

# **Ireland and Me:** reflections by emigrants

THE IRISH TIMES



**IRISH TIMES BOOKS**

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## Introduction

Emigration has been the default option for Irish people in times of economic hardship for centuries, and when the most recent downturn hit, our response to it was almost predictable. Over the past six years, almost a quarter of a million Irish people have left the country in search of better opportunities abroad, making emigration once again a defining theme of our times.

Through the Generation Emigration series in *The Irish Times*, we have shared the stories of hundreds of these recent emigrants, whether they have gone for adventure, or involuntarily left loved ones and loved places behind. We've also published many submissions from people who left Ireland in decades past, and have made permanent homes abroad, because there is more than one "Generation Emigration".

Last November, we ran an "Ireland and Me" competition, inviting readers overseas to tell us about their relationship with the old country. We received more than 120 poignant, insightful and funny pieces, from all over the world.

The winning entry by Chris McClay, and runner up by Bridget Farmer – two very different tales of making a new life in another country - were published in print, while dozens more have appeared online.

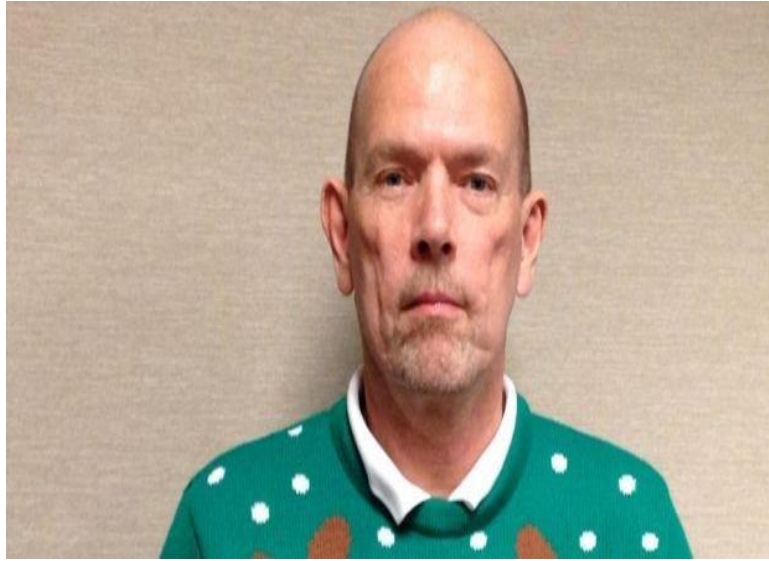
Reading all the submissions together in this eBook gives a complex overview of what it means to be Irish, what it means to be an emigrant, and what it means to love – and often resent – the country in which you were born but no longer live.

One writer had only lived abroad for two months, while another was gone 57 years. But for most who wrote in, no matter how long they've lived away, Ireland will forever be the place they consider "home", even if it's no longer their only one.

-Ciara Kenny



**‘I have always known that Texas isn’t home’**



*Christopher McClay, Texas*

Mine is probably not the typical emigrant story. I was born in St Patrick's home for mothers and babies, on Navan Road in Dublin, and lived there until shortly before my fourth birthday. It is enough to say that my single mother was unable to care for me and that she made a difficult and courageous decision.

Just before my fourth birthday I was adopted sight unseen – save for photographs – by an American couple in Texas. Two plane rides later I was in my new home.

Although I have no clear memories of my first four years in Ireland, my adopted parents raised me with the knowledge that I was adopted and that I was from Ireland. They also made it clear that both of these things were a blessing.

Growing up, I felt strongly drawn to Ireland – and I found myself missing Ireland. I would see pictures and feel almost homesick. I thought it was strange that I would miss a place that I didn't remember.

Carson McCullers wrote: “We are homesick most for the places we have never known.”

It seemed the older I got, the more I missed it.

Then, in my mid 40s, a surprising development: I discovered that I had family in Ireland, a brother and a sister.

When I finally returned, in 2011, it was for a visit, not to stay. I brought my grown son with me. I wanted him to see the land of my birth. The minute I stepped outside Dublin Airport I knew I was home. Those words don't convey what my heart felt, but that's the best I can do.

It was two wonderful weeks of meeting my brother and sister and nieces and nephews and cousins. I spent time in Dublin, Newbridge, Galway and the Aran Islands. I visited my birth mother's grave while I was there.

Before I left I discovered I had two more brothers and a sister I hadn't known about. I learned who my birth father was. I rode the rails through the Irish countryside and was captivated by her beauty. Every person I met in Ireland made me feel welcome. Her beauty and her people stole my heart.

I will continue to visit home when possible. For me Ireland is heaven on earth. In a perfect world I would be able to move my family, my friends and my job 4,500 miles across the Atlantic to Ireland. But this is not a perfect world.

I have spent a lifetime now in Texas – and it is a fantastic life that I have. I have a loving wife, three wonderful children, two beautiful grandchildren, wonderful friends and a great job. I have roots here in Texas. I have always felt at home here, but I have always known that here isn't home.

Home is Ireland.

**‘I live in Australia. I have just had a baby’**



*Bridget Farmer, Australia*

I live in Australia. I have just had a baby, a little Aussie baby, and thoughts of Ireland and all the things I can't show him constantly creep into my sleep-deprived mind. I'm not homesick for me; I'm homesick for him, because he will never know Ireland as home.

He'll not spend his summer holidays in soft sunlight and hazy rain on deserted Donegal beaches. Yes, we have beaches in Australia, some of the best in the world, but you don't feel you have discovered them yourself. The getting lost in flat limestone-spotted fields and rolling sand dunes for three-quarters of an hour, with only the taunting sounds of the elusive waves to guide you, is an essential part of Irish holidaying.

Thigh-level stabs from spiky dune grass, sightings of stripy beach snails and sheep poo sticking to the soles of your bare feet are all part of my nostalgic childhood memories.

I will bore him with my "in Ireland . . ." anecdotes. I already wear my husband's patience thin every time I despair at the Australian sun setting in just under half an hour, or how it's so unfestively hot at Christmas or how disappointing it is not to have the option of sweet popcorn at the cinema.

He'll grow up thinking a three-hour drive is just a short trip down the road instead of the span of the entire country with 100 accents and dialects along the way.

I never intended to marry an Australian. I certainly never thought that my child would have an Australian accent, and sometimes I even find it funny that my dog is Australian. I don't like the heat. I actually quite like cold, wet days. Bush-fire season terrifies me, and although I've yet to see a snake I can't help but think that every stick or hose pipe has just writhed in a very reptilian manner. What am I doing here?

The truth is that I am making a living here. A family here. A home here. I live in a wonderful country town filled with artists and alternative people.

In Australia everyone has roots from elsewhere. I no longer think about how my Northern Irish accent, with its foundation of English vowels left over from my first five years of infancy, sounds. I am now part of this multinational, multiracial, hot, snake-filled, salty-popcorn-eating country.

So instead of lamenting the loss of summer evening light that lingers in the sky until just before midnight, and having to tap my shoes out before I put them on, for fear of lurking spiders, I content myself with lullabies of *Raglan Road* for my baby and planning the trip home early next year to introduce my boy to his Irish family.

**‘I felt my Irishness was dissolving as the years passed’**



*Jennifer Dosch, Texas*

I left Ireland because of, and in spite of, love.

There was no grim necessity to provide for loved ones or a pursuit of faraway streets paved with gold. Rather, there was a wonderful man with whom I had pledged to spend the rest of my life. He was from Texas and we agreed we should live there for a while.

Any time I thought about leaving my (albeit battered and bruised) country and my family and friends in Dublin, the tears would flow endlessly. As my departure time approached, I felt like a spectator watching the life I had built be rented, sold, stored and dispersed for a new life in a place to which I didn't want to move.

The reasons we leave are varied and many, but the result is often the same. To go, whether forcibly or of your own volition, is a wrench. Adrift in a strange land, I immediately decided everything in Texas was wrong - the food, the climate, the television, the insects, the attitude to guns - all collectively appalling.

Fractured from all that was familiar and reassuring, instead of soaring, I felt like my wings were broken. And all the while, people wished me a good day, with all the sincerity of a pageant queen.

The tinted glasses with which I wistfully gazed at Ireland were more crimson than rose. I yearned for the soft, inoffensive weather. My mum's cooking. My dad's special sandwiches. Glasses of Guinness and blackcurrant by the crackle and smell of a real peat fire. The glorious vividness of a rapeseed field in May. Pointless nights spent laughing with dear friends. Fish and chips.

But, in time, each trip home brought an unperceivable shift in perspective. I slowly started to miss the neighbourliness of our Texan friends. Nobody said hello on the streets of Dublin. Instead, they averted their eyes.

Typical Irish idiosyncrasies, once natural, were starting to feel strange. While I knew that I would never belong to Texas, I felt like my Irishness was dissolving as the months and years passed. It upset me.

Whether we like it or not, we all crave a sense of belonging and a move across the globe can have a seismic impact on that. It's not so much about settling in a new home in a new country - well, it is, but it's also about settling into the new person that is created by that move.

You don't come from where you live and you don't live where you come from. Just as I start to worry about losing everything that makes me Irish, I hear that familiar accent and I know. These creative, gregarious, soulful, emotional lunatics - these are my people. I belong with them. We will return, of this I am sure. But in the meantime, what's so wrong about wishing someone a good day, even if I don't mean it?

**‘Tea is a wonderful reminder of home even if it is an awful cliché’**



*Niall McArdle, Ontario, Canada*

I have a stash of Barry's Tea recently brought to me from the old country. It's a special treat to sip it while looking at the snow falling outside. You can actually buy it in shops in Canada but getting it that way feels wrong. It's too easy; drinking it wouldn't have the same sense of occasion.

For years I'd actually almost forgotten how much I missed Barry's Tea until I heard it mentioned on, of all things, *Boardwalk Empire*. The tea is a wonderful reminder of home even if it is an awful cliché.

Then again, more than ten years gone I myself am an awful cliché: the Despondent Exile. I prick up my ears when I hear an Irish accent, and people I might not otherwise give a second glance have to suffer my persistent cloying attention as I press them for information about anything at all as long as it's to do with "home": where they're from back home; the weather back home; do they get to go back home often?

A few weeks ago I went to see an Irish show that was touring Canada - *Echoes of Erin* - put on by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. It was very good: there was ceol, caint agus craic, but let's be honest, if I was still living in Dublin it's the sort of thing I'd run a mile from.

During the intermission I sidled up to the tour manager just so I could hear his voice. He was from Drogheda. The musicians and dancers were from tiny villages I'd never heard of. When I told him I was from Dublin he said "so's our sound guy", and sure enough, I went looking for him.

I don't think of myself as an immigrant in Canada; I am an emigrant out of Ireland. I know that is a failure on my part. I stubbornly refuse to fit in and fully assimilate. Then again, how can I when people still struggle to pronounce my name? "Nails" could be an excellent moniker for a heavy from Love/Hate, but it just doesn't suit me.

I swore I would never become this dreadful version of myself that I have become; a stodgy middle-aged Dubliner adrift in the world, forever looking back. I have a growing addiction to stories in *Generation Emigration*. I have become the emigrant version of the old biddy who reads the death notices; instead of looking to see who died this week, I'm looking to see who left this week.

So yes, Ireland, especially Dublin, will always be where I'm from. The awful stink of Booterstown at low tide is the last thing I thought I would miss about the place, but it's the first thing I think about when I think about home.

And the Pigeon House, of course. I'd cut down a hundred crosses on Carrauntoohil, as long as I could keep those two hideous red and white striped chimneys. They are my emblems of home.



**‘Emigrating is a process of learning to accept what you have lost’**



*Bronwen Keyes-Bevan, Toronto*

You may be reading this because you are considering leaving Ireland. Perhaps you have had enough of the unemployment statistics, the rain, the mé feiners let loose in parliament.

Perhaps you've charted the trajectory you'd like your career to take and decided it's not going to happen in Ireland. Or perhaps you just looked around, observed the familiar nooks and crannies of your home and decided it is time for a change.

Eight years have passed since I left. I've wandered back and forth between the old and new world but I now call Toronto home. For me, to discuss Ireland is to discuss the neighbour's home-life having only caught glimpses over the garden fence.

Reading The Irish Times headlines and scanning status updates about water taxes does not qualify someone to comment on the cut and thrust of daily life in Ireland. And it is with that knowledge that I have come to accept I am from Ireland but it is no longer home.

When you leave Ireland there will be many things you prepare for: foreign workplace etiquette, colloquial differences, the practical need to sand off the corners of your accent. What nobody prepares themselves for is how the dynamics of your relationships with those at home shift. As months turn into years, the grammar of your daily life changes, you lose the shared language you had with close friends. You become acquaintances with the confidantes you left behind.

Emigrating is a process of learning to accept what you have lost: friendships as you knew them, the feeling of belonging. And it is a process of learning to embrace what you will gain. Yes, the job opportunities and the quality of life that you have heard so much about. But more than that, too. You will gain a deeper sense of belonging, safe in the knowledge that you have chosen your place in the world. You will recognise that you are just one of billions of world inhabitants who, at a fundamental level, are just like you.

Be under no illusion, emigrating will be one of the hardest things you ever do. And it is true what they say, that once you leave, you can never truly go home. You will not be the same person who left and you will wonder if there would even be a place for you if you were to return.

To dig oneself from home ground, re-house in a sunnier spot and burrow deep roots on the other side of earth is not for everyone. But those who go will blossom.

I'm not from Toronto but it is home.

**‘I don’t remember a time when I didn’t know I would leave’**



*Marc de Faoite, Malaysia*

I left Ireland two days after my graduation. It was 1989. I was 21. I have never lived in Ireland since and the gaps between my visits “home” have long since lengthened into years.

I don't miss Ireland. At least not all that much. I'll admit there are times when nostalgia gnaws my gut, but like the occasional bout of indigestion it passes.

I'll read the occasional article from The Irish Times to have some idea what my parents are talking about when we chat on Skype, but the news rarely affects my life directly. It's more like updates on some long running TV show that I've long since stopped watching.

Sometimes I shake my head in resignation at the shenanigans that go on, but no country is perfect, and despite everything Ireland is better than most when it comes to the silly things politicians do or say.

When I was a child, sex seemed like some kind of fiction - something I only read or heard about, without experiencing myself. Similarly nowadays Ireland holds a certain unreality for me. When I return to visit I am simultaneously reassured and vaguely surprised that the place still really exists.

Most of the time Ireland is no longer a place, but more a specific set of feelings or emotions, or a collection of imprecise images and memories in the cluttered cupboard of my mind.

Often it's the smells that come back, sometimes with surprising clarity: the acidity of ash trees and the nettles in a ditch, the frosty morning steaming sweetness of a big pile of manure, the metallic tang of rotting winter leaves in Stephen's Green, the smell of a muddy rain-filled pothole, the musty perfume of old women and wooden pews in the local church, an uncle's whiskey tainted breath, or the not unpleasant odour of stale beer and dirty ashtrays at opening time in the local pub.

Things change. When I step into a busy pub now I am surprised the fug of warm bodies is accompanied by the homely waft of cooking. Gone is the all-embracing pall of cigarette smoke, the smell of rain-wet woollen clothes.

In Ireland I'm an outsider. It's not that things have changed, or that I am a different person now, though both these things are true. I was an outsider long before I ever left. I don't remember a time when I didn't know I would leave.

Perhaps if I had grown up in present-day Ireland I wouldn't have had the same desire to go. It's a much more tolerant and open-minded country than the one I left - the type of place I could almost live in, if it wasn't for the weather.

But I'm gone too long now to consider a return. My life is elsewhere and has been my entire adult life. Whether in Ireland or abroad I am an outsider looking in. But I know, no matter where I am, that I will always still be Irish.

**‘Home for me is a mindset, and I've found mine in London’**



*Catherine Kavanagh, London*

I've always harboured an ambivalent relationship towards England. By dint of my father's job I was born in Oxford in the early 70s, and was promptly evacuated Home, I suspect to avoid indoctrination. I use Home as a proper noun as the lexicon used by Irish emigrants everywhere.

Growing up in Ireland in the late 1970s and '80s meant nurturing a pantomime hostility towards our nearest neighbours. This surfaced rabidly during springtime, when the Irish were regularly bullied around Lansdowne Road or Twickenham by the men in white shirts, but melted away when much-loved family members appeared for rare holidays to Dublin with their Melton Mowbray accents, my Terenure-bred uncle and his royalist proud English wife.

But that Irish ambivalence towards all things English began to trouble me as I grew older and developed a strong English circle of friends. My career in finance made me realise the positives of having a huge cultural and economic superpower next door. I couldn't reconcile the grudge.

A two year stint in Australia during the Celtic Tiger had given me an appetite for life away from Home. I had returned to an Ireland I didn't recognise, with a resurgent rugby team, a dynamic economy and an increasing frenzy amongst my peer group towards life goals like property ownership and marriage. Try as I might, I couldn't identify with this race to the top of the South Dublin cul de sac or the Montessori waiting list.

Eventually in 2010 after a lot less soul searching than anyone would believe, I took a decision to move away from the sinking morass that was then Home, and seek a future elsewhere.

London has been my new Home since 31st January 2011. I have truly found my place. Home for me is a mindset. I cherish my Irish heritage, my culture and my value system. Unusually for a Londoner, I go to funerals and look colleagues in the eye when they return to work white-faced and silent following family bereavements.

I host regular dinner parties while many Londoners socialise in restaurants or bars. That's brought its own benefits. People comment on my Irish paintings, my obsession with Lyon's Tea. "No PG Tips in this house!"

I volunteer with charities and ensure I nurture my close friendships with a deeply-cherished set of other Londoners. We refer to ourselves as the "urban family".

I adore the rush and the single-minded deadly ambition of this city. I think it speaks to the innate Irish value system of hard work and adapting to the unfamiliar. We've had enough practice at that over the past 800 years thanks to the erstwhile habits of said superpower.

The traditional Dublin greeting "How are ya" rather than "hello" always elicits a quizzical "I'm fine thank you", which invariably makes me laugh. That has lightened the mood on more than one occasion.

Home for me is resolutely Irish of spirit, but I'm proud to be a Londoner.

**‘Returning to live in Ireland after 30 years, I was hatched’**



*John K White, returned from Toronto*

Growing up in Toronto was the best of many worlds, but never one I called home. Home was where I was born in Dublin, Ireland, at the Hatch Street Nursing Home, half a block from John Millington Synge's birthplace.

Upon my return to Ireland to live thirty years later though, I prefer to say I was hatched. It's more poetic and to me Ireland was always home to the poetic - a land whose "history began before the angelic clan."

I chose Baltimore, West Cork, a sloping seaside town. My father was a Cork man and had spent summers on nearby Sherkin Island and had stirred me by its beauty. In West Cork, I would finally assume my birthright.

The beauty of the landscape was evident. Mount Gabriel reached across the harbour, holding Baltimore in an almost embryonic embrace. Homes dotted the hillside, peeking through the gorse as sails tingled in the fresh coastal breeze.

Ireland was not entirely new. There were my parents' stories of a young republic. I had visited for a summer as a seven year-old and as a university graduate doing the Europe thing, but then the distinction was between two of Ireland's most hallowed stouts.

