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Horse Latitudes

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Horse Latitudes

Abstract

The worst month of my life was spent in an unairconditioned hotel room in Kairouan, Tunisia, September 1989. I had no friends and no money, an unfinished Master's thesis hanging over my head, and a case of dysentery so bad I might have died had the hotel staff not forced me to drink cup after cup of salted rice water. Throughout my weeks-long illness, I could hear the sounds of horse-drawn carts echoing in the cobblestone streets just beneath my window. *Clippity clop, clippity clop, clippity clop . . .* Sometimes, when a cart was parked directly in front of the hotel, I could hear the horse snort or shift in its traces. These sounds, so otherworldly and yet so familiar, never failed to comfort me. Gradually the desire to get well again got mixed up in my mind with the need to stroke the withers of these animals which I could hear but not see. *The horses*, I would murmur in my delirium, *I've got to get down to the horses . . .* Entire days were spent in this hallucinatory state.

Keywords

horses, food, ride, species, difference



July 6, 2012

Horse Latitudes

An Essay by Robert Rebein

A canter is a cure for every evil. –Benjamin Disraeli

The worst month of my life was spent in an unairconditioned hotel room in Kairouan, Tunisia, September 1989. I had no friends and no money, an unfinished Master's thesis hanging over my head, and a case of dysentery so bad I might have died had the hotel staff not forced me to drink cup after cup of salted rice water. Throughout my weeks-long illness, I could hear the sounds of horse-drawn carts echoing in the cobblestone streets just beneath my window. *Clippity clop, clippity clop, clippity clop . . .* Sometimes, when a cart was parked directly in front of the hotel, I could hear the horse snort or shift in its traces. These sounds, so otherworldly and yet so familiar, never failed to comfort me. Gradually the desire to get well again got mixed up in my mind with the need to stroke the withers of these animals which I could hear but not see. *The horses*, I would murmur in my delirium, *I've got to get down to the horses . . .* Entire days were spent in this hallucinatory state.

When finally I recovered enough to leave the hotel, I descended the stairs on wobbly legs and stood in the intense sunlight of the Place des Martyrs, waiting for one of my phantom horses to appear. At last one did, staggering to the curb before a two-wheeled cart loaded with onions. The animal was little more than skin and bones, its rump covered in open wounds from where the driver, a boy of twelve or thirteen, had whacked it with a length of splintered wood. Ignoring the driver's shouts to keep my distance, I stepped into the street and rubbed the poor animal along its neck and ears,

understanding for the first time how it was that Nietzsche was driven to insanity by the sight of a horse being beaten on a public street.

“Les cheveaux sont . . . la plus noble des creatures,” I scolded the boy in halting French. “This one deserves far better treatment than he’s getting from you.”

“He’s old,” the boy replied, shrugging.

“If I give you money,” I asked, “will you feed him a little grain tonight?”

“His teeth are very bad,” the boy answered, holding out his hand. “But give me the money anyway, and I’ll try.”

Digging in my pocket, I came up with a five dinar note, the last of the money I had changed after arriving in Tunis from London. “Here, take it,” I said, “and remember . . .”

“La plus noble, oui,” the boy said. “I know, I know . . .”

Days to come, as my strength returned and I took on a full teaching schedule at a university in the suburbs, I made sure to bring a carrot or potato with me whenever I passed through the Place des Martyrs. Before long all of the cart drivers knew me. “Here he comes!” they would shout. “The crazy English who feeds the horses!”

They meant the name derisively, but that’s not the way I took it. As far as I was concerned, those run-down horses they beat so mercilessly had all but saved my life.

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Horses evolved on the plains of North America some 45 to 55 million years ago. Starting out as beagle-sized, multi-toed creatures inhabiting a damp, primeval world, they changed along with their environment until they became the fleet, long-necked, single-toed animals we know today. By contrast, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, today's human beings, are relative Johnny Come Latelies, having emerged from the evolutionary record only about 50,000 years ago.

