

Patten, Angela
STILL LISTENING [pointer]
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Born in Dublin, Ms. Patten emigrated to the United States in 1977 and now lives in Vermont, where she received degrees from both the University of Vermont and Vermont College. Her poems have been published in literary journals around the world and she currently teaches poetry. It is invariably the mark of a good storyteller that she or he is first a good listener. Ms. Patten is definitely such a poet, and her collection is aptly titled. Her ear records not only the verbatim sense of her speakers, but the patterns, inflections, and nuances of their speech as well. Her poems are, foremost, narrative works in the melodic Irish oral tradition, works meant to be listened to as well as read. They contain snippets of dialogue, unbidden memories both clear and fuzzy, elements of history, and, perhaps most importantly, family lore: those stories in a family's tradition that have moved beyond literal veracity to a more deeply rooted mythological truth, such as the story of how her father lost his left eye. As is the case with many Irish expatriates, Ms. Patten tries valiantly to reconcile the confining influences of her Catholic working-class upbringing with her simultaneous fondness for its richness and familiarity. It is this tension which animates her work. "You can't breathe for choking on the past," she complains. Yet, moments later, she fondly relates a glimpse of her father kneeling at a kitchen chair, "the black beads running through his callused fingers like water over rocks."

What a pleasure it is to pick up a volume that one can enjoy thoroughly, from the simple, evocative cover art to the last line of the final poem.