

# The Boy in the Ring

by Dave Lordan (Salmon Poetry, 2007, 12.00)

IF THE NEED AROSE TO SUM UP Dave Lordan in a couple of words, I don't think I'd be alone in classing him a 'political poet'. When Lordan's collection *The Boy in the Ring* won the Kavanagh award, Indymedia congratulated him as someone its readers would know as 'an unabashed social activist'. He is a visible member of the SWP and the Irish Anti-War Movement, his best-known poem the long angry protest 'Reflections on Shannon'.

So I suspected that this book would require me, yet again, to get all bewildered about the relationship between poetry and politics. I was surprised. The first part of this exhilarating collection is not protest or manifesto, but a controlled and powerful exploration of young male suicide. I suppose we all know by now that suicide is the most common cause of death for young Irish men today. This, then, is a significant, an *important* book. I thought of Brian Turner, the American poet who completed an MFA in creative writing before serving seven years with the armed forces in Iraq. The resulting work, *Here, Bullet*, recalled traditional poetic roles—the *file* who learns the tools of the trade before hitting the road. A review in the *New York Times* (quoted in *Here, Bullet's* blurb) read:

'The day of the first moonwalk, my father's college literature professor told his class, "Someday they'll send a poet, and we'll find out what it's really like." Turner has sent a dispatch from a place arguably more incomprehensible than the moon—the war in Iraq—and deserves our thanks...'

Like Turner, Lordan has been trained up—in his case with an MPhil from Trinity—before heading off to another kind of front. Lordan sends back a dispatch from a place unarguably more incomprehensible than the moon—the place where a young person considers death an attractive, or the only possible, next move.

What makes the first part of *The Boy in the Ring* powerful is that it is an exploration and *not* an argument. The poems about suicide come to a variety of conclusions, rather than starting from one. 'At 14' recalls Hartnett's 'Death of an Irishwoman' in its catalogue of the useless things left behind by a life cut short. 'Turkey', in contrast, winds up at '[t]he sense it makes to take revenge like that / to go and lock the whole damn world out.' 'Mail for a dead guide' speaks earnestly to a friend about what might have made him slip 'into a knot / on the bark of an oak / disappearing out of their diminishing vision / completely' whilst 'Bad Luck Story' is a comical whine. Funniest and hence most fearsome is 'Fearless':

Doubt me now?  
Watch me go so

