A Voice Fit for Winter

Seamus Heaney's Poetry on Ageing in *Human Chain*

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In August 2006 Seamus Heaney and his wife, Marie, had gone to Donegal to celebrate the 75th birthday of Brian Friel's wife. Many old friends were there beside the Friels – the singer, film-maker and broadcaster David Hammond, the Northern Irish politician John Hume, the writers Tom Kilroy and Desmond Kavanagh, who had known Seamus since the days of high school in Derry. When Heaney woke up the following day, he tried to get out of bed and suddenly felt strange. "I didn't know what was wrong with me," he told Robert McCrum in an interview, "I made to move, but I couldn't move, and I felt very odd. My speech wasn't affected. When Marie came over to help me, she saw my leg was twisted, and she began to cry out" (2009). At that point Heaney realised there was something seriously wrong, and asked his wife to go and call the Kavanaghs, who alerted the medical services. Soon an ambulance was on its way, and Kavanagh and the poet Peter Fallon helped to carry Heaney downstairs. Even on that occasion, Seamus did not lose his typical sense of humour: since most of the friends who were there had in some way been involved in the Field Day Theatre Company, and many had recently experienced some illness, he made a joke about the 'curse of Field Day'. Although Heaney told McCrum that he remembered Marie sitting in the back of the ambulance with him, and he felt that the bumpy ride through the countryside to reach the hospital had renewed their love, the stroke suddenly made him aware of his frailty. The collection *Human Chain*, published in 2010, is Heaney's last creative response to illness and old age.

This essay will take into consideration a selection of these poems, showing how they are spoken in the voice of someone 'fit for winter'.[1]

AN UNEXPECTED, ALMOST DANGEROUS WIND

Human Chain opens with "Had I Not Been Awake", a meditation on the serious illness that caught Heaney off-guard, leaving him both shaken and at the same time deeply aware of having been miraculously offered a second chance in life. It seems particularly apt that the following analysis should start with this evocative poem, because, as will be shown, the sudden gust of wind "that rose and whirled until the roof / Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore" (Heaney 2010: 3) closes the collection in a circular pattern, with the image of a kite that finally takes flight, breaking free of its string ("A Kite for Aibhín"). As the first poem of *Human Chain* begins, lying in bed, the speaker hears the howling wind: "It came and went so unexpectedly / And almost it seemed dangerously" (2010: 3). Something has changed forever, and the poetic "I" is both physically and spiritually reawakened: "the whole of me a-patter, / Alive and ticking like an electric fence" (ibid). The image of newly rediscovered vitality corresponds to the creative impetus that has not abandoned the poet, despite his weakness and fear. Although with the advancing of old age Heaney is resigned to the ephemerality of life, which he elsewhere defines *as mono no aware*[2] or *lacrimae rerum*,[3] he is determined to treasure the moments of delight that the future, however short, still has in store for him. As John Banville has commented, "Had I Not Been Awake" "does stand at the head of the collection like the compact but elaborate first letter of a medieval codex"

1 I owe this definition to Luke Smith's 2011 online review "A Portrait of the Artist as An Old Man".

2 *Mono no aware* refers to a central ideal of Japanese aesthetics, literally the "tears of things" or *lacrimae rerum*. It is usually associated with a feeling of melancholy which is caused by the contemplation of the impermanence or the ephemeral beauty manifested in nature, human life or a work of art. For further reference cp. Heaney 2007: 15.

3 *Lacrimae rerum*, literally "the tears of things", is an expression derived from *Aeneid* I, l. 462: "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*".

and "crackles with the force of a presentiment that seems as dangerous as it is exciting" (2010). It sets the atmosphere for a "book of grief and pain" (Lewison 2010), "of shadows and shades" (Tóibín 2013), "of ghosts and goodbyes" (Lordan 2011).

