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HORSE: 4 FRAMES

JEFF STREEBY



2020 O:JA&L CHAPBOOK SERIES

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ATOKAD PARK: 1983

We had twenty-three horses in training. Two were from the same farm. They could have been twins— both tall and rangy and built to run, both bright bays, both with a little strip and a snip, both with a wide flash of white at the right front coronet— except one was a four-year-old filly, flighty but gentle, and one was a rank and deadly savage, a two-year-old horse colt. They were stalled across the alley from each other. One night after I went home, John swapped them out “to see if I was really paying attention.”

I wasn't.

*Spring afternoon—
six black swans on the temple pond*

*elphmet
xis kcalb snaws*

QUADRIGA

1. **Darley's Arabian:** *in Aleppo*

Nosing after milk, the big colt batters her udder again. Accustomed to his frequent assaults, she merely grunts her soft complaint, drops her head, searches out spring grass. Among last year's stalks, close to the root, her swift-winnowing lips discover new milletgrass, wild wheat. Her worn teeth clip and tear. Her foal suckles. Gouts of blue milk-foam trill from his eager lips.

*In Saint Simeon's ruined shrine,
a blackcap sings from the hermit's seat.*

At Aleppo, Sheikh Mirza receives the English Consul.

2. **Byerley's Turk:** *at Atokad Park with John Wolfers*

In June, 1686, Lorraine and Bavaria and Savoy invest the city. By September, Pest burned, Abdi Pasha dead, Buda falls in flames—yet for the dark warhorse, the omens are auspicious. For him, the Aras roars and foams, siroccos rise red in the west. Out of Yorkshire then, long years he sends like khamaseens his swift, sure-footed sons: Jigg and Partner, Tartar and Herod.

In Tully, County Kildare, Ahonoora then Indian Ridge.

In Nebraska, a shirt-tail relative.

Always that hot blood tells.

*An odor of prairie sage—
the moon framed in the window
moving on.*

She must have come in sometime in the middle of the night. When I got there at 4:00 a.m. John already had her settled in a stall next to the tack room. "From back East," he said. A big long-legged mare. Dark bay, star and a strip, a little cresty, but good balance and muscling. Fit. She looked bright and alert, too, but she was heavily bandaged on all four legs and to top that, she wore an odd bulky wrap to sweat her nearside shoulder. Her front end seemed the worst—tendons wrapped and poulticed, spider bandages over both knees and going halfway up her forearms. John had two ice boots sitting outside the stall door, too. "Looks like she's a clumsy sprinter," he told me, "but she might make a racehorse." Of course, if he were going

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to make that happen, he'd have to be really careful with her.

*Nebraska sunset—
the shadow of a lone cottonwood
spooks my horse.*

When he sent her to work, she went out as soon as they opened the track, so she was always ready to go when I got there—yellow vet wrap and cotton sheeting all around, clear to her hocks on the back legs, moleskin patches and lubricants over the bulbs of her forefeet and inside over the coronet bands behind. All I had to do was throw a saddle and bridle on her and hand her off to the gallop boy. John took her over himself when she came back and he spent a lot of time in her stall.

*Nebraska.
All summer long,
a harmonica in my saddlebag.*

Every day, other trainers would come by to commiserate with John over the mare's fragile physique and to nod and muse and offer their best advice on how to keep her on her feet long enough to finish a race or two. Most thought she was a waste of time and feed, and said so in so many words. John was always the patient sufferer. He sent her off in a couple of quarter claimers and she ran along with the bunch but never made a move on the leaders.

*Especially in summer,
the yammering of coyotes—
high plains moon.*

One Saturday morning I had a note. John had hauled the mare down to Omaha and had entered her up in some high dollar handicap. When he got back that next Monday, he showed me a suitcase full of money. He said there was close to \$50,000 in it. Our mare had gone off at 1200/1 and he had cleaned up through an off-track bookie. The mare won by 6 lengths. He had an offer and sold her out of the test barn for \$35,000, cash.

