

The Poetry of Joan McBreen: Of Family and Nature

by Josey Murray

A deep love and appreciation of the Irish landscape defines Joan McBreen's poetry. In her work, she discusses familial relationships within the natural framework of the west of Ireland, praising the delicate flora and profoundly captivating hills. Through the use of simple themes rooted in landscape, McBreen mirrors the seeming simplicity of this specific part of the world, its soft colors and flowing green grasses, with her short and nuanced verse. The poems grow with meaning and emotion with each additional reading just as the landscape of the west of Ireland reveals its interest with each moment of staring off into it. Immersion in her poetry reveals its bountiful beauty, capturing her own discovery of brilliance in the landscape she has spent a lifetime in. Beyond the dominant painting of landscape, McBreen captures intense feelings of love and loss, as filial relationships change with the passage of time. She uses the weather, light, plants, and animals to hint at her own experiences raising a family. Her poetry is of nature and family, each of which she intensely devotes herself. Intertwining these two topics brings her experiences of motherhood in the Irish landscape into one story. Beyond a general focus on family, McBreen's poetry specifically is based in an immersion in motherhood and immersion in landscape. Her poetry of nature and family, shows the value of the voice of a mother, the voice of a woman, and of speaking from personal experience, intimate attachment, and ordinary life.

With her mother as a significant figure in her life and her role as mother central to her adult life, motherhood permeates the poetic work of Joan McBreen. As McBreen grew up in Sligo, her father's presence in her home existed in the pictures her mother had of him and the letters he sent from other places in the world. Working at sea left him physically absent from the

home and led McBreen's mother to raise her largely as a single parent (Noble). After marrying Joe McBreen in 1970, she mothered six children and now has thirteen grandchildren. Her role as a mother allows her to explore the mother as a nurturing force (Murray). Abundance of love defines a mother's relationship with her children but not without times of loss, brokenness, and complication. These aspects of motherhood come across in McBreen's poetry. Her path to writing poetry in her adult life largely influences this focus.

Joan McBreen's family praised poetry as she grew up in Sligo. In an interview with Rand Brandes, she said, "In my family, poetry was considered as natural and as necessary to our lives as the air we breathed" (Brandes). From the start, poetry existed in her life as a powerful force, essential to life. McBreen wrote and published poetry as a teenager in Sligo. Her involvement in the art went beyond reading it; even writing poetry became close to her from the beginning. Writing poetry at a young age must have influenced her perspective of the world moving forward, viewing the world in a way that allowed for poetic creation and lyrical expression. Having this foundation of love for poetry made it easier and more necessary for her to return to writing after having children. After marrying in her early twenties, her focus turned to raising her family in Tuam while having a full time teaching job (Noble). She was able to return to writing when she finally found time for herself. During the time focused on her six children, she stayed involved in poetry, specifically reading Eavan Boland, who became particularly influential moving forward in McBreen's journey as a poet. Even though McBreen knew she wished to write poetry, she did not think she could; she believed that "for me as a woman, a wife, a mother, a teacher it was not going to be possible to pursue my life as the poet I suspected I might be, in the way I would want it to be-that is, totally" (Brandes). With this conviction, she stayed patient

waiting for the right time, “Therefore you might say I deliberately waited until for me it would be the right time” (Brandes). McBreen holds a unique and subtle confidence in her presence as a poet, based in her consistent immersion in poetry and patience in emerging as a contributor to Irish poetry.

A couple events led McBreen back to writing poetry once she was raising her children, one being the death of her father. In desperate times, we return to old ways, and the thoughts of her father ignited the need to create (Lendennie). A local event of a young girl dying of cystic fibrosis moved her to write an elegy, and have it published by the local newspaper. The editor then got her involved in the Galway Writers’ Workshop which allowed her to meet other poets and explore writing poetry once again (Lendennie). She found a voice with support from a writing workshop and friends involved in the craft and willing to be honest with her. Returning to poetry after having her six children and being engaged in raising them must have been different from writing poetry as a teenager and explains her intense focus on motherhood. Her maturation as a woman and the evolution of her role gave her a perspective to harness in her poetry and a new voice to tell her stories with.

Her focus on motherhood in much of her work speaks to the experiences of being a mother and the importance of that role in her life, but it also demonstrates the influences of other poets on McBreen when she returned to poetry. The focus on motherhood as a nurturing role validates the experiences of women as mothers and their unique place with their children. In “Domestic Interior,” an essay McBreen wrote for a collection celebrating Eavan Boland, McBreen finds incredible value in Boland’s poetry about domestic life and details of motherhood such as feeding children in the night (“Domestic Interior”). Her praise of this aspect of Boland’s

work shows how much McBreen values the discussion of the entirety of a woman's experience even the aspects of motherhood that feel mundane, repetitive, and ultimately less poetic. Finding these pieces of the domestic interior in Boland's poetry reminded McBreen that she could share her experiences and feelings of motherhood in poetry. A mother is deserving of a voice; this voice is worth sharing. McBreen notes how "Boland was creating art out of the ordinary" ("Domestic Interior"). She cites the poem, "Night Feed," in which Eavan Boland expresses a mother's love for a child through describing a typical moment with an infant. The same focus on simplicity and the ordinary can be seen in McBreen's poetry. Boland's poetry deeply affected McBreen; "But what struck me most forcefully was how directly this poem spoke to me and addressed my own life as a woman and a mother" ("Domestic Interior"). Before reading and thinking about Boland's poetry, McBreen thought, "To consider writing and perhaps publishing poetry, something I longed to do, seemed an impossibility" ("Domestic Interior"). After marrying and starting a family, the writing part of her life was "for the most part, abandoned," but with attention paid to women poets including Eavan Boland, it all became possible ("Domestic Interior").