FAMILY MEMORIES AND MISSED EMBRACES

Heaney's brush with death, which, as already said, is symbolised by the unexpected, dangerous wind of the first poem, leads the poet's imagination to linger on the figures of his loved ones, in a collection which, as will be shown, is also and above all a celebration of human bonds and solidarity. This section of my analysis will focus on three poems in particular, all of which concentrate on the intergenerational parent-child relationship: "Album", "Uncoupled" and "The Butts". "Album" is a sequence of five pictures from the past, which are filled with remembrance and regret. The first part takes the reader back in time, to a period the poetic voice is struggling to recall. The reference to "the timed collapse / Of a sawn down tree" (2010: 4), in the first stanza, clarifies from the outset that the poem is about severed relationships and demise, while at the same time reminding the reader of the chestnut tree in "Clearances",[4] associated by the poet with a dead aunt, who left behind a void later turned into a creative space, "utterly empty, utterly a source" (Heaney 1987: 26). In "Album" the first person pronoun "I" is coupled in the poet's fervid imagination with "them", a reference to his parents, and his memories are set into motion: "I imagine them // In summer season, as it must have been, / And the place, it dawns on me, / Could have been Grove Hill" (ibid). Heaney's friend and translator Marco Sonzogni[5] comments that the depth and nature of the parents' relationship is revealed by their "steady gazing / Not at each other but in the same direction" (ibid.), a quotation from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Terre des hommes*.

However, it is "Too late, alas, now" to retrieve the moments when he would "stand with them on airy Sundays / *Shin-deep* in hilltop *bluebells*" (ibid, emphasis added). This reference may call to mind a similar image in

4 First published in *The Haw Lantern* (1987).

5 Cp. Heaney 2014: 1120.

a poem by Sligo-born Joan McBreen, titled "The Broken Swing", which also deals with memory, the advancing of old age and death: "Come with me / through the rusting gates / […] into this high-walled garden / and move ankle deep in *bluebells*" (2003: 55, emphasis added). McBreen's poetic voice is reminded of her dead mother, as she seems to hear the sound of a piano coming from the now abandoned family home, surrounded by the "garden with the broken swing" where she used to play as a child. The last two stanzas of her poem offer a hopeful image of continuity between generations, with a new, closing reference to the flowers which are also dear to Heaney:

> […] bring
> your children here.
>
> Take them in from the town
> to pick bluebells in the garden.
> Stay near the house with the shuttered windows
> from where you first saw the stars. (McBreen 2003: 55)

Heaney's "Album" of family memories includes a second picture of his parents, this time as they leave him on his first day as a boarder at St Columb's College, in Londonderry, in the 1950s:

> Seeing them as a couple, I now see,
>
> For the first time, all the more together
> For having had to turn and walk away, as close
> In the leaving (or closer) as in the getting. (2010: 5)

An old Heaney appreciates, in retrospective, the inner strength of his parents, who despite the wrench of imminent separation and their consequent emotional upheaval, managed to dutifully conceal their feelings, thus confirming their solidarity as a couple. Dipping into the past, age has added a new perspective to the emotions that, as a child, he did not possess.

The third section of "Album" is characterized by a further flashback in time, as the poetic voice describes the parents' "wedding meal" (2010: 6).

Heaney is "uninvited" but "ineluctable" (ibid), non-existent but an inescapable future reality, an integral part of their destiny. The poem may be read as a commentary on the detachment and stern aloofness of Heaney's parents, particularly on his father's part, as that side of the family was graver and far less convivial than his mother's (McCrum 2009). An allusion to this can be found in the reference to "all the anniversaries of this / They are not ever going to observe // Or mention even in the years to come" (2010: 6). As Fawbert acutely observes, "[t]his reluctance to show and respond to emotions of love will resurface in [Heaney's] father-son poems" (2010).

