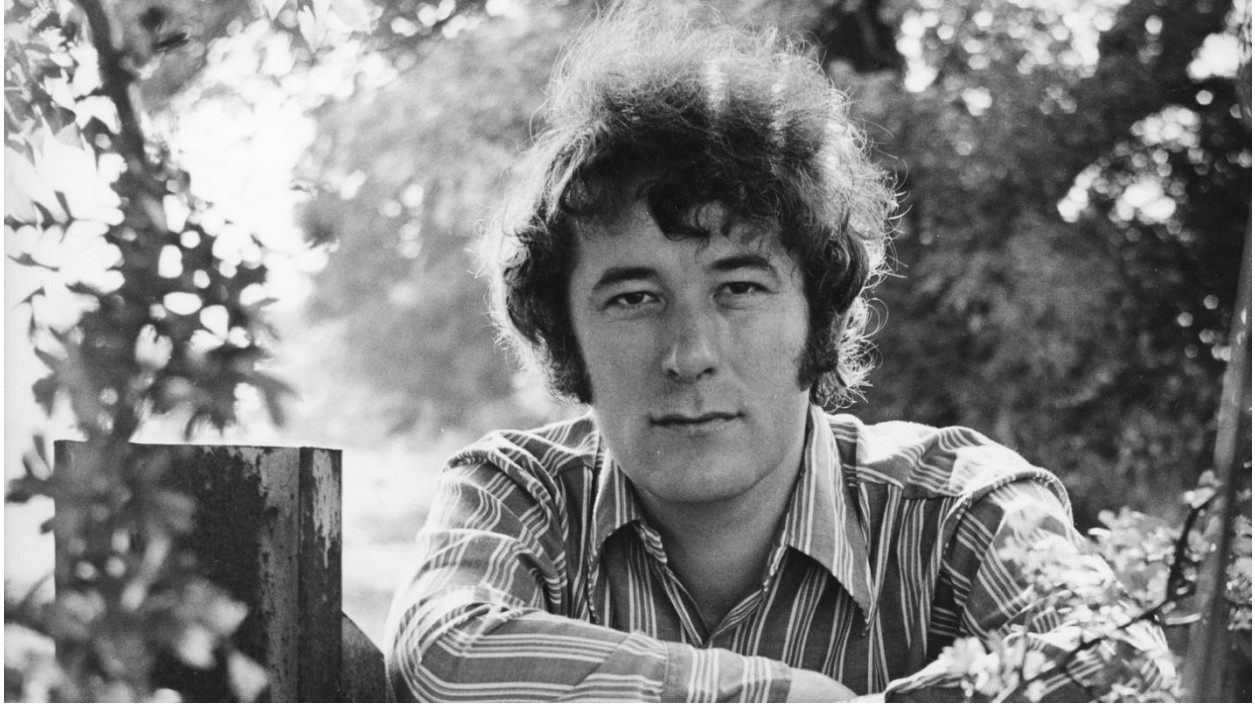


SEAMUS HEANEY ZOOM PACKET



I hope you enjoy this packet of poems by Seamus Heaney, one of the treasures of his native Ireland, and of our English language in general. As ever, feel free to skim, ponder, and savor these many poems. You can study them before the zoom discussion, or bring them along and read with us as we share our responses. You can print this document and have a pretty nifty booklet, or just open it on another device during our zoom. Obviously, there are so many that we won't expect to cover each poem in our time together in the virtual world, but I hope this collection provides much pleasure beyond our class. We can talk about whichever poems the group members nominate for discussion.

NOTES

“Mid-Term Break” The subject is the death of the poet’s four-year-old brother Christopher, struck by a car outside their farmhouse.

“Requiem for the Croppies” The poem is set in Wexford in the 1798 Rebellion, when at Vinegar Hill the ill-armed Irish rebels died in great numbers. “Croppy” was a term applied to the rebels who wore their hair cropped as an expression of sympathy for the French revolutionaries.

