

TRACKING THE MUSE

The Girl Who Married the Reindeer. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Wake Forest University Press, 2002; *The Soldiers of Year II.* Medbh McGuckian. Wake Forest University Press, 2002.

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The Irish poets Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Medbh McGuckian are often grouped together by critics and anthologists. They are mature, provocative writers in a country noted for its poetry but with a long history of failing to recognize its female voices. Less formal than their more famous colleague, Eavan Boland and less associated with writing in the Irish language than Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Ní Chuilleanáin and McGuckian tend to be labeled as wildly imaginative, anti-authoritarian and feminist. However, though both do reject the inherited authority of Ireland's male-dominated verse tradition, their work is vastly different from one another's. Ní Chuilleanáin's work is accessible, driven by a desire for connection and communication, moving in its sympathy for those who are cut off from others. McGuckian's is private and inward-turning, nonrational, built upon the inaccessible logic of dream and subconscious associations, enraged by war and savagery and the domination of brute force.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has been publishing poetry for thirty years while also pursuing a career as a university professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature and serving as editor of the literary journal *Cyphers*. Born in 1942, she comes from a literary and scholarly family: her mother was Eilís Dillon, a respected historical novelist who was herself the niece of poet and revolutionary, Joseph Mary Plunkett, and Ní Chuilleanáin's father taught Irish at the University of Cork.

As might be expected of someone with this background, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry reflects a scholarly sensibility and deep knowledge of Ireland's cultural, religious, historical and poetic past. Yet it is not academic in the sense of being pedantic, conventional or conforming to a set of traditional rules. Rather, her poems are fiercely independent, imaginatively fresh and original.

The Girl Who Married the Reindeer, Ní Chuilleanáin's seventh collection, deepens her concern with strays, outsiders, captives, the solitary seekers and the cloistered. She is drawn to "the wanderer," to those whose "names are lonely" to a woman entering the convent or a man who lives where "our liberation never/Reached him." A typical speaker, feeling herself set apart by the labyrinthine ways of her world, says: "I search for hints of doors inside doors." Another, seeking "peace in the mountains," finds herself so far removed from the rest of her community that "somewhere two streets away/It was Saturday."

From her studies of myth and fable, Ní Chuilleanáin knows that the outsider is our most reliable spiritual guide, the one who helps us see most clearly our culture's follies. Her poems couple the most convincing mundane details with mysterious, often religious yearnings to create a sense of spiritual urgency in the reader. Here is the entire nine-line poem, "Anchoress," which suggests many of her most compelling concerns and shows Ní Chuilleanáin's methods at their starkest:

In the last season, she changed her ways.
The pilgrim would find only
The mossgrown window beside the church porch
And through it at times a loaf and water were passed.

A few words, a command. Yes she knew who was there,
She still prayed for them all by name. I remember
When she would give me an hour of her visions,
When she would levitate – she was always deaf –
when thin pipe music resounded beyond the grilles.

Notice how much is left to reader here. Ní Chuilleanáin trusts us to sense how crucial the moment is for her speaker in this, "the last season," when the Anchoress on whom she depended for a variety of faith-supporting signs and acts is changing "her ways." The miraculous manifestations are dwindling now, as the Anchoress herself seems to be dwindling, physical contact is being reduced to the merest glimmer, and there is a strong sense of now-or-never to the speaker's presentation of her situation. With the point of pilgrimage vanishing, will the pilgrim's belief endure? Will the speaker, left alone and cut off, ironically, from the one who lives in seclusion, be able to manage on her own?

Whether in the form of a long fable about a girl who marries a reindeer, accounts of stranded animals, narratives of freed captives, meditations on

foreign travel, or elegies for lost family and friends, Ní Chuilleanáin's poems in *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* seldom abandon the world of the isolated, lonely soul. Closed gates, half-opened doors, barred windows abound. In an intensely moving poem about visiting Bessboro, a former convent and home for unwed mothers in Ní Chuilleanáin's native County Cork, the poem's speaker says:

Now that I stand at the gate
 And that time is so long gone
 It is their absence that rains,
 That stabs right into the seams
 Of my big coat, settling
 On my shoulder, in pointed
 Needles, crowding the short day.
 ("Bessboro")

Like the Magdalene Laundry or the various convents, cloisters and prisons that appear throughout the book, this spot triggers Ní Chuilleanáin's sympathy. Having grown up in a society where religious repression punishes the life force, having studied the long history of Ireland's isolating forces, she longs for a world of connectedness. "I leap over lines that are set here to hold and plan," she writes in "Borders." In "A Wave," she identifies her task as a poet, which is to place words at the very place where they face the greatest threat from forces that would erase them, whether religious, natural or cultural: "words will be there but already,/Written in the new cursive,/They waver like flourishes at the edge of a tide."

Ní Chuilleanáin's poems may occasionally ask too many portentous rhetorical questions ("Who is that he can hear panting on the other side?"). They may accommodate the too-easy, too-didactic ending, as in an elegy for her Aunt that concludes: "The past keeps warm, although/It knits up all our griefs:/A cold start in our lives." They can seem rushed, too, lapsing into a prosy, journal-like awkwardness or slackness, as in the opening of "Crossing the Loire":

I saluted the famous river as I do every year
 Turning south as if the plough steered,
 Kicking, at the start of a new furrow, my back
 To the shady purple gardens with benches under plum trees
 By the river that hunts between piers and sandbanks –

But they are never inaccessible, never seem willed into being rather than imperative, necessary.