The father figure and the difficulty of communicating with him emotionally resurface in the penultimate section of "Album", an autobiographical meditation on lost chances. Heaney evokes the painfully vivid memories of three attempted embraces with his now dead father, which call to his mind the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*,[6] in which Aeneas, after his descent into the Elysium, longs for one last meeting with Anchises. The first attempt Heaney remembers was "on the riverbank / That summer before college, [his father] in his prime" (2010: 7). The son's desire to hold his father was unfulfilled, and with hindsight Heaney evokes the inhibition he felt, as an eleven-year-old, in that attempted contact. The second opportunity happened years later, "When [his father] was very drunk and needed help / To do up trouser buttons" (ibid). Heaney's embrace came as an answer to his parent's helplessness and undignified state. The third, final hug was during his father's "last week", when he was reduced to his most basic needs and unable to hold himself up: "Helping him to the bathroom, my right arm / Taking the webby weight of his underarm." (ibid) This image of the elderly father, now physically impotent and completely

6 Heaney had shown a deep interest in the *Aeneid* since the publication of *Seeing Things* (1991), which includes "The Golden Bough". Other references to Virgil can be found in *Electric Light* (with 'Glanmore Eclogue'), and in *Human Chain* itself, particularly in "The Riverbank Field" and "Route 110". Before his death, in the summer of 2013, Heaney completed an integral translation of *Aeneid* Book VI, which was published posthumously by Faber in 2016. For further references cp. *Virgilio nella Bann Valley*, edited by Giorgio Bernardi Perini and Chiara Prezzavento, with a contribution by Massimo Bacigalupo (2013).

dependent on the family for support, closely anticipates "The Butts", which will be dealt with further on in this essay.

"Album" closes with a reflection on generational differences:

> It took a grandson to do it properly,
> To rush him in the armchair
> With a snatch raid on his neck,
>
> Proving him thus vulnerable to delight. (2010: 8)

In his spontaneous gesture of love, the grandson ignores the emotional inhibition of his grandfather. The use of the adjective "vulnerable" emphasizes the grandfather's lack of strength, his fragility and unsteadiness. Heaney seems to imply that the new generations are allowed to break the rules of formal behaviour and it is easier to forgive them, because they can melt the ice of even the most hardened souls. The poet himself was fortunate enough to experience the blessing of becoming a grandparent,[7] and among many poems *in memoriam*, he also celebrates new lives and new beginnings in the three poems he dedicated to each of his beloved granddaughters, Anna Rose, Aibhín and Síofra.[8]

As has been shown, the series of snapshots from Heaney's family album takes the now aged poet and his readers on a walk down memory lane. A similarly nostalgic mood also dominates "Uncoupled", "a diptych in memory of his parents", with "all the placid beauty of a Dutch painting or a Schubert song", as Colm Tóibín noted in a 2010 review. "The first part describes his mother carrying a tray of ashes from the house to the ash-pit", offering "a picture of immense, distant dignity" (Tóibín 2010), while the second part is a picture of his father "not much higher than the cattle /

7 For a poem about Heaney's own grandfather, cp. "In the Attic" (2010: 82).

8 To Síofra Heaney dedicated the poem "In Time", which he wrote twelve days before his death in 2013. The poem celebrates the encounter between an old man and a newborn child, and it is essentially a contemplation of time, suspended between the memory of the past, the fleeting present and a hope for the future to come.

Working his way towards me through the pen, / His *ashplant*[9] in one hand" (Heaney 2010: 11, emphasis added). The father is captured in a moment of everyday life, but he is "Waving and calling something I cannot hear", because of "all the lowing and roaring, lorries revving / At the far end of the yard, the dealers // Shouting among themselves" (ibid). Once again, the poet's memory lingers on the useless attempt at communication between father and son, but the parent's figure turns into a shade dissolving in the past. As becomes apparent in the last two lines, "time has passed and death has intervened" (Tóibín 2010): "So that his eyes leave mine and I know / The pain of loss before I know the term." (Heaney 2010: 11)

The "pain of loss" is equally crucial in "The Butts", another poem about the winter of life, the sense of longing and the unbearable loneliness after the demise of his parent. In this case, the pain "is caused by the unshakable certitude that his father is no more" (Kędzierska 2016: 34). As the poem opens, an adolescent "I" delves "past flap and lining / For the forbidden handfuls" (Heaney 2010: 12), the cigarette butts his father kept in the pockets of his suit. Even "this last hopeful moment of intimacy brings only a kind of empty-handedness" (Kędzierska 2016: 34), a sad foreboding of what remains of his father's life. In the second part of the poem, a mature son assists his father, at his most helpless, with the other members of the family, learning how:

