

The Pursuit of *Virtù*

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Abstract: “The Pursuit of *Virtù*” is a personal narrative revisiting a pivotal riding lesson that unlocked the uglier side of the adage that the horse is a mirror to your soul. The beating heart of the essay reflects on how a rider’s trauma can manifest in the body of the horse as well as how classical dressage—the pursuit of courage and collection—can provide a map to return to a harmonious state of balance that is as much mental as physical. Mostly, it is a prayer asking forgiveness from all horses who have had to carry the unbearable burden of human hearts and minds heavier than their bodies could ever be.

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The horse is a mirror to your soul. Sometimes you might not like what you see.

— Buck Brannaman

Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves.

— Bessel van der Kolk

There was a time our bodies moved together in balance. A simple inhale coupled with an imperceptible lift of the pelvis would shift Eroika and me into a ground-covering trot. A crisp tightening of the abdominals and a closing of the pinky on the outside rein shifted the mare's balance towards her haunches, the beginning of a medium trot evident in our very first lesson. A rise of the inner seatbone would be met by Eroika's generous back, lifting me into a canter that was soft, round, and ground-covering. Although we were just learning movements like shoulder-in and turn on the haunches, the foundation of collection—mental and physical—allowed us to move harmoniously. Until it didn't.

This is Eroika's story; it is mine, too. It is a tale of madness and despair, but also of love, passion, and hope: a desperate clinging to the ethos of classical dressage as a means to heal body and soul when alcohol and psychotherapy failed (the latter far more damaging than the former). Mostly, it is a prayer asking forgiveness from a mare I loved before she was born—indeed to all horses who have had to carry the unbearable burden of human hearts and minds heavier than their bodies ever could be.

Eroika is a proud Lipizzaner mare of noble lineage with a lovely, liquid eye that expresses the subtlety of her rich interior. Her father, Maestoso Platana 21, was a performer in the illustrious Spanish Riding School in Vienna—the partner of third generation *Bereiter* Christian Bachinger. Her mother Tacoma bestowed the blood of Maestoso Canada, a remarkable stallion who closed the quality gap between Austrian and American broodmares. Eroika’s early promise impressed Dr Jaromir Oulehla, retired director of the Spanish Riding School and the Piber Stud. At the tender age of six months, she was the first horse in America—including mature stallions—to be awarded a “10” for her head and neck. Her elastic trot also received a perfect score. Eroika’s temperament received good, though not perfect marks. Submission was never high on her list of priorities. Even as a filly, she did not suffer fools.

My heritage is not so illustrious. I am quite literally a bastard born in Charleston, South Carolina whose adoptive parents robbed me of a naturally optimistic temperament that longed for beauty. Alma Faye and Jack Ansel, stock characters from the Southern Gothic, raised me—groomed me—for the husband who ultimately *broke* me. I know this seems melodramatic; in happier times I laugh at the excess of emotions which rock my world when their mad bolt heeds no curb. Too often it is only fatigue that brings some level of calm, exhaustion as a momentary forgetting that never sticks. In spite of valiant efforts to move past the violently amorous attentions of a *humbertishly* bigoted father, my body remembers.

Of course, tales of crazy women (or crazy horses, for that matter) don’t always begin with abuse. There are other accounts of misfiring synapses and inherited traits interpreted according to the fashion of the day which create other stories, yet beneath these narratives are the distorted bodies whose reality is too often denied by the profession charged with their healing. Freud reinterpreted the confessions he had taken as truth in his younger days as an internal diseased desire of the daughter rather than a traumatic reaction to an external act of violence by the father (or uncle or neighbour or shopkeeper, etc.) after Krafft-Ebing et al. dismissed his “Aetiology of Hysteria” as

nothing but “a scientific fairy tale.”¹ Vincent Felitti’s ground-breaking work linking obesity and sexual trauma grew into the Kaiser Permanente study of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), yet he received institutional pushback for believing these fat malingerers.²

In fact, the only thing stronger than the incest taboo and its pedophilic cousin is the desire to relegate these stories to the margins. Although Dorothy Allison, Maya Angelou, Mary Karr, Oprah Winfrey, Vanessa Springora, Erika Schickel and others are high-profile voices decrying the devastation inflicted on tender little bodies, we just don’t want to know.

