

The Land of Youth

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European Ghost Literary Project

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The ancient myth about Oisín and Tír na n-Óg (Land of Youth) is almost as old as Ireland itself. Handed down through the generations by word of mouth, later recorded with heavy Christian influences by monks in the Middle Ages and retold by poets during the Victorian Age, many versions of the story abide. Below, Philip Casey has combined elements of many of the existing stories, taking the two most popular myths about the Land of Youth, and retold them in his own way.

The Land of Youth

Nowadays we know that if a space traveler goes on a very long journey at nearly the speed of light, when he returns from space he will be just a bit older, but his friends and family will have been dead for a long, long time.

Something like this happened in Ireland long ago.

The Fianna were special warriors. They were gathered from every part of Ireland to protect the country. The man who brought them together was King Cormac, who owned a magic cup which broke in three if it heard lies, but came together again if it heard three truths.

The leader of the Fianna was Finn McCool. Finn was a chieftain, a warrior, and a poet, and he could see the future. He had been taught all of these skills by Liath, the woman warrior.

The love of Finn's life was Sive, and she was Oisín's mother. She was beautiful, and immortal.

This is how they met.

One day, when Finn was young and he and his Fianna were hunting, a red deer crossed their path, and the hounds chased her. She dodged this way and that, and never got tired, so that after a while all but Finn and his hounds, Bran and Sceolan, had been left behind. Now Bran and Sceolan were no ordinary hounds, as believe it or not they were cousins of Finn, whose aunt Tuiren had been changed into a hound herself because a fairy woman was in love with her husband and was jealous of Tuiren. So her children, Bran and Sceolan, were hounds too, and were greatly loved by Finn as he knew they were his own family. The hounds finally caught up with the deer, but when Finn arrived he was surprised to see that they were playing with her and licking her.

'What's this?' he thought. 'This is no ordinary deer.'

So he made sure she was unharmed, and brought her back to the Fianna fort at the Hill of Allen.

He woke that night and thought he was still dreaming. At the foot of his bed stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered.

‘O Finn,’ she said. ‘I am Sive. I was the deer you chased today.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am from the Land of Youth, but because I would not give my love to Fer Doirich, the Druid, he cast a spell on me and so I have been in the shape of a deer for three years until today. I thought I would always be like that, but Fer Dorich’s slave took pity on me, and told me that if I could find my way into the Fort of Allen, the spell would have no power. So when I found you and your hounds, who I knew were partly human, I took my chance.’

‘There’s no need to be afraid,’ Finn said. ‘You are my guest, and you are safe from that evil man.’

Now it must be said that Finn would have done the same for her even if she hadn’t been beautiful. It was the law of hospitality to give shelter and food to those who needed it, and Finn could no more refuse hospitality and protection than he could refuse to breathe.

So she stayed and soon they fell in love. Finn was so much in love that he gave up hunting to be at her side, and soon, to his great joy, Sive told him she was pregnant.

However, it wasn’t too long before Ireland was attacked, and Finn had to lead the Fianna against the invader.

Fer Dorich saw his chance, and waited patiently.

Days passed, and Sive was worried, until at last, she heard the borabu, the great hunting horn of the Fianna, and she saw Finn coming home with Bran and Sceolan. He was safe!

The other women warned her to be careful, but she wouldn't listen, and rushed out of the fort to greet Finn. She was about to run into his arms when, too late, she saw that it wasn't Finn after all, but Fer Dorich, who struck her with his hazel wand and turned her into a deer again and Fer Dorich's hounds chased her into the wood.

That was the last anyone saw of her.

When Finn returned, no one would look him in the eye and he knew that something terrible had happened to Sive.

'A druid cast a spell, and there was nothing we could do,' an old woman said.

Finn closed his eyes tight and beat his chest with his fist, then took Bran and Sceolan to look for Sive. He knew it was useless, but for seven years he went out every day with his faithful hounds, until he remembered to use his gift of seeing into the future, and Sive could not be seen there.

It was then he gave up all hope.

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One day he was hunting on Ben Bulben with the Fianna. The hounds had run ahead, and Finn heard them fighting each other. When he and his men caught

up with them, they were amazed to see Bran and Sceolan protecting a boy from the other hounds. Finn stared at the boy, and remembered how Bran and Sceolan had found Sive. He asked the boy, who had long hair and was naked, who he was, but although he was about seven years old, the boy could not speak.

