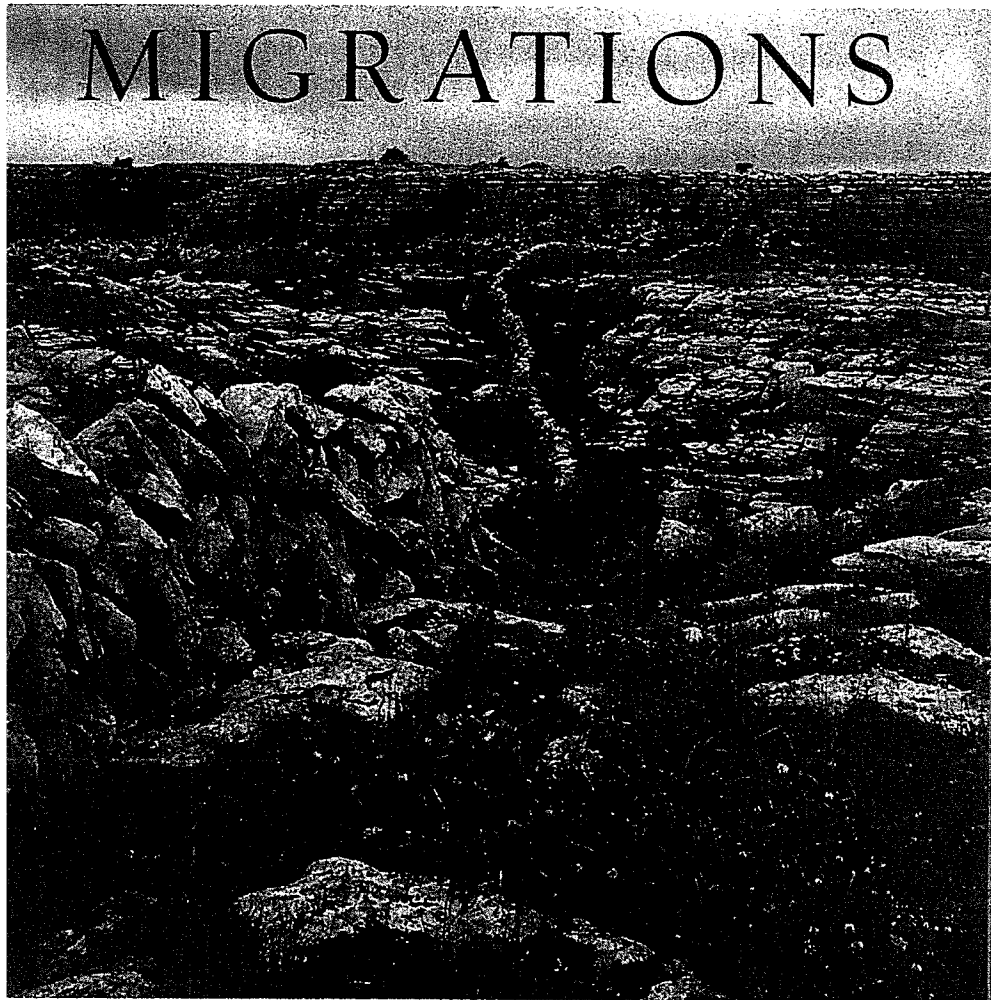


A BOOK OF MIGRATIONS



SOME PASSAGES IN IRELAND

REBECCA SOLNIT

12 Rock Collecting

I was on vacation. Everyone else was on holiday. I left my knapsack in the hotel-cum-hostel with pub in the center of Lisdoonvarna and walked to Ailwee Caverns. I went less for the sake of caves than for the route, through the barren windswept expanse of limestone on the southwestern lip of Galway Bay called the Burren, from an Irish word for a rocky place. It was a long walk, and it was raining. Up a crest, past one of the horrible tree plantations, which had picnic benches scattered around its impenetrable mass, on the apparent assumption that a forest is a scenic recreation site place no matter what. Over a slope where stone was breaking through everywhere and some of the fields were not really fields but pavements of warped, riddled, hollowed-out pale limestone, in which little pools of water gathered, sweeping toward the misty distance. Past the place the map said had a side road going to the Blessed Bush, where the imprint of St Brigid's knees can be seen, in stone that must be less complicated than the terrain I was wandering through, for such a slight impression to be noticeable.