It’s too unseemly.

It’s too scary.

Charming men, honourable men, and handsome men wreak far more havoc than the lonely pervert with a lollipop, a trench coat, and an aged van with tinted windows (or the equivalent across centuries): respectable fathers — not just the drunk, poor, dark, and Other — take unspeakable liberties that only a sadist could describe as fantasy or seduction. Popular textbooks of psychiatry still maintained that occurrences of incest were as rare as one in a million as late as 1975: “The legacy,” writes Judith Lewis Herman, “of Freud’s inquiry into the subject of incest was a tenacious prejudice, still shared by professionals and laymen alike, that children lie about sexual abuse. This belief is by now so deeply ingrained in the culture that children who dare to report sexual assaults are more than likely to have their complaints dismissed as fantasy.” Herman’s reflections

1 Masson, *The Assault on Truth*, 10. Masson quotes at length from Freud’s disappointed response to his paper in a letter to his close friend, the ear, nose, and throat specialist Wilhelm Fließ: “A lecture on the aetiology of hysteria at the Psychiatric society met with an icy reception from the asses, and from Krafft-Ebing the strange comment: It sounds like a scientific fairy tale [*Es klingt wie ein wissenschaftliches Märchen.*] And this after one has demonstrated to them a solution to a more than thousand-year-old problem, a ‘source of the Nile!’” A compelling focus of Masson’s controversial treatment of Freud’s seduction theory is to wonder what might have happened if he had never abandoned his trust in the truth of the tales of his hysterical patients. What would the world be like if Freud had maintained his belief in them? It is a question worthy of careful consideration in our #MeToo era.

2 Felitti, “Relation”, 44–47.

on Freud resonate with the response to Felitti and others who try to expose this open secret: “Within the medical profession, denial persists even in the presence of incontrovertible evidence, such as venereal disease in children. Rather than acknowledge the possibility of sexual abuse, physicians have been known to assert that children can contract venereal disease from clothing, towels, or toilet seats, an idea that transcends the limits of biological possibility and which would be considered laughable if applied to adults.”³ Even mainstream French newspapers like *Le Monde* featured letters in support of paedophilia signed by luminaries such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Roland Barthes because “it is forbidden to forbid.”⁴ Any analyst trained in this milieu, “no matter how benevolent otherwise, does violence to the inner life of his patient and is in covert collusion with what made her ill in the first place.”⁵

Such collusion was exacerbated in my case: like many of the molested,⁶ I unwittingly sought to replay the family drama by marrying a brilliant, well-educated Yankee with a gloriously irreverent sense of humour. He was also a malignant narcissist (every woman adores a fascist/the boot in the face. . .) with two previous marriages and two broken engagements that landed all four women in mental institutions. I was no. 5, locked up on the same fifth floor of Bloomington Hospital where no. 4 had been hauled against her will some twenty years before. Although our courtship began in fairytale style, daily taunts soon took me back to the “home” I thought I had married above, unleashing an unwelcome onslaught of memory.

The repressed terror buried in my marrow poisonously leaked out, and I became dangerously unhinged. Courage and joy fled as pathetic self-loathing altered my conformation: rounded shoulders, lowered head, and tight hips replaced the open heart and soft eyes of good equitation, mental health, and rigorous Pilates. My hands

3 Herman, *Father–Daughter Incest*, 11. Herman quotes this shocking statistic from D. James Henderson’s entry “Incest” in the widely used *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*.

4 Onishi, “A Victim’s Account”.

5 Masson, *The Assault on Truth*, 191.

6 I cannot bear the words “victim” or “survivor”. Neither and both describe me; I only want to be a rider. Perhaps a writer as well.

shook at the slightest sound or fast movement. The irony was not lost on me that the worst of my mental collapse took place in a Victorian bedroom with century-old yellow wallpaper. Worst of all, I welcomed an old childhood friend: dissociation.

