

# Thembe Mvula reviews Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, David Clarke and Susannah Dickey

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## **The Map of the World**

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

The Gallery Press, €11.95 and €18.50

## **The Field in Winter**

David Clarke

Nine Arches Press, £10.99

## **ISDAL**

Susannah Dickey

Picador Poetry, £10.99

As the title suggests, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's ***The Map of the World*** is ambitiously expansive. Published by The Gallery Press, this T.S. Eliot Prize shortlisted book, the poet's tenth collection, explores myth-making, history and legacy. Ní Chuilleanáin was born in Cork, Ireland in the 1940's and made her mark in the literary landscape not only as a celebrated poet but also as a translator and professor, so it is unsurprising to meet within these poems a developed, authoritative voice. Cerebral and dense with surging impact, this collection of poems demands attentiveness. In return the reader is transported through time and space by the poet's rich language, haunting imagery and breadth of historical knowledge, all of which consistently agitate our notions about truth and uncertainty.

The opening poem, *The Miracles*, casts the reader's imagination back to 5th Century Ireland when the patron saint of Ireland, Brigid of Kildare, lived piously, performing

miracles that garnered her a wide following and established her lasting legacy in Irish spirituality and folklore. The first stanza unfolds an ominous rural scene where a silent night is disrupted by crying foxes. This is followed by a voyage into the city where oppressed civilians find hope in a divine figure. Although the figure is referred to as "the Virgin" this term situates Saint Brigid, who was often regarded like a Virgin Mary figure, within the poem. The poem depicts a helpless civilisation that finds agency in a deity who is formed in their own likeness.

Thronging the walls,  
these puppets of misfortune, not the natural kind  
like a mad bull or a robber or evil spirits – instead,  
the tall tree of human revenge, dressed up  
to look like justice

The poem oscillates between certainty – "I could not have made it up" – and hesitation in declaring the events as truth, provoking the reader to consider the driving force behind this. Furthermore, it begs the question: how does folklore disrupt the interlacing between a nation's history and imperialism?

*St Brigid's Well* continues to pose similar questions by introducing an unreliable narrator. In the first of the poem's two parts, the reader is presented with a speaker making their way to a landmark statue rumoured to possess healing powers, so as to document it and those who visit it: "I wrote her words that same evening, to be sure / I had the truth."

The commitment to truth telling and seeking deteriorates in part two of the poem, when the appearance of ghosts cast further doubts about the speaker's perceptions. The poem ends with a question, "Could I have forgotten?", which highlights here the tension between the power and fallibility of those who document history.

Imagery is another powerful way that Ní Chuilleanáin captivates the reader's attention. Impressive examples include the ekphrastic poem *Two Paintings by Nano Reid* and *Seasons of the Lemon House*, with the latter displaying delicate sketches of nature shifting to changing climates and the resilience of trees: "spilling across the map, the lemon trees are safe". There's a feeling of timelessness in a poem that captures the passing of seasons, but the hint at longer term shifts in conditions pulls the reader more into the present.

David Clarke's *The Field in Winter* is an elegiac exploration of how nature facilitates our deeper connection to the body as well as healing, conveying shifts in seasons and intimate relationships in a way that highlights our inherent vulnerability. A Lincolnshire born poet, Clarke's poems sit firmly in the realm of the pastoral. In this, his third poetry collection published by Nine Arches Press, Clarke draws the reader to observe and reflect on the natural world through the poet's eyes. The collection takes shape in mostly evenly structured stanzas, almost reflecting English landscapes. Sonnets are a recur throughout the collection, with *The Severn by Waldings Pill* one that conforms more strictly to the form.

Two poems *Before Storm Ellen Arrives* and *Before Storm Ellen Leaves* correspond and follow on from each other. In both poems, the speaker echoes the voice of a prophet, describing scenes with the omen of an apocalypse: "All the birds are quitting the sky. // A great yew bucks and thrashes like a bear / in chains." (*Before Storm Ellen Arrives*) Here, the language becomes almost biblical, as if reimagining of the prophet Ezekiel's vision of a dead nation being restored:

The bones  
of people are kindling now,

dry as twigs that brute boys snap  
in rushes of senseless, sudden strength.

There's a sense of humanity's perseverance against the harshest conditions, surpassing the creatures that also call the Earth home. Does this reflect an earned homo sapient hubris or does it warn of what we may not survive if our consumption of resources clouds our conscience? *Before Storm Ellen Leaves* paints a more perilous picture with surreal images that gravitate towards horror, "Houses curl and cower" conveying the vulnerability of civilization to nature's ways and vice versa when "Thunder breaks open another magnum of froth."

