

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.

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1. Why do you think Ni Chuilleanain called the poem 'Fireman's Lift'?
2. The poet compares the dome to a 'big tree'. Do you think this is an effective comparison? Why / Why not?
3. Is the imagery in the first stanza positive or negative, do you think? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Which of the verbs in the second stanza suggest that raising the Virgin to heaven is difficult work?
5. Which verbs in the same stanza suggest that the workers are caring and supportive?
6. Why do you think the painter would like to have stood back from his work?
7. What was the effect of the bright light streaming down from the top of the cupola?
8. What details / effects were clear to those below?
9. Comment on the metaphor in which the poet compares the cupola to a petticoat.
10. 'This is what love sees.' What vision of love are we given in this poem? Explain your answer with reference to and quotation from the poem.
11. The angels turn their bodies into cranes, roofs, cradles and bridges to support and move the Virgin in her ascension. Which of these do you think is most interesting, and why?