

To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaya, married in Dublin  
on 9 September 2009

When you look out across the fields  
And you both see the same star  
Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple –  
That is the time to set out on your journey,  
With half a loaf and your mother's blessing.



Leave behind the places that you knew:  
All that you leave behind you will find once more,  
You will find it in the stories;  
The sleeping beauty in her high tower  
With her talking cat asleep  
Solid beside her feet – you will see her again.

When the cat wakes up he will speak in Irish and Russian  
And every night he will tell you a different tale  
About the firebird that stole the golden apples,  
Gone every morning out of the emperor's garden,  
And about the King of Ireland's Son and the Enchanter's Daughter.



The story the cat does not know is the Book of Ruth  
And I have no time to tell you how she fared  
When she went out at night and was afraid,  
In the beginning of the barley harvest,  
Or how she trusted to strangers and stood by her word:  
You will have to trust me, she lived happily ever after.

## From the Griffin Poetry Prize:

What is poetry good for? If you need some kind of utilitarian reason for why it is created, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's tribute to a recently wed couple is not only a fine answer, but you'll see that it both serves and delightfully transcends being functional. Whether or not a life milestone is observed through an explicitly religious lens, most such events - births, weddings, funerals and so on - are indeed marked with some kind of ceremony, even if it's secular. Ní Chuilleanáin's benediction for Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaja has references for all tastes and sensibilities, from the biblical to the historical, mythical and folkloric. She's blended them all with an understated whimsy that surely struck the right notes as everyone clinked their goblets at the Dublin celebration.

As the 2010 Griffin Poetry Prize judges observed as they pondered *The Sun-fish*, the collection from which this poem is taken, "Ní Chuilleanáin poses many questions – not always directly – and often chooses to leave the questions themselves unresolved, allowing them to resonate meaningfully past the actual poem's end." As she says here, there is no answer at the end of this yet-to-be-written story, and we'll just have to trust that it turns out well. It's a splendid way to bless a marriage.

### **Background:**

Ní Chuilleanáin wrote this poem for the occasion of her son's marriage to Xenya Ostrovskaja. A poem written to celebrate a wedding is called an epithalamium. The couple had chosen to have a civil ceremony rather than a religious one and both parents were asked to write a short speech to be read during the ceremony. Ní Chuilleanáin decided to write this poem dedicated to the couple rather than a more traditional form of speech.

The stories which are told throughout the poem involve characters journeying far from home in search of love and happiness. Just as they have to leave their homes, so her son has to leave her and seek true love. Each of the journeys ends with the hero and heroine living 'happily ever after', and the poet wishes the same for her son and his new bride. She also tells them that even though they may be leaving behind the places they know best, they will 'find once more' all that they left. Perhaps this is her way of saying that in time they will come back to these old stories when they have their own children and therefore the journey will come full circle.



**Stanza One:**

The poem is addressed to a young couple starting out on their life as a married couple. This journey seems to be fated and the omens are in their favour. They see the same star 'Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple' which tells them it is time to go. The symbol of the star is a positive one (think of 'reaching for the stars') and Ní Chuilleanáin is acknowledging the rightness of a union between two people who share the same vision at the same time. The poet loves her son but acknowledges that now he must seek his own path in life with his wife by his side.

The poet refers to a fairy tale in which three sons are given the choice of setting out on a journey with a full loaf of bread and his mother's curse, or half a loaf and her blessing. The youngest son chooses the half loaf and the blessing, and his journey ends in the traditional 'happy ever after' ending.<sup>1</sup>

**Stanza Two:**

The poet tells the couple that it is time to leave behind their past lives and begin a new life together. It is time for them to make new traditions but the likelihood is that they will return to the same stories and values that they grew up with themselves. Ní Chuilleanáin refers to the story of Sleeping Beauty and also mentions a 'talking cat' – another popular figure in fairy tales. There is a blend of the negative and the positive here. Sleeping Beauty tells of hardship and difficulty but there is a happy ending because the prince who saves the beautiful princess is determined to battle his way through the forest of thorns to reach her. The talking cat is 'asleep / Solid beside her feet', which is a comforting image and stresses the importance of dependability and consistency. The repetition in 'you will find once more' and 'you will see her again' makes the idea in this stanza ultimately reassuring and optimistic.

