

Eilean Ni Chuilleanain

Leaving Cert Poetry Notes

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The Second Voyage

In 'The Second Voyage' the poet assumes the persona of Odysseus, the eponymous Greek hero of Homer's 'Odyssey' who spent a decade lost at sea and on various strange lands when journeying back from the Trojan War. The poem captures Odysseus alone at sea cursing the waves and dreaming of his return to land and home.

Ultimately, his desire for control, over both the sea and his destiny are just fantasies, and he's left powerless and crying in his boat. The poem is about feeling lost, but it also touches on themes of masculinity and the patriarchal desire to control, colonise and name.

The opening stanza begins in a third person narrative, Odysseus, sea weary, ‘rested on his oar’ as the personified waves taunt him ‘crocodiling and mincing past’. The verbs used by Ni Chuilleanain bring the sea to life, evoking the menace that ignites Odysseus’ anger as he retaliates, ‘he rammed / The oar between their jaws’. The sibilant image, ‘In the simmering sea where scribbles of weed defined / uncertain depth’, emphasises the sinister nature of the sea, even the fish appear in ‘fatal formation’. The tone is ominous and the mood oppressive.

Odysseus is given a voice by the poet, ruing the waves and his inability to do actual harm to them with his oar:

If there was a single
Streak of decency in these wave now, they’d be ridged
Pocked and dented with the battering they’ve had

His desire to for violence is followed by his desire to name the waves ‘as Adam named the Beasts’ and there is something of the coloniser evoked in these images.

The next stanza sees Odysseus’ mood change, he moves towards wistfulness and longing, imagining he takes the oar to land, walks far from the sea he longs to ‘organise his house then’, order is craved in the face of the formlessness of the sea, where he is ultimately a prisoner:

But the profound
Unfenced valleys of the ocean still held him.

He sits in the boat under which the ‘sea was still frying’ and considers a litany of images associated with water, yet all to do with water *on land*, ‘fountains’, ‘flat lakes’, ‘water clattering into the kettle’, ‘horsetroughs’ and so on.

The hero’s devastation and isolation are captured in the final desolate image:

His face grew damp with tears that tasted
Like his own sweat or the insults of the sea.

The harsh alliterative ‘t’ evokes the bitterness of the image.

The poem is an exploration of the idea of what we must sacrifice when we give up the familiarity, comfort, and orderliness of home in order to embark on a journey. Using the myth of Odysseus lends a wonderful universality to the themes.

Overview:

- **Themes:** journey, loss of self, colonisers tendency for violence and desire to name.
- **Key images:** the waves taunting him, his desire to harm and name them, his desire to organise his home, the land water images, his salty tears.
- **Stylistic features:** persona of Odysseus, sibilance, alliteration of 't'.
- **Tone:** bitter, angry, wistful, desolate.

Death and Engines

'Death and Engines' is poem written in five stanzas and each stanza is a single sentence long, each stanza is punctuated significantly with that final full stop that links very much to the theme. It is a bleak and very direct look at the most human of conditions, our inevitable death. The poem works well when analysed alongside 'Fireman's Lift', which was written in response to the death of her mother, as this poem is in response to her father's passing. It is an unnerving poem in a lot of ways in that it looks at death as a metaphorical wreckage, the last few lines offer some solace, but not enough to transform the atmosphere of melancholy and gloominess that pervade the poem.

The opening stanza remembers a plane landing in snowy conditions, the speaker spies the wreckage of the 'back half of a plane, black...tubular, burnt-out and frozen' a chilling sight to behold as one descends 'in a stiff curve'. The wreckage forces the poet to confront her mortality, as the plane tries to land again:

we faced again
The snow-white runways in the dark

Facing the darkness is a metaphor for facing death.

She suggests to the reader that death may be closer than we think, 'Soon you will need wings of your own', here the 'cold' 'metal' wings of the plane are transformed into something angelic with religious connotations, yet there is little spiritual comfort offered in the poem. The moment is captured in the simile:

...where
Time and life like a knife and fork
Cross, and the lifeline in your palm

Breaks.

The tone here is far more brutal than the transition to the afterlife that is imagined in 'Fireman's Lift', with angels passing the Virgin through the clouds.

