

Sladana Bukovac

Stall Disease

Listen to those mathematically identical pauses between the hoof beats, that trackless train engine which one must subordinate to one's own uncoordinated movements.

Hundreds, thousands of hours wedged between worn out, always worn out pieces of woodwork, between school chairs of minimal manufacturing complexity designed with the best humanist intentions and their matching ascetic tables, all these efforts to understand exactly and globally, comparative methods, abstract thinking and experiments. Today at five o'clock in the afternoon, just like at any other time of day tomorrow and yesterday, as she's trying to walk in front of the bridled nag, in front of her, that is, not parallel with her fore legs or, even worse, skipping behind her shoulders, behind the shoulders of that damned perfectly balanced animal that can coordinate better on four legs than she could on two, she faces the same, unpredictable and irreparable educational deficit made when one did not go for two more hours of riding, among the children of wanton and distracted parents. Who mimic the educational model of the British aristocracy, meaning piano, French and riding lessons on patient nags. These ten-year-olds, raised to be vain, but mostly without the talent to become arrogant, wouldn't aim for the narrow wooden door on the fence like this, me like this, the horse like this, and then a bow and a picador's cape sweep through the dust, the prettiest movement is an unnoticed one, we passed through the door tramping melodiously, we didn't get stuck on the croup between the wooden stakes. It's too late now, Jelena thinks every day of her only riding experience, of a horse who, she now knows, was a retired hurdler, with the astonishingly long and slim legs of a supermodel, the fence of the manege barely reached his groin, and she had to hold on to the saddle with both hands in order to lift the flat-heeled boot, which she now knows is unacceptable when on a horse, up to the stirrup, and straddle that animal that didn't fill her with trust, but forced her with its anatomy to sit up straight for what must have been the first time in her life, to understand the meaning of uprightness, which had nothing to do with class and arms crossed behind the school chairs, from that position, the riders position, Jelena first saw in an almost shocking manner what a spine was for, and then followed the disastrous report on the state of her character, because horses know everything you can possibly know about human failures, they recognise hesitation and feigned vigor when pulling the reins, cowardice masked as empathy in lukewarm goading, the evolutionary fall of the lovers of plush puppies and kittens who are no longer bold enough to use the whip.

Controlling a horse meant controlling life, it's a skill you have to master at any cost, but Jelena nevertheless never came back, although she wasn't afraid, not at that point, she comforted herself with lack of time and the high cost of training, she justified herself with contempt for the exclusive character of riding, she defended herself from that terrible personal defeat as well as she could. Long term, the damage was enormous. She became painfully aware people were divided into those who ride and those who don't, that the position of rider was the only measure of meaning to someone's biography, and that the speed of reflexes was immeasurably superior to intelligence after the fact, however masterfully reflexive that intelligence may be.

The nag hesitated at the stable entrance. Then she pulled her usual trick: lifting her head suddenly, she tried to rip the reins from her hands. Jelena was ready for it, her harmless mutiny is part of an everyday ritual. Earlier she'd often get scared and let her go, even when she could hang on to her, partly because she understood her unwillingness to return to the obscure area of the box two hours before dusk, and partly because that image of a horse, with its head raised and its eyes turned downward, was

simultaneously terrible and fascinating, like a direct insight into insanity, an omen of disaster, a hundredth of a second of a frame from a dream laden with symbols of the unconscious.

She's pretty, nicely built, with a refined head, delicate nostrils, dramatically dark, doe-like eyes. She's not pretty in a phantasmagoric way like thoroughbreds are, she's a mixture of a hot blooded and cold blooded horse; the usual and time tested recipe for an obedient, stable horse meant for beginners, invalids, those suffering from cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis.

