



THE WANDERINGS OF OISIN¹

by W. B. Yeats

(You can listen to this read at

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BOOK I

- S. PATRICK. You who are bent, and bald, and blind,
With a heavy heart and a wandering mind,
Have known three centuries, poets sing,
Of dalliance with a demon thing.
- Oisín. Sad to remember, sick with years, 5
The swift innumerable spears,
The horsemen with their floating hair,
And bowls of barley, honey, and wine,
Those merry couples dancing in tune, 10
And the white body that lay by mine;
But the tale, though words be lighter than air,
Must live to be old like the wandering moon.
- Caoilte, and Conan, and Finn² were there,
When we followed a deer with our baying hounds.
With Bran, Sceolan, and Lomar³, 15
And passing the Firdolgs⁴ burial-mounds,
Came to the cairn⁵-heaped grassy hill
Where passionate Maeve⁶ is stony-still;
And found On the dove-grey edge of the sea 20
A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
On a horse with bridle of pindrimny⁷;
And like a sunset were her lips,
A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
But down to her feet white vesture flowed, 25
And with the glimmering crimson gloomed
Of many a figured embroidery;
And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell
That wavered like the summer streams,
As her soft bosom rose and fell. 30
- S. PATRICK. You are still wrecked among heathen dreams.
- Oisín. 'Why do you mind no horn?' she said
'And every hero droop his head?
The hornless deer is not more sad
That many a peaceful moment had, 35
More sleek than any granary mouse,
In his own leafy forest house
Among the waving fields of fern:
The hunting of heroes should be glad.'

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'O pleasant woman,' answered Finn, 40
'We think on Oscar's⁸ pencilled urn,
And on the heroes lying slain
On Gadhra's⁹ raven-covered plain;
But where are your noble kith and kin,
And from what country do you ride?' 45

'My father and my mother are
Aengus¹⁰ and Eógan,¹¹ my own name
Niamh¹², and my country far
Beyond the tumbling of this tide.'

'What dream came with you that you came 50
Through bitter tide on foam-wet feet?
Did your companion wander away
From where the birds of Aengus wing¹³?'

Thereon did she look haughty and sweet:
I have not yet, war-weary king, 55
Been spoken of with any man;
Yet now I choose, for these four feet
Ran through the foam and ran to this
That I might have your son to kiss.'

'Were there no better than my son 60
That you through all that foam should run?'

I loved no man, though kings besought,
Until the Danaan¹⁴ poets brought
Rhyme that rhymed upon Oisín's name,
And now I am dizzy with the thought 65
Of all that wisdom and the fame
Of battles broken by his hands,
Of stories builded by his words
That are like coloured Asian birds
At evening in their rainless lands.' 70

O Patrick, by your brazen¹⁵ bell,
There was no mind of mine but fell
Into a desperate gulph of love!
'You only will I wed,' I cried, 75
'And I will make a thousand songs,
And set your name all names above,
And captives bound with leathern thongs
Shall kneel and praise you, one by one,
At evening in my western dun.'

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- 'O Oisín, mount by me and ride 80
To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide,
Where men have heaped no burial-mounds,
And the days pass by like a wayward tune,
Where broken faith has never been known
And the blushes of first love never have flown; 85
And there I will give you a hundred hounds;
No mightier creatures bay at the moon;
And a hundred robes of murmuring silk,
And a hundred calves and a hundred sheep
Whose long wool whiter than sea-froth flows, 90
And a hundred spears and a hundred bows,
And oil and wine and honey and milk,
And always never-anxious sleep;
White a hundred youths, mighty of limb,
But knowing nor tumult nor hate nor strife, 95
And a hundred ladies, merry as birds,
Who when they dance to a fitful measure
Have a speed like the speed of the salmon herds,
Shall follow your horn and obey your whim,
And you shall know the Oanaan leisure; 100
And Niamh be with you for a wife.
Then she sighed gently, 'T grows late,
Music and love and sleep await,
Where I would be when the white moon climbs,
The red sun falls and the world grows dim.' 105
- And then I mounted and she bound me
With her triumphing arms around me,
And whispering to herself entwined me;
He shook himself and neighed three times: 110
Caoilte, Conan, and Finn came near,
And wept, and raised their lamenting hands,
And bid me stay, with many a tear;
But we rode out from the human lands.
In what far kingdom do you go? 115
Ah Fenians, with the shield and bow?
Or are you phantoms white as snow,
Whose lips had life's most prosperous glow?
O you, with whom in sloping valleys,
Or down the dewy forest alleys, 120
I chased at morn the flying deer,
With whom I hurled the hurrying spear,
And heard the foemen's ducklers rattle,
And broke the heaving ranks of dattle!
And Bran, Sceolán, and Lomair, 125
Where are you with your long rough hair?
You go not where the red deer feeds,
Nor tear the foemen from their steeds.
- S. Patrick. Boast not, nor mourn with drooping head
Companions long accurst and dead, 130
And hounds for centuries dust and air.

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Oisín. We galloped over the glossy sea:
I know not if days passed or hours,
And Niamh sang continually
Óanaan songs, and their dewy showers 135
Of pensive laughter, unhuman sound,
Lulled weariness, and softly round
O’er human sorrow her white arms wound.
We galloped; now a hornless deer
Passed by us, chased by a phantom hound 140
All pearly white, save one red ear;
And now a lady rode like the wind
With an apple of gold in her tossing hand;
And a beautiful young man followed behind
With quenchless gaze and fluttering hair. 145

‘Were these two born in the Óanaan land,
Or have they breathed the mortal air?’

‘Vex them no longer,’ Niamh said,
And sighing bowed her gentle head,
And sighing laid the pearly tip 150
Of one long finger on my lip.

