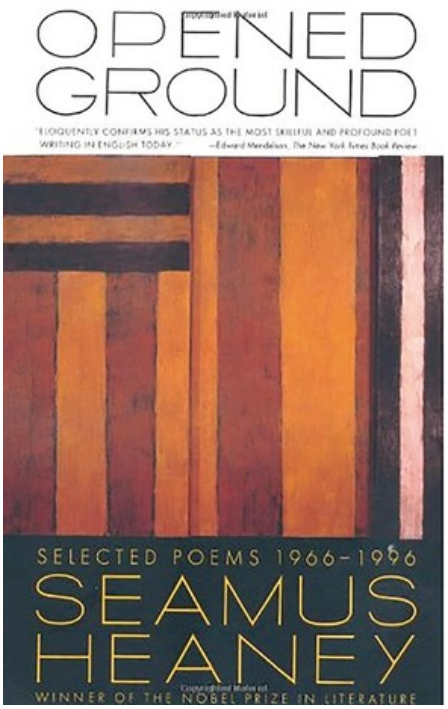

Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996

Seamus Heaney

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Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996 Seamus Heaney
In "Digging", the first poem in Opened Ground, Heaney likens his pen to both spade and gun. With these metaphors in place, he makes clear his difficult poetic task: to delve into the past, both personal and historic, while remaining ever mindful of the potentially fatal power of language.

Born and raised in Northern Ireland, where any hint of Gaelic tradition in one's speech was considered a political act, Heaney is all too aware of the dire consequences of speaking one's mind. Indeed, during times of crisis, he has been expected to appear on television and dispense political wisdom.

Most often, however, he stays out of the fray and opts for a supreme sense of empathy to guide his words. As excavator--of earth, of his beloved Gaelic, of his own life--Heaney is unmatched. In "Bone Dreams", the archaeologist's task is synonymous with reaching for a cultural past: I push back through dictions, Elizabethan canopies, Norman devices, the erotic mayflowers of Provence and the ivied Latins of churchmen to the scop's twang, the iron flash of consonants cleaving the line.

And in early poems like "Blackberry Picking", Heaney's images--deftly, delightfully--carry us back to childhood fields: At first, just one, a glossy purple clot Among others, red, green, hard as a knot. You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam pots Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots. Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills We trekked and picked until the cans were full... Opened Ground is a pleasure and a triumph. These three decades of work confirm Heaney as one of the most important poets of his time. --Martha Silano

Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996 Details

Date	:	Published October 25th 1999 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (first published October 1st 1997)
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Meredith Holley says

Sad day for the rest of us. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/31/art...

It's the time of year when everything brings this poem into my head. I think Seamus Heaney has a brilliant ability to create momentum. Also, blackberry picking is one of my favorite things that I never do anymore.

Blackberry-Picking

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

Sylvester says

Seamus Heaney has so many qualities I appreciate in a poet. He's grounded. He writes about fields, work, nature, relationships, people. His word choices - well, he's Irish, and it shows all over the place - and there's some of that old Beowulf influence in there too.

One of his more well-known and characteristic poems as a sample:

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.

Tina says

As I started reading this collection, something struck me as familiar, and then I hit the poem “Digging”, wherein in I said aloud to myself: “Oh, this is the *bog* poet!”. The other people on the Greyhound (who weren’t asleep) were probably like, “what?”, but who cares about them! I remembered I had read Heaney before, back in University, where the professor I had quite a crush on spent 3-4 classes on Heaney’s work, specifically on his bog poems such as “Bog Queen” and “Tollund Man.” So, there is my history with Heaney, and I’m glad to say I have reacquainted myself with him, especially now, ten years later when I’m

not distracted by my dreamy professor and heading to Ireland in three weeks.

