

# Capall Bán

*Written and illustrated by*

**Sorcha Ables**

**Cathasaigh Bogert**

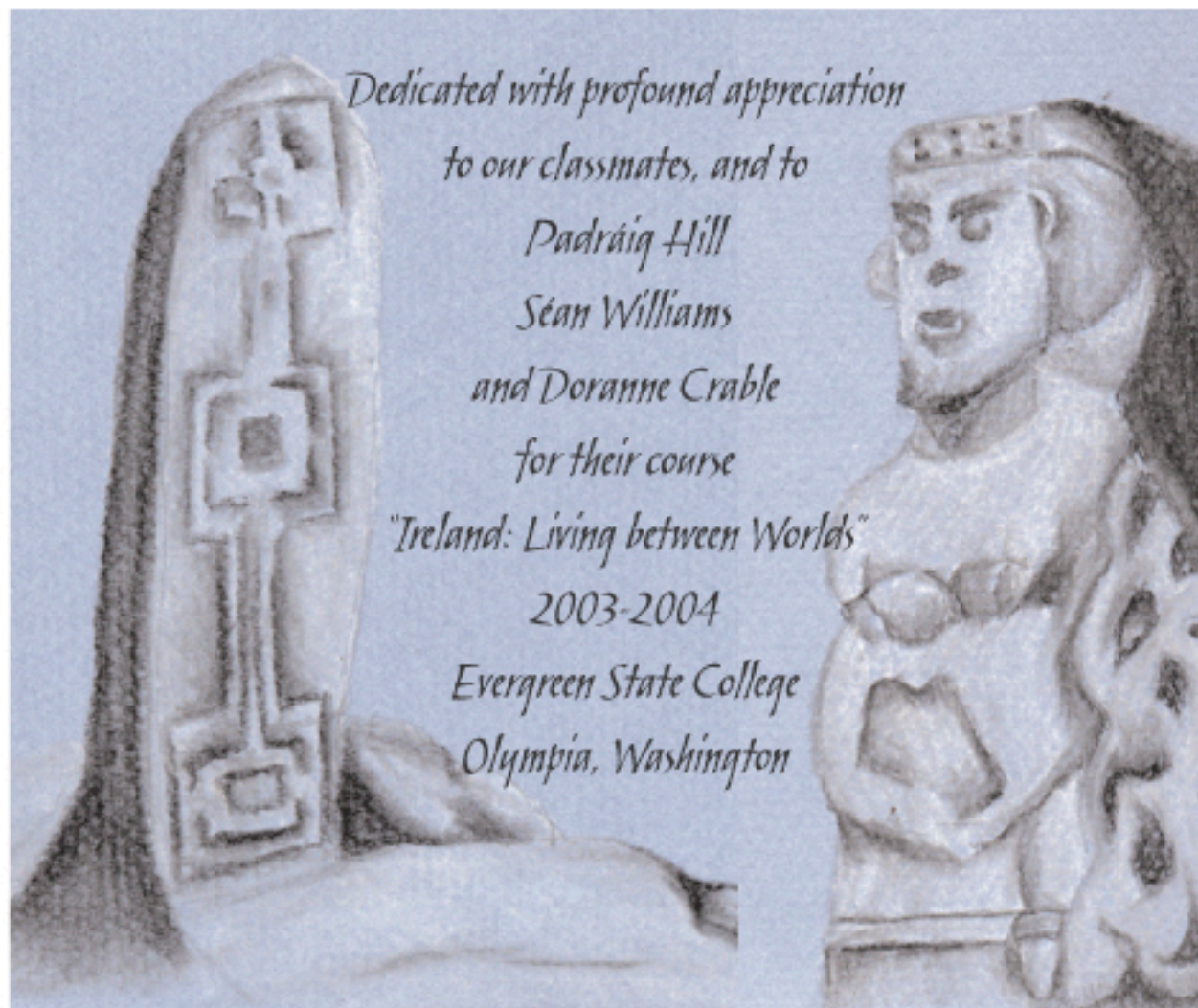
**Ceallaigh Ní Briain**

**Cara Cale**

**Sorcha Fields**

**Tamlin Iverson**

**Gairnéad Turner**



*Dedicated with profound appreciation*

*to our classmates, and to*

*Padraig Hill*

*Séan Williams*

*and Doranne Crable*

*for their course*

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## *In a younger, simpler time,*

in a far off and greener land, there sat an old stone cottage with a thatched roof.

On a night, like many others before it, when the moon shone bright on the bay, a fiddle could be heard playing a tune in time with the lapping of the sea. The doorway to the old stone cottage hung wide—a welcoming square of firelight flung into the soft summer evening.





Within the cottage, next to the fireplace an aged woman sat and sang:

*"A mother came when stars were paling  
Wailing around the fairy spring  
Thus her tears were softly falling  
Calling on the fairy king."*

Her three grandchildren, Colin, Maggie and Norah listened with rapt attention to her melodic voice.

