

MICHAEL LONGLEY

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1984*According to Pythagoras*

When in good time corpses go off and ooze in the heat
 Creepy-crawlies breed in them. Bury your prize bull
 (A well-known experiment) – and from the putrid guts
 Swarm flower-crazy bees, industrious country-types
 Working hard, as did their host, with harvest in mind.
 An interred war-horse produces hornets. Remove
 A shore-crab's hollow claw, lay it to rest: the result
 Is a scorpion charging with its tail bent like a hook.
 Worms cosy in cocoons of white thread grow into
 Butterflies, souls of the dead. Any farmer knows that.

Germ in mud generate green frogs: legless at first
 They soon sprout swimming and jumping equipment.
 A she-bear's cub is a lump of meat whose stumpy
 Non-legs she licks into shape in her own image.
 The honey-bees' larvae born in those waxy hexagons
 Only get feet and wings later on. That's obvious.
 Think of peacocks, eagles, doves, the bird-family
 As a whole, all starting inside eggs: hard to believe.
 There's a theory that in the grave the backbone rots
 Away and the spinal cord turns into a snake.

The fundamental interconnectedness of all things
 Is incredible enough, but did you know that
 Hyenas change sex? The female mounted by a male
 Just minutes before, becomes a male herself. Then
 There's the chameleon that feeds off wind and air
 And takes the colour of whatever it's standing on.
 Air transforms lynxes' urine into stones and hardens
 Coral, that softly swaying underwater plant.
 I could go on and on with these scientific facts.
 If it wasn't so late I'd tell you a whole lot more.

Michael Longley won the Whitbread Poetry Award for Gorse Fires
 (Secker & Warburg, 1991). Poems: 1963-1983 is published by Penguin.

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