*July.
Sound of a train horn down at the crossing—
coolness of evening.*

I asked him “Weren’t they worried about her old injuries?” He told me then that as far as he knew, the mare had never taken a bad step in her life. All the bandaging and griping about her legs had been just smoke so nobody would be interested in her long enough to look hard at her papers—Lorenzaccio on the topside and three lines to Nasrullah on the bottom. “Best bred horse I ever owned. But you can’t fall in love with ‘em. That’s how you go broke.”

*On my front step,
an empty snakeskin—*

whatever you might make of that.

3. **Godolphin’s Barb:** *Tattersalls, Ireland. Sale Day*

*Lot #72. Bay colt by **Dream Ahead (IRE)** out of an **Entrepreneur (GB)** mare. Consigned by private owner. A three-year-old horse in training. Galloping well on the flat. **E.B.F.** nominated. Sold with veterinary certificate.*

How then shall we regard him, our marvelous engine of expectation, his legacy of natural violence? And how regard this new deputy, our own guesswork, our wishful thinking?

On the tote board, even odds.

How fluid the boundaries of good luck.

4. **Mr. Alcock’s Arabian:** *at Ak-Sar-Ben with Tipton Stables, 1983*

And by 4:00 am, we’re at breakfast in the track kitchen. By 5:00, we’re back in the shed row and Big John’s coffee maker begins to gurgle and hiss. This is when the two-year-olds start to stir. They chuffle softly, growing restless-- they nicker stall to stall. The clock radio in the tack room suddenly begins to blare out Top 40 Country. An old campaigner startled awake surges upright in a racket of hooves, his bandaged legs thrashing his bed of yellow straw. When the lights come on, horses stretch like big dogs and shake themselves, shift forward toward their routines, lean into the alley expecting the grooms. The pony horse grinds his teeth and bucks in place. The crazy chestnut weaves. Others, the youngsters, work their jaws or pace. The big bay gelding paws the floor.

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The feed room door sticks then rattles open when I give it a jerk. Impatient for his splash of oats, the new colt circles, kicks the wall—against the mild textures of the moment, the unexpected detonation is just one more mark against him.

Gallop boys lounging over strong coffee idly consider him. John's already got his number.

*Cold morning sun coming up red.
Long shadows of riders headed out.*

Good days for sure, way back when. Ak-Sar-Ben and the Coliseum are long gone. John's long dead. We did start some nice horses there—*Tipton Special*, *He's a Block*, *Huliai*, my old route horse *Blazing Don* who had to have at least a mile and a half to win, the leggy Kentucky mare that come running out of nowhere and paid John off 1200-to-1. But that gray colt? He was an empty hide—a foul-tempered, dangerous, one-gutted hog that never ran up to his papers. We sent him out five times and he couldn't break his maiden. We kept him fit to run but they wouldn't write him a race. Finally, on the last day of the meeting, John put him in the gate as a \$300 claimer “3-year-old maidens, colts and fillies, non-winners of 4.” He went off in a field of half-a-dozen other no-talent nags, all of them useless cripples and crow bait. I'm in the win picture with the little savage, but the stewards took his number down before we even got to the test barn. They figured out he'd bumped the three horse down the stretch. More bother than he was worth, I swear, whatever they paid for him. He should have gone straight to the canner from the yearling sale.

In the constellation of the first horse, Al Faras al Awwal, the subtle star Kitalpha is ascendant; in the legend, it is the pale mare Kirat. Legends and stars, all these in long line of descent from Mr. Alcock's Honeywood sire—Crab and Aimwell, Desert Orchid, Red Rum, Arkle, Native Dancer, that sorry plug we started in Omaha, and all the Thoroughbred grays.