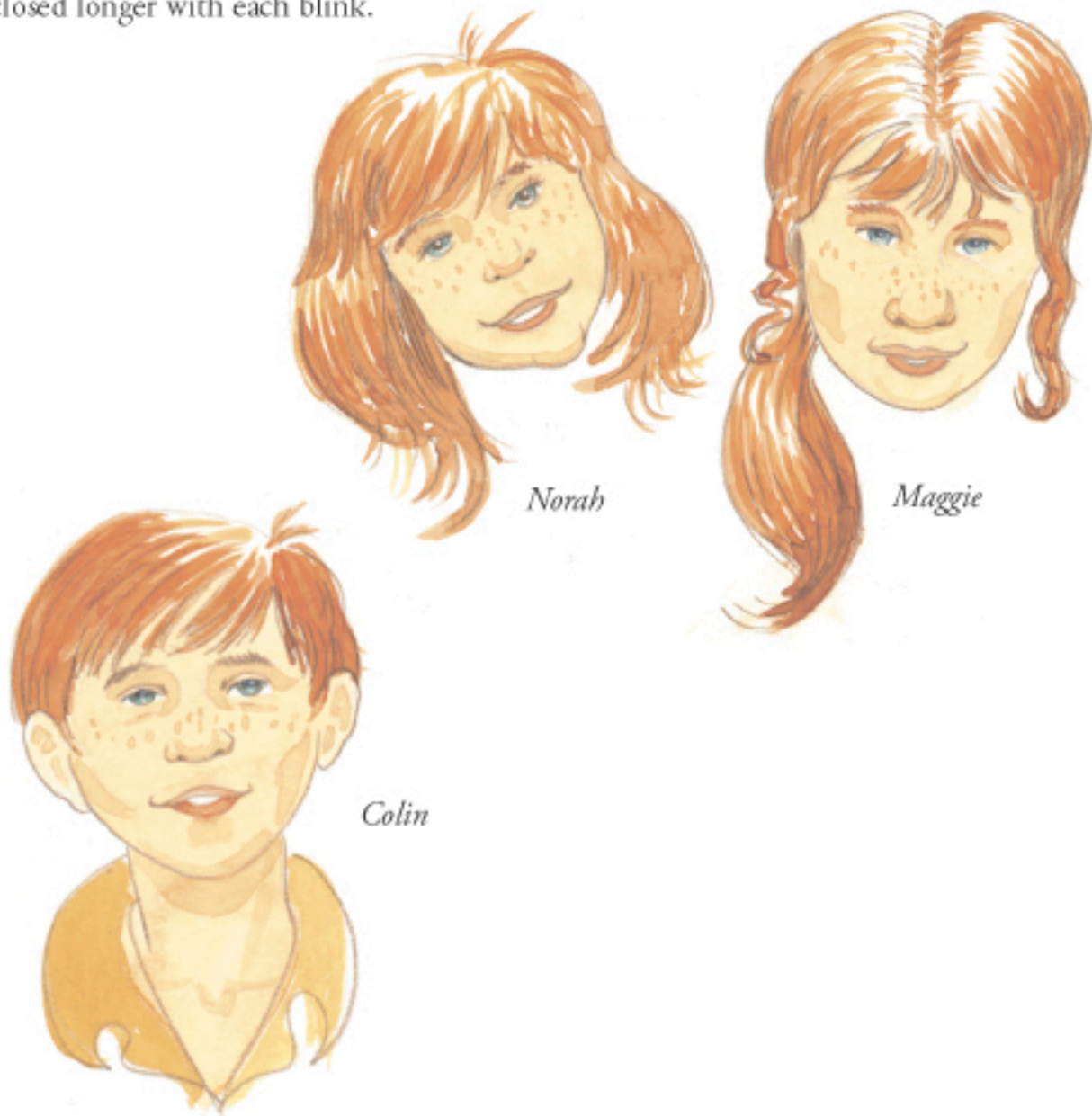
“Tell me the story of Oisín, *Mamó*,” pleaded Colin.

“Oh, you do be always wanting that story,” kidded Maggie, “you never want anything else.”

“Tonight I will tell Colin the story of Oisín, Maggie,” said the grandmother. “Tomorrow I will tell you the story of Deirdre.” And so the grandmother began to tell the children of Oisín’s trip to Tir Na n’Og, the Land of Eternal Youth, and his adventures there.

“I wish I was Oisín,” said Colin sleepily.

The grandmother sighed and smiled at her grandchildren as their heavy eyelids closed longer with each blink.



*mamó* — grandmother



The next morning, the children awoke to the sound of weeping. Outside a fog shrouded the land and an unfamiliar smell filled the air. Mother and father stood near a dark, slimy mound with their heads in their hands. Colin crept up to his parents.

“What is that, Father?” asked Colin.



“It *was* our crop of potatoes,” he answered. “The blight has destroyed them.”

“But what will we eat?” asked Colin. Mother’s weeping grew louder in answer. Father said nothing.

Grandmother appeared at the door of the cottage and walked slowly towards them. “There has been blight here before,” she said. “We will survive.”

But over the next several months food became more and more scarce and surviving became difficult.

The livestock meant to satisfy the rent collectors was slaughtered for meat.

"Where is the rent?" asked the land agent.

"Have mercy," said Father, "our crops have failed, and we needed the food."

