
Poetry as a “Humane Enterprise”: Interview with Eavan Boland on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of her Literary Career

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Few poets have written so eloquently as Eavan Boland about the silencing of women’s voices in the literary and historical past. Throughout her prolific career as a poet she has defended a new Irish aesthetics rooted in everyday life, a subject matter not particularly sanctioned by the Irish poetic tradition, which chiefly revolved around the traditional subject matter of the heroic, dismissing the ordinary world of women as a trivial issue. In blurring the borders of the political and the private realms in Ireland, Boland has renewed the conventions of the public poem, the domestic poem and the nature poem. It is now clear that, after ten volumes of poetry, she has founded a new Irish literary tradition of her own recognisably different from that of poets such as W.B. Yeats, one of her fondest male precursors. From this perspective, she is not only a constituent part of contemporary Irish poetry but also an essential voice of worldwide literature in English.

The recent publication of *A Journey with Two Maps* (New York & London: Norton, 2011) again evinces how her strong voice has asserted itself above the echoes of her male literary predecessors. In this new prose book, Boland reflects on the different ‘maps’ she has followed on her journey as a woman poet. Some maps are dictated by the poetic past and the inherited craft; others by subversion and innovation. But Boland has not only been a traveler in search of accurate maps; she is also, at this stage, inevitably and unquestionably, a map-maker herself, a cartographer whose work has provided guiding signposts for younger women poets in the difficult task of overcoming what she defines in this interview as the “aching silence at the center of a national literature”. Interestingly, although Boland now enjoys critical acclaim among readers and writers, she never enacts that authority in poetry. An idiosyncratic feature of her work is the powerless stance taken in her writing to subvert the communal authority that has been at the centre of Irish poetry.

This interview is meant to be a tribute to Boland’s work on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of her fruitful literary career. Here, Boland addresses with hindsight crucial aspects in her poetry such as its exilic nature, her relationship with the poetic past, her view of poetry as a “humane” enterprise, the women poets who influence her writing, the interplay of communality and individuality (and how that affects her poetic voice) and the present multicultural atmosphere of Ireland, among other issues. Undoubtedly, the many readers and critics of Boland will appreciate such generous public exposure of the private (and at times esoteric) world of the poet’s imagination.

Key Words. Eavan Boland, interview, 50th anniversary of literary career, Irish poetry, women and literature in Ireland.

Sólo un escaso número de escritoras han logrado transmitir de una manera tan elocuente el silencio al que las mujeres han estado sometidas por el pasado literario e histórico; Eavan Boland es una de ellas. A lo largo de su fructífera trayectoria como poeta, Boland ha defendido

una estética arraigada en el día a día, tema que no ha sido legitimado por la tradición poética irlandesa, centrada fundamentalmente en lo heroico, trivializando por ello el mundo cotidiano de las mujeres. Al sobrepasar las barreras de lo político y lo privado en Irlanda, Boland ha renovado los límites establecidos previamente por el poema público, doméstico y pastoral. Es evidente que, tras diez volúmenes de poesía, esta escritora ha inaugurado una nueva tradición literaria irlandesa reconociblemente diferente a la de poetas como W.B. Yeats, uno de sus precursores masculinos más preciados. Desde esta perspectiva, Boland no es sólo una parte constitutiva de la poesía irlandesa contemporánea, si no a su vez una voz esencial que ha de tenerse en cuenta en la literatura mundial en lengua inglesa.

La reciente publicación de *A Journey with Two Maps* (New York & London: Norton, 2011) pone de manifiesto nuevamente cómo su potente voz se ha impuesto por encima de los ecos de sus predecesores masculinos. En esta nueva colección de ensayos, Boland reflexiona sobre los distintos ‘mapas’ que ha seguido en su viaje como poeta. Algunos mapas han sido dictados por el pasado literario y la herencia poética; otros vienen determinados por la subversión de este pasado y la innovación artística. Pero Boland no ha sido sólo una viajera en busca de mapas certeros; ella es también a estas alturas, inevitablemente y sin lugar a dudas, una cartógrafa cuyo trabajo ha ejercido de brújula para escritoras más jóvenes, en la difícil tarea de sobrepasar lo que ella define en esta entrevista como “el doloroso silencio en el epicentro de la literatura nacional”. Curiosamente, aunque Boland en la actualidad es aclamada por lectores y escritores como una de las mejores plumas del país, ella nunca ejerce esa autoridad en la poesía. Una de las principales características que definen su obra es la postura vulnerable de su voz poética, que subvierte la autoridad comunitaria que subyace en la tradición poética irlandesa.

