



The Skunk

Seamus Heaney

Up, black, striped and demasked like the chasuble

At a funeral mass, the skunk's tail
Paraded the skunk. Night after night
I expected her like a visitor.

The refrigerator whinnied into silence.
My desk light softened beyond the verandah.
Small oranges loomed in the orange tree.
I began to be tense as a voyeur.

After eleven years I was composing
Love-letters again, broaching the 'wife'
Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel
Had mutated into the night earth and air

Of California. The beautiful, useless
Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.
The aftermath of a mouthful of wine
Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

And there she was, the intent and glamorous,
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,
Mythologized, demythologized,
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.

It all came back to me last night, stirred
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress.

Vocabulary

- **demasked** - richly decorated or luxurious material
- **chasuble** - a sleeveless outer vestment worn by the officiating priest at mass
- **whinnied** - make a gentle, high-pitched neigh
- **verandah** - a roofed platform on the outside of a house, level with the ground floor
- **voyeur** - a person who gains sexual pleasure from watching others when they are naked or engaged in sexual activity
- **mutated** - change or cause to change in form or nature
- **tang** - a strong taste, flavour, or smell
- **eucalyptus** - a pleasant smelling, evergreen tree
- **mythologized** - convert into myth or mythology; make the subject of a myth

Pre-reading task

- Would you like someone to compare you to a skunk?
- Can a love poem be humorous?

Questions

1. What do you think of when you think of a skunk?
2. How has the poet described the skunk in the first stanza?
3. Is it important that this is a female skunk? Why?
4. How do we know that the poet welcomes the skunk's nightly visits?
5. 'After eleven years I was composing love-letters again', what does this line tell us about the relationship between Heaney and his wife?
6. What atmosphere is created in the second stanza? How?
7. What sense is emphasised in the fourth stanza?
8. How can a skunk be 'intent', 'glamorous', 'ordinary' and 'mysterious' at the same time?
9. How does the poet link his wife to his memory of the skunk in the final stanza?
10. Do you find elements of humour in this poem? Does the humour add or detract from the romantic nature of the poem?

Overview

The poet describes the nightly visit of a skunk to the back yard of a Californian house he had been staying in away from his wife and family. He describes 'her' in unusual terms, likening her upright tail to a priest's vestments at a funeral mass as she 'paraded'. This feminine presence reminds him of the absence of his wife as he returns to writing her 'love letters' after eleven years of marriage. His sensual description of the smell and taste of the Californian night-time evokes a memory of his wife and displays how he misses her. He returns to his depiction of the skunk which is somehow 'intent', 'glamorous', 'ordinary' and 'mysterious', all at the same time. Reunited with his family he is reminded of the skunk as he watches his wife 'head-down, tail-up' searching in a bottom drawer for a 'black plunge-line nightdress'.

Key Points

- Deeply Personal
- Vivid Imagery
- Nature
- Sensuality
- Ordinary/Everyday
- Memory
- Love

Word Bank

- Create a bank of words you might use when writing about the poet's work.
- Some are provided for you.
- Add your own.
- You can write definitions of words you don't know.
- You can pick out suitable quotes to go with the words.

[illegible]

Past Questions

Honours

2021

3. Seamus Heaney

“Seamus Heaney transforms the familiar and the mundane through his powerful use of language, thereby enabling us to learn a range of profound lessons from his poetry.”

Discuss the above statement, developing your response with reference to your experience of the poems by Seamus Heaney on your Leaving Certificate English course.

2003

4. *Dear Seamus Heaney ...*

Write a letter to Seamus Heaney telling him how you responded to some of his poems on your course. Support the points you make by detailed reference to the poems you choose to write about.

Mind Map

