

The Aran Island ferry docked a mile from the bus station to connect to Galway. Disembarking offered a powerful dose of the strain of packing 25 pounds of gear over a rocky trail, following behind throngs of beach-combing kids who slog along in unlaced boots, puffing on cigarettes, oblivious to the sand or the sea.

One healthy specimen blocked the trail to untie his boots. He'd laced them to keep from tripping on the slippery docks. Took him a minute to fuss the tongue right and loosen the strings to properly drag. However, one of the elements of my problem, solved the problem. Before I walked 20 paces onto a busy parking lot, a ferry agent shouted to a young van driver to give me a lift to catch the bus to Galway.

Galway was to be my first experience of an Irish city. Agents at the bus station pointed to the taxi stand on the west end of the town square. In 20 minutes, a taxi swished into Corrib Village, the housing center for National University. Travel agents for the poetry and prose festival expedited check-in by prearranging room assignments. After a short walk across campus, I found the right building.

Taking the stairs to the room, I estimated 175.75 semesters had passed since I lived in a dormitory. My eyes smarted remembering the farewell party after ol' Dean Click ruled I'd make a better ranchhand than a student in his department. On a Fort Worth train, I kept hoping the cars

would derail on a high bridge and plunge into a deep abyss to forever bury my shame. Along about Brownwood, it hit me that unless we became mired in a sandbar on the Colorado River, there wasn't a chance of being drowned on the Santa Fe line to San Angelo.

All it took to unpack was a laundry sack. A limited clothing allotment lasts 10 days unless a major spill of red chili soup splatters on the shirt front, or a splotch of chocolate mousse lands on a pants leg.

The laundromat filled with students a fifth my age. The strong Irish detergent turned every garment a light blue, except for a pair of navy socks hosting the new color scheme. Bouncing around on hard bus cushions and absorbing the salt water on the ferries wrinkled my countenance so much, the kids insisted on lifting the wet wash to the dryer. I didn't object as I was beginning to notice weariness deeper seated than the wrinkles.

Next afternoon, buses unloaded the registrants for the festival, who traveled as a group. The only familiar face was a real friendly writer, Alice McDermott. Her newest book, "Charming Billy," won the National Book Award in 1999. Mrs. McDermott brings her children along to conferences and makes herself accessible to all her fans. She's the kind of celebrity easy to wish well.

The festival opened in earnest on Sunday night and ran for four days. The slate of novelists and poets covered a wide range of nationalities, reaching from the Irish to a

Chinese poet and on to an African American. Scholars from the university held two morning sessions on Irish literature, featuring Joyce and Yeats.

Frank McCourt, the author of "Angela Ashes," made a warm presentation. The group landing at Shannon Airport saw the Limerick neighborhood, where Mr. McCourt set his book on his tragic childhood. He brought on the full power of his Irish blood by holding the audience under a spell for an hour and stealing the show on the panels.

Studying the Irish Americans or Irish writers, you come to realize they don't have to rehearse. In the midst of a reading on the Gaelic language, for example, a poet stopped and said, "I tried to find the equivalent of mañana in Gaelic, but failed to find a word having that much urgency."

On the third day, we sailed to Innismore, the largest of the Aran Islands, for reading in a stone cliff fortress going back to the fifth century. Actors and actresses performed historic sketches. Tall, handsome figures stood on the rock walls, waving red and yellow Celtic banners in ancient dance. A flutist played an eerie tune as withdrawn from the crowd as if playing in another world.

The winds whistling through the cracks in the stones and intermittent mist failed to stop the performance. The likes of Joyce Carol Oates and Edna O'Brien read right along after obscure writers making their first show. Think what you may of "word people," (and that's what the participants

and followers of literary festivals are), but give them credit for grand style.

At the end, we walked down the steep hill to the harbor in a rain too hard to stay dry under ponchos. Taken back for a bit on the slippery road, I remembered what a guy named Roddy Doyle had just read: "I can eat an elephant if I take small enough bites." Backed by his humor, I made it down the hill without falling.