Heaney is a wonderful poet. He concocts tangible imagery that you can not only see in your mind, but almost smell and touch, even while sitting uncomfortably on a stinky bus. I believe Ireland won't feel so foreign to me after reading his work, especially as we are traveling out of Dublin into the countryside and to Northern Ireland as well. Why not 5 stars, then? Well, though I would call him a "master" of language, I'm not actually that enthralled by poems about places, evocative as they are. I like poems about love, about loss, about passion. Or poems that are cryptic. In fact, I have 6 poems framed as art (thank you, Pinterest) in my guest room, being: No Second Troy (Yeats), "Talking in Bed" (Philip Larkin), "Poets" (Mark Haddon), "Ozymandias" (Shelley) "The Orators" (Auden), *The Waste Land*'s "IV. Death by Water" (T.S. Eliot), so you can see that the poems I like are a little, well, darker, and less about the physical world than concepts.

So, while I think Heaney is brilliant, he didn't blow my mind. My favorite poems of the bunch:

Shore Woman
Glanmore Sonnets IX
The Underground
An Artist
Lightenings xix
Squarings xxix

Yet, I must also make a comment about "Act of Union", simply because it made me think. And here comes some musing, so consider yourself warned.

One of the things I love about poetry is that it's far easier to analyze than print. So, I was sitting in the Greyhound again yesterday morning and got to this poem. It wasn't hard to tell what it was about for anyone who knows even the basics of Irish-English history, but in reading the poem a second time I was struck by something. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not degrading the poem or saying there is anything wrong with it, I'm just taking a different reading of it. And you don't have to agree with me – that's fine.

There is no argument that Ireland was represented in the poem as a fragile, defenseless, raped woman, and England the domineering, controlling, male rapist. The imagery makes sense in what he's trying to say about his country. Personifying Ireland as a vulnerable woman is not unique to this poem, or even unique to Ireland, so it's no wonder gender roles and institutionalized sexism is something, as a society, we cannot break free of. I'm not saying that Heaney's use of the metaphor was wrong or even misplaced – I think the poem is quite brilliant – but it made me think about why victimization is often tied to femininity. As I said, Heaney's use of the "vulnerable woman" is not new. Similarly, quite often in poetry, imagery of a female form or femininity is used to suggest fertility, vulnerability or compassion and male imagery connotes agency, fortitude and strength. I argue that the use of these metaphors throughout the centuries in our art/literature helped perpetuate the idea that women are delicate, fragile creatures that are inherently weaker than men (and, no, I'm not going to go into detail about the "female firefighter" argument). These metaphors also perpetuate the idea that men are naturally more domineering and strong. I'm not talking about characters in novels with depth and personality but I'm talking specifically about when we personify *objects* as metaphor.

As we progress through the 21st century we are realizing that these stereotypes are negative for both men and women, as it insists that there is a natural "way" that men and women are, that to be a woman is to be gentle and delicate and to be a man is to be tough and aggressive. Where, arguably, it's centuries of ideology that created this dichotomy, not "nature" (there were some recent studies about Ancient Egypt that suggested it was actually an egalitarian society, where men and women ruled together, but the male scientists in the 1800s discounted the art that suggested this because it seemed ludicrous to them). When people don't fit into these gender molds though, they are told they are aberrant in a negative way, such as a proactive, outspoken

woman being a “bitch” and more sensitive, nurturing man being told he’s a “wimp”. Little boys shouldn’t do this,little girls shouldn’t do that, etc etc. There’s also benevolent sexism, which doesn’t help either.

Again, I’m not saying Heaney was wrong to use this imagery, as, first of all, it was written in 1975, and second of all it made for a compelling poem. Yet, I felt my brow crinkling as I read it, as it made me think about *why* the raped Ireland was a woman specifically. Why was it gendered that way? It’s obvious why, but I find it interesting to dig a little deeper into our social constructs.

But that’s what I love about poetry – it forces you to think, even about things the author did not intend. And I could be wrong and I definitely don’t think everyone has to read the poem that way, but it’s just what came to my mind when I read it and I felt like extrapolating.