**Stanza Three:**

Ní Chuilleanáin imagines the cat waking along with the princess and speaking 'in Irish and Russian'. He will tell the couple 'a different tale' every night. This is a fantastical image but is in keeping with the celebration of the power of stories and folk tales from both the bride's and groom's cultures. The blend of stories from both traditions

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<sup>1</sup> *The Red Ettin or The Red Etin* is a fairy tale collected by Joseph Jacobs. It was included by Andrew Lang in *The Blue Fairy Book*.

highlights the idea that love is a unifying force. The magic and wonder conjured up by this image evokes the magic and wonder of love and is entirely suitable for this poem.

This image also reminds that young couple that all of the fairy tales and folk tales they heard when they were young ended with 'happily ever after' for those who were brave, loyal and loving. Although the couple are starting out on a new life, they will always have those stories to come back to and the image of the cat telling the tales every night is a reminder to them to keep the old stories alive. In time, perhaps, they will pass these folk tales with their messages of love and hope on to their own children.

Just as the couple are marrying, so two stories from each tradition are married in this stanza. The story of 'the firebird that stole the golden apples' is a Russian tale in which a tsar promises wealth and marriage to his daughter to anyone who can stop the firebird from stealing the apples from his orchard. After a difficult and dangerous mission, a young man called Ivan succeeds and gets his reward. The Irish story of the King of Ireland's son has a slightly different message in that the young man first wins but then loses a beautiful young woman, Fedelma. The message here might be that the couple must be attentive to one another and not take their love for granted. Each of the stories referenced in this poem focus on love being a wonderful prize but also something which is not easily won.

#### **Stanza Four:**

Here Ní Chuilleanáin refers to a story from the bible rather than from folklore. However, the message is similar. In The Book of Ruth, a young woman marries a man from a different tribe. Obviously, this has a special relevance in the case of the poet's son and his new wife as they are from different lands and cultures. When Ruth's husband dies, she stays with her new tribe and works extremely hard to provide for the family. The barley could be seen as a symbol of reaping what you sow in this life. You will get back what you put in, in other words. Although this is a tale of hardship, once again there is a happy ending for Ruth who goes on to remarry a kind and loving husband.

The final line of the poem reinforces the joyful blessing that is at the centre of this poem and ends, appropriately enough, with the words 'happily ever after'.

*Here is the full story of the firebird, taken from the website <http://stpetersburg-guide.com>*

### **The Tale of Ivan Tsarevich, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf**

Once upon a time in a far away land, there lived a mighty tsar. The pride of the tsar's kingdom was a magnificent orchard, second to none. However every night a firebird, with golden feathers and eyes like crystal, would swoop down on the tsar's favorite apple tree, and fly off with a few golden apples. The tsar was very distressed at this and called in his three sons to help.

"My dear sons," he said, "to whichever one of you is able to catch this firebird and bring it back alive, I will give half of my kingdom now, and the other half when I die."



The three sons promised to do their best to catch the bird. The oldest son stood watch the first night, but he fell asleep and the firebird made off with a number of apples. The next night, the second oldest son camped out by the apple tree in hope of catching the bird but he, too, fell asleep, and the firebird stole a few more apples.

The third night the youngest son, Ivan Tsarevich, guarded the tree. One hour went by, then a second, and a third ... Ivan was sleepy but took his job seriously and managed to stay awake. Suddenly the whole orchard lit up, as if a thousand lights were shining on it - the firebird was making its entrance! As the bird began to pluck golden apples off the tree one-by-one, Ivan sneaked up and grabbed it by the tail. But the bird managed to wriggle out of Ivan's grasp, leaving the youth with only a bright red tail feather. The feather was so luminescent that if it were brought into a dark room, the room would glow, as if illuminated by the setting sun.

The firebird never came back to the orchard after this, but the tsar was so enchanted by the glowing feather that he sent his sons out again to find the bird and bring it back alive. The two older sons, filled with envy that their younger brother was able to bring back a feather from the bird, went off together on their search. Ivan left on his horse alone.

