

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

**THE  
MOTHER  
HOUSE**



Gallery Books

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## T H E M O T H E R H O U S E

## *The Small Museum*

Enormous in the low crypt  
(and even taller winged attendants  
are offstage pressing to get inside)  
the alien vested saints have  
waited to manifest, they pounce  
and lift up the despicable body,  
they place it at the centre, the point  
where order meets disaster.

We need to be here, our signatures  
(which not many will read) must populate  
the lower margin, while  
on an upper floor of the universe  
the man, gigantic and bare, embraces light,  
seeks brighter light, ignores the mob  
as if he had met us in his own house,  
naked at dawn, and we shrink seeing him  
since the rising sun and shadows make him  
tall as the judge on the day of anger.

## *Sister Marina*

'Was there no drama in their lives?'  
Once, it was almost Passiontide  
and in Lent of course no letters arrived —  
people knew better than to write.  
So, when a letter landed postmarked Lancaster  
for Sister Marina, Reverend Mother  
opened and read it and went to find her  
just leaving an empty classroom. She closed the door  
and handed over the letter. Reverend Mother  
was by two years the younger;  
now for the first time in her life she saw  
a face dragged backwards, dragged down, and how  
pain and fear come first, and only about  
two seconds later the beginning of thought  
weighing down on the heart. She saw the brother's wife,  
the brother grim-faced as ever, the sick child  
as they printed on the other woman's mind,  
as plainly as if a light had flickered  
and lit them up in a screened picture.  
Nothing that happened after so clearly displayed  
how the body is all summed up in a face,  
in a flaw — how knowledge travels all the way  
down through a body and burns into the floor.  
That was drama, she thinks, and hopes for no more.

## *A Slow March*

*Lento*, as a threshold wearing down,  
as the hesitant writer's hand,  
the man with the trombone  
stands waiting for the moment,  
for the horn solo to finish, for the pause  
until he lifts the long slider.

No other tone brings the body  
so close, and how does it speak  
about distance too? declaring the presence  
of a breathing body, the note steady  
as the lungs are slowly pushing out air  
and the sound travels for miles,

while the girl with the piccolo is still  
waiting her turn, for her five bars,  
watching while he plays, her stance  
as stiff as the pins holding her hair  
flattened in place, gripping it down —  
one eye on the score, counting the repeats.

And what harm if these characters  
were to wear down to a trace and be lost  
like the bump of an old defensive wall?  
It would still take longer than  
the notes of the trombone  
and the piccolo too, fading away.

## *Fastnet*

The winds go past, and the waves,  
they forget where they were aiming  
like a mind whose door is blown open  
by another life imagined,  
*If only*, forgetting the present:  
*Oh, any time, not now, anywhere*  
*but not here*, and the storm  
sticks to us, a tall shadow marching  
beside us, big as a darkening cloud —

no way of slowing down,  
another life compelling,  
and the wind is a Gothic parade  
with faces like Castlereagh  
seven bloodhounds beside him  
panting for wider carnage,  
faces that zoom and then pull back  
and each of the serial lives is  
plunged and then dragged to the surface.

Only the man that minds the light,  
watching the great revolving spokes  
hitting the piled castles of spray,  
can say, trapped, not able to save,  
*This is life, I am living it now,*  
*here*, and the rock answers him back  
as they wait for the storm to change its key,  
*It is yours, yours alone, you are living it here.*