

The War Horse

This dry night, nothing unusual
About the clip, clop, casual

Iron of his shoes as he stamps death
Like a mint on the innocent coinage of earth.

I lift the window, watch the ambling feather
Of hock and fetlock, loosed from its daily tether

In the tinker camp on the Enniskerry Road,
Pass, his breath hissing, his snuffling head

Down. He is gone. No great harm is done.
Only a leaf of our laurel hedge is torn—

Of distant interest like a maimed limb,
Only a rose which now will never climb

The stone of our house, expendable, a mere
Line of defence against him, a volunteer

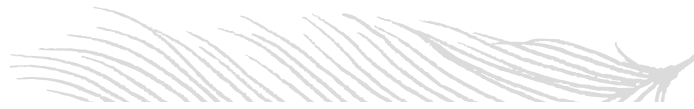
You might say, only a crocus, its bulbous head
Blown from growth, one of the screamless dead.

But we, we are safe, our unformed fear
Of fierce commitment gone; why should we care

If a rose, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted
Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated?

He stumbles on like a rumour of war, huge
Threatening. Neighbours use the subterfuge





Of curtains. He stumbles down our short street
Thankfully passing us. I pause, wait,

Then to breathe relief lean on the sill
And for a second only my blood is still

With atavism. That rose he smashed frays
Ribbioned across our hedge, recalling days

Of burned countryside, illicit braid:
A cause ruined before, a world betrayed.



from *The War Horse* published in 1975

Glossary:

Hock: joint on a horse's hind leg


Fetlock: a projection on the back of a horse's leg, just above the hoof.

Bulbous: fat and round

Subterfuge: evasive technique

Atavism: reversion to ancestral characteristics

Illicit braid: this refers to the green ribbon worn in the buttonhole of the Ribbonmen, members of a 19th century secret society formed to fight the cause of poor Irish Catholics.

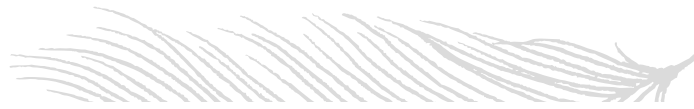


Background: Eavan Boland explains her inspiration for this poem:

'I married in my mid-twenties and went to live in a suburban house at the foothills of the Dublin mountains. The first winter in the suburb was harsh. The weather was cold; the road was half-finished. Each morning the fields on the Dublin hills appeared as great slates of frost. At night the street lamps were too few. And the road itself ran out in a gloom of icy mud and builder's huts. It was early '70s, a time of violence in Northern Ireland. Our front room was a cold rectangle with white walls, hardly any furniture, and a small television chanting deaths and statistics at teatime. One evening, at the time of the news, I came into the front room with a cup of coffee in my hand. I heard something at the front door. I set down the coffee and went to open it. A large dappled head – a surreal dismemberment in the dusk – swayed low on the doorstep. The reattached itself to a clumsy horse and clattered away. There was an explanation. It was almost certainly a traveller's horse with some memory of our road as a travelling-site and our garden as fields where it had grazed only recently. The memory withstood the surprises of its return, but not for long. It came back four or five times. Each time, as it was started into retreat, its huge hooves did damage. Crocus bulbs were uprooted. Hedge seedlings were dragged up. Grass seeds were churned out of place. Some months later I began to write a poem. I called it 'The War Horse'. Its argument was gathered around the oppositions of force and formality. Of an intrusion of nature – the horse – menacing the decorous reductions of nature that were the gardens. And of the failure of language to describe such violence and resist it. I wrote the poem slowly, adding each couplet with care. I was twenty-seven years of age. At first, when it was finished, I looked at it with pleasure and wonder. It encompassed a real event. It entered a place in my life and moved beyond it. I was young enough in the craft to want nothing more.'

