THE RETURN OF NIAV

(FOR I.S.)

An air from Errigal seemed to come to America with Maeve; that beauty of hers that subdued the heart like de Danaan's magic had changed with the sorrowful years; like sunrise once, she had a more troubled, patient, tender loveliness now. "Like to the mournful moon," Una said.

The evenings she spent with us were wonderful, all the world's wars forgotten in the talk we had always loved—talk of the enchanted waters and hills of Ireland, of ruins and symbols and rituals, and of the music that would come out of Ireland when we were free.

"Do you know that my Neoineen is making the strangest, most marvellous music already?" she said. "Her masters in Leipzig hardly know what to make of her; she is as creative, they told me, at seventeen as any composer in his prime, and makes deliriously beautiful tunes. But she won't study; while she should have been learning the history of music she was composing a symphony, I'm afraid!"

"What is her symphony?" Una asked, and Maeve replied:

"The Children of Lir." 3

She looked at us then, her eyes shining, and spoke in a voice hushed with joy. "It is the sweetest, unearthliest music I have ever heard. The cold—the mortal cold of the waters! The wild lonely sorrow of the swans—the yearning for human things—the dreadful enchanted striving through water and air—nothing could describe it but music—no music but hers! She will be giving the music of Ireland to the world."

Maeve stopped, shy of so praising her own child, but I could believe it all. I had a memory of Neoineen when she was four years old and the loveliest thing, except her mother, that I had ever seen—a wind-sprite of a child with a floss of silvery-gold hair raying out like Lugh's halo round her head, and a little pointed face and dark hazel eyes. Her soul and body were all music; day-long she would be dancing to the sun or the wind or the moon, or making strange little rhymes. Maeve was making a little pagan of her, filling her imagination with the wonder-tales of Ireland, inventing druid rituals, making magical songs. I remembered an old priest warning Maeve solemnly that she was exposing her child to influences more dangerous than she knew and how Maeve, who always had an artist's recklessness, only laughed—"All beautiful things are good."

"Do you remember," I asked her, "how anxious you used to make poor Father Cahill! He thought Neoineen would lose her soul!"

I spoke laughingly, but Maeve's face, remembering, grew grave. "You don't know," she said, "how nearly he was right."

Dorothy Macardle, Earth-bound: Nine Stories of Ireland (Worcester, MA: Harrigan & P., 1924)
She looked at our incredulous faces and smiled, "You don't believe it? I will tell you then—I will tell you, though I was dreadfully to blame, because it is all over long ago. I think that was how her music came."

We drew close, intent, waiting, and dreamily she began to tell.

"It never could have happened but for the solitude of our home: I was so eager to welcome a companion for Neoinen. I built my house there for the glorious freedom of the place—a place unchanged, you would think, since the days of Fionn. Our home is on the very brow of the mountain where it breaks in a cliff over the loch—the water at our feet, the hawks and the clouds and the mountain peaks overhead, and steep, wooded ravines and torrents below. There we lived, just our two selves and my old Maura, as happy as human people could ever be. We had no neighbours at all except half-a-dozen families who lived fighting the mountain for a livelihood on their tiny farms. A little scamp called Seumas belonging to one of them was Neoinen's only playmate. I liked him to come because he talked such delicious Irish—I did not want her to hear English at all—but she preferred playing with me or alone.

It was unthinkable, always, to leave Neoinen to the companionship of a nurse, impossible to find a satisfying playmate for such a child.

That summer—the thing happened when she was five—we had the most radiant June I have ever known, full of wild scents of heather and bog, and we spent golden days. I was painting trees at the edge of the Druid's Wood—a steep, narrow glen—and Neoinen used to wander away by herself on marvelous adventures.

We were in the Fionn cycle then! She was Osgar, I think, and I was Oisin; I was expected to make a new song every day!

St. John's Eve came, one of our Festivals, a morning of jewel colours in earth and sky. We had planned to stay out till moonrise and light our magical fire in the ravine and we had made a song with a sweet, bewitching little tune to it, to lure the fairies to our fire. While I settled to my painting Neoinen wandered away to gather wood of nine different kinds and to choose a place for the fire. She was a long time away, but she came to my whistle at last, wearing a foxglove helmet on every finger, and with her arms full of wet flowers—meadow-sweet and the yellow irises that grow in pools.

"How did you pull those, Osgar?" I asked, and she answered:

"Nia in the wood; she sang a most wonder-ous song."

I was accustomed to Neoinen’s "wonder-ous" adventures and only thought, while she told me her tale, eating her lunch under a tree, that it was the prettiest she had invented yet. She was impatient to be away, and jumped up very soon. "Farewell, Fionn!" she called to me, kissing her
hand as she ran away into the wood, and, guessing that our rôles had changed, I answered, “Farewell, Oisin!”