About ten of them visit the ranch every month with their caretakers. The caretakers are mostly parents whose duty is to try and outlive their own children, because the usual, reversed biological order is working directly against them. There is no free, or even cheap sanctuary for young men and girls with twisted limbs and distorted heads fixed on the headrest of the wheelchair, there is no humane solution, it's beyond the ability of every general-purpose philanthropist, so these parents live in the hell of longevity, condemned to timelessness, vitality and optimism, and can't afford loosening, sickness and death. Sick children (no matter what their age, they're always children) mostly expressly ask for this nag, Tara, she's used to walking in circles for hours in a slow, steady tempo, eating apples from a cramped hand in a wheelchair, rubbing her head on their locked shoulders. She's the muse of the handicapped, her framed photographs stand and hang in the neat living rooms of these homes, forever defined by misfortune, photographs on which those who were never walkers become riders, and witness with their happy faces the miracle that a simple horse can produce.

Two parts of oat and a bale of hay. The goat, who lives with Tara in the same box, and awaits her return from pasture always in the same position, with her front hooves over the fence, like a curious neighbor, grabbed the oats first again. Standing on her hind legs, her head is deep in the bowl. The nag sometimes bites her and chases her away, but very rarely. Mostly she just calmly watches the goat eat her food, and eats what's left over. Why does a big animal allow a small one to deprive her of an elementary need, food? if there is an explanation for it, it wasn't available to Jelena. A horse can kill with one blow, or at the very least mutilate a goat. She can hurt her by accident, in a state of anxiety or fear, and fear and anxiety are very common states in the world of horses, in the world of a prey animal, used through evolution to being attacked by perfectly organised packs, tearing off pieces of flesh from its legs and body from several sides at once, until the victim kneels and collapses, so they can bite through her neck and eat enough to secure energy for the next few days, or weeks. Were Tara and the goat friends, in some way? Every morning when she gets in the stable, she finds them in the same position, with their heads over the fence, the same eye movements, a similar look on their faces. The goat with her hooves on the board, a curious suburban neighbor lady, the horse with her hooves on the ground, but identifying with the goat's silliness, a kitsch image of an idyllic family. They've tried to separate them but the goat kept coming back, either from self-interest or loyalty, or both.

"Horses don't want to kill", the Righteous One once said, when he was trying to teach Jelena to block a galloping stallions path with her hands above her head. "Horses don't want to kill." "Horses don't want to kill." "Kill." Could a quadrupedal animal really understand the meaning of murder and death, violent death? The link between a blow of the hoof, the ending of an irritating nuisance, like a fly in reach of the tail or a goat with its head in the bowl, with a taboo that isn't its taboo, which doesn't concern it, the taboo of murder? And if there is no taboo, what's left is empathy. There are no large animals that don't kill small ones out of empathy. Buddhists don't kill ants, but not because of empathy, but for religious beliefs. People mostly don't kill their pets, but that has nothing to do with empathy, it's about complex psychological and social mechanisms, identification, anthropomorphism; complicated, but harmless deviations.

An unseemly curious goat, a neighbor in a housecoat with her annoying braying, perchance the horse's friend, every morning safe and sound, unharmed. There is no explanation. There is no explanation, unless one succumbs to the myths from the melodramatic genre, about the eternal good that lives in Lassie who's coming home, just like Saint Francis of Assisi. Good isn't eternal, it's sporadic, and inexplicable. Sometimes it's a consequence of thorough breeding or successful dressage, but, unlike evil, which is reliable and transparent, almost mathematically predictable, it's mostly unexplainable. Jelena fears what she can't understand, and she can't understand horses.

The Righteous One knows nothing about people, he's completely face blind, he can't read discomfort, polite refusal, absentmindedness, he can't see where a joke ends and offense begins, he can't tell false enthusiasm from the real thing. Occasionally he's suspected of being bereft of empathy, which turns out to be unprovable and pointless every time. He knows horses, which is superior, you can live off horses. Off people too, and even their moods, but it's slippery turf you're better off not stepping into. Jelena likes to think she knows a thing or two about people. It's no exact knowledge, she's infantile, she responds to movements, to other people's energy, her nervous system is programmed much like that of a horse.