Kate says

2/5stars

OKay i'm sure this collection of poems is fine or whatever and I'm sure Seamus Heaney is a good poet considering he's won a shit ton of awards. but

i hate poetry

i hate it so much

every time we do it in school i want to rip my face off

but ESPECIALLY this collection like this legit seemed like Heaney wrote a paragraph story and then just put rANDOM LINEN BREAKS OH MY LORD I HATE POETRY

anyways, we didn't read all of them we read: Digging, Death of a Naturalist ,Blackberry Picking, Mid-Term break, Bog Oak, Anahorish, Oracle, The Tollund Man, Kinship, Field Work and Tollund

the only one that kind of pulled an emotion out of me was "Mid Term Break"

sorry i just hate poetry so much please don't read this review i'm so bias

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Sarah Ryburn says

This should really be on my "always reading shelf." I love his poetry. It's grounded, almost smelling of the earth (of his native Irish soil), and gritty without being graphic or turning too hard an edge. In an interview following the publication of his new translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney talks of the old Anglo-Saxon poet and the warrior culture evoked in the poem. He speaks about the heart of the poet grieved by the cruelty of the world, the loss of home, of safety, of companions: a grief not unknown in modern Ireland. I hear the same voice in much of his own verse; there is, as he puts it, a knowledge that "the world is not quite trustworthy, but we must be grateful for it when it is."

Note: How sad that Heaney is gone! (added September, 2013)

Brad says

I made this five stars in defiance of Michelle. I am **THE** Five Star Slut. And proud of it. But no...this is a brilliant collection of poetry. Seriously.

Nathan says

This is vintage Heaney, of course, and Heaney is one of those poets who can never be anyone other than who he is and whose voice is so a part of him and his words and themes that opening this book is like being rushed by a wave of Heaniness. The images of Ireland: cold, foggy, soggy, boggy, and peat-covered, are the meat of his art, even when the subject is not explicitly Irish. That aesthetic is the prevailing one throughout. Heaney has an eye for the quotidian as quotidian; he doesn't have to imbue ordinary objects with some deeper meaning, because he respects their ordinariness as it is. I found myself more affected by the poems that do touch on larger themes of love and justice (such as "Punishment", which has taken up longterm residence in my memory), so some of the poems I found a little trivial, though still beautiful.

I think finding one's own distinctive voice must be one of the poet's hardest jobs, and Heaney has done that admirably and unmistakably. What he says with it is sometimes less than memorable. Still, he has impressive tools at his disposal, an easy, agile hand with the weavings of rhyme and meter, so I don't mind the ordinariness of his subjects as I would in a less talented craftsman.

Matthew says

Poems mostly on the strange and ambiguous spaces of everyday life, which I often found a bit too vague to be very moving. The language, though, is unbelievable. I've never read anyone who had such an amazing ear for the jagged music of the English tongue, nor such an ability to craft the hard-edged cadences of Anglo-Saxon speech.

David Mills says

The books I had been looking for had been checked out. There was nothing but crap to be found on the new acquisitions shelf. The librarian was announcing the library would be closing in five minutes. I saw this book waling towards the exit.

I had heard "Famous Seamus'" praises sung by historians, fellow celtaphiles (anam caras), Nobel Prize groupies, and even by my son who brought home a college assigned copy of Heaney's translation of Beowulf. What is more the feast of St. Patick's was to take place in the coming week and what could go better with pint of Smitchwick's than an Irish poet. All that seemed enough to justify the impulse to check out this book and so I did. The reason I am able to rattle off these a priori rationalizations so adroitly is because during the month it took me to read though Opened Ground I clung to them like a drowning man holds onto drift wood. I was so far in over my head that on a good day I could make were perhaps a dozen pages. In hindsight I should have seen this coming.

A native or Northern Ireland Heaney's life has been steeped in centuries of overlapping cultures that even now wrestle for the consciousness of those who live there. Heaney's poetic instincts have sent him wandering far outside of his own cultural backyard into the poetics of other times and places. Wherever and when ever he roams he is guided by a desire to make poetics accessible for modern readers. Even so I found myself working harder at parsing Heany's poetics than I ever have at cracking Greek or Hebrew texts (Praise be to St. Google!) Yet the hard work is worth it. While at work revitalizing Beowulf and Sophocles Heaney poetic compass never loses touch with the true north of common experience. This is a man who can bring to the life the flames that consumed Troy and the fumes that waft from a stable. In many ways its was Heamey's ability to crossbreed the mundane with the mysterious that kept me going. The "familiar" became the diving board from which I would spring into the depths of the "unknown".