The comfortless realism continues in the imagery in the fourth stanza. Here the poet imagines the time for all of us when 'images of relief', like a man who has survived an accident and is 'conversing cheerfully / through cut lips', will 'fail' us all. The harsh alliterative 'c' in this image is seen repeated in the poem, as well as mournful melancholic assonance of a repeated 'o' sound, both sound techniques contribute to the overall bleak tone of the poem. The poem confronts us with the fact that not every accident or illness is a close call, there will be a time when it is fatal.

The pronouns begin to shift from 'we' in the beginning to 'you' as the reader cannot escape the message of mortality. The final stanza is the culmination of this as a metaphorical wreckage is imaged in the chaotic and violent language used; 'alone', 'accelerating', 'blind', 'too late', 'death', 'scattered', 'spin'.

The final image is significant, although the poet imagines that we are remembered by our loved ones after our death, even the remembrance has an edge of violence to it. Our memories are like shrapnel, embedded into our loved ones, causing them pain:

The pieces every one a different shape
Will spin and lodge in the hearts
Of all who love you.

The fragility of us all is confronted in this cold, bleak poem.

Overview:

- **Themes: our inevitable death.**
- **Key images: the burnt out wreckage, the snowy runway, the wings, the lifeline in the palm, the survivor in hospital, death as wreckage, pieces of us lodged in our loved ones.**
- **Stylistic features: violent, chaotic language. One sentence per stanza, harsh alliterative 'c' sound throughout the poem as well as melancholy assonance of 'o'.**
- **Tone: bleak, brutal, cold.**

Fireman's Lift

'Fireman's Lift' is an elegy, it's a poem about Ni Chuilleanain's mother's death and was published shortly thereafter. The poem remembers a visit to Parma Cathedral with her mother in 1963 when both admired the fresco in the dome, Correggio's 'Assumption of the Virgin'. Hordes of angels are hoisting the Virgin up to Heaven, chaotic spiralling tiers of them, where her son awaits her in the apex of the dome. Years later, as her mother was dying, she was cared for by nurses and this reminded Ni Chuilleanain of the angels supporting the Virgin mother on way from this life to the next. Indeed, the title 'Fireman's Lift' refers to the type of lift you use on an elderly or disabled person when trying to manoeuvre them.

The opening line of the poem sees both women standing beside each other admiring the work of art but the whole poem is full of symbolism; it also symbolises mother and daughter standing together throughout life and through the mother's final illness.

I was standing beside you looking up

Looking up at the ceiling, looking up to her mother as a child, and looking up towards Heaven; the depth of meaning in the language Ni Chuilleanain's work is astounding.

The image of the church which 'splits wide open to admit /Celestial choirs, the fall – out of brightness' is dynamic and illuminating. And the energy of this image continues into the second stanza with all the participles or 'ing' words 'spiralling', 'shining', 'heaving', 'supporting' and 'crowding', there is extraordinary vibrancy here as the Virgin is 'hauled up in stages' by 'teams of angelic angel arms'.

In the fourth stanza Ni Chuilleanain uses the metaphor of a 'wide stone petticoat', an old fashioned, women's garment, to describe the structure of the dome. Within the dome mother and daughter see how the light influences our perception of the art and seemingly disembodied figures float in the fresco 'Loose feet and elbow and staring eyes'. There's a certain irony at play here as she claims 'we saw the work entire' but, in actuality it is the detail she focuses on. This somewhat disconcerting disconnection between body parts continues throughout the rest of the poem.

The subject of the fresco is a spiritual experience, as is the death of her mother, yet, the poet focuses on the corporeal aspects and the struggle and the weight of the human body are the focus of the imagery.

A jaw defining itself, a shoulder yoked

The back making itself a roof

This difficulty of the transition from one life to the next illustrates our need for support and human touch at the time of our deaths.

As she passed through their hands.

The final poignant image is of the Virgin on the cusp of Heaven, ‘as she came to the edge of the cloud’. She is on the precipice of the next world and the image is a peaceful one following the struggle of the angels. The poem is filled with love and sadness, but also depicts death in a positive light, a spiritual experience where one is buoyed up by the love and care of those around you, before a transition to a higher power.

The piece of art had a profound impact on Ni Chuilleanain, but mostly in that it was a shared communal experience with her mother, and it is a very female centred poem. The language in the poem in many ways can be associated with birth, and often death is framed as form of rebirth. There is something indicative of labour particularly in that final stanza:

As the muscles clung and shifted
For the final purchase together
Under her weight as she came to the edge of the cloud.

