

The Insular Celts – Ciaran Carson

Having left hard ground behind
in the hardness of their place-names,
they have sailed out for an island:

as along the top of a wood
their boats have crossed the green ridges,
so has the pale sky overhead

appeared as a milky surface,
a white plain where the speckled fish
drift in lamb-white clouds of fleece.

As their sails will be covering
for the first houses that they build,
so their boats will be hovering

in the smoke of their first fires,
like red blood falling will be
their landing on the first shores.

They will come back to the warm earth
and call it by possessive names:
mother, thorned rose, woman, love's birth;

to hard hills of stone they will give
the words for breast; to meadowland,
the soft gutterals of rivers,

tongues of water; to firm plains, flesh,
as one day we will discover
their way of living, in their death.

They entered their soft beds of soil
not as graves, for this was the land
that they had fought for, loved, and killed

each other for. They'd arrive again:
death could be no horizon
but the shoreline of their island,

a coming and going as flood
comes after ebb. In the spirals
of their brooches is seen the flight

of one thing into the other:
as the wheel-ruts on a battle-
plain have filled with silver water,

the confused circles of their wards,
their cattle-raids, have worked themselves
to a laced pattern of old scars.

In their speckled parchments we read
of word-play in the halls of kings,
of how these people loved to fight,

yet where are their fine houses now?
They are hammered into the ground,
they have been laid bare by the plough.

Yet their death, since it is no real
death, will happen over again
and again, their bones will seem still

to fall in the hail beneath hooves
of horses, their limbs will drift down
as the branches that trees have loosed.

We cannot yet say why or how
they could not take things as they were.
Some day we will learn of how

their bronze swords took the shape of leaves;
their gold spears are found in cornfields,
their arrows are found in trees.