The rift between Eroika and me under saddle did not always hinder our friendship outside of the arena where my heart could mitigate the harm of my body. Grooming and groundwork — soft caresses and awkward dancing — kept up our intimacy. I particularly loved standing next to her left shoulder, the lead rope swinging lax, picking up my left foot to cross over my right. . . Eroika picking up her left hoof to cross over her right. It was tentative at first as she figured out what I was asking — not unlike the talented dancer in high heels relying on a less agile partner who, in one of life's inexplicable asymmetries, is the one who leads. She would be so pleased with herself after we crossed the arena in tandem, her baritone nickers, demanding a peppermint, increasing in delighted anticipation as the plastic crinkled during the unwrapping.

But even the suggestion of a canter, particularly on the left lead, was a whole other story.

Under the weight of my misery, Eroika's easy lope erupted into a violent bolt; her dropped back, raised head, and pinned ears signified the removal of the consent her soft body once offered. She flailed; she flung herself at the sides of the arena when inside or, more perilously, took no care for her feet when out in a vast, open field. Before long, the mare whose noble carriage once reflected her Imperial lineage mirrored the seismic shift in my mental and physical state.

Diagnosing the unwanted behaviour of a horse is not unlike diagnosing the unwanted behaviour of a human. You seek physical causes first. Mostly able to mask the internal tumult from nine to five, only my closest friends — or those unlucky enough to catch me in the later hours — knew the full truth. Or *a* full truth: the onslaught of repressed memories erupted in my dreams and haunted even sunny days. That didn't mean I couldn't hide it from most: *la belle indifférence* of our mask. You can lie to your therapist, your spouse, your friends, and

your co-workers. Perhaps they will be grateful to be spared the truth. You cannot, however, lie to your mount. “There is no secret so close,” writes R.S. Surtees, “as that between a rider and his horse.”⁷

Wisely, I sought the advice of equestrian friends, trainers, and veterinarians, following the appropriate diagnostic protocol to find the root of the decline in my mare. Eroika’s mouth was carefully checked for any dental discomfort. So was her body—especially the right shoulder that braced, refusing to turn when she was stressed. Her flash noseband was removed, and her preference for a jointed snaffle versus a French link was immediately indulged. The soft sheepskin of a Mattes pad cushioned the saddle custom fitted to Eroika and me by a master *sellier*.

Sometimes things continued to go well, following our well-established routines. Other times, it was terrifying for both of us. While Eroika could tolerate my riding her into the ground, putting her audacious pride literally onto her forehead as my equitation became increasingly fetal, she could not tolerate it when I mentally left her, leaving only my misshapen body behind.

Tellingly, it was a riding lesson that first granted me profound insight into our misfortunes—though it would take time to sink in. During the dissolution of my marriage, I abandoned the expense of a dressage trainer due to the high cost of a divorce attorney. I rode less and less while I fretted more and more. A good friend coaxed me to fill in a spot at a clinic with a Grand Prix rider at her barn. I was reluctant for two reasons: the money and, of course, my mental state. Fragility can understandably frustrate trainers devoted to helping horses and humans find as much beauty and balance as their forms allow.

7 Surtees, *Mr. Sponge’s Sporting Tour*, 199. The quote has leapt out of this mid-Victorian homage to foxhunting and the grifting life onto the larger stage of equestrian internet memes. Although its twenty-first century life invokes mystical interspecies intimacy, its nineteenth-century usage was a blissfully satirical commentary on the many mounts of Soapey Sponge: “When a man and his horse differ seriously in public, and the man feels the horse has the best of it, it is wise for the man to appear to accommodate his views to those of the horse, rather than risk a defeat. It is best to let the horse go his way, and pretend it is yours. There is no secret so close as that between a rider and his horse.” I couldn’t let my millennial usage totally betray the cynical spirit of Surtees!

