

**RITA ANN HIGGINS**

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THE CLEMSON EXPERIENCE

(Conference of Irish Studies. Conference centre surrounded by golf course, formerly a plantation.)

In the Walker Golf Course where no one walked  
Joyce's wet dreams were splashed about  
in the name of the father.  
Carson's bullets slip-jigged and reeled  
Yeats's black habits were boiled and peeled  
more Joyce dot com for psycho netters  
Joyce in Celluloid, Joyce in hotpants  
Joyce in toilet with betters.

Heaney's bogmen were dragged up  
by their rotting stubs  
their bones picked asunder  
the contents of their ancient bellies  
made flesh and flung among us  
on this golf course at Clemson, once a plantation  
where tailgating is something dirty Yeats didn't do.

The golfers over-the-hilled at 8 a.m.  
in their twenties, in their trolleys, off their trolleys  
on their starters orders.

The man with the megaphone threw shapes.  
"Proper golf attire does not include  
grown men with big bellies prancing round  
this 18 hole in suspender belts  
shorts should be of Bermuda persuasion  
not to the shins or below  
not too far above the knees  
no balls in the trees  
that last remark was a slip of the tongue.

Right you cock shots, you hot shots  
only collared shirts here  
shiftless losers over there  
no flashy ankle socks with tiger paws or other  
absolutely no swim wear, no Aran sweaters

if you want Synge try Ballroom four.”

Papers about what Jack B. did to Lady G.  
 while W.B. was exorcising his tea  
 or viewing “A Portrait” from his tightest orifice (with slides)  
 chaired by a Carolina Panther supporter from Chattanooga  
 or the pitying shape of Irish drama  
 as told through the space invaders in Friel’s work  
 or learning the quotable Yeats and Heaney in three easy lessons  
 for after dinner speeches or the odd peace process.

Megaphoner-all-aloner was losing it with the golfers.

“Hey you, Mr. Inappropriate chest of drawers  
 do you want me to send you in there  
 where they pick Heaney, poke Joyce  
 pickle the bones from man of ice  
 O.D. on Yeats and queer theory  
 Tiresias and Art O’Leary.

Where all the day is spent finding the missing link  
 between Behan, Boland and Lewinsky.  
 And you with the black leggings  
 put your hand on your affliction  
 when I am dressing you down.

This is Clemson, home of The Clemson Tigers  
 where the Blue Ridge Mountains shield you  
 from the smell of that rotting cheese  
 where Lake Hartwell ducks eat gluten-free bread  
 where the azaleas and camellias  
 would sicken a sorry dog with that splash of colour  
 where the chrysanthemums are edging in just for notice.

The choice is yours, will you wear proper golfing attire  
 or will I let the wind-filled professors at you?  
 Where they heaney time by plucking the maggots  
 and sucking the marrow out the bones of the bogmen of Ireland  
 on this championship golf course, once a plantation.  
 What’s it to be, you in the girl’s knickers!?”

THE WEATHER BEATERS

The bitter snap is over  
a few bones told them.  
The two of them leg it  
through the green  
a hundred steps more or less  
and the cure will be in hand.

The winter was too long  
this is the first bright day  
and true to form  
pep came back to step  
it out across the Prairie  
the only open space in Castle Park.

They are not as old as they look  
these weather beaters  
karate- expert- weather- beaters  
they box it and kick it  
with their falling off toes  
they shout while they do it  
one says the snow is an animal  
a pig dog with horny warts the other says.

This bright day has giving them hope  
anti- freeze- cider- hope  
they're walking faster now  
they leg it across the green  
faster than they did in ages.

The flea infested couch they got  
as a so called Christmas present  
can go to blazes  
they think this in unison  
with their bachelor brains.

Today they stretch their bones  
their funny bones  
everything is funny today  
they say hello to two kids lighting a fire  
the kids say fuck off and die  
the weather beaters laugh and laugh.

MOTHER AND SON  
 (AFTER ALEKSANDR SOKUROV)

(for Rod Stoneman)

*I'd like to walk first,  
 let sleep be second  
 let sleep always be second  
 in fact let sleep be last.*

It's very cold now mother  
 when you wake up it will be warmer.  
 We can walk then to the postcard bench  
 I'll read the years back to you  
 I'll ask "who was he" questions  
 you'll pretend not to hear me  
 I won't ever mind mother.

*I want to walk but I have no clothes,  
 only that raincoat that smells of death  
 how can I walk in a raincoat that smells of death?*

Listen to her, no clothes indeed,  
 what next I ask you.  
 We can keep ourselves to ourselves  
 just you and me mother.  
 We don't need raincoats or people  
 we can stay away from people.