Down Corkscrew Hill, apparently named for the zigzag road down its steep side, into a more inviting landscape, with trees along the stone walls and soil rather than stone as its primary surface. Past a field, where a primeval white horse, with thick legs and Roman nose and stiff short mane, came up to greet me, to a country hotel. Inelegant rain garb shed, into the hotel, a sort of poor man's stately home, with its tattered prints and old volumes from scattered sets. Tea on a sort of settee in the room with the bar, a table away from the only other guests there, a well-dressed English family, three generations of women who looked like unhappy dolls and men who looked as immobile as the furniture beneath them. Outside again, the hills looked like topographical maps, because they had eroded into ledges or sills as regular as elevation lines, but beyond them was the sea. The cave was like many caves – long sinuous corridors resembling bodily passages, the literal bowels of the earth – and the tour guide was a young man with a good memory but no flair for recitating from memory, like most cave guides, but it was pleasant to be out of the rain. Then I ran into the Giantess on the road. She was better at vacation than I was: she had stayed in a town much closer to the caves and walked much less and met a man in a pub in Doolin who looked like Mel Gibson, but virtuously declined him. I thought we might keep running into each other, bound up on some parallel track of chimera chasing, but I never saw her again.

The next day it was raining harder. I walked to Kilfenora and bought a packet of chips and a chocolate bar in a dusty store where strangers or women must have been infrequent sights, because the man who sold them stuck his head right up against the dusty window and goggled after me, his tongue balled up between his teeth in concentration or wonder. The church in Kilfenora – technically a cathedral whose bishop is the pope – was half in ruins, full of graves, and had on one wall a carved fourteenth-century Bishop making a sign of benediction with the same two-fingered gesture drivers now salute each other with as they pass. No one passed me, however; the Burren on this stormy day seemed like an abandoned landscape, like the surface of a planet whose inhabitants had all vanished an indeterminate time ago. No cars, almost no birds, and signs of cattle in the fields but no cows, just a flat rocky expanse to the horizon, scoured and gnawed by wind and rain – nothing but botany, geology, meteorology, and ruins. The wind was making the rain so horizontal it tickled my inner ear. There were pockets of water in the hollows of the limestone, and the slabs all fit together like pieces of an eroded puzzle, with long fracture lines making rows of rock. Even the whitethorn trees seemed lonely, each set at a distance from the next along the walls.

I had the dead for company at the eleventh-century church in the cross-roads called Noughaval, another roofless stone structure being strangled by ivy, like a nervous system choking its bones. The surrounding cemetery's headstones amid the wet grass and nettles ranged from a past weathered into illegibility, tombstones become plain rock again, to the near present, with plastic flowers for remembrance, all ringed round by more stone walls. I had been walking a long time in the rain when I finally arrived at the great portal tomb of Poul nabrone. There were a few cars parked on the roadside and, despite the No Entry sign, figures wandering the stony field on which it reared up, a vast slab of stone held up high by a few uprights on a low mound of unshaped stones. The uprights had kept the slab balanced as a roof for four and a half thousand years, in defiance of gravity or celebration of balance. The roof hovered at a slight angle, so that it didn't echo the horizon but pointed beyond it, soaring. As I stepped across the treacherous footing of hollows, ridges, rows, and dips, I saw a figure in ink-blue clothes approaching from another angle. He reached the tomb at the same time I did, and because the rain was coming down harder, he invited me inside with a hospitable gesture. These are always where there is much wind and water, he said as we stood on the low mound under the slab, and added, I come from Brittany, where there are many such things.

He was at ease and set me at ease too by immediately assuming affinity, as though since we were sheltered by the same megalith we must care about the

same things and could skip the preliminaries. The Bretons, he declared in his French-accented English, are blueeyed Celts, though he was darkeyed and blackhaired himself, and he asserted that Breton was the most widely spoken of the surviving Celtic languages, spoken by far more people than speak Scottish, or Welsh, or Irish – he spoke it himself. I tried out a passage of Rimbaud on him: "I have my ancestors' pale blue eyes . . . only I don't butter my hair," but he didn't recognize it, at least not in English. We wandered together over the rocky ground to the next field, talking of stones, Celts, fairies, pilgrimages, and old places. We had both been down the old pilgrimage trail of Santiago de Compostela, which begins in Paris, but he had gone the whole way, and on foot. He was more beautiful than Mel Gibson, but this is not a novel: his mother was waiting for him in the car, a cranky Colette in leather pants unimpressed by the wet pre-Celtic monuments he had brought her to see.

