

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

**COLLECTED
POEMS**



Gallery Books

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The Last Glimpse of Erin

The coastline, a swimmer's polished shoulder heaving
on the edge of sky; our eyes make it grow:
the last glimpse, low and smooth in the sea.

We face the air, all surfaces become
sheer, one long line is growing
like a spider's navel cord: the distance

from your low shoulder lost in the quilt,
an arm thrown forward: a swimmer, your head
buried in a pillow like a wave.

The white light skirting the cloud pierces
glass riddled with small scratches and creates
the depths and cadences of a spider's web.

A man is holding his baby and laughing,
he strokes her cheek with a brownstained finger
while his wife sews a wristbutton on his other hand.

The island trimmed with waves is lost in the sea,
the swimmer lost in his dream.

'He Hangs in Shades the Orange Bright'

So quiet the girl in the room
he says
it is a precarious bowl
of piled white eggs on a high shelf

against the dark wardrobe the gleam
of skin and the damp hair inclining
over her leaning shoulder fades
into dark. She leans on a hand
clutching the bedrail, her breasts pale
askew as she stands looking left
past the window towards the bright glass.
But from the window it is clear
that the dark glass reflects nothing;
brilliance of the water-bottle
spots the ceiling.

The man in the courtyard waters the roots of the trees
and birds in their cages high on the red wall sing.

She moves her head and sees
the window tall on hinges
each oblong tightly veiled. One side admits
air through a grey slatted shutter, and light
floats to the ceiling's
profound white lake.

Still the sound of water and the stripe
of blue sky and red wall,
dark green leaves and fruit, one ripe orange
she says
the sheet lightning over the mountains
as I drove over the quiet plain
past the dark orange groves.

Inheriting the Books

They've come and made their camp
within sight, within slingshot range,
a circle of bulked shapes
dark inside like wagons.
There are fires like open eyes.
I watch the billows of smoke,
the dark patches, hallucinating
herds and horses.

Who is that in flashing garments
bowing to the earth over and over,
is it a woman or a child?
In the wedge of the valley by the stream
what food are they cooking, what names have they
for washing the dead, for the days of the week?

The long rope has landed, the loose siege hemming me.
In whatever time remains, I will not have the strength
to depart.

At My Aunt Blánaid's Cremation

In the last dark side chapel
the faces in the dome
are bending down like nurses
who lift, and fix, and straighten
the bed that's always waiting,
the last place you'll lie down.

But your face looks away now,
and we on your behalf
recall how lights and voices
and bottles and wake glasses
were lined up like the cousins
in a bleached photograph.

We carry this back to the city
since the past is all we know —
we remember the snake called Patrick,
warm in his Aran sleeves —
the past keeps warm, although
it knits up all our griefs:
a cold start in our lives.

The Light

for Dambnait Ní Ríordáin

Come out, I say, and you all come to the light.
I look for her, she's there,
the sunlight glancing up from the shining leaves
wavers on her face
as she consults the rose bush, the light moving
in slow time with her hair.

At the end of the garden where the tall trees shivered
the river was in spate.
We walked down there at dawn to get rid of the noise
of the night's debate,
leaving the table with the bottles and empty glasses,
Socrates and his fate

in *Phaedo*, in the Great Books of the World edition
on thin bible paper
laid open, we left them to look at the river rushing
down to Askeaton,
the tall Desmond castle, the friary beyond the bridge,
in their desolation.

When we turned back, to wash the glasses and arrange
the room before her parents
rose up, she stopped to consult the rose bush, the risen sun
blazed in its ranges;
her face shone green in the glancing light, I remember
across all the changes —

and that they had arrived in the dark, the small shy moths
lined up, wings packed tight,
crowded under the lamp that still shone emptily
recalling the hours of night.

Seaweed

*for my grandparents, Thomas Dillon and Geraldine Plunkett,
married 23 April, 1916*

Everything in the room got in her way,
the table mirror catching the smoke
and the edges of the smashed windowpanes.
Her angle downward on the scene
gave her a view of hats and scattered stones.
She saw her brother come out to help
with the barricades, the wrecked tram
blocking off Earl Street, then back inside.

And for the man in the room, obscured
by her shadow against the window,
the darkening was a storm shifting his life —
he wondered, where were they now, and would
this perch above the scene blow apart soon,
and he imagined the weeds that sink their filaments
between rocks to nourish a life in water
until all of a sudden they're sheared away to sea.

And out at sea the gunboat was bucking and plunging,
throwing up spray. The weeds are slapped
back again on sharp rocks beside beaches
that are sucked bare by the storm after this one,
their holdfast plucked away. He was thinking,
would they find a place and lose it, blown away
again, and find another, on the western coast,
as the seaweed is landed, a darkness in the dark water.