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Across a Crowded Room

Adrian Rice

It's not every day that you get to meet your hero, for the first time, at his own front door. And then to spend the whole livelong day with him. I was so providentially lucky, twice. On the second occasion, I got to meet the great John Hewitt at his house on Stockman's Lane, Belfast, just a year before we lost him—an unforgettable experience for a man from Protestant Rathcoole, one of the Troubles' 'hoods', who had fallen in love with poetry at the tender age of fourteen, and then with the tradition of Protestant Dissent, not long after, through Hewitt's hero, Dr William Drennan, the Presbyterian poet who coined the phrase 'the Emerald Isle'. Hewitt was seventy-eight, one year from the end, but he gave his precious time, passionately, to wee me, and as I made to leave that day, I decided to renege on my parting plan to fetch his books from my car for him to sign (being too shy, believe it or not, to bring them in on arrival). But as John led me towards the door, he stopped and asked me if I had any books to be signed. I said I had brought just one, and it was in the car, (I lied—I had several), and that he didn't need to bother, as he'd given me more than enough already. He raised a huge smile, took me gently by the arm, and said: "You go get your book, for I've missed some great ones in my day." I ran like the wind and brought back the Blackstaff Press *Selected Poems*, which he slowly inscribed, "For Adrian, my new friend". And that's exactly how one of the greatest Ulstermen of all time had made me feel, like a friend.

I met Hewitt in 1986, when I was twenty-eight. It was the year of my first poem. Because of the towering example of the already legendary Ulster poets—Montague, Heaney, Mahon, Longley, Simmons, et al—I knew not to write until there might be something, something worth any of their reading. Writing wasn't for therapy in Belfast—we had enough pubs for that. Both first poem and Hewitt meeting were made possible by my close friendship with Ulster artist, Ross Wilson. And it was Ross who had also arranged my very first meeting with my other living poet-hero, the Man himself, just one year before, in 1985.

The Fenderensky Gallery in Belfast had hosted an exhibition by Ross that year of charcoal portraits of famous literary folk, including some of my international heroes, like Joseph Brodsky and Raymond Carver, and Seamus knew of these and commissioned a family portrait from Ross, in charcoal. (I still sit open-mouthed when I think of Ross coming into my cottage on Islandmagee, throwing down signed copies of both men's books and saying, "Do you know these guys?" He then proceeded to inform me that he had just spent time with them in Belfast, as they had sat for his sketches. He owed me Heaney!) When Seamus called to commission the portrait, I remember Ross suspecting that someone was pulling his leg on the phone. But no, it was *really* Seamus Heaney, and it was quickly arranged for Ross to travel to Dublin to spend a day with the whole Heaney family—no mean feat to achieve—to take as many black-and-white photos as Ross could manage, to help him with the portrait. Being the thoughtful guy that he (still) is, Ross asked Seamus if I could come down to Dublin with him, and wonderfully, amazingly to me, Seamus said yes. So, soon after, we girded up our youthful loins and headed for Strand Road, and the house of Heaney.

When we reached the Heaney home, we were so nervous that we parked around the corner and sort of composed ourselves before driving round into the driveway and walking to the door like a couple of giggling teens. Seamus answered the door, in a grey woolen sweater and jeans, and our hearts nearly stopped. As Woody Allen is reported to have said of first meeting Bob Dylan, the man was clearly more mysterious than the myth, in the nicest, earthiest way. His first words were, “Hello boys.” I think we said hello back, but I can’t be sure if we said anything. Our legs were ‘watter’. He led us into the family kitchen, which was a welcome sign for us. Straight to the hearth, as it were. No messing around with awkward, artsy living room sitting spells. ‘You’re in your Grannies now’, was the immediate feel, and that felt good. Marie was right there to mirror the warm welcome, and we met the lovely wains pretty quickly too—especially noting the Seamus-double that was Michael, the first born—and found that they were just as cool and friendly and down-to-earth normal as their illustrious parents.

