

*Catharines' Horses*

*Reflections*

*on the*

*History*

*of a*

*Life Spent*

*in the*

*Midst of Kingdoms*

In aged solitude, destitute in a kitchen bare, barely robed in a freezing apartment filled with the fewest pans, plates, cups, a small oval table with one chair, memories visit me in my enclave called “bed.” Cold, I pull up my quilt, desiring to luxuriate myself as a babe inside a womb. Yet, all I can do is stare at the emptiness, at the reality of my surroundings. When, I wonder, did I age to exist in a plight never dreamed of happening to me. In youthful pride I jumped the high picket fences surrounding my house, climbed the tallest trees, outran the fastest boys. Now, my inability to jump and holler and dash off into a meadow, steal from me youthful dreams, leaving me to ponder delusional tomorrows.

In this existence of today I reside impregnated with forlorn images of a life once filled with pastures where lustrous red-brown bay horses fed, golden palominos pranced—and sometimes reared. The stance, staunch; the rise of the head, majestic; the bend, as though a prince asking his princess for a dance. The clouds drift by with an invitation to voyage into the deep watery moon—such images are my rejuvenation.

The neighing, the nickers, the snorts a cacophony symphony performed by the grand, multi-ranged talents of the horses reside forever in my memories. Call me out of my bed, I beg, for one final ride through the canyon, atop the ridge, through the oaks and hickory trees. My long hair flows back, settling on my shoulders. The kiss of time given to me, wants its breath returned.

In old age, with gray hair, legs weakened, knees failing, I am absent from the field that once occupied every fiber of my being. The scent of the grass. The motion of the leaves fluttering upon sturdy brown branches—the leaves’ first appearance barely discernible until they blossomed, their form and beauty occupying the height of the trees which rest underneath white and gray clouds, depending on the season.

Fields and pastures stretched before me each morning of my youth,

middle age, and even now, aged as I may be, I long to reach to the stars to drift amidst constellations of joy where the human spirit merges with the Creator's. Disenchantment wakes me to the reality of the condition of my life wherein the time finally came upon me when I had no choice but to walk away from my pastures of a life fulfilled to live in a dimly small enclave, this apartment of near subtraction from everything I once loved and cherished.

Whenever I feel strong enough to drive to once-owned fields, I see an interwoven fence erected from white planks which locks me out from venturing to gaze upon what had belonged to me in a time fanciful adorned with precious memories. What was mine, belongs to another.

The angle-roofed barn which my husband and I spent countless hours laboriously keeping it in shape has now shut its red doors tight to my visitation. Its once welcoming steeple seen from afar, is now a waste of bright invitations. Nevertheless, what power on earth can take away from me times spent among my noble friends, my horses, an ancient power to be reckoned with? Intense images wake my mind with a motion of performance, horses rearing up, horses glancing near the blue lake, horses underneath an expanding tree of comfort, tribes of elegance hypnotizing at once whoever stops to catch a glance, eternally remembered.

These reflections of wonder I first encountered when I was a child held in mama's tender arms who stood in a daze of gratitude in an endless field bordering the Missouri River.

I know full well the histories of the horses' ancestors who became my friends, my protectors, my companions, the contributors to traits and talents enforced through acquaintance first as a child, then ingrained into my personality characteristics as an adult.

Every evening, before I fell asleep, I journeyed to the door that unlocked into beautiful fields. Standing as if bathed by a mystical nuance, I watched the blackened trees as I listened to the wind. I could never view long enough or hear clearly enough all the sounds I found so essential to my life. Never tired, I went to my bedroom to read colorful, illustrated, books of the companions I longed for, my horses impossible to bequeath to anyone living, for none, save one, shared my love for my horses as much as I. While talking to my nephew, Walter, together we captured my memories that contain volumes of pictorial histories of a fascinating fantasy of a world I never wanted to leave. The glimpses and words held steadfast in my youthful mind through the veiled candlelit nights.

