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God's chatter

by [William Logan](#)

On Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*, Mark Strand's *Man and Camel*, A. R. Ammons's *Ommateum*, with *Doxology*, Louise Glück's *Firstborn*, and Franz Wright's *God's Silence*.

Natasha Trethewey's well-mannered, well-meaning poems are as confused about race as the rest of us. The daughter of a black mother and white father, she was raised in the deep South of the Sixties, when the civil rights acts had still not penetrated the backwaters of her state. (Some would say that in large swatches of the South they haven't penetrated yet.) Under the miscegenation laws, her parents' marriage was illegal. In *Native Guard*, she has wrapped a memoir of her childhood around Civil War history—near her hometown, miles off the coast, former slaves and free men-of-color mustered into the Union army stood guard over Confederate POWs at a ramshackle island fort.^[1] A soldier notes in his diary:

Truth be told, I do not want to forget
anything of my former life: the landscape's
song of bondage—dirge in the river's throat
where it churns into the Gulf, wind in trees
choked with vines.

Soldiers don't write this way, but poets do. The *landscape's song of bondage*, the *dirge in the river's throat*—this ex-slave's fancy phrase-making troubles that “Truth be told,” because every scrap of art here makes the past a lie. There *were* literate slaves, all too few, and perhaps none among the lowly soldiers serving at the sandy, fly-ridden prison near Fort Massachusetts. (The major of the regiment, however, a slave-owning Creole, spoke five languages and was the highest-ranking black officer in the Union army.) To recreate a voice rendered mute by history, Trethewey has sometimes borrowed from a white colonel's memoir to make do. Putting the words of an educated white into the mouth of a freed slave isn't so bad; but, when Trethewey is forced to choose between the pretty and the profane, the pretty wins every time. She's an aesthete in wolf's clothing.

Trethewey's last book, *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), was a portrait of a prostitute in Storyville, the red-light district of turn-of-the-century New Orleans where E. J. Bellocq took his haunting glass-plates of local whores, who looked at times surprisingly genteel. The poems invent a past re-imagined through the wishful thinking of the present, in that theme park of the oppressed designed by modern academics. Forty-five years ago, an amateur historian who took the trouble to record Storyville's surviving denizens and habitués found many prostitutes still alive—a couple of the transcripts are as brilliantly foul-mouthed as any episode of *Deadwood*. It's a long way from there to Trethewey's prim, rose-colored-glasses whore who, however borne down, seems sad in the

pluckiest possible way.

As soon as you know the premises of Trethewey's poems, you know everything: they're the architecture of their own prejudices. Though fond of form, she fudges any restrictions that prove inconvenient, so we get faux villanelles, quasi-sonnets, and lots of lines half-ripened into pentameter—most poems end up in professional but uninspired free verse. Trethewey wears the past like a diamond brooch. She writes of her parents with no fury or sympathy or even regret, just the blank courtesy of a barista at Starbucks. You read the tales of prostitution and slavery without feeling a thing—the slaves might just as well be dressed by Edith Head, with a score by Max Steiner swelling gloriously over a Technicolor sunset. Trethewey's moral sunniness has all the conviction of Scarlett O'Hara gushing, "As Gawd is mah witness, I'll nevah be hungry agai-yun."

Since the poems know where they're going long before they get there, it's a shock when one takes a wrong turn. As a girl, bringing daffodils to her mother, Trethewey sees in them something of herself ("each blossom a head lifted up// toward praise"):

I knew nothing
of Narcissus or the daffodils' short spring—

when the wind blew—a whisper, treacherous,
from the sill. *Be taken with yourself,*

they said to me; *Die early,* to my mother.

Such lines face the guilt other poems resist, though there are secrets they can't confess (they're cagiest about a stepfather's violence). Soon it's back to a tone-deaf blues ("When the preacher called out I held up my hand;/ When he called for a witness I raised my hand—/ *Death stops the body's work; the soul's a journeyman*") or four photographs of the South tortured into poems, each duller than the last. The poems move excruciatingly slowly, their symbols marked like road signs—a landscape is never just a landscape, it's the "buried/ terrain of the past"; and, as for history, the "ghost of history lies down beside me, // rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm."

