

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Hofstetter's Serenade
La serenata di Hofstetter

Ten poems translated by Conci Mazzullo



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Introduction

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Traveller of the Word

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The translations spring from a meeting dictated by an intimate necessity. *Hofstetter's Serenade*, which gives the title to the collection of poems has an interesting story of its own, as the string quartet concert for violin and piano was originally mistaken for Haydn's composition. The poems by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, often narrative poems, are inhabited by protagonists who come to the fore from history, from society and from deeply rooted experiences of her "history". A veil of empathetic feel and cathartic imagery filter defeat, tragedy, famine and slavery. Eiléan's endorsement of the enclaustrated nun's choice in "Inside The House" and "She Was At the Haymaking" spreads out as a powerful heritage witness to courage handed down by generations of challenging women.

I already knew the poem about James Connolly that Eiléan had written in memory of him for the 1916 Anniversary. It was published in *The Irish Times*, commissioned by the Irish Writers Centre, who had asked six poets to write a single poem dedicated to each day of the Easter rising. Eiléan was probably inspired by the words of the "Proclamation of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Ireland", where James Connelly addressed both "Irishmen and Irishwomen" willing to grant them "the right to the ownership of Ireland to pursue the happiness of the whole nation", including children as well, "cherishing all of the children of the nation equally".

In the poem, Eiléan recognizes in all of them, as well as in the lower classes victims of capitalism, the hopeless souls bustling to reach Dante's boat heading to Purgatory to be freed from hell. She also sees the lustful and Paolo's and Francesca's souls buffeted by the airs of love, unable to oppose the strength of the hellish whirlwind. The word *Enough* resonates throughout the text denoting the endless wait for change, but finally Connelly's sacrifice lets glimpse that women and men will welcome the inner strength of his testament.

"Hofstetter's Serenade" opens with "the tight bundle of grief" that has melted through 25 years from Eiléan's sister's

death. Searching for her leads Eiléan to follow the musical thread her sister had left her, which restlessly “catches its breath”, freely flows weaving textures of notes. It twists through music stands and instruments, and after leaving the concert-hall circularly traces back her sister’s childhood. Since she was eleven she had felt “the pure line of sound” lifting her into a fairytale dimension, music let her feel she could have fascinated an emperor a thousand years before. The poem gains vigor when Eiléan mentions the silence which interrupted the restless and endless waving sound! Eiléan is sensitive to the poem irregular sound patterns (ABCBA; ABAACDB) and diffused musicality, which link her pursuit of sound throughout the lines. Repetition of consonant sounds (internal rhymes, bright, tight, over and under, grows and rose) and the idea of movement focuses on a sequence of 7 gerunds chasing one another, rising, dipping, landing, catching, flowing along, breathing, tracing. The pronoun “she” is repeated 5 times to evoke her sister’s presence gradually fading until silence. Here her verse is often deceptively smooth and simple, but it can plunge down in an abyss or fly up to the celestial sphere.

One of the poems that I deem as geometrically perfect in its spherical allure, is “She Was At the Haymaking” which starts with the protagonist’s immersion in nature, contemplating the tide *courting* the land with its gentle pushes, while she’s attending to her job. Her solitary experience is counterpointed by a group of people ready for something momentous to happen. She’s on the watch both for the rolling wave and for the car and from the static circular movement she takes off to a different fate. “So I’ll go”. From the scent of hay, to the roar of the car, from her deep religious and spiritual roots she bravely moves to the future, to the unexpected world of self-denial across the Atlantic. From the circular *turning* the hay, at the river *mouth* to the *curved edge* of the tide, thinking of the *rolling wave* she then goes off to her challenging destiny.

What I think is also important to underline here is Eiléan’s Dante’s spiritual heritage that strengthens her choice of tercets and the last conclusive line apart from the last tercet, as in his Cantos to give emphasis to “the letter took three weeks crossing the sea”.

