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# 'NO LASTING FRUIT AT ALL': CONTAINING, RECOGNITION AND RELINQUISHING IN *THE GIRL WHO MARRIED THE REINDEER*

> Psychoanalytic development theory has consistently explored various metaphors – containment, holding, recognition, affect attunement – for the maternal activity that is necessary to form the somatic sense of self and to perceive and think about the me and not-me environment; in other words, to become one's own container, able to own affects rather than be overwhelmed by them. The mother acts as an outside other … The first form she assumes is that of concrete physical other, whose holding and breathing contain the child…[1]
>
> …To the grace of a future that none can control.[2]

Ní Chuilleanáin's 2001 collection shows her at the height of her creative achievement.[3] Distinguished by several outstanding individual poems, it is also deeply satisfying in its internal organisation, weaving larger patterns of dynamic contrast and balance. On repeated readings it yields up complex meanings, in a series of linked reflections which have ideological implications, but which develop those implications within a mode of meditative lyric which Ní Chuilleanáin has developed with growing skill and remarkable consistency over her poetic career. *Reindeer* consists of thirty-one poems, mostly ranging between about fifteen and about twenty-five lines.[4] Still predominantly – and unconventionally – meditative in mood, *Reindeer* nevertheless sometimes approximates the 'crisis-lyric' mode determinedly avoided by this poet in most of her earlier work: two

signal examples of this are the beautiful juxtaposed poems 'Autun' (*Reindeer*, p.32) and 'Crossing the Loire' (p.34). Ní Chuilleanáin also keeps clear of the vogue for traditional metres and for rhyme among her younger contemporaries, or indeed by the strong formalist Yeats-Heaney inheritance in Irish poetry in English. One poem near the end, 'Borders' (p.44), mischievously announces 'I no longer own a ribbed corset of rhyme', but is itself a *tour de force* of playful assonance, as if the poet were showing that she, too, has the technical skill to play the game by such conventional rules, but does not wish to.

It would be a major undertaking to develop a full analysis of *Reindeer*'s complex patterning of language and figuration, or of its themes, often developed from poem to poem. I shall focus on a small selection of poems. It will be helpful, however, to summarize what I see as the main *conceptual* interests of the collection, underlying its various locations and other items of poetic décor, drawn sometimes from the poet's life-experiences, sometimes from literary, historical or traditional sources. On this level of ideas, *Reindeer* is structured by sets of oppositions, sometimes played out in social contestations, but which we ultimately recognize as balancing or inextricably yoked antinomies at philosophical and moral levels: paradoxes which can neither be torn into two halves nor resolved by smooth unification.

*Reindeer* especially interests itself in a fundamental opposition between states of closure and enclosure, and their antitheses, forms of openness and freedom. These contrasts are not merely cerebral: they are freighted with emotional and bodily experiences of fulfilment or constraint. Enclosure is sometimes felt negatively, as imprisoning, with varying degrees of rigour and suffering, causing a desire and a search for release. Also negative, however, though a less dominant note in the collection, is an idea of being locked out, excluded. The most striking instance is in the final poem of the collection proper, the punningly entitled 'Gloss/Clós/Glas' (46). Here a male scholar is locked into a library, and by implication inside his mind, while outside the locked door

(the Irish *glas* means 'green', but its homonym means 'lock') a woman is panting. 'The steam of her breath is turning the lock green', while within he feverishly researches 'the price of his release', namely the discovery of a language which has 'no word for *his*, / No word for *hers*'. Ní Chuilleanáin's conceit of a quest for the *grammatical* erasure of gender difference playfully stages the utopian desire for release from oppositional *social* gendering and the misogyny of Irish traditions of learning.

But (en)closing may produce other kinds of affect: it may be quasi-involuntary, but temporary (as for instance in the opening poem, 'The Crossroads' (*Reindeer,* p.12), with its female speaker mysteriously obliged, it seems by a ritual or religious requirement, to stay at the crossroads for that part of the liturgical year from the beginning of Lent till the feast of the Assumption on 15 August. Or it may be gladly chosen, as for instance by nuns and hermit-figures ('Anchoress', p.13). With very strong positive feeling, some poems voice a longing for a kind of enclosure which is holding, embracing, and quieting ('The Cloister of Bones', p.16). Sometimes this is explicitly figured as a kindly holding embrace, where what is contained and stilled is vulnerability or restlessness. In the fine piece 'A Capitulary' (p.40) the speaker tells of lying asleep and faintly hearing the voices of others 'beyond the wall'. This recalls first a nameless, third-person child 'tucked up' (characteristically, in a library), 'waking and dozing again', hearing her father's voice, then in the final stanza a personal memory:

> I feel the ticking of their voices and remember how
>
> My sister before she was born listened for hours
>
> To my mother practising scales on the cello;

This poem explicitly connects the experience of being held inside a comforting space with the parental and the familial: first the father (who in the poem is telling 'his story to the chaplain', then the bishop), then, in a direct naming of the infant's first experience of physical containment, the mother. Further, this scene unifies the female speaker, her

mother and her sister, in a conjunction which recurs at other highly significant moments of *Reindeer*, as we shall see.

At their most powerful, such instances of contented containment can, paradoxically, enable an opening-out within the experiencing self, a freeing of things, places, people, and events from, sometimes terrible, separateness and incommensurability into potential connection and recognition. The ending of 'In Her Other House' (20), a dream or fantasy where a family's generations all sit down together to table, and where '[i]t is the dead who serve us', beautifully instances such a moment, projecting it outwards towards contested civil or national histories. It concludes:

> In this house there is no need to wait for the verdict of history
>
> And each page lies open to the version of every other.