I can't claim to have come near to "touching the bottom" of Heaney's poetics but here's one thing worth noting. This evening, as I finally finished the book and started back to the library, things seemed different. The sight of the woman who lives with her son across the alley, the sound of two small brothers roughhousing in the next apartment, the smell of the falling rain were vivid, even striking. These are sensations that I am so accustomed to that more often than not I'm not aware of them. And yes, I took my meds today. Yet what is usually just "white noise" was different after finishing Opened Ground. Apart and together these sensations seemed windows through which one could catch glimpses of something more. Even trying to describe that shift in awareness I wonder if this sensing something more in the something ordinary isn't what good poetry seeks to promote. Find out for yourself. Try doing the fifty yard dash while waist deep in Heaney and see what you think. I'll be in the library waiting to see what "strikes" me next.

Anthony Buckley says

People in Northern Ireland rather think that Seamus Heaney – “Famous Seamus”, they say with irony – belongs to them. They feel he is close to them, expressing their everyday concerns. Even when he ventures into abstruse territory, for example, translating Beowulf or Antigone, Ulster people sense that even these texts express concerns they share with him.

Gaelic football is a big preoccupation in the area he was brought up. So when I found myself there discussing football, it was no surprise that different teams claimed ownership over him, each explaining how he played football for their team and not for the others

A recurring theme in his poetry is his childhood in the flat farmlands of south Derry. It was a life of butter-churning, pig-killing, turf-digging, jamb-walls, funerals; of policemen and beggar-women; of taciturn farmers sending foolish youths on fools’ errands; a world where recreation revolved around Gaelic sport; one where the postman had to know the invisible boundaries of invisible townlands. Heaney writes much of his father who spent much of his life in silence, believing that “even to speak at all was an affectation”, and of his siblings, for example, playing at trains on the living room couch. It is the kind of world – fading now – that I got to know myself in other parts of rural Ulster, though in my case as an outsider. All the same, having been among such people, I find his poems startle me by being accurate.

It would be wrong to think Heaney sentimental. Nor is he a parochial poet. It’s just that he evokes more general truths by writing straightforwardly, with realism and apparent simplicity, about the people and the places he knows.

Ulster, however, is a complicated place. At the moment Heaney emerged as a writer, so did Ulster’s Troubles. Heaney therefore gave significant voice to a strand of decency found in Ulster political opinion. Few people in Ulster are blindly sectarian; but nor can they shake off old loyalties and this ambiguity is

present in his writing. He gives voice to what everybody feels in war, the anger, the futility, the exasperation, the sense that what one does is what one also regrets. He sometimes gives vent to the hypocrisy and untruth that conflict brings. “Whatever you say, say nothing” is the title of a poem, but it became a catchphrase in Ulster, for it rang an important bell.

Heaney is a poet to his boots, passionate about language. Despite his subject matter and the seeming simplicity of his writing, his scholarship peeps through. He seems pleased to have had his ability recognized, but he does not appear to have sought recognition. I met him briefly once, and I thought him a kindly, decent man who just liked to write poetry. The book contains his speech of acceptance in Stockholm. It is a model of clear prose and humanity, and well worth reading.

The epithet “Famous Seamus” has a convoluted Ulster irony. It firmly chides him for winning a Nobel Prize, for in rural Ulster, one is supposed to be “modest”. But there is also affection in the accusation, for everybody knows that Heaney as a quiet, modest man who wears his celebrity very lightly. Indeed, one doubts if he wears it at all.

Abby says

Song

A rowan like a lipsticked girl.
Between the by-road and the main road
Alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
Stand off among the rushes.

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.

Can anyone, really, compare with Seamus Heaney? (I think not.) (I could drink of him all day never feel like I'd had enough. And I don't even really know how to read poetry.)

