

New and Selected Poems

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PAT BORAN



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For Raffaella

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Acknowledgements

As well as previously uncollected poems, *New and Selected Poems* includes work from the following collections: *The Unwound Clock* (Dedalus, 1990), *Familiar Things* (Dedalus, 1993), *The Shape of Water* (Dedalus, 1996) and *As the Hand, the Glove* (Dedalus, 2001), as well as the chapbook *History and Promise* (International University Press, 1990).

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Reading Pat Boran

by Dennis O'Driscoll

Pat Boran describes Portlaoise, the County Laois town where he was born in 1963, as 'our once congested, now double-bypassed town'. Following EU-funded 'bypass' operations, midland towns like Portlaoise are no longer clotted with city-bound traffic. The conference hotel where tight-suited insurance men endure a pep-talk from their regional manager; the shopping centre beyond the church where stubbly farmers, on the way home from a mart, stock up with tea bags and fruit cake; the pallid public hospital: all have reverted to local phenomena. The *Shell Guide to Ireland* judges Portlaoise to be 'noteworthy merely as the location of the Republic's only male convict prison' – thus sentencing the town to be bypassed by potential visitors also (except, of course, the involuntary kind).

Portlaoise would have been largely bypassed by literature too, were it not for the fidelity and clarity with which Pat Boran has portrayed the town in his work. County Laois may mean little to the tour guide whose coach passengers are intent on chalking up a sighting of the world-renowned Rock of Cashel rather than the locally-cherished Rock of Dunamase, or to the executive whose digital organiser burns with the urgency of his next city appointment. But, for those who inhabit the town, it is the centre of the known world. Here they are: the schoolboy who grows drunk on the wine uniform of the girls' school; the widow parking 'her black Raleigh / outside Whelan's butcher-shop'; mourners 'escorting / a body down the street'; 'the square, / a country town, neighbours / stripped of their professions and their trades, / aprons hung and blinds pulled down, / the accordion band doing its best'. And what is a town without its characters? Eddie Boylan of the grocery shop on Lower Main Street is recalling his youth (a 'fading world, rich / in an obsolete currency'); the Guru Maguire

achieves instant celebrity on a TV chat-show; Hannigan's brother 'went to the dance and never / came home again'; a mischievous delivery man is ferrying chickens in a van with 'wash me back doors'.

Vividly though the moods and mores of his small town world are captured, there is far more to Pat Boran's poems than what he terms 'footnotes to a local history'. It is not just that, like all good poets, he universalises experience but also that his imagination ranges freely, responding to everything from Dublin street scenes to celestial mysteries. Diverse in theme, wide in scope, modulated in rhythm, his poetry excels at making what Seamus Heaney calls the 'transition from the world of data to the words of invention'. That Pat Boran would become a poet in the first place seemed almost preordained from the moment in his youth when—proving that the Muse moves in mysterious ways—brochures for the family's travel agency in Portlaoise came packaged with a tour of Miroslav Holub's work:

One of the first poems to make an impression on me was Miroslav Holub's 'A Boy's Head'. Possibly more than any other, with its great endorsement of the imagination, it marked the beginning of a physical (in the sense that it came from outside my own geographical world) and a mental journey into writing. And the fact that I first came across it on a printer's offcut from some anthology which had been used to wrap brochures for my father's travel agency was poetic in itself.

Perhaps it is to the example of Miroslav Holub, a scientist as well as poet, that Pat Boran owes one of his great strengths—an objectivity which might be described as scientific; an ability to maintain a determined detachment from his subject-matter, to distance his poetical 'I' from an empirical self in order to gain a clearer perspective on the world. Yet his detachment is in no way doctrinaire; tonal warmth and emotional empathy are always on hand where appropriate to a love poem or elegy. Apart from the scientific stance it often adopts towards reality, Pat Boran's work reflects a keen interest in scientific thought itself. Names overheard in his books include those of J.B.S. Haldane,

Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein. There are ‘Notes Towards a Film on the Life of Galileo Galilei’; an eclipse of the moon is observed through a poetic lens; and ‘Bedtime at the Scientist’s House’ suggests that the raw facts of scientific data cast a story-like spell (‘Tell us the names of Jupiter’s moons, / the valencies of atoms 1 to 103’). In the poignant ‘Waving’, childhood recollection unexpectedly segues into scientific epiphany at the precise moment where a cloying note might have been a danger.

