

HIRAETH

poems for Miranda Whall

'A candle on a Lonely Beach'

Innis Leacain

In the Yukon

In the Sahara

Ponterwyd

The Long Grass

Sweep All That Aside

It's An Illness

The House of the Lord

The Prison of Hiraeth

The Mountains of Your Country

Staying on the Land

'A Candle on a Lonely Beach'

I read a poem somewhere about a house on the far side of some sad estuary. Night was falling, and the house was dark. Then suddenly there was a little light in one of the windows beckoning in the gloom. But no-one could go to the house; the estuary too was filling like the sky. I remember the line 'a candle on a lonely beach': hiraeth is something like that, I think.

Innis Leacain

I long for a place which was more beautiful than home, where a boat would take us to a little island in the sea of Connemara.

And Father always giving a shout half a mile before landing, and then throwing us out of the boat, and us swimming slowly after him always safely to shore.

When I stood with my back against the stone wall of the house, the sea-tide approaching, in the black of night, I was not afraid of goblins or witches: I longed for it to continue...

In The Yukon

I was in the Yukon, in the coldest place there is; for five months it was midnight all day. And my heart longed for my feet to be free.

For one like me, who had grown where rivers and sea flowed, and branches were restless, and wind scattered crows across the hills; for one like me who had run along beaches, the winter in the Yukon was prison.

Poetry was frozen, like beer in the can; we began talking like people not quite right in the head; but we kept the stove burning and held up our hands.

Then one morning in Spring, we broke out, hit the highway to Alaska, and raced towards the ocean and the islands, until we could taste the salt on our lips; and I saw the sea dancing with the harbour, and I wept.

In the Sahara

I am from Llangeitho, and I have little time for hiraeth; he who is always looking back is useless now. But when I was a child (because I was a good child), my mother and father took me to live in Africa.

Under the Sahara sun I got used to seeing the shadows of men melt in the heat. And I had none of the longing of my mother and father, or thirst after the waters of the old country.

But once, when I was playing in the sun in front of the house, there came an eclipse of the sun and everywhere went dark. And suddenly it became cold, and how lovely that was! I longed for Wales in summer...

Ponterwyd

*I long for a Welsh which is nearly at an end in the farms of
'False Herd' and 'White Herd'.*

*And the names that tools and implements had in the 'Valley
of the Bracken Field' and the 'Acre of Beards'.*

*And the stories about Glyn-Dŵr and Arthur in the 'Place of
Halls' and the 'Great Wall'.*

*And the summery words of a girl as she took off her shirt
over by the 'Lakes of Ieuan' or the 'Stream of Rhys'.*

*It will soon all be gone, as the old white homesteads went
long ago beneath those mighty woods on the 'Sweet
Mountain' and the 'Bank of Birds'...*

*'You comin' up to Tom's Place later, then?' I long for a
Welsh which is nearly at an end.*

The Long Grass

I was born in Llansaint in Carmarthenshire. I have no longing for the village, or for the people, to tell the truth.

My longing is for the open land; my longing is for the fields and the hedges, the little fields everywhere, and the tall grass.

And I long to run and run and run through the tall grass, and then lie in the sun, and hide from the world under a blue sky.

That is what 'hiraeth' is to me... But in years to come, who knows what I will long for whenever the world turns nasty?

Sweep All That Aside

Everyone had a little farm, you see: a few acres, chickens, a pig, a cat, and two or three cows for milking. They knew how to manage; they grew things themselves; everyone for himself in the fair, everyone together at hay-time.

And we hill children leaping over the haystacks, and sticking out our tongues at our mothers and fathers, and Mam-gu and Tad-cu... Sweep all that aside: there is nothing left of it but pieces of memory.

But here are the mountains, and here are the valleys, the rivers and the waterfalls, the cliffs and the rocks. And here they will be when I am dead and the haystacks and the children have gone forever.

It's An Illness

It's an illness beyond words. But not an illness you can name. I have a pain, Doctor, but I don't know where.

I can't anchor myself; time is all askew. I'm not in the past. There is no future. But the cloud of the past encompasses the present.

I felt it sometimes walking down the road. It was absence then, as if I was losing my substance, my cells emptying.

I walk into a hotel room, a place people travel through, staying no more than a couple of nights. The population is always moving, in and out, in and out. And there are always the traces of those that were there before.

That sends me to the deep place – like a ghost in my soul, in my cells; emptying.

The House of the Lord

When I first went to London, I had never laid my head on any bed but the one that was in the old white house that had been the home of my family since the year 1893! While I was looking for a place to live, I stayed with a family, who were very kind, believe me, but absolute strangers to me.

My first night, I went to the bathroom, and there I stood looking at myself in the mirror. And the room filled up with the voice of my aunts from afar: 'We told you, we told you that you would regret it!' And then it was that I decided I would stay.

That's what it was like then, when I first left the old house; a lump in the throat, nausea, a hollowness in the stomach. Now it's much more; a terrible longing to go home to a house whiter than the home of my people, where I can lay down my head: now I long for the house of the Lord!

The Prison of Hiraeth

You can't have hiraeth for something yet to come: the material of hiraeth is memories... Memories of people, of a place, the memory of a sound. Memories of the company of a dog, of a view.

Memories of walking on a summer's evening after the long yellow hazy day, and everywhere silent, everywhere silent and still, and being embraced by the heat...

*'Great hiraeth, cruel hiraeth breaks my heart every day...'
No it doesn't! It's not worth having if that's what it does;
long for something that makes you smile.*

Long for something that's worth having again, because you are a prisoner, and you don't want to be in the prison of hiraeth if the bed is cold and hard...

The Mountains of Your Country

That pulling at the heart when a Welshman is out of his country: someone called it 'hiraeth' long ago. Do they feel it in other countries? Do they have a word for it in Africa?

I've travelled and worked in every corner of England, and I've met many knowledgeable people, people who understood a good deal about the world. But I don't remember one Englishman talking about hiraeth.

I remember one time in London; I was working in Richmond, among the tofs, painting houses. I turned up one morning in my white apron and I met a stranger, a man from Lebanon.

Are you a Londoner? the man asked. I am not! said I. I come from Wales. I have heard of it, he said then; there are mountains there like those of my country.

And he spoke of trees, of the cedars of Lebanon, and the hyssop which grows out of the wall. Does your heart hurt also, friend, when you think of the mountains of your country?

Yes! Yes! And that's the only time I have talked about this with anyone in England. I forgot to ask the man from Lebanon what his word for it was.

Staying on the Land

The room in Dinas Mawddwy where my father lay: I will never forget that scene. He lay exactly as if he were sleeping, and I wanted to touch him.

I took hold of his fingers; my father's fingers were short and thick, and like dry leather after the work he had done in every weather since he was a boy, dirt in every crease. And when I left home as a lad, with his blessing (because there was enough in my head to pass exams), little did I know that in a few years I would come back here to work the land of my father and my fathers.

Sometimes I long for the merry company I gallivanted with, and I think of unkept promises, and failed dreams, but when I look down from Aran Fawddwy, from among thirty of my black cattle, at the bridge of Barmouth, and the waves of the sea, and over at Arennig, and all the lands that reach as far as the slopes of Snowdon, and then turn my back on all these, and look towards the Valley of Dyfi and Llandinam and Pen y Fan – and England somewhere in the rain – then I have a greater hiraeth; hiraeth for the industriousness in my father's time, and the loss which binds together the Welshmen of the ages gives me strength to stay on the land.