

Thompsonville

Q. SHERWOOD

The Postmistress perked to listen
 soon as I told my lunch chum
 I cheated on my income tax. "Filed married,"
 I said, the Mistress sat one table back.

It's a lucky thing I have no box
 in Thompsonville—where fortune
 schussed to a gritty wind,
 so hot it curled the past,

twisted a dozen pictures by the bathroom
 of LaVerdier's Village Inn: clapboard town,
 street mud, railroads crossed,
 two lines both gone;

corporeal frame of the warehouse
 empty, now a ghost with chickens
 on the lintels, frames
 collapsing to the vacuum.

One needs to worry, is forced to
 wonder: how serious is a woman
 about her federal job, in a village
 lost that won't disappear,

a town that's stayed to haunt the map,
 and gather sand from across the scrub
 pines, in a landscape dryly barren;
 the glory, commendation perhaps,

promotion she won't take (this place
 her home forever), for corralling the tax
 cheat, who, with a pen stroke staved financial
 ruin to the tune of, oh, several hundred dollars.

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Hunger

JOANNE B. MULCAHY

It is more certain than certainty that in the northern
 shore of Ireland a place horrible by its terrors was found by
 him and generally called St. Patrick's Purgatory. The fame of
 that place has been so scattered through European parts
 that it seems to go on wings.

—Thyraeus, *Panegyrics on the Names, Tribulations,
 and Miracles of St. Patrick*, Douai, 1617

So much alike is our historical
 And spiritual pattern, a heap
 Of stones anywhere is consecrated
 By love's terrible need.

—Patrick Kavanagh, *Lough Derg: A Poem*

I paced the Derry bus terminal on a balmy July day. Beach-
 bound passengers surrounded me, faces blistered by the
 hottest summer sun in a century, spirits soothed by the
 dawning of peace after twenty-five years. I envied their light
 spirits. Slave to some inner voice, I'd awakened at 5 a.m.,
 determined to get to Lough Derg, the legendary pilgrimage
 site bordering Northern Ireland and the Republic. I'd missed
 the first bus; now, I begged instruction from a bent man in
 tweed. He brandished his walking stick and announced,
 "Aye, you can get there, but not if you start from here." "And
 not for the 2 p.m. ferry!" added the woman beside him. I
 began to despair. A nearly palpable presence seemed to
 block my path. "Aye, it's the devil who tries to hold you

back," my neighbor, Tommy O'Doherty told me months later, "Once it's in yer mind to get to Lough Derg. He'll keep at ye, so he will."

I queried a Franciscan nun who stood by the door as to which bus went to Lough Derg. "St. Patrick's Purgatory?" she asked gently. Her body seemed to sway under a sea of black robes. Or was it my dizziness born of heat and light and the echo of purgatory? Memories of St. Ursula's elementary school. Sister Cyril's face close to mine as she detailed the punishing fires between heaven and hell. I wavered. My weakness or the devil? After a pause, I nodded. "Aye," she pointed to a bus, "That will get you to the dock of Station Island. Yer last ferry goes at 3 p.m." Her quiet insistence propelled me forward. Banish the devil. I got on the bus.

We careened by mounds of drying turf, through the rocky hills of southeast Donegal. My stomach knotted and expanded in accordion fashion, mimicking the bus's movements. Anxiety or hunger? In Ballyshannon, I changed to the final bus, joining a dozen other people, all silent and somber. Across from me, a black-haired woman of about forty stared ahead, her huge green eyes brimming with sadness. In the next seat, the unlined face of a woman no older than twenty-two. The youth of many passengers surprised me. I'd read numerous accounts of sexual abuse scandals and the crumbling of the Irish Catholic Church, particularly its dissolving hold on young people. Why had they come?

Why had I come? An American folklorist one month into a six-month residency at the Verbal Arts Center in Derry, an ancient walled city. Stories drew me to Northern Ireland, particularly women's accounts of the newly proclaimed and fragile peace. In between talk about peace, I heard tales of Lough Derg. Vague and alluring shards of narrative. "Aye, Lough Derg! It's brutal, but you have to experience it to know. Hard to say why people go back." "Daddy goes every

June," announced one acquaintance, "Grand to get it over with early." "Thousands of years of prayer. Aye, that's a holy place." Tommy O'Doherty squinted with one eye, stared right at me with the other, "I wouldn't tell ye to go; I wouldn't tell ye not to go." Roísín, a woman I worked with, reacted with passion. "You're mad! No sleep, the cold . . ." She widened her eyes. "And the three-day fast! It's *really* hard. But there's nothing like it. Go for the craic. The stories you'll hear!"

