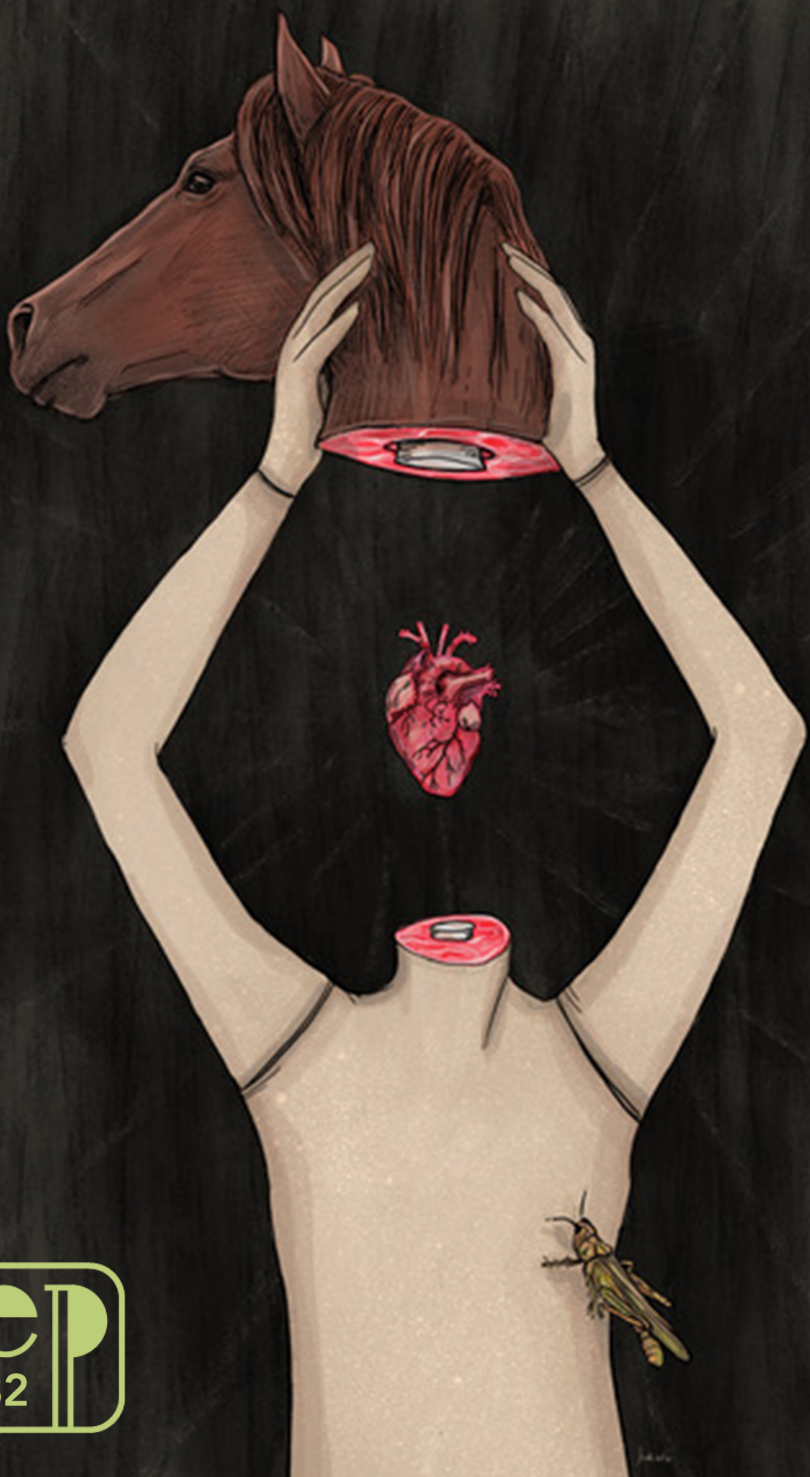


WHEN THE HORSE LIGHTS THE NIGHT JENIFER SANG EUN PARK



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#82

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

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CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	vii
WHEN THE HORSE LIGHTS THE NIGHT	1
WORKS CONSULTED	34
IMAGES & DIAGRAMS	36
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	37
AUTHOR BIO	38

INTRODUCTION



I SWALLOWED MYSELF WHOLE and turned into a knot. I couldn't undo myself, so I crawled inside a horse. Inside the horse I hardened, and then broke. The horse picked up the pieces and glued me back together. I unraveled the horse and stitched it back together. The horse trampled me and I burned through its hooves.