Overview:

- **Themes:** death, how art can trigger emotions/memories, caring for loved ones during times of illness.
- **Key images:** angels, the Virgin, the body parts, the metaphor of the cathedral’s cupola as stone petticoat.
- **Stylistic features:** the energetic ‘ing’ verbs, the comingling of the language of birth and death.
- **Tone:** nostalgic, poignant, gratitude, love.

Street

‘Street’ is an ambiguous poem, short with fairy tale and gothic qualities. It takes the form of a narrative and tells the story of a ‘butcher’s daughter’ and the man who desires her, from a distance. The poem is full of voyeurism, desire, power, and hints of violence.

‘Street’ is appealing due to the subversion of the power relations, in the first of the two stanzas the imagery reveals it is the woman and not the man, who wears the ‘knife on a ring at her belt’. She has agency and power in the scene despite first being introduced in terms of her relationship to her father, she is the ‘butcher’s daughter’. In fact, both characters are nameless, adding to the mystique of the poem and lending the story a universality.

The knife she wears appears to be dripping with blood; ‘He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving – stones.’ The drops prompt images of violence and indeed sexuality and menstruation. But it also suggests a Hansel and Gretel like trail left to entice him. The word ‘dangling’ also suggests this idea of temptation and a temptress.

In the second stanza the suitor ‘followed her / Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles’, the shambles is the slaughterhouse. While this could be construed as an enamoured boy, innocently following a girl ‘He fell in love with’, according to the opening line, there could also be a malign undertone. She is oblivious to this person pursuing her, watching her. Much of the poem is ambiguous like this, straddling two perspectives. The image of the knife we looked at earlier, a work tool yes but also an instrument of harm and protection.

The final image of the poem is important, she has gone into the slaughterhouse, removed her blood-soaked shoes at the bottom of the stairs, and gone up them, but her heels have blood on them from the shoes and she has left a series of half-moons on each stair.

Her shoes paired on the bottom step,
Each tread marked with the red crescent
Her bare heels left, fading to faintest at the top.

This final alliterative image of her footsteps fading, suggests she has eluded, or escaped him, depending on your perspective. Either way she is beyond reach, beyond sight but has left an indelible mark and that mark is in the shape of a crescent moon. The moon is always associated with femininity. Again, this image captures the

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dichotomy at play within the imagery, she is symbolic of femininity, while having definite masculine agency earlier in the poem with the knife.

The poem is both traditional fairy tale romance and a feminist commentary on patriarchal norms. Much like our protagonist, the poem evades being defined through one lens.

Overview:

- **Themes:** love, lust, romance, sexuality, mystery, danger, voyeurism, femininity and masculinity.
- **Key images:** the dangling knife, the blood droplets on the pavements, following her, her bloody footsteps on the stairs.
- **Stylistic features:** alliteration 'f', slow assonance, symbolism, defining the girl in terms of her father.
- **Tone:** mysterious, narrative.

All for You

In a similar vein to 'Street', 'All for You' is a mysterious, poem with gothic-like qualities. Much is left out of the narrative we are presented with, and the poem leaves the reader with more questions than perhaps answers.

The poem is in the present tense lending an immediacy to the narrative, but the imagery evokes a bygone era, the speaker and their companion 'dismount', the house is grand with a with 'sprawling' staircase and effused with 'the dry fragrance of tea chests'.

As is usual with Ni Chuilleanain there are subtle contradictions at play within the images the stableyard they arrive in to is described as 'strange', does this mean unknown or does it mean unsettling? And yet the house is described as 'All for you', so how can an unknown house be for their companion?

The poem focuses on the description of the place, and it's personified as some sort of majestic bird:

The great staircase of the hall slouches back,
Sprawling between warm wings.

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The steps ‘wind and warp’ continuing the soft alliterative ‘w’, and adding to the increasing undertone of unease, there is an atmosphere of uncertainty, are these the owners of the house or is it abandoned?

The personification continues in the sensual image ‘the breath of ovens / Flows out, the rage of brushwood, /The roots torn out and butchered’. Again, here the house seems alive, and lived in, the ovens are burning, but the words ‘rage’, ‘torn out’ and ‘butchered’ to describe the kindling of the fire has definite violent overtones. Is the house the site of a violent event?