“Clearances” Sequence of elegies for his mother, Margaret Kathleen McCann. After the nine-line introductory poem there are eight sonnets. Number 3 is particularly well-loved in Ireland.

“Mossbawn Sunlight” Dedicated to Mary Heaney, Heaney’s paternal aunt. Mossbawn was the first family farm.

“Alphabets” Commissioned by the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard University and first delivered at Sanders Theater in 1984. The poem traces the development of language in the poet’s education. The sets of letters that represent the sounds and glyphs of language as a child first hears it form the basis of basic skills, critical thinking, and more refined long-term uses. Learning the alphabet underpins the first stage at school. Subsequent alphabets appear as interest and studies develop. Heaney runs through his range of English, Latin, Irish, and Greek from Anahorish Primary school to Saint Columb’s secondary boarding school to Queens University in Belfast. The poem ends with Heaney in the present delivering his composition in a lecture theater at an American university.

A helpful list of some of the references in the poem may be found here:

<https://fawbie.info/the-haw-lantern/alphabets/>

“Squarings xxiv” Part II of Heaney’s 1991 collection *Seeing Things* is entitled “Squarings.” The title is a term from the game of marbles. The forty-eight poems in “Squarings” are each made up of twelve lines, four tercets. The poem here is the twenty-fourth in the sequence. “Squarings” was later published in a special edition as a separate volume with an illustration for each poem commissioned from artist Sol LeWitt.

“An Ulster Teilight” Printed on a limited edition Christmas card. A memory of a gift from a member of a family of Protestant neighbors with whom the Catholic Heaneys were on good terms.

“An Old Refrain” Introducing various Elizabethan, mostly Shakespearean, terms for plants familiar from Heaney’s childhood.



Digging

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.



Mid-Term Break

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying—
He had always taken funerals in his stride—
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

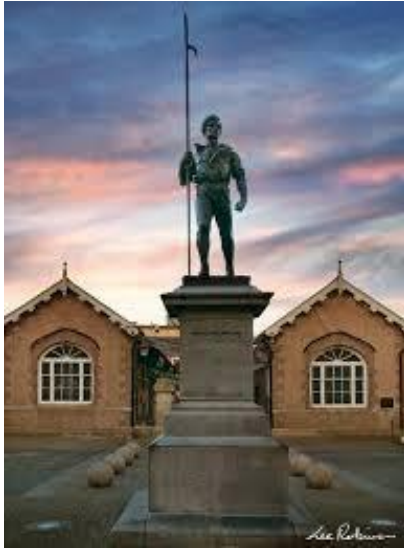
And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'.
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four-foot box, a foot for every year.



Requiem for the Croppies

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley...
No kitchens on the run, no striking camp...
We moved quick and sudden in our own country.
The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.
A people hardly marching... on the hike...
We found new tactics happening each day:
We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
And stampede cattle into infantry,
Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.
Until... on Vinegar Hill... the final conclave.
Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August... the barley grew up out of our grave.



Clearances

In Memoriam M.K.H., 1911-1984

*She taught me what her uncle once taught her:
How easily the biggest coal block split
If you got the grain and hammer angled right.*

*The sound of that relaxed alluring blow,
Its co-opted and obliterated echo,
Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen,*

*Taught me between the hammer and the block
To face the music. Teach me now to listen,
To strike it rich behind the linear black.*

1

A cobble thrown a hundred years ago
 Keeps coming at me, the first stone
 Aimed at a great-grandmother's turncoat brow.
 'The pony jerks and the riot's on.
 She's crouched low in the trap
 Running the gauntlet that first Sunday
 Down the brae to Mass at a panicked gallop.
 He whips on through the town to cries of 'Lundy!'

Call her 'The Convert'. 'The Exogamous Bride'.
 Anyhow, it is a genre piece
 Inherited on my mother's side
 And mine to dispose with now she's gone.
 Instead of silver and Victorian lace,
 The exonerating, exonerated stone.

