the gold-robed Nunc Dimittis[3] of their certain choir.
Where's my child's hymnbook, the poems edged in gold leaf,
the heaven I worship with no faith in heaven,
as the Word turned toward poetry in its grief?
Ah, bread of life, that only love can leaven!
Ah, Joseph, though no man ever dies in his own country,[4]
the grateful grass will grow thick from his heart.

1984

Seamus Heaney

b. 1939

More prominently than any poet since Yeats, Seamus Heaney has put Irish poetry back at the center of British literary studies. His first full-length collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), ushered in a period of renewed interest in Irish poetry generally, and Ulster poetry in particular; the subsequent attention to poets like Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, and Paul Muldoon owes a great deal to the scope of Heaney's popularity.

As a great number of Heaney's early poems bear poignant witness, he spent his childhood in rural County Derry, Northern Ireland; his family was part of the Catholic minority in Ulster, and his experiences growing up were for that reason somewhat atypical. The critic Irvin Ehrenpreis maps the matrix of Heaney's contradictory position as an Irish poet: "Speech is never simple, in Heaney's conception. He grew up as an Irish Catholic boy in a land governed by Protestants whose tradition is British. He grew up on a farm in his country's northern, industrial region. As a person, therefore, he springs from the old divisions of his nation." His experience was split not only along religious lines, then, but also national and linguistic ones; in some of his early poetry Heaney suggests the split through the paired names—"Mossbawn" (the very English name of his family's fifty-acre farm) and "Anahorish" (Irish *anach fhior uisce*, "place of clear water," where he attended primary school). As a result, Heaney's is a liminal poetry—a "door into the dark"—and Heaney stands in the doorway, with one foot in each world. Heaney makes brilliant use of the linguistic resources of both the traditions he inherited, drawing on the heritage of English Romanticism while also relying heavily on Irish-language assonance in lines like "There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies, / But best of all was the warm thick slobber / of frogspawn that grew like clotted water / In the shade of the banks" (*Death of a Naturalist*).

When he was twelve, Heaney won a scholarship to a Catholic boarding school in Londonderry (now Derry) then went on to Queen's University, Belfast, which was the center of a vital new poetic movement in the 1960s. He was influenced by poets who were able to transform the local into the universal, especially Ted Hughes and Robert Frost. As an "Ulster poet," it has fallen to Heaney to use his voice and his position to comment on Northern Ireland's sectarian violence; ironically enough, however, his most explicitly "political" poems were published before the flare-up of the Troubles that began in 1969, and his most self-conscious response to Ulster's strife, the volume *North* (1975), uses historical and mythological frameworks to address the current political situation obliquely. The Irish critic Seamus Deane has

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[3] "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace," sung at the end of Mass.

[4] The line echoes Jesus's comment that no prophet is honored in his own country (Mark 6.4). On one level, Joseph may be Jesus's father, mourning his son's early death. *Midsummer* as a whole is addressed to Walcott's friend Joseph Brodsky, the exiled Russian poet.

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1984

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written, "Heaney is very much in the Irish tradition in that he has learned, more successfully than most, to conceive of his personal experience in terms of his country's history"; for Heaney, as the popular saying has it, the personal is the political, and the political the personal. His most successful poems dealing with Ulster's political and religious situation are probably those treating neolithic bodies found preserved in peat bogs. Heaney was living in Belfast, lecturing at Queen's University, at the inception of the Troubles; as a Catholic, he felt a need to convey the urgency of the situation without falling into the easy Republican—or Unionist, for that matter—rhetoric. It was at this point that Heaney discovered the anthropologist P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1969), which documents (with riveting photographs) the discovery of sacrificial victims preserved in bogs for 2,000 years. Heaney intuitively knew that he had found his "objective correlative"—what he has called his "emblems of adversity"—with which to explore the Troubles.

Like Yeats, Heaney has, from the very start, enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim. His poems have a surface simplicity; his early poetry especially relishes the carefully observed detail of rural Irish life.

Punishment[1]

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:[2]

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

---

[1] A young girl's body, dating from the first century A.D., was recovered from a German bog in 1951. The body exhibited various punishments bestowed upon adulterous women by ancient Germanic peoples.

[2] A wooden container.

you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled[3] in tar,
wept by the railings,[4]

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

1975

The Skunk

Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble[1]
At a funeral Mass, the skunk's tail
Paraded the skunk. Night after night
I expected her like a visitor.

