

Field of Vision

That's the title of a poem written by Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet who died in his prime at 74 years of age in 2013. He won a Nobel Prize for his work, taught at Oxford and Harvard, was the first of nine siblings born on a farm in Northern Ireland, Catholic . . . His production was enormous, a poet by career.

The poem has a kind of mystical tone although it seems simply to be about an old woman who sits day after day staring out a window. It goes: *I remember this woman who sat for years / In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead / . . . at sycamore trees unleafing / and leafing at the far end of the lane. // Straight out past the TV in the corner / The stunted . . . hawthorn bush, / . . . The same acre of ragwort, the same mountain.*

Hardly worth mentioning, it seems. There's nothing extraordinary about the poet's description, about an old woman in a wheelchair. And yet, he begins to see more; he continues:

She was steadfast as the big window itself. / Her brow was clear as the chrome bits of the chair . . . // Face to face with her was an education / of the sort you got across a well-braced gate - / One of those lean, clean, iron, roadside ones / Between two whitewashed pillars, where you could see // Deeper into the country than you expected. / And discovered that the field behind the hedge / Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing / Focused and drawn in by what barred the way.

In other words, the poet himself, in observing this woman and the persistence of her seemingly empty stare, was himself beginning to see *something "strange"* that was emerging from that everyday landscape, enticing us as well, despite our hesitancy, to acquire a truer understanding of ourselves and our destiny.

Which makes me think: may not this poem offer us a key to understanding today's Gospel parable? The Pharisee in the parable can't see past his own perfect self, his own good deeds. He even measures them out (fasts twice a week, pays a tenth of his income) as the proof he and God need to justify his self-satisfaction: *I thank you God that I am not like the rest of the human race.* In other words: he is so self-centered as to be blind! Whereas the tax collector as a Jew in the employ of Rome's bureaucracy and very remorseful of his betrayal of his people, knew himself better than the Pharisee knew *himself*. From a distance he senses God can be merciful.

In other words, like the woman in the wheelchair, the sinner was learning to see past the God of the Pharisee to the God whom Jesus saw, one of absolute sympathy, grace, understanding, cultivation, ready to embrace you as you are – as fragile, as worth more than you realize – inspiring you to see *deeper into the country than you expected*, discovering *that field behind the hedge (and all that hedges you in) – that field that grows more distinctly strange (and graced) as you keep focused and drawn in, despite whatever and whoever would bar your way.* How far (and deep) does your field of vision range?

Geoff Wood