



Reliquaries

Angela Patten



salmonpoetry

THE CHANGE OF MOTHER'S LIFE

As a girl she polished apples in a greengrocer's shop
(don't squeeze me til I'm yours).
Knew all apples by their natures
from the crisp Cox's Pippin
to the tangy Granny Smith
and the knobbly Bramley cooker.
Knew too the season for blood oranges
and the axiom against eating pork
whenever there was an "R" in the month.

Her knack was for making the least thing
extraordinary. We were the studio audience,
she the heroine of a radio drama
in which she bicycled the Wicklow hills,
hair blown back and hat askew,
escaping tidal waves by the skin of her teeth,
fishing for pinkeens with a shoelace and a pin.
The Salvation Army were victims
of her pink-tongued taunts
which they bore with silent fortitude
as they clanged benevolent bells
up and down Dun Laoghaire's seafront promenade.

Then there were blackouts and the Black and Tans
hammering at the door of Number 19 Findlater Street.
Our aunts and uncles kneeling on the flagstone floor
holding their breaths while our Granny called out
to the knocking of rifle-butts
There's only women and children now.
The heavy steps moved on up the Metals.

To hear Mother tell it
she played with dolls until her twenties

though the snapshots in the purple chocolate-box
showed clusters of curly-haired young men
in wide-legged trousers leaning over gates
while she swung her legs to and fro with abandon.
We loved the photo of the artist
who brought *Black Magic* chocolates on every date.
Why didn't you marry him we'd ask,
then maybe we'd all be artists.
We laughed when our father fled to the garden in a huff.

We marveled at the lovely things she had
one time before we came along.
The ivory fans from her sailor uncles,
the willow-pattern teacups,
the dainty sugar-bowls and silver tongs,
the three-tiered cake-plate
with its etched glass wings.

Then came a time when she was
cranky as a bag of cats.
When all our usual misbehavior
seemed to suddenly drive her wild
and she'd flick a lick of the dishcloth at us
in desperation. Then Valium became
a household word. An aunt arrived
to make us good, to impose some order on the chaos
to rescue her from a one-way trip around the bend.

Hard then to believe that Mother had ever been
the flighty girl she loved to contrast with my
moody brooding. Would you ever get out
from under my feet she'd say
and not be ruining your lovely eyes

with those depressing books.
Would you ever come down from the clouds
and when in doubt always say your mother sent you.

But that was long ago
before the family came unraveled
and its several strands slipped off
in different directions.
Before the fragile shell that held our shared experience
cracked six ways from Sunday.
Before we broke the few remaining wedding presents.
And after that her heart.

THAT'S ALL

In the wake of our father's funeral we visit
the cramped house where we all grew up,
bringing our own children with us
to re-enact the receiving line we fled in a body
back at the church and cemetery.

We cluster like bedraggled birds
in the front doorway, then fan out
into hall and sittingroom, scullery and yard.
Tentative at first because it's odd isn't it
to be there without him sitting in his hard chair
next to the heater that conceals the old coal fireplace
saying close the door there's a terrible draught
and isn't the weather very poor for your visit.

We're not expecting much
knowing he threw out everything
except the letters and the photographs
as if accusing God of unfair treatment
after our mother died.

The grandchildren nose around
pointing out the pictures of themselves
in all the faunal phases of their lives.
How small it all appears
from the wrong end of the telescope.

We open drawers to find a pile of letters
in our mother's hand—our proof of the lovers
they have been. Impossible to think
his bones are resting now, one-up one-down
in their double-storied grave,
and all her fleshy warmth turned to dust.

And I don't care what they say, he wasn't lovely
in his blue tie and drycleaned suit
as the undertaker, who was (naturally)
a friend of a relation, kept repeating.
And I can't get over his white hands
or the taste of marble forehead on my lips.

There are the letters we have written
over all our years away from home.
Unopened gifts of dress shirts in their crackling packages,
new socks in pairs like courting couples,
the sets of fancy luggage he forgot to use.

Sometimes he'd show up with nothing
but a comb and toothbrush clutched
in a plastic bag.
Where was the leather travel kit
I sent you for your birthday, you'd ask him.
But he'd only smile and shake his head.

There wasn't much he wanted,
just the odd trip to a part of Ireland
he hadn't seen in years, to admire the changes
wrought by EU grants. New houses
popping up like toadstools in the West
for sons and daughters coming home from exile.

Not like it used to be when he carried water
for his mother's tea from the pump up the road,
then gathered kindling for a fire to boil the kettle.
Before rural electrification lit up the land
and all the old ghosts downed their tools and fled.

No, there really wasn't much he wanted,
just the music session down at *Combaltas*
on a Wednesday night, a lift up to the church
for choir practice after mass on Sunday,
his dahlias and tomatoes in the greenhouse,
a nice slice of apple tart, a biscuit with his tea,
a little company and conversation.
That's all.

ANGELA PATTEN COMES INTO HER OWN in this collection. There is an assurance and deftness to the verse of *Reliquaries* that manages perspective just so: the domestic interiors of her childhood and youth are set forth with mingled irony and love, as numinous relics that survive in memory and poetry despite the savage depredations of time. There is a radiant sense in these poems of the experience of ordinary working class Irish people and their culture that is completely authentic and honest.

— Anthony Bradley, Editor, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*

POETRY ASKS OF US WHAT WE YEARN FOR DEEPLY—to be present each moment. Angela Patten's poems speak to that yearning. She is able to weave the accurate feelings that accompany large and small incidents. And she is able to summon the sheer texture of realization and bafflement, that bittersweet dance that even death does not undo. Ireland is the memorable ground beneath her feet but her grace and acuity are all her own.

— Baron Wormser

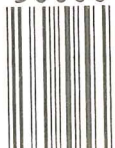


Angela Patten was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. After moving to the United States, she graduated from the University of Vermont and received an MFA in Poetry from Vermont College. Her first collection of poetry, *Still Listening*, was published by Salmon Poetry in 1999, and her poems were included in *The White Page/An Bhileog Bhan: Twentieth Century Irish Women Poets*, *The Breath of Parted Lips*, and *Onion River: Six*

Vermont Poets. Her poems have also appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Gaelforce* (Scotland), *Prairie Schooner*, *The Michigan Poetry Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Calyx*, *Hunger Mountain Review* and other literary journals, and she has given readings in Ireland, Germany, the Republic, and throughout Vermont and New England at the University of Vermont.

\$17.90

50000



TRADE



9 787774 568677



www.salmonpoetry.com

Cover photograph by Angela Patten

DESIGN MacWorks