

## ROSITA BOLAND



### PAKISTAN

Karimabad, on the Karakoram Highway. A mountain village in northern Pakistan, near the borders of Afghanistan, China and Kashmir. The original Shangri-La, I was assured. At the tiny post office, I presented my letters home, and waited for the man behind the counter to tell me what the postage would be. He hunted through his list of countries, muttering to himself and looking increasingly puzzled. He examined the addresses on my letters again. Finally, he emerged from his pages of names.

“To England?” he said hopefully.

“No, to Ireland.”

“Ah, Holland!” This was common. Whenever I said “Ireland” in Asia someone invariably reparteed with “Holland”, although why a country smaller even than my own should trip so lightly off Asian tongues I did not know.

“No, not Holland. Ireland.”

“Australia? Germany?”

“No, Ireland. Eye-err-land.”

“But I cannot find this country!” He flapped the pages of the book at me. “Is not on my list! No country Ireland, therefore cannot be sending letters there!”

It’s a disconcertingly exotic sensation to be told that your country does not officially exist. Mystic isle indeed. I stood in Karimabad’s post office and searched for my lost country in the pages of Pakistan’s Postal Workers’ Handbook. Ireland was nowhere to be found.

“But I want to send them,” I persisted. “I know they’ll get there. I mean, I know that Ireland is out there.” He looked at me with mistrust. Ridiculously, I waved an arm westwards. “It’s that way. Honestly.”

“Perhaps,” the post office official said, “you could send instead these letters to Holland. I am knowing the rates for Holland.” He smiled encouragingly.

“But they’re to people who live in Ireland!” I cried. “IRELAND!”

A brainwave struck the harassed official. “Madam, what country is neighbour to Ireland? Then I can charge the neighbour country rates.”

I grew up in Clare, where the presence of the landmass that lies across

the horizon seemed at least as near as England. It is equally our neighbour, just one which is a bit further away. The European Union politicians, I suspected, would not have been best pleased at my interpretation of that geographically rooted word “neighbour”. “America,” I declared firmly. “America is Ireland’s neighbour.”

And so, my letters to Ireland were finally posted, with American rate stamps attached, and duly arrived safely in the mystic isle, via Shangri-La’s post office.

#### IRAN

It takes eighteen hours by bus to cross the stretch of desert that seeps between Zahedan and Shiraz, in the far south east of Iran. The landscape throbs. Engulfed in black, I have never been so hot in all my life. I fanned myself with a photograph. It caused great interest. “Home,” I said, searching in my phrasebook for the Farsi word. It was a picture of the Moher Cliffs and their uncertain Atlantic floor. The photograph was passed around the bus. The man who returned it to me consulted another for English words. “We also,” he said carefully, looking out the window at the desert, “would like to live in the sea.”

## HARRY CLIFTON



Patrick Kavanagh once wrote, “There is no virtue in a place”. Growing up in a Dublin housing estate I had no reason to dispute that statement. Nor another by the same poet that has stayed with me over many years of wandering:

I turn away to where the Self reposes,  
The placeless heaven under all our noses.

A young person, living as he or she does on the level of sensation, will tend to be dazzled by geographical variety. The city of Paris rubs off in a different way than the American midwest, the Jos plateau of Nigeria differently than the mountains on the Cambodian border. Having lived and written in all those places and many others, it is no longer the difference between them that interests me, but what they share in terms of