I'll wrap a blanket round you  
 and carry you most of the way.  
 You, light as the air  
 I'll hardly know I'm carrying you.

*I'll know my gentle son,  
 I'll always know you are carrying me,  
 my bones will be breaking with pity.*

## THE RIVER

The syness was painful  
before this not even the whisper  
of a stolen kiss.

On the walk down towards the bridge  
her head fitted his shoulder—  
Gráinne's bed.

Wistful river  
pulsating with greed  
taking bits of everything  
empty cigarette packets  
(a lipstick wearer's handbag)  
pieces of wood  
her inhibitions.

Brazen sorcerer  
never taking no for an answer  
all this slushing and gushing.

In no-time shyness slipped off her hips  
tonight she would wear lipstick  
she would be young girl giddy  
she would pirouette for nothing

she would show him her arse.

## WHY I REFUSE TO BE GRACIOUS (FOR LILIA DOOLAN)

*"the bee-goat spleen roseth, helpeth the coeliack"*

*Pliny*

My small intestine is anything but fine  
in fact my small intestine is anything but mine.  
I have some of the most tangled and shrouded  
reasons to whine, but do I ever, I never.

It's the gluten you see  
and it hates the shite of me.  
That jejunum the bugger  
is the cause of all the trouble.  
He does a hand stand  
when a chocolate bar he sees  
or battered fish or battered chicken  
or bread or cakes or custard creams.

When he's supposed to work  
he'll throw a wobbler  
act gimped or look inane  
and carp and carp and malabsorp  
until the stone of unripe grape  
is portion plenty at the gate.

The inner circle talk now going round  
is about the cleanest colon in town  
I'm pissed off it will never ever be me.

My mucosa makes the mosta  
of my slightest little boasta  
my villi is the dilli with the willi  
in the middle of a field  
each villus that should stand  
just flops to beat the band  
waiting myrtles and quinces  
and shredded fifty pences.

My enterocytes acts the shitists  
in the middle of the nighists  
and the hee-goat spleen  
is nowhere to be seen  
roasted or raw  
or ready for the thaw  
not a drop not a jigger  
not a lick of the frigger  
have a sampled since I was eighteen

ANTHEM

Our fury was well invested  
year in, year out.  
I wouldn't give an inch  
you wouldn't give an inch.  
Hammer and tongs our anthem.

On the morning you died  
I could see no reason  
to change the habits of a lifetime.

It was strange  
saying the rosary round your bed  
half praying, half miming.  
The room was cold  
with that window open.  
Some *piseog* or other was being acted out.  
(Letting your spirit dander round Mervue)

A half smoked cigarette  
lay nipped on your bedside locker,  
no *piseog* here only you were probably dying for a drag.  
your new fur-lined slippers in everyone's way  
you weren't planning to leave just yet.

The rosary was in full flight  
echoes of the old days  
and every bit as long  
half song, half whisper,  
extra prayers for the devil knows what.

As far as I was concerned  
you had died, end of story  
end of our Trojan War.

Some nuisance more ancient  
than your Connemara lingo  
or the jagged stones of Inis Meáin  
was playing puck with my sensible side  
the side I use for dancing,

making me for the smallest whisker of a second  
 want to tuck the blankets round you,  
 sparing you the waspish November chill.

## PAUL MULDOON

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### A TELEGRAM FOR SEAMUS HEANEY\*

“It was far from it he was reared,” I hear my da volunteer  
 of a neighbour who’s taken a trip to Rome  
 and eaten pasta, Lord have mercy, in the shape of women’s ears,  
 while I sit today in a motel room

in Clemson, South Carolina, and cheer  
 as, one by one, the networks pick up the news from the Stockholm  
 in which, however far from it you might have been reared,  
 you’ll surely find yourself at home.

I imagine you taking in yet again the Vasa, that great warship  
 they lifted from the harbour-bottom, a three-story block of bog oak  
 that sank even as it went down the slip

filled with the bounty of Sweden. I imagine your making us see  
 as if for the first time not only the sailors’ platters and purses and pikes  
 but, wonder of wonders, the shapes of warships in the limbs of trees.

\*Editor’s Note:

This sonnet was written at the Ramada Inn in Clemson on the evening of October 5, 1995, following a poetry reading in the Self Auditorium of the Strom Thurmond Institute, Clemson University, and the announcement that Seamus Heaney had won the Nobel Prize for literature. The poem was revised and faxed to *The Independent* (London) from the English Department before Mr. Muldoon’s departure the next morning and is reprinted here with his permission, a counterpoint to R.A.H.’s point, “The Clemson Experience.” — W.K.C.