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A WINGLESS FLIGHT

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There exists within the art of writing poetry a delicate balance between form and content. Some poets choose to ignore form entirely, opting instead to use free verse, though as Susan Sontag might say, a lack of form is a form in itself. Other poets choose to write in a more confined way, sticking to a particular set of beats, rhyme scheme, or amount of lines. It would be a grave mistake to believe that writing in form (or a lack of form) is a decision not carefully made by the writer. So much of a poem's meaning, intent, effect, and lasting appeal come through in the way it is presented on the page, so the form must be wisely chosen. The looseness of free verse might suit one work, while the circling interconnection of a villanelle might better set the mood for a different piece. Each work demands consideration of the form, because every poem has a feeling all its own, and the form helps express the emotion. It is possible to think of every aspect of a poem as a puzzle piece, needing to join with all the other pieces to create the whole picture. Form is one of those crucial pieces and thus deserves careful thought.

Deciding on a form is not where the balance ends, but where it begins. When choosing a closed form, such as the sonnet, the battle is to prevent the form from overtaking the content, and instead force it to work in harmony with the soul of the poem. Adrienne Rich writes, "[i]t's a struggle not to let the form take over, lapse into format, assimilate the poetry; and that very struggle can produce a movement, a music, of its own" (219). When I resolved to write the following collection of poetry in sonnet form, I first needed to decide how rigidly I would adhere to this form and what advantages or disadvantages that choice might afford the pieces.

Originally, the sonnet (meaning "little song" in Italian) was most often written as a love poem, with Petrarch and Shakespeare as two of the most widely read original

sonneteers. These men wrote of the abounding love they possessed for their women, singing praises to their female muses and wooing the ladies with their loving words, but today sonnets cover a wide range of topics, many that are dark and twisted, bordering towards uncomfortable. For example, Nick Demske has a sonnet called *PSA* that pokes fun at terrorism. A portion of it reads as follows:

The terrorist was last seen noogieing leukemia
Patients. The terrorist was last seen zerbering fat
Babies. I hate to be the bearer of accurate news, but
Wiley ol' terrorist was recently spotted perfecting taxidermy.
On the decapitated Head of State. All calls
Are being monitored for quality assurance purposes (Demske ll. 1-6).

In *PSA*, Demske ends lines abruptly, pulls words from modern slang (such as zerbering), and toys with a subject matter many might not see the humor in, all while maintaining a traditional Shakespearean sonnet form of fourteen lines. And though he is often unconcerned with beats per line, he does play with rhyme scheme in some of his works. Clearly, the modern sonnet has moved far away from the days of Shakespeare's adoration poems comparing a lover to a summer's day.

I chose to blend traditional form (ten beats per line, fourteen lines total), and traditional content (horses are treated in poetry since the earliest writings), with modern elements (a loose rhyme scheme, etc.), in these poems. This allowed the pieces room to breathe within the form, yet also held true to the intensity that the brief, rhythmic lines of the sonnet can offer to a work. As previously mentioned, modern poetry allows for much more flexibility within form, with writers like Demske creating line breaks in the middle

of words and rhyme scheme becoming more of a possibility than a rule. Though traditional sonnets have existed for many centuries, modern sonnets take elements of the traditional form and blend them with new ideas, constantly pushing the boundaries of the imagination and the language. This blending contributes to the moving music of which Adrienne Rich wrote.

With the influence of modern form writers such as Seamus Heaney, Wyatt Prunty, Philip Larkin, and Greg Williamson, I created sonnets in the vein of the traditional Shakespearean sonnet, but with modern twists. I maintained the form of fourteen lines and ten beats per line in all the poems in the collection. In some of the works, a rhyme scheme is evident, though it does not follow the Shakespearean rhyme scheme. Beyond these elements of tradition though, the sonnet expands in my works, the form and the content urging one another along in an effort to allow my voice to resonate. I use the sonnet form as the base for my poems, but then take flight, allowing the poem to carry me away in hopes of expressing to readers a view into a world previously unknown to them. Rich writes:

What really matters is not line lengths or the way meter is handled, but the poet's voice and concerns refusing to be circumscribed or colonized by the tradition, the tradition being just a point of takeoff. In each case the poet refuses to let form become format, pushes at it, stretches the web, rejects imposed materials, claims a personal space and time and voice (225).