Esta entrevista pretende rendir homenaje a la obra de Boland, con motivo del 50 aniversario de su carrera literaria. En ella, la escritora aborda en retrospectiva aspectos cruciales en su poesía, como el exilio, su relación con el pasado irlandés, su visión de la poesía como una empresa ‘humana’, las diferentes escritoras que influenciaron su obra, la interacción entre comunidad e individualidad (y cómo esto afecta a su voz poética) así como la atmósfera multicultural de Irlanda que nos encontramos en la actualidad, entre otros temas. Sin lugar a dudas, los numerosos lectores y estudiosos de Boland apreciarán esta exposición pública del mundo privado (y a veces esotérico) de la imaginación de un poeta.

Palabras clave. Eavan Boland, entrevista, 50 aniversario de carrera literaria, poesía irlandesa, mujeres y literatura en Irlanda.

PVA: 2012 marks the 50th anniversary of your literary career, as in 1962 you published your first pamphlet of poems, *23 Poems* (Dublin: Gallagher). In retrospect, thinking back to those years, how would you define this pamphlet of poems, published at the age of 18?

EB: I’m not sure I can define it. To start with, it was a much more informal, improvisational thing than it looks now. It happened in a casual sort of way. I had a friend who had another friend with access to a printing press. I’d been writing poems non-stop in my last year of boarding school and I thought it would be nice to see them printed. All of this sounds very deliberate, but the fact is Dublin was a very literary city back then – full of pamphlets, and broadsides and hand-to-mouth printed objects. It didn’t feel unusual, or even presumptuous, to want to join in. I’ve often wondered, when I look back, whether I’d do it again. The poems are really little more than tentative gestures.

And no wonder. I was seventeen that summer. It was an extremely small edition anyway, selling at something over a shilling. But I suppose I learned from it.

PVA: In an essay on Adrienne Rich, you quote Rich’s statement that in her early work “formalism was part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves it allowed (her) to handle materials (she) couldn’t pick up barehanded”. Do you think that this statement could be applied to early collections such as *New Territory* (1967), generally regarded as a conventional volume in theme and style, and *The War Horse* (1975), a transitional collection in your work where you venture into new themes?

EB: Adrienne Rich’s statement remains a very compelling one. It’s honest and illuminating, both. But it’s also a more self-aware remark than I could have made when I was writing *New Territory*. I never thought of the poems in

that book as formalist. Even the word formalism, even the term “strategy” as Rich uses it, implies a choice. I’m not sure I knew I had choices. I lived inside one learned world of the poem; and I produced poems from within that narrow compass. By the time I was writing poems in *The War Horse* I was more alert. But still a good way off from having a “strategy”.

PVA: In your recent prose book, *A Journey with Two Maps* (2011), you reflect, by means of this cartographic analogy, on the numerous tensions and contradictions you have experienced when becoming a woman poet: between the public poem and the domestic one, between history and the past, the legendary and the commonplace, authority and resistance, craft and innovation. Is your work still shaped by these contradictions or has it overcome them? If so, in which sense? I am asking this with a recent poem in mind, “Indoors” (*Domestic Violence*, 2007), which, to my view, revives some of these tensions ...

EB: I suspect for many poets – certainly for me – tensions don’t so much disappear as gradually turn themselves into a dialogue. I still recognize fault lines between the public poem and the so-called domestic one. I still recognize problems of authority and permission which, especially when I was young, got under my skin. But all these so-called contradictions have eased over the years into a more manageable perspective. Maybe that’s simply because in writing poems generated by those tensions I found some way of balancing them. The poem you mention here, “Indoors”, isn’t so much a poem seeking to resolve these contradictions. It’s more a way of noting them. When I write in the poem that I’m “an indoor nature poet” that really is a way I once thought about my writing. And, for that matter, still do. It’s a point of view that goes back to poems as early as “The Bottle Garden” in *The Journey*; and as recent as “An Elegy for my Mother in which She Scarcely Appears”.

