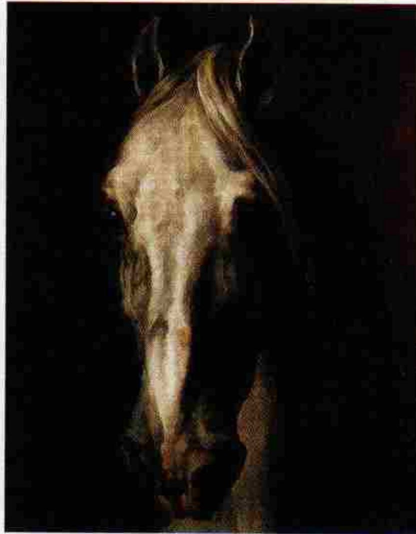
HORSEMAN, PASS BY

Glory, grief, and the race for the Triple Crown

By John Jeremiah Sullivan

Far back, far back in our dark soul the horse prances.
—D. H. Lawrence



IN THE MONTH OF MAY

My only real awareness of the Kentucky Derby, growing up across the river from Louisville, lay in noticing the new commemorative glass that appeared in the cupboard each May, to be dropped and broken, as often as not by me, before the next one arrived. Although my father attended the race every year for more than a decade, occasionally taking my older brother along, he never said anything to me about it apart from to ask, when I got old enough, which horse I would like him to bet on with my allotted two dollars. His position, in general, was that to talk about work was the same as being at work, and there was already plenty of that.

A sportswriter gets used to people coming up to him in restaurants or at PTA meetings and taking issue with something he said in a column or on some call-in show. And my father was sensitive to the slightest criticism—really the slightest mention—of his writing, almost to the point of wincing, which may have stemmed from his having come to the job somewhat backward. As opposed to the typical sportswriter, who has a passion for the subject and can put together a sentence, my father's ambition had been to Write (poetry, no less), and sports were what he knew, so he sort of stumbled onto making his living that way. When the alternative weekly paper in Columbus, Ohio—where we moved when I was twelve so he could take a job writing for the *Columbus Dispatch*—started running a regular column entitled "The Sully," in which they would select and expand upon what they felt to be my father's most bizarre sentence from the previous week (e.g., "'Second base is still an undefined area that we haven't wrapped our arms around,' Tribe general manager John Hart said, sounding very much like a man about to have his face savagely bitten"), we were amazed by his pained reaction. The compliment behind the teasing would have been plain to anyone else, but he would not have the thing in the house.

Two years ago, in May, I sat with him in his hospital room at Riverside Methodist, in Columbus. He was in recovery from what was supposed to have been a quintuple bypass operation but became, on the surgeon's actually seeing the heart, a sextuple bypass. There had, in the preceding year, already been the aneurysm surgery, then the

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Head of a White Horse, by Theodore Gericault © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York City

surgery (unsuccessful) to repair the hernia caused by the aneurysm surgery. "My succession of infirmities," as he put it to me in a letter, "has tended finally to confront me with blunt intimations of mortality." Otherwise it was not a morbid scene. The last operation had gone well, and he seemed to be feeling better than he had any right to. The waning sedative and, I suppose, twenty-four hours without cigarettes had left him edgy, but he was happy to talk, which we did in whispers, because the old man with whom he was sharing a room that night had already gone to sleep.

"All of a sudden there was this . . . disruption in the corner of your eye. And before you could make out what it was, here Secretariat came"

I asked him to tell me what he remembered from all those years of writing about sports, for he had seen some things in his time: Michael Jordan at North Carolina, a teenage John McEnroe, Bear Bryant, the Big Red Machine in Cincinnati. This is what he told me:

> I was at Secretariat's Derby, in '73, the year before you were born—I don't guess you were even conceived yet. That was . . . just beauty, you know? He started in last place, which he tended to do. I was covering the second-place horse, which wound up being Sham. It looked like Sham's race going into the last turn, I think. The thing you have to understand is that Sham was fast, a beautiful horse. *He* would have had the Triple Crown in another year. And it just didn't seem like there could *be* anything faster than that. Everybody was watching him. It was over, more or less. And all of a sudden there was this . . . like, just a disruption in the corner of your eye, in your peripheral vision. And then before you could make out what it was, here Secretariat came. And then Secretariat had passed him. No one had ever seen anything run like that—a lot of the old guys said the same thing. It was like he was some other animal out there . . .

I wrote that down when I got back to my father's apartment, where my younger sister and I were staying the night. He lived two more months, but that was the last time I saw him alive.

A year later I went to the New York Public Library and looked up the pieces he had written for the *Courier-Journal* (then the *Courier-Journal & Times*) on that first Saturday in May 1973. There were two by "Mike Sullivan, Staff Writer": the procedural one, about Sham; and another, stranger piece, buried well into the section, which may be of interest to scholars of the newspaper business someday, if only because it shows how far into the provinces the New Journalism had penetrated by the early seventies. In it my father describes floating around Churchill Downs on the morning of the Derby, looking for something to write about. Midway through the story "The Kid" appears, "loose-limbed . . . fitted out in old jeans and sneakers . . . he looked very much like a groom or stable boy." My father always wore a white linen suit to the Derby, à la his great hero, Mark Twain (though his colleague and friend the noted horsewriter Billy Reed once wrote that he looked more like "a deranged Colonel Sanders," a look that I imagine would have made him quite approachable to a confused hippie).

The Kid confesses to my father that he has snuck in without a ticket, and says that he is trying to get the jockey Laffit Pincay's autograph for his "buddy" back in Michigan. Some weird post-sixties dialogue ensues. My father advises him not to go forward with his plan of impersonating a groom (*they* might catch him) but instead to "wedge against the runway fence after the race" and try for the autograph there. The Kid is then given a meeting place for after the Derby. "At that time, he would tell whether he'd gotten the autograph . . ."

It was the next and last sentence that, for some reason, struck me as odd and oddly affecting, coming across it there in the hum and the mortuary light of the microfilm machine. It is: "If The Kid failed in his mission, this story will end here."

AMONG THE YEARLINGS

All horses turn one on the first of January following their birth, New Year's Day being roughly when the new crop starts to appear. Given that the breeding season runs from February to June, and that a mare carries her foal for eleven months, a horse can be anywhere from seven to twelve months old when it becomes a yearling, which means that the animals for sale last September at Keeneland, in Lexington, Kentucky, were between sixteen and twenty-one months old. This may be when thoroughbreds are at their most beautiful. They have just outgrown the awkward stiffness and knobby knees of the foal, and their muscles have begun to develop, subtly rippling under their coats like waves seen from a height.

A two-day sale was scheduled for September 10 and 11. I got there on the morning of the tenth, a day of exquisite weather, the low, overcast skies so often seen in central Kentucky replaced with brilliant blue and small clouds. At the door I was given my "hip book," the catalogue that lists all the as yet nameless colts and fillies (each of which has a lot number affixed to its hip), with the names of their consignors or owners. The book also includes elaborate, page-long pedigrees that note the amount of prize money won by each horse's sire and dam. At the top of each page is a crow's-foot family tree going back three

generations. Most of the people here have the book in hand, consulting it, scribbling in the margins. It is a kind of libretto for one of the most unusual pieces of theater in America.

The process by which the individual horses are brought to the gavel begins in the week before the sale, when the trainers, owners, and others with serious intent to buy gather at the Keeneland stables, where the yearlings are kept on view. Each animal gets a thorough veterinary exam, the results of which will be broadcast on closed circuit just before it enters the bidding. Prospective buyers are informed if the horse is a "cribber" (one that likes to chew on fences, which can lead to gastrointestinal problems) or a "ridgling" (a condition that comprises both the "monorchids" and the "cryptorchids," colts with either one or both testicles undescended, respectively). The trainers check the animals all over, do even deeper research into their pedigrees (there is a library on-site for this purpose), and watch them run around a bit. Most of the hard decisions, about which horses a prospective buyer wants to bid on and how high he or she might be willing to go, are made before the public sale even begins.

The sale itself is about nerves, for those who plan to part with a lot of money, and spectacle, for those who have come only to watch. The horses are led, one after another, on a circuitous route from the stables to the stage, beginning outside, moving slowly (always slowly) into the paddock, then through an oblong, covered corral, stopping at various points along the way so that the stressed-out trainers, about to gamble with millions of someone else's dollars, can get a last look. The grooms are brushing them the whole time, combing their hair, whispering to calm their nerves, doing everything possible to make them look gorgeous and even-tempered. The amount of money that can be lost by a sudden, unexpected move, which can cause the horse to act up and look too high-strung in front of the bidders, is ridiculously large. People hang over the railings, watching them pass. Most conspicuous in the crowd are the Arabs, who move about with entourages of unsmiling bodyguards and assistants. Some of the horses notice the attention and tug against their bridles, as if it annoys them. The higher-profile trainers will sometimes walk into the corral with a horse that has caught their attention. They stand with arms folded, chewing their lips, their eyes moving deliberately over the animal's body, taking in every angle and sinew as they try to gauge the worth of a racehorse that has never run competitively in its life.