The locals welcomed me and, in the same breath, asked where I was from, but perhaps that had more to do with small towns. Baltimore's downtown was one road, a dead-end at that. I could hardly compare Baltimore to Toronto.

When I opened my mouth, they asked if I was American. Of my Irish beginnings, they were amused and said a different Ireland existed here than in Dublin. I exchanged stories with the locals. One told me the elusive "whole" of Ireland was in fact a hole in the rocks behind the Beacon, Baltimore's postcard attraction beckoning tourists like birds.

I listened to the deep-sea divers, who dove for steel inside the wreck of a nearby ship. They told me of the sea and friends who had died. One diver told me the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel could well be the light of an oncoming train.

I read *The Sack of Baltimore* by Thomas Davis, immortalizing the day in 1631 when Algerian invaders carted off over a hundred Irish as slaves. Anything to stake my claim. But would they ever stop calling me "the Canadian" I wondered?

I tried some of my own Irish lore. If my stories brought any laughter, they did as much for their Irishness as they did for my attempts at being Irish. I wasn't doing well.

Was I presumptuous about my Irish beginnings? Perhaps, Ireland doesn't give easily of itself because much has been taken - by colonial administrations, famine, the Troubles, the unemployed young like my parents, leaving annually by the thousands to seek work elsewhere.

To be sure, a country today must preserve its culture. Tradition and heritage are its life-blood, but there is no poetry in a country whose young must leave, hatched or otherwise.



**‘To have a house with land would be impossible in Ireland’**



*Ian Pettersson, Estonia*

I left Ireland in 2010. It was on a bit of a whim really. I had been working for a large company that eventually closed its Dublin office, making all the staff redundant. Looking back now, the redundancy was the best thing that happened - some time off to think and some money to make a go at a fresh start.

I had been to Estonia, my wife's homeland, on many occasions but never really thought it would be a good idea to live there. The wages are a fraction compared to what I would earn in Ireland. The weather is cold. The people are cold!

It was my suggestion to go. "Just for a year," I said. We packed the car full and took the ferry. I was very nervous.

In those first few days I had the most vivid dreams, about driving across the Wicklow mountains on a sunny day, or being together with my family at Christmas. Dreams that really made me question what I was doing.

We arrived in November. It was snowing and cold. But it was different and exciting. Within the first week I was offered two jobs. I had done a TEFL before I left, which I soon found out was a very wise move.

It's been four years now in Estonia, and I love it here. Of course I miss Ireland, especially the people, the friendliness, the craic. But really, I have no real longing to go back home. The weather really is cold here. But it's so cold it doesn't rain. It could be -20 outside, but the sky is blue, the ground is white, the air is fresh and it's dry.

The people are cold, but only at first glance. Take some time to get to know them and they are very warm. And they're straight. If they don't like you or have a problem with you, they'll tell you straight out. There's a lot to say for that.

I live in a house that my wife inherited. It's old and needs renovation, but as a teacher I have my summers free to work on that. We have lots of land. We grow our own fruit and veg. To have a house with land like this would be almost impossible in Ireland.

I am very proud of my Irish roots. I tell my kids the same stories I learnt in school about Brian Boru and Finn MacCool. I think that's very important. I would like to teach them Irish, but unfortunately I can't speak it myself.

I even bring some Irishness to my classroom here. In fact, there's a certain town in Estonia where you can ask most of the 16- to 19-year-olds "What's the craic?" and they'll know exactly what you're talking about.

**‘I have been writing in pen and ink on paper to home’**



*Sarah Griffin, San Francisco*

It is winter again in California. The third winter I've been here - the first I've not gone home to visit Dublin. The drought that sat in dry, yellow afternoons all year is breaking a little - it has been raining heavy this week in San Francisco. The sound of it is the same as it would be on the windshield on my father's car or on the living room window of the house I grew up in. I have been spending a lot of time listening to this.

The digital landscape of Facebook and Twitter was once very comforting to me. My mother's name in a flashing blue box in the corner of the screen asking how I am - Sunday morning Skypes, tuning into house parties via webcam and watching the blur of the people I love mill around, taking turns saying hello.

It was enough for the first year, the voices in text, the faces in pixels. It was almost enough for the second, but now that my roots have started to try and anchor themselves to American soil, this connection to home falls too short.

Ireland online is not right for me - it is a pantomime of us, of how things were, and how things are. The truth is impossible to capture in something as flat as the internet - and the less I have engaged, the further I have pulled my hands from the keyboard, the closer to home I have felt.

In the distance, instead of fading, Ireland towers. It is everyone I have ever known standing on each other's shoulders. Instead of disappearing or withering, it glows. In terms of landmass, the island could fit five times into the state of California, but rather than that making the country seem small, it feels intricate and ancient - a complicated, beautiful knot that I can never managed to figure out - or even hope to.

This winter I have been writing in pen and ink on paper to home. Cards, letters. Sending pieces of this world to that world, over the ocean. So much more tactile than the How R U Babes? of Facebook instant-messenger, so much more honest.

Here is the sound of the rain in pen, here is how I really am in the shape of my letters, here are things too big to type into a flashing box. Just between you and me, not you and me and Instagram. You cannot press 'like' on this, but you can keep it in your desk, or magnet it to your fridge. This is how I used to talk to my friends, even if distance and the ocean and three years has tried to change that.

I am sure my fresh letters are in a drawer in somebody's desk. I can see all of you still, despite the distance - you are a lighthouse, even if I am out across the sea. I will send pieces of my new life back to add to the tower. I will come home again soon. I am happy to have been split between places. I am sure, somewhere in Ireland it is raining.

**‘My first Christmas was rough. I had siblings nearby but I missed home’**



*Imelda Cummins, Virginia, US*

No matter the reasons for emigrating from Ireland, and there are many, every person will continue to feel the pull back to what was and the life that continues at home. I left Ireland in June 1987, eager to get away and spread my wings. I planned to spend the summer trying out my new country, the United States, and if I was missing the “old country” by summer’s end I might rethink the plan and return home.

Initially I welcomed the new experience. Trying to settle, I searched out the familiar, in Irish groups, classes, and a Catholic church. I wanted anything that would remind me of home. The courage found in the familiar gave me the freedom to wander beyond the safe Irish circle.

It seems strange to look back now and see the person I was then, and ponder the changes that have taken place, consciously and unconsciously over the past 20-plus years. I feel a profound empathy for my younger self, torn between the old and the new.

My first Christmas was rough. I had other siblings nearby but I missed home - home as in sitting at my mother’s kitchen table, with her standing at the cooker with an Irish breakfast well under way, asking “do you want another rasher”?

I get asked here “what’s a rasher”, and I have learned to call it “Irish bacon” instead. Food plays a huge role in the life of an emigrant. Irish import stores supply, especially during what Americans call “the holiday season” and the Irish call “Christmas”, all the “necessities” from home.

This time of year we all clamour to get our hands on a tin of Afternoon Tea biscuits, a bag of Tayto or, oh my God! Is that a bottle of club orange?

During my first year here I met my husband, moved to a rural part of the United States, had a child, and then the real business of being Irish in America began. How would I ever find a school for my child that echoed my own Irish experience? I found a school but of course it’s not the same.

That’s the emigrant mantra... I found an alternative, but really “it’s not the same”. I travelled many times across the Atlantic and over the years I noticed the grass seemed to get greener every time the plane landed in my homeland. Was I turning into an American? Was I a deserter? Turning my back on the Mother country?

But really, it’s not quite as drastic as that. I am simply an emigrant, pulled between the Irish and American parts of my life. Ireland has and always will have a hold on my heart strings; the simplest definition of what it is to be Irish and an emigrant.

**‘In praise of the things Ireland gives its emigrants’**



*Janet Kalinowski*

We are, for the most part, loved and missed and endlessly discussed and debated. If we are conscious only of what we are owed, we run the risk of forgetting all that we have gained growing up in Ireland.

The Irish emigrant community (and those left behind) are inevitably brought into sharper focus at Christmas and there has been much talk lately of homesickness, loss and depression; a sense that emigrants are the unwelcome guests being pushed out the door, having had their pockets picked as they go.

There is a general sense that Ireland has failed its emigrants, that we are the cast-off victims of a corrupt and uncaring government. There is little room in this narrative for what you might call the reluctantly reluctant emigrant; those who have made happy lives in other places can feel slightly more guilty and shamefaced at this time of the year.

But there are in truth many things that Ireland gives its emigrants that we should treasure and appreciate, besides the ubiquitous and oft-mentioned Barry's tea and Tayto's:

For so many of us, a fine education that leads to fulfilling work; a sustaining sense of humor that keeps our feet firmly on the ground no matter where that ground may be; a friendliness and compassion that is legendary; a history that makes us welcome in so many parts of the globe; the sense of values and loyalty that so many Irish have was fostered in our homes, among our families and friends and is a tribute to the ones left behind; and our ability to navigate a multicultural world with ease despite coming from a small island perched on the edge of the Atlantic.

While the happiness of one emigrant doesn't mitigate the sadness of another, joy is a verse of the emigrant song too often left unsung.

No matter if you go or stay there will be something lost and something gained. There is no such thing as an ideal world; there never has been nor likely ever will. It would be wonderful if anyone who wanted to could stay at home and find work but we live in an increasingly fractured world, where economic migration is becoming the norm.

And Ireland, for all its faults, isn't pushing us out with war and weapons; we are not shivering and dying beneath refugee plastic while the world tries to decide what to do with us. Mass homelessness and poverty is not an abiding characteristic of the Irish emigrant community today as it is for so many others.

We are, for the most part, loved and missed and endlessly discussed and debated. If we are conscious only of what we are owed, we run the risk of forgetting all that we have gained growing up in Ireland; that elusive thread of "Irishness" that ties us all together.

Ireland and the Irish made me, and tens of thousands like me. This Christmas, the season of giving, let's give a little credit where it's due.



**‘Returning home represents an admission of failure’**



*Niall Sreenan, London*

I have lived in London for four years, apart from a nine-month period of uncertainty in which I oscillated between this smoggy metropolis and my hometown, Cork. I was unemployed, playing in a (not unsuccessful) band, and drinking probably a little too much for my own good.

There was little else to do then, shuffling daily between the practice room (cans), pubs (pints), and my childhood bedroom (hangover), with no other responsibilities other than the odd job around the house. Although I had designs on “great things”, I was comfortably suspended in a state of prolonged adolescence.

Being offered a PhD in London removed any insecurity about where I should live, but brought with a new type of uncertainty. Now in the third year of my studies, teaching and working at the same time, I’m still no closer to knowing where I’ll settle, where I’ll work, or build my life. Ireland’s too depressed; London’s too expensive.

This is a particular sort of limbo. Returning home represents an admission of failure, an inability to make it in the Big Smoke despite all that fancy education. And yet staying away, you’re just another Paddy in London; a rootless denizen of “Irish” chain-pubs, bellowing out ‘The Aul Triangle’ at 3am as if you actually missed the place. As if you were imprisoned.

It is, perhaps, an unfairly bitter attitude to hold on to. After all, this is not the emigration of old, where starry-eyed girls and boys arrived with no more than a few shillings. Something of the naïve determination of this previous generation makes me both sentimental for the Irish spirit (whatever that is), and strengthens my own determination to stay.

It hits me hardest when, walking numbly through a supermarket in South East London, a whole shelf is given over to an Ireland that only exists in the emigrant imagination. TK Red Lemonade, Porter Cake, and powdered curry sauce sit uneasily beside the trappings of contemporary metropolitan living: elderflower cordial, gluten-free bread, and something called Sriracha, a Thai chilli sauce synonymous with fashionably-bearded foodies that serve burgers from vans, not because they have to, but because it’s cool.

I leave the supermarket only to encounter another bearded man, this time begging for spare change in the hybrid accent of Hibernia via Kilburn. He grasps a paper cup. Milky looking tea steams into his gnarled face. No doubt, some generous Londoner gave it to him earlier, but I can’t help think that, like me, he thinks the tea’s crap here anyway.

In the safety of my flat, I turn on RTÉ News to see families at airports crying, hugging, welcoming home those who left home for better things. And yet, how is it that these scenes are celebrated? As if our failure as a country is precisely what we wanted, a part of a larger narrative of beautiful Celtic melancholy. It reminds me, that for all my solipsistic uncertainty, I may never go back.

**‘I’m struck by the green every time I fly back to Ireland’**



*Margaret O'Donnell, San Diego, California. Photograph: David Sleator/The Irish Times*

It's been eleven years since I left. I did not intend to stay this long. The original plan was to leave after seven years, taking husband and cats with me, and move back to my apartment in Dublin.

Then, I became used to my life on a small island across the bay from San Diego. The weather is perfect here. Most days, I need no longer rush to the window to pull back the curtains to see if there's an aqua blue sky outside. It's usually there and, if not, it will be back shortly. No living under low, threatening, dark clouds for me. "Ah, but that's what makes Ireland so green" I'm told here.

Yet, I'm struck by that green every time I fly back to Ireland. On our approach into Dublin, once we have lurched our way through several layers of those dark, threatening clouds, there it is, in all of its verdant shades. It speaks to me as if my very blood were green.

I feel a childlike delight when I listen to the announcements (in Irish and in English), that I'm back in Dublin again. My spirit veritably jumps up and down, listening to people who speak like I do. It is through the people at home (and I still call it "home") that I again find my own identity. Strangers, family, good friends. All of them help me knit myself back together again.

The people in Southern California are, in the main, kind and well-meaning. Most of them rejoice in my Irishness and that still fills me with wonder. Being Irish here is like having that extra passport that lets you pass by the normal borders people have with strangers.

I sometimes get away with things because it is put down to my Irish "quirkiness". It is even said I am some people's favourite Irish person. That possibly would be because I'm the only Irish person they know. In some instances, my role as an "ambassador" makes me want to present the best me possible, so that we don't all get a bad name. I strive to be better in all kinds of ways which, of course, has to be a good thing.

But no matter how well received I am here, I feel like I'm getting into a comfortable suit of clothes when I go home. I never feel that in San Diego. I'm too watchful, alert to the very high sense of "political correctness" I find here sometimes. There's nothing wrong with being careful about others' feelings, but when you have to watch your Ps and Qs because someone might take umbrage against my saying the word "Christmas" for instance.

And sometimes I just don't care what I say. Not in a bad way, but I just have to let go of the constraints for a moment. There is also the dichotomy of what I hear and the behaviours I see that really confuse me sometimes. At home, everything tends to be more overt.

There's an ache in my heart when I think of family and friends that an annual two-week holiday never fills. Yet I know I have an incredibly good life here in so many ways and should feel thankful. I do feel thankful. I just want it all. The Irish and the American. I will have to just be content with what I have. And it is indeed a good life.

**‘In Nigeria I experience something unexpected every day’**



*Martin Kenny, Abuja, Nigeria*

Hearing about the seemingly endless stories of emigration from Ireland with people in search of a better life for themselves, I have begun to realise that my emigration experience is quite different than others. Firstly and despite spending six of the last seven years living and working in some pretty far flung places, I am still not sure I yet consider myself an emigrant.

Maybe this is because I have moved around quite a lot. I am now living in my fourth different country since I first left Ireland. Or maybe it's because still somewhere deep in my subconscious I still regard Ireland as home.

The second and perhaps more significant difference between my experience and that of most others is that I chose to leave Ireland of my own free will. Unlike many of my peers, I was not compelled to go in search of work or a better lifestyle for myself or family. Going abroad was something I had always intended to do, driven by not only a sense of adventure but also a passion for what I do.

Invariably when I go home, somebody will profess the thought to me "ah sure it's a terrible shame that so many of you young ones had to leave to find work". While I am unfortunately not so young any more, I am always obliged to agree the premise but all the while knowing that I would still have left regardless of the economic situation at home.

I thoroughly enjoy my "emigrant" experience. Living where I do and doing what I do, I get to see and experience something different, crazy and unexpected every day. I have seen things and been to places I could never have imagined. I get to spend time with some of the most amazing people in the world from whom I have learned so much about modesty, humility, generosity and strength against incredible adversity. I get to have my opinions, views and prejudices challenged on a daily basis.

I am in the lucky position to have a job that I enjoy - a job that seems to be turning into a career that I enjoy, currently with Action Against Hunger. I get to spend my down time relaxing beside tropical lakes and oceans or wandering around safari parks among wild animals of all descriptions or jostling my way through busy African markets.

Of course home is always missed; family, friends and the everyday Irishisms which you don't find anywhere else, such as my father's regular complaint that you can't get away with anything anymore and meaning it like it is a bad thing.

Ireland is still however, a major part of my life. GAA still forms a big part of my summer Sunday afternoons, The Irish Times is still the first website I check for news, RTE Radio One is still my most listened to radio station, there is always an Irish man running a bar somewhere and I still get the weekly run down of the weather and who has died locally from my mother.

I am sure there are still many more adventures ahead but someday maybe someday, I will turn up on my parent's doorstep with the words "Ma I'm home".

**‘London offered new cultures, new friends and new surroundings’**



*Olivia Brennan, London*

Unlike most of my generation in Ireland, I moved away less than a month after the Leaving Certificate results in 2010 completely of my own accord. In fact, I practically ran with glee through Dublin airport to the manic but epic city that is London.

My decision to study abroad had nothing to do with my degree choice or with money. I merely wanted to do things differently. Looking back now, I see a teenager with adventure at the forefront of her mind, maybe a little bit of arrogance too. London offered new cultures, new foods, new languages, new friends and completely new surroundings.

To me, Ireland seemed grey, slow and often backwards in mentality. In reality I was unaware that at the time that Ireland was not the place for me. I love my country, my family and friends but as a newfound adult about to enter the real world, it did not interest me one bit.

As time passes and I grow older, I realise how patriotic I have become since moving away. Four years in London and half-way through another in Belgium, I am so aware of the Irish idioms when I visit home. I laugh and think to myself “only in Ireland”, and I often wish these Irish slangs would flow so easily from my mouth.

I still experience a tingle of familiarity when I hear an Irish accent in a crowded pub in Brussels. I love seeing the reaction of my British and European friends to the Irish language and to GAA, even though neither of these things interested me when I lived at home.

The question of would I ever live in Ireland in the future has frequently occupied my mind lately. There are so many things I miss and love about home - the friendly people, the beautiful coast, the history, the banter and even sometimes my mam’s cooking.

But in reality I’ve spent all my adult life in other countries, and the idea of going home scares me. I often wonder if I would fit in now. But I realise that I am one of the lucky ones, I wasn’t forced to move away when Ireland spiraled into economic catastrophe, it was my choice.

I don’t think you can ever lose your ‘Irishness’ but rather it changes shape. Even if I never move home, I know Ireland will always be the place that made me who I am and who I will continue to be regardless of where I am.



**‘Even after 24 years away I still say I’m going “home” on visits’**



*Brian Meehan, Switzerland*

I couldn't wait to leave Ireland. I have distinct memories of gazing out the window in secondary school and dreaming of foreign climes. Didn't matter where it was, just not Ireland. So one Sunday morning in August 1990 I stepped off a bus in London's Victoria Coach station and headed off into the future.

I was never homesick. There were odd moments, when I would catch an accent on the tram in Melbourne, or phone home at Christmas. But basically I left and didn't look back.

