

## READINGS & CONVERSATIONS

SEAMUS HEANEY  
With  
DENNIS O'DRISCOLL  
1 October 2003

### Dennis O'Driscoll

In Seamus Heaney's translation of the medieval Irish Text, *Sweeney Astray*, we meet an Irish King who is turned into a bird and condemned to live in the trees. For Sweeney, whose name pleasingly rhymes with Heaney, 'a day on the beech' was likely to mean a day perched awkwardly on a beech tree.

For more grounded beach-lovers, however, the name Heaney is now – according to *The Observer* newspaper – used in Cockney London as the rhyming slang for bikini. [laughter] So I am prompted by this to remind you that we have a *two-piece* event here tonight: [applause] first, a reading by Seamus Heaney and then a conversation between us both – a kind of imaginary Irish pub in Santa Fe with two Irishmen there. [laughter]

Seamus Heaney has published ten collections of poetry, five volumes of critical prose (including this year's winner of the Truman Capote Award, *Finders Keepers*) and a number of translations, most famously, *Beowulf*, one of the most deserving, but as an Anglo-Saxon poem, one of the most unlikely Grendel-sized bestsellers. With his friend, Ted Hughes, he has co-edited two heavyweight – but not at all baggy – poetry anthologies, *The Rattle Bag* and *The School Bag*. In the years since winning his first award, the Eric Gregory in 1966, he has been honored with every award for which his books were eligible – not least a Lannan Literary Award in 1990.

Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, exactly eight years ago, was an experience Seamus compared to being 'hit by a mostly benign avalanche.' He followed three other Nobel-winning Irish authors of immense stature, George Bernard Shaw, W.B. Yeats, and Samuel Beckett – with whom he shares a birthday, if not a temperament. But his greatness as a poet of pre-reflective memory and post-Troubles elegy should not blind us to the wit and high spirits of which this least pretentious of poets is capable – the kind of man who helped his daughter with her school Latin not by intoning Horace around the house but by speaking a species of joke Latin – punctuated by phrases like 'Sanctus Fumos!' for Holy Smokes. [laughter]

Some of the larger business corporations in America are said to have a bigger turnover than the Gross National Product of certain Third World states. Seamus Heaney could similarly be said to have been conferred with so many honorary degrees that his combined doctorates exceed those of the entire faculty of many medium-sized American colleges! [laughter]

The reason why Seamus Heaney is so often found in the winner's enclosure is because he is among the finest poets in the history of English – a position he has reached through combining verbal genius with vocational devotion. And his genius is not confined to his poetry alone; it also extends to criticism: he is a critic of exceptional eloquence and persuasiveness, exemplifying high art as much as he illuminates it. Think of the way he raises criticism to the level of poetry in, for instance, this stray sentence from an uncollected newspaper review of a Gerard Manley Hopkins biography: 'A Hopkins line brings you to your senses: like hearing a woodpecker at dawn, or walking across a beach of small crunching shells.'

Like Czeslaw Milosz (the living poet he most admires), Seamus Heaney has managed – if I may resort to computer-speak – to firewall his imagination against the more virulent viruses of modern literary practice - and theory. Far from being a knowing poet, he has become something far more important: a wise one, who can satisfy the highest demands of the intellect, while answering the deepest yearnings of the soul.

Far from succumbing to shallow post-modern cynicism and relativism, he can credit the marvelous while also acknowledging the monstrous. Far from confining his attention to big public issues, he can lavish rapt attention on the humblest objects – a pitchfork or a bricklayer's trowel – while also viewing them, in the manner of all the greatest artists, *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the gaze of eternity). And he has the uncanny ability – blending exact, exotic and evocative language – to write his way back to the childhood farmhouse where every emotional and physical ripple is registered, like the tremors on the drinking water bucket in the Mossbawn scullery.

I am delighted, on behalf of the Lannan family, many of whom are here, and the Foundation, to welcome Seamus Heaney and his wife Marie (herself a writer of real distinction) to Santa Fe for their first ever visit. To borrow Seamus Heaney's own words, what we are about to experience is 'the pleasure and surprise of poetry, its rightness and thereness, the way it is at one moment unforeseeable and at the next indispensable.' One thing that is foreseeable tonight is that this will be a very memorable reading by an entirely indispensable poet, a poet whose work – more than that of any other contemporary – conveys what Wallace Stevens calls 'a new knowledge of reality.'

