

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

**THE MAP  
OF THE  
WORLD**



Gallery Books

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T H E M A P O F T H E W O R L D

## *Muriel Gifford After Her Fever*

Fluttering coiling a strand of hair a phrase,  
a tune remembered, not named —  
is it called *fever*? the weariness  
that comes after fever, even too weak to brush my hair?

(the mass of tangles at my neck like the leaves  
blown into a corner, piled  
by a feverish wind).  
The long strand of memory twisted and blended

entwines around my hand holding the brush, and  
the story my grandmother knew  
catches, my mother told me she gave her  
the way to untwist the long tangled locks of hair.

In those days they cut your hair off if you'd had a fever,  
but Muriel's hair was lovely,  
her husband prevented them cutting,  
he sat beside her and used the tip of the comb,

carefully combing all the way down, slowly  
stroking every long hair free  
until she could wind it again  
twisted in plaits and piled up as she chose.

When I finish my hair I'm too weak to begin the day  
putting on your heavy carved ring,  
with its dark green stone, and my mother's ring  
on the other finger. My hand feels light, something swept  
away, as they were swept  
by the firing squad and the stifling, coiling wave.

## *Where Truth Lives*

Settled in their orbits  
the distances determined,  
dependent on each other —  
the bodies keep their measure.  
This is where truth lives

in one material form  
as with the old machines  
partly still visible though  
no longer in daily use —  
they do not intend to change.

This is where the past lives,  
the frescoes peeled away,  
the portrait sold for cash  
to appease a thirsty lover,

the separated bodies, the space debris  
(because they move in orbit and catch  
light from each other, the glance in a crowd  
a crooked reflection, that glazed curve  
where light flashes elated, speaking  
the many forms of connection)

they enter our shared space, alongside  
the word spoken to the empty passenger seat,  
the gleam from the pantry, provisions for the day  
just dawning.

*'Some lads were walking home late after  
a dance'*

Although I don't know just what happened then,  
the words are a warning, gripping me, alerted  
as if by the sharpening breeze they felt when,  
reaching the crest of the low hill,  
they had a few miles yet to go,  
the odd sound from far off, the cooling air  
freshening their wits. The rhythm of walking,  
the company, made the way seem short enough.  
A shadow, hare or cat, was crossing the road  
where it sloped gently downward from the cross.

And what was shown to them there,  
what words were spoken? Although  
(since this is a typical episode)  
I can guess, an encounter, a door  
opening to an urgent world,  
which needs to speak, which asks for help.  
One of them was called by his name  
and given a message to pass on  
to a neighbour of his own.  
All three saw, four fields away,  
a light in the ruined house.  
The story is current still in the place.  
They never forget that meeting,  
but remember especially how wide awake,  
how ready they had felt, at midnight  
outside the dancehall, calling out goodbye  
before turning together for the road home.

*The Bishop and His Sisters*

The question was too hard for them, so they went and  
asked the Bishop.

After they left he turned in his chair  
and took down the big book from Salamanca.  
He opened at the page, and read,  
'A woman naturally beautiful, dressed  
in the usual fashion of her native country,  
is allowed to walk along a certain street  
even if she knows that somebody there  
will commit sin when he sees her. Occasionally,  
she might go around the longer way,  
if not very inconvenient.'

He closed the book,  
and thought about her stepping on the cobbles  
between the grooms and the horses, if she tried  
going round by the long lane beside the stables.  
*A woman naturally beautiful.* How long  
since he looked straight in a woman's face? He remembered  
his own sisters, how he'd see the three of them  
filling big jugs together at the pump  
so they could wash themselves, and the soft knock  
to be heard from their bedroom, and sometimes a splash,  
and how they looked when they came downstairs,  
their hair in plaits, their faces fresh and calm,  
able to face the day, and the day's work.