

THE WOMAN WHO WORKED WITH CHALLENGING HORSES

Coal-black and seventeen hands tall,
the Arabian is impressive by any standards.
He is all fire; frantic and furious.
She is cool, midnight and starless.
If one was asked to describe her after
a meeting, they would find it difficult.
He paws the ground, eyes wild.
She seems to float, her movements spare.
As if unaware of each other,
they edge together all the same.

The woman: calm, unconcerned.
The horse: trembling, cautious but curious.
He walks unevenly, side-stepping, towards the rail.
She leans against it, trails her hand
along the top, nonchalant, then,
raises her eyes, and gazes deliberately
into the animal's, holds his glance as long
as he'll let her before, confused, he snorts
but doesn't buck, doesn't pull back.

Simply lowers his head momentarily,
before pushing his velvet-soft muzzle
to her hand, brushes it softly, once, then again.
She moves her head closer to the fence.
Close enough for the horse to reach her face,
and edging forward, inch by inch,
he finally lays his great head against hers,
lets her stroke his solid neck, murmur to him.

She calms him, soothes him, soothes, soothes.
She begins to breathe in time with the horse.
Soon his heart-rate is matching hers,
lowering his anxiety considerably.
She asks nothing more of him than that.
He becomes calm -- just settles.
It is what he wishes for himself if only
he knew it, but it doesn't matter, it's enough
she knows it, and, can help him get there.
Now.
And again.

Steeped with the Violence of Horses (from Chthonic by John James)

THE EQUINE FAREWELL

"We kept him until he died...and sat with him during the long last minutes when a horse comes closest to seeming human." C.J.Mullen

Crawling to the window, I know:
this is clear, everything about this is clear –
it doesn't matter how weary I am,
I know, finally, I am doing the right thing

Who knew horses grieved?
I watch Luna try to hook her hangnail
newness and climb the horizon
and notice Lady Ann—your best friend,
if horses can be said to have best friends—
has laid herself down near you and rested
her head against your neck.
I wonder when she did that –
it must've been while I nodded off.

My love and I are taking turns observing
our other horses as they say goodbye to you,
grabbing sleep when we can.
The vet suggested we let you succumb
in the paddock, just go down softly, whenever
the sedative took effect, then mentioned
this other possibility.

In the stable, grief swallowed me
before you were even dead.
I saw concern written large on the vet's face,
and my love's. Shock, too probably.
You were so healthy, never even sick,
and now, you were dying?
I hardly knew what to do with myself.
Glory, you were my go-to everything:
confidante, therapist, joy-of-my-life.
What would I do without you?
How did you get ill so quickly?
I couldn't believe there was nothing
to be done to help you.

However fanciful it sounded to let
the other horses say goodbye to you,
it made your passing a gentler thing.
You knelt under the sugar maple halfway

down the paddock fence – a good place
for us to watch you from the house.

Bless you for not keeling over
the way some horses have.
As if sensing you were about to pass out,
you knelt, then lay down on your side,
the way you would if you were foaling;
I hope you didn't think that was the case.

As your great liquid eyes closed,
I went out to sit with you, to stroke your neck,
and talk to you until you breathed no more.
“Lay me in the field with all the fallen horses”¹
ran through my mind, as tears dripped
off my chin and plinked onto your shiny coat.

I wondered at the irony of how well you looked
when you had a disease that was killing you –
and right then, I noticed you were no longer
breathing. I sobbed for you, but mostly I sobbed for me.
Silly, I know, but I pulled your small barn blanket
over you as if to keep you warm – the way one does.

Glory-B – the next two days and nights, your friends,
our other horses paid homage to you in ways we could
never have imagined; we were privileged to witness
the way horses grieve, especially a beloved friend

Without exception, they all sniffed you from head
to tail and more than once; they nudged you repeatedly
as if they could make you get up – even gently pawed
at you at first as if to say, “get up, get up” not quite
ready to believe you were really gone. I knew how
they felt. It was amazing to see the stallions especially,
be gentle with each other and take turns going up to
you – the blacks are not usually that kind or considerate.

The only conflict I noticed was when one of the youngsters,
—the brown thoroughbred already sold but still with us—
he got a little rough with his investigation – nudged you
too hard or pawed too vigorously; his father neighed at him.
It was the only vocal noise of the night and quite remarkable.

¹ James, John. “Years I've Slept Right Through.” *Chthonic*, CutBank Books, 2014, pp. 51-51.

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When most of them first went up to you, after sniffing all over,
they would race around you in a circle, then stop and,
throw their head back and open wide their lips but not
their teeth – they looked so much like wolves, but no
sound escaped them, not a whisper ...eerie, but touching too.