Ladies and gentlemen, Seamus Heaney. [applause]

### **Seamus Heaney**

Thank you. Well, this is a great occasion already, long looked forward to for many reasons. Santa Fe itself is something of a mythic destination, and, I'm pleased to say, totally undisappointing. The highest praise at a certain stage of your life, the stage I'm at now, is 'It wasn't disappointing.' [laughter] Well, it's better than that. But on mythic journeys, of course, the traveler needs a

soul-guide, a friend, a spirit companion, to keep his purpose firm and his vision clear. And I have been blessed in the run up to this reading to have had Dennis O'Driscoll, one of our national treasures at home, you'll understand, one of our most coveted assets abroad. I've been lucky to have had Dennis helping and encouraging.

A few months ago, my wife had the honor of introducing Dennis at a poetry conference in Dublin, in Dun Laoire, a conference attended by some of the best poets in the country, including Julie O'Callaghan, Dennis' spouse. And, of course, the best poets are the most testing bloody audience you could imagine. Anyway, Marie said, to the ardent applause of those niggardly applauders, 'Dennis O'Driscoll is an exemplary friend, an exemplary friend of poetry, and an exemplary poet.' And for once I couldn't find any way to disagree with her. [laughter]

This is a reading of a lifetime for me, honestly, because of these circumstances. Because, not only is Dennis going to be, of course, the soul-guide on the mythic journey, but there's always a questioner who gives the test. He's going to do that as well. And the other, of course, great reward of this journey, is to be the guest of the Lannan Foundation which represents the enchanted palace of art in the mythic place, really. Lannan is by now a magic word in the world of art and literature, in the world of creative commitments, in the world of cultural freedom, and as Dennis has said, I've had the magic wand waved over me and felt the bounty and benediction of that. So, I stand here as a former recipient of the Lannan award with great gratitude and with a strong certitude that their commitments and their gift to the world will continue to be as magnificent, in the full Medici sense, as it always was.

I'm shocked to discover I've been writing poems for forty years, so you won't hear all of them, but I'll read a few from the beginning and a few from more recently that aren't in any of the books - poems which grew from the world in which I grew; poems of childhood; poems even of infancy; poems of Ireland, and some poems with American basis; poems born out of anxiety; poems born out of affection. All poems, in a sense, are born out of infancy. *Infans*, the Latin word, means unspeaking, and the infant is the unspeaking one. So all good poems have been gathered in silence and have moved from the unspoken need to the luck of getting spoken right. So, the first poem I want to read is about the silence in the kitchen where I was *infans*. I imagined it from the point of view of the infant in the cradle, taking in the atmosphere of this house - 1940's, traditional Irish white-washed house, thatched, sunlight, which as Dennis pointed out to me the other day, sunlight is a rarer thing in Ireland than it is in New Mexico. So, this is basically a poem which wants to be a Vermeer but can't. [laughter] A woman is baking bread, making scones, heating the griddle. Anyway, it's called 'Mossbawn (which is the name of the house) Sunlight'.

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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.

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Sometimes the silence in the house was a little strange. You'd come home from school. You would know, as the poet Patrick Kavanagh says, 'some strange thing had happened.' You weren't quite sure what, but for a start, your mother wasn't in the kitchen. There was a faint scent of disinfectant; doctor smell. Your mother was in bed up the room. Beside her in the bed, there was something, yes, a little mite, another wee child. And somebody would say, 'When you were at school, the doctor brought a new, wee brother for you, [laughter] in his bag'. [laughter] Those beautiful old doctor's bags with a snib: plump [?] bags.

So this poem is called 'Out of the Bag' [laughter] It's two bits of a slightly longer poem. Therefore, I thought of the doctor's surgery in Magherafelt, the town near us, as a kind of mixture... I thought of it as a place where the assembly bits for all babies were hanging out; [laughter] as a kind of a combination of a gleaming laboratory and an old style butcher's shop. [laughter] Well, I thought I had the book here. So I have!