Finn brought him home and called him Oisín, which means *Little Deer*, as he knew in his heart that the boy was his son, and the boy's mother was Sive.

Oisín learned to speak, and told Finn that his mother was a deer, and he had grown from a baby to a boy in a green valley rich with tall cliffs and many kinds of fruit. Sometimes a man would come and speak quietly to his mother, but she would always turn away, until finally the man lost patience.

Under his spell, the deer had to follow him, as if he was a magnet and she had iron in her head, although she did not take her eyes off her son until Oisín was alone. The druid had put a spell Oisín too, which made him think he was a tree, and worn out from trying to move, he fell into a deep sleep until he woke on Ben Bulbin.

As he grew up, he was stronger than any warrior or wrestler, and could run faster than any hound. He loved the sounds of the woods, and the cry of the wind, and the music of the cuckoo and the blackbird, and the silence of the crane. He loved fast rivers and the deep peace of a lake. He was a master of chess. His poetry was so beautiful it made everyone who heard it feel at peace with the world.

Every woman he ever met loved him, but he set his eyes on Evir. Her yellow hair was so bright that only a great warrior could look at it for more than a second. She was the daughter of Lugh, and her house was thatched with the feathers of bright birds, its doors were made of finely woven grass and its door posts were made of gold.

Evir and Oisín had a daughter, whom they named ‘Flower of Women’, and a son, Oscar, who was the pet of the Fianna as he grew up.

There was nothing Oscar liked more than sleeping, especially in the mornings, when all the other young men were out and about at the crack of dawn. And as for a spear or a sword, he took one look at them when he was a boy, and shrugged his shoulders.

Now if it had been anyone else, once he was old enough the Fianna would have dragged him off to the hunt and he would have trained by one of the women warriors, like his father and grandfather. But Oscar was different. The Fianna smiled when they saw him, and laughed at his laziness. Some people have that kind of charm. He did nothing all day but watch the grass grow and the birds fly. Of course he was Oisín’s son, but no one thought it was unusual that a great warrior and hunter like Oisín would let his son sleep on in the mornings. Yet, despite being lazy, he grew up tall and strong, and none of his friends thought about teasing him, just in case he gave them a wallop.

Then one day, outside the fort, the Fianna were attacked by their old enemies, the Clan Morna. Oscar was watching from the rampart, but he wasn’t concerned as he thought the Fianna would beat the Clan Morna easily.

But then he noticed that they were falling back, and he got more and more puzzled, but as the battle got harder he knew he had to do something.

But what? He had never used a sword or shield.

Then he saw a log lying in the grass just outside the fort.

He leapt from the rampart, picked up the log, and swinging it around his head he charged with all the energy he had been saving up for years, and knocked the Clan Morna down ten at a time.

The Fianna couldn't believe their eyes, and neither could the Clan Morna, who ran away. Oscar was furious and shouted at the Fianna to chase them, but no one moved and no one said a word. Then the Fianna started laughing, and they laughed and laughed at the sight of their pet saving them.

'Eh? What are you laughing at?' Oscar demanded.

Before he could ask again, he was carried into the fort.

'We thought you were a pet lamb,' one of his friends said, grinning, 'but now we know you are a bull.'

'Eh? What are you talking about?' Oscar demanded, before going off for a nap.

Every morning after that, Oscar was up at dawn to hunt. The hounds loved him.

Every spear he threw found the heart of its target. He could use a sword like a druid could use a wand. The Fianna, and especially Oisín, were happy.

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But things cannot go on the same forever, though in youth it seems as if they will.

Evir, Oisín's great love, disappeared. It was as if she had walked into the night, and when the sun shone again, she was gone like the morning dew.

He went into the woods, thinking of Evir, and thinking of his mother too, wondering if she was a deer he sometimes saw darting between the trees. There was an ache in his heart, and he composed poems in his head, trying to ease his pain - but by the time he got home he had forgotten every word.

Life seemed to be full of a mystery he could not even begin to understand, and he longed for the simple happiness he knew would never come again. His only consolations were Oscar and his lovely daughter.