Sometimes, however, it is not clear which is preferable: to be shut in and in company, or free, outside, but alone. In 'The Chestnut Choir' (p.14) the central figure stops on a long drive to listen to a village convent choir singing Vespers. Leaning 'her cheek against the wall', in the silence at the end of the music she knows 'that they were still there while she, the wanderer, was free to be away.' But her freedom is also a form of isolation: 'The bar would be shut…'

There is also a stronger, more forceful form of openness. This is at its clearest in the elegant 'The Horses of Meaning' (p.39), about horses galloping away into the distance, unrestrainable once released from the dark stable: 'The wind combs their long tails, their stalls are empty'. However, the title's overt analogy with the non-limitable meanings of a text sets the poem somewhat apart from the continuing complex renegotiation between freedoms and constraints which I believe forms the central, deeply involving, enquiry of the collection. The poem 'Borders', another of *Reindeer*'s more easily accessible pieces, concerns the opposite pole, the resistance to confinement and control. The poet's choice of a formal restriction – its use of assonance, mentioned already –

mimics this theme. Last of three successive poems about the dead, 'Borders' describes the speaker's drive northwards to the wake of a friend, John McCarter. The title word is polyvalent: it alludes to the territorial border between Ireland's two jurisdictions, but also to the discipline of poetic form and the process of control enacted in mapping and even in the lines of longitude.[5] Now loosed from a notional 'ribbed corset of rhymes', the speaker envisages herself as a 'witch who stands one-legged, masking one eye, which echoes female figures of ill omen in early Irish literature.[6] This is an uncanny empowerment in defiance of official structures, parallelled by the dead man's former travels to and fro, making his own nets over the land 'in a toil of love' comparable to the enchantment of Fionnuala, daughter of the mythical king Lir. With her uncanny powers the poet can 'leap over' the virtual corset of longitude (making a comic *cailleach*-as-the-land-of-Ireland equivalence between the ample 'global waistline' of territory and of an older woman), and thus 'follow the road that follows the lie of the land, / Crossing a stream called *Fairy Water*, to come to the bridge at Strabane'. Ní Chuilleanáin slyly, almost Muldoonishly, plays with intertextual allusion, parodying both Yeats' rag-and-bone-shop – 'I must start at the start, at the white page in my mind' – and perhaps also Heaney's trademark topographies: '…sober monoglot bands'. But for all its lightness, remarkable in a wake poem, 'Borders' is purposive in its invocation of ancient toponymies ('Fairy Water'), and also of the ritual symbolism of journeys ('crossing the stream … to come to the bridge'). The dead man has made a definitive uncanny 'crossing'; the poet now makes hers, to attend his wake, in the process suggesting the persistence of such earlier meanings through and beyond the record of attempts to eradicate them and to control land and people by imposing a single, English, mode of understanding. This form of domination has been evident since, crossing the literal border, she is '[p]assed under the soldier's lenses at Aughnacloy'.

'Borders', with its *cailleach*-figure, uncannily and invisibly empowered and set against Irish historical resistance to external domination, clearly takes up from earlier poems such as 'Daniel Grose'.[7] But in *Reindeer* such antitheses of control and freedom are played out more in personal, affective life, and in the internal social and ideological systems of the Irish state itself. The matter of the nation becomes much more than before a question of resistance to internal oppression, and Ní Chuilleanáin's feminist feeling – always evident, if, as has often been noted, never readily detachable from other aspects of her complex and subtle poetic thought – flows together with passionate social critique. This critique addresses itself to the Republic's discipline and punishment of women's sexuality and its systematically harsh suppression of emotion. These combined, in all but the last decades of the twentieth century, with an authoritarian Catholicism to maintain so many Church-run, State-funded and popularly accepted institutions of confinement: Magdalen laundries, orphanages, and so-called 'mother-and-baby homes'.

Ní Chuilleanáin has generally aimed for a rather austere poetic typicality, shown in her studied detachment from the specificities of place, with the exception of a particular, exceptional strand of quasi-topographical Cork poems.[8] But there are earlier hints of *Reindeer*'s direct address to these scandals of Irish social history, the Catholic Church's role in them, and their prominence in national self-critique during the 1990s. Before *Reindeer* she had drawn on material from the repertoire of Catholic devotion, both Irish and Italian, and developed her already evident interest in the poetic uses of nuns, convents, saints, relics and miracles. Indeed she had conducted a thematic exploration, highly unusual for the 1990s, of the role and psychological functions of the sacred, including religious manifestations from the subaltern realm of popular devotional practice. Such practice and its accompanying beliefs, in Ireland now residual phenomena, perpetuate earlier Catholic forms of piety and, often unconsciously in their devotees, draw upon ancient Church writings and lore, especially hagiographical. She has explicitly

indicated her personal distance from fervent or literalistic forms of Catholic practice.[9] In my view, then, Ní Chuilleanáin deploys this whole range of subjects not in order to propose a re-mystification of the world (in the teeth of postmodern secularism), still less to reinstate Catholic hegemony, but to set up a thematic viewpoint which is both specifically feminist and allows a kind of symbolic intelligence which is alternative to current Anglophone norms to operate. Thus two successive poems, 'Saint Margaret of Cortona' and 'Our Lady of Youghal', stage a kind of triumph for the central female figure – Margaret an amused persistence, 'Our Lady' a revelation – which amounts to an imaginative apotheosis.[10] Ní Chuilleanáin has made clear her interest in using the Magdalene figure as a convergence of feminist aesthetic, bodily-erotic and ideological motives.[11] Her fine 'St Mary Magdalene Preaching at Marseilles' is now well known, but her naming of the whole 1989 collection as *The Magdalene Sermon* proposes the identification of the poet's speech more generally with that of the harlot saint.[12] She remarks that in 'Titian's *Mary Magdalene* the very presence of the body was felt like a rush of Mediterranean heat, strong and undeniable', and in Correggio's *Leda and the Swan* she sees 'a female body at the centre of a story, female and pleased in all its dimensions'.[13] Ní Chuilleanáin finds in pre-modern and south European art and thought a sensual moment which she couples with feminine self-authorship; in the same discussion she strikingly refers to the mystic St. Teresa as 'the woman writer… a writer of herself'.[14] Rightly noting Ní Chuilleanáin's insistence on the body, Dillon Johnston has connected it specifically with her ideological interest in Catholic, especially Italian, Counter-Reformation art and literature.[15] I think this analysis could be broadened to address also late-medieval thinking about and representations of the body, and especially the non-dualistic understanding of embodiment which is a central topic of the important writings of feminist intellectual historian Caroline Bynum.[16] Ní Chuilleanáin's interest in harlot saints can certainly not be mapped onto the uses of hagiography in the prudish

discourses on sexuality of the Ireland she grew up in: she repeatedly expresses a delight in female carnality and amusedly recalls the Botticelli 'naked ladies' hanging at home in place of the usual Sacred Heart or the crucifix which her mother would not have in the house.[17]

