

Seamus  
Heaney  
New  
Selected  
Poems  
1966—1987

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New Selected Poems  
1966-1987

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## 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.

## Death of a Naturalist

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart  
Of the townland; green and heavy headed  
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.  
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.  
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.  
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,  
But best of all was the warm thick slobber  
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water  
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring  
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied  
Specks to range on window-sills at home,  
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until  
The fattening dots burst into nimble-  
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how  
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog  
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog  
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was  
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too  
For they were yellow in the sun and brown  
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank  
With cowdung in the grass and angry frogs  
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges  
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard  
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.  
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked

On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some  
hopped:

The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat  
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.  
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

## Blackberry-Picking

*For Philip Hobsbaum*

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.

## Follower

My father worked with a horse-plough,  
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung  
Between the shafts and the furrow.  
The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert. He would set the wing  
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.  
The sod rolled over without breaking.  
At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round  
And back into the land. His eye  
Narrowed and angled at the ground,  
Mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,  
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;  
Sometimes he rode me on his back  
Dipping and rising to his plod.

I wanted to grow up and plough,  
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.  
All I ever did was follow  
In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,  
Yapping always. But today  
It is my father who keeps stumbling  
Behind me, and will not go away.

## Mid-Term Break

I sat all morning in the college sick bay  
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.  
At two o'clock our neighbours 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, stanced 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.

## Poem

*For Marie*

Love, I shall perfect for you the child  
Who diligently potters in my brain  
Digging with heavy spade till sods were piled  
Or puddling through muck in a deep drain.

Yearly I would sow my yard-long garden.  
I'd strip a layer of sods to build the wall  
That was to keep out sow and pecking hen.  
Yearly, admitting these, the sods would fall.

Or in the sucking clabber I would splash  
Delightedly and dam the flowing drain  
But always my bastions of clay and mush  
Would burst before the rising autumn rain.

Love, you shall perfect for me this child  
Whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking:  
Within new limits now, arrange the world  
And square the circle: four walls and a ring.

## Personal Helicon

*For Michael Longley*

As a child, they could not keep me from wells  
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.  
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells  
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.  
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket  
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.  
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch  
Fructified like any aquarium.  
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch  
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call  
With a clean new music in it. And one  
Was scaresome for there, out of ferns and tall  
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.



## Thatcher

Bespoke for weeks, he turned up some morning  
Unexpectedly, his bicycle slung  
With a light ladder and a bag of knives.  
He eyed the old rigging, poked at the eaves,

Opened and handled sheaves of lashed wheat-straw.  
Next, the bundled rods: hazel and willow  
Were flicked for weight, twisted in case they'd snap.  
It seemed he spent the morning warming up:

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well-honed blades  
And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods  
That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple  
For pinning down his world, handful by handful.

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,  
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together  
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,  
And left them gaping at his Midas touch.