

Vona Groarke

# WOMAN OF WINTER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY ISABEL NOLAN



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## Introduction

*Aithbe dam-sa bés mora;  
sentu fom-dera croan;  
toirsi oca cíá do-gnéo,  
sona do-tét a loan.*



So begins ‘The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare’, an anonymous poem in Old Irish dating from the ninth century, known to us via several manuscript discoveries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A short prose preface, most likely added in the eleventh century, marks perhaps the first attempt to interpret the poem and its dramatic, articulate, wounded and resistant female protagonist. In this preface, she is said to pass into ‘seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were peoples and races’, locating her as a national ancestress and her poem as a kind of origin story; a source.

Since that eleventh-century interpretation, the poem has continued to attract both poets and scholars wishing to understand and respond to what it can tell us about its moment, voice and world. Since Kuno Meyer’s 1911 translation various versions have written An Caillech Bérrí, An Cailleach Bhéara, the Hag of Beara or the Nun of Beare into contemporary English. This version is my attempt to contribute to an interpretative process which will, no doubt, continue to evolve.

That nobody owns this poem is obvious (especially since the name of the author is lost to us). All translation is a passing through: I stake no claim beyond the claim of finding in this poem a chime with subject-matter that

matters to me at this time of my life. Others will write into this poem in other ways and, perhaps, the best we can hope for is that it will survive, unscathed, sundry interpretations. May we leave only scant mark on the scroll of this poem, that has such passion and sincerity in it, and that speaks so true and arrestingly from its small, dark room to our own.

It is, I believe, a poem deeply engaged with how the world is to be experienced through the body and, specifically, through the body of a woman whose social standing has been compromised as she has aged. I cannot think of another poem, from then or now, that attempts to describe ageing and to name or calibrate its attendant losses and infelicities so forensically, or so successfully.

What follows is a free version that plays with what has been received in an effort, not to translate the original (or originals) as such, but to write a new poem in contemporary English that draws upon the heritage of a poem extraordinary in its candour and for the power with which its first-person voice still animates and asks, via lyric sensibility, questions remaining pertinent today.

My hope is that, by using the Old Irish poem as a framing device, my version will accommodate a voice that is, in some essential sense, true to the original, while also harnessing the kind of experience a living woman no longer young might wish, to greater or lesser extent, to have acknowledged.

*Vona Groarke,  
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