"Crops are failing everywhere," said the land agent. "I cannot hand out charity. Go to the workhouse."

"But my family," pleaded Father.

"You'll have to go," said the land agent. "We're going to remove your home. This land is more valuable as pasture."





That was the experience of families all over Ireland who lost their homes and went in search of hope.

Colin and his family, like many other Irish families at that time, took what belongings they could carry and set off in search of a place to call home.

It was a difficult time to be Irish.







One evening, Colin and Maggie's family made a camp near a dolmen along side the road.

"Go find some firewood," said Maggie to Colin.

"Why don't you?" retorted Colin.

"Because I must clean the *coney* we've the luck to find," said Maggie. "Now, *please* go find firewood."

"You're not my mother!" And with that, Colin turned and stormed into the thicket. In his anger, he failed to notice the tears in Maggie's eyes.

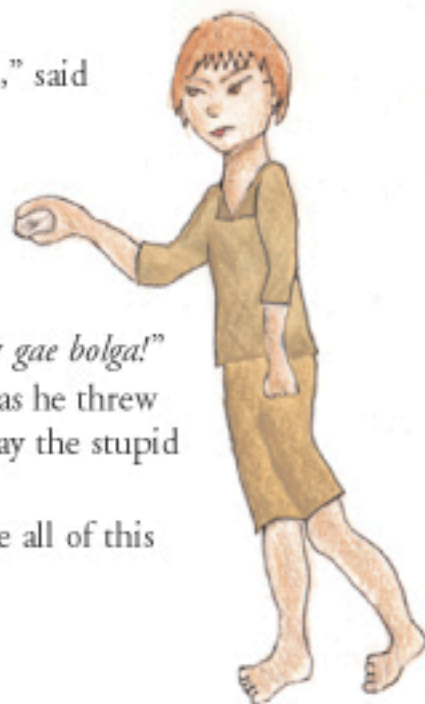
"I wish I was Cúchulainn," yelled Colin as he hit the ground with a stick. "Then I would strike them with my *gae bolga*!"

"I wish I was Fionn Mac Cumhaill," screamed Colin as he threw rocks at the trees. "Then I would know how to drive away the stupid land agents."

"If I was Oisín," cried Colin, exhausted, "I could leave all of this behind. I wish I was in Tír Na n'Og."

*coney* — rabbit

*gae bolga* — lightning bolt





A rustling in the wood brought Colin back to his surroundings. A few yards away stood a horse of pure white eating the brambles.

"You're lucky my father hasn't seen you," said Colin. "He's not above killing a horse for our dinner."

"He'd have to catch me first," said the horse.

"You can talk!"

"So can you!"

"But you're a horse," replied Colin. "Horses don't speak."

"But I'm not just any horse. My name is *Capall Bán*."

"But *Capall Bán* just means 'white horse,'" said Colin.

"Would you rather I be called '*madra rua*'?" replied *Capall Bán*. "So, do you really want to go to *Tír Na n'Og*?"

"Do you know how to get there?" asked Colin.

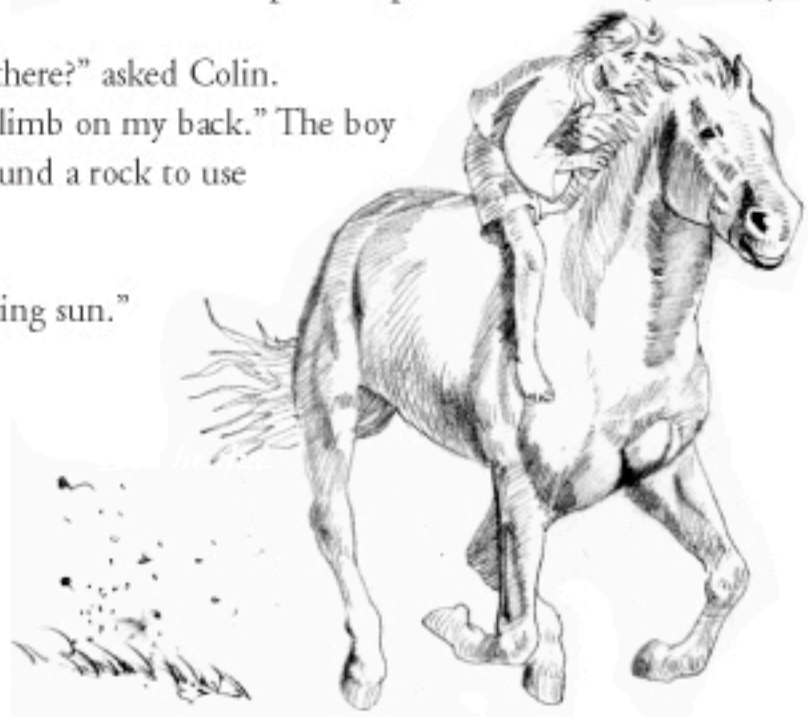
"I do," said *Capall Bán*. "Climb on my back." The boy hesitated for a second, then found a rock to use as a step to climb up.

"Now what?" asked Colin.

"Now to jump over the setting sun."

"No one can do that!"

"I can," said *Capall Bán*.



