

**"Those who cannot remember the past are  
condemned to repeat it."**



## **Quarantine – (Irish Famine 1845 – 1852)**

### **Poem by Eavan Boland**

In the worst hour of the worst season  
of the worst year of a whole people  
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.  
He was walking - they were both walking - north.  
She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.  
He lifted her and put her on his back.  
He walked like that west and west and north.  
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.  
In the morning they were both found dead.  
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.  
But her feet were held against his breastbone.  
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.  
Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.  
There is no place here for the inexact  
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.  
There is only time for this merciless inventory:  
Their death together in the winter of 1847.  
Also what they suffered. How they lived.  
And what there is between a man and woman.  
And in which darkness it can best be proved.

#### **About the poem**

**Between 1845 and 1852 more than a million Irish people died from starvation and disease.** The catastrophic **Famine of the 1840s** devastated Ireland, an event, in Mary Robinson's words, 'which more than any other shaped us as a people. It defined our will to survive. It defined our sense of human vulnerability'. Eavan Boland's poem was prompted by an anecdote in *Mo Scéal Féin* by An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire and, in twenty lines, Boland catches the sweep of history and what she terms 'a seasoned love story'.