From the corral the horses arrive at a sort of backstage area, the last stop before they go up for sale. At this point people intending to bid on an animal whose approach they have followed move into the amphitheater, where the auctioneer sits. As each hip number is called, a twenty-five-foot-high wooden door, like the entrance to a medieval castle, is pushed open, and a different groom, in a fancy green jacket and black pants, takes the bridle and brings the yearling onto the wooden stage. Then the door is pushed closed again.

DAWN

Among our first conscious signs of ourselves, in the prehistoric caves of Spain and France, they are already there, prancing, stampeding, and evidence suggests that we had already begun to see them as something more than themselves. Writers on Ice Age art mention the paradoxical fact that horses make up a sizable percentage of the painted images in caves where they are hardly to be found among the discarded bones. There is even what looks like an altar to the horse, in a cave in the south of France, dating back 15,000 years, a "kneeling sandstone figure" of what looks to be a mare amid skulls and horsehead jewelry. Our awe in their presence—who has not felt it, just standing across the fence from one?—is as old as anything we can call ours.

They began 50 million years ago, in North America, on what is now the Great Plains. They were *Eohippus*, "dawn horse," the size of a small dog, with multiple clawed toes on their feet. At some point during the Miocene, when the Alps were forming and the primates were starting to diversify, they found their way down into South America and across the land bridge over the Bering Strait—opposite to the way we came—and colonized Europe and Asia: herds of wild horses, alpha stallions with their harems of mares, "bachelor bands" of subdominant males, moving across the steppe and the plains. They had become ungulates, mono-toed. They had developed those enormous eyes that seem always to see you no matter where you stand, like the eyes in old family portraits, which allowed them to watch the

Photograph of cave at Combe d'Arc (detail) © AKG London

grass they were eating and the predators lurking in it at the same time. And they had become fast, faster than anything on the solid earth apart from the cats, and the cats could maintain their speed for only a few hundred yards or so, whereas this creature could run from morning to night. The entire genius of evolution had gone into crafting *asva*, as it was called in Sanskrit, this verb made flesh, this thing whose every atom wanted to run, from the giant nostrils, drawing huge drafts of air into the cavernous heart and lungs, to its long,

powerful hindquarters. The horse essentially leaps when it gallops, like a tremendous hare.

AMONG THE YEARLINGS II

The seats in the amphitheater itself are reserved for high rollers, but at any given time enough of them are out looking at upcoming lots that you can slip into one of their seats and watch the action. The auctioneer sits atop an enormous podium, fifteen feet above the stage. The horses themselves are so tall that he has to be up that high to see over them, and these absurd proportions make him seem like an indifferent judge in a Kafka story. He uses the frenetic, twanging banter of the country fair rather than the somber drone of the art auction. (There is wonderful unnecessity to this style; surely no horse would sell for a dollar less if he were simply to say, "I have a bid for five hundred thousand dollars. Would anyone like to bid seven hundred and fifty?") The banter runs ceaselessly, from morning till evening, as the hip numbers are called in unbroken succession: when one auctioneer gets tired another slides into his place, and when one horse exits stage left another is poised to enter stage right, a carousel of every admixture of black, brown, white, red, and gray.

The auctioneer is flanked at the podium by two relay men. His calls are based not on what he sees but on what they whisper to him. They are watching the spotters, men who stand at the feet of the aisles and scan the crowd for that raised eyebrow or click of the pen that signals a higher bid. This conspicuous anonymity on the part of the wealthiest bidders has its uses, since for an unknown buyer there is cachet to be had in going head-to-head with one of the "names" on the floor, a sort of gamesmanship that can quickly turn expensive for all concerned. As an experiment, I take a seat in the front row and turn around to face the crowd, curious to see if I can spot the bids: I do not catch one. When the spotter registers someone willing to rise to the auctioneer's bait ("I'mlookingforfourhundredmillionnowfourhundredmillion . . ."), he spins on his heels with a "Hyah!" or a "Hey!" Each has his own yell. The relay man writes down the new bid and repeats it, sotto voce, to the auctioneer, and suddenly—mysteriously, because the first event in the chain is almost totally imperceptible—the price goes up.

The yearlings themselves pace back and forth, occasionally rearing, their hooves clacking on the hard wood of the stage, their dark eyes roving crazily in their sockets, swallowing the crowd like that panther in the Rilke poem. Somehow it is much, much stranger and more unsettling to be in the presence of a thoroughbred than in the presence of, say, a giraffe, or some other novelty animal whose defining characteristic is its weirdness. These horses are mystical in their beauty; I cannot help noticing how much, despite their tails, they resemble enormous deer. Every motion of their limbs is a kind of flickering, so that one blinks and expects them to vanish. Many of them snort while they are being sold. Others are silent. One in ten will whinny, as if to protest being stared at so insolently, and the sound will scissor through the room above the auctioneer's breathless tally. They shit prodigiously, and there is with them on the stage, apart from the groom, a uniformed sweep, who brushes the pile into a pan as soon as it hits the floor.

These two men are the only black people I see at the sale, which I am embarrassed to say I have to remind myself to notice, having spent too much time down South to find it remarkable. It is appalling, if not entirely fair, to note that if you were to trace backward through time the job of the man sitting atop the podium—the Keeneland auctioneer—you would eventually make your way to a man named Jerry Delph, said to be a model for the slave dealer in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Delph sold both human beings and horses off the same auction block in the Cheapside district of Lexington, a neighborhood that "is still tainted," according to the unofficial state historian, Thomas D. Clark, "by the indignities committed there against humanity."

Study for *The Race of the Riderless Horses*, by Emile-Jean-Horace Vernet
© North Carolina Museum of Art/CORBIS

It is something to see these animals looking back at all that Arab royalty and Irish aristocracy, the Japanese billionaires and the old Southern money and the New Economy arrivistes searching for some new hobby to fight off the boredom, and at you. There is an innocence to these creatures; they are children, after all. Yet their pride is undeniable, too: they seem to know that the whole affair, the hundreds of millions changing hands every year, the roaring crowds, the pageantry, the tears, are about them, and are nothing without their power. Yet their power is ambiguous, for they have already accepted the bit and the bridle. And just as they are the reason for this display, so all this money in the crowd, all this arrogance, is the reason for their existence.

On my way out of the pavilion, I spot Bob Baffert and Prince Ahmed bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia in the back row, surrounded by local news anchors and fans. They are the owner-trainer team behind the Thoroughbred Corporation, which in a fairly short time has become one of the most successful breeding and racing concerns in the world. Baffert has solid white hair just long enough to call floppy, and he is wearing, here inside, his trademark dark glasses (he is allergic to hay and keeps the shades on to hide the redness of his eyes). Bin Salman has a chubby, friendly face, with hair he keeps oiled and a black mustache. Baffert is the most recognizable human face in the game, and Bin Salman is arguably its most powerful player, yet they are the antithesis of the old Kentucky horseman (Baffert lives in California and got his start as a jockey on déclassé quarter horses, and there is the matter of his hay allergy), so Lexingtonians tend to love and hate them even more strongly than everyone else loves and hates them. On Baffert's advice, Bin Salman has just bid something close to $5 million on hip number 203, a chestnut great-grandson of Secretariat. Just for fun I try to count how many of the 573 horses for sale have Secretariat's blood in them but get bored at a hundred: the great champions sire armies of offspring.

Amazingly, the bid is not high enough. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, the defense minister of the United Arab Emirates, wins the auction at five and a half. I later ask Rogers Beasley, the director of sales, whether the sheikh and the prince ever get competitive on the floor, going higher just to outdo the other. "Used to," he says. "They got a little smarter on us." He is not complaining: on this day alone, more than $60 million worth of horseflesh is sold. Bin Salman, smiling and giving the palms-up "What can you do?" sign for the cameras, seems philosophical about having lost out, but Baffert is visibly disappointed. He was looking forward to training that horse.

A COLD EYE

My trip to the September yearling sale was only the second time I had been back to Lexington since we had buried my father there a year before. On the evening of the twelfth, after the last hip number had been called and most of the buyers had been driven to the airport, I pulled away from Keeneland under an almost radioactive violet sky that had the first tinge of fall in it, passing a skinny, bald-headed man who was walking shirtless along the side of the road, listlessly waving an American flag. The car was pointed toward my grandmother's house, where I was staying, but I veered at the last minute toward the cemetery.

