

Perhaps this reflects the speedy way that the poem came to him; Heaney wrote it in February 1963, sitting in an armchair in his shared flat in Wellington Park, waiting for a flatmate to cook supper. It was first published in the *Kilkenny Magazine* later that year. Late in Heaney's life, Michael Longley would refer to these early poems as 'little miracles', and the last poem in *Death of a Naturalist* was dedicated to Longley: it is an envoi of astounding self-confidence.

PERSONAL HELICON

As a child, they could not keep me from
wells

And old pumps with buckets and
windlasses.

I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the
smells

Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.

I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.

So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.

When you dragged out long roots from the
soft mulch,

A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and
tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my
reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some
spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

The confidence was not misplaced. *Death of a Naturalist* was widely reviewed by major critics and won four prizes, including the Somerset Maugham Award, which provided a grant to a young writer that had to be spent on foreign travel and would help bring the Heaneys to the French Pyrenees and Spain a couple of years later.

Inevitably, in some less talented Northern writers, notably James Simmons, a pulse of envy began to beat. Simmons was six years older than Heaney and midway through an erratic career as a teacher, balladeer, and determined hellraiser. His undisciplined poetry shared some of these characteristics. Always keen to assume the role of literary entrepreneur, in 1968, Simmons started an influential magazine called *The Honest Ulsterman*, with the intention of challenging the

Northern Irish ‘establishment’ and what Simmons and some of his contributors saw as the ‘clique’ of Longley, Mahon, and Heaney. It also provided a showcase for his own work. Heaney contributed poems to it, but the journal also became an outlet for critiques and parodies of his own work. In 1969, the journal ran a competition for a poem ‘written in the Heaney manner’, allegedly to be judged by Heaney himself.

Death of a Naturalist inaugurated what became a remarkable connection between Heaney and his readership. The book sold well for a first poetry collection, but more significantly, it created a following which would grow. Heaney’s public profile was coming into focus. Personal charisma had something to do with it, and an ability to read his own work to riveting effect (unfortunately, an ability not given to many poets). His voice could also be heard (from 1968) on a recording issued by Garech Browne’s Claddagh Records. (Later, living in Wicklow, the Heaneys would encounter the glamorous and rather rackets world which Browne gathered around himself at Luggala, his legendary house in the mountains.) With Longley and Hammond, Heaney organised a trailblazing poetry tour of Northern Ireland, called ‘Room to Rhyme’, in May 1968. His unforced skill as a lecturer made him much in demand. But all this was secondary

to a poetic voice which, on one level, connected immediately with what many Irish people knew: a rural past slipping away, a violent and traumatic history, a social integument based on mutually observed avoidances. Reading him, they felt they were in good hands. On another level, that voice was heard and understood by readers far beyond Ireland, not only for its extra-sensory powers of observation, its humanity, and its generosity of vision, but also for its ability to craft language with an unerring economy and to hit on the utterly unexpected, yet utterly appropriate, word.

Early on, this was what drew him to the attention of major critics such as Christopher Ricks, John Carey, and Helen Vendler, while continuing to alienate those invested in a more restricted enterprise, such as Al Alvarez and Ian Hamilton. ‘What I was after’, he would later recall, ‘was a way of making the central tradition of English poetry, which we’d observed in college and university, absorb our own particular eccentric experience’. From 1969—the date of his next collection, *Door into the Dark*—the ‘eccentric experience’ of Northern Ireland would come into international focus, as what Heaney often termed the ‘noxious’ elements of life there were released into the ether. And this too would affect the contract between Heaney and his readership.

Many of the poems in Heaney's second collection were written before the violent assault on marchers for civil rights which sparked off the Northern crisis in 1968, but the volume is full of explosive little epiphanies which read presciently and prophetically ('Dream', 'The Forge', 'Thatcher'). Along with memorable evocations of country life, love, and music, such as 'The Given Note', there was a strong sense of Northern self-consciousness, notably in 'Lough Neagh Sequence'. (Eels, like frogs and rats, became a haunting presence in Heaney's poetic world.) Above all, the collection ended with the prophetic 'Bogland', a step into the metaphor for the memory of historical violence which would become famous, and controversial, when he published *North* six years later. Looking back from the standpoint of the interviews published in *Stepping Stones* in 2008, he would describe it 'like opening a gate'.

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening—
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

Writing to Michael Longley after the publication of *Door into the Dark*, Heaney described it as an effort to tap into the self via 'secret rather than public poems': a search to find a mode of expression that 'blends discipline and disarms disciplinarians'. But there was more to it than that.