We know not why they are there, for how long, who they are or even what their relationship is. In the final lines we see the house as place of rest, with the final ambiguous rhetorical question:

Where better to lie down
And sleep, along the labelled shelves,
With the key still in your pocket?

Questions abound, is it the key to the house, why must it be guarded so closely, why do they need to rest in the storeroom? The only certainty in the entire poem is encapsulated in the repetition, the speaker’s surety that everything is ‘All for You’, a statement exuding adoration, love, perhaps obsession.

Overview:

- **Themes: Love, obsession, gothic fairy-tale.**
- **Key images: the strange stableyard in stanza one, the personification of the house as birdlike in stanza two, the breath of the ovens and the violent words, the imagery of the storeroom, the key in the pocket.**
- **Stylistic features: ambiguity, present tense but set in the past.**
- **Tone: Adoration/obsession, unsettling.**

Following

‘Following’ is the third of the trio of truly enigmatic poems by Ni Chuilleanain on the course. The other two being ‘Street’ and ‘All For You’. She gives us glimpses of a fragmented narrative. The poem has three disparate settings: a fair, a bog and a library. There is a ‘she’ who appears across all three stanzas and there is a man who appears in stanza one and three, who we take to be the poet’s father, and there is risen corpse in the surreal second stanza. The sense of a journey spans the poem.

The poem opens with 'So' as if we have entered the narrative in media res, which is a literary device where an epic poem begins in the middle of the story.

So she follows the trail of her father's coat through the fair

The use of the present tense also lends to the dramatic effect and gives an immediacy to the imagery. The fair is a masculine space, hostile and unwelcoming to the young girl who must navigate the 'beasts packed solid as books' as well as the 'dealing men nearly as slow to give way'. The scene is almost dreamlike as the figures are dismembered body parts as opposed to whole human beings. Similes such as 'a back like a mountain', 'A shifting elbow like a plumber's bend' all contribute to the oppressive nature of opening stanza, relieved only when the girl spots her father. Interestingly, his description focuses on his clothing, and perhaps the aspects that could be seen a symbol of a different class of man; 'the shirt-cuff, a handkerchief, / Then the hard brim of his hat'.

The second stanza shifts from dreamlike to having an almost nightmarish quality. It is night and she is once again 'following' as the title intimates, 'tracing light footsteps / Across the shivering bog by starlight'. The mood evoked in this stanza is eerie and ethereal, and contrasts sharply when juxtaposed with the first. A 'dead corpse' has risen and is 'gliding before in her in a white habit' is she following her father on his way to the afterlife? The images of this place are disturbing and again we see disembodied body parts only they are more menacing and evoke fear, 'hands of women dragging needles / Half- choked heads...mouths that roar'. The onomatopoeia here bringing the imagery of the dead, to life.

The final stanza brings us 'a library'; is this a return to an image of her father in his library, is it that she has finally reached him in a sort of heaven? What is interesting is that he has 'whiskey poured out in two glasses' so the child of before is gone, the girl is a woman. If we look once more to the title, and the concept of 'following' we see that Ni Chuilleanains father was a learned man and she very much followed in his footsteps, it is apt they meet as equals in his library.

Again, there is a focus on his clothes which we saw in the first stanza. The image of 'his clothes all finely laundered' evokes a sense of order restored. The final images are interesting, if difficult to decipher. The speaker describes two things pressed within the bindings of the books in the library: one a

square of white linen
That held three drops

Of her heart's blood

Is this a father's handkerchief, stained with his child's blood, kept as a keepsake or just unwittingly.

The other image, 'the crushed flowers', also a memento from a child perhaps? I think the secret is between father and daughter and we are not supposed to be privy to them. That is the beauty of this poem, its intimate secrets.

Overview:

- **Themes:** father daughter relationship, following in someone's footsteps.
- **Key images:** the fair, the disembodied body parts, the eerie bog and the dead corpse, the library, the whiskey, the bloody pocket square and the crushed flowers.
- **Stylistic features:** the ambiguous nature of the imagery, the juxtaposition.
- **Tone:** Determined, unnerving, satisfied, intimate.