> […] to reach well in beneath
> Each meagre armpit
> To lift and sponge him,
> On either side,
> Feeling his lightness,
>
> Having to dab and work
> Closer than anybody liked

9 The symbol of the father's ashplant also recurs in "The Strand", one of Heaney's haiku-like poems, which was published in *The Spirit Level*: "The dotted line my father's ashplant made / On Sandymount Strand / Is something else the tide won't wash away." (1996: 62) Also cp. "1.1.87" from *Seeing Things*: "Dangerous pavements. / But I face the ice this year / With my father's stick." (1991: 20)

But having, for all that,
To keep working. (Heaney 2010: 13)

As Kędzierska perceptively observes, "The Butts" "registers an unwavering, familial respect for the elderly, as well as the preciousness of human life in general", celebrating "the frail and ailing people as gifts to be cherished" (2016: 34). The poet realises how the presence of his father has enriched him, even *in hora mortis*, when the test of love was most arduous. At the same time, the inevitability of death leads him to ponder on his own mortality: to quote Nicole O'Driscoll, Heaney "leaves it to us to make the connection that he is now the most vulnerable link in the chain" (2012).

ILLNESS, THE RENEWAL OF LOVE AND SOLIDARITY

In *Human Chain* three poems deal with various degrees of explicitness with Heaney's stroke in 2006, an experience he faced with utter courage and strong determination: these are "Chanson d'Aventure", "Miracle" and the title poem. "Chanson d'Aventure" takes its title from an Old French type of lyric, "a framing device, where the singer (or poet) wanders into a wild, rural setting and has a chance encounter usually of an erotic or amorous nature" (Fawbert 2010). As emerges from the 2009 interview with McCrum, Heaney kept the latter aspect of the original genre: "The trip in the ambulance I always remember, because Marie was in the back with me … To me, that was one of the actual beauties of the stroke, that renewal of love in the ambulance." The jolting ambulance ride, the hospitalization and the gradual recovery are an occasion for reflection on the relationship between the body and the soul, as made clear by the epigraph from John Donne's "The Extasie".[10] As Fawbert comments, "the soul seeks outward expression through the body, inhibited at this point by stroke-induced paralysis" (2010). The patient recalls being "Strapped on, wheeled out, forklifted / Locked in position for the drive" (Heaney 2010: 14), a process described by the language of trade inscribed in a series of past participles. The memory of his wife Marie's loving presence mitigates the feelings of

10 "Love's mysteries in souls do grow, / but yet the body is his book." (Donne 2014: 181)

extreme vulnerability and impotency that are nestled in the image of "me flat on my back" (ibid).

The first poem in the sequence directs the reader's attention to the tense electricity of the silence between husband and wife ("Everything and nothing spoken", ibid): there is no need for outward communication. The critical circumstances heighten the couple's spiritual union and their mutual understanding, which find expression in their interlocked gazes ("Our eyebeams threaded laser-fast", ibid.). From the eyes, the second part of the sequence shifts the attention to the hands. "Recalling how strong he once was, he realizes that his hand is no longer 'capable' and 'warm', and that he could not even feel Mary lift and hold it" (Kędzierska 2016: 35). In its numbness, "it lay flop-heavy as a bellpull" (Heaney 2010: 15). However, the unforeseen illness helps the poet rediscover the bond of love, and the deep feelings shared by the couple as they travel at full tilt along the roads of Donegal are only disrupted by the medical paraphernalia on the ambulance: "our gaze ecstatic and bisected / By a hooked-up drip-feed to the cannula." (ibid)

The third and final poem in the sequence describes a further stage in Heaney's recovery, expressing his determination to recuperate physical strength. The poet compares his own condition to that of the charioteer at Delphi, a well-known icon of ancient Greece, which depicts, "in its incompleteness, a man striving onwards despite incapacities that would appear to render progress impossible" (Fawbert 2010) – "[h]is left hand lopped / From a wrist protruding like an open spout" (Heaney 2010: 16). The sculptor has created a figure that emanates unwavering determination: "his gaze ahead / …His eyes-front, straight-backed posture" (ibid.). Heaney shows a similar "almost heroic struggle with his impotence and weakness" (Kędzierska 2016: 36), as he learns how to walk again, "[d]oing physio in the corridor, *holding up*" (Heaney 2010: 16, emphasis added), this last verb alluding to both his regained capacity to stand erect and his single-mindedness. The poem closes with the image of the physiotherapist, who, like Heaney's father teaching him the art of ploughing, now teaches an elderly man how to move again.

