

Bench on the bluff

by [J. Barrie Shepherd](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue

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Skerries we called them  
back on Scotland's black and jagged coastline,  
these far-ranging rows of age-old rock stretching  
parallel to the shore and descending, sharp and menacing,  
to the water's edge, and then beyond, emerging now and then  
from the green and ever mobile to and fro with a seething flash  
of white and an exploring colony of gulls, brown ducks,  
or a motley clutch of gossiping eiders. Far to the left,  
where stone is overcome by sand, Higgins Beach begins  
and a bobbing batch of black-clad surfers paddle off  
still searching for their perfect wave.

Out there, farther than eye can scan, lies Europe.

"On a clear day," Mhairi and I will claim, "you can see Portugal."

And there are conditions when a bank of cloud on the horizon,  
or some faint mirage shaped on the distant gleam  
can seem the cliffs and headlands of Iberia.

Time was when, sitting here, I might conjure up  
John Keats, seeing myself as bold, intrepid Cortez, silent,  
wondering on his peak in Darien. These latter days it's old Ulysses  
comes to mind, as Tennyson has him, scanning beneath,  
beyond the arch of rich experience, yearning to launch  
one final expedition, to claim whatever still remains,  
set sail for distant Portugal.