Throughout the whole collection hovers the “Architectural Metaphor”¹ which, beyond establishing the convent foundation conceals/reveals, the mystery of the foundress’s mummy’s head oriented to the west, through the sudden opening of a hatch.

“Inside The House”, tunnelling its potential, discloses by dotting the poem with the preposition “in” and the place adverb “inside”. From the title itself where a nun who voluntarily joined a cloistered convent moves *inside the house*, *inside* the building, *in* she [*goes inside*], *inside*, and finds her secret escape getting deeper, plumbing the basement or *searching inside the chimneys*. By getting deeper *inside*, where no man could violate the threshold, *inside the door*, by getting through the chimney she gets rid of constraints and finds her freedom taking over the man’s phallic role of penetrating the “physicality” of a dark void. And she finally joyfully says “You’d be black all over it”.

The same happens in *She Was At the Haymaking* where two opposed worlds are determined by the sensual world of nature and the presence of *houses* evoking enclosures, the family *house* and the nuns’ mother *house* which will entail a new world full of discipline and rules.

Other confining structures are recurring in the collection *Hofstetter’s Serenade*. *Rooms*, no longer *houses*, as strongholds appear in “Seaweed” where the female protagonist holds a privileged view point on the darkening storm of the 1916 Easter Rising, on the 24th April the day after her marriage, inside a *room* delimited by “smashed windowpanes”.

¹ “The Architectural Metaphor”, *The Brazen Serpent*, Gallery Press, 1994, 14.

However, in different contexts, *rooms* spatialize and expand into wider and more hopeful perspectives in “For James Connolly” where, from a hellish backdrop fighting against a tornado “that lifts the lids off *houses*” “waiting for the wind to change”, Irishmen and Irishwomen can glimpse a “*painted room*” in which music can be shared.

Usually Eiléan’s *houses, windows, doors, cloisters*, marking limits shelter secrets and mysteries. In “Carr’s Lane” the *house* hosting a library trespasses and crosses over finally falling into decay while hinting at the historical trade of beef or butter with the French ships carrying slaves to the Caribbean. Here History takes over its predominant role in Eiléan’s poetry and houses the more miserable *cabins* and Famine (1845-1849), in “Maria Edgeworth in 1847”. In this poem the narration focuses on a destitute young boy from the *cabin*, now a dock worker, often far from *home*, who brings meals to the community limiting starvation and helps Maria Edgeworth, whose basket of food gets lighter at every *cabin door*, feed the hungry families.

Recalling “Gloss/Clós/Glas”² from *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*, well encompasses the architectural metaphor of *doors, room, locked presses, locked door* and sheds light to the essential quest for significant language. In the poem the gender discrimination of the possessive adjectives His/Her, unknown to the Irish language, crucially puts into perspective the importance of words and the capture of the most suitable nuance of meaning. The highlights in the poem centre on the title “Gloss/Clós/Glas”, where Gloss means a brief explanation of an obscure word used in manuscripts/Clós means school courtyard /Glas means green as adjective/lock as a noun, which launch an explorative journey through elusive words that like “rags of language are streaming like weathervanes, like weeds in water [...] turn with the tide [...] slippery like the silk thighs of a tomcat...”.

Eiléan, as the scholar “who has still not gone to bed”, “hunting words [...] all night” and struggles with words, as it is visible in *Hofstetter’s Serenade*, enters worlds of words which are always crossed and travelled in different directions. We can’t decline her invitation to visit the pantagruelic visionary mouth of her poems, which open up unexpected sceneries, landscapes of the outer and inner world showing the linguistic mastery of an indefatigable traveller of the word.

² Gloss/Clós/Glas, *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*, Gallery Press, 2001, 46.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Hofstetter's Serenade

“The Cat Dinner”

We knew they were there, their flattened masks,
and that when they withdrew into lunar shadow
there would be no witness, a cobwebby silence.

Lips open but speech fails, round the half-cleared table,
sitting there, but strangers, our fussy notes shuffled,
lying at random. We made the long journey

to deliver the gesture, but who has noticed us?
– like the food left outside for visiting spirits
which is gone next morning, but did the cats eat it?

