

A Song among the Stones

Kenneth Steven

In the sixth century, the water between Ireland and Scotland was busy with coracles and currachs. The Celtic Christian world was at its busiest, and Iona itself was no edge-of-the-world place of quiet, but rather a centre of learning and missionary activity. For some hermits, the quest for ultimate solitude took them out from Iona to the remotest of the Hebrides where they built simple stone cells and crosses. But some went further, and to this day the Icelanders believe the Papar (the name the Norse gave them) reached their shores and settled (most likely during the summer months of light). This would mean these monks reached Iceland long before the first Norsemen. In a sequence of untitled fragments, *A Song among the Stones* attempts to tell the story of that first journey from Iona to Iceland. What follows is an extract from this sequence of fragments.

a day out of clean silk
washed like a child that's lived
for days in fever, the light pure and beautiful
and nothing troubled left in all the world

it was a day to love a neighbour
to see in the young field's promise
God rippling and strong, unquestionable

four men gathered from the island
went down to the shore
ready for the vessel, eyes full and wide

and the moon rose over the rim of the earth
and fell like fishes on the sea
their moon road north

the youngest woke alone

they curled into the boat
faces blue-white with the night

the last of the land was leaving them
north waited, watching

why had he come
was it for God, or for the girl on the island
whose eyes smiled when she passed every dawn
on her way to the well

was it for her

the sea rose and fell
a dark breath

was that a light
who lived there

he looked, leaning out
yearning answers he could not find

all he knew was a sore fear
goring him

he held onto the light
like a child

he dreamed of Ireland
warm with hay, safe, a place
to lie and snug among the softness
rocked by sleep

the up in the morning early light
the buttercup fields knee-deep in sun
the woods splayed with yellow patches, thatched with birdsong
the running laughter of the river

until the soft fall of night
the breath of the blue trees
the cloth call of an owl
the kiss of starlight

land lay at anchor
a ledge of darkness

the sea swivelled
hissed in its rolling

the boat lurched and swung
like thread through the eye of a needle

closer and closer
in to a cut in the cliffs

the stench of birds and wet stone
the rocks a singing of droplets

they crouched, salt-lipped
their mouths dry caves

the dank slap of water
the thick, bad air

and the boat nudged in
dunted a black beach

one day
he spoke and could not look at them

I miss the warm bread
broken in the morning

I miss the cloister
with the wind in the grass

I miss the curragh
coming full to the brim with word of Ireland

I miss the voices of women
the kind softness of their talk

I miss the books and their pages
the scent of their leather

I miss everything I cannot have
and my prayers have grown thin and bitter

I ask that we may go back home

Kenneth Steven is a published poet and writer whose books include *Iona, Island, Salt and Light, The Missing Days* and *Wild Horses*. The full selection of *A Song among the Stones* will be published by Polygon in 2012.