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## Out of the Bag

1

All of us came in Doctor Kerlin's bag.  
He'd arrive with it, disappear to the room  
And by the time he'd reappear to wash

Those nosy, rosy, big soft hands of his  
In the scullery basin, its lined insides  
(The colour of a spaniel's inside lug)

Were empty for all to see, the trap-sprung mouth  
Unsnibbed and gaping wide. Then like a hypnotist  
Unwinding us, he'd wind the instruments

Back into their lining, tie the cloth  
Like an apron round itself,  
Darken the door and leave

With the bag in his hand, a plump ark by the keel...  
Until the next time came and in he'd come  
In his fur-lined leather collar which was also spaniel coloured

And go stooping up to the room again, a whiff  
Of disinfectant, a Dutch interior gleam  
Of waistcoat satin and highlights on the forceps.

Getting the water ready, that was next –  
Not plumping hot, and not lukewarm, but soft,  
Sud-luscious, saved for him from the rain-butt

And savoured by him afterwards, all thanks  
Denied as he towed hard and fast,  
Then held his arms out suddenly behind him

To be squired and silk-lined into the camel coat.  
At which point once he turned his eyes upon me,  
Hyperborean, beyond-the-north wind blue,

Two peepholes to the locked room I saw into  
Every time his name was mentioned, skimmed

Milk and ice, swabbed porcelain, the white

And chill of tiles, steel hooks, chrome surgery tools  
And blood dreeps in the sawdust where it thickened  
At the foot of each cold wall. And overhead

The little, pendent, teat-hued infant parts  
Strung neatly from a line up near the ceiling –  
A toe, a foot and shin, an arm, a cock

A bit like the rosebud in his buttonhole.

4

The room I came from and the rest of us all came from  
Stays pure reality where I stand alone,  
Standing the passage of time, and she's asleep

In sheets put on for the doctor, wedding presents  
That showed up again and again, bridal  
And usual and useful at births and at deaths.

Me at the bedside, incubating for real,  
Peering, appearing to her as she closes  
And opens her eyes, then lapses back

Into a faraway smile whose precinct of vision  
I would enter every time, to assist and be asked  
In that hoarsened whisper of triumph,

'And what do you think  
Of the new wee baby the doctor brought for us all  
When I was asleep?'

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Thank you very much. [applause]

Standing alone, standing the passage of time, in a much, much shorter poem, you'll be glad to hear. It's a little poem called 'Oracle'. Memory of being secluded in a hollow tree; and I remember going into it quite often but I know from family lore that once upon a time I caused great panic by being lost in it. Panic of course is the fear associated with woods. So this was just associated with one tree in this case. My parents were in panic. So they were crying out and shouting out my name, Seamus. I use the word cuckoo here, 'a-hoo': looking for me all over the place. So I see it as the... I see in the poem itself as the little uvula in the throat of the tree. [laughter] This was in 1972 and I had the ambitions to be the voice of the district, so to speak. But anyway, there's a little, just a little doodle.

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## Oracle

Hide in the hollow trunk  
of the willow tree,  
its listening familiar,  
until, as usual, they  
cuckoo your name  
across the fields.  
You can hear them  
draw the poles of stiles  
as they approach  
calling you out:  
small mouth and ear  
in a woody cleft,  
lobe and larynx  
of the mossy places.

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This was trying to make poetry as natural as the moss on the tree but of course, it is on the one hand natural. Remember Shakespeare - in one of my favorite quotations about poetry, Shakespeare has a poet in the play 'Timon of Athens' and in the very first page - you don't have to look too far for this quotation if you want to look it up - the poet says, somebody says, What have you brought for Timon? What gift have you...And the poet says, A poem. And he describes his poem as 'a thing slipp'd idly from me'. He said, 'Our poesy is as a gum/ which oozes from whence 'tis nourish'd: the fire i' the flint/ shows not till it be struck; our gentle flame/ provokes itself, and like the current flies/each bound it chafes'. So it was very easy for Shakespeare it seems. [laughter]

But some have to strike for it and one of the images I had of *making* early on, came from my neighborhood, from a forge, a blacksmith's forge, a mile up the road, which is still there. The blacksmith, well over 80, is still there, and he brought in the millennium by striking the anvil twelve times on the eve of the millennium. Anyway, this is called 'The Forge'. It was the title poem, really, of my second book, *Door into the Dark*.