2

Polished linoleum shone there. Brass taps shone.
 The china cups were very white and big—
 An unchipped set with sugar bowl and jug.
 The kettle whistled. Sandwich and tea scone
 Were present and correct. In case it run,
 The butter must be kept out of the sun.
 And don't be dropping crumbs. Don't tilt your chair.
 Don't reach. Don't point. Don't make noise when you stir.

It is Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead,
 Where grandfather is rising from his place
 With spectacles pushed back on a clean bald head
 To welcome a bewildered homing daughter
 Before she even knocks. 'What's this? What's this?'
 And they sit down in the shining room together.

3

When all the others were away at Mass
 I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
 They broke the silence, let fall one by one
 Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
 Cold comforts set between us, things to share
 Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
 And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
 From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
 Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
 And some were responding and some crying
 I remembered her head bent towards my head,
 Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—
 Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

4

Fear of affectation made her affect
 Inadequacy whenever it came to
 Pronouncing words 'beyond her'. *Bertold Brek*.
 She'd manage something hampered and askew
 Every time, as if she might betray
 The hampered and inadequate by too
 Well-adjusted a vocabulary.
 With more challenge than pride, she'd tell me, 'You
 Know all them things.' So I governed my tongue
 In front of her, a genuinely well-
 Adjusted adequate betrayal
 Of what I knew better. I'd *naw* and *aye*
 And decently relapse into the wrong
 Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

5

The cool that came off sheets just off the line
 Made me think the damp must still be in them
 But when I took my corners of the linen
 And pulled against her, first straight down the hem
 And then diagonally, then flapped and shook
 The fabric like a sail in a cross-wind,
 They made a dried-out undulating thwack.
 So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand
 For a split second as if nothing had happened
 For nothing had that had not always happened
 Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,
 Coming close again by holding back
 In moves where I was x and she was o
 Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.

6

In the first flush of the Easter holidays
 The ceremonies during Holy Week
 Were highpoints of our *Sons and Lovers* phase.
 The midnight fire. The paschal candlestick.
 Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next
 To each other up there near the front
 Of the packed church, we would follow the text
 And rubrics for the blessing of the font.
As the hind longs for the streams, so my soul. . .
 Dippings. Towellings. The water breathed on.
 The water mixed with chrism and with oil.
 Cruet tinkle. Formal incensation
 And the psalmist's outcry taken up with pride:
Day and night my tears have been my bread.

7

In the last minutes he said more to her
 Almost than in all their life together.
 'You'll be in New Row on Monday night
 And I'll come up for you and you'll be glad
 When I walk in the door . . . Isn't that right?'
 His head was bent down to her propped-up head.
 She could not hear but we were overjoyed.
 He called her good and girl. Then she was dead,
 The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned
 And we all knew one thing by being there.
 The space we stood around had been emptied
 Into us to keep, it penetrated
 Clearances that suddenly stood open.
 High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

8

I thought of walking round and round a space
 Utterly empty, utterly a source
 Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
 In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
 The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.
 I heard the hatchet's differentiated
 Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
 And collapse of what luxuriated
 Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.
 Deep-planted and long gone, my coeval
 Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
 Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
 A soul ramifying and forever
 Silent, beyond silence listened for.

Thatcher

Bespoke for weeks, he turned up some morning
Unexpectedly, his bicycle slung
With a light ladder and a bag of knives.
He eyed the old rigging, poked at the eaves,

Opened and handled sheaves of lashed wheat-straw.
Next, the bundled rods: hazel and willow
Were flicked for weight, twisted in case they'd snap.
It seemed he spent the morning warming up:

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well honed blades
And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods
That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple
For pinning down his world, handful by handful.

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
And left them gaping at his Midas touch.





Alphabets

I

A shadow his father makes with joined hands
And thumbs and fingers nibbles on the wall
Like a rabbit's head. He understands
He will understand more when he goes to school.

There he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,
Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y.
This is writing. A swan's neck and swan's back
Make the 2 he can see now as well as say.

Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate
Are the letter some call ah, some call ay.
There are charts, there are headlines, there is a right
Way to hold the pen and a wrong way.

First it is 'copying out', and then 'English',
Marked correct with a little leaning hoe.
Smells of inkwells rise in the classroom hush.
A globe in the window tilts like a coloured O.

II

Declensions sang on air like a hosanna
As, column after stratified column,
Book One of Elementa Latina,
Marbled and minatory, rose up in him.
For he was fostered next in a stricter school
Named for the patron saint of the oak wood
Where classes switched to the pealing of a bell
And he left the Latin forum for the shade

Of new calligraphy that felt like home.
The letters of this alphabet were trees.
The capitals were orchards in full bloom,
The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches.

Here in her snooded garment and bare feet,
All ringleted in assonance and woodnotes,
The poet's dream stole over him like sunlight
And passed into the tenebrous thickets.

He learns this other writing. He is the scribe
Who drove a team of quills on his white field.
Round his cell door the blackbirds dart and dab.
Then self-denial, fasting, the pure cold.

By rules that hardened the farther they reached north
He bends to his desk and begins again.
Christ's sickle has been in the undergrowth.
The script grows bare and Merovingian.

III

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.
He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.
Time has bulldozed the school and school window.
Balers drop bales like printouts where stooked sheaves

Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest
And the delta face of each potato pit
Was patted straight and moulded against frost.
All gone, with the omega that kept

Watch above each door, the good-luck horseshoe.
Yet shape-note language, absolute on air
As Constantine's sky-lettered IN HOC SIGNO
Can still command him; or the necromancer

Who would hang from the domed ceiling of his house
A figure of the world with colours in it
So that the figure of the universe
And 'not just single things' would meet his sight

When he walked abroad. As from his small window
The astronaut sees all that he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum -

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our name there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.

Mossbawn Sunlight

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

of each long afternoon.
So, her hands scuffled
over the bakeboard,
the reddening stove

sent its plaque of heat
against her where she stood
in a floury apron
by the window.

Now she dusts the board
with a goose's wing,
now sits, broad-lapped,
with whitened nails

and measling shins:
here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.





Edouard Manet, Oysters (1862)

Oysters

Our shells clacked on the plates.
My tongue was a filling estuary,
My palate hung with starlight:
As I tasted the salty Pleiades
Orion dipped his foot into the water.

Alive and violated,
They lay on their bed of ice:
Bivalves: the split bulb
And philandering sigh of ocean
Millions of them ripped and shucked and scattered.

We had driven to that coast
Through flowers and limestone
And there we were, toasting friendship,
Laying down a perfect memory
In the cool of thatch and crockery.

Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,
The Romans hauled their oysters south of Rome:
I saw damp panniers disgorge
The frond-lipped, brine-stung
Glut of privilege

And was angry that my trust could not repose
In the clear light, like poetry or freedom
Leaning in from sea. I ate the day
Deliberately, that its tang
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb.

The Butter-Print

Who carved on the butter print's round open face
A cross-hatched head of rye, all jags and bristles?
Why should soft butter bear that sharp device
As if its breast were scored with slivered glass?

When I was small I swallowed an awn of rye.
My throat was like standing crop probed by a scythe.
I felt the edge slide and the point stick deep
Until, when I coughed and coughed and coughed it up,

My breathing came dawn-cold, so clear and sudden
I might have been inhaling airs from heaven
Where healed and martyred Agatha stares down
At the relic knife as I stared at the awn.





Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.