“Hofstetter's Serenade”

(Máire Ní Chuilleanáin 1944-1990)

I felt the draught just now as I was keying in the numbers –
the date of her death, going on twenty-five years ago;
it is May but the bright evening is turning colder,
the tight bundle of grief has opened out and spread
wide across these years she knows nothing of, and if I go
in search of her I must unwind and stretch out the thread
she left us, so it twines like a long devious border
turning between the music stands, over and under
the kettledrums and the big bass lying on its side,
but it plunges away leaving the concert-hall behind
and catches her at the start, in the year she was eleven, when
it first rose out of her, the pure line of sound that grows
rising dipping never landing twice on the same spot, then
catching its breath and then flowing along as even
as her own breathing, smooth like a weaver's thread
back and forth tracing. It weaves and it hops again,
the arched finger nails down the note but it overflows.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

La serenata di Hofstetter

Ten poems translated by Conci Mazzullo¹

“La cena dei gatti”

Sapevano che erano lì, le loro piatte maschere nere,
e che quando si rintanavano all'ombra della luna
nessun testimone, silenzio di ragnatela.

Labbra aperte ma silenzio, intorno alla tavola mezza sparecchiata,
seduti lì, estranei, le nostre febbrili note mischiate,
messe lì a caso. Abbiamo fatto un lungo viaggio

per recapitare gesti, ma chi si è accorto di noi?
– come cibo lasciato fuori per gli spiriti
sparito il giorno dopo, ma l'hanno mangiato i gatti?

“La serenata di Hofstetter”
(Máire Ní Chuilleanáin 1944-1990)

Ho sentito l'alito di vento proprio ora mentre
digitavo i numeri – data della sua
morte, venticinque anni fa;
è maggio ma la luce della sera, fredda si fa
il denso grumo di dolore si è
sciolto e disperso negli anni a lei ignoti, e
se la cerco devo srotolare il filo che
ci ha lasciato, che si intreccia
lungo confine, aggirandosi tra leggi, sopra e sotto
i tamburi e il contrabasso a fianco,
ma si tuffa via lasciando la sala del concerto
e la coglie all'inizio, quando undicenne,
affiorò la linea pura del suono che cresce
sollevandosi inabissandosi, senza atterrare
due volte nello stesso posto, poi
riprendendo fiato e fluendo, lineare
come il suo respiro, liscio come filo di telaio
avanti e indietro. Fila e supera ancora, con dita
arcuate giù sulla nota, ma lo sovrasta.

¹ The poems by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, originally published in *The Mother House* (2019), and their translations appear by kind permission of the author and The Gallery Press (<www.gallerypress.com>).

She was eleven years old. A thousand years before,
she could have been married to an emperor, she was sure
she was able to consent on the spot, as the notes wrapped
 around her, and
she went on playing as her eyes opened; like words,
like the long serpent that can only swim upstream, like time,
the line drew her along, the string and the bow, towards
the moment I saw the breath leaving her body, and the
 silence began.

“A Slow March”

Lento, as the threshold wearing down,
as the hesitant writer’s hand,
the man with the trombone
stands waiting for the moment,
the horn solo *lento* finishing then the pause
before he slowly lifts the long slider

and the girl with the piccolo
goes on waiting her turn, her five bars,
watching while he plays, her spine
tense as the hairpins pinching her hair
holding it smooth in its place
– one eye on the score, counting quavers

– and what harm if these characters
were to wear down to a trace and be
lost like the trace of the old defensive wall?
It would still take longer than
the notes of the trombone,
and the piccolo too, fading away.

Aveva undici anni. Mille anni prima,
sposa di un imperatore,
sarebbe potuta diventare, era certa
che avrebbe potuto subito acconsentire, mentre le note
la avvolgevano, e
continuò a suonare quando gli occhi si aprirono, come parole,
come sinuoso serpente che va, controcorrente, come il tempo
la linea la portò, la corda e l'arco,
verso il momento che vidi il respiro lasciare il suo corpo, e
iniziò il silenzio.

