'Horse Latitudes' and 'Drives'


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Is this the book where Muldoon has finally ‘gone native’ in America? Horse Latitudes, his tenth collection, looks like an American wolf in Faber & Faber clothing, with its (FSG?) cover design of nose-to-tail horses doubtless shifting from foot to foot around the book, and its fortunate exemption from the rather too interesting blues, browns, greens, reds or yellows of other recent Faber productions. (The spelling in the book is American too.) The cover painting, by Stubbs, is entitled ‘Mares and Foals without a Background’, a caution, perhaps, for those who relentlessly try to bring Muldoon back home to Ulster. Of course, it’s equally tempting to see a free-floating, perpetual circling as the only stable place for a poet who seems as restless as his poems, only really at home within them. (Muldoon’s carbon hoofprints must be extensive.) Yet to fall ‘between two stones’—be they ‘Armagh or Tyrone’ (‘The Outlier’), Ireland or America, one side of the street or the other—relies, in this book as in its predecessor, Moy Sand and Gravel, on the tension of a double anchoring that keeps the poet from freefall, from precipitation into a postmodern void whose ‘provisional’ qualities could themselves begin to look remarkably fixed. Never ‘without a background’ to his foreground, or a foreground to his background, it’s as if Muldoon habitually copes with having been born an only twin. The speaker in ‘Eggs’ pecks his way through a crack in present-day America back to ‘a freshly whitewashed / scullery in Cullenramer’ and into the ‘new-laid eggs’ of the past ‘from any one of which’, he writes, ‘I might yet poke / my little beak’. The ‘country toward which I’ve been rowing / for fifty years’, in ‘It Is What It Is’, is also that landscape of the past, ‘the fifty years I’ve spent trying to put it together’.

It’s now twenty years since Muldoon left ‘The Old Country’ (as one of the poems in this collection has it) for pastures new, and even more than that since an hallucinogenic stroll with Ciaran Carson through the green fields of home transformed his head into the ‘head of a horse’ with a ‘dirty-fair mane’. It was probably only a matter of time before horses, in one form or another, earned a place in a book title, given their ubiquity in Muldoon’s oeuvre— from Moy’s horse fairs to the Wild West—and unsurprisingly, the horse trail in this book has all the elusiveness we’ve come to expect from the poet. The ‘horse latitudes’, the blurb helpfully tells us, ‘designate an area north and south of the equator in which ships tend to be becalmed, in which stasis if not stagnation is the order of the day, and where sailors traditionally threw horses overboard to conserve food and water’. That’s one handy fact through which to ‘interpret’ this book, of which more anon. Another strategy might be to pick up various horse links in a chain, to jog along an intertextual and self-referential ‘inside track’: there are ‘clay horses’, cobs, war horses, stallions, pack mules and asses. There’s a pair of ‘rain-bleached horses’ (compare ‘Gathering Mushrooms’) who stand ‘head to tail’ (compare ‘Why Brownlee Left’). There are moments of Frostan rhetorical canters: ‘whereof … whereof…whereof’; ‘whereth … whereth … whereth’. And horses become, inevitably, hobbyhorses—one of Muldoon’s being the urge to squeeze significations dry: so there’s a ‘half-assed attempt to untangle / the ghastly from the price of gasoline’; his former lover is put ‘through her paces’, although she kicks ‘against the traces’. Even more obliquely, the seemingly all-American poem, ‘Soccer Moms’, a double villanelle and paean to 1960s America, with ‘Gene Chandler … winning
seems to parody the kind of academic pedantry that tried to ‘work out’ Muldoon (‘My first may be found … in grime / but not in rime’ etc). The answer – griddle – is only another version of ‘riddle’ anyway (a wire-bottomed sieve) which takes us once more round the hamster wheel and back to where we began. It is, in other words, an empty quest.