In 'St. Margaret of Cortona', the saint, patroness of prostitutes, is 'still here, she refuses / To be consumed' (her relics, described with a characteristic comic materiality, are kept behind the altar of a Dublin church). This poem is a particularly good example of Ní Chuilleanáin's moves towards the re-negotiation of feminine modes of agency and towards the salvaging, from the current wreck of institutional Catholicism in Ireland, of a range of images of female holiness and transcendence which resist the virgin-or-whore patriarchal binaries which, as Simone de Beauvoir argued, underpin rational selfhood in dominant Western traditions.[18] As 'St. Margaret' opens, the priest is delivering the annual sermon for her feast-day, while behind this foreground of official approbation, surreally '[i]n the mine of the altar her teeth listen and smile'. Thus, in spite of the condemnatory rhetoric applied to Margaret's whore's life (before conversion) the poem conveys a strong sense that she possesses an insight and an understanding of her own which is other than the masculine clerical version. The epithets flung at her become part of her biography and of her being, but in a final transforming simile Ní Chuilleanáin re-envisions these insults as 'Like children swinging from a father's arm, / Their tucked-up feet skimming over the ground'. In the process she also envisages a concrete paternal affection, distinct from the theological misogyny of celibate clergy. In the poem as a whole the life of the saint is re-imagined as something irreducible and perhaps imponderable, but certainly much stranger than its routine institutional citation. Unusually among her pre-*Reindeer* work, this poem makes an open meta-textual link with Irish social history in its sub-title, which names Margaret as patroness of the Dublin Lock Hospital. This puts it beside the Victorian containment of prostitution and venereal

disease, a process aimed to regulate and control women sex-workers. The effect of 'St Margaret' is to propose a feminine integrity – embodied, quite literally, in the saint – distinct from and other than its instrumental use as a mere *exemplum* of moral teaching, more particularly as this was hypocritically performed in a bourgeois public sphere which, in England and in Ireland, systematically denied the reality of the trade in sex and of the sexual double standard.[19] In the light of this motive, characteristically understated, the poem's insistence on Margaret's physicality acquires its *raison d'être* and thus Ní Chuilleanáin's recourse to the language of relics, miracles and saints' days its meaning. Such symbolic work draws upon the immemorial and quasi-subaltern traditions of Catholic peoples rather than upon doctrine, and by its obliquity bypasses the whole web of official belief, institutional theology, and social dominance which in the post-1960s period increasing numbers of Irish Catholics had come to resist. Ní Chuilleanáin combines these subaltern cultural resources with her own sophisticated intellectual formation in European Catholic thought and culture.

As well as such explicit references to the social order, however, *Reindeer* weaves, much more evidently than in previous volumes, strong strands of deep individual feeling around the familiar, generic items (cloisters, the quiet life of the Italian hill-village, the aftermath of unspecified disasters, the unworldly self-enclosed male scholar, legendary records of vanished or imagined cultures). Some of the finest poems are almost *à clef*: they are recognisable by recurrent motifs which by metonymy (looking poetically) and by allusion (looking biographically) broach certain profound personal loves and griefs. I read these via those alternations and antinomies of open and closed, alone and together-with, free and constrained, which I have already outlined.

One of these motifs is the playing of a stringed instrument. The poet's mother was an amateur cellist, her sister a professional violinist. This collection comes after both their deaths, the sister's in her prime, from cancer: the deservedly well-known and

beautiful 'Fireman's Lift' concerns the mother's.[20] These events figure, though under the surface, in earlier poems, but in *Reindeer* Ní Chuilleanáin more openly performs the work of mourning. She draws sister and mother together, often using a trope of music, especially the playing of scales on the cello, to make a complex and moving pattern of grief, cherished memory and imaginative recuperation. The cello scales signify persistence and rhythmic effort, a figure for both for the practice of making art and for emotional survival: at every point where the motif appears, these scales are bound up with the reciprocal love of mother and daughters for each other. Another cluster of personal meanings is to do with the poet's own parenthood, clearly a related topic, which I shall raise in my discussion of the poem 'Jesse', below. The acts and processes named in my title are all parts of *Reindeer*'s doing of the poet's 'work' of representation and of feeling.[21] The poems enquire into, juggle and juxtapose all three stances, dynamically envisaging them as fundamental constituents of meaning and emotional possibility.

Five successive poems, printed in sequence starting with the title-poem (p.22), can be read as a sustained meditation on women's self-formation and quest for autonomy, reproduction and its consequences, on gaining and losing children, and the containment and regulation of women in Irish society. The title-poem enacts in legendary mode the return and recognition of a lost, exogamous child. It is followed by 'Translation' (p.25), subtitled '*for the reburial of the Magdalenes*', then by 'Bessboro' (p.26), about visiting the site of a particularly harsh Cork 'Home' for unmarried pregnant women whose children were routinely signed away under varying degrees of coercion.[22] Facing this poem is 'Jesse' (p.27), which is a healing and consolatory construction of reproduction and perhaps of human creativity in general. Finally 'Troubler' (p.28), which I shall not discuss in detail but which does form part of this cluster of ideas, concerns a girl planning to run away with a secret lover from an Irish farm home of the past.

'The Girl who Married the Reindeer' tells a tale, in its language and atmosphere reminiscent of European folktales, on which it draws for motifs.[23] A bare, impassive narration, phrased with flawless economy of effect, tells how a girl goes out into the mountains sloe-picking. Barefoot in the cold dusk, she mounts a reindeer who comes to 'claim' the sloes, and rides off north to his home 'without speaking'. There, we later find, she bears a son. After thirteen months she returns – with breasts 'large from suckling' and 'salt in her hair' – to her sister's wedding, and is kept there for ten years by a trick of 'the old queen'. Then, far north, now dying, the reindeer curses the queen. As she lies, struck dumb, 'groaning for power', the boy rides up on a wild reindeer, and stands watching his mother, who is shelling beans in the courtyard, but does not recognize him. Then, in the powerful concluding stanza:

A light wind fled over them

As the witch died in the high tower.