But now the moon like a white rose shone
In the pale west, and the sun’s rim sank,
And clouds arrayed their rank on rank
About his fading crimson ball: 155
The floor of Aíthúin’s¹⁶ hosting hall
Was not more level than the sea,
As, full of loving fantasy,
And with low murmurings, we rode on,
Where many a trumpet-twisted shell 160
That in immortal silence sleeps
Dreaming of her own melting hues,
Her golds, her ambers, and her blues,
Pierced with soft light the shallowing deeps.
But now a wandering land breeze came 165
And a far sound of feathery quires¹⁷;
It seemed to blow from the dying flame,
They seemed to sing in the smouldering fires.
The horse towards the music raced,
Neighing along the lifeless waste; 170
Like sooty fingers, many a tree
Rose ever out of the warm sea;
And they were trembling ceaselessly,
As though they all were beating time,
Upon the centre of the sun, 175
To that low laughing woodland rhyme.
And, now our wandering hours were done,
We cantered to the shore, and knew
The reason of the trembling trees:
Round every branch the song-birds flew, 180
Or clung thereon like swarming bees;
White round the shore a million stood
Like drops of frozen rainbow light,

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And pondered in a soft vain mood
Upon their shadows in the tide, 185
And told the purple deeps their pride,
And murmured snatches of delight;
And on the shores were many boats
With bending sterns and bending bows,
And carved figures on their prows 190
Of bitterns, and fish-eating stoats¹⁸,
And swans with their exultant throats:
And where the wood and waters meet
We tied the horse in a leafy clump,
And Niamh blew three merry notes 195
Out of a little silver trumpet;
And then an answering whispering flew
Over the bare and woody land,
A whisper of impetuous feet,
And ever nearer, nearer grew; 200
And from the woods rushed out a band
Of men and ladies, hand in hand,
And singing, singing all together;
Their brows were white as fragrant milk,
Their cloaks made out of yellow silk, 205
And trimmed with many a crimson feather;
And when they saw the cloak I wore
Was dim with mire of a mortal shore,
They fingered it and gazed on me
And laughed like murmurs of the sea; 210
But Niamh with a swift distress
Bid them away and hold their peace;
And when they heard her voice they ran
And knelt there, every girl and man,
And kissed, as they would never cease, 215
Her pearl-pale hand and the hem of her dress.
She bade them bring us to the hall
Where Aengus dreams, from sun to sun,
A Druid dream of the end of days
When the stars are to wane and the world be done. 220

They led us by long and shadowy ways
Where drops of dew in myriads fall,
And tangled creepers every hour
Blossom in some new crimson flower, 225
And once a sudden laughter sprang
From all their lips, and once they sang
Together, while the dark woods rang,
And made in all their distant parts,
With doom of bees in honey-marts, 230
A rumour of delighted hearts.
And once a lady by my side
Gave me a harp, and bid me sing,
And touch the laughing silver string;
But when I sang of human joy
A sorrow wrapped each merry face, 235
And, Patrick! by your beard, they wept,
Until one came, a tearful boy;
A sadder creature never swept

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Then this strange human bard, he cried;
And caught the silver harp away, 240
And, weeping over the white strings, hurled
It down in a leaf-hid, hollow place
That kept dim waters from the sky;
And each one said, with a long, long sigh,
'O saddest harp in all the world, 245
Sleep there till the moon and the stars die!'

And now, still sad, we came to where
A beautiful young man dreamed within
A house of wattles, clay, and skin;
One hand upheld his beardless chin, 250
And one a sceptre flashing out
Wild flames of red and gold and blue,
Like to a merry wandering rout
Of dancers leaping in the air;
And men and ladies knelt them there 255
And showed their eyes with teardrops dim,
And with low murmurs prayed to him,
And kissed the sceptre with red lips,
And touched it with their finger-tips.

He held that flashing sceptre up, 260
Joy drowns the twilight in the dew,
And fills with stars night's purple cup,
And wakes the sluggish seeds of corn,
And stirs the young kid's budding horn,
And makes the infant ferns unwrap, 265
And for the peewit¹⁹ paints his cap,
And rolls along the unweildy sun,
And makes the little planets run:
And if joy were not on the earth,
There were an end of change and birth, 270
And Earth and Heaven and Hell would die,
And in some gloomy barrow lie
Folded like a frozen fly;
Then mock at Death and Time with glances
And wavering arms and wandering dances. 275

'Men's hearts of old were drops of flame
That from the saffron morning came,
Or drops of silver joy that fell
Out of the moon's pale twisted shell;
But now hearts cry that hearts are slaves, 280
And toss and turn in narrow caves;
But here there is nor law nor rule,
Nor have hands held a weary tool;
And here there is nor Change nor Death,
But only kind and merry breath, 285
For joy is God and God is joy.'
With one long glance for girl and boy
And the pale blossom of the moon,
He fell into a Druid swoon.

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And in a wild and sudden dance 290
We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance
And swept out of the walled hall
And came to where the dewdrops fall
Among the foandrops of the sea,
And there we hushed the revelry; 295
And, gathering on our brows a frown,
Bent all our swaying bodies down,
And to the waves that glimmer by
That sloping green Oe Danaan sod
Sang, 'God is joy and joy is God, 300
And things that have grown sad are wicked,
And things that fear the dawn of the morrow
Or the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.'

We danced to where in the winding thicket
The damask²⁰ roses, bloom on bloom, 305
Like crimson meteors hang in the gloom.
And bending over them softly said,
Bending over them in the dance,
With a swift and friendly glance
From dewy eyes: 'Upon the dead 310
Fall the leaves of other roses,
On the dead dim earth encloses:
But never, never on our graves,
Heaped beside the glimmering waves,
Shall fall the leaves of damask roses. 315
For neither Death nor Change comes near us,
And all listless hours fear us,
And we fear no dawning morrow,
Nor the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.'

The dance wound through the windless woods; 320
The ever-summered solitudes;
Until the tossing arms grew still
Upon the woody central hill;
And, gathered in a panting band,
We flung on high each waving hand, 325
And sang unto the starry broods.
In our raised eyes there flashed a glow
Of milky brightness to and fro
As thus our song arose: 'You stars,
Across your wandering ruby cars 330
Shake the loose reins: you slaves of God.
He rules you with an iron rod,
He holds you with an iron bond,
Each one woven to the other,
Each one woven to his brother 335
Like bubbles in a frozen pond;
But we in a lonely land abide
Unchainable as the dim tide,
With hearts that know nor law nor rule,
And hands that hold no wearisome tool, 340
Folded in love that fears no morrow,
Nor the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.'