*May rain—
in the abandoned pasture,
meadowsweet,
a sea of looestrife.*

EL PASO: JULY

Mike is trying to lift up the horse's head and I'm on one knee trying to get at the big vein in the neck. The sorrel's eyes are closed: a week of this and he's almost used up—washy and shaky and about to go down. But before I can open the stop on the jug of Ringer's, he squeals and bawls and is up on his hind legs, backing away. He's like that for what seems a long time before everything stops and he falls over backwards. When he hits the ground, a cloud of red dust rises and his last breath leaves him all at once—a loud choked-off grunt.

Shadows are falling. The sky at this hour is layered in reds—all the shades of chestnut horses. The dust is settling. The morning glories on the barn are closing up. Soon the coyotes will be out, the burrowing owls. Nighthawks will be calling.

Mike holds the broken lead shank. I wince at my bloody wounds—shoulder, hip, and head. The dead horse's hide is wet with sweat. We don't move. We don't say a thing.

West Texas sunset--

*in the seam of earth and sky,
this hot, still moment.*

Maybe we knew all along that he would die, but we were young and did not expect life to surrender with such violent reluctance, did not expect the husk of it lying there in the yard to be so different, so absolutely empty.

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FARMINGTON: AUGUST

Late afternoon. Already moonrise and the shadows of the mesas begin to hem us in.

Behind the shed row, an electric motor hums and slow-turning arms of a hot walker around their squeaking axle clang and clank. At the end of a shank, rank, on the muscle, blowing like a steam engine, a black-type colt, fitting for his first campaign, lunges and bucks then sucks back and plants his feet, stops dead in his tracks. Five empty arms bounce and bang, loud as a train wreck. His neck stretched, hindquarters braced, he strains against the halter. The motor and its traction belts complain. The high-strung young horse suddenly falters, squeals like a scalded cat, cow-kicks at nothing then moves off, shaking his head, his ears pinned flat. Whirling in the gathering dusk, he raises Cain—strikes or kicks with every stride—his light heels capering, making plain his brave résumé.

This moment has something to do with us though if we are ready for it, neither you nor I can say.

New Mexico day-moon—

*all the fittings and fixtures
of things to come.*

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*Luck is the pick-me-up, Luck un-resented,
For one of these days we'll be the ones.*

Michael F. G. Standen, "Common Knowledge"

*The gate stood wide open when he got there. A man he recognized
but could never quite name waved him through. The man's gray Stetson was soaked
and water dripped from it where the wide brim sagged. A pile of wet snow
grew on its crown. He wore a frayed Fish slicker whose sleeves were bloody.
He had blood on his hands.*

Strange snow still fell. It covered everything

He thought, "*It wasn't like that. No. It wasn't anything like that.*"

but the crumbling county blacktop. It melted there and he could see
the road ahead stretch out wet and black and shiny into the storm.

There are stories that end well, aren't there? This could just as well be one.
The monster from our childhood darkness will die in a spray of blood,
strong sword-voice of the shield-breaker singing him the chant of edges.
Someone will discover, won't they, that one-eyed bastard in the game,
notice those aces up his sleeve? Accused, he'll deny, take chances
through another hand or two— push his luck— draw to an inside straight,
say, or try to fill a royal flush. Caught out, he will try to bluff.
When pressed, out of bravado, he will skin his little hideout gun.
Surely, some game soul will topple this tinhorn from soda to hock.
From those squirming entrails then shall step wisdom, beauty, the winged boar.
Out of that torn throat, out of that heart, sword-split and shivering, shall
spring forth, hoof on stone, the stallion, his brother of the heavenly air.

*The woman had been standing on the front porch, had seen him arrive.
She wore no coat or hat. Snow dusted her red hair, her hunched shoulders.
Her eyes, without expression, unreadable, were red from crying
but she was not crying now.*

The truck's bald tires made a hissing sound

The man's horses had all moved away from the fence as he walked up.

on the wet pavement as he drove along.

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*They were wet and they steamed,
shivering in the cold. Their heads low, their ears flat against their skulls,
they had moved off, their hooves sucking at the slurry of snow and mud.*

Where the blacktop ended, the road was gravel.

