

Ancient Irish Poetry

The Mystery

I am the wind that breathes upon the sea
I am the wave of the ocean
I am the murmur of the billows
I am the ox of the seven combats
I am the vulture upon the rocks
I am a beam of the sun
I am the fairest of plants
I am a wild boar in valour
I am a salmon in the water
I am a lake in the plain
I am a word of science
I am the point of the lance of battle
I am the God who created in the head the fire
Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the mountain?
Who announces the ages of the moon?
Who teaches the place where couches the sun? (If not I?)
--- Amergin, brother of Evir, Ir, and Eremon, the first Milesian princes who came to Ireland hundreds of years before Christ

The Scribe

*Dom-fharcaí fidbaide fál
Fom-chain loíd luin, lúad nád céil;
Húas mo lebrán ind línech
Fom-chain trírech inna n-én.*

*Fom-chain coí menn, medair mass,
Hi mbrot glass de dindgnaib doss
Debrath! Nom-Choimmdiu coíma,
Caín-scríbaimm fo roída ross.*

A hedge of trees surrounds me:
A blackbird sings to me
Above my lined booklet
The birds chant their songs to me.

The cuckoo sings to me lovely and clear
In a grey cloak from the ramparts of bushes.
Well indeed does the Lord look after me
As I write with care in the woodland shade.
--- Anonymous, 9th century

Pangur Bán

I and Pangur Bán, my cat
'Tis a like task we are at;

Hunting mice is his delight,
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men
'Tis to sit with book and pen;
Pangur bears me no ill will,
He too plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry thing to see
At our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray
In the hero Pangur's way;
Oftentimes my keen thought set
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den,
O how glad is Pangur then!
O what gladness do I prove
When I solve the doubts I love!

So in peace our tasks we ply,
Pangur Bán, my cat, and I;
In our arts we find our bliss,
I have mine and he has his.

Practice every day has made
Pangur perfect in his trade;
I get wisdom day and night
Turning darkness into light.

--- Anonymous (a student at the monastery of Carinthia), early 9th century

Summer Has Come

Summer has come, healthy and free,
Whence the brown wood is bent to the ground:
The slender nimble deer leap,
And the path of seals is smooth.

The cuckoo sings gentle music,

Whence there is smooth peaceful calm:
Gentle birds skip upon the hill,
And swift grey stags.

Heat has laid hold of the rest of the deer –
The lovely cry of curly packs!
The white extent of the strand smiles,
There the swift sea is roused.

A sound of playful breezes in the tops
Of a black oakwood is Drum Daill,
The noble hornless herd runs,
To whom Cuan-wood is a shelter.

Green bursts out on every herb,
The top of the green oakwood is bushy,
Summer has come, winter has gone,
Twisted hollies wound the hound.

The blackbird sings a loud strain,
To him the live wood is a heritage,
The sad angry sea is fallen asleep,
The speckled salmon leaps.

The sun smiles over every land, --
A parting for me from the brood of cares:
Hounds bark, stags tryst,
Ravens flourish, summer has come!
--- Anonymous, 10th century

The Light of Love

Ní fetar

Cía lasa fífea Etan

Ach ro-fetar Etan bán

Nícon fhífea a hoenarán

I do not know
Who Etan will sleep with
But I do know that fair Etan
Will not sleep alone.
--- Anonymous, 9th century

A Kiss

Cride hé

Daire cnó

Ócán é,

He's a heart,
Grove of nuts;
My little one,

Pócán dó

A kiss to him.

--- Anonymous, 10th century (love poem to a baby)

A Stormy Night

Is aicher in gaíth innocht

Bitter is the wind tonight,

Fu-fúasna fairge findfholt;

It tosses the sea's white tresses;

Ní ágor réimm mora mind

I do not fear the fierce warriors of Norway,

Dond láechraid lainn ua Lothlind.

Who only travel the quiet seas.