

A NOTE ON PAULA MEEHAN

Maurice Harmon

Paula Meehan writes of women's experiences - of love and loss, sexual union, miscarriage, pregnancy, marriage under strain, longing and passion, - without being self-conscious or defensive. Although her poetry often reflects the poverty and deprivation of Dublin's inner city, her response is warm and positive. Her natural exuberance spills into a poetry often characterised by long incantatory lines. That is her the dominant style, the other, more restrained, has shorter lines and stanzas. But the voice is similar in each.

In *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991) which incorporates two previous collections, *Return and No Blame* (1984) and *Reading the Sky* (1985), three poems are of particular interest - 'Buying Winkles,' 'The Pattern' and 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks'. In the first of these a child is sent to buy winkles for her mother. It is a magical journey. Although the urban surroundings are bleak, her imagination transforms them: she jumps over the cracks in the pavement, waves to women in doorways, sees the moon as a bonus, the rain as something that makes winkles a wet and glistening blue, pubs as warm places with golden mirrors, and looks forward to the winkle-seller who will show her how to extract a winkle from its shell, the 'sweetest extra winkle/that brought the sea to me.' (17-18) It is light-hearted, playful, exact in its details, creating a vivid picture of the child in a particular place, her zest for life, the mystery and delight in her eye.

'The Pattern' which is also a series of recollected scenes begins with a memory of conflict between daughter and mother - 'the sting of her hand/across my face' - then develops warm portraits of the mother, as she waxes and polishes the floor and the children skate about her, or when she remakes an old dress.

I wore that dress
with little grace. To me it spelt poverty,
the stigma of the second hand. (71)

When she knitted the daughter had to hold the skein. 'One of these days,' she'd say, 'I must teach you to follow a pattern.' The pattern the daughter makes is the poem's piecing together of these changing and contrasting scenes.

'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' sympathises with the fifteen year old girl who gave birth at the grotto. Meehan uses natural imagery as objective correlatives for the agony and tragedy of the event. She assembles images of bleak weather, trees twisting in agony, men hunting down other men, dying lakes, the agony and crucifixion of Christ. In springtime the setting can be lovely, in midsummer there is such a breaking forth of fertility the Virgin herself longs to be incarnate and sexual. Autumn has its pageantry, but in November, the season in which the child-mother died in childbirth, 'there is/no respite from the keening of the wind.' Even the dead in the graveyard implore the sky for judgement. The statue remembers the child coming to the grotto.

and though she cried out to me in extremis
I did not move,
I didn't lift a finger to help her,
I didn't intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear. (44)

Part of the effectiveness of this poem is its use of the language, rhythm and tone of religious supplication, of prayers to the Virgin who now herself implores the sun for pity and forgiveness. The girl's isolation is rendered more pitifully by the failure of the Mother of Perpetual Succour, the one of whom it is claimed that never was it known that anyone who fled to her protection was left unaided.

Returning to the tenement world of Gardiner Street, just north of the Liffey, 'A Child's Map of Dublin' in *Pillow Talk* (1994) counters the destruction and changes that progress has brought with an imaginative repossession of the lost land and the creation of a private world of freedom and love.

The stuffed seagull in the Natural History Museum - 'childhood guide/to the freedom and ecstasy of flight' - acts as a springboard to the celebration of personal freedom.

In the updraught
of a sudden love, I walk the northside streets
that whelped me; not a brick remains
of the tenement I reached the age of reason in. Whole
streets are remade, the cranes erect over Eurocrat schemes
down the docks. (14)

That associative leap leads her to recall herself as a child and her fantasies. Written as an address to a lover, it ends with the couple climbing into bed to explore the charts of their bodies, the 'wonders' to be found and with a romantic invitation.

Come, let's play in the backstreets and tidal flats
till we fall off the edge of the known world,
and drown. (15)

'A Child's Map of Dublin', a love poem to a lost place, is a loving, loosely-formed recreation of the past, an introduction of a loved region to a lover, and finally a happy descent into sensuality. The quality of innocent, happy-go-lucky development, a matter of tone, rhythm and association makes the poem attractive.

Meehan's natural rhythm is seen again in 'The Other Woman', a long, chanted line, stanzas built on run-on lines in which the spoken rhythm carries meaning across the line-endings so that what might seem awkward is subsumed in the voice's modulations and rhythms. She wants, she says, in 'The Standing Army' to be a poet who can provide 'chant' and tribal songs' for a people 'weary of metrical talk', and talk in the academies.

In 'Handmaid' the language of religious devotion is used to convey a passionate human relationship. In 'Playing House' the sense of arrival and relief is gently poignant. Many poems deal with the strain and stress of relationships, this is a quiet statement about making a home.