When the Horse Lights the Night is a poem that documents my obsessive and parasitic relationship with the horse. At one point a muse, the horse is transformed into a vessel used to travel the volatile hollows of my memory, selfhood, and loss. To make this journey, the horse mutates from an image into a companion, a projection, and a reflection which, as Wallace Stevens wrote in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," injects imagination with "the strength of reality." Presented in lyrical prose, diagrams, photos, and conceptual excerpts from imagined texts, *When the Horse Lights the Night*, pieces together a true story spurred by my tormented, pathological, and, ultimately, redemptive imagination.



WHEN THE HORSE LIGHTS THE NIGHT

In twelfth-century Kenil Cunil, the most remote part of Ulster Ireland, a king is inaugurated through the slaughter and ceremonial consumption of a mare. The appointed mare must be as white as a bleached skull. Once the mare is identified, she's led to the center of the crowd and waits for the new king to confess humility by crawling to her on all fours. By rephrasing his body, the king submits himself as a beast to another beast. After the initial transaction is complete, the white mare is cut into pieces and boiled in a large cauldron. From the stewing broth a bath is prepared for the king. The king sits in the cauldron and is served chunks of the mare's flesh. Members of the community stand around the cauldron to share the flesh with the king. Later, the king is required to drink the broth by lapping it up with his mouth. At this moment the transfer is complete.

•

Two white mares in a field, equally formidable and equally beautiful. Each contemplates: which of us will be taken for our blood and meat? Which will be good enough for the next king?

•

Horse: Do you remember the feeling of feeling?

Me: Sometimes.

H: What color are my eyes?

M: All the colors.

H: Are they beautiful?

M: No. They make me nervous.

H: When was the last time you had a good sleep?

M: It's difficult to remember.

H: It's difficult to remember.

M: It's difficult to remember.

•

I ate the horse years ago and it still hasn't left my body. A serving of horse is 28g of protein, 6g of fat, 5mg of iron, 55mg of sodium, 65mg of cholesterol, and a total of 175 calories. A serving of horse has 25% less fat, 27% less sodium, and 30% less cholesterol than ground beef. Horsemeat is low in saturated fats, rich in polysaturated fats, and proven to lower cholesterol. I watch the next horse butcher itself. And the next. The horse lives as a forever-cadaver.

•

Though previously endangered, the horse of Jeju-do, an island located in the Korea Strait, is still considered a delicacy. Due to its lean profile, the Jeju horse is more tender and flavorful when eaten raw. Once the meat is pulled from the stocky, rectangular frame, it's tossed in sesame oil for a light tartare, placed on a nub of rice, or positioned in a ring of thick slices on a decorated plate. Horsemeat, however, isn't the only use of the Jeju horse: its soul is extracted and manufactured into creams and oils for beauty products and its bones are ground up and sold as pills for the treatment of arthritis and bone diseases.

•

Ancient Patagonian Indians extract the stomach of a mare to hold a baby. Once the soft packet of human flesh enters the sinewy stomach, a spiritual osmosis occurs. Encased in the wet and still-warm envelope of her stomach, the child is imbued with the qualities of the horse. Under a more vigorous procedure, the neck, body, and legs of the horse are lassoed. Members of the tribe distribute themselves across each end of the lasso to upturn and steady the horse. As soon as the horse slows her breathing, the father of the child slits the mare from the neck down. After the heart and innards are removed, the baby is placed in the cavity. The goal is to keep the animal stuttering until the child is placed inside his secondary womb. If achieved, the Patagonian Indians believe they ensure the child's destiny as a superior horseman. The remainder of the mare is prepared for a feast and the community joins to savor the sum.

•

A 150g bottle of *Jeju Horse Bone Pills* sells for \$48.32. A 50ml container of *Jeju Horse Oil Cream* sells for \$47.90. The *Horse Oil Soothing Gel Cream* is \$12.84. And the luxurious *Jeju Horse Placenta & Oil Natural Facial Cream* is an even \$124.00. Some of us are ingenious cannibals.

•

The night before my inauguration as king of Kenil Cunil, I'll paint every white mare black. "See," I'll say when they look for the white mare. "She's gone and there are none." On inauguration day, I'll walk to the center and ask to be cut and boiled into a broth. "Cook me," I'll say, "then gather the black mares and bathe them in my soup. Feed them my flesh."