When experimenting in his own language lab, Pat Boran—never afraid to risk fragmentary utterances—is more often a poet of implication than of explication. The reader works backwards from the evidence presented as frequently as the writer moves forward towards a final click of narrative closure. From the very start, he triumphed at one of the hardest calls in poetry: gauging when to regard a poem as finished and best left alone. He never overstates or overstays; the poems are remarkable both for their resonance and their restraint. Viewed very broadly, Pat Boran’s work falls into two principal categories: poems which chart the human struggle to make sense of our existence on a mysterious planet afloat—maybe even adrift—in space; and those in more direct mode where people are recorded in life, elegised in death or celebrated in love. In the latter mode, he could as justifiably have named his second collection *Familial Things* as *Familiar Things*: the familiarity displayed in poems about parents and siblings breeds unsentimental tenderness, as in ‘Song for my Parents’:

Evening sky and age, you do not take them,
but rearrange the furniture of home
until they lose themselves among familiar things.

Eight years later, in the tightly-crafted *As the Hand, the Glove*, the familiar things are themselves lost: the old family home is as empty as the shells of the wave-washed ‘House of Shells’ in his first book (‘the tide in its gables almost audible’). The wireless ‘breaking out into the world beyond / our sleepy, listening midland town / in a house since vanished’ is described as ‘the only thing on earth defined / by absence

..... Wire-less'. The defining absence in *As the Hand, the Glove* is that of the poet's recently-dead father whose 'disappearing act' prompts questions that can never be answered and quests—of recovery and discovery—that can never be fulfilled. Pat Boran writes evocatively about childhood and children. 'Children' is a piercingly perceptive poem, one of his very best; he writes well too of childhood icons like Desert Island Dick, of a 'breezy, childhood room made infinite / by conspiracies of movement and light' and of an ostracised, bullied child.

A preoccupation with time, its ravages and ramifications, is what draws together the thematic threads of his poetry—personal and scientific, local and global. The meagreness of the human life-span is all the more evident when set in the continuum of infinity and space. Even language cannot be relied on to preserve what is being lost to ageing and dying: 'We feared speech / knowing of the alliance / between language and time'. In the opening lines of 'Am', a poem in memory of his father, a watch-face mirrors his own face:

1.35 a.m.
I look at my watch and see
my life story:
I thirty-five am

Somewhat older than thirty-five though Pat Boran now is, his poetry is not at all as well-known or widely-read as it deserves to be. It would be an overstatement to describe him as neglected—his poetry has, from the first, enjoyed the admiration of his peers; he also gained recognition as children's author, festival programmer, editor, reviewer, broadcaster, workshop director—but he is undoubtedly underrated. Hence this attempt to briefly encapsulate his poetical oeuvre as a whole (and not just the selection from it he has made for this book); and, while almost as sceptical about introductions to poetry volumes as I am about cover blurbs, I feel impelled to make a sole exception in this case because of my longstanding conviction that Pat Boran's work merits a large readership and serious critical atten-

tion. His absence from many anthologies too is surprising, given how satisfying his poems can be not only collectively but individually (think of ‘Song of the Fish People’, ‘Literature’, ‘Machines’, “‘The Dead Man’s Clothes’”, ‘The Immortal’ and numerous others already cited).

Several years ago, I found myself riveted by a short story set in London and read on the radio (or should I say ‘wireless’?) by an actor. I had missed the beginning of the broadcast, and had absolutely no clue as to the author’s identity; yet I quickly realised that he or she had writerly skills in abundance. Discovering later that the story was by Pat Boran, I was confirmed in my view that—even on a blind tasting—here was a writer whose talent for language was unmistakable. Perhaps the fact that I had entered the story at its half-way stage was telling in itself: he is a master of writing that plunges its audience *in medias res*. ‘It’s like what happens with water’ his third collection, *The Shape of Water*, blurts out with buttonholing bluntness in its first line, not even pausing to remove its sopping hat and hang up its raincoat. Now himself *nel mezzo del cammin*, the timely selection published here allows us to savour a cross-section of Pat Boran’s finest work. Author of a chapbook called *History and Promise*, he is also a poet of mystery and fulfilment, of the eternal and numinous no less than the earthly and everyday. Although a spirited celebrator of the local and the known, he steps ‘beyond / the porch-light of language’ to hazard the dark and comfortless unknown.

from The Unwound Clock (1990)

House

Water clanks from the tap
like a chain—a lifetime

since anything has moved here
but rats and birds. I see

the last inhabitants as a father
and son, the father

sending the son off to the city
with a handshake and a pocket

of old pound notes.
He might as well be sending him

to bring home the time
without a watch to carry it.