Home, you say, let this be
a home for you. Unpack
your clothes, hang them
beside mine. Put your sharp
knife in my kitchen, your books
in my stacks. Let your face
share my mirrors. Light
fires in my hearth. Your talismans
are welcome. Break bread
with me. Settle. Settle. (p.28)

Running through the poems, as an undercurrent, are the rhythms, the intensity and the directness of prayer, and indeed of the modes of supplication and response, prayer made and prayer responded to. In 'The Ghost of My Mother Comforts Me' the mother speaks as a benevolent figure, a trusted, protective presence giving reassurance, bestowing strength and confidence. While some of Meehan's poems express anger at the failure of the Catholic Church, at a deeper level her spirit is open to renewal. The rhythms absorbed in childhood surface as strengthening forces.

Because I am your mother I will protect you
as I promised you in childhood.
You will walk freely on the planet,
my beloved daughter. Fear not
the lightning bolts of a Catholic god, or any other,
for I have paced my body and my soul between you
and all harm. (p.38-39)

There is in Meehan's work a purity of feeling. She is blessed by an instinctive faith in herself, in the powers within her psyche. Her work is permeated by this spiritual energy, in its language and rhythms, in the resonant voice, in the capacity to absorb and transcend life's harshness and to celebrate life's beauty and value.

Meehan is a poet of the streets, particularly of Dublin's inner city and, more recently, of the southern squares. In the background are the tragedies, the cruelties, the deprivations. She walks through the streets, brings back reports of what she has

seen, views of cloud and moon, weather reports, the drowned young man, the battered prostitute, the abandoned girl. Resisting an art that refuses to delineate life's harsh details, she wants to show 'the kinks of my habitual distress,' to test the 'painted doll against the harsh light/I live by, against the brutal merciless sky.' ('Not Your Muse', 24)

She is also a frankly erotic poet. 'Laburnum' exposes the pain in love. It may be laburnum time but the speaker's sense of loss and abandonment fills the poem. In its three line stanzas the poem's simple diction describes the details of the speaker's room, its evidence of dejection, the persona's numbing grief, the determination to face realities. The bleak admonitory address captures the sense of despair as the poem rounds to its conclusion, repeating the descriptive detail of the opening stanza.

You will live breath
by breath. The beat of your own heart
will scourge you. You'll wait

in vain, for he's gone from you.
And every night is a long
slide to the dawn you

wake to, terrified in your ordinary room
on an ordinary morning, say
mid May, say the time of laburnum. (27)

She is one of the few poets who can release feeling in this direct way - naked, personal, with little artifice. The directness of language, the naturalness of images, reminiscent of folk poetry, avoids sophistication, avoids complexity, gives the impression of being artless.

Go to your window, look out -
the moon is safe above the clouds
growing as our child grows in me
safely, a secret still.

I inhabit
the rain. Lean out. I'll wash
over your body, cleanse you of burdens
you've carried too long, rinse you of grief
and ghosts of old that batter your heart. (30)

On the other hand 'Pillow Talk' carries a warning: she is two women, one protective, the other destructive. The poem has strength of utterance and urgency of tone. It contrasts the imagery of romantic assignation with the imagery of fierce pursuit. As a warrior queen, a mythic huntress, she tears men apart. When her lover is 'panic-stricken', it is because he senses her power. She cannot save him from that 'demon'.

A different complexity is found in 'Not alone the rue in my best garden...' which tells the story of love and loss through its metaphor of tending the garden. The speaker and her husband prepare the soil together. He is a painter who portrays the depths of hell, then overpaints it with a green-eyed young fiddler. But she cannot follow suit. Despite the year-long cultivation, the eventual flowering and the solace it brings, she goes away. She returns to the abandoned husband and the abandoned garden. They grieve over what they have lost. She feels guilty and pleads for forgiveness.

The poem has a strong narrative base, is founded on particulars but escaping the circumstances, rises to artistic play. The imagination enjoys its ability to recreate. Making the garden is not altogether different from making a poem. It reminds us how lyrical Meehan can be and how central to the strength of her work is the presence of an animated persona whose changing perspectives and reactions enliven the lines. Even though this poem has tighter lines, they loop onward, reflecting the forward-looking, varying reactions of the speaker.

Mornings I walked out after a shower
had tamped the dust and turned
the volume up on birdsong,
on scent, on colour, I counted myself
the luckiest woman born, to gain such

an inland kingdom, three wild
rushy acres, edged by the Eslin
trickily looping us below the hill,
our bass line to the Shannon
and the fatal rhythm of the Atlantic swell. (p.43)

'Birthday Present' also works through allegory and stays clear of its causes. A child's father comes to claim his child. Because she distrusts his soft hands and their short lifeline, she lies to protect the child. The brevity and incompleteness release the poem. It can gesture towards explanation and experience. It can provide short-hand version of events while keeping its freedom. 'Birthday Present' and the closing poems in Pillow Talk are cryptic and riddling, suggesting more than they declare, hiding feelings, touching on issues but keeping a distance from them. Their slightly mystical nature is in keeping with the religious element in much of Meehan's work.

Born in 1955 in Dublin's inner city she belongs to a new generation of women poets who have a freedom to speak as women that had to be fought for by the generation ahead of her, including her mentor, Eavan Boland. As yet Meehan's full powers have still to be realised but, as these two collections show, she is a poet of considerable power and promise. Her most recent collection, *Mysteries of the Home* (1996) is a selection from the two previous volumes.