“Una marcia lenta”

Lento, come la soglia che si consuma,
come l'esitante mano di uno scrittore
l'uomo col trombone
è in attesa del momento,
il *lento* assolo del corno sta finendo, poi pausa
prima che lentamente sollevi il lungo pistone

e la ragazza con l'ottavino
aspettando il suo turno, le sue cinque battute,
lo osserva suonare, la sua colonna
tesa come mollette che pinzano i capelli
fermandoli delicatamente
– un occhio al conteggio, guardando le crome

– e che sventura se questi personaggi
dovessero ridursi a una traccia ed essere
perduti come resti di un muro difensivo?
Ci vorrebbe molto di più delle
note del trombone,
e dell'ottavino che sfumano via.

“Inside The House”

She crossed the footbridge, the bell
 was ringing from the chapel, they were there
 expecting her. In she went,
 inside, like breathing, her quest
 for the kernel, the seed
 that might burst and make a way
 of release for her, escape –
 even if its hiding place was a shell,
 even if it had to be secret
 as the fragile yolk that held the giant’s life:

she plumbed the basement and searched inside the chimneys.

She laughed telling the story.
 O, you’d do that, she said,
 we couldn’t have a man inside the door.
 The kitchen chimney
 and I loved it,
 well I remember
 the old days, you’d be
 black all over after it.

“Seaweed”

*for Thomas Dillon and Geraldine Plunkett,
 married April 23rd 1916*

Everything in the room got in her way,
 the table mirror catching the smoke
 and the edges of smashed windowpanes.
 Her angle downward on the scene
 gave her a view of hats and scattered stones.
 She saw her brother come out to help
 with the barricades, the wrecked tram
 blocking off Earl Street, then back inside.

– and for the man in the room, obscured
 by her shadow against the window
 the darkening was a storm shifting his life
 – he wondered, where were they now, and would
 this perch above the scene blow apart soon,
 and he imagined the weeds that sink their filaments
 between rocks to nourish a life in water
 until all of a sudden they’re sheared away to sea.

And out at sea the gunboat was bucking and plunging,
 throwing up spray. The weeds are slapped
 back again on sharp rocks beside beaches
 that are sucked bare by the storm after this one,
 their holdfast plucked away. He was thinking,
 would they find a place and lose it, blown away
 again and find another, on the western coast,
 as the seaweed is landed, a darkness in the dark water.

“Dentro la casa”

Lei attraversò il ponte, nella cappella la campana
risuonava, erano lì
e l'aspettavano. Entrò,
dentro come un respiro, ricercando
il baccello, il seme
che potrebbe esplodere e darle
una via di fuga –
anche se il suo nascondersi fosse un guscio
anche se custodisse un segreto
come il fragile tuorlo che
teneva il gigante in vita:

scandagliò il sotterraneo e cercò dentro i camini.

Rise raccontando la sua storia
Oh, lo facevi, diceva,
nessun uomo poteva varcare la soglia.
Il camino della cucina
mi piaceva,
ricordo bene
i vecchi tempi,
diventavi tutta nera dopo.

“Alghe”

*per Thomas Dillon e Geraldine Plunkett,
sposati il 23 aprile 1916.*

Ogni cosa nella stanza le dava impaccio,
lo specchio del tavolo catturava il fumo
e i bordi dei vetri della finestra fracassati.
Il suo sguardo giù sulla scena
le restituì l'immagine di cappelli e pietre sparse.
Vide suo fratello uscire a mettere su le barricate, il tram distrutto
che bloccava Earl Street, poi rientrò.

– e per l'uomo nella stanza, oscurato
dall'ombra di lei contro la finestra
il farsi buio fu una tempesta che cambiava il corso della vita
– si chiese dove fossero ora, e se
il loro osservatorio sulla scena sarebbe esploso,
e lui immaginava le alghe che affondavano i loro filamenti
tra le rocce per nutrire una vita in acqua
sin quando all'improvviso non siano strappate via in mare.