•

I learned long ago how futile it is to resist what we feel. Hence, control lies in the absence of resistance. Impatient, I waited. Silent, I spoke. Mutable, I steadied. In the wait, the horse shed two legs and slipped through a seam in the mirror. The horse became that crucial bite—the beginning of a story gone awry.

•

A chain of white mares standing in pools of black-red-black chewing.

•



A WHITE MARE WAITS.

•

The Red Horse
wears a saddle
made of my bones
slings my limp casing
over his back
takes me to a hill
rears to drop me.
My eyes fall out
& tumble
into my mouth.
He pours gasoline
over me
& lights the night.

•

In the Omak Suicide Race, horses and their riders have 50 feet to rush then sprint 500 yards down Suicide Hill, a rise grinning with a 60-degree slope. After successfully sprinting down the hill, the horse and rider must cross the Okanogan River. After this sloppy 50-yard swim, the horse and rider climb out to speed towards the finish line. Excited spectators eagerly greet the drenched and dirty survivors. Some horses fall and roll to the bottom of the hill or, unable to grasp their breath or footing, sink and disappear into the river. Other horses die during training, in practice trials, and after completing the race. Though the race began in 1935, only 21 deaths have been accounted for in the last 25 years.

•

My parents used to take us to Wyoming where we'd ride old horses along a worn path. "Wear jeans and covered shoes," I'd remind everyone. I was always the first to run out of the car. To pat the horse's face was to touch something godly.

•

Defenders of the Omak Suicide Race argue that the race is the ultimate demonstration of animal and man working in complete unity. In order to display such ostentatious athleticism, the horse and rider must fuse into a single, harmonious unit. What they fail to mention is that unity requires a loss from both parties. That the rider is the one being ridden. That the horse will die, but the rider won't. That the horse will never really die.

•

Since 1980, runners and riders on horseback have gathered to race on a scenic 22-mile stretch in Llanwrtyd Wells for the annual Man versus Horse Marathon. Though now an established event, the race began in jest. Gordon Green, a pub owner, overheard a couple patrons discussing theories of the differential endurance between the horse and man. A patron hypothesized that over a long distance, a man can beat a horse in a race. Intrigued, Green organized the first Man versus Horse Marathon. Hundreds of individuals tested their bodies against the horse. The horse, however, is known for being a particularly difficult opponent. It was on the 25th anniversary of the race that the first human, Huw Lobb, beat the horse. "Finally, finally!" the town yelled.

•

We politely followed the guide and his horse in a single line. Horse-butt to horse-head at a leisurely pace. I wanted so badly to kick the horse with my heels. To make it gallop. To feel it breathe hard under me. I was never brave enough and it'd take us a few hours to circle back to the stable. When I got off the horse I marveled at the numbness in my legs. As the car turned out of the stable, I rolled down the window to tell my horse goodbye. "Spaghetti legs, spaghetti legs," I said on our way back home. Later I would learn that bravery can come out of loss. That the horse has been galloping under me for years.

•

A camera is attached to the helmet of a rider. A young, white horse. The race begins. Whipping. Down the hill they go. Shaking, yelling. The descent. The heartbeats. They plunge into the river. Riders fall from horses. Horses twist out into the periphery. Whipping. Water on the lens. Water plugging nostrils. The horse pushes forward. Whipping. The horse climbs out. The added weight of water. The added weight of breathlessness. Whipping. They sprint. The shaking. The lens occluded by rising dust. The panting and throbbing. The strain of each push forward. The horse is not here. The horse crossed the finish line before I even started.

•

Equine self-mutilation syndrome is a condition involving an "aberrant, repeated, relatively invariable sequence of movements." An otherwise normal horse could develop a habit of biting himself from flank to shoulder to chest. Another otherwise normal horse could start shaking his head repeatedly as if to say *no no no* to whatever distresses him. This condition occurs in 15% of domesticated horses and has been associated with a variety of factors such as excitement, stress, weather changes, and the scent of poop or piss.

•

A few years ago I developed the habit of grinding my teeth. A committee would call it bruxism. My mom noticed this when we shared a hotel room in Colma. "You grind your teeth," she said as we ate breakfast. I stopped eating and looked at her. I didn't know what it sounded like so I looked it up. A woman recorded her husband grinding his teeth in his sleep. It is the worst sound a human can make.