*The mare stood quietly
her eyes closed. Weak, shocky, she trembled, her breath rapid and shallow.
Snow piled along her topline and gathered in her forelock. When it
melted, water coursed downward in runnels, striping her tawny hide.
She wore a trophy halter. Hanging from it, a new white lead rope
tangled in a little heap at her feet.*

Snow covered the gravel,

He thought, "Hell. *It wasn't like anything.*"

but in ruts and low spots
there were black pools of standing water.

*Each pad of the prickly pear
beside the machine shed drooped under its own burden of wet snow.
The new tin roof of the saddle house had shed in one rough furrow
its whole load of cold slush.*

Fence pliers on the dash slid to the floor
as the truck bounced along. Gravel rattled under the running boards.

He didn't think anymore. He saw it all again.

*His father,
a frail skinful of bones still presiding over household quarrels,
plays solitaire at the kitchen table, aware the losing cards
he deals himself today will still be here next week when he is dead.*

The hero has arrived, you know. The moon can see him and the stars
peer down as witnesses. Wisely, he has consulted oracles,
poured out generous libations. Fragrant smoke of his sacrifices
hangs yet in the air. On the altar, the dun steer and shearling lamb
are bones and ash. He sleeps alone and dreamless on the barrow floor,

his broad sword freed from stone. Soon he will buck the tiger, braced or not.

Water splashed in the fender wells.

He bent to examine the wound.

A long sharp spear of bone showed white through the muscle of the forearm.

Her lower leg, though bent at the knee, rested at an odd angle,

fetlock, pastern and hoof wall of the toe all flat against the ground.

Dried blood had caked thick and brittle over the leg below the break.

Where the mare had stood there was a shadowy stain under the snow.

The heater fan clattered in its housing. The wiper motor whined.

Wiper blades squealed back and forth.

He remembered the truck wouldn't start.

The old man totters out there— everybody trailing after him,

an odd cortege. He makes the grown boys fetch him his tools: screwdriver,

3/8 wrench, an emery cloth. He growls then with his old impatience,

for an instant that eighteen-year-old gunner's mate in Navy wool

spoiling for a fight. He fixes the wrench on the battery clamp.

He strains heroically toward that one small success. His hand

trembles. Sweat seethes on his forehead. And he can't break it loose. He flings

away the little wrench. It chimes cheerfully— once, twice, then three times—

as it bounces down the driveway. He goes inside. No one else moves.

He is faithful—Pia Fidelis. In fulfillment of his vow,

he has raised up shrines. He is dedicant of a dozen fanums.

With good reason, he expects the sword, shield, cloak, the golden bridle.

Though the gods grant him all, he will fold, cards on the kitchen table.

Wipers packed snow into ice along the bottom of the windshield.

He had taken a yellow grease marker out of his coat pocket,

marked then the suffering mare's face clearly with the necessary "X"—

from the base of the left ear to the right eye then from right to left.

It was still early. Up ahead the road was white. There were no tracks.

He fished three cartridges from his coat and chambered them in the pistol

then rotated the cylinder and closed it up. When he cocked it,

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his first cartridge came under the hammer.

Sinking under wet snow
nearby mesquite thickets looked for all like calving glacial faces.

*Two active shifts of firemen at the graveside. Scores of retirees.
Naval Reserve Honor Guard. Back to the old hometown one last time,
relatives and friends gone for more than a generation.*

Gravel,
mud, ice slush roared against the floor. Wipers could not clear the windshield.
He could not see the fence line on the far side of the borrow pit.

*When he looked around he saw the woman had come down from the house.
A gust lifted her wet hair, made of it a nest of red serpents.
Shivering now, she stood silent by the corner of the neat barn
her grey eyes fixed on him. He nodded and turned back to his business.*

He could not see the windrow of pines just a quarter mile beyond

He didn't get it.
Echoes of a bugle. Cordite in the air.

and beyond that he could not see the ancient peaks of the Franklins.