To wake is a cruelty, but the dream, the dream is the motivator to capture in life a reality of worth.

We began when I was six years old. During the daylight hours, after swiftly-cooked eggs, ham, and biscuits, and after my long walk to reach school, I couldn't wait for the recess bell to dismiss us from math and science. My journey to the library, my favorite room, my cherished pastime, seemed as a hallow church where rested shelves of books, my treasure haven guarding tales tall and true. I, alone, among the dozen or so students, dared to speak among the hushed occupants, not quieting until the librarian found for me my coveted stories of gallant heroes racing their horses into battle against great odds. I longed to read stories of lovers discovering a quiet place set within a green, flower filled forest, both staring deeply into each other's eyes atop the silent, understanding horses. I sigh with deep satisfaction at those youthful years, innocent years that created in me an unshakable foundation to own my personal herd of registered greats and envies.

At sixty-five, I learned to share what I had experienced during my youth with the innocent children of today, their wide-eyed stares exactly as mine nearly when I was their age.

My love for reading books on horses, cows, husbandry, remain with me to this day, so much so, I volunteered my time at the local library after officially retiring from raising and selling horses. I wanted nothing more than to be around young children to impart my love of horses to them.

In the first week of my voluntary work, hopes came true when a vortex of coincidences occurred at the right moment—the ancient circumference of curiosity captured a four-year-old girl's mind as it had mine when I was her age. The child, dressed in brimmed hat with a cowgirl's pink and green blouse and hands strong enough to grab a rein, sat among glorious picture books of every type of breed of horses in existence. I stared at her mouth forming an awe-inspiring expression, a personality ready to accept her destiny that waited within the pages for the right reader.

I handed her my favorite book on horses.

The girl's eyes duplicate mine when I was her age. The toddler smiled broadly when she saw, for the first time, the Andalusian.

Perfect timing visited me in that encounter. Without hesitation, I shared with her my knowledge of how horses came to live in the United States.

"They were the conquistadors' favorite horses," I said. "They originated in Iberia, famous for always being prepared to help the soldier in his journey, no matter how far or how wide. Each guard who protected the king rode them around tall and strong castles."

She returned my smile as she studied the picture depicting the strong horses with elegant soldiers proudly suited atop assuring saddles.

“I dream of one day meeting my true prince,” she confided.

A mischievous boy who sat beside us, as soon as he realized what book she was reading, looked at me.

“Darling,” I said to the girl, “Why don’t you share the book with the young man?”

The children’s faces glowed as their fingers stopped to touch the pictures of an enacted fairytale. I enjoyed looking at her brief wonder, and the hypnosis in the boy’s eyes as he studied the saddle’s shape, color, and the magnificent stance of the horse.

In my mind I know he dreamed not only of the huge creature, but he also dreamed of the true princess riding in front of him, enraptured within the saddle of a mystical adventure.

As I studied his face, his lips opening, the drop of his blond hair into his eyes, I imagined him to be like my son. On each visit, my son’s mind, similar to this other boy’s, seemed to drift from whatever book I gave to him, to the ceiling, to the window, to imagine a great escapism into another universe of glee. As I watched him, I happened to catch the sight of the walnut tree that I planted at the library’s ground-breaking ceremony. Through the decades it grew into a strong, high, and festive delight. Not far from it the road intersected with another, one leading downtown, the other to the countryside.

Happy memories filled me as I looked at the two children, as I looked at the walnut tree, as I looked at the two roads, one a life of commercialization and community, the other, independence. But only for the stance individual. At that moment, I recalled talking to my son, who at his age, shared with me his desires to own a tall, properly bred, brave horse who never wavers on the battlefield. A horse suitable for Alexander as he marched into Persia. A horse suitable for Hannibal when he met the Roman legions riding behind Scipio Africanus.

Only youthful impressions dream of such heroes: courageous warriors of Greek, Roman, and Persian countries—the establishers of our legends, the brave soldiers, the changers of borders after the war field has calmed and the politicians have debated.