There were places in the Burren that had never been inhabited and hardly disturbed, and when the Office of Public Works tried to build an interpretive center for tourists in one of them a few years ago, it prompted one of the most heated environmental campaigns in Ireland, a campaign to leave the place undeveloped that was at least temporarily won. In the daytime it seemed possible to believe that human beings were rare, solitary creatures who existed largely to rearrange the stone according to slowpassing fashions into tombs, stone forts, churches, walls, and that there was no other scale of time but the eons of geological formation and erosion, the millennia of architectural styles, the decades of building, and the hourly shifts of clouds and wind and rain. Every place exists in two versions, as an exotic and a local. The exotic is a casual acquaintance who must win hearts through charm and beauty and sites of historical interest, but the local is made up of the accretion of individual memory and sustenance, the maternal landscape of uneventful routine. The Burren seemed to be an old local place that was becoming almost exclusively exotic (which is not to argue against the pleasures of promiscuity or for never leaving mother). The decline in population since the Famine has nowhere been more precipitous than in the west, and of all the places I visited, the Burren felt loneliest for its abandonment.

At night things were livelier. A group of Welsh people was staying in the place I was, and they were an energetic bunch. By day they bicycled, kayaked, and climbed, less out of any evident enjoyment than out of a dogged sense of propriety: these were their holidays, and this is how holidays are spent. But in the evening they drank and sang in the pub attached to our hostel and looked happier. The first night, there were hired local musicians

too, and the proprietor's three young daughters came down and gave us a show of step dancing. They wore elaborate, stiff costumes with full short skirts, and the information circulated that the three had won many awards. Stiff and immobile from the spine on up, their grave faces suggesting their upper body knew not what the lower was doing, no matter how their skirts flipped up and their feet flew. I always think step dancing must be an elaborate allegory about conscious suppression and unconscious expression of erotic energy, with its impassive head and body and aggressive legs, but that's another story.

The following night, a Friday, the young English busker who'd been moping around the place drifted into the pub with his guitar. His first song was "Dirty Old Town," a song very popular as a description of Dublin, and his dirgelike monotone suited it well. But he flattened the next song into the same melancholia, and the next. The crowd of young Dubliners who'd driven straight to the pub for their bank holiday and surrounded me in my corner seat couldn't bear it; they rushed out to their car, came back with a pair of guitars and politely wrested the evening from his mournful grasp. They sang pop and rock songs with cheerful tunefulness and with lined notebooks full of lyrics and chords to keep them on track. When they weren't singing, they chattered and poured pints of Guinness down their throats at an impressive rate and kept quantities of cigarettes smoking in the ashtrays. The Welsh gang chimed in, requested songs, and joined the banter. One of them played an Irish drum – a bodhrán, it's called – and one had a theatrical baritone of awesome volume, and between songs they bantered with the Dubliners.

There's a word, *craic* in Irish, *crack* in English, to describe this lively conversation, in which jokes and insults and compliments and stories are fired back and forth in playful volleys. It impressed me that such talk was so highly valued it had a name, and impressed me more to meet people who made their own entertainment, rather than consuming someone else's. I bantered a little with them and fell into talking about rock and roll with the guitar-wielding Dubliner sitting next to me. Music was beginning to be as useful for socializing with the younger strangers I ran across as weather was with their elders. This man had a particular devotion to U2 and told me about the U2 concert he'd flown to New York to see.

U2 is itself obsessed with America, and its songs are as likely to be about Martin Luther King and the Fourth of July as about Ireland's Bloody Sunday; for them rock and roll is itself about America. Later on my travels I found a little one-night-a-week rockabilly club in Dublin where a collection of young people had formed a sort of cult of American pop culture. Europeans approach many genres of American popular music with a peculiar reverence;

it's as mysteriously, exotically perfect for them as though it were Ming dynasty porcelain. The French worship of jazz is well known, and much obscure country and rockabilly music of the 1950s is reissued on German and English labels with scholarly liner notes. The music invokes a fantasy America, pared down to twangs and heartaches and rhyme schemes, the perfect world of a perfected art form, and artists like the Australian Nick Cave and Ireland's U2 conjure up an iconic America over and over again, full of wild horses and wanted men unburdened by the banality of the familiar. Country music, which after all originated among poor rural white southerners in the process of being displaced, is the most popular genre in Ireland now, edging out rock and roll. When I was there even the prepaid telephone cards featured Garth Brooks, the corporate cowboy himself, Ireland's number one pop star.

