# Michael Longley Blends In

Michael Longley started out in Northern Ireland at about the same time as Seamus Heaney. But Longley, over the course of a long career, has done a steadily more effective job of not doing what Heaney did. By now, with Heaney so firmly established on the international scene that he makes the secretary general of the United Nations look like a filing clerk on a short contract, Longley remains such a local poet that one would not be surprised to hear of his beard being taken over by squatting leprechauns.

There is still a serious gift, however, lurking among the shrubbery of his localised vocabulary. His new collection, *A Hundred Doors*, gives us a small poem that should settle any doubts about the intensity of the lyrical talent we are dealing with. It is called “Twayblade”.

Twayblade. We find it together,

The two of us, inconspicuous

With greeny petals in long grass,

Lips forked like a man, two leaves

Some call sweethearts, our plant today,

Fed on snowmelt and wood shadows.

For a while there, early in the poem, the reader must wrestle with the possibility that it is not the tiny plant, but the poet and his interlocutor, who are inconspicuous with greeny petals in long grass. But the last line is delectable, written as if meant to be remembered. If, however, you take memorability as a desirable criterion for any poem, many of Longley’s later things seem designed to circumvent it by itemising the landscape with a thoroughness which would surely bring weariness even to a naturalist. A naturalist, after all, must occasionally rest, and see what’s on television.

Longley, when naming names, is rarely off the case. The Carrigskeewaun area was already present near the end of his *Collected Poems* (2006). Here it is again, with all its plants and animals. “Otters are crossing from Dooaghtry to Corragaun.” Do they later cross back from Corragaun to Dooaghtry? Luckily, we trust him: “How snugly the meadow pipit fits the merlin’s foot.”

And that’s just the first poem in the book. As we delve deeper, we approach the landscape always more closely, and find the poet tangled up in it. This was already happening in the *Collected Poems* but by now he blends into the shrubbery like a sniper laying up for an ambush, or Dick Cheyney out hunting his friends.

Firewood for winter when

I shall not be here – wild

Fig perhaps – white sap

For curing warts, scrotum-

Concealing leaves…

Good to know that the scrotum is safe from detection. Pretty phrases, though, keep popping up in the seed catalogue. All the children get at least one poem each, and a girl called Catherine will now always be remembered as “the harbour seal”. What a sweet notion. There is an appropriately well-wrought little poem about Chidiock Tichborne (not the famous claimant) who wrote a masterpiece before he was torn apart, and very lovely it is: “And now I live, and now my life is done.” One of the great lyric poems in English, it can’t, of course, be matched, but Longley sensibly makes a subject out if its deeply underlying mystery: how on earth did Tichborne concentrate on the fabrication of so exquisite a thing when he knew that he himself would soon be dismantled?

A smile on his face, surely,

As he found the syllables

And the breathing spaces.

All poets will acknowledge that Longley is on to something here. The delights of composition are indeed wonderful. If Longley has a drawback – or if he has arrived at one after decades of detour – it is that he writes poetry more often than he writes poems. The self-contained, stand-alone thing has become more and more rare in his work. Back when the Irish boys were all starting off, some of them thought they would make it as singers. They had the towering example of Yeats looming behind them, but they were more impressed by his fey gush than chastened by his sculptural monumentality. One of the reasons that Seamus Feamus (it was my joke, so let me use it) broke into the clear was that he put the poem before poetry. James Simmons, movingly lamented by Longley, was only one of the poets who found out the hard way that a tone of voice wasn’t quite enough. The hard way tended to be spread over the long run, and that made it harder.

But Longley himself is ever cheerful, perhaps because the land of his birth, always within reach, is a natural world that will never cease to move him to a phrase. In “A Swan’s Egg” he handles a “century-old/ Alabaster emptiness” and notes the “collector’s particulars” that are written around the black hole in its surface. The display cabinet is “Brimming with bird silences.” We know that the egg’s history is safe with him. He isn’t going to drop it. Here is a wealth of noticing and sympathy in one little poem, “A swan’s egg among wren/ Pearls and kingfisher pearls.” The tactile tact, as it were, is uniquely his: a big man with a light touch.

-- *Financial Times*, March 18, 2011.