His grave is at Calvary, a Catholic cemetery that lies directly across the road from Lexington Cemetery, site, as it happens, of the first racetrack in town and the place where all of my Episcopalian family on my mother's side are buried. The two graveyards, starkly separated from each other by the road and the traffic and the fences, seemed at the time to sum up rather neatly how opposite my parents were in almost every way: he Catholic, she Protestant; she Old Lexington, he a grandson of Irish immigrants, brought up in White Plains, New York, who moved to Lexington only as a teenager when his father, a construction supervisor, got a job overseeing the building of an IBM plant outside of town; she a former boarding-school cheerleader, he a former Memphis hippie (the freakiest of the hippies, as any survivor can tell you); and the list is long. It is a riddle how they stayed together for twenty years.

One of the most difficult things in dealing with my father's death is how inappropriate grief seems beside any memory of the man himself

The headstone was not on the grave yet, the grass had not come in. No one else was around. I had no flowers or anything else to leave and felt slightly awkward, as if I were trespassing.

One of the most difficult things in dealing with my father's death—for many of the people he left behind, I think—is how totally inappropriate grief and mourning seem beside any memory of the man himself. He was a deeply funny person, a collector and disseminator of bawdy jokes and carefully clipped page 10 stories about insane trailer-park crimes. He had inherited some variant of that dark and antic strain of Irish humor that runs through Synge and Flann O'Brien, by which the worst imaginable scenarios, the worst outbursts of temper, would flower in a joke that made everything bearable. It was a quality not without its regrettable side, for he used it to keep our concern

over his health at bay. I have a letter from him, written less than a month before he died, in response to my having asked him about an exercise regimen that his doctor had him on. In typically epithetic style (it was his weakness), he wrote, "Three days ago didst I most stylishly drive these plucky limbs once around the 1.2-mile girth of Antrim Lake—and wasn't it a lark watching the repellently 'buff' exercise cultists scatter and cower in fear as I gunned the Toyota around the tight turns!"

For all the joking, his disappointments and sadnesses never quit him. His own father had died when he was only nineteen, dropping dead in harness, as it were, on the job at a construction site.

We have never been certain whether the horse meant death or life, peace or war; over time it wavers, like a compass at the pole

"Four men came up to my mother at the funeral," my father told me once, "and claimed to be the one who caught him, which is how she knew that no one did." He was devastated; he had worshiped the man. He dropped out of college, utterly lost for a while. I see now that he was always, in some sense, a son. In one of his journals are plans for a book that would tell his father's story, the story of "a great and unknown man." But he never wrote it. His temperament was not suited for the long commitment, for the artist's obliviousness to competing responsibilities, which necessitates a certain cruelty, let us admit. So he accepted his defeat, with dignity, and with a total lack of self-pity. He wrote his newspaper stories, and wrote them well, downstairs at his vast green-leather-topped desk, on his creaking chair, in a haze of smoke. The desk was accidentally lost during the settlement of his estate. It is in a Salvation Army somewhere in Louisville, or at the dump.

The night he died I went back to his bachelor apartment in the dismal complex and sat down at the old desk, among his few things. In the drawers were his "quitting journals," as he called them, special notebooks, set apart from the others, filled with his rapid, loopy script. He would start a clean one with each new attempt to kick cigarettes. I had glanced at them once or twice, without permission, when he was alive. Now they belonged to me, along with all of his "creative work," under the terms of the will. They were largely self-excoriations, full of dark thoughts, efforts to locate and take hold of his own willpower. How *badly* he wanted to change. Worse than any of us could want that for him. I remember a notecard on the table by the bed, written during a brief period when he was attending a support group: "Reasons to quit: 1) It worries my children."

ICON

We have never been certain whether the horse meant death or life, peace or war; it depends what culture you consult, and down through time it wavers, like a compass at the pole. Symbols become more polysemous as they grow in familiarity: jade will always signify purity, but the apple can stand for anything. And nothing, until, say, 1913, when Henry Ford began using interchangeable parts—or until now, on some parts of the planet—has been more familiar to us than the horse. It is not too much to say that a person today who knows horses, really *knows* them, understands more about what it meant in the past to be human than the most knowledgeable historian.

In many places—pretty much everywhere in the industrialized world—the horse has passed out of our common life. It is a pet, or a police horse; at most it carries an unregenerate cowboy. But thousands of years of symbiosis leave a trace. It shows up most clearly in the language, this deep familiarity, in all the excellent words. You can go mad noticing them. Beyond all the metaphors that have passed into our speech—all the ponytails and tantivies, the horsebeans, horseleeches, and horselaughs, beyond all the junkies shooting white horse and all the cutpurses hung from the mare foaled of an acorn—beyond that there is, most excellent of all, the terminology, the words we have evolved in order to live in such close association with these beings for such a long time, to be able to talk about them and what they do: piebald and roan, withers and farrier, crupper and martingale. A Martian, equipped only with time and a dictionary, could reconstruct the history of the human race by looking for these proliferation-points of vocabulary, where the language suddenly explodes, signaling long intimacy, necessity. And yet, in an irony both strange and somehow perfect, when our Martian got to the word "horse" itself, he would find that white flag of lexicography: "origin unknown."

There is a theory that our language itself—our real language, Indo-European—is before all else the language of horsemen. Historical linguists have long wondered why we speak a derivative of an obscure tongue that is thought to have developed 6,000 years ago on the Central Asian steppes rather than one of the many languages once dominant in Eurasia, of which today Basque is the only survival. An archaeologist named David Anthony, at the Institute for Ancient Equestrian Studies in New York, put this enigma together with the fact that the steppes are where he and other excavators have unearthed 5,000-year-old horse skulls showing the world's earliest known signs of bit-wear, a discovery that pushes the advent of riding back a full millennium.

One afternoon, the theory goes, a group of people belonging to one of these steppe societies were

probably standing around looking at the horses in a pen, and someone (Anthony speculates that it may have been a child) decided to try to climb on top. It was a notion that could have occurred in regard to only a few animals, camels and elephants being the other two. Although *Equus* can be quite threatening when it needs to, it is alone among hooved quadrupeds in having no horns or antlers to hurt us, and its back is long and sturdy enough to accommodate our bodies, a biological affinity that Darwin noticed when he wrote, in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, "A naked man on a naked horse is a fine spectacle; I had no idea how well the two animals suited each other."

The species—both species—never looked back; what had been separate destinies were woven together in a double helix. The horse was saved from the extinction it had been headed inexorably toward, and the people became riders. These riders, it may be, speaking their harsh proto-Indo-European, having climbed atop and learned to guide the beasts that everyone else was still using for meat or milk—or simply watching with admiration—were able not only to spread their culture at formerly unimaginable speeds but also to put the fear of God (literally, perhaps) into whomever they met. Before long everyone spoke their tongue, worshiped their horse-headed gods, and rode horses.

FIRST SATURDAY IN MAY

I know that some old Lexington friends have seats just above track level, in front of the wire, so I vacate my seat in the press box at Churchill Downs and head down the white metal staircase to the grandstand. Shadowy men in vests and sunglasses, carrying sniper rifles and binoculars, are ranged along the edges of the roof. Security is said to be extra tight this year, owing partly to the presence of Prince bin Salman, a member of the Saudi royal family and as such one of the only people on earth the Arab fundamentalists hate more than us and the Israelis. In order to get through the checkpoints, all of your food has to be in clear plastic.

My friends, Chris and Becky, and Chris's brothers, have clear plastic bags full of ham biscuits, a Kentucky delicacy, which they feed me. There is a blimp hovering overhead and two propeller planes towing banners: "Merrill Lynch discriminates against women" and "Dèja Vù: Totally Nude Gentlemen's Club. SHOWGIRLS." The sun is getting bright. A guy in a Panama hat is smoking a joint right next to a female army private in camouflage, and people are taking their picture.

Chris and his brothers, John and Patrick, run a flower business together, and they tell me a story about last year's Derby, when they decided they would have a close-up look at the traditional Derby wreath, a horseshoe-shaped mantle of roses that is placed around the neck of the winning horse. When they found it, a woman was standing there, entrusted with keeping it safe.

"Hey, where do those roses come from?" John asked her.

"Why, these are *special* roses," the woman said, "grown right here in Kentucky."

"Bullshit," he said, "those are Ecuadoran."

"Yeah, you're right," she said, "but don't tell anybody, okay?"

The "undercard," the term used to refer to all the non-televised races run before the "big one," which, when there is a big one, always comes near the end of a meet, is under way. My friends are arguing over their bets, but I have decided to wager all my money on the Derby.