They spend their lives on the backs of these beasts, unknotting the kinks caused by unbridled fear as much as wanton cruelty. If they are not careful, the bodies of the trainers can become a repository of both human and equine misery.

As I warmed up, I watched this previously unknown trainer give a lesson to a lovely blonde middle schooler on her very first pony, who, like most ponies, had definite but mercurial opinions. The little mare sped up and slowed down, she wouldn't turn—everything according to her own volition. It would have been tempting to smack the pony and rip her face, to scream “stop it” —and I'm certain many generally kind riders have experienced a moment where they could not trust their better selves. This trainer, however, trusted in shapes to bring them into harmony, telling this sweetly talented little rider to rely on equitation rather than rough hands and crude aids to communicate with her willful mount.

It is difficult to dominate a pony. It is difficult to dominate a mare. It is nearly impossible to dominate a pony mare. If you succeed in doing so, it will never be beautiful, and such ugliness degrades horse and human alike.

This is not a new truth—it's at least as old as Xenophon. In *The Art of Horsemanship*, he maintains that nothing “that is forced or misunderstood can ever be beautiful”. “For what the horse does under compulsion,” Xenophon warns, “is done without understanding; and there is no beauty in it either, any more than if one should whip and spur a dancer.”⁸ Such riding never results in real connection that preserves joyful vitality in the pair. Only tense imitation of spirit results from horses “fretted by their riders into ugly and ungraceful action.”⁹

This middle schooler would not be satisfied with ugly, throwing her brave little heart into the pursuit of a grace she will be chasing her entire life as she grows into an exceptional horsewoman. With each lap around the arena, the child focused on disciplining her body into alignment rather than pulling the mare onto the bit. With each

8 Xenophon, *The Art of Horsemanship*, 62.

9 Xenophon, *The Art of Horsemanship*, 56.

stride, they became more and more beautiful. The girl's bright eyes sparkled and the wrinkled crease of the pony's cow eyes softened. The little blonde's irrepressible grin descended all the way down to the mare's feet, which were no longer shuffling to some internal cacophony. They were now in rhythm. It was a perfect twenty-metre circle that was an absolute joy to behold.

Observing the changing expressions of the horse and rider, I mentally checked my own position from crown to toe. I straightened my back and opened my collarbone, softened my thighs and relaxed my heels. I rolled my shoulders back and down, setting my elbows and wrists to move in concert with Eroika's sensitive mouth. Lastly, I felt the imaginary string talked about by every horse trainer and Pilates instructor, the one at the top of my head that was pulling me higher and higher, creating space between each vertebra — new places for Eroika and me to breathe into as we picked up a tentative trot.

Our lesson began.

As I had not been riding much of late, maintaining a proper position without tension for a long time was tough but surprisingly doable. At the instructor's request, we picked up an easy working trot. Instinctively the trainer knew not to push us into more expressive gaits. I marvelled at our rhythmic relaxation; Eroika was in a good mood. So was I.

The lesson emphasized correct basics, and trusting in the geometric wisdom of Podhajsky, Klimke, and Loch. My outside hip turned with her easily to describe the circumference of a lovely, round twenty-metre circle. We repeated these patterns on the left, mixing in a little leg yield to supple her massive shoulders and ample haunches. It was splendid; my joy kept my heart open and my legs softly breathing around her receiving body. The relentless misery of the past few years temporarily melted away, and I glimpsed a brighter future for us.

I don't know what shifted. It happened in the kind of time only physicists, great musicians, and greater equestrians can measure. I had not yet registered the alteration, nor had the spectators in the

arena. In fact, at that very moment, a friend who shared some of the normal fear that accompanies middle age shouted in encouraging solidarity: “That’s good Ang!”

Did I tense because it was the moment in a lesson where we would normally shift into canter, and I just didn’t feel ready? Did fat old Tom, spooker of even the quietest horse in pursuit of a wayward mouse and a dead stopper — meaning he would decide to use the arena as a litter box right in front of any horse, regardless of its size, speed, or temperament if fancy struck him — decide to have a little fun with us? Did the next pair warming up for their lesson cross our path a little too closely, reminding me that I could not always stop this mare and a collision might ensue?

