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Tuck it in

Kevin Young

If I cannot write here as fully or as deeply about my feelings about knowing Seamus Heaney, first as a teacher and then as poet and man, as I might, it is because that’s what poems are for. Heaney actually taught me that.

Heaney also taught me the power of stories, of anecdote, for that is how he taught: by telling. In the undergraduate workshop I was fortunate enough to take with him in 1990, it seemed that many students simply wanted him to tell them how good their poems were—and who even seemed to grumble when he didn’t—wanting to be pronounced great by greatness. This always struck me as strange. As for Heaney himself, he was generous even to us, especially to us: he could have only talked about our poems; that would have been plenty! But instead, his stories seemed to me a way of connecting, of sharing not just aspects of his life, but the prospect of the life of a poet. Wasn’t that what we were trying to learn and lead? Telling us about knowing Robert Lowell or reading with Ted Hughes (was it in Iceland?) was his subtle way of reminding us that all poems are written by people, not some famous machine. We could write poems too; and if we were lucky, we might even become people in the process.

Heaney also lived in my college dorm, Adams House, whenever he was in residence at Harvard. He literally walked among us. That seemed a lesson too, because he appeared to enjoy it—he certainly was more than a welcome presence at our regular teas in the House Master’s residence. One of my undergraduate jobs then was setting up the weekly teas for the Physics Department, so I knew what all it took to make such events happen. It was a job I inherited from a roommate who hadn’t lasted long at it, and I could see why: it meant going Friday afternoons to boil an enormous (and literal) pot of tea, steeping a dozen (give or take five) giant tea bags in it, and then trying not to scald myself while getting all the brew into samovars. The cookies came delivered stale from some food service and I simply set those out, plastic peeled back, for the students, faculty, and umpteen Nobel laureates of that fine department, which it was clear held such frequent teas because of the kind of prestige and grants that prize of prizes had earned. Weekly, or weakly, the teas were a way of showing how it was done.

The teas in Adams house were much more open—“tea” sometimes meant booze, especially around St Patrick’s day, long an excuse in Boston to have a wee dram (give or take a hundred). In Adams House, it was an excuse for poetry—I saw Heaney read informally at many an occasion, often informal events that also involved his telling a story, whether that meant his speaking about the history of the bog people that inspired North or a more private anecdote of a poem’s composition. He was teaching us to read, and to listen, in all senses.

It all seemed perfectly normal then, I must admit, that he would read and we would listen. For me, not knowing any poets growing up in Kansas, it also felt like a revelation and an accomplishment. Though I had studied under a couple of poets during summer classes (rest in peace, Young Kansas Writers program) I couldn’t say I knew them or knew how they did
whatever they did. I certainly had no poets in my family, unlike one of my college friends who
told me off-handedly: *Four members of my family have books coming out this month.* That
brought its own burden, I learned later, but at the time seemed simply wonderful. I myself
couldn’t point out poets to what all a poet did till I got to college and saw the passion of my first
teacher there, Lucie Brock-Broido, and the patience and glint of Heaney. What a gift. With him,
poetry felt like a great secret you were able, as a writer, to let others know about. It was a wink,
and a drink, a way of talking but also a way of listening and dare I say being. It wasn’t for
everyone, but it could be, and could be for you if only you listened.

Back then, it was as if giants walked the earth. I knew from Nobel laureates—those physics teas,
remember, trudging cross campus to, cleaning up, hands withered—but in Boston and
Cambridge lived poets we knew would soon be Nobel winners, too, it was simply a question of
when. And yet they were still people you could find yourself at dinner with—keep your mouth
shut and you might learn something. One of the finest readings I ever saw was at Sanders
Theatre, a fundraiser—if memory serves—for Amnesty International. The bill included Heaney,
Derek Walcott, Rita Dove, who had just won the Pulitzer, Ellen Bryant Voigt, and Joseph
Brodsky, who had his Nobel already. I was struck seeing Brodsky read that he appeared nervous,
which shocked me at the time, but wouldn’t as much now—that is, till he switched from English
to his native Russian. That was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard, and I felt I was starting to
learn the many mysteries, the untranslatable quality of a poem, but also that undeniable quality—
let’s call it music—that carried over and through.

I had scraped together my little Physics Department money for the special ticket I bought (I want
to say it was a whopping $25) that promised access to the writers at a backstage reception. There,
I got to meet Dove, whose work I admired and had changed mine. Her *Thomas and Beulah* had
taught me that my two sets of Louisiana grandparents were worthy subjects for poems; Heaney,
both then and later, taught me through his work that so was the land my parents were from, that
deep country in all senses. Poetry, I figured out along the way, was not the air, or ether, at least
not only that—rit was also the dirt, the mud, the bog we’d call the bayou, where you might be
buoyed up. Write about that, I thought, not that I had any choice; still Heaney gave me hope that
in doing so I could find a metaphor for not just my poetry, but poetry itself.

I still have nearly all my writings from that time, what’s more, I often have the worksheets of
even others from nearly all my workshops. Not that I can bring myself to read through them—
being one’s own archivist only goes so far. But poems from that time, many written in his class,
fill my first book—titles like “Southern University, 1962” and “Five,” based on family stories or
slave lore, respectively. I especially recall his advice with “Southern University” to *just tuck in*
the ending, to reverse my nineteen-year-old poet’s instinct to have it end “with the tears” instead
of “with the rain.” Boy, those lines look and sound terribly stark like that, but the poem retells a
story my father had told me, my father who hardly spoke of the indignities and dignity of the
Civil Rights Movement he and everyone else’s parents I knew had marched and fought and felt
in, this time marching to desegregate the town of his historically black college. What a fortunate
thing for the school to have been named Southern, as the story felt somehow iconic and could
have taken place anywhere in the South at that time. My father’s was an account he told with as
much humor as sorrow, describing his cardboard shoes falling apart and the tear gas those lovely
keepers of the peace sent the protestors’ way. It was a story he told while I was home from
school one holiday, sitting on his back deck in Kansas, my father’s friend (and now fellow doctor) playing a Black Greek chorus, one of wonder at surviving but also at how far they’d each come, at least in terms of shoes but also stories. Even as he told it I felt he knew I was getting it all down. Heaney helped me see I could maybe even get it right. Just because the tears were real—as was the rain—that didn’t mean they had to come last.

Now that my father and Heaney have both died, I see how there’s often an ending before the ending we might wish for—that our job as poets and as people may be to tuck it in, to find some truer sense, a best last word, one that somehow sings.