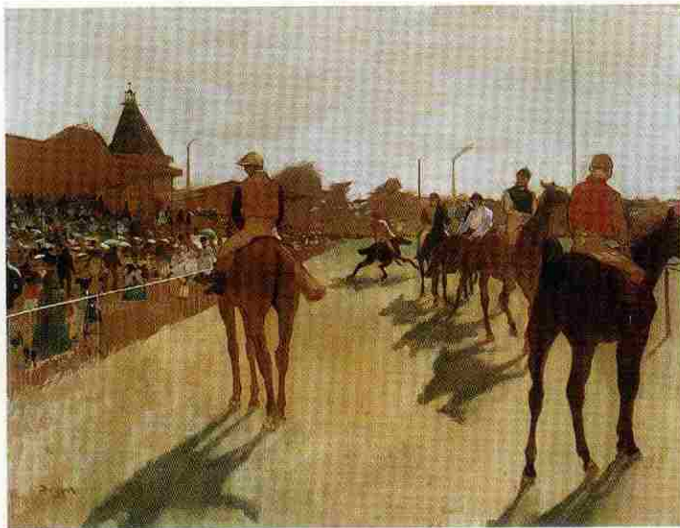
For the past eight months, ever since the yearling sale, I have been following the crop of two-year-olds, and now three-year-olds (the age of the horses that run in the Triple Crown), hoping to get lucky and to end up accidentally having followed a contender. I have won a lot of money on a sublime black colt named Mayakovsky, who placed, as I had bet he would, in the Hopeful at Saratoga, and I have lost even more money watching an Irish horse, Johannesburg, sprint across the wire in the Breeder's Cup at Belmont Park. I have worked to educate myself about the sport. In the process I have become a devoted reader of the *Daily Racing Form*, only dimly aware of world events beyond the two apologetic headlines printed in each day's issue, on the fourth page, under the title "News Briefs."

Back at the paddock—the circular staging area where horses are held, saddled, and mounted before each race—people are crushed against the railing, not so much to see the horses as to see the celebrities, who are not there to see the horses, either, but to see one another, and to make sure that *USA Today* gets their good side. Sean "Puffy" Combs is here, in a white suit, along with 'N Sync's

Woodcut of samurai © Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York City

Joey Fatone, the one with the shoe-polish goatee; so is the Backstreet Boys' Kevin Richardson, the thin-faced one with the costume-shop goatee. Richardson is a Lexingtonian: I heard him sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before a Wildcats game, which he did with real pizzazz. Someone says, "Hey, is that Britney Spears?" But no, it is Jessica Simpson, another blonde pop singer. Ivana Trump is here, too, in a tasteful feathered hat.

A heavyset frat-looking guy in a white T-shirt and a white cap is screaming at Ivana, and people actually quiet down to enable him. "Ivana!" he bellows. She goes on chatting. "I-V-A-N-A! We love you, Ivana!" She keeps her back turned



to him, but it is clear to all that she is now consciously keeping her back to him, which is fun to see. He has pierced the veil. Emboldened, he switches to Puffy, who now goes by P. Diddy. "P. Daddy! P. Daddy!" he cries. A woman walks up and starts giving him a good slap on the back every time he lets loose with one of his wild namings. I hear her refer to him, in conversation with another bystander, as "my son."

The behavior of this lunatic and his dam raises a question about the people inside the paddock, which is, What kind of person would voluntarily endure what is essentially a foodless outdoor cocktail party of strangers in heavy sun, in a concentration-camp-style enclosure, wearing outlandish clothes and trying to appear relaxed while being gawked at and openly insulted by hundreds if not thousands of drunken hill people? It is sad to be reminded, once again, that all this horse-racing business is about the rich, for the rich are hideous. There is nothing they cannot ruin. And, of course, if there is one other thing that horse racing is all about, it is people who do not have money to lose—the bettors—losing it.

So it is beautiful when the horses themselves appear, in their ignorance and their majesty, and assert their presence amid all this crappiness. "Oh Horse, Horse, Horse," wrote D. H. Lawrence in a letter, "when you kick your heels you shatter an enclosure every time," and now I know just what he means. Only those with souls most thoroughly hollowed out by fame fail to turn and watch the three-year-olds when they take their slow lap around the paddock. And the jockeys! Who could not love a sport with its own paid battalion of wee men, their bright, gay silks, their young faces, their ambiguous quasi-midgetry. We have had to evolve a special race of human beings, when you think about it, so that the thoroughbreds may have riders.

The blimp passes just overhead, causing a momentary eclipse of the sun, and I make up my mind to get inside the paddock itself, given that I have gone to the trouble of getting a press pass. But it is too close to Derby time. Although I get past the first security guard, another guy, in a newer uniform, puts his hand on my chest and says, "Only if you are with NBC." Why I do not simply call this man my buddy and tell him that if Mr. Costas is not drinking this bottle of water in thirty seconds we can both start looking for another job, I do not know. As I am escorted out, I see Bob Baffert, shaking hands with one hand and patting his horse with the other. As of last night, he and Bin Salman had two horses entered in the Derby, but one of them, Danthebluegrassman, has been scratched from the race this morning, and he is left now with just one horse, a black colt with a white star between its eyes, War Emblem, which is tossing its head nervously. I had never heard of the horse until this morning. Baffert looks confident, despite having already received a beating in the press for having entered Danthebluegrassman late, which kept another, Kentucky-based trainer out of the race altogether.

I have a cousin somewhere in the fabled "infield," so I go in search of her, thinking that I am sure to see some sights. But this, too, is a disappointment. The infield crowd is incredibly *well behaved* (all the papers will report on this the next morning—fewest crimes ever). The rifles and the plastic-bag dictum seem to have done the trick. I expect at least to see titties and knife fights, but this is more like Slip N' Slide and keg stands, men kissing women's bellies, that sort of thing, though the infield remains a wonderful place to see a certain kind of Kentucky face, a face made obsolete in other parts of the world by dentistry and nutritional guidelines. One Southern stereotype that is not in the least exaggerated, and that lends some support, perhaps, to the old canard about Appalachian people having held onto an English cultural inheritance squandered by the rest of the country, is the extraordinary state of many Kentuckians' teeth, which seem to fall or get knocked out in groups, rather than singly,

Race Horses in Front of the Stands, by Edgar Degas © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York City

lending a rather shocking aspect to their smiles.

I get to the seat that my friends have saved for me just in time to see the horses being led to post, their jockeys floating atop them, their coats shimmering in the perfect sun as if they were covered in oil. Each is accompanied by a gentle pony whose nerves are not so tweaked as those of the thoroughbred, and each hides its face in the pony's neck as they near the gate. A voice comes over the loudspeaker announcing that we will now sing "My Old Kentucky Home." Here and there, a hanky is unfurled, as some native son or daughter cannot suppress a tear. In the box directly in front of us, there is a group of men in their late twenties with the look of well-heeled WASPs who have not yet woken up to their homosexuality, a type found everywhere in the South. They are wearing bespoke poplin suits that sort of match, and shirts of the softest, softest pastels, and their arms are around one another. Each looks to the others' faces as they sing and sway, as if for confirmation of the feeling they are feeling. When we get to the second line of the song—which was changed in the program notes only in 1972 from Stephen Foster's "'Tis summer, the darkies are gay" to the line I learned in school, "'Tis summer, the people are gay"—the boys smile broadly and emphasize the original word.

The singing of this line is a somewhat charged moment in the history of the Derby. Whites fought hard against the change even at that late date, and one must bear in mind that the track was segregated well into the 1950s: separate entrances, separate grandstand, separate rest rooms, this for a sport with a history not only of devoted and skillful black grooms—which fit easily enough into the old white Southern vision of "their place"—but of great black jockeys as well. In the first Derby, held in 1875, thirteen of the fifteen jockeys, including the winning jockey, were black. (Ask any Southerner why lawn jockeys are black. They have no idea.) The only black faces I have seen today were in the paddock, and belonged to rappers.

DARKNESS

It is worth reading the complete lyrics of the song itself, "My Old Kentucky Home," one of Foster's most famous. They are not at all what you think. The "darkies" are not really "gay"—not even in the song, I mean. Foster is toying with you there, seeing if he can get you to take out your hanky. Legend has it that he composed the song during a party, a "gay ball" at an old country home, amid dancing belles and beaus. We must picture him there, jotting down the last verse on the back of some sheet music while he pretends to listen to some drunken son of a landowner talk about how *his* family's darkies have no complaints:

> The head must bow and the back will have to bend,
> Wherever the darkey may go:
> A few more days, and the trouble all will end
> In the field where the sugar-canes grow.
> A few more days for to tote the weary load,
> No matter 'twill never be light,
> A few more days till we totter on the road,
> Then my old Kentucky Home, good-night!

"No matter 'twill never be light." Few lyrics, outside the early blues and British heavy metal, could match that one for hopelessness. The Derby commissioners should make the crowd sing the whole thing, rather than bowdlerizing one line.