•

I sit in front of a building and watch who opens the door for strangers. "She is nice," I say, when she extends her arm to keep the door open for a stranger. She is not a horse. "He is nice," I say, when he opens the door for others before he walks in. He is not a horse. I can't stop.

•

Colma, a short BART ride from San Francisco, is popularly known as the "City of Souls." With most of its land dedicated to cemeteries, the population of the dead exceeds the town's living population. I know exactly what it feels like to live amongst the dead. My job is to talk to the dead. My job is to undo the living.

•



MOM HORSE.

•

Major was a horse tired of life. For Major, his inclination for self-mutilation evolved into attempts to end. From the railway, a dead lighthouse. Past the billets of azaleas, the trestle bridge. Here, Major attempted for the first time. Though he understood the physics of falling, he tripped and caught his hind legs on the trestle's latticework. He hung like a hinged apple until someone saw the black mass curling and uncurling like a beckoning finger. It took two hours to lower Major into the river and return him to his stall.

•

Sometimes, I hear so many hooves, I lose my way back home.

•

Major tried again. He was found in his stall with his halter wound around his throat. He was half-dead with a wrecked blood vessel in his neck. They brought him back again. To leave and be brought back is considered to be lucky. Luck is nothing but an empty canteen in a winding trail of escapes and returns.

•

There are no known causes for bruxism, but many cite stress as a factor. "Did I grind my teeth last night?" I ask my partner. "Was it bad?" I try to do it when I'm awake and I fail. The pressure required to mill molars against each other for even the slightest audibility is too difficult to reenact. In my teeth is a city of souls, scratching to escape and neigh. I floss out bones and watch histories trample out. I ate too many horses on my way here.

•

In a photo, the body of a horse with a malignant tumor is cut for wolf feed. Hung from the neck, the body hangs on a scaffold of three wooden poles peaked into a tripod. The horse's rigid head faces west. A bloated tongue limps out of his mouth. Behind the hanging horse is a parched tree and behind this tree is a ditched school bus. Below, a man wearing glasses, a brown tank top, and a pair of light jeans, hole at the knee, bends to strip the meat from the hindquarters. Beside him, a wooden box where the cuts of meat will be preserved. The mane cascades the same shade of dusty blonde as the man's ponytail. If the photo were cropped it'd be a still of a rearing stallion. The horse's eyes are shut for the pleasure of being carved for another animal.

•

I split my own body to carry the horse inside me. I lasso my appendages and stretch them unto stakes. I pull the blade from my neck down. I see my cavity stuttering. For each inhalation I blame myself.

•



REARING.

•

The man carving meat from the horse for his wolves doesn't know that what hangs above him is the horse of him hanging. You can see other versions of the self if the mirror is used properly.

•



FEED.

•

H: What did you do today?

M: I sat in front of my bowl of oatmeal & thought of burning you.

H: Do you think I want this?

M: No.

H: What are my bones made of?

M: An alphabet that hates me.

H: You made me like this.

M: You made me like this.

•

According to Korean superstition, a “weak” person is more likely to be inhabited by a spirit than a person of “stronger character.” And in Korean, 말, pronounced “mahl,” means horse. 말 also means “word,” “speech,” and “utterance.” This is some kind of destiny.

•

I crushed hard in the beginning. The horse was an answer to each prompt. In the horse’s body, I saw the possibilities of my own body. In the horse’s past, I saw my own past. The horse understood me and I wanted to share this oblivion. There was no human to share it with. I shared a mirror with the horse.

•

Some explanations:

1. I just think horses are cool.
2. I was tired of seeing the sky in your eyes.
3. At the end there was a question mark.
4. I got lost on my way home.
5. The mirror needed fixing.
6. Because the past is more uncertain than the future.
7. My body is too small for my body.
8. No other mask seemed to fit.
9. I was jealous.
10. I shit my heart out & needed a replacement.
11. I was playing the longest game of hide-n-seek.
12. I came upon a fortress & the door was locked.
13. I was experimenting with renewable energy sources.
14. My grandma is a horse.
15. My horse is not my grandma.
16. I am the Judas horse.

•

Like the horse's reflection, Reiter Mahl dissolves and vanishes into the eye. Mahl is known to be the most mysterious and evasive equine enthusiast, historian, and researcher of this century. In his most personal work, *As a Rider*, Mahl recounts his childhood spent on a ranch. Though this work opens a private door to Mahl's extensive knowledge on equine matters, he does not provide the name of the ranch or any other identifying locators. Nor does he provide any names except the names of his favorite horses, Anastasia and Sandman. And though there are no records of his date of birth or location of birth, it is widely believed that Mahl is still alive and still sharing his work. In most cases, it's the horse inside us that keeps us alive.