She knew her child in that moment…

The girl's departure with the reindeer symbolizes the young person's necessary break from the control of the elders and her exogamous mating. The evil old witch-queen would, if she could, keep her confined within the household: the reindeer's otherness, his wild northernness, symbolically counterpoises her will to contain the young girl within the house. In death the reindeer's body is a man's, recalling the wolf-transformation stories of Angela Carter, another feminist writer who draws on traditional folk narratives to disrupt conventional femininities. Bynum argues that motifs of metamorphosis powerfully rehearse the shifts and alterations necessary to the person's developing identity; Ní Chuilleanáin's poem vividly pinpoints not only the older woman's (bad mother's) wrong attempt at control by containment, but the young girl's readiness to relinquish her previous life and give herself over to be changed by a stranger, the

reindeer. This process of transformation culminates in the moment in the courtyard when she recognizes not only her child, but her altered self as his mother.

The girl is magically freed into this recognition, and the whole mode of this poem is otherworldly, out of time in the manner of traditional tales, yet in the constellation of ideas I have outlined it is strongly connected with a dominant strand of the collection, namely the meditation on questions of power and inter-relationship, between generations and between individual subjects familially linked with one another. In particular the mother's loss and then recovery of the child resonates with several other poems.

'Translation' (p.25), about an Irish Magdalene laundry, also has a controlling older-woman figure, and the system she serves is also ultimately destroyed, though only after her death and those of its victims. It refers to the reburial and commemoration during the 1990s of women convent laundry workers who had been buried, as was the usual practice, in unmarked and sometimes communal graves.[24] 'Translation' implies an analogy between the writer's work and the belated acknowledgement, in the last decade of the century, of the stolen lives and hidden deaths of generations of Irishwomen incarcerated in Magdalene asylums. This revisiting of the harlot-saint Magdalene figure offers explicit resistance to the suppression by dominant Irish ideologies of embodied womanhood. It insists on feminine embodiment and the lost gaiety of girls reduced to bodies first hidden in sexual shame, then obliterated by their nameless collective interment. It also poignantly notes the complete silencing of the Irish Magdalenes as they did their enforced and, in some places, lifelong penance.

'Translation' seeks to elicit speech from this silence and, by the speech-act it is itself performing, to 'translate' silence into expression. The nun in charge, whose role we recognize by 'the bunched keys I bore', speaks the last stanza: she too is finally, at the reburial, herself 'washed clean of idiom' and knows 'that spell lifted' which kept in being the cruel system she served. The vocabulary repeatedly mentions words and naming: this

is the poet's attempt too to 'translate' these bad past events, to carry them over into some bearable version. Torn from their familial and communal contexts, the women 'from every county' who were in the laundry – and are now in the graveyard – are '[s]earching for their parents, their names'. The nun is also being cleansed of 'the baked crust / Of words that made my temporary name'. The 'temporary name' is her name in religion, that is, the saint's name she took on entering the convent, which, as Ní Chuilleanáin is observing, involved relinquishing her previous identity as an individual.[25] The poem thus surprisingly draws together the Magdalene penitents and this nun in charge, in their common confinement in the institution and now in their shared 'sifting' (a word used at both lines one and nineteen) in and by the earth they have all become. We recognize maybe only retrospectively that this is the insight delivered by the opening line, with its macabre and shocking charge: 'The soil frayed and sifted evens the score'. Yet the poem stops short of pretending to an even score in terms of power between the woman in authority and the totally subservient and ineradicably disgraced women under her thumb. The poem's delicate and precise language traces the oppression of a life where a glance exchanged is 'blinded and bleached out'; the natural playfulness of young women is poignantly displaced onto the 'steam', which alone is free to dance around the stone drains, giggling and slipping across the water. This figure recalls Catherine Clément's remark that '[i]n the field of religion, the feminine cannot rise up except by escaping, like steam that has been compressed too long'.[26] Now these girls are mere 'ridges under the veil' of the anonymous earth; then too they were obscured, even from their own potential lives. The reverend mother's speech is a note of horror which blares through her own skull; only now she recognizes the 'parasite' power 'that grew in me'; and only now can the bunch of keys, sign of her gatekeeping function, 'slacken and fall'. If Ní Chuilleanáin's earlier poetry and other discussions take a predominantly affectionate and respectful attitude to nuns, this poem addresses the darker side of the

role of some religious in the maintaining of such institutionalized oppression.[27] This woman in such punitive authority over others is, finally, 'a cloud over my time' (recalling, but more darkly, the steam which alone could escape the imprisoning laundry). At the end of this poem referring so openly to Irish social history, no moment of healing, aesthetic or ideological, is staged. The nearest the poem comes to traditional modes of discourse surrounding religion is its prayer-like note of invocation: '[a]ssist them now', '[a]llow us now to hear it'. But no divine or intercessor figure is set up to whom such cries could be addressed.

'Bessboro', whose subject matter is similar, takes a different tone: careful, reflective, full of compunction.[28] The only one of this group with an 'I'-speaker, it opens with a gesture of disavowal, of a kind often made during the last fifteen years or so of the century, usually by middle-class people who had lived psychologically insulated from, if physically close to, Irish society's dark places of institutional oppression.[29] Ní Chuilleanáin paradoxically uses this gesture to make plain the genuine felt implication of the speaker in what was done here, in this place, the suburbs of Cork:

> This is what I inherit –
>
> It was never my own life
>
> But a house's name I heard
>
> And others heard as warning…