*madra rua* — red dog



*And he did.*



Colin closed his eyes in terror. There was a tremendous roar of wind, then a thump as Capall Bán landed. When Colin opened his eyes, they were in Tir Na n'Og.

"What do people do in Tir Na n'Og?" asked Colin.

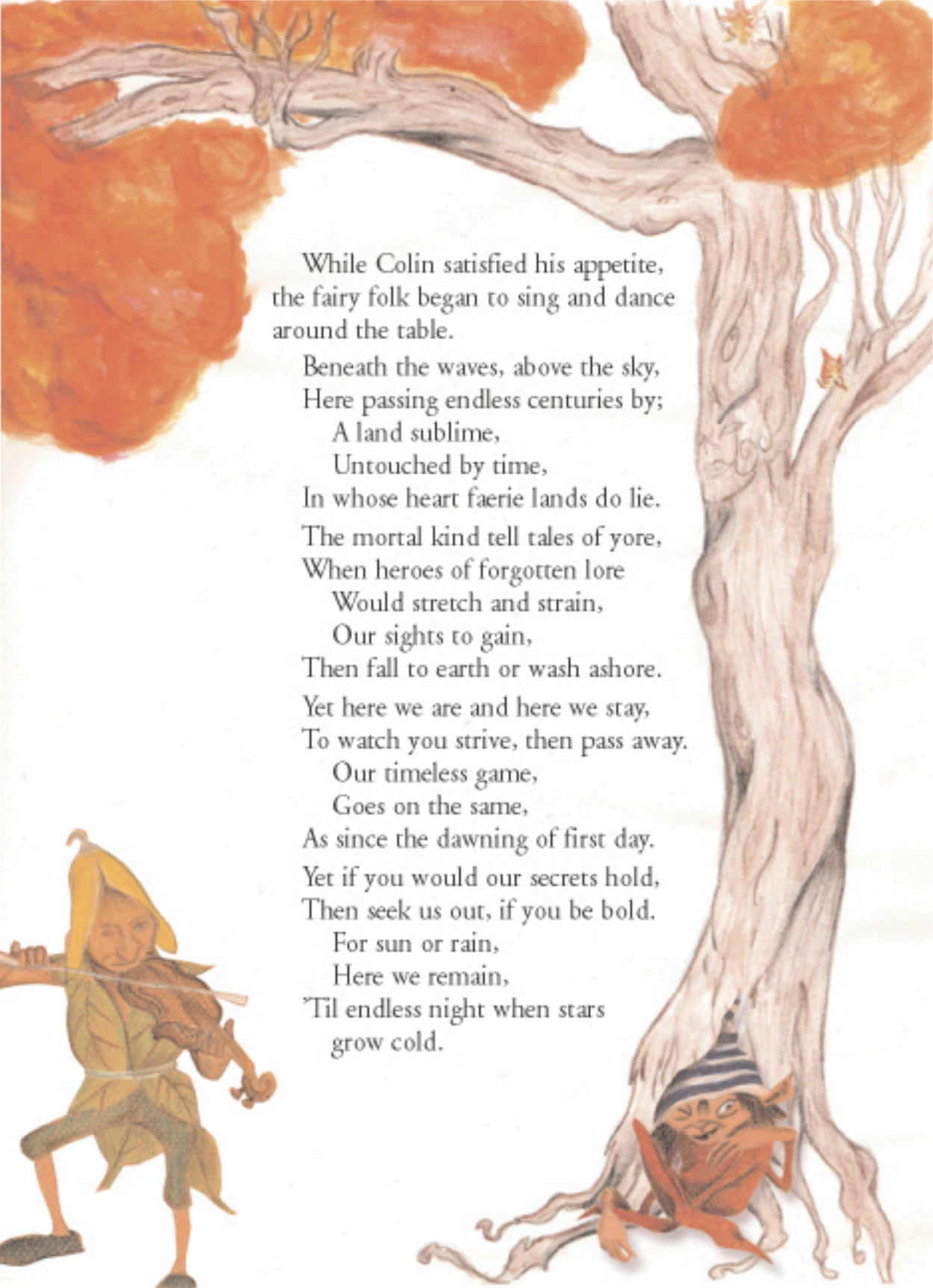
"Whatever they like," answered Capall Bán. "You'll have plenty of time to think it over. Come along, a feast has been prepared in your honor."

In a small glen and under a gnarled oak tree, a table was laden with foods and sweets of every imaginable variety. All the folk of Tir Na n'Og were present to take part. Some boldly introduced themselves to the new guest, while others watched suspiciously from a distance.

Colin barely noticed them. Before him was food *go leor*, more than he had seen in his whole life, and he was very hungry.



*go leor*—plenty, galore



While Colin satisfied his appetite,  
the fairy folk began to sing and dance  
around the table.

Beneath the waves, above the sky,  
Here passing endless centuries by;  
A land sublime,  
Untouched by time,  
In whose heart faerie lands do lie.  
The mortal kind tell tales of yore,  
When heroes of forgotten lore  
Would stretch and strain,  
Our sights to gain,  
Then fall to earth or wash ashore.  
Yet here we are and here we stay,  
To watch you strive, then pass away.  
Our timeless game,  
Goes on the same,  
As since the dawning of first day.  
Yet if you would our secrets hold,  
Then seek us out, if you be bold.  
For sun or rain,  
Here we remain,  
'Til endless night when stars  
grow cold.