The language regards nature with an underlying fear, but this fear coalesces into reverence as the poem concludes. In the end, humanity must humble itself to the forces of nature or be humbled by it: "Merciful storm. Pull us softly apart / and sluice us. We are open to earth."

This grappling with vulnerability takes on a different mode in *Liniment* which recollects a rare and tender moment shared between father and son. The poem contrasts the comfort that a young boy receives from his father when suffering growing pains with the comfort he extends back to his aged father at his hospital bed. Restrained by the norms of hyper masculinity, there's a grief for missed opportunities, between father and son, to exchange physical affection: "And if we have love it is this - to know the struggle / of another body".

In many ways, poetry is an art of noticing. David Clarke's knack for observation gives the collection a meditative quality that could go further in making its connections between the environment and human senses. Poems like *The Bees* offer a warm, ode-like tribute to the small worlds within the great ecosystem we all navigate. By paying attention to and zooming in on these worlds, the poet expresses deep appreciation of them: "How we long for labour like this - / to lose our days in the making of life, / to honey the air with our joy."

The penultimate poem, entitled *Song*, resounds with this message of gratitude, as the reader bears witness to all the wisdom that the poet absorbs from nature when they pay attention to it, and is invited to do the same: "I thought the rock said break, / but it said breathe. / ... I was mishearing the world."

**The Field in Winter** exemplifies how engaging with nature can facilitate deeper connection and teaches us empathy. And it is the appeal for empathy that is a focal point in Susannah Dickey's **ISDAL**.

**ISDAL** is Derry born poet and novelist Susannah Dickey's debut poetry collection. The collection centres on the true account of the charred and deceased body of an unidentified woman (dubbed The Isdal Woman), found in Norway's Ice Valley by a father on a hiking trip with his two young daughters in November 1970. Divided into three parts: *Podcast*, *Narrative* and *Composite*, **ISDAL** explores how society dehumanises and fetishizes victims.

The first part narrates a poetic, satirical reimagining of the production of a ten-part True Crime podcast about The Isdal Woman. The reader follows two podcast hosts, a man and a woman, whose goal is to entice and galvanize an audience with their shrewd commentary on the sensationalism and voyeurism intrinsic to the True Crime genre. It poses pertinent questions like what does it mean to make a spectacle of a dead female body? What does it mean to capture the imaginations of audiences through speculating about a faceless and nameless woman who died a vague, disturbing death? The poems highlight how certain bodies cease to escape the male gaze and societal scrutiny, such as when the Isdal Woman is used as a cautionary tale in *A spectacular funeral*: "Marry the comely girls, predictable, well-fed. / Not the beautiful strangers, acicular and dead."

The podcast host's fixation on the Isdal Woman's age, looks and mysterious persona drives home the idea of heedless voyeurism: "He describes her with unveiled alacrity. / Did he mention her tooth gap? God, she was pretty." (*A local driver speaks*)

Although heavy in subject matter, Dickey's wit infuses a lightness into the poems that makes them digestible. For instance, in a moment of feigned self-reflection, one of the podcast hosts says: "I hope our podcast passes the bechamel test" (*Digression #1*)

Ideas about what identities are deemed worthy of sympathy and grief are explored more deeply in the second section of the book. This section is also marked by a shift in tone and features a series of prose vignettes.

Reminiscent of Maggie Nelson's **Bluets**, the prose engages in philosophical musings on death, narrative, and voyeurism. Dickey references a range of thinkers and primarily addresses French philosopher Georges Bataille's theory of continuity of life to make a case for why the flaws in Bataille's theory: "should lead us towards thinking about how True Crime packages death, how it ignores our responsibilities to one another" (*Part II: Narrative: 79*).

The shift to a more serious tone reflects a deliberate intent to appeal, not to the senses, but to intellectual and moral sensibility. It appropriately provokes reflection on the relevance of this idea today, where the world has witnessed a genocide unfold in Gaza as world leaders debate and defend its plausibility. This brings new weight to questions around what bodies are deemed grievable and not grievable, and the urgency to be sensitive to other's pain in order to preserve our humanity.

The concluding section showcases more pensive, gentle poems that focus on the perspective of the one daughter who saw the Isdal Woman's dead body. The fixation turns towards introspection as the reader considers what is carried by the first-hand witness, outside of the reconstructed and repurposed image sensationalised by the media. This final section ties together the poet's discourse with sensitivity and clear character.

Overall, whilst Dickey's delicious and striking vocabulary at times verges on being laborious, the poet's artistry as a storyteller really shines through in this collection, culminating in witty, playful imagery such as: "The archipelago is fungal hyphae // in a forgotten lunchbox." (*New day, new episode*)

**Thembe Mvula** is a South African/British poet and writer who has performed poetry nationally and internationally. She likes to write about writing, people and places, and loves baking.