Favorites, which might as well just list the entire contents of this collection

Digging
Death of a Naturalist
Blackberry-Picking
Personal Helicon
The Peninsula
The Tollund Man
Limbo
Good-night
Nesting-Ground
Song
The Underground

Old Smoothing Iron
Stone from Delphi
Fosterling
The Rain Stick
Mint
Postscript

Sherry Elmer says

It doesn't seem right to say I "read" Opened Ground, as if at a moment in time I read the poems and now I am finished. It is more that I opened the cover and stepped into Seamus Heaney's Ireland and spent some time there conversing with the people he conversed with, smelling the scents he smelled, feeling the land that nurtured him; it seems more that I spent some time with the poet, observing and absorbing.

As a little teaser, here is the Chorus in "Voices from Lemnos":

Human beings suffer.
They torture one another
They get hurt and they get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing,
The utter self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
And lightening and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.

It means once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

This is a great collection of poems from a world class poet deserving of the Nobel Prize.

Jonathan says

Re-reading as homage. God, the hard-edged music of him! Lines you feel in your mouth like chewy, brackish bread.

Interestingly, for me (and possibly for any of you who read my Recognitions review), is that the location of my first sighting of the ship in the sky was here (from Lightenings):

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it."

Interesting the difference here – in the original tale, the man drowns, yet in Seamus' version, he is saved. Does this tell us something of the man's warmth and humanism?

PGR Nair says

COMPOSING IN DARKNESS

Homage to Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

Seamus Heaney, Ireland's foremost poet who won the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature 'for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past' , died on Friday, August 30 . As the greatest Irish poet of his generation, he never lost his instinctive feel for the universal rhythms of rural life, his ability to see the extraordinary in the humblest of places, and to express it with an eloquence and beauty in his poetry that could make the reader's heart stand still.

Seamus Heaney will also be remembered for his translation and for his literary essays. His lyric translation of “Beowulf” made the Old English epic poem a bestseller in 2000 and introduced the history of the English language to scores of schoolchildren. Another great translation venture he undertook along with Stanislaw Baranczak was the translation of the 16th century Polish poet Jan Kochanowski's "Laments".

Mr. Heaney made his reputation with his debut volume, “Death of a Naturalist,” published in 1966. In his famous poem “Digging, "he explored the earthy roots of his art and wrote:

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

Since the poet hailed from a farming community engaged in digging fields for cultivation, 'Digging’ establishes the poet’s most significant and versatile metaphor for the creative endeavor and the search for truth – digging.

Seamus Heaney is a poet who believed it was the role of the artist to give a voice to those who were oppressed and ignored, who never saw a boundary between art and compassion, but rather believed that art was fundamentally driven by empathy, by a bond that links every living person.

Let us begin with a deeply touching and tender poem that reminisces the narrator's mother titled 'Clearances iii'.

Clearances iii
(In Memoriam M.K.H., 1911-1984)

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.

The above wonderful poem taken from 'Clearances' is dedicated to his mother, Mary Heaney, who died in 1984. The poem describes the close relationship between Seamus Heaney and his mother. The octave (first 8 lines) of the sonnet describes a past incident between the mother and the child. In this past scene, the mother and her child are working in the kitchen, peeling potatoes. They work in silence. They are so engrossed in each other’s company that they are brought back to their senses only by the little splashes made by the potatoes falling one by one into a bucket of water like "Solder weeping off the soldering iron."

The atmosphere that the poem evokes is one of isolation and silence. The life in that household was perhaps not one of acceptance and happiness for this mother and child. All the others having gone to church and the poet as a child is left alone in the house with his hard-working mother, preparing the Sunday lunch 'while the others were all away at mass.' He says, 'I was all hers', but we can tell that what he really means is, that she was all his. In the silence, their knives dip in and out of the water, the two doing a sort of dance together.

The sestet (rest six lines) represents the present: we are brought to the dying mother's bedside. The parish priest beats out his prayers for the dying in a loud voice, but obviously without any real emotion. The other people gathered there are the dying woman's relations and friends. Some of them say 'Amen' and some are crying, but none of them appear to feel as deeply as the narrator does about her. While the others are thus feigning grief, the son or the narrator who is genuinely overwhelmed by sorrow on the occasion stands in silence. The present scene reminds the narrator of the days when he shared moments of deep intimacy with his mother peeling potatoes. The mother and the child experienced a kind of mutual devotion in that silence. Yet, the dipping knives were 'fluent': the cold dipping knives are paradoxically expressive of the warmth of the love between the mother and the son. The rhyming couplet brings the experience to a satisfactory close.