I frankly don’t recall. But the trainer, unconcerned about any of these “threats”, perceived only my hypervigilance and quietly asked me to bring her to a walk on the long rein. Eroika exhaled into the slower tempo, her neck stretching out like an accordion.

“She doesn’t like it when you go away,” the trainer said to me.

“What?” I asked, confused. This was not typical clinic talk of inside reins, outside legs, and uneven hands that accompany the proverbial command to “get that horse on the bit”.

“She doesn’t like it when you go away,” the trainer repeated. “She got a worried look on her face, so I asked you to walk.”

While I’m certain that my friend who organized the lessons informed the clinician that I was struggling with fear issues because the mare could bolt — and bolt she would — that even she, also a trainer and former eventer, had experienced some fear when Eroika ran madly across an enormous hay field, refusing to stop or turn until exhausted, I’m also certain my trainer friend didn’t give her a detailed list of my traumatic life, of the childhood dissociations when an unwelcome visitor crossed the threshold of my bedroom, of the recent violations that dragged that past into a present I all too frequently couldn’t remain in.

Yet this clinician saw in less than a blink of an eye that the mare became terrified when I dissociated.¹⁰

I don't know what gave her an insight that my marriage counsellor, my friends, my attorney, or even my soon-to-be ex did not see; one that I couldn't fully comprehend until later, but I knew she was on to something. I also knew that I could trust the rhythm and shapes of *manège* riding to restore a beautiful balance to our decimated lives.

In *The Ethics and Passions of Dressage*, Charles de Kunffy paints a truth Eroika learned from me (a source of my everlasting sorrow): “No living creature can be gymnasticized when ill, in pain, uncomfortable, weak, anxious, intimidated, or even unhappy.” De Kunffy therefore places great importance on the “rider’s attitudes, inner emotional climate and character development”, maintaining that when done in “the right spirit, riding should improve the personality of the rider, causing new virtues to emerge while strengthening the old ones.” For this Hungarian master, the benefit of gymnastic exercise for horse *and* rider is indisputable: “Classical horsemanship is *therapeutic* riding.” These insights correlate with the wisdom of trauma studies, providing a reliable truth that seems to elude psychoanalysts and yet anchors my soul. “Riding,” he continues, “that does not remain at all times attentive to therapeutic needs of the horse will fail in the attainment of athletic ones.”¹¹ Indeed, shapes matter for horses and humans alike. In this spirit de Kunffy links aesthetics with emotional welfare because beauty “ultimately looks like the manifestation of happiness”.¹²

Similarly, Alois Podhajsky, who safeguarded the Spanish Riding School from none less than Hitler, reminds us of the empathy inspired by the horse who “teaches us self-control, constancy, and the ability to understand what goes on in the mind and the feelings

10 It should be mentioned here that this unnamed clinician is Betsy Van Dyke. In spite of her profound impact on the lives of me and my mare, I only rode with her this one time. She read the essay and graciously responded that it had moved her. Her compassionate intuition marks her as a true friend of horses and riders.

11 De Kunffy, *Ethics and Passions of Dressage*, 16–7.

12 De Kunffy, *Ethics and Passions of Dressage*, 47.

of another creature” when in pursuit of collection.¹³ It is important to recognize that collection as a form of self-government applies to both horse and rider. To be calm, cool, and collected has dual meanings. The mental element reflects relaxation and emotional stability while the physical is expressed in the increased power and equilibrium in all movements at all gaits. Real self-carriage relies on the accountability of each individual — human and equine — to act as responsible moral agents according to their capacities.