*He faced the crippled mare and drew back the hammer, placed the barrel
a foot from the intersection of the yellow lines of that "X"
he had drawn on her forehead and touched the trigger and as the gun
roared and bucked in his hand, the bad luck mare coughed once and bobbed her head
and spoiled his aim and he saw as she fell that he had not killed her.*

In the rearview mirror he saw the end of the blacktop recede

No, he didn't.

*Great granddad's Elgin watch was home in a drawer.
Uncle Eddie's old Ivor Johnson was on the seat beside him.
Dad's twelve-gauge, the Zoli over & under, was in the closet.
What the hell was that all about?
He nearly spoke the thoughts aloud.*

until it disappeared behind falling snow.

*She lay there grunting,
unconscious. Her legs moved as if she were running. The broken leg
moved at the shoulder but not below. The ball had entered her head
below the base of her right ear, passed through and lodged in her shoulder.
As she thrashed there, hot blood pumped from her wounds and sprayed him head to foot.*

Ahead of him, he watched a coyote trot out of the borrow pit,
cross the road, watched where it slipped into the chaparral and vanished.

Sometimes every temple is empty. All the gods just slip away.
The mad Pythoness straddling her sacred abyss cannot riddle.
Epona's horses run mad; her mules and asses die forsaken.
Somewhere even monsters must take the time to eat and sleep and breed.
Then sling stones find their shallow angle of repose. Then mosses bloom.
Just when they do, Rick's smiling croupier drops the ball on 22.

*He tried to draw back the hammer to fire again but it was jammed
so he had to break it open and fiddle with the cylinder,
work the hammer back and forth and after a while he got it fixed.
He cocked it, caught the mare's halter, put the muzzle to her skull, fired.*

The *Lucky Lady* casino's sign loomed suddenly above him

He remembered
*the grave was in the shade of some kind of green ash.
On an east-facing hillside close to the road. All the stones are flat,
all set flush with the ground for easy mowing by summer groundsmen.*

and he hit the brakes.

*For a little space, a broad stream of blood flowed
out of her wounded forehead, out of her mouth, her nostrils, her ears.
It pooled under her head. It steamed in the cold. Then it slowed and stopped.*

The truck bounced hard and fishtailed a little through deep ruts and
potholes

When he looked, the woman was gone.

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as he turned into the mud lot.
The motor dиеseled for half a minute after he turned it off.
He sat a while using a shop rag to clear himself of dried blood.

He remembered the only war story he had ever been told.
On the tin can David W. Taylor, battle claxons blare.
A seventeen-year-old gunner's mate stands amidships at the rail.
He is watching two Japanese torpedoes approach from starboard.
He waits for the concussion, fire and smoke, sounds of the breaking keel.
He does not breathe. He feels the ship heel over too late. He watches.
The torpedoes pass under his feet and in the next two seconds
he knows they have been set too deep. He smiles and goes to his gun tub.

So solitaire was his game. He was always luckiest alone.

Dusty trophies hang in his great hall— captured arms, the monstrous claw,
jeweled dagger hilts (giant-forged), silver cauldrons from the World Worm's hoard—
his hole cards bestowed by smiling gods whose runes fade from standing stones.
Amen. By now, the gates of Paradise will have closed behind him.
Some divine psychopomp or other surely will have waved him through.
His heirs, who will cast lots for the blue wool, must one day cash in, too.

Lottery scratch tickets littered the floorboards of the truck. He laughed.

We all know the rough beast runs loose. Red, black, green, we've got his number.
Still we bet the Red Snake and let it ride. We are out of our minds.
We expect miracles but not ordinary things.

He drifted:
He is ten. It is Deadwood or maybe Lead-- some tourist snake pit.
In a cheap copy of Number 10 Saloon, Wild Bill Hickok sits,
eights and aces in his hand, his manikin's back turned toward the door
where the old man smokes a cigarette and studies the horizon.
Outside, dust devils swirl. Route 85 is melting in the sun.
Across the road a farmer smaths a field of ordinary hay.