"Mid-Term Break"

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbors drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying--
He had always taken funerals in his stride--
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble,'
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Though one of his first published poems, "Mid Term Break" shows a remarkable degree of poetic maturity and control, dealing as it does with death of one his younger brothers, the four year old Christopher. Isolated from the rest of the school in 'in college sick bay'- as if death itself might be contagious- the boy listens to the " bells knelling classes to a close " , the knelling conveying a premonition of death.

The familiarity, predictability of home, however, is immediately violated by the sight of his crying father and the sound of his mother's 'angry tearless sighs'. Once more Heaney is deft and delicate in handling the double perspective, the reader being simultaneously aware of child's embarrassment in suddenly becoming the focus of stranger's sympathy, and the adult writer's irony describing the contrasting emotion of how the baby of the

family, unaware of the happenings, ' cooed and laughed and rocked the pram'.

After the inadequate stock phrases proffered by the community-understatements that cannot bear grief-the poet chooses the opposite images to move us. The snowdrops and the candle imply innocence and fragile beauty, qualities reiterated when Heaney talks metaphorically of 'poppy bruise on his left temple", poppies being the colour of blood as well as a symbol of the dead. Heaney uses the word 'box' rather than coffin, and the poet feels as if the child still slept in his cot.

The mathematical preciseness, the tragic equation within the final line- "A four foot box, a foot for every year"- deepen the pathos of the poem's ending.

The below passage from his poem "North" contains probably the best advice anyone could give to an aspirant poet.

"It said, 'Lie down
In the word-hoard, burrow
The coil and gleam
Of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
In the long foray
But no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear
As the bleb of the icicle,
Trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
Your hands have known."

His counseling voice speaks to him across 1200 years of time, about literary enterprise, language, the poetic process, the artistic temperament and personal integrity. He advises to be at one with one's own linguistic resources (Word-hoard here refers to the hidden treasures (vocabulary, shades of meaning) stored in the writer's mind), delve deeply and concentrate within the coil and gleam of your furrowed brain; reconcile yourself to composing in darkness; anticipate the discrete shimmer of composition, an aurora borealis than a starburst: no cascade of light; accept that what you undertake will require stamina and commitment as for a long foray (like Viking explorations) ; keep your mind lucid and on ask ; your eyes as clear as the bleb (meaning swelling or bubble) of the icicle.

Heaney's fidelity to his difficult vocation , his command to 'compose in darkness', to work without the comfort even of hope for a 'cascade of light' , and yet to be faithful witness to whatever gleans are there, is absolute and awe-inspiring, both in this poem and those that follow.

As Michael Parker says , ' In 'North', the vocation to compose in darkness had been understood both in terms of the monastic vision of 'Gallurus Oratory', and of the heroic age when fili, the early Irish poets, were expected to go into darkness and retreat to compose.'

Heaney’s poems have a rare auditory quality. His focus on sound in his poetry is a natural progression from his vowel-rich South Derry dialect and vocabulary. His stanzas are dense echo chambers of contending nuances and ricocheting sounds. And his is the gift of saying something extraordinary while, line by line, conveying a sense that this is something an ordinary person might actually say. Heaney chooses his words very carefully and effectively which make his words appeal to the senses, thus creating in the mind of the reader a mental picture true to the poet's intention. The word sounds are a musical accompaniment to the

imagery.

As a person, Seamus Heaney possessed that rare quality of being acclaimed and loved by people from all backgrounds and from all parts of the world. Despite his fame he remained modest and down to earth, and became even more endearing because of this. In a 1997 interview in The Paris Review, Mr. Heaney described winning the Nobel as “a bit like being caught in a mostly benign avalanche. You are totally daunted, of course, when you think of previous writers who received the prize. And daunted when you think of the ones who didn’t receive it.” He was also a poet of immense dignity, effusive to his readers and a well of inspiration to his fellow poets. He never cast aspersions on anyone he had come across, including his critics.

