

PREFACE

‘... a sunny, misty, cloudy, dazzling, howling, omniform, Day’

Weather has no plot. It is all mutability and vicissitude, and so is this anthology. It is structured as a notional ‘omniform’ day, containing all weathers – and its three hundred entries, which range from the literary to the scientific, to jottings, journals, letters and many more, in their various voices prompting and curtailng each other, are a loud part of that day’s noise. What we are offering is an impression of weather as non-stop interruption, although even that impression will be interrupted by others in the pages that follow.

In his essay on ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’ William Hazlitt describes a walking holiday along the Bristol Channel with his new friend: ‘A thunder-storm came on while we were at the inn, and Coleridge was running out bare-headed to enjoy the commotion of the elements ...’. ‘Bareheadedness’ has been another of the aspirations of this anthology. Our texts are hatless. Authors and titles have been pushed aside (to the foot of the page or the back of the book) so that extracts may be exposed to each other – one excerpt summoning up the weather of the next – with no distinction between prose and poetry, or between poems with authors and without authors, or between fiction and report. There are almost no dates on the page, since weather occupies what Wallace Stevens called ‘the area between is and was’. We’d like you to read this book with no hat, no coat, no preconceptions, encountering each voice abruptly, as an exclamation brought on by the weather.

Coleridge, who described positioning his mirror so that he could see the changing cloud-light while shaving, maintained a bareheaded attention throughout his notebooks. Among daily weather memos (‘the sky is covered with whitish and with dingy cloudage, thin

dingiest Scud close under the moon and one side of it moving, all else moveless'), he recorded his wish to write 'a set of playbills for the Vale of Keswick – for every day in the year – announcing each day the performance, by his Supreme Majesty's Servants, Clouds, Waters, Sun, Moon, Stars, &c.' *Gigantic Cinema* is that kind of performance – and this way of speaking has something to do with the weather's play-like control of our attention, on the stage of the day. 'Enter a cloud' says W.S. Graham, and this phrase could be the title of any of our entries, like one of Shakespeare's stage directions ('Enter mariners, wet'), or like Elizabeth Bishop's fantasia of weather as stage machinery: 'Now the storm goes away again in a series / of small, badly lit battle-scenes, / each in "Another part of the field"'. Virginia Woolf, ill in bed and staring at the sky, had the same sensation of being someone in the weather's audience, and her delirious description provides the voice-over for this anthology: 'this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and wagons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away... One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house.'

Any attempt to communicate all that buffeting is bound to be, as she says, both interminable and experimental. After all, what is not weather? Medieval writers thought honey was a form of weather; Homer described speech as a kind of snow; a report in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1916 suggested that the 'tremendous expenditure of ammunition' on the Western Front had itself become a meteorological force; Audubon witnessed an eclipse of the sun by passenger pigeons. If you restrict weather to the air, then you miss out on Maeterlink's phototropic flowers or Mandelstam's pebble, or the stone tortoises of Victor Segalen. If you relate it to light, then you forget the blindness of John Hull, stuck at the musical centre of a rainstorm. It is tempting to call anything weather when it is beyond human control, but that fails to account for the rain-invocations in Fraser's *Golden Bough* or conversations with the sun in Daniel Paul Schreber's record of his illness, or Pueblo Indian rituals of magical weather-thinking. Distracted by all these examples, we have widened

and widened our definition. In the end, working with the hunch that weather might be nothing smaller than undated Time, we have included dreams, ghosts, birds, volcanos, nuclear explosions, moods, echoes, souls, luck, smoke... and a good deal more.

Before it became a science of constant weather, meteorology (meaning the art of looking up) was the study of individual meteors: manifestations of the unusual, of rogue individuals in nature. Defoe could still report – of the Great Storm of 1703 – that ‘the air was full of Meteors and fiery Vapours’. We include a lot of extraordinary weather, to get some purchase on what ancestors thought was really happening in the sky; but we have also tried to listen to the quieter, closer weathers that appear in diaries, journals, notebooks, letters – writings which report with immediacy on unstable phenomena and are themselves unstable, unanchored in the literary: places where the everyday, in the form of weather, progressively stole into literature.

