



# Casualty

BY SEAMUS HEANEY

SHARE



I

He would drink by himself  
 And raise a weathered thumb  
 Towards the high shelf,  
 Calling another rum  
 And blackcurrant, without  
 Having to raise his voice,  
 Or order a quick stout  
 By a lifting of the eyes  
 And a discreet dumb-show  
 Of pulling off the top;  
 At closing time would go  
 In waders and peaked cap  
 Into the showery dark,  
 A dole-kept breadwinner  
 But a natural for work.  
 I loved his whole manner,  
 Sure-footed but too sly,  
 His deadpan sidling tact,  
 His fisherman's quick eye  
 And turned observant back.

Incomprehensible  
 To him, my other life.  
 Sometimes, on the high stool,  
 Too busy with his knife  
 At a tobacco plug  
 And not meeting my eye,  
 In the pause after a slug  
 He mentioned poetry.  
 We would be on our own  
 And, always politic  
 And shy of condescension,  
 I would manage by some trick  
 To switch the talk to eels  
 Or lore of the horse and cart  
 Or the Provisionals.

But my tentative art  
 His turned back watches too:  
 He was blown to bits  
 Out drinking in a curfew  
 Others obeyed, three nights  
 After they shot dead  
 The thirteen men in Derry.  
 PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said,  
 BOGSIDE NIL. That Wednesday  
 Everyone held  
 His breath and trembled.

## II

It was a day of cold  
 Raw silence, wind-blown  
 surplice and soutane:  
 Rained-on, flower-laden  
 Coffin after coffin  
 Seemed to float from the door  
 Of the packed cathedral  
 Like blossoms on slow water.  
 The common funeral  
 Unrolled its swaddling band,  
 Lapping, tightening  
 Till we were braced and bound  
 Like brothers in a ring.

But he would not be held  
 At home by his own crowd  
 Whatever threats were phoned,  
 Whatever black flags waved.  
 I see him as he turned  
 In that bombed offending place,  
 Remorse fused with terror  
 In his still knowable face,  
 His cornered outfaced stare  
 Blinding in the flash.

He had gone miles away  
 For he drank like a fish  
 Nightly, naturally  
 Swimming towards the lure  
 Of warm lit-up places,  
 The blurred mesh and murmur  
 Drifting among glasses  
 In the gregarious smoke.  
 How culpable was he  
 That last night when he broke  
 Our tribe's complicity?  
 'Now, you're supposed to be  
 An educated man,'  
 I hear him say. 'Puzzle me  
 The right answer to that one.'

## III

I missed his funeral,  
 Those quiet walkers  
 And sideways talkers  
 Shoaling out of his lane  
 To the respectable  
 Purring of the hearse...  
 They move in equal pace  
 With the habitual  
 Slow consolation  
 Of a dawdling engine,  
 The line lifted, hand  
 Over fist, cold sunshine  
 On the water, the land  
 Banked under fog: that morning  
 I was taken in his boat,  
 The Screw purling, turning  
 Indolent fathoms white,  
 I tasted freedom with him.  
 To get out early, haul  
 Steadily off the bottom,  
 Dispraise the catch, and smile  
 As you find a rhythm  
 Working you, slow mile by mile,  
 Into your proper haunt  
 Somewhere, well out, beyond...

Dawn-sniffing revenant,  
 Plodder through midnight rain,  
 Question me again.

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