Seamus once confessed that he saw poetry as an escape from a terrible fear of silence that always haunted him. “What is the source of our first suffering?” he asked, quoting the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. “It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak.” It is gratifying that the poet, who died Friday at the age of 74, mastered that fear magnificently in five decades of lyrical compositions dwelling on “the silent things within us" earned him the acclaim as one of the greatest poets of this century.

Ref: Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996 by Seamus Heaney
Seamus Heaney : The Making of a poet by Michael Parker
Seamus Heaney : Helen Hennessy Vendler
Poems, 1965-1975: Death of a Naturalist / Door Into the Dark / Wintering Out / North by Seamus Heaney

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Sasha says

Heaney's diction reminds me that there are many small, old words which I do not know. When I read his poetry, I sense that he loves our language, but especially the kinds of words which are timeworn and can be held in the hand, words which, like old, oiled tools, have served and been put to good use. His metaphors rise up out of the landscape of his country; he writes of earth and natural setting, but he also wrtites with the perspective of an older man, looking back on familiar places and memories of childhood. Often a poem begins with the suggestion of a place and ends with a parallel feeling, transitioning into a remembered moment, as though the tone if the place reminded him of the tone of a time, even if fleeting, but which is worth remembering,

His use of enjambment, ending a line in mid-sentence, enhances the ambiguity of his language and the suggestiveness of his verse. If read contemplatively and aloud, the effect is that the mind is invited to branch off into a number of possible interpretations before the grammar of the sentence brings the reader back to the main sense of the thing, Heaney's poetry suggests a thoughtful, meditative man, who found tenderness and even a wild beauty in ordinary settings and ordinary people. Often his poems seem so indirect and personal as to be inscrutable, at other times they seem like experiments and explorations into his own more academic or bookish interests, not without genuine emotion, but somewhat restrained and conveyed at a slant.

After reading his poetry, I get the sense that he might have been a hard man to get to know. There is much hesitation in his lyric. Intentional subterfuge, poetic technique or a wrangling with expression? Beautiful poetry, to be read slowly and mulled over.

Simon Robs says

Song

A rowan like a lipsticked girl.
Between the by-road and the main road
Alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
Stand off among the rushes.

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.

Kathleen Jones says

I love Seamus Heaney's poetry and I have a few scattered collections - Stations, Death of a Naturalist - but I've recently treated myself to this because it covers most of Seamus' collections, from the first in 1966 right up to The Spirit Level in 1996. This gives a wonderful overview of the development of his work and it also includes his Nobel lecture 'Crediting Poetry'.

Seamus chose the poems to be included himself, weeding out ones he was no longer happy with and some of the poems were re-written, though the alterations are so minor it's difficult to find any differences.

All my favourites are there - The Forge, Digging, The Barn, Churning Day, and his prose poem The Stations of the West, which describes how he was sent to the Gaeltacht to learn Gaelic and hoped, perhaps, to learn something of the Celtic mysteries. These visions are denied the child, but there are other kinds of revelation. It ends:

'Neither did any gift of tongues descend in my days in that upper room when all around me seemed to prophesy. But still I would recall the stations of the west, white sand, hard rock, light ascending like its definition over Ranna-fast and Errigal, Annaghry and Kincasslagh; names portable as altar stones, unleavened elements.'

Other favourites are the poems about his childhood home, Mossbawn, political poems such as The Ministry of Fear, Oysters, The Skunk - his erotic poem to his wife, peeling potatoes with Mary Heaney in 'Clearances', then the beautiful Postscript, and finally Song -

'There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.'

Yes, that's it exactly - that's what the poetry does. Words like 'big, soft buffetings' that come at you sideways 'And catch the heart off guard and blow it open'.

