THE

earth

IS THERE TO

catch us

WHEN WE

fall

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