But the story of how weather enters writing, at first as spectacle, then as a constant marginal presence, goes beyond the scale of any anthology. Over a period of five years, we have been gathering examples, most of which have not been included, and it’s important that a reader should construe this whole endeavour as absurd, fragmentary, unfinishable. There is a great storm of writings pushing at the edges of the book. Perhaps the only way to convey this uncontainable excess is to quote from one of them – Curzio Malaparte’s account of his time as a war correspondent, covering the Eastern Front in 1941:

On the third day a huge fire flared in the Raikkola forest. Men, horses and trees clutched within the circle of fire sent out awful cries. The rangers, firing through that wall of smoke and flames, blocked every avenue of escape. Mad with terror, the horses of the Soviet artillery – there were almost a thousand of them – hurled themselves into the furnace and broke through the besieging flames and machine guns. Many perished within the flames, but most of them succeeded in reaching the shores of Lake Ladoga and threw themselves into the water.

The lake is not deep there, not more than six feet; but a hundred yards from the shore the bottom suddenly drops. Pressed within the narrow space (the lakeshore curves inward

a this point, forming a small bay) between the deeper water and the barrier of fire, the horses clustered, shuddering with cold and fear, their heads stretched out above the surface. Those nearer to land were scorched by the flames and reared and struggled to hoist themselves onto the backs of the others, trying to push a way through by biting and kicking. And while they were still madly struggling, the ice gripped them.

The north wind swooped down during the night. (The north wind blows from the Murmansk Sea, like an angel of doom, crying aloud, and the land suddenly dies.) The cold became frightful. Suddenly, with the peculiar vibrating noise of breaking glass, the water froze. The heat balance was broken, and the sea, the lakes, the rivers froze. In such instances, even sea waves are gripped in mid-air and become rounded ice waves suspended in the void.

On the following day, when the first ranger patrols, their hair singed, their faces blackened by smoke, cautiously stepped over the warm ashes in the charred forest and reached the lakeshore, a horrible and amazing sight met their eyes. The lake looked like a vast sheet of white marble on which rested hundreds upon hundreds of horses' heads. They appeared to have been chopped off cleanly with an ax. Only the heads stuck out of the crust of ice. And they were all facing the shore. The white flames of terror still burnt in their wide-open eyes. Closer to the shore a tangle of wildly rearing horses rose from the prison of ice

There is no let up. That passage drifted in among several others when the book was already at the printers. A metre-high heap of other samples had already been rejected as too indoor or too convoluted. Our ruling idea was to have no ideas: to dispense with writing 'about' weather, writing that knows what it's talking about. Instead we have preferred writing that is 'like' weather, that has the sovereignty of sheer event. As if the weather were to write itself (as it does in Apollinaire's calligramme of rain). So that even the most discursive of the texts included have a way of speaking – telegraphic, visceral – that 'buffets' us, indicating an outdoor world moving behind the language.

So, events rather than thoughts. But these definitions are not exact. Wherever you draw a line, as with Paul Muldoon's 'Boundary Commission', there is weather on both sides. (like the fog in the drawing-room, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's London notebooks). Weather interrupts thinking and shares inconsequence with it, as Thoreau recognised when he dreamt of compiling 'a meteorological journal of the mind'. You can no more prevent thought than you can prevent rain, and the words we think in are part of this squallishness. For Dr. Johnson, 'words are hourly shifting their relations, and can no more be ascertained in a dictionary, than a grove, in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water.' Weather as a name for the shock and luck of encountering language or reacting to the elements, weather as an affliction of thought or a gift of idea, weather as impossible excess or interruption or distraction or simple outsidedness – all these visions of a force beyond our control are wonderfully liberating. And we want the anthology to capture these irresponsibilities.

To concentrate on something as erratic as the weather has an immediate and disturbing effect on the imagination. This anthology will not add to the image of Nature as a suffering solid. Instead it attends to patterns and forces, things that are invisible, ephemeral, sudden, catastrophic, seasonal and endless: air's manifold appearances. Gilbert White took it for granted that 'the weather of a district is undoubtedly part of its natural history'. The anthology takes seriously such a thought, and its scale is small. It privileges the perceivable, the particular, the local over the global, the 'now' of raindrops. Even so, this weather constantly frames the human figure as tiny, besieged, exposed. Not only can we never leave the performance, but often it turns on us, like God goading his audience from inside the whirlwind: 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest?' The height of the weather is a measure of man. This anthology has tried to get the proportions right. If the Anthropocene is us, and is upon us, we are being orphaned by it on a scale that has no measure. One way of saying this is that weather is what we stand to lose.