You're surprised *Native Guard* doesn't contain a tourist's guide to the symbols, to make sure the reader knows where to look. The book does come with notes, as if mounting every epigraph like a dead bug and pointing out each historical source made the poems any the livelier. Trethewey so wants to be praised, she has injected these poems with the formaldehyde of style.

Mark Strand's louche charm and languid good manners (he's as debonaire as Cary Grant in a tux) let him treat weighty matters as if they were light as feathers, and feathery matters as if they weighed out as lead. His teasing, self-mocking parables, so even-tempered a flame thrower couldn't ruffle their composure, have made many readers wonder if he can take anything seriously. The new poems in *Man and Camel* don't try very hard to be exceptions.[\[2\]](#)

I am not thinking of Death, but Death is thinking of me.
He leans back in his chair, rubs his hands, strokes
His beard, and says, "I'm thinking of Strand, I'm thinking
That one of these days I'll be out back, swinging my scythe
Or holding my hourglass up to the moon, and Strand will appear
In a jacket and tie, and together under the boulevards'
Leafless trees we'll stroll into the city of souls."

There's much to be said for treating even Death with devil-may-care carelessness; but critics have long had trouble dividing the absurdist Strand, the one who could sell Dada to Eskimos, from the moody, philosophical poet who has occasionally made an appearance through this long and desultory career. Even Strand has trouble telling them apart.

The eerie fables and quirky anecdotes in *Reasons for Moving* (1968) and *Darker* (1970) were told with a minimum of detail and all the affect of a dry martini. They were much imitated in their day (sometimes they even imitated themselves), but the longer and more pretentious poems that followed in *The Story of Our Lives* (1973) were more tedious to read than they must have been to write. Strand's reputation never quite recovered, and he was very quickly promoted to that Grand Old Man status in which poets win awards for books not half as good as ones ignored when they were Sweet Young Things.

Had Sylvia Plath never written a line, Strand would have been the most gifted American poet born in the Thirties; and his darkly cynical poems sometimes sound like a posthumous version of hers, what she might have written after laying waste to everything in sight. Shorn of metaphors and similes, prosaic as a paper bag, Strand's poems come long after an apocalypse no one can quite remember.

Man and Camel seems at first to have been written by the Strand whose every poem is a variation of a joke about a man walking into a bar with a parrot on his shoulder. A man begins to act like a horse, but he can't fool real horses ("they might have known me/ in another life—the one in which I was a poet./ They might have even read my poems"). A man finds he can walk into fires and emerge unscathed. A man on a porch sees a man and a camel stroll by. The man and animal wander up the street and out of town, singing a haunting song, then return to the man on the porch. "You ruined it," they say. "You ruined it forever." It's amusing, a little, this thinly disguised revenge on people who want something from art. Strand is often most heavy-handed when he's writing about nothing at all.

It's a surprise, then, after so many poems half-thought and half-baked, to find a group written in the same style but violently sad and unappeasable.

I still recall that moment of looking up
and seeing the woman stare past me
into a place I could only imagine,
and each time it is with a pang,
as if just then I were stepping
from the depths of the mirror
into that white room, breathless and eager,
only to discover too late
that she is not there.

The poet seems to have woken to some arctic world of Schopenhauerian suffering. These poems rely too heavily on props left over from the 1970s—*night* and *moon* and *stars*, all available by mail order. You're never sure this more solemn poet isn't going to tie your shoelaces together when you're distracted.

Worse, the book closes with an overwrought sequence, "Poem after the Seven Last Words" (the last words of Christ), commissioned to be read between movements of a Haydn string quartet (or, as the proofs have it, "Hayden"). Religious poetry is not the ironist's *métier*, because it removes his chief weapon: "you/ shall be with me in paradise, in the single season of being,/ in the place of forever, you shall find yourself"—who knew that Christ had mastered, not just the pop-psych jargon of "finding yourself," but the run-on sentence? Still, it's good to be reminded that sometimes, when this

poet balances doubt against absurdity, doubt still triumphs.

