

The Bend in the Road

Title:

The title of the poem suggests twists and turns in life which we are unable to predict. Whatever happens, however, life will go on just as the road does although we cannot see where it leads.

Stanza One:

In the first stanza the poet describes the exact spot on the road where her son once felt sick in the car and 'they pulled over'. The significance of this spot is made clear from the start by the use of the definite article 'The Bend in the Road', and the demonstrative 'This' at the start of the opening line.

There is a moment of waiting before the child feels well enough to continue on the journey. All of nature seems to wait with the family: the whole landscape holds its breath to see what will happen: 'nothing moved'. The stillness is slightly surreal: a nearby house casts its shadow over them and a tree appears transformed into a sentient creature too.



The simile describing the tree is an interesting one.

Why is it like a cat's tail? Is it perhaps because it is slender and waves in the breeze much as a cat's tail may sway back and forth? There is a fairy-tale quality to the description of the landscape here which seems appropriate when we consider that the focus of this memory is a young child.

The word 'waited' is repeated to add emphasis to the tension of this brief moment. Will the child be sick or will he recover quickly? The tension and stillness is broken by the opening of the windows and as the child breathes easily, so do the parents and the reader.

Stanza Two:

Twelve years have passed since that incident, and much has changed. The spot where the child felt sick has become part of the family's history and although it is 'as silent as ever it was on that day', the boy is not the same. He is taller now than his parents are and the tree which seemed to wait along with him in the first stanza is taller too. The house has become covered with 'green creeper', and we are reminded that despite the silence of the place,

nature is alive and plants are slowly, inexorably growing and moving.

Stanza Three:

This spot on the road is significant to the family and because they remember that day each time they pass it, they also reflect on everything that has changed since the child fell ill. This simple bend on the road becomes a repository of family memories. The poet remembers those who, unlike the boy, did not recover from illnesses. One critic observed that Ni Chuilleanain's 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.'¹ Those who died are 'never long absent from thought' and the memories of them are 'Piled high' like layers of cloud. This is a consoling and beautiful image as they are imagined as 'softly packed' in a 'perfect sky'.

The poet compares the way the spirits of loved ones are, to her, 'softly packed' in a cloud to the way they were 'wrapped and sealed' by their final illness at a time when even sleep became 'a piled weight' that they could not 'carry for long'.

The bend in the road, once merely a spot where the family pulled over to allow the child a moment to recover, is now a monument to all that has changed since that day and all those who have gone before. Their memories remain and they are kept alive in the thoughts of those who loved them, but in another sense they have passed beyond the bend in the road to a place that cannot be seen.

¹ The Architectural Metaphor in the Poetry of Eilean Ni Chuilleanain. [The Free Library](http://www.thefreeibrary.org/2007/07/irish-university-review/). 2007 Irish University Review