Kilcash

'Kilcash' is a translation from an Irish poem written around 1800. It is a lament for Margaret Butler also known as Lady Iveagh, 'the lady...with such honour', as well as lament for the grand estate of Kilcash in Tipperary which had gone to ruin.

It's the cause of my long affliction
To see your neat gates knocked down,

The poem has a tone of longing as the speaker wishes for the restoration of the house and, in a way, a bygone era to return once more. The poem has seven stanzas, all octets written in iambic meter, this coupled with the regular rhyme scheme, gives the poem a lovely wistful, melodic quality.

The sorrowful tone is striking in the opening question, which is full of soft alliteration;

What will we do now for timber
With the last of the woods laid low

The decline of the big house has had a detrimental effect on the people in the area and a sense of scarcity and collective desperation is evoked from the outset. Lady Iveagh was known to have been kind to the local Catholics, who would have suffered

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oppression under the penal laws, and this is alluded to in the line ‘heard the sweet words of mass’.

Much of the stanzas in the poem are concerned with the degradation of the house and by extension the natural world around it. Imagery of dereliction abounds, ‘the avenue overgrown’, and the absence of the animals which once thrived there, ‘the roar of the bees gone silent’. An eerie emptiness and silence seems to have descended, which the speaker bemoans at length. Nature itself seems aware of the loss as the alliterative image ‘Darkness falls among daylight’ reflects the dark mood evoked.

There is a shift in focus in the sixth stanza, Lady Iveagh’s marriage to her first husband is described and her absence is lamented ‘Her company laments her’ as she was the ‘poor soul’s friend’.

The final stanza takes the form of a prayer, to bring her back and restore all that was lost, ‘may she come home safe to us here’. The silence and dereliction from earlier are banished, images of warmth and civilisation replace them, as the speaker hopes for ‘dancing and rejoicing’ and ‘fiddling and bonfire’. The tone of hope is captured in the language in the final lines, words and phrases like ‘anew’ and ‘may it never be laid low’, mean the poem finishes with a gusto that was so lacking the previous stanzas.

It is a poem of contrast and not just in terms of imagery but also thematically. It is about loss and restoration, scarcity and abundance, presence and absence, the good old times, and the reality of the new. Although the poem could be thought to be outdated and archaic in many ways in terms of its subject matter, these themes maintain its relevance.

Overview:

- **Themes:** lamenting a historical figure, Margaret Butler and the decline of the ‘Big House’.
- **Key images:** images of scarcity, the house in ruins, the lack of animals, the weather and darkness, Lady Iveagh gone, the final prayer for restoration.
- **Stylistic features:** contrast, the iambic meter and regular rhyme
- **Tone:** sorrowful, wistful, and finally hopeful.

Translation

Few poems on the course require background research but if you have studied ‘Translation’ I encourage you to do some reading about the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland and the horror of what happened to the women there. Women were

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incarcerated and forced to work cleaning laundry in the religious run institutions; they were subjected to all forms of abuse and as a final indignation, often buried in unmarked graves when they passed away. This poem is dedicated to some of these women who were reburied after their graves were discovered. But as the poem points out, this small act of reburial could never atone for the sins that the Church, the State and Irish society as a whole, visited upon these women.

The poem opens with the arresting sibilant, image of the soil moving, 'The soil frayed and sifted evens the score'. The exhumation of the bodies is some form of recognition, and therefore retribution, against the State. Women have attended the ceremony from all over the country to acknowledge that women from each corner of Ireland were interned in the laundries.

The second stanza flashes back to the stark reality of the laundries where the conditions offered no relief, 'White light blinded and bleached out / The high relief of a glance'. Women were not allowed to look at each other or speak to each other as they worked. The personification of the steam which 'danced' and 'giggled' is all the more poignant because of the contrast with women and girls who were constrained and silent, who should have been dancing and giggling.

The bodies of the women now seek to reinstate their history, their identity and their reputations, which were all stripped from them so callously, so needlessly:

Searching for their parents, their names.

The enjambment in the fourth and fifth stanza means the poem gathers pace as the women are imagined combining to a single voice 'one voice'. Their cry of vengeance is aptly compared to the cry of an infant in the simile 'sharp as an infant's cry' a cry that fills the skulls entirely 'Until every pocket in her skull blared with the note'. The silenced are demanding to be heard and the poet demands we listen to them now, 'Allow us to hear it'.