The refrigerator whinnied into silence.
My desk light softened beyond the verandah.
Small oranges loomed in the orange tree.
I began to be tense as a voyeur.

After eleven years I was composing
Love-letters again, broaching the word "wife"
Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel
Had mutated into the night earth and air

Of California. The beautiful, useless
Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.
The aftermath of a mouthful of wine
Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

And there she was, the intent and glamorous,
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,

---

[3] Capped.

[4] In Belfast, women may still be shaven, stripped, tarred and handcuffed to railings by the Irish Republican Army for keeping company with British soldiers [Heaney's note].

[1] A sleeveless vest worn by priests.

1975

British soldiers [Heaney's note].
by priests.

Mythologized, demythologized.
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.

It all came back to me last night, stirred
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress.

Hear it calling out to every creature.
And they drink these waters, although it is dark here
because it is the night.

I am repining for this living fountain.
Within this bread of life I see it plain
although it is the night.

1978

The Toome Road

One morning early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.
How long were they approaching down my roads
As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.
I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell
Among all of those with their back doors on the latch
For the bringer of bad news, that small-hours visitant
Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?
Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones. . .
O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.[1]

1979

The Singer's House

When they said Carrickfergus[1] I could hear
the frosty echo of saltminers' picks.
I imagined it, chambered and glinting,
a township built of light.

What do we say any more
to conjure the salt of our earth?
So much comes and is gone
that should be crystal and kept,

---

[1] The navel, or central point (Greek).

[1] Seaport just north of Belfast on the northeast coast of Ireland.

"Your bag's still there in your room as well you know."

"Aye."

"Will I give you a call? about 5?"

"Aye, fine. 6 would be even better!"

"I'm sorry, it'll have to be 5—she'll be back in the kitchen after that."

"I was only kidding."

"If it could be later I'd do it."

"Naw, honest, I was only kidding."

The girl nodded.

After a moment he walked to the foot of the narrow, carpeted staircase.

"You'll be wanting a cheque cashed then?"

"Aye, probably."

"I'll mention it to her."

Up in the room he unzipped his bag but did not take anything out, he sat down on the edge of the bed instead. Then he got up, gave a loud sigh and took off his jacket, draping it over the back of the bedside chair. He closed the curtains, lay stretched out on top of the bedspread. He breathed in and out deeply, gazing at the ceiling. He felt amazingly tired, how tired he was. He had never been much of an afternoon drinker and today was just proving the point. He raised himself up to unknot his shoelaces, lay back again, kicking the shoes off and letting them drop off onto the floor. He shut his eyes. He was not quite sure what he was going to do. Maybe he would just leave tomorrow. He would if he felt like it. Maybe even tonight! if he felt like it. Less than a minute later he was sleeping.

1987

◆

Eavan Boland

b. 1944

The question posed by this final section of the anthology—"whose language?"—asks to whom the English language belongs. The poet Eavan Boland puts a special spin on this question throughout her work. As an Irish writer, she has a complex relationship to the language and the literary tradition shared with England, of course. But the thrust of Boland's questioning is directed more toward Irish literature in English and above all to modern Irish poetry. In that rich poetic tradition, Boland sees an absence, hears a silence: the woman poet in Ireland has been, she argues, shut out of poetry in a distinctive way.

The *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* was a monumental undertaking; published to wide acclaim in the early 1990s, and edited by Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel among others, the anthology had an ambitious scope, intending to collect all the major writing in the Irish tradition up to the present day. Eavan Boland made a bold stand in print and in person after its publication, declaring that the absence of more female editors and more works by women was evidence of a long-standing gender problem in Irish literature, even today. Ireland was traditionally represented in poetry and fiction by the figure of a suffering woman, whether she was an old country crone, "the old sow that eats its farrow" in Joyce's *Ulysses,* the beautiful Countess Cathleen Ní Houlihan in Yeats's play, the grieving mother of the famine literature, or the magical ancient Queen Mab. Poetry was written about these metaphorical women, standing in for Ireland and symbolizing the country, but almost never, Boland asserts, in a woman's voice. Women had been sidelined in Irish history altogether, despite having played many active roles, turned by poetic language into beautiful icons or sorrowing mothers in the literature that articulated Irish independence. All of Eavan Boland's complex and distinguished poetry before and since her quarrel with the *Field Day* anthology has been devoted to supplying those absent women's voices. Boland's eloquent poetry is regarded as among the finest women's writing of our time.

Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944; since her father was a diplomat, she spent considerable time outside Ireland growing up, in London when her father was Ambassador to the Court of St. James's from 1950 to 1956, and in New York City from 1956 to 1964 when he served as the Irish ambassador to the United Nations. She returned to Ireland and Dublin for college, receiving a first-class honors degree in English from Trinity College. She spent a year at Trinity as a junior lecturer, but then left the academic life to write full time, raise a family of two children with her novelist husband, and teach sporadically at the School of Irish Studies in Dublin. Her first full-length book of poems, *New Territory,* came out in 1967, followed eight years later by *The War Horse.*

Boland's third collection was a watershed for her: *In Her Own Image* (1980) inaugurated her concentration on bringing the inner lives of women to poetic voice. A fountain of volumes has emerged since then, as well as awards to match them. Among the books are *The Journey and Other Poems* (1983), *Selected Poems 1980–1990* (1990), *In a Time of Violence* (1994), *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems* (1996), and *The Lost Land* (1998); the awards include a Lannan Foundation Award in Poetry and the American Ireland Fund Literary Award. Eavan Boland is currently almost as well known for her essays and reviews, and for her cultural journalism in the *Irish Times,* as for her prominence as a reader of her own poetry. And she has come full circle since leaving academe; Boland is currently a professor of English at Stanford University.

The poems by Eavan Boland collected for this anthology are diverse and complicated, yet each works to restore missing voices, missing narratives, most of them female. *Anorexic* voices the paradoxical self-destruction of starving for love and power; *The Pomegranate* is a beautiful rewriting of the myth of Persephone, the Greek maiden whose mother, Ceres, the goddess of fertility, was forced to let her daughter spend the winter each year underground with Hades, the god of the underworld, in order to let spring come again. Narrated in the voice of a contemporary mother gazing at her own teenage daughter, separated from her by the girl's need to acquire independence, the poem modernizes the cycle of human seasons and probes the nature of maternal regret. Boland brings the intimacy of such feelings to her meditations on history, violence, and Ireland itself. *The Journey* evokes a mother's grief for her children of war and catastrophe, yet is far from passive—the woman is the traveler. *Mise Eire* is a dazzling play on words from its title onward; a defiant female voice repudiates Ireland, rejects it for naming her "the woman" in its poetry, not seeing beyond that designation to the real woman who once stood on the deck of the *Mary Belle,* headed to America, a half-dead infant in her arms. "A new language is a scar," the poem tells us. Eavan Boland's poetic task has been to heal those scars by uncovering them, to give voice to the absent throng of women in the Irish past.

Anorexic

Flesh is heretic.
My body is a witch.
I am burning it.

Yes I am torching
her curves and paps[1] and wiles.
They scorch in my self-denials.

---

[1] Breasts.

How she meshed my head
in the half-truths
of her fevers till I renounced
milk and honey
and the taste of lunch.

I vomited
her hungers.
Now the bitch is burning.

I am starved and curveless.
I am skin and bone.
She has learned her lesson.

Thin as a rib
I turn in sleep.
My dreams probe

a claustrophobia
a sensuous enclosure.
How warm it was and wide

once by a warm drum,
once by the song of his breath
and in his sleeping side.[2]

Only a little more,
only a few more days
sinless, foodless.

I will slip
back into him again
as if I have never been away.

Caged so
I will grow
angular and holy

past pain
keeping his heart
such company

as will make me forget
in a small space
the fall

into forked dark,
into python needs
heaving to hips and breasts
and lips and heat
and sweat and fat and greed.

1987

---

[2] These verses recall God's creation of Eve from one of Adam's ribs as he sleeps (Genesis 2.21).

Mise Eire[1]

I won't go back to it—

my nation displaced
into old dactyls,[2]
oaths made
by the animal tallows
of the candle—

land of the Gulf Stream,
the small farm,
the scalded memory,
the songs
that bandage up the history,
the words
that make a rhythm of the crime

where time is time past.
A palsy of regrets.
No. I won't go back.
My roots are brutal:

I am the woman—
a sloven's mix
of silk at the wrists,
a sort of dove-strut
in the precincts of the garrison—

who practices
the quick frictions,
the rictus[3] of delight
and gets cambric for it,
rice-colored silks.

I am the woman
in the gansy-coat[4]
on board the *Mary Belle*,
in the huddling cold,

holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts East
and North over the dirty
water of the wharf

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that

---

[1] I am Ireland (Gaelic). Mise Eire also reads as "misery," a pun.