In 1955, a sales executive for a medical glassware firm paid a notorious vanity press to publish his first book of poems. The book sold sixteen copies (royalties amounted to “four four-cent stamps,” the poet joked), other copies being palmed off on business cronies by the poet’s father-in-law. Exactly a century before, Walt Whitman had paid the printer’s bill for *Leaves of Grass* out of his own pocket. The young glassware man, A. R. Ammons, went on to win two National Book Awards and the Bollingen Prize. The reissue of his rare first book, *Ommateum, with Doxology*, completes the barrel-scraping that followed his death five years ago.[\[3\]](#)

Ammons was always an oddball in American poetry, producing lyric reflections and rambling meditations on nature, philosophy, science, the verse stumbling along as if it couldn’t quite catch up. He wrote in inspired fits, good and bad indifferently jumbled together, and is perhaps most famous for *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965), composed upon an adding-machine tape, which made the lines short and the poem nearly endless (you wonder if he took the tape on his way out the door of the glassware business). A new preface by Roger Gilbert proposes that, after *Leaves of Grass*, *Ommateum* may be the “most important self-published book of American poetry”; but it must compete with first books by, among others, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Ezra Pound.

If *Ommateum* was the “first expression of a mature, startlingly original artist,” as Gilbert believes, it would have taken a crystal ball to tell. The poems are fervent and indistinct, not at all like the house style of the Fifties, but not very original. The best are faded washes of Pound in high romantic mode, and indeed many use as their protagonist a heroic figure named Ezra, half prophet and half wandering Ishmael: poems have been set in Sumer, as well as at a crucifixion, in a crusade, and during a medieval plague. For all his heroic fortitudes and heroic claptrap, the hero seems less Gilgamesh than Gumby.

The worst poems are impossibly dotty, so awful you wonder what the author ever saw in them:

Silent as light in dismal transit
through the void, I, evanescent,
sibilant among my parts,
fearing the eclipse of a possible glance
and not glancing, shut-eyed,
crouch froglike upon my brain.

Even if you paid through the nose to get a vanity press to publish this, you’d have to bribe the typesetter not to cut his own throat.

One scholar has suggested that *Ommateum* is an example of “outsider art”— the folk art, often touching and strange, sometimes quite mad, of uneducated naïfs and mental patients. Ammons was a thoroughly educated naval veteran (he studied for an MA in English at Berkeley), not some hick with a charred twig and a slab of bark; yet the implicit comparison to Whitman, another outsider, has curious merit. Ammons and Whitman both pretended to be more naive than they were (Whitman was self-educated and a newspaper editor, not the slouch-hatted bumpkin of *Leaves of Grass*), and each violated the poetic constraints of his day. We look back at Whitman and see his peers writing third-rate Keats; we look at Ammons and see his peers writing third-rate Eliot and Pound—yet *Leaves of Grass* is a work of genius, and *Ommateum* a collection of thoughtless witterings:

My dice are crystal inlaid with gold
and possess
spatial symmetry

about their centers and
mechanical symmetry and
are of uniform density
and all surfaces have equal
coefficients of friction for

my dice are not loaded
Thy will be done
whether dog or Aphrodite.

The young poet eventually learned how to make the short line bear more weight (here the lines stutter with ecstasy: “Come word/ I said/ azalea word/ gel precipitate/ while I/ the primitive spindle ...”). Ammons the woodsman and natural philosopher is occasionally on display (“The grasses heading barbed tufts/ airy panicles and purple spikes”), but the poems celebrating the cornucopia of the earth’s business lie a good distance in the future.

Ammons took the long way around to become a poet. *Ommateum* disappeared without notice (apart from one dismal review in *Poetry*), and it was eight years before he published another book. He was lucky this volume became so rare (God help him, he thought it might have been his best), because for a long while the poems were hidden from sight. This reissue commemorates the ambitions of that young ampoule and urine-bottle salesman. The only way Ammons could have improved *Ommateum* would have been to burn it.

Many poets never live down their first books (a few find they cannot live up to them); but sometimes later books take such a radical turn, the first is forgotten or dismissed as youthful folly (Frost’s agreeable and slight *A Boy’s Will* was soon overwhelmed by the genius of *North of Boston*). Sometimes in this chronicle I will look back at neglected books, even books that might have to be rescued from the author’s distaste. Think of Louise Glück’s *Firstborn* (1968).^[4] The original dust jacket referred to her as “Miss Glück,” an address that sounds almost Victorian now—you’re surprised she wasn’t called a poetess. When reprinted in the Eighties, this debut was practically orphaned by its author, who felt only “embarrassed tenderness” toward it.