Heaney's notebooks for 1969 show a preoccupation with history, particularly the 1798 Rising, when a Republican enterprise briefly brought Northern Presbyterians and Catholic radicals together; it is the subject of a much-worked-upon but never broadcast radio play, among other things.

The tentative politics of *Door into the Dark* took a more decided form in a celebrated poem about the 1798 Rising, 'Requiem for the Croppies', with its powerful closing image of the pocketfuls of barley seeds buried with the slaughtered rebels and sprouting from the ground a year later. After 1969, with the British Army on the streets of Belfast and the birth of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, this could look like an invocation of blood sacrifice in the style of Patrick Pearse, and Heaney was acutely conscious of this—so much so that he stopped reading it in public performances. From 1969, the question of the public stance of the poet became pressing—an issue that would separate Heaney from some of his contemporaries. A supporter of the civil rights movement (he had been on those early marches) and fiercely conscious of the injustices under which the Catholic population lived, he was not actively involved in politics. But a good deal of unpublished work from these years suggests an angrier commitment than appeared

in public—or in retrospect. ‘For the Catholic writer’, he remarked to Seamus Deane ten years later, ‘I think the Troubles were a critical moment, a turning point, possibly a vision of some kind of fulfilment. The blueprint in the Catholic writer’s head predicted that a history would fulfil itself in a United Ireland or something. These are very fundamental blueprints’. Heaney’s own blueprint was to emerge as less cut-and-dried than this, and he was unprepared to see violence as a necessary preliminary to any long-desired political outcome. But a draft poem in his notebook for this time called ‘Ulster Politics’ uses Swiftian images of blocked bowels and necessary ruptures, while a series of interrogative verses about his own political commitment rehearses imagined slights and accusations against himself as a ‘smiling public man’ unprepared to align openly with his ‘tribe’.

Significantly, this was also a juncture when his outlook was widening in all sorts of directions. With two Faber collections in print, he was writing for main-line journals in Britain, such as *The Listener* and the *New Statesman*, rather than local outlets such as the *Honest Ulsterman*; though Heaney placed occasional pieces there, his enterprise was consciously international. Simmons, among others, would not view this ambition generously. More surprisingly, corre-

spondence from Brian Friel with other writers in the 1970s, before his close friendship with Heaney, suggests a certain asperity about Heaney's 'consciously cultivated' approach to his work and easy manipulation of a new audience in England.

But the horizons were widening beyond Britain. The year Heaney spent, with his young family, as a visiting lecturer in Berkeley, California, in 1970 was a vital broadening of opportunities, both personal and intellectual. It was not merely a question of—as he put it—'silence, exile and sunning'. Given his formalist literary aesthetic, he found the laid-back students, the free-wheeling academic culture, the radical politics worn on multicoloured sleeves, and the novelty of Californian life in the late hippie era unimaginably different from Queen's and Belfast. The excitement is tangible in letters he wrote to friends at home. He was experimenting with writing fiction (never published), revelling in the intellectual camaraderie of people from all kinds of backgrounds, shaking off 'northern clay'. Nonetheless, Irish connections were important: Thomas Parkinson, a distinguished Yeatsian, and Robert Tracy, who wrote incisively about Irish literature from the eighteenth century on, were on the faculty, as was the critic and (later) great historical novelist Thomas Flanagan, who became one of Heaney's closest friends. Flanagan

and Heaney would in subsequent years spend much time making summer expeditions to historic Irish sites; it was a stop-off with Flanagan at Moran's pub and restaurant at Kilcolgan, County Galway, en route to Yeats's tower at Ballylee, that inspired Heaney's celebrated poem 'Oysters'.

Through the Flanagans the Heaneys met the controversial critic and politician Conor Cruise O'Brien and his wife, the poet Máire Mhac an tSaoi, and many others. But there were also American poets in the vicinity, such as Gary Snyder and Robert Bly. Oddly, though Heaney was already familiar with Czesław Miłosz's poetry in translation, and the Polish poet was in residence at Berkeley too, they did not meet at this juncture; his friendships with Miroslav Holub and Zbigniew Herbert would also come later. The literary culture of Berkeley (which also took in the short-story writer Leonard Michaels, a friend of Heaney's) acted as a kick-start for the next phase of Heaney's writing life, but in terms of approach rather than opening up new material; as he put it himself, 'what the Californian distance did was to lead me back into the Irish memory bank . . . origin and the inward path'. Even more significantly, Flanagan's powerfully historicised approach to Irish literature had given him 'a more

charged-up sense of Yeats and Joyce . . . I was starting to see my own situation as a “Northern poet” more in relation to the wound and the work of Ireland as a whole’. This recognition infuses and penetrates the poems in his next two books.

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