I am not as concerned with end rhyme as much as Larkin, Williamson, or even Heaney are, but I am more dedicated to sticking with fourteen lines than Prunty is—so somewhere in between these men of form, my poetry finds a resting place. Take what has

come before, mold it into something different to show what comes next, seems to be a motto of the poems I write, both with relation to form and content.

A common trait of these men I admire, these men who carved a space near which I fit, is a desire to express emotion succinctly, to allow form to work to the writer's advantage and increase the heat behind the words. Denise Levertov writes:

This sense of the beat or pulse underlying the whole I think of as the horizon note of the poem. It interacts with the nuances or forces of feeling which determine emphasis on one word or another, and decides to a great extent what belongs to a given line. It relates the needs of that feeling-force which dominates the cadence to the needs of the surrounding parts and so to the whole (632).

Feeling a need for the pace, as many of the men mentioned previously did, is the main reason I chose to maintain the ten beats per line that was a hallmark of the original Shakespearean and Petrarchan models. This constructs another level of flow and cadence and places emphasis on the words in a way that poems without form must create more synthetically. Here, form becomes a natural partner to content. As Levertov says, "content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction" (630). My poems are visceral, and a strict form such as the sonnet helps keep the seams knitted, preventing the emotion from bursting beyond the action or conversely allowing the emotion to outshine the raw grittiness. Ultimately, the sonnet allows for a fragile construction of balance within its natural framework that is not always available in other forms.

In addition to the form, I wanted to focus on poems of a physical nature. Writers like Seamus Heaney writes poems, sonnets included, with a punch, full of images of farm life, animals, the countryside, and his family's place among all three. Equal parts about

the natural world and himself, Heaney created lines within a closed form that hold supercharged meaning. In the poem *The Forge* he writes:

All I know is a door into the dark.
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.
The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music.
Sometimes, leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,
He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter
Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;
Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows (19).

Physically, the poem focuses on describing the shop in detail, but so much more is in these lines. Heaney hints at himself in those very simple opening words “all I know.” Though he describes the shop of a farrier wonderfully, this is certainly not *all* Heaney knows, yet his readers get a clear view of who he is and what he knows well. His poems hold deep truths about the topics he writes on, certainly, but of himself even more deeply. It is with this knowledge in mind that I began creating the pieces in this collected work.

Like Heaney, I wanted to create a collection that would be a look into my life and my place within the landscape, so to speak. The following poems are all part of a sonnet sequence, creating the outline of a whole picture from many segments. The poems in this collection seek to illuminate a physical life, brimming with sweat, dirt, and immense beauty hidden within—one that, many years ago, was commonplace and now slips farther from view each day—a life with horses.

Horses once carried people across countries, fought in battle, and performed for man as both tool and treasure. Now, horses have receded into small pockets scattered across nations, no longer a vital element of daily life. The average person knows almost nothing about caring for horses, how to interact with them, or what living with them entails. For horse owners though, the struggle and splendor these animals bring to our lives helps to refresh nature for tired eyes and pushes raw physicality into daily life as the animals become a backdrop for defining our very selves. The truth is, it is easier to *not* have horses than to have them, so it requires a certain amount of physical and mental fortitude to want to embark on the challenges of horse ownership in today's world. Yet, there have always been, and seem to always be, at least some people owning horses—and those people are constantly in awe of the incredible, lovely power horses possess. Dating back even centuries ago, striking poems about horses exist. Even one of the original sonneteers, Shakespeare, wrote in eager admiration of the beast in many of his plays. And while horses do not feature prominently in his sonnets, the words in his plays are strong and lovely, much like the horse itself. In *Henry V* he writes:

When I bestride him, I soar,

I am a hawk: he trots on air; the earth sings when

he touches it ...

he is pure air and fire (III.vii.15-24).

