

Seamus Heaney: On “Mid-Term Break”

Christopher Heaney [the poet’s brother] was killed in a road accident in February 1953

Would you mind saying something more about that accident? The poem “Mid-Term Break” is so well known.

I wasn’t there on the evening it happened, but I do have a clear picture of it in my mind. It was at the bus stop a little up the road from our lane. Christopher and my brother Hugh were on one side of the road, posting a letter on the bus for Belfast – it used to be you could hand a letter to the conductor and it would be mailed later that evening in the city; it saved a trip to the post office. Anyhow, at that same moment, my brothers Pat and Dan were walking up the road on the other side, on an errand to fetch a gallon of paraffin oil from a house further along. As the bus moves off, Christopher – who is three and a half years old – sees the two boys on the other side and immediately starts across the road towards them. But while the bus is pulling away, a car is coming in the opposite direction, and Christopher runs out from behind the bus straight into the side of the car and is knocked down. The driver hadn’t a chance. What happens next I can hardly bear to think about: Hugh lifts him and holds him, bleeding and probably unconscious; then the man who is a passenger in the car comes and takes Christopher and carries him the thirty or forty yards to our lane, Hugh behind him, weeping all the time. My mother who is out at the clothes line, hears it and comes around to the street and sees what has happened. All in a few minutes. He was taken to the mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt and died a couple of hours later.

[...]

The manuscript [of Death of a Naturalist] was accepted in 1965, and you recalled earlier that you published what you considered your first achieved poem in 1962. So Death of a Naturalist contains no poems written while you were a student?

No. The earliest ones are “Turkeys Observed” and “Dockery”; “An Advancement of Learning” and “Mid-Term Break”: the first two written in late 1962, the others in early 1963.

I’d like to hear about the places where you wrote those poems.

I shared a flat [in Belfast] from 1961 until 1963 with two postgraduates in biochemistry. And I wrote “Mid-Term Break” one evening there after a day’s teaching in St Thomas’s School*, sitting in an armchair waiting for one of those guys to produce the evening meal. We had a rota: week by week, one did the shopping, one did the cooking and one did the dishes. It was my week for the dishes, so I had this free hour from five to six; and I remembered Christopher’s accident because it was February, round about the time of his anniversary.

* St Thomas’s Secondary Intermediate School in the Ballymurphy area of Belfast]

(From: Dennis O’ Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, 2008)

The *Kilkenny Magazine* was a wonderful thing for me because they did “Mid-Term Break”, which was written very quickly one evening in early February, when Christopher’s anniversary was coming up. I sent it off and they took it almost by return of post. So that was a terrific sense of confirmation.

(Seamus Heaney)