Ross took a lot—I mean a *lot*—of pictures that day. Seamus and the family were saints. In between the many pics, we ate good Chinese (this was a working day, and Marie was not allowed to cook), and Seamus played some soulful records for us. I distinctly remember him putting on an American classic about ‘walking the dog’. “Boys, we’re gonna walkkkkk the doooggggg!” he joked, more than once. Marie gave one of those knowing, loving, Seamus-smiles. He also spun one LP which led him to declare, “I’m gonna wreck the house!” Marie gave an even bigger Seamus-smile at that empty threat. (And Ross reminded me just recently about Seamus measuring the living-room fire breast, above which the portrait was to be eventually hung. Seamus couldn’t find a tape measure, so, in true Bellaghy fashion, he used a length of simple cord.)

One of the many highlights of that awesome—yes, I said awesome—day was when Ross and I were brought up to see Seamus’s study at the top of the house. Seamus opened the narrow door and led Marie and us up the stairs to his workroom. We were struck by the small, humble, two-planked, unvarnished wooden desk, and the fact that the only work of art hung up there was a small, greeny oil painting from Ross. Seamus must, surely, we thought later, have placed that there, just for the occasion. Maybe not. Whether or which, it was a wonderful thing to behold for Ross, and for me, as his friend. Seamus and Marie then posed for even more pictures, as Ross wanted to make sure that I got in on the memorable act. How they managed to crack another smile is beyond me. As she smiled, and he signed gift books for us both, I was grateful for the Herculean effort. Pictures to treasure, I knew then; even more so, now.

The commissioned picture, the family portrait, took several months to materialize. Ross walked round and round it, fretting, waiting for something to strike. I reminded him that this was *The Heaney* that we were talking about, and that he needed to get the job done. But he kept faith with his own muse. Then one day, he called me to say that it had appeared, in a rush, in a matter of hours, and that I needed to come see it, to see if it “was any good”. I saw it, and saw that it was better than good. As we stood there in Ross’s Ballycraigy cottage studio, he handed me a stick of charcoal and told me, as I was a part of that day, that I should do some charcoal squiggles in the top left hand corner, and sign and date them, which I did. He then told me that I was not to tell Seamus—until he signed the check.

The portrait was finally framed and ready. We set off for Dublin to deliver the goods. When we arrived, we were greeted by Marie who lovingly, but firmly, informed us that we had but thirty minutes this time. Seamus was entertaining a Dutch guy, who was translating his poems, and he had flown in for just one hour, and then we were next. Seamus appeared and I was quickly designated to herd the Heaney's into the kitchen, and keep them there until Ross hung the portrait above the family fireplace. You can imagine my knocking knees. Picture hung, the family was released, and they all loved it. After Seamus wrote the check, Ross pointed out my meagre efforts. All was still well, thankfully. Before we made our exit, Seamus or Marie spotted that Ross had written along the bottom of the piece, in pencil, on the charcoal, the phrase, "May the circle be unbroken", and that seemed to 'please them no end', as we'd all say up North.

Well, sadly, inevitably, the circle is now broken; at least temporally, though not eternally. So what is there left for this wee poet to say? That Seamus was the real deal. A proper Poet. The pick of the crop. An ultimate example. Our omphalos. That we were lucky to have the best poet in Ireland also being the nicest. Yes. Yes. Yes. And that every time you wrote to him about anything, he always, always, wrote back. And that he gave me my very first book blurb—what a risky thing to do! And that the last time I met him in the flesh, up close, was at a literary gathering in his adopted town of Dun Laoghaire, in a post-festival hotel. Some of the usual suspects were parked beside him, and many other friends and admirers were coming to and fro, so I naturally kept my distance. (I always remembered his comment on a postcard he sent to me in transit from Krakow to Munich, on another grueling tour: "I feel like an old wireless dial". No one worked harder.) But every now and then, I would glance over at the great man, and it magically seemed that every time I did so, he was there, right there, present, prescient, to wink or nod or smile. When the crowd eventually dwindled, Rand Brandes and I moved in to quietly say our farewells. As I reached out a hand, Seamus just gave me a big hug and whispered in my ear, "Across a crowded room." And I thought—that's about it. That's the honest best you can be, as fully human as you can be, to those who are your family or friends or fans or fanatics or PhD students, to those who come to you daily, minutely, seeking a word. Seamus always gave himself, and gave that word, the *right* word, even to the very end: his last text, in Latin: '*Noli timere*'. 'Do not be afraid.' Not, I'm afraid. But: you, my beloved wife, do not be afraid. And now we're all blessed to be left with his written (and, thankfully, recorded) words. And they do ease the pain, still sending their tremendous signals out across the crowded room.