

EAVAN BOLAND

(b. 1944)



Illustration by Marianne Goldin

This Moment

Child of our Time

Love

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready
to happen
out of sight.

Stars and moths.
And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

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

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

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

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1. After her marriage, Boland moved to the suburbs of Dundrum. The suburbs are generally viewed as dull and bland, and not exactly inspirational for poets and artists. However, Boland managed to find her inspiration in this seemingly unexciting setting and she made her environment the subject of many of her poems.
 2. Boland's mother was an artist and "This Moment" is a particularly visual poem.
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The poem opens in a suburban neighbourhood at dusk. It could be anywhere. The short sentences and the mention of things "getting ready / to happen / out of sight" add the stillness and the sense of anticipation. There is an intensity to the poem, a feeling that something important is about to occur. The rhythm of the poem is broken by full stops and this serves to heighten the suspense.

Even in this suburban setting, nature is evident. There are "Stars and moths. / And rinds slanting around fruit." This last, sensuous description, of "rinds slanting around fruit" shows us that Boland has an artist's eye for detail.

The language in this poem is simple and effective in creating an atmosphere of stillness and mystery. The things that "are getting ready / to happen" will happen, "But not yet."

In the meantime, Boland describes the silhouette of a black tree and follows this with an image of a lit window which is "yellow as butter." The simplicity of the language and the domestic setting do not detract from the powerful visual effect created by this vivid contrast of black and yellow, of light and dark. There is something deliberate about the repetition of the word "One" at the start of both lines. Our attention is focused and it seems as if the poet is somehow delaying the moment when we will learn what is "to happen." There is an increasing sense of anticipation at this stage in the poem.

In the next three lines, our waiting is over. A child runs into its mother's arms and the moment is so full of love, so beautiful, that "Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples

sweeten in the dark." Nature is in harmony with this simple but universal gesture of love when a child is swept up in its mother's loving embrace.

The structure of the three lines in which "this moment" is described mirrors the motion of the child running towards its mother while she waits, with arms outstretched. The first line is long and reminiscent of the mother's arms flung open wide and also . The next line is shorter as they draw closer together and the last line contains only two words. The mother and the child could not be closer, at "this moment."

The movement of the poem contributes to our understanding of the importance of "This Moment". The first half of the poem is still and hushed but once the child runs into its mother's arms, there is movement and life:

"Stars rise.

Moths flutter.

Apples sweeten in the dark."

Although there is movement now, the poem maintains its gentle, warm, reflective tone. The repeated "s" sounds in "stars", "rise", "Moths", "Apples" and "sweeten" give the image a softness and a quietness which is in keeping with the close of day. The onomatopoeic "flutter" of the moths evokes memories of a typical twilight scene as the insects are drawn to the lit windows and bump softly and repeatedly against the glass in their efforts to get to the light. The arrangement of the lines and the full stops at the end of each one slows down the pace of the poem again after the embrace, and this emphasises the gentle, slow pace of a summer's evening in the neighbourhood.

Motherhood

The poem celebrates the love between a mother and her child. All nature seems to hold its breath, waiting for the mother to embrace the child. When she does, it is as if nature responds: "Stars rise. / Moths flutter. / Apples sweeten in the dark."

Ordinary, suburban life

The life of a suburban wife and mother is not generally regarded as the stuff of great poetic inspiration, yet it is here that Boland manages to find themes and images for poems such as "This Moment".

Although the poem may appear simple and its tone almost a little detached, there is unmistakable warmth and celebration in the portrayal of the child running into its mother's arms.

Eavan Boland was born in Dublin, but spent several years of her childhood in London. Returning to Ireland, she studied at Trinity College, Dublin. She enjoyed her time there, and found living in Dublin city in the 1960s helpful and inspirational to her career as a writer. However, when she married and started a family, Boland moved to the suburb of Dundrum. She was no longer part of the vibrant city life, but still managed to find creative inspiration in this new place. She realised that none of her artistic, literary friends thought the suburbs worthy of any particular attention. She called her new home "the almost invisible world that everyone knew and no one referred to." She became determined to explore this world, and to make it the subject of her poetry. I think it is clear from "This Moment" that Boland succeeded in what she set out to do when she said that she wished to "bless the ordinary, sanctify the common."

‘This Moment’ is about a time in my life when my children were very young. We lived in a suburb which faced the Dublin hills and where the summer light lasted a long time into the evening. When I went out to call in my daughter she would run into my arms, just as the light was going.

This poem remembers that time, but in an impressionistic way. I wanted to convey the stillness, the waiting, the about-to-happen feeling of summer light going. Most of those details in the poem are taken from my life at that time: the moths of late summer always caught my eye as they banged against our kitchen window, and the first house lights through the summer twilight were always an evocative sight to me.

But it’s the mother and child who are the focus of the poem. It’s as if the child’s

reunion with the mother makes the summer twilight shift and stumble into real night. The stars, the moths, the sweetening of the apples all happen as a result of the encounter.

And that's my real subject. This is a poem which puts human nature and actual nature beside each other. It also puts nature under the control of human nature, which of course it's not in the real world. But by suggesting it is in this poem I was able to convey something of the power and beauty of the meeting between the child and the mother. And that's what I wanted to do.