PVA: In the first essay of *A Journey with Two Maps*, “Becoming a Woman Poet”, you narrate how your mother used to pick up, at the end of the day, an enameled mirror in order to stare at her own painting over her right shoulder. That memory has stayed with you as “the first sign of expressive power” you saw as a child, as “the first article of feminine faith” (2011: 13). With hindsight, if you now take this mirror and

look at your own work throughout these fifty years, what would you see? And how would you define or evaluate it?

EB: The actions are not comparable. So I’m not sure I have an answer here. I was a young child in London when I first saw my mother look at her painting in a mirror at the end of the day, with her back turned to it. The fact is, however, when she lifted that mirror, she was only reflecting on a day’s work. She was looking for inconsistencies, mistakes. And when she saw those mistakes, she was going to have the chance to revise them. In fact, she painted them out the very next day. But I have no way of doing that. I have no mirror for books and poems that go back over years, even decades. And I wouldn’t want to have. As a poet I know, as any writer does, that you can’t unwrite things.

PVA: In *Domestic Violence* (2007) you seem to open new avenues of artistic experimentation by revisiting and questioning major themes in your work, such as domesticity and nationality, and by addressing the changing conditions of the “new Ireland” of the Celtic Tiger period. How are the poems of *Domestic Violence* in continuity with your previous work? How are they different?

EB: There are certainly differences in *Domestic Violence* with what went before – but probably more points of similarity. Maybe I reach the line out a bit longer in a few of the poems. Maybe I think aloud a bit more. The main shift is a focus of theme. It’s in mixing elegy with micro-history and what effect that has on the speaker I’m setting up in the poem. I’m not so much experimental in form as in theme in poems like “Amber,” “An Elegy for my Mother in which She Scarcely Appears” and “In Coming Days”. They all look at time and retrospect. That’s something I’m more interested in these days, and it’s in some new poems I’ve been writing.

PVA: You started writing on the margins of the English canon by virtue of nationality and gender. Fifty years later, you are undoubtedly considered an essential poet in the English language. Has this external change (in the reception, status and canonicity of your work) affected your writing in any way?

EB: I think poets are most affected by how they perceive themselves and not by how

they're perceived. That's true for me. If I have something that seems finished, that looks viable and I find other people don't like it, I'm not shaken by that external opinion. Of course I'd always prefer to have a reader than a critic. I'd always prefer that someone likes a poem, and I feel the usual disappointment if they don't. But it doesn't change my view of what I've done. In the same way if I can see that something I've written isn't working, then I don't care how many people like it. I know I won't be able to live with it.

PVA: An overriding concern in your poetry is to address the reality of silenced communities in the past, most notably Irish women muted and simplified by a constraining literary tradition. Yet, your work is also fiercely determined by individual, private experiences, and as such, it is also somehow shaped around by what you define as "the silvery *I* of the poetic singular" (*A Journey with Two Maps*, 2011: 22). In this interplay between the individual and the communal, which one predominates in your work, the *I* or the *we*? The private poem or the public one?

EB: This is probably the aspect of poetry that interests me most at this stage as a writer. Twentieth century poets began writing in a world in which the *we* was already beginning to dissolve: organized religion, communities of faith, cartels of power and class had started weakening and turning in on themselves at the end of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century, with its turbulence and communication skills, hastened the process. So a great communal resource began to disappear from the poet's world. And once that *we* was gone, the *I* of the poetic self was stranded in a more subjective place. For myself, I don't so much prefer one to the other, as I now see more clearly what happened. When I was a young poet, living in Dublin, trying to navigate through an inherited tradition, it was harder to recognize. Irish poets were among the last to see that *we* dissolved. The fact is, the intimate mythos of Irish history seemed to offer the Irish poet a specially authoritative form of that *we*. At one time it looked like something that could even be raised to the level of Yeats's formulation: "a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions". One of the many things

that happened in Ireland during a painful quarter century of violence was the intense pressure applied to that first person plural. The mythos no longer looked inevitable. The history became a source of fission not fusion. The question that hung in the air – at least for me – was what would happen to Irish poetry now those binding elements were loosed? What would the *I* of the new Irish poem look like? Some of the poems in *Domestic Violence* try to imagine that stranded first person singular in a new and unfamiliar Ireland. What would it feel like? Who would lay claim to it? And how would it survive now that it was cut off from what Yeats called "a past of great passions"?

