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Remembering Seamus Heaney

Jill McCorkle

I will always feel very fortunate that my time teaching at Harvard was during those years when Seamus showed up every spring. His arrival was something celebrated by everyone—a welcomed burst of life and spirit against the gray frozen January backdrop. I met Seamus with the idea that if he proved to be someone who was aloof or difficult to know, I would understand and accept that as just part of dealing with world-class celebrity. Surely someone of his brilliance and talent did not have time to greet and chitchat with any and everyone in his path. *Surely* a man of his stature could rise and float above us all and I would still have total respect for his great work.

And then what a wonderful surprise! Seamus Heaney was a man who *did* make time to greet and speak to any and everyone in his path with great kindness and enthusiasm. He *was* the kind of person who could change the whole climate of a room and did so with the greatest of ease. He asked people what was going on in *their* lives. When he was there to teach, he was completely there, meeting with students and pitching in with every task of the creative writing department; he did not beg off any of the group tasks of reading manuscripts for prizes or thesis committees. He taught me to use the phrase “I’ll check with my committee,” when put on the spot with a question from students or people from the community seeking entry to a class. *Always refer to your committee*, he said, *even when the committee is just you all by yourself*. Needless to say, by writing this, I am giving away a great professional secret as I have used “the committee” many many times, but I give it up as just one small example of all the ways Seamus was able to handle situations tactfully and with gentle kindness while also protecting himself when put on the spot.

Once a well-known poet was on campus and our department was invited to a reception to honor this person. I arrived to find Seamus already seated at a table as he waited to greet the honoree. And then we waited. And waited. *Surely a person wouldn’t just miss such a lovely reception*, he said. And we waited some more. *Surely, something must have happened because a person wouldn’t choose to keep other people waiting*. We waited some more, and the statements of *surely* continued, each time his eyebrows lifted, a playfulness around the eyes that suggested lots of other thoughts about or reasons for this absence. He offered many generous excuses while also revealing a wise and bemused curiosity that suggested a headful of thoughts and possibilities. When everyone agreed that the honoree probably was not coming after all, Seamus proclaimed that it had still been a very pleasant time, a very nice reception, and it struck me in that moment as I watched him leave—poet most likely to win the Nobel prize—that he embodied the very best of humanity—wisdom and generosity and a great sense of humor. I was struck by how he had given up an hour plus of his day to do the right and respectful thing and in fact had done so more graciously than most.

I feel very lucky to have gotten to spend moments here and there in the presence of such a great man. I have used his work in my classes, used the poem “At The Wellhead” *sing yourself to where the singing comes from* in several graduation speeches, and I have thought often of the

perfect balance he seemed to strike in his own life: devoted loving family man and Nobel prize winning poet, a friend to so many all over the world, and a great voice and member of his many communities. The pleasure of getting to know Seamus Heaney will always be an important fact in my life, and I knew as I was there that with his arrival in the spring, I was witnessing something extraordinary like Halley's Comet—bright and brilliant and forever memorable—only more so because Halley's Comet will have to cross the sky many many more times before this world ever glimpses another Seamus Heaney.