The poem then recounts a visit paid to this house on a rainy day: the speaker stands at the gate and interrogates this separateness of hers. Far from being mere sad scene-setting, the rain stabs and darns, veiling distance and making a 'lace' of mist which 'hides/ Elements of the known'. This figuration is effective, making the rain suggest the immemorially and almost constitutively feminine activity of sewing, enjoined upon women in countless conduct-books and rules as a productive and regulatory discipline, to keep the glance averted and the hands out of mischief. But this rain is a form of attack,

needling the protagonist's detachment from the constricted lives of other women witnessed by this house. Further, the veiling and the 'half-drawn lace', which also, of course, connote the self-effacing modesty enjoined upon women, conceal from the poet the full reality of this previous suffering. She cannot by her visit simply penetrate the past and assimilate it. At the end '[e]arth is secret as ever': yet '[t]he blood that was sown here flowered / And all the seeds blew away.' There is finally no containing the long-term effects, bad or good, of what was done and happened here. This daring metaphor combines blood-sacrifice with 'flower[ing]', appropriating Christian figurations in which it is Christ's blood which fertilizes humanity's growth towards redemption. By virtue of this appropriation, we may in the end read the poem as an equivocal celebration: the experience of the women confined there and of their children is beyond interpretation and therefore any smug sense of possession by us, their successors, who cannot live their confinement but who perhaps also cannot imagine what 'seeds' may have escaped to blow away. This is a passage from dominating containment to the sense of possibility, from closure to openness: earth may be secret, but seeds are carried on the wind, beyond our tracking them, to new growth.

The ending of 'Bessboro', a little more hopeful than 'Translation', leads directly to the governing idea of the facing poem, 'Jesse' (p.27), one of the most beautiful in the collection, which develops more positively its predecessor's closing suggestion of a saving indeterminacy, and also of human promise despite suffering and constraint. 'Jesse', a short lyric of only twelve lines, is the climax of this group. I believe it addresses, without explicitly stating, a theme profoundly important in the poet's personal life. Ní Chuilleanáin's moral and emotional investment in questions of reproduction, the gain and loss of children, and the harsh regulation and control of these processes by past authorities in Ireland, is evident from the previous three poems, different as the legend-like first is from the latter two. I would connect this investment to the fact that she is the

mother of an adopted son, and in discussing this has said that her interest does not lie in 'the biology of heritability'. She further remarks that we 'don't know where he gets his red hair from… though we may find out some day', possibly gesturing towards the tracing by adoptees of their biological parents.[30] In the public realm this too became a painful and contested question during the 1990s, when it emerged that the authorities in mother-and-baby homes often deliberately frustrated such attempts to identify birth mothers, by the falsification of documents at the time of birth or adoption, and the subsequent withholding from now-adult adoptees, even scores of years later, of vital information.[31]

'Jesse' refers to a prominent motif in Christian iconography, the Tree of Jesse in Isaiah. Ní Chuilleanáin makes inspired use of it to elaborate an account of reproduction which stresses the sheer insubstantiality of inheritance and the impossibility of controlling a child's future life and acts. In medieval tradition, the Jesse tree is used to show the genealogy of Christ *via* David: there are versions, in stained glass, stone or wood, in churches all over Europe.[32] Christ's royal descent from Jesse and David was a strictly patriarchal one, via Joseph, and since Joseph had of course no part in the begetting of Christ, evidently a need was felt to incorporate Mary in the sequence. An important strand is the exploitation of a word-play between the Latin *virgo*, a virgin, and *virga*, a rod or stem. Typically, the Virgin Mary (*virgo*) is shown as a physical part of the upwardly shooting main branch (*virga*) of the tree, which springs from the recumbent Jesse's middle and leads up to Christ and above him the Holy Spirit. There is an 'ascending sequence' from *radix* (root), through *virga* and *flos* (flower), to *spiritus*.[33] So the iconographic tradition Ní Chuilleanáin invokes is one which does recognize the central role of the female figure. The poet evidently delights in the blunt physicality of the Jesse images, which typically show his sleeping figure with a very solidly physical, and indeed

phallic, trunk rising out of his lower torso.[34] A corresponding almost-humorous suggestion of tumescence and detumescence –

> As you lie in your sleep there grows like a lung inflating
> A tree out of your navel, enlarging and toppling
> Into its perfection when the leaves and the fruit are soft as air,
> Are drenched like capillaries, and as they swell
> They become transparent and fade away…

– is combined with an ultimate and calm acquiescence in the immateriality of inheritance. 'The true tree of knowledge' is 'good for nothing…' – nothing, that is, in the line of acquisition or hopes for self-aggrandizement via one's offspring. Taking up and developing the closing lines of 'Bessboro', this is

> …a family tree
> That each son and daughter carries the seed of,
> That will grow some time and flourish and be gone.

Children (and by extension, all human products) 'are able to give you only the light that passes through the leaves, / No lasting fruit at all'. Perhaps inspired by the effect of light through stained glass in the many Jesse windows of European cathedrals, this lovely image has Platonic overtones of the transcendence of matter by the beauty of forms. It echoes two classic English poems: Shelley's '[l]ife, like a dome of many-coloured light/ Stains the clear radiance of eternity', in *Adonais*, and Marvell's bird-soul in 'The Garden', which sits singing on a bough and 'till prepar'd for longer flight, / Waves at its wings the various light'. But Ní Chuilleanáin significantly adapts the Platonic notion of the ultimate sheer insubstantiality of matter towards her own focus on a relinquishing of the claim to control, over either one's children or the products of one's own doing and making. In this respect 'Jesse' renounces the totalizing urge to contain, dominate, or close down human impulses of playfulness, transgression, or wayward pleasure (such as those of 'a

girl /Daring and caught by ill-luck', as 'Bessboro' has it). Ideologically, then, 'Jesse' implicitly rejects the stern authoritarianism of Ireland in earlier decades of its existence, along with more general desires for personal parental ownership or control and the familist obsession with biological heritability which so often kept adoptees in ignorance of their origins. More philosophically, containing, having, is made possible only by the paradoxical recognition that we must relinquish, settling for the beautiful 'light that passes through the leaves'. And the ultimate loss of all children to all parents is reinscribed as a gain paradoxically achieved by giving up.