Cristina says

As if we needed any proof that Seamus Heaney's Nobel Prize in Literature was well-deserved--the (somewhat abridged) collection of his volumes of poetry from 1966-1996, contained in *Opened Ground* prove this. Heaney's collected poems illustrate a discovery of (Irish) heritage, an awakening from childhood into adulthood, and an astounding awareness of the "little" things in life. From the opening poem--the well-known "Digging"--we are immediately immersed in Heaney's world of ancestry, the burden of age, the struggle to maintain a balance between history and heritage, the future and modernism, and other "grand motifs" that Heaney somehow manages to condense into metonymic and representative figures and symbols, respectively.

This is also, in many ways, a collection about nature and the cycle of life. One of the most fascinating types of poems found here are Heaney's "bog people" poems, which describe the physical bodies found and excavated from the marshy land of Ireland. "The Tollund Man" exemplifies these such poems early on and Heaney returns to the local in his penultimate poem of the collection, "Tollund." Heaney's intense love of earthiness, of Ireland's "soft" terrain, of wells, water-pumps, slime, mud, and bogspawn also give us material that, quite possibly, could be enjoyed by ardent environmentalists and nature-lovers.

But this is not to say that Heaney's poems are meant for only one kind of person or another. On the contrary--they are meant for everybody.

Additionally, Heaney's organization is felt both within each volume and among them. There is no such thing as haphazard with Heaney--every piece feels interlocked with the others, each poem truly belongs, and every one is readable on various levels. Of course, much of the poet's work is also highly political, but this never seems to become some sort of eye-rolling "hidden agenda" of the collection. We are never distracted, negatively, by any one thing. Instead, we are asked, as readers, to compile, return to, and remember the various images, thoughts, and motifs offered here and often returned to.

Of interest to writers, too, is Heaney's address of the poet's burden: is he to respond to life as it is and report it in all its rawness and ugliness? Or is he to take events and sugarcoat them a bit? In *Opened Ground* it quickly becomes evident that Heaney struggles with and attempts to do both at times. In the end, however, it at least becomes apparent that Heaney's greatest loyalty lies with Artistic Vision, whether it means describing the deaths of mythic heroes of yesterday or the passing of family members before his very eyes.

Mel says

If you like poetry then give this poet a try. I am glad I did. What a pleasure to read. I read this in the early morning part of my commute and it was wonderful to drink my morning coffee and enjoy such beautiful sentiments about both serious and humorous subject matter and even some mythology. Best reads pile. Highly recommended to those who enjoy reading poetry.

Peter Holford says

In recent years I have tried to read one major poetry anthology each year. Heaney's 'Opened Ground' seems to have been that book for 2016. I've not read a great deal of Irish literature, but earlier this year I read James Joyce's 'Dubliners' and enjoyed it very much. Heaney's poetry has been a good counterpoint to that.

The poetry is rich and meaningful and rewards close study. It is heavily situated in Irish geography, culture and the politics of the second half of the 20th Century, so is more easily grasped with regular reference to Wikipedia (or equivalent) if you're not already well-read in those areas. Heaney's work is also heavily influenced by the classics and his upbringing in the Bible via the Catholic church, so if you know the Bible, it helps too.

That said, I found a good number of 'diamonds' in this mammoth collection of the poet's work. The painful experience of the Irish in recent centuries is a theme, evident in the title: Ireland is the 'opened ground' referred to in a couple of poems, but most openly in 'Act of Union': 'No treaty / I foresee will salve completely your tracked / And stretchmarked body, the big pain / That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.' 'Mid-Term Break' is a poignant account of being brought home from boarding school on the occasion of his younger brother's untimely death. 'Casualty' is a powerful and confronting account of the impact of The Troubles on ordinary people. One of my favourites, however, has to be the collection of eight sonnets called 'Clearances' - written in memoriam to his mother, especially III.

On another front entirely, Heaney writes and reflects on the experiences of being a writer and a poet, a teacher and a lover of words from the very first poem, 'Digging', but also in a range of later poems, such as several in 'Sweeney Redivivus' (see 'The Master' and 'The Scribes' and 'Holly') which I appreciated very much. The collection concludes with Heaney's speech, 'Crediting Poetry' given in 1995 in Stockholm on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. Well worth a read in itself.