For a Beekeeper

You rise in the morning, the residue
of dream-honey on your eyelids.
Mornings you are not at your best, but then
facing breakfast you remember how
the wings of your bees beat *how many
times a second?* how flowers are identified
by a sense more akin to taste than smell
or sight . . . You see the queen,
big like a fruit, the precise
network of the honeycomb, the flowers
like excited shopkeepers, opening
their shutters to the sun's gold coin.

There is barely time to shine your shoes
when, already at the window, the first drone
beckons you to court.

House of Shells

Before Kildare there was water.
Before the town rose from the ocean
the spot was marked by occasional rocks,
sea-rounded hillocks, and birds which flew
patient circles overhead.

2

Slowly it began to appear
and the places that would become Melitta Road
or Bride Street were tiny rivulets
draining off into the sea.

Crude homes were built of stone,
and for the first time strings of smoke
trailed like kites in the sky.

3

When the last drops of ocean
had rejoined the seas or risen to the clouds
Kildare got on with the business
of being a town,
all intimacy with water was forgotten.

So complete was their forgetting
they would maybe go to Bray on holiday
or travel west to marvel where the Barrow passed.

4

Then as they slept one night
the ocean, wishing to refresh their memories,
threw a huge wave-wash across the town,
leaving a house of shells,
the tide in its gables almost audible.

Widow, Shopping in Portlaoise

She parked her black Raleigh
outside Whelan's butchershop
and bought her brother his chop.

The basket creaked with meat.

She orbited the roundabout
in the Market Square
and stopped there for bread

where a brown dog tore a refuse bag.
The cream on buns
yellowed in the sun
and tinsel paper caught dead flies.

A fridge purred the pleasures of a 99.
To 'How's all at home?' she replied
'Fine' as if it were a brand name.

And then she cycled home again the pothole road,
breathing like an old engine,
whistling as she came through the gate exhausted
to see her brother shout abuse at a hen.

Guitar

for Kate

Music came from behind his fingernails
where the day's dirt was. A hint of face
was visible in his round red beard.
An organ grinder ground to a halt
to listen as the music came
from the tramp's broken silhouette.

And the monkey slowed down to a Viennese waltz.

Soon the street had frozen to a painting:
the baker had stopped baking, the butcher,
bejewelled in a chain of sausages, imagined
the melody drifting delicately down the street
like soap bubbles blown by the old guitar.

The Castlecomer Jukebox

We often travelled to Garryhinch for turf,
my mining-town father and I,
kissing the wet road

in his lip-red Volkswagen van.
The song on his lips was always
Play To Me Gypsy— ‘beside

your caravan’. How has it happened
that this is his only song?
Outside Kilkenny in two rooms,

eight boys and their six sisters
rearranged the contents of a home, and grew,
approximately, into each other’s clothes.

Did they all have just one tune—
something popular in their youth become
the soundtrack for their lives?

A haiku-worth of *Play To Me Gypsy*
recorded by him in that house
with the outside toilet.

December, they stood side to side
or in a perfect vaudeville arc,
smiling, snow and stars outside.

And their parents, uncommonly relaxed,
crunching home-baked cakes like popcorn, tossed
a thrupenny bit giddily, hand to hand,

whispered together like teenagers,
selecting the Christmas Dinner song
from their barefoot Castlecomer Jukebox.

return of The Castlecomer Jukebox

And even if we listen to ourselves so much
we hear nothing of the world about us;
and even if our pockets are always empty
and our calendars full of disappointments;
there will always be some youngster, wiser
by our foolishness, with a coin he has kept
for just the right time—when the dancing
has stopped and the jukebox light is gone out.