I told myself it was "the craic" I was after, that uniquely Irish form of conversation. I wouldn't have admitted to a spiritual quest. Though raised a Catholic, I am selectively religious in the American "menu" mode, choosing the palatable parts of Catholicism. My Irish friend, Helena, calls me a "Catholic cocktail"—blended bits of belief and doubt, hope and despair, faith and cynicism. I thought about Helena as the bus twisted toward the ferry site. Would everyone here be Catholic? What kind of Catholic?

As I boarded the boat, hunger gnawed at me. I had never fasted in my life. Could I do it? I fingered the snacks I'd packed into various pockets. *Just in case*. The raw sensation of wanting forced a rising panic. *Remember, you're an observer, a writer/anthropologist analyzing culture, a folklorist in search of stories. Not one of them*. I leaned down toward the floor and slowly unwrapped a banana. In quick, surreptitious movements, I ate.

An elfish boatman nearly swallowed by his tweed cap steered us across the six-by-four mile Lough Derg, the "red lake." One legend holds that St. Patrick lived here in the sixth century and slew a terrifying demon, dying the water red; others say folk hero Fionn mac Cumhail delivered the death blow. Prayers have echoed at this psychic and geographic edge for over 8,000 years. From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, pilgrims came from all over Europe, driven by the tales of an Irish knight, Sir Owein, a murderer who journeyed to Lough Derg to atone for his crimes. He

fasted for fifteen days, followed by 24-hour vigil in a cave which brought him face to face with the horrors of purgatory. An Anglo-Norman monk, Henry of Saltrey, recorded Owein's tale of objects inserted into his flesh, vicious attacks by demons, and fiery rivers of writhing, suffering souls. His final vision, a procession of the saved bathed in golden light, appeared just as the prior arrived to release him from the cave. Sir Owein's widely translated story inspired Dante's inferno, gained mention in Shakespeare, and cemented the notion of purgatory in the Western-European imagination. The path was set for future pilgrims willing to endure the trials of Lough Derg. When the stone was rolled back from the cave, the pilgrim emerged transformed. If he survived.

St. Patrick's Basilica rose up through a veil of mist as the ferry landed. Stillness cloaked the island. Cameras, musical instruments, and radios are forbidden. Only low-toned conversations, whispered prayer, the cries of gulls and plaintive church bells ever break the silence. The Basilica's green dome towered over two modern, stone dormitories framing an interior courtyard. Dark clouds hovered overhead; Derry's bright morning seemed years ago. Clusters of people in green waxed rain jackets and multicolored vinyl slickers circled a towering sycamore tree, heads bowed in prayer. Their one shared feature was bare feet. The plastic clothing and naked feet formed an incongruous—and laughable—image. But I would not be laughing at 4 a.m. when my own feet refused to register even a modicum of blood flow.

In the dorm lobby, a young woman handed me the "Lough Derg Guide" outlining the pilgrimage sequence. I scanned the description: three days of ritual prayers, called "stations," several Masses, a confessional service, and night prayer and benediction in the Basilica. The centerpiece: a 24-hour vigil during which the pilgrim remains continuously awake. My eyes fixed on "THE FAST." "From midnight prior

to arriving on Lough Derg, the pilgrim observes **a complete fast from all food and drink.**" Bold type intensified the power of those eight words. The young woman returned to a group that laughed and joked behind a glass window. They sipped tea and shared scones thick with butter and jam. I already envied their freedom.

I placed my bags in the dorm room, bare but for a bunk bed, a sink and shelves. The communal bathroom was equally spare: no showers, but a row of odd-looking, low sinks that resembled bidets. Back in my room, I tested the bed, planning to take a break later, crawl under the blankets and read. Only when I packed to leave would I notice that there were no lights or electrical outlets. Standing at the sink, hunger seized me again. *Remember, you're an observer. Keep up your strength.* I crammed a hard-boiled egg into my mouth. A few bits of yoke escaped. I flushed them with a criminal panic.