Around 9,000 BC, horses spread from North America to Asia, Europe, and finally to Africa. Not long after this, the land bridge across the Bering Strait disappeared under the melting ice pack, leaving the horses of North America isolated on a changing continent. Within a thousand years, they slipped into extinction along with the sloth and the mastadon, not to return until the Spanish brought them on ships in the early 16th century.

According to tradition, the first horses to return to the New World were the sixteen that Cortes unloaded at Vera Cruz in 1519, of which eight were said to be bay or sorrel, three gray, two brown, one black, and two piebald or paint. More breeding stock arrived soon after, and by 1541, the conquistador Francisco Vasquez de Coronado had little trouble rounding up fifteen hundred horses for his expedition to what would later be New Mexico and Kansas.

The spread of horses across the plains proceeded rapidly. In 1719, the French explorer Du Tisne reported to his superiors in Louisiana that the Wichita Indians, who had never

seen a horse before Coronado appeared among them in 1541, owned upwards of three hundred of the animals which “they esteem[ed] greatly” and with which they would not part for any price. A hundred years later, the American explorer Stephen H. Long put the number of horses owned by the Pawnee at somewhere between 6,000 and 8,000 head, or roughly four horses for every warrior in the tribe.

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The flyer said FREE RIDING LESSONS and featured a picture of a horse jumping a tall hedgerow. It was November 1986, and I was in my first semester as an exchange student at Essex University in Colchester, England. In those days, Colchester was a grim, wet garrison town ninety kilometers up the A12 from London. The place smelled of fried fish, unemployment ran into the double digits, and most nights the pubs were overrun with drunken soldiers, skin heads, and heroin-addicted punks. Needless to say, this was not the picture of England I'd had in mind when I left my home on the plains of Kansas to seek adventure abroad.

The same day I spotted the flyer, I walked two miles in drizzling rain to meet the owner of the stable, an angular, middle-aged woman named Jane or Elizabeth (I forget which) whose tangled, gray-at-the-roots hair and filthy barn coat announced confidently to the world, "I am the sort of person who has ceased to give a damn about anything but horses."

"So you're a Yank," Jane observed, looking me up and down. "Ever mucked out a stable?"

I shook my head. "I've done farm work since I was a kid, though."

"Splendid," she said, showing me a mouthful of tobacco-stained teeth.

I spent the next hour shoveling horseshit into a wheelbarrow and hauling it up a muddy

hill to a field behind the main barn. When I finished, Jane saddled one of the lesson horses, an ancient gray gelding, and led him into a large hilltop arena. There Jane's eyes narrowed, her manner stiffened visibly, and her voice took on an abrupt, almost angry quality. "No, no, no!" she barked when I stuck my muddy boot into the left stirrup, preparing to mount. "That's not how we do it. We face the *back* of the horse. I thought you said you'd ridden before."

"I have, " I said. "Western."

"Well, no wonder," Jane said.

Once she had shown me the proper way to mount a horse, Jane went on to demonstrate the correct method of sitting an English saddle. The whole thing felt pompous and stiff and was nothing at all like what I was used to. "We are not rounding up *doggies* on some Texan cattle station," Jane announced. "Neither are we preparing to *hurl* a lariat. We are *riding*. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I answered through gritted teeth.

At this, she hooked a lunge line to the side of the horse's halter and stepped back twenty feet into the middle of the arena.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Preparing to lunge the horse, of course."

"But I thought I was going to ride."

"You are, yes. But first we must do something about your dreadful posture. Now, *straighten* your back and get your *heels* in line with your *hips*. You're slouching!"

And so it went. Week after week, I mucked stables for free, and in return Jane did everything in her power to kill off any joy it was possible to feel while riding. She'd have made an excellent ballet or piano teacher. "Goodness, your hands!" she'd cry out as I rode in circles at the end of her long leash. "I have seven year olds who hold their hands more even than that! Heels down! Toes up!" Hearing this, I'd be seized by a desire to run her down where she stood in the middle of the arena. That accomplished, I'd jump the arena fence and be gone into the countryside beyond.