But there must be more to it than that, and perhaps this is a book about rather different kinds of ‘riddles’, one that proposes ‘riddles’ in as much as it confronts, and seeks to express, the difficult, or insoluble problem. That expression is embedded in the form and structure of the poems, as much as in the surface difficulty of what they say. Always drawn to repetition, Muldoon has taken it, surely, as far as it can formally and thematically go, notably in the sonnet-sequence ‘The Old Country’. Here, as elsewhere, Muldoon is fascinated by envelope patterns, enclosing the whole sequence with ‘every town was a tidy town’, and platting each poem into the next through one step forward, two steps back repetitions – a slow, slow quick movement that is to appear in reverse in the final poem of the book, ‘Sillyhow Stride’. In ‘The Old Country’, the final line of each sonnet is the first line of the next. This suggests repetition as a cumulative building of detail, as is the case in ‘The Outlier’, and as is familiar from Eliot’s ‘Ash Wednesday’. But in ‘The Old Country’, Muldoon complicates the forward narrative since the repetitions double back on themselves. (If each repeated line were to be numbered, from 1 to 9, the pattern of repetition runs: 123; 3224; 2445; 5446; 6776 and so on to conclude 9881.) The form captures the stagnation and insularity (‘Every track was an inside track / and every job an inside job’) of a society renowned for a certain ‘no surrender’ mentality: ‘Every point was a point of no return / for those who had signed the Covenant in blood’. To parody a mentality the poem simultaneously critiques is a risky strategy, since the poem might all too easily become its detractors. Yet Muldoon does carry it off – just – capturing both the sense of apocalypse (‘every ditch was a last ditch) and tedium (‘every boat was, again, a burned boat’) that leave the ‘old country’
struggling to prime / their weapons of mass destruction’; in ‘Blackwater Fort’, Bush will ‘come clean’ on the ‘gross / imports of crude oil … only when the Tigris comes clean’ – a sinister hint of purging there. The present stains the past as much as vice versa, just as ‘Carolotta’s’ cancer, another strand to the sequence, is a ‘tumor … on dark ground’, contaminating memory, denying a future. The attrition of this sequence thus sends depressing signals to the present, more particularly to Bush’s America: this is a history in which there are, quite evidently, no winners, however many battles are fought, whatever their names.

If the lesson learned, or more depressingly unlearned here, is that war is a no-win situation, it’s unsurprising that Muldoon allows himself, in Milton’s phrase, to ‘give the reins to grief’, in the elegy for Warren Zevon, ‘Sillyhow Stride’, at the end of book: ‘you knew the mesotheliomata // on both lungs meant the situation was lose-lose’. Whatever journeys through space and time have been going on in Horse Latitudes, it is always here, with the inevitability of repetition, that they have been taking us: as he puts it in ‘It Is What It Is’, ‘My mother. Shipping out for good. For good this time.’ The collection is haunted by cancer victims: his former lover, Mary Farl Powers, his mother Brigid, the musician Warren Zevon, and his sister Maureen Muldoon, in whose memory the book is dedicated. This is elegiac ground Muldoon has trodden before – in ‘Incantata’, and in ‘Yarrow’ – but here something sounds different. One of the repeated motifs of ‘Sillyhow Stride’ is ‘yeah right’ (‘to enter in these bonds / is to be free, yeah right’). This is a more cynical music than the ‘all would be swept away’ of ‘Yarrow’, and in writing of his sister’s death, Muldoon, far from nipping out of the bathroom window, is extraordinarily present in the poem:

I knelt beside my sister’s bed, Warren, the valleys and the peaks
of the EKGs, the crepusculine X-rays,
the out-of-date blisterpacks
Averno is Louise Glück’s best book in at least ten years, perhaps her best since The Wild Iris (1992). Like almost all her books, it mixes curt fragments of autobiography, apothegmatic claims about disappointment and unfulfillment in human life generally, and analogies from familiar myth: in this case, the myth of Persephone, whose descent into Hades, and consequent winter (Italian ‘averno’), the poet sets against (a) her own midlife fears about death, (b) her thoughts on the tenacious, frightening bonds between mothers and daughters, and (c) the story of a modern girl, an anti-Persephone of sorts, who – through carelessness or arson – burns a wheat field to ash.