The final stanza is the voices of the Magdalenes which is fitting and just. The images from this stanza are haunting and the tone is accusatory and bitter but also there is sense that they are free of our judgement now 'Washed clean of idiom'. The most shockingly subversive image is the image

A parasite that grew in me that spell
Lifted

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Many of the women in the institutions were considered ‘fallen’ women, women who had crossed societal boundaries on what was permissible sexually in a repressed society. Some would have spent time in Mother and Baby homes, and given birth to children deemed ‘illegitimate’ at the time. The parasite that grew in the women, however, is the hatred and demonisation they endured at the hands of both the religious organisations and the State, not the beautiful children that many were forced to give up. The ignominy they endured has now rightfully been foisted onto those who deserve it. Their memory casts a shadow as a reminder of the misogyny within Irish society in the final metaphor, ‘a cloud over my time’.

Overview:

- **Themes: restitution of the reputations of the women in the Magdalene Laundries, historical justice.**
- **Key images: the soil, the contrast of the dancing, giggling steam with the silenced, labour worn women, the collective voice of the women the simile of the infant’s cry, the parasite lifted, a cloud over their time.**
- **Stylistic features: alliteration, onomatopoeia of the infant’s cry, the structure of the final stanza which gives voice to the Magdalenas.**
- **Tone: angry, bitter, admonishing.**

The Bend in the Road

When it comes to the titles of poems students often unwittingly overlook them, when it can, in fact, tell us so much about the themes explored in the poem. The title ‘The Bend in the Road’ has an anticipatory feel to it; it signifies the uncertainty of the future and the unexpected twists encountered in the journey of our lives. When we look at closer at the poem, we will see it also explores the condition of living in a body, feeling and taking up physical space with our presence. It is also about death and the absence left behind when a body ceases to exist and how that presence persists in the memory of the living.

The first two stanzas are set in the Italian countryside, a place visited often by Chuilleanain throughout her life. Stanza one is a third person narrative, a family stop because a child feels car sick, he gets some air and feels better. The tone is very matter of fact, but the scene has a serene painterly quality, dominated by the ‘shadow of a house’ and the ‘tall tree like a cat’s tail’; it has a distinctly rural feel to it. This is also, evoked by the stillness and quietness of the imagery; ‘waited’, ‘breathed / easily’, ‘nothing moved’.

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Stanza two becomes more intimate, with the speaker addressing a 'you', the child who is now grown and she playfully notes how 'You are taller than us now'. The speaker remarks how the bend in the road has 'over twelve years', become synonymous with that day:

it has become the place
where you were sick one day on the way to the lake.

The image evokes how ordinary events become embedded memories in our lives, take on a larger significance to us and root us to places and people.

Although the house has become dilapidated quite covered in / with green creeper' and the tree too 'is taller', the quiet and accompanying anticipation remains.

...and the bend
in the road is as silent as ever it was on that day.

The assonance throughout these stanzas adds to the somnambulant atmosphere.

The third stanza is less narrative, more meditative. The stillness of the place prompts the speaker to contemplate ideas around presence and absence, and the space left behind people die. The simile of a 'cumulus cloud' is particularly evocative.

Piled high, wrapped lightly, like the one cumulus cloud
In a perfect sky, softly packed like the air,
Is all that went on in those years.

A cloud is both presence and absence; it has a presence, but its gaseous quality mean it is also intangible and non-permanent, very much like our memories. Our lives are built on presence and subsequent absences. The people we love when they die, still take up metaphysical presences in our lives.

The faces never long absent from thought,
The bodies alive then and the airy space they took up

Repetition runs throughout this stanza, 'piled', 'wrapped', 'absences/absent', as does sibilance 'sealed by sickness', adding to the musicality of the musings. Very much like the title much is alluded to 'in all that went on in those years' but in typical Ni Chuilleanain fashion much is left ambiguous and unsaid. What she does refer to more overtly is illness and how our corporeal bodies are vulnerable and succumb to illness and death;

When we saw them wrapped and sealed by sickness
 Guessing the piled weight of sleep
 We knew they could not carry for long;

And yet, she concludes with the comforting thought that those who have passed on continue to be present in our lives, in the places all around us, 'in the tree, in the air'. We paradoxically feel their presence in their absence.