You know what the silence of noon can be, the spell-bound silence of a June day; it seems to well up, like clear water, from earth to heaven and hold one entranced under a still pool—it is in those silences great music is born.

It was such a magical silence that was pierced then, suddenly, by the most rapturous music I had ever heard, wild singing, joyous and daring as a bird’s. As I listened, scarcely breathing, fantastic images thronged my mind; I thought some wild swan must be singing his death-song, having strayed out of Tir-na-n-Og. I thought it was faery music out of the mountain—I thought of Etaín and of Niav.

The singer was coming towards me through the wood; Neoinne was holding her by the hand; I could see her between the trees. Her beauty was like the beauty of her song—daring and exquisite and free. A little high head she had with a glory of red-gold hair about it; a green, ragged gown was on her and her delicate white feet and arms were bare; she came towards me like some young, triumphant queen, leading her lover by the hand; she looked at me with soft eyes like a fawn’s and smiled.

“Come with us to Tir-na-n-Og,” Neoinne said, and took my hand and led me down the steep, dark paths into the wood. “This is Niav,” she said, speaking Irish, of course, and the girl looked at me joyously and said, “Cuirim fad bean-nacht na greine thu!”—“I give you the blessing of the sun!” Her Irish was as musical as her song, soft and vigorous and rich.

She led us down to a deep hollow in the wood, honey-fragrant, alight with the smouldering purple of foxgloves, loud with the brabble of a little waterfall where the brook tumbled into a pool. There, on a great flat stone, they had prepared the druid fire.

The foxgloves were Oisin’s warriors, it seemed; he went from one to another, praising them for marvelous deeds, bidding Niav lean down and kiss the best; I heard her add her praise to Oisin’s with such queenly grace, speak so gravely of their perils and wounds that I became almost rapt in their illusion, too. When it was over she came and sat in a patch of pure sunlight, singing dreamy and mystical songs—songs such as I had never heard before, though I knew Irish music well—more entrancing than anything I had heard.

I spoke to her once, “You have Irish only?” I said, and “Irish only,” she replied.

Tired of singing, she ran to Neoinne and they chased one another like sungleams among the trees, Neoinne like a little mad sprite of laughter, growing wilder and wilder, till she tumbled, poor baby, into the pool. Niav gave a strange, terrified cry, but Neoinne scrambled out, laughing, and shook herself like a dog. I hurried her home, leaving Niav among the trees.

It had been an enchanted day, but it ended
sadly. Neoinene had set her heart on the druid fire—she was a fire-worshipper always; but the evening was chilly and she seemed fevered with excitement and I dared not, after that wetting, let her stay out after dark. She tried all ways to persuade me, but at last, to Fionn’s sorrow, Oisin cried. I remember the play I made to comfort her, with the song we had made to sing in the druid wood. She was a faery child and I was a lonely woman with no little girl and when I sang our luring little song she would creep out of faeryland, steal to me and leap into my arms at last. Again and again we played it until, drowsy and serene again, she let me sing her to sleep.

I hardly know how to tell you how the rest of that summer passed; it is like a half-forgotten dream. Only I know that for me no less than for Neoinene there was a childish eagerness in living, a joyous wonder, from day to day—as though we lived to music. “Niav” —we knew no other name for her, played with Neoinene and sang for me, sat in the sunlight or crouched over my fire, telling long tales, as though they were dear memories, of the old glories of the Gael. It was all what my heart’s desire for Neoinene would have chosen. I listened and watched their play and painted and forgot there were sorrows in the world.

Then, in September, quite suddenly, my dear old godmother died. She brought us up, you know—me and Hugo Blake; he was left desolate by her death. He wrote and implored me to go to him; he had always regarded me as his elder sister and he had no one else in the world. I had to go; and I had to leave Neoinene.

I know you will think I was to blame; I know it myself now. I could have taken her, of course; but Hugo was in one of his dark, gloomy moods, and his Tower seemed no place for a child, and she was so happy, playing with Niav.

Niav’s own folk, she had told us, lived “over the hill.” Quite poor, I imagined them, since she wore thin, ragged clothes always and could not read or write; but the gentlest, in the West, are the very poor, and Niav was as gentle as a queen. I left Neoinene to her and Maura, and went to Hugo for two months.

He was ill and despairing. It was one of those black periods when he could not paint; there were times, you know, when we feared for his mind. November was over before I came home.

It was a troubled letter from Maura that brought me then.

“The darling is as good as gold,” she wrote, “but she’s not taking her food and she’s too thin. She does be falling asleep in the middle of her play.”

