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Goodbye, Seamus

Shannon Hipp



Eliot Summer School, July 2009

I have so much to say about Seamus Heaney. And yet I have almost nothing to say. For a short while, in the immediate shock of his leaving us, I tried leaving the tributes to those far more talented than myself. I spent days reading every reminiscence I could find through news sources, print and digital, the world over. And yet I found myself still with a story to tell.

On the Friday the news came that Heaney had passed, I heard it first from the mouth of one of my high school seniors. We had just finished reading “Digging” aloud. I had opened class with it on Monday in AP Literature, and we had been devoting a bit of time to the poem each day. “I’ll dig with it,” I concluded, and Felipe Gastaldi’s hand went up, front and center. I thought his spirit had been moved to immediate insight. Eagerly, I called on him. “He died today,” he said. “The guy who wrote this poem, Heaney. He died today.” I was struck dumb. I stammered a bit, finally settling on the fact that I would not coherently be able to continue to discuss “Digging.”

A couple of hours later, I logged on to facebook, realizing how many of my friends had changed their profile picture to a picture with Heaney. It was staggering. I have grown accustomed to the facebook trend of demonstrating unity through the profile picture: the pink equal sign on a red background and its many variations as DOMA was struck down. “Throwback Thursday” scans, sepia-toned, showcasing my adult friends as ‘70s children. Honoraria to mothers and fathers on their respective days. But this, this I hadn’t seen. Seamus was everywhere. Smiling beside everyone. He was ours. Each one of my friends’. Mine. When I told my students this story, they asked “Did you do it too?,” and I replied, “Of course.” The truth was, I couldn’t do it quickly enough. Selfishly, I wanted to add my face to meet the faces that he’d met. Unselfishly, I needed to add to the silent tribute. Here was a man who had reached his arms out so far not only to literarily embrace us but to literally embrace us.

Incredible.

Extraordinary.

Unprecedented.



July 2009

I vowed not to take my picture down for a while. The impact of that reach takes a long time to sink in.

Over the course of the week following Heaney's death, I spoke to friends, colleagues, and my own teachers, read memorials, watched video footage online. I tried to write my own story but remained still stunned, my own pen not digging but instead lying still. On September 11, 2013, I attended an evening celebration at Emory University in remembrance of Seamus Heaney. Some of those with whom I most frequently spoke about Heaney gathered to tell stories, to read poems, to drink Irish whiskey and Guinness in (where else?) the library. There, I found the space, time, and words to formulate my own.

Geraldine Higgins opened the event, recounted that while traveling back to Ireland for Heaney's funeral using his American passport, Paul Muldoon was stopped at customs, asked "What do you do in America?"

Muldoon replied, "I teach."

"What do you teach?," came the reply.

"Poetry," replied Muldoon.

And the customs officer looked him straight in the eye and said, "You must be devastated today." Not knowing Muldoon was Heaney's student, Heaney's protégé, Heaney's eulogizer.

Jim Flannery said of Heaney that "so many kindnesses came out of nowhere," and recounted that his daughter-in-law had wept at the loss, saying that "vital as the power of language and story may be, what is more important is the testimony to how to live a human life."

Ron Schuchard spoke of the most magical day of his teaching career when, on an Oxford study abroad program, he took students to Thomas Hardy's grave. Hearing that they were there, Heaney simply arrived unexpectedly, shared a picnic, spoke of how Hardy unlocked the blocks that Eliot and Pound had erected to personal poetry.

Kevin Young read his own "Elegy for Heaney" for the very first time, preceding his poem with stories taken from Harvard, where Heaney lived in Young's dorm and taught poetry writing, assigning the students to "write a poem without words."

Each also read a poem, and I kept a careful list. For myself, for anyone reading, as a tribute and memorial. That on an early September night in Atlanta friends, fans, kindred spirits lifted a glass and read these words. We could be reading still now. But these stand and suffice. Ron Schuchard read "Anything Can Happen," Rosemary Magee read "Postscript," Nathan Suhr-Sytsma read "The Forge," Emily Leithauser read poem viii from "Lightenings," Jim Flannery read "Follower," Geraldine Higgins read "A Kite for Aibhin," Maggie Greaves read "The Underground," and Kevin Young closed the evening by reading "Saint Kevin and the Blackbird," recalling personally that Heaney had inscribed books to him riffing on the name he shared with the Irish saint.

What would I have read? Truth be told, I had "The Blackbird of Glanmore" in my bag, ready at hand. I would have said that the poem seems too intimate for such an occasion, a revisiting of his very young brother's death, the pain of loss unimaginable and revisited here toward the end of his career. But that Heaney's death had revealed to me the possibility of achieving such intimacy on the most paradoxically grand scale. So I too, I who only shared a handful of conversations with him personally but had read him all my life, I too could say that after his death, I felt how "The automatic lock/Clunks shut." I too could admit in a crowd, "Hedge-hop, I am absolute/For you," in all honesty, in all admiration. Is "Glanmore" my favorite Heaney poem? Is it even the most appropriate? No way to know. It is probably even less likely that I might ever be able to decide. Two periods after I had heard the news of Heaney's death, I scrapped my planned lesson and taught "Personal Helicon" to my British Literature students. I posted it to my facebook page. That last line: "I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing," haunts me. As does the image of the child who couldn't be kept from wells. I too found myself staring into the dark.

In Seamus Heaney's passing, I realized that the kindnesses that came out of his own words became incarnate in his sparkling eyes and large frame bent at the shoulders, bent so that he could be sure to catch every word of your conversation with him. Those kindnesses then became our words, intertwined with his as we read poetry and reflected, shared stories and looked at photographs. I remain particularly touched by my teacher Paul Muldoon's eulogy at Heaney's funeral. But in returning to the tributes, which I know I will continue to do, I realized that I have loved them all. Collectively they begin to capture the spirit of a man of monumental generosity, a man of seemingly depthless skill.

We were so blessed.