As she continued complete engagement in motherhood, McBreen came back to Boland's poetry and specifically the poem, "Night Feed":

Years later, sitting at my kitchen table with Eavan Boland's 1982 book in my hands, I was astonished. Here I was meeting an Irish poet, a woman, married with two young daughters, who was writing poems about her domestic interiors. It was the first time I had encountered a poet using such images as a milk bottle rinsed clear with a hint of

winter constellations, jugs and kettles, a washing machine, a nursery light in a suburb window, a baby's fist as damp and tight as a nighttime daisy. ("Domestic Interior")

This moment reveals McBreen finding her voice in motherhood and seeing poetry and beauty in the ordinary. Boland's poetry led to McBreen attending one of her readings in Galway with her six children tagging along, showing her deep commitment to both her children and her art. In an interview, McBreen said, "in desperation... I piled the whole lot of them into a small battered yellow Volkswagen and drove myself and themselves into Galway" (Noble). At this reading, McBreen asked Boland how to be both a poet and mother to which Boland replied with a turn of her head to control her tears. McBreen did not understand what those tears meant until much later. Once McBreen revealed she wanted to write poetry, Boland invited her to the poetry workshops she was leading in Dublin ("Domestic Interior"). McBreen's interest in Boland's poetry and her role as a mother and poet directly influenced her return to poetry after the many years since her teenage verse in Sligo. Boland's poetry in the way it speaks to the ordinary and motherhood allowed McBreen to see the value in her experiences of raising children. McBreen credits Boland with giving her the strength and courage to write the poetry women needed. She said that Boland's poetry "continued to feed myself and many, many Irish women poets and gave us the courage to write the poems we needed to write and to find publishing outlets for them where we could" ("Domestic Interiors"). McBreen said in one interview, "The central component of poetry written by women in Ireland is more and more, and very powerfully, simply their own experience" (Brandes). The influence for McBreen directly relates to the type of poetry she writes, of her own experience as a woman and as a mother.

After understanding the context of what brought McBreen back to poetry after many years, her words come together in a new way. Her poetry can be viewed after the “short-lined, warm-toned” poetry of Eavan Boland, that so beautifully paints a mother entering a nursery to pick up her infant. Short-lined and warm-toned itself, McBreen’s poetry uses the seeming simplicity of the landscape of Ireland to build off of. However, the warmth of the tone that mirrors the soft grasses of the land does not mean sadness and loss are absent from her work. Quite the opposite is true. Her poems describe refreshing light, bluebells, and blackberries, but also downpours in July and when times come to an end. Her poems portray loss with the passage of time and more emotion spills out of the lines with each additional reading. Reading further into McBreen’s poetry, contemplating each line, and placing the self into the position of the speaker allows her emotion to flow into the reader.

Even without knowing McBreen’s background, her poetry contains rich evidence of motherhood. In *Heather Island*, McBreen explores mother-daughter relationships while addressing landscape and nature. Pieces of motherhood come across in poems throughout the collection, including “The Broken Fanlight,” “Daughter in July Downpour,” and “Water Light at Lissadell.” “The Broken Fanlight” and “Daughter in July Downpour” capture the complicated nature of a mother-daughter relationship in a way that grasps its nuances and evolution. These poems portray an intimate connection between a mother and daughter through the framework of the natural, the landscape that McBreen is intimately connected to and invested in. In “The Broken Fanlight,” a poem dedicated to the memory of McBreen’s mother, the speaker addresses the collective story of a mother and daughter, “where our story began,” before addressing feelings of brokenness and loss as there is a broken “fanlight over the door” “at the house you

left” (*Heather Island* 33). In “Daughter in July Downpour,” the ambiguity of if McBreen’s presence as the mother, the speaker, or the daughter presents the cyclical nature of a mother-daughter relationship as infinitely intertwined. Mothers are daughters; daughters become mothers. It portrays the great nurture that a mother supplies to her child, as the mother gives the daughter “a bouquet of marguerites / and the rain will cease to matter” (*Heather Island* 24). She describes a mother winding flowers into a daughter’s hair and ends with an image of the petals raining down from the flowers, insinuating an end to a stage in their relationship and the daughter’s development into a woman. Another poem in this collection, “Water Light at Lissadell” goes into McBreen’s memory to highlight the evolution over time. The poem begins with “Trees are the same / as in my childhood,” starting the poem with a comparison between the present and a memory (*Heather Island* 27). The first stanza depicts a scene that mirrors the memory of childhood. Then, the second stanza takes a darker turn with the line, “But the people I knew / are gone” (*Heather Island* 27). This stanza speaks to what can happen to a place from one generation to the next.