The idea of returning was suggested by my parents in phone calls. My mum telling me how people with my qualifications were being sought, and how my brother had come home from the States and was doing great. But the Celtic Tiger didn't catch me. I was gone and that was that. I didn't go to Irish pubs, didn't really have any Irish friends or connections.

Fast forward 24 years: I am now living in Switzerland. I have been here since 2001, after spending five years each in London and Melbourne. My wife and children laugh at my accent when I speak German. I have dual nationality, as do my children. I am at home here, part of the community.

Being back in Europe has allowed me to reconnect with Ireland. I go home twice a year, more than that the last couple of years when my mum was sick. The kids love Irish bacon and chat with their cousins on iPhones. I see my family, love having a pint with my brother and bring back a backpack full of Barry's tea. For the Swiss, tea is something you drink if you are sick.

The frequent visits have also allowed me to reassess my own tangled relationship with Ireland. Even after 24 years, I still say that I am going "home" when we go to Ireland. When my children were born, it was suddenly important to me that they be registered as Irish citizens with the embassy in Berne. I had no idea where this feeling came from, and wondered if it was just silly sentimentality to a country I had left over 10 years before. I have come to recognise it is more than that.

The German word which fits is "Heimat", which implies not just a nationality, but also a deeper cultural and spiritual connection to one's home country. It is something I feel when I go to Donegal, where both my parents come from. The hills, the sea, the changing light when the clouds roll over Ardara. The grave yard, where I always go to see my grandparents graves and leave a flower. The old house, now renovated, which hold childhood memories of eating herring and turf fires in the range. The knowledge that generations of my family before me have walked these roads, seen this changing light. My children have now done this too. It is a connection, albeit intangible, to the generations before them.

Switzerland is home. But Ireland is "Heimat".

**‘Events at home made me feel separated and unconnected’**



*Tracie Delaney-Evans, Orlando, Florida*

It's nearly 25 years since I left the streets of Belfast. It was a cold December night and the memory of the view over the whole city as we drove over the top of the hills out towards the airport still seems so clear, like it was yesterday. I was almost 19.

I yearned to live somewhere without the daily toll of a political struggle with no end in sight. I feared that day would never come and as soon as an opportunity arose to leave, I grabbed at it.

I have lived in Europe, England, a tropical island just 20km wide in the Caribbean for 11 years, and now in Florida for the past nine.

The waves of homesickness have come and gone. In the early years it was worst when there was a baby niece or nephew's christening, or my dad's 60th birthday party, or my cousins' weddings. These events at home made me feel separated and unconnected, but yet I had chosen this expat life for myself.

It didn't mean I wasn't happy overlooking crystal blue Caribbean waters with swaying palm trees and white sand around my toes. The beach would remind me of family walks in Donegal with my cousins, all adorned in the Aran sweaters my mother had knit for us. We looked like a tribe.

We didn't have Facebook or iPhones in those early days abroad, and if we had, perhaps the pain of missing loved ones would not have been so bad. I mastered the art of long handwritten letters of tales of the Caribbean, of steel pan music and the strange new culture to which I was welcomed.

I received in return letters from home about the terrible weather, new babies, weddings, and the adventures of the neighbour's cat. All of these subjects brought me great laughs.

After the Caribbean we transferred to Florida. In June each year, we travel back with our two daughters to the "Motherland".

It is interesting to see them play in the castle grounds near my childhood home as I once did, roll down the same hills, like history repeating itself. They connect with my city and I feel pride in that. Most of all I am proud it's a better city since I grew up there.

Whilst it is hard to hold on to your heritage when you are no longer living in your birth place, I think I put more effort into doing so, because of that. My youngest daughter Irish dances and we celebrate St Patrick's Day with our American neighbours, who would be devastated if we didn't hold a gathering every year now.

The hardest time of the year for me is Thanksgiving, a time in America where families gather to be together. It's a time I feel most lost, most yearning for my own family back home. It doesn't get easier each year, especially as loved ones have passed and some are ill.

But in my heart it doesn't matter where I am, they know I am always with them, and they with me.

**‘I clung fiercely to my Irishness for decades after emigrating’**



*Patrick McKenna, Montreal, Canada*

For decades after I arrived in Canada in 1975, I clung fiercely to my Irish identity. I wasn't ready to relinquish something that cost me dearly in psychological and emotional terms as I came of age in Belfast in the early years of the Troubles.

Not only was I proud of my Irish identity, I was also smitten with Ireland's land- sky- and sea-scapes and her culture, music and stories. I never had much time for the North American Dream that was, and still is, way too materialistic for my tastes.

I was the classic homesick immigrant; I wrote and called home (pricey in those days, at \$10 for three minutes), sent the remittances, flew back as often as I could (on my Irish passport of course), collected cherished LPs (from that by now ancient era of vinyl) of the Dubliners, O'Riada Sa Gaiety, the Chieftains, Planxty, Boys of The Lough, and so on.

Believe it or not, this state of affairs continued for 34 years. Suddenly one summer - in 2009 to be precise - my homesickness just fell away from me.

It now seems, five years on, that losing my homesickness is as irreversible as it was sudden. I was dumbstruck by this change. It was as though some invisible hand had reached inside me and flicked an invisible switch to "off". I felt like a serpent that has just wriggled out of its old skin. I was at last, free.

This wonderful change wasn't that simple, however. When I shucked off my homesickness, my cherished Irish identity went with it. Bathwater and baby both went gurgling down my life's existential plug hole. Suddenly, I no longer felt Irish. Belfast, Northern Ireland, Ireland - each one was "just another place". They no longer possessed any emotional charge for me. We had gone our separate ways.

I suppose you may be saying, or thinking, "It must be great to be a Canadian now". Well, there's a problem with that, too. I don't feel any more Canadian than I ever did. When I thought this through I realised Canada is way too big - 9.2 million square kilometers - for me ever to get to know. How can you love somewhere (or someone) you don't know?

Even Quebec, at almost 1.2 million square kilometers, is too big to know. To my Quebecois friends and acquaintances, no matter how good my French is, I am an Anglophone or "Anglo" (which really means "English" - so ironic for someone with my pedigree.) They introduce me as "Notre petit Anglo" just as my protestant friends and acquaintances would introduce me in Belfast as, "our wee Fenian".

The place I can embrace is my little corner of Montreal, that, after 36 years, I know well enough to know I love. It is my "heart of heaven", it's where I belong, at least for now.

**‘I miss Ireland but the things I miss most are long gone’**



*Catherine Yigit, Turkey*

“Do you miss Ireland?” asked the teacher. And for a moment I was silent within the flow of gossip from the parents in the canteen around me.

“Well, em...”

I miss Ireland but the things I miss most are long gone. That’s not just because I left the country for good 13 years ago. Even if I was still living in Clontarf I’d miss these things:

Summer holidays down the country, which encompassed Schull or Louisburgh or Castlegregory or Creeslough and anywhere in between. The excitement of sitting in the car as my father packed the boot, cursing under his breath in his effort to fit in tennis rackets, suitcases, swimming gear, and books, looking completely befuddled when Mam would arrive out later with a box full of salt, pepper, jams and cornflakes. The long, long drive in the days before motorways followed by the shouts of “I can see the se-ee” when we finally came close. Exploring our new house, ours for two glorious or rain-soaked weeks and being somewhere new.

Jump a decade or so, and waking to the sound of church bells peeling out across the centre of Dublin. Heading to Bewley’s for a fry. Gorgeous rashers and sausages and black and white pudding, washed down with hot milky tea. Mouth-watering, the flavours breaking through the morning-after-the-night-before feeling. And what a night it would have been, sitting chatting in a quiet pub or squashed like sardines in a noisy one or dancing away in a since-renamed nightclub or even all three. I’m skipping the Christmas mornings, the family gatherings and the summer picnics.

I’ve left out listening to Morning Ireland for the daily tally of violence in the North, the sense of inertia that greeted every new idea, and the broadening scale of the pedophilia scandals. Things that hopefully are left in the past.

I miss the people who filled these moments, the sound of their voices, their laughter. Some are still there at home, the younger ones now parents with growing families; the older ones, changed in ways the migrant cannot fully know. Some are gone, scattered around the globe on their own adventures, my sister included. A few, precious few thankfully, are dead.

And what am I now? Am I a Turk? Well I have the pink ID card, the Turkish husband and two Turkish-born children. Am I Irish? Yes, but I am embedded in another culture, I live in another language.

I spent a good number of my early years feeling caught between here and there, critiquing one culture against the other. Religion different but attitudes similar, family equally important but tighter-knit here, beaches better there... the list went on. In the end, I learned to accept each as being unique, shaped by different influences, heading in different directions.

But explaining all this to a virtual stranger is difficult and tends to lead to glazed eyes and startled looks. So I answered, “Yes, I do miss Ireland.”



**‘Fifteen years after leaving Ireland, I don’t think I’ll ever be back to live’**



*Georgia Gaden Jones, Calgary, Canada*

I left Ireland in the spring of 1999, when the Celtic Tiger was in full voice, for “a year in Australia”. One thing led to another, and I wound up in Calgary, Alberta, where I now live with my husband and our two gorgeous daughters.

As a child and a young woman in Ireland, I was confused about my Irishness, or lack thereof. My parents were English, which sometimes made things complicated in ways that I did not at first understand. I wanted to belong.

Instead of having generations of family or history in particular place, I found national pride in media spectacles like the Eurovision and in the endeavours of the Irish football team. Cheering on Johnny Logan and Jack’s boys gave me that sense of belonging.

When I left for my Australian adventure I cried all the way onto the plane. I phoned my mum everyday for the first week, comforting myself with her voice and stories from home. Weeks, months, years, later, and I don’t think that I will ever return to live there, which is a difficult thing to write.

My visits home are more expensive and less frequent these days, but those visits are somehow really important: to stand on the beaches in Dublin and in Wexford and to put my hand in the water and breathe the sea air; to laugh with friends and family and to walk over fields and feel the soft ground underfoot; to sit at the table and eat white pudding with my breakfast.

Last time we were in Dublin I showed my husband where I spent all my money in the jukebox in Bruxelles, where I bought concert tickets at the Sound Cellar, and where I spent endless afternoons in Stephen’s Green. Our eldest daughter played with my friends’ children.

When we visit this summer we will take the girls on walks along the lanes around my mother’s house outside of New Ross; to JFK Arboretum; to play on Killiney Hill and to run around the obelisk, and through the woods playing hide and seek.

Ruby will see the children she does not remember meeting the last time but who I tell her about, and show her photographs of. Zelda will step foot on Irish soil for the first time.

Weather-permitting we will stand outside on a clear night and look up at the stars and breathe the air. I want them to have these experiences of Ireland.

These details are small personal moments of connection, and history, they are pieces of me.

These days, when I don’t sound as Irish as I used to, or my name doesn’t raise tricolours in people’s minds, it is the significance of these details that constitutes my Irish identity. When I stand on the pier in Dun Laoghaire and look out at the sea, that *feeling*, and my longing for it when I am away, is what it is to me to be Irish.

**‘Returning from California after 26 years: My Irish friends say  
‘Don’t do it’**



*Mark Czerwin, California*

I left my home in Clontarf in Dublin for Orange County, California in 1988, aged 22. I had an American girlfriend who I had met in Phoenix Arizona, during one of my summer trips to make money on a J1 while studying for my engineering degree at Trinity.

Back then, I was attracted to her liveliness and fun-loving nature. To me, Irish girls in the 80s seemed somewhat dull in comparison. The job market was not great then either, and that combined with the dreary weather and decaying Dublin city made me make the move.

I had no idea how hard it would be for the first few years to live away from family and friends in a strange environment, but I worked hard, made some friends, got married and had two kids.

Over the years I would always come back to Dublin at least once a year, but that just seemed to stir my homesickness for the dirty old town. It was always heart wrenching to hear about my friends getting together and having the craic. This only got worse with the advent of social media, when I started to see photos of what I was missing.

But I tried to put Ireland out of my mind and focus on my life here; the fantastic weather and outdoor lifestyle we have in Southern California, the low cost of everything, and the variety and selection of goods available made being away from home seem worthwhile.

Now, I have just turned 50 and I've been divorced for 15 years. The kids are grown and doing their own thing. I have a girlfriend here, a nice house with a view, a three-car garage, boat, motorcycle, Mustang convertible, SUV, surfboards, snowboards and more possessions than I could ever need. Yes, it's a good life, filled with sun and sea.

But... it's a dog eat dog society. The reason people come to the US, and especially the west coast, is because they are ambitious go-getters. This can sometimes make them selfish and not very outgoing. Striking up a conversation with someone at a bar, or even talking to your neighbours can be a challenge.

After all these years I have some friends who I see occasionally, but it's nothing like walking around to the local or going to a rugby game and meeting up with the lads. Orange County is an urban sprawl, there is no city centre where people gather. Instead there are shopping malls, and you have to drive everywhere. Getting around is difficult for older people, or even those who like the odd drink. Good luck finding a bar open past 10pm.

I think it's time for a change. I'm weighing up two options: move back to Dublin, back to the family home to look after my aging mammy and grow old with my good friends. I would work for half what I get paid here and pay twice the price for most things, and my Irish friends say "Don't do it". But I don't mind about these things anymore.

Plan B is to buy a yacht and cruise the world on a fixed income budget. I might do some online work part time, but for the most part I would sail from port to port, swimming, fishing and paddle boarding until I get too old to do it anymore and then I'll return to Dublin.

Either way I'm starting to wrap things up here, selling my toys on Craigslist and eBay and putting the house on the market. I've had a good run of it here in the OC, but as I've grown older my priorities have changed; I'm less materialistic and more enthusiastic about living in a culture where people know and care about each other.

Since I've left, I've changed, Ireland's changed and the OC has changed. Now I'm looking at things with a different perspective and what I'm looking at has also morphed. It's time to act on that realisation.

**‘Emigration has scattered everyone I know from home’**



*Sean Rooney, Syracuse, US*

Through an American friend who I had played basketball with at NUI Galway, I got put in contact with the owner of a bar in upstate New York. The rest as they say is history. David Hoyne, a Kilkenny native, offered me a job working in his pub Kitty Hoynes in a city called Syracuse, about four hours north of New York City.

About the size of Galway in population, the snowiest city in America has strong Irish connections. Before the steam engine crisscrossed the country, we settled here by the thousands in the early 1800s to help make the Erie Canal which stretched all the way from Buffalo to Albany.

Descendents of these canal builders and other Irish immigrants would come down to the pub every day of the week to have a drink, something to eat, or more importantly just for the chat. For them, talking with someone Irish was a way of connecting to home.

Ironically enough it was a way for me to keep a foot in the auld sod as well. On a daily basis I would find myself in conversation with people with direct or indirect Irish connections, people who claim Irish ancestry, people that think they might be Irish through a mathematical equation and people that expressed even the vaguest interest in someday visiting the country.

The pub was such a safety blanket that I would often forget that I was thousands of miles away from home until a slip of the tongue using a turn of phrase or a different adjective or noun and I would quickly come back to reality looking at a puzzled American face in front of me.

Wanting to show people a different side to our culture other than the social one, I restarted the Gaelic football team here in 2009. There has been a team in the city on and off since the 1920s, playing in a division with Buffalo, Rochester and Albany.

The fact that I hadn't kicked a Gaelic football since I was 13 didn't deter me. Initially composed of a few Irish lads, a guy from Bristol, an Australian, a Canadian and Americans, the team has had its ups and downs like any club. Most of the downs are caused by the same economic factors that forced many to leave home. But the club still helps settle myself and the other Paddies around the city.

Because of work I only make it home every year or two, which I know is a lot more than some people can manage because of their immigration status. Sometimes I think things might be the same at home as they were when I was in college, that I am missing a mad session, that unreal craic was had at one of the lads' houses last weekend... but in reality, migration and emigration has scattered everyone I know to all the corners of Ireland, and the globe.

**‘What I miss most about living in Ireland are the little things I once took for granted’**



*Philip Lynch, Tasmania*



What I miss most about living in Ireland are the little things I once took for granted.

By this I mean the ordinary everyday stuff. Like the landscape where I grew up in unremarkable rural Westmeath. Long summer evenings that stretched into the night. Soda bread. I miss the stillness of the bog on a midsummer's day when we were tending turf. And, of course I miss Christmas in winter.

And then there's the small matter of the remnants of the family I've left behind. There are cousins I no longer know and funerals of so many aunts and uncles I can't attend. But beyond all, that I have to concede I'm happy enough here in Australia.

What I don't miss is the economic nihilism I felt before I left back in the early 1980s. And I'm frankly grateful now that I'm well away from aftermath of the bailout and the massive debt that continues to loom large over the Irish economy. But what I do miss is the humour and the dry ironic wit that pervades so much of everyday Irish life.

I've spent the last 30 years getting used to living in this massive continent that is Australia. It's been a journey of subtle adjustments. I've driven the length and breadth of this mighty country and yet I've barely scratched its surface. And 30 years on, I'm still adjusting, still trying to make a go of it here. Sometimes I think we migrants have to try harder to succeed because we don't have much to fall back on.

Australia, warts and all is home. Deep down I don't think I've ever seriously entertained the idea of going back to live in Ireland. I'm more able to openly admit this now that my parents are no longer alive. Having made a go of things here I feel as if I owe some sort of favour to Australia and I'm not about to up stakes any time soon.

My old life in Ireland came to an abrupt stop the day I left. All of a sudden I had no need for my driver's license, my motorbike and my bank account – or my wellies. All I really needed to leave was a resolve to go and start afresh half a world away.

So much has happened since I left Ireland. The crazy era of the Celtic Tiger has come and gone. The Good Friday Agreement has held. And of course the phenomenon of emigration and the notion of an Irish diaspora have entered the everyday lexicon.

It still feels a little unreal to be moving through my middle-age in Australia. It's as if part of me isn't really here at all. I'm still Irish, or at least part of me still is. But every morning I wake up to a brand new day in Australia and the longer I'm away, the more right it feels here, Down Under.

**‘Slowly it dawns that you no longer fit in in Ireland, after 18 years gone’**



*Ann Murphy, Germany*

I laughed hysterically the first time somebody called me Frau Murphy, but that is who I have become. To be an emigrant is to be an enigma, shrouded in mystery and, in my case, wrapped in a conundrum of shamrocks and sauerkraut. Emigration changes every ounce of your being, over and over again.

At first, the changes are subtle. You start off with the small things, the accent is toned down and you stop saying things like "I amn't". You buy a Jack Wolfskin anorak as if rain is something to be feared. You take off your shoes when you go to somebody's house and you patiently wait for the green man before crossing, even if its 2am and the roads are deserted.

Then it becomes more deep rooted, ingrained. You are thrilled when all the years of practice pays off and a stranger asking for directions mistakes you for a good Fräulein, albeit a pale, freckled one.

Your German friends see through you - you are not efficient, organised or punctual! You are the funny Ausländer who always forgets the rules, but are great, how you say, craic?

Secretly you find yourself starting to miss the rain, the ham sandwiches, the Club Orange and everything you once loftily declared provincial. The rules and regulations are driving you mad. And they talk on the phone about flooding, factories closing, water charges... and it all sounds blissful.

You re-programme your brain mid-flight. Now you are determined to be the same as BEFORE. You ramp up the accent in case anyone thinks you've gotten notions.

