

# Death of a Naturalist

Seamus Heaney

Published by Faber and Faber

Extract

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SEAMUS HEANEY  
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*faber and faber*  
LONDON BOSTON

First published in 1966  
by Faber and Faber Limited  
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU  
This paperback edition first published in 1969  
Reprinted 1973, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1985,  
1986, 1987, 1988 and 1989  
Reset with amendments 1991

Photoset by Wilmaset, Birkenhead, Wirral  
Printed in England by  
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

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A CIP record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 571 09024 9

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Acknowledgements are due to the editors of the following, in which some of these poems have appeared:

*Belfast Telegraph, Dublin Magazine, Kilkenny Magazine, Interest, Irish Times, The Listener, New Statesman, Northern Review, Outposts, Poetry Ireland, Vogue; The Arts in Ulster* (BBC Northern Ireland), *The Living Poet* and *The Poet's Voice* (BBC Third Programme); Universities Poetry 5, Young Commonwealth Poets '65 (Heinemann).

## 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, the 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.

## The Barn

Threshed corn lay piled like grit of ivory  
Or solid as cement in two-lugged sacks.  
The musty dark hoarded an armoury  
Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks.

The floor was mouse-grey, smooth, chilly concrete.  
There were no windows, just two narrow shafts  
Of gilded motes, crossing, from air-holes slit  
High in each gable. The one door meant no draughts

All summer when the zinc burned like an oven.  
A scythe's edge, a clean spade, a pitch-fork's prongs:  
Slowly bright objects formed when you went in.  
Then you felt cobwebs clogging up your lungs

And scuttled fast into the sunlit yard –  
And into nights when bats were on the wing  
Over the rafters of sleep, where bright eyes stared  
From piles of grain in corners, fierce, unblinking.

The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff  
To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits.  
I lay face-down to shun the fear above.  
The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.