E fuori in mare la cannoniera cavalcando l'onda,
tirava su la spuma. Le alghe sbattute
ancora indietro, su rocce affilate, accanto alle spiagge
denudate dopo l'impeto della tempesta,
il loro fortino strappato via. Lui stava pensando
avrebbero trovato e perso un posto – ancora una esplosione –
e trovato un altro sulla costa occidentale,
quando l'alga si posa, un'oscurità nell'acqua scura.

“She Was At The Haymaking”

She was down in the small field
turning the last swathes of hay
on the slope facing the river mouth,

each time she came back up
she saw the wave so gently courting
the land, with shallow pushes

and the curved edge of the tide
making its way upstream.
She was alone in the field

– they were up in the house with Mary
whose bag was packed, waiting for the car
to bring her on her first stage,

the start of her long voyage
away to the far shores
of America and the novitiate.

She worked on with the rake
thinking of the rolling wave,
an eye watching for the car.

When she heard it on the road
she brought the rake up with her
on the steep path to the house.

They were all there in the parlour,
Mary sitting in the middle,
her face amazed. ‘I can’t go’.

‘Now that it’s time, I can’t go.’
Her parents said nothing. Her sister
had come to bid her goodbye,

now she said ‘So I’ll go’.
She shook a small bit of hay
out of her hair. She washed her hands,

she took up the bag and went off with the driver
to a house full of rules – so far away
that when she wrote to say she was happy

the letter took three weeks crossing the sea.

“Era lì a fare fieno”

Era giù al campo
rivoltando gli ultimi fasci di fieno
sul pendio davanti la bocca del fiume,

ogni volta che ritornava
vedeva l'onda delicata corteggiare
la terra, con lievi spinte

e il ciglio rotondo della marea
farsi avanti su per la corrente.
Era sola nel campo

– loro erano su in casa con Mary
la borsa pronta, in attesa della macchina
per portarla alla prima tappa,

inizio di un lungo viaggio
via per rive lontane
di America e noviziato.

Continuò col rastrello
pensando all'onda rotolante,
un occhio attento alla macchina.

Quando la sentì sulla strada
portò su il rastrello con sé
sull'erto sentiero verso casa.

Erano tutti lì nella sala,
Mary seduta in mezzo,
col viso attonito. ‘Non posso andare’.

‘Ora che è il momento, non posso’
I genitori in silenzio. Sua sorella
era venuta a salutarla,

‘Allora vado io’ disse,
scosse via il fieno
dai capelli. Si lavò le mani

prese la borsa e andò via con l'autista
verso una casa piena di regole – così lontana
che quando scriveva una lettera per dire che era felice

ci volevano tre settimane per attraversare il mare

“Carr’s Lane”

You can see the tall front door
but don’t expect to be admitted.
On your left is Carr’s Lane,
at the corner a newspaper shop;

up the lane a door, stone steps
worn pale by rain and people climbing,
unlocks at the agreed time
on quiet days for callers they know.

Scholars disagree about
Carr’s Lane, is it *cart’s lane* corrupted?
Or was there a prosperous
local merchant family called Carr?

– They could have grown rich selling
butter to the transatlantic trade
or beef abroad. If their books
gave their story, those have all been cleared.

The dealer came one Monday
early, the shelves were bare before noon,
the library is closed off –
dangerous, woodworm in the floorboards.

“Il vicolo Carr”

Puoi vedere l'alta porta d'ingresso
ma non aspettarti di poter entrare.
Alla tua sinistra c'è il vicolo Carr,
all'angolo un negozio di giornali;

su per il vicolo una porta, gradini di pietra
impalliditi dalla pioggia e persone che vi salgono,
si apre in tempi stabiliti
in giorni tranquilli per quelli che conoscono.

Gli studiosi non sono unanimi sul
Vicolo Carr, è forse corruzione di *Vicolo Cart*?
O lì c'era una famiglia benestante
di mercanti chiamata Carr?