A week passed in which Colin feasted, danced and sang with the people of Tir Na n'Og. He wore finely decorated clothes and learned the stories of those creatures who dwell in Tir Na n'Og. His joy in new surroundings began to fade, however, and a hollowness came on him as time passed because he couldn't share his good fortune with his family.

"I would like to see my sister Maggie," said Colin to Capall Bán on the seventh day.

Capall Bán looked at Colin thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Come with me," and led the boy to a pool at the edge of a wood.

"Look within," said the horse, "and say the name of your sister. You shall then see what is happening with her."



So Colin said his sister's name. At first there was nothing to see but their faces reflected in the pool, but this soon faded and was replaced by the image of a young woman on the deck of a ship.

"I barely recognize Maggie," said Colin. "She looks older."

"For every week that you are here, seven years passed there," said Capall Bán.

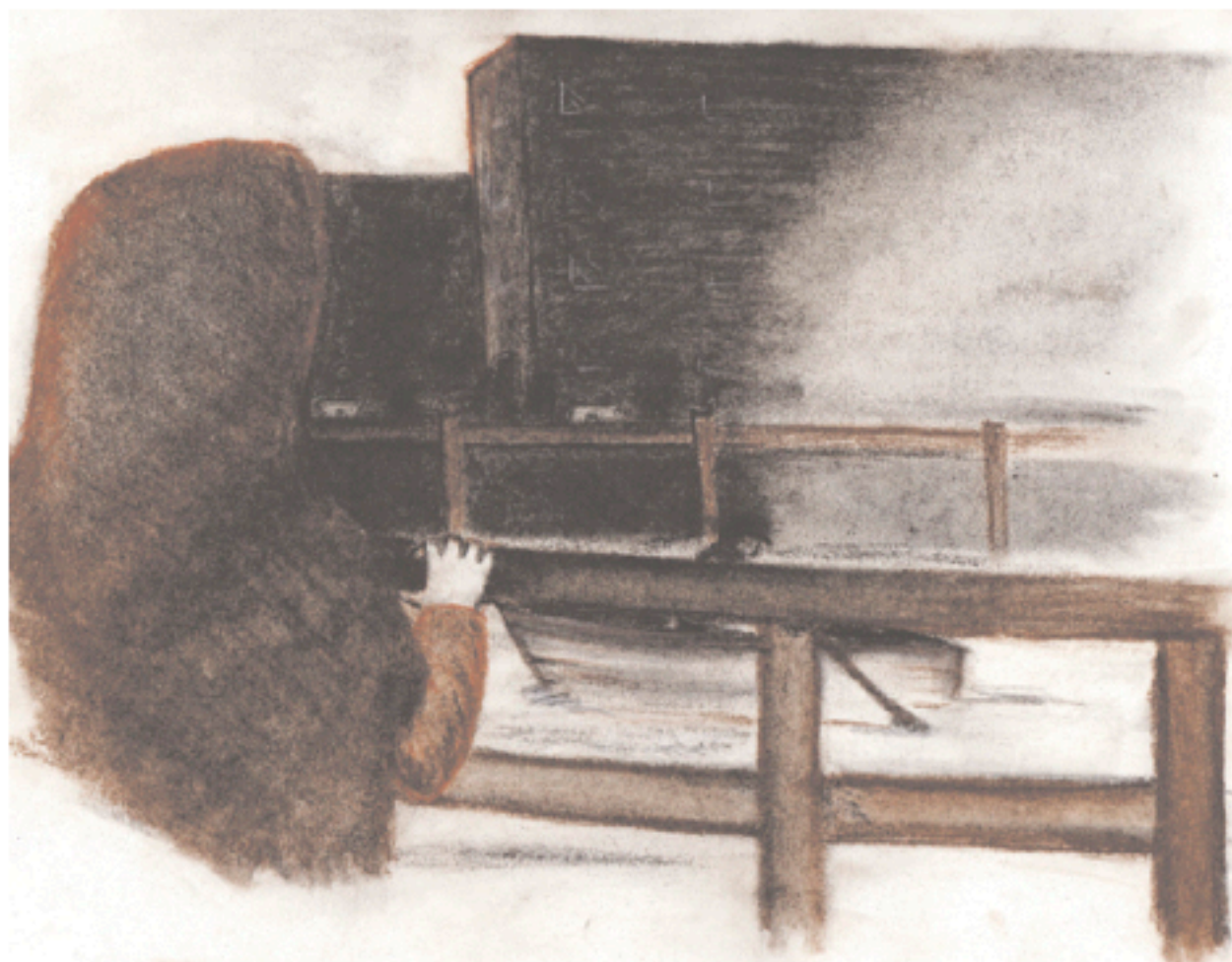
It took a moment for Colin to grasp what he had just been told. His whole family was seven years older while he had aged hardly at all. "Why do I see only her?" asked Colin. "Where is the rest of my family?"