Overview:

- **Themes: the unknown future and unexpected twists, the role of memory in keeping people alive, absence and presence, life and illness and death, leaving space to remember loved ones.**
- **Key images: the house, the tree, the child, the cumulus cloud.**
- **Stylistic features: repetition, assonance, sibilance, paradox, juxtaposition.**
- **Tone: narrative, meditative, sad and celebratory.**

On Lacking the Killer Instinct

This poem centres on a retelling of a story about the poet's father when as a young man in the IRA and he managed to escape the Black and Tans. The unifying image in the poem is that of the hare which brings together the poet's grief as her father was dying and the story of his lucky escape.

The poem begins with the image of Ni Chuilleanain as she 'fled into the hills, that time / My father was dying in the hospital'. She is stopped in her tracks by the sight of,

One hare, absorbed, sitting still,

The clipped nature of the language here, coupled with the soft sibilance makes the reader pause, as did the poet. This hare is remembered by the poet when she sees a photo in the newspaper of another hare, one that is being chased by two 'absurdly gross' greyhounds 'tumbling over'. What catches her eye about the photo is the look in the hare's eye;

.....her bright eye
 Full not only of speed and fear
 But surely in the moment a glad power.

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It is this mix of speed, fear and unusual power, that perfectly capture her father's experience that results in the conflation of the two. As her father runs from a 'lorry of soldiers' we see the repetition of glad 'never such gladness, he said, cornering in the narrow road / Between high hedges in summer dusk'. The poet here is portraying a peculiar human quality, the ability to feel most alive whilst in mortal danger.

The cleverness of the hare is compared with her father, while she 'double back / on her own scent', her father risks all by fleeing the 'growling lorry', with the onomatopoeia echoing the pursuing hounds. He flees into a house and pretends to be one of the family washing his face at the sink.

.....The soldiers
Found six people in a country kitchen, one
Drying his face, dazed-looking, the towel
Half covering his face.

The narrative is paused at this point as the speaker questions the arbitrary nature of our decisions;

Should he have chanced that door?

The final lines of the poem return to the poet who admonishes herself for running away, something she, ironically, celebrates her father and the hare for doing.

And I should not
Have run away.

She cleanses herself in 'brown bog water' and there is something primitive and ritualistic about this closing image. The closing soft alliteration leaves us too, thinking with the poet, of the 'hare, in her hour of ease'. There is a quiet satisfaction palpable here.

Overall, the language in this poem contrasts with some of Ni Chuilleanain's more lyric poems, it's very much three narratives woven together and the language reflects that.

Overview:

- **Themes:** escape, feeling alive in the face of danger, death of her father.
- **Key images:** the hare, the greyhounds, the narrative of the lorry chasing her father and washing his face in the house he fled to, washing in bog water.
- **Stylistic features:** narrative poem, weaving of stories together with the unifying image of the hare.
- **Tone:** admiration, fear, wonder, satisfaction.

Lucina Schynning in the Silence of the Nicht

‘Lucina Schynning in the Silence of the Nicht’, or in other words, the moon goddess shining in the silent night, is a poem that also deals with the death of her father and the appearance of the hare described in ‘On Lacking the Killer Instinct’. In fact this poem was written first and Ni Chuilleanain reuses the exact line about the hare, as well as washing in the bog water, in the latter. They are great poems to use together in a Leaving Cert essay, as they are easily linked and that will give you marks for cohesion in the exam.

The poet ran away to a ruin as her father was dying. She returned to a sort of primitive survivalism ‘without roast meat or music / Strong drink or a shield from the air’ and ‘after three days’ rain’ her head felt ‘clear’.

The poem depicts a sort of dark night of the soul and the pervading sense is that the poet is cleansing her troubled soul in this return to the wild, natural world. This is captured in the image where she washes in the water of the bog;

I washed in cold water; it was orange, channelled down bogs

There are spiritual connotations to this water imagery and indeed throughout the poem there are subtle references to religious imagery; ‘Lucina’, ‘the plagues’, ‘mosaic beasts on the chapel floor’. And yet the poem is very much rooted in the natural world as the speaker is kept company by a variety of animals; ‘bats flew through my room’ ‘sheep stared at me’, ‘sheepdogs embraced me’.