You are outraged that Barry's has been replaced with the Aldi brand at home. You make scathing remarks about the country that has given you free university education, health insurance, employment, your best friend.

But slowly, very slowly, it dawns on you that you no longer quite fit in here. How could you? It's been 18 years since you boarded that plane in Shannon, things have changed. You remember the life you have temporarily left behind you in the Land of Lederhosen and begrudgingly realise you miss it a little.

You cry at Dublin Airport every single time. But it's only because you'll miss Mam you tell yourself. You are lucky, you repeat silently, and perk up a bit; but then you are greeted in German at Passport Control. You have a Derek Zoolander moment in Baggage Claim and feel desperately alone. Not because you are in Germany. But because you realise that you are a little lost.

What are you? Gerish? Ireman? The doomed emigrant of yore, a stranger at home and abroad. You are predictably melancholic that evening as you enjoy the last bag of Tayto's while watching your favourite German soap. The irony is lost on you.

This indulgent, self-absorbed navel gazing is short lived, thankfully. A good night's sleep and you are back to yourself: Irish one minute, German the next. You are genuinely grateful to have both worlds. Perspective is a wonderful thing.

**‘My dad passed away this year. My home is where he lies’**



*Feargal Roche, Havertown, PA*

I left Ballymun on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1989 on a one way ticket to New York. If I had a return ticket I would have utilised it after 20 minutes in JFK.

My ultimate destination was Havertown, a suburb of Philadelphia where I would join my sister who emigrated five years earlier. I was 28 years old. I lived with her, got work as a landscaper, and very quickly settled into a life of work and drink.

While I met a very nice bunch of young Irish folk, most of whom remain my very good friends today, I did not settle well. I missed my family and friends, and my GAA club Ballymun Kickhams too.

Some much needed organisation was put on my new life when I met Lynn, my wife now of 20 years. We have a beautiful 15-year-old daughter. I now have a successful career in healthcare, and get back to Ballymun regularly enough.

I have done everything I can to make Havertown my home but to this day it is still only where I live. I tried coaching a GAA team here and while we had moderate success I was never 100 per cent committed to it; my first and only love was and still is Ballymun Kickhams.

In the early 1990s while coaching here, my mind would always drift back to Kickhams because of the struggles they were having with the juvenile section at the time. I often felt like dropping everything and going back to help. Thankfully they managed without me, and today the club is thriving again.

I'm not quite sure if the internet made me insane or preserved my sanity. I read the Irish papers every day and have RTÉ Radio on in the office and car. Knowing what I know about the happenings in Dublin I appreciate my very nice house that I don't have to lock at night, great schools, every amenity a man could need within walking distance and the best of friends any man could ask for.

And yet I still long for a life back in Ireland. I think the answer to my question is, the internet has made me insane.

My dad passed away earlier this year. I was there when he died but only got to see him for about an hour before the pain killers kicked in and he closed his eyes for the last time. I told him I loved him, never told him that when he was alive and kicking. I hope he knew it.

I will be home again in a few days and will tell him again. My home is where he lies, where my mam and my brothers live and where Kickhams play. Havertown is where I live with my beautiful family that I love very much.

I can't explain it but it's the way it is.

**‘Emigration has been a theme in my family for generations’**



*Caroline Duffy, Lanzarote*

Despite having spent the last decade in Lanzarote, I know, in my heart, I still *live* in Ireland. It's a strange feeling to have, after so many years away from home but in quiet moments, when I am alone with my thoughts, I always find myself drifting back, to walk the streets of Dublin in my mind.

Emigration has been a theme in my family for generations. My parents lived in England for many years, deciding to move home to Ireland when I was three. My grandfather spent most of his life in America and my aunt, uncle and cousins moved out there too when I was just a child.

So there was always the excitement of letters with interesting stamps from far off places and the sound of the distance in telephone calls, as we waited for our words to travel across the earth, in a time before satellite communication.

Nowadays, between my two brothers, my sister and I, there are three of us living abroad. Luckily Skype has revolutionised what it means to stay in touch. I can sit at the kitchen table, back in Dublin, every day with Mum and Dad and catch up on what's going on or have a late night cupán tae with my sister in Sydney.

As wonderful as this may be though, nothing can take away the heavy hearted feeling of the long walk between the entrance of Dublin Airport and the farewell area at the departure gates on the day you have to leave. My family has cried more times than I care to remember at those gates, and every time I see my father make his way back through the crowds towards the exit, wiping his eyes as he goes, my heart breaks just a little bit more.

I am lucky to have always had work in Lanzarote, to have made wonderful friends. I live in a tiny rural village, and feel lucky to have had the opportunity to experience authentic Lanzarote life. But for me, nothing in the world can beat boarding a plane, the thought of Dublin waiting just three and a half hours away dancing in my head.

You see, there's something about the first sight of Poolbeg and the city waiting patiently in the distance which makes my stomach do somersaults of excitement. Going home to the house I grew up in, the familiar feel of the streets, the smell of hops and rain, the cosy coffee shops with friends, the tall handsome trees and the greenness of everything are things which never fail to delight me.

It's undeniable that living abroad and travelling opens your mind and broadens your horizons, but as Joyce once said, "You think you're escaping and run into yourself. The longest way round is the shortest way home."

**‘Last November I lost my mother to cancer’**



*Natasha Browne, London*



Departing Ireland just over six years ago, I never imagined I'd still be gone. It's only London, I know, but that marks a huge gap with home. A gap only those who have had to do the journey can truly appreciate.

Returning to Wicklow every three to four months may be better than an annual visit from Toronto, but that's little consolation when your daily routine revolves around a city you had never really set your sights on. London was a temporary solution to a looming problem in September 2008; the crash that kept on giving.

This city has been fantastic for building a career, I could never deny that, but those years don't seem to translate into Irish opportunities. Six counts of 12 months and still unemployable in Ireland. This may be proof the "recovery" is mere myth. I have finally resigned myself to the idea that I will have to take a major career detour to come back home.

And I'm prepared for that. After months of trying to return to be with family, and failing, I have learnt my lesson. Lured by an attractive opportunity in London, I almost fell into the trap of staying; of believing a career was the only way to build esteem. But esteem is not a job title; it's an illusion. A perception that one person is worth more than another; that humans sit along a spectrum of value.

On November 18<sup>th</sup> last I lost my mother to cancer. She was diagnosed at stage four of the disease in less than a month from her passing. Yes, she had been ill for longer. But there was hope, belief, and even certainty, that she had at least a few years left ahead of her. Blessed as I was to spend the last couple of days with her, I will never reconcile myself with the fact I spent six years apart from her. We had holidays and weekends and visits, and she was always my best friend, but emigration put a sea between our souls.

The real tragedy of emigration is not loss of national identity or the comforts of home. It's the loss of those most dear to us, and accepting this too late.

**‘After nearly 40 years in the US I’m more Irish than ever’**



*Jerry Barnes, Sacramento, California.*

When I arrived in the United States in 1977 I had little time to think of my Irishness, one way or the other. I was too busy adjusting to a new life, finding a job and surviving. I must admit I was also younger, so much of my energy was spent in just having a good time.

But I soon entered the mainstream, meeting my partner, going back to school, developing a career, buying a home and becoming a US citizen. Throughout this time, my only tentative connection with Ireland was the odd bundle of Irish newspapers I would get once or twice a year in the post. During the height of the Troubles, the BBC was our only source of news. We were totally ignored by RTÉ, it's only sop to us being the odd GAA shortwave broadcast.

Then the internet arrived. I remember the first time I accessed The Irish Times online – what a revelation! Hardly a day has gone by since where I haven't read the paper online. Then RTÉ became available, which was ironic really, as growing up in West Cork we could barely hear *Radio Éireann*, the signal was so weak. Now my friends in Ireland think I know more about what's going on than they do.

But it's more than just being connected with what's going on. I've always loved my *cupla focal*. *Tà mo chuid Gaeilge ana lag anois ach is maith liom go mór mór esiteacht le RNG agus TG4, an ceoil agus caint.*

I am especially interested in the arts and am in awe that our small island continues to produce a seemingly endless stream of remarkable talent, especially in literature. And when the Irish 'excel on the golf course or the rugby field, how can that not put a spring in your step?

The internet has truly liberated us by allowing us to stay connected with Ireland while still participating fully in our adopted land. As well as access to Irish media, it also allows us access to distance learning such as the wonderful courses offered by Trinity College through FutureLearn.

Divorce, abortion, gay rights, the boom, the bust, water charges – I've followed it all like an eager fan sitting on the sidelines always wondering if we, the silenced Irish, will ever have a voice in Irish affairs by getting the right to vote.

Don't get me wrong, I am also totally involved in my adopted country and I participate fully in my community. I love the US for all the opportunities it has given me. But I am Irish to the core until the day I die.

**‘I don’t consider myself an emigrant. I had a choice’**



*Eimear Kelly, Canada*

The rain here is not wet, you should go to Ireland. The rain there is wet rain. It's real rain. That's why everything is so green.

I'll often find myself saying this to a Canadian at the bus stop or walking to lunch with my colleagues. As they struggle to put their umbrellas up, I reminisce about my old life on film sets, working on hill-tops looking over the Atlantic, wind howling around me, waves crashing below, sheep roaming around the cliff edge and dreaming of adventures beyond.

It's a romantic vision. Standing in that rugged landscape I looked out on the ocean knowing another land and life was beckoning. It's not a new dream. It's a dream that is as current today as it was hundreds of years ago, a common theme throughout Irish history. I don't consider myself an immigrant or an emigrant. I had a choice. I didn't leave out of necessity. I just had a desire to explore, discover, push myself and find out if I could go out into the world and make it alone.

The stories of Irish travellers before me had inspired me. So many Irish people went out into the world. They became outlaws and presidents and ordinary people building new communities. Irish people travel; it's what we do. It's hard not to seek adventure growing up on an island with a coastline that was a gateway to some of the greatest voyages of discovery in history. In Vancouver I live my seven-year-old-self's dream. I work on animated Barbie movies during the week and sail the gulf islands at the weekend. I embrace Canadian culture. I drink craft beer watching hockey wearing yoga pants eating poutine. I live for statutory holidays so I can pack up my all-wheel drive and either go skiing or camping depending on the season.

It hasn't always been easy. I have faced many life challenges and struggles setting up a life away from family and friends. Even though Alice was in Wonderland and Dorothy was in Oz they still thought of home. I love the life I have built here but I think of home and the memories I made there often.

When Seamus Heaney passed away, I had my whole office read Midterm Break and explained to them his contribution to Irish history and culture. I will often email the national anthem to a colleague to prove Irish is an actual language. My friends laugh at my attempts to pronounce my th's.

I'm currently purchasing a sailboat that I will fittingly call Grace O'Malley. Maybe I will sail home on the boat, or maybe I will bring my stories of Ireland to a new land. There is a great comfort in knowing that Ireland will always come with me even if I never step foot on her soil again.

**‘Sometimes you have to journey far away to realise where you are really from’**



*Jonathan Drennan, Sydney*

When you come from Northern Ireland, identity issues abroad are common. I grew up on the island of Ireland, but where I grew up was indelibly culturally British. Belfast is not a big city on the world scale, but separated by a few short miles you have completely differing cultural spheres.

On my street, cricket and touch rugby were played every night throughout the summer. A stone's throw across the city, children in West Belfast pucked a sliotar about dreaming of lining out at Croke Park.

We tuned into CBBC, they watched *Dustin on the Den* on RTE. We sang *God Save the Queen* at school prize days, they rose for *Amhrán na bhFiann* at Antrim Gaelic football games. We lived in opposing bubbles on the same island, largely ignorant of each other.

I left Belfast when I was 18, to go to Trinity and Dublin. Before this, I would have considered myself solely British, because this was all I knew. My grandmother was from Dublin, and we made regular trips there as children, but those visits were fleeting and besides she had an English accent from her schooldays. Irish culture was foreign to me, simply because I had never experienced it on any deep level.

When I started at Trinity, I was able to make friends from all over Northern Ireland, from the Bogside in Derry and Andersontown. It was obvious with all of these friendships that they never would have happened if we had stayed together in Belfast.

The bigotry and segregation was never obvious or stated in my experience at home, we were simply raised in parallel worlds that rarely had reason to touch. It would have been difficult to relate. It took the equalising experience of being new in Dublin and university to find common ground beyond our childhood experiences.

I found myself on a conveyor belt of sorts, from university in Dublin onto a graduate scheme in London. I immediately felt at home in London. Culturally, after all, it was what I had grown up with.

But for the first time, I understood on a very slim level the ignorance that Irish people have had to field abroad. I had always considered this a problem for others. Jokes were made at work about bombings and terrorism, never realising in their innocence that everyone in Northern Ireland is affected by a killing in the Troubles on some level. In many ways, I had to go to London, to find and accept that Ireland and being Irish was part of my life, regardless of how I had grown up.

I sit alone in Sydney in my office skyscraper now years later. The sky is blue and I feel heat through the window. There will always be a part of me that is from Belfast. I adore the city and its people. I haven't lived there for nearly ten years, but it is still my home. I was brought up surrounded in a British sphere, but now love to visit every side of the city, comfortable in my ability to do so having made those connections in Dublin.

I can't hide from my British background, nor do I want to. But equally, I can now comfortably embrace my Irishness. Being abroad, I am comfortable with being Northern Irish. To me, it captures my hybrid identity perfectly; raised on the beautiful island of Ireland in a British context. It is maybe not the way I would have chosen it, but it is now what I can relate to best.

Sometimes you have to journey far away to realise where you are really from.



**‘At first I thought I had to stop being Irish to make it in New Zealand’**



*Noelle Mc Carthy, Auckland*

The texts from Ireland come in while I am sleeping. Photos mainly, and articles from websites like Waterford Whispers. I'm in a Viber group with three friends from Cork. We call each other the Judas Cows, I forget why now. Sometimes they'll be messaging about going to the cinema, or to the Opera House, and they'll include me.

"Sorry, I'm in New Zealand this weekend," I text. I like how that makes the world feel smaller.

Cork time is 13 hours behind Auckland. I have to go back half a day whenever I come home. My mother rings me every Sunday. I'll be going to bed and she'll be getting the dinner ready, peeling potatoes while she talks to me, asking if I want Cadbury Snacks sent over, telling me about the novena she is doing for my brother. I love all this, the Irishness.

This wasn't how it used to be. I came to New Zealand in 2001 on a one year working holiday visa. I've lived in Auckland for the last 13 years, on and off. It's where I got my start as a radio announcer. The accent helped, certainly.

I was professionally Irish for a while there, and I hated it. When I was doing talkback, people used to ring up and want to reminisce about their Irish grandparents. Looking back, I can see that they just wanted to share their memories, but at the time I found it excruciating. I didn't want to be an immigrant with an accent, I just wanted to sound like every other Kiwi on the radio.

I used to cut them off quickly. I'm sorry about that now, it was mean of me. Back then, I thought I had to be one or the other; that I had to stop being Irish if I wanted to make it in Auckland.

I wanted to be new in New Zealand. I loved not having to share it with anyone from home either. That's a selfish way of experiencing a new place, but I'd felt squashed growing up in Cork, like there wasn't enough air for me. There was air-time in New Zealand. I used it.

Then I came home. I moved back to Cork in 2011. I wanted to see if I could live there again, as a grown-up, in my 30s. I lasted 18 months. It was hard and it was precarious. It was one of the three best things I have ever done, along with moving to France for love, and giving up drinking.

I wrote a lot. I ran to Fitzgeralds Park and back every day from my little house by the river. Until I reclaimed it, I never realised how much Ireland scared me.

I'm back in Auckland now, and I think I'm more Irish than ever. I know who I am and where I come from. I'm a Judas Cow. I'm an Irish voice in Auckland.

**‘I broke my mother’s heart when I emigrated to Canada in 1981’**



*Mary Curran, Canada*

I broke my mother's heart when I emigrated to Canada in 1981. I was the only girl in the family and afterwards I atoned for leaving by frequent summer visits home, especially after my father passed away. For 23 years I missed Irish winters until I received an unexpected Christmas gift.

In December 2004 my mother lived in a nursing home in Derry and one of my brothers provided my plane ticket to join a pre-Christmas surprise family lunch for my mother at an old hotel. I arrived in Dublin five days before Christmas and drove north through the familiar litany of small towns: Slane, Ardee, Carrickmacross, Monaghan, Omagh, Strabane and finally Derry.

I wasn't homesick but I was wistful when I opened the door of the family home, empty of people but filled with what history leaves behind: furniture, photos, pictures, cups and plates and pots and pans. I sought solace in the practical, turned on the heat and unpacked the suitcase.

I used to ignore my mother's wordless disapproval of my casual jeans and running shoes during other holidays. But this time I decided to please her and dressed up in a suit and blouse, good shoes and handbag and set off to the hotel. Since I feared for her 85-year-old heart, I called the day before from Toronto to tell her that I was coming, but I didn't mention the lunch.

The family cars arrived almost simultaneously in the driveway of a very old house, invisible from the main road. We looked prosperous and well dressed, and I thought my mother must be pleased. But mostly I recall the contented surprise on her face and the sounds of laughter and conversation as we ambled into the hotel and stepped down into a moment in history.

My mother and I explored by car during my journeys home. I learned about relatives dispossessed by emigration or death who once lived in cottages now derelict along country roads in Derry and Donegal. I saw the small house still standing outside Derry where she and two friends rented a bed for the nights when sirens warned of possible German planes overhead.

She spoke guardedly about the girls who dated American and Canadian service men stationed in Derry during the war. But neither of us expected to see, at a family lunch in 2004, the uniforms, hats, maps and photos of foreign soldiers on display under glass in an old hotel where they were billeted 60 years before.

I left early the next morning to drive south to take a plane to Toronto. I used to think I was making amends to my mother for leaving her, but I know now our journeys together allowed me to connect in the most practical ways the history of an Irish past to my Canadian present and to celebrate and seek consolation in that endeavour.

**‘Being Irish colours my view of the world, and that is a bonus  
abroad’**



*Eric O'Donnell, Singapore*

I live in Singapore, work for a French company, am married to a French woman, my children speak to me mostly in French and most of our friends are French. But I am Irish.

Before moving to Singapore in 2013, I had lived in France for 18 years, which explains the presence of French but makes answering questions like “where are you from” slightly longer than normal. When I say Ireland, people are sometimes confused or surprised as they mostly associate me with the French community.

When we lived in France, there were fewer variables, so it was easier. The change to Asia (and reading Generation Emigration) has made me think of the meaning of that simple question “where are you from?”

I am Irish; my family is in Ireland, I grew up in Mullingar, was educated and trained there and in Dublin. I prefer when Ireland beats France in the Six Nations, especially in Paris. I read The Irish Times online and always “return” to Ireland rather than just “going” there.

Being Irish inevitably colours my view of the world, and I consider that a bonus when I’m abroad. Having moved to Singapore, I find that my time in France, and marriage to a French woman add another, different perspective. Surely, when I return to Europe, Asia will have given me a third.

I don’t know many Irish people here in Singapore, probably because I would actually have to go out of my way to meet them. So it does make you wonder if “I’m Irish” is enough. At the end of the day, it’s not. I am Irish but I am mostly just me, and being Irish is just part of being me. If you are just Irish, you don’t adapt to new surroundings, or enjoy a new view of the world.

