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Simon Harsent

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Issue #3

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BLAST *by* Simon Harsent —
Studio Sitzings.

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BLAST

by Simon Harsent — Studio Sitings

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As a child, I would sit in my father's study while he wrote. I say study, but it was just the front room of our small three-bedroom semi-detached house in suburban England. The walls were shelved floor to ceiling, containing what seemed like more books than our local library. A chimney breast protruded from one of the walls. While its fireplace had long been blocked up, on that section of wall the shelves stopped halfway down, and underneath them was Dad's bureau, where he would sit with his typewriter.

I was allowed in the room on the condition I didn't disturb him while he wrote. I didn't understand it at the time, but the writing of poetry and conversation with a child don't work well together. Still, it was my way of spending time with my father, and it shaped me both as a young child and as a man.

I would sit reading, quietly absorbed in that room, moving through book after book of the old masters: Picasso, Renoir, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, and Rembrandt. I was too young to fully appreciate each artist's subtleties, but the transformative power of the images persisted. Simply put, I learned how great art can make you feel.

Amongst all those names, the artist who has had the most lasting effect on me is Rembrandt.

Rembrandt's use of light was so masterful and distinctive that centuries later, the aesthetic has a name – his name – all its own. Rembrandt lighting. The subtle and natural chiaroscuro effect, throwing a crucial portion of a model's face into shadow, was apparently coined by Cecil B. DeMille during the making of the 1915 film, *The Warrens of Virginia*. When I started painting, I tried to emulate this graceful use of light, and tried to again when at thirteen I started taking pictures. If I'm being honest, I'm still processing his influence to this day.

I've always loved making portraits – not just for the eventual picture, but for the act of the sitting itself, the time shared between myself and the subject. I'm not one for being overtly energetic with the sitter; I prefer a quieter tone and pace, a more considered mood. When making a portrait, I am that boy in the room again.

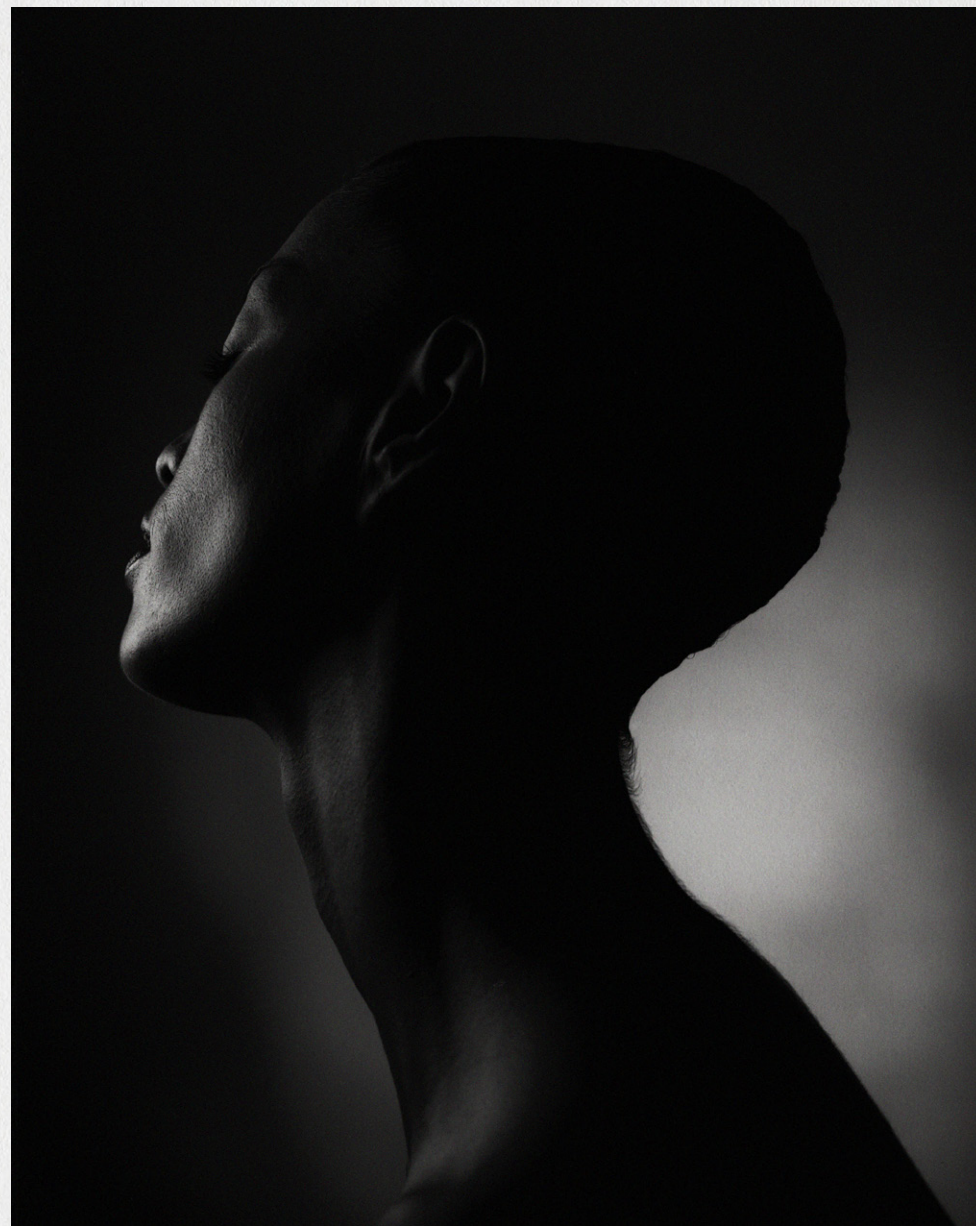
There are always so many things going on during a sitting that it's sometimes hard to remind yourself what you're trying to achieve. In my early career, I spent too much time trying to please the sitter, which often didn't yield the picture I was after. I then tried to just please myself, which sometimes worked. Eventually you come to understand that the key to a successful portrait sitting lies somewhere between both. A sitting is about constructing an environment where magic is allowed to happen. That magic is the unknown.

