, the stone at the mouth of the grave. How cumbrous I feel. And how finished” (*Citizen* 353). “Endings” conveys the bittersweet realization that the speaker’s children will grow into adults with autonomy, reflecting nature’s process of renewal. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh points out that “Boland often turns to images of flowers and woods to embody feelings, the life cycle in the natural world reminding her speakers of the limitations of maternal joy” (69).

The short poem consists of just sixteen lines of free verse arranged in four stanzas. The setting of the first stanza is the interior of a home in which the speaker is near enough to a sleeping child to hear her movements. In “Domestic Interiors,” Boland states her intention to reclaim the Irish poem’s lack of vibrant, breathing interior spaces in her poetry: “The poem’s ability to speak of domestic spaces and, by inference, of the lives lived in them, was becoming atrophied. A whole teeming world was going on, leaning forward into a future poetry would not share” (*Citizen* 289). The poem begins with the movement of a baby in a crib and the sadness of a mother who will not bear another child:

A child

Shifts in a cot.

No matter what happens now

I'll never fill one again. (*Citizen* 359, lines 1-4)

For the remaining stanzas, the point of view shifts from the scene inside the home to a nighttime view of the outside environment, revealing the garden. Both inside and outside the home, living things are evolving.

It's a night

white things ember in:

jasmine and the shine –

flowering, opaline –

of the apple trees. (5-9)

The assonance in these lines (“night,” “white,” “shine,”) combined with the end rhymes (“flowering,” “opaline”) provide both musicality and moodiness to the scene. The imagery of the night’s darkness contrasting with the glow of the white flowers gives visual texture to the poem. The speaker then presses forward to observe more closely: “If I lean / I can see / what it is the branches end in:” (10-12). Just as the speaker is grieving the end of her childbearing years, she can “lean” to visualize the inevitable changes that will occur as her children grow:

The leaf.

The reach.

The blossom.

The abandon. (13-16)

These short lines consisting of slant rhyme couplets evoke sadness as the speaker visualizes her future without young children at home, a theme Boland returns to in many of her poems.

“Love”

At the time “Love” was published in Boland’s *A Time of Violence*, fifteen years had passed since the critical events in Iowa City. Boland and her husband, Kevin Casey, were in their fifties and their children were teenagers. At the University of Arizona reading, Boland described her impressions as she revisited the city: “When I went back to Iowa City then, many years later, I went back to the bridge, and I was just so moved. In my mind, Kevin was in front of me. Of course, that is something about the past and memory, the figures our mind produces are not real, they are ghosts of the past” (Voca). This vision of her husband on the bridge over the Iowa River forms the basis for her poem about the changing nature of love between a husband and wife over time. The narrative poem is arranged in eight stanzas of various lengths and juxtaposes mythological representations with simple, down-to-earth images:

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. (*Citizen* 375-376, lines1-6)

In Iowa City, “myths collided” for the young couple as their daughter clung to

life. The heroic figure in these lines is Virgil's Aeneas who embarked on an epic journey through the Underworld guided by the Sybil. Alliteration in these lines ("dark," "dusk," "deepens," and "where we once," for example) creates early harmony.

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. (7-12)

Boland recalls the kitchen of their temporary apartment, and the solid plainness of their Amish table contrasts with her complex personification of love. This love is not an abstraction but has taken a godlike form that combines lightness and strength. Its wings symbolize an agency to come and go, implying that the couple have welcomed and fostered it. As "a brother of fire and air" (12) it acquires elemental importance.

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. (13-19)

Here Boland presents a chilling contrast between the illness and recovery of their child, the tragedy they had escaped, with the insurmountable gulf between the living and

dead that Aeneas witnesses when he can no longer communicate with his fallen comrades.

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. (20-24)

In brief phrases, Boland describes a love that endures. However, the dailyness of their interactions in a mature, settled marriage are perfunctory, lacking the intensity that youth and danger once brought into their relationship.

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: (25-28)

Boland feels the absence of the once deep emotional connection she experienced with her husband as they leaned on each other through their daughter's illness. The details she provides of snow on her husband's shoulders and a car's headlights briefly illuminating the scene create a vivid image that is transitory.

