

BROKEN TIME: WOMEN POETS AND THE POLITICS OF INTIMACY

On the one hand, poetic convention – conventions, moreover, which I had breathed in as a young poet – whispered to me that the daily things I did, things which seemed to me important and human, were not fit material for poetry. That is, they were not sanctioned by poetic tradition. But, the whisper went on, they could become so. Eavan Boland, 1995 1

December 27th 2008

It is 2.08 am exactly. I am visiting in my father's house. He soon turns 89; a wonder of independent living. My Aunt Joyce died at 5.00 am yesterday, the morning of a family reunion at my brother's house. It's not large, this family. On my father's side, his two brothers and their offspring; on my mother's side, no one. A sole child, she died in 1990.

My children are with their father. A single parent since 1994, I find it somehow weighs heavily tonight that my two sons are with me only every second Christmas. They are fifteen and eighteen – a long stint in single mothering. I worry: are they having a good holiday? Did the youngest remember shoes?

The sea below the house roars. The northeasterly will blow bluebottles ashore in their hundreds, making swimming a tangle of risks. Last January I was smothered in a toga of them, their beaded stingers a trail of welted pain across my shoulder, round my stomach, circling my thighs. But the sea, yes the sea, is like that. It covers most of the planet, brims with life, and can sometimes hurt you like a stingray's shaft to the heart. But it's a deep love, and its noise is the womb flowing back and forth and the moon draws it as it draws my blood. Something in its sorrowful keening pulls me into the dark to turn on the leadlight lamps my father has made – one decorated with fish and one with a flying Pegasus – to write, finally, in the exhaustion of silence.

Tomorrow, the tidying of Christmas wrappings my brother's small children left under the lounge. Funeral arrangements. I planned to go camping down the coast to write alone. That will have to wait. Time with Dad seems too precious now to fritter on writing; to reach for the separated mind of the poem.

December 29th 2008, 5.30 am. 'No, I'm just up a bit early. It's OK. You can try

going back to bed. Sure, Dad, breakfast on the deck then. In an hour, OK?'

Where was I? Yes, yes, that background static of the ocean as it claws at the sand, rolls the shells to grit in Shelly Cove just beyond the house. Like family static – from which the woman's heart cannot, will not, turn its attention. The life of the poem brooks no distraction. It pours itself into silence and out of silence. That is its birth medium. So full of itself is the poem, that it cannot take time to check the breath of the sleeping baby or the aged father. There is only the 'poem' in its world; only enough breath for two – the poet and the poem. Like a jealous lover, it demands the full attention of eyes; the quick intake of breath. If you listen, you can hear each individual wave; each individual child, calling from out of the salty static of family. That poem's voice, though, still and small, can barely be heard above the tide; can't compete with the whole kettledrum blue of a pounding surf. You would have to get to a place away from noise to hear that voice.

And somehow, with our tidal obeisance to that pearl the moon, women's bodies are pulled back and forth, ordering, caring, rising early from and weary to bed. Women writers with children often seem so distracted, heads full of percussive lists; over-busy, worried, trying with varying success and sustained irritation to carve out a cave of silence...

January 3rd, 2009, 5.00 pm. Hang on a sec... You're back early from bowls, Dad, how

did it go? Oh great! No, not so quick here, the writing. No, I don't know why... Yes,

dinner in about an hour, OK? Can you...? Yes that'd be great.

Yes, yes... a cave of silence into which we can retreat for a moment, to listen to that quiet, to bathe in it, and let our weary bodies fill with the energy of creative life outside family. Motherhood ensures that our time and attention is fragmented; that snatches of time are all we have each day. And it's true as Adrienne Rich wrote that 'for a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed – freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away.'²

Imagine, if you will, a woman who rises in the morning refreshed. At breakfast the children sparkle with the day's anticipation, chatting to her, as a Golden Shadow figure prepares their lunches, quickly irons forgotten school shirts, arranges pickups for soccer and basketball (if only they did the same sports at the same time!), while the Woman Poet sits and eats, mind settling towards the day's writing as children are ferried away to bus and school. As the Golden Shadow writes a shopping list, puts on the washing, mentally notes the dusting for later, and dinner's requirements – oh and the soccer boots forgotten – *after all* – and school book lists yet unfilled, dental appointments almost slipped by – she, our Woman Poet, goes to the study, shuts the door, and her entire being turns towards three hours of reading followed by four for writing, until dinner, when the children and the Golden Shadow (a little dulled, admittedly, by day's end) enjoy her company for a few hours before bed.