– Avrebbero potuto arricchirsi vendendo
burro per il commercio transatlantico
oppure manzo all'estero. Se i loro libri
raccontassero la loro storia, sarebbero stati eliminati.

Il gestore venne un lunedì
presto, gli scaffali nudi prima di mezzogiorno
la biblioteca chiude –
pericolosi, tarli nelle tavole del pavimento.

“The Light”

for Damhnait Ní Riordáin

Come out, I say, and you all come to the light.
I look for her, she’s there,
the sunlight glancing up from the shining leaves
wavers on her face
as she consults the rose-bush, the light moving
in slow time with her hair.

At the end of the garden where tall trees shiver
the river was in spate.
We walked down there at dawn to get rid of the noise
of the night’s debate,
leaving the table with the bottles and empty glasses,
Socrates and his fate

in *Phaedo*, in the Great Books of the World edition
on thin Bible paper
laid open, we left them to look at the river rushing
down to Askeaton,
the tall Desmond castle, the friary beyond the bridge,
in their desolation.

We turned back again, to wash the glasses and arrange
the room before her parents
rose up. She stopped to consult the rose-bush, the risen sun
blazed in its ranges;
her face shone green in the glancing light, I remember
across all the changes –

and that they had arrived in the dark, the small shy moths
lined up, wings packed tight,
crowded under the lamp that still shone empty
recalling the hours of night.

“La luce”

per Damhnait Ní Riordáin

Esci, dico, e tu verrai alla luce.
La cerco, è lì,
la luce del sole che affiora dalle foglie splendenti
ondeggia sul suo volto
mentre consulta il cespuglio di rose, la luce che si muove
al passo lento dei suoi capelli.

In fondo al giardino dove rabbriviscono gli alberi alti
il fiume era in piena.
Camminammo laggiù all'alba per liberarci del rumore
del dibattito notturno,
lasciando bottiglie e bicchieri vuoti a tavola,
Socrate e il suo fato

nel *Fedone*, nell'edizione dei 'Grandi libri del mondo'
su sottile carta Bibbia
aperta, li lasciammo a guardare il fiume impetuoso
giù verso Askeaton,
l'alto castello di Desmond e il monastero oltre il ponte,
nella loro desolazione.

Ritornammo, a lavare i bicchieri e sistemare
la stanza prima che i suoi genitori
si alzassero. Lei smise di consultare il cespuglio di rose, il sole sorto
ne infuocava il profilo;
Il suo volto risplendeva di verde nel raggio di luce, io ricordo
attraverso tutti i mutamenti –

che erano giunte nell'oscurità, le piccole falene timide
allineate, con ali pigiate,
affollate sotto la lampada che ancora inutilmente risplendeva
evocando le ore della notte.

“For James Connolly”

i

When I think of all the false beginnings...
The man was a pair of hands,
the woman another pair, to be had more cheaply,
the wind blew, the children were thirsty –

when he passed by the factory door he saw them,
they were moving and then waiting, as many
as the souls that crowded by Dante’s boat

that never settled in the water –
what weight to ballast that ferry?
They are there now, as many

as the souls blown by the winds of their desire,
the airs of love, not one of them weighing
one ounce against the tornado

that lifts the lids off houses, that spies
where they crouch together inside
until the wind sucks them out.

It is only wind, but what braced muscle, what earthed foot
can stand against it, what voice so loud
as to be heard shouting *Enough?*

ii

He had driven the horse in the rubbish cart, he knew
the strength in the neck under the swishing mane,
he knew how to tell her to turn, to back or stand.

