

# Long Paddock

**JOHN WATSON**

## *Ripple on Lines of Paul Muldoon*

*You can't make bricks without the straw  
That breaks the camel's back.*

Already by the time he has crossed  
The maize labyrinth (the field, the field  
Crossed with paths!) he has decided  
To make his variations far-ranging.

Who is this "he", this eponymous,  
Anonymous, monogamous observer  
Who wanders all too frequently into poetry?  
It is difficult to be more specific than to say  
That he is a thoroughly nice person, really.

He is related by marriage to that "you".

And someone has to do it! Someone has  
To bundle up these sticks (these lines!)  
And he just happens to be standing about  
Like a spare prick at a wedding.

He is, in short, one of any number  
Of means to an end, that end being to outstrip  
The gravitation of the beginning (the theme!)  
And get on like a house on fire.

The water spume, the double helix,  
The air column, ice sculpture, glare in the landscape,  
All these singularities help him regain his theme:

You can't make an omelette  
Without breaking eggs,  
All of them in one basket.

And if the full variability, the full  
Valency of events is to be believed  
You can't break an egg without making

At the very least an omelette and quite possibly  
An impressive upside down curd cake.

And if you're a woman of reproductive inclination  
And perhaps nervous in the cathedral of the kitchen,  
You can't make an egg  
Without breaking bread or a china cup handle  
Or even the occasional omelette.

But you can't make bricks without the straw  
That breaks the camel's back  
That passes through the eye of the needle.

A bird sang just long enough  
For it to articulate with good cheer  
*You can't. You can't. You can't.*

That wren may actually have witnessed the camel  
Disappearing through the eye of the needle  
Which it had found in a haystack.

It may have wished to confirm -

You can't make bricks without the straw  
That breaks the camel's back  
As it passed through the eye of a needle  
It had found in a haystack  
Made while the sun shines  
Under which there is nothing new.

And now to the aetiologies,

The notes in everyone's eyes, true grit:

The bricks are made in the sun in a courtyard;  
The straw which is so vital to the process  
Is piled against the shed. Cockerels

Nest in it. They cross and recross the road  
Where a horse is repeatedly led to water  
And a camel staggers under the load

Of fardels, circumstance, straws in the wind.  
It narrowly avoids the crisis by sloughing off  
One straw as it passes through the needle.

Monsieur Monet : Eh bien!  
Since it is not given to us  
To step twice into the same haystack

I present for your consideration  
Several haystacks separated only by hours  
One of which may or may not  
Hide a needle, and - incidentally -

Plying one or other of them (these needles!)  
A seamstress in a floral dress  
Intent on placing a stitch in time,  
And a camel, bent under its straw,  
And the splash of a rider  
Changing horses in midstream.

Outside the barn where a few straws  
Are showing which way the wind is blowing,  
Someone is putting the cart before the horse  
While another is shutting the stable door  
After the horse has bolted.

### *Positive Incapability*

I'm trying all the time  
To push ahead uphill this heavy stone  
Of possible ideas.

*Windshadow on the river braids*  
Is not enough.  
*The tidal shoals in sandstone clefts*  
Are not enough  
To float the stone free with the tide.

A sense of place alone is not enough  
To make the stone unfold  
Like paper flowers in water.

The obdurate inertia of ideas  
Cannot be overcome and made to fly  
By force alone.

Can Sisyphus be reading as he climbs?

What follows is a travesty: some lines  
From Nabokov's *Speak Memory*  
Iambically translated as emblem for  
The artifice which cannot by itself  
Breathe life into ideas by will alone.

Dying in St Petersburg in bed

His half-deluded grandfather,  
Half-conscious, had convinced himself  
He could and would survive  
If he remained on Mediterranean shores.  
Nabokov's mother camouflaged his room  
To simulate his favourite room in Nice.

With furniture rushed back by courier  
And sheaves of flowers equally correct,  
The wall outside his window painted white.  
That Riviera white. Perhaps convinced,  
While Russian birches souged just out of sight,  
He died enswathed in artifice.

This is an emblem for forced lines which seek  
But lack at last that transformative grace  
With which they might take flight  
— Or flow uphill.

And incidentally that painted wall  
Suggests O'Henry's tale,  
*The Last Leaf*. There a similar device  
Allows a convalescent at the pane  
To cling to one last clinging, painted leaf.

*The light is water-skiing at first glance,  
Then suddenly the river is deserted.*

And here again is proof  
That Place alone, while willing us  
To think it all-embracing,  
Cannot soar and cannot even move.

*Some birds fly in to fill the void  
But cannot bring with them sufficient narrative.*

Let us carefully expose  
The text which pushes on by artifice  
Until at last it has no reader left.  
How is this  
Unlike the tree fall unheard in the forest?

Or Sisyphus asleep  
In equilibrium against the stone?