I did none of this, of course. Instead, I joined the campus saddle club, whose stock-in-

trade was large trail rides deep into the neighboring moors. It was on one such ride that I witnessed something that reminded me what it was that had drawn me to riding in the first place. We were stopped at a country crossroads, and had been ordered to hold our horses so that a group of fox hunters could ride through at a trot. Here they came, one after the other, all of them posting leisurely in time with their horses. It was a pleasing sight, albeit nothing to write home about. Then, just as we were preparing to resume our own ride, a final member of their group, an older, jockey-like man with a white pencil mustache came barreling past us at a dead run. Whereas all of the other riders had skirted the hedgerow that lined the road where we had stopped, the old man went right over it, his body rising in unison with the horse, so that the two of them, rider and horse, appeared not just to glide over the hedge, but rather to *fly*.

That was twenty-five years ago. I still wake some mornings dreaming about it.

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Horses are a precocial species, which is to say they are capable of standing and running within a short time after birth. Man is the opposite, an altricial species. Years after birth, he is still dependent on others to carry, feed, and protect him from harm.

Horses have the largest eyes of any land mammal, providing a range of vision greater than 350 degrees. Their ears rotate up to 180 degrees, allowing them to hear in all directions without having to move their heads. By contrast, man strains to see what is directly before him and is often fatally deaf to all sounds but those that please him.

Horses walk at four miles an hour, trot at eight miles an hour, and gallop at twenty-five to thirty miles an hour. They can sleep standing up or lying down, and require only an hour or two of REM sleep every few days to meet their minimum requirements. Man, meanwhile, hesitates to walk a city block under his own power and requires 14-16 hours of REM sleep per week just to stave off idiocy.

Horses are prey animals, evolved over millions of years to survive by dint of attentiveness and flight. Man is a predator. Whenever a prey animal catches his attention, his deepest instinct is to hunt it down and eat it.

Given these differences, can the mysterious partnership that developed between horses and men over the centuries be viewed as anything other than a miracle?

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In the years I was growing up there, the grasslands surrounding Dodge City, Kansas were a regular Mecca for horses, many of them worthless and rarely ridden. My cousin-in-law Kim Goodnight owned a couple of such animals on his and my cousin Beth's farmstead north of Dodge City. It was there, under Kim's tutelage, that I had my first riding lesson, a five-minute affair which consisted of the transmission of three basic rules or ideas: (1) kick the horse to go, (2) pull back on the reins to stop, and (3) if you should happen to fall off, pick a soft place to land. "Think you can handle that?" Kim asked.

I nodded, full of a teenager's brash confidence.

"Good. Let's get you introduced to Jack."

Jack was a thirteen-year-old paint gelding that shared a five-acre pasture with another of Kim's horses, a fat grulla mare whose name I've forgotten. "You'll find that Jack's barn sour and a little mulish but otherwise bulletproof," Kim remarked as we saddled him up.

"Bulletproof?" I asked.

"Easy to catch, and he doesn't buck, bite, or kick. Those are traits you'll come to appreciate, if you keep riding."

“What about the mare?” I asked, nodding at Jack’s pasture mate.

“Whole different ball game,” Kim said, giving Jack’s front cinch one last tug before climbing aboard his John Deere and disappearing into a nearby milo field.

I had been anticipating this moment for a while by then, and my expectations could not have been higher. I expected to ride hard and go fast, while at the same time maintaining a Zen-like balance and poise—all movements in sync, no separation at all between thought and action, no *effort* at all, just a transcendent, gliding motion, like an eagle soaring above a bottomless canyon.

Jack, however, had other ideas. No sooner did I climb into the saddle and try to ride away from the barn than he locked his legs at the knee and refused to budge. I moved my hips back and forth and prodded him in the ribs with the heels of my Converse All Stars. “Hey now!” I yelled. “Get going! Ha!” In response to this, Jack pivoted on his back feet and turned to face the barn, as if to say, “*That’s* the only direction I intend on going.”

