

Annemarie Ní Churreáin

**THE  
POISON  
GLEN**



Gallery Books

*The Poison Glen*  
is first published  
simultaneously in paperback  
and in a clothbound edition  
on 28 October 2021.

The Gallery Press  
Loughcrew  
Oldcastle  
County Meath  
Ireland

[www.gallerypress.com](http://www.gallerypress.com)

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ISBN 978 1 91133 814 7 *paperback*  
978 1 91133 815 4 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

*The Poison Glen* receives financial assistance  
from the Arts Council.



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*for my foster-brother Darry McDaid  
(28 September 1990-21 June 2014)*

*An Gleann Nimhe* (The Poisoned Glen) lies in northwest Donegal, Ireland. According to legend, it is where the ancient evil-eyed King of Tory Island, Balor, was killed by his exiled grandson Lugh, the God of Light. There is some speculation that the original placename *An Gleann Neamhe* (The Heavenly Glen) was lost in a translation error by an English cartographer. Locally, the area is sometimes known as The Poison Glen.

### *A Villager Speaks of Eithne*

How many men did it take to drag the girl  
up into the island tower?

Did she spit? Or kick? Did she try to bite  
through woollen binds, lifting clumps of skinhairblood  
beneath a fingernail?  
Did she struggle?

Or was she simply lead, like a calf,  
by hazel switch into a den?

An island daughter bears the rage of pirates in her bones.  
An island daughter can empty tombs with a curse.

Here, in the afternoon of all that followed —  
infants, marriage, loss —  
a badger lies wide open in The Poison Glen,  
red *fealeastram* spilling out.

It is written here among the heather rocks and electric eyes:  
*She was not her father's animal.*  
*She was not her husband's prize.*

## *Boy 462*

*at St Joseph's Industrial School, Artane, Dublin (1870–1969)*

Ninety windows like ninety raven wells.  
Who could wish this house on any child?

What troubled Boy 462 at night was not  
the snores, or weeps of younger inmates on the wings,  
but the darkness

of a house without mother-touch,  
of a house pledged to the soldier's song,  
of a house hungry for *under the moon and over the stars*.

One morning a Brother yelled across the yard,  
*Attention, Boy! Lift your chin!*  
And standing there, beneath a sky of blue-gold roses,  
the boy realized how much it hurt his eyes  
to look up.

Later, when it asked of The Order,  
*To what end did you try to raise this boy with light?*  
the office replied only,  
*Light was not part of the job.*

## *The Language Ban*

*at St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, Cabra, Dublin (1857–1999)*

And here is how the house began to split;  
in the names of the state-makers,  
*all the signs banished overnight*

as if the hand could become enemy or oppressor,  
as if the hand dared a demon,  
as if the hand was wrong,

and not a white hawthorn globe, like a lantern  
trembling in moonlight, or a young salmon  
glittering upstream.

World became a forced grammar,  
mimicking a dream, before body corrected,  
before body stilled,  
before the speech sounds for *body, fable, sin*.

## *The Peacock*

*at Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home, County Westmeath  
(1935-1971)*

You don't need to breathe a word — *I remember*

those girls in the dirt sun, big-bellied and pitched like tents  
over the earth, uprooting from darkness  
carrots, parsnips, potatoes.

It was a sinner's work. Some claimed  
that one girl of the Home died  
delivering a child into the hands of a Sister.

The family refused to take back her body.  
The body was a symbol they would not concede.

What do I know of grief?  
Never have I second-guessed my parade  
of electric and metallic blue-greens, all eyes spying.  
*Here I am. Come and get me.*

In a locked-up state, in a landlocked county,  
I tried to offer a glimpse of the ocean,  
of waves among waves.

If a feather is the closest thing to God,  
briefly, I offered mercy.

## *A Charm to Protect a Girlchild*

Be patient. Wait by a window.  
You want a robin, but not inside  
the house. It is enough to look  
through glass. *There he is. There he is.*  
Little bond-bird, guardian of news.  
The robin unpicks earth's prophecies,  
thorn by thorn, feathers the world  
in breath, heals the blood-path  
with moss and leaf. Let him be  
a sign of *spheres to come*. Rid yourself  
of lock and key. Go closer to the flame.  
Once the elders carved out of this  
tiny breast the heart-stone and wore it  
for luck. The robin knows death,  
but is not death. In the omen tongue  
the girl who cannot be stolen  
is named *spideog*. Speak the language  
of the robin. Become apprentice  
to snow. Chant *life, greater  
than crucifixion*.