If "Chanson d'Aventure" makes an explicit reference to Heaney's struggle for physical recuperation, the poem "Miracle" expresses with highest dramatic intensity the poet's tribute to the 'guardian angels' who came to his aid on the day of the stroke, the invaluable friends and

dedicatees of the collection, Desmond and Mary Kavanagh and Peter and Jean Fallon, whose support "helped bring about the miracle of recovery" (Fawbert 2010). The poet alludes "to the disorientating experience of being carried, helpless, to an ambulance, and of feeling the support of those bodies doing the lifting" (Fawbert 2010). This emotionally charged, painful memory is associated with the gospel story of the paralytic who is carried to be healed by Jesus, an episode narrated in three of the four Evangelists: Matthew (9:2-8), Mark (2:1-22) and Luke (5:17-26). Heaney does not commemorate "the beneficiary of a biblical miracle", "but rather, his own 'stretcher-bearers' whose solidarity took up the challenge however daunting of moving him" (Fawbert 2010):

> Not the one who takes up his bed and walks
> But the ones who have known him all along
> And carry him in –
>
> Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked
> In their backs, the stretcher handles
> Slippery with sweat. (Heaney 2010: 17)

Although the poem is written in the third person, it is clear that it was inspired by personal experience. The repetition of the sibilants, in the last two lines of the second stanza ("stretcher handles / Slippery with sweat", ibid.), emphasizes the lack of grip, which makes the task of delivering a sick man for healing even more difficult. Heaney invites his readers to "be mindful" "of those who had known him all long" (ibid), who tried to help in the best way possible, with their resilience and strength (the body is "strapped on tight, made tiltable / And raised … then lowered", ibid), sparing no effort ("no let-up", ibid.). Without their assistance, "his illness might have met with a less felicitous outcome"[11] (Fawbert 2010).

The imagery of "Miracle", with its crucial theme of the shared burden, is recalled and amplified in the title poem of the collection, where Heaney compares the sadly familiar televised image of aid workers passing sacks of food "hand to hand / In close up" (2010: 18), in emergency assistance to the victims of social and political disaster, to his own experience of lugging

11 Cp. O'Driscoll 2008: 461-462.

bags of grain on a trailer, during the harvests of his rural youth. The experience of loading these heavy bags is described in terms that recall a confrontation between two assailants ("eye-to-eye", ibid), the quick, rhythmical movements evoked by the expression "one-two, one-two upswing" (ibid), while the repetitiveness of the action is suggested by "the stoop and drag and drain / Of the next lift" (ibid). In the last two lines, Heaney lingers on the sense of relief that is felt after a weight is released: "Nothing surpassed / That quick unburdening, backbreak's truest payback." (ibid)

If the expression "A letting go" literally refers to the release of grip, it may also be read as a metaphor for the final liberation of the body through death, which will come again "once / And for all" (ibid). Andrew J. Auge argues that the "unburdening" of the body in death can be interpreted as "both welcome release from and meagre recompense for the pain endured in life" (Auge in O'Brien 2016: 35). However, the poem "Human Chain" and the collection as a whole seem to express Heaney's great gratitude for the precious gifts life has reserved for him, above all the consolation of human solidarity, which, thanks to his own extraordinary generosity and warm-heartedness, he treasures most in the winter of life. However, as Kędzierska has argued, "The proximity of death, as well as the poet's response to it, weaves its elegiac patterns throughout the collection, preventing oversimplifications and naïve sentimentality" (2016: 33).

