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The Rain Stick Revisited

Rand Brandes

I first met Seamus Heaney in 1981 at Emory where I was completing my graduate degree in English. Through certainly a poet with an international reputation by then, he had not achieved the well-deserved universal acclaim that followed his being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1995. My first conversation with Seamus and the one that planted the seeds of a deep friendship took place at a bar near the campus. I had just picked him up at the Atlanta airport and he suggested that we stop for a pint since we had a few extra hours before his reading. Appropriate to this very moment in August 2013, and a theme that ran through our long relationship, was the fact that I grew up in the casket capital of the world, Batesville, Indiana. The small town of 2000 people was the home of the largest manufacturer of caskets in the country at that time. So we laughed for hours about the facts and fables and foibles of the art of funerals.

Over the years Seamus, Marie, and their family graciously welcomed my wife Beth and me into their lives and their home. The real test of our friendship came when Beth, our son Blake, and I arrived at their home, before moving up the road to Stillorgan, in the fall of 1993 with a flotilla of suitcases. This was the beginning of our one year residency in Dublin where I worked with Seamus in his attic organizing, documenting, and preserving his manuscripts and archives. During this time my admiration and respect for the poetry and the person grew exponentially. There was no separate code of conduct, capacity for caring, or creative insight for the public poet and the private person.

For Christmas in 1993, one we spent with the Heaneys in Dublin, Seamus gave us a manuscript copy of "The Rain Stick," the poem he dedicated to us and which is the first poem in his 1995 volume *The Spirit Level*. The poem may be read many ways, but I have always considered it a poem of friendship. The poem first appeared in *The New Republic* (copied below):

Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney died this morning in Dublin. Over the years, he published many poems in *The New Republic*. In tribute, here is "The Rainstick," first published in the magazine in 1993.

for Rand and Beth

Upend the rainstick and what happens next
Is a music that you never would have known
To listen for. In a cactus stalk

Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash
Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe
Being played by water, you shake it again lightly

And diminuendo runs through all its scales
Like a gutter stopping trickling. And now here comes

A sprinkle of drops out of the freshened leaves,

Then subtle little wets off grass and daisies;
Then glitter-drizzle, almost-breaths of air.
Upend the stick again. What happens next

Is undiminished for having happened once.
Twice, ten, a thousand times before.
Who cares if the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
You are like a rich man entering heaven
Through the ear of a shower. Listen now again.

So now I return to my first fortuitous encounter with Seamus's genius, generosity and good humor—one of my personal and professional touchstones. I know for a fact that he has had this same effect on the thousands that he has had personal interactions with and the millions who have been moved and inspired by his poetry to be better people by not letting what he called "the murderous" rob us of the joy and justice we find in "the marvelous." Seamus was a great man and a great poet and he made me the person I am today—someone who believes in the transformative power of poetry, of words arranged one by one as if one's life depended upon it; as if all of our lives depended upon it.