

from HORSES IN THE BACKYARD

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INTO THE NIGHT PASTURE

Ages ago, I said I'd bring a horse back in from turnout, and so on a moonless night in May I went into the pasture with a flashlight, a halter and lead rope, and two pieces of carrot in my pocket.

A dry lot flood light got me started, and as I walked farther that light became faint and barely skimmed the ground and the earth and grass lost their colors, and thousands of stars came to fill the sky down to the horizon.

And when I reached the drop-off to the little stream bed and was up to my knees in darkness, I picked my way downhill with the flashlight, and the brown earth and green pasture grass came back, but the stars withdrew. And I swept the ground looking for a path I knew to the place the stream cut is deeper and the wet more narrow. And I stepped across reaching and balancing from one grass clump to the next.

And I kept the light farther ahead uphill as I climbed, scanning, listening. If the horses would head up to the pasture tank to drink, they'd crest the hill right above me.

And the grass on the flat was damp and thick. And with my light I saw several horses grouped, surprisingly small in the black distance, and there were rose red blood flashes in their eyes.

And when I reached them, I could hear their breathing, their feet rustling the grass around me, the grass tearing with each mouthful they took.

And with my spot of light I saw a shoulder, a foreleg, neck, hip, not the horse. When I looked at their faces for markings I was blinding them and they snorted and shied and trotted off. And I turned off the light and went closer, and the near ones raised their heads and in silhouette above me took stars out of the sky.

And now they would dodge me and my light. And their moving circling me unnerved me, they have such strength and presence, and I turned back to the barn. I'd come back early. I'd catch him in daylight.

And now that the horses knew I was leaving, would they wonder if I carried treats for them, carrots, grain? And when they came looking, they would be going several horses wide, and every minute's distance I walked was for them five seconds to run, and they'd be looking for my light's spot, which was away ahead of me, and I would be in the darkness between it and them.

And at the hill I looked back, and where I'd seen the horses there were now stars.

And I tried to move quickly, and I tried to move quietly, and I tried to move noisily, trying to be invisible and visible both at once, wanting to get out of their pasture.

MORNING BRING-IN

When they're at the gates in the morning, getting horses from their pastures into the barns must seem like nothing. Look, they're up and want to come in.

But hungry horses can get a little competitive. Go lead a mid-level pecking order mare out of a pasture in front of the alpha mare and you'd best expect surprises. Hard and fast rules will get somebody, one of them, one of us, hurt.

I'll take the first steps for bringing-in even as I pull into the drive at the barn, when I park my car away from the dry lot and gates, so the pasture herds don't start into horseplay too soon.

I'll hay the couple of horses kept in for medical reasons overnight, set grain up in the barns, and check that the blue barn road door, the far side arena door, and the swing gate to the arena are closed, that the driveway gate between the barns, and the double gate to the out-back are shut. And I consider closing the human green door in the gray barn. A young horse walked out it, once. Things can happen. Then I'll open the west doors.

And as I open the first one, for the fun of it, I'll name to myself which horses are nearest the mare and the gelding gates. Probably nobody right at the mares' gate, but Danni and Taz are pretty close. Dudley's not a bully, but for the last while he's been the one most likely at the gelding gate, and he's there today. In the pasture he won't harass another horse, but he wants the morning gate, so nobody's within forty feet.

The geldings are restless today, so I'll go there to take some pressure off the gate. And as I walk the 90 feet from the barn, the pecking order will often change. I've seen Dudley, Buck, Bobo, Dually, Highway each shift the others away to be first. And the size of the horse doesn't determine its position at the gate. Though he's not a first one, Palomino gelding George, at fourteen hands maybe the height of a tall pony, always gets a place at the gate well before the sixteen or seventeen hand Thoroughbreds Thor and Jumper. It's their sense of themselves, of their heart.

And as I walk, Dudley is moved slightly away from the gate by somebody, probably Dually, who is farther out, off to the side but nearly in line with the gate. And watching Dudley and me.

