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 **The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Body Politic:  
A Conversation with Paula Meehan**

*Jody Allen Randolph (bio)*

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**We've been talking recently about the early sound maps of childhood. You grew up in the city off Gardiner Street and moved as**

## **an older child to Finglas. Were there sonic elements of your childhood that particularly formed you as a poet?**

One of the most noticeable things about it, even to me as a child, was that there were no books, not many at least, in the houses around, in the flats. So an awful lot of the energy, the excitement was in the oral. I grew up in an oral tradition: the stories, the singers, the old people, the lore, the sometimes very empowering lore. I soon developed, I believe, a hunger for ritualized sound, in and of itself. The rhetoric around trade union politics, for instance, would feed it as much as, what seemed in childhood, the continual ceremonials around the church. Then, it was the part of the city where the Citizen Army had been active. That had a whole set of stories and dramas. It had the old lore of the Monto, which at the turn of the last century was the biggest red light district in Europe servicing the garrison, the docks, the Ascendancy, and the laboring classes. The old whores were still around when I was a child, it had the lore of the docks and the dockland community. It was a vivid, interesting, and textured world forme with a lot of song, a lot of music, not least the music of the city itself, the steel hoop rims on cobbles, the horses' hooves. There was an abattoir near us. I remember the squealing of pigs and the cries of sheep waiting to be slaughtered. The music of the Latin, of the bells of the church, all of that—a fantastically rich childhood in sonic terms. **[End Page 239]**

### **What was the Dublin of your childhood like?**

Dublin was a much darker place in those days. Buildings were encrusted in grime, the grime of centuries it seemed and still seems in memory. The city center was dark. This was before they sandblasted the granite of the iconic buildings so Trinity, the Bank of Ireland, the GPO, even the houses we were living in, they were all much darker. There was less advertising, much of it still painted rather than electric. So less light. A ban on hydrocarbon fuels was a long time away so the winters were smoggy. It was a wonderfully mysterious place to me as a child. The tenements themselves were full of life. There were people and families in each room—a whole family inhabited a room. And the tenement

houses were porous to a child—you could wander in and out of other peoples' rooms, sometimes find yourself getting fed at dinnertime in a completely different family. I had a direct plumb line into a very vital and lively oral culture. Story telling, songs, the actual language of the people themselves, the pure Dublin accent. Even today if I've been away a few weeks the minute I come back to the city and hear the rich Dublin accent, something visceral happens in my stomach. Incidentally the Dublin accent is an endangered species. Those elements of sound, of the sonic, were a huge influence on me. Now I don't want to romanticize it, talk about story and song alone, because those were desperately hard times. A girl in my class, one of a family of thirteen living in a two room flat, died of diphtheria. This was about 1960. A beautiful quiet gentle girl called Clare. For the next few weeks the health authorities were crawling all over us, we were tested for everything. And I saw old people lying literally on pallets of straw in basement hovels, and I don't want to romanticize that part of my childhood.

**In that vital oral culture of your childhood, a story telling culture, what stories were you drawn to?**

There were a lot of street sellers and each of them would have their own spiel. People had a lot of time—the relationship with time has...

**JODY ALLEN RANDOLPH**

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