But in the dimly lit bar on a Dublin back street, this pack of rockabilly aficionados felt like an obscure religious cult, druidic, secretive; the songs they knew and steps they'd mastered seemed like initiation rites or incantations summoning up another time and place. They were perfectly friendly to me, though I wasn't dressed for the occasion and can't jitterbug. I fell to talking about favorite fifties country songs with one of them, and when I said, Johnny Horton, "Honky-Tonk Hardwood Floor," he pumped my hand with the fervor with which Stanley must have greeted Livingstone, and I was one of the anointed anyway. A DJ walked me back through the dark streets after midnight, remarking in passing, The Irish are eighty percent drunk and twenty percent depressed. He was clearly among the 80 percent and slipped a little from his hipness as we parted on O'Connell Street, saying, God bless you.

Having seen U2 on their first American tour stood me in good stead in Lisdoonvarna, and having been to the place in the southern California desert their album *The Joshua Tree* was named after didn't hurt any either. Late that evening, when the singing had turned back into talking, a shaggy, grimy, spry old man, a leprechaun of sorts, wandered in out of the rain with a fiddle case clutched in one dirty hand. He showed off on the fiddle, playing jazzy, experimental introductions to his traditional ballads and jigs and mumbling through his long beard in a brogue so heavy it took me a while to notice the German accent around the edges. Finally, after the last call for drinks – no liquor can be poured in Irish pubs after 11:30 p.m. in the summer months and 11 p.m. the rest of the year – an old local quavered some American country ballads sublimely, with accompaniment by the Welsh drummer and the German fiddler. When he was done and my last whiskey was downed, I wandered off to bed while the guitarists serenaded me from the foot of the stairs with an ironic rendition of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven."

The following night, in Galway, it was a young woman who had the guitar and handwritten notebook of songs – and a loaf of soda bread baked by her mother. She was from a small town not far away and had come down for a weekend holiday after breaking up with her fiancé, and she sang in a tiny, good voice “Take Me Home, Country Roads” and “Walking After Midnight.” I’d caught a ride into Galway with a man who was trying to start a business supplementing the region’s scanty bus service with a van shuttle. In practice, this meant that he picked me up in Lisdoonvarna, dropped by the youth hostel a dozen miles up the coast of Galway Bay, loitered there for midmorning tea and cookies with a couple of other young women, dropped them off somewhere, picked up his kids from school while still driving me about, and discoursed marvelously on local matters all the while. Efficiency is an unfriendly virtue, and no one I met in Ireland seemed afflicted with it.

Stone walls occupied us for the first stretch. They were first of all, said my driver, the easiest way to unstone a field, and the more stony the field the thicker the wall. There are supposed to be places where the walls are ten feet thick for this reason, and there was a field I saw where boulders too big to build with filled almost a quarter of the cleared field. I was becoming a connoisseur of stone walls: the low Cork walls in which verdure had almost overtaken the stone; the neat solid walls of places where the rock came in flat-tish shapes; the particularly charming walls in which the stacks of horizontal stones were crowned with a row of uprights that always recalled rows of books on a bookshelf; and the ungainly walls in places where the stone came in irregular shapes, walls as loose as lace, full of holes the light and wind came through. My driver told me that a lot of the walls had been built in Famine times, because the English didn’t believe in giving something for nothing, and a lot of them were intentionally useless. He pointed out the lines of walls running straight up the rocky ridges of the Burren, walls in places too rough for large animals and too low to keep goats and sheep in, pointless walls built by starving people. He called the tracery of stonework evidence of torture.

Galway was full of evidence of history and music clubs, and I wandered through both. There were a lot of histories to choose from. There was a modern cathedral on an island, through which communicants wandered from the end of a mass, and tall priests in lace vestments strolled. There was a plaque to commemorate Christopher Columbus’s stay in Galway:

On these shores
in 1477
Christopher Columbus
found sure sign
of lands beyond the atlantic

said the sign on the stone pillar on one of the many waterfronts of this coastal town on a river. It had been defaced with a little anticolonialist rhetoric by someone who wasn’t so enthusiastic about the old world’s early enterprises in the new world. Nora Barnacle Joyce’s childhood home was open to the public on a little side street, and when I wandered in I was happy to find that her husband had played tourist too, long before he became a tourist industry himself. He apparently subscribed to the idea that one can understand history and personality through the tangible space in which events unfolded. There was a letter of his framed on the wall,

26.VIII.09

My dear little runaway Nora

I am writing this to you sitting at the kitchen table in your mother’s house!!! She sang for me “The Lass of Augrim” [the song the dying lover sings in “The Dead”] but she does not like to sing the last verses in which the lovers exchange their tokens. I shall stay in Galway overnight.