[2] The English adapted "Eire" to "Ireland," drawing the word out into dactylic meter.

[3] Frozen smile.

[4] A cheap cloth coat.

a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before.

1987

The Pomegranate

The only legend I have ever loved is
The story of a daughter lost in hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.
And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere. And have.
As a child in exile in
A city of fogs and strange consonants,
I read it first and at first I was
An exiled child in the crackling dusk of
The underworld, the stars blighted. Later
I walked out in a summer twilight
Searching for my daughter at bedtime.
When she came running I was ready
To make any bargain to keep her.
I carried her back past whitebeams.
And wasps and honey-scented buddleias.
But I was Ceres then and I knew
Winter was in store for every leaf
On every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed.
And for me.
It is winter
And the stars are hidden.
I climb the stairs and stand where I can see
My child asleep beside her teen magazines,
Her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.
The pomegranate! How did I forget it?
She could have come home and been safe
And ended the story and all
Our heartbroken searching but she reached
Out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.[1]
She put out her hand and pulled down
The French sound for apple and
The noise of stone and the proof

---

[1] In the classical myth, Persephone would have emerged from the underworld unharmed except for the fact that she broke a command to bring nothing back: by plucking a pomegranate, she became liable to death. The next lines recall the derivation of the term "pomegranate" from Old French *pomme granade*, "seeded apple."

1987

except for the fact that she
ıth. The next lines recall the

That even in the place of death,
At the heart of legend, in the midst
Of rocks full of unshed tears
Ready to be diamonds by the time
The story was told, a child can be
Hungry. I could warn her. There is still a chance.
The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured.
The suburb has cars and cable television.
The veiled stars are above ground.
It is another world. But what else
Can a mother give her daughter but such
Beautiful rifts in time?
If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.
The legend must be hers as well as mine.
She will enter it. As I have.
She will wake up. She will hold
The papery, flushed skin in her hand.
And to her lips. I will say nothing.

1994

A Woman Painted on a Leaf

I found it among curios and silver.
in the pureness of wintry light.

A woman painted on a leaf.

Fine lines drawn on a veined surface
in a handmade frame.

This is not my face. Neither did I draw it.

A leaf falls in a garden.
The moon cools its aftermath of sap.
The pith of summer dries out in starlight.

A woman is inscribed there.

This is not death. It is the terrible
suspension of life.

I want a poem
I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in.

I want to take
this dried-out face,
as you take a starling from behind iron,
and return it to its element of air, of ending—
so that autumn
which was once
the hard look of stars,
the frown on a gardener's face,
a gradual bronzing of the distance,

will be,
from now on,
a crisp tinder underfoot. Cheekbones. Eyes. Will be
a mouth crying out. Let me.

Let me die.

1994

Lorna Goodison

b. 1947

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, to working-class parents, the eighth of nine children, Lorna Goodison studied at the Jamaica School of Art before transferring to the Art Students League of New York. After completing her studies, she returned to Jamaica to work in advertising. In 1980, Goodison published *Tamarind Seasons: Poems*, a collection that strongly reflects the failure of her marriage in 1972 to a Jamaican radio personality and their divorce in 1978. Her second book, *I Am Becoming My Mother* (1986), brought Goodison to the attention of the international community and earned her Britain's Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Her sixth collection, *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (1995), was given a Gold Star by *Booklist* magazine. Goodison's poetry portrays the life and character of her fellow Jamaicans, describing folk practices and elegizing her dead mother. She also writes extensively about Jamaica's bloody colonial past as in her poem "About the Tamarind," about the tree that came to the Caribbean with shipments of African slaves, but her work seeks to lessen the suffering by giving it name, to ease the pain by spreading it among the entire audience of the world. Goodison has taught in Canada and the United States, and currently teaches creative writing at the University of Michigan.

The Mulatta as Penelope[1]

Tonight, I'll pull your limbs through
small soft garments
your head will part my breasts
and you will hear a different heartbeat.
Tonight, we said the real goodbye, he and I
But this time I will not sit and spin and spin
the door open to let the madness in.
Till the sailor finally weary of the sea
returns with tin souvenirs and a claim to me.
True I returned from the quayside
my eyes full of sand
and his salt-leaving smell
fresh on my hands

---

[1] The faithful wife of Odysseus who, in Homer's *Odyssey*, waited twenty years for her husband's return from the Trojan Wars.