

Whip & whisper

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Abstract

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In this essay, I seek to investigate the contours of power and class dynamics in the equestrian world, and look for resonance in the wider world of capitalism and its various crises. I want to examine our desire for classification, for division from nonhuman animals, while considering the connections to broader cultural alienation from nature, from the body, from the other, from the self. Another question I take up is the responsible use of metaphor, and its potential use as both a colonizer and a bridge; I hope to examine this as just one of our many tools of communication, which must also include the body and the breath.

Whip & whisper

One thing to remember is to talk to the animals. If you do, they will talk back to you. But if you don't talk to the animals, they won't talk back to you, then you won't understand, and when you don't understand you will fear and when you fear you will destroy the animals and if you destroy the animals you will destroy yourself.

- Chief Dan George

A horse trainer once gave me this metaphor to think with: Imagine you are a sparrow in the care of a large dog. Your wings are clipped; you are small, and hollow-boned. You rely on the dog for food, water, shelter, and space to walk around.

One day, as the dog leads you to dinner, you see a menacing and unfamiliar figure leering out behind the bins. Terrified, you try to fly away. The dog yells loudly at you, ignoring the figure behind the bins and apparently dismissive of mortal risk.

Sparrow, what do you do? You can't believe the dog when she tells you it is safe, it is all in your head, to come along anyway. You have learned not to confide in the dog any urgent secrets.

I have heard the racetrack compared to high school: some do okay, will bounce onward and upward unscathed, while others bear the scars for life and still others do not come out alive.

A racetrack is a money mill, is machine, is therefore in need of automatons. The results must be formula and the process streamline, which one could say (like American high school) does not inspire individuality or accommodate a diversity of needs (to be generous).

The horses at the track are kept mostly in their stalls, swaying knee to knee by the bars or fish-eyed in the back chewing wood off the walls. They are fed high-octane grain with molasses and kept in small spaces so their bodies are bursting between the walls when they are led to the track, pressed to explosion, driven wild!

To train a racehorse to run and win requires a high-pitched physiological state, well beyond muscle lines or conditioning of the heart. Thus, even crude and brutal methods of training begin with an understanding of at least one part of the animal condition: the basic sources of fear.

The horse's material conditions over time and essential orientation toward the world compel panic in response to small, confined spaces; to chasing, and being

snuck up upon; to isolation from the herd, to the frenzy of the herd; and to physical restraint, violence, and pain.

The racehorse, at two years of life or less, is in these ways methodically driven mad.

There is a sharp bit in the mouth, which weighs on gum and bone, (pain), and a hard whip on the flanks, sudden and volatile in application (violence). Between the two she is trapped, (restraint), driven away from the whip and into the bit, from the bit back into the whip; foamed up and without an exit, she will run for her life.

This is when legs snap in half and the van pulls up and the PA system assures the audience. This is just one part of the show, which goes on.

So it is interesting that we even need a metaphor, which makes symbolic use of two different animals and a fictionalized conception of nonhuman proprietorship, to understand the relationship between the animal *us* and the animal *horse* at hand. Is it so foreign that the prey animal might suspect the predator, especially amidst regular violence? Did we not learn this basic principle – Tom & Jerry, chaser & chased – in elementary school? Or that the isolation and powerlessness of captivity may produce heightened responses

(*bad attitudes, bad habits*) and perhaps an overall lack of confidence in oneself and one's environment? Didn't we learn this in middle school?

There are a few reasons for the confusion, I think. One is the persistent symbolic value of the horse, and the tired Western narrative of the mythical cowboy – ideologies still echoed throughout the equestrian community and popular culture today: that the horse is primarily *tameable*. Therefore the horse is wild, the horse is *the wild*, a blustering and thundering force that could tear you to pieces if you gave it half a chance. Therefore, also, if the horse is tameable, and is not behaving as such *for us*, we confront an erosion of sacred hierarchy that is not supposed to slip. We have lost control.

There are no flowers in Eden because they are too tempting to the senses (*the body, the beast*). Our shoes loosen in the mud.

We rope the horse, sandbag three hooves with our aching for what we are and are not. The burden is too great for something that is more than symbolic (*is alive*).

But a horse is not a thundercloud; a horse is not vacant behind the eyes or brutish with the hooves. Horses are careful, deeply nerved and sensing creatures. They are decisive and precise – watch them move across the hills like rain. In

this sense, the sparrow is helpful. We think the lightness of wings and our hands soften their touch.

Then there is the issue of perception. In the metaphor of sparrow and dog, the lesson is not only, 'do not punish fear' but also, 'first acknowledge fear.' This requires attention to sudden shadow, flapping tarp, animation in the leaves, taking pause.

