

*Alan Brownjohn*

## Seven Old Men on an Inter-City Train: a Yeatsian Poem

- The First.* Is that a flood or a lake?  
*The Second.* I saw a lake.  
And were there flooding there would not be swans.
- The Third.* The swans could have come from a lake, with all this rain  
A lake could overflow and spawn a flood,  
And cast out swans on it.
- The Second.* Yet I look again,  
And see they are not swans but clumps of suds  
Engendered by detergent. Had you but looked  
You would have seen all their necks were under water.
- The Fourth.* But it is unimaginable that suds  
Should drift in wandering pairs as if designed  
To have the look of swans. Now the train has passed,  
I speak it with an old man's memory,  
Yet say that nearly all of them were in pairs.
- The Second.* Why should not some base tycoon-man, who desired  
The pride of an environmentalist,  
Discharge the effluent of his factory  
So that, upon a sudden dreaming glance,  
It looked like swans?
- The Fifth.* That would enhance  
A desolate, vulgar place, could it but have  
Appearances of companionable swans.
- The Sixth.* The poet Yeats loved real swans on real lakes,  
And had a penchant for using them as symbols.
- The Third.* And Yeats, I have heard tell, wrote of swans on floods.
- The Second.* But what would Yeats have thought of clumps of suds  
Reclining ceremoniously on a foul scene?  
To forge his symbols would be difficult.  
Yeats was not of an age when factory waste  
Was put on show as swans as a P.R. stunt.
- The Fourth.* But Yeats himself was a bit of an old . . . tycoon,  
And symbol swans are just as shadowy  
As foam that moves on a twilight flood.
- The Sixth.* Yet Yeats  
Would not have cried the praise of effluent-swans  
To sanctify some tycoon's greedy till.  
Yeats was—
- The Seventh.* I think that Crewe is the next stop.

## Seamus Heaney

### Belderg

“They just kept turning up  
And were thought of as foreign”—  
One-eyed and benign  
They lie about his house,  
Quernstones out of a bog.

To lift the lid of the peat  
And find this pupil dreaming  
Of neolithic wheat!  
When he stripped off blanket bog  
The soft-piled centuries

Fell open like a glib:  
There were the first plough-marks,  
The stone-age fields, the tomb,  
Corbelled, turfed and chambered,  
Floored with dry turf-coomb.

A landscape fossilised,  
Its stone-wall patternings  
Repeated before our eyes  
In the stone walls of Mayo.  
Before I turned to go

He talked about persistence,  
A congruence of lives,  
How, stubbed and cleared of stones,  
His home accrued growth rings  
Of iron, flint and bronze.

So I talked of Mossbawn,  
A bogland name. “But *moss*?”  
He crossed my old home’s music  
With older strains of Norse.  
I told how its foundation

Was mutable as sound  
And how I could derive  
A forked root from that ground  
And make *bawn* an English fort,  
A planter’s walled-in mound,

Or else find sanctuary  
And think of it as Irish,  
Persistent if outworn.  
“But the Norse ring on your tree?”  
I passed through the eye of the quern,

Grist to an ancient mill,  
And in my mind’s eye saw  
A world-tree of balanced stones,  
Querns piled like vertebrae,  
The marrow crushed to grounds.