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## The Forge

All I know is a door into the dark.  
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;  
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,  
The unpredictable fantail of sparks  
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.  
The anvil must be somewhere at the centre,  
Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,  
Set there immoveable: an altar  
Where he expends himself in shape and music.

Sometimes, leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,  
He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter  
of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;  
Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick  
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows.

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Of course, the blacksmith is a kind of sacred, mystical figure in all traditions: Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Greek. The 'Shield of Achilles' by Auden, about the making of the thing by Ephestes, and in *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon poem which Dennis mentioned, many of the weapons are always described as made by smiths of yore - smith work. Magical smith work. And there's a wonderful pride in describing hammered work of helmets, shields, swords, and so on.

I want to read a poem which is more recent, called 'Helmet'. It was a gift from a Boston fireman. It was on my shelf for twenty years. It was one of those things, gathering dumbly in silence; the unspoken hovered over it; wanted out, but couldn't get out. Then, the terrible circumstance of September 11, 2001 occurred and the need to write about the fireman's helmet increased. Anyway, after all that, it's quite a small poem, but it got done. I thought I might read this little bit out of *Beowulf* which was at the back of my mind always, where the poet describes this gift of the helmet given to Beowulf by King Hrothgar. This is really a terrific war helper:

'An embossed ridge [says the poet], a bent rod lapped with wire  
arched over the helmet: protective headgear  
to keep the hard-ground cutting edge  
from damaging it when danger threatened  
and the man was battling wild behind his shield.'

A thane, as they called him, fought with his war-board, or with his shield. The line of battle, in Anglo-Saxon poetry, was a shield-wall, and your comrade was called your shoulder companion, and some of that Anglo-Saxon diction gets into this poem. So,

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Helmet

Bobby Breen's. His Boston fireman's gift  
With BREEN in scarlet lacquer on its spread  
Fantailing brim,

Tinctures of sweat and hair oil  
In the withered sponge and shock-absorbing webs  
Beneath the crown -

Or better say the crest, for crest it is -  
Steel-ridged, leather-trimmed, hand-tooled, hand-sewn,

Tipped with a little clasp of beaten copper...

Badged helmet 17 sits on my shelf  
Like a trophy, 'the headgear  
Of the tribe', as O'Grady called it

In right heroic mood that afternoon  
When the fireman-poet presented it to me  
As 'the visiting fireman' twenty years ago,

As if I were up to it, as if I had  
Served time under it, his fire-thane's shield,  
His shoulder-awning, while shattering glass

And rubble-bolts out of a burning roof  
Hailed down on every hatchet man and hose man  
Till the hard-reared shield-wall broke.

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[Applause]

After that day, a poem which I had cherished for different reasons took on new strengths and new strangeness - Horace, a poem by Quintus Horatius Flaccus, a Latin poet, of the Augustan age. If anybody's interested, it's in *Carminum Liber Primus*. That's the first Book of Odes, Number 34. Horace, in this poem, gets a shock. He says, I'm a pretty cool kind of guy. I'm not really gospel greedy. I go with the crowd. But, something happened that really put the wind up me. Oops! And the terms of the poem...it's really about poetry's covenant with the irrational, I thought first of all. It's about thunder in the clear, blue sky. Shock, Jupiter, the thunder god, *ba-boom*. But some of the terms used were so resonant in a new world of the twenty-first century. He talked about (Latin), god certainly has power, he said. (Latin) He can change the highest for the lowest. He can (Latin)...He can bring the unknown forward. And this moment of great danger, great grief, great dread, promised a re-tilting of the world in all kinds of ways. Both the hammer coming down, and, something else, perhaps we're being shown new.....It required what the poet, W.B. Yeats, said that was required of every kind of mature intellect; it required us to 'hold in a single thought reality and justice.' Beautiful to formulate; extremely difficult to manage. But, the danger and menace of this was in the poem for me. So this is called 'Horace and the Thunder'. Three stanzas of Horace, one stanza of Heaney, but I'll not tell you which is which. [laughter]

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Horace and the Thunder

Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter  
Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head  
Before he hurls the lightning? Well, just now,  
He galloped his thunder-cart and his horses

Across a clear, blue sky. It shook the earth  
And the clogged underearth, the River Styx  
The winding streams, the Atlantic shore itself.  
Anything can happen, the tallest things

Be overturned, those in high places daunted,  
Those overlooked regarded. Stopped-beaked Fortune  
Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest  
Off one, setting it down bleeding on the next.