To my disappointment she was asleep when I came home, lying on a nest of cushions by the fire, Niav on guard. Niav rose and kissed me softly. At the very sight of her shining, serene loveliness, the old gladness flowed back, and when my Neoinene awoke and hugged me and caressed me, crooning little lyrics of her love, earth was my heaven again.
But she was not well, my little one. I accused myself for staying so long away. Loving and contented as ever, she seemed, but she had not grown a hair's breadth and had lost weight and had become fastidious about food. Niav lived on with us; I could not do without her; no one else could make Neineen eat at all. She never tired of the child; they would play together just as vividly, run just as lightly over the frosty ground as in those golden summer days; but after their play Neineen would steal in to me tired—even, I sometimes fancied, a little nervous, and cuddle into my arms and fall asleep. She slept at night too deeply; nothing would wake her; her breathing was too light.

My old friend, Dr. Moore, came for a day or two, but he could not give me much help. The child's imagination seemed over-excited, he said, he found nothing else wrong.

It was then that I began to wonder about Niav, to watch her closely and love her not quite so well—she seemed to me to have changed. She who had been so tender would not comprehend that Neineen was ill, would not listen to my fears.

I began to be afraid of their play, though it had grown so dreamy and quiet you would have thought it could not hurt Neineen. One day I came upon them suddenly in the shrubbery, Neineen lying on a bed of fallen leaves. Her eyes were shut, her arms lay limp, her face was quite colorless. I was frightened; I could not wake her or make her stir. Niav laughed at me, a little scornfully I thought. "She is only playing! Come back Ashore!" At that soft whisper in Niav's sweetest tones, Neineen awoke and clung to me and cried. I looked at Niav then for the first time, coldly, and said, "Do not play at death with her again!" She did not answer save with a smiling look, but to my imagination there was a mocking challenge in her eyes.

My own imagination was growing morbid—tainted with jealousy perhaps—that is what I thought then. It was foolish; my Neineen loved me; she loved no one so well as me; yet if Niav left her, I believed, so entwined was she with her life, the child would die. Then again I thought myself half crazy in that belief, so unreasoning, so fantastical it seemed. And as the dread took hold of me, haunted me more and more terribly—the dread that I was doomed to lose Neineen, it was my own feverish imagination that I accused. "The more need for her," I would say to myself then, "to have a clear-spirited, joyous being like Niav to share her play." So, in a nightmare duel between warning instinct and incredulous will, I wore the winter and spring away.

Of all festivals of the year, except Saint John's Eve, we loved Beltaine best. It was then, on the last day of April, that the crisis came.

All the Beltaine mysteries—the fire-building and songs and rituals, Neineen had decided, were to be a surprise for me. She and Niav would prepare them alone. So all that day they were away together in the Druid Wood. They were
away so long that I went out at dusk to look for them, calling "Neoinen, Neoinen!"

Do you remember April evenings in that glen? The sky translucent like a green faery sea, the mountain like a rock of amethyst, cut into hollow and ridge, shadow and gleam—and that evening there was a ghost of new moon. Green the woods were, too, just sprinkled with budding leaves, seeming to hold the dying light in a magical net; the long weeds and brambles were cold with dew and a silvery mist was winding among the trees. There was something tremulous, eager, pent, in the listening air.

I stole down, calling softly, into the deep glen, till I heard the gurgle of water among the stones and came out where the little torrent breaks into a fall—where we made our Saint John's fire on the Druid stone.

There on the flat stone lay Neoinen, in her thin white smock, quite still. Kneeling upright beside her, her hands clasped, swaying and singing softly, was Niav; my heart stood still.

For a moment such terror was on me that I could only stand motionless, watching, while Niav laid her lips on the child's mouth. Then I rushed down, screaming, and seized Neoinen and cried out I know not what fierce things to the girl, telling her to go back to where she came from, that never, never, should she touch or see my darling again. Niav stood up then and lifted her head and laughed—a low sweet laughter—and turned and ran and vanished into the dark.

For dreadful hours Maura and I worked, wrapping her in hot blankets, chafing her numbed body and stiffened limbs, forcing warm milk between her clenched teeth, before the rigor passed. Her little face was terrible; I could scarcely look at it; blue and shrunken it was, like an old woman's—like a cunning old woman, dead.

When we had won our battle with death—when her breathing was tranquil at last, and her blood flowing, and her body warm and relaxed in natural sleep, I stole into bed and held her fast in my arms. Life is wonderful when you have looked at death.

It was late in the morning when I opened the curtains; sunlight flowed over her as she lay, and gleamed on her shining hair. As I stood, looking down at her, crying with love and joy, she opened her eyes and looked right into mine. I had been through terror, but that moment was the most horrible I have known. What looked at me out of those hazel eyes was mockery—it was mockery—triumpant—and hate.