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O Pátrick! for a hundred years
I chased upon that woody shore
The deer, the badger, and the boar. 345
O Pátrick! for a hundred years
At evening on the glimmering sands,
Beside the piled-up hunting spears,
These now outworn and withered hands
Wrestled among the island bands. 350
O Pátrick! for a hundred years
We went a-fishing in long boats
With bending sterns and bending bows,
And carved figures on their prow
Of bitterns²¹ and fish-eating scoats. 355
O Pátrick! for a hundred years
The gentle Niamh was my wife;
But now two things devour my life;
The things that most of all I hate:
Fasting and prayers. 360

S. Pátrick. Tell On.

Oisín. Yes, yes, for these were ancient Oisín's fate
Loosed long ago from Heaven's gate,
For his last days to lie in wait.

When one day by the tide I stood, 365
I found in that forgetfulness
Of dreamy foam a staff of wood
From some dead warrior's broken lance:
I turned it in my hands; the stains
Of war were on it, and I wept,
Remembering how the Feniars slept 370
Along the blood-beddled plains,
Equal to good or grievous chance:
Thereon young Niamh softly came
And caught my hands, but spake no word
Save only many times my name, 375
In murmurs, like a frightened bird.
We passed by woods, and lawns of clover,
And found the horse and bridled him,
For we knew well the old was over.
I heard one say, 'His eyes grow dim 380
With all the ancient sorrow of men';
And wrapped in dreams rode out again
With hoofs of the pale findrinn
Over the glimmering purple sea.
Under the golden evening light, 385
The Immortals moved among the fountains
By rivers and the woods' old night;
Some danced like shadows on the mountains
Some wandered ever hand in hand;
Or sat in dreams on the pale strand, 390
Each forehead like an obscure star
Bent down above each hooked knee,
And sang, and with a dreamy gaze
Watched where the sun in a saffron blaze

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Was slumbering half in the sea-ways; 395
And, as they sang, the painted birds
Kept time with their bright wings and feet;
Like drops of honey came their words,
But fainter than a young lamb's bleat.

An old man stirs the fire to a blaze, 400
In the house of a child, of a friend, of a brother.
He has over-lingered his welcome; the days,
Grown desolate, whisper and sigh to each other;
He hears the storm in the chimney above,
And bends to the fire and shakes with the cold, 405
While his heart still dreams of battle and love,
And the cry of the hounds on the hills of old.

But We are apart in the grassy places,
Where care cannot trouble the least of our days,
Or the softness of youth be gone from our faces, 410
Or love's first tenderness die in our gaze.
The hare grows old as she plays in the sun
And gazes around her with eyes of brightness;
Before the swift things that she dreamed of were done
She limps along in an aged whiteness; 415
A storm of birds in the Asian trees
Like tulips in the air a-winging,
And the gentle waves of the summer seas,
That raise their heads and wander singing,
Must murmur at last, "Unjust, unjust"; 420
And "Oy speed is a weariness," falters the mouse,
And the kingfisher turns to a ball of dust,
And the roof falls in of his tunnelled house.
But the love-dew dims our eyes till the day
When God shall come from the Sea with a sigh 425
And bid the stars drop down from the sky,
And the moon like a pale rose wither away.

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BOOK II

NOU, man of croziers²², shadows called our names
And then away, away, like whirling flames;
And now fled by, mist-covered, without sound,
The youth and lady and the deer and hound;
'Gaze no more on the phantoms,' Niamh said, 5
And kissed my eyes, and, swaying her bright head
And her bright body, sang of faery and man
Before God was or my old line began;
Wars shadowy, vast, exultant; faeries of old
Who wedded men with rings of Druid gold²³; 10
And how those lovers never turn their eyes
Upon the life that fades and flickers and dies,
Yet love and kiss on dim shores far away
Rolled round with music of the sighing spray:
Yet sang no more as when, like a brown bee 15
That has drunk full, she crossed the misty sea
With me in her white arms a hundred years
Before this day; for now the fall of tears
Troubled her song.

I do not know if days
Or hours passed by, yet hold the morning rays 20
Shone many times among the glimmering flowers
Woven into her hair, before dark towers
Rose in the darkness, and the white surf gleamed
About them; and the horse of Faery screamed
And shivered, knowing the Isle of Many Fears, 25
Nor ceased until white Niamh stroked his ears
And named him by sweet names.

A foaming tide
Whitened afar with surge, fan-formed and wide,
Burst from a great door marked by many a blow
From mace and sword and pole-axe, long ago 30
When gods and giants warred. We rode between
The seaweed-covered pillars; and the green
And surging phosphorus alone gave light
On our dark pathway, till a countless flight
Of moonlit steps glimmered; and left and right 35
Dark statues glimmered over the pale tide
Upon dark thrones. Between the lids of one
The imaged meteors had flashed and run
And had disported in the stilly²⁴ jet,
And the fixed stars had dauned and shone and set, 40
Since God made Time and Death and Sleep: the other
Stretched his long arm to where, a misty smother,
The stream churned, churned, and churned -- his lips apart,
As though he told his never-slumbering heart
Of every foamdrops on its misty way. 45

Tying the horse to his vast foot that lay
Half in the unvesselled sea, we climbed the stair
And climbed so long, I thought the last steps were
Hung from the morning star; when these mild words

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Fanned the delighted air like wings of birds: 50
 'Og brothers spring out of their beds at morn,
 A-murmur like young partridge: with loud horn
 They chase the noontide deer;
 And when the dew-drowned stars hang in the air
 Look to long fishing-lines, or point and pare 55
 An ashen hunting spear.
 O sigh, O fluttering sigh, be kind to me;
 Flutter along the froth lips of the sea,
 And shores the froth lips wet:
 And stay a little while, and bid them weep: 60
 Ah, touch their blue-veined eyelids if they sleep,
 And shake their coverlet.
 When you have told how I weep endlessly,
 Flutter along the froth lips of the sea
 And home to me again, 65
 And in the shadow of my hair lie hid,
 And tell me that you found a man unbid,
 The saddest of all men.'

A lady with soft eyes like funeral tapers,
 And face that seemed wrought out of moonlit vapours, 70
 And a sad mouth, that fear made tremulous
 As any ruddy moth, looked down on us:
 And she with a wave-rusted chain was tied
 To two old eagles, full of ancient pride,
 That with dim eyeballs stood on either side. 75
 Few feathers were on their dishevelled wings,
 For their dim minds were with the ancient things.

'Bring deliverance,' pearl-pale Niamh said.