Horses have limited depth perception, cannot combine both left- and right-eye information in one image because, being prey, their eyes are set across the skull from one another. Unlike height or width, which stay fixed and constant from any angle, *depth* is constant in its shifting as our bodies move across the earth. Having a depth sense means knowing each moment the relationship between edge of skin and edge of rock, edge of other skin. It is fluid measure of the strings that run from your one particular through the bright-everything all.

Application of the sparrow metaphor also requires a sort of de-familiarization with the world around us: seeing freshly, we would not scan the surroundings and see an upturned bucket as a symbol of the thing, (vessel, plastic, dead), but as a new shape, wrongly held in space, bright and erratic against the gravel.

It is a difficult task for us. We are accustomed to our world and its symbols, and

for us they empty out.

We are similarly accustomed to the lives of nonhuman animals being small, uninteresting, and subordinate – whether as pets, food, or labor. The vet will tell me a cat is built to sleep twenty hours per day, will not ask if she has any cause to move beyond her square of carpet. Does she have reason to practice using her claws, her nose, or any of her cowish body, anyway? She does not, because she is fed meat cereal twice daily and lives out an existence behind a series of doors, which do not open to her. Yet it is *her* nature that imposes limits.

Lately, she has begun to go blind.

Anthropologists, devoted in their study to the essential nature of human beings, did not scientifically (read: officially) acknowledge the fact of romantic human love until 1992. When I think of what we do not know about the interior lives of nonhuman beings, I think of this.

Even in the animal sciences, behavioral and otherwise, it is rare for the experts to break beyond the hollow hierarchy. This will take many forms, will shift, as all structures of exploitation do, to justify itself within its current conditions. Its totality is a trick of the eye.

In a familiar example, *anthropomorphism* is: my dog is excited that tomorrow is her birthday. *Anthropomorphism* is not: my dog gets depressed when I leave her in the dark house all day and do not take her on walks.

But there is a special excuse in the sciences, which is *objectivity*. We see our science as the gears of reason: pure, steely, sharp, and neutral. Essentially, we see a machine. And, as operator or engineer, we assume the spot of satellite, distant and unattached, an untouchable god. From up here our depth sense flattens out and stagnates, fixes itself in outlines. In pursuit of objectivity, we compress the body and tell a lie: when our reports come down from the airtight lab, unseen and unimplicated and outside of time, they neglect to include the latexed hand, the particular gaze, the microscope and its lens.

This is familiar today, but the idea of mechanism was not always so tightly tied with our scientific method. Until midway through the seventeenth century, the tradition of experimentation and investigation was *not* associated with a mechanical philosophy but with those who called themselves alchemists and natural magicians, who viewed the world in layers, in networks and with depth.

This, of course, threatened the church, with its holy doctrine of sinful fruits. And with reason the death period of alchemy and natural magicians was also a time

when women were being strung up and burned with public approval, via the alluring and mysterious metaphor of the Witch (*bad bodies, bad beasts*). The institution of the time had already appointed its victims and had begun making examples. If the art of exploration and experimentation were to go on unimpeded, it would have to form itself a new rhetoric. Thus mechanism: our swift gears of reason and unassailable neutrality, and with it, the rooted implication of ‘*maker.*’

So we grant ourselves both. The mask of metaphorical doubling allows for a rhetorical compartmentalization of terms, while still maintaining a fundamental, ideological marriage in practice. The narrative mirror between humanity and god allows for a parallel operationalization and exploitation of parts, from which we, the real whole, remain separate.

But if we attempt, in earnest, to broach the divisions of species and language from a mechanical worldview, and with practiced fluency in transactional relationships, we begin to feel the slippage of our program. Between the animal us and the animal other gapes a terrible vacuum, our words choked out in bleach still air.

We hear nothing these
days from the ones in
power

Why talk when you are a
shoulder or a vault

Why talk when you are
helmeted with numbers

Fists have many forms;
a fist knows what it can do

without the nuisance of
speaking: it grabs and smashes.

From those inside or
under words gush like
toothpaste.

Language, the fist
proclaims by
squeezing is for the
weak only.

- Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics*

Some horses, before learning to run for their lives, or after too many days
running for their lives, will throw themselves up into the air in revolt. Often
these horses will be browed by the butt of a whip – as explained to me, this is
meant to make them think they have hit an invisible ceiling. Logically, they will
stop rearing because they now believe themselves to be under constant ceiling.

See the twist as it happens: the horse will stop rearing, not because they are fearful of violence and have learned to self-silence; but because they have accepted our impossible lie, assimilated it seamlessly into their reality. See how we preempt the choice of thought, fix the lens, dust our hands. See how we invisible ourselves.