The temperature dropped steadily. I piled on every piece of clothing I'd brought: undershirt, T-shirt, turtleneck, two sweaters, jeans over stretch pants, gortex rain jacket, hat and gloves. I noted the date: the eighth of July, my partner, Bob's, birthday. An aching sense of loss that I could not be with him as he packed the remains of his mother's life in her Connecticut house. I thought of her funeral two months before. A windy day in a small, New England Congregational church. Bob and his brother at the grave, black-suited, kneeling, heads in hands. Speechless, I wept. I had no words of comfort; I had never known death. The day now felt immediate. Did Bob feel abandoned, as terribly alone as I did? I fought back tears. *I can't do this. I'm not one of them, not Irish, not holy, not . . . worthy.* I focused on getting dressed. Reluctantly, I removed my socks and black Reeboks, stroking their comfortable padding. I massaged the edges of my soles, heels, and toes.

I joined a group of pilgrims on the penitential beds,

seven concentric rings of roughly laid stones surrounding a cross. Each is dedicated to a saint: Davog, Molaise, Brigid, Catherine, Patrick, Columcille, and Brendan. The beds are the last archeological evidence of the archaic "purgatory," the site Pope and Protestants battled over for centuries. The cave was filled in by papal order in the late 1400s; the Protestant penal laws forced destruction of the site in 1632; the Counter-Reformation Catholic Bishops waged war against all "superstitious" practices such as pilgrimages in the 1700s. Yet when penalties were heaviest, pilgrims still came. Certain hungers can be neither sated nor suppressed.

The rain steadied. Freezing despite my layered clothing, I huddled over my printed schedule and reread the directions. "Begin with prayers at St. Patrick's Cross." I followed the raven-haired woman from the bus to a towering central cross and kneeled. The frigid slate beneath my knees soaked through to my lycra stretch pants. "Shit," I muttered, face buried in the instructions. "Kiss the Cross." Embarrassed, I watched my companion follow the command. *Do it.* I raised my lips to cold metal. Tears bathed my eyes. I blinked hard.

"Go to St. Brigid's Cross on the outside of the wall of the Basilica," the directions read. I moved toward the twelfth-century Roman cross inlaid into the stone. "Stand with your back to the cross, and with arms outstretched, say three times, 'I renounce the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.'" *Ridiculous! I can't say that. I'm only an observer.* Then, as though outside my body, I witnessed my frame stretched across cold stone. I heard the words. From my lips? Or an echo of thousands through the centuries who have mouthed them? The next instruction: "Walk slowly . . . four times around the Basilica, while praying silently seven decades of the Rosary and one Creed at the end." I had no rosary. The interloper feeling returned as I moved my fingers in my jacket pocket, faking the presence of the holy beads.

A queue formed before the first penitential bed. Rain in torrents now; I danced from foot to foot to keep warm. A kindly looking gray-haired man I'd seen on the ferry approached and introduced himself. Frank from Galway. Did I have a rosary? *He knows. I've been found out.* "No, I've left mine at home," I mumbled. He extended a weather-roughened hand to offer me his extra beads, brown nuggets missing the cross at the end. Gratefully, I took them, cradling this mark of legitimacy, the holy jewels which adorned arms, necks, wrists of all other pilgrims.

Circling St. Brigid's bed, I watched for sharp stones. Frank approached with Anna, a friend from Galway. "You're going the wrong way," she cautioned gently. Looking me in the face, her eyes full of compassion, she asked, "Are ye on your own?" "On your own . . ." The words lingered, reverberating as though in a sound chamber. Again, I fought tears. "On my own, yes," I finally said. "This way," she directed. I began to walk.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . ." I circled St. Brendan's, St. Catherine's, then St. Columcille's beds. The hypnotic power of my Catholic upbringing enveloped me. I don't know how long it took to complete the first three beds. But I remember the pelting rain, my knees beginning to bruise, a Franciscan nun who walked before me, black habit trailing over reddened, crusted feet. And I recall when I started to weep in earnest. At the end of one round of prayers, I slowed down and focused on Bob, allowing myself to picture his face. I remembered his mother, her courageous spirit, how he had cared for her until her death. How I had left him just two weeks later. *A torrent of tears. What if something happens to him, this magical gift to my life, someone who loves me more than I deserve? A crushing sense of isolation. I am overwhelmed by loss, potential loss, by not being the person I want to be.* I knelt before St. Columba's cross and raised my face to the

sky. Rain and tears drenched my hair, filled my mouth, cascading onto the ground. "Are ye on your own?" the voice echoes, again and again.

Shamed by the intensity of my weeping, I fled the penitential beds for my dorm. Our rooms were now off limits, but no one stopped me. I sought refuge between the blankets and tried to suture the tears. *I'm not cheating. I'm not sleeping. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not.* I pleaded with nameless ghosts, God, the saints, any being who might listen. *I'm not worthy yet, but I will be, I can be, I beg you.* The spirit of the penitent had entered me.

