

Digging

Seamus Heaney

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.

My People

Robert Wrigley

Not having any money never made them
think badly of the moon's monthly vanishing.
Besides, there was scientific expertise to be gleaned
from beans and a slingshot squab. Also gravy.
Their driveways were paved with coal-stove clinkers.
An outhouse forgave all sins without confession.

Any star that shone in the morning was a blessing
upon them. The problem with newspapers
was that they were owned. Coal dust seeded
their lungs with the nights they would not live to see.
Train whistles moaned, kindly and beneficent.
Elsewhere was another myth they did not believe.

Bent as he became, my grandfather found a thousand
quarters and purchased a thousand beers therewith.
He was thirty when he married my grandmother,
who was not quite sixteen and loved his graceful way
on the dance floor. My father almost finished fifth grade
and half a century later built a grandfather clock.

Rumor always had it there was a picture somewhere
of the person they called "Old Man Wrigley,"
gum magnate and millionaire. He sat right there with them,
in the old unplumbed, foundationless, immaculate house.
No one ever found the picture but they still believed
the old man the relative he was claimed to have been.

Socialists and anarchists, mostly, they disapproved
of Democrats but despised Republicans.
The few who became cops were forgiven. Several died
in wars. Their graves are scattered all over
Bluff Hill Cemetery, sometimes a husband and wife
with a stranger, or even two, between them.

They would not know what to make of this work
I do, which would not seem to them like work at all.
Three years ago, I rolled my father's wheelchair
to the grace of his namesake, Great-Uncle Arvil.
Ninety-two, with Parkinson's my father didn't say much
but said, as he always said, "Shit, I hate that name."

Digging – Portrait Poem Breakdown

By Seamus Heaney

For the first two lines: describe something about you that is part of your connection with your person.

In the second stanza describe your person involved in some action. Use sensory detail—sound, sight, taste, touch, smell.

In the third stanza, describe the action in more detail, zoom in, get specific in terms of detail.

In the fourth stanza say something directly about your person and about the action described.

In the fifth stanza describe your person in an action or story that involves you.

For the sixth stanza provide imagery and more sensory detail about your person.

For the final stanza repeat the image in some way from the first stanza.