Then one day, deep in the woods, he noticed that a pig was watching him. Wild boar did that sometimes, and when they did they could be getting ready to charge, so he held his spear at the ready.

But the pig's eyes were friendly. Oisín wondered about this, but he blinked, and the pig was gone. He looked around him, because he knew pigs were clever and might attack from behind, but there was no sign - not even the rustle of leaves.

He laughed to himself. He was happy because a pig had looked at him like a friend. Why was that? Was it a spirit pig, he wondered?.

That was a good guess, and this is why.

Man mac Lir was King of The Land of Youth, and lived there with his wife, the beautiful Queen Fand. He was a jester and liked to play tricks on mortals, so he often went to Ireland when he was bored. Sometimes he was invisible, and sometimes he went in disguise.

He was a healer, too, and took pity on the sick, even those who were sick from sorrow or sick from love. When Fand fell in love with the hero Cucullen, Man didn't mind, but he knew that Fand and Cucullen were suffering because of this love, and Cucullen's wife Emer was suffering because of it, too. He thought about what best to do, and decided to put his magic cloak between them so they would forget their love and be put out of their torment. And that is what happened.

He had a magic boat which had no oars or sail, but moved by the power of his thought. And he had a magnificent white horse called *Ebarr*, which means 'imagination'. *Ebarr* could gallop across the waves without his hooves getting wet.

But the charm and joy of his life was his daughter Niamh of the Golden Hair. She had never married, as she was waiting for the right man, but as she was immortal, and there was no time in the Land of Youth, she was happy to wait.

Of course she had the problem that all beautiful women have. She wanted to be loved for herself, not for her beauty, and wondered how she would go about this. One day she asked Man about it. He was too wise to tell his daughter what to do, but he reminded her that a true sign of a king was a man who would not refuse the love of a woman who was old and had lost her beauty. Most men refused, but

the one who accepted was rewarded when she turned into a beautiful young woman. He would also be a king.

As soon as the last sentence was out of his mouth, Man remembered that he was the king, and wondered would the man who won Niamh's heart replace him. He decided that it was too difficult to think of this on a fine day, and called Ebarr and went to Ireland to have some fun instead.

He had set Niamh thinking, though she had no intention of turning herself into an old woman who could hardly walk. She went to a magician, and asked him if he could make part of her ugly. The magician was a grump, but his heart was in the right place, and when Niamh explained her situation he thought for a while.

'How would you like the face of a pig?' he asked.

'A pig!'

Niamh was shocked. She was thinking more in terms of ... well, she didn't know, really.

'A pig,' you say.

'There's only one catch,' the magician said.

'Oh? And what's that?'

'If he loves you, then you get your beauty back. But if he doesn't love you, then you will have your pig's face for the rest of your life. Which in your case means eternity.'

'Oh.'

She was quiet for such a long time that the magician began to examine his fingernails. ‘Hmm,’ he said to himself. ‘I haven’t cut these for at least three hundred years. They could do with a trim.’

‘I’ll do it,’ she said, then.

‘Are you sure?’

‘If I don’t, how will I ever know if I am truly loved for what I am?’

‘You have a point.’

‘Well then, go ahead,’ she said.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You must think about it. This is a serious matter.’

When she returned, he looked surprised.

‘You think I’m foolish, don’t you?’

‘Well, you’re old enough to know your own mind.’

She was, indeed. She was five thousand years old if she was a day – not that anyone counted time in The Land of Youth.

She was thinking about this when his hazel wand touched her head and immediately she felt as if her face was being crushed. The pain was terrible and she wanted to cry out but could not. It was as if a dark cloud had replaced her mind. Then, as she struggled to scream, she grunted, like a pig, and looked out through her pig’s eyes at the magician.

It was like looking through water

‘You did insist,’ he said, frowning and curling up his nose. Then he disappeared, and Niamh was alone.

Her head felt so heavy that she thought she would fall over, and she felt sick as she saw her nose stretching out in front of her, covered in rough hair. She touched her ears.

There was no doubt about it. She had a pig's head and face.

Well then, there was no turning back now, so there was no point in wasting time. She found herself a cloak to disguise the beauty of her body, closed her eyes, and in an instant, she was deep in an Irish wood.

No sooner had she opened her eyes than she saw a tall handsome man walking through the wood, reciting poetry.