Sigh... but I digress. Or do I? This woman poet couldn't work like that anyway. Impossible to just erase those lists of tasks from the mind, to ignore those connections of caring that are represented by the practical jobs done willingly for those she loves and who do, in reality, need that cherishing each day. It is too simple to say that the work of domestic family life 'gets in the way'. Yet, those women who have stayed at Varuna Writers' House will attest to the productivity possible when it is *out* of the way. A list-free, shopping-free, cleaning-free, worry-free existence there. On a fellowship there, each day poetry spilled into my waking hours. Nights of inspiration which rendered sleep impossible caused no harm as the days were free for naps while dinner arrived every evening, cooked and tasty at 7.00 pm in the boot of Sheila's car. Totally immersed in that silent space, anything and everything was possible on the page. The joy and the struggle were total and self-filled, selfish and self-free at once. Plugged into the poetic ether for three weeks, only then could I produce the draft of the Dead Mother poems in my most recent book.

Such irony.

January 3rd, 2009, 5.30 pm. Can you give me ten more minutes... oh the prawns are peeled? Great... yes... thanks... yes, how about 'Miss Marple'? Yes, we can get the wine then too. Yep, have a whisky while you wait. OK? Thanks for the G&T, Dad...

How weary we are of hearing how Sylvia Plath rose at 4.00 am to write. As if we do not show enough devotion to the art if four hours of sleep will not do. But even if we cleared time and space, we cannot clear our hearts of caring, our psyche too, so turned towards our children as we are. And as Jennifer Strauss once commented on motherhood, 'it is from somewhere in the same area of the psyche that being a poet stems.' 3

Being a poet is a troubled existence for a woman, often filled with selfdoubt, as we struggle to find voices which resonate with our lived experience in the great wash of poets who have gone before. And there is the nature of creativity itself with its anxiety over the blank page; questions about the whole point of the enterprise at all. Being a mother too is filled with anxiety, which begins with the terror of their dependence and continues into the wakeful nights waiting for that key in the door, listening to the screech of tyres striate the night along the highway. During my interview for *The Divided Heart: Art and Motherhood* it occurred to me that life for creative women carries this double jeopardy of anxiety.⁴ But I also see it extend as we begin to care for our parents as they age and in those without children who are parent-carers: checklists that emerge watching the steadiness of their step up the stairs; fearful anticipation that momentary forgetfulness might signal we will have no control over their future. Is the caring for parents as they age simply an extension of women's nurturing: same anticipation of need, same concern for safety, same overwhelming anxiety for their future – just facing a different direction? Is it, too, part of the imperative to nurture which, whether socially induced or not, women still generally engage in to a greater extent than men and certainly differently? It can't go unnoticed that the vast majority of editors (eighty-seven per cent!) are women – working with dedication and tactful nurturing to bring on the next generation of writers.

And then, what can we write about? What *should* we write about? Is the (still male-dominated) 'canon' any use to us at all? Should some things not be written about? What is appropriate for poetry – poetry that connects and poetry that lasts? 'Transforming experience into poetry inevitably involves questions of identity', writes Patricia Haberstroh: personal identity, female identity, national identity.⁶ These obviously differ for women and men; mothers and those who are not. 'A woman writer must have a directly female voice', writes Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, but finding that voice among the cacophony of male voices is difficult.⁷ Here we are, immersed in this life of family, in the politics of intimacy, which we know so well. 'Where am I?'

'Who am I?' we constantly ask. Judith Beveridge commented once that because poetry is so connected with the self, what happens to you in life directly feeds your work', as she aimed for the 'emotional truth' rather than 'the autobiographical' in her work.⁸

And what of audience, readers? Who are they? The great majority of people do not do tertiary studies in literature and couldn't care less about a 'canon'. Many of us sell out our print runs when we take poetry to 'ordinary' audiences. Those who enjoy the poetry, who, when listening, hear themselves in it and say, as Seamus Heaney commented, 'Yes, I know something like that too... thank you for putting words on it'.⁹

As poets, I believe we are in a guild, apprenticed to those who went before. Without it, our skills are amateur; our gift, untried, unformed. But to which guild are we apprenticed? It would be foolish to think we are not influenced by everything we read while young and since, even if it is in reaction rather than in imitation. And we are influenced by histories of silence.

January 3rd 2009, 5.55 pm. Yes, I know, I did say 6.00, Dad. So we'll sort dinner, yeah, of course that's fine. No, this doesn't matter. Best to eat. What's another word for apprentice? OK... Now!

January 3rd 2009, 9.00 pm. Washing up's done, Dad. Yep, sleep well. No, just another hour on this. Sweet dreams.

