

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

**SELECTED
POEMS**



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Swineherd

When all this is over, said the swineherd,
I mean to retire, where
Nobody will have heard about my special skills
And conversation is mainly about the weather.

I intend to learn how to make coffee, at least as well
As the Portuguese lay-sister in the kitchen
And polish the brass fenders every day.
I want to lie awake at night
Listening to cream crawling to the top of the jug
And the water lying soft in the cistern.

I want to see an orchard where the trees grow in straight
lines
And the yellow fox finds shelter between the navy-blue
trunks,
Where it gets dark early in summer
And the apple-blossom is allowed to wither on the bough.

Celibates

When the farmers burned the furze away
Where they had heedlessly lived till then
The hermits all made for the sea-shore,
Chose each a far safe hole beneath rocks,
Now more alone than even before.

Nights darker than thickest hawthorn-shade;
The March wind blew in cold off the sea.
They never again saw a sunrise
But watched the long sands glitter westwards.
Their bells cracked, their singing grew harsher.

In August a bee, strayed overboard
Down the high cliff, hummed along the strand.
Three hermits saw him on that long coast.
One spring the high tides stifled them all.

I Saw the Islands in a Ring All Round Me

Far from the land, they had started to grow,
Far from complete, around the line of sky.
The boat edged across the circular bay
As loud as a circular saw
Slicing a wake through metal.
The sea expired in silence; the islands
Shuffled and swam. The circle
Edged slowly to the west.

The pilot is the pivot
In the middle of a clockface.
The boat slides evenly as the hand of a clock
Measuring time at the edge of the water.
She still recalls how his face
Against the primrose light, the curve of his forehead
Bisecting the horizon, cut off
An hour, the first horizon.

The Lady's Tower

Hollow my high tower leans
Back to the cliff; my thatch
Converses with spread sky,
Heronries. The grey wall
Slices downward and meets
A sliding flooded stream
Pebble-banked, small diving
Birds. Downstairs my cellars plumb.

Behind me shifting the oblique veins
Of the hill; my kitchen is damp,
Spiders shaded under brown vats.

I hear the stream change pace, glance from the stove
To see the punt is now floating freely
Bobs square-ended, the rope dead-level.

Opening the kitchen door
The quarry brambles miss my hair
Sprung so high their fruit wastes.

And up the tall stairs my bed is made
Even with a sycamore root
At my small square window.

All night I lie sheeted, my broom chases down treads
Delighted spirals of dust: the yellow duster glides
Over shelves, around knobs: bristle stroking flagstone
Dancing with the spiders around the kitchen in the dark
While cats climb the tower and the river fills
A spoonful of light on the cellar walls below.

London

At fifty, she misses the breast
That grew in her thirteenth year
And was removed last month. She misses
The small car she drove through the seaside town
And along cliffs for miles. In London
She will not take the tube, is afraid of taxis.

We choose a random bar. She sits by me,
Looking along the jacketed line of men's
Lunchtime backs, drinks her vermouth.
I see her eye slide to the left;
At the counter's end sits a high metal urn.

What are you staring at? That polished curve,
The glint wavering on steel, the features
Of our stranger neighbour distorted.
You can't see it from where you are.
When that streak of crooked light
Goes out, my life is over.

1981

River, with Boats

Of course she does not mind sleeping
On the deep fur of the bed
Beside the wide window
Where the birds hop,
Where the boats pass.

She can hear the hooters
Down there in a greeting;
She can see a flash of the river,
A glitter on the ceiling
When the wind blows
And the high branches of trees
On the other bank
Skip and bow in circles.

Only at the highest tide
The window is blocked
By the one framed eye
Of a tethered coaster
Swaying and tugging and flapping with the wind,
And the faces of the mariners
Crowd at the glass like fishes.