“That’s the one,” she thought. “I know. I just know,” and in her mind she smiled, though she didn’t know how a pig smiled, and though she wanted to greet him, she didn’t know how a pig spoke. She was still learning.

As soon as he spotted her he was on guard, ready to attack. She had the strangest feeling for a moment, before she realised it must be what the mortals called fear, but she got over that quickly and tried to smile at the man.

Nothing happened, no matter how hard she tried, and then she remembered that you can hardly see a pig’s smile. You can see the smile in its eyes if you looked closely, but she knew that wasn’t enough, so she slipped out of sight to think, but kept watching him.

He looked around him for a few moments, and then relaxed. He shook his head. Then he laughed to himself.

Why did he laugh and why did he go away? Would he come back? Should she follow him?

She followed him, surprised that her bare feet broke the twigs she walked on and that her legs were cut by briars. This vexed her a lot. And she was hungry, so she had to forget about this man for a moment.

She found a bush full of summer berries. She nibbled at them till they were gone, and waited for them to appear again until she realised that this only happened in The Land of Youth.

She could see less and less, and wondered if her pig's eyes were going blind. Then she couldn't see at all, and she felt strange - so strange she had to lie down and ... and ...

She opened her eyes again in the weak light of morning, and yawning, she stood up and stretched. What had happened? She had no idea, but she was glad that the light grew stronger. The only thing was, she was hungry again and had to hunt for more berries.

When she had eaten, she remembered the man she had met, and wondered why he had not come back. She wasn't used to men not coming back, so she followed the trail he had left until she came to the edge of the woods and she saw a great fort on a hill. Out here, the sun was shining more brightly.

Then, the gates of the fort opened and warriors marched out. There he was, at the head of them! Looking closely she could see that two men were very like him, one older and one younger, and she knew that one with the grey hair was her love's father, and the other was his son.

So he had a wife.

She felt something else she hadn't felt before. She felt like doing bad things to his wife, but as he passed, she forgot this feeling and followed the warriors. They marched all day, resting in the woods at night, sitting around a fire and eating, drinking, singing and reciting poetry. To her delight, she heard Oisín's name, and his father's name, Finn, and his son's name, Oscar.

She was even happier when Oisín spoke as if he knew every palace and orchard in The Land of Youth, and the music of his voice made her so happy that when he stopped, her heart felt empty.

Then as day broke, they came to a place called Gowra, they raised their flag which showed the sun rising from the floor of the sea, and the Fianna met the Clann Morna. Many ravens came and settled in the trees to wait.

Niamh watched from a hill as the two armies ran towards each other, and the clang of iron against iron, and the groans and cries of the wounded rang across the valley, until by the end of the day, the valley was red with blood and many were dead.

Why were they not coming back to life again, as they did in The Land of Youth? She walked among the bodies which were twisted this way and that, until she came to Oisín kneeling beside the body of his son. Oscar had many wounds, and Oisín wept as he stared into his son's dead eyes.

Finn came then, and turning his back to the Fianna, he wept too. His grandson's mighty strength was gone forever.

The other Fianna who were still alive made a stretcher from sally branches, and they lifted the body of Oscar onto it and brought him home.

When Oscar's wife Aideen saw that her husband was dead from many wounds she lost her mind, and died of sorrow.

Niamh watched all of this and once again she felt something new. Tears rolled down her pig's face, and she felt her heart was breaking. It made her look in a new way at Oisín.

She knew that he would come to the woods to be alone, but now she also knew that her pig's face was foolish. She no longer cared if he thought she was beautiful or not. No longer did she want him only for his beauty and his poetry. She only wanted to bring him away from all this suffering.

While she was thinking this, she saw him come into the woods. His fists were beating the air, his head was thrown back, his eyes were closed and his mouth was open in a silent scream.

He fell to his knees, his body shaking.

Niamh found her voice.

'Oisín,' she asked. 'Why are you like this?'

He looked up slowly and it was a while before he spoke.

'The Fianna are defeated and my son and his dear wife are dead.'

'Will you walk with me?'

Oisín nodded, and they walked through the woods together, and she asked him about Oscar and Aideen, and he talked about them for a long time. Then they stopped to rest.

'And who are you, kind pig who can speak? What is your story?'

‘My name is Niamh of the Golden Hair.’

