

Fireman's Lift

I was standing beside you looking up
Through the big tree of the cupola
Where the church splits wide open to admit
Celestial choirs, the fall-out of brightness.

The Virgin was spiralling to heaven,
Hauled up in stages. Past mist and shining,
Teams of angelic arms were heaving,
Supporting, crowding her, and we stepped

Back, as the painter longed to
While his arm swept in the large strokes.
We saw the work entire, and how light

Melted and faded bodies so that
Loose feet and elbows and staring eyes
Floated in the wide stone petticoat
Clear and free as weeds.

This is what love sees, that angle:
The crick in the branch loaded with fruit,
A jaw defining itself, a shoulder yoked,

The back making itself a roof
The legs a bridge, the hands
A crane and a cradle.

Their heads bowed over to reflect on her
Fair face and hair so like their own
As she passed through their hands.
We saw them Lifting her, the pillars of their arms

(Her face a capital leaning into an arch)
As the muscles clung and shifted
For a final purchase together
Under her weight as she came to the edge of the cloud.

Parma 1963-Dublin 1994

Summary and analysis:

The poet explains the title thus: 'It's the way of lifting a disabled person of which I was reminded when I saw the nurses lifting my mother in her final illness. They were all young and pretty and she loved them.'¹

In 1963, Ni Chuilleainain and her mother visited the cathedral in Parma where they saw Corregio's 16th century fresco on the cupola or dome. The painting shows the Virgin's assumption into heaven, and the poet links this to the idea of her mother being lifted into heaven too. The angels and saints helping to carry the burden of the woman in the fresco are mirrored by the nurses carrying and caring for the poet's mother in her final illness. Although the subject is death, the focus is on ascending to heaven. Ni Chuillianain calls this a 'cheering-up poem', written 'when my mother was dying because I absolutely knew that she would want me to write a poem about her dying.'²

The poem opens with Ni Chuillainain's memory of standing with her mother, gazing up at the fresco in the cupola. The dome is compared to a 'big tree' as it reaches towards the heavens. The light and brightness of the point in the church where the roof 'splits wide open' gives this stanza a positive, uplifting tone.

The Virgin is being lifted upwards in a spiral by the angels. The work is difficult: she is 'Hauled' and the arms that lift her are 'heaving', but the love and support that surrounds the woman is clear from the words 'Supporting' and 'crowding'. The mention of the 'mist and shining' makes the scene otherworldly and mystical.

The poet and her mother step back, as she imagines the painter longed to do so that he might see his work in its entirety. Those who can see it from below marvel at the blend of architecture, light and paint as all blend together so that the angels' limbs seem to be dangling in the space of the cupola.

The dome is likened to a 'stone petticoat' under which the viewers gather. Ni Chuilleainain has said playfully that staring up at the Duomo is 'like looking up under someone's skirt'³ and she also believes that the metaphor captures the comforting and loving image of 'churchgoers being enclosed like children under their mothers' skirts'.

¹ 'Italian dialogues: an interview with Eilean Ni Chuilleainain' – Carla de Petris

² 'Interviews with Eilean Ni Chuilleainain' – Patricia Boyle Haberstroh

³ 'Hundred-pocketed Time: Ni Chuilleainain's Baroque Spaces' – Dillon Johnston

The act of lifting the Virgin is one of love and her weight is gladly born by those who turn their bodies into bridges, cranes and cradles as they hoist her heavenward.

Writing the year after her mother's death, Ni Chuilleainain said of 'Fireman's Lift': 'When I found myself compelled to write about Correggio's Assumption of the Virgin, I could only concentrate on one aspect, the way it shows bodily effort and the body's weight.'⁴

The compassion and respect the teams of angels show as they bow their heads reminds Ni Chuilleainain of the nurses gentle care of her mother in her sick bed.

The reader is invited to share in the poet's hope that, like the Virgin in the fresco, her mother will also ascend into heaven when the time comes.

'Ni Chuilleainain has said that, on one level, the poem is about the nurses who looked after her mother when she was dying, but we can not



fail to note the ways in which the cathedral architecture and Correggio's painting are interrelated to express a sense of loss, as the Virgin figure disappears behind the edge of a cloud. The poem ends here, for beyond the cloud is the mystery, another of Ni Chuilleainain's boundaries and crossings, the secret behind the edge unknowable.'⁵

⁴ Hundred-pocketed Time: Ni Chuilleainain's Baroque Spaces' – Dillon Johnston

⁵ Architectural Metaphor in the Poetry of Eilean Ni Chuilleainain – Patricia Boyle Haberstroh

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