These deflated lyric utterances possess the starkness of her other recent books (such as 1999’s Vita Nova) but almost none of their self-pity, and none of their risky, apparently thin consolation. ‘I thought my life was over,’ Vita Nova concluded, ‘then I moved to Cambridge,’ that is, Cambridge, Massachusetts. No wonder Americans pay such high rent to live there.

Such responses, provoked whenever a poet does not quite transform her life into art, should not arise from Averno, which provokes astonishment, and perhaps a little fear, instead. In this book, when a life is over, it is truly over: ‘these things we depend on,’ the first poem says, ‘they
The dedication in Paul Muldoon’s first collection, *New Weather* (1973) reads: ‘for my Fathers and Mothers’. It’s a typically mischievous phrase which acknowledges not only his real father and mother, but also those literary forebears, precursors, mentors, and tutors, who bear some responsibility for the gestation of the poet-Muldoon – Seamus Heaney, the Longleys, Michael Allen most immediately and obviously, not to mention Robert Frost, Louis MacNeice, and others in the literary tradition through which he truffles so productively. On the one hand a gracious tribute, on the other the dedication is also a self-assertion of Muldoon as the enfant terrible who will, with wonderful arrogance, tell ‘new weather’ from ‘broken bones’.

There is a precedent here for Leontia Flynn, and in more ways than one. Flynn’s is one of the most strikingly original and exciting poetic voices to have emerged from Northern Ireland since the extraordinary debut by Muldoon 35 years ago. Like Muldoon, she appeared on the scene in her first collection, *These Days* (2004) as something of, as she puts it in the opening poem ‘Naming It’, a ‘marauding child’ out to discover something new, who might be ‘preachy / with booklearning’ but certainly won’t be preached at, and whose iconoclasm (Alan Gillis has something of this quality too) is refreshing in a Northern Irish

will and inwardness thinned
like a chemical haze over the lettuce fields,

smokes risen from torn-up vineyards,
weary vines heaped for burning…

Doty’s voice – controlled, quietly eloquent, precise – is able to lift the banal into poetry. Rather than speaking directly of his literary relationship with Walt Whitman (as happens in ‘Pipistrelle’ and an ‘Apparition’ poem), the connection is here demonstrated through Doty’s poetic description of a very American landscape. Likewise, in other ‘Apparition’ poems Doty witnesses the ghosts of John Berryman and Alan Dugan, but these are engaging only insofar as the quality of the actual writing, rather than the slightly heavy references. Doty’s description of Alan Dugan’s spectre is brief and powerful: ‘Bitter wind off a metal harbor / and here’s Alan Dugan crossing 15th Street / as if he owns it, sharp new jacket / just the shade of that rifflted steel’.

At such moments the poems stay on the right side of the volume’s self-conscious pursuit, and overall Doty succeeds in mixing the poetic with the meta-poetic. His attention to the electric, sometimes sublime, exchange between language and consciousness is careful, considered and ultimately engaging.

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FRAN BREAERTON

Leontia Flynn, *Drives*

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The dedication in Paul Muldoon’s first collection, *New Weather* (1973) reads: ‘for my Fathers and Mothers’. It’s a typically mischievous phrase which acknowledges not only his real father and mother, but also those literary forebears, precursors, mentors, and tutors, who bear some responsibility for the gestation of the poet-Muldoon – Seamus Heaney, the Longleys, Michael Allen most immediately and obviously, not to mention Robert Frost, Louis MacNeice, and others in the literary tradition through which he truffles so productively. On the one hand a gracious tribute, on the other the dedication is also a self-assertion of Muldoon as the enfant terrible who will, with wonderful arrogance, tell ‘new weather’ from ‘broken bones’.