Ivan rode on and on until he reached a big stone standing in the middle of an open field. On the stone were the following words: "He who goes straight will be hungry and cold. He who passes to the right will be safe, but his horse shall die. He who passes to the left will be killed, but his horse will be safe." Choosing the lesser of three evils, Ivan decided to go to the right and rode for three days.

Suddenly a gray wolf appeared out of nowhere and devoured the horse. For a long time, Ivan wept and eventually continued his journey on foot. He walked for an entire day and became very tired. The gray wolf suddenly appeared again. "I'm sorry I killed your horse," the wolf said, "and making you go all this way on foot. But it was God's will. Jump on my back, though, and I'll take you where you want to go!" Ivan, for some reason, began to trust the wolf now and told the animal that he needed to find the firebird. He climbed on the wolf's back and they sped off like a flash.

After a short while, they reached a stone wall. "Climb over that wall, Ivan, and you will find the firebird sitting in a golden cage in a garden. Take the bird, but don't touch the cage or you will be caught."

Ivan did as the wolf instructed and had the bird in his hand, when he thought, Where am I going to put the bird if I don't take its cage? So he went back to get the golden cage and the minute he touched it, alarms went off and guards seized the lad. He was immediately taken to the tsar, who was furious and demanded an explanation. "I'm the son of Tsar Vislav" Ivan said, "and the firebird had been taking apples from my father's orchard every night. So he sent me to get the bird."

"Well, if you had just come and asked me, I would have given the bird to you," the tsar said. "But now you have disgraced yourself by thievery. However, there is something that you can do for me to redeem yourself. Go to the kingdom of Tsar Afron and bring back the horse with the golden mane. If you do this, I will forgive you and you can have the firebird."

Ivan left the tsar and told the wolf everything that had happened. He said he was very sorry that he had not listened to the wolf about not touching the golden cage.

"Well, what's done is done. Get up on my back and I will take you where you need to go," the wolf said.

Ivan got up on his back and the wolf took off like a bullet. It was hard to say whether it was a long time or a short time, but eventually they reached the kingdom of Tsar Afron. When they stood before the royal stables, the wolf told Ivan to take the horse with the golden mane, but not to touch the golden bridle hanging on the wall. Ivan went in and started leading the horse out. Then all of a sudden he saw the magnificent golden bridle. He was so attracted to it that he simply could not resist taking it. But the second he touched it, alarms went off and stable boys came running to seize the young man. They took him to Tsar Afron, who was furious and demanded an explanation. Ivan told him the whole story.

"Well, if you had just come and asked me, I would have given the horse to you! But now how will it look when I tell the whole kingdom what you've done? However, to get your honor back, there is something that you can do for me. Go to the Thrice Tenth Kingdom and bring back the princess Elena the Fair. I want her, but I have not found a way to get her here. If you do this, I will pardon you and will give you the golden bridle."

Ivan left the palace in tears and told the gray wolf everything. He apologized for again disobeying the wolf's instructions.

"Well, what's done is done. Get on my back and I'll take you where you need to go," the wolf said. Ivan jumped on the wolf's back and off they went.

When they reached Elena's kingdom, the wolf told Ivan to wait by a green oak tree. This time the wolf was going to do the job himself! When the princess was walking in her garden, the wolf grabbed her and they hurried back to the tree, where Ivan was waiting. Ivan climbed onto the wolf's back next to the beautiful princess and they headed back to the kingdom of Tsar Afron.

As fate would have it, Ivan and the princess fell in love on the wolf's back. Approaching the kingdom, Ivan was in tears. "My dear friend, the wolf, how can I not grieve? Elena and I are in love and now I have to return her to Tsar Afron, or else I will be held in disrepute throughout the kingdom."

"I have served you well," the wolf answered, "and I will help you again. This is what I will do: I will transform myself into the princess and you can take me to the tsar. He will think that I am Elena. Then, when you are riding back in the open field on the horse with the golden mane, and when I am allowed to go outside to walk with my ladies-in-waiting, think of me and I will appear."