Ground gives. The heavens weight  
Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle lid.  
Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.  
Smoke furl and boiling ashes darken day.

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Smoke furl and boiling ashes have been familiar in Northern Ireland for - well they had been - for thirty years, thirty-five years. Explosions; fires. The next poem has the ashes in it. It's a sestina. So you can be sure there are thirty-nine lines coming up - six sixes and three and the six end words are repeated, including the word 'Magherafelt', the place I mentioned already where an IRA bomb blew up the whole center of the town, including a bus station which I had known since childhood, where I often met my mother. And the poem goes from the 1940's to the 1980's. It has one, I think, of the more romantic titles that I have concocted. It's called 'Two Lorries'. First, in the 1940s, the second in the 1980's, delivering a proxy bomb to the center of this village. So it begins with the mother working.

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### Two Lorries

It's raining on black coal and warm wet ashes.  
There are tyre-marks in the yard, Agnew's old lorry  
Has all its cribs down and Agnew the coalman  
With his Belfast accent's sweet-talking my mother.  
Would she ever go to a film in Magherafelt?  
But it's raining and he still has half the load

To deliver further on. This time the lode  
Our coal came from was silk-black, so the ashes  
Will be the silkiest white. The Magherafelt  
(Via Toomebridge) bus goes by. The half-stripped lorry  
With its emptied, folded coal-bags moves my mother:  
The tasty ways of a leather-aproned coalman!

And films no less! The conceit of a coalman...  
She goes back in and gets out the black lead  
And emery paper, this nineteen-forties mother,

All business round her stove, half-wiping ashes  
With a backhand from her cheek as the bolted lorry  
Gets revved and turned and heads for Magherafelt

And the last delivery. Oh, Magherafelt!  
Oh, dream of red plush and a city coalman  
As time fastforwards and a different lorry  
Groans into shot, up Broad Street, with a payload  
That will blow the bus station to dust and ashes...  
After that happened, I'd a vision of my mother,

A revenant on the bench where I would meet her  
In that cold-floored waiting-room in Magherafelt,  
Her shopping bags filled up with shovelled ashes.  
Death walked out past her like a dust-faced coalman  
Refolding body bags, plying his load  
Empty upon empty, in a flurry

Of motes and engine-revs, but which lorry  
Was it now? Young Agnew's or that other,  
Heavier, deadlier one, set to explode  
In a time beyond her time in Magherafelt...  
So tally bags and sweet-talk darkness, coalman.  
Listen to the rain spit in new ashes

As you heft a load of dust that was Magherafelt,  
Then reappear from your lorry as my mother's  
Dreamboat coalman filmed in silk-white ashes.

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Two sonnets I wrote after my mother died - memories of childhood, of that house in Mossbawn: one of peeling potatoes and one of folding sheets. *Tr\_s intime!* My mother and I used to go to early Mass and all the rest of the family, which was copious, and numerous, went to late Mass. So the house was still, quiet.

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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.

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[Applause]

The cool that came off sheets just off the line  
Made me think that 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.

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Thank you very much. [applause]

I knew great experiences were in store in New Mexico. My wife and I came with great pleasure, in the company of our companions, the O'Driscoll and the O'Callaghan, the poetry factory, [laughter] and then something quite wonderful happened as we drove up towards the ski lifts. For the first time, my wife saw a skunk, [laughter] a small skunk, but nevertheless, a skunk. In 1976, I had written a poem called 'The Skunk' which she mercifully liked, so this is it. I was in California for twelve weeks, doing a residency, teaching there, and I was in a beautiful house on Mount Tamalpais Road. I was house-sitting, and the owner had said, before she left, 'Listen, a family of skunks may come along. Just stay very still. They pass over the verandah. Just stay still. Nothing will happen.' [laughter] So, right enough, one night there she came, this Mae West figure. [laughter] She was alone, and I was alone. [laughter] All atremble. She passed. I stayed, and all was fine. [laughter] So when I came back, I wrote this poem.