He knew where the wind hailed from, he studied
its language, it blew in spite of him.
He got tired waiting for the wind to change,

as we are exhausted waiting for that change,
for the voices to shout *Enough*, for the hands
that can swing the big lever and send the engine rolling

away to the place we saw through the gap in the bone
where there was a painted room, music and the young
people
dancing on the shore, and the Old Man of the Sea

“Per James Connolly”

i

Quando penso a tutte le false partenze...
L'uomo valeva un paio di mani,
la donna un altro paio, un po' più economiche,
il vento soffiava, i bambini avevano sete –

quando passava dalla porta della fabbrica li vedeva,
si muovevano e aspettavano, tanti quante
le anime che si affollavano presso la barca di Dante

che mai prese il mare –
quale peso per equilibrare quel traghetto?
Sono lì ora, tante quanto

le anime soffiate via dal vento del loro desiderio,
aere d'amore, non una di loro pesava
un'oncia da opporre alla bufera

che solleva i tetti delle case, che spia
dove si raggomitano vicini
finché il vento non li risucchia fuori.

E' solo vento, ma quale muscolo allenato, quale piede ben piantato
può opporvisi, quale voce così forte
da essere sentita urlare *Basta?*

ii

Aveva guidato il cavallo del carro della spazzatura, conosceva
la forza del collo sotto la fruscante criniera,
sapeva come dirgli di girare, indietreggiare o star fermo.

Sapeva da dove il vento provenisse, ne studiò
il linguaggio, soffiava a suo dispetto.
Si stancò di aspettare che il vento cambiasse,

come noi esausti di aspettare quel cambiamento,
che le voci gridino *Basta*, che le mani
muovano la grande leva e mettano in moto il motore

verso il luogo che vedemmo attraverso una breccia nell'osso
dove c'era una stanza dipinta, musica e,
giovani
che danzavano sulla spiaggia, e il Vecchio Uomo di Mare

had been sunk in the wide calm sea.

iii

The sea moves under the wind and shows nothing
– not where to begin. But look for the moment
just before the wave of change crashes and

goes into reverse. Remember the daft beginnings
of a fatal century and their sad endings, but let's not
hold back our hand from the lever. Remember
James Connolly,

who put his hand to the work, who saw suddenly
how his life would end, and was content because
men and women would succeed him, and his testament

was there, he trusted them. It was not a bargain:
in 1916 the printer locked the forme,
he set it in print, the scribes can't alter an iota

– then the reader comes, and it flowers again, like a
painted room.

era stato affondato nel grande mare calmo.

iii

Il mare si muove sotto il vento e nulla mostra
– da dove cominciare. Ma cerca il momento
proprio prima che l'onda del cambiamento si frantumi

e indietreggi. Ricordi i folli inizi
di un secolo fatale e la loro triste fine, ma non
allontaniamo la mano dalla leva. Ricorda

James Connolly,

che mise mano al lavoro, che subito vide
come la sua vita sarebbe finita, ed era contento perché
uomini e donne lo avrebbero seguito, e il suo testamento

era lì, si fidava di loro. Non fu un affare:
nel 1916 lo stampatore fissò il formato,
lo stampò, gli scribi non ne possono alterare una iota

– poi arriva il lettore, e rinasce ancora come una
stanza dipinta.

“Maria Edgeworth in 1847”

She was touched by the generosity of the porters who carried the rice and India meal to the vessels for shipment to Ireland in the famine, refusing all payment; and she knit with her own hands a woollen comforter for each porter, of bright and pretty colours, which she sent to a friend to present to the men, who were proud and grateful for the gifts; but, alas! Before they received them, those kind hands were cold, and that warm heart had ceased to beat.

*A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth,
by Frances Edgeworth.*

Anger. *Work*. Confusion – what is to be done?
– the Atlantic in the way and the news getting worse,
work stretching to occupy every hour in the day,
carrying back and forth, lifting bearing and setting down.

We are in the centuries when work told the body how
to lift, fasten and drag, the weight of the world needed
heaving,
when the horses staggered and slowed on the steep hill
the coach too full, too heavy to drag onwards –

they stopped fearfully and the child from the cabin
was waiting for his chance, he ran out with a stone
pushed it behind the wheel so the horses could breathe
and waited for the farthings flung from the passengers’
windows.