•

A friend asks if I want to see a horse. "She has a horse at her ranch. We can drive up there anytime." With false exuberance, I say, "Yes, of course!" I reply in the way the obsession taught me. This meeting will never happen. "Not today. I'm not feeling well." Or, "Maybe this weekend? I have work to do." I'm afraid of looking into the horse's eyes and finding in that single gaze the meaning of hatred and love at once.

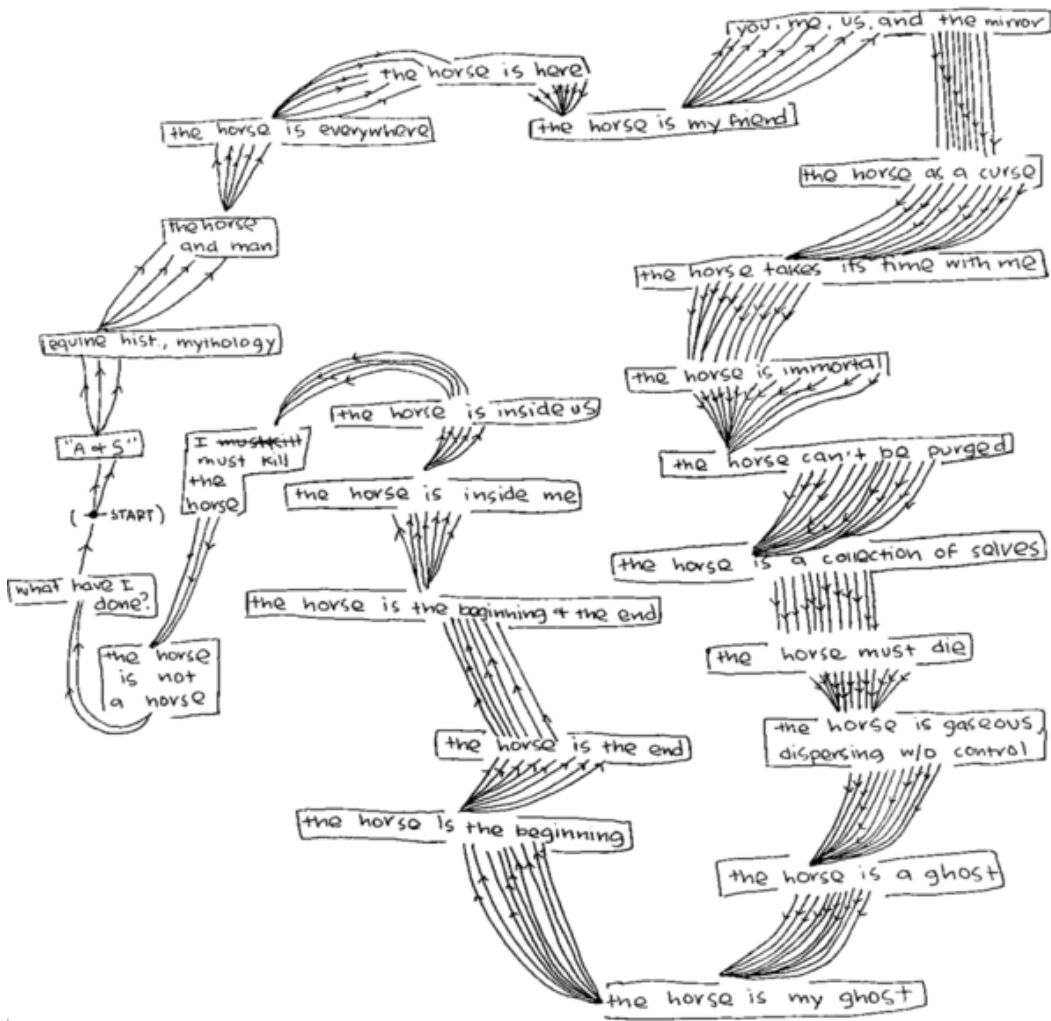
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I have correspondents, though I call them my horse angels. You trip and tell your friends, colleagues, and family, "I've fallen in love with the horse. It's all I can think and write about." This is when people give you things imprinted with the horse—a book, a mug, a poster, a sticker, a shot glass, a stuffed horse, etc.—you accept them and say, "Thank you, thank you!" This is when you go to the thrift shop and buy an ill-fitting T-shirt with a mule on it. This is when you buy a contraption that when affixed to your bicycle will mimic the sound of a trotting horse. And when it never arrives, you complain only minimally and check the mailbox periodically. This is when a friend, in an attempt to cheer you up, agrees to take you to a ranch in the middle of the night because "there are horses" and you shrug. Each gift is another device for torture.