In France or Singapore, I never thought of emigration as a negative thing: the world is our oyster, full of opportunities that we should not refuse. We are lucky to live in an age where travel and communication mean that “leaving” only means that I will be back, soon. When you’re away, you just have to be yourself, and keep in touch with home.

**‘My language has changed since leaving Ireland’**



*Molly O'Mara, Switzerland*

There's a heap of things I miss from home, one of them is "loads". My language over time has changed, I've started saying heaps instead of loads, calling a duvet a doona, and not using "the craic" enough.

Sure, it's nothing a good natter on the guthán-poca to some cairde or mo clann back home won't cure, but I guess it boils down to the Irishness. The familiarity and the comfort of being around Irish people. That pure hilarity, commonality and constant craic that's to be had. Australia isn't too bad at doing a good job at it, she gives it a fair old go alright, but at times it'd make ya miss home.

Ireland will always be my homeland, but not my only home. Australia became a home away from home for me. I gathered great friends over the years, ones I find it hard to believe haven't been in my life since we were in nappies. It's a strange and wonderful thing. It's a form of family found amongst friends. Australia found me and I found myself there.

Living and working in foreign countries requires a lot of paperwork and my visa ran out and I had to return to Ireland, and put my life of the past five years on pause. I decided to indulge entirely on Irish culture, to see if I truly missed it and wanted to return home to Ireland for good, or like many, just missed because it's what you're expected to do.

So as I roved out to the motherland, I took fiddle school at the Willie Clancy trad fest, sipped on endless cups of tea, had the craic with friends and family over pints, ate slice upon slice of fresh brown bread and munched on every packet of crisps the local shops had to offer. I savoured every flavour. I embraced it, as it embraced me, with open warm arms.

And then, I found myself on an adventure once more, not back to Australia, but onwards to another place, a new country and culture. For the next year, I'd be calling Switzerland "home". Once again I found myself starting from scratch, just another person on the train, in a country which completely contrasts both my previous homes in many respects.

I love it. I love the animosity, the newness, the adventure...but the strange thing is, I find myself longing for home more and more, but that "home" is not Ireland...



**‘I emigrated because I felt Ireland was suffocating me’**



*Fiona Doyle, Saudi Arabia*

I got my first taste of living abroad when I was 16, in boarding school in France. Away from my family and friends, in a new culture, interacting in a language that it turns out the Junior Certificate syllabus does not prepare you for, I started to adjust and gain confidence in myself.

Coming back was harder than I had expected. I saw things differently and I was dissatisfied with what was on offer for me in Ireland. Finding myself drifting and lost, I made a decision that the next time I left I would not be coming back.

Six years and one degree later I set off to Spain. The plan was to stay six months and then move on, teaching my way around the world. Instead I fell in love with the north of Spain. Finally I felt happy, satisfied and had that warm feeling of "home".

There are many reasons why people decide to emigrate: money, experience, job shortages, adventure, personal troubles... the list goes on. My main reason was to get out, as I felt Ireland was suffocating me.

I had many plans and many ideas of how my life would shape up, but not once did I imagine I'd want to go back to Ireland. Yet here I am now, adding Ireland to the list of places I might want to study my Master's.

Every time I go back I am reminded of some of the unique characteristics of the Irish, and the longer I stay away the more I miss them. Where else in the world can you have a bit of banter with the cashier or get teased by the bus conductor? Where else will you sit in a bar and strike up a conversation with the stranger beside you that leads into a three hour sesh as you share stories and discover connections?

Where else can you go to an amazing affordable theatre production and then wander around a museum for free? Ireland has a lot to offer in terms of socialising and culture. I need to know if these things are worth dealing with the bad things, I need to answer the question: "What if I hadn't left?"

This year I am based in Saudi Arabia teaching English, attracted by the money which will help pay for my Master's. When I think of Ireland I miss my friends and family but Santander is the place I get homesick for, it is the place where I fit in. The leisurely pace of life, the reserved yet warm and loyal people and the small but buzzing social life is what makes it feel like home for me.

But recently I've been returning again and again to that question: what if? I spent the years between 16 and 22 waiting to get out. My view was obscured by personal problems. Now older and with a less biased outlook, I want to try and answer that question. Who knows, maybe I'll stay, or maybe I'll run faster and further this time, but at least I'll have given it a chance.

**‘I want to continue to engage with Ireland as a citizen living abroad’**



*Eamon O'Hara, France*

What do I see when I look at Ireland today? Mostly I see a mishmash of lots of different things: a beautiful country whose natural environment is being degraded by poor planning and incoherent development; a country of smart, funny and warm-hearted people who are being poorly served by a government that is hopelessly out of touch; a country of great minds and brave entrepreneurs whose collective potential is being squandered due to a lack of leadership and a coherent vision of the future; and a country with a proud, loyal diaspora that is ready and willing to play its role in shaping its future, but feels cut-off and disconnected.

What I see is a country with enormous potential, but lacking the unifying force to make this a reality. Ireland needs a visionary leader; someone who can rise above party politics and unite the people and the political system around a common project.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to see where such a person could come from. The current political system has too strong a focus on the party and party politics. Perhaps what Ireland needs is a president, not in the sense that we currently understand it, rather a president with real powers.

Successive holders of this office in Ireland have tried to create and promote a vision of the future of the country, but this has invariably progressed no further than a public relations exercise. Without the powers to ensure the vision permeates all aspects of public policy, the office of the presidency can never have any real impact. Other countries such as France and the US have a different model, with the president having greater powers to set the political agenda. Could this work in Ireland?

As an Irish person living abroad I retain a strong interest in Ireland. I read the newspapers online every day, I call "home" regularly, and I am up-to-date on most of what is happening in Ireland, be it sport, politics or religion, despite having lived abroad for over 13 years.

This might sound a bit sad, but it's not. My continuing interest in Ireland does not stem from a longing to return, but from a desire to continue to engage with my country as a citizen living abroad. At this point I cannot say with any certainty whether or not I will ever move back. I have a wife and two young children now so I also have to consider what's best for them. But I am certainly not ruling it out and it's not something I would fear.

In the meantime, my sense of Irishness will continue to evolve, as it does for all Irish people, whether they live in Ireland or abroad, but I don't expect it to diminish. I look forward to one day being able to contribute to a new vision of Ireland that unites all its people, wherever they are in the world.

**‘I’m still treated like a tourist after 31 years in Africa’**



*Eithne Smyth, South Africa*

Oh Ireland, I miss the feeling of belonging, the ease of just being me.

I easily identify myself as Irish wherever I am; it's a huge part of how I am perceived by my friends and colleagues in Africa. But my Irish identity creates a certain distance between myself and my African family, friends and colleagues. For example, any input on politics or current affairs is always interpreted as that of a foreigner. In many ways I am still treated like a tourist, even after 31 years here.

I have now lived abroad longer than I lived in Ireland. But my sense of being Irish has never left me. As soon as I land in Dublin, I feel whole I am sure and confident of whom I am, unafraid to speak and have opinions about current issues. It's like breathing with ease instead of with control, of being off guard instead of on guard in conversation.

The moments I look forward to while planning my trip home are many: the final approach to Dublin Airport, the greenness of the land we fly over, the search for beloved family faces on arrival, catching up on all the news.

The things I miss? The smell and taste of Bewley's coffee in Grafton street, Kerrygold butter on Irish soda bread and a whole pot of tea, Cadbury's chocolate, Icebergers, Milky Mints, iced caramels... I could go on and on... Batch bread, the friendliness of people, especially in countryside shops and pubs, genuine interest in who you are and where that funny accent comes from.

I have three children, all born in South Africa, two now living in Ireland. The third is still at school in Cape Town, but he has plans to head to Ireland as soon as he can. I have always made sure my kids had strong connections to my home and family, returning every year at least once.

My father and siblings did everything they could to ensure they had the best of Irish times, and it left its mark. It's the place they have always wanted to return to, the place of their childhood dreams.

To move there as adults was not an easy transition. They had to get used to long dark winters and the cold and rain, but now they are more Irish than me. I hear their accents changing, the Irish expressions flowing, and it makes me proud.

Will I return to live? Most definitely not. I couldn't afford to live in Ireland. I could never own my own home, or maintain my current lifestyle. I have a home in Africa, with everything a home represents, memories of my children growing up there, familiar sites and close friends.

I have Irish friends in Cape Town and Congo, and I never laugh as hard or as easily as I do when I spend time with them. Working in rural Congo gives me opportunity to go deep into the rainforests, work with rural communities still living traditional lives and see wild animals roam freely. My diet is goat on a homemade spit instead of lamb, cassava leaves called saka saka instead of spinach, and fresh river fish cooked in palm leaves instead of river salmon.

I bathe in rivers and streams that find their way to the mighty Congo river, and its magical might has opened my soul and has a space all to itself.

So as much as my heart is in Ireland, Africa is in my blood. I love my adopted home, but that is always what it will be and I am not complaining. I am a happy Irish citizen living and working abroad, thankful for the opportunity to come home for a visit whenever I can.

**‘Hearing an Irish accent abroad connects you to home’**



*Gráinne Perkins, South Africa*



I think I know how Gráinne Mhaol, my namesake and a distant relative, gained her reputation as a no nonsense pirate Queen of Ireland. Non-Irish nationals couldn't pronounce her name, and after a while she obviously got tired of repeating herself.

Irish-named J-1ers can relate from summers spent in America, where their names are transformed beyond recognition. Siobhan becomes "Shy o ban", Niamh becomes "Nymph", and who can forget being called "See a moose" (Seamus) for an entire summer? I've become accustomed to "Gráinne" having many accented variations, all of them wrong.

Emigrating to South Africa in 2012, I thought my pronunciation troubles were behind me in the American summers. Surely South Africa, a country with eleven native languages, would have no problem pronouncing Gráinne? Paddy Power couldn't have predicted how wrong I was.

Irish emigrants often forget how both their Irish names and accents shape their identities. A South African recently told this born and bred Dublin Northsider how they loved the way the Irish always sound hungry; because we eat the ends of our words.

After recently returning to Cape Town from Dublin, someone asked me what language I was speaking. "English," I slowly replied. Both my accent and the speed at which I talk was just too much for them.

Apart from sounding constantly hungry, misunderstood accents can have profound consequences, as I'm sure Gráinne Mhaol discovered. In a conversation with two South Africans, it took only two sentences to cause mass confusion. I'm sure this is how many wars have started. The conversation went along these lines:

Ray: "I'm going to the Mosque- I'll be back later."

Me (hearing "I'm going to buy a mask- I'll be back later"): "Are you going to a party?"

Ray: "What's apartheid got to do with it" (He heard: "Is it to do with Apartheid?").

Although our accents differ, it seems that South Africans enjoy a similar sense of Irish humour.

My love of Irish accents has never waned. When home, stealing a day to wander Dublin and soak up the accents of the capital is a requirement. The sounds of the question-raising Cork-onians, perfect word ending Dublin 4-ers and Daniel O Donegal-ers always remind me of the mix that is my home, a place where we sound hungry because we love our words.

While this love is evident in our poetry and prose, it is most obvious in our random conversations. Strangers in Dunnes, coffee shops and pubs share comments in a uniquely Irish manner which can make you buy that dress or have that second pint. When heard abroad, an Irish accents connects you to more than your county, it connects you to home.

To change my name or alter my accent to fit in would be to change my identity, so South Africa will just have to adopt my name. I can only hope that someday my name will be understood with no repeats or explanations required. Then I'll be as much at home in the Mother City as I am in my Dirty Old Town.

**‘My dependence on and tolerance of alcohol plummeted since leaving Ireland’**



*Darragh Kelleher, Singapore*

Ironically, I was working in the dole office but I decided to leave Ireland anyway in January 2011. I saw first-hand what the recession was doing to the place. Whilst it was an exciting place to work in ways, having to serve genuine people experiencing hard times such as my friend's parents made it kind of depressing.

I had just graduated university, and my girlfriend (now fiancée) was living in Singapore. Having met in the US during exchange, I got a taste for living abroad. So my decision to emigrate was clearly a mixture of push and pulls factors. People say travel broadens the mind, and I have to agree. I have no regrets.

Of course, there are many things I miss about home, starting with family. Having a laugh with my brothers, playing with my nephews, mum's cooking, dad's stories, and even my cat's purring.

Heading to the pub with the lads is something which I greatly miss. Alcohol prices in Singapore are excessively high, but this could be a good thing. I find myself drinking a lot less, which was a big part of Irish culture. My dependence on and tolerance of alcohol have plummeted since leaving Ireland.

I go home for Christmas every year, back to the frosty and gloomy winter. It's a big change from the 32 degree heat of Singapore, I couldn't think of a better place to spend the holidays than at home with family. The fry-ups are plentiful, since black pudding is banned here. Somehow that cup of Lyon's tea doesn't taste the same here compared to the rusty teapot of home.

My aunt recently passed away and we've had a few health scares in the family, which makes it harder being away. Meeting fellow Irish people makes it easier though, with an Irish population here of a few thousand, a chamber of commerce, a GAA team, and of course, many Irish pubs.

A few days ago, I found a book in Singapore for Irish kids to learn Irish and I even considered buying it for myself to brush up. I am instead using an app called Duolingo which encourages people to speak more Irish.

I will no doubt return to Ireland in a few years' time, hopefully not on the other end of the counter in the dole office. To ensure this won't happen, I will get more experience under my belt at work. I will raise my future children in Ireland, and my soon-to-be wife, Andrea, will have to get used to the freezing winters, since my sallow freckly Irish skin can't take the sun for much longer.

**‘I feel almost like I betrayed my home by abandoning her for my own ends’**



*Taryn O'Donnghaile, Nottingham*

A relationship gone wrong - my own stupidity for the record - and a dead end job were essentially my reasons for leaving Ireland.

At the same time that I left the country, my parents and brothers left Dublin. My parents and older brother moved west, and my younger brother went to Europe. It was strange timing. Not only did my personal relationship with Dublin come to an end but my family link to it disappeared. The safety net of having a home that I knew was gone.

I feel somewhat homeless now. Not in the sense that I don't have a roof over my head, but that I am from a country that is now very different to when I left. The Celtic Tiger was still living large then, people were happy and affluent. I haven't shared the hardship that the crash brought.

In fact, through the crash I was doing okay, and while the communal suffering and belt-tightening brought a lot of the country together, I can't even claim the "pedigree" of the emigrant forced away o'er the foam through circumstance. I feel almost like I betrayed my home by abandoning her for my own ends. I guess you can take the man out of Ireland but the guilt follows you.

I am married now, with a child of my own (she has an Irish passport) but she is very young, and wouldn't understand Daddy's guided tour of Dublin. Dublin in 2015? I wouldn't know what to say to her. It took me some time to realise that Dublin was part of my past, and that even if at some stage I move back to Dublin, it will be a New Dublin in a New Ireland.

Living in Nottingham I am thankful the image of the Irish migrant is a positive one. There is a large Irish population here and hearing accents from home is not unusual. It's a comfort to hear them, and reminds me I took a step that many others like me have before.

**‘I always dreamed of retiring in Italy but it didn’t work out’**



*Michael Power, Dublin*

I have lived in Italy for a few years and now I am back. Italy seemed a much more romantic place than dear old Dublin and I had always harboured a dream to retire there. Three bad summers made up my mind for me, so I went in search of my Italian dream.

Summer there was a haze of heat and sun, sun, sun... until you just had to get indoors or under an umbrella in the piazza. There, people sat all day, many without buying a thing in the bar or restaurant which provided the chairs and umbrellas. They played cards, drank espresso or wine, argued about football or Berlusconi, smoked interminably, watched the beautiful girls go by, or just chatted and dozed.

The clear blue sea was five minutes away and approached by golden sands so warm you could not traverse barefoot. I swam every day. In the evenings we sat and enjoyed our *aperitivo* and more, us Irish and Brits, unlike the locals who must be respectable and preserve their *bella figura*, not just physically, but in terms of image and respectability too.

Living was easier and cheaper than in Ireland. A meal of pasta with fish such as *rigatoni agli scampi* and beer or a quarter litre of sparkling wine could be had for a tenner! Alessandro would reassure me I was “the man” and nothing was too much trouble to him. The bill would arrive with a *sconto grande*, a big discount.

The World Cup and Euro Finals we watched in the heat and comfort of the piazza with Italian, English, Irish and many other nationalities, and made more friends. Football was an international language, as my t-shirt said. I became a *Pizzitano* and was accepted as such.

The piazza was alive until the small hours and there was never a bit of trouble or agro, drunkenness or unseemly behaviour, even when packed with thousands at festival time in the summer.

So why did I come back to Dublin? I had escaped to make a new life for myself. But I had five great adult children in Dublin. Winter in Pizzo was not so hot or enticing, especially as I was alone. The piazza was mostly empty, even in the evening. The crowds were gone.

I felt lonely and missed my family and wanted to be here for events such as births of grandchildren, weddings and to meet my own siblings, who were also growing older.

I tired of trying to converse in Italian and wanted to know what was going on in the world in English. I could find some work and interesting activities easier in Dublin as a retired gent, So I rejoined the world I had escaped from, and it has been good for me.

**‘I left Ireland in the late 1990s, disenchanted with the frenzy of the Celtic Tiger’**



*Sarah De Klein, Winnipeg, Canada*



On a cold winter's day in Winnipeg where I live, I heard Colm Tóibín being interviewed on CBC Radio 4. I could have been in the kitchen at home in Kerry having a cup of tea with my mother.

He talked about what it is to be Irish and living abroad. That “yearning for home is hardwired into our DNA”, that the euphoria of travelling home evaporates almost on arrival, like a promise whispered on a soft breeze.

I left Ireland in the late 1990s, disenchanted with the frenzy of the Celtic Tiger. I was living and working in Dublin, and witnessed what appeared to be a sort of ethnic cleansing, a desire to slough away Irishness and replace it with Americanisms and Britishness. The attendant infrastructure to make this all possible like the plastic surgeons and luxury car dealers soon followed. I left at its height.

I met my Canadian husband in London, lived around Europe for a while, and eventually settled in Canada. Once you leave Europe the strong tether to Ireland feels so unbearably fine, as if the miles are stretching the bond that holds you to it.

Children came along, making me feel I was living in a parallel universe to the one in which I grew up. The differences in bringing up children in North America are seismic. The endless discussion and debate and negotiation here bears no relation to the cut and dried approach I grew up with. I can still hear my mother: “Well, you’ve two choices, take it or leave it”. Peculiar now how comforting that is.

I see now the wisdom of this tough love, this Irishness. I understand its place in the scheme of things. There is an arrogance that comes with having plenty, a sort of swagger. A tuning out, if you will, of the goings on elsewhere.

And oddly enough, the certainty that you will be “taken down a peg or two” at home if you get too cocky, a trait I once found gratingly annoying, I now find strangely appealing.

This is, needless to say, why so many Irish do so very well when they emigrate – it’s that delicate combination of slightly low self-esteem coupled with a burning ambition. Heady stuff.

I miss many things about Ireland. I often talk about returning “home”. I make the calls, put out feelers. I think of a poem by Robert Frost, The sound of Trees.

“They are that talks of going

But never gets away;

And talks no less for knowing,

As it grows wiser and older,

That now it means to stay.”

I think I will always be Irish. But my life is here, for now.