The same cannot be said of Medbh McGuckian's often impenetrable new work in *The Soldiers of Year II*. While undeniably full of feeling, the poems resolutely block full connection with the reader, turning in on themselves as they follow their own private grammar. As she says in "Love Affair with Firearms," "I track the muse through subwoods, curse/the roads, but cannot write the kiss." It is as though the poems lose themselves in the quest for their own sources (tracking the muse through subwoods), which leads McGuckian to an irritated muddle of imagery (cursing the roads). What is missing is "the kiss," the moment of genuine connectedness with subject or reader.

The "Year II" of the book's title refers to the revolutionary calendar developed by the French in 1793. This calendar was intended to mark a new beginning they hoped to make in human history. It was a hope soon lost; the calendar was abandoned in Year XIV, after so many soldiers and other victims perished for the sake of an idea of revolution. Coming as she does from war-torn Northern Ireland, McGuckian is passionately concerned with war and revolution, with the effort to make a new beginning—in time, in language, in human values. Her work emerges from a longing for change and its language has always been meant, I think, to be a vehicle for that change. As she announced in the poem "Idée Mère," "I want words that don't exist." This desire leads her to rely on an excess of compound words (a "sharkspine cloud" or "bedded/on winter-brown leaves with a sand-filled pillow") and to load familiar words with unmanageable burdens ("Druidic wind, running without a sweatband,/your womblessness sows its white smile/near my face"). Frustrated in her search for words that don't exist, in her loathing of "the too-travelled path to word-house completeness," she offers as an alternative a linkage of phrases, sentences and stanzas that resolutely refuse to connect: "the morning drills/secretly, like an element that absorbs."

The Soldiers of Year II gathers poems from McGuckian's two previous volumes, which had been brought out by her Irish publisher (Gallery Press) but not released in the U.S. Thus it is a *de facto* 'Selected Recent Poems,' showing what she has been producing in the years since her last look at revolutionary fallout, *Shelmalier*, appeared in 1998. Now 52, and having published since her late 20's, McGuckian has achieved mastery over a surreally disjointed poetry. Her zone of interest is the psyche and its nonrational ways of expression. As she said in the 1996 edition of *Contemporary Poets*, "I believe wholly in the beauty and power of language, the

music of words, the intensity of images to shadow-paint the inner life of the soul.” Language, especially language fractured in its coherence and up-rooted from customary usage, is meant to carry her poems—narrative, and the familiar sense of subject matter, are seldom relevant to her procedure. Her work, McGuckian adds, explores “the sensual realms of dream or daydream for their spiritual value.” Such an approach can, of course, produce miraculous poetry; it has done so for McGuckian in the past, as in “The Flower Master,” “Marconi’s Cottage,” or the memorable “Smoke”:

They set the whins on fire along the road.
I wonder what controls it, can the wind hold
That snake of orange motion to the hills,
Away from the houses?

They seem so sure what they can do.
I am unable even
To contain myself, I run
Till the fawn smoke settles on the earth.

The connection between trying to control the fire and trying to contain the self is powerfully made, a completely convincing association that resonates back into the poem’s imagery.

McGuckian’s new poems, however, often seem trapped by the poet’s irresistible impulse for weird adjacencies, for jagged seams and language made more odd by its remoteness to actual speech or thought. Sometimes the poems feel like Hart Crane stanzas reproduced by a computer program, as this opening stanza from “Oration”:

You, command in the changing light,
are shedding your leaves, the oldest of them,
the oldest disciple: you know our martyrs.

Or they can read like pseudo-Stevens (“Its rivers grow cloudy, the pores of its woods/do not give out any red lighthouse fragrance”) or like Ashbery parodies, as in this opening stanza from “Life as a Literary Convict”:

I have experienced a wilderness
printed black on white.
Tarnished years of silver fever.
All my minds are weapons.

Occasionally, a poem will begin with clarity, as in these lines from the first stanza of “A Poem for St. Patrick’s Day”:

February is shot through with autumn
like a piece of tweed,
October has a divine budding voice
coming regularly out of the air.

Then, as though shocked by what she has done, McGuckian will veer toward a strangeness that feels imposed. These are the poem’s next four lines:

The fourteen hinged bones in fingers and thumb,
the eight bones of the wrist, the five in the palm,
the twenty-six in the foot, form an embryo of years
in the bowels of winter.

As another form of disconnection, poems bear odd intoxicating titles that have little to do with their content (“Turning the Sleep Spindle” or “Revival of Gathered Scents” or “Ring Size M 1/2” or “Round Square”). There are also a pair of brief prose narratives that give the illusion of story while dissolving into a maze of disunity.

What finally proves most shocking, over the course of 123 pages of this mode of expression, are the few brilliantly clear poems. An example is “Hessian, Linen, Silk,” a love poem (of all things) which begins with this vivid description of the season: “Through moments of winter,/through graduations of the shine on raindrops,/we have reached the shortest day.” Moving through a series of thoughts and gestures “testing, does he love me,” the poem reaches a conclusion that is both clear and mysterious, communicative without sacrificing real strangeness:

Nothing moves but the rain,
a downward float into closure,
you could scream, there would still be silence.

Something I don’t know how to name
waits as if especially for me
on the journey’s black keys.

At this point in her career, Medbh McGuckian's intentions as a poet are clear. She articulates them openly enough in "To Such a Hermes," "I loosen your language/from myself, an enemy/of meaning comes near." Determined to loosen herself from the languages she has inherited—the English of the invaders who colonized her country and who comprised the accepted poetic canon, the Irish of her fellow Catholics in the Republic—McGuckian can be highly original and exciting in her fresh eloquence. But she can also be lost behind dense thickets of elusive, remote utterance. Hidden from the enemy of meaning. Her determination to avoid "the too-travelled path to word-house completeness" has taken her to a place where confused language reigns. In *The Soldiers of Year II*, McGuckian only rarely admits her readers to the private world of her imaginings.