Several of Foster's songs were hits in his lifetime, and he was able to negotiate a royalties deal with a New York music publisher. But he was an alcoholic of cosmic dimensions and drank himself into such chronic debt that he started selling off the rights to his compositions for a few dollars apiece, then spending those dollars on beer.

He died in a Bowery hotel in January of 1864, while the Civil War raged. He had been in bed for days with a fever, his wife and child having long since left him. In the early morning he rose to call a chambermaid for help, but he swooned, gouging his head on the washbasin next to the bed as he fell. He was found hours later by George Cooper, one of the only friends he had left. Cooper described the scene:

In the first Derby thirteen of the fifteen jockeys were black, but ask any Southerner why lawn jockeys are black and they have no idea

> Steve never wore any night-clothes and he lay there on the floor, naked, and suffering horribly. He had wonderful big brown eyes and they looked up at me with an appeal I can never forget. He whispered, "I'm done for", and begged for a drink.... We put his clothes on him and took him to the hospital.

Foster died three days later. History has recorded his possessions at time of death: In his tattered leather purse were thirty-eight cents and a scrap of paper on which he had written, in pencil, "Dear friends and gentle hearts."

DOWN THE STRETCH

Your experience of a horse race is strongly colored by where you choose to sit. Here, at the wire, I will see the field pass twice—once just out of the gate, and once as they hit the finish—but I will see nothing of the rest of the race. I cannot even see the gigantic electronic screens

posted at each of the turns. From the press box (the opposite extreme), I could look through binoculars and watch the entire thing develop, see the moves, the jostling for position, who is using the whip and when. But you never know when you will be back to the Kentucky Derby, and I want to taste the track off their hooves, to see their eyes.

When the gates fly open the horses are like a freak storm moving over the track together, their legs attended by a cloud of dust that they trail behind them, their colors flashing kaleidoscopically in the sunlight. The loudness of their pounding takes me by surprise. It overwhelms even the crowd. I am so stunned by the sight of them that by the time I collect my mind, they have disappeared around the turn. We who are sitting close to the wire stand listening to the call, waiting for them to return.

None of my beautiful colts of the year gone by has warranted even a mention. Most of them did not even make it to the race

As the race unfolds through the track announcer's sharp, metallic call, I notice that it is dominated by unfamiliar names, and one name in particular: War Emblem. He leads from the break. Our eyes strain in the sun to catch the field emerging around the final turn, and when it does War Emblem is still in front. He comes across the wire having never lost the lead, the green-and-white silks of the Thoroughbred Corporation—of the Saudi flag—rustling on the jockey's back.

The crowd is strangely quiet. There is more clapping than cheering. There has been virtually no talk about this horse, and the great majority of bettors base their decisions on talk, which is why racetracks make money.

In the post-race interviews Baffert and Bin Salman are genuinely ecstatic. "That last hundred yards," Baffert says, "you wish it would last forever." The reporters are understandably gentle on the subject of the prince's being the first Arab owner ever to win the Derby, in this of all years, and not just an Arab but a Saudi, and not just a Saudi but a man with a "bin" in his name. The prince broaches the topic himself by saying that he has won this one not for himself but "for the Saudis, the great friends of the Americans," but when one brave scribe ventures something along the lines of "Don't you think this is a bit weird?" Bin Salman is quick to brush him off. "I am a businessman, not a politician," he says—a strange remark for a prince to make, but an accurate one. "I'll leave [these questions] to your politicians and my politicians."

More interesting to the daily reporters is the question of whether Bin Salman and Baffert have "bought the race." The story of their association with War Emblem is both totally lacking in romance and deeply American. Three weeks before the Derby, they realized that they had no contenders. This was not an acceptable place to be for Bob Baffert, who had already won the Derby twice. So one day, back in Riyadh, the prince was watching the Illinois Derby via satellite and saw something in the winning horse, which led from the wire and took it going away. He called Baffert, who promptly acquired the colt from its original owner, a Chicago steel magnate named Russell Reineman, for $900,000 (said Reineman later, of the decision to sell, "The steel business has been terrible lately"). Baffert liked War Emblem, despite the horse's being something of a head case (before what would have been his first race, in September of 2001, War Emblem threw his jockey and ran out of the paddock into a parking lot), and the trainer immediately started pointing him toward the Triple Crown. All in all, the story could not be more at odds with what horse-racing fans and the people who write for them like to hear, the favorite story being, "We raised this colt from a yearling on our beautiful farm down South, saw its promise, always believed in it, and now here we are."

Bin Salman does not go for what I would consider the obvious response to this challenge, which would be to point out that Reineman and his trainer, Frank Springer, had not been planning to enter War Emblem in the Derby at all (the horse has bone chips and other "soundness" issues), meaning that none of us would have had the joy of seeing this animal run. Instead he goes for a more direct answer, and also probably a truer one. What he says makes me like him: "Everybody buys the Derby, because you have to buy a horse or raise a horse in order to win. If you tell me who is going to win [next year], I'll buy him again."

The next morning, the paperboy brings the *Courier-Journal*, post–Derby Day edition. None of my beautiful colts of the year gone by, I reflect, has warranted even a mention. Most of them did not even make it to the race, not Mayakovsky (never entered) or Buddha (scratched), not Officer, which I heard Bin Salman describe on television as the best two-year-old he had ever seen. The copydesk boys at the *Courier* go for a bit of ye olde historical echo: in tall bold letters the headline reads, IT'S WAR EMBLEM.

BEAUTY

For the last couple of years I have had on my computer screen three grainy little video clips that I got off the Internet. I click on them at the end of the day, when the blood sugar dips and aphasia sets in. They were bootlegged from some late-seventies TV sports documentary about Secre-

tariat, and each of them shows him winning one of the legs of the '73 Triple Crown. The quality is so poor that you hardly see anything beyond a bunch of pixelated brown masses, but the audio track includes the calls by the three announcers, which are for the ages. One of these—Chick Anderson's, from Belmont Park, which ends with Anderson holding back tears of disbelief as he shouts, "It looks like he's opening . . . The lead is increasing! Secretariat is *widening* now! He is moving like a TREE-MENDOUS MA-SHEEN!"—is up there with Herb Morrison's Hindenburg broadcast for sheer power of description and spontaneous verbal majesty. Secretariat had a habit, especially early in his career, of starting races in last place; in fact, in the Derby call, you do not hear him mentioned (except in the obligatory early rundown of the field) until the pack has almost reached the final turn, so that when the sound of his name bursts into the call, you can close your eyes and see him breaking through.

That afternoon he ran each of the last three quarters faster than the preceding one, after having spent the entire first quarter dead last. His official time, 1:59 and ⅖ seconds, is still the Kentucky Derby record, going on the thirtieth anniversary of his race. Sham also broke the previous Derby record that day, which should give you a sense of the field.

Secretariat has a Boswell, or it might be truer to say a Homer, whose name is William Nack, the author of *Secretariat: The Making of a Champion* (1975). It is a masterpiece of the genre, possibly the only masterpiece of the genre. Writing a good horse book is no easy thing if you are writing for adults. Beasts do not make good protagonists, for the simple reason that unless you have money riding on their success or failure it is impossible for anyone older than ten to identify with them fully. The books that succeed, such as last year's *Seabiscuit*, by Laura Hillenbrand, do so by spending most of their time with the human beings whose fates run more or less parallel to the track. There is plenty of that in Nack's book, too, but he somehow came across a technique that allowed him to make his horse the central character without personifying it, without even indulging, more than once or twice, in pathetic fallacy. The style is akin to art criticism, and appropriately so.

Nack's description of Secretariat's Hopeful, a race for two-year-olds held every September at Saratoga Racetrack in New York, perfectly captures a certain mystical quality that Secretariat's races possessed, one that you notice when you watch the tapes: not that he was above the field—not a bully or a tedious dominator, in other words—but that he was *outside* of it:

> Secretariat moved to the field with a rush, accelerating outside as they made the bend, without urging from Turcotte, bounding along as if independent of whatever momentum the race possessed, independent of its pace and tempo, independent of the shifting, slow-motion struggles unfolding within it, the small battles for position and advantage. [He] was not responding to any force the race was generating, but rather moving as though he'd evolved his own kinetic field beyond it, and Turcotte would later recall sitting quietly and feeling awed.

Secretariat was "by," as horsepeople say, Bold Ruler, his sire; he was "out of" a mare named Somethingroyal, his dam—her fourteenth foal, Nack tells us. He was a chestnut colt, his coat "like a new penny," with stockings of white on three of his feet and a white star between his eyes. For most of his life he would be called Big Red, his "stable name." He was given his racing name some months after his birth, as is the custom with thoroughbreds. The rulebook stipulates, among other criteria, that the name of a racehorse must be no more than eighteen characters—spaces included—and that it can be neither obscene nor already taken, whether by another horse or by a "notorious" person. Elizabeth Ham, an employee at Meadow Stables in Virginia, where the horse was foaled, had before that been the personal secretary of Norman H. Davis, American delegate to the 1933 disarmament conference in Geneva, "the home of the League of Nations' secretariat." She put forward the name.