PVA: One crucial achievement of your work is its revision of the poetic conventions of the traditional nature poem, in line with other poets such as Sylvia Plath, who highly influenced your writing. In fact, you seem to draw more inspiration from natural settings than from urban ones in order to invoke the domestic realities of the Dublin suburb. Thus, in your poetry, boundaries dissolve as nature enters kitchens, nursery rooms and bedrooms (hence your definition of yourself as 'an indoor nature poet'). Do you find the natural world more inspiring than the city? What role does nature have in your work?

EB: I think of the women poets I was reading when I was young – Plath, Bishop, Rich – as not simply revising the nature poem, but radicalizing it as well. That was important to me. In "The Moose" for instance, Elizabeth Bishop writes about a bus traveling from the Maritimes to New England. Just a beat-up, slow-stopping bus riding through the late afternoon. The travelers are talking quietly. There are sights out the window, sounds inside the cabin. Then the bus stops. A moose looms up. The travelers all comment on it. The bus starts again. The piece finishes. In fact, the poem is beautifully, modestly constructed; but deceptive. It builds to an extraordinary insistence that revelation can and should be communal, not just individual. In doing that Bishop opened a transgressive conversation with the traditional nature poem; she set about boldly unwriting a tenet of the traditional neo-Platonic nature poem, in which revelation can only be singular. In a poem like "Nick and the Candlestick" Plath allows her motherhood to

be generative of vision. Adrienne Rich examines history and violation in “Power” which is a great, scalding nature poem before it’s anything else. When I read these poets when I was young it wasn’t nature that intrigued me. I wasn’t debating between the city and the country. I’m not a pastoral poet. What drew me in was their eye-catching insistence that the radical engine of the nature poem is human nature, not natural events; and the implied effect that women poets might have a special contribution to make to these revisions.

PVA: You have often defined your childhood as ‘nomadic’ and you now live part of the year in the US. As you put it, writers such as Joyce and Beckett could “only find their country ... through their exile from it” (*A Journey with Two Maps*, 2011: 141). Can we apply this statement to your relationship with Ireland nowadays? Have you found your country by an act of physical distance?

EB: I live in a very different world from Joyce and Beckett, with an entirely different angle of distance. Joyce and Beckett were true exiles. They were estranged from both the place and the culture of their particular Ireland. They went away to re-make these things so that they wouldn’t be re-made by them. I’m far away from that paradigm. I live a substantial amount of the year in Ireland, and a somewhat greater portion of the year in the US. Travel is now very manageable between the two places, if not enticing. I go backwards and forwards very freely and very frequently. When I’m at Stanford I go back to Dublin every ten weeks. I have from the start. There is a “but” here, of course. The “but” lies in the fact that there have always been elements of exile in my relation to Ireland, but they weren’t caused or made or re-made by this physical distance. They pre-date any of my more recent absences from the country. Nor were they anything like the dispossessions suffered by Joyce and Beckett. As a young woman I was, in a certain sense, an elective exile. I felt I had to be. The Irish poetic past seemed to me prescriptive – it nominated subjects, lives, values to the ordained tradition. And none of them were mine. To a certain extent, I confirmed my own exile by exploring exclusion and dissent. And I felt that exile regardless of location. I felt it when I was four miles away from Stephen’s Green. I felt it in my twenties and thirties when

my everyday turning circle, with small children and a home in the suburbs, was rarely more than ten miles. The distance was metaphysical; not physical.

PVA: One of the most defining features of your work is your resistance to the exclusivist tendencies of the inherited poetic tradition, which marks your poetry as deeply groundbreaking and innovative in Ireland. Yet, you never disown the poetic past, and that is why you call your latest book *A Journey with Two Maps*, in order to show that one map of poetry is not sufficient, that two (at times oppositional) maps are needed. In which way is your work still loyal to poetic inheritance? Or traditional in that sense? Has it been positively defined by custom and tradition, in terms of craft or poetic form, for instance?