Now he is carrying sacks of meal to the boat
back and forth, loaded then free, and the work stretching
ahead,
like the road where at the same moment Maria Edgeworth
walks out, her young servant beside her carrying

the basket that gets a bit lighter
at every cabin door. This is her work now
at the end of her life. At home,
she sits down to the story she is writing,

line after line, her hand straying back and forth
across the remaining pages. The child from the cabin
is a man carrying meal to the docks, and at last
the day is over, and time for him to be paid –

but he is too angry, his comrades are too angry
to take money for helping to feed starving people. And she
who is not ever recorded as being angry

“Maria Edgeworth 1847”

Fu colpita dalla generosità dei facchini che portavano il riso e la polenta ai vascelli da spedire in Irlanda ai tempi della grande carestia, rifiutando qualsiasi pagamento; lei allora lavorò a maglia con le sue mani, per ognuno di loro, una sciarpa di lana, di bei colori brillanti, che mandò a un amico per donarla agli uomini, che furono orgogliosi e grati dei regali; ma ahimè! Prima che li ricevevano, quelle mani gentili, divennero fredde, e quel gran cuore aveva smesso di battere.

*A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth,
di Frances Edgeworth.*

Rabbia. Lavoro. Confusione – cosa si deve fare?
– l’Atlantico di mezzo e le notizie sempre peggiori,
il lavoro che si protrae per occupare ogni ora del giorno,
portando avanti e indietro, sollevando e scaricando.

Siamo nei secoli in cui il lavoro diceva al corpo come
sollevare, fissare e trascinare, del peso del mondo serviva
farsi carico,
quando i cavalli barcollavano e rallentavano sulle erte colline
la carrozza troppo piena, troppo pesante da trascinare oltre –

si fermavano spaventati e il bambino dalla casupola
aspettava la sua occasione, correva fuori con una pietra
la spingeva dietro la ruota per far prender fiato ai cavalli
e aspettava gli spiccioli lanciati dai passeggeri dalle
finestre.

Ora sta portando sacchi di polenta alla barca
avanti e indietro, carichi poi scarichi, e il lavoro si
allunga,
come la strada che allo stesso tempo Maria Edgeworth
percorre, con accanto la sua giovane serva che porta

il cestino sempre più leggero
davanti ogni porta. Questo è ora il suo lavoro
alla fine della sua vita. A casa,
si siede davanti al racconto che sta scrivendo,

riga dopo riga, la sua mano si sposta avanti e indietro
attraverso le restanti pagine. Il bambino della casupola
è ora un uomo che porta la polenta alle banchine, e alla fine
il giorno si spegne, ed è tempo di essere pagato –

ma è troppo arrabbiato, i suoi compagni sono troppo arrabbiati
di guadagnare per aiutare a sfamare gente che muore di fame. E lei

takes out her knitting needles and the long skeins of wool
the women have spun in the cabins, to make
a warm comforter for every man, her needles
twitching back and forth until the work is done.
She is famous and fortunate, she will be remembered.

Like the girl whose brothers were turned into swans,
she does what she knows, the long scarves piling
softly beside her chair, one after the other like the days.

They are far from home when her gift reaches them, the trace
of their work unravelling like a worn thread of wool, their
kindness
out of anger stretching across the sea, and answered.

che nessuno ha mai visto arrabbiata
tira fuori gli aghi da maglia e le lunghe matasse di lana
che le donne hanno filato in casa, per fare
una calda sciarpa per ogni uomo, i suoi aghi
che si agitano avanti e indietro sino a lavoro finito.
Lei è famosa e fortunata, sarà ricordata.

Come la ragazza i cui fratelli furono mutati in cigni,
fa ciò che sa, le lunghe sciarpe si accumulano
morbide accanto la sedia, una dopo l'altra come i giorni.

Sono lontani da casa quando i suoi regali li raggiungono, la traccia
del loro lavoro si srotola come un consunto filo di lana, la loro
gentilezza
suscitata dalla rabbia si allunga attraverso il mare, e ottiene risposta.