When the poet awakes after the third day, she has left behind the depression which she arrived with;

Behind me the waves of darkness lay, the plague
Of mice, plague of beetles

The repetition of ‘plague’ throughout stanza three has a chilling effect, which is further compounded by the image, ‘The disease of the moon gone astray’, a metaphor for a kind of madness. A madness the poet may be feeling at the impending loss of her father.

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Luckily the tone shifts in the next stanza as the speaker informs us calmly ‘In the desert I relaxed’ the desert here is a metaphor for her absence from civilisation. The image of the ‘sky growing through a hole in the roof’ of the ruin too, appeals to us giving a sense of heavenly relief. This image strongly echoes the poem Ni Chuilleanain wrote about her mother’s death, ‘Fireman’s Lift’, and the fresco on the cupola in Parma.

The imagery ends with the hare ‘absorbed, sitting still’ there is a sense of peace evoked in this stillness. When the poet says she hears the ‘chirp of the stream running’ we know life has resumed as normal and the onomatopoeic ‘chirp’ means the mood is more hopeful now.

Overview:

- **Themes: the dark night of the soul, loss, dealing with grief, nature as place of healing, finding yourself in the wilderness.**
- **Key images: the moon goddess, the religious imagery, the positive imagery of nature, the plague, the hare.**
- **Stylistic features: metaphor, repetition, personal pronoun ‘I’ central to the narrative**
- **Tone: frenzied, despair, wonder, contentment.**

To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaya, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009.

Ni Chuilleanain wrote this epithalamium to be read on the wedding day of her only son to his Russian fiancée, as illustrated by the title. An epithalamium is a poem written to celebrate a marriage, and this poem does so beautifully. Ni Chuilleanain offers her advice to the young couple couched in traditional stories and fairy tales, from both Irish and Russian folklore. When analysing this poem in the exam what is more important than fully understanding the background stories is being able to interpret the messages Ni Chuilleanain intended for the young couple.

Stanza one opens with a distinctly intimate tone with the poet directly addressing the married couple;

When you look out across the fields
And you both see the same star
Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple –

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The lines are filled with soft assonance and sibilance, as we are invited to picture the star on top of the steeple of a church. These are subtle religious allusions, ironically in the imagery of a poem which is in celebration of a *secular* wedding ceremony and we will see this religious imagery again in the penultimate stanza.

We see her tell the couple ‘it is time to set out on your journey /With half a loaf and your mother’s blessing.’ This alludes to a fairy tale where the son marries a princess, a compliment to her son’s fiancée and also reiterating her approval and blessing upon the marriage.

Stanza two explores the idea that to enter into a new phase of life we often have to leave behind our old life. This message is emphasised with the repetition of ‘leave behind’ and ‘you will find’. She comforts her son that he will return ‘in the stories’. Stories are what bind us to people and places and this is very much a theme of the poem. In this stanza she describes ‘sleeping beauty’ who was awoken by her prince and the common fairy-tale trope of the ‘talking cat’.

The poem moves to a blending of the two traditions, Russian and Irish, through the storytelling voice of the cat:

When the cat wakes up he will speak in Irish and Russian
And every night he will tell you a different tale

The ‘firebird’ and ‘golden apples’ is a Russian tale of falling in love with a princess and the story of the ‘King of Ireland’s son’ mirrors it; all the tales are about ending up in love, befitting an epithalamium.

The final tale is Biblical, from the Book of Ruth, a return to the religious symbolism we saw at the beginning. The essence of the story of Ruth is a woman who goes to live among her husband’s family and is welcomed. The final two lines emphasise this message with the repetition of ‘trust’. The poet says Ruth ‘trusted to stranger and stood by her word’. The final line of the poem which stands alone entreats in a conspiratorial, yet tender, tone;

You will have to trust me, she lived happily ever after.

The poem aptly ends with the common concluding line of most fairy tales.

Overview:

- **Themes: love, marriage as a blending of traditions, the power of stories or folklore in interpersonal relationships.**

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- **Key images:** the star and the steeple, the various stories; sleeping beauty, the cat, the firebird and the golden apples, the King of Ireland's son and the Enchanter's Daughter, the book of Ruth.
- **Stylistic features:** repetition of 'leave', 'will find', and 'trust'. The final separate line.
- **Tone:** intimate, joyful, celebratory, didactic.