GHOSTS AND GOODBYES

In *Human Chain*, old age and approaching death inspired Heaney to write a series of poems *in memoriam*, many of them celebrating the lifelong friendship of artists and intellectuals. "Loughanure" is dedicated to Colin Middleton, an Irish artist and friend of the Heaneys, who is immortalized "with tenderness and regret" (Lordan 2011) with his inseparable cigarette, "nodding" and "grunting" (Heaney 2010: 61) as he would stand in front of a picture he had sold them, gazing at it. Similarly, in "Death of a Painter" Heaney bids a last farewell to Nancy Wynne-Jones, "working to the end" (2010: 60). Perhaps the most touching of these portrayals is in "The Baler", which recalls the figure of the aged painter Derek Hill. The speaker's

perception of the beauty of sunset, the "dusk Eldorado" he is enjoying, is contrasted with the artist's refusal to watch this spectacle:

> But what I also remembered
> […]
> Was Derek Hill's saying,
> The last time he sat at our table,
> He could bear no longer to watch
>
> The sun going down
> And asking please to be put
> With his back to the window. (Heaney 2010: 24)

Heaney describes "the feelings and responses of a man" who "was already wheel-chair-bound" and "knew that he was dying" (Fawbert 2010). Smith emphasizes how the definite article in the expression "[t]he last time" evokes a "terrible finality" (2011). In this image, the artist turns away from the world, "abandoning a vital part of himself … defeated" (Smith 2011). Yet the poem may be interpreted as an affirmation, through suffering, of "art's power to look at death unblinkingly – to keep a chair facing the window" (Smith 2011).

Sonzogni has rightly noticed (2014: 1126) that the figure of Derek Hill in "The Baler" is in stark contrast with the old woman of "Field of Vision", from *Seeing Things*:

> I remember this woman who sat for years
> In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead
> Out of the window […]
>
> She was steadfast as the big window itself.
> […]
> She never lamented once and she never
> Carried a spare ounce of emotional weight.
>
> Face to face with her was an education
> Of the sort you got across a well-braced gate. (Heaney 1991: 22)

The poem celebrates the old woman as a positive, living example of patient acceptance of the ageing process. "Looking straight ahead", she invites the poet and the readers alike to embrace wider horizons, beyond the thresholds of that window and the gate, which so recurrently feature in Heaney's poetry.

Another moving dedicatory piece from *Human Chain*, which stands out in a collection "of ghosts and goodbyes" (Lordan 2011), is "The Door Was Open and the House Was Dark", written in memory of Heaney's close friend, the Irish musician David Hammond:[12]

> The door was open and the house was dark
> Wherefore I called his name, although I knew
> The answer this time would be silence
>
> That kept me standing listening while it grew
> Backwards and down and out into the street
> […]
> I felt, for the first time there and then, a stranger,
> Intruder almost, wanting to take flight
>
> Yet well aware that there was no danger,
> Only withdrawal, a not unwelcoming
> Emptiness, as in a midnight hangar
>
> On an overgrown airfield in late summer. (Heaney 2010: 82)

Hammond was a refined connoisseur and practitioner of traditional Irish music. In the *Guardian* obituary Heaney devoted to him on 28th August 2008, he affectionately defined him as "a natural force masquerading as a human being", remembering how, "For all his love of Belfast, David was

12 One is reminded, by contrast, of an earlier poem Heaney wrote for Hammond, "The Singer's House", published in *Field Work*: "his song / A rowboat far out in the evening. // When I first came here you were always singing" (1979: 27). There, too, he celebrated Hammond's inspiring friendship and his essential encouragement in the 1970s, when they both collaborated with the Field Day Theatre Company.