He is best described not as the greatest horse, nor as the greatest runner, nor even as the greatest athlete of the twentieth century, but as the greatest creature. The sight of him in motion is of the things that we can present to the aliens when they come in judgment asking why they should spare our world.

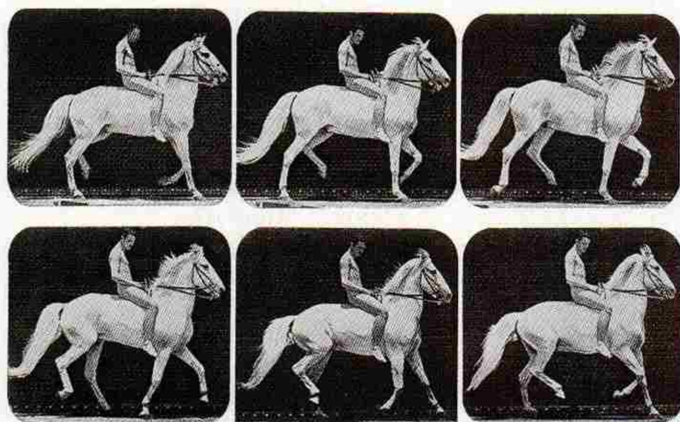
A few contrarians maintain that Man o' War was greater, but the majority of the people who

Photograph of Secretariat at the Kentucky Derby (detail), 1973 © AP/Wide World Photos

saw both horses run with their own eyes hold with Secretariat, and there is the fact that Man o' War, whose career took place at a time when "doping" with opiates was unregulated, has also been described as the "greatest hophead horse of all time." When Man o' War died, in 1947, he was embalmed—the first horse for which this was done—and lay in state for three days. Two thousand people filed past his coffin. He had died with an enormous erection, which somehow remained tumescent after the embalming process. Someone thoughtfully covered it with a blanket before the parade of mourners began.

OFF TRACK

After the Kentucky Derby, I become one of a large group of people who subscribe to the theory that War Emblem—and/or Victor Espinoza, his jockey—"stole" the race. A horse is said to "steal" a race when it comes out fast and sets a false pace. The other, stronger horses, stalking the lead horse, mistake its speed for the limit of its abilities, and so wait just off pace for it to tire out. But the horse is holding something back.



And when the stalking horses begin to make their move, it unleashes its reserves, capitalizing on its lead to take the race. It is a legitimate tactic not entirely deserving of its pejorative name, but it is a ruse, one that often does not indicate which is actually the fastest horse in a field. It is my opinion, one I share with many people, that War Emblem will be a no-show in the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes—the two remaining legs of the Triple Crown—because the jockeys will have seen his tricks and will be sure to burn him out before he makes the homestretch.

I watch the Preakness at an Off Track Betting shop in Chinatown, just a couple of blocks from the hotel where Stephen Foster met his end, as it happens. Inside every OTB is a fully functioning self-contained culture, a yin and yang of cautious hope and stoical depression that swirls inside each head and circulates through the room itself. Such a *serious* atmosphere. I get the feeling that many of these men have been here since the shop opened, and will leave only in the evening when it closes, and have done this every day for years. The men (no women) are Chinese and Hispanic, mostly. The atmosphere is devoid of festivity. Everyone is intent on his betting sheet, or on one of the TV monitors, or on one of the automated machines at which you can enter in your picks. Here and there I see a "stooper," a man who does not have the money, or is too cheap, to bet, but who walks around picking up discarded tickets, hoping some greenhorn has failed to realize that when a horse he has bet to show ends up placing instead, for instance, he still wins money.

At the track, you can usually tell the difference between a hard-core gambler and a horse fan by whether or not a person yells the horse's name or its number during the race. Here it is all, "Six! Six! Six!" and some of the sheets used by the bettors to calculate odds, I notice, do not even include the names of the horses. What these men are doing is calculating elaborate mathematical equations, over and over, trying to convert their paychecks into something a little fatter. The bets tend to be small. When a race is done, one rarely hears a groan or a whoop. They turn away and go back to one of the counters.

I approach a machine and consult with the *Daily Racing Form* for the numbers. A Chinese man with incredibly thick spectacles is behind me the entire time, saying, "Okay, sir. Please, sir. Okay, sir." A race he wants to put money on is coming up. I finally figure out the machine, which spits out my slips with a whir and a *thunk*.

Moments later the race begins. I cannot hear the call for all the chatter, but I see clearly enough what is happening. Unusually for War Emblem, he is not first out of the gate. Instead, the lead is shared by a horse called Menacing Dennis and one called Booklet, trained by John T. Ward. I have money on the latter. But by the first turn, Booklet has dropped away, and it is War Emblem who shares the lead with Menacing Dennis. Then it is War Emblem alone. I am shaking my head. As they head down the stretch (the Preakness is the shortest of the Triple Crown races—it happens almost comically fast, given how much anticipation it generates), I watch Proud Citizen, trained by the Kentuckian D. Wayne Lukas, come within a length of War Emblem. And I think, this is it. They're calling his bluff. But then something goes wrong. Victor Espinoza gives his horse the whip, and instead of the nothing that is supposed to happen War Emblem surges. He is the real thing, goddammit. He pulls *away* from Proud Citizen. Then in the final yards he gets *another* challenge, this time from a horse called Magic Weisner. But War Emblem is running even faster, pulling away from this one too. Suddenly he has

Photograph from *Animals in Motion*, by Eadweard Muybridge © Mary Evans Picture Library

won. Suddenly he has positioned himself to win the first Triple Crown in twenty-four years. And this time there is no question of "stealing." They came after him, but he was too good.

In the OTB no one cares. They are already scanning the sheets for the next race, already lining up at the machines. Of course, I am forced again to admit: This is what racing is all about. These men. The upturned proud and lonely faces of these men, cathode horses shining in their eyes, numbers dancing in their heads. I wad up my tickets and leave them in the trash can by the door.

BLOOD

In *Stud* (2002), *The New Yorker* writer Kevin Conley's book about horse breeding, Conley makes the intriguing point that James Weatherby's *General Stud Book,* which first appeared in 1791, preceded the first edition of *Burke's Peerage* by thirty-five years. There was, in other words, an official registry of equine aristocracy before there was one for human beings. We could follow this trend—of looking to horse breeding as a model on which to pattern human reproductive affairs—both forward and backward in time. It begins with Theognis, a Greek poet of the sixth century B.C., who wrote to a friend that in "horses . . . we seek the thoroughbred, and a man is concerned therein to get him offspring of good stock; yet in marriage a good man thinketh not twice of wedding the bad daughter of a bad sire if the father give him many possessions."

Two and a half thousand years later, this idea was picked up by Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton is known as the father of eugenics. In *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), he argued that governments of the future could take a page from horse trainers, who recognized that "it is better economy, in the long run, to use the best mares as breeders than as workers." Galton's work was greeted with great enthusiasm all over Europe and America.

In the twentieth century, that work was carried forward primarily by two men. One was an American, Charles Davenport, a promising biologist turned quack social engineer who wrote in *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911), "Man is an organism—an animal; and the laws of improvement of corn and race horses hold true for him also. Unless people accept this simple truth and let it influence marriage selection . . . progress will cease." Davenport inculcated the wife of the railroad tycoon E. H. Harriman with his ideas, and with her money (Rockefeller pitched in, too) he was able to establish the Cold Spring Harbor labs on Long Island, where researchers gathered to prove the necessity of eliminating the "feebleminded" and other undesirables (read, Negroes) from the population. Hideous experiments were carried out, and the data were misrepresented effectively enough that several states adopted the policy of sterilizing "mental incompetents." Laboratory archives show that Davenport spent $75,000 (this was in the 1930s) acquiring "research in genetics of the Thoroughbred horse."

The other torchbearer of eugenics in our time was Adolf Hitler, who compares horses to Jews in *Mein Kampf*. The Jewish "will to self-sacrifice," he wrote, "does not go beyond the individual's naked instinct of self-preservation. . . . The same is true of horses which try to defend themselves against an assailant in a body, but scatter again as soon as the danger is past," indicating that, in addition to his violent stupidity on all matters having to do with human affairs, Hitler knew little about the behavior of *Equus* in the wild (he was not a good rider). Nonetheless, he found something to admire in the thoroughbred, looking forward to the day when the "folkish philosophy of life" would "succeed in bringing about that nobler age in which men no longer are concerned with breeding dogs, horses, and cats, but in elevating man himself."

