

FIFTEEN POEMS



Michael Longley

INVOCATION

Begin the invocation: rice cakes, say, buckwheat
Flowers or temple bells, bamboo, a caged cricket
Cheeping for the girl who plants the last rice seed.
I have a good idea of what's going on outside.

THE WEATHER IN JAPAN

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

THE SEAL

Will you remember how we watched the minute hand
Move between two cupids, gilded wings underneath
“The Wave” by Gustave Courbet, so strong a swimmer
He was nicknamed “the seal” by local fishermen,

Or how in Chardin’s “Vase of Flowers”—tuberose,
Sweetpeas and carnations, his only surviving flower
Piece—the Chinese vase reflects a window and three
Or four petals have just fallen on to the table?

THE WINDBREAK

There’s a dip in the mattress where I sleep.
Rise out of your hollow hours before me
Every morning, and on the last morning
Tuck me in behind our windbreak of books.

NIGHT TIME

Without moonlight or starlight we forgot about love
As we joined the blind ewe and the unsteady horses.

THE EVENING STAR

in memory of Catherine Mercer, 1994-1996

The day we buried your two years and two months
So many crocuses and snowdrops came out for you
I tried to isolate from those galaxies one flower:
A snowdrop appeared in the sky at dayligone,

The evening star, the star in Sappho's epigram
Which brings back everything that shiny daybreak
Scatters, which brings the sheep and brings the goat
And brings the wean back home to her mammy.

THE DAFFODILS

Your daughter is reading to you over and over again
Wordsworth's "The Daffodils", her lips at your ear.
She wants you to know what a good girl you have been.
You are so good at joined-up writing the page you
Have filled with your knowledge is completely black.
Your hand presses her hand in response to rhyme words.
She wants you to turn away from the wooden desk
Before you die, and look out of the classroom window
Where all the available space is filled with daffodils.

BROKEN DISHES

Sidney our mutual friend is kneeling by your bed
Hour after hour on the carpetless hospital floor.
He repeats the same kind words and they become
An invocation to you and you start to die.

You love your body. So does Sidney. So do I.
Communion is blankets and eiderdown and sheets.
All I can think of is a quilt called "Broken Dishes"
And spreading it out on the floor beneath his knees.

IN THE ILIAD

When I was left alone with our first-born
She turned in the small hours her hungry face
To my diddy and tried to suck that button.
Her spittle condenses on my grey hairs.

We wear them like medals for our children
And even in nakedness look overdressed.
In the *Iliad* spears go through them and,
Later, one's ripped from Agamemnon's chest.

THE MOUSTACHE

The moustache Edward Thomas grew to cover up
His aesthete's features, the short-back-and-sides hair-do
That moved him to the centre of modern times, recall
My father, aged twenty, in command of a company
Who, because most of them shaved only once a week
And some not at all, were known as Longley's Babies.

THE EXHIBIT

I see them absentmindedly pat their naked bodies
Where waistcoat and apron pockets would have been.
The grandparents turn back and spend an eternity
Rummaging in the tangled pile for their spectacles.

THE CHOUGHS

As they ride the air-currents at Six Noggins,
Rolling and soaring above the cliff-face
And spreading their wing-tips out like fingers,
The choughs' red claws recall my father

Telling me how the raw recruits would clutch
Their "courting tackle" under heavy fire:
Choughs at play are the souls of young soldiers
Lifting their testicles into the sky.

PASCOLI'S PORTRAIT

Dining under your portrait at Ponte di Campia
I need hardly apologise for not knowing
Your poetry, although I hear wingbeats and see
An eye that sees the skylark and the skylark's eye.

Since a poem's little more than a wing and a prayer,
I turn back to my dinner and pretend our souls
Are roosting on the broken lamp beneath the eaves.
Splashes of birdlime on the pavement give us away.

THE MUSICAL BOX

for R. E.

As well as querulous house-martins and the bells
That clang out from San Ginese's to waken up
The terracotta tortoise dozing between the tongs
And the wood-stove, and distract the bronze herons,
One listening to the ceiling, the other to the floor,

There is so much music in your house, it contracts
In my mind to a musical box with room enough
For the old woman who ran a kindergarten
In this kitchen—simple addition, tonic solfa—
And for the man who kept canaries under the roof.

PHOSPHORESCENCE

We should have been galloping on horses, their hoofprints
Splashes of light, divots kicked out of the darkness,
Or hauling up lobster pots in a wake of sparks. Where
Were the otters and seals? Were the dolphins on fire?
Yes, we should have been doing more with our lives.