‘I see no golden hair.’

‘A magician cast a spell on me, and gave me a pig’s face.’

He looked at her closely.

‘That was a terrible thing to do. How can the spell be lifted?’

Niamh’s heart beat faster. This was the moment of truth.

‘I must be loved for what I am.’

He looked into her eyes. He touched her head, and he stroked her pig’s ears between his fingers.

‘I will love you for what you are, kind woman,’ he said. ‘My mother was a deer who was hunted by hounds, and I have no dread of your appearance.’

He closed his eyes and kissed her snout, and in an instant her beauty was restored and she shone like the sun. When Oisín opened his eyes he was almost blinded by the radiance of her beauty.

‘You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.’

She smiled, and kissed him back.

‘Leave this suffering mortal world and come with me to The Land of Youth,’ she said.

‘I will, but I must say goodbye to my father, who is in mourning too.’

‘I will come back for you, then,’ she said, and disappeared.

Oisín blinked, shook his head, and decided he must have been dreaming, but if it was a dream then it had been a wonderful dream.

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There had been no music or poetry to distract them since the defeat of the Fianna and Oscar and Aideen's death, and the the flames of the fire only darkened the shadows of sadness across their faces, but after they had eaten that night, Oisín turned to Finn.

'I had a strange dream today,' he said.

'And what was it?' Finn asked, only half interested.

'I dreamt I kissed a pig on her snout, and she turned into the most beautiful woman I ever saw.'

Finn sat up straight.

'Be careful, Oisín. If you are taken to the Other World, then I will be alone all my days.'

But Oisín was not listening.

The days passed and Oisín still could not forget Niamh, and he was pleased when Finn declared that they needed to hunt.

They were on the shores of Lene lake when the hunting party stopped in wonder as they saw a beautiful woman ride towards them on a great white horse. She wore a golden crown, and a cape of silk lined with stars of gold. which trailed to the ground.

A stillness seemed to fall on all things. The horses stopped and closed their eyes and the hounds lay down and rested their heads on their forelegs to dream. All of

the Fianna noticed that the white horse did not touch the ground, and they hardly dared to draw breath.

When she stopped before them she spoke to Finn.

‘I have come a long way and I’m glad I found you, Finn.’

Finn was used to women from other worlds, and was not afraid.

‘Who are you, fair lady, and where do you come from?’

‘I am Niamh of the Golden Hair, Princess of the Land of Youth. I am here to bring your son Oisín to where he will have no more suffering. He will be happy for all time. Will you come with me, Oisín?’

‘I will,’ Oisín said. ‘To the farthest shore.’

‘Oisín, my son, don’t go,’ Finn implored him. ‘I will never see you again.’

‘You will, dear father, I promise.’

Finn knew better than to argue with Oisín, who, without looking back, got onto the horse behind Niamh.

‘Embarr,’ Niamh whispered. ‘Bring us home.’

Embarr galloped across the air till he reached the top of a mountain and then they flew through the clouds until suddenly they dropped like a stone into the ocean and Oisín needed all his courage to trust Niamh until, like a picture slowly developing, a beautiful land became clearer and clearer. Oisín got off Embarr and looked around him.

‘Do you like it?’ Niamh asked, smiling.

‘Niamh, this is a miracle,’ he whispered.

‘You will never suffer again, Oisín. Come, my father has prepared a feast for you.’

So Oisín entered a world so perfect that everything was easy. He plucked fruit from a bush, and instantly it grew again. He drank wine from a glass. The glass filled itself again, and he drank again, and never got drunk.

Niamh had an even temper. She never nagged him, never asked him to do things for her. Like everyone in the Land of Youth, she was perfectly beautiful in the morning, during the day, and all night.

When they went hunting, the deer they killed magically returned to the pasture as soon as they were eaten. A hornless deer was chased by a white dog with a red ear, for all eternity, but Oisín never tired of watching them.

Oisín was so happy, all of the time, that he forgot what happiness was. He had even forgotten his sadness about Oscar and Aideen, and only remembered the happy times he had spent with them.

But he remembered the promise he had made Finn, and after he had tasted every delight in the Land of Youth, after he had feasted again and again on its beauty and the beauty of its people, he spoke about it one afternoon with Niamh, as they walked the golden beach by the warm blue sea.

