

## On Lacking the Killer Instinct

One hare, absorbed, sitting still  
Right in the grassy middle of the track,  
I met when I fled up into the hills, that time  
My father was dying in a hospital –  
I see her suddenly again, borne back  
By the morning paper's prize photograph:  
Two greyhounds tumbling over, absurdly gross,  
While the hare shoots off to the left, her bright eye  
Full not only of speed and fear  
But surely in the moment a glad power,



Like my father's, running from a lorry-load of soldiers  
In nineteen twenty-one, nineteen years old, never  
Such gladness, he said, cornering in the narrow road  
Between high hedges, in summer dusk.

### The hare

Like him should never have been coursed,  
But, clever, she gets off; another day  
She'll fool the stupid dogs, double back  
On her own scent, downhill, and choose her time  
To spring away out of the frame, all while  
The pack is labouring up.

The lorry was growling  
And he was clever, he saw a house  
And risked an open kitchen door. The soldiers  
Found six people in a country kitchen, one  
Drying his face, dazed-looking, the towel  
Half covering his face. The lorry left,  
The people let him sleep there, he came out  
Into a blissful dawn. Should he have chanced that door?  
If the sheltering house had been burned down, what good  
Could all his bright running have done  
For those that harboured him?



And I should not  
Have run away, but I went back to the city  
Next morning, washed in brown bog water, and  
I thought about the hare, in her hour of ease.

### **Summary and analysis:**

This poem is part of a collection called 'The Sun-fish'.

Ní Chuilleánáin wrote the poem about her father's final illness, connecting it with a story he had told her about running away from the Black and Tans during the War of Independence, when he was only nineteen years old: 'He said he never felt so well in his life as when he was running, so I've been trying to put that into a poem.'<sup>1</sup>

The title of the poem is intriguing and makes us consider the instinct to kill: is it animal, human or both? Is it something we all possess or are there those who lack it? It also makes us think of the 'fight or flight' response which determines whether we react to danger or

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin - Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin  
Irish University Review

stress by fleeing or standing and fighting.

The style of the poem is cinematic as we move rapidly between a number of images of stillness and movement, past and present, animal and human.

The poem opens with the image of a hare 'sitting still' in the middle of a 'grassy track'. It is 'absorbed', but we don't know what it is that has caught its attention. Ní Chuilleanáin has gone to this place in the hills to avoid dealing with her father's illness and impending death. The hare's stillness is calming and contrasts with the poet's flight from the stress of being with her dying father.

The sight reminds Ní Chuilleanáin of a photo in the morning paper, showing a hare being pursued by two greyhounds. The dogs are described rather negatively: they are foolishly large and clumsy: 'absurdly gross' and 'tumbling over' compared to the agile little hare which 'shoots off to the left'. The poet's sympathy for and empathy with the hare is clear; she refers to it as 'she' although she can't possibly know its gender.

Even though the hare is terrified, it is also filled with a 'glad power' as it evades the pursuing dogs. The adrenaline rush it must be feeling reminds her of another chase which may, on the face of it, have appeared unfair and unequal but which also showed that cleverness and quick-thinking can allow a seemingly weak prey to elude a stronger predator. In 1921 her father managed to escape capture by the Black and Tans and he said that he 'never felt so well in his life' as at when he was running. The 'gladness' he felt at that time echoes the 'glad power' of the hare in a few lines earlier. He is running in the semi-darkness of dusk and there is a sense of confinement in the descriptions of 'narrow roads' and 'high hedges', which again links him to the coursed hare which must elude its pursuers within the limits of an enclosure. For both, escape seems impossible.

Neither the hare nor the poet's father should have been hunted in this way, but both display their ingenuity as they fool their pursuers. Although the photo in the paper cannot have shown how the hunt ended, Ní Chuilleanáin imagines that the hare tricks the 'stupid dogs' by doubling back on her own scent and then springing 'out of the frame' of the photo and away to permanent freedom. The dogs are not as fast as she and they are contrasted with the hare as they work or 'labour' to catch up while she springs, doubles back and finally 'gets off'.

Once again, there is a flashback to a different place and time. The dogs become the 'growling' lorry and the poet's father, like the hare, tricks the hunters by darting off in an unexpected

direction. He takes refuge in a house and snatches up a towel to partly cover his face. By pretending to be drying his face and appearing confused by the soldiers' appearance, the poet's father manages to evade capture. Fortunately for him, the occupants of the house are willing to harbour him and he stays the night there, emerging into a 'blissful' dawn. The word 'blissful' conveys the young man's relief and delight at having escaped unscathed.

Now, however, the poet wonders if he should have done such a thing. His presence put the family in the 'sheltering house' at risk and the Black and Tans may well have burned it down if his ruse had failed and he had been caught there.

Whether he was right or wrong to run, the poet acknowledges her father's bravery and determination. His courage inspires her to go back to face the awful reality of his final illness. She washes herself in 'brown bog water', probably in a ritualistic, symbolic way more than anything else, and goes back to the town.

The poem ends with the image of the hare which was instrumental in setting the poet on the train of thought that led to her return to her father's death bed. It seems that in the poet's mind it has almost become the same hare that ran so frantically from the greyhounds but it has found peace now in its 'hour of ease'.<sup>2</sup> This is a positive and uplifting message on which to end the poem and reinforces the idea that the poet's decision was the right one.



---

<sup>2</sup> Earlier in the poem, when she first saw the hare, Ní Chuilleanáinsaid that she saw her 'suddenly again' in the morning paper. Of course it is not the same animal, but it is what it stands for that is important to the poet.

### **Critical Comments on Ní Chuilleanáin:**

Her poems depict edges, borders, and crossings between different kinds of worlds: physical and metaphysical, life and death, past and present, human and natural, scientific and imaginative. As Irene Gilsenan Nordin has suggested, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry 'is informed by the theme of crossing: the crossing from one realm of experience to another, from the realms of the everyday and ordinary to the realms of the spirit world and the world of the other'. Intersections between these worlds and the edges where one touches another create many of the image patterns in her work, and borders often hold the key to meaning in her poems.

Ní Chuilleanáin develops these ideas in the architectural imagery which recurs in her poetry, illustrated through what in one poem she calls the 'architectural metaphor'. Images of houses--walls, doors, windows, roofs, gables, hatches--and churches, convents, and ruins occur again and again, expressing diverse ideas. For Ní Chuilleanáin, the architectural metaphor is often connected with history, an interest she developed in her undergraduate years at University College Cork and graduate work at Oxford. For Ní Chuilleanáin, history is not only a journey into the past but also a key to the present: 'we are inclined to associate certain things with the past as something vanishing, where in fact, one is constantly made aware of the fact that the past does not go away, that it is walking around the place and causing trouble at every moment'. Dillon Johnston, in contrasting the poetry of Eavan Boland and Ní Chuilleanáin, argues that Ní Chuilleanáin's use of architectural imagery reflects her interest in Baroque art: 'Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry resists containment, within the literal or physical or domestic, as she wanders beyond borders and margins and walls of structures. She often represents such traversing of thresholds and boundaries in relation to architecture'.