So much for soaring like an eagle, I thought.

In the barn, I found a two-foot length of nylon rope with a hondo tied into the end of it. Applying this improvised whip to Jack’s backside, I managed a painfully slow zig-zag across the pasture. The trip lasted five minutes and took far more out of me than it did out of Jack. However, a reward of sorts awaited at the far end of the pasture, for no sooner did I turn Jack around to face the barn than he took off in a bone-jarring trot, holding the gait without further bidding until he fetched up before the barn door, where the fight to get him to go commenced all over again. In this herky-jerky way, like a sailboat tacking into a strong headwind, then turning to glide freely and with full sail, I managed to cross the pasture a dozen times in the space of an hour—not exactly a stellar showing, given all the work that was required of me to make it happen.

Even so, I was hooked. I loved Jack, loved the staccato feel of his movements beneath me, the way his feet hit the ground in such steady and reliable rhythm, four beats at a walk, two at a trot, three at lope (if you could get him to lope—not an easy proposition). I loved the way his ears moved to indicate where he was looking, the way he rolled on the ground like a big dog when the saddle was taken off, the sucking noises he made when drinking from the water trough. Young as I was, I felt that I was discovering all of this for the first time. No one before me, not the Plains Indians, nor the nomads who rode with Genghis Khan, nor even the knights of the fabled Round Table had ever noticed or experienced any of these things. Two or three times a week, more often in the summer, I made the trek out to Kim and Beth’s place to ride, at first

limiting myself to the five-acre pasture, but then venturing farther and farther afield.

Then Jack ate some bad grain, bloated like a hippo, and died. The news devastated me. Every time I saw a paint horse in a pasture somewhere my eyes would well up and I would cry. This period of mourning lasted a week, maybe two. Then I got on my Suzuki and rode back out to my cousin's place.

I saw the grulla mare standing in the far corner of the pasture as I turned into the gravel driveway. She lifted her blue head from where she was grazing and looked at me steadily, as though sizing me up. I knew from talking to Kim that riding this horse would be nothing at all like riding Jack. Whereas Jack was mulish but predictable, the mare was responsive and quick, but also prone to sudden explosions of cantankerous ill temper. Even so, I figured to give riding her a shot. If nothing else, getting kicked or bit would give me something else to think about than Jack's sudden demise.

I caught the horse, snubbed her to a post, and threw a blanket and saddle on. Choosing a curbed bit with some stopping power should I need it, I led the mare into the pasture and climbed on. No sooner had my butt hit the saddle than the horse took off at a gallop, slowing only to throw in a buck every ten yards or so. Holding the reins in one hand, I gripped the saddle horn with the other and held on for dear life. From the corner of the pasture, I could hear Kim yelling, "Turn her! Put her in a circle, for Christ's sake!" I did as I was told, and yet still the mare ran, nostrils dilated, hooves pounding. For more than twenty minutes she kept it up. After a while, I loosened my hand on the saddle horn; then I let go of it altogether. I stopped pulling back on the reins and let the mare have her head completely, concentrating instead on matching my rhythm with hers. By the time she ran down to a trot, and finally to a walk, I felt like a switch of some sort had been thrown in my brain. *So this is what it means to ride*, I thought. *This is what it's supposed to feel like . . .*

Later that same day, the mare would buck me off the back of the saddle and dropkick me halfway across the gravel lot in front of the barn, but not even that could dampen my growing enthusiasm.

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Horses were first domesticated on the steppes of Eurasia sometime around 4000BC. Fossil records from the period tell the story. Horse teeth begin to display the wear and tear associated with the use of bits. Human economies and settlement practices show signs of a rapid increase in mobility. The horse becomes a symbol of power in prehistoric art. Horse bones begin to appear in human graves.

