

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 27, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

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



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.

Seamus Heaney¹

☞ Reflections

As the Fall Covenant Period at St. Stephen's Church comes to a close this week and *Wellspring* takes a break until the new year, I offer this poem as a prayerful entrance into Advent. In these days leading up to Christmas, many of us pay particular attention to the kind of distinct interior anticipation that is probably quite different from the more commercial exuberance of the holiday season. During Advent, we are waiting; we are expectant, patient, hopeful, watching. And I find that this poem echoes some of those themes.

¹ "Postscript" by Seamus Heaney from *The Spirit Level*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Used by permission.

In an interview in which Heaney speaks to the genesis of this poem, he writes that it came to him as a miracle, like a “quick sidelong glimpse of something flying past.” He goes on to explain the geography and landscape—a windy day along the southern coast of Galway Bay, “facing the waters and the wild; ...this glorious exultation of air and sea and swans.” I know there’s nothing explicitly Christmasy about the poem, but I do sense something of the transcendent mystery and wonder of Advent here: the looking out and past as a way of also looking inward; the recognition that some moments are not able to be captured, much less explained; the surprise and delight of witnessing beauty.

My favorite lines are the last ones: “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.” It resonates with me as a description of my own life of faith, of liminality, of things at once familiar and strange. It’s a moment that seems to capture something wonder-filled, interior, and ecstatic. The idea of the heart being blown open reminds me of another line of poetry I admire, from Leonard Cohen (poet, songwriter, Buddhist monk): “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” It occurs to me that Advent, this period of waiting, might be a time for tending to the heart, expecting that even if doesn’t quite blow open it might very well be cracked, thereby enlightened.

I wish all of you, my faithful *Wellspring* readers, a peaceful season. May you both expect and receive light and lightness, and be both blessed and a blessing to others.

☞ About the Poet

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was a Nobel Prize-winning poet. Born in Northern Ireland, Heaney is known for his evocation of Irish rural life and Irish history. An exceptional essayist, playwright, and translator as well, Heaney is one of the world’s most recognized and most accomplished men of arts and letters.



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