In that library which still stands, several United States maps lined the wall: the map of colonial times; the map of a great purchase from Napoleon; the map of a country without California or Texas—the cry of Manifest Destiny achieved to the detriment of another country which today longs to settle back into restored borders.

The young man turned to me.

“Can I be an explorer when I grow up?”

“Why not,” I replied.

Fifteen years later, when I was seventy-nine, after marrying that little girl whom he first met at the library, he joined the Army. Before leaving to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, he confessed to me, “If not for those maps of Mexico in the library I would never have joined the Army. I often returned to that same book that you handed me to look at the Spanish warriors. I loved looking at their chainmail and helmets, venturing across the fierce ocean to create new homes for their families.”

“Dear,” I said to him, “The Spaniards traveled throughout Mexico and Peru not to civilize, but to ravage and destroy villages. As a soldier you don’t have to be cruel.”

He nodded at me. “I remember when all I wanted to do was to conquer tall, serpent-decorated Mayan temples.”

“All boys do.”

After he left to drive to basic training camp I returned to the library. By chance several boys were grouped around the newest maps of undeniable history.

“Would you like me show you some books of horses?” I asked them.

Several boys, being used to seeing me around, nodded yes. In that moment, their minds tuned in with mine. Happy with this usefulness, I showed them the latest publication of colorful books celebrating historic tales of ancient Mexico, across the Rio Grande River.

“What kind of horse is this?” one asked me.

“An Iberian horse,” I replied. Circumferential time captured me again in this new vortex of sharing.

“Can you tell me about this place?” he asked me as he stared at the unfathomable depictions of Mayan and Aztec temples, a contrast in style and culture to the burial edifices in Egypt.

I proceeded to speak. Then hours after the glass structure closed, I returned to my apartment. Each journey back and forth allowed me a new opportunity to refine the first conversation I shared with the first boy and girl I met fifteen years ago.

I warmed my microwaved dinner, sat to an empty table, stared out the window to a newly built highway across fields no longer existing. The eternal land, reshaped by the machinery and creativity of engineers.

After I finished, Walter, my nephew, called me. He needed new information, clarifications, which I gladly, thankfully, shared with him—my remembrances, rendered through the device of a memoir, written in shorthand. Walter plans to write my history to the world. I shrug. I do not want fame so much as I want to be remembered by my grandson’s son-to-be.

I may not live to see him, but Walter's collection will hopefully be read by him—he whom I know not yet in this world, but perhaps in the spiritual world to come.

Walter went back to his writing while I returned to my loose-leaf diary collection of the history of Mexico's conquest.

After my brother, Joseph, married his wife from Costa Rica, I fell in love with Spanish history. Mexico, most of all, for they are the men who raised great horses among great estates.

*Let me enlighten you of how Aztec cities fell, I began my first discourse on lined paper, white and ready for the pencil, the Spaniards toppled the nefarious heart destroyers, amid a whirlpool of history barely mentioned; perhaps because the truth of slaughter is too great to come to terms with, the historic reality fraught with danger.*

*I wonder if esteem can be bestowed to such a ploy, or maybe it is best left to banditos across the Rio Grande. I believe that even Napoleon preferred not to remember the Spaniards' lust.*

*The short warriors with spears long, sharp, and strong, wielded swords trained to inflict grave wounds upon naked men, women, and children.*

*The cotton coats of the Itza and Aztec warriors were defenseless against the piercing lead ball. The bearers of Dutch and French muskets and cast cannons plowed under the embers of prejudice, history, and kingship heritages.*

*Caballeros alone endured.*

*Nojpetén awaits a movie director.*

*The gold-seeking adventurers cared neither for soul redemption or humanitarian principles. Filled with an obsession for wealth and fame, and perhaps ownership of an estate, the history makers crossed an ocean wide, where hurricanes muster strength, furious and soul stealing, so the Spaniards in turn could kill and plunder and reduce Mexican Aztecs and Peruvian Incas to callous, subservient states.*

