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A Horse's Heart

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by Susan Haris



About the Author

Susan Haris is a doctoral candidate in literature and philosophy at IIT Delhi, India. She researches the evolving dynamics of human-animal relationships in postcolonial India, with a particular emphasis on Kerala. She cofounded the Indian Animal Studies Collective which aims to bring together researchers working on animals and animality in India.

A Horse's Heart

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My gem-chest is also partly open,
it spills over like your heart carrying
within it my summer luck, my evening
luck, the chest must never close
the door to the past where you are
Young, power, and a stubborn angel
who can be tamed if we spirit the spirit
of your jumps up in the sky where
you discover no holes to fall through
returning to earth phosphorescent,
just a lot of work you don't want to do
where the horseshoe of a routine
keeps you metallic, nightly in your sulk,
that soft resistance skull silent instructions
for a hypothetical final competition
where you walk but won't trot or canter
certainly not gallop when what you
want is a pasture that is green and oak,
all the other horses running with hair
to imaginary jobs and offices and you
greet them and breathe them nickering,
you can want me too, I will be there with
apples and carrots and douse myself
with molasses and beat my own heart
to match your quiet rhythm's past.

I met Duke when I was staying at a horse ranch in Santa Ynez, California. The horse ranch had 17 old and retired horses. The only real things I knew about horses were that I must hold my palm very flat when I feed them carrots if I did not want them to bite me and that Kris called horse poop meadow muffins (I agreed with that nomenclature). In a storied world where humans must tell the stories, how do we write multispecies histories? Do we gather them through patient histories by polite listening like doctors, or do we gather clues and then construct them like a detective?

Soon, I began to make some horse friends, but many of them came either for carrots or out of casual interest. It was only Duke who took a real interest in me. I was devoted to Duke and spent hours watching him and following him around. All I knew about Duke was a small card outside his stall which said how much alfalfa and grass he should get in the a.m. and the p.m., the name of his owners, and the vet.

Two weeks later, Duke had surprise visitors. The people who owned him came to visit him. He was delighted, nickering with pleasure. That's when I got the complete story. Duke used to hate participating in horse shows, and he used to be very stubborn and disobedient. However, he had a good sports horse conformation, so they continued to train him. He competed in several shows, even winning in some of them. Then, when he came to the ranch to "retire," his personality completely changed. His owners told me that he was a horse who did not like to "work" and that he was finally happy to be left to himself, having to do nothing. He was no longer difficult or dangerous, he was gentle and kind.

Donna Haraway says that "stories are means to ways of living" (1989, 8). Multispecies ethnographers weave together lived experiences that are shared between humans and animals to suggest that through storying these shared worlds, we can understand that human species is itself an interspecies relationship (Tsing 2012). Yet, what do we do when we want to contextualise an animal individual of whom we know so little? What different conclusions do I draw without having this intimate knowledge?

This poem is an attempt to think about the question of animal biographies in multispecies histories. Animal biographies are spotted by critical events and shaped by power. They are complicated by the variation within individuals when the overwhelming tendency is to have an animal stand for a particular species so that ethnographers can construct social histories where animals can be equal players. The poem tries to express this tragedy. The multispecies ethnographer's responsibility is to tell stories which can be "powerful tools of connectivity thinking" (van Dooren and Rose 2016, 85). In this connection, perhaps, the individual is not very important, but it

mattered to Duke—it was his whole life. My poem reciprocates the openness with which he accepted me and offers him comfort and support to fulfil his desires, whatever they may be.

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