Keep in mind, when bringing-in it's hardly ever the horse you handle that'll give you trouble. But be aware of what's behind him.

Because, if I go in and walk over to Dudley, who's always been nearest, and walk him with a neck rope over to the gate, both he and Dually know that he's being held controlled by a human, and if Dually wants to snake bite at Dudley's rump, Dudley can't turn to defend himself, but will bolt ahead. And I'll get dragged if I hang on.

Bear with me, these horses' names are similar. In life, they're also both chestnuts of the same build, so they are further similar. I could use different names, but the names are not the point, the point is to be alert, to be aware.

So, in order to get the horse I'm leading safely through the gate and under control, I make eye contact with the horse standing beyond mine and break his concentration from thirty feet by waving an arm up and

speaking sharply to him. That can work. Too, if there's a second person for bring-in, that person can walk out and shift the other horse's attention.

So, when I've gotten the first of the geldings out of the pasture and am leading him to his stall, imagine that another person goes to that gate for the next horse, probably Dually. And when I come back, I'll go into the mares' pasture and neck rope the alpha mare Danni, but I know, too, that Taz is her friend, they live in adjacent stalls and have a pretty strong bond, so as I lead Danni toward the gate in my right hand and with my left hand flip the chain-loop off the top of the gate post to get Danni through, I know that Taz will pony along, following loose after Danni. So I'll get Danni out, transfer the rope to my left hand, swing Danni's hind end around when she's in the dry lot, and allow Taz to follow through the gate on her own. Then I'll get the gate shut and held by the chain-loop before the next horse gets out. It's a little ballet.

Next trip, here is Annie, with Faith standing a little behind. And they are also friends and stalled beside each other, as well. But I don't neck rope the nearer Annie, because the slightly more independent Faith will not follow along after her. So I go in and neck rope Faith and lead her past Annie, who trusts Faith in this space and doesn't much move, and when Faith is in the dry lot and the gate is clear Annie pops through. I flip the chain, leading Faith to her stall, and Annie is only seconds behind. I take two steps to slide both stalls shut, clip them, and go out again.

It's wonderful, there are always a few pairs of friends. If Danni goes into the arena for a lesson, Taz whinnies. If Faith is turned out and Annie left in, Annie screams for her, and in a second or two Faith's call in response comes into the barn. And the most remarkable bond came for Bea, who was always first or second at the mares' gate. But after only one night's turnout with a newly boarded mare, Bea gave over her status and began coming in with the new horse at the middle of the herd.

So, with Faith and Annie in, I'm down to the last three mares, and I'll neck rope Gracie and swing the gate until it stands open on its own. And Tammi will pony along after Gracie. And the last horse, Butters, will come out of the pasture by herself at speed and get ahead of me and my two horses, so I plan to walk inside the path she'll take, and she'll put herself in her own stall. So when I get there, I'll shut and clip all three doors, and they're done.

After a while, morning patterns emerge. If it's foggy they'll probably be out on the plateau and we'll have to open both end doors early as a signal, or call to them. And if it's windy they'll be extra skittish, so there's a better chance of getting dragged. And if it's starting to rain, we just get wet, no flapping hood and poncho. They've proven spooky in the past. And if it's thundering, it's all these elements and probably more. So we'll keep our eyes open and the dry lot tight.

MOWING ROAD PASTURES IN THE AFTERNOON

I will remember of mowing the front road pastures before turnout on a summer afternoon that as I ran the blue tractor west and then east, back and forth, and again, insects, grasshoppers, butterflies, tiny moths, would startle from the grass the tractor's front bucket touched, and in the golden dust haze of mowing, sharp-winged, split-tailed barn swallows came to dart and twist, looping and crossing in front of me just above the seed heads of the grass, taking these flitters and flappers and hoppers from the air, reaping in a bow of countless ecstatic figure eights as I mowed until time was gone.