In terms of form, the sheer grace and coherence of the allusive language of 'Jesse' exalts and makes lyrically triumphant this renunciation. The poem has a quality of soaring which reinscribes, but with a difference, the ascent towards triumph and salvation embodied in Christ which the Jesse windows and illuminations sought to render. The difference is that Ní Chuilleanáin appropriates the medieval material to quite different ends: what she celebrates is not transcendence as completion, but a process of flowering and fruiting which is endless, like the process of signification, and which connotes freedom and lightness. So her use of Christian iconography might be described as gently ironic: the genealogy she gestures towards is one which goes on and on *escaping* the line of patriarchal descent rather than carrying it on and keeping within its linear bounds, as the biblical genealogies aim to do. Thus the phallic suggestiveness of Jesse's 'rod' is dissipated.[35] An essential quality of the Tree of Jesse depictions is this materialization of the male role in reproduction, which one might interpret as assuaging men's anxiety about its invisibility. In the tradition this virtual, counter-factual representation displaces the actuality of female gestation, so corporeally evident, just as the idea that Eve was created from Adam's body does, and as we have seen it allows the Virgin Mary in as a kind of transcendent anomaly, by virtue of her very virginity. Ní Chuilleanáin develops a disruptive reversal of this preposterous version of reproduction which escapes the

patriarchal character of the given narrative. She exploits the organic metaphor of plant growth, by which the Jesse tradition works, to make sex indeterminate: the 'you' addressed in the poem may start out as Jesse, but ultimately indicates anyone, of any gender. Discussing the autobiography of the American experimental poet Lyn Hejinian, Clair Wills observes 'a tension between the generative nature of the language of the text, and the refusal to articulate the life itself in terms of fulfilment and generation'.[36] This Ní Chuilleanáin poem offers just such a tension, despite the fact that her writing does not put up open challenges to conventional lyric form. The 'hiddenness' which John Kerrigan has identified as a characteristic of her work operates not just at thematic level, but also in the opacity of the poems: sometimes the parts seem comprehensible, but the whole is disrupted or withheld by a slightly cerebral distancing. I have argued above for the significance of this poet's being steeped in medieval culture and aesthetics: that focus on particulars which refuse assimilation to the totality (the 'one free foot', the relic teeth of St. Margaret of Cortona listening and smiling) is also perhaps inspired by medieval ways of thinking. Together with her knowledge of Irish cultural traditions, this makes Ní Chuilleanáin a gifted mediator between past and other forms of understanding, and urban, globalized postmodernity.

What is the role of 'Jesse' in the informal sequence I have been noting within *Reindeer*? 'Jesse' subverts the notion of the nuclear family based on biological relationship; but it does so at the opposite end of a spectrum of freedom and creativity from the coercive institutions of the past. Where industrial schools and orphanages so often, as their survivors' accounts show, denied or could not offer their inmates the chance to form emotional attachments, and the Magdalene asylums separated young mothers from their infants, Ní Chuilleanáin's refunctioning of the Jesse Tree can be read as proposing a consolatory passage beyond either parent-child presence or its absolute prevention and denial, figuring this consolation as 'the light that passes through the leaves'. The earlier

poem 'Balloon', first called 'The Adoption Order', uses the image of a 'lighter-than-air balloon' to suggest the situation of the child now 'held and freed'.[37]

I turn finally to 'Autun' (p.32) and 'Crossing the Loire' (p.34), which immediately succeeds it. Both 'Loire' and 'Autun' are about holding and relinquishing the beloved dead; they concern the struggle to attain self-recognition and then contain and hold the sense of self in the face of death. Both, like 'Borders', stage the poet as speaker, and in both she is driving, but now through France. Both also allude to the sister-musician motif, and to the cello scales which are the sign of the poet's mother.

'Autun' begins sadly as the poet drives in the rain away from the town in Burgundy, whose vast cathedral is named for Lazarus and holds his alleged tomb. It also has a vivid tympanum showing the Last Judgement and the re-membered dead being raised. The poem meditates on the ultimate confinement, in the tomb, and its wished-for opposite, resurrection. As she drives, the radio's music is drowned by 'other voices' of the unnamed dead, who have 'no music but the skeleton tune / The bones make humming'. This unheard music is, however, evidently made on cello or violin: 'the knuckles warning each other / to wait for the pause and then the long low note' which is held down 'like a headstone' by the middle fingers of the left hand. Echoing other bone-motifs in *Reindeer*, this also signals the presence of the lost sister and mother.[38] The speaker feels that her own body does not always hold together or contain her:

> How often was I taken apart,
>
> the ribs opened like a liquor press,
>
> and for decades I heard nothing from my shoulders –
>
> my hair flying, at large like a comet

but also that she is

> …often reconstructed,
>
> wrapped and lagged in my flesh, and again

mapped and logged, rolled up and put away

safely, for ever.

This unsettles the sense of self-possession and bewilders us by forcing a realisation that containment, holding together, is sometimes our desired state, but sometimes this is swapped for an enabling relinquishment of subjective unity and wholeness. The 'mapped and logged' self may also be the dead one, beyond the hope or possibility of good change or renewal (controlled, deathlike, as with the 'sober monoglot bands' of 'Borders'), while a disassembled self might, with exhilaration, fly 'at large, like a comet'. This parallels the seeds that blow away from Bessboro, and the 'leaves and the fruit as soft as air' in 'Jesse'. The final stanza of 'Autun' is a joyful resurrection scene, in which the many deaths of the suffering 'I' give many births to a 'she' who 'dances out of the womb / bursting with script'. These 'mornings of my risings' are linked, by the down-to-earth 'I can hardly see in the steam', with the displaced spirits of the Magdalene laundry-girls from 'Translation', where only the steam can giggle, dance and slip away. This 'she' is another of those possible selves who were held always *in potentia* within the 'I', however dead and closed it seemed. 'She', however, is also a kind of shadow or avatar of the dead sister, whose continuing identity is reaffirmed at the end in this joyful proclamation of her resurrection in the poet's recreating memory:

She fills the ground and the sky

with ranked and shaken banners,

the scrolls of her nativity.

I stammer out music that echoes like hammers.