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: (29-32)

Boland elevates her husband to the role of epic hero, and like Aeneas's fallen comrades, she yearns to powerfully reconnect with him again.

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? (33-36)

Here Boland wonders if the powerful love that sanctified their Iowa City ordeal is now no longer attainable. These lines return the reader to the birdlike symbol of love with "the feather and muscle of wings" (4) that had once attended them.

But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.

You walk away and I cannot follow. (37-38)

With resignation, Boland understands that there are distances too vast to bridge, even within a marriage to a man she loves and remains committed to.

"The Journey"

In an interview with Robin Ekiss, Boland described "The Journey" as "a poem about child mortality" and "also about the fact that such subjects are extraordinarily absent from poetry" (Boland, "Of Antibiotics"). Instead of addressing child loss directly, she uses the beginning of the poem to focus attention on the modern miracle, an antibiotic that saved her daughter's life. Boland argues that "ornamental language can protect a poet from reality" and raises "the old debate about what agency language has in a poem: whether it merely decorates the subject or reveals it" ("Of Antibiotics"). This frustration

echoes the feelings Boland experienced when her child was ill and the poetry she knew lacked the power to comfort her.

“The Journey” is a lengthy, formally structured narrative poem composed of twenty-four four-line stanzas. In the first three stanzas, the speaker, a poet, expresses anger about the distances between poetic language and reality: “somewhere a poet is wasting / his sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious // ‘emblem instead of the real thing” (7-9). As the speaker’s emotions ebb and night encroaches on her work, she focuses briefly on her surroundings, a room that is “a mess” (20), littered with “hardcovers, half-finished cups, clothes piled up on an old chair” (21-22). When fatigue sets in, she falls into a state of semi-awareness, her book open to the story of Aphrodite and Sappho. Like the Sybil to Aeneas, Sappho then appears to the speaker, leading her “down down down without so much as / ever touching down” (33-34) to “a sudden rest beside a river in what seemed to be / an oppressive suburb of the dawn” (42-44). As the speaker becomes aware of her surroundings, she sees the figures of mothers and their children, and Sappho informs her they are “the children of the plague” (52).

Virgil’s description of a similar scene in *The Aeneid* is included in Boland’s epigraph to “The Journey” – just four lines of Aeneas’s passing encounter with children who died in infancy. Auge points out that “the inattentiveness of the male-dominated literary tradition to one of the most fundamental realities of human life throughout history, the horror of child mortality” (138) makes Sappho a perfect conduit for a more complete re-visioning of the allegorical dream convention.

The speaker focuses on the harrowing agony of mothers helplessly unable to hold and succor their children:

Then to my horror I could see to each
 nipple some had clipped a limpet shape –
 suckling darkneses – while others had their arms
 weighed down, making terrible pietas. (*Citizen* 376-380, lines 53-56)

Sappho warns the speaker to abstain from judging these women:

She took my sleeve and said to me, ‘be careful.
 Do not define these women by their work;
 Not as washerwomen trussed in dust and sweating,
 Muscling water into linen by the river’s edge //
 ‘nor as court ladies brailled in silk
 on wool and woven with an ivory unicorn (57-62).

Stripping differences between the classes, Sappho shares the wisdom that no mother, regardless of social status, is immune from the tragedy of child loss:

‘But these are women who went out like you
 when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
 recovering the day, stooping, picking up
 teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets – (65-68)

The speaker is frozen in place on one side of the river; the grieving mothers are rooted in everlasting sorrow on the other. She wants to speak to them, but like Aeneas and his companions, language cannot close the divide between life and death. Her plea to Sappho, “let me at least be their witness” (78), is denied: “what you have seen is beyond speech, / beyond song, only not beyond love” (79-80).

The poet speaker wants to give voice to women who have suffered in this version of the Underworld, to reveal their histories. According to Sheila C. Conboy, “Sappho embodies the woman poet’s concern for other women because she undertakes the journey, and the journey itself produces the speaker’s newfound sense of connection with women who may be mythical but are yet representatives of a historical past” (70). For Boland, the desire to speak for voiceless women of the past is strong, but writing the unwritten stories of women in a silenced past comes with the risk of misrepresentation. Stef Craps believes that “the poet’s mission, as Sappho sees it, is not to break these silences by filling them up with words, but to preserve, honour, and respect them by listening to them and making them audible as silences” (171).