*Expertly trained swords, their constant companions, holding spears on the top mast that heralded Christian banners of Spain, and with well-aimed muskets, the warrior-survivors of a war against the Moors came to the Americas to plunder yet again.*

*Islam, proud, profound Islam, who, upon the demise, the nation of Spain lost its greatness of artistry, science, medical, and mathematical explorations.*

*The Spanish warriors, their hearts filled with anger, lusted for more blood to fill their pockets with continued wages. Their personalities colored red with bitterness, pursued untamed warfare to pillage the souls of dark*

*and uneducated people, the brown villagers raised to have their hearts torn out under the stone knives of pagan priests.*

*The cannons' roar frightened the Aztec warriors, their defense a rout. Yes, it is true, Spanish metal swords defeated wooden swords, the war rally from the Aztecs nothing more than fear possessed.*

*From the start of the galleon ship's voyage, its carved mast bearing beautiful she of dreams, set upon the wind's course the ship's discovered, destined arrival upon a land smeared by netherworlds and Quetzalcoatl.*

*The soldiers, grinning faces all, lowered their sails, hoists tied, settled upon hardened soil, a fearsome beast 54 inches tall, wide hips, powered in motion by relentless stares; the harbinger of all morality tales whispered in myths and drawn viciously in the depths of darkened Lascaux's cave, Bhimbetka's cave also, to the first domesticators in the Urals—the Kazakhstan warriors' pride—the Egyptians' foremost ally in bold and powerful charges against Hyksos and Amalekite armies foretold Armageddon, no doubt.*

*Came forth the greatest warrior from the House of Equidae, to vanquish forever in conquest, anguished Aztec and Itza pride.*

Uncertain of my approach, I called Walter.

“Aunt Cathy,” he said to me, “I’m doing all the writing. All you have to do is make sure I have the facts and timelines correct. “History and writing is my thing.”

He’s right. An honor student should not be trifled with. I relented and he went on to straighten me out. I agreed to let him write everything. My biography became ingrained within his own memories, he having lived and experienced the things I went through—the things my family went through. How can a warrior with a pass so vicious ever have mellowed out? His wife? Yes, his wife calmed his heart, softened his personality.

My thoughts returned to my horses whose descendants lived throughout the United States. In my mind I see a time when horses did not live anywhere in the continental forty-eight states before the English, the Germans, the Frenchman, and the Spaniards arrived. The historic truth, the undeniable accuracy, is this: the horses that once roamed the vast plains of the Americas, before the Europeans arrived, were hunted as wild beasts and eaten to extinction by the nomads of the plains of North America.

Yet, the horses were ordained to run again throughout the Americas when the offspring of Spanish conquerors horses escaped their confining corrals. The mustang, a feral descendant of powerful war horses, populated once again the American West.



I closed my eyes, forgetting the possible visages of youthful boys and girls reading in fascination the history of the American West. I returned my thoughts to present times where I now see, not the mustangs racing to the delight of unharnessed impulses, or the Iberian powerhouses of might and courage, or the Lippizans, majestic risers and leapers, but my eyes viewed again my childhood love of strikingly, majestic quarter horses in supreme canter, who gallop at command to the treat of carrots held in my hand.



I sigh in captured memories restored.

I breathe to a pounding heart of glee. Happiness can never be forbidden. In high school cowboys lifted their hats in tribute to fantasies desired as I walked by them. Many, owning tall, pretty horses, to gain my attention, my affection, knowing my dream to one day own a registered American Quarter Horse, after school hours, galloped their horses near me, waving to me as they tipped their hats. All this too-handsome, pink-cheeked German girl heard was the neighing of the swift-passing horse. Sometimes I returned the smile, all the time, longing not to be the boy's arms, but rather, to ride a swift race in a pasture vacant of other lives, to touch the wind, to watch the blur of the forest, to experience the clouds standing still as I towered above them.