The disconcerting, morbid psychology of *Firstborn* seems heavily marked by the influence of Sylvia Plath (*Ariel* had appeared only three years before). The younger poet’s lines are seductive as a tango, as she tries to shake off all the older poet knew (the debts accrued as inspiration were paid in resistance). Where Plath was a poet of melodrama and rude outburst, Glück is all pinched reserve (she speaks like Atropos, every sentence cut short), the poems mere shards and shattered glass. She watches a family on a train:

the kid
Got his head between his mama’s legs and slept. The poison
That replaces air took over.
And they sat—as though paralysis preceding death
Had nailed them there. The track bent south.
I saw her pulsing crotch ... the lice rooted in that baby’s hair.

How Freud would have loved the violence of her seeing! Brute but matter-of-fact, the lines have the rhythm of complaint but not concession; they’re almost sorry for the world they have to record. The pleasure the poet takes in the senses lies partly in the gratification of disgust—Sharon Olds and C. K. Williams might have learned at her feet.

In *Firstborn*, everything happens for the observer’s eye (urgent as tabloid headlines, the poems are

cast all too frequently in the present tense). Though later books reconvened Glück's life as myth, here she lives in the world of cars and soup cans, the world of the everyday. The world of boys.

Requiring something lovely on his arm
Took me to Stamford, Connecticut, a quasi-farm,
His family's; later picking up the mammoth
Girlfriend of Charlie, meanwhile trying to pawn me off
On some third guy also up for the weekend.
But Saturday we still were paired; spent
It sprawled across that sprawling acreage
Until the grass grew limp
With damp. Like me. Johnston-baby, I can still see
The pelted clover, burrs' prickle fur and gorged
Pastures spewing infinite tiny bells. You pimp.

This is a Glück you recognize and a Glück you don't, not quite. The rhymes that button up these poems—rhymes she soon abandoned—have been lost in the avalanche of enjambment. The economy becomes a declaration of pain, with nothing left beneath terseness except despair. Glück's later poems in *The House on Marshland* (1975) and *Descending Figure* (1980) turn woozy and narcotic, living in the bedclothes of dreams and myths, drawn to female sufferers like Joan of Arc and Abishag. The rough edges have been planed off, the anxieties battened into place—self-consciousness has set in.

There are lines in *Firstborn* like shavings from Plath's workshop floor (the "click,/ Click of his brain's whirling empty spindle," the "moon as round as aspirin"), but Glück has a dour comedy of her own: "I watch the lone onion/ Floating like Ophelia, caked with grease." Like Dickinson, she's a flawed solitaire sometimes grimly amused by herself. The poems are not the practiced, French-polished productions of a professional—there's raw nerve in their claustrophobic interiors. Only one or two of these apprentice pieces have the shimmer of lasting work, but all are triumphant—even gloating—in their losses.

Fish bones walked the waves off Hatteras.
And there were other signs
That Death wooed us, by water, wooed us
By land: among the pines
An uncurled cottonmouth that rolled on moss
Reared in the polluted air.
Birth, not death, is the hard loss.
I know. I also left a skin there.

She must be one of the few poets to imitate "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and live to tell about it.

Though Glück never formally entered college, she attended a few courses at Columbia and Sarah Lawrence (Hart Crane's father invented Lifesaver mints, Glück's the X-Acto knife)—her career is that of an outsider looking in, while the poems reveal someone trapped in a body looking out. Why return to this book almost forty years later? Not just to examine how much the poet left behind, but to note how much still seems fresh and unexhausted. In her first book, Glück had already reached the limits of her skin. The poet she became had to be different—a metamorphosis few poets have managed with as much grace, or success. Quarrelsome though I have often been about her later work, she has earned my admiration for the way she has wrestled with what might be called the

music of a career—with being a poet over time.

The potential market for poetry action-figures must be enormous, so why not start with that holy terror, Franz Wright? Every figure must come with accessories: in Wright's case, one set for before rehab (bottle of whiskey, hypodermic, glassine envelopes), one for after (twelve-step pamphlet, Good News Bible). Wright has never had to choose between perfection of the work and of the life, the life is already so imperfect. But, like many ex-drunks and ex-junkies, he can't let you forget his glory days. He never lets himself forget, either—he revels in old sins while begging praise for new virtues. (Some sinners end up holier than thou, some druggier than thou, though a few want desperately to be both.)

