

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 17, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



from *To a Dutch Potter in Ireland*

for Sonja Landweer

2. After Liberation

Sheer, bright-shining spring, spring as it used to be,
Cold in the morning, but as broad daylight
Swings open, the everlasting sky
Is a marvel to survivors.

In a pearly clarity that bathes the fields
Things as they were come back; slow horses
Plough the fallow, war rumbles away
In the near distance.

To have lived it through and now be free to give
Utterance, body and soul—to wake and know
Every time that it's gone and gone for good, the thing
That nearly broke you—

Is worth it all, the five years on the rack,
The fighting back, the being resigned, and not
One of the unborn will appreciate
Freedom like this ever.

Seamus Heaney¹

Reflections

Long before I knew anything of its historical context—the Troubles in Northern Ireland—I committed this poem to memory. So deeply have I loved it and clung to it that it never seemed to matter much that I might not know my political history as I should. And though I don't know that understanding the cultural backdrop that accompanies it is necessary to an appreciation of the poem, I'll provide an over-simplified (and incomplete, I'm sure) summary.

¹ "To a Dutch Potter in Ireland" by Seamus Heaney from *The Spirit Level*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Used by permission.

First, Heaney was one of the world's most beloved poets and also one of the most prominent voices for peace; he had a long and complex relationship with politics over the span of his career and while part of his popularity stems (even posthumously) from his willingness to confront civil strife, it would be a disservice to read this poem through *only* that lens. Nevertheless, it might be noted that the woman to whom the poem is addressed, Sonja Landweer, is a famous artist, a potter, who came to Ireland from Holland in 1962. She is credited with infusing the art world not only with her talent but with her unflagging belief in the necessity of the arts, of craftsmanship, and of beauty. (The Irish Export Board, in 1961, commissioned a report that found the state of Irish design to be neglected, and one of the government's first moves toward a solution was to invite artists, such as Sonja Landweer, to establish residences with only one real responsibility: to raise the design standards of Ireland.)

So, Heaney, already one of Ireland's most well-known poets, and Landweer became inspired friends. The first part of "To a Dutch Potter..." gestures more directly towards the World War II bombings in the Netherlands and a woman (perhaps Landweer) who has carried her art through the wreckage. Many critics see a kind of parallelism with Heaney's political involvement and personal anguish concerning the unrest in Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles, which was a violent three-decades-long conflict from 1968 to 1998. (At the heart of the Troubles was discord over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.)

You can see how some of this information may be interesting and even helpful to an understanding of the poem (or of thinking, more specifically, about where and how "war rumbles away"), but is not really addressing the poem itself—which is, to be honest, the part I'm more interested in. Because even if you know nothing of this political history, and nothing of Sonja Landweer—as I did not—the poem is still, if not *more*, beautiful. It's a poem of resurrection, of survival, of transcendence, of possibility, of hope. In that way, it's a perfect Easter poem, a kind of archetype for what is timeless and universal: the desire to survive and the soul's abiding endurance.

I think of it this way: whatever the thing is—"the thing / That nearly broke you"—you *did* survive it. Perhaps to your own astonishment, perhaps even against all scientific, spiritual, even self-inflicted odds, you are *still here*, in this just-born spring, a witness not only to "broad daylight / swing[ing] open, the everlasting sky" and "pearly clarity bath[ing] the fields" but also to the world's own continuing, its new generation being born day after day before your very eyes. In the same way that I am convinced the only reason to ever *leave* home is for the unmatched feeling of *returning* home, I have wondered before if one reason the depths of despair exist is to heighten and brighten our sense of wonder, our ability to marvel, and our appreciation of mercy. The unborn—or perhaps, more metaphorically, the untested—are not likely to know the very particular (God-given, often inexplicable) relief that comes just when you thought such a thing was not possible. One day, you realize, you have survived—even if barely—that which you thought unbearable.

"To have lived it through and now be free to give / utterance, body and soul" is, for me, one of the most profound (and even comforting) explanations concerning the purpose for suffering (as though I could really know the reason). But, perhaps we suffer so that we can

later name it. Perhaps we suffer in order to live more fully and completely into our humanity. Perhaps we suffer so that we can be a witness to others in their own despair and say, yes, spring is here and yes, mercy comes and yes, your very existence is indeed a marvel. Behold it with all your might.

✧ About the poet

A native of Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney was raised in County Derry and spent much of his life in Dublin. He taught at Harvard University and the University of Oxford and authored over 20 collections of poetry and literary criticism. Heaney won not only the Nobel Prize for Literature (1995), but nearly every other major award in poetry, including the T. S. Eliot Prize and the PEN Translation Prize (for his edition of *Beowulf*, the Old English epic). When he died in 2013, it was not only the literati that grieved his passing, but presidents, universities, and entire nations. Upon receiving the Nobel Prize, the press release issued thereafter praised his work's "lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt[s] everyday miracles and the living past." The collection in which this particular poem appears, *The Spirit Level*, was the first book of poems he published after winning the Prize. He is widely recognized as one of the major poets of the twentieth century.



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