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Audenesque

Seamus Heaney

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Seamus Heaney

AUDENESQUE

in memory of Joseph Brodsky

Joseph, yes, you know the beat.
Wystan Auden's metric feet
Marched to it, unstressed and stressed,
Laying William Yeats to rest.

Therefore, Joseph, on this day,
Yeats's anniversary,
(Double-crossed and death-marched date,
January twenty-eight),

Its measured ways I tread again
Quatrain by constrained quatrain,
Meting grief and reason out
As you said a poem ought.

Trochee, trochee, falling; thus
Grief and metre order us.
Repetition is the rule,
Spins on lines we learnt at school.

Repetition, too, of cold
In the poet and the world,
Dublin Airport locked in frost,
Rigor mortis in your breast.

Ice no axe or book will break,
No Horatian ode unlock,
No poetic foot imprint,
Quatrain shift or couplet dint,

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Ice of Archangelic strength,
Ice of this hard two-faced month,
Ice like Dante's in deep hell
Makes your heart a frozen well.

Pepper vodka you produced
Once in Western Massachusetts
With the reading due to start
Warmed my spirits and my heart

But no vodka, cold or hot,
Aquavit or uisquebaugh
Brings the blood back to your cheeks
Or the colour to your jokes,

Politically incorrect
Jokes involving sex and sect,
Everything against the grain,
Drinking, smoking like a train.

In a train in Finland we
Talked last summer happily,
Swapping manuscripts and quips,
Both of us like cracking whips

Sharpened up and making free,
Heading west for Tampere
(West that meant for you, of course,
Lenin's train-trip in reverse).

Nevermore that wild speed-read,
Nevermore your tilted head
Like a deck where mind took off
With a mind-flash and a laugh,

Nevermore that rush to pun
Or to hurry through all yon
Jammed enjambements piling up
As you went above the top,

Nose in air, foot to the floor,
Revvng English like a car
You hijacked when you robbed its bank
(Russian was your reserve tank).

Worshipped language can't undo
Damage time has done to you:
Even your peremptory trust
In words alone here bites the dust.

Dust-cakes, still—see *Gilgamesh*—
Feed the dead. So be their guest.
Do again what Auden said
Good poets do: bite, break their bread.