*A Year of Last Things*, Michael Ondaatje (Cape Poetry)

Michael Ondaatje's poetry is rooted in memories and an attempt to make connections between them. It is a quiet, persuasive poetry with a sense of otherworldliness to it. Sometimes this is due to a fuzziness of recall, a sense of distance and time; sometimes due to geography and place (poems about going to school in Colombo, Sri Lanka); at other times a deliberate engagement with the unknown or other, be that 'the plotless thirteen hundred / pages of a Sanskrit dictionary' he reads in 'Definition' or the totally unknowable combination of vetinary treatment and animal sounds:

 THE CABBAGETOWN PET CLINIC

 For years I wrote during the day

 above a veterinarian

 The howls, the heavy breathing, the sighs

 from that faraway untranslated world

Of course, whilst neither Ondaatje or the reader can know the language of animals, what Ondaatje can do is recreate the experience of writing in solitude and hearing what is going on below. I like the fact there is no description of his room, where the clinic is, or what he is writing, just the establishment of occupation and the metaphor of what is being written as another world which he is struggling to access. Simple but complex. Four lines. Done and dusted.

Of course, very few of the poems in this book are this compact. Many tell stories, or ponder, philosophically, on the emotions or scenes being recalled. 'Lost' moves from the narrator 'remember[ing] the afternoon I kept losing you / at the Evolution exhibit in Cambridge' to a suggestion that 'one of us became the forsaken lover / who somebody might wave from a subtitled dream' to a more dramatic final questioning last verse:

 How did we let slip each other's hand

 in the carboniferous era on the third floor

 before we wandered down the Triassic times.

Here are not only a couple losing each other, physically and emotionally, but also an evocation of a huge sense of time and distance, separation; perhaps of humans adrift in the vast universe.

Love and longing are frequently the subject, or one of the subjects, of poems here. 'Leg Glance' considers 'The dangers of the subjunctive mood / when love affair are still all coal and smoke', using cricket as a sustained metaphor for desire, noting that 'not bothering to move / from the path of the dangerous ball' is 'how you make a song / out of someone else's rumour'. Or perhaps it is a poem about cricket using love as a metaphor?

It is this uncertainty that I enjoy, the fact that these poems, in many ways traditional free verse narratives, can not be simply pinned down and defined. Ondaatje's poems are slippery and complex. The six part poem 'A Night Radio Station in Koprivshtitsa' could be considered a travelogue ('Crossing the mile-wide ten-mile depth / of the San Andreas fault and three time zones'), a history lesson ('Ottoman rule prohibited the building of churches / higher than a horse and rider'), or a metaphysical or religious poem. In part 4, 'How to Paint an Icon', we are instructed to

 Depict new rain whenever it arrives over the hills.

 No sunlight. Everything is sunlight.

This is physics, colour as reflected light, but also tied up with the notion that icons are a window to God, not a representation of the saint depicted. Part 5 expounds upon 'the silence in icons' and also notes the 'deafness in icons' and the fact that 'Icons do not travel.'

By now the poem sequence has become a prose poem. Part 6, the longest, returns to the theme of 'How to paint an icon' but also considers the lives represented by icons; notions of pilgrimage, confession and veneration; offers us a part of a travel diary which includes the radio of the poem's title; and recalls being shown 'a photograph of three poets standing together, each half blind, so they had only the perspective and depth-of-field of three eyes among them'. They are not named or described, but it is clear as the 11 page sequence ends that it is another allusion to how we see, represent and (mis)remember what we desire or once knew. '"I recall what you were wearing, even now"', says the narrator in closing, '"when I did not even know of you, had not yet even desired you, and was awake all night."'

Whether in the realms of dreams and the imagination or the realities of 'What can be Named in the Earth', Ondaatje is adept at swimming in the rivers of memory he creates, enticing us into the complex currents of time. *A Year of Last Things* is an engaging and personal book, offering an 'intimacy that comes with trusting a fiction, a non-personal truth, going towards what you do not yet know.' The author is exploring too, suggesting that he 'will not even remember writing it.'

Rupert Loydell

(811 words)