One of my most treasured possession is a letter written to me by Seamus Heaney after receiving prints I had sent from our sitting. The handwritten letter sits framed on my desk and is a daily reminder of how satisfying it is when all things that need to align for a successful portrait come together.

How sometimes magic can happen.



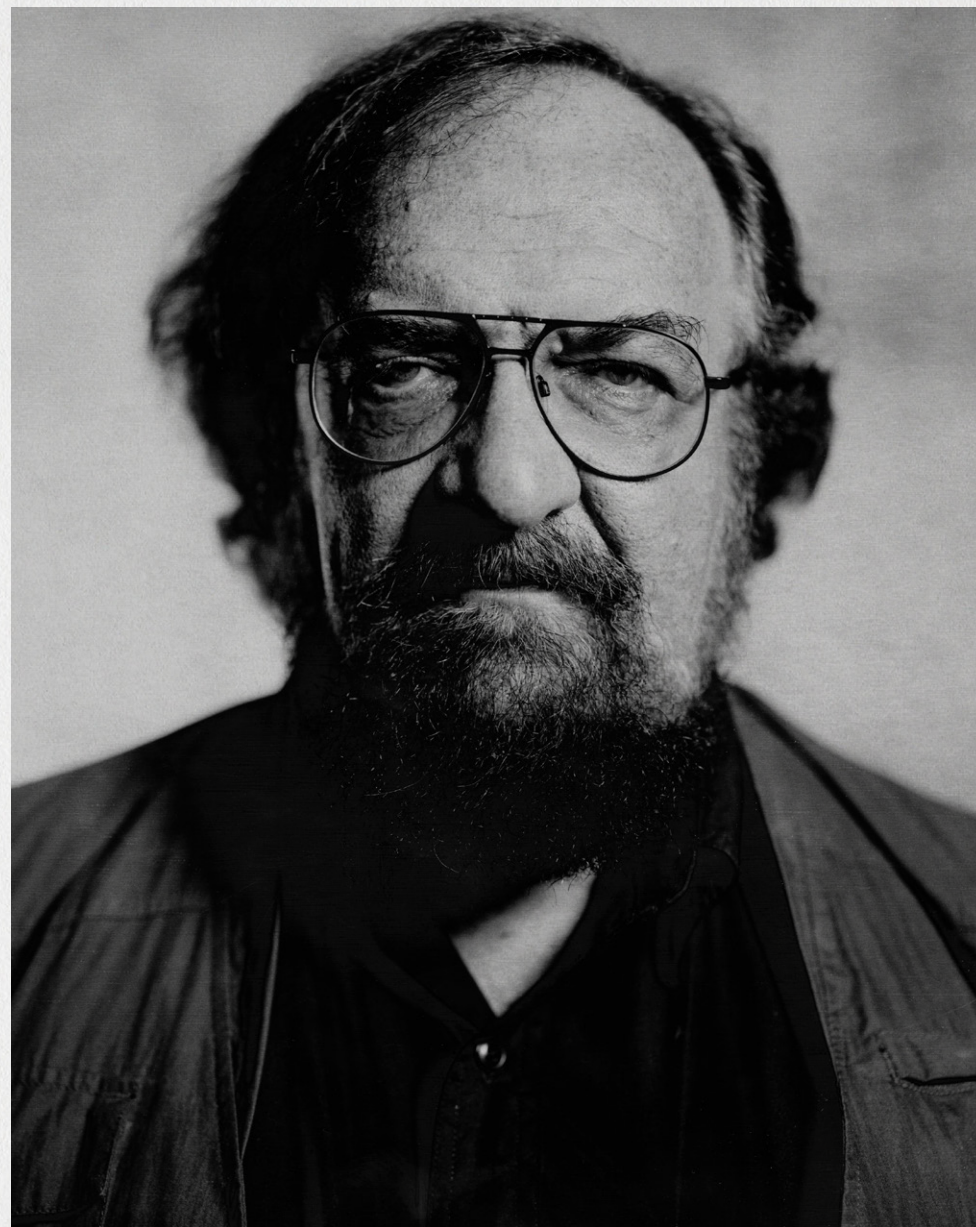






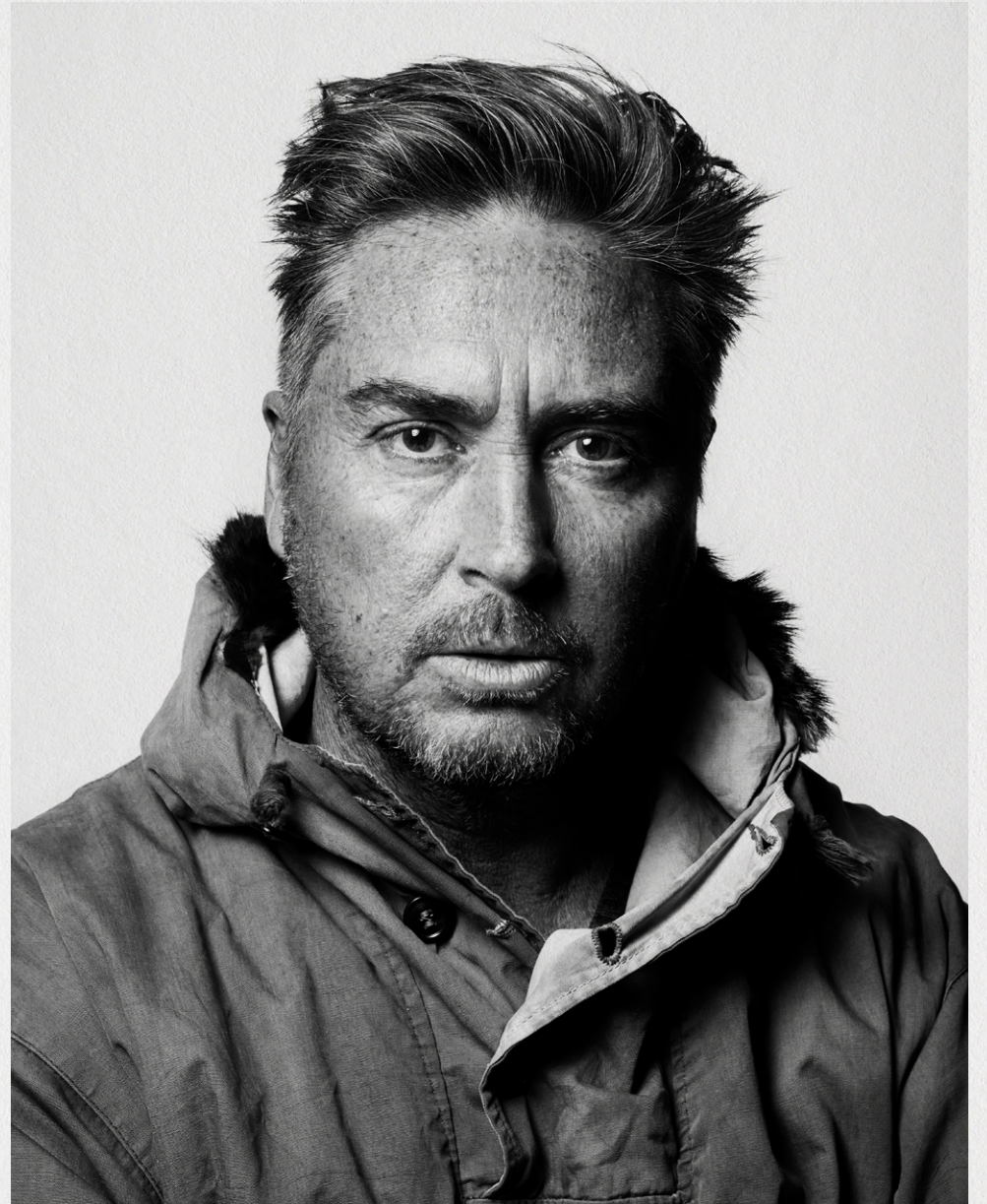




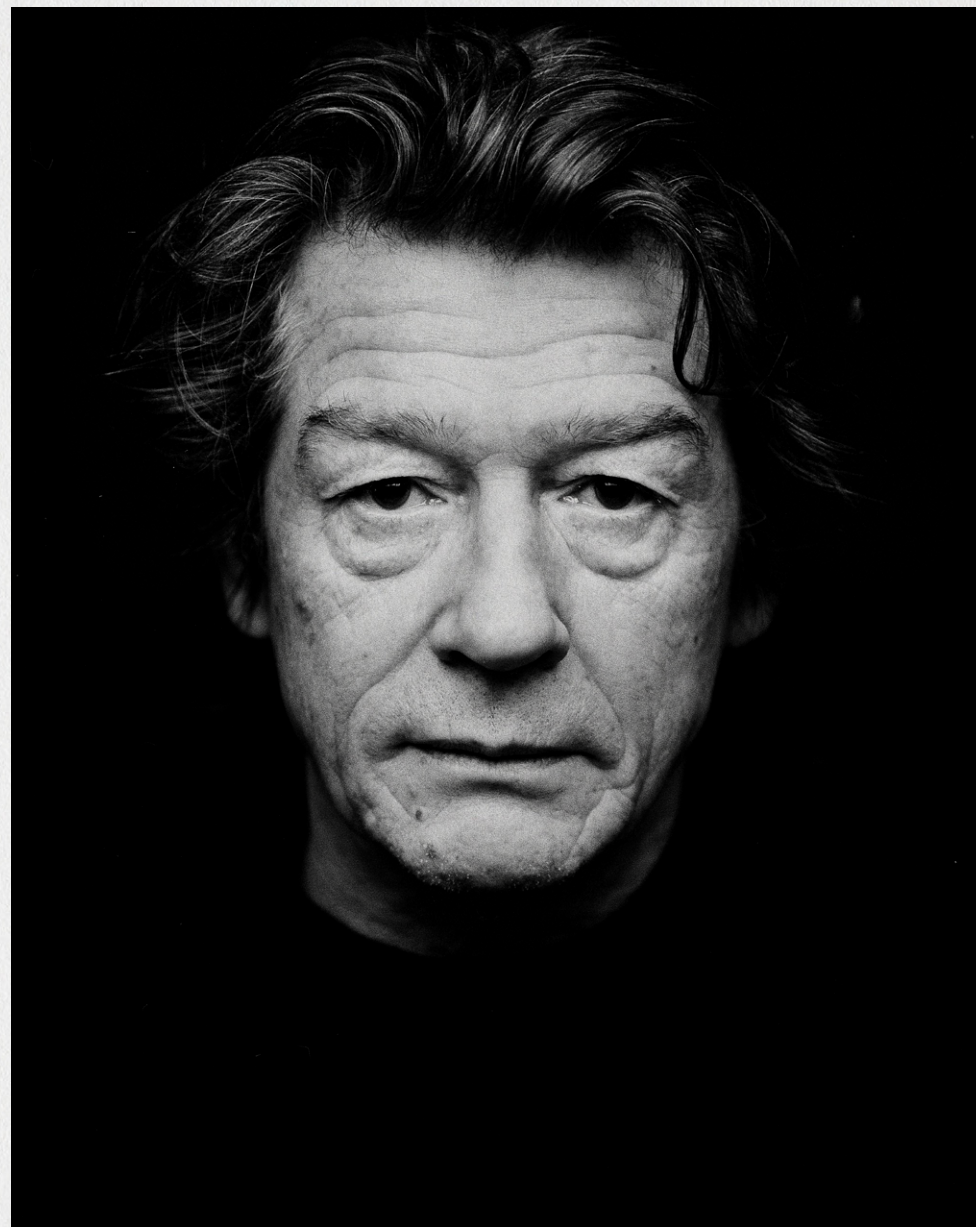




















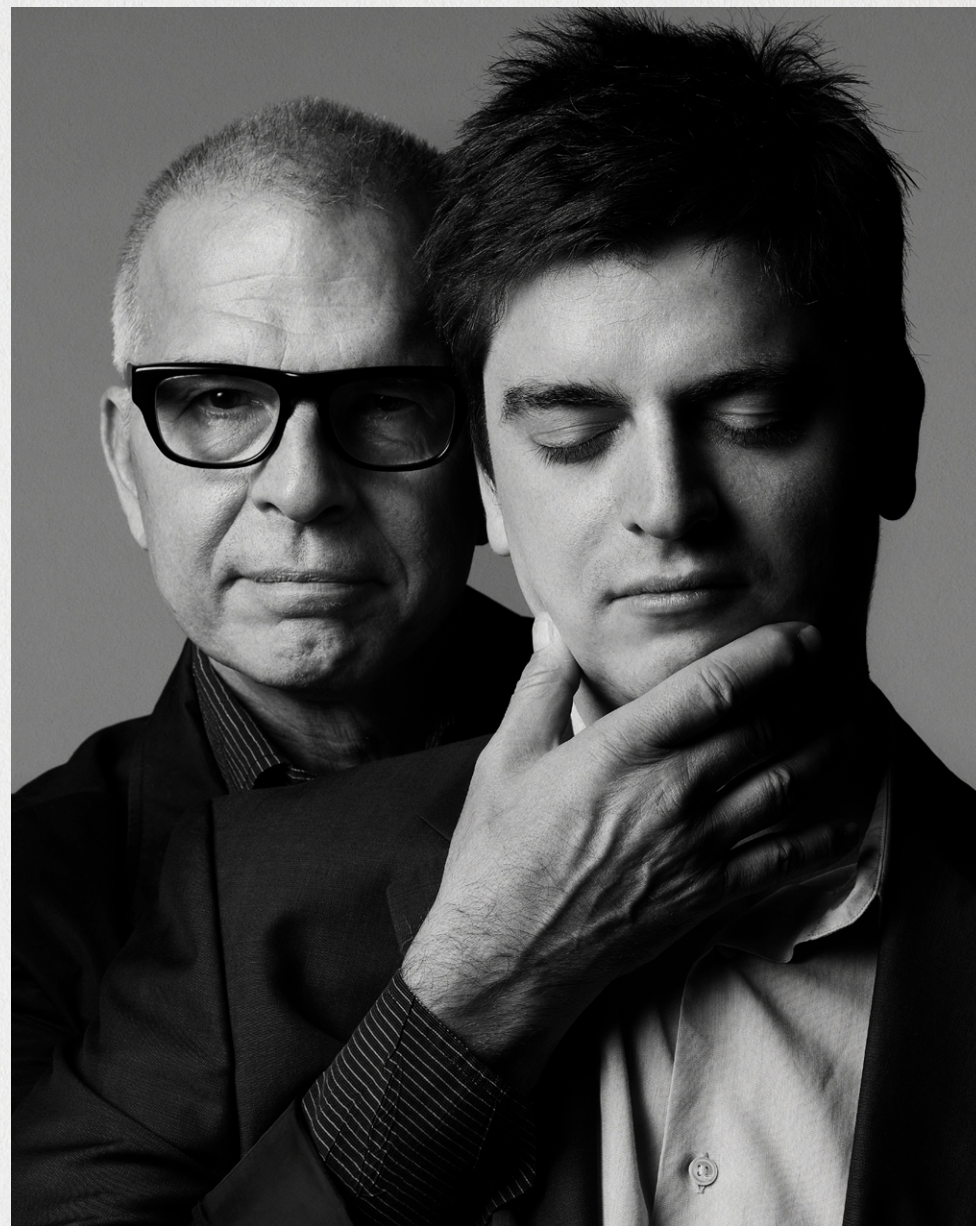














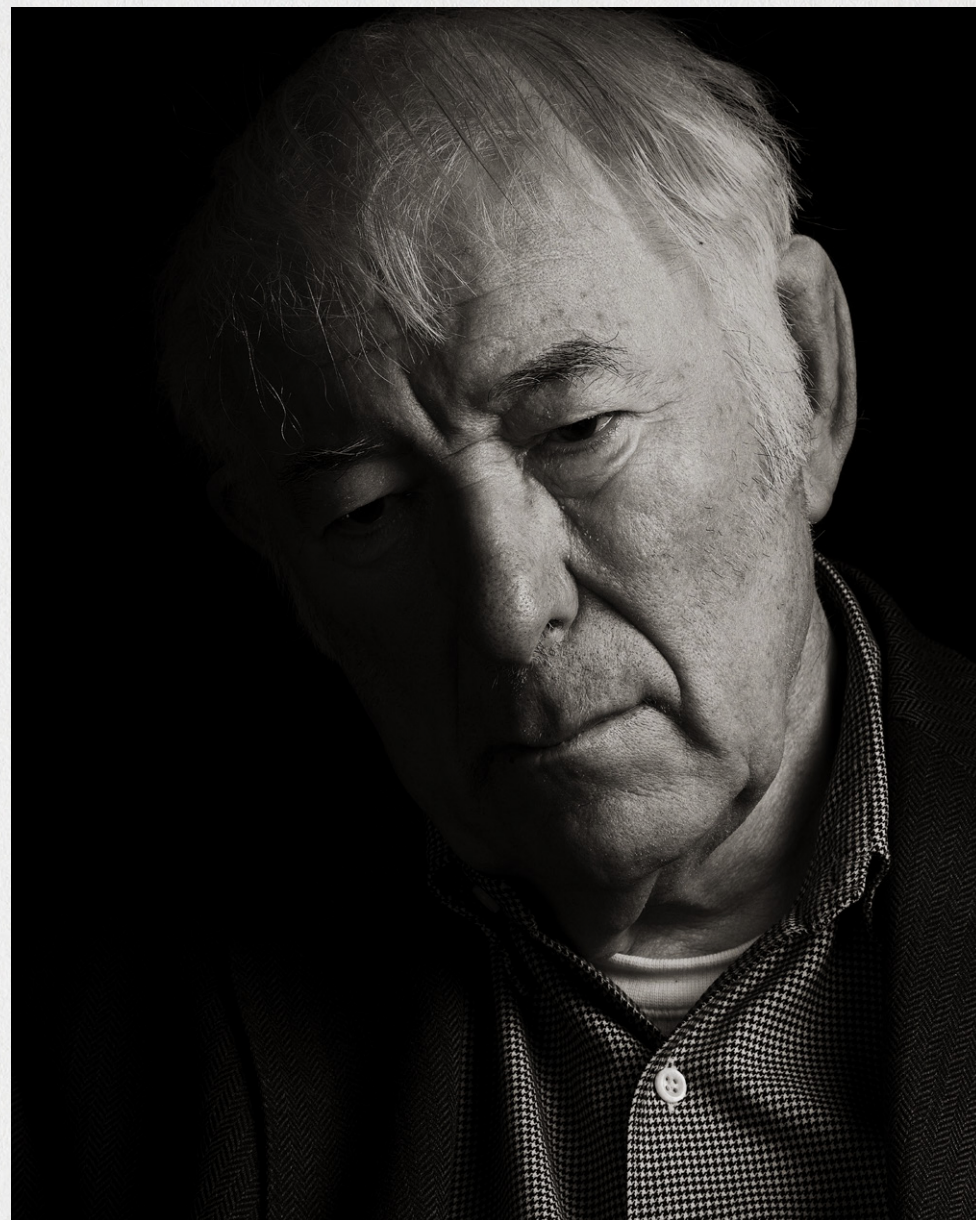
31 May 2013

Dear Simon,

Marie and I have just come back from a while in Rome where we saw many great portraits of popes and princes, especially in a mighty Titian show, so it was exhilarating to arrive home and find the magnificent prints. I know from other occasions how difficult it is to 'get' so many things that need to be gotten - some sense of the sitters being, the photographer's technical and artistic standards to be met to his own satisfaction, a certain otherness in the likeness - all triumphantly achieved. You are extremely generous to send so many, any one of which is outstanding - and in-dwelling, as it were. I have a sense, indeed, that I'm about to attain icyberg status.

Masterly work. I'm honoured by it and deeply grateful - Blessings on the work -

Seamus



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