My own 'apprenticeship' seems very idiosyncratic but it may not be. Unless these histories are shared, we're not to know how universal or individual they might be. And of course we are all products of our times and social conditions. My mother, herself denied an education, knew books were important and gave them. My father, though he left a selective school for an apprenticeship, doing years of technical training for his engineering qualifications, always recited Shakespeare and Australian poetry classics and still does. Just this morning, on my rising 'late' at 8.00 am, he welcomed me with: 'Ahh... there was movement at the station for the word had passed around...'

I had a great grammar teacher. Mrs Eliot: lines tight as Latin. But it was my literature teacher, Mary Rose Liverani, who shaped my poetic life, followed at university by a shearer turned tutor, Peter Abotomy. The former made us read Shakespeare out loud until we 'had it with passion'. She thumped a dozen books – mainly fiction – down on my desk each summer holidays and commanded, 'Read them, Rowland': Steinbeck, Maugham, Tennessee Williams, Forster, Kafka, Salinger, Conrad, Martin Boyd... I don't remember any women, but that was not unusual then.

Peter Abotomy, half-Irish, half-Lebanese, led the charge at Wollongong University to introduce Australian poetry and literature, while the new Professor from England refused because 'it doesn't exist'. At the end of our first year, a new grade – Terminating Pass – was invented for those of us who had campaigned with Peter and prevented many from continuing on in the English program. We had visited our tutor regularly in his miner's cottage, hanging like a wish on the cliffs at Coalcliff, where, a reformed drinker, he consumed pot after pot of tea, cooked Lebanese food and recited Frost, Eliot, Blake, Les Murray and AD Hope ('Death of a Bird' was totally formative).

Later, hospitalised with a breakdown, he asked me to read Robert Frost's poems, particularly 'Desert Places', to him. I never recovered from – nor ever want to – the stunning power of Frost. I don't remember any women – maybe Plath was there somewhere in the shadows and possibly Wright. It just didn't come up much.

Then there was the emergence of Women's Studies. We were that emergence: early teachers in it who had to study every subject to piece together courses from the fragmentary but rapidly appearing databases and texts in every subject area that uncovered evidence of bias, tomes of refound knowledges and herstories of women, in science, history, politics, psychology, economics, literature. An exciting time, it lead many of us to Virago's women's fiction list and the poetry of Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Margaret Atwood, Marg Piercy, Emily Dickinson and all those unpretty ones... angry women poets raging out of their frustration.

Having strayed into psychology and women's studies, I built my academic life there in a political struggle. During some of that time I wrote poetry and published. I started to read erratically rather than systematically, and still do – where serendipity takes me. I prefer poetry that strikes towards the heart, that speaks to me of living and its struggles. I prefer the openness of the Canadians and the lack of embarrassment of feeling in the Irish poets. I find that Irish women poets channel an honesty about the guts of everyday living, while being highly political in the sense of changing history, language and metaphor. Mary O'Malley speaks to me of the land, the language and the heart; Eavan Boland captures the universal in the ordinary and true moments that count through family and love, country and immigration; Moya Cannon captures the delicacy of dust and song of history; Paula Meehan the colour and vigour of the senses and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, writing in Irish, is unequivocal in her rewriting that old language into the feminine so that myth becomes a new reality.

And what do we Australian women write? What our bodies tell us? What our hearts dictate? 'Her responsibilities remain the same as they have been for every poet: to formalise the truth', writes Eavan Boland.¹⁰ Still, there is a pressure, more subtle now, not to validate the truth of women's realities; not to repeat the 'tedium' of women's experience of childbirth, domestic life, love and the heart's harvest of barbs. Yet these experiences are central to the lives of readers. And women do not only write about these, but also politics, land, immigration, science, myth. The world. As large a world as any man's. Yet often experienced differently. We inhabit the same place but still in different ways; corporeally differently, imaginatively differently. No better, no worse.

Writing about her search for a female voice, Adrienne Rich wrote: 'But even in reading these women I was looking in them for the same things I had found in the poetry of men; because I wanted women poets to be the equals of men and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same.' It's not *still* like that, is it? Have we at last come to the point Rich hoped for 'when women can stop being haunted, not only by "convention and propriety" but by internalised fears of being and saying themselves'?¹¹

