How We Made a New Art on Old Ground

By Eavan Boland

A famous battle happened in this valley.
You never understood the nature poem.
Till now. Till this moment—if these statements
seem separate, unrelated, follow this

silence to its edge and you will hear
the history of air: the crispness of a fern
or the upward cut and turn around of
a fieldfare or thrush written on it.

The other history is silent: The estuary
is over there. The issue was decided here:
Two kings prepared to give no quarter.
Then one king and one dead tradition.

Now the humid dusk, the old wounds
wait for language, for a different truth:
When you see the silk of the willow
and the wider edge of the river turn

and grow dark and then darker, then
you will know that the nature poem
is not the action nor its end: it is
this rust on the gate beside the trees, on
the cattle grid underneath our feet,
on the steering wheel shaft: it is
an aftermath, an overlay and even in
its own modest way, an art of peace:

I try the word distance and it fills with
sycamores, a summer’s worth of pollen
And as I write valley straw, metal
blood, oaths, armour are unwritten.

Silence spreads slowly from these words
to those ilex trees half in, half out
of shadows falling on the shallow ford
of the south bank beside Yellow Island

as twilight shows how this sweet corrosion
begins to be complete: what we see
is what the poem says:
evening coming—cattle, cattle-shadows—

and whin bushes and a change of weather
about to change them all: what we see is how
the place and the torment of the place are
for this moment free of one another.
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