"Your sister has gone with your *mamó* to America and your aunt Brigid," said Capall Bán. Unfortunately, your *mamó* died on the way—of the fever."

Colin stared at the pool, trying to understand. So much had happened.

"What has happened to my parents and Norah?" he asked.

"They stayed behind to look for you," said Capall Bán.



The image in the pool began to change. Buildings formed, their massive structures facing streets filled with people.

"What place is this?" asked Colin.

"That is New York City," said Capall Bán. "That is where your aunt Brigid lives."

The amount of activity Colin was seeing astonished him. "That is America?"

"Yes,"

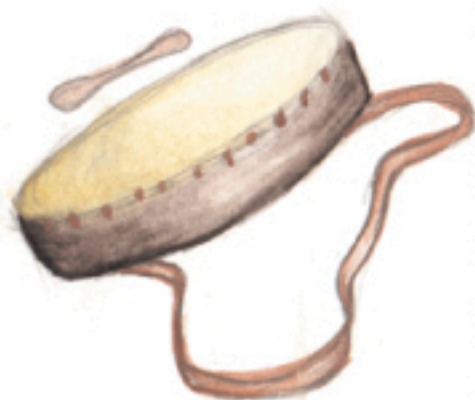
answered Capall Bán.





Colin didn't return to the pool for another week. The people of Tír Na n'Og distracted him with lessons in music and playing the bodhrán. Colin was an excellent student, and the people gifted him with a drum of his own in recognition of this.

Like all presents from that realm, there was a glamour\* on the drum. For a person with a good heart, it gave joy and a desire to dance merrily. For one with an evil heart, it gave sorrow and forced a dance that made the feet bleed.



Although Colin was very grateful for the gift, his loneliness once again overcame him, and he longed to see his family. Colin picked up his new bodhrán and asked Capall Bán to take him to the pool at the edge of the wood.



*April 7, 1863*

*A Ghraí Maggie,*

*The time we have feared since that fateful day all those years ago has finally come to pass—our dear máthair and athair have succumbed to the sorrow that has been their burden since Colin left us. A life spent and wasted on a search hopeless since the beginning! I know you would not agree with me, but I was a mere babe when this occurred and have never felt the same passion—I cannot help, but to think he left us for want of a better life.*

*You remember the good times—I have no such memories. Just as sure as I lost you to America, I lost our parents to a ghost, a memory, or rather, I never had them. My life has seemed as tedious as yours has been indulgent. Ah, but don't take it to heart dear Maggie—I bear none ill will! This is merely the grieving of a woman whose prime is over before her life truly began.*

*Perhaps now I can devote my time and passions to the children I have ignored, just as surely as our parents ignored me. I love them, as I love you and Colin, but with their passing—the search ends.*

*Your loving sister,  
Nórah*

\**glamor*—a spell or charm



Capall Bán led Colin back to the place. The boy said his sister's name and again images began to form in the still water. Maggie appeared in an unfamiliar uniform.

"What is Maggie doing?" asked Colin.

"Your aunt Brigid helped your sister get work as a nurse," said Capall Bán. "Some of the money she earns she sends back to your family in Ireland."

"Some of the money she earns goes to build a beautiful cathedral in New York City."



“But times are difficult for your sister. There is civil war in the United States. The chaos spreads to the city. There are riots and Irish-Americans do horrible things to African-Americans.”

“The Irish think the Africans are taking all of the jobs. They believe they are being forced to fight for African freedom when they do not feel the people from Ireland are free.”

“But your sister does not believe this. She helps rescue some children from an orphanage which is attacked by the rioters.”

“She nurses the injured and helps the families regardless of who they are.”



“Within all the horror of war and riots, there is a man, Sgt. James P. McManus, who captures Maggie’s heart.”

“And she captures his.”

“Unfortunately, Sgt. James is in the army and is often in danger,” said Capall Bán.

As Colin watched, a battle scene came into view within the pool. Men were dying everywhere, and Sgt. James was struggling to find his friends and regroup. Colin saw a man near a tree aim his rifle at Sgt. James who was unaware.

Colin began to panic. His sister loved this man who was about to die. Not knowing what else to do, Colin impulsively picked up his bodhrán and began to beat it frantically.

Within the pool, the rebel soldier dropped his rifle and leaped in the air, howling and hopping as if his boots were stuffed full of stinging nettles.

Colin wasn’t sure if his drum playing was the sensation that distracted the gunman,

