

SARA BERKELEY



My Irishness. It hid in the wings till I left the country. First, to California, where I discovered Irishness was like a trendy hat. I could wear it to parties, I could take it off at home. Then to London: during the bombings of '93, my Irishness wrapped itself around me like a scarf from the wrong football team. Back to California for good, where at last I found the time to learn slowly what being Irish meant to me; to luxuriate quietly in it; to worry about it somehow, imperceptibly, slipping away.

Eight years after leaving Dublin, I notice my emigrant status has finally swum to the surface of my writing. A year ago, an uncle died in Enniskerry. Writing about a trip home, where I visited him in St. Vincent's, I found that the wish to name places in Dublin welled up out of the memories. Bewley's, Grafton Street—it was elemental, the need to root the poem, the pain, in my home town. I wanted suddenly to talk about my city with authority and love. Then into the middle of the poem crept a line about the pilot on the flight from San Francisco telling us we were passing over the dead centre of America. I remember how those words thrilled me. Now my home is perched on the Pacific coast of a continent three thousand miles wide. I can drive east for days and never reach the ocean. Six thousand miles east, my other home curves around its bay, ringed by my first mountains. Dublin is always the first city to me.

I sometime fight the urge to write yet another emigrant poem or story, and yet, that is my world. That's what I'm given, as powerful and potent a subject as I could wish for. Why fight it? There's always something new to say. No one else ever left Dublin in 1989 and wound up living two miles north of the tiny village of Inverness, forty miles up the coast from San Francisco.

Then there's the wealth of material that American herself offers. The canyonlands of Utah, the deserts of the southwest—five in number, each distinct and astonishing—and the rich cultures, mingled and dissonant, of the San Francisco Bay Area.

In my home, in the intense privacy of page and ink, the writing hovers between exploring life in the New World and gently probing how it feels to have left the old, with no plan to return. What emerges is the need to keep learning about my Irishness. What can I keep? What can I pass on? What do I have to let go? I don't think I'll ever feel like an Irish writer; it's hard enough to feel like a writer. But I know that, to myself, I finally feel Irish.