From *Object Lessons* by Eavan Boland, 1995



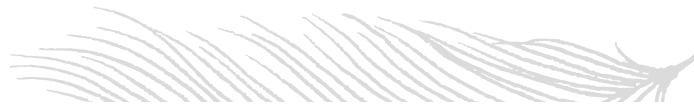


Summary and analysis:

The title conjures up images of violence and conflict, albeit of a bygone age, but the first lines of the poem bring us into a suburban setting far removed from war and chaos. The poem opens much like 'This Moment' in that the poet states that nothing at all unusual has happened in this quiet place – up to this point. The word 'This' focuses us on a specific moment and the word 'dry' suggests a lack of anything stormy or dramatic. The onomatopoeic 'clip clop' of the horse's hooves are not normal in the suburbs yet the horse seems indifferent to how out of place he is and to the damage he is causing to lawns and flower beds as his heavy, iron-shod hooves stamp on delicate plants. The enjambment in these lines keeps the poem moving forward and mirrors the movement of the horse as he ambles along the quiet street.

Boland involves herself to a certain extent by opening the window to look closer. She is interested, but not enough to take any action to stop the horse or guide him away from the gardens. Again, the run-on lines convey the horse's freedom as he has been 'loosed' from his tether in the tinker camp and is free to wander at will. Following on that is a description which is slightly different and is marked by different punctuation. The horse lowers his head, sniffs the ground, exhales and is gone. The short sentences 'He is gone'. 'No great harm is done' are almost like a sigh of relief and a release of tension. For a moment the horse had come so close that his breath could be heard but now he has moved on. There was a sense of threat in his 'hissing' breath but Boland can now revert to practicalities and see that no real harm has been caused.

The damage to the plants is minimal: a leaf has been torn from the hedge, a rose and crocus have been destroyed. The language used to describe the effects of the horse's passing is interesting in that it is language more usually

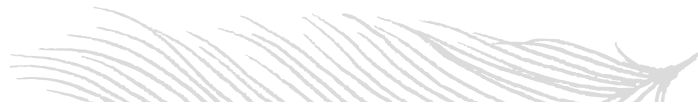


associated with descriptions of the battlefield. The missing laurel leaf is of little importance and only evokes 'distant interest', but it is also like a 'maimed limb'. Does this suggest an attitude towards war? Are those of us who are not directly involved inclined to view such events dispassionately? The dead rose is 'expendable' and it is nothing more than a 'mere line of defence'. The rose is viewed as a 'volunteer' so presumably it would be happy to die in its role as defender, just as those who give up their lives for their country are often viewed as being more than willing to do so. Are such deaths less important, then? The crocus which will now never grow is merely 'one of the screamless dead' as it is violently 'blown' from the ground by the horse's hooves.

The word 'But' at the start of line 17 signals a change. Boland now moves to reflecting on the way in which we take refuge in our own safety and wonder 'why should we care' when war threatens. We have a fear being called upon to take a side and are relieved when danger passes us by and leaves us unhurt. The horse represents an invader whose actions are watched but not hindered. Those who observe him hope he will simply go away without harming them. (I always think, when I read this, of Robert Frost's final lines in 'Out, Out –' in which he says 'And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs'. You can read the poem here if you are interested:

<http://www.aoifesnotes.com/leaving-cert/ordinary-level/Paper-Two/docs/prescribed-poetry/Frost-%20Out,%20Out%20-%20.pdf>

The horse comes back into the poem at this stage as he is the symbol of war. He is the powerful, invading force that we watch fearfully but hope will not impact on our lives. When he is gone, we go out to pick up the pieces and see what he has done. Some neighbours have evaded his presence by hiding



behind their curtains and pretending they do not see him. Boland has, at least, opened the window.

Boland does not judge those who hide behind curtains. She and her neighbours are joined in her use of the words '**our** short street', and 'passing **us**'. Like her neighbours, Boland is relieved that the horse has passed on without inflicting serious damage on her property. She has escaped relatively unscathed.

There is still a certain amount of tension – 'I pause, wait' - until it is clear that the horse is really gone and is not coming back. Then Boland leans on the windowsill and breathes a sigh of relief.

For a moment, Boland feels connected to her ancestors and compares her moment of fear and tension to their similar feelings when war and violence raged. The rose the horse destroyed is now a symbol of all that was destroyed in Ireland during its troubled past. Did some of those who saw what was happening hide behind curtains and walls, praying that they would escape unnoticed and unhurt? If so, did they lack the 'fierce commitment' needed to stand up to an enemy? Did they betray their country by not fighting or does Boland mean that Ireland was betrayed by those who ruled it so harshly? Either way, there is little judgement here, just a sense of regret that such things happened and an acknowledgement of the suffering of the Irish people in the past.