Soon our new ring-giver comes. Some bold Battle-bringer among us,
some longshot, our poker-faced Raven-lord, that grim pistolero,
will risk all and ante up, call the one-armed bandit's bluff. Or raise.
He will hit the jackpot, mark with red the feet of raven and eagle.
Should he fold, it is no matter. The same king comes time and again.

Wild rumors are abroad already—stunned virgins swell with saviors,
Kings and Knaves and Queens and Bulls. We shall have us much of anointing.
It will never end. Every day more new Grendels outgrow their fens.

The little bell over the back door jingled as he went inside.

*The one poker machine in the place has blown its breaker again.
He sits at the bar alone all afternoon and drinks good whiskey.
He bets recklessly on simulcasts from Sunland Park and for hours
he wins and wins and wins.*

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NANCY COOPER RUSSELL

*Big October sky—
wild geese in long restless skeins,
their calls to each other*

The dramatic Kriehoff portrait lifts her solemn and luminous out of a black region of conventional abstraction: her gaze placid, unreadable; her lips expressive but crimped enough for modesty. A bearing serene, self-possessed. So prim there, so square-shouldered, so stiffly Victorian-- an enigma in her fashionable flowered dress. Still, she is a shapely girl, wasp-waisted with comfortable hips, a dignified incarnation of Charley's playful odalisque.

*October sunset—

in her living room,
last light through open windows.*

Childless. There was an adopted son.

*She adjusts the bridle on his bay horse.
Behind them,
the long cortege.*

Her house has been vacant since 1927. Things like the pretty things she might have fretted over are kept polished and dusted behind velvet ropes. A docent shepherds along small groups of curious strangers who shuffle slowly in and out.

*October—
this cold room, its amended echoes,
this sun going down*

THE IRMA HOTEL

Some cold, clear morning in spring, I want to be out west again. I want to be up early when day is coming rose and gold over the edge of the world. I want to watch the sun light up Rattlesnake Mountain. I want to notice as scraps of snow in the lees of things grow gradually bright. I want to see my breath. I want to catch the strong scent of wood smoke that rises from chimneys all over town. I want to know my lever action hangs in the rack behind me when I park the pickup. In the afternoon, I want to be standing on the porch of the Irma Hotel when the auctioneer calls the numbers on the big bay 2-year-old everybody wants. I want to be where I can watch the bidders wave. I want to be there when the spotters shout and point. I want to hear the price go higher and higher and higher and then hear the gavel fall. I want to watch an outfitter from Jackson or Dubois or Victor or Star Valley lead the wide-eyed colt away. I want to go inside the saloon then and take a place at the long cherrywood bar that was commissioned over a hundred years ago by order of the Queen. I want to admire again its bulk and heft and artistry, its beveled mirrors, its columns and arches and grillwork and finials. I want to sit under the solemn gaze of its carved bull and drink rye whiskey. I want to feel the weight of the thick-walled shot glass in my hand and I want my throat to burn the way rough liquor can make it burn. I want to see if Tom Frye's portrait of Cody made in sheet steel with evenly spaced bullet holes still hangs in front of the dining room's cash register. I want to walk the broad hallway under the glass-eyed stares of all those sheep mounts. I want to hear the jingle of my rowels and spur chains echo off the tin ceiling. I want to hear the floor creak under my boot heels. I don't want to be surprised.

Up and down the Shoshone
October
beyond all imagining

Once upon a time, cowboys and Indians auditioned in a field out back for a spot in the show. Once upon a time, Bill Cody lived upstairs in a suite of bright rooms. Once upon a time, Irma sat at a favorite table with a view of the street. In the whole town, every door swings into that century. I want to be accustomed to those faint drafts from the fairytale days.