God's Silence lives in the suffering of forgiveness (Wright seems stuck on step five of the famous twelve: he can't forgive himself and sometimes can't forgive God), but it's hard to tell when the suffering stops and the wallowing begins. [5] The poetry is romantic in all the wrong ways—it's the work of Peck's Bad Boy gone straight, of Byron in a dog collar, the pages stained with self-loathing piety. Wright's relation to his God is that of whining schoolboy to distant headmaster, a headmaster who refuses to speak to him.

I am very afraid but still know You
are taking care of me, and even live in hope
You will one day see fit to put into my mouth
words that will explain it all, floating before me in letters

of fire.

The religious poems here—delivered in spews of cringing self-abasement—are the more moving for being so unconvincing. (Like many solipsists, Wright can't relate to others without sentimentalizing them; and that includes God, the most forbidding of father figures.) Few poets since Plath have dissected themselves so publicly for their art (I'm not even going to suggest the accessories required by the Plath action-figure) and Wright is the last and most frustrated of confessionals. He has few poetic gifts beyond displaying his wounds in public; but the breast-beating apologias are cast in language so clumsy and affected, they seem a lie. Has any poet ever wanted so badly to be sincere, or failed so miserably?

One of the few pleasures of writing
is the thought of one's book in the hands of a kindhearted
intelligent person somewhere. I can't remember what the others are right now.
I just noticed that it is my own private

National I Hate Myself and Want to Die Day.

I hope I'm not the only reader who finds this both hilarious and insufferable. If I were a "kindhearted / intelligent person," I'd put my head down and run like blazes.

Wright's father, the much loved and much honored poet James Wright (they are the first father and son to win Pulitzer Prizes in poetry), was a hard act to follow—and I say that despite never having been a fan. He comes in for abuse here, but he was a poet of more dignity and modest seriousness than his son. Indeed, the son's poetry contains the negative virtues of the father's: brutish where his

father's affected a plain elegance, sniveling where his father's remained sensitive, ordinary where his father's could be haunting.

Franz Wright longs for the annihilations of faith (he writes so many poems about a blinding light, I wanted to buy stock in Sylvania; then I realized he meant the light of God); but he doesn't have a vocabulary sophisticated enough to render them. (Most poets want to write about sinners, few about saints, because sinners are better box office—they make everyone else feel virtuous.) Wright drops so eagerly into quasi-religious blather ("I cling to the Before/ The spirit face/ behind the face/ yearning for light/ the water and the light/ And I am flowing back to the Before"), you'd think he was angling for an appearance on *The 700 Club*. His faith barely conceals the rage beneath:

Poem is not composed in states of exaltation: most that are, in fact, result in total doggerel and, frankly, insufferable puke.

The peculiar mixture of pride and self-loathing makes these poems rude, unlovely things, like papier-mâché sculptures by a roomful of fifth-graders. Wright's readers seem fascinated by a man obviously held together, like his poems, with spit and glue. Beyond the gruesome sentiment, the ranting and raving, the hunger for praise no Pulitzer could satisfy (it would take nine yards of cement to ruin the appetite of someone who feels so unloved), lies a damaged soul with wry self-knowledge: "Nobody has called for some time. / (I was always the death of the party.)" I wish Wright could laugh at himself more often, because when his morose, tortured poems stop asking for sympathy they start demanding pity; and then they want all the money in your wallet.

Set track 10 80 as the muses want to lay a terrible curse upon a child. They give him a bat's ears, a code-breaker's eye, the ability to juggle words like flaming torches; then they say, "You will have all the gifts a poet desires, but nothing whatever to write about." Paul Muldoon's early poems were quirky and modest, and it's hard to tell exactly when he went beyond baroque. What was manner became mannerism—he turned into one of those Las Vegas interior decorators whose motto is "If it doesn't move, gild it!" A poet, as he ages, can become so secure in his tendencies he can't remember when he didn't have tendencies at all. The Muldoon of thirty years ago might shake his head in bewilderment at the poems in *Horse Latitudes*:[\[6\]](#)

Not the day-old cheep of a smoke detector on the blink
in what used to be the root cellar,
or the hush-hush of all those drowsy syrups
against their stoppers

in the apothecary chest
at the far end of your grandmother's attic,
not the "my sweet, my sweet"
of ice branch frigging ice branch,

nor the jinkle-jink
of your great-grandfather, the bank teller
who kept six shots of medicinal (he called it "therap-
utraquist") whiskey like six stacks of coppers ...

