

## Brief Timeline for Seamus Heaney

1939: born in Castledawson, County Derry

1960s: Catholic civil rights movement in Northern Ireland

1966: *Death of a Naturalist*

1970s/1980s: the height of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland

1972: *Wintering Out*

1975: *North*

1990s: the Peace Process / Good Friday Agreement of 1998

1995: Nobel Prize

1996: *The Spirit Level*

1999: translation of *Beowulf*

2013: dies in Dublin



## Digging

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

Bogland

*for T. P. Flanagan*

We have no prairies  
To slice a big sun at evening--  
Everywhere the eye concedes to  
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye  
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up  
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.  
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks  
Of great firs, soft as pulp.  
Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before.  
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless.

## The Tollund Man

### I

Some day I will go to Aarhus  
To see his peat-brown head,  
The mild pods of his eye-lids,  
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country near by  
Where they dug him out,  
His last gruel of winter seeds  
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for  
The cap, noose and girdle,  
I will stand a long time.  
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him  
And opened her fen,  
Those dark juices working  
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'  
Honeycombed workings.  
Now his stained face  
Reposes at Aarhus.

### II

I could risk blasphemy,  
Consecrate the cauldron bog  
Our holy ground and pray  
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed  
Flesh of labourers,  
Stockinged corpses  
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth  
Flecking the sleepers

Of four young brothers, trailed  
For miles along the lines.

### III

Something of his sad freedom  
As he rode the tumbrel  
Should come to me, driving,  
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,  
Watching the pointing hands  
Of country people,  
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home.

## The Peninsula

When you have nothing more to say, just drive  
For a day all around the peninsula.  
The sky is tall as over a runway,  
The land without marks, so you will not arrive

But pass through, though always skirting landfall.  
At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill,  
The ploughed field swallows the whitewashed gable  
And you're in the dark again. Now recall

The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log.  
That rock where breakers shredded into rags,  
The leggy birds stilted on their own legs,  
Islands riding themselves out into the fog.

And drive back home, still with nothing to say  
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes  
By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,  
Water and ground in their extremity.

## 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 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 or 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