Lady Sylvia Loch, another passionate adherent to the old ways, also situates discussions of “dressing” a horse within the larger field of aesthetics, which reflects “the beauty and order of nature”.¹⁴ This ethos of the classical rider rejects Foucauldian vocabulary like “normalizing judgment” and “docile bodies” as well as the Freudian fixation on repression and hysteria in favour of more empowered incarnations: self-government and collection that result from a world where good equestrianism is a part of *virtù*, or what Vicki Hearne describes as “that noble old conception of intelligence, courage and power collapsed in one trait”.¹⁵ This quality manifests itself as a kind of somatic harmony. Like Drummer Girl, the thoroughbred mare featured in Hearne’s chapter “Crazy Horses”, Eroika craved “balance, symmetry, and coherence [. . .]. Hence the depth of her enraged despair when the world failed to provide the forms she inchoately yearned for. She desired balance the way any creature desires its own nature, and this meant more to her than what we usually call

13 Podhajsky, *Complete Training*, 20.

14 Loch, *Dressage*, 18–9. Loch argues that in “the days when art could never in the public’s wildest imagination comprise of a canvas daubed with bold brush strokes of a raw colour accompanied by an apparently random use of squiggles and blobs, blurs, and bobs, definitions were undoubtedly easier [. . .]. To our forefathers, art represented the definite and classical. This meant that it pertained to reality, reflected the beauty and order of nature and was determined always by the laws of balance and light. Logic and symmetry prevailed at all times. The opposite of classicism was chaos, disorder, darkness — a breaking of the rules — something quite unacceptable.” Her call-to-arms clearly echoes Goethe’s *characterization* of the classic as healthy and the romantic as sickly. Before you dismiss this as misplaced nostalgia, think about the bizarre world of postmillennial dressage where phrases like “flash and trash” describe disjointed extravagant movement that win blue ribbons and perhaps even Olympic medals from horses who don’t enjoy the longevity of the mounts of the Spanish Riding School.

15 Hearne, *Adam’s Task*, 121.

love.”¹⁶ Eroika instinctively knew the lesson I had to learn from the pit of heartbreak, from the tumultuous, disorderly chaos improperly named, and her soft eye begged *me*—not this melodramatic wastrel who inhabited my form—to come back to her.

It is this return of *virtù* I doggedly seek for both of us. If only an epiphany could immediately erase the traumatic memory in my body and its impact on hers. Most tales of equestrian courage recall the heroics exploits of Alexander on Bucephalus, the doomed British Calvary in the Crimea, Lara Prior-Palmer retracing the steps of Genghis Khan on the untamed steppes of Mongolia, even Velvet riding the Pi to a fictional victory in the Grand National. We don’t count a fifty-year old seeking to canter her mare in an elegant circle while being fully present as brave. In spite of current lip service, most don’t count little girls—regardless of their chronological age—who finally speak up about unwelcome attentions as brave. *Tant pis*.

When I reflect upon the riding lesson that finally offered Eroika and me a path to wellness, I cannot help but smile when I think of the brave little blonde with bright blue eyes on her pony. Her courage and tact allowed her to place at usDF Regionals on a beloved “throw-away” against older girls riding European imports that cost more than a sports car. Brava!

Being brave will be different for me and Eroika, whose lot in life is limited by my being her guardian as my lot in life was limited by Jack Ansel and Alma Faye being my guardians. The courage embedded in her very name, however, gives me hope. I apologize to her profusely at times; she signals her forgiveness by coming over of her own accord to the old mulberry tree where we tack up for a ride in the field, graciously taking a sugar cube like a princess accepting tribute. I ride only as long as I can keep my heart open, my chin up, and my soul present. That is my solemn promise to her.

There are no championships in our future. That is absolutely fine. We still can share a life of glorious intimacy. She and her buddy Tyco live right outside my bedroom window. They let me know their desires

16 Hearne, *Adam’s Task*, 129.

by long nickers and loud stares. We are getting older together, doing the best we can. There is a heroism in that. Before rides, I take Tenyson, sugar cubes, and peppermints out to the field. I read aloud the last stanza of “Ulysses” to remind us of the beauty that remains. I tack her up, tighten the girth in slow increments, gently swing a leg over, settle into the saddle, and reach down to give her a sugar cube, sometimes on her left, more frequently on her right, all the while reciting the words we both now know by heart:

Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

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