Horse Latitudes: Poems

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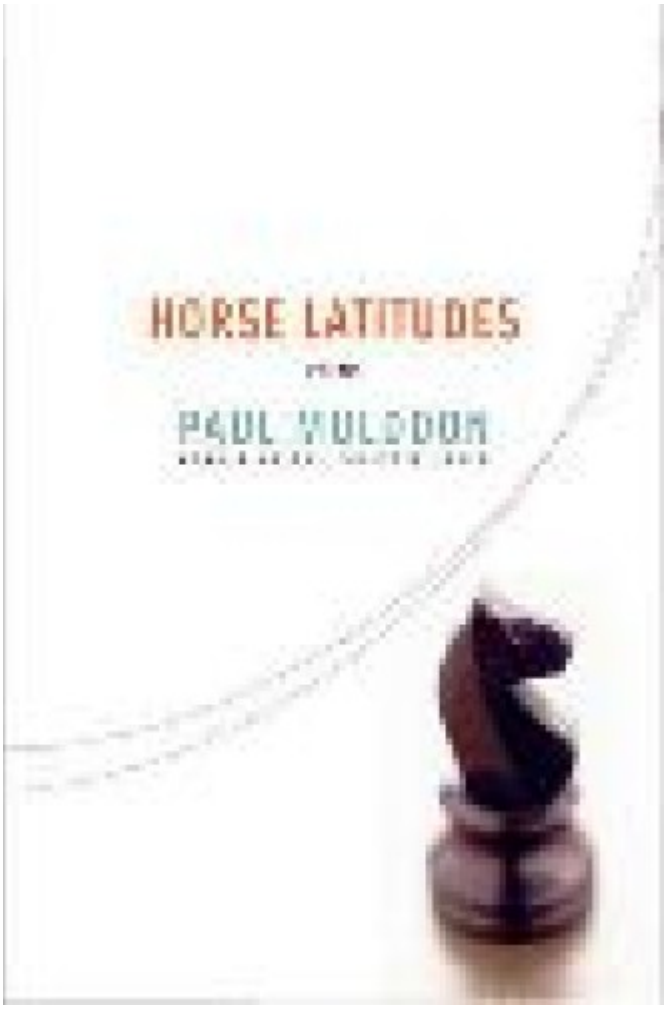
In Review



Horse Latitudes: Poems

Paul Muldoon
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Among Ireland’s best contemporary poets, Paul Muldoon pours forth a river of words resembling (to this Midwestern reviewer, at least) not so much Joyce’s Liffey as

Twain's Mississippi. His verse feels broad in its idiomatic currents, ever flowing and turning, perplexing sometimes in its unpredictable fathoms, but still remarkable to behold. *Horse Latitudes*, Muldoon's first book since he won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for *Moy Sand and Gravel*, displays formal sophistication and a mercurial voice—from comically hip to elegiac, from allusive and learned to downright ornery.

Readers will find here a sonnet sequence, double villanelle and sestina, and no fewer than 90 haiku called "text messages"—a Muldoonian touch, that. And the words! Mix the Hiberno-English of Muldoon's youth in Northern Ireland with his present love of American slang, add his encyclopedic reading and penchant for catalogs, and you have a brew of linguistic resourcefulness seldom seen in contemporary writing. He embraces popular language that would make Chaucer proud ("hooch," "wiggle room," "honky-tonk," "thingamabob," "what's-his-face's daughter") and more rarified English, cherished and preserved by academic poets (the latinate "age-old traductions," the archaic "farthingale" and "hauberk"). These two worlds often collide, as when a grandfather is "fain to wrastle," a phrase evoking prim Elizabethan lute players and World Wrestling Entertainment's goateed muscleheads.

Muldoon believes in the importance of conscious, correct speech: as recent guest editor of the *Best American Poetry* annual, he described politicians archly as "a class just now notable for imprecision," and he laments in an interview that "so much is unclear and indirect." His stereophonic sense of the mother tongue should appeal to anyone doing the church's work in the medium of English. Some critics, however, resist Muldoon's virtuosity. William Logan recently called him an undiscriminating mannerist. Logan's judgment is understandable but severe.

Most readers of *Horse Latitudes* will find a powerful if troubled heart beating beneath the verbal spells and bricolage. Muldoon has always reveled in keen intelligence and catholic interests, but now, at midcareer and midlife, he does the more daring thing—he reveals. Though dazzling technique still reigns, he now engages personal history more frequently. The wistful "The Old Country" ultimately abandons the ironic distances of clichés and classical and biblical references ("Every resort was a last resort," "Every runnel was a Rubicon," "Every ass had an ass's jawbone"), treating with biting etymological awareness that stereotypical Irish image, the milk churn, "whose every dent was a sign of indenture." Less characteristically, Muldoon comes to realize that less is more "and every letdown a terrible letdown." The understated final line, "every town was a tidy town," actually conveys more of both emotion and satire than the preceding tongue-in-cheekiness.