Clearly, horses leave an impression. The following poems seek to praise the horse while staying true to the rich aspects, both negative and positive, of life with horses.

Not only is the collection a balance of form and content, it is a balance of glamour and grotesque. As in any area where animals are present, there are moments of marvel and moments of harsh reality—manure, blood, and death. Using sonnets, originally a poem of love and loveliness, to describe some of these less than beautiful moments feels like a poetic act within itself. Forcing this rigid form to submit to my topics is much like breaking a horse, bringing it under control of its master, making it work as the master sees fit, and training it when it responds incorrectly. And, after much hard work, the sonnets have become something new, with traces of something old, a modern feel with a traditional base.

The process of sonnet writing is not an easy one, though. In the beginning, many of my sonnets were like green-broke, unruly horses, with awkward line endings creating a forced feeling. For example, my poem *Endurance* began with an awkward opening line ending with the word “he.” By pushing the limits of the form, molding the words, and reworking lines to add more grit, I completely reshaped the poem and jumped into the action, ending the new line with “fast,” a much stronger choice. As the poems progressed throughout the writing process, I felt the strength increase. By the time I wrote *Farrier*, every line had a strong ending and the flow and progression was natural and fluid. It is certainly a battle to come to understand the nuances of working with sonnets, and I have a long way to go, but I absolutely have made progress and have seen my poems blossom

because of this growth. In this project, I achieved what I set out to do: I took a challenging form and brought it under control more than ever before in my writing.

I hope to be the type of poet I admire in the men I have discussed—one who pushes the limits, writes physically and always strives to stay honest in writing. I hope to bring something to readers that they might not be familiar with, and within that scope feel as if they are coming closer to a truth. I hope to expose something deep in myself on the chance that others might connect. I hope to show freedom in rigidity by using form. Most of all, I hope what I write, now and into the future, feels true. Anne Lamott writes, “good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are” (3). My truth contains horses and so, of horses I write, reaching in to myself and out to others in that common hope to know the deepest parts of our soul, whatever might be contained there. This is the motive behind my collection—to write for others that I might understand more fully, who I am and how I got here. Defined by brutes that move like dancers, my collection is certainly one of form. It is also a collection of personal history. It is a collection of truth, a door into my dark, sonnets shifted into today.

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A Wingless Flight

Possibility

Pulling the cinch tight around my horse's belly, we head into the out, leather squeaking. Leo paws, excited to smell decaying wood and feel the change from man made driveway to riverbank and piney earth beneath his solid hooves. Yesterday we rode along a snaking ridge, a buck appeared—lean and fierce—his scent of salty dirt, ten bony points swung our way. Nostrils flared, brown eyes fixed as I ceased existence for a heartbeat. I've never heard silence like that before. I urge Leo forward. Drawing wild into his lungs, he moves. Steadily, we advance into stillness.

Sunday

Pausing at the red light, a steeple draws
my eyes upward to its gleaming white height.
Stretching into the blue sky it reaches
toward God. I see the faithful flow inside
to pray and sing and praise his name. Guilt
washes over me as I drive away
from the angels toward my waiting horses.
Steam rising from the ground evaporates.
The soil holds a warmth the dawn air craves.
Leo watches as I enter his stall,
kneeling to check his leg, pouring sweet oats,
placing hay before his hooves, his nose pressed
to my heart for a beat. Sunlight sings through
the panes, his dove white coat shines, and he sighs.

Parade

Nine and five, Patrick and I roll along
on two wheels, red, leather seat holding
us tight together, my plaid jacket forced
against his Incredible Hulk sweatshirt.
Waving to the camera with one hand, reins
wind loose in the other, guiding my small,
gray horse. Shiny black straps and gold buckles
cover Firefly as he steps proud, his hooves
clopping against the pavement, pulling
two with ease. Just out of sight, the Clydesdale
broke loose from its trolley, like a train car
running off its tracks, slick with sweat, wild-eyed,
sprinting for its life. Firefly marches down
Main Street, amidst a blue confetti rain.