Markings

I

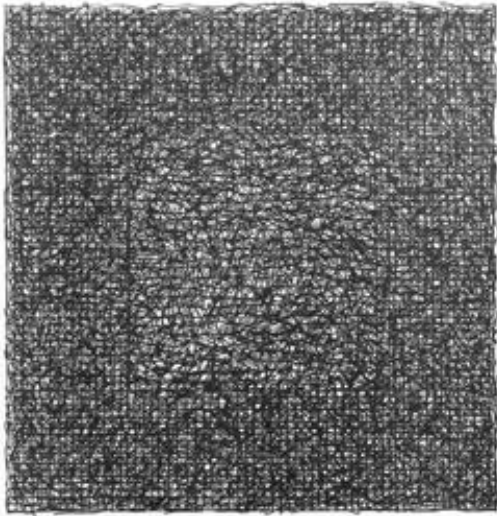
We marked the pitch: four jackets for four goalposts,
That was all. The corners and the squares
Were there like longitude and latitude
Under the bumpy ground, to be
Agreed about or disagreed about
When the tie came. And then we picked the teams
And crossed the line our called names drew between us.
Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field
As the light died and they kept on playing
Because by then they were playing in their heads
And the actual kicked ball came to them
Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass
Sounded like effort in another world...
It was quick and constant, a game that never need
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.

II

You also loved lines pegged out in the garden,
The spade nicking the first straight edge along
The tight white string. Or string stretched perfectly
To mark the outline of a house foundation,
Pale timber battens set at right angles
For every corner, each freshly sawn new board
Spick and span in the oddly passive grass.
Or the imaginary line straight down
A field of grazing, to be ploughed open
From the rod stuck in one headrig to the rod
Stuck in the other.

III

All these things entered you
As if they were both the door and what came through it.
They marked the spot, marked time and held it open.
A mower parted the bronze sea of corn.
A windlass hauled the centre out of water.
Two men with a cross-cut kept it swimming
Into a felled beech backwards and forwards
So that they seemed to row the steady earth.



Sol LeWitt, illustration for special edition of *Squarings*⁴⁸, 2003.

Squarings xxiv

Deserted harbour stillness. Every stone
Clarified and dormant under water,
The harbour wall a masonry of silence.

Fullness. Shimmer. Laden high Atlantic
The moorings barely stirred in, very slight
Clucking of the swell against boat boards.

Perfected vision: cockle minarets
Consigned down there with green-slicked bottle-glass,
Shell-debris and a reddened bud of sandstone.

Air and ocean known as antecedents
Of each other. In apposition with
Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim.



An Ulster Twilight

The bare bulb, a scatter of nails,
Shelved timber, glinting chisels:
In a shed of corrugated iron
Eric Dawson stoops to his plane
At five o'clock on a Christmas Eve.
Carpenter's pencil next, the spoke-shave,
Fretsaw, auger, rasp and awl,
A rub with a rag of linseed oil.
A mile away it was taking shape,
The hulk of a toy battleship,
As waterbuckets iced and frost
Hardened the quiet on roof and post.
Where is he now?
There were fifteen years between us two
That night I strained to hear the bells
Of a sleigh of the mind and heard him pedal
Into our lane, get off at the gable,
Steady his Raleigh bicycle
Against the whitewash, stand to make sure
The house was quiet, knock at the door
And hand his parcel to a peering woman:
'I suppose you thought I was never coming.'
Eric, tonight I saw it all
Like shadows on your workshop wall,
Smelled wood shavings under the bench,
Weighed the cold steel monkey-wrench
In my soft hand, then stood at the road
To watch your wavering tail-light fade
And knew that if we met again
In an Ulster twilight we would begin
And end whatever we might say
In a speech all toys and carpentry,
A doorstep courtesy to shun
Your father's uniform and gun,
But -- now that I have said it out --
Maybe none the worse for that.

An Old Refrain

i

Robin-run-the-hedge
We called the vetch --
A fading straggle

Of Lincoln green
English stitchwork
Unravelling

With a *hey-nonny-no*
Along the Wood Road.
Sticky entangling

Berry and thread
Summering in
On the tousled verge.

ii

In *seggin*s
Hear the wind
Among the sedge,

In *boortree*
The elerberry's
Dank indulgence

In *benweed*
Ragwort's
Singular unbending,

In *easing*
Drips of night rain
from the eaves.