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The Skunk

Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble  
At a funeral Mass, the skunk's tail  
Paraded the skunk. Night after night  
I expected her like a visitor.

The refrigerator whinnied into silence.  
My desk light softened beyond the verandah.

Small oranges loomed in the orange tree.  
I began to be tense as a voyeur.

After eleven years I was composing  
Love-letters again, broaching the word 'wife'  
Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel  
Had mutated into the night earth and air

Of California. The beautiful, useless  
Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.  
The aftermath of a mouthful of wine  
Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

And there she was, the intent and glamorous,  
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,  
Mythologized, demythologized,  
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.

It all came back to me last night, stirred  
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,  
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer  
For the black plunge-line nightdress.

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[Laughter and applause]

I read that poem...'All I know is a door into the dark'. Of course, dark, shutting your eyes to see, the image of the blind as the visionary thing, the deep, deep, deep, old, old, old image. I was blessed to have a blind neighbor who played music and who..... I once read her a poem about a well in the back of her house and she said, 'Oh, I can see it now. I can see it.' Best review I ever got. [laughter] My wife has something of that kind of visionary quality about her too. When she starts to sing, she shuts her eyes.

There's a line in Sean O'Casey's 'Juno and the Paycock' where Joxer Daly, the ingratiating little Dubliner who is in the play...he's a singer and at the party, when he gets drunk, somebody says to him, 'Give us one of your shut-eyed ones, Joxer.' [laughter]

This is called 'At the Wellhead', the well being the one which I wrote about. It's a double sonnet.

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At the Wellhead

Your songs, when you sing them with your two eyes closed  
As you always do, are like a local road  
We've known every turn of in the past -  
That midge-veiled, high-hedged side road where you stood  
Looking and listening until a car

Would come and go and leave you lonelier  
Than you had been to begin with. So, sing on,  
Dear shut-eyed one, dear far-voiced veteran,

Sing yourself to where the singing comes from,  
Ardent and cut off like our blind neighbour  
Who played the piano all day in her bedroom.  
Her notes came out to us like hoisted water  
Ravelling off a bucket at the wellhead  
Where next thing we'd be listening, hushed and awkward.

That blind-from-birth, sweet-voiced, withdrawn musician  
Was like a silver vein in heavy clay.  
Night water glittering in the light of day.  
But also just our neighbour, Rosie Keenan.  
She touched our cheeks. She let us touch her braille  
In books like books wallpaper patterns came in.  
Her hands were active and her eyes were full  
Of open darkness and a watery shine.

She knew us by our voices. She'd say she 'saw'  
Whoever or whatever. Being with her  
Was intimate and helpful, like a cure  
You didn't notice happening. When I read  
A poem with Keenan's well in it, she said,  
'I can see the sky at the bottom of it now.'

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[Applause]

Just two poems to end with: St. Kevin and the Blackbird. A very old story about St. Kevin, who is an historical figure, and in this poem the story about him is probably true enough. If it's not historically true, it's true now in some other way [laughter] It's a shut-eyed vision of... Kevin himself is like that and we have to close our eyes to see him perfectly. [laughter]

St. Kevin and the Blackbird

Old story. I have my hands like this [hands clasped in front of chest], for some reason - but it's not saintliness, it's anxiety. [laughter] The old saints didn't pray like this, they prayed like this [arms outstretched] The Celtic ones kept their arms out.

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St. Kevin and the Blackbird

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird.  
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside  
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff  
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands  
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked  
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked  
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand  
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks  
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,  
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?  
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?  
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?  
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?  
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,  
'To labour, and not to seek reward', he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

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And this is a P.S. It's called 'Postscript'. It's about driving West. The phrase, 'going west', from the First World War, has connotations of mortality, fatality, to 'go west'. And there's a very beautiful cadence in the last story of Joyce's *Dubliners*, 'The Dead' the story is called, when Joyce says it was time for him to set out on his journey westward. So this is a memory of a vivid journey westward that we had.

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### 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.

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Thank you very much.

[Applause]

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