Ordinarily to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. Pedestrians would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky-gazer. What snatches we get of it are mutilated by chimneys and churches, serve as a background for man, signify wet weather or fine, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of dishevelled autumnal plane trees in London squares. Now, become as the leaf or the daisy, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it! – this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and waggons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away – this endless activity, with the waste of Heaven knows how many million horse power of energy, has been left to work its will year in year out. The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Some one should write to *The Times* about it. Use should be made of it. One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house. But watch a little longer and another emotion drowns the stirrings of civic ardour. Divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless. Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit. If we were all laid prone, frozen, stiff, still the sky would be experimenting with its blues and golds.

Think of the storm roaming the sky uneasily
like a dog looking for a place to sleep in,
listen to it growling.

Think how they must look now, the mangrove keys
lying out there unresponsive to the lightning
in dark, coarse-fibred families,

where occasionally a heron may undo his head,
shake up his feathers, make an uncertain comment
when the surrounding water shines.

Think of the boulevard and the little palm trees
all stuck in rows, suddenly revealed
as fistfuls of limp fish-skeletons.

It is raining there. The boulevard
and its broken sidewalks with weeds in every crack
are relieved to be wet, the sea to be freshened.

Now the storm goes away again in a series
of small, badly lit battle-scenes,
each in 'Another part of the field'.

Think of someone sleeping in the bottom of a row-boat
tied to a mangrove root or the pile of a bridge;
think of him as uninjured, barely disturbed.

7.

The rain came abruptly at a time when no one expected it,
In the very heart of luminous days and glorious fruit crops.

At daybreak

When the women opened the windows, everything
Was changed – leaden and damp. And everybody felt
As if someone had deceived them. However they were not
Enraged at all – only surly and speechless.

The soothing fragrance of the fields entered the houses
Like a broad pardon before they knew their error. Then
With the sacks they once used to carry grapes,
They made a coarsely cut effigy of the summer and filled it
With straw and scattered memories. For a moment
You thought they were going to burn it in the upper square

Majesty's voice breaks, and I can see how tears stream down his venerable face. And then, yes, then, for the first time, I thought to myself that everything was really coming to an end. That on this rainy day all life is seeping away, we are covered with cold, clinging fog, and the moon and Jupiter have stopped in the seventh and the twelfth houses to form a square.

143.

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe.
Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion.
I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate.
All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.
Time to die.

144.

In the courtyard where I watch it fall, the rain comes down at several different speeds. In the middle it is a delicate and threadbare curtain (or a mesh), an implacable but relatively slow descent of quite small drops, a never-ending languid precipitation, an intense fragment of pure meteor. A little away from the walls on left and right heavier drops fall separately, more noisily. Some look the size of a grain of corn, others a pea, others almost a marble. On the parapets and balustrades of the window the rain runs horizontally, while on the underside of these obstacles it hangs down in convex lozenges. It streams in a thin sheet over the entire surface of a little zinc roof directly below me – a pattern of watered silk, in the various currents, from the imperceptible bosses and undulations of the surface. From the adjoining gutter, where it flows with the contention of a deep but only slightly inclined stream, it suddenly plunges in a perfectly vertical, coarsely braided stream to the ground, where it breaks and rebounds in shining needles.

Each of these forms has its own particular speed and gait; each elicits a particular sound. The whole thing is intensely alive in the manner of a complicated mechanism, as precise as it is random, a

clockwork whose spring is the weight of a given mass of precipitated vapour.

The ringing of the vertical threads on the pavement, the gurgling of the gutters, the tiny gong beats multiply and resonate all at once in a consort without monotony, and not without delicacy.

And when the spring is unwound, some of the gears continue to function for a while, getting slower and slower, until the whole machinery stops. Then, if the sun comes out again, the whole thing is erased, the brilliant apparatus evaporates: it has rained.

145.