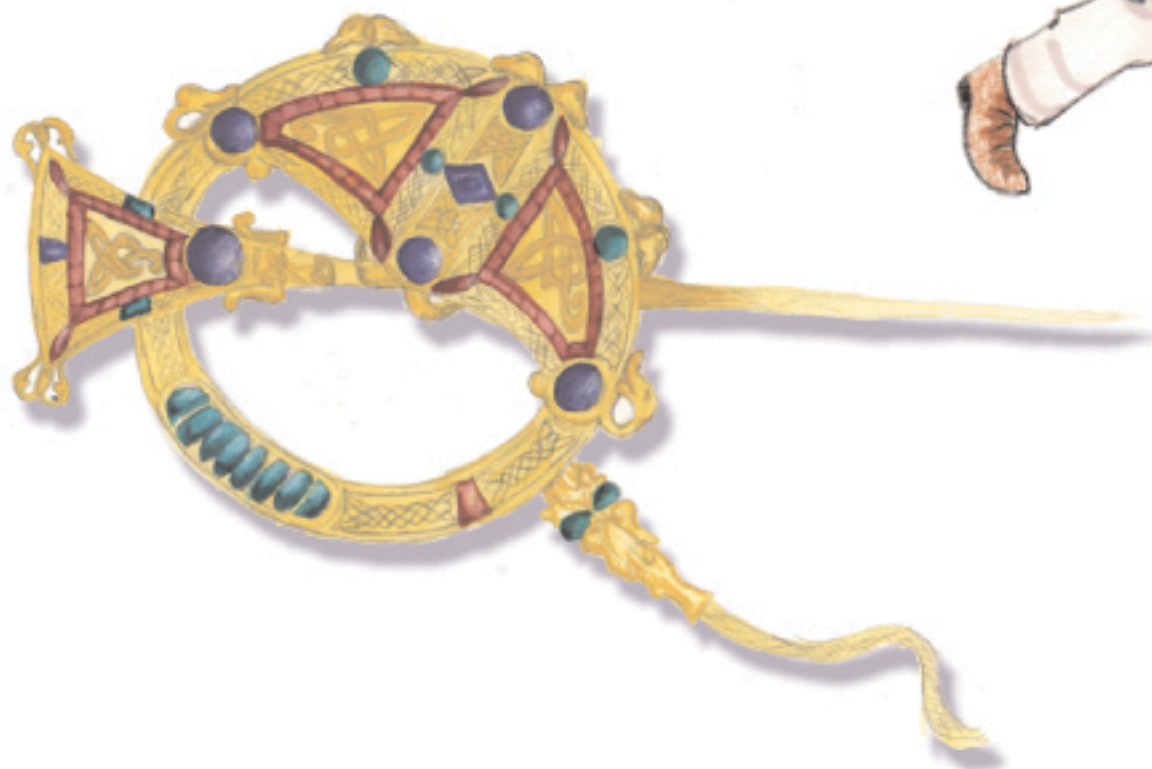


but he was grateful to see that James had made his way to safety.

It was several more weeks before Colin was able to return to the pool to see his sister. The people of Tir Na n'Og once again drew Colin's attention away from his sister's world with lessons in music, reciting of myths and going on adventures. Colin learned practical lore as well, such as the uses of certain herbs in healing and their cultivation.

Colin learned the craft so well, the people honored him with the Brooch of Wisdom which granted its wearer the knowledge necessary in a time of need.

But all of Colin's new found wisdom seemed in vain without a family member to share it with. He knew Maggie could especially use his healing knowledge in her work as a nurse.



Finally, Colin found a break in his lessons where he could separate from the people of Tir Na n'Og.

"Take me back to the pool, Capall Bán," asked Colin. "I would like to see my sister again."

Once again Colin said his sister's name into the pool. An image of a middle-aged woman with white tinged hair came into view.

"How long has it been since I last saw her?" asked Colin of Capall Bán.

September 12, 1868

My dearest sister Norah,

My sister, you will not believe the violence that goes on in this fair city! Will we never rest? It seems like every time I turn around there is a riot for some cause or another. Luckily, no one I know was hurt severely, or dare I say, killed, *Dia linn!* But you'll never guess who I saw in the hospital lying in bed with a broken leg. It was none other than Sean beag from back home. Ah, but he is a grown man now. Look at our men coming here for a better life and getting themselves into all sorts of trouble!

All is not bad here in Amerikay, though. I am doing well, as is my husband, and the children are growing like weeds. Ah, I wish you could see them, my *cailin beag* Una is the spitting image of you. How I miss your sweet face, Norah! The fast pace here just doesn't settle with me and I am left longing for home. But that is not for you to worry about. I'm sure you've plenty of worries for yourself and more.

I love you, sweet Norah!

Maggie

*Dia linn* — Thank God  
*cailin beag* — little girl



"It has been three weeks here, but twenty-one years there," answered the horse. "Much has happened in your sister's life."

"Maggie's love, James, and she were finally able to get married after the war ended," explained Capall Bán. "Their wedding was an event that attracted the entire community; they were so well respected for all their work and generosity. James and Maggie's wedding was blessed."

"James and Maggie were then able to settle

down and start their own family," continued Capall Bán. "They were graced with seven children, four boys and three girls."

"The oldest boy was named Colin," added the horse.

An image began to form in the pool of Maggie next to a young child in a bed. Maggie was placing wet cloths on the child's forehead.

"What is happening?" asked Colin.

"The youngest child, a girl, has been very sick for some time," answered the horse. "It is not known if the girl will live."

As Colin watched the image of Maggie tending her daughter, a great fear came over him. He realized that lying on the bed was his niece who he might never meet. He wanted more than anything at that moment to give Maggie all the special knowledge he had just gained.

He willed Maggie's hands to use the right herbs and prepare medicines. He reached out with all his heart to



Maggie as she placed her hands on her daughter to attempt to relieve the child's pain.