•

The Red Horse
doesn't sleep
in a stall
or a bed
but in a shoebox
& the spine
of a book
or me.

•



A TIMELINE.

I put on a white coat and diagnose myself with made-up maladies. I'm concerned with speaking procedurally and matter-of-factly. To be a doctor means to have the intent to heal. This puts me on the other side of the mirror. What I see is both enough and emptying. I assign myself symptoms of Critical Obsession, Sympathetic Spontaneous Combustion, Latent Retrieval Learning, Death Dissonance, and Para-Psyche. I give myself these things because it makes me sick with comprehension.

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Horse horse horse

A critical obsession is one that endures long enough to change the individual's core perception values. This infection can be felt immediately and explicitly, or slowly and implicitly. There are countless ways an obsession infects the consciousness of an individual, but immediate attention should be paid to the initial implosion. Though variations also exist within these parameters, the onset of a critical obsession is evident in a momentous implosion that viscerally conflicts with the self. This implosion primarily affects the individual's emotional-motor skills, present-tense cognition, and reality-perception. The implosion seeps deeply and thoroughly, much like an exodus of locusts.

To think of the horse beyond one's normal responsibilities is, according to some subjects, a "curse." All processed subjects later perceive

this "curse" as a self-inflicted, necessary event for their completion. To highlight this phenomenon is an excerpt from a testimony completed by our core subject approximately mid-process:

It isn't possible to be simple. Sandman, when I met you I was hiding under a cloak. I was unhappy and you were there to meet me for coffee and scones at a café I've never heard of before. We had the same assignment. I wrote in front of you and later, for you. I made *Anastasia*. *Anastasia was real. She was pulled apart by tractors. She drowned herself. She starved herself. .22 caliber to the head.* I make it all up so I can be made. Killing her was necessary. I grey the want and need.

I didn't mean to hurt you if that's what you're thinking. I'm too "something-something" for that.

Sometimes, it's easy to see Anastasia on a hill enjoying the shade of a large tree. She's quiet and still. I don't even know what she looks like in motion. But you, Sandman, you're different. You're always moving. I scroll into the future and find you mid-sentence. I turn to see if you're behind me. You're not there. You used to be. You used To Be. I face forward only to see you on a horizon so far my eyes water from the strain of searching. I forget what I'm doing. Anastasia respected me because she was me. You, Sandman, are the tractors. Gasoline and metal. I wrote so you could kill me or I wrote in the killing of

The Red Horse
drinks whiskey
out of Styrofoam cups
gets high
into the night
sings me songs
I can't untie
combs my hair
until it falls out
tells me I'm the ugliest
thing he's ever seen
tells me I'm the most
beautiful when I'm wrong
is the finger
I put in my mouth
when I bend over
the toilet.

Tommy Burns, or Timmy Robert Ray, killed horses for a living. He was one of the best in the business. When he made his round in the circuits, spectators would mutter, "Shh, the Sandman's coming. Shh, the Sandman's here." In each racehorse and show horse is a titan holding a bag of money called "insurance." Sandman the Man killed racehorses to help owners collect the sum. He charged \$5,000 for 10 minutes of work. In 10 years, he knocked more than a dozen horses with his method of choice, death by electrocution. A split electrical cord rigged with alligator clips. One clip to the anus and another to an ear. Once the clips were affixed, he stood back and plugged in the cord. In a single spastic moment the racehorse would drop dead. To ensure the collection of insurance, the horse must be pronounced dead by accident or illness. Electrocution is particularly effective because it can be disguised as colic in an autopsy. Electrocution is quick and clean. Electrocution is a hush, hushed further by paperwork. "Shhh, the Sandman's coming. Shhh, the Sandman's here. He's here."