And outside it's raining and raining and doesn't look as though it will ever stop. Which I do not mind in the least. I am sitting inside, dry, and am only embarrassed to be eating an opulent *Gabelfrühstück* in front of the house-painter who at this moment is standing on the scaffolding outside my window, and is spattering the windows unnecessarily because he is furious at the rain which has let up a little, and furious at the amount of butter I am putting on my bread. However, that too is probably my imagination, since he is no doubt 100 times less concerned about me than I am about him. No, now he really is hard at work, in the pouring rain and lightning ...

146.

In making a film of atmosphere, I found that you could not stick to the script and that the script should not get too detailed. In this case, the rain itself dictated its own literature and guided the camera into secret wet paths we had never dreamed of when we outlined the film. It was an exceptionally difficult subject to tackle. Many artistic problems were actually technical problems and vice versa. Film experience in photographing rain was extremely limited because a cameraman normally stops filming when it begins to rain. When *Rain* was finished and shown in Paris in 1929 the French critics called it a *ciné-poème* and its structure is actually more that of a poem than

154.

look between the rain
the drops are insular
try to remember before you were born

155.

They sing their dearest songs—
He, she, all of them—yea,
Treble and tenor and bass,
And one to play;
With the candles mooning each face...
Ah, no; the years O!
How the sick leaves reel down in throngs!

They clear the creeping moss—
Elders and juniors—aye,
Making the pathways neat
And the garden gay;
And they build a shady seat...
Ah, no; the years, the years,
See, the white storm-birds wing across.

They are blithely breakfasting all—
Men and maidens—yea,
Under the summer tree,
With a glimpse of the bay,
While pet fowl come to the knee...
Ah, no; the years O!
And the rotten rose is ript from the wall.

They change to a high new house,
He, she, all of them—aye,
Clocks and carpets and chairs
On the lawn all day,
And brightest things that are theirs...
Ah, no; the years, the years;
Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs.

156.

Bored with the town, our rain god pours his pitcher of torrential dark
over the next-door boneyard's pale people, and threads mortality
through the fog-bound faubourgs.

Revolving her wasted furious body, the cat roots for a bed on the
floorboards; thin voice lonesome as a cold ghost, the soul of an old
poet roams the gutters...

The great bell mourns, and from the grate a smoking log plays falsetto
to the rheumy clock, while in a pack of malodorous cards

(fatal heirloom of some hydroptic aunt), the queen of spades and
handsome knave of hearts keep up dark gossip round their dead
heart-throbs.

157.

The weather, you know, has not been balmy; I am now reduced to
think – and am at last content to talk – of the weather. Pride must
have a fall.

158.

He often delighted to say of Edmund Burke, 'that you could not stand
five minutes with that man beneath a shed while it rained, but you
must be convinced you had been standing with the greatest man you
had ever yet seen.'

159.

It is commonly observed, that when two Englishmen meet, their first
talk is of the weather; they are in haste to tell each other, what each
must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or
calm.

There are, among the numerous lovers of subtilties and paradoxes,
some who derive the civil institutions of every country from its

201.

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

202.

Somewhere nowhere in Utah, a boy by the roadside,
gun in his hand, and the rare dumb hard tears flowing.
Beside him, a greyheaded man has let one arm slide
awkwardly over his shoulders, is talking and pointing
at whatever it is, dead, in the dust on the ground.

By the old parked Chevy, two women, talking and watching.
Their skirts flag forward, bandanna twist with their hair.
Around them, sheep and a fence and the sagebrush burning
and burning with a blue flame. In the distance, where
mountains are clouds, lightning, but no rain.

203.

There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon,
some unnatural stillness, some tension. What it means is that tonight
a Santa Ana will begin to blow, a hot wind from the northeast

whining down through the Cajon and San Geronio Passes, blowing
up sand storms out along Route 66, drying the hills and the nerves to
flash point. For a few days now we will see smoke back in the
canyons, and hear sirens in the night.

I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know
it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too. We know it
because we feel it. The baby frets. The maid sulks. I rekindle a waning
argument with the telephone company, then cut my losses and lie
down, given over to whatever it is in the air. To live with the Santa
Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic
view of human behavior.