Neither the living, nor the unlabouring dead,
 Nor the high gods who never lived, may fight 80
 Og enemy and hope; demons for fright
 Jadder and scream about him in the night;
 For he is strong and crafty as the seas
 That sprang under the Seven Hazel Trees²⁵,
 And I must needs endure and hate and weep, 85
 Until the gods and demons drop asleep,
 Hearing Aed²⁶ touch the mournful strings of gold.'

'Is he so dreadful?'

'Be not over-bold,

But fly while still you may.'

And thereon I:

'This demon shall be dattered till he die, 90
 And his loose bulk be thrown in the loud tide.'

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Flee from him, pearl-pale Niamh weeping cried,
For all men flee the demons; but moved not
My angry king-remembering soul one jot.
There was no mightier soul of Deòber's²⁷ time; 95
Now it is old and mouse-like. For a sign
I burst the chain: still earless, nerveless, blind,
Wrapped in the things of the unhuman mind,
In some dim memory or ancient mood,
Still earless, nerveless, blind, the eagles stood. 100

And then we climbed the stair to a high door;
A hundred horsemen on the basalt floor
Beneath had paced content: we held our way
And stood within: clothed in a misty ray 105
I saw a foam-white seagull drift and float
Under the roof, and with a straining throat
Shouted, and hailed him: he hung there a star,
For no man's cry shall ever mount so far;
Not even your God could have thrown down that hall;
Stabbling His unloosed lightnings in their stall, 110
He had sat down and sighed with cumbered heart,
As though His hour were come.

We sought the part

That was most distant from the door; green slime
Made the way slippery, and time on time
Showed prints of sea-born scales, while down through it 115
The captive's journeys to and fro were writ
Like a small river, and where feet touched came
A momentary gleam of phosphorus flame.
Under the deepest shadows of the hall
That woman found a ring hung on the wall, 120
And in the ring a torch, and with its flare
Making a world about her in the air,
Passed under the dim doorway, out of sight,
And came again, holding a second light
Burning between her fingers, and in mine 125
Laid it and sighed: I held a sword whose shine
No centuries could dim, and a word ran
Thereon in Ogham²⁸ letters, 'Manamán'²⁹;
That sea-god's name, who in a deep content
Sprang dripping, and, with captive demons sent 130
Out of the sevenfold seas, built the dark hall
Rooted in foam and clouds, and cried to all
The mightier masters of a mightier race;
And at his cry there came no milk-pale face
Under a crown of thorns and dark with blood, 135
But only exultant faces.

Niamh stood

With bowed head, trembling when the white blade shone,
But she whose hours of tenderness were gone
Had neither hope nor fear. I bade them hide
Under the shadows till the tumults died 140
Of the loud-crashing and earth-shaking fight,

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Lest they should look upon some dreadful sight;
 And thrust the torch between the slimy flags.
 A dome made out of endless carven jags,
 Where shadowy face flowed into shadowy face, 145
 Looked down on me; and in the self-same place
 I waited hour by hour, and the high dome,
 Windowless, pillarless, multitudinous home
 Of faces, waited; and the leisured gaze
 Was loaded with the memory of days 150
 Buried and mighty. When through the great door
 The dawn came in, and glimmered on the floor
 With a pale light, I journeyed round the hall
 And found a door deep sunken in the wall,
 The least of doors; beyond on a dim plain 155
 A little runnel³⁰ made a bubbling strain,
 And on the runnel's stony and bare edge
 A dusky demon dry as a withered sedge³¹
 Swayed, crooning to himself an unknown tongue:
 In a sad revelry he sang and sung 160
 Bacchant³² and mournful, passing to and fro
 His hand along the runnel's side, as though
 The flowers still grew there: far on the sea's waste
 Shaking and waving, vapour vapour chased,
 While high frail cloudlets, fed with a green light, 165
 Like drifts of leaves, immovable and bright,
 Hung in the passionate dawn. He slowly turned:
 A demon's leisure: eyes, first white, now burned
 Like wings of kingfishers; and he arose
 Barking. We trampled up and down with blows 170
 Of sword and brazen battle-axe, while day
 Gave to high noon and noon to night gave way;
 And when he knew the sword of Manannan
 Amid the shades of night, he changed and ran
 Through many shapes; I lunged at the smooth throat 175
 Of a great eel; it changed, and I but smote
 A fir-tree roaring in its leafless top;
 And thereupon I drew the vivid chop
 Of a drowned dripping body to my breast;
 Horror from horror grew; but when the west 180
 Had surged up in a plummy fire, I drove
 Through heart and spine; and cast him in the wave
 Lest Niamh shudder.

Full of hope and dread

Those two came carrying wine and meat and bread,
 And healed my wounds with unguents out of flowers 185
 That feed white moths by some Óe Óanaán shrine;
 Then in that hall, lit by the dim sea-shine,
 We lay on skins of otters, and drank wine,
 Brewed by the sea-gods, from huge cups that lay
 Upon the lips of sea-gods in their day; 190
 And then on heaped-up skins of otters slept.
 And when the sun once more in saffron slept,
 Rolling his fragrant wheel out of the deep,
 We sang the loves and angers without sleep,
 And all the exultant labours of the strong, 195

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- But now the lying clerics murder song
With barren words and flatteries of the weak.
In what land do the powerless turn the beak
Of ravening sorrow, or the hand of Wrath?
For all your croziers, they have left the path 200
And wander in the storms and clinging snows,
Hopeless for ever: ancient Oisín knows,
For he is weak and poor and blind, and lies
On the anvil of the world.
- S. PATRICK. Be still: the skies
Are choked with thunder, lightning, and fierce wind, 205
For God has heard, and speaks His angry mind;
Go cast your body on the stones and pray,
For He has wrought midnight and dawn and day.
- Oisín. Saint, do you weep? I hear amid the thunder
The Fenian horses; armour torn asunder; 210
Laughter and cries. The armies clash and shock,
And now the daylight-darkening ravens flock.
Cease, cease, O mournful, laughing Fenian horn!
- We feasted for three days. On the fourth morn
I found, dropping sea-foam on the wide stair, 215
And hung with slime, and whispering in his hair,
That demon dull and unsubmitable³³;
And once more to a day-long battle fell,
And at the sundown threw him in the surge,
To lie until the fourth morn saw emerge 220
His new-healed shape; and for a hundred years
So warred, so feasted, with nor dreams nor fears,
Nor languor nor fatigue: an endless feast,
An endless war.
- The hundred years had ceased;
I stood upon the stair: the surges bore 225
A beech-bough to me, and my heart grew sore,
Remembering how I had stood by white-haired Finn
Under a beech at Athlum and heard the thin
Outcry of bats.
- And then young Niamh came
Holding that horse, and sadly called my name; 230
I mounted, and we passed over the lone
And drifting greyness, while this monotone,
Surlily and distant, mixed inseparably
Into the clangour of the wind and sea.
- I hear my soul drop down into decay, 235
And Manannán's dark tower, stone after stone,
Gather sea-slime and fall the seaward way,
And the moon goad the waters night and day,
That all be overthrown.