The form of the poem is fairly open. The short lines helped me create a sort of staccato effect. Small as the space was, I wanted a hint of drama, of an event getting ready to happen. But this kind of poem – which is over almost before it's begun – depends most on its images.

As a young poet, I was influenced by my mother. She was a painter and had studied in Paris in the thirties. She was taught by a Russian artist called Leo Survage, who spoke a strange and memorable phrase to her. "There is a place in the painting" he used to say "where the soul sits". Despite the slight quirkiness of the phrase, my mother remembered it and often quoted it to me. Even now, I find some truth in it when I think about a particular poem. If I apply it to "This Moment" I can see one particular place in the poem where if not the soul then the centre of the action sits. It's the line about the window and the butter. It's the most deliberate and intent image in the poem.

I have a clear memory of hesitating before I used it. But I went ahead anyway. This is a very short poem. Its space is limited. If I wanted to convey both magic and ordinariness, and I did, I needed an image which would put the light of that first window into the context of the downright and plainspoken image of yellow butter. The effect of the first needed the solidity of the second. So I went ahead and did it, and it's still the part of this poem I remain most satisfied with.

Yesterday I knew no lullaby
But you have taught me overnight to order
This song, which takes from your final cry
Its tune, from your unreasoned end its reason;
Its rhythm from the discord of your murder
Its motive from the fact you cannot listen.

We who should have known how to instruct
With rhymes for your waking, rhythms for your sleep,
Names for the animals you took to bed,
Tales to distract, legends to protect
Later an idiom for you to keep
And living, learn, must learn from you dead,

To make our broken images, rebuild
Themselves around your limbs, your broken
Image, find for your sake whose life our idle
Talk has cost, a new language. Child
Of our time, our times have robbed your cradle.
Sleep in a world your final sleep has woken.

17 May 1974

Boland wrote this poem in response to a photograph of a fireman carrying the body of a dead child from the debris of the Dublin bombing in May 1974. The poem is dedicated to Aengus, a friend's son who died a cot death at the time Boland was writing the poem.

Boland begins by saying that before this terrible event she didn't know any lullabies to soothe a child to sleep, but the shocking death of this child has prompted her to write a song or a poem. She addresses the child directly in the poem and says that for him, she will compose "This song". She uses the word "order" which may mean that she has ordered, or called up, the poem from her imagination but may also refer to the fact that by writing the poem, she is attempting to put some sort of order or structure on what has happened. The bombing was so shockingly sudden and the results so devastating and chaotic that she may feel some sort of order is needed to make sense of it all.

She says that the song "takes from your final cry / Its tune." This is a heartbreaking image of the bewildered, anguished cry of a dying child. It is from this sound, this cry, that Boland draws her inspiration; the child's cry is the reason for the song.

Note the use of the words "lullaby" "cry" and "tune" in the first four lines. Taken out of context, they are words normally associated with the everyday lives of small children, but in this poem, they have a very different meaning. The child's cry is his "final cry". He will never cry again and he will never hear the song which is being written for him. By using these normal, homely words, Boland contrasts the dreadful reality with the way things should be in this child's life.

The poet wants to find some kind of "reason" in the murder of the young child but this seems almost impossible. Boland is trying to make sense of what has happened, to find the rhythm of her poem in "the discord of your murder". Still, she is faced with the inescapable fact that she is writing a song for a child who "cannot listen."

In speaking directly to the child and in referring to "we" when talking about how adults have failed to protect this child, Boland may be facing up to what she feels are our collective responsibilities to all children, everywhere. She doesn't shirk her role in a society which, through its "idle talk", has cost this child his life.

Adults should have taught this child nursery rhymes and songs and the child, like all children, should have been put to bed with its soft toys "the animals you took to bed," but instead, the child was murdered by the adult world. The child's imagination and sense of wonder should have been stimulated by "legends to protect" and its sense of belonging to a community should have been fostered by being taught "an idiom for you to keep". All children are entitled to such things but this child was killed before he could learn all he should have learnt.

Children are told fairy-tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" in order to teach them valuable lessons about the dangers of talking to strangers, for example. The irony is that it is the "We who should have known how to instruct" who now "must learn from you dead". The adult world has not protected this child and Boland clearly feels that we are all responsible. She does not talk about the "they" who let the child down but rather the "we."

The sounds in the second line of this stanza are reminiscent of the sounds a parent might make while soothing a child to sleep: "With rhymes for your waking, rhythms for your sleep". The repetition brings to mind a child's song or nursery rhyme and reminds us once again of the gulf between a song used to settle a child to sleep and an elegy written on the sudden, brutal death of a young child.

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From the death of this child, Boland says, lessons must be learnt. We must rebuild the world anew for the child's sake. She claims that our "idle talk" had led to this violence and that people must realise that words have consequences. We must find a "new language" and build a safer, better society for our children.

She addresses the child once again and admits, in a heartbreaking line, that "our times have robbed your cradle." The poem ends with a wish that the child will find peace in the next world. His "final sleep" means that when he next wakes, it will be in another place. Might there also be a suggestion that the child's death may have awoken us to our senses?