Ivan liked the idea and, like magic, the wolf turned into the princess! Ivan led him to the tsar, who was overjoyed at seeing who he thought was the princess. Ivan was immediately given the horse with the golden mane and rode toward the kingdom of Dolmat (secretly picking up the real princess where he had left her). For several days, the two were so enchanted with each other that they completely forgot about the gray wolf. Then, on the fourth day, Ivan thought "What happened to my friend, the wolf?" It just so happened that this was the first day that the wolf was permitted to leave the tsar's palace so he could escape. And just as thoughts about the wolf entered Ivan's head, the wolf appeared there!

So Ivan, the princess, the wolf and the golden-maned horse began their journey to the kingdom of Dolmat. When they approached its border, Ivan said to the wolf, "Listen, my dear friend, you have done much for me, but could you do one more thing? I would love to have this golden-maned horse to bring back to my own kingdom. Could you turn yourself into a horse, and we'll do the same thing we did with the last tsar?"

Poof! The wolf turned into a golden-maned horse. Ivan presented him to the tsar, who was quite jubilant and they all sat down for a large feast which lasted two full days! On the third day, the tsar gave the firebird to Ivan. Ivan then left for the trip back home, picking up Elena and the real golden-maned horse along the way. It wasn't long before the tsar went out riding with his new horse (who, of course, was really the wolf). At an opportune time, the tsar was thrown off his mount and all he saw after that was tail end of the wolf running off into the distance!

With his speed, it didn't take the wolf long to catch up with Ivan and Elena the Fair. They traveled together until they reached the place where the wolf had eaten Ivan's first horse. "Now it's time to part," the wolf said. "You have a horse again and I can't be of any more service to you." The wolf ran off and Ivan shed many tears over the parting of his good friend and companion.

Ivan, the princess, the firebird and golden-maned horse headed home. They were still many miles away from the kingdom when they stopped to rest. They tied the horse to a tree and kept the bird beside them. If you remember, the tsar's two older sons, Dmitriy and Vasiliy, had also been looking for the firebird. They were returning to the kingdom themselves when they stumbled upon the sleeping Ivan and Elena. They were quite charmed by the golden-maned horse, the firebird, and Elena. Filled with envy, they decided to kill their brother. Dmitriy took out his sword and thrust it into the body of



Ivan. Then they woke Elena, who saw the motionless body of her sweetheart and burst into tears. "You might have been called honorable knights if you fought and won a battle in an open field. But as it is, you killed someone who was sleeping and defenseless. What kind of respect could you possibly deserve?"

The brothers paid no attention and rode back to their kingdom with their treasures, including the lovely Elena. "One word of this to the tsar," they warned, "and you won't live to see another day!"

The slain Ivan lay for exactly thirty days on the spot where his brothers had left him. Then the gray wolf found him, recognizing the lad by his scent. He wanted to help his friend, but he didn't know what to do. When he saw a mother crow and her two babies circling and hungrily looking at Ivan, he waited until they landed and grabbed one of the babies.

"Please don't harm my child," the crow pleaded. "He's done nothing to you."

"Then go to the Thrice Tenth Kingdom and bring me back some magical life-and-death water. Your child will be safe if you do this," the wolf said. The crow agreed and flew off.

On the third day, the mother crow returned and brought two vials of water. Without warning, the wolf ripped into the flesh of the young crow he was holding, and tore it in two. Then he sprinkled some "water of death" on the young crow and the crow's wounds were healed. Next he sprinkled some "water of life" on him, and the young crow came to life, fluttered his wings, and flew off to his nest!

The wolf repeated the procedure with Ivan. Miraculously, the boy came to life, saying, "Oh, how long I've slept!" "Yes," the wolf said, "and you would have slept much longer had I not found you!" He told Ivan everything that had happened and that today Ivan's brother Vasiliy was about to marry Elena the Fair. The wolf told Ivan to climb on and in a flash they were off for the city. Ivan arrived as the wedding feast was already in progress. Elena saw Ivan and jumped up from the table. "There is my dear fiance, not this coward sitting next to me!" The tsar, confused at this turn of events, asked for an explanation and Elena gladly told him everything. The tsar, quite naturally, was furious with the brothers Dmitriy and Vasiliy and threw them in prison.

Ivan and Elena got married themselves and were so happy with each other that they never parted.