The first horse, we know, was hunted. Probably the first to be mounted was done so in service of better hunting its family. Historically, horses were the toys of royalty and the livelihood of the serf; today it is no different. Check every show barn and racetrack in the U.S. and find steamingly fresh imported European horses tended by underpaid undocumented immigrants and the working class poor, working six days a week to shovel the shit and oil the hooves and throw the hay and give the meds and brush out the crust and clean the buckets and provide all the needed equine care and labor swarms of waspy elite; the farm horse starves in its harness.

Horses are private property, bought, sold, and leased. Horses can be flown on planes across the sea, can be bred for stud fees of tens of thousands, can even sell for millions. It starts in the blood and moves outward: a European warmblood might go for \$25,000 as a baby, \$15,000 as a fetus, \$10,000 as sperm. But the real value is relational; it is produced by performance in shows,

by amount of performances, by being rubbed by the right sets of hands. It's not formula; it's class ritual. Not science, but magical thinking. We use it when it's useful.

Even at Grand Prix and Olympic levels, the prize money/ quantifiable value of winning is less than microscopic when placed against the cumulative costs of horse ownership, especially at higher levels – training and conditioning by professionals, plus lessons for the rider, who is usually not a professional; costs of shipping every two weeks to shows, often cross-country; boarding, entry fees, hotel bills; more specialized tack and equipment, often multiple sets; the maintenance and replacement of tack; nutritional supplements, treatments, and vet bills; plus the regular feeding, shoeing, and blanketing costs. But without the shows, or without the showing, a horse would only eat and poop; the horse would not (a well-loved term) have any way to “earn their rent.”

The horses stamp their feet on ships, trucks, and planes as they jet through the trans-Atlantic, burnished to the sheen of plastic piggy banks.

When they arrive they will wear small santa hats and eat molasses cake; they'll be swaddled in sheepskin and wrapped like glass for shipping. They'll be banned from too-deep mud, uneven grass, from touching other horses. Their

bodies have use like a violin: taut and rosined, expected only to sing when touched.

There are places, of course, where wildness is valuable and therefore held up with pride: in front of a large jump, on the long stretch of track (*spectacle: the bodies of the beasts*).

The most expensive horses are born with textbook body shape, according to the charts. As a kid I pored over pictures of horses where all the different breeds were measured. Width of skull between the eyes; length of cannon bone and square of knee; degree of fetlock, point of hip. In the diagrams they look like cows or pigs or chickens, the red lines sectioning familiar divides.

We are split through the horizon but fail to see the break; it already looks like a line to the eye.

Next to the charts, horse whisperers look as mystical as psychics, nomadic wind-burned people on silent feet who come to touch the problem horses, who draw the fear out through the forehead with a wandlike touch of the one bent fingertip—

The cowboy's silence blooms the grass.

“All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility...*Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker...*” *Capital, Vol. 1*

Marx called our perpetual exchange with the natural world a *metabolism*; his description of the inevitable contradictions and estrangements created by capitalism (between us and all else) was later called the *metabolic rift*.

The new soil scientists of England’s second agricultural revolution (1815-1880) were able to convincingly demonstrate that the soil is fed by plants; that the fertility (and therefore rent value) of any given plot of land is not a given; is not fixed, static, or natural. It is fed by what is returned to it, in the form of waste, compost, and everyone’s dead. Farms are run by labor; of horses, people, machines; they churn out the goods in the shape of fruits and leaves and roots and fiber, send them out into the stream and never see a return to soil. The farmer who cannot buy commercial fertilizer is swallowed by the fields, who are either starving or exhausted.

There is a rift in the belly cycle, blockage in the gut. The metabolic metaphor lashes together the life and death cycles of both labor and nature in a universal

and perpetual rhythm, held to one living, bodily system. It allows us to understand these processes as subject to our agency and also not; rather than a stretch of line, the two distinct poles, we see a living sphere; autopoietic. The breath expands impossibly in the lungs.

Unsurprisingly, the solution of the capitalist class to the escalating threat of soil depletion was a heightened demand for imported fertilizers, and imperial annexing of islands suspected to be rich in guano (*see the twist as it happens*).

"As the Indian Wars came to an end, American Indians struggled to settle and preserve the small territories that the U.S. government called reservations. Horses, which had become so central to our culture, were largely forbidden. The big herds were destroyed.

He means too much to us, our 'holy dog'; the spirit that binds us could not be fully broken. The Horse Nation is our ally, now and forever."

—Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota), 2009

The Quarter Horse, possibly America's most popular and most lucrative breed, was originally an 18th-century cross of Chickasaw ponies and English thoroughbreds.