How strange life is, my own dear love! To think of my being here! I went round the house on Augustine Street where you lived with your grandmother and in the morning I am going to visit it pretending I want to buy it in order to see the room you slept in.

Nora Barnacle’s family’s house was a tiny box wedged between larger buildings, with one small room downstairs and another upstairs, no running water, no gas, and an open fireplace to cook on. In it she had lived with her parents, five sisters, and a brother until many of them were adult – though she had been farmed out sometimes to her grandmother and to a convent – and her mother, Mrs Annie Barnacle, had lived there until she died at the age of eighty-four in 1940. The Barnacle house was so small no one could have even sighed privately, and psychic as well as physical life must have been communal. (Ireland never did give me a very specific sense of ancestral identity, save for the reminder that those names on the genealogy were most often the names of poor people, the heirs to centuries of poverty, and the poverty in early Irish photographs, of furnitureless cabins and ragged, barefooted people, suggested what that poverty might mean. I remembered my own mother’s admonition that people who fantasized about the past always thought they’d be aristocrats, but the great majority of us were descended from peasants and were we to be magically transported back would be peasants at best.)

The woman who took admission gave her set piece about the history of the house and, when I asked if you could feel a person’s presence by being in the space they’d occupied, added that it was a very good place to write letters and that Stephen Joyce, the Joyces’ grandson, had come by a few times and

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approved of what they were doing. A sweetvoiced ordinary-looking woman in her fifties, she gathered steam from there and went into the most marvelous soliloquy, circular and lyrical, chaotic and enthusiastic, one that would undoubtedly have made Joyce himself happy. All I could recall from it were the phrases: When we get to the end of time, we will see everything is connected. We will see the thread that runs through everything. Because if you go back very very very far – if you look far back enough at a family tree and such – it's all connected.

13 The War between the Birds and Trees

I didn't realize I was headed for a convent until I was on my way there. I had met Kathleen at the Killarney conference when she had tried to interest a speaker in what was happening to her local forest. The man whose talk had been about the importance of forests wasn't interested, but I was, and so she took me off to tell me more, and when she found out I was a writer – a professional witness – she invited me to come and see for myself and stay in her community, which seemed to be the hub of the environmental activism she was talking about. She had a sense of great urgency about her local environmental crises, she was fluent in the jargon of environmental activism, and she was wearing white running shoes, jeans, and a pastel sweatshirt. In her late thirties, she had chestnut hair and an appealing face and an air of delicate yet vigorous youth.

Where I'm from, communities that care about environmental issues usually mean collective households of young radicals. But when I called up Kathleen, she told me that Sister Phyllis and Sister Agnes were in Galway City and would take me back to Portumna, and I realized how far away I was and that I was headed farther away: to a convent. Portumna is a town on the west bank of Lough Derg, the big lake the Shannon swells into as it divides County Galway from County Offaly. Anywhere else, it could be called sleepy and small, but by Irish standards Portumna seemed average, with a main street of shops, with schools, churches, and with a ruined priory and castle being restored as national heritage-cum-tourist attractions. The Portumna Sisters of Mercy had once run a residential school to teach young women the domestic arts of farmwives, but the days when domesticity required such art were largely over, and the four sisters lived in corners of the handsome stone school building that must have once held a hundred. All except Sister Noreen had lived in San Francisco – practically everyone in Ireland seems to have passed through the Bay Area – and two of them still taught school as they had there. To welcome me, they opened a bottle of elderberry wine a local had brought by and slipped hot water bottles into my bed in one of the abandoned student cubicles. The enormous differences between their beliefs and mine never came up; it's easy not to talk about sexual morality.

Kathleen, a former teacher of eight-year-olds, was being funded by the diocese to work as an environmental activist, and she had a fine tradition behind her. Early medieval Irish monks had once written nature poetry that