**‘Home for me is where my husband is in Italy, and where my family is in Cork’**



*Orfhlaith Ni Chorcora, Italy*

I've lived in Italy for 15 years. It was a voluntary choice to move here, for love, and one that has brought me great happiness. I travel the world for work, from Lagos to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi to San Francisco and many places in between.

People often comment I seem more Italian than Irish in my ways, and sometimes even tell me I speak great English. I assume they come to this conclusion because I dress Italian (I admit I love fur), eat Italian, suffer loudly in the absence of a good espresso, obsess about footwear and handbags, gesticulate a lot, speak Italian, am immune to bawdy television, love a crisis and am unfazed by the political shenanigans in the countries I visit, given my overexposure to Italian politics and its pervasive influence on daily life.

But that's just scratching the surface. Other than my very pale skin (an Italian child once asked me if I had any blood), which is a dead giveaway, I bring Ireland and my Irishness with me in everything I do. My curiosity about people, my love of a good chat, a grá for storytelling, an indulgence in the long Irish goodbye after a social evening (a cultural phenomenon my husband will never fathom), a sense of humour and light hearted perspective with a healthy dose of sarcasm that often characterises the Irish, particularly in the face of adversity; a hint of shadowy guilt for missing mass on Sunday, every Sunday, coupled with a hint of smug rebellion for the very same reason...

And lest I forget, my very Irish name, which is a tongue twister and ice breaker wherever I go.

Home for me is where my husband is in Italy, and where my family is in Cork. I don't feel the need to choose. I feel enriched because I have had the good fortune to embrace and grow within two cultures that have some commonality but many differences.

And I can't finish without mentioning the weather. There's no contest, Italy wins on that score!

**'Ireland is where I grew up and Canada is where I matured'**



*Margaret O'Shea Bonner, Ontario*

I considered going to Australia once when I was 17 and asked my father if he would be okay with that. “Why don’t you go a bit further and you’d be closer to home,” he said. I took that as a no.

A couple of years later my boyfriend (now husband) and I left for the US on J1 visas, finding ourselves in California, Alaska and places in between. It was an adventure. We eventually ended up in Toronto, Canada on student visas, this time for post-graduate studies.

Our families were in Ireland, our friends were there too, and we would join them when we were done, we thought. We made a point of buying a dual voltage hairdryer so it would work in both countries. We had plans. Hah!

The MA turned into a PhD and by the end of that we had three Canadian children. A long story and 37 years later we are still here, and it looks like this might be it.

I think of the dual voltage hairdryer from time to time, especially when the issue of identity comes up. Is this home now? Am I Canadian? Is Ireland still home? Am I Irish? For me, both are true, but the nature of that duality is that I’m not a whole one or the other.

Is that what blow-ins feel like? Am I a blow-in? My husband’s parents moved from Donegal to Tipperary early in their married life and adopted a permanent blow-in status there. Their children were given county citizenship in part, I think, because they were good at hurling and camogie.

I get to go “home” twice every year, once to go there, then to come here, both coming home. And I need both. While I feel some disconnect from Ireland, I have changed and so has it, it remains at the essence of who I am and being there strengthens that for me.

I need a hit of the western Atlantic shore, the nearness of extended family, Irish humour wet and dry, and a good pint of Guinness. And then I get back on the plane and go home again. Ireland is where I grew up and Canada is where I matured.

I’m not sure I could have done either as well anywhere else.

## September morning on All-Ireland Final Day in Toronto



*Eamon O'Riordan, Canada*

Here I am. A September morning on All-Ireland Final day. In Toronto, Canada.

The bar showing the game is festooned haphazardly. Bunting dissects the room at neck height while flags are already surrendering. Members of the general populace passing outside offer the blankest of gazes in the direction of the gathering crowd within. Puzzled and passive, they mutter before they untangle the lead of an inevitable pug, and continue to their brunch date armed with an anecdote.

The black and amber and blue and gold get a kick out of this, guffawing into their streaky Canadian and sunny side ups. Bar staff brace for the onslaught.

The crowd is made up of assorted die-hards and session heads, summer J1ers and long lost plumbers. An older gang ensconced in a side room is heading towards 70. I wonder what they make of us. They left in the 50s from the village down the road.

There is a fierce amount of hilarity about the place as throw in time approaches. From the sound of it, the vast majority of high jinks and goings on in most of these peoples' lives appears to have occurred the night before. Perhaps we are trying too hard to recreate Jones' road in a vacuum. Still, something is rising.

The game begins. Beside me I have not noticed until now a quiet presence. He calmly dispenses with the remains of the \$10 Irish breakfast and grips his mug of drip coffee determinedly. Throughout, there's very little movement. The odd little jump up when Tipp near the goal. This is a man who knows.

Arm over the ledge, Finches Orange era jersey, and a full pack of camels on the table. Whenever Tipp score this system's operator lets loose a flood of electricity through the blood vessels causing him to rush to his feet arms extended into a 360 degree spin, all at the same time. In between scores, a mild twitch. Tipperary scored 1-28.

There are families goggle-eyed and open-mouthed. No words are formed by the shouts and screams from a sliotar slung over the shoulder from the sideline under the Cusack.

Ice cold terror in one girls eyes at the end. Tipp have won. Kilkenny threw it away. That was never a free. That was never a free.

Twenty LCD screens that no one can look at. Dismay, survival, eruption, exhaustion. We are all wrecked.

On Yonge street the sun is doing its best to bring the tarmac to boil. I find myself walking around in the soup. The subway can wait. Out here, there seems to be a whole lot of relaxing going on over eggs benedict and pet anecdotes.

No matter. Messages are exchanged across. There was a screening of it at a house in Galway that took the brunt of a 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party the night before. Sore heads are giddy. The family witnessed it in the flesh. Exalted company. Right at the edge.

I hop on the train.

**‘In England I will always be regarded as Irish, in Ireland I’m the English visitor’**



**Patsy McKearney, England**

Ireland, Mother Ireland, land of my birth, the place that will always be home. I was born there in Trim, Co Meath and spent the first eighteen years of my life there; the next fifty-seven have been spent as an emigrant, an exile in the land reputed to have streets that are paved with gold.

Ireland in the 1950s saw 50,000 a year cross the Atlantic to search for employment. I crossed the Irish Sea. I vividly remember that bright June evening, having completed my Leaving Certificate when I boarded the bus in Trim to embark on a journey to a foreign land.

I recall the pain as the mail boat, The Hibernia, set sail from Dun Laoghaire at 8.45pm. I looked back with tear-filled eyes and I wondered if I would ever live in Ireland again.

For me there was no sense of liberation, I missed the familiarity of home. Few people had home telephones; I sent a telegram to say that I had arrived safely. The loneliness was palpable. I had to change my vocabulary, not because I wanted to but to make myself understood. Who would have known what I meant if I said the towel was in the hot press? A press became a cupboard.

Over the years, I have spent many holidays in Ireland with my husband and children. I have retraced childhood haunts, visited the ruins of the Norman castles where I played in those carefree days of yore. I have walked by the banks of the River Boyne where I learned to swim, visited the old graveyard at Newtown where my ancestors lie buried.

My children have grown up in England. It is a sad thought that a few decades from now I may have grandchildren and great grandchildren who will say “My grandmother was Irish”, and may not even know what part I came from. I wonder if they will return to trace their roots, as American presidents, as Australians and New Zealanders have done?

Over the years there have been so many things I have missed about Ireland. I was brought up with the rituals and they will always be dear to me, the May devotions, the October devotions,



the Corpus Christi processions. When I hear the Ave Verum and Panis Angelicus sung, I am transported back to the days of my youth.

Am I stateless? In England I will always be regarded as Irish, in Ireland I am seen as the English visitor.

**‘I long for a hug, the comfort of physical contact where words across oceans fail’**



*Claire Mullins, Melbourne*

“She’s gone,” he says.

It’s June 2008 and the chill of early winter forces me to shove my hands in my pockets as I stroll through Fitzroy Gardens on the outskirts of Melbourne city centre. It’s a clear, crisp day and the sun hangs happily in the sky on the brink of setting, earlier and earlier these days as we approach the shortest day of the year.

My mind drifts back to winter in Ireland; those endlessly dark days, the sun stubbornly refusing to cut through the low-hanging rain clouds. I think of how morning after morning, I longed for the sunnier climes of far-off countries as I pushed the limits of the snooze button before begrudgingly leaving the warmth of the bed to face the day.

I’m still a stranger in this city, not yet settled five months, and my senses are still adjusting to the unfamiliar sights and smells and sounds of my new surroundings. The grass is a peculiar brown-green and crunches slightly underfoot. The trees are large and colourful with branches that stick out from twisted trunks at awkward angles.

Birds trill oddly as they swoop low between trees, and squirrel-like creatures scurry along branches with scraps secretly snatched from nearby bins. The winter chill creeps in around my neck and I’m almost grateful for the familiar shiver that reminds me of winter back home.

I feel my phone buzzing next to my hand and I pull it out of my pocket. It’s the middle of the morning in Ireland and I’m not expecting a call. It takes me a second to register my brother’s face blinking on the screen.

“She’s gone,” he says, when I answer the phone.

It’s my granny. She’d been sick in the week leading up to this call but the news of her death is unexpected. I’m trying to find my bearings. My brother’s voice is familiar yet strangely unfamiliar in this place. He tries to fill me in on details and formalities but his voice breaks and there’s a knowing silence between us. We’re both crying silently, a grief shared 17,000 km apart. I long for a hug, the comfort of physical contact where words across oceans fail.

The phone clicks off and he’s gone and I am alone in this strange park. I will fly home for the funeral. I want to be with my family and surrounded by familiar sights and smells and sounds as we bury our grandmother in the Irish summer.

That was six years ago. I’m still in Melbourne and no longer a stranger in this city. I stroll through Fitzroy Gardens, the familiar crunch of the thick brown-green blades of grass underfoot. Lorikeets swoop low between the spotted gums and possums scurry along branches with their prized scraps.

I think about my granny and my connection to her now in this place. This place, once so unfamiliar, is now my strongest connection to her and to home.

**‘Every six months, I decide I am going home to Ireland’**



*Amy Martin, London*

Every six months, I decide I am going home. I think about it in detail for a week or two and tell the girls about it over cups of tea in our various flats in London. They nod in understanding and some agree that maybe they will too, maybe next year.

We talk hypothetically about where at home we will go – “Back to Cork?” “No, Dublin – more options there.” “Yes, yes....” But I don’t tell my parents, because I know it’s not going to happen any time soon.

I haven’t been gone that long, I left in early 2012 and still remember that first flight over to the UK and the painful goodbyes that preceded it. As the months of my new life passed by, I missed Ireland more and more. Certain daily scenes triggered memories I didn’t know my mind had retained, and sometimes in the evenings, when sirens screamed by me as I walked home and people I passed looked agitated and rushing, rushing, rushing, I longed for clearer, cleaner air and the lilt of familiar, softer tones. A slower pace.

We are lucky over here because we have each other; our accents won’t change and there is always someone flying back who can pick up any home comforts needed. Yet still, when I hear an Irish voice on the tube I look up eagerly and when someone asks me about where I am from, I sound like a Fáilte Ireland advert.

There aren’t many glaringly obvious cultural differences between here and home, but the longer you stay, the more you feel like you are always slightly on the margins, like an outsider looking in at yourself as you begin to naturally observe a different society’s tendencies and abide by their rules. There is a certain hesitation when you feel like you don’t quite belong, you will take that extra second to observe and adjust. I am not sure that will ever go away.

I miss walking down Patrick’s Street at dusk when shops are closing up and the night ahead spreads before you, lights twinkling in pub and restaurant windows. I miss the English Market buzzing on a Saturday afternoon and Fitzgerald’s Park on a sunny day. I miss the people – the casual greetings, the relaxed tones, the camaraderie that we all feel because we come from the same place.

I really don’t know when I will be able to move back. I know where I belong but am faced with the difficulty of getting back there, and while I am happy here in London with my friends, old and new, and the endless possibilities that this city holds, I sometimes ache for the ease of familiarity and that smell I get when I walk through my front door at home.

**‘My year abroad taught me I should never have left Ireland’**



*Martin Hearty, Vancouver, Canada*

It was a perfect Irish summer's day; bright and warm with just a whisper of wind.

I stood on a bridge looking down at the River Erne with a hand in mine, smaller and perfect, with pale skin as soft as the breeze that brushed strands of restless red hair playfully over her face.

Days like this were created just for her. You'd think the Enniskillen Tourist Board employed her just to walk around the place.

I slid my foot forward and nudged a leaf off the edge of the bridge, following it as it drifted silently downwards and then, without a word of protest or splash of resistance, floated off into the distance to end up a world away from where it belongs.

As I write this it's exactly one year to the day since I boarded a plane for Canada with a lump in my throat I genuinely didn't expect. I had my reasons, I think. A myriad of personal, professional and historical rationalisations so daft that even sitting here in my room alone I daren't say them aloud.

In less than a month, I will once again pack up my life and head back across the Atlantic. I don't know if my relatively short excursion away from home qualifies me to be a member of Generation Emigration but I do know that it has taught me one thing; I should never have left Ireland.

There's certainly nothing wrong with Canada. It's a wonderful country that has given me many tremendous experiences and friends I will miss sorely, but for whatever reason I just don't get it. I look around at the other emigrants, so happy to be here, slipping seamlessly into their new lives and I can't understand what it is I'm missing.

Perhaps it's because I am not really here. The best part of me stayed at home with her.

There was of course the initial excitement of a new city but in truth I've never been happy in Vancouver (not to say there haven't been happy times), rooted here by the self imposed notion that to return home without having at least done a year after all my bluster would be to bring with me the stigma of failure.

Emigration can be an incredible and life changing experience but it is not a silver bullet for all your problems, especially when you consider that your biggest problem is in all likelihood yourself and no matter how far you go, or for how long, that's the one thing you can't leave behind.

And so I will return home, an exercise in damage limitation, with five squares to crawl my way through before I even get back to square one.

I'll return to that lovely bridge over the Erne at some point but this time with nothing in my hand and probably as much chance of getting back what I had as that leaf does of finding its way back here.

What is my relationship with Ireland; the country I loved but thought I had to leave and then couldn't wait to get back to? In truth I have no idea, but I intend to find out.

**‘As an emigrant I will always be drawn to enthralling, infuriating Ireland‘**



*Sean Carroll, Freiburg*



When you live abroad and meet someone new, Ireland takes the liberty of introducing you. It regularly makes presumptions – and often tells outright lies – about your fondness for alcohol, your musical talent, your religious devotion.

For some people Ireland takes a moment to speak up; for others it comes crashing out of their mouths, bleeding through their skin pigmentation, their hair colour, even their choice of clothes. It ascribes personality traits before you've had a chance to say your (strangely spelt, unpronounceable) name.

Living for the past four years in Freiburg, in southern [Germany](#), I've found myself trying to understand what I'm being identified as when I'm introduced as Irish – trying to define Irishness, to see if Irishness defines me.

Germans expect certain behavioural traits from the Irish (as we do of them), and we often comply. We assert our distinctness by drinking Guinness, by bemoaning the standard of tea and by listening to Irish bands.

My relationship with Ireland as an expat is complicated; I am passionate in defence yet quick to criticise. I swing between disappointment and pride. I still feel a rising anger when I think of Ireland's failings, but I also feel a great tenderness. Many other Irish I've met abroad say the same. Perhaps this is the best representation of Irishness: to be locked in a complex relationship with Ireland itself.

When I first moved to Germany, from Dublin, I was happy to go abroad. My peers and I had entered university brimming with possibilities and come out to find ourselves lost. In Dublin I did a series of communications internships that held the prospect of employment but led nowhere. No business, it seemed, wanted to hire someone without experience. I was unemployable thanks to my lack of employment.

Shortly before Christmas 2010 a college lecturer emailed an advertisement for a communications position at a German nonprofit focused on environmental sustainability. The salary was modest but enough to live on. I weighed up the decision to apply, knowing if I was successful I would have to relocate.

There was an attraction to leaving Dublin behind, of having the chance to present myself without the context of my upbringing. In Germany the area I lived in, the school I went to, even the sport I played had no implicit meaning.

My application was accepted, and in 2011 I moved to a country with a booming, almost obscenely stable economy. In Freiburg the restaurants were packed every day; in Dublin many in my area were closing for good. But now, when I visit home, this bitter economic narrative seems to be changing. Dublin is reimagining itself; there is a raw creativity I haven't felt before.

These visits also remind me how sharply Ireland contrasts with my adopted country. Germany is a remarkable place: the services are excellent, the people have a strong sense of civic duty, and the buses arrive on time.

Ireland is always looking to other places for guidance and inspiration: to London, to Berlin, to New York. But in aping others we should remember that everything has a price. The best parts of Ireland – the irreverence, the love of the absurd, the belief that life is not to be taken so

seriously – may not fully survive if we adopt a more rigid, Germanic mentality. What is the trade-off for 9pm no longer really meaning 9.15pm?

So perhaps Ireland will never be Germany, but that's fine by me. Ireland doesn't need to be. It is a fascinating, infuriating, enthralling island, which I will always be drawn to – even if I don't live there any more.

**‘I speak about home as if working for the Irish tourist board’**



*Geraldine Morrison, Saudi Arabia*

Leaving Ireland was bitter sweet. I longed for adventure and career opportunities but at the same time I was anxious I wouldn't fit in anywhere else. Nevertheless, there I was, teary eyed boarding a flight to Saudi Arabia to begin teaching internationally.

The climate, the abaya, the prayer times, the restricted social life were so alien to me when I arrived first. But I adapted quickly and became fascinated with the daily hustle and bustle of Jeddah, a far cry from the quiet streets of Belfast.

Before I left I pondered endlessly: was I just hard to please? Why am I not content with where I am? Should I not just settle down, like many people seemed to advise? Each time I came back to the same conclusion; I needed to see the world, and I needed to do it sooner rather than later.

The traveller in me began exploring the surrounding Middle Eastern countries, and further afield in Asia. That feeling of curiosity and excitement I would get every time I arrived at a new airport would be the catalyst for the next trip.

One thing was consistent; I was always proud to talk about my background, about the beauty of Ireland. I would often find myself speaking about home as if I worked for the Irish tourist board, hoping they would visit and recognise its beauty for themselves.

I thought I would miss home immediately, but it took some time. Slowly, but passionately, I began to long for the simple things in life I never dreamed of missing before I left Ireland. A walk in the countryside surrounded by green became more appealing than the golden desert. I began to miss the craic more and more and being able to use certain colloquialisms without having to offer an explanation as to what they mean.

Just as I anticipated, living abroad has its ups and downs, but it has given me the adventure I was looking for, and for that, I am ever grateful. Above all, it has made me appreciate my loved ones back home, and I am closer to them as a result.

Ireland will always call me home, but for now I will continue to enjoy the adventure I sought.

**‘The only Irish accent I hear now is my own’**



*Nicola Monahan, Montana*

Making the decision to leave Ireland seven years ago was an absolute wrench. I knew what I was leaving behind, the irreplaceable friends I've had since school and the family that has nurtured me from day one. I wouldn't be watching nieces and nephews grow up, I wouldn't be there to help aging parents when the day comes.

