

Outwitting Winter

Michael Longley, *The Weather in Japan*. Cape, £8

There's been something *fin de siècle* in the air recently, with, in one or two cases, rather too much *fin* about it. Mahon's exposé of 1890s decadence in *The Yellow Book* fails, in the end, to live up to its own epigraph—"decadence...is but one technical problem the more which a writer has to solve"—and feels, as a result, as imaginatively weary as it is also world-weary. Rather more energetically, if no less self-consciously, Heaney marked the end of the twentieth century by wielding his heroic pen/spade/Beowulfian sword to slay mothers and monsters, and to cut through (side-step) some of the knotty translation problems that have preoccupied the scholars for a couple of centuries. Both *Beowulf* (1999) and *The Yellow Book* (1997) take their place in each writer's grand narrative as their final curtain calls to a century notable in its last decades, as it was also in its first, for the high profile of technically accomplished, aesthetically tormented Irish poets. Both volumes also, inevitably perhaps, look backwards, try to make their mark on the century as a whole. *Beowulf*, particularly, is not just an attempt to get the century sewn up, but the last millennium as well. Even for a poet of Heaney's undoubted talents, that (albeit unconscious) enterprise is doomed to failure. *Beowulf* itself points up the moral that however great and glorious an achievement, it may end abruptly with the man who drives it. The acclaim and awards given to the translation may be, in that sense, less a validation of where poetry is going than an official seal on the envelope of where poetry has been.

Longley's *The Weather in Japan* is also haunted by a sense of endings. In the hidden poem at the end of the collection he writes: "on the last morning / Tuck me in behind our windbreak of books"; elsewhere he muses about his "life's work", about the "Forty years" he's "been at it". The collection is profoundly elegiac. At some level, this is a poet taking stock. But *The Weather in Japan* also marks a new phase in the break with some of the constraints of the past that came with

the astonishing 1991 collection *Gorse Fires*. Longley's capacity successfully to reinvent himself in his middle years, and, what is more difficult, to do so within the sustained continuities of his own work, allies him not just with MacNeice, but with that great *fin de siècle* survivor W. B. Yeats. The predominantly elegiac mode of Yeats's "modernist" phase serves as a reminder that elegies look forward as well as back: as Yeats elegised one generation he simultaneously established a mode in which he was to influence many future generations. *The Weather in Japan*, because it is not self-consciously absorbed in its own status in history and literary history, and because it avoids the self-conscious (self-) mythologising of some of his contemporaries, is also more likely to model a future as well as elegise a past. "[T]here's more enterprise / In walking naked", Yeats affirmed in 1914. "The world of letters is a treacherous place", Longley writes in "Birds & Flowers", towards the end of this collection which shows the world itself as a treacherous place: "Let us float naked again in volcanic / Pools under the constellations..."

If some of Longley's elegies, honed to perfection in *Gorse Fires* and *The Ghost Orchid*, seemed to mark the limit of poetic exquisiteness—"The Ghost Orchid" achieved a seldom equalled density of form and meaning in only a few lines—*The Weather in Japan* might also serve as a reminder that, as Yeats was fully aware, the limit can itself become a new dimension. The title poem pays tribute, in its cameo form, to a Japanese poetic tradition. Its compactness of description, achieved through a delicate, internal assonantal rhyming, and syntactical shift, is singularly evocative of both the drawing of horizons, and of what is, effectively, limitless space:

The Weather in Japan

Makes bead curtains of the rain,
Of the mist a paper screen.

And one of the single sentence poems in this collection, "The Comber", is quintessential Longley both in its manipulation of space and time, present and future, and in its seamless mutation of life into art, art into life:

A moment before the comber turns into
A breaker—sea-spray, raggedy rainbows—
Water and sunlight contain all the colours
And suspend between Inishbofin and me
The otter, and thus we meet, without my scent
In her nostrils, the uproar of my presence,

My unforgivable shadow on the sand—
Even if this is the only sound I make.

This long, curling sentence is also about to transform itself into a breaker, though not quite, in a moment of movement and stasis combined. The object itself—the otter—is syntactically suspended through the first four lines of the poem; the verb trembles into stillness; the collapse comes in the white space after the poem's end. If the present moment is held in suspense for, and, in the opening, from the reader, the poem also reaches, paradoxically, from the present moment to the imagined future of its own existence—"this...the only sound I make".