The Wanderings of Oisín

But till the moon has taken all, I wage 240
War on the mightiest men under the skies,
And they have fallen or fled, age after age.
Light is man's love, and lighter is man's rage;
His purpose drifts and dies.'

And then lost Niamh murmured, 'Love, we go 245
To the Island of Forgetfulness, for lo!
The Islands of Dancing and of Victories
Are empty of all power.'

And which of these
Is the Island of Content?'

'None know,' she said;
And on my bosom laid her weeping head. 250

The Wanderings of Oisín

BOOK III

FLEO foam underneath us, and round us, a wandering and milky smoke,
High as the Saddle-girth, covering away from our glances the tide;
And those that fled, and that followed, from the foam-pale distance broke;
The immortal desire of Immortals we saw in their faces, and sighed.

I mused on the chase with the Fenians, and Bran, Sceolan, Lomair, 5
And never a song sang Niamh, and over my finger-tips
Came now the sliding of tears and sweeping of mist-cold hair,
And now the warmth of sighs, and after the quiver of lips.

Were we days long or hours long in riding, when, rolled in a grisly peace,
An isle lay level before us, with dripping hazel and oak? 10
And we stood on a sea's edge we saw not; for whiter than new-washed fleece
Fled foam underneath us, and round us, a wandering and milky smoke.

And we rode on the plains of the sea's edge; the sea's edge barren and grey,
Grey sand on the green of the grasses and over the dripping trees,
Oropping and doubling landward, as though they would hasten away, 15
Like an army of old men longing for rest from the moan of the seas.

But the trees grew taller and closer, immense in their wrinkling bark;
Oropping; a murmurous dropping; old silence and that one sound;
For no live creatures lived there, no weasels moved in the dark:
Long sighs arose in our spirits, beneath us bubbled the ground. 20

And the ears of the horse went sinking away in the hollow night,
For, as drift from a sailor slow drowning the gleams of the world and the sun,
Ceased on our hands and our faces, on hazel and oak leaf, the light,
And the stars were blotted above us, and the whole of the world was one.

Till the horse gave a whinny; for, cumbrous with stems of the hazel and oak, 25
A valley flowed down from his hoofs, and there in the long grass lay,
Under the starlight and shadow, a monstrous slumbering folk,
Their naked and gleaming bodies poured out and heaped in the way.

And by them were arrow and war-axe, arrow and shield and blade;
And dew-blanchèd horns, in whose hollow a child of three years old 30
Could sleep on a couch of rushes, and all murther and maid,
And more comely than man can make them with bronze and silver and gold.

And each of the huge white creatures was huger than fourscore men;
The tops of their ears were feathered, their hands were the claws of birds,
And, shaking the plumes of the grasses and the leaves of the mural glen, 35
The breaching came from those bodies, long warless, grown whiter than curds.

The wood was so spacious above them, that He who has stars for His flocks
Could fondle the leaves with His fingers, nor go from His dew-cumbered skies;
So long were they sleeping, the owls had builded their nests in their locks,
Filling the pious dimness with long generations of eyes. 40

The Wanderings of Oisín

And over the limbs and the valley the slow owls wandered and came,
Now in a place of star-fire, and now in a shadow-place wide;
And the chief of the huge white creatures, his knees in the soft star-flame,
Lay loose in a place of shadow: we drew the reins by his side.

Golden the nails of his bird-claws, flung loosely along the dim ground; 45
In one was a branch soft-shining with bells more many than sighs
In midst of an old man's bosom; owls ruffling and pacing around
Sided their bodies against him, filling the shade with their eyes.

And my gaze was thronged with the sleepers; no, not since the world began,
In realms where the handsome were many, nor in glammers by demons flung, 50
Have faces alive with such beauty been known to the salt eye of man,
Yet weary with passions that faded when the sevenfold seas were young.

And I gazed on the bell-branch³⁴, sleep's forebear, far sung by the Sennachies³⁵.
I saw how those slumberers, grown weary, there camping in grasses deep,
Of wars with the wide world and pacing the shores of the wandering seas, 55
Laid hands on the bell-branch and swayed it, and fed of unhuman sleep.

Snatching the horn of Niamh, I blew a long lingering note.
Came sound from those monstrous sleepers, a sound like the stirring of flies.
He, shaking the fold of his lips, and heaving the pillar of his throat,
Watched me with mournful wonder out of the wells of his eyes. 60

I cried, 'Come out of the shadow, king of the nails of gold!
And tell of your goodly household and the goodly works of your hands,
That we may muse in the starlight and talk of the battles of old;
Your questioner, Oisín, is worthy, he comes from the Feman lands.'

Half open his eyes were, and held me, dull with the smoke of their dreams; 65
His lips moved slowly in answer, no answer out of them came;
Then he swayed in his fingers the bell-branch, slow dropping a sound in faint streams
Softer than snow-flakes in April and piercing the marrow like flame.

Wrapt in the wave of that music, with weariness more than of earth,
The moil of my centuries filled me; and gone like a sea-covered stone 70
Were the memories of the whole of my sorrow and the memories of the whole of my mirth,
And a softness came from the starlight and filled me full to the bone.

In the roots of the grasses, the sorrels, I laid my body as low;
And the pearl-pale Niamh lay by me, her brow on the midst of my breast;
And the horse was gone in the distance, and years after years 'gan flow; 75
Square leaves of the ivy moved over us, binding us down to our rest.

