

notions) of home, a consciousness and sensibility eager to make a map of its own surroundings, in order to be at home in them, wherever they are. The real point is, of course, that—important as they may be for an external understanding of what one is at, for the critical grasp to tighten on the lineaments of the work—issues such as these have to be digested by the poet himself or herself, and become some organic element in the larger project, which is making sense of the world, this world, the one we inhabit in our one body for whatever span we stretch to. For this reason, poems of “exile” couldn’t be part of what I’m at, since (however personally complicated my relationship with Ireland and with America might be, however the word “home” might seem natural to me in its broad sense only as it applies to Ireland) mine is not really an experience of exile, and to make a subject of it would be for me a kind of emotional exploitation (as other contemporary Irish writers have said about themselves). And the poems that might result from such exploitation—whether corrosive with indignation or sticky with nostalgia—would, as poems, be neither interesting nor worthwhile.

SEAMUS HEANEY



A poem is, among other things, a process of coming to for the first time in a place which nevertheless feels like home ground. That being so, you would think it should be easy for poets to remember where they are, but in fact it usually takes a while for the familiar to sink in deep enough to resurface in an imaginable way. Even poems as on-the-spot as Frank O’Hara’s come from the reredos rather than the retina; they too are “things discovered in the deep” of brilliant, burning lunch-hours, as far off within themselves as sunstruck flowers in a Manhattan roof-garden.

Somehow, the landscape of the poem needs to undergo the kind of flooding that will make it a reservoir, make it newly available as a breathable and lucid element. This was what happened when Wordsworth—not used, as he says in *The Prelude*, to make a present joy the matter of his song—crossed Westminster Bridge; or when Whitman crossed Brooklyn Bridge; or when Emily Dickinson crossed into a certain slant of light. The present became a foreign country. They were effortlessly in step with the stranger inside themselves.

Oddly enough, getting to know strange places or strange things for the first time—on holiday, say, or at work in different parts of the United States—has not usually excited the poem-writing part of me. Letters and journal entries can record that “present joy”, but generally speaking, the whole thing needs to go down into the clear element of the reservoir before it can be repossessed in a poem. And this is true even if I know at the time that what I am encountering is a subject that already belongs to me.

I often shared the airport bus from San Francisco Airport to Berkeley with young soldiers headed for Vietnam, due to be dropped off *en route* at Treasure Island Military Base. They were haunting presences, pale and frail and still hung over from farewell-parties of the previous night, and I knew as I sat with them that I was on a death-coach: I was my own dream-worker, more animated by the imagined dimension of the moment than by its actuality, but for some reason it took me twenty-five years to come out with it, when I was winging through the flurry of twelve-line poems that would become the “Squarings” sequence in *Seeing Things*. In a court of law I could say it was written quickly, but not in the court of poetry.

PETER McDONALD



I'm writing from a room at the top of a tall house in Clifton, a suburb of Bristol, the city I've lived in for the last five years. It's raining for the first time in what seems like months, and today I needn't go in to work until the afternoon. At least I don't have to get to the Midlands, as I had to do last week: the news this morning has Birmingham pretty much closed, bombs on the motorways, and traffic chaos. Sure signs, I suppose, of the imminence of next week's General Election, in which I shall vote—this will be the fourth time I've voted for an English M.P., the first occasion being in 1983 when, on the eve of my Final exams, frantic with scholarship and caffeine, I put my cross, as usual, on the losing side. There is coffee brewing now, and music playing on the stereo: my wife, returned from a trip to Nashville, has brought a tape of lately-unearthed early Hank Williams demos, and I spend a half-hour listening to the 1940s, and a voice and a poetry where I feel utterly at home. And in fact I suppose I have felt at home in places like Tennessee which are, strictly speaking, “abroad”, though the whys and wherefores seem to