I remember how, at age twelve, in 1948, my mother Ruth relented and allowed me to have my own horse. At that time we lived in the extreme boundaries of Lewistown, Missouri, a settlement that seemed to float in and out of existence atop the cultured farmlands near the Missouri River.

A fierce fright, the Missouri River—a powerful froth of waves when the Missouri slams into the Mississippi. In truth there are not two rivers, but rather one river that churns away mud and rock borders in its divide of a continent's expanse as it flows toward New Orleans. In the rivers dominant flow, crossing one state after another, the civil engineers and Army Corps designed a masterful plan to straighten what should have been left alone. Their futile attempt resulted in disastrous floods.

I have seen the floods' terrible ravage of farmlands and the flood's destruction of homes. I have seen its merciless rush to vanquish a family's possession. I have felt the river's ability to ruin and destroy every ounce of a family's aspiration, its turbulent and bitter strength seeking only to restructure its hellish, curving, twisting, lanes.

In this land of farms, of thick forests, I lived near a tributary of the Missouri River at Lewistown, Missouri, a rock's throw to where the Fabius

River churns in a twist, in a turn, to seek the brown-wide race of a crippler of watersheds. There, in a home filled with mother and father, three sisters, and my eldest brother, I dreamed at age five for a bonnie lass of my own.

Times cherished can never leave me.

Today, my apartment walls are covered with pictures testifying in truth a prize-winner's glory never to be forgotten. The newspaper tributes, the recognition, the renown that I earned happened only because I was willing to sacrifice everything for a brief mention in history.

An unsubstantiated history if I don't get Walter to write everything down before I die. The newspaper clipping have worn into a yellow, brittle testimony. But, I am substantial for I exist, have existed, and will exist until I release my last breath.

Can a poet ever capture the essentialities of my training and work with golden palominos? Can a writer capture in words what the heart feels when it sees the tall and beautiful, roan, and speckled also, horses? Can their transfer the touch, the feel, the warmth of the shawls that rest on top of a horse's back, beneath the leather saddle? How a writer paint in words, or pronounce in viable sentences or stanzas the glimmer of blue, purple, and yellow that is deeply woven into the shawl that rests beneath a polished leather saddle tooled with images of rolling landscapes and trees, outlined with tanned memories of home and range? What depiction can capture the strength and confidence of holding in one's hand the gleaming horn and the grabbing of a horse's reins? Control is the essence of communication between a horse and its rider. To grab a black and proud gelding with a pronounced head, intelligent eyes, and a neck bred for a king's embrace is a feat to undo feats. It is a boast said not in arrogance, but in necessity.

Then, in loneliness, a fear strikes hard at my chest: Are all my experiences, all my moments of touching the majesty, the brushing and soothing, to be discarded upon my final breath?

It cannot be so. I called Walter again.

I start crying. "Was my life for nothing? Who's ever going to remember, or even care, about what I did?"

"You lived a worthwhile life, because through you, I'm remembering the gentler nature of myself."

Thus, in this old age, when others falter at the knock of life's final intruder, I resolved to speak tales true and undisputed—historic landmarks as they are—because the present moment is mine and being mine, cannot be forsaken to the thief's call of death.

With a soft voice, calmed through Walter's love for me, I hear the

distant nickers in a nearby barn. The sounds transcend time. Motion is a constant as the winds of history always resound in my ears though I am light-years removed from even the last hour that has just passed.

Then I think of God. Of Abraham. Not of Isaac—for little do I know of him—but I know much about Jacob. Yes, on Jacob, I often ponder. Yet, whenever I think of God, I find it strange, nearly insulting, for strangers to question my beliefs, to say to me that my love of God is inappropriate when I include him in my lectures of horses. The parents of the library's youthful visitors had objected to my talking of God and flag and holiday celebrations. Their callous insults that a stranger should never talk to their children of patriotic duty dumbfounded me. Their remarks made me wonder if my own grandchildren object to my love of God when I write my letters of encouragement to them.