‘You know, Niamh, I never thought I’d say this, but I miss the Irish rain.’

She was horrified.

‘Only joking,’ he said.

‘Oh. One of your jokes.’

‘But I should go back to see my father. I promised him. It’s at least a month since I was there, and he will be wondering about me.’

‘I can’t let you go,’ she said, and for the first time since he had come here, she was upset.

‘But you must. I promised my father, and I cannot break a promise.’

‘Then you must promise me one thing,’ she said.

‘I will.’

‘I will give you Ebarr to return, but your feet must not touch the Irish earth. Promise me that.’

‘Don’t look so worried! I promise. I promise!’

But Niamh would not be consoled, and tears streamed down her perfect face.

She called Ebarr and Oisín tried to brush away her tears with his fingers, but they were like rivers in winter and could not be stopped.

‘Go,’ she said, ‘if you must.’

He kissed her and mounted Ebarr and stared at her, drinking in her beauty as if it really was the last time he would see her. Then he shook his head at such a foolish thought, and Ebarr brought him up through the ocean and into the clouds, and soon they were back in Ireland.

Sure enough, it was raining, but Oisín was glad of the gentle moisture after the daily sun of the Land of Youth, and closed his eyes and breathed in deeply as it touched his skin. The smell of grass and the sound of rushing streams delighted him, and he knew it was right to come back, even if he couldn’t touch the ground of Ireland, which he now longed to do.

He headed straight to the Fort of Allen, expecting a hero's welcome, but while the hill was where he expected it to be, the fort, its rampart, its many white dwellings, and its great hall were gone. There was not a warrior, woman or child to be seen.

There was nothing left but grass.

'How can that be?' he thought. 'Has Niamh enchanted me?'

Feeling a panic he had never felt before, he asked Ebarr to carry him over the tree-tops, and he called Finn and his companions, his voice echoing off the hills. Then he called Bran and Sceolan. Surely their sharp ears would pick up his voice no matter where they were?

But there was no reply.

All that came back was the thin sound of bell.

He looked down, and saw men in white robes looking up at him. Their heads were shaved across the top.

Ireland has been invaded, he thought. Where are the Fianna?

He remembered the borabu. Once it was blown, the Fianna would come from wherever they were in Ireland.

They had left it under a broad flat stone in Munster on their way to Lene lake, on Oisín's last day in Ireland, so he asked Ebarr to bring him there. When he arrived, he saw the stone but there was a herdsman looking after cattle in the same field.

The herdsman looked at him as if he had seen a ghost.

'Tell me where the Fianna are,' Oisín asked him as mildly as he could.

‘Who?’

‘The Fianna! I looked for them at Allen but there is no trace of them. Has Ireland been invaded? Finn is nowhere to be found.’

‘The Fianna? When you say Finn, do you mean Finn McCool?’

‘Yes, who else did you think I meant?’

‘Well, I’ve heard of Finn and his Fianna, but they’ve been dead for three hundred years or so.’

‘What do you mean, three hundred years? I was speaking to Finn only a month ago.’

Then the truth dawned on Oisín. He had been in the Land of Youth not one month, but for centuries. The Fianna were dead and gone. Sadly, he turned Ebarr towards The Land of Youth, but then he remembered the borabu.

‘Will you turn over this stone for me?’ Oisín asked the herdsman.

‘I couldn’t lift that, and neither could twenty men like me,’ the herdsman said.

Oisín could hardly believe his ears, but this was no time to argue. He rode up to the stone, and, reaching down, he turned it over. Underneath was the horn of the Fianna, the borabu, curled like a seashell.

‘Will you lift up this horn to me?’ asked Oisín..

‘How would I do that?’ the herdsman asked him. ‘It would take twenty men to lift it.’

When he heard this, Oisín lost his patience and reached down to lift the borabu himself but Ebarr was a very big horse and he had to reach so far he slipped and his foot touched the ground.

The herdsman was astonished. Not only had the great white horse disappeared, but Oisín, who moments before was the tallest and strongest man he had ever seen, was turning into a weak, ancient man before his eyes.

Oisín's hair had turned grey and thin, his eyes blind and watery, and his breath rattled.

'Come here,' Oisín whispered to the herdsman. 'I want to tell you everything while there's time.'