HORSE: 4 FRAMES
JEFF STREEBY

Once there was a Burlington siding just down the street. There was coal smoke, a huff of steam, a deep mechanical growl, a whistle, a bell. There was a hiss of pistons that moved heavy levers and gears. There was a distinct crash of a first lurch forward then the unyielding car couplings shuddering down the line, a glissando hard as a fall of rocks. There was a long freight starting off with shrill friction of drive wheels to rails, iron squealing against iron, and for a while everything quivered in time with that slowly opening throttle. There was all that rolling stock, carriage after carriage, battering out of rail joints flexing over their sleepers that pattern of slowly accelerating repetitions. There was light from the locomotive's headlamp falling through a six-pane sash to make odd geometry move on the opposite wall. There was rumbling enough to excite an answering rattle from one window glass. Once, in early morning darkness, there was *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders* headed east for the last time.

Our summer intentions are no longer enough.

Into October.

Once upon a time we cheered in a New Year at his old hotel. There was a slow drive from Greybull, a blizzard, drifts over the fences. There were some few sentimental trinkets we exchanged. There was the \$2 bill, holed by the trick shootist's wadcutter that I misplaced years later. There was boisterous camaraderie among strangers, all those extravagant toasts, all those impractical resolutions, the Auld Lang Syne, the departing crowd, and at last, the room at the top of the stairs. In the morning there was sun on snow, the Teamster's Breakfast, the quiet ride home, the expectation that we would live happily ever after. There was no way to judge then how much we stood to lose.

We never know what comes next, so I will go through the ordinary motions again today. I will trust in custom, in established routines. I will shower, shave, make coffee, zone out in the back seat of my carpool for the hour's commute, keep my essential appointments, call it quits. I will smile at everyone all the way home. I will be imperturbably cheerful. I will keep the lid on my wishful thinking the whole time as if nothing is wrong. For now, I will stick to the script though I know I will find here only what there is to find—the same old story— avoidable error, this exile, the pain of hindsight, my irresistible impulse to keep looking back.

October—

*in an instant of perfect clarity,
all things just so.*

ELEGY WITH NO ONE IN IT

Nothing depends on our presence.

Joe Gouveia

Among the cottonwoods down by the river, a band of brood mares
searches out the early grass.
In the channel, gravity—a drowned steer high and dry on a sandbar.
Three fat magpies explore him.
Upstream, two gray cranes wade among bleached snags.

*A stranded raft of floodwood—
the jumble,
the tangled facts of the world.*

Today I know for sure another spring is here, and so I am thinking again of my old friend Joe. Of one cool, rainy afternoon when we got good and drunk in a little New Hampshire bar. He had been reading James Wright I remember— that “As I step over a puddle at the end of winter” poem. And as usual he had a lot to say— about that and about Rexroth and about Snyder and about something Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti wrote, and when finally he had managed to work himself into that familiar blustery dudgeon, he said, “*You know, Lao Tzu says that Nature is not human-hearted. And by God, he’s right. Nothing depends on our presence. Here we are, talking about something a dead Chinese guy said 2500 years ago. He’s not here. We’ve got his voice. That’s proof enough for me.*” Drunk maybe, but for me this was one of those moments that every now and have opened up in front of me and left me with nowhere to go, left me this time staring into the bottom of my empty shot glass, wondering. I don’t know where our conversation ends after that; in the back of my mind I can still hear his earnest Cape Cod stammer.

*Loss. Regret. Grief.
All my equipment of optimism*

down for repairs.

There is a current in the brown water—natural laws drawing it away. There is a rule of wind—a current in the weather. There is the uninterrupted progression of the hours—a current that draws along the seasons. And for us, of course, none of that will do. We give ourselves instead a world we have imagined, one where none of the stories can get along without us.

HORSE: 4 FRAMES
JEFF STREEBY

Noon.

*Pale sky above yellow bluffs—
just a frayed edge of this one moment.*

Like it or not. Here is this expanse of water. Here are these scattered trees. Here are prairie crocuses out now and soon the purple clover will bloom. Here is breadroot coming on and the next purple coneflowers and the next blazingstars. Here is new grass— blue grama, June-grass, little bluestem.

