FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION IN CONVERSATION WITH EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN

FORWARD ARTS FOUNDATION: When did you start writing poetry and what drew you into it?

EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN: My mother was a writer so I always knew writing was possible. Also she read and copied out poems all the time – I remember being flabbergasted by the finesse and symmetry of a Shakespeare sonnet, when I was nine or so, but I realise now it was her voice reading it that made all the difference.

I was young enough to think prose fiction (which was what she did) was easier, and people said poetry was difficult, so I said ‘I’ll do that’. A classic premature decision, but I was stuck with it. By the time I realised how much you can get into prose I had developed the mindset of a poet.

FAF: Please talk about your development as a writer of poetry. Tell us when you first felt you were a poet and how it went from there.

EC: I was writing poetry seriously from the age of fifteen. It was very obscure, because I was writing about things I didn’t understand. Then, at 20 or so, a poem got published, and I began to realise that if people were to read it, the writing had better be clearer. I still write about things I don’t understand, like sex and death and history, but I try to find ways of making them more articulate.

It was wonderful to be beginning to publish in Dublin in the late 1960s, to be surrounded with people who cared about poetry, in the literary pubs. Up to then I had been isolated except in the family. I just about escaped alcoholic poisoning so it was all positive.

In the 1970s I became involved in starting a literary magazine, Cyphers, which still runs, and that gave me and my colleagues (Leland Bardwell, my husband Macdara Woods, and the late Pearse Hutchinson) a continuing sense of belonging to a community. My own work staggered a bit, as it seemed I had exhausted some themes; I wrote a couple of sequences of poems, and then decided I would concentrate in the future on the single poem, as the sequence appeared to me to be a dilution. Then I seemed to get going again. I think that
something that happened was that the audience changed, as the feminism of the 1970s broadened out and became more complex, and readers were no longer looking only for the gynaecological poem. I think I responded to that.

And at one point I decided I would never again use a negative adjective. That’s all I’m aware of in the way of development.

**FAF: What does being shortlisted for the Forward Prizes mean for you?**

**EC:** I had heard of the Forward Prizes but had never looked at the details. It is very nice being in such good company (I’ve just looked back, for the first time, at previous shortlists). But I’m aware that not all of the good poets get this kind of attention.

**FAF: Please tell us about the creation of your shortlisted collection, from first words to final book. Does it mark a departure or change from your earlier work? Which poems in this collection are most important to you?**

**EC:** I usually find that while I don’t plan a collection around a given theme, one emerges as I go along. In this case it was clear, from quite early on, that the collection was going to have a musical core, and that that was connected with my sister Máire, who has been dead for twenty-five years. She played first violin in the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and I hear her in the whole of the orchestral repertoire. I felt cold when I typed ‘twenty-five years’ just now: it has taken me all that time to absorb the reality of her death.

The poems that mean most to me are ‘A Musician’s Gallery’, ‘Stabat Mater’, ‘The Skirt’, ‘The Percussion Version’, which are musical; ‘An Information’ which returns to my old obsession with nuns, ‘The Words Collide’ and ‘The Burden of Cloth’ about historical awfulness, ‘Finding Proteus’ about trying to make sense of the past, and the more cheerful ones, ‘Dream Shine’ and ‘Incipit Hodie’ which is about my first grandchild.

**FAF: Which poets do you admire most and what do you value in their work?**

**EC:** Donne, Herbert, for their intensity; Byron because he’s such fun; Kavafis (in translation) for the extraordinary calm light that shines through his work; among my contemporaries those who use their intelligence and wit, those who know the weight of the single word.

**FAF: What’s next for you as a poet?**

**EC:** There are more musical poems to be written; I want too to return to the nuns, with a poem or a group of poems about a convent in Cork where a woman called Nano Nagle set
out to teach poor girls to read in the eighteenth century, when the church didn’t think it was necessary. And I have a second grandson, so there has to be a poem for him.

**FAF: What advice would you give to anyone starting out in poetry today?**

**EC:** Read and keep reading, from every period; read in translation, translate yourself if you can, keep asking yourself ‘what does poetry do’? And never say more than you mean. And definitely never live with anyone who thinks it is your hobby.

Spend time with real poets, though you will find that some of them too are obsessed by prizes and reputations – their presence is the only thing that will remind you that what you are doing is real.

At the core of every poet is an immense arrogance and ego: this is a beast you have to feed even if your character is quite retiring and polite, because the poems won’t come if you starve him.