I splashed water on my face to subdue the tears, returning to find the beds slightly less crowded. I shed the pamphlet; instructions now seemed directed from within. Just as I finished the prayer cycle, a group of pilgrims entered a modern dining hall. The fast, I discovered, is not total. One is allowed a daily "Lough Derg" meal—black tea or coffee with dry toast or oatcakes. An improvement, apparently, upon the traditional fare of "Lough Derg soup"—hot water with salt and pepper. I sat down with Anna and Frank. Bridie, also from Galway, joined us. She leaned conspiratorially forward and told of finding candy wrappers in the dorm's trash bin the previous year. "Disgusting!" she delivered with feeling, brushing back a perfectly coifed lock that had miraculously survived the torrential rain. Everyone concurred. A flush of shame on my neck. Tremors of fear that the fruit and nut bar would fall from my pocket. *Please, God, keep it hidden. I'll not touch it till I'm back in Derry.*

After the 9:30 night prayer and Benediction, the 24-hour vigil without sleep began. The huge door of the Basilica shut ritually, the reminder that this night metaphorically preserves imprisonment in Purgatory. Up until the 18th century, pilgrims had a Requiem Mass offered for them before entering the cave, rendering death perilously real. The liminal world opened with the sound of chants rising into

the dome. *Vene, Spiritus, Sanctum.* The Latin words resurrected the Masses from my childhood. The cantor's sweet soprano nearly lulled me to sleep. A second priest sang over a huge host held out to the congregation, a celebration of the metaphor, the body and blood of Christ. Transformation. The faces surrounding me lit with hope. At the close of the service, the priest instructed us to fight fatigue and hunger. A crusading spirit, an air of momentary frivolity as he directed us to elbow anyone caught dozing.

Round of prayers now began inside the Basilica, punctuated by breaks in an adjacent lounge. After the third station, my head began to droop. I escaped to the terrace. The moon rose over the lough. Lanterns sat on the stone walls, casting ghostly shapes over the blackwater. Wind sang through my bones, deepening the chill. When I thought I was alone, I began to do jumping jacks. From the shadows, a figure moved. I leaped back from the black haired woman I'd seen on the bus. "Aye, you're grand," she laughed to assuage my embarrassment. "First time?" I asked after she introduced herself as Margaret. "Oh, no," she shook her head, a slight smile easing the sad eyes. "But first for a purpose . . ." I waited for elaboration, but she fell silent.

I saw Anna at the next break. Five a.m. she told me. Shudders encased my body. All the deprivations heighten at the final hour of darkness. *This is how it was in the cave.* A surge of longing—for Bob, a warm bed, a sense of wholeness. I paced outside until light gathered through an orange/gray mist as smoky clouds lifted into dawn. The priest's words rang out from the Basilica. "Arise and thank the Lord." *I'd kill for a cup of tea.*

Morning Mass. Every kind of longing now raw and immediate: sex, food, warmth, *need.* I was a sham; I couldn't even stand one night of deprivation. Every trace of anthropological adventure was gone. Why had I come?

The Service of Reconciliation followed. I watched my fellow pilgrims approach the line of priests seated in the

confessor position. All men. I dreaded confession. As a child, I'd tell of stealing quarters from my mother's bag, of lying, eating meat on Friday. Never the dark secrets of doubting God, hating sister Cyril, reveling in the deep pleasure of my body. At the end, I'd add an extra sin to cover the lies of omission. Now, I folded my arms across my chest defiantly. *I'll tell them nothing. All I want is a cup of tea.* My turn. I spoke quickly, spilled out a few minor sins. "Is that all?" the priest urged. *My God, he knows there's more.* I skulked back to my seat, mortified.

A break in early afternoon. Margaret sat down with me and sighed. "It's the worst over now. Are you glad you came?" I looked out over the lough. An affirmative seemed too simple, a negative wrong. "It's an experience," I said. Remembering that she'd had a specific purpose, I asked. "And you?" No direct answer. A long silence, then a story. "Aye, it was Halloween," she began. *A party near Belfast. Before the cease-fire. Her niece turning eleven. Friends gathered for the event, a roomful of laughing children, joyful until the men in black masks burst into the room, all orifice, noses and mouths and the hungry, gaping holes of guns exploding in a blood bath of children, innocence shattered, a black despair descending and Oh, God, we were never political, why us, why us? She weeps now, chest heaving with sobs. The suffering of centuries, nothing more, nothing less than Margaret's grief. What stone will roll back and flood light here, what vision transform her world, whose confession make right the revelation of this story? Where are the St. Patricks, the Fionn Mac Cumhalls, the heroes whose swords will slay these demons? What sustenance, finally, will sate this woman's hunger?*