And, man of the many white croziers, a century there I forgot
How the fetlocks drip blood in the battle, when the fallen on fallen lie rolled;
How the falconer follows the falcon in the weeds of the heron's plot,
And the name of the demon whose hammer made Conchubair's³⁶ sword-blade of old. 80

And, man of the many white croziers, a century there I forgot
That the spear-shaft is made out of ashwood, the shield out of osier³⁷ and hide;
How the hammers spring on the anvil, on the spearhead's burning spot;
How the slow, blue-eyed oxen of Finn low sadly at evening tide.

The Wanderings of Oisín

- But in dreams, mild man of the croziers, driving the dust with their throngs, 85
Moved round me, of seamen or landsmen, all who are winter tales;
Came by me the kings of the Red Branch, with roaring of laughter and songs,
Or moved as they moved once, love-making or piercing the tempest with sails.
- Came Bláid³⁸, Mac Nessa, tall Fergus who feastward of old time sunk,
Cook Barach, the traitor³⁹; and warward, the spittle on his beard never dry, 90
Dark Balor⁴⁰, as old as a forest, car-borne⁴¹, his mighty head sunk
Helpless, men lifting the lids of his weary and death-making eye.
- And by me, in soft red raiment, the Fenians moved in loud streams,
And Crania⁴², walking and smiling, sewed with her needle of bone. 95
So lived I and lived not, so wrought I and wrought not, with creatures of dreams,
In a long iron sleep, as a fish in the water goes dumb as a stone.
- At times our slumber was lightened. When the sun was on silver or gold;
When brushed with the wings of the owls, in the dimness they love going by;
When a glow-worm was green on a grass-leaf, lured from his lair in the mould;
Half wakening, we lifted our eyelids, and gazed on the grass with a sigh. 100
- So watched I when, man of the croziers, at the heel of a century fell,
Weak, in the midst of the meadow, from his miles in the midst of the air,
A starling like them that forgathered 'neath a moon waking white as a shell
When the Fenians made foray at morning with Bran, Sceolan, Lomair.
- I awoke: the strange horse without summons out of the distance ran, 105
Christing his nose to my shoulder; he knew in his bosom deep
That once more moved in my bosom the ancient sadness of man,
And that I would leave the Immortals, their dimness, their deus dropping sleep.
- O, had you seen beautiful Niamh grow white as the waters are white,
Lord of the croziers, you even had lifted your hands and wept: 110
But, the bird in my fingers, I mounted, remembering alone that delight
Of twilight and slumber were gone, and that hoofs impatiently slept.
- I cried, 'O Niamh! O white one! if only a twelve-hour'd day,
I must gaze on the beard of Finn, and move where the old men and young
In the Fenians' dwellings of wattle⁴³ lean on the chessboards and play, 115
Ah, sweet to me now were even bald Conan's⁴⁴ slanderous tongue!
- 'Like me were some galley forsaken far off in Meridian isle,
Remembering its long-oared companions, sails turning to threadbare rags;
No more to crawl on the seas with long oars mile after mile,
But to be amid shooting of flies and flowering of rushes and flags.' 120
- Their motionless eyeballs of spirits grown mild with mysterious thought,
Watched her those seamless faces from the valley's glimmering girth;
As she murmured, 'O wandering Oisín, the strength of the bell-branch is naught,
For there moves alive in your fingers the fluttering sadness of earth.
- 'Then go through the lands in the saddle and see what the mortals do, 125
And softly come to your Niamh over the tops of the tide;
But weep for your Niamh, O Oisín, weep; for if only your shoe
Brush lightly as haymow earth's pebbles, you will come no more to my side.

The Wanderings of Oisín

'O flaming lion of the world, O when will you turn to your rest?'
I saw from a distant saddle; from the carth she made her moan: 130
I would die like a small withered leaf in the autumn, for breast unto breast
We shall mingle no more, nor our gazes empty their sweetness lone

In the isles of the farthest seas where only the spirits come.
Were the winds less soft than the breath of a pigeon who sleeps on her nest,
Nor lost in the star-fires and odours the sound of the sea's vague drum? 135
O flaming lion of the world, O when will you turn to your rest?'

The waiting grew distant; I rode by the woods of the wrinkling dark,
Where ever is murmurous dropping, old silence and that one sound;
For no live creatures live there, no weasels move in the dark:
In a reverie forgetful of all things, over the doubling ground. 140

And I rode by the plains of the sea's edge, where all is barren and grey,
Grey sand on the green of the grasses and over the dripping trees,
Dripping and doubling landward, as though they would hasten away,
Like an army of old men longing for rest from the moan of the seas.

And the winds made the sands on the sea's edge turning and turning go, 145
As my mind made the names of the Fenians. Far from the hazel and oak,
I rode away on the surges, where, high as the saddle-bow,
Fled foam underneath me, and round me, a wandering and milky smoke.

Long fled the foam-flakes around me, the winds fled out of the vast,
Snatching the bird in secret; nor knew I, embodied apart, 150
When they froze the cloth on my body like armour riveted fast,
For Remembrance, lifting her leanness, keened in the gates of my heart.

Till, fattening the winds of the morning, an odour opened-moun hay
Came, and my forehead fell low, and my tears like berries fell down;
Later a sound came, half lost in the sound of a shore far away, 155
From the great grass-barnacle calling, and later the shore-weeds brown.

If I were as I once was, the strong hoops crushing the sand and the shells,
Coming out of the sea as the dawn comes, a chant⁴⁵ of love on my lips,
Not coughing, my head on my knees, and praying, and wroth with the bells,
I would leave no saint's head on his body from Rachel to Bera⁴⁶ of ships. 160

Making way from the kindling surges, I rode on a bridle-path
Much wondering to see upon all hands, of wattles and woodwork made,
Your bell-mounted churches, and guardless the sacred cairn and the rath⁴⁷,
And a small and a feeble populace stooping with mattock⁴⁸ and spade,

Or weeding or ploughing with faces a-shining with much-toil wet; 165
While in this place and that place, with bodies unglorious, their chieftains stood,
Awaiting in patience the straw-death⁴⁹, croziered one, caught in your net:
Went the laughter of scorn from my mouth like the roaring of wind in a wood.

And because I went by them so huge and so speedy with eyes so bright,
Came after the hard gaze of youth, or an old man lifted his head: 170
And I rode and I rode, and I cried out, 'The Fenians hunt wolves in the night,
So sleep thee by daytime.' A voice cried, 'The Fenians a long time are dead.'