Colin didn't know if he had helped, but the images he saw showed the child becoming healthy and active once again.

Colin then saw the other children in the pool. The older ones were even older than he was.

"How much more of my family's lives am I going to miss?" wondered Colin as he left the pool.





The weeks continued to pass and Colin continued to learn from the people of Tir Na n'Og. However, the knowledge that he was missing so much in Maggie's life was weighing heavy on him still.

The folk of Tir Na n'Og tried to distract him with music, stories and magics, but his mind always wandered back to the pool and the images of Maggie and her family.

After a few more weeks had passed, Colin asked Capall Bán once again to go to the pool at the edge of the wood.

"Before we go," said the horse, "there is something I would like to give you."

Colin looked at Capall Bán with surprise. "You don't need to give me anything. You're my friend."

"Need?" said Capall Bán. "I don't do this out of need but out of desire." And the horse led Colin to a space in the wood where a table sat. On the table lay a silver mirror. "This mirror is my present to you," said Capall Bán. "It has a very special glamour on it."

"What does it do?" asked Colin.

"Its magic will become apparent in time," replied the horse. "Let's go to the pool now."

"How long has it been since I've seen Maggie?" asked the boy as they approached the pool.

"It has once again been five weeks here and thirty-five more years there," answered Capall Bán.

"Maggie will be an old woman," whispered Colin to himself.



The image Colin saw in the pool was not just of the old woman Maggie had become, but of Maggie who was also dying. Colin wanted desperately to be back at Maggie's side and talk to her one more time.

"Take me back to her, Capall Bán," said Colin.

"It has been many years since you lived in that world," said the horse. "Much has changed."

"I don't care," said the boy. "There has to be a way for me to get back. I want to be with her."

"Then climb on my back," said Capall Bán. "We can jump through the pool to her side."

And they did.



They arrived at the foot of Maggie's bed. Startled by the sudden noise, Maggie sat up and looked around her room.

"Who is there?" asked Maggie. "My eyesight is failing me."

"It is your brother, Colin. I have been in the Land of Eternal Youth, Tir Na n'Og," he cried. "I have been watching you and your life from there."

"I always knew that you were well," said Maggie. "But you sound as though you are still young." said Maggie.

"I am still young," answered Colin. "It is because of the magic in Tir Na n'Og." An unopened letter on the table next to the bed caught Colin's attention. It was addressed to Maggie from Norah. "There is a letter on your nightstand from Norah," said Colin.

"I know," said his sister. "Because of my eyesight, I have not been able to read it. Would you do it for me with your young eyes?"

"I would love to," replied Colin and opened the letter.



Maggie sighed. “*Go raibh maith agat*, Colin,” she said. “It would be wonderful to regain my youthful eyes and read as you do.”

“But you can!” said Colin. “They can restore your sight and your youth in Tír Na n’Óg. My friend, Capall Bán can take us.” Colin turned to the horse. “You can take both of us, can’t you?”

Capall Bán replied slowly. “I can only take one. *Tá brón orm...*”

Colin thought for awhile, then quietly said, “Take her.”

*May 12th, 1916*

*My dearest sister Maggie,*

*I sympathize with your ongoing ailments. Gone are the days of vitality and youth. As this body of mine has aged beyond my recognition, the memories of our childhood become all the more precious.*

*Spring has finally arrived here and the isle is green again. The land teems with new life, plants and animals alike.*

*Not all the news is so pleasant, however. There has been much destruction and mayhem in Dublin since the occupation of the Post Office, by the rebels last month. I understand their frustrations, as we all struggle to feed our children and ourselves on a daily basis. But I fear the repercussions from their forceful protest, which has proved to be beyond our worst imaginings. The violence from the British troops and rebels alike has continued to escalate since the incident, and everyone in the city is terrified. Downtown Dublin has been reduced to little more than rubble (I am enclosing a picture from the newspaper), and each day one Irishman is being executed for treason.*

*I hope and pray that something good will come out of this tragic state of affairs. Or at the very least there will be peace and an end to suffering after this life is through. May our Heavenly Father bless and keep you in the days to come.*

*Slán go foill,*

*Nórah*

*Go raibh maith agat*—Thank you (pronounce it ‘gurrev my-agutt’)

*Tá brón orm*—I’m sorry

*Slán go foill*—farewell for now

“Are you sure?” said Capall Bán. “I cannot come back for you. You will remain here for the rest of your life.”

“It is as I want it,” said Colin. “I have had my fun, now I must live.”

“I thought you might make this decision,” said Capall Bán. “You have learned a lot in your brief stay with us. Use your gifts



well, and look into the mirror whenever you wish to see your sister or myself.”

“I will miss you,” said the boy, hugging the big horse’s warm broad neck.

“Now I must go,” said Capall Bán. “Help your sister onto my back.”

“But how will you get back?” asked Colin.

“The sun will be setting in a couple hours,” replied Capall Bán. “I will take your sister to say good-bye to her children, then make the great jump.”

“*Slán go foill, Maggie,*” said Colin.

“It is so hard to have you back only to lose you again,” said Maggie.

“It is fine. Time will go quickly for me,” said Colin and he smiled. “Trust me.”



And she did.