Ní Chuilleanáin is again drawing on Christian ideas and images. Certainly the Song of Songs' praise of the beloved woman is here: 'Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?'[39] Other contexts are under the surface, especially the lively medieval debates about literal

bodily resurrection, in which the twelfth-century theologian, encyclopaedist and author of a commentary on the Song of Songs, Honorius Augustodunensis (probably named from Autun), was a major figure.[40] Ní Chuilleanáin is always drawn to anti-dualist views of human selfhood as inseparable from the real lived body. So the medieval learning forming the poem's ideas is infused by an intense desire to hold and contain the beloved dead, a desire which the poem triumphantly negotiates in its concluding figure, which relinquishes them only into a larger, cosmic recognition, 'fill[ing] the ground and the sky…'

'Crossing the Loire' (p.34) describes the poet's arduous annual drive from Ireland to Northern Italy: like 'Borders' it is about crossing a bridge. Exhausted by the sheer relentless effort of this journey, she longs only to stop and rest:

My road traced before me in a dance
Of three nights and three days,
Of sidestepping hills and crescent lights blinding me
(If there was just a bar counter and ice and a glass, and a room
upstairs…)

Then, half-dozing at the wheel, she imagines herself a guide: the female river-spirit, who speaks the final ten lines. The journey is pilgrimage-like, with its ritualized three days and three nights, and indeed the river-goddess speaks of Rome as the destination '[w]here the road gallops up to the dome as big as the sun'. However, this guide, a surrogate-mother, herself 'humming the song about the estuary, and the delights / Of the salt ocean', promises no easy prospect to her weary listener. This is how the poem ends:

You will see your sister going ahead of you
And she will not need to rest, but you must lie
In the dry air of your hotel where the traffic grinds before dawn,
The cello changing gear at the foot of the long hill,

And think of the story of the suitors on horseback

Getting ready to trample up the mountain of glass.

So the sister's presence is promised, and *she* has transcended the need for rest, though only by already reached the ultimate destination. This promised vision allows a moving disparity between the poet, still struggling onward towards Italy, and her dead sibling, who has passed beyond struggle but also beyond retrieval. The final image is, again, from an Andrew Lang tale, in this case 'The Princess on the Glass Hill', in which only the true prince, who seems a peasant, is able to ride to the top of the mountain where the princess is confined, be recognized, and claim her hand.[41] Ní Chuilleanáin adapts this motif of the impossible ordeal, which the knightly suitors all fail, from its context of gallant courtship and turns it into a more general symbol of all striving. It is these failed, non-princely suitors without magical powers who mirror her state: she too feels doomed to failure and must continually resume her hard journey, in weariness and discouragement (the last line's 'trample' vividly indicating this glum persistence).

'Loire' achieves a moving articulation of attachment, loss and longing. It is set, somewhat unusually for Ní Chuilleanáin, within the ordinary life of modernity: the car, the bar counter, the hotel room with the sound of constant traffic. This gives 'Loire' the texture of a concrete struggle. The helper who comes 'rising up out of the water' to outline the future echoes those wise companions in many journey-poems, from Dante's Virgil to Boland's Sappho in *The Journey*, but is also a projection out of the speaker's own self-consoling imagination.[42] Crossing the river is an annual rite of passage, but also a sign for inner growth and the struggle both for insight and a bearable continuance. The poet must endure and persist, lying awake through sterility and physical attenuation ('dry', 'grind[ing]'). The dead are raised, by the power of memory and longing, within the mind of the bereaved, but never as controllable presences, only glimpsed in this virtual realm

where the lost sister might be seen poignantly 'going ahead of you'. In this realm, too, the gear-grinding of the HGVs is transformed into that remembered cello music played by the dead mother to the unborn sister in her womb.

The climbing cello notes powerfully symbolize both the grace of aesthetic performance – music as order, calm and resolution – and the experience of past love, encouragement and steadfast persistence. The summit of the glass mountain parallels the top of the scale and looks forward to the projected end of the poet's solitary drive. All stand for a kind of arrival which can be enacted only in the heart: the recognition and recovery of the lost, relinquished ones:

> My sister before she was born listened for hours:
>
> A grumble of thick string, and then climbing
>
> To a high note that lifted
>
> that lifted its head
>
> like a seal –
>
> To a high note that lifted its head like a seal in the water ('A Capitulary', p.40).

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[1] Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p.27.

[2] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. 1984. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 186.

[3] *The Girl who Married the Reindeer* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 2001).

[4] A 'Coda' contains two versions, from the Irish song 'Cill Cais' and from an episode of *Piers Plowman* respectively.

[5] Ní Chuilleanáin said in 1995: 'I have not yet understood why it is so important to me to write about borders, the crossing of borders, the moving of borders. This probably has something to do with the Irish border, wityh its position, with the emotions which one feels on crossing it. I've been considering this lately, that I have other emotions which are very strong and which I don't understand. For example, crossing the Alps or crossing a natural border like the Pyrenees…' Interview with Inés Praga at the Glasgow ESSE conference, in *Ireland in Writing: Interviews with Writers and Academics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp.83-92.

[6] For the grotesque supernatural female who presages death, see the extracts from *Togail Bruidne da Derga* and *Aided Con Culainn*, selected and edited by Máire Herbert, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing IV*, edited by Angela Bourke *et al.* (Cork: Cork University Press), pp.264-5: 'Standing on one foot, with one hand raised, and in a single breath', she chants her prophecy of the death of King Conaire (p.265). I thank Máire Herbert and Kay Muhr for discussion of this motif.

[7] *The Brazen Serpent* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1994), p.34.