I recall being told, when I first moved to Los Angeles and was
living on an isolated beach, that the Indians would throw themselves
into the sea when the bad wind blew. I could see why. The Pacific
turned ominously glossy during a Santa Ana period, and one woke in
the night troubled not only by the peacocks screaming in the olive
trees but by the eerie absence of surf. The heat was surreal. The sky
had a yellow cast, the kind of light sometimes called 'earthquake
weather.' My only neighbor would not come out of her house for days,
and there were no lights at night, and her husband roamed the place
with a machete. One day he would tell me that he had heard a
trespasser, the next a rattlesnake.

'On nights like that,' Raymond Chandler once wrote about the
Santa Ana, 'every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the
edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything
can happen.' That was the kind of wind it was. I did not know then that
there was any basis for the effect it had on all of us, but it turns out to
be another of those cases in which science bears out folk wisdom.

The Santa Ana, which is named for one of the canyons it rushes
through, is *foehn* wind, like the *foehn* of Austria and Switzerland and
the *hamsin* of Israel. There are a number of persistent malevolent
winds, perhaps the best know of which are the mistral of France
and the Mediterranean sirocco, but a *foehn* wind has distinct
characteristics: it occurs on the leeward slope of a mountain range
and, although the air begins as a cold mass, it is warmed as it comes
down the mountain and appears finally as a hot dry wind. Whenever
and wherever *foehn* blows, doctors hear about headaches and nausea
and allergies, about 'nervousness,' about 'depression.'

In Los Angeles some teachers do not attempt to conduct formal classes during a Santa Ana, because the children become unmanageable. In Switzerland the suicide rate goes up during the *foehn*, and in the courts of some Swiss cantons the wind is considered a mitigating circumstance for crime. Surgeons are said to watch the wind, because blood does not clot normally during a *foehn*.

A few years ago an Israeli physicist discovered that not only during such winds, but for the ten or twelve hours which precede them, the air carries an unusually high ratio of positive to negative ions. No one seems to know exactly why that should be; some talk about friction and others suggest solar disturbances. In any case the positive ions are there, and what an excess of positive ions does, in the simplest terms, is make people unhappy. One cannot get much more mechanistic than that.

204.

What more there is lies within the mountain. Something moves between me and it. Place and a mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered. I cannot tell what this movement is except by recounting it.

205.

... I will at present only mention that the sun has for years spoken with me in human words and thereby reveals herself as a living being, or as the organ of a still higher being behind her. God also regulates the weather; as a rule this is done automatically, so to speak, by the greater or lesser amount of heat emanating from the sun, but He can also regulate it in certain ways in pursuit of His own purposes. For instance I have received fairly definite indications that the severe winter of 1870–71 was decided by God in order to turn the fortunes of war in favour of the Germans; and the proud words on the destruction of Philip II's Spanish Armada in the year 1588 *Deus afflavit et dissipati sunt* (God blew the wind and they were scattered) most probably also contain a historical truth. In this connection I refer to the sun only as the instrument of God's willpower which lies

nearest to the earth; in reality the condition of the weather is affected by the sum total of the other stars as well. Winds or storms in particular arise when God moves further away from the earth. In circumstances contrary to the Order of the World which have now arisen, this relation has changed – and I wish to mention this at the outset – the weather is now to a certain extent dependent on *my* actions and thoughts; as soon as I indulge in thinking nothing, or in other words cease performing an activity which proves the existence of the human mind, such as playing chess in the garden, the winds arise at once.

206.

ULYSSES. As soon as her shed blood reddened the earth, the gods thundered audibly above the altar. The wind shivered the air with excited whispering and the sea answered by bellowing. The far shore roared and went white with foam and the funeral flame lit itself. Then the sky flickered with lightning and cracked open and threw down a holy horror to reassure us. The shocked soldier said that Diana descended in a cloud directly into the fire and he thought that she carried our vows and our incense right through the flames to heaven.

207.

Eros shook my
mind like a mountain wind falling on oak trees

208.

But the winds go to every tree, fingering every leaf and branch and furrowed bole; not one is forgotten; the Mountain Pine towering with outstretched arms on the rugged buttresses of the icy peaks, the lowliest and most retiring tenant of the dells; they seek and find them all, caressing them tenderly, bending them in lusty exercise, stimulating their growth, plucking off a leaf or limb as required, or removing an entire tree or grove, now whispering and cooing through the branches like a sleepy child, now roaring like the ocean;