This is what racing is all about. The upturned proud and lonely faces of these men, cathode horses shining in their eyes

ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH

[DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE] PAUL WOLFOWITZ: If you would indulge me for a minute, actually, I have with me a dispatch that came with from one of our Special Forces guys who is literally riding horseback with a sword with one of the Northern Alliance.

[CBS NEWS ANCHOR] BOB SCHIEFFER: With a sword?

WOLFOWITZ: With a sword, with the Northern Alliance group of several hundred people [who] had nothing but horses and rifles. And he said, "I'm advising a man . . . how best to employ light infantry and horse cavalry in the attack against Taliban tanks, mortars, artillery and machine guns," a tactic which I think became outdated with the invention of the Gatling gun. . . . It's, in a sense, the return of the horse cavalry, you might say, but no horse cavalry in history before this could call in airstrikes from long-range bombers.

SCHIEFFER: Do these people—do the people in the Special Forces know how to ride horses? I mean, there is a difference in jumping on a horse and hanging on and being able to ride. Are they trained to ride horses?

WOLFOWITZ: I can't say for sure, but apparently these guys were. They're trained in an extraordinary range of survival skills and local customs and language, and they're quite an amazing group.

—*Face the Nation*, November 18, 2001

TRACKER

My only real "personal" experience with a flesh-and-blood horse came in the summer I turned eleven. At that age I was spending all of my time in the woods across the street from our house in Indiana, dressed in camouflage, practicing fighting off the Russian invasion that television had convinced me was pending. I must have gotten a reputation in the neighborhood for knowing my way around back there—or, more accurately, as the weird chubby boy who knew his way around back there. Not only was I going through a fat phase that year but I had convinced myself that if I slicked my hair back flat to my head with water, it would make me look thinner, which meant that I had constantly to sneak into the rest room at school; on top of that, both of my top front teeth had fallen out, but only one had come back in, and that one was snaggled on the end. My smile was more easily conceived than described, and on top of it I was given to wearing a camouflage beret. My father, until the end of his life, carried my school photo from this period in his wallet. He said it cheered him up.

There is a chance to see a horse win the Triple Crown, and people want to be there, even if the horse is *owned by a Middle Eastern dude*

The daughter of one of my father's colleagues had lost her pony, Flicka, and her mother called my mother and asked if I could look for it. I accepted the mission with pride and solemnity, perhaps even applying a little extra paint to my face that afternoon. I tramped around in the woods for hours, ridiculously, looking in the leaves for signs. At one point, coming down a path that I often took, I looked up to see a red fox coming toward me. It was the only wild animal I ever saw in those woods, which did not even deserve the name of "woods"—they were scrublands between two subdivisions. Eventually, when I was hungry and ready to cry, I found a bleached deer skull in a creek bed. Seizing it triumphantly, I ran with it all the way to the house of the bereaved girl, formulating the account of my discovery.

By the time I got there, they had already found the horse. It was twenty yards beyond the edge of their back yard. Somehow it had gotten free and gone running into the trees, but the rope that was still hanging from its harness became entangled. The pony pulled and pulled till it broke its own neck, they said. It was half-decomposed in a horrible way, the tissue showing through the skin in patches. I walked back to the woods, slowly, and threw the skull into a thicket.

DEAD HORSES

There are more than 100,000 people at Belmont on the day of the race, a record crowd by thousands, at a time when Americans are supposed to be scared of large gatherings. There is a chance to see a horse win the Triple Crown, something you can tell your grandchildren about, and people want to be there, even if War Emblem *is* owned by a Middle Eastern dude.

Thousands are picnicking out back on the grass. Another day of perfect weather. The atmosphere is straight out of the nineteenth century—it feels as though a four-hour-long program of religious speakers could begin at any moment—though the people here, apart from the famous, are not as dressed up as they were at the Derby.

Only reporters who write for dailies are allowed in the press box today, so I borrow someone else's seat in the grandstand, high enough up that I can see the whole track through binoculars. I am just in time to hear the gates shoot open for the fourth race. About twenty seconds into it, as the field approaches the first turn, I see a horse go down on the track, and then another horse. A sickened groan goes up from the crowd. Immediately the accident begins to be replayed on the huge electronic screens, the same groan going up each time, with diminishing volume. A filly named Imadeed trips—it looks as if her front legs have simply given way—and another horse, Pleasant County, trips on her. Over and over they crash hideously in slow motion. One can see, in the replay, that Pleasant County is already dead. She falls on her head, and by the time her great body settles onto the track her legs are already stiff. Imadeed staggers to her feet and begins to limp around. The jockeys weirdly mimic this scene: one hops up, but Pleasant County's rider stays down. The one who is able to stand runs over and helps the other jockey to his feet. A horse ambulance pulls up, and a couple of men bring out the folding gray screen that signifies: dead horse. This screen comes in especially handy when a horse has to be euthanized on the track. Nothing makes a crowd feel less like betting money on horse races than watching an animal be shot between the eyes. Imadeed is led, hobbling but alive, into another ambulance, and both vehicles tear away.

It is with a morbid desire to find out what will happen to the body of the dead filly that I head for the stable area, through a long, dim tunnel that smells wonderfully of hay and horseshit. At the end of the tunnel I step into the light and see the wooden stables ranging away from me in rows, lined up along quiet streets. It is *so* quiet back here, so pastoral. I can still hear the loudspeaker back at the track, but it already seems to emanate from another world. I have no idea where I am going, and like a fool I have forgotten to bring my *Racing Form*, which would have

told me the name of the horse's trainer. The stables go back for a mile.

Two Hispanic guys pass me in a golf cart. I wave them down and tell that I am "*buscando el caballo muerto.*" They exchange glances, and the one on the passenger side tells me that they have not heard about the accident. He says that they can take me to the information booth and moves over so I can hop in. I ask them where they are from: Puerto Rico and Panama. What do they do, work with the horses? "No, man, we clean the shit and carry the water. The dirty work."

A huge majority of the grooms and stable boys working at American tracks and farms are Hispanic, and the reason for this—apart from the obvious reason: their willingness to work hard and cheap—is the same reason that so many of those early jockeys were black. Rich white (and now Japanese and Arab) people own horses, but they tend not to know much about them. They need people around with expertise and knowledge. And who really *knows* horses? The people who work with them—workers. In 1875, the year of the first Derby, those workers were former slaves, the men who had been entrusted with the horses' care back on the plantation, who had lived with the animals, in some cases even slept under one roof with them, as Secretariat's black groom, Eddie Sweat, slept with his horse the night before the Preakness in 1973. Today, in the United States, it is getting harder to find people of any color who know horses in this way—that is, other than as pets—so the owners and trainers have taken to importing their barn workers.

Our golf cart arrives through shady paths at the information booth, but the security guards there, all of whom are in their forties or fifties and are already exhausted from what is for them the busiest day of the year, do not want to hear that I am looking for a dead horse. They look down at my shiny blue-and-orange press badge and shake their heads wordlessly. "I just want to find out what happened to her," I say through the window. "Can you tell me which barn her trainer is in?"

One of them leans way back in his office chair and says to a guy in the far corner, "Do you know who trained that dead horse?"

"It's already gone," the other guy says.

"Really?" I say. "They already took her away?"

"You can see the other horse," the guy says, by which he means Imadeed, the one who lived. "She's one of Steve Young's."

The grooms at Young's barn eye me suspiciously, which I understand: their boss does not need bad press about how his extremely expensive horse went down and caused the death of someone else's extremely expensive horse. I try to make it clear that I am only curious. If I knew the Spanish, I would say, "Look, I'm just a hack!" But instead I ask, with barely intelligible grammar, about "*el caballo que se calle.*" They nod toward the one they are feeding. "*¿Es ella?*"

"Who are you?" one of them says, very pointedly in English.

"A journalist," I say. "*Por una revista.*"

"Talk to Mr. Young," he says, and points me toward the other end of the barn.

I find Young, the trainer, in his office. He is kicked back in his chair, a remote control in his hand, watching television—live feed from the track. He jumps up when he sees me, looking very displeased. His eyes are bright red and his speech is choked with saliva—he has either been drinking or crying. I suspect the latter.

The first thing he says, before I even ask a question, is, "We don't know yet."

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"As bad as it gets."

"She looks so good."

"She's content. But there's a contusion. We worry about infection."

Initial reports are that Imadeed might be saved as a broodmare, but circulation never fully returns to her right leg, and she will be put down back in Kentucky on June 20.

I start to walk deeper into the stable area, away from the track, and it only gets quieter and more bucolic as I go. Roosters, barn cats, pigeons roosting on bales of hay. And the horses, standing in

the shadows of their stalls, having already raced or about to do so, now and then looking up from their chewing to watch you pass, their bored eyes taking you in and then letting you go.