EB: *A Journey With Two Maps* is indeed about the poetic past. But its chief focus is whether, as poets and readers, we choose a passive or active relationship with it. When I was young that past was often spoken about in Ireland as if it had the power to ordain the present. As if it could not only shape poetic form, but also the actual identity of the poet going forward. If you think about that carefully, and you apply a family inheritance figuration to this, it could well seem that the poet most likely to prosper is the one least likely to give trouble. I wasn’t that poet. There were parts of the Irish poetic past that troubled me – the braiding, for instance, of the national and feminine. The distance between the object and the author. The sense that a powerful bardic tradition had been constructed in the absence of women, and might well predicate its future on the continuation of that absence. And that if it went forward in that way there would be an aching silence at the center of a national literature. But you’re right in the question you ask. An active and challenging relation to the poetic past – any poetic past – doesn’t necessarily imply for me any erasure of the achievements that are stored there. I was just advocating in the book that the past, even for a very young poet, should be a responsibility as well as an inheritance.

PVA: I have always been intrigued by your view on the ethical responsibility of poets. As you claim, “the ethical vision is a functioning part of the poetic imagination and not an optional addition” (*A Journey with Two Maps*,

2011: 128). I wonder whether you could expand on this idea of the ethical vision as a moral imperative for poets...

EB: I'm not a purist. The idea of art for art's sake holds no attractions for me. If art isn't a human enterprise, and therefore a humane one, then I don't know what it is. So when the imagination (if we can still call it that) seizes on an image, an occasion, even a phrase, it's tugging at something that has roots, that has a human origin, a history. To pull those things out of the ground and argue that we're now free of our humane responsibility to them just because we're setting them up as symbols or images in a poem makes no sense. These things don't cease to have human meaning because we import them into a poem and announce that they now have artistic significance. If those figurations had histories and living connections outside the poem, we shouldn't erase them inside it. In my first attempts at a critique of the Irish poetic tradition, that's what seemed to me to be happening to the images of women. Outside the poem the reality of women in Irish history was shadowed and complicated by a terrible history. Inside certain Irish poems they re-appeared, sometimes as nationalist tropes, all the shadows edited away. That in my view was an ethical failure. And no amount of aesthetics could make up for it.

PVA: You have defined the decade of the 1980s in Ireland as an exciting time for literature, in its endless talk about the nature of the political poem and in its continual dismantling of familiar poetic categories and beliefs with the sudden emergence of women poets. How would you define the present literary scene in Ireland? As similarly enriching and disruptive?

EB: I don't think I can define a literary scene; or for that matter ever could. I'm not sure such a thing exists. I certainly did live and work as a writer in the 1980's in Ireland. And I did indeed find it exciting. It was a time of challenge, argument and transition for me. But not because of a literary scene. It was because of two circumstances: I was writing my own poems, trying to inch forward; and I was reading the poems of other people. That was my horizon. And my experience wasn't unusual. Whatever is going on at this minute or any other in Ireland there will always be

writers and readers. That's not going to change.

PVA: At a certain point in *A Journey with Two Maps* you claim that "poetry should be scrubbed, abraded, cleared and re-stated with the old wash stones of argument and resistance. It should happen every generation" (2011: 117). Similarly, in your evocative essay "Letter to a Young Woman Poet", you encourage the new female voices in literature to change the poetic past by "eroticizing" it (254). It now seems to me, when reading recent work by Irish women poets, that the youngest female voices no longer have as their main concern the rewriting of a national past. This act of literary revision of the poetic tradition seems to be combined with – and at times overshadowed by – the need to record the uncertainties and anxieties of the global present. Do you agree with this? Do you think their work is taking new directions?

EB: I couldn't answer that question as it's framed. The perception of trends, patterns, outcomes is a deceptive thing. When you ask me whether new Irish women poets are no longer concerned with re-writing a national tradition, my response tends to be that no one ever was concerned with it. As a poet, for instance, I never thought of myself as re-writing a national past. That wasn't my aim. That's a legitimate purpose for a politician or a historian or a propagandist. I'm a poet. I was preoccupied with getting the poem I wrote to inhabit the life I lived. I thought about how the language an Irish poet inherited – I'm speaking about poetic language here – might be inhospitable to my own plainspoken day as a woman. Those were everyday worries for me as a poet. They're ordinary worries for a writer. I'm fairly sure that the relation between the lived life and the language is more or less the primary concern for most poets. But I'm wary of large designations like the national past and the global present. When I take up the work of a new poet, I'm not looking at those designations. I'm looking at the poem. If the poem is good, then the patterns are not significant. If the poem isn't good, they matter even less.