equally at home in his 'singer's house' by the sea in west Donegal", where "he exulted in being head of a loving household and acted as host to a veritable court of music and poetry" (Heaney 2008). The situation and the atmosphere evoked by Heaney in "The Door Was Open" are the opposite: David's house is dark, silent, empty, and his friend's familiarity with the place makes it even harder to accept his absence, especially when Heaney calls the friend's name but receives no answer. Feeling like "a stranger, / Intruder almost, wanting to take flight" (Heaney 2010: 82), he is reminded of a visit by night to a place not far from his parents' home, the airfield at Creagh. He had always found it mysterious and oddly fascinating (cp. Dennis O'Driscoll 2008: 358), even when it was not in use any longer, like Hammond's house, now deprived of its lively owner's presence, which used to be associated with his singing and his warm hospitality. As Kate Kellaway insightfully observes, in "The Door Was Open" "Heaney explores the silence after a death. It is a wonderful idea that silence should develop a life of its own, journeying through the second stanza and retiring into the street. The strangeness rings emotionally true, a reaction to a new relationship with silence. And the last line is an extraordinary release: 'On an overgrown airfield in late summer'" (2010).

CONCLUSION: KITES TAKING FLIGHT

Human Chain closes with "A Kite for Aibhín", a poem which celebrates the birth of Heaney's second granddaughter, born to his eldest son Michael and his wife. The title significantly recalls an earlier composition included in *Station Island* (1984), "A Kite for Michael and Christopher", in which he, the father, teaches his two sons how to launch a kite and keep it flying up in the air:

> Before the kite plunges down into the wood
> And this line goes useless
> Take it in your two hands, boys, and feel
> The strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief.

You were born fit for it.
Stand in here in front of me
And take the strain. (Heaney 1984: 44)

In *Stepping Stones*, where Heaney spoke about "the mysterious gulf between childhood and old age … that I can only now put into words" (2008: 27), he told Dennis O'Driscoll that the poem was triggered by the childhood memory

of an afternoon when my father came out to a field at the back of the house and launched a kite. What was surprising and what I still remember most vividly was the powerful drag in the kite string … The more string you could pay out … the higher and more spectacular your flight; although often … because of that mighty strain, the string would break and you would lose the kite. (2008: 254¯255)

From the kite of his own childhood, made by his father "of lath and pasted newspaper" (ibid), the poet moves to the one "made of nylon" that he bought for his two adolescent sons, whom he encourages to follow in his path. Gabriella Morisco talks about "[a] metaphorical lesson for life based on a constant attention and the capacity never to give in; to have the strength to endure even the pain caused by the taut, thin, cutting string in one's hands" (2013: 36). In *Human Chain* it is an elderly Heaney, now a grandfather, who makes the kite fly for his beloved granddaughter: in this case, the symbol so dear to the poet's imagination blends with an image he derived from Giovanni Pascoli's "L'aquilone". Pascoli was inspired to write this poem during a period he spent in the Italian city of Urbino, where, still today, in the month of September, the local people hold a traditional kite challenge. In her essay Morisco recounts how Heaney first heard about Pascoli's "L'aquilone" during a visit he made to Urbino in 2007, when he was awarded a honorary degree. On that occasion, Morisco had given him a postcard of a painting that showed a boy flying his kite outside the city gates, "a postcard he kept long afterwards, because he told [her]" "I had not finished with the image of that boy and his plaything" (ibid). In "A Kite for Aibhín", Heaney replaces the countryside surrounding Urbino with the hills of Anahorish. While the opening lines are written after Pascoli, in the part which follows, Heaney's voice takes over and echoes Yeats and his own poem written twenty-five years earlier. "But this time", Morisco emphasizes, "[i]t is he himself, the poet, who, with his feet

well-planted on the ground, gazes up with a sense of waiting, until … the line breaks and the kite flies away, light and elated, a separate and free being" (2013: 38):

> Rises, and my hand is like a spindle
> Unspooling, the kite a thin-stemmed flower
> Climbing and carrying, carrying farther, higher,
>
> The longing in the breast and planted feet
> And gazing face and heart of the kite flier
> Until string breaks and – separate, elate –
>
> The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall. (Heaney 2010: 85)

As Troy Jollymore acutely comments in *The Washington Post*, the "transformative wind" that opened *Human Chain* returns in the final poem, a symbol of the poet's wish "that death might represent a liberation, a passage to a higher state of being", a feeling which "is ubiquitous in this collection, and … infuses these meditative poems with a spiritual buoyancy, a subtle and reassuring joy" (2010).

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