I took Margaret's hand. My eyes brimmed with tears. We sat on the stone wall for a long while. A brilliant sun blazed overhead, seeping into the warm stone. Death denied, the purgatorial shadow lifted. We rested against warm gray granite, lifted our faces to the light, let the heat

penetrate to our bruised soles. A gradual lightness built between us as we made our way toward the water. The hunger gone, for now. Moments outside time. If religion means anything, it lives in finding some shred of such peace in everyday life. At the water's edge, where we had knelt and prayed at the final stations, Margaret turned to me, her face bright. She repeated, "Aye, the worse is over. Aren't you glad you came?"

Was I glad I came? Why did any of us come? The poet Patrick Kavanagh penned a now-famous poem after his journey to Lough Derg in 1942. He wrote of the pilgrim's prayers for good harvests and health, and also of hopes for exams passed, indigestion cured. Not in jest did Kavanagh write of such mundanities; neither did he mock less than spiritually lofty goals. A devout Catholic, he chronicled the relief from daily suffering which urges an average 20,000 pilgrims each summer to "the loneliest place on earth." But if many pursue relief from quotidian pain, they also seek the transcendence which drove medieval peoples to "the other world" at the edge of Europe, where the "impossible becomes possible." Did Margaret find that edge of possibility? Could such transformation come to individuals? Or does it hover at the edge of a spiritual horde, dependent for its life on shared, liminal space?

I watched Margaret, wondered if she knew Kavanagh's words:

On Lough Derg, too, the silver strands
Of the individual sometimes show
Through the fabric of prison anonymity
One man's private trouble transcending the divinity
Of the prayer-locked multitude
A vein of humanity that can bleed
Through the thickest hide.

And this:

Lough Derg overwhelmed the individual imagination
 And the personal tragedy
 Only God thinks of a dying sparrow
 In the middle of a war.

Margaret and I moved along the stone pathways past the penitential beds to the dock where new pilgrims now arrived, ready to begin their stations, the cycle resumed. The penitential beds now seemed like a foreign country in a distant past. We eyed the pilgrims, not smugly, but with compassion. *Yes, I am one of them now—a believing, questioning, melded contradiction, facing myself, seeking communion. "On my own," yet lost in Margaret's Halloween night of unspeakable tragedy. The individual stands solitary, the collective owns each story of suffering. God does think of a dying sparrow in the middle of a war.*

We walked back to the dining hall. One more Lough Derg meal before the evening service. A friend of Margaret's joined us. "Grand to see an American here!" she exclaimed. "And are ye Catholic?" Shame surged through my veins. What could I say? I hadn't been to Mass since Christmas the previous year. I thought back to Helena's "cocktail." With my pieced together beliefs, was I still a Catholic? When I scan the sacristy and see men in authority, I flee church for long periods. But I return to a sense of myself as Catholic, deeply moved by the transformative symbols: the body and blood of Christ, the Stations of the Cross, tales of suffering and redemption. Worlds of spiritual possibility. Unlike many other Americans of my generation, I can't abandon Catholicism to become a Buddhist, Quaker, or Unitarian. I remain, in my mind and heart and cultural world view, a Catholic. But what did that mean in Ireland in 1995? What did it mean at Lough Derg?

The sun was still high in the mid-summer sky when Margaret and I reluctantly departed from the dining hall to

ready for evening service. Before we rose, I turned back to Margaret. "You're a practicing Catholic?" I queried. "Oh, aye," she responded, shrugging her shoulders. This, I finally understood, was incidental to the real experience, the story she had recounted on the stone wall, the deep hunger we shared.

"Lough Derg is not strictly about the Church. It's about faith," a friend declared when I asked him why he continued to go. "Lough Derg was there before the Church." The earliest monks deliberately sought out this geographic and psychic edge, away from the centers of ecclesiastic power. Anthropologist Lawrence J. Taylor calls this a "historical dialectic" between the freedom of the "horizontal" edge and the constraints of the "vertical" church hierarchy. A journey to Lough Derg, like keening at wakes, visits to holy wells, and other "horizontal" practices, became a form of resistance to the "vertical" world. Now, the Church operates the pilgrimage. But I felt other spirits suffuse the stories threaded through official prayers. It is faith which drives this penitential practice, drenches the ground of Station Island as steadily as the pounding rain, still permeates life in an Ireland increasingly skeptical of Rome's authority.