I turned away to the window, gasping, pressing my forehead to the cool pane, praying that I might not be mad—I tried to force myself to call her and dress her and brush her hair, chatting merrily as every day; but I could not. I knelt and held her by the shoulders at last and looked into her face and said sharply, "Neoinen, tell me what is wrong?" She smiled. "Nothing, Mameen," she said softly, "nothing, little Queen-Mother, nothing at all!" It was her lovingest name for me; it
froze me to hear it spoken in that bitter-sweet tone. I tried to startle her—to shake the strange mood away; I said suddenly, "Do you know Niav is gone?"

"Niav has gone away," she answered lightly. "We don't want Niav any more." And she fixed me with those cold, hard eyes till my heart shrunk.

Little Seumas was calling from the garden, wild with eagerness over the May-day games. But there was no festival of Beltaine; she laughed and called and chased him up and down hill, hid and sprang out at him from trees and boulders, hooting like an owl, crying out like a curlew until he was bewildered and tired. She caught him then and laughed, but he turned and stared at her and pulled himself free and stole away home, afraid. I told her she had been rough and unkind, and she cried.

I blamed myself bitterly then. I should have been thankful I said; it was just that her long illness had suddenly gone. Day by day now she grew healthier, browner; she ate, greedily even—was never tired—never for one moment fretted for Niav, never even mentioned her name. I walked and played, explored and gardened, sang and danced with her as of old; she went with me everywhere, responsive, caressing as ever before—yet—yet—Oh, how can I tell you the truth of those hideous days? I did not believe in her, did not want her, did not love her. I was consumed and tortured with craving for my own little lovely girl.

I dare say I am not remembering it all quite as it was. I am sure, whatever other thing had happened, my own mind was unbalanced, my imagination distorted from the strain.

Maura told me that I should bring Niav back. "What she done," Maura said, "no other can undo," and I used to walk wildly about the mountain seeking and enquiring for any sign, but the cottage folk knew nothing of her at all. One old woman drew from me the whole dreadful story; she sat in her corner distressfully shaking her head. "You were mad foolish, mad foolish," she said, "you to lead her by the hand into your home."

"What can I do?" I sobbed, "what can I do to get my baby again?"

"I heard of them going," she answered mournfully, "but I never heard of one coming back."

I began, after crazy weeks of vain searching, to despair and try to comfort myself in childish ways, talking to Neoineen when I was quite alone, pretending that I held her in my arms. And I used to dream about her all night long—cruel, maddening dreams. I would hear her crying out to me, see her, reaching piteous arms to me from the dark, and always when I clasped her she turned to air.

A kind-of mania seized me to being to the places where we had been-together, repeating the things we had done; and the child followed me everywhere—the child that I hated—hated, now. I gathered wood of nine kinds on Saint John's
Eve and set a fire in the glade on the druid's stone.

Memory was vivid as an illusion—I thought there was music in the air. It was a day as golden as a year ago it had been, the air sweet with honeysuckle and with the songs of the water and the birds; there were fox-gloves burning in the shadows, meadowsweet and irises in the pools. All the afternoon I was pulling weeds and flowers, strewing them around the druid stone, and sobbing, sobbing aloud. The child followed me, staring, scared and subdued; I tried to send her away, but she would not go. At moonrise I lit the fire and cried out the wild little invocation that Neoineen and I had made—gave way to all the crazy anguish within me—chanted it loud enough for the hills to hear. I was the forlorn mother in our story, playing alone, alone.

The little brown girl sat crouching under a stone, whimpering with fear and cold. I cared nothing for her. I wanted my own baby, the child of my body and soul, wanted her more than the dying could long for life or the living for death, wanted her with an anguish that is not known.

I flung my arms out in the darkness, walking nine times, sun-wise around the fire, singing, singing that luring, magical song; piercing sweet was the wild tune we had made!

In the dark ravine the sparks leaped redly, terrifying the crouching child. As I passed her she sprang up shrieking and stamped her feet, but I sang on and flung ashes over her out of the fire. With a wierd scream she fled from me into the darkness and I ended my ninth circling of the stone.

When I stood still at last all was silent, and suddenly frightened, I ran down to the stream. She was lying under the water with shut eyes.

I lifted her; she was limp, white, unconscious. I carried her to the fire, stripped and warmed her, held in the glow, wrapped her in my shawl, then carried her home, hugged to my heart, calling her every name she had ever heard—my star-flower, my daisy-bud, vein of my heart. Just as I crossed the threshold she opened her eyes, wide and loving and clear, but they filled with tears and she clung to me crying: “Mameen, Mameen! Oh, hold me, little Queen-Mother! Don't let me go any more.” Then she fell asleep in my arms—my baby girl.

No memory remains of it at all; it is gone like a dream.”

Kilmainham.