[8] She contrasts her husband, poet MacDara Woods', writing about particular places with her own desire to maintain distance and typicality. Interview with Leslie Williams, in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, edited by Susan Shaw Sailer (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 29-44.
[9] She records her mother's adamant refusal to have a crucifix in the house but readily acknowledges her own interest in sacred space, liminality and sacred-profane meeting-points (Ray 1996, 63-73. Elsewhere she notes 'the Protestant war on icons of the body, rituals, and material ceremonies' ('Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: The *Cailleach* Writes about the Renaissance', *Southern Review* 1995, 570-580.)
[10] *The Brazen Serpent*, pp.24, 25.
[11] 'Mary Magdalene [is] the meeting place of the sacred and the profane; she's the [*sic*] femininity and the body, the presence of the body – all this copious weeping. And the issue of blood – menstruation – comes into that as well. There's plenty there…' She then mentions Crashaw's use of Mary Magdalene in his ecstatic poem 'The Weeper' (67-8). Kevin Ray interview, *Eire-Ireland* (1996), 63-73. She also says 'my Mary Magdalene is the Titian visionary, not the figure at the foot of the Cross' (Williams, p.38); and 'she stands for the border between the sacred and the profane because she is a person who transgressed… she appears as someone who was not doing what was expected of her and remaining in her category' (Praga interview, p.91).
[12] *The Magdalene Sermon* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1989), p.33.
[13] 'Acts and Monuments', 576.
[14] Ray, 68.
[15] Dillon Johnston, ''Our Bodies' Eyes and Writing Hands': Secrecy and Sensuality in Ní Chuilleanáin's Art', in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, edited by Anthony Bradley and Maryann Valliulis (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp.187-211.
[16] See for instance *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1991).
[17] 'Acts and Monuments', 575.
[18] By 'wreck' I mean a range of events including the steep decline in church attendance and the even steeper one in religious vocations, together with the widespread discrediting of church authority by the many scandals, including the hypocritical or abusive sexual activities of Catholic clergy.
[19] On the functioning of the Irish Lock Hospitals in the containment of venereal disease and the stigmatisation of women, see Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: A Study of Magdalene Asylums in Ireland* (Piltown, Co. Kilkenny: Congrave Press, 2001, pp.134-5, 160-66, 210-11.
[20] *The Brazen Serpent* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1994), p.10.
[21] Jessica Benjamin discusses 'the mother's work of representation or thinking (and *work*, as the nineteenth-century metaphor for transformations of energy, seems an appropriate term)' (Benjamin, p.29).
[22] The poet said in a 1997 interview that she wants 'to write about laundries, institutions, kitchens…' and expresses her interest in 'the domestic life of convents, institutions, colleges'. While she did not then define an ideological attitude to such institutions, in *Reindeer* a deep distress and compunction emerges about their oppressive character in twentieth-century Ireland, if not at other historical periods.
[23] The reindeer has metamorphosed from the bull in Andrew Lang's 'The Black Bull of Norroway' (*The Blue Fairy Book* (New York: Dover, 1965), p.380.
[24] See Gary Culliton, 'Last Days of a Laundry', *Irish Times* 25 September 1996 for a specific reference to one such event in 1993. On that occasion, 133 women's bodies were disinterred and cremated before reburial of the remains in Glasnevin cemetery: the cremation of the bodies may have prompted the powerful opening of the poem ('the soil frayed and sifted').
[25] A characteristic of the life of religious sisters previously noted with some asperity at the ending of the earlier poem '*J'ai Mal à nos Dents'* (*The Magdalene Sermon*, p.29).
[26] 'Foreword', *French Feminists on Religion*, edited by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2002), p.xi.
[27] It is important to recall that the nuns who ran orphanages, Magdalen laundries and industrial schools were carrying out the state's work: the close collaboration between these orders and officialdom was shown during the later 1990s. The state financed the incarceration of various individuals and groups who did not fit into its oppressively familist and patriarchal ethos. See Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan, *Suffer the Little Children: the Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools* (Dublin: New Island, 1999), the television documentary *States of Fear* (RTE, April 1998), and Pádraig O Móráin, 'State involvement in mistreatment of children exposed', *Irish Times* May 1, 1999. The undoubted instances of harshness and cruelty by particular individuals among religious do not exonerate the state, or indeed the whole society, from blame for what was a whole coherent and uncontested system of oppression, an intimate combination of emotional suppression, sexual prudery, class prejudice, and misogyny.

[28] June Goulding, who worked as a midwife at Bessboro, gives an excoriating eye-witness account of its cruelties and hardships in her memoir *The Light in the Window* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 2000 and reprints 2005, 2006).

[29] See Nicholas Daly's acerbic comments on willed amnesia and Pharisaic self-congratulation in contemporary Ireland about the multiplying manifestations of earlier cruelty and of repressions official and concealed, while discussing the reception of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* in the 1990s. 'From Elvis to the Fugitive: Globalization and Recent Irish Cinema' (*European English Messenger* 3, 3 (December 1999), 262-274.

[30] Ray, 69.

[31] See Mike Milotte, *Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland's Baby Export Business* (Dublin: New Island Press, 1997), pp.169, 173 ff. Milotte quotes Rev. Cecil Barrett, author of a 1952 officially sanctioned Catholic handbook on adoption, who makes it clear that this process of concealment and withholding was a systematic one (pp.48-52).

[32] Isaiah 11.1-2, Matthew 1.1-25, setting out the genealogy of Christ. See Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), pp.15-22, and Arthur Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934). I thank Jennifer O'Reilly for illuminating discussion of the iconography of Jesse and for showing me examples in manuscripts, carvings and stained glass.

[33] Watson, p.3.

[34] See Watson, Plates II, III, VII, XI, XIV, XV, XVII, XVIII, XXIII, XXVI and XXVII for particularly graphic examples.

[35] The language in the King James Version is markedly phallic: 'And there shall come forth a *rod* out of the *stem* of Jesse, and a *Branch* shall grow out of his roots' (Isaiah 11.1, my italics).

[36] Clair Wills, 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice'*, Critical Quarterly* 36, 3 (1996): 34-52.

[37] *Magdalene Sermon*, p.21. See Ray, p.38.

[38] 'The Angel in the Stone' (p.15), makes robustly physical references to bodily breaking ('you have heard / [t]he twang of the waves breaking our bones'), while 'The Cloister of Bones' (p.16) develops the trope of a sheltering, safe building considered as a body: a displaced image of maternal holding and good containment.

[39] Song of Songs, 10.16.

[40] See Bynum, pp.12, 94, 240, 243, 395, n. 6.

[41] Lang, Andrew, 'The Princess on the Glass Hill'. *The Blue Fairy Book* (New York: Dover, 1965), p.332.

[42] Dublin: Arlen House, 1987, pp.39-42.