When the time came to leave, amid the backslapping and tears, one piece of advice I was given has stayed with me – it will be what you make it. Hardly profound, but this has guided me through the bad times.

Emigrating really is what you make it. I decided to love my adopted country from day one. I deal with homesickness in a rational way, I think it through and I move on. I do not dwell on the birthdays and holidays spent away from family.

I feel pain and loneliness. I feel the distance in my heart. I have missed so many milestones already: communions, confirmations, funerals, weddings, big birthday bashes. But, it is what it is, I live in Montana now.

Moving to Montana felt like another planet at first. The food, the people, the weather, and oh my God everyone drives so slow on roads the size of runways. The only Irish accent I hear now is my own; I have never met another Irish person here.

I cling to every tiny piece of Irishness I come across as something precious and sacred. The other night watching a film with my husband, I proudly declared "that's Liam Neeson, he's Irish" as my weary husband replies "yes, I know, you've told me". Many times apparently.

Living in Montana, there's a lot to love. The people are warm and unpretentious, the scenery and wildlife breathtaking at every turn. Of course, Montana regularly reminds me that I am not a local. When going camping in Fethard-on-Sea as a child, we never had to pack bear spray. I never remember my father bringing a shotgun in case an errant mountain lion wandered in to camp. I never had to wear factor 50+ sunscreen during those rainy two weeks in Lahinch in July. Not once did I swat a mosquito on my leg and wonder if maybe now I have West Nile Virus. Ah summer in Ireland, it might be raining but at least you're at the top of the food chain.

Making the most of my new home while still holding on to my Irishness has worked well for me. It's so different here; I drive a car the size of the average Rathmines bedsit and get called Nicole-a every day, but it's home. I achieved things here that I never could in Ireland – a university education, a promising career, a beautiful home that I can actually afford. Montana's been good to me, and I have no regrets.

**‘I don’t let homesickness hold me back anymore’**



*Emma Hartigan, France*

I moved to Nice in the south of France two months ago. To say I was homesick in the beginning is an understatement. Nothing was right, nothing made me happy; not the spectacular views, or even the fresh warm croissants. I was determined I was going to be miserable in this new city.

I resisted everything. All I did was compare; compare every aspect of my life here to Dublin. Beautiful, friendly, and fun Dublin. Nothing even made it close to matching how I viewed my home city; I didn't allow anything to match it.

The people here don't chit chat when you walk into their shop. They make you jump through hoops just to open a bank account or set up a mobile plan. My French friends don't always get my sense of humour. My wonderful boyfriend is over 1,000km away. Everything's better at home.

Then, over a French press coffee, an emotional conversation with my Canadian roommate changed everything. She said since I arrived here, it seemed as if I was *trying* to not enjoy myself. "Why don't you just embrace it?" she asked.

It was this conversation, and realisation, that really helped me change things. Instead of being miserable and thinking about Dublin every second of every day, I am living in the moment here.

Don't get me wrong, I still think of Dublin every day, but I do not long, I do not pine, I smile and appreciate how great it is while also smiling and appreciating the great things that are here. I can't go listen to my friends play Irish music in the pub, but I can go for long walks on the beach in December at night time followed by a glass and/or bottle of French wine.

They don't know what a flat white is here, but they do make the best baguettes in the world. The French just don't know how to have the craic the way we do; but they do enjoy each other's company by showing affection at every opportunity.

People here ask me to talk about Dublin, because, quoting one of my new friends, "I wish I loved where I came from half as much as you do". Now, I embrace Dublin, I wear its memories as a warm fuzzy blanket, but I do not let the pain of missing hold me back from discovering my new city.

Someday I know I will be back in Dublin, wearing the memories of Nice as a white linen shirt. And I will smile, in knowing that wherever I go, whatever obstacles I think are in my way, I will carry the warm spirit of Dublin with me.



**‘Alpine peaks will never move me as much as a glimpse of Omey strand’**



*Caroline West, Grenoble, France*

I left Ireland thirty years ago, a naïve, idealistic graduate off on a one or two-year stint in France, feeling privileged to have landed a cushy position as *lectrice* in a university just outside Paris.

I had no plans to make my life here – in the mid-80s, we all had to get away from dull, dirty Dublin and experience the glamour and thrill of more sophisticated destinations, but I had already picked out the house I aspired to buying along the Grand Canal once I had made my fortune.

The first couple of years in Paris were exciting, exhausting ; cramming in theatre, cinema, museums, learning how to be a savvy commuter on the RER and metro, and trying to emulate chic Parisianisms but frequently failing.

After three years, I moved south to Grenoble, which was so different to Paris. It is a very manageable city surrounded by breathtaking mountains, and is small but cosmopolitan thanks to a large university, research centres and multinationals, and is easy to cycle or walk around. It is a great place to bring up children.

In the first few years I navigated quite easily between French friends I met with my then husband, and English-speaking friends I met through my teaching job at the university. Regular trips home and summers on the beach in Connemara with their cousins meant my children not only learned to speak English but were also able to identify with the culture of home.

Despite the occasional smiles from family at their odd syntax and their rather formal phrasing, my three boys would rapidly pick up more natural expressions from their cousins and friends. There were smiles also from their English teacher in France, as when one described something in an essay as a ‘yoke’

I get impatient with the French sometimes, but am repeatedly surprised by the politeness of my students, by the ‘Bonjour Madame’ at the bakery, by the daily handshake or *bise* between colleagues. All that French sophistication reassured me as year after year I seemed less likely to return home, looking down on the dreary Ireland of the late 80s to convince myself I was better off in France.

The bewildering Celtic Tiger years (what, better restaurants in Dublin than France? What's with all the SUVs?) gave way to a secretly satisfying I-told-you-so as it all came tumbling down.

Although monitoring what is happening in Ireland has become so much easier, checking The Irish Times website daily still doesn't match the pleasure of finding the rolled-up copy that would come through the letter-box weekly as a gift from my mother, to be leisurely perused over a cup of tea.

And now, as France still struggles to maintain a semblance of economic decorum, Ireland seems to have begun back on an upward slope. Where will my children make their home? Have things come a full circle as my second son finds his first job in Galway? Where is home?

So much of me is settled here. I have so many close friends, a satisfying job, an easy lifestyle, but the daily vista of spectacular Alpine peaks around me will never move me as much as a single glimpse of the tide opening on Omey strand.

**‘Living abroad meant being identified solely as being Irish’**



*Siobhain Simpson, Australia*

Growing up, I remembering being bitterly disappointed to discover Coke and Kellogg's were not Irish brands. My childhood was anchored by the view that very little existed outside of the land from which I hailed, and if it did, that it must be the brainchild of fine Irish minds.

Accelerated by the petulant teenage stage I began to concentrate my attentions on parts further afield, and my sense of national pride reversed. Nothing Irish was cool to me; I balked at RTÉ, scoffed at fig rolls and rolled my eyes at Dunnes Stores.

I lolloped (which is always the verb of choice when I think of my teenage self) through my education and vividly remember the many angry and overly dramatic missives I penned in my head to the Department of Education lamenting the fact that I was forced to labour away at Leaving Cert honours Irish.

Finally, at the age of 25, I left home. What occurred next was interesting. Living abroad meant being different and being identified solely by where I was from. Having riled for so long against the country it was a strange and challenging transition to suddenly be aware of the intrinsic value system which that same place had unknowingly embedded in me. Stranger still was how much I valued it right back.

Eight years on, it's the humour I miss the most. Irish people are funny and warm and beautifully odd, with a voracious appetite for honesty and self-deprecation. As a unit, their enthusiasm for anything which proffers a break from the mundane, like holidays, unusual weather, sporting events (often at which they are not even represented), is so incredible to behold and impossible to translate.

The most homesick I've been was during the global financial crisis. I think it was the pride at which we seemed to knuckle down, suck it up and get on with things. This may be converse to the actual lived experience of the event for those who were still living in Ireland, but from the outside, this was how I viewed it.

**'I never saw myself living in Ireland'**



*Ken Williams, London*

When I was eleven I wanted to live in Hamburg. I also wanted to be a cartographer and was obsessed with what I called “instrumental” music. I’m not sure if any of that is linked but I had a definite plan to live in Hamburg.

As years went by Hamburg changed to London, Barcelona, New York and New Zealand. Isn’t it odd that throughout my formative years I never saw myself living in Ireland? I always knew I’d leave.

And I did leave. Boston, Brussels, Sydney, and currently the London commuter town of Hertford have all had the pleasure of my residence.

I met my wife, an English girl with Irish stock, in Sydney. In an alternate universe she fell for my more charming housemate and not me. They’re happily married and I’m still in Australia. I earn more, am a lot fitter, but live 17,000 km away. I’m very thankful she picked me.

I’m very comfortable in the UK and get to Cork about four times a year. Life here isn’t that different to life there of course, but it is different. It took years of self-restraint to remember to allow people to finish their sentences and now it annoys me when my friends jump in when I’m speaking.

It’s politer but it hinders conversation. In Ireland, we’ll interrupt you when everyone at the table knows your point, punch line, where you’re going or has heard it before. Be interesting or be damned. In England they’ll politely listen, laugh and put the kettle on.

British culture is becoming more and more tabloid and it can make me feel unwelcome at times. Immigrant is a really dirty word here and people tend to forget I am one. I’m doing my bit for diversity though. I’m proud that more than one Englishman in my office regularly greet each other with “What’s the craic?”

Although I miss home and often think what my life would be like if Mum was around the corner and I could play football on Wednesday nights with the lads, in reality I’ve never been happier. Walking on Barley Cove beach a few times a year (no matter the weather) is enough for me.

I never made it to Hamburg and I am not a cartographer, but emigration has worked for me.

**‘Growing up in Ireland has allowed me to make the best of my circumstances’**



*Brian William Murphy, Australia*

There's a half hour on the clock before I leave my relatively new job and get to enjoy the weekend (sorry boss). I arrived in Sydney a year ago. A month of partying and sightseeing followed until I had about 100 dollars left and realised it was time to bag a job to keep me going. Luckily my time spent as an under grad in NUI Galway equipped me with the skills to flourish not only in front of a bar but also behind a desk.

I managed to bag a decent role right on Darling Harbour that kept me fed and watered until it was time to do my regional work for my second year visa in a potato packing shed in South Australia for three months. This led to me holding a koala, and for those mere 30 seconds all memories of the hundreds of tonnes of potatoes that I packed were forgotten.

I've read quite a bit on Generation Emigration and I was always left cold with the perception that people feel strongly disconnected from Ireland and their friends and family after having moved abroad. Granted I've less than a year away under my belt, but I can only hope to be distant from Ireland in miles but never in heart and mind.

It was my decision to leave the country and no one else's. I did struggle to find a job straight out of college in 2011 but I did manage it. Family and friends continue to struggle but they are managing as well. They do deserve better I'll admit.

A lot of my friends are flourishing now. I don't intend to belittle people who are currently struggling but growing up in Ireland has allowed me to make the best of my circumstances. Ireland has gifted me with my jovial sense of humour and also the general disregard for the things in life I can't change. It's also gifted me with a beautiful, loving family and friends for life.

I'm not sure if I'll ever return home for longer than a long holiday. I still get a heaviness in my heart when I think about my niece entering her teenage years at home and that I'm not there to witness her grow up. But a stronger sense of reassurance washes over me when I think of where she will develop into adulthood. I can only hope she has great craic while she's there.



**‘Ireland’s most valuable export has been people who have shaped the world’**



*Colm O'Brien, Belgium*

Twenty-three years, 337 days ago. Not that I'm counting or anything. That was the day I left the East Wall in Dublin aboard a boat all set for a long sea and land journey during the "Big Snow" and the first Gulf War, to what I didn't realise then would become my home for more than two decades.

Unlike many others emigrating at the time I left for adventure, to Belgium, land of chocolate, mussels, beer and the statue of the pissing boy.

Not the most exotic of places and not that inaccessible to Ireland, Belgium has allowed me to maintain a hold on my home country that sometimes I wish could let go. I need to accept that this is my home, but what I cannot learn to live without is the compassion of the Irish.

I read and see how Ireland has changed in the last 20 years but I firmly believe that those at home, beyond their worries and troubles, are still the most compassionate people in Europe. I miss that. I miss being greeted with "Howya? Lovely day isn't it?" If you say an unsolicited hello to a Belgian they immediately suspect something sinister or just blank you.

How has my connection changed? Gone is the need to keep my family and friends up to date via exorbitant phone calls and Aer Lingus fares you needed a mortgage to afford. The internet and Ryanair have changed this expats life, but for the better? Sometimes I don't think so. It's just allowed me an opinion on everything from Ryan Tubridy on the Late Late (why oh why?) and water charges (why not oh why not?) but does it concern me? Not anymore, and that makes me sad.

It's still my country of birth, it's still where I call home, and it's still where I want to be before I end up in a wooden box. But again, maybe if I went back I'd find island life claustrophobic. I might ostracise myself from my neighbours by being willing to pay water charges, property taxes and higher taxes in return for real services.

As an expat I have misgivings about how I'm perceived. "Generation Emigration"? I don't remember that in the 90s. The Gathering? Most Irish expats have been gathering in Ireland for generations.

We're an island and historically one of our biggest and most valuable exports has been people who have gone on to help shape the world as it is today, for good or for bad.

**‘On the day I left, my mother would not say goodbye’**



*Alyson Meadowcroft, Jersey*

I have been thinking a great deal about Ireland during the last few months, remembering my home town in Co Down and all my family and friends there. The thing is, there are very few of them left now and I haven't visited that town since Christmas 2010. It has probably been on my mind as I have recently retired at the age of 60 and have decided to stay in Jersey, in the Channel Islands.

I moved here in January 1990, to take up a teaching position. My mother was a widow, I was her only child, 35 years old, single and living in Belfast where I taught. But I used to go home to Co Down regularly. She had grown to rely on me for many things and I took the chance to break free. She was stunned when I told her and didn't really believe I would stay in Jersey long.

But after I had been away for three months she realised I was happy and would be staying. I came home for the Easter holidays and we had some bitter words. On the day I left, my mother would not say goodbye to me. When I phoned her later that night, she told me she did not want to hear from me again. I was shocked but soon realised she meant it, when she didn't answer my calls or letters.

Then, three months down the line, Mum called me and just spoke as if we had never been estranged. What had happened between us was never referred to again. We kept an uneasy truce going. I think I made my peace with Mum when I nursed her through terminal cancer in the last months of her life in 2003.

Then I packed up everything that August and truly left Ireland. Emigration for me had been a continual battle on the home front. But I am glad I did it, even though I still miss the smell of Mum's cooking and baking. I look online everyday to see what is happening back home, and often watch BBC Northern Ireland news. Old habits die hard, even after nearly 25 years. And I will be visiting home again next autumn, it has been too long. I need to see Co Down again and have a real taste of home.

**‘I dream of weekends in Dublin’**



*Anne O'Brien, Brussels*

Strong winds shift the grey clouds that sit over Brussels. Days like this make me homesick. I long for the tang of salt on the wind. The flat North Sea lies over an hour away, the Belgian coastline is only 65km long. It's a sea of sorts, so sometimes I head to Oostende.

Last year I turned 52. I've lived more than half my life in Belgium. I first came here on a one year scholarship in 1986. It has taken time to forge Belgian friendships and I know they'll last but I miss the easy chatter and the instant connections made while waiting in the rain for the 46A. Here, only the mad talk to strangers and even then they'll use the polite "vous" form.

There are good things: Belgian chocolate is possibly the best and Brussels abounds with Art Nouveau cafes where, even in winter, we sit by side outside, watching the world go by. Belgians are foodies, dinner dates are made weeks in advance, food carefully prepared, wine chosen, but on my first evening back home, all I want is to head to Libero's for a bag of chips smothered in vinegar. Nothing beats poking a hole in the wrapping and popping a scalding, salty chip in your mouth.

I dream of weekends in Dublin; of being buffeted by wind crossing O'Connell Bridge, under the screeching seagulls that ride the air currents over the muddy Liffey. Then heading to Grafton Street with the edgy energy of the buskers and the feeling that anything can happen and sometimes does. I'd take root in Bewley's with my Irish Times, catching a whiff of burnt coffee, though the brass roaster that sat in the front window is long gone. A perfect weekend.

Hopping on the Dart I'd press my face to the window to watch the changing coastline, from the broad, wet sands at Sandymount, with the lone man walking his dog, to the graffitied remains of the crumbling pool in Blackrock where we swam as kids. Along by Seapoint and the arms of Dun Laoighaire pier that had reached out to greet us as the plane swayed alarmingly in the inevitable cross wind on our descent into Dublin.

We'd dart along past Sandycove and emerge to the splendour of Killiney bay, heads lifting from their iPhones as I'd yank the window open to smell the sea. Then on to Bray, to sit in my sister's kitchen drinking tea, all the while hoping I'm not morphing into the distant cousins of my mother's who visited when I was a child, having made the long trip "home" from America.

I remember looking at their fine clothes and wondering what it was they found in Ireland that they couldn't get in New York. Maybe it was just the sense of being among your own and the tang of salt on the wind.

The doorbell goes. It's our Flemish postman with a package from Ireland: Pears Soap, Milk of Magnesia, and squashed bags of Tayto.

**‘I’m back home now and there’s no place like it’**



*Alison Matthews, returned from Germany*

Upon asking a bus driver at Kerry Airport a few years ago what time next bus to Cork was, he replied that there was a direct one in a few minutes but best to wait another 10 as it took you into Killarney bus station where you could get a good cup of tea. Does this simply prove Irish people are obsessed with drinking tea and keeping warm?

No. To be Irish is something much deeper than that. For me, it's the strong sense of empathy we have for others. That bus driver knew I travelled a long way (from Frankfurt Hahn in Germany), that I was tired, and that being of the country but not in the country permanently, a good cuppa was exactly the thing I was looking for.

In August of this year I moved back to Northern Ireland after nine years of living abroad. People would always ask what do I miss about Ireland there were the obvious answers: Tayto crisps (now increasingly available abroad), bacon, sausages, Barry's tea, Cadburys chocolate, and the sea - oh how I missed the sea, especially living in a landlocked country.

But the real things you miss are much less tangible; the way people chat to you wherever you are, just for the plain simple love of chatting, and seldom with a hidden agenda. I missed the "craic" which just can't be described to anyone who has never felt the craic, had the craic, enjoyed the craic.

I missed people's generosity, of time and of money. Despite a fairly average income, Irish people are amongst most generous in world, and give even when we have very little.

What do I miss about abroad now that I'm back? I miss the foreignness of being away, of the different styles of houses, of people talking different languages. I miss the coffee which just isn't the same in Ireland (at least not where I work) and the mixed coffee/pub culture which hasn't quite permeated Ireland yet.

But would I go back there to live? I don't think I would. I'm home now, and as they say there is no place like it.



**‘I’m still buying Irish tea in Connecticut’**



*Rebecca Egan, Connecticut*

Like most Irish people, I've been drinking tea since I grew out of the bottle. I can remember my nana making me milky cups with two sugars when I was about six. For this reason, making and drinking tea is shrouded in nostalgia for me. As my nana used to say each time she boiled the kettle, it "warms the cockles of your heart".

Tea brings people together. At home, we "call around for tea" and "drop in for a cuppa schald". We use tea as the reason/excuse for visiting friends and staying for hours.