Evening Mass, then night prayer and benediction. Time stopped, frozen in the lilting echoes of prayer and song, *Vene, Spiritus, Sanctum*. My mind elsewhere now. I prayed with my body, as Anna from Galway had told me I would. At 10 p.m., we walked from the Basilica back to the dorm for our first sleep in two days. I lingered for a moment at the lough shore beyond the penitential beds. A pink sunset bathed the sky. This, truly the edge of the world. Anna and I wished one another good night like giddy schoolchildren. Sleep! The anticipation felt delicious. I remember climbing into the wooden bunk, then the ring of the 6 a.m. bell. A sense of dislocation, a lightness of being as I woke. *I really did this?* I rubbed one blistered aching foot. *My body?* Wind

and slashing rain had whipped the building all night, someone reported in the bathroom. I had heard nothing.

All smiles and congratulations at morning Mass. "Rough, wasn't it?" Frank from Galway shook his head and smiled. "The toughest pilgrimage in the world." After the service, we visited the pilgrimage shop. I bought holy cards and a small plastic bottle for Lough Derg holy water. A talisman to remind me six months hence that I had truly been here. In the dorm's bathroom, I found Margaret seated at the low row of sinks that had puzzled me the first day. I joined her, lifting one foot under the cascade of warm water. Toes first, then heels and soles slowly came to life as I massaged soap into crevices. In banishing the flesh, I had rediscovered it. A loving gratitude, a deep sensuality enveloped me. This is religion. Not an institution but an embrace—of body as well as spirit, of all who surround us, of the pink clouds in the evening, the whip lashing rain, the unspeakable, and the joyous.

Patrick Kavanagh's reminder: "A heap of stones anywhere is consecrated by love's terrible need." This, I now knew. One last time, I knelt at the lough's edge. I held out my arms, not to renounce the world, but to gather it around me, welcoming all that might enter and transform. Above all, the stories.

I helped Margaret carry her bags downstairs. We sat tranquil in the morning sunshine. Her pain of last evening seemed, for now, cleansed. "Only one more day of fasting," she reminded me. *Yes, I am one of them now. I can carry on the fast until midnight. The devil banished. Well, maybe a bit of milk in my tea. I can almost taste its smooth creaminess!* The boatman, his tweed cap perched to one side, steered the open wooden dory towards the dock, ready to carry us back. Across to the other world. A riveting desire still held us to this heap of stones" whose magic had forced us inward, yet delivered communion. "Love's terrible need."

Back in Derry, I kept my fast. A few days later, I had

dinner with friends. Still savoring unexpected flavors in foods, I exclaimed over the olives and smoked salmon, a creamy chicken casserole, potatoes boiled with a richness I had never known. My friends laughed at my ecstatic post-pilgrimage state. Slightly embarrassed but insistent, I tried to narrate Lough Derg without trivializing it. I remembered what so many had told me before I went. "There is no description. You really must experience it." Brian, a non-practicing but spiritually inclined Catholic, posed a question, sympathetically, but with just an edge of incredulity, "Do you mind if I ask . . . You . . . you had a spiritual experience?" I answered without hesitation, "Yes." I went to Lough Derg unprepared at best, cynical at worst. An Irish-American with dubious credentials as a Catholic, I was not scorned. I was welcomed into a community of hungry souls, an imperfect member, perhaps not hungry enough, but embraced all the same. I left cradling this fragile communion as the heart of religion.

I remembered saying good-bye to Anna and Frank, who were to continue on the bus to Galway when I disembarked in Ballyshannon. We'd talked all the way of family and home and holiday celebrations. We drank "minerals," sugary fluids we were allowed, anticipating the next day's meal. As the bus slowed in Ballyshannon, hugs all around, good wishes for my journey, my time in Ireland, hopes that I would visit their respective farms outside Galway. I clung to Anna, who had been so kind to me. As I finally pulled away, she smiled and said, "And will ye go back to Lough Derg?" I just laughed, saying I'd think about it. Now, as I turned to Brian, I knew that I would go back. Perhaps not to Station Island, but to all that it represents. To the mystical edge where "the impossible becomes possible," to the quest for communion, to the stories that lift us beyond the self. Yes, I will go back. I still have the hunger.