Taken together, these changes suggest a much larger transformation, one similar to what occurred on the plains of North America in the late 17th Century. The Cheyenne prophet Sweet Medicine explained the arrival of the horse in apocalyptic terms. Buffalo would disappear from the earth, and beef cattle would arrive to take their place, but between these twinned disasters, a third animal would appear, one with a “shaggy neck and a tail almost touching the ground” whose purpose was to help the tribe to find their way in the world. “Those far hills that seem only a blue vision in the distance take many days to reach,” Sweet Medicine said, “but with this animal you can get there in a short time, so fear him not.”

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I was standing on the windblown deck of the American Legion pool when the girl rode in. In those days, a dilapidated white building, the sort of multi-story monstrosity you'd expect to encounter in the back streets of Saigon or Beirut, rose up on the west side of the pool, and it was across this building's ruined courtyard that the girl rode, bareback, her long legs dangling, left hand loosely encircling a hunk of mane. What a sight she was! Nymph-like and beautiful, perhaps fifteen years old (which to me was *old*, seeing as I was nine or ten), the girl rode the horse with the quiet competence and nonchalance of someone who had been born on horseback.

I remember standing there, the dry Kansas wind raising gooseflesh up and down my arms and legs, as the girl collected the horse beneath her and spun him in a circle, first to the left, and then to the right, directing these balletic movements with nothing more than the pressure of her bare heels in the horse's ribs. No other part of her moved—not her head, which she held high between her shoulders, nor her back or hands.

Witnessing this, in the moments before the lifeguard came down from his chair to run her out of there, I remember thinking, *How is it possible that something this beautiful and profound has existed all my life, and I knew nothing about it?*

But it wasn't the girl alone that provoked this response in me. Nor was it the horse, a run-of-the-mill, aging gelding such as populated pastures for miles in every direction. Rather it was the two of them together, rider and horse, the way they seemed to meld into each other joint and limb to form a completely new animal, an animal far more perfect and complete than either could have been without the aid of the other. The horse completed the girl, and the girl completed the horse. Seeing them together like that, I

wanted them never to part.

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When I arrived home from North Africa in the summer of 1990, I weighed a little over 153 pounds—twenty-five pounds lighter than what I had weighed as a skinny defensive back on my high school football team. My mother took one look at me and asked, “Lord God, what have they done to you?”

“Nothing that a little home cooking won’t fix,” I joked, trying to sound upbeat. In truth, I felt cynical, depleted, world-weary, and sad. I was like one of those now-mythical Vietnam vets who had the misfortune of being transported from battlefield to airport-filled-with-protesters to backyard barbeque, all within the space of forty-eight hours. Though I was glad to be home, it was going to take a while before I regained a sense of balance and equilibrium in the world. The feeling was, maybe I never would.

In search of a cure, I jumped on my motorcycle and rode out to the fifteen hundred acre cattle ranch my father had traded for while I was off experiencing other latitudes. Topping the last hill before the ranch, I slowed the bike carefully on the sand road and paused to look down into the valley below. A tree-lined creek snaked through the middle of the property, splitting the ranch in half. On the north side of the creek, a herd of white cows grazed alongside their newborn calves. On the south side, a half mile from where I stopped to look down, a pair of horses grazed in the middle of a smaller, rockier pasture.

At first the horses stood stock still, watching me. But as I neared the gate, they came running across the pasture, front hooves reaching out before them, long tails flowing

behind like kite tails. Seeing them, I felt my heart rise up in my chest. And by the time the horses fetched up before the gate in a swirling cloud of dust, I was already there to greet them, my hand already reaching into my coat pocket for the apple halves I had stowed away there.

Robert Rebein is the author of *Hicks, Tribes, & Dirty Realists* (University of Kentucky Press, 2009) and of the forthcoming essay collection *Dragging Wyatt Earp*, of which "Horse Latitudes" is a part. He teaches creative writing and directs the English MA program at IUPUI.

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