These days, I buy my tea from ShopRite in Milford, Connecticut. I've been living here almost a year now. This is the only place I have managed to source Barry's so far. It's a 15 minute drive from my apartment, but my roommate and friend has developed a similar love for a brew, so once a month or so we make the trip together and hand over a shocking \$6.60 in exchange for the gold blend. It is totally worth it.

Sometimes I feel as though I am losing a little piece of myself here. At the supermarket, for example, I catch myself succumbing to the US way and asking where the tomAYtoes are, or making my way to the restrooms instead of the toilet. I was calling my mam from Viber the other day, and told her I was off to do some laundry. When she laughed I genuinely couldn't see why, forgetting what I used to call it. "The washin'!" she reminded me.

I don't know how much longer I'll be here for. But after times like those, I stick on the kettle for tae and refill the vessels once again with the golden taste of home.

**‘For many emigrants the only solace is still the pub’**



*Ultan MacDaragh, Chicago*

A spell overseas offers promise and hope of endless success and dreams made into reality. But the perfect setting and dream job can amount to very little when the day to day nuts and bolts of an individual's life are removed overnight, or rather a 12 hour overnight flight.

As a bright eyed young QS graduate I snapped at the opportunity to go straight from college to work in a management level job on a mega-structure construction site in Miami Beach. The team I worked with welcomed me with open arms and I was weaned into my job role and gradually given more and more responsibilities.

As time passed I got on well with all the guys I worked with and the learning curve was steep but comfortable. I started work the day after I arrived and the first month passed by in a whirlwind. I felt there wasn't enough hours in the day between sorting accommodation, a car, getting the lay of the land and keeping up with work. But after that joyous and exciting first 30 days or so, the new life adrenaline faded and the dreary real life reality set in.

Almost everyone on my work team was significantly older than me, and all were married with only one without a child. Everyone worked more than their normal hours to secure their job and once finished for the day rushed home to be with their family.

Far removed from my parish GAA club with scheduled training two nights a week and a game every Sunday morning, I joined a gym and tried to get involved in some casual soccer tournaments. But I soon found that after a hard long day working in sunny south Florida's tropical heat, a man's self-motivation wears thin.

Left to my own devices I turned to the classic cure for the Paddy abroad, the boozier. I soon quit pursuing any genuine hobbies and took to stopping into my local bar most days to catch happy hour, which ran from 5.30pm to 7.30pm. Weekends were usually spent drinking on a Friday and Saturday night. I'd start alone but would usually get chatting to people on the next bar stool, and sometimes be invited into a larger group.

Time flew by living this cycle of work-to-bar and bar-to-bed lifestyle, and before I had blinked, nine months has passed and I had little to show for my long hours sweating on site and my weekly pay cheque.

Nine months into my contract I quit my job and headed north to Chicago, where I stayed with a group of friends from home who were there on their J1. The senseless drinking ceased and I went back to enjoying exercise and playing some level of sport. A Friday night could be spent in a cinema with friends instead of on a bar crawl with dive bar comrades. I picked up work in Chicago and now I'm back to enjoying my old normal "Irish" life.

Moving away can be a positive experience when one learns great new skills, meets exciting new friends and sees some fantastic landscapes. It can also take away your sense of self and see you slip into a life you never wanted.

Generation Emigration mainly shines the light on the happy success stories of Irish people abroad. But for many who move away the only solace may still be the pub, and the more time they spend there escaping their surroundings, the less ability they have to change their circumstances for the better.

**‘After 7 years in Australia I’m questioning whether I’ll ever return to Ireland’**



*Aidan Phelan, Melbourne*

"Leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again," I jokingly texted to my friend, while sitting in the departure lounge in Dublin Airport. The year was 2007 and I was certain I'd be back in a year or two, and would slot seamlessly back in to my old life. Now, after more than seven years away I'm beginning to question if I'll ever return.

The path I was taking was tried and tested; a couple of months in South East Asia followed by backpacking around Australia and then home. It was to be the last hurrah before establishing a career, buying a house, and settling down. One last nod to irresponsibility and youth before adulthood finally took hold.

It was in Melbourne where these plans changed; a job and a subsequent offer of sponsorship coincided fatefully with the economic downturn at home. The general consensus from family and friends was that it might be wise to see out the next couple of years away from Ireland while we all waited for things to pick up.

At home, while austerity became the buzzword and things went from bad to worse, in Melbourne a new life was beginning, friendships were formed, and roots were laid. I adopted an AFL team, albeit influenced by the team with the strongest Irish connection, attended the Melbourne Cup, betting on the Irish horses of course, and honed my nascent barbecue skills.

As time passed in Melbourne I moved through various visas, filling in countless forms and spending many lost hours in immigration offices, before one day finding myself in a town hall on a rainy October evening pledging my loyalty to Australia. Having spent so long here citizenship had seemed like the next logical step, an end to the visa applications, however in the back of my mind I viewed it as Australian insurance for when I inevitably returned to Ireland.

Ireland is never far from my thoughts, and with distance I find myself becoming increasingly patriotic, rising at all hours of the morning to watch our national teams play, and being first in the queue whenever an Irish artist deigns to travel as far as here. Nevertheless, the Ireland I see whenever I visit home ebbs further from the Ireland I left behind.

It's the sad fact of life as an emigrant that births, deaths, and marriages will occur in your absence and each visit simply captures that moment in time, as a snapshot in your mind. With each subsequent visit you find the picture altered, sometimes imperceptibly but always different. As such, Melbourne has now become the familiar, the constant, and with each passing year my memory of Ireland gets more distorted.

In the end, the mournful words of a Scotsman who I met in a campsite in Queensland still ring in my ears. "Australia; it's a great country, but don't stay so long that you feel you can't leave."

I think it's almost time to answer that question.

**‘I have come to London to write about home’**



*Judy O’Kane, London*

I love how the plane feels like it's being pushed up from behind as it leaves Dublin. I love the whoosh of dusty air that hits your eyes as the Tube pulls up to the platform.

I love the sense of wonder the first time you see the Shard. If the rain isn't coming down in italics you stand mesmerised as waves of hands grasp *Evening Standards*. Behind the hoarding, they hammer and clatter all night on the Crossrail and orange galoshes clamber up steps as if returning from lobster fishing.

All human life is here, the Hummers and the white stretch limos, and the sports cars with personalised plates opposite the Sexual Diseases Unit at Guy's, and just down the river, Greenwich, GMT.

I have come to study wine. London feels like the centre of the world, winemakers and critics congregate here. I love how you clear French passport control in St Pancras Station, or how you can harvest grapes in Kent and be back in London Bridge an hour later, the mud still on your boots.

Wine tasting reminds me of Seamus Heaney's blackberry picking. I have come to London to write about home. I don't write about London while I'm living here, so I stuff cards and notes into plastic bags like a pathologist collecting samples.

London exhausts you; everyone seems to be wearing sports gear or learning their lines. I love how you come out of the station disoriented, your eyes blinking into the sunshine to the sound of the taxis' engines turning over; it feels like you're running to stand still.

I learn about soil and rock types and root depth. I spend too much time underground. "Daddy, we're going sideways," says a child on the Tube. Once, on the Heathrow Express, a woman invited me to housesit; I lived there for two summers.

Home is everywhere: Fingal Ferguson's salami on menus, Irish names on the cranes towering over the skyline. I imagine that I blend in, but I'm usually the only one in yoga class with no tattoos. I love how you can go to a college reunion and hear accents just like yours before dissolving back into the city.

The upward motion as the plane heads home reminds me of the ticks of approval I put on student papers, the marks I need to see from my PhD supervisor.

I don't miss things till I hear them: the ding of the Luas, the flap of the swans' wings as they take off from the pond in Herbert Park. I love the sense of being in both places and being in neither, in transit.

But I still struggle with the distance relationship, I wonder what I'm missing, and long for weekends or work trips. "You won't fit in when you go back," a consultant told me years ago, while I was working on secondment. "It's like taking a letter out of an envelope, it doesn't go back in the way it came out."



**‘Like a stick of Tramore rock my origin runs through my core’**



*Veronica Leaney, Thailand*

One of the many things I found unfair in primary school was learning to draw the island of Ireland. I was convinced that this along with knitting mittens was a skill I would never use for the rest of my life.

"In the States," my teacher asks "do you do this?" "Ireland," I explain for probably the 50th time since I began attending this adult education class. Today there are only two students so she finally registers the correction. "Ireland," she says, "part of England?" Quick as a flash I grab a pencil and draw the island (badly). When I mark the border and begin to explain the Good Friday agreement I realise the nice lady teaching me Thai and my fellow student are in some kind of international oversharing nightmare. A year ago I was completely lost. In July of 2013 my husband signed a one year contract with a Thai company, and in December that year I joined him here. I was 50 years old, with my children, friends and family left behind.

On week two I rounded the corner of an aisle in our local supermarket and there was a shelf full Tayto crisps. It was a wake-up call. If the sight of Mr Tayto caused such a serious wave of nostalgia, I was in big trouble.

When you leave behind as we did two college going children - one in the care of each grandfather - you take with you a wave of guilt that I think only an Irish mammy could fully feel. You fear any enjoyment you get out of your changed circumstances is balanced by the misery of someone you have left behind.

So I went back to advice given to me by my mother about dating: go out at least once with everyone who asks you. I put all preconceptions on the back burner and embraced every opportunity to meet new people here in Bangkok. I would wear my nationality lightly (apart from Paddy's Day bunting), and on home visits replenish my stash of Irish gifts for every occasion so I could share Ireland's bounty with my new community.

A Scottish friend recently mentioned that in my absence I am referred to as "Irish Veronica". It transpires that like a stick of Tramore rock my origin runs through my core.

**‘I am not strictly Irish but my mom is’**



*Niamh Cahill-Billings, US*

I am not strictly Irish but my mom is.

Growing up, she told me that I was 75 per cent Irish and 25 per cent American, which provided me with the comfort of knowing I had an identity. While the States boasts incredible diversity, many of its citizens are lost. Torn up from their roots, first-generation immigrants cling tightly to their traditions and try to carve out a comfort zone of culture; pillowed by the familiarity of each person's special customs.

Despite being thousands of miles away from her family, my mom taught my sister and me the importance and comfort of having a supportive family. In the United States, it's easy to become fixated on our own individual battles and agendas. It's easy to perpetuate ourselves forward with complete disregard others.

My mom taught me that we aren't alone in the world. She grew up in her grandfather's house surrounded by her family's history. Each corridor and hiding spot of the three-story town house told a story that she dutifully recounted to my sister and me in the most specific detail possible.

The saliency of family is not strictly an Irish value, but I consider it a gift that many of my American friends were not blessed with. I have numerous other examples of uniquely Irish forms of parenting that my mom employed; for example, affectionately referring to my friends as "pet", cooking them lamb stew, and forcing my sister and I to endure Sunday Miscellany on the way to Church.

She taught me that no matter how bad my day was it could always be fixed with a hot cup of tea, and that it was never as bad as I insisted. She taught me that there are few things not to compromise on in life, most importantly being quality tea. She showed me that wakes are not strictly reserved to mourn and commemorate the dead, but to appreciate the living, and that a second-cousin-twice-removed is still a cousin. She taught me to be a story-teller, and that no matter where I go in the world chances are I am going to run into an Irish backpacker because we are a traveling and inquisitive people at heart.

When I was little, Christmas was a holiday I shared with a family thousands of miles away. Even though I have family in the States, my Christmas presents were primarily composed of Cadbury chocolate assortments, and lip gloss and plain black socks from Penny's. A week before Christmas, we'd patiently wait for a package from my aunt in Dublin filled with Irish sausage, rashers, and black pudding so that we could have a traditional Irish breakfast on Christmas morning; a delicacy cherished so reverently by my sister that she refused to eat sausage that wasn't Irish.

Now that both my sister and I are much older, our breakfast package no longer comes in mail and the excitement and mystery of Christmas morning has waned. Yes, Cadbury chocolates are delicious, but more importantly Christmas morning is a pure moment to ruminate in our blessings and the love of our families.

**‘Relationships change when you emigrate. I am the one who chose to leave’**



*Sarah Kenny, Amsterdam*

Leaving Ireland did not sadden me, as I always planned to return. I have been living abroad for a little over three years in Amsterdam. Embracing a new life in new society has actually strengthened my relationship with Ireland, and helped grow my appreciation of where I come from.

I miss home, my family and friends, my culture, language and people, and being surrounded by Irishness. Things often taken for granted become more special when they are taken away. I miss Irish people, pubs and restaurants, the air of the west coast, the smells, RTÉ and the Sunday papers, seeing my nieces and nephews grow, cups of tea with Mum, home comforts like fruit scones and hot chicken rolls. While I do have a box of Barry's Tea on my desk here, it's not quite the same.

I am proud to embrace my Irishness abroad, hear and see how we are perceived by another culture, and experience a life I would not have at home.

Relationships change when you move abroad. I struggled initially with conversations with friends at home, as they were always about when I am home next or upcoming occasions, and never to do with where I live and work and what friends I have here. From their perspective, I am the one who chose to leave Ireland and go elsewhere. I understand this now, but I've no doubt these friendships will pick up where they left off when I go back.

Amsterdam is a beautiful city and the Dutch are positive and liberal, and enjoy a great lifestyle. I had to come all this way to meet my Irish boyfriend Ruairí, have made many new friends and have had some unexpected experiences. It is an enjoyable chapter of my life.

To me, emigration is a long-term word with a hint of sadness attached to it, a word that means a permanent move and leaving Ireland behind because it could not provide. I prefer to think of myself as an expat, as it leaves the possibility of returning to Ireland open in my future.

**‘I’ll be returning to Ireland with a wife and son who didn’t leave Ireland with me in 2010’**



*John Bracken, Shanghai*

When I looked at the open invitation to write this article, the first two questions, “What makes you wish you were at home?” and “What makes you glad you live overseas?” struck me as incongruous to the task.

Personally, I am in a vortex, and its genesis was impending redundancy back home in 2010 when I was staring down the barrel of a dole queue for who-knows-how-long. I fled; what else could I do?

And in 2010, some even had the temerity to suggest that going abroad was somehow abandoning the country, that we'd be better off staying home trying to turn things around. Four years on, I wonder if they still are so resolute.

So, in essence, I'm not glad I live abroad; I'm fortunate. I'm fortunate to have gotten a great job here after wading through a few poor ones and have eventually set up a nice life for myself.

As for wishing I was back home, it's more like I wish I had a “home” to go back to. My home wasn't a house, or a street... it was Ireland itself. Four years on, the gaff is still in tatters. Bailouts, troikas, Merkel, dole queues, Sinn 'effing Fein somehow conniving their way into Government... that's the Ireland I've become accustomed to reading about.

I want to go home, plan to, will do, but the place really needs to get itself in order first. [That said, *Love/Hate* made me strangely homesick – make of that what you will].

Living abroad, one truly becomes serious about coming home when one sets a date. I fuffed around always with some ephemeral idea that I'd go back that year, or the next, but nothing happened. I went from Korea to China with that old monkey on my back, but now I've set a date now for September 2016 and will do my best to stick to it.

There is obviously a sense of trepidation involved, largely as I'll be heading back with a wife and son who didn't leave Ireland with me in 2010. I fear for my wife getting a job; she's a nurse here in Shanghai, but without wanting to besmirch the hospitals here too much, I'm not sure she'd either be able to get a job back home or be ready for the challenge. Her cushy private international hospital in the gilded financial district is poor practice for one of the overworked public hospitals in Dublin.

Her friend, lovingly nicknamed Tiny by some of the nurses she worked with in Dublin after living there for a few years, made her jaw drop with tales of night shifts, A&E violence, and having to fight for a reasonable salary.

I'll swim home in 2016 if I have to. Luckily my employer provides free flights home after contract completion, so that'll be my Wonka'esque golden ticket. I just hope I have something to come home to by then. Work, and a pint of Guinness in O'Donoghues or Neary's.



**‘For the first decade abroad, I constantly pitched Ireland against America’**



*Aine Greaney*

“That’s the (expletive) trouble with Ireland, Ma’am.” The man was leaning tipsily out of his train seat to hiss and curse into my mother’s face. “Nobody in this country minds their own (expletive) business. Not like England, where nobody passes any remarks at (expletive) anybody or anything.”

Sitting there in her prim mackintosh, my late mother cocked her chin and gave that sniff that said this man and his Ireland-versus-England soliloquy were beneath both her commentary and contempt. He tucked himself back into his train seat and snapped open the can of Guinness he had just stolen from the dining trolley.

My mother wasn’t one for train fights. She wasn’t even one for travel or trains. But that August day, the year I did my Leaving Cert, she had volunteered to accompany me from Galway to Dublin for my college-entrance interviews.

We were on the return trip, about a half hour outside Houston Station, when that man and his three pals—all of whom spoke an expat’s patois of Cockney London and west of Ireland—started nicking cans of Guinness from an abandoned Iarnrod Eireann dining trolley. My mother watched in horror before commanding the ringleader, her adversary, to stop being so dishonest and put back that beer.

The most startling part of the episode? At 16 years old, this was the first time that I had heard my own country get tagged and labeled like a jam sponge cake in a baking contest.

“Ireland?” I wanted to yell across the train aisle at him. “I thought we had just chugged out of Tullamore?”

That afternoon, I didn’t know that, less than 10 years later, I would be the expatriate traveling home on a train or a plane. And, though I never nicked drinks off the Aer Lingus trolley, I would fall into that trap, that simplistic and reductive labeling of both my native and adopted countries. For the first decade abroad, I conducted an ongoing contest in which I inwardly set one country—its weather and food and educational system--against the other.

Mind you, before I emigrated in 1986, I thought America was that place that broadcast from our two-channel telly in the corner of our living room. The Brady Bunch or Little House on the Prairie or Hill Street Blues? Sure, what difference? Wasn’t America just America?

Then, after I settled here, I began to distinguish the borderlines between regions, states and towns. I became attuned to the cadences of language, accents, politics and sensibilities. I had immigrated to America, yes, but my life here would largely depend on the exact region and state and town I settled in.

Now, 35 years after that day on the Galway-Dublin train, I speak and write about my home country in the third person, as if Ireland were one, homogeneous entity.

Equally, on expatriate trips back to Ireland, I catch myself talking about America--vast, diverse, baffling America—in that same, wide-angle-lens way.

Sometimes I think that moving countries sets us permanently on the wrong end of the telescope. The vista expands or narrows, blurs or brightens, according to our current vantage point, to where we’re currently standing.

**'I'll never forget that last goodbye'**



*Jimmy Percival, Christchurch, New Zealand*

I miss our family

I miss our friends

I even miss my crap heap Merc Benz

It's been 3 years

It's been too long

It feels we have been forever gone

Now Skype helps

And Facebook too

But it's not the same as holding you

When were missing you

And we feel alone

Just be there beside the phone

Now I'm no poet

I rarely try

I'll never forget that last goodbye

We will meet again

For this I'm sure

As I know our love is pure

So lift your head

And present a smile

For one day between us will be just a mile

Many thanks to all the featured contributors for agreeing to share their story in this collection.

For more personal tales from the Irish abroad, as well as news, features and emigration guides, see [www.irishtimes.com/generationemigration](http://www.irishtimes.com/generationemigration)