That sense of an imagined future, as well as the re-imagined past, points to these poems as aspirational in terms of the world we could create as much as elegiac for the world we have lost in the traumas of the last century, with its concentration camps, wars, ecological and human disasters—all of which come within Longley's scope in this collection. So while *The Weather in Japan* is preoccupied with loss—many of these poems are written "in memory"—it also stitches together its themes and its namings—a circle of friends, an array of colours—into one of the book's recurring images, the quilt. If that image cannot prevent hurt and betrayal, or counteract death ("How do you sew the night?"), it can at least offer a reassurance that something survives. In "A Linen Handkerchief" (one of the quilt's various mutations), despite the embroidering and unpicking of "hundreds of names" through the Second World War, "in one corner the flowers / Encircling your initials never came undone", a testament to one woman's survival of the concentration camps. In "The Yellow Teapot", the security of that handkerchief reappears as a quilt to offer, in one of Longley's lists, not so much protection against, but comfort after, betrayal:

When those who had eaten at our table and drunk
From the yellow teapot into the night, betrayed you
And told lies about you, I cried out for a curse
And wrote a curse, then stitched together this spell,
A quilt of quilt names to keep you warm in the dark:

*Snake's Trail, Shoo Fly, Flying Bats, Spider Web,
Broken Handle, Tumbling Blocks, Hole in the Barn
Door, Dove at the Window, Doors and Windows,
Grandmother's Flower Garden, Sun Dial, Mariner's
Compass, Delectable Mountains, World without End.*

(For the “curse” as well as the “spell” try “Damiana”.) The quilt returns again and again—as an altar cloth, as sheets and blankets, as the marriage symbol, as, in a way, a magic carpet. More obliquely, it returns as the poppy petal shower—“Two thousand petals overlapping as though to make / A cape for the corn goddess”—as the Burren embroidered with “Gentians and lady’s bedstraw”, as the snowy landscape, and, when “The Quilt” earns its own poem, as life itself, with its occasional “tears in the quilt, patterns repeating”.

The collection too, like the quilt, is haunted by “patterns repeating”. In the early 1970s, Longley, in “A Letter to Seamus Heaney”, signed off by “leaving careful footprints round / A wind-encircled burial mound”. The elegies of *The Weather in Japan* are not so final as epitaphs, but are brief, compassionate, and tentative trespasses on the intimate. The majority of the poems are short; many are single (sometimes circular) sentences; several are also questions; yet each points the reader elsewhere both inside and outside the collection. One might, therefore, suggest that these brief imprints on the page are footprints traceable throughout the whole of Longley’s *oeuvre*. Feathers and footprints, snowing and snoozing, are among the recurrent motifs: in one such motif, the snowman of earlier collections, in the various guises of ghetto child or ice-cream man, becomes, in *The Weather in Japan*, the cenotaph snowman who draws together Longley’s preoccupations with war and remembrance. Retelling the story of Irish soldiers who, frustrated by the delay in constructing memorials after the Great War, built their own impermanent memorial, “The Cenotaph” gives permanence to a forgotten moment of history:

They couldn’t wait to remember and improvised
A cenotaph of snow and a snowman soldier,
Inscribing “Lest We Forget” with handfuls of stones.

Such connections subtly permeate this collection. “The Waterfall” may be read as implicitly encouraging the reader to understand the poems, not so much as “Muldoodles” that grow up into epics, but as each an integral part of “this half-hearted waterfall / That allows each pebbly basin its separate say”. Both stylistically and thematically, the short poems of *The Weather in Japan* are at several removes from the very early Longley rhyming couplets which the poet described in 1968 as “tiny units, reduced stanzas, circuits which are almost closed” with “an air of ‘end of the road’ rather than ‘en route’ about them”. There is now an openness and expansiveness about even the tiniest of units which places these poems en route (to the future as well as to each other) rather than written into a corner. The po-

ems in *The Weather in Japan* do not have to be read through each other: each stands, like the elements of the waterfall, or, indeed, of the patchwork quilt—"uniforms, coat linings, petticoats, / Waistcoats, flannel shirts, ball gowns"—on its own. But to read them together is also to see the pattern differently from different and multiple vantage points. The absence of a voice that speaks for or from a collective is characteristic of an approach that tries to give, or allow every element its "separate say".

If Longley speaks for and to many people, it is partly because of this approach, in which he claims to speak not for "history" or "community", but only for the individual. Throughout, the collection is characterised by the desire to place the small, the apparently insignificant, the singular, against the blanket sameness of a destructive (in whatever shape or form that destruction takes) past and present—"a diamond pattern / That radiates from the smallest grey square"—and against an equally destructive forgetfulness. The longest poem in this collection, "The War Graves", struggles throughout with a monumental scale of suffering, "headstones" that "wipe out the horizon like a blizzard" and "mine craters so vast they are called after cities". But in naming names, in detailing minutiae, the poem refuses to allow the past to be wiped clean. In the honesty of that refusal, it also finds a different monument and a possible future: "we pick from a nettle bed / One celandine each, the flower that outwits winter."

¶ Metre congratulates Michael Longley on the awards of both the Hawthorn-den and T.S. Eliot Prizes for *The Weather in Japan*.