*A redtailed hawk settles on a branch—
all the colors of the country.*

Joe has the right of it. It's spring. The brood mares are heavy in foal. Under the cottonwoods next to the river, they find the early grass.

WINTER RANGE

(for Debra)

*This one broken button
still closing my ragged Carhartt—
winter moon.*

This is that nice red horse of Crystal's, isn't it? Just back from a work on the ridge, it looks like. He's fit and legged-up tough in this one, just tired and a little droopy and running sweat. And you. Nobody can tell yet you're starting to run down. The vest nearly fits and the narrow-hipped jeans, but you know how this will end up—both shoulders about to give out altogether, the wrecked knee.

*Moonrise--
first ice in the river bend.
What we witness is ours for good.*

Nobody announced it but look around—it's winter already. Now the cold has settled in, you can't help but notice, much to your dissatisfaction, how you've grown stiff and had to slow down.

*Winter storm--
the hours ahead
one long, narrow cage of aggravation.*

Well, you better "Suck it up, Cupcake," as your friend would say. "You ain't here just for decoration." Winter is itself a fine season. You'll find out, if you look, all your well-practiced impulses, all your intricate implements of purpose are up and running, and out there in the corral stands a nice trigueño filly and she's pretty as any picture. Come next spring, she'll need work. She'll be fat and snuffy and she'll saddle plenty fresh. She will damn sure give you trouble. You know with all the tricks up your sleeve, by fall you could have her finished and spinning on a dime.

*A December moon and light snow
dusting the country with silver.*

*Winter range—
all the instruments of consequence brought to bear.*

ENTERING THE CITY

Of course, one may still approach from the sea. Near the end of a pleasant voyage, travelers would first see in the distance those curious traffic ways. Then an extraordinary sun would pick out for them an unexpected plexus of catwalks binding together certain derelict works whose arrangement suggests nothing so much as the dried husks or vacant hives of industrious insects. At the neglected wharf, a dismasted antique listing in its moorings, settling by the bow. Marooned in a silt-trammeled mole, other brittle hulls—careened, cracked open there and emptied. And framing all, a white arc of beach, a running tide its ragged ruffle, its blue wrinkled skirt.

Just beyond the waterfront, a clutch of blunted outlines, stark ruins quaint enough to suit a stereoscope — roofless insulae, a tumbled wall, its gateless barbican—places where a golden jackal might easily materialize then suddenly vanish behind the curtain of heat. Rough outlines of Imperial boulevards lead a short way into the desert where they disappear under saltbush and yellow flowering thistle. Loosely aligned hills of rubble. The imposing façade of the proconsul's library. Latin inscriptions. Graffiti from a dozen centuries. A ruined agora bounded by remains of market stalls. Pigeons often alight there near the well. In the scorching afternoons, dust devils array themselves in local golden grit and ascend for a time like minor princes.

Even so, we have been assured by those in authority that here all the ordinary things happen every day in full view of everyone. We have been made to understand by the inhabitants that one's companions might sometimes grow listless and stray—that this is the way of things. After all these years, natives have come to expect the familiar shimmering at the limit of vision will lift the horizon.

Visitors who approach by land must traverse broad sand sheets and serirs before they round a steep horn of the great barchan. Here they encounter the irrepressible vitality of date palms. By now, the veiled women of the caravans will have noticed the sea, rough hem to a sky hung as sheer blue backcloth or drape. Behind them, routines of their unremarkable lives cluster as long chains of family names and before them, those august shapes, every one a mystery of architecture, as pavilions of incandescence that hesitate at the verge of apprehension. The camels tread tirelessly on. Shadows grow long. The terraces of the Asclepeion come into view, the broken columns of the xysti, the massive foundation stones of a vanished palace. Eventually the wind rises and the tang of humid salt-scent rinses the back of every throat.

At the head of the column, a blue sheik notes with interest the sudden drama of pigeons circling above the distant square.

His horse is restless under him and capers a dainty pirouette.

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