

SECOND VOYAGES

*Writers on poems
by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin*

Edited by Peter Fallon



Gallery Books

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Introduction

To celebrate the wonders of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry on the occasion of her eightieth birthday I invited fifty writers, one for each of the years The Gallery Press has been publishing her work, to select a poem and to provide a short essay on their choice. They have chosen from each of her collections including from 'New Poems' in her *Collected Poems* (2020) and, even, from as yet uncollected poems.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is a remarkable poet for many reasons, not least among them that her finest poems include some of her earliest and some of her most recent, with exceptional poems accomplished at every stage of her writing life. A poem composed last year, 'St Brigid's Well', and one completed this summer, 'Muriel Gifford After Her Fever', stand with the best of them, which is to say with the best of any poems being written in our time.

Noted first for the originality and vividness of single images — 'I looked down and saw that sea / glittering westward / like a stretch of bright knitting' (from a jettisoned poem 'Gibraltar') or more recent examples, 'The silk scarves came flying at her face like a car wash' ('The Witch in the Wardrobe'), 'just looking at the map . . . I can see / how countries are nibbled out of continents' ('Somewhere Called Goose Bay') or 'the great revolving spokes' of the lighthouse beam in 'Fastnet'. But various essays in this collection point to more than a single striking image. Martina Evans notes a poem's 'pure cinema with a double edge' while, in the essay that follows, Audrey Molloy describes 'a scene unfolding, the filmic sense of a handheld camera following the subject'.

Torn between two poems to which she might respond, Karen Solie described the one she chose *not* to dwell on ('The Bookshelves') as 'an enigmatic poem that opens on the spine of its metaphor' while Lavinia Greenlaw refers, in her essay on 'The Distance', to the 'hinge of simile'. These phrases, 'spine of metaphor' and 'hinge of simile',

S E C O N D V O Y A G E S

strike me as useful apparatus when approaching the realm of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's imagination. Her narratives blend elements of fable and folklore in work distinguished by the steadfastness of her gaze, the concentration of her focus and the utterance of these in the pure pitch of her voice.

Borges believed paradise would be 'a kind of library'. As it might be for Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin too, however lightly she wears her learning — though in hers no doubt there'd be a serenade playing.

Her poems return to familiar subjects and settings — history, travel, the sea, convents — without any repetition. Her work constantly refreshes itself and, as Eleanor Hooker writes in a response to 'Bessboro', there is often a prescience to it. More recent poems such as 'The Morandi Bridge' and 'Key-ring' admit emotional freight.

Second Voyages includes many of the author's finest poems with enlightening new perspectives on them by an array of international admirers and on poetry itself, such as Rosanna Warren's astute observation that 'All poems, in metre or free verse, invite us to measure time: they pace our consciousness.'

As with all good poems Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's seem to discover themselves as they proceed. Through her lenses and prisms mysteries unfold to a point — a point where the reader remains enthralled, amazed and satisfied. Publishing her work for half a century since I was her student in Trinity College has been one of the great privileges and pleasures of my life.

*Peter Fallon
Loughcrew
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