This poem examines the cost of political violence. The child is an innocent victim of the troubles and the poet wonders if any sense can be made of such an act. She says that our responsibility, ultimately, is to ensure that our children are safe and protected. That is the job of adults and in this case, they have failed miserably. She does not point the finger of blame at others but says we are all culpable in this. Our "idle talk" can lead to horrific acts of violence and none of us are without blame. The only real innocent is the "child of our time" who dies before his time.

The tone in this poem is one of sadness and of regret. The poet is mourning the loss of the innocent child. She is also reproachful: pointing out that we, as adults, have to take our share of the blame for what has happened.

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.

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.

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.

I am your wife.
It was years ago.
Our child is healed. We love each other still.
Across our day-to-day and ordinary distances
we speak plainly. We hear each other clearly.

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:

I see you as a hero in a text -
the image blazing and the edges gilded -
and I long to cry out the epic question
my dear companion:

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?

But words are shadows and you cannot hear me.
You walk away and I cannot follow.

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1. The "mid-western" town to which Boland refers in the first verse is Iowa, in the United States. She and her husband lived there in 1979 when they were teaching at Iowa University.
2. The "hero" is Aeneas, who was the hero of Virgil's
3. "Amish table." Simple, plain table made in the style of the Amish community in Pennsylvania.
4. "epic" - heroic or impressive.
5. "formidable" – very strong, possibly causing fear or alarm.
6. "ascension" – rising or uplifting.

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The poet is revisiting a town in Iowa, where she once lived with her husband and family. As she crosses the bridge, she begins to remember the time they spent there. The reference to "the water / the hero crossed on his way to hell" is meant to evoke images of the river Styx. In Greek mythology, this is the the river which flows through the underworld, or hell. Both Virgil's Aeneas and Homer's Odysseus visit the underworld. In Homer's _____, the hero braves the underworld in order to get home

more quickly. He is in a hurry to get back to his beloved wife, Penelope. This poem draws heavily on the idea of myth and legend, of hero and heroine. Did her husband rush home to her when they lived in that town? Does he do so now? The poem explores the nature of love and of marriage. Does it stay the same or does it change all the time? It is significant that the poem opens at dusk. This creates a sense of gloom, of things being hidden, and possibly of things nearing an end.

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The poet thinks of the apartment that she shared with her family when they lived in Iowa. She reflects firstly on the practical aspects of their home: the kitchen, the table and the view. Then she says that love came to live with them there. In the poem, love is seen as something elemental, like fire or air. The four elements in ancient Greece were fire, air, earth and water. All of these are mentioned in some way in the poem. Love is personified, and is clearly something very powerful and intense. It has "muscle of wings" and chose to "come to live with us". Of course, there is the implication that love, being something independent and separate, may also choose to leave.

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We learn that while they lived in Iowa, one of the couple's children fell seriously ill. Fortunately, the child's life was spared. This was obviously a very intense and emotional time in the couple's marriage, and Boland examines it in some detail. She refers again to Aeneas or Odysseus' journey through hell. As they travelled, they met former companions who had died and were trapped in the underworld. The dead men tried to speak, but they could not be heard. This idea is something to which Boland returns later in the poem. The reference to "a life they had shared and lost" is clearly not just telling us about the Greek hero and his friends. The poet feels that she and her husband shared a different life, a different kind of love at that time.

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The poem returns to the present day. The child is healed; the couple "love each other still." On the surface, all is well. They converse and "hear each other clearly." However, there is no hint of the emotional intensity which existed at that earlier time.

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The poet wants to return to that time in Iowa. Although there may have been stressful moments in their lives, there was an intensity which has gone, and which she now longs for. She sees her husband as he was at that time: a hero in her eyes. The image of him standing on the bridge with snow on his shoulders is reminiscent of the hero of a film, picked out by the headlights of a passing car. She also sees him as the hero of a myth or legend: someone brave and bold and glorious. But that time has gone. She wonders if love will ever come to live with them again. Again, love is personified. He is seen as something so formidable, so powerful, that even to be in his presence was awe-inspiring and uplifting. However, like the dead men in the underworld, she wants to cry out to her "dear companion" but he cannot hear her. The image of her husband on the bridge turns and walks away. Like the men trapped in Hades, she cannot follow. The hero of the past is gone, and it is impossible to go back. No matter how passionate their love was then, it cannot be recaptured. Time passes and things change. Her words are "shadows". They are insubstantial, and she cannot communicate with the memory of a person as they once were. He cannot be the man he was, and their lives must move on.

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The poet looks at a time when she and her husband loved intensely. Though they are still together and "love each other still" they are not the people they once were. It is not really possible, she seems to say, to keep the same level of passion and intensity in a relationship as there might have been in the earlier days. However, the view of marriage should not be seen as a negative one. They are together and they are in love. They communicate and "hear each other clearly".

There is a sense of sorrow, of loss and of longing in this poem. The poet looks back with nostalgia on a time that has gone and cannot be recaptured. But there is also acceptance of things as they are now, and a recognition of the love and affection the couple shares.