Sappho entreats the poet to remember what she has witnessed, and before vanishing, she warmly addresses her:

‘there are not many of us; you are dear //
 ‘and stand beside me as my own daughter.
 I have brought you here so you will know forever
 the silences in which are our beginnings,
 in which we have an origin like water. (84-88)

Here Sappho claims a foremother relationship to the poet, sharing knowledge that can only be imparted through experience. Anna Kisiel believes that what Sappho has explained “is incomprehensible within the frames of language and thus impossible to be transferred by the means of the linguistic system” (135). Instead of language, Kisiel invokes Bracha Ettinger’s “originary matrixial space, which does not need words for communication” (135).

When the poet speaker awakens, she finds that “nothing was changed; nothing was more clear” (93), indicating that while the dream vision had not altered the reality of her challenges as a woman poet, she has received a new clarity about her path forward. She can honor the silences of the past by writing poetry that explores the common experiences of women throughout time. Boland closes the poem with these poignant lines: “The rain was grief in arrears; my children / slept the last dark out safely and I wept” (95-96).

The choices of “Night Feed,” “Endings,” “Love,” and “The Journey” together reflect the work of a mother poet who believed her world was worthy of poetic expression, and that the concrete objects that appeared within that world, whether they were antibiotics, a baby’s bottle, a toy in the grass, or snow on her husband’s coat, told stories just as vibrant as Aeneas’s golden bough. In Boland’s poetry, these things “assumed importances” (“An Interview” 124) and she wrote them into her poetry to help express the complex layers of maternal emotion. She made use of inspiration from the natural world she observed both within and outside of her suburban home and through her growing children, believing that images of creation were the essence of maternal poetic inheritance.

Conclusion

The 2024 publication of Boland’s unusual and incomplete “Daughter” reveals an untold part of her story: the degree to which the near-death of her baby fueled an outrage that intensified her determination to subvert an exclusively male poetic authority. Interwoven with her recollections of this watershed event are elements of the essential

battles she fought: disrupting the traditional definitions of the poetic subject, expanding notions of the poet's identity, elevating the domestic poem, advocating for concrete authenticity over pretentiousness, seeking a new poetic language for her world, and recognizing that motherhood need not silence a poetic voice. Her emergence in the Irish literary scene coincided with enormous changes in the country's political and social landscape, but her determination to lead the way through the headwinds of resistance was revolutionary. Most of all, she was willing to witness through her poetry the experiences of women and mothers, a perspective silenced through generations of exclusion.

In addition to the lyric and dream convention poetry she shares in "Daughter," it is interesting to ponder other forms she may have added. The anti-lyric poetry of *In Her Own Image* might have been included, or she may have discussed the challenges of writing from the perspective of an aging body. Her work to expand the stereotypical posture of political and nature poems from her position as a mother within a domestic landscape would have extended her argument. But even without finality, Boland's essay has changed the understanding of her unique motivations to foster change.

Initially, the title seems to refer to the frightening illness of her daughter, Eavan Frances, which motivates and frames the piece. But the interaction of the lyric persona with the ancient poet Sappho in "The Journey" may add another layer of meaning: "there are not many of us; you are dear / 'and stand beside me as my own daughter'" (*Citizen* 380, lines 84-85). Additionally, Boland also felt a close connection to her own mother, painter Frances Kelly, who taught her that not only could objects in a scene tell a story, but also that motherhood and a creative life can coexist. Perhaps most importantly, Boland wanted to be a foremother to women poets of the future. Like Sappho, she might

have felt a warm, motherly impulse to provide for them what she lacked – someone to show her the way. The poem she might have included in “Daughter” to express this desire was published in *Against Love Poetry* (2005):

Is It Still the Same

young woman who climbs the stairs,

who closes a child’s door,

who goes to her table

in a room at the back of a house?

The same unlighted corridor?

The same night air

over the wheelbarrows and rain-tanks?

The same inky sky and pin-bright stars?

You can see nothing of her, but her head

bent over the page, moving,

moving again, and her hair.

I wrote like that once.

But this is different.

This time, when she looks up, I will be there. (*New Collected Poems* 305)

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