Here are the cheerfully swollen vocabulary, the onomatopoeia ("jinkle-jink"), the queerly fabricated words ("therap-/ *utraquist*") of late Muldoon. Should you wonder why the little soufflé of "therap*utraquist*" has been divided like East and West Berlin, you only have to look at the end words—alternate stanzas rhyme with each other. (Muldoon's so addicted to rhymes, for a good one

he'd sacrifice his firstborn son.)

This is the sort of tour de force Muldoon lives for; but after you read nineteen sonnets, each named for a battle beginning with the letter *B* (yet pointedly not Baghdad, though the armored cavalry of Gulf War II forms a counterpoint to the horses of earlier wars), or the villanelle, or the double villanelle, or the sestina, or the pantoum, or the ninety haiku—most of these forms with his own madcap stamp upon them—you wonder if there was a point. There were other poets like this once, and they wrote in Latin two thousand years ago and were ridiculed as Alexandrians. Muldoon never runs out of things to say, only things worth saying.

There's nothing natural about his poems now—they're full of artificial sweeteners, artificial colors, and probably regulated by the FDA. Poem after poem fires off words with such abandon they're noisier than Phil Spector's Wall of Sound (if at fifty-five you title a book *Horse Latitudes*, write a terrible set of couplets about Bob Dylan, and start your own rock band, people will wonder if you're having a midlife crisis). Muldoon's a Wittgenstein disciple who believes the world is everything that is the case, and he can't bear to leave anything out: you can find Gene Chandler, stilettos, spivs with shivs, tweenie girls, and anti-Castro Cubans, all within half a dozen lines. He has a riddle about *griddle* that takes thirty lines (if you haven't gotten the hint, Muldoon's favorite rhea is logorrhea—or is that his favorite logo?). Like God, he loves all things equally and not wisely but too well; in the democracy of such love lies tedium.

What happens if you patiently untangle the spells of this sorcerer? (It helps to have some hepcat up on the latest lingo as well as a fat dictionary.) "The Old Country" seems composed of nothing but frothy contrivance:

Every flash was a flash in the pan
and every border a herbaceous border
unless it happened to be *an*
herbaceous border as observed by the *Recorder*

or recorded by the *Observer*.
Every widdie stemmed from a willow bole.
Every fervor was a religious fervor.

This rings its changes all the way through a crown of sonnets; yet, if you examine every line, you see the terrible small-mindedness of a town where everyone watches everyone else, noting his pronunciation and the newspaper he takes. When you penetrate the asphalt of these poems, you may find a nugget of gold; but you need a jackhammer to do so.

Becalmed in the horse latitudes that afflict most writers, Muldoon will pitch logic, truth, beauty, and meaning overboard, just to save the cheep-cheep of that smoke detector. A very few poems, like "The Treaty" and "Eggs," though dressed in the bling-bling of his later work, return him to the Ireland before and during the Troubles (he's now an American citizen and a professor at Princeton). Something has been gained, a lot of it 24-carat, but much has been lost as well.

Notes

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1. *Native Guard*, by Natasha Trethewey; Houghton Mifflin, 51 pages, \$22. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Man and Camel*, by Mark Strand; Alfred A. Knopf, 55 pages, \$24. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. *Ommateum, with Doxology*, by A. R. Ammons; W. W. Norton, 85 pages, \$23.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
4. *Firstborn*, by Louise Glück; New American Library, 55 pages, \$4 [out of print], reprinted in *The First Four Books of Poems*, Ecco, 217 pages, \$15. [Go back to the text.](#)

5. *God's Silence*, by Franz Wright; Alfred A. Knopf, 146 pages, \$24. [Go back to the text.](#)
6. *Horse Latitudes*, by Paul Muldoon; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 107 pages, \$22. [Go back to the text.](#)

William Logan will have a volume of early selected poems out in the spring.

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