...two days before Anastasia leapt from the cliff to drown I brought water to her in a large ceramic bowl. The bowl, covered in tiny poppies lazily & haphazardly painted, was part of a china set purchased from an older woman three miles east of the ranch. When I held the bowl under her mouth I suddenly became very thirsty. Anastasia stopped, leaving me a cupful of water. I tilted the bowl & drank. She nuzzled me though she knew two days later she'd jump from the cliff because she was still thirsty.

-R. M., *As a Rider*

Sandman the Man excelled in the business of killing because he knew no racehorse knows the smell of money. No racehorse knows their estimated stud fee or the extent of their racing career earnings. It was easy to do work that didn't need to be explained. To Sandman the Man, it was all about money. Put the horse to sleep and collect. Put the horse to sleep and collect. This horse. Then that horse. Then this horse. And another.

•

Sandman the Man was caught on the stormy night of the Streetwise attempt. He was ordered to break the leg of Streetwise, a show jumper, in order to corroborate the following story for the insurance claim: "Streetwise slipped in the rain and broke his leg. He was in so much pain, he had to be euthanized." While Sandman the Man steadied Streetwise, his assistant, Harlow Arlie, swung a crowbar to break the horse's right leg. The leg snapped, and in shock, Streetwise ran out of the stable. Sandman the Man and Mr. Arlie desperately trailed behind Streetwise calling his name, half-concerned for the job and half-concerned for the horse. Local officials were notified of a possible Sandman the Man killing and were in the vicinity of the stable. Sandman the Man was caught. In most reports, Sandman the Man expresses guilt and remorse. In other reports, he is just a man trying to make a living. In fewer reports, he is depicted as a charming, likeable man who grew up poor, ran away at 15, saved enough to buy a Cadillac, rescued a three-legged cat, and took care of three dogs.

•

I met with a psychiatrist a few times. She was interested enough. She provided scientific explanations. This was what I wanted. Pragmatism in a stampede of abstractions. She told me about spectrums, bodily deficiencies, and genetics. She told me her husband is a history professor and that he presented something on Sylvia Plath. She told me about writers and depression. I did not turn my psychiatrist into a horse. She became a horseshoe I threw into the sea.

•

Interested in the peculiarities of equinophobia, I imagined the life of a boy named George. George has periodic nightmares of horses trampling his body. After school, George masturbates to the children's cartoon *My Little Pony*. When he's 26 he'll kill himself.

•

Sandman the Man meets Sandman the Horse. Sandman the Horse takes Sandman the Man up a hill. Sandman the Horse rears. Sandman the Man feels Sandman the Horse's body tighten under him. Sandman the Man holds on though he doesn't know where they're going. I know exactly where they're going. They gallop away. Am I guiltier than Sandman the Man? Is it because I won't let the horse die? Who is the greater beast of burden?

•

The Red Horse
follows me to the clinic.
I follow him out.

•

In the Wikipedia entry for "Equinophobia," Kansas City Chiefs safety Eric Berry is the first name listed under "notable people suffering from equinophobia." Berry has been recorded multiple times vocalizing, and sometimes reacting physically to, his fear of Warpaint, the Chiefs' mascot. After each home game touchdown, Warpaint takes a victory lap around the field with his rider, Susie. "I don't fuck with that horse," Berry says pacing nervously on the sidelines. In a brief NFL Films documentary, Berry admits he was not averse to horses until he realized actual horses are unlike the fanciful renditions caricatured in My Little Pony. Owing to this realization and having been emotionally bludgeoned by an unfortunate incident at a petting zoo, Berry developed equinophobia.

•

"Do you have a history of self-harm? When was the last time you thought about these things?" What I want to explain to the committee is that there's no time. More specifically, in here, there's no time. Instead, I move away from the truth. I loosen myself for the presentation. I smile. She gives me material. A brochure. A chart. A drawing. I stuff them into my bag and smile again. Don't you understand that I know all of this? Don't you understand that I'll use this as fodder for the fire? Don't you understand I'm in danger? I see her doing this a few times a day. I see her making more copies. I see her filling the manila folder with more brochures, more charts, more drawings. This is her job. We all have jobs.

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IMAGES & DIAGRAMS



The rearing / hanging horse was taken by Josh Brooks.

All other images were taken by myself or are photos I found in miscellaneous personal reserves.

The timeline was invented by the horse in me who has a crucial eye for order.

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AUTHOR BIO



Jenifer Sang Eun Park completed her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. Her work can be seen in *Perversion Magazine*, *Dreginald*, *storySouth*, *Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches at the University of Alabama and the University of Montevallo.

