



The T S Eliot Prize 2009

Reading Groups:

The Sun-fish

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin was born in Cork City in 1942. She was a founder member of *Cyphers*, the literary journal in 1975. Her first collection, *Acts and Monuments* (1972), won the Patrick Kavanagh Award. Recent books include *The Brazen Serpent* (1994) and *The Girl who Married the Reindeer* (2001). Her *Select-ed Poems* was published in 2008. *The Sun-fish* (Gallery Press) is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and draws on themes from Irish history.



On Lacking the Killer Instinct

One hare, absorbed, sitting still,
Right in the grassy middle of the track,
I met when I fled up into the hills, that time
My father was dying in a hospital –
I see her suddenly again, borne back
By the morning paper's prize photograph:
Two greyhounds tumbling over, absurdly gross,
While the hare shoots off to the left, her bright eye
Full not only of speed and fear
But surely in the moment a glad power,

Like my father's, running from a lorry-load of soldiers
In nineteen twenty-one, nineteen years old, never
Such gladness, he said, cornering in the narrow road
Between high hedges, in summer dusk.

The hare

Like him should never have been coursed,
But clever, another day
She'll fool the stupid dogs, double back
On her own scent, downhill, and choose her time
To spring away out of the frame, all while
The pack is labouring up.

The lorry was growling

And he was clever, he saw a house
And risked an open kitchen door. The soldiers
Found six people in a country kitchen, one
Drying his face, dazed-looking, the towel
Half-covering his face. The lorry went off,
The people let him sleep there, and he came out
Into a blissful dawn. Should he have chanced that door?
If the sheltering house had been burned down, what good
Could all his bright running have done
For those that harboured him?

And I should not

Have run away, but I went back to the city
Next morning, washed in brown bog water, and
I thought about the hare, in her hour of ease.

The Witch in the Wardrobe

And so she opened the plank door
Where the dry palm branches had always
Perched, balancing lightly,
Pegged over the architrave;
She swam at once inside a fluent pantry,
A grange of luxury. The silk scarves
Came flying at her face like a carwash
Then brushed her cheeks and shoulders coolly down –
The fur slid over her skin, oiled and ready,
And a cashmere sleeve whispered, probing her ear,
'We were here all along like an engine idling,
Warm, gentle and alert: what will you do now?'

But when she closed her eyes to feel it closer
Their swatch of sublime purples
Intensely swooping and spinning
Dived past her cooing like pigeons –
their prickling mauve inside her stretched eyelids –
The bridge was gone and beyond it
She could no longer see
Her body, its flesh without stain, its innocent skin.

A Bridge between Two Counties

The long bridge
stretched between two counties
so they could never agree
how it should be kept

standing at all
(in the mist in the darkness
neither bank could be seen
when the three-day rain

the flood waters
were rising below).
On that day I looked
where the couple walked

a woman a small child
the child well wrapped
becoming less visible
as they dodged left

then right, weaving
between the barrels and the planks
placed there to slow the traffic
and something came

a brown human shape
and the woman paused and passed
the child's hand
to a glove and a sleeve

and very slowly
at first they moved away, were gone,
there was the mist,
the woman stood and seemed

to declare something
to the tide rocking below
and for the second time

in all my life I saw

the dry perfect leaf
of memory stamped in its veins
the promise I heard
Val Kennedy making

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