THE EARLY PURGES by Seamus Heaney

I was six when I first saw kittens drown.

Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',

Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din

Was soon soused. They were slung on the snout

Of the pump and the water pumped in.

'Sure, isn't it better for them now?' Dan said.

Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced

Them out on the dunghill, glossy and dead.

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung

Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains

Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back

When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows

Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks.

Still, living displaces false sentiments

And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown

I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town

Where they consider death unnatural

But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.