Wound

Dark blood slides down Leo's pastern, pooling
on cement. He fidgets, twitchy with loss—
the burn of skin pulled raw, salmon pink flesh
taking in air, bubbling blood ignored
while the vet searches for loose bone, probing
the opening, thumb pushing deep, hunting
for the tendon that feeds the hoof that holds
the weight that stretches when the animal
takes flight. His finger finds its target, sigh
of relief he ends the quest and straightens.
Pulling pale, yellow serum, he pierces
Leo's neck to foil infection, hoping
stitches won't be needed. The wet blood clots,
sticky thick like syrup matting the hair.

Beginnings

I will marry that man one day, thinking
to herself, she watched him ride by, his horse
held its tail high, neck arched, head tucked correct.
They met at a horse show. She rode others'
horses, hoping to win a blue, hoping
to get away from cornrows missing teeth
with greasy silk. He rode in front of crowds,
hoping to draw big bidders and breeders,
proving their power. They played along, sealed
deals and won faith, but this isn't where love
took root. She tells me of grapes hanging low
in a vineyard they rode through together
alone in the dusk. He climbed off his horse,
picking a ripe bunch to share, soft and sweet.

Trust

It's earned with time, treats on flat palms, brush strokes,
late nights hoping colic will pass, miles
walked, hands lowered, teaching them not to rush
through the river when they're carrying you.
One sun-drenched day, I went into Leo's
pen, he rested in warmth, smelling of stone
silt. We began moving in tandem down
the fence line, slow circles, side by side, free
of ropes or reins. Long shadows moved with us,
and a hawk screech pierced the quiet above.
We stopped, admiring the rosy glow
of the setting sun, horizon ablaze.
Leo bumped my shoulder with his velvet
nose, breathing with me in perfect rhythm.

Duty

Jamming my pitchfork into manure
heaped in a corner of the stall, facts roll
through my mind—fifty pounds of waste per day
for the average horse. A month's worth gathered
could fill a swimming pool to brimming, bugs
looping overhead, thrilled with the maggots
they plan to lay inside this tub of filth.
Disgusted, I remember why we spread
manure on fields, turkeys picking through
the fresh layer for worms rising to eat
droppings enriching the soil, thinning
everything to mulch, a smell that fades fast.
A fly lands on the pile by my boot.
I lean close, watching for a small backstroke.

Red-Tailed

We saw him soaring, a black silhouette
against the deep blue of late summer sky.
Weightless, he dropped toward our fence, landing
on a solid post. Watching my dad mow
the pasture, a pollen cloud engulfing
the tractor, the hawk ignored the horses.
He cocked his eye toward the earth, scanning
for mice displaced by the tractor rumble. Twice
he hopped to the ground, snatching up rodents.
The horses smelled his air as he sailed
off at dusk. After that, he visited
often—sometimes to hunt, usually
to rest near his fenced in friends, taking flight
when struck with yearning to feel wild again.

*But there is a touch of divinity even in brutes,
and a special halo about a horse, that should forever
exempt him from indignities.*

—Herman Melville

Courage

The mare was failing fast, over lean, hair missing in areas where she thrashed, legs flailing as her failing hips tried to pull her weary, withered bulk upright again. Ebby wobbled unsteady, searching eyes looking into us for release—fighting, labored, waning. It was warm the last day of Ebby's life. Mom waited by the fence outside while I watched the vet draw toward the horse, two syringes ready to stop pain, then the pulse. The needle slid toward the heart, piercing. Ebby crumpled, still. Mom choked out goodbye as a horse whinnied from afar, shrill and vibrant, echoing.