It took the horses three days and two nights
to grieve you, but when the third night was rolling in,
I knew we needed to decide on a final place for you,
Glory Be – it was time- I was ready.

I DREAMED THE LAKE AND YOU

"Horses lend us the wings we lack." Pam Brown

In the lake that I count on to be
my everything, before the bow
of my scarlet canoe, you rise up
on the back of your Mustang,
like a mirage. I try blinking
you away and for seconds
you disappear - as ghostly
as the geisha in mama's good
china set - do you remember her?

The way she only appears
in certain types of light –
faint but perfect in every detail, she is.
But you - you are yourself only not,
and your horse, your beautiful
odd horse – he's there too though
you are both also the lake, fully water.

And I think I see you like cut-out dolls
as you rise up staring through me,
then turn and are gone again just like that.
And I think I must be going mad.
I look off starboard, and there you are again.

BIG BROWN

Such a glorious example of equine splendor are you,
prancing out, the sun almost too shy to shine brightly
upon such flanks as yours. You, so many hands high
and in the sport of sports, the sport of kings, you rise above
mere mortals such as owners, jockeys, trainers all.
We bow down before your noble self, a steed of such majestic
resplendence has not been seen for oh so long.

We are breathless as we almost fear to watch lest we jinx you.
This final lap, the circuit terminus, known for undoing much lesser
steeds than you, great heart, so sure we are that you will take
it all, chase it down and lay to rest the rumors of its exclusivity,
that rarefied clique that seems barred to all comers save those few
ghosts galloping through the mists of races run so long ago.
Their winnings seem illusory in retrospect – you are going to change
all that, we know it in the deepest part of our deepest parts, those
places where we harbor our most private, frightened dreams and
thoughts.

We put all of this and more on your broad withers, knowing you can
bear everything we will place on you, knowing you are up to every
challenge, and we need not worry about you, for as common is your
name, uncommon is your every other part: your bearing, your stride,
your nonchalance at being such championship material - you hardly
seem to notice what a prince you are or how you seem to the manor
born, so naturally well-suited to the mantle of royalty about to be
bestowed upon your head.

Once you put to rest this final test, put paid to any nay-sayers, as few
as they are, there are the lonely few. You are chomping at the bit;
of course, you are - how else could it be for the Belmont stakes?

The post trumpet sounds surprisingly soon, but you are so relaxed,
focused, your eyes not glazed, nor rolling.

You strut– yes strut round the track during the final parade.

Thousands roar their love, their adoration, lusting for the win,
knowing it is near, taste the victory cup fresh upon their lips.

“They’re off!”

The words, so common-place, yet filled with such import

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as millions strain towards their TV screens, to urge you on.

But – but – what is this we're seeing? You seem to falter.
You – Is that really you? Not pulling forward at all, but dropping
back, and back, and back again – until you are not back a bit but
back of the back, the very back, you are barely moving, running last.

Big Brown, the clear favorite, the darling of us all, is running last.

The disbelief is universal, if such a thing is possible, a collective
soul-despairing, not accepting, fist-shaking, head-in-hands type
of incredulity as the entire horse-racing world watches with faces
fixed, stricken, as it were, in fugues of abject horror, so great is
the unthinkable scene unfolding live for some and on the screens
for so many of the rest – a scene to be replayed again too often
until its drama, at last, wears off and the truth of it finally sinks in.

Big Brown not only does not come first and win the Triple Crown
this day – he trots with such a measured, totally unhurried gait,
back of the pack, then off to the stable area to cool down and get
out of the glare of the press, the publicity, and all the questions...
many are left dumb-founded.

There will, of course, be many questions, but Big Brown, he'll not
be saying much, it's thought.
He's done with racing this day, perhaps this year.
Perhaps forever.

WHEN DANCING STALLIONS RETIRE

“Ask me to show you poetry in motion and I will show you a horse.” Author Unknown

Passing the tannery is the worst part for the once famous equines.
No savages these, the aging Lippanzer stallions cannot resist,
even as senescent years begin to show—a blazon of rust stains
their silky white coats—
They still execute a quick caracole, almost managing to eclipse
the scent of death where hides are cured so near them,
when they are led on their way to the exercise-ring.
The ticklish, oh-so-sensitive parts of their nostrils quiver,
nervous and fearful, filled with a potpourri of equine emotions
they cannot identify
Until beyond the town, they are near the market and suffused
with the smell of kiwi fruit.
Another enigma but, thankfully, at least the tannery is forgotten.