The tough, agile pony of the colonized and the leanstreaking horse of the colonizer come together in a horse most commonly seen today in Western disciplines, head and chest pieces bedazzled with rhinestone, their fringed-leather riders tipping cowboy hats and spinning spurs. The style of Western pleasure riding seems an even more painfully literal reenactment: loping around on a draped loose rein, the horse keeps her head low to the ground and moves with the pace of a tail-tucked dog, slow-stepping and barely picking up her hooves, as if having already been worn into the ground, eyes looking up but not at. The whole presentation astream with ribbons and flags. The symbolism gets me in a place behind the jaw; like a funny bone, it is too much.

The archeological remains from the villages of the Botai people, who lived in a Kazakhstan made of grass circa 3,500-3,000 BC, reveal constellations of horse bone shard and pottery made with mare's milk. They are believed to be the earliest people to touch and hold the horse, as far as our science can tell. I imagine a horse and anonymous, in a field now how long gone, the hair of monkey just sloughed from the back of anonymous, haloed by the setting light, on soundless padded feet, reaching out the crooked finger –

“Perhaps such a search for individuals, for the “units” of biology, is

misguided. The fundamental nature of life may be not atomistic but relational... A thin film of networked organisms spreads over the surface of the Earth rock, building on the rubble of past ages.”

– David George Haskell, *The Songs of Trees*

Any time but summer, the air in the valley is one breath from water, and algae velvets the landscape. The fence posts slick with green which stiffens in the horses’ manes when they scratch their ears or reach between the posts for clover.

I started taking lessons at a show barn at eight, where my mom and I made up the poorest tier of clients. We aren’t poor, to be clear: we’re firmly working class, a single parent household, and one in debt – but stable. I got a scholarship to lease a bay pony and take lessons to be on the show team. I got entry fees for birthdays, helmets and boots and brushes under the tree. I felt desperately lucky; ashamed when I did not.

When I went to shows I worked, mucking and grooming and schooling the ponies to be good in the ring for younger girls. I spent Saturdays scrubbing buckets of slimed alfalfa and refilling the water, sweeping the aisles, mucking the stalls, running the wheelbarrows out to the shed. I took the horses out for grass at lunch, gave them baths and clipped their coats. I led them to the arena when it was dark and empty, a bluish desert, wooden walled, to watch them

kneel and roll and rub the dust into their skin.

When I was sixteen we found a horse who had flunked off the racetrack:

\$12,000. Little grey mare, blowing behind the eyes.

She is full of wind, hooves cracking. Trainers are afraid of her, or else are begging to *have a go*, licking their lips at the chance for a showdown. We step quickly and the rope swings slack between us up the gravel drive.

My mom, afraid at first of her hooves and her temper, sung songs at night from the frame of her stall door as she was dying and I was away at school and the grooms swept up the shavings around them.

One of the grooms, Javier, worried with us at the edge of her window; pointed out new baby birds in tree pockets all over the farm and the crow that mimics a cat from the high arena rafters. I saw it myself, actually meow.

Javier has a small house, tomato patch, and ball python named Mona, after the *Mona Lisa*. He invited me in once to see her eat, found me in the field with a squeaking coming from his hands. We stood and watched the quick dart, long squeeze, impossible hinge. The former mouse's PetCo box unfolded on the table.

In the horse world, mares are said to be unpredictable, defiant, *bitchy*, (see the twist), unreliable; and geldings dumb, dull, and steady; good worker bees.

Putting aside what can most obviously be said about these gendered descriptors, and the tracing of their ripples to our violently gendered culture: in my years of working horses from all backgrounds, (slaughterhouse rescues, ex-racehorses, toughened children's ponies) I have found these stereotypes largely true. A gelding will generally pose fewer questions, present less challenge, bare teeth less. A mare will give her very most, but demands to be convinced. What to do with this information, I don't know. One thousand patterned narratives pop up with shining faces.

Sometimes when people want to curb a mare's attitude, the vet will plant a marble in the wall of her uterus, to make her body think she's pregnant and reduce the flood of hormones (*bad bodies, bad behavior*). She can be pregnant forever – magic.

I can't help but return to the sparrow metaphor. It is always too easy to stack the patterns into place. They are too triumphantly true.

Scanning for shells on the rim of Yellowstone Lake, I found a patch of heat brewed up from below and felt the tender gape. Touched the living pulse. The

broken

beachrocks held each other, bubbled and porous and light as saltines. A heavy shell, dark and marbled, broke a sweat out in my hand.

I tossed it back, doubletook, was struck like a gong by the spill of its ridges as it arced through the setting light, a tooth,

A molar, symmetrically bumped like ours, like the ones I found in horse anatomy books under blankets as a child. Once grinding grasses in the mouth of some steaming unknown, shucked from its socket now how long ago, leaning against all other mineral, held through the night by its cradle of sand. It is hard to believe its weight in my palm; I want to warm it like an egg, as if.

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