Several other poems confirm Muldoon's imaginative connection to Ireland despite his having lived in the U.S. for two decades. He has taught creative writing at Princeton since 1990, and from 1999 to 2004 he was also professor of poetry at Oxford, delivering the lectures that appeared as *The End of the Poem* (Faber and Faber). He also inhabits diverse clubs in New York as a guitarist for Rackett, a quirky Princeton rock concoction also boasting an entertainment lawyer and scholars of Milton and Henry James. If Muldoon had a dollar or pound sterling for every time a critic described his "clever wordplay" or employed sorcery imagery (alas, I too am guilty), he would need none of these jobs.

Muldoon's worlds converge in the occasional poem "Bob Dylan at Princeton, November 2000." Its jaunty couplets ("His last time at Princeton, he wouldn't wear a hood. / Now he's dressed up as some sort of cowboy dude.") reflect the poet's preoccupations with linguistic coincidence (the ceremony occurs in Dillon Gym) and cyclical return (Dylan last visited 17 years ago). Suburban family life appears regularly—as in "Soccer Moms," or in the form of a Mercedes and a Jiffy Lube in "Alba," or in the "popping underfoot of the Bubble Wrap / in which Asher's new toy came." More historically roving poems also begin with the everyday. In "Tithonous" a smoke detector's "day-old cheep" initiates a generational series of sounds, terminating in a great-great grandmother's world, while the unpacking of a dozen eggs calls to mind hidden family shame—an Irish grandmother's spending egg money on liquor. From her next dozen eggs "I might yet poke / my little beak," Muldoon writes, a surreal, playful sign-off that, while recalling films like *Being John Malkovich*, suggests powerfully the way we originate in family narratives.

Horse Latitudes opens with an eponymous sequence of 19 sonnets. They nicely showcase the poet's impressive ambitions and occasionally frustrating obscurities. The title phrase refers to areas just north and south of the equator where light winds and dry weather cause ships to stagnate. It's where Spanish vessels bound for the West Indies would throw their horses overboard. Such violence becomes a motif. Here the grandfather of the speaker's Italian consort, Carlotta, cuts donkeys' vocal chords to prevent them giving away troops. These donkeys may be ironic stand-ins for the silenced poet, who in this case seems more complicit than victimized. The atmosphere surrounding the speaker and Carlotta, a poolside in Nashville, evokes escapism and diminished expectation:

Proud-fleshed Carlotta. Hypersarcoma.
For now our highest ambition
was simply to bear the light of day
we had once been planning to seize.

Yet grand historical meditation emerges. Each poem takes its title from a battle—Bosworth Field, Boyne, Bunker Hill, Bull Run, Basra. “Baghdad” is the obvious, haunting absence, though Carlotta speaks of oil and the Tigris. (The French, ironically, prime their “weapons of mass destruction.”) These sonnets may overwhelm some, yet they inherit the schematic and syncretic juxtapositions of high modernists like Eliot, whom Muldoon admires.

Muldoon doubtless knows that the northern horse latitudes are called the calms of Cancer. The phrase acknowledges the book’s most painful, personal subject—the loss to cancer of Muldoon’s sister Maureen and his musician friend Warren Zevon. “Dear Sis,” the book’s dedicatee, is addressed in three poems, including the harsh “Turkey Buzzards,” whose elegant stanzas don’t hide its figurative vivisection, and “Hedge School,” in which we find Muldoon sneakily looking up the root of “metastasis” in a bookstore. Strangely, this provocative image also expresses vulnerability, as if the poet were insisting that linguistic obsession is not preening but a way of coping.

The concluding tour de force, “Sillyhow Stride,” first feels like an amp turned up too far: the elegy honors Zevon by zipping in the rocker’s Corvette among “bling-it-ons” at the Grammys, diverse guitars and Hollywood’s Viper Room. The Dantean terza rima form and multiple echoes of Donne’s poetry raise the noise level. Yet the elegist deepens his song by telling Zevon of his dying sister. Her “sillyhow” oxygen mask explains the title—the word means “blessed deathmask”—and her cancer becomes a “quick, quick, slow / conversion of manna to gall.” Muldoon seeks consolation for both deaths and a glimpse of the “Everlasting Life we bargain / for,” which reminds us, as he reminds Zevon, that flesh is “merely a bruise on the spirit.” Grief is essential to Muldoon’s present poetry; it becomes the wished-for solid ground from which he can still fly the dragon-faced kites of his imagination.