**The Coursing: New Year’s Day by Ann Leahy**

Voices from the kitchen and the toaster sending up steam.

In the frosted yard, breath visible from men and dogs.

Sprinkled from a screw-top jar – clear drops of coarse poteen

to stroke round smooth-haired flanks, down rope-thin legs.

He’d slip a lead round each dog’s quivering throat.

Keen-eyed, they’d strain to the gate, to hop, nails skittering,

on the car’s back seat. His last request – a towel, a bowl

(to wash their feet between races) - and they were gone.

One, left behind with us and grey around the muzzle,

glimpsing something at the boundary fence, darted and sped

in a rare return to form, inspired by all the bustle.

She yanked twice, tossing a cat, tissue-light, by the neck.

That last squeal was a buzz-saw snarl that rose, stopped dead.

We arrived to marmalade fur, an inert, bloodied scrap,

the dog, eager, prancing towards us, swivelling her head,

tail wagging, quick-quick-quick, slow-slow, stop.

Later, the men returned, victorious, to silence,

a body to be buried. He said, chucking the old dog’s ears,

‘it’s just their nature,’ but he couldn’t meet my eye. For once,

the upper hand: ‘It’s not *their* nature that most bothers me.’

The trophy, I saw just once again - the local paper,

a spread in black and white: ‘Welcoming the New Year WIN’.

An all-male line-up. One shared gag. Him at the centre.

One hand on the cup. The downward tug on his grin.