Yet still there seems a difficulty in reviewing women poets: what to *do* with us? Rarely does a review place us in any tradition or compare us with the 'great poets gone before' as reviews of male poets often do. In those reviews, men either belong to, or fail to belong to, a tradition. Do women poets not have a life of influence from the male line of writers? Perhaps there is a 'problem' with women poets: we fit no mould? Or the reviewer is so lacking in knowledge of the breadth of women's poetry he/she cannot tell the influences at work, or the lineage of female voice to whom a modern poet might be linked; those guilds to whom we might belong. Indeed critical texts still seem to add to our invisibility. Our history in this country is systematically erased through being ignored. In a recent review of Philip Mead's *Networked Language: Culture & History in Australian Poetry*, Ali Alizadeh comments in his otherwise positive review, that his only criticism is 'its lack of detailed examination of the female voices (other than Judith Wright's) that have also either contested or supported the cultural tendencies under discussion'.¹² Women *were* there and *were* writing. Every decade; every century. I was there and saw it in the late sixties and early-mid seventies at Sydney dinner tables where the men were beautiful and passionate and the women expected to be silent. But they weren't. Women were writing too. But do we remember their names? It's so selective – Wright and Dobson (justifiably), but not Margaret Scott; Porter and Beveridge (quite right), but not Jan Owen? Just two each generation then?

Tuesday January 6th, 10.30 am. No, we won't be late. We'll be fine, there's plenty of

time to get up to lunch at the Dunsters' by 12.30. The Blinds man is coming at

11.00. Yes, that'd be great, Dad, thanks. Just want to read this last bit. Really

appreciate your help... Yes, let's take your tomatoes, they're so good. I've got the

bread and quiche. Yep, done that. Did the audiologist ring back? Ha! Love ya, Dad.

Often the life of a woman and a poet in our time is still riven by the caught nature of family – a love we choose to engage in with its fragmenting and restitching; still determined by the limits of time and resources; still captured by the struggle to find and keep our own real voice. Often, critical pressure is subtly applied to move away from the ‘personal’, the ‘ordinary’ in the centrality of our lived lives, with all that accumulated wisdom and understanding. Pressure not to document the small instead of the large; the ‘personal’ instead of the ‘universal’. Feeling is still seen as somehow overdone; accessibility, not as a choice for the purpose of more direct communication, but as a lack of sophistication, knowledge and intellect.

‘I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed’, writes Eavan Boland. ‘One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out selfreflectiveindividualism.... In a certain sense, I found my poetic voice by shouting across that distance.’¹³ Shouting, still.

The noise of the sea is gathering again. You can blame the wind. If it’s a nor’easter the stingers will be in again. If not, it’ll calm at dusk. That ocean is crucial in the survival of the planet; its purpose. And that sound, high tide or low, roaring or sighing, with its rhythm in the blood, the womb, the air, the very sky. It pulls; it pulls.

Postscript:

January 20th 2009. Back at my Dad’s again to organise his birthday party – big event with a theme, a small band and a crowd of thirty-five swinging ‘not-so-youngies’. I’m exhausted by the preparations and the heat. Tonight, though, we sit up to watch Obama’s inauguration. I’m terribly moved to see Elizabeth Alexander become only the fourth poet to give an inaugural poem: ‘Praise Song for the Day’. In it she speaks of the ordinary, the daily rituals; of community and love. With a live audience of two million and many more eavesdroppers across the globe, a woman poet sings Obama in. Good choice, Barack. I wonder, could it happen here?

DR ROBYN ROWLAND AO has published six books of poetry. *Silence and*

Its Tongues (Five Islands Press, 2006) was runner-up for the 2007 ACT

Minister's Judith Wright Poetry Prize. Her work has been featured on ABC

Radio National programs: *Poetica* and *The Spirit of Things*. Her CD *Off the*

Tongue was released late 2008. Robyn is an Honorary Fellow, School of

Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne.

ENDNOTES:

1 Boland, Eavan, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, WW Norton,

1995, p 252.

2 Rich, Adrienne, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision', reprinted in *American Poets*, William Heyen (ed), Bobbs-Merrill, 1976.

3 Strauss, Jennifer, 'Love and Death, but not so much the Weather', in *A Woman's Voice. Conversations with Australian Poets*, Jenny Digby (ed), UQP, 1996.

4 Power, Rachel, *The Divided Heart: Art and Motherhood*, Red Dog, 2008.

5 Fourth National Survey of Editors, Pamela Hewitt, Professional Editors' Association (NSW), <http://www.peansw.com/pdfs/survey4.pdf>, Freeline, 24 September 2008, Australian Writers Online,

IPEd website.

6 Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle (ed), *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, Syracuse University Press, 2001.

7 Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan, 'Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer', in Haberstroh, 2001.

8 Beveridge, Judith, 'The Beauty of the Essential World', in Digby, 1996.

9 Heaney, Seamus, 'Feeling into Words', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, Faber

and Faber, 2002.

10 Boland, *ibid*, p xv.

11 Rich, *ibid*.

12 Alizadeh, Ali, Review of *Networked Language: Culture & History in Australian Poetry* by Philip Mead, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008, published in *Cordite*, Dec, 2008.

13 Boland, *ibid*, p xi.