Impossible

When a horse dies, all the beauty that knits
their parts together, everything that makes
them fly and dance dissolves. One thousand pounds
are left behind to be dragged and lifted
and slumped into the hole where the silence
will blanket them, enveloping bones back
into the soil. Straps holding ankles
raise the beast, dangling like a mad balloon,
limp and awkward, a jumble of limbs, neck
arched backward, machine gears grinding against
weight. But finally in place, my dad climbs
into the ground, smoothing the mane, brushing
dirt off the face, his hand sliding over
half open eyes, murky, dark, unseeing.

*For by the love that guides my pen,
I know great horses live again.*
—Stanley Harrison

Circling

Wild with winter, the horses toss their heads,
reveling in strength, flinging icy flakes
with each stride. Reaching the small hilltop
they dig toward the earth buried beneath heaps
of white icing, hoping to discover
blades of frozen grass reminding them Spring
still exists. Mom mentions the two beloved
horses from years ago, now buried deep
in that hillside. The graves aren't marked, except
for two dips in the hill, where the soil
grew around its prizes, fresh hoof prints break
the surface now. Mom says, *this feels more
fitting*, watching Leo rear, the backdrop
framing him in glassy, skeleton trees.

Farrier

Calloused with the weight of a thousand hooves,
squeezed tight between his palms, fingers wrapping
around the hammer, driving a nail deep
into the hoof wall, placement perfect,
iron bonded at the base, a shower
of sparks to fix the fit, a crack against
the hide to stand up straight, he's leather-faced,
smells spicy sharp like cinnamon coated
in metal. Charlie wipes sweat with his fist,
smears dirt on his head, tips his weathered hat
back to survey the stance of the beast sure
his work speaks for itself in the gallop.
Chewing a piece of straw, he nods once, shifts
tools, boots planted, grabbing hold of the rasp.

Partners

It takes a mare eleven months to foal.
In the year of wait, lifeless leaves dropped, snow
rose, yielding to daisy chains bringing home
our chocolate colored puppy, Summer.
New life desires new life, the brown baby
expecting the hidden one, smelling kicks,
ears held curious. Wet with birth, puppy
barks blend unsteady horse legs finding strength.
They made odd siblings, Summer and Snickers,
but to each other felt home—the same grass,
cool barn, midnight mother forcing manners.
Two years ago, Summer died, grayed with time.
But even now, when a dog barks, Snickers'
head lifts, deep eyes searching for his sister.

Guidance

Reams of pictures parade horses dad rode
that I never knew. Strong, hardy, and firm,
his eyes watching the horizon, coaxing
the horse to use every muscle, bending,
flexing like athletes he sits true, looks sure.
I've heard about Cassie, the gray pony,
unsafe, throwing his boyish frame so hard
he flew through the air like a cannonball.
Scared, sweet, nasty, he rode them all, hoping
more might be like his baby mare, knowing
most would not. Last fall, we rode together.
I watched him teaching Hank one-hand reining:
feeling for correct response, his face calm,
certain from years in this delicate dance.

Nighttime

The air smelled like rain the night Leo, Jake,
and I were still riding home after dark.
We trusted the horse on which route to take
because his eyes, sharp in black, could guide home
lost travelers. A bat whirred by, chasing
slapped mosquitos drawing blood. Crickets drowned
out every sound, save for the steady
clap of strong hooves returning beat by beat.
Leo slowed as we reached familiar
fence. Mom approached, worry etched on her face.
He drew close to her, gentle head lowered,
rolling his bit on his tongue, calm and pleased.
Their faces glowed green as a firefly stuck
on his head, blinked—a tiny lightning strike.

Endurance

I remember the gentle mare gone so fast
nobody said goodbye. Then the pumpkin
colored gelding rearing, front legs striking
angry, his ten-year-old rider rolling
across the arena. Before Jake found
Hank there were tears, sadness and fear, struggle
wiping out the good, the last one, sturdy
chestnut, wild nature with no room for love.
Why keep trying if it always brings pain?
Answers uncertain, bad drowning good, strings
tenuous, almost broke. But I watch them
now, the sweetest horse, the hopeful boy, climb
a hill alone, to search sky reaching trees,
grasping clouds. Proud, together. He smiles.