LARGER

On the way back to Bin Salman's barn I take a slight detour and loiter for a minute in front of Barn 5, where Secretariat was stabled before his Belmont. There is little activity now, but in '73 every person who had access or could get through security was here, wanting just to see him. From

Etching by Gustave Doré (detail) © Mary Evans Picture Library

this barn, Stall 7, he was led to the most remarkable horse race ever run. "Perfect achievements," Kafka wrote in "The Aeroplanes at Brescia," "cannot be appreciated." This one could.

Sham led the field going into the first turn. He was flying. Everyone watching the race knew that he was going too fast. The strategy for Secretariat, for *any* horse, would have been to hang back and let Sham destroy himself, but Ronnie Turcotte decided to contest the pace. It was, to all appearances, an insane strategy. William Nack writes that up in the press box, turfwriters were hollering, "*They're going too fast!*"

Secretariat caught him just after the first turn, and for the first half of the race it was a duel between the two rivals. Then, around the sixth furlong, Sham began to fall apart. Laffit Pincay pulled him off in distress, and Secretariat was alone. Turcotte had done nothing but cluck to the horse.

This is when it happened, the thing, the *unbelievable thing*. Secretariat started going faster. At the first mile, he had shattered the record for the Belmont Stakes, and at a mile and an eighth he had tied the world record (remember that he was only three years old; horses get faster as they age, up to a point). Everyone—in the crowd, in the press box, in the box where the colt's owner and trainer were sitting—was waiting for something to go wrong, because this was madness. Yet he kept opening lengths on the nearest horses, Twice a Prince and My Gallant.

Turcotte, turning around, could hardly see the rest of the field. At a mile and three eighths, Secretariat had beaten Man o' War's world record. He was, at that moment, almost certainly the fastest three-year-old that ever existed. And still he kept opening lengths. Twenty-nine, thirty. If he was not lapping them, as my father remembered, it would not have taken him long, at that clip, to do so.

He finished thirty-one lengths ahead of Twice a Prince. His time: 2:24. He had clobbered the world-record time—for a horse of any age—at twelve furlongs, beating it by two and two-fifths seconds. Unprecedented. Unreal. People were crying uncontrollably. Reporters wanted to know what Turcotte had done, why had he so pressured Secretariat, when the race was clearly over? But Turcotte had never showed his whip. He had hardly even touched the horse.

There is a passage on the tape from the '73 Belmont that I noticed only after watching it dozens of times. It occurs near the end of the race. The cameraman has zoomed up pretty close on Secretariat, leaving the lens just wide enough to capture the horse and a few feet of track. Then, about half a furlong before the wire (it is hard to tell), the camera inexplicably stops tracking the leader and holds still. Secretariat rockets out of the frame, leaving the screen blank, or rather filled with empty track. I timed this emptiness—the space between Secretariat exiting and Twice a Prince entering the image—with my watch. It lasts seven seconds. And somehow each of these seconds says more about what made Secretariat great than any shot of him in motion could. In the history of profound absences—the gaps between Sappho's fragments, Christ's tomb, Rothko's black canvases—this is among the most beautiful.

Secretariat ran a few more races after the Belmont, winning all but one. His value as a stud was too great for his owners to risk having him injured on the track, so he was retired to Claiborne Farm, in Lexington. He stood there for many years, siring countless progeny, but in 1989 he developed laminitis, a cruelly painful condition that affects the hooves, and he had to be euthanized. William Nack was in Lexington when it happened and wrote a piece about the experience for *Sports Illustrated*. He interviewed Dr. Thomas Swerczek, the vet who performed the autopsy on Secretariat. This is what Swerczek told him:

> I've seen and done thousands of autopsies on horses, and nothing I'd ever seen compared to it. The heart of the average horse weighs about nine pounds. This was almost twice the average size, and a third larger than any equine heart I'd ever seen. And it wasn't pathologically enlarged. All the chambers and the valves were normal. It was just larger.

LAST LEG

At Prince bin Salman's barn there is a crowd, but not a large one—turfwriters, mostly. Bin Salman himself is not in attendance, citing business affairs back home, though rumors of death threats have been flying since this morning. (Sadly, today is his last chance to see War Emblem run. The prince will die of a heart attack on July 22 back in Saudi Arabia, at the age of forty-three.) It is getting extremely close to race time, and a

A Man on a White Horse, by Honoré Daumier © AKG London

sportscaster standing a few feet away from me says, for the rolling camera, "Baffert says he's not in *any* hurry. He'll be there on time." Baffert himself is standing just inside the barn, his arms draped over his young son's shoulders, looking back at us, inscrutable behind his dark glasses.

Just across the road, behind us, is the barn of D. Wayne Lukas, one of Baffert's rivals. Tension between the two trainers increased when Lukas made a point of saying to the *New York Times* that his horse, Proud Citizen, would wear a blanket reading "FDNY" before and after the race. (No Arab owners here!) It seems that neither man wants to lead his horse out first.

Suddenly Lukas defers and decides to go ahead. We all turn to watch Proud Citizen being led toward the tunnel that connects to the paddock, his entourage flowing around him. Almost immediately Baffert starts out, too, having proved his point. He has War Emblem by the bridle, then passes it to a groom. This truly is a beautiful horse—not black in the way that Mayakovsky was black, not inky, but very dark brown, with a long proud face, and the white star.

We all fall into step, careful to keep a few feet between us and the horse. It is weirdly silent. The only sound is the soft crunching of gravel. The thickness of history in the air is like the pressure of your own blood in your ears. Each of us is wondering if we are participating, however tangentially, in a Triple Crown. War Emblem is looking around, noticing the commotion. All his life, since he was sold as a yearling, it has been like this, strangers staring at him. *Why are they here?*

It is wonderful to walk through the tunnel behind him, to try to keep our eyes on his dark head as it disappears and unexpectedly pops up again in the shadows, to see the dust swirling in the sunlight at the paddock end of the tunnel, where we are headed, and to hear the crowd around the paddock start to roar, to see the faces when he first steps forth, prancing now, into the light. This, too, we have to concede in fairness—it is also about this. About glory.

I did not expect to be back in the stable area for so long, and I have yet to place my bets, though I more or less emptied out my bank account this morning for that purpose. I rush out of the paddock and back up to the second level, where, ever faithful, I bet the Sullivan System, a decent amount on every horse between ten-to-one and twenty-to-one to place. I run outside to my seat, binoculars swinging. I have already missed the elaborate 9/11 mourning rite.

This race does not feel like any of the races I have been to in the past year. There is something circulating through the crowd. I want to say that it is like goodwill. We are all waiting to see something beautiful, something that almost never happens, that almost never has a *chance* to happen, but which might happen today. In all the conversations I have had and overheard since this morning, no one has expressed the slightest concern about the fact that War Emblem's owner is Saudi. They know that a horse has to be owned by *somebody*. Bob Costas is talking about it, but nobody else is. It is just like the Clinton scandals. This total indifference to the counterfeit reality that pundits and op-ed writers work daily to force down our throats seems to me very American, and, for the moment, I love my country.

People are shouting before the race even begins, waving their programs in the air. But War Emblem stumbles at the very start (later, watching the replay, I see that he almost goes to the ground), and although he rallies, he never regains the lead. The race is won by *another* horse that nobody has ever heard of, one with a beautiful name: Sarava. A colt called Medaglia d'Oro places, at ten-to-one.

As at the Derby, the crowd is strangely muted. First War Emblem shocked them into silence, now he has disappointed them into silence.

Funny, I did not think that I wanted this horse to win all that badly. His story was so *crass*. But when I finally drop the binoculars, my eyes are full of tears. It takes me a full beat to realize that I have just won $500 on Medaglia d'Oro.

CODA

Back home in Manhattan it is morning, and the sun floats between buildings like a bubble of molten steel, though here in the Village there is only a glow, a brightening behind the blinds that feels tenuous, like a false dawn, as if any moment the light could think twice and just slip back, tidelike, into the sea, and all would be darkness and waiting again. This is that single silent hour between the last cokehead finally kicked out of the bar, braying, not having been laid, and the first of the rumbling yawns of the shop-front gates being rolled up, over, and out of sight. It is fearfully still.

Once more I put on my headphones and click on the sorry little clips, and in my ears I hear the calls. Once more I close my eyes and watch him run: the Derby, the Preakness, the Belmont Stakes, 1973. I listen to Chick Anderson as he struggles and fails, in the human way, to describe perfection, to describe what no one had ever seen, and what no one there would ever see again.

And still the old question hangs over it all: Why? Why did he run as he did, with no one forcing him, or even urging him, with no one or thing to defeat anymore, with no punishment waiting for him if he slowed? For this morning, at least, at last, the answer is clear. It requires no faith. He ran that way, I know, because he could, and we cannot.

One does not, if one is beauty, have to know what beauty is. ■

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