The poem continues, “The ghosts of my parents / pick bluebells at Lissadell,” echoing the bouquet in “Daughter in July Downpour,” which represents an abundance of love given to a child (*Heather Island* 27). This line suggests the care and love given to her as a child. It does so in a way that joins her parents as a united force that raised her, perhaps just as a feeling of looking back upon the times since it is known that her father was not often home on account of his work. Later in the poem, the lines, “Other children run across / the great lawns,” expresses natural life cycles (*Heather Island* 27). These cycles bring new children into the spaces that she once occupied as a child, but as this collection comes in her later life, it can also include thoughts

about her children growing up and new children running across the lawns on which they played, perhaps even her grandchildren. The cycle of our lives includes growing out of youth, growing into a new role, and nurturing new youth. This poem ends with “The light. The weather. Now,” a particularly striking and thought-provoking final line, bringing the audience back to the present (*Heather Island* 27). As light and weather are forces that exist only in the moment and do not last, this line settles back into a mindfulness of the present, to McBreen’s current life, as an adult woman, with children who now have children of their own, all moving forward in their own time.

Likewise, in *Map and Atlas*, her most recent collection, memories of McBreen’s childhood describe familial relationships. Because of how recent this collection is, the feelings of motherhood are different than her earlier poetry. At this time in her life, the children she spent time and energy raising are getting married and starting families of their own. Dedicated to her son, Peter, and Elaine, “Poem after a Wedding” describes the mixed feelings a mother has as her child gets married. Simply the title of this poem indicates the loss experienced by a mother as her children grow up. A wedding is bittersweet as a child completely moves forward in their life, to commitment to another individual and to a new family of their own. This wedding represents a loss, but also a gain with the incorporation of a new individual into the family. McBreen shows these feelings of loss, of realizing her son has grown up, in the first stanza, “The gate is open, the house empty. / I lean on the wall, suddenly cold” (*Map and Atlas* 21). In the second stanza, the first two lines, “If I were to call out your names / you might not answer,” continue the feelings of loss (*Map and Atlas* 21). The child she once never let out of her sight now is too far away to even be beckoned by a single call. The physical distance between mother and child worries her as she

feels less needed in his life. While the poem contains these sad moments of realizing loss, imagery of cinquefoil shining, of “spring gentians,” and “May blossom” bring aspects of positivity to the poem and bring the warmth of tone indicative of her poetry (*Map and Atlas* 21). Not all is cold and empty, the beautiful variety of flowers left and incorporation of nature assure her of the beauty of the occasion and the blossoming family that has been created. The poem ends with the speaker asking for a promise:

If I were to ask gifts of you,
 they would only be the year’s
 first violets and the promise
 that you will carry to me
 the moon’s reflection in water. (*Map and Atlas* 21)

She makes them promise that she will remain present in their lives. She comes to an acceptance of what this wedding means for the future, of how it means more growth with “the year’s first violets,” indicating a hope for grandchildren (*Map and Atlas* 21). The poem ends with an image of the moon, a symbol of cycles, implying the similar nature of the parent-child relationship, and the fact that soon it will be a child’s time to become a parent. The use of the moon and flowers in these lines shows how natural the process is, how nature is of ends, of beginnings, of constant change.

Even though motherhood can be seen as important in Joan McBreen’s poetry without knowing of her life, a certain power comes to the reading of her poetry when her story and her role as a mother of six children and grandmother to thirteen grandchildren comes into context. These details add background to the landscape poetry about the west of Ireland. More emotion,

strength, and vulnerability comes to reading her poetry after meeting her in person and being showered by her warmth and lively and positive spirit. A new life comes to her lyrical verse, in the way her voice can be heard reading it - her voice in a sweetly colored small publishing house in Letterfrack, Co. Galway, at the base of Diamond Hill, light shining in the window behind her and illuminating her presence in a pale pink ensemble.

Being in the west of Ireland made me crave intimate connections. This landscape, the soft grasses, the gray extensions of the hills into the skies, is uniquely capable of bringing people together. When the outside world only possesses itself, in the natural, without extravagant civilization by humans, people can immerse themselves in each other and into the earth. Motivated by the landscape to fall into each other, people allow themselves to deeply connect with other people. The silence of this unique place begs for the voices of the people there to be shared. The landscape begs for an expression of its own beauty, begs for consumption of that beauty and for all to surrender to it completely. Familial relationships, built from the romantic love between partners, grow when the landscape of the west of Ireland, when the seasons of showers and clouds, settle people inside, into each other, and into their own thoughts. Joan McBreen harnesses the beauty of the Irish landscape, its variety of plant life, and vibrance in the life it holds. Her experience of motherhood occurred right in this landscape. It nurtured her soul, as she nurtured her own children. The Irish landscape motivates individuals to appreciate change over time, natural cycles, and the value of each piece of the environment and of the nurturing force that allows all to flourish.

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