**Storm on the Island *Seamus Heaney***

We are prepared: we build our houses squat,

Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.

The wizened earth had never troubled us

With hay, so as you can see, there are no stacks

Or stooks that can be lost. Nor are there trees

Which might prove company when it blows full

Blast: you know what I mean - leaves and branches

Can raise a chorus in a gale

So that you can listen to the thing you fear

Forgetting that it pummels your house too.

But there are no trees, no natural shelter.

You might think that the sea is company,

Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs

But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits

The very windows, spits like a tame cat

Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives

And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo.

We are bombarded by the empty air.

Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.

**Vocabulary**

wizened (line 3) dried up, shrivelled

stacks / stooks (lines 4/5) haystacks / shocks of corn sheaves

strafes (line 17).................................. bombards, harasses with artillery shells

salvo (line 17) ..................................... simultaneous firing of artillery

The poem describes the experience of being in a cliff-top cottage on an island off the coast of Ireland during a storm. Heaney describes the bare ground, the sea and the wind. The people in the cottage are extremely isolated and can do nothing against the powerful and violent weather.

Storm on the Island Notes **by Michael Woods**

**STORM ON THE ISLAND**

Heaney writes in the voice of an islander (but one who seems representative of the island’s population) describing a way of life, the ravaging effects of a storm and the experience of living in a remote place.

There is a robust confidence at the beginning of the poem “We are prepared” suggests that the islanders are certainly ready to face a storm but their practices have clearly come about as a result of experience. This weather has conditioned their lives to the extent that it influences their architecture and farming methods. The way people deal with their environment is inevitably conditioned by the climate in which they live. The landscape of the island presented in the poem is bleak and exposed to the elements. The opening word “We” suggests a collective, cultural voice of solidarity; a community facing a common enemy that is the unpredictably tempestuous weather.

The landscape is inhospitable and bleak, allowing what we might consider subsistence without luxury. We are told that “The wizened earth” is too barren to yield hay. There are no “stacks” or “stooks” of it. We are also introduced to the extreme power of nature, isolation and the difference between real and perceived danger. On the one hand, the storm and its power are invisible and therefore a “huge nothing” (line 19) but, on the other, the effect on the island is palpable both in physical and psychological ways. The islanders have to adapt their farming practices to take account of the potentially ruinous effects of storms. For example, houses are built “squat” (line 1) their walls are well founded in “rock” (line 2) and they are roofed with heavy slate.

The idea of exposure and danger is well realised throughout poem. An island is by its very nature, more acutely affected by rough weather than a much greater non-coastal land mass. There is not even the consolation of the company of trees that can “raise a tragic chorus in a gale” (line 8) to distract the listener from the alarming reality that the wind “pummels” houses as well as the surrounding landscape. This chorus reminds us the sort of lamentation of a Greek tragedy and as such reinforces the mournful atmosphere being created. A chorus in Greek tragedy also had the function of making sense of events, interpreting. Here, the absence of any anchor point leaves us with the sense that the islanders lack anything that might divert their attention away from the reality of their situation. It seems that they alone are prey to the gale.

The sea is inhospitable. It is described by Heaney as “Exploding comfortably down the cliffs” (line 13). The verb “exploding” is an image associated with the ordinance of war, something that is developed in subsequent lines. Explosions seem natural to the personified sea, which serves to reinforce how disconcerting it is for the querulous people on the receiving end of the storm’s onslaught. The manner in which weather can change very quickly as a storm begins is conveyed through the image of  “a tame cat / Turned savage” (lines 15-16). We are all aware of how something as apparently benign as a domestic cat is capable of changing instantly into a violent creature, if provoked. The islanders endure the storm and “sit tight” (line 16). The untrammelled power of the storm is suggested through the powerfully alliterated  sounds of “spray”, “hits”, “spits” and “cat”.

Assaulted by nature, the island is presented as being under attack. Extended military metaphor presents the storm as a fighter plane that “strafes invisibly”. This is reinforced with “strafed” and “bombarded”, terms normally used to describe a fighter pilot’s use of machine gun and bombs. This very violent imagery makes the storm seem like a war which is wreaking havoc upon the island. Heaney highlights the mysterious power of the wind by writing that it is “empty air” and “a huge nothing” that is the source of all this feared havoc. This poem does not simply concern itself with a storm on an island but engages with the idea that however practical and rooted we may be, there are forces beyond us that are ultimately more powerful than we are. This poem contemplates the power of nature and its effects on the human imagination as well those on the immediate environment.

The tone of the poem is conversational as befits a dramatic monologue. At one point the islander is clearly talking as if sharing a confidence with someone when he says, “you know what I mean” (line 7).

Heaney evokes atmosphere very powerfully and challenges idealised thinking about living on an island. This island is not a romantic retreat but somewhere to endure. We cannot always expect good weather in life. There will be times when we are required to call upon all our resources, our inner strength and to conquer our fear.

 It suggests a blasted landscape on one of the islands off the West coast of Ireland.

The houses have to be low lying and strongly built into the rocks. The implication is that otherwise they would be destroyed by the storm.

Stooks – these are pyramidal shaped arrangement of hay in a field. Interestingly, Heaney uses the word to draw attention to the fact that there are no stooks as there is no harvest.