*Thou shall carry my friends upon thy back. For to thee shall accrue
the love of the master of the earth, and thou shall fly without wings
and conquer without a sword."*

–The Quran

Photograph

Inside these four walls, he runs forever.
Centered, but to the right of the frame, he
floats above the earth just barely touching
the wheat grass below his hooves. He never
meant to be immortal, but now his taut,
muscles, sinew, strength, and bones will fly long
after he slips away. Eyes bright, he leaves
the sun behind him. Even frozen, curved
legs hover beneath, not earth bound, defies
gravity. His movements look effortless.
For him I guess they are. It's a wonder
he ever surrenders infinite flight.
Breaking a horse means they give in to you,
but I can't find anything broken here.

Wandering

At the peak of the slope to the valley,
Leo and I wait for Buster and mom.
Looking back, ready to progress, we pause.
Winding with care to where we stand, he picks
his steps like an artist choosing colors.
She studies the woods, hoping to find flat
spots left from once sleeping deer, now hidden.
I remember her saying childhood
was happiest when riding alone, fields
stretched for turfed miles, searching for unseen.
I press my heel into Leo's side,
leaving them alone again with the wood's
ferns and trees, gnarled in twisted embrace,
the quiet secrets creaking murmured songs.

*Other animals ran only when they had a reason,
but the Horse would run for no reason whatever,
as if to run out of his own skin.*
-Rabindranath Tagore

Protection

Nostrils flared, Leo's body quivers, feather
light dense muscle, a hair-trigger coiled
fangless rattlesnake, hovering in wait,
ready to fling his strength at approaching
monsters hiding in the black. Steps muffled
by dense grass, the cricket songs fill my ears,
shutting out the looming hoof beats drawing
closer to my side. Like a shadow, Hank
runs by, so close I smell his heated flesh.
Striking, Leo swings bared teeth past my face,
hammering Hank's broad flank, pushing him back
into the sea of dark, his neck taut, pulsing.
Sliding his head over my hair, Leo
finally unwinds into the deep night.

*Wherever man has left his footprint in the long ascent from barbarism
to civilization, we will find the hoof print of the horse beside it.*
-John Moore□

History

Broad Lipizzan stallions carried strong
leaders to front lines, carving chronicle
into battlegrounds. Heavy-haunched Belgians
dragged ploughs, furrowing fields for farmers.
Fine women sat sidesaddle, polished, prim
Morgans floating beneath long, ruffled skirts.
Cowboys roped cattle from atop steady
Mustangs, the horses pulling hard
in reverse, slinging bulls to the dirt,
castration creating steer, branding irons
sizzling, flesh smoking. Pintos traveled
between towns, running news down open roads.
Arabians hid in tents with nomads,
avoiding thieves, four thousand years ago.

Heavy

*I think we should tear it down. Sometimes
I just wish it were gone.* I was talking
about the big, gray barn that used to hold
the dwindling dynasty of a once
great Arabian horse farm. That barn
housed magnificent horses and kept watch
over my grandfather's home, reminder
of his ability to fit empires
anywhere he wanted. Now the building
sits soulless, no horses fill its belly,
no people walk on its echoing limbs.
The mice moved out. *I just wish it were gone.*
The next day, the roof caved in, the walls bowed
in respect. *The weight of the snow*, they said.

Defining

Horses towering above me, necks stretched
down to check pockets, nuzzle my grubby,
little girl hands and overalls, hoping
for peppermints. My earliest memory,
bare feet and dry sawdust, holds these giants.
I loved their smell and the barn cat tossed
over my shoulder, her tail missing
since long before I made her drape across
me—a living scarf. I don't know a life
without horses. I wouldn't be surprised
to find out they live deep in my marrow.
The rhythm of my heart sounds like hoof beats.
If I could crack my bones open, expose
my core, herds of horses might gallop out.