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poetic tradition at risk of taking itself as seriously as it has been taken by its critics. There is a different kind of risk, therefore, for Flynn in her debut collection too. At first glance, some of the poems seem throw-away, off-hand, brief jottings on the page rather than fully realised poetic achievement. Yet the assurance and skill required to hide those same qualities of assurance and skill is also what gives the ten-line seemingly ephemeral and anecdotal poems scattered across These Days their depth and originality. In a reversal of strategies adopted by one of her immediate precursors Medbh McGuckian, Flynn makes it seem easy, which, for her readers, can also make it that little bit harder to grasp what she is about.

In that sense, her second collection Drives is a more immediately comprehensible achievement, its formal complexities no longer playing hide and seek with the reader, but announcing themselves in full dress. Flynn compulsively writes sonnet after sonnet – sometimes conventional ones, sometimes experimental, and constituting almost half the poems in the book. (It’s a compulsion characteristic of Muldoon too, a third of whose oeuvre to date consists of sonnets and sonnet-sequences.) They are sonnets about mothers and fathers, of the actual and literary kind. ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad’, Larkin (one of Flynn’s early crushes) famously wrote, a comment which is perhaps particularly prescient as regards literary mothers and fathers in the Irish tradition. Flynn is not alone among her peers in exhibiting both an admiration of, and tendency to react against, the celebrated older generations of Northern Irish poets. In her first collection, this manifests itself in the affectionate irreverence of ‘When I was Sixteen I met Seamus Heaney’ (‘I believe’ she concludes the poem, ‘he signed my bus ticket, which I later lost’). There are also some side-swipes at, as well as borrowings from, a literary tradition from Chaucer to Wordsworth, Flynn’s casual allusiveness free of pretension.

In Drives the second stanza of Larkin’s ‘This Be The Verse’ seems to hold good too: ‘But they were fucked up in their turn’. Here are just a few of the figures who drive Flynn’s sonneteering through the book: Charles Baudelaire, Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath. Poetically strong some of them may be; well-adjusted they are not – or certainly not as they appear in these pages. The ‘Drives’ of the title refer to journeys and homecomings; they are also the things which drive us, suicidal or sexual urges, compulsions (like the one to write poems perhaps) not entirely healthy and not always understood. Beckett, Baudelaire, psychoanalysis and mothers offer one variation on this theme; Howard Hughes, his mother, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (and OCD is also a preoccupation of Flynn’s first collection) another. There’s a knowing play on this even in Flynn’s own recurrent use of the sonnet. ‘I just kept repeating them’, she said in an interview recently. ‘I have to stop that now’. Beckett ‘dreams of suffocation, / palpitations, panic attacks’; ‘Olive Schreiner ‘will suffer from asthma’; in Elizabeth Bishop’s art of losing (linked here to Plath’s art of dying) ‘She even loses her breath’; and in ‘Marcel Proust’ a ‘mellancholic asthma’ is linked to the speaker’s anhedonia – all of which obliquely tracks back to ‘Acts of Faith’ and the poet’s 24th birthday in These Days, where her ‘lungs close over’ and her ‘mother brings … Prednisone’.

These are all, in different ways, figures who prove liberating for the poet, (influences also evident in the work of Nick Laird and Alan Gillis), and it’s notable that so many are from the American tradition, an asthmatic and transatlantic breath of fresh air. It seems, too, that the problems they suffered ‘in their turn’ and in some cases the accompanying confessional impulses are what help to unleash Flynn’s own voice. In Drives she treads personal, sometimes painful ground, too astute not to be aware of her own entrapment in an art versus life dilemma, or of her own self-absorption. ‘Personality’ asks what can survive the student knives ‘parting the skin’ on the ‘practice corpse’ of a poem, and the personality which ‘breathes iambically’ at the end ‘love me, love me, love me…’ is reminiscent of the close of Plath’s The Bell Jar where Esther listens to ‘the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am’ (Plath is the single
most recurrent figure in Flynn’s writings to date.) In ‘Robert Lowell’, Flynn writes ‘imagine using those letters in his sonnets? / Using and re-using / the fact of pain – as thought pain were a poem’. But as she writes ‘imagine’, she also imagines, and the poem must of necessity collude in what it seems to decry. Appropriately, ‘Robert Lowell’ is a double sonnet, the first, on the whole, conventionally Shakespearean, the second a mirror image, a mimicking of its own subject. Rhymed abcd abcd efg efg the poem, like the poet, gets two goes at it, ‘revising and revising…the living details of a living life’; ‘story’ and ‘art’ chime with ‘journey’ and ‘heart’.