I do not know how to separate myself from God.

I do not know how to neutralize His impact and effects upon my life.

I am not capable of subtracting God from my discourse.

The librarian, in turn, gave my lectures a poor rating, not based on my knowledge or in the sharing of my personality, no, rather, on stories of how God is forever interwoven in my life.

Unapologetic, I stopped my volunteer work at the library, those happy moments taken away by society's normalization of what is proper and improper. Political correctness affected me to suffer more loneliness. An eighty-year old person must not be expected to understand the philosophy and lifestyle of the twenty-year old.

I am a Christian woman and for that suffer disdain by those who think their children should never have to be exposed to the old and trite foundations of American's rise from the cruelty of European's vices. Now, football players knee at the stadium. The NACCP calls the National Anthem racist. I do not hate anyone though I stand to pledge my allegiance and sing the song I grew up. Maybe *America the Beautiful* would be a good replacement. I will leave it to the next generation to decide.

In my reflections of my appointments by God to relish, to hold, to tend to His greatest creation, the horse, I think of Sunday past and today, when we, as one people, pledged to protect a nation set to rule the world, a capital to glean the eternal laws that took root through Abraham. I easily see Abraham's reddish steady horse rearing high on its two back legs when it first saw the River Yarden. A hundred years later, possibly much more, I see God presenting His gift to Jacob, son of Isaac: a foal—sturdy, wide hips, the

first stallion of Arabia.

Jacob so tenderly loved this stallion of Arabia, he built for his wondrous companion a strong stall, thick, filled with energizing food, the angels' approval so grand, they clapped upon its completion.

My family, for generations tuned to biblical understanding, to Germanic legends, lived each day in thoughts of God, to thoughts of creativity, to thoughts of the intertwining essence of one generation dependent upon another. No matter how many generations we are removed from Adam, all of us thrive in present time.

We depend on such memories and biblical associations, for they preserve us in latitudes of salvations. A Job's task set before all men.

I think how sad Jacob must have been when he left the Promised Land to preserve his family in green Memphis of Egypt, not so far west of the Red Sea. I easily imagine how he glanced each day, brokenhearted, to the erected barns he himself had built from fallen timber and broken axes. I know the struggle of carrying chopped and shaped logs to place them atop each other. I know how he worked as diligently, as arduous as he did to protect his magnificent black stallion.

The angels themselves must have wept when Jacob and his eleven children walked through the parched lands to preserve a people who would become the saviors of mankind; the Messiah to come from Jacob's line through Judah.

I do not care if Jacob manipulated Esau and Laban to win hope and endurance for his family. Whatever faults Jacob may have manifested from a weak and frivolous character, this man ... the black stallion of Arabia loved.

This man, Yehuway preserved.

The dream of emancipation that began with Noah and through the oncoming millenniums was realized when foretold prophecies ordained to become true, did in fact become true. The guiding spirit of God made itself manifest through Joseph, husband of Mary, the life giver to the Messiah, who rose through the children of Jacob.

This incredulous manifest first became evident in human terms when the eleventh child of Jacob, Joseph, matured at death to become the symbolic overture of *He* to come to Yisra'el. Though Jacob and Joseph died centuries before the arrival of the ultimate Messiah's entrance; I assure you, in life spent with his friends and family, Joseph did indeed envision a savior set to ride upon a stallion of war through the gates of heaven to the foundations of Yerushalayim.

Joseph, alone, enslaved, imprisoned, and beaten, forfeited of all material things, alone among the twelve, also saw the virgin donkey that Jesus rode—

its young offspring following her left side.

I ask, after I read the account of Genesis, after I undressed in the dark into my pajamas, before I slumbered to a new dream in my bed, warm and assuring: Did the Archangel also see, first, Jacob's stallion on the same road that led to Memphis?