The Wanderings of Oisín

- A whitebeard stood hushed on the pathway, the flesh of his face as dried grass,
And in folds round his eyes and his mouth, he sad as a child without milk-
And the dreams of the islands were gone, and I knew how men sorrow and pass, 175
And their hound, and their horse, and their love, and their eyes that glimmer like silk.
- And wrapping my face in my hair, I murmured, 'In old age they ceased;
And my tears were larger than berries, and I murmured, 'Where white clouds lie spread
On CREVROC⁵⁰ or broad Knockpeim⁵¹, with many of old they feast
On the floors of the gods.' He cried, 'No, the gods a long time are dead.' 180
- And lonely and longing for Niamh, I shivered and turned me about,
The heart in me longing to leap like a grasshopper into her heart;
I turned and rode to the westward, and followed the sea's old shout
Till I saw where Maev lies sleeping till starlight and midnight part.
- And there at the foot of the mountain, two carried a sack full of sand, 185
They bore it with staggering and sweating, but fell with their burden at length.
Leaning down from the gem-studded saddle, I flung it five yards with my hand,
With a sob for men waxing so weakly, a sob for the Feniains' old strength.
- The rest you have heard of, O croziered man; how, when divided the girth,
I fell on the path, and the horse went away like a summer fly; 190
And my years three hundred fell on me, and I rose, and walked on the earth,
A creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry.
- Now the men of the sand-sack showed me a church with its belfry in air;
Sorry place, where for swing of the war-axe in my dim eyes the crozier gleams;
What place have Caoilte and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan, Lomair?
Speak, you too are old with your memories, an old man surrounded with dreams. 195
- S. PATRICK. Where the flesh of the footsole clingeth on the burning stones is their place;
Where the demons whip them with wires on the burning stones of wide Hell,
Watching the blessed ones move far off, and the smile on God's face,
Between them a gateway of brass, and the howl of the angels who fell. 200
- Oisín. Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Feniains, O cleric, to chaunt
The war-songs that roused them of old; they will rise, making clouds with their breath,
Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath them shall pant,
And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled beneath them in death.
- And demons afraid in their darkness; deep horror of eyes and of wings, 205
Afraid, their ears on the earth laid, shall listen and rise up and weep;
Hearing the shaking of shields and the quiver of stretched bowstrings,
Hearing Hell loud with a murmur, as shouting and mocking we sweep.
- We will tear out the flaming stones, and batter the gateway of brass
And enter, and none sayeth 'No' when there enters the strongly armed guest; 210
Make clean as a broom cleans, and march on as oxen move over young grass;
Then feast, making converse of wars, and of old wounds, and turn to our rest.
- S. PATRICK. On the flaming stones, without refuge, the limbs of the Feniains are tost;
None war on the masters of Hell, who could break up the world in their rage;
But kneel and wear out the flags and pray for your soul that is lost 215
Through the demon love of its youth and its godless and passionate age.

The Wanderings of Oisín

Oisín. Ah me! to be Shaken with coughing and broken with old age and pain,
Without laughter, a show unto children, alone with remembrance and fear;
All emptied of purple hours as a beggar's cloak in the rain,
As a hay-cock out on the flood, or a wolf sucked under a weir.

220

It were sad to gaze on the blessed and no man I loved of old there;
I throw down the chain of small stones⁵² when life in my body has ceased,
I will go to Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Sceolán, Lomair,
And dwell in the house of the Feniains, be they in flames or at feast.

*Give me the world if Thou wilt, but grant me an asylum
for my affections. -- TULKA⁵³*

The Wanderings of Oisín

Notes

¹ Yeats described Oisín, son of Finn, as “the poet of the Fenian cycle of legends.” His note on this poem, from 1912, read:

“The poem is founded upon the Middle Irish dialogues of S. Patrick and Oisín and a certain Gaelic poem of the last century (*Laoidh Oisín ar Thír na n-Óg* by Micheál Coimín). The events it describes, like the events in most of the poems in this volume, are supposed to have taken place rather in the indefinite period, made up of many periods, described by the fohetales, than in any particular century; it therefore, like the later Fenian stories themselves, mixes much that is mediaeval with much that is ancient. The Gaelic poems do not make Oisín go to more than one island, but a story in *Silva Gadelica* (in *The Adventures of Cian’s son Teigue* by Standish Hayes O’Grady, 1892) describes ‘four paradises,’ an island to the north, an island to the west, an island to the south, and Adam’s paradise in the east.”

² (l, 13) Members of Fianna, a band of adventurers who lived off the land. Yeats defined The Fenians as “the great military order of which Finn was chief.” The Fenian Cycle of Myths is about Finn (Fionn mac Cuhail) and the Fianna.

³ (l, 15) Finn’s favorite hunting hounds, because there were as smart as humans. In fact, they were his cousins as his aunt, Tuiren, had been changed into a dog.

⁴ (l, 16) Yeats defined the Firbolg as “An early race who warred vainly upon the Fomoians, or Fomoroh, before the coming of the Tuath De Danaan. Certain Firbolg kings, killed at Southern Moytura, are supposed to be buried at Ballisodare. It is by their graves that Usheen (Oisín) and his companions rode.”

⁵ (l, 17) While a cairn is any pile of stones left by people, Ireland’s numerous pre-historic cairns and mounds have always been associated with her mythological immortals – The Good Neighbors, the Faery Cavalcade, the Shee.

⁶ (l, 18) Maeve, according to Yeats, was “A famous queen of the Red Branch cycle. She is rumored to be buried under the cairn on Knocknarea. Ferguson speaks of ‘the bell-shaped cairn of Maeve high up on haunted Knocknarea,’ but inaccurately, for the cairn is of stones.”

Knocknarea, Queen Maeve’s grave, is a imposing hill just west of Sligo Town, where Yeats spent his boyhood. It is the second largest such mound in Ireland, after Newgrange. Queen Maeve is the principal antagonist in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, The Cattle Raid of Cooley, at the heart of the Ulster cycle.

⁷ (l, 21) “A kind of red bronze” according to Yeats in the Glossary of *Poems*. The notes to the more recent *Collected Works*, however, define it as “white bronze,” and cite an etymology from ‘fiondrúine.’