PVA: As you know, I am currently involved in a project about migration, multiculturalism and contemporary Irish literature, in which I compare, among other things, the poetry of

both Irish women and immigrant women in Ireland, by bearing in mind rearticulations of 'home' and representations of interracial encounters and cross-cultural exchanges. With respect to this, in which way do you think the new influx of immigration in Ireland has altered literature and in particular the contemporary panorama of Irish women's poetry?

EB: I am slightly troubled by the question you pose, although I know it's a valuable one. The problem lies in trying to compress and shape two very different things: recent immigrant events in Ireland and Irish women's poetry. It's important, I think, to keep them separate: not to discuss them as if they are causative of one another. So do I think immigrant events have altered the panorama of Irish women's poetry? Not really. But then, maybe I should qualify that, and say not exactly.

What has been altered – and this is where your thesis comes in – is the perception of cultural norms in Ireland. These have certainly been shifted by recent immigration. When I was younger Irish literature seemed to mainly draw on a paradigm which was male and traditional. Women's poetry, and its emergence, required the literature to make a new space, not without considerable resistance. Now immigrant voices require another new space. What is interesting to consider is whether these are really "new" spaces. Or whether they're visible dramatizations of underlying realities which have always been there. Irish women poets found their voices by displacing the traditional concept of the "Irish poet". Now immigrant voices find their reality by exploring further displacement. I suspect this is a re-statement of an old situation rather than being a new one. There has always been a tendency to destabilize place and persona in Irish writing. It is as much there in Joyce as in Roddy Doyle. What seems to me very important is not to confine immigrant voices to this role. It's essential not to audition them for a fixed part in the displacement of the Irish identity. That would be both a confining and condescending role to offer them. It's tempting to do it. Occasionally, I see some criticism or commentary that makes me feel in some ways it's already been done.

PVA: In this sense, do you think that poets should have a particular role in this multicultural society which is Ireland now? Is

it possible to achieve an integrated, multicultural Ireland through writing?

EB: I don't think writing has a place in achieving an "integrated, multicultural Ireland". That's not its purpose. It shouldn't have a cultural agenda of this kind. It's a very over-designed role for it. On the contrary, Irish writing will move forward, as it always has, through the voices of individual writers – some of whom may have no social commitment of any kind. The purpose is good writing; the role is no more and no less than that.

On the other hand, I think you can argue that, if he/she is to be both honest and innovative, a writer has little choice but to take note of new realities. In that sense, a powerful and illuminating new community in Ireland – made up of those who have lost so much to be in the country, and whose current losses shed such light on our own past ones – that can only be a very rich and rewarding source of new thinking and writing.

However, to go back to what I said at the start, the danger is in bringing either of these realities – the immigrant experience and Irish women's writing – into a causative relation with each other. That could lead you to restrict the meaning of both. But if you were to argue for an inescapable dialogue between the two – one that was moral and imaginative – I think you could end up in a very valuable space.

PVA: Throughout these fifty years, you have had a hectic time as a university professor, essayist, literary critic, translator of poetry and editor of anthologies. Is it easy to combine all these academic activities with writing poetry? Do you find these activities disrupting or inspiring and stimulating?

EB: I've always been a teaching poet. I was 22 when I became a Junior Lecturer at Trinity College. I teach at Stanford now, and it's a great place to teach. I've never thought of myself as involved in an academic life. But I have thought of myself as being involved for most of my adult years in a teaching life. Teaching allows me to extend the conversation about poetry that I'm always having with myself anyway. I'm leading a seminar on women poets at Stanford this quarter in fact, and it really has been a wonderful experience. I get to look at texts, arguments, perspectives in a fresh way twice a week with very committed students. In that way, I think of the classroom

as a very dynamic space for a poet – at least for me. But in fact, all the parts of my life – from writing prefaces, to teaching, to conversations with friends – are permeable to poetry. I don't look for obstructions to the writing process,

and I don't see them around me. I have a remarkably similar writing process here in Stanford as I had years ago in Dundrum with very young children. Poetry is a fugitive art. It goes with you where you go.

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