Digging Down into the Bag of Metaphor and Symbolism with Seamus Heaney

Now it is time for you all to get a little dirty. On our field trip today to the Natural History Museum, I hope you will be able to experience this extensive collection of archeological finds with the same awe you might have had as a child. Of course, we can never return to our eight-year-old minds and bodies, but we can recapture some of that youthful imagination and creativity by looking at the world through poetry.

Now don’t misunderstand me. I do not mean that we should turn weepy and sentimental and nostalgic. That’s just gross. I do mean, however, that children tend not to censor their imaginations, that is not until untutored and boorish adults get hold of them; so I would like you all to see the items on display with that same freedom of the mind at play. Essentially I want you to be poets for the day.

Take a walk around the museum, check out all the floors with dinosaur and mammal bones—a giant mosasaur swims right above your heads in the atrium—an exotic if not macabre collection of stuffed birds, and snakes, live snakes that will leave you “Zero at the bone”! Oh, yes, and you can stand a foot away from General Custer’s horse left standing when Custer himself lay littered with feathered arrows.

1. Find an object you like and write the name of the display:

2. Describe the object in detail, noting its overall composition (how the curators have chosen to display it) as well as its smaller or less conspicuous parts:

3. What attracts you to it? What is fascinating or curious or provocative?

4. Use a simile to describe the object:

5. Use a metaphor to describe the object:

6. List four or five images (or more for the truly ambitious) drawn from this display that you think would work well in a poem. Remember imagery evokes all the senses so don’t limit yourself to the visual.

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If the wind were a gust / snout of large toad / nearly as large as boxwood, like

strawberries / like swine //

sinking into the earth / brown color, without sound //
Little Lost Lungfish

As you swam in the shallows
And the bright sea, I wonder
If you could have imagined
How much the world has changed.

Did you then appreciate
The purity and freedom
That all life experienced,
However perilous and fleeting?

Oh how the bones of the past
Serve as the foundation on which
Life continuously renews, rebuilds
Only to fall at the barest instant!

Did you exult in your sleek body,
Almost a missile, or did the lungs
Gifted to you give pleasure
When they filled with crisp air?

Oh how fresh everything must’ve been
And going where you please
As long as there weren’t jaws
To snuff out life to prolong its own!

Did you swim among the pillars
Crafted by microbes, things
That even now are understood
Imcompletely; secrets hidden?

Oh how the tiny things, unknown
To you, have built structures that
Proportionally to our creations
Tower in grandeur, yet simplicity!

Did you realize the significance
Of your first journey to land?
Near where you took your first steps
I took mine, both uncertain and excited.

Oh how you might not have taken those
First steps, had you known that the world
Would spawn vessels of destruction
Shaped much like you!

Did your screaming eye, beady and wary,
Swivel to the pillars that sheltered
Both you and your prey and seek
There a means of escape?

Oh how even in death you would serve
To prolong life, to provide the sustenance
And substance on which small creatures
Might seek to build a living!

Did you struggle in the end
As teeth gnashed, to cling to life
Or as time ravaged as it does
And left you flaking in the bottoms?

Oh how the ages pass, bringing change;
Where once you were free and vital
Now only exists a glass prison and
The bones of the forgotten, newly found!

Did all this happen, that I might be free
From both death and shackles
Only to fall as chaff in a field of billowing
Mushrooms, reminiscent of stromatolites?

Oh how I wish I could freely imbibe the sun
And drink up the starlight, as you once did!
But I wish, I think, I love, I hope, I know
That my – our – fate will never be yours.