

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.