Drives, as we might expect from its title, is a book of journeys. Two early poems, ‘Belfast’ and ‘Leaving Belfast’ are points of departure for a whistlestop tour of ‘budget destination[s]’ (The Human Fish’); we are whisked through ‘Monaco’, ‘Barcelona’, ‘Rome’, Copenhagen, ‘Paris’, ‘Berlin’, ‘LA’, ‘Washington’, ‘New York’. There’s a mini-parable here for Flynn’s reaching out from her home ground (the MacNeicean debt acknowledged in ‘Belfast’) to the big wide world. Fortunately, for those perhaps weary of poets journeying to interesting places for interesting cross-cultural encounters resulting (theoretically at least) in interesting poems, these individualist and quirky meanderings are short, sharp, perceptive and self-aware. Yet although they proliferate, the travel poems are not where the real discoveries of this book are found. Rather, the journey underlying the book’s development is a more personal and painful one relating to the poet’s father. As the pages of poems accumulate, they stand in contrast to the gradual erosion of her father’s memory in ‘A Head for Figures’:

And where have they gone, the rest of those rustling facts?
They have fallen from his head like cerements.
They have slipped through his fingers,
they have slipped from his big kind hands.

In effect, as the ‘rustling facts’ slip away from her father, Flynn finds her own ‘art of losing’. It has its clever intertextualities, its linguistic and formal sleights-of-hand, but Drives goes beyond its own self-consciousness to probe the nature of loss and gain, learning and unlearning. What might seem like theoretical issues and questions about language and ‘personality’ are also the private emotional core of the book. In the sestina ‘Drive’, the word ‘sign’ is progressively evacuated of meaning through its end-line repetitions as words become, for her father: ‘empty signs, / now one name means as little as another’. In ‘Our Fathers’, signs are ‘braille / or a trail // of breadcrumbs / or rosary beads … by which … we seek to delay / them, our fathers’:

thinking – heh heh – if we can trap
them,
then we can keep
them,

and if we can keep them

we’ll keep them … forever!

But the signs don’t work, the words themselves can’t contain meaning, and the father figure slips through the lines of the poem. This art of losing is hard to master; and the delicate, elusive simplicity of these lines captures what it also lets go. If Flynn is wrong-footed by her father’s illness, attempting the impossible, she doesn’t put a foot wrong on the page:

But my father
my father
Alice Oswald’s previous books have demonstrated her ability to craft poems which focus intently on the rural landscape. She works in the shadow of precursors such as Hughes and Heaney, yet with an almost dogged aversion to any direct play with their work. *Weeds and Wild Flowers* meets the expectations of her style, although it aims for a broader (and perhaps younger) audience. Oswald is one of few British poets writing today whose work continues to show a strong grasp of poetic fundamentals: idea, image, form, and language. This book’s drawbacks primarily relate to weaknesses and excesses of language. On balance, however, this is a fine book that gives the reader more of what they could expect from Alice Oswald based on her past work.

Each of the book’s 24 poems personifies a flower or weed native to the southwest of England. Oswald personifies eight as male, one of indeterminate gender (but written in the first person), and the rest as female. Oswald’s characters (I will refer to them as characters to avoid the lumbering repetition of ‘personifications’) read like an eighteenth-century chapbook of marginal denizens of rural England, a list that has not changed much since Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, and the first volumes of John Clare. Wordsworth’s rural types live on in the shadows of Oswald’s characters:

my father holds open
the door of himself
and lets his old ghost
pass through

before him
(‘after you, after you’
he mouths): his guest,
– his old self – stealth

-ily tip
-toeing out (Shhh)…