⁸ (l, 41) Oscar is the Fenian hero who killed the traitor Goll mac Morna at Gabhra, but is himself killed in the fight. There is an anachronism here as Oscar is the son of Oisín and Niamh. Some of the mythology of ancient Ireland has been rediscovered since Yeats’ time, so maybe he did not know this detail, or maybe it was just poetic license. Either way, the story is in the telling. It is not history.

⁹ (l, 43) The Fianna is defeated in the Battle of Gabhra Hill, Cath Gabhra, in the Fenian Cycle. Ravens call to mind the Irish triple-goddess of war, The Morrighan.

¹⁰ (l, 47) Angus is “The god of youth, beauty, and poetry. He reigns in Tir-nan-Oge, the country of the young” according to Yeats’ Glossary in *Poems*, which contained an intermediate version of this poem.

¹¹ (l, 47) The story of Aengus and Edain is the archetype of myths of young love. Interestingly only fragments of *The Wooing of Étain*, or *Tachmarc Étaine*, were known when Yeats wrote this!

¹² (l, 48) Niamh means luster, bright or brilliance.

¹³ (l, 53) In Irish myth Aengus’ kisses turn to birds.

¹⁴ (l, 63) According to Yeats “Tuath De Danaan means the Race of the Gods of Dana. Dana was the mother of all the ancient gods of Ireland. They were the powers of light and life and warmth, and did battle with the Fomoroh, or powers of night and death and cold. Robbed of offerings and honour, they have gradually dwindled in the popular imagination until they have become the Faeries.”

¹⁵ (l, 71) Brazen can mean made of brass, harsh sounding, or rudely imposing. Perhaps a deliberate triple entendre?

¹⁶ (l, 156) The Hill of Almuin is Finn’s home. It translates “great neck.” In County Kildare, today it is called the Hill of Allen.

¹⁷ (l, 166) quires – choirs.

¹⁸ (l, 191) stoats – weasels, especially when in their Summer coats.

¹⁹ (l, 266) peewit – small.

²⁰ (l, 305) damask – a kind of red.

²¹ (l, 355) bitterns – a sea bird with a particularly harsh call.

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²² (II, 1) A crozier is the staff carried by a bishop a sign of office. It is meant to represent a shepherd's hook.

²³ (II, 10) The "Druid gold" was secret knowledge, which wed the faerie race to men.

²⁴ (II, 39) stilly – still, quiet.

²⁵ (II, 84) In Irish mythology the hazelnut is associated with wisdom and poetic inspiration. Oisín's father, Finn, gained his wisdom from a 'the salmon of wisdom,' that had eaten nuts from sacred hazel trees.

In the Glossary to *Poems* Yeats wrote: "There was once a well overshadowed by seven sacred hazel-trees, in the midst of Ireland. A certain lady plucked their fruit, and seven rivers arose out of the well and swept her away. In my poems this well is the source of all the waters of this world, which are therefore sevenfold."

²⁶ (II, 87) Aed is "A God of death. All who hear his harp playing die. He was one of the two gods who appeared to Cuhoollin before his death, according to the bardic tale" according to the Glossary in *Poems*.

²⁷ (II, 95) Heber is a son of Mil, whose line makes up the present population of Ireland. The Hebrides are named for Heber.

²⁸ (II, 128) Ogham is the secret alphabet of the Druids. It was created by Ogma, the Irish god of eloquence, learning and wisdom. Manannan is Ogham is

²⁹ (II, 128) "Manannan the sea-god, was a son of Lir, the infinite waters" according to Glossary in *Poems*.

³⁰ (II, 156) runnel – a small, running stream.

³¹ (II, 158) sedge – marsh grass.

³² (II, 161) Bacchant – a constant pleasure seeker; a drunk. From Bacchus, the Greek god of drink.

³³ (II, 217) unsubduable – unconquerable.

³⁴ (III, 53) bell-branch – "A legendary branch whose shaking casts all men into a gentle sleep" according to Yeats' Glossary in *Poems*.

³⁵ (III, 53) Sennachies – A traditional Irish story-teller, or historian.

³⁶ (III, 80) Conchubar (mac Nessa) was king of Ulster in the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The smith who made his sword-blade was Chuainn, the namesake, of sorts, for Cú Chulainn (which means 'Chuainn's Hound').

Conchubar is said to have been born the same day as Jesus Christ. His capital, Emain Macha, is close by Saint Patrick's capital of Armagh.

³⁷ (III, 82) osier – willow used in weaving.

³⁸ (III, 89) Blánid – "The heroine of a beautiful and sad story told by Keating" according to the Glossary from *Poems*.

³⁹ (III, 89-90) A sub-plot from the *Táin* in which Blánid is kidnapped, then murdered. Fergus was the king of Ulster before Conchubar. He is under a geiss to attend a feast if invited, and this is used to betray him and murder his men.

⁴⁰ (III, 91) Balor -- "The Irish Chimaera, the leader of the hosts of darkness at the great battle of good and evil, life and death, light and darkness, which was fought out on the strands of Moytura, near Sligo" according to the Glossary from *Poems*.

⁴¹ (III, 91) car-bourn – carried on a car or litter.

⁴² (III, 94) Grania – "A beautiful woman, who fled with Dermot to escape from the love of aged Finn. She fled from place to place over Ireland, but at last Dermot was killed at Sligo upon the seaward point of Benbulbin, and Finn won her love and brought her, leaning upon his neck, into the assembly of the Fenians, who burst into inextinguishable laughter" according to the Glossary from *Poems*.

⁴³ (III, 115) wattle – woven branches and twigs when used to for building.

⁴⁴ (III, 116) Conan the Bald – a fat, ugly and cowardice member of the Fenian. He was often a laughing stock.

⁴⁵ (III, 158) chaunt – chant.

⁴⁶ (III, 160) Islands off the coast of Ireland. Rachlin is in the far north, and Bera in the far south.

⁴⁷ (III, 163) rath – an old Irish name for a fort or fortified town.

⁴⁸ (III, 164) mattock – a digging tool like an adz.

⁴⁹ (III, 167) straw-death – dying in bed, when beds were made of straw.

⁵⁰ (III, 179) Crevroe – A royal house of King Conchobar.

⁵¹ (III, 179) Knockfein – where Niamh's parents, Aengus and Edain, met.

⁵² (III, 222) "chain of small stones" – a rosary.

⁵³ This quotation introduced the poem in *The Poetical Works of William B. Yeats* (1906).