

Digging

By Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

- 15 the gold-robed Nunc Dimittis³ of their certain choir.
Where's my child's hymnbook, the poems edged in gold leaf,
the heaven I worship with no faith in heaven,
as the Word turned toward poetry in its grief?
Ah, bread of life, that only love can leaven!
- 20 Ah, Joseph, though no man ever dies in his own country,⁴
the grateful grass will grow thick from his heart.

1984



Seamus Heaney

b. 1939

More prominently than any poet since Yeats, Seamus Heaney has put Irish poetry back at the center of British literary studies. His first full-length collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), ushered in a period of renewed interest in Irish poetry generally, and Ulster poetry in particular; the subsequent attention to poets like Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, and Paul Muldoon owes a great deal to the scope of Heaney's popularity.

As a great number of Heaney's early poems bear poignant witness, he spent his childhood in rural County Derry, Northern Ireland; his family was part of the Catholic minority in Ulster, and his experiences growing up were for that reason somewhat atypical. The critic Irvin Ehrenpreis maps the matrix of Heaney's contradictory position as an Irish poet: "Speech is never simple, in Heaney's conception. He grew up as an Irish Catholic boy in a land governed by Protestants whose tradition is British. He grew up on a farm in his country's northern, industrial region. As a person, therefore, he springs from the old divisions of his nation." His experience was split not only along religious lines, then, but also national and linguistic ones; in some of his early poetry Heaney suggests the split through the paired names—"Mossbawn" (the very English name of his family's fifty-acre farm) and "Anahorish" (Irish *anach fhuor uisce*, "place of clear water," where he attended primary school). As a result, Heaney's is a liminal poetry—a "door into the dark"—and Heaney stands in the doorway, with one foot in each world. Heaney makes brilliant use of the linguistic resources of both the traditions he inherited, drawing on the heritage of English Romanticism while also relying heavily on Irish-language association in lines like "There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies, / But best of all was the warm thick slobber / of frogspawn that grew like clotted water / In the shade of the banks" (*Death of a Naturalist*).

When he was twelve, Heaney won a scholarship to a Catholic boarding school in Londonderry (now Derry) then went on to Queen's University, Belfast, which was the center of a vital new poetic movement in the 1960s. He was influenced by poets who were able to transform the local into the universal, especially Ted Hughes and Robert Frost. As an "Ulster poet," it has fallen to Heaney to use his voice and his position to comment on Northern Ireland's sectarian violence; ironically enough, however, his most explicitly "political" poems were published before the flare-up of the Troubles that began in 1969, and his most self-conscious response to Ulster's strife, the volume *North* (1975), uses historical and mythological frameworks to address the current political situation obliquely. The Irish critic Seamus Deane has

3. "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace," sung at the end of Mass.

4. The line echoes Jesus's comment that no prophet is honored in his own country (Mark 6.4). On one level,

Joseph may be Jesus's father, mourning his son's early death. *Midsummer* as a whole is addressed to Walcott's friend Joseph Brodsky, the exiled Russian poet.

written, "Heaney is very much in the Irish tradition in that he has learned, more successfully than most, to conceive of his personal experience in terms of his country's history"; for Heaney, as the popular saying has it, the personal is the political, and the political the personal. His most successful poems dealing with Ulster's political and religious situation are probably those treating neolithic bodies found preserved in peat bogs. Heaney was living in Belfast, lecturing at Queen's University, at the inception of the Troubles; as a Catholic, he felt a need to convey the urgency of the situation without falling into the easy Republican—or Unionist, for that matter—rhetoric. It was at this point that Heaney discovered the anthropologist P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1969), which documents (with riveting photographs) the discovery of sacrificial victims preserved in bogs for 2,000 years. Heaney intuitively knew that he had found his "objective correlative"—what he has called his "emblems of adversity"—with which to explore the Troubles.

Like Yeats, Heaney has, from the very start, enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim. His poems have a surface simplicity; his early poetry especially relishes the carefully observed detail of rural Irish life.

Punishment¹

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

5 It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

10 I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

15 Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:²

20 her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

1. A young girl's body, dating from the first century A.D., was recovered from a German bog in 1951. The body exhibited various punishments bestowed upon adulterous

women by ancient Germanic peoples.
2. A wooden container.

1984

25 you were flaxen-haired,
 undernourished, and your
 tar-black face was beautiful.
 My poor scapegoat,
 I almost love you
 30 but would have cast, I know,
 the stones of silence.
 I am the artful voyeur
 of your brain's exposed
 and darkened combs,
 35 your muscles' webbing
 and all your numbered bones:
 I who have stood dumb
 when your betraying sisters,
 cauled³ in tar,
 40 wept by the railings,⁴
 who would connive
 in civilized outrage
 yet understand the exact
 and tribal, intimate revenge.

1975

The Skunk

Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble¹
 At a funeral Mass, the skunk's tail
 Paraded the skunk. Night after night
 I expected her like a visitor.
 5 The refrigerator whinnied into silence.
 My desk light softened beyond the verandah.
 Small oranges loomed in the orange tree.
 I began to be tense as a voyeur.
 After eleven years I was composing
 10 Love-letters again, broaching the word "wife"
 Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel
 Had mutated into the night earth and air
 Of California. The beautiful, useless
 Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.
 15 The aftermath of a mouthful of wine
 Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.
 And there she was, the intent and glamorous,
 Ordinary, mysterious skunk,

3. Capped.

4. In Belfast, women may still be shaven, stripped, tarred
 and handcuffed to railings by the Irish Republican Army

for keeping company with British soldiers [Heaney's note].
 1. A sleeveless vest worn by priests.

20 Mythologized, demythologized.
 Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.
 It all came back to me last night, stirred
 By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
 Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
 For the black plunge-line nightdress.
 25 Hear it calling out to every creature.
 And they drink these waters, although it is dark here
 because it is the night.
 I am repining for this living fountain.
 Within this bread of life I see it plain
 30 although it is the night.

1978

The Toome Road

1975

One morning early I met armoured cars
 In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
 All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
 And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.
 5 How long were they approaching down my roads
 As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.
 I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
 Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
 Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
 10 Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell
 Among all of those with their back doors on the latch
 For the bringer of bad news, that small-hours visitant
 Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?
 Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones. . .
 15 O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
 It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
 The invisible, untoppled omphalos.¹

1979

The Singer's House

When they said Carrickfergus¹ I could hear
 the frosty echo of saltminers' picks.
 I imagined it, chambered and glinting,
 a township built of light.
 5 What do we say any more
 to conjure the salt of our earth?
 So much comes and is gone
 that should be crystal and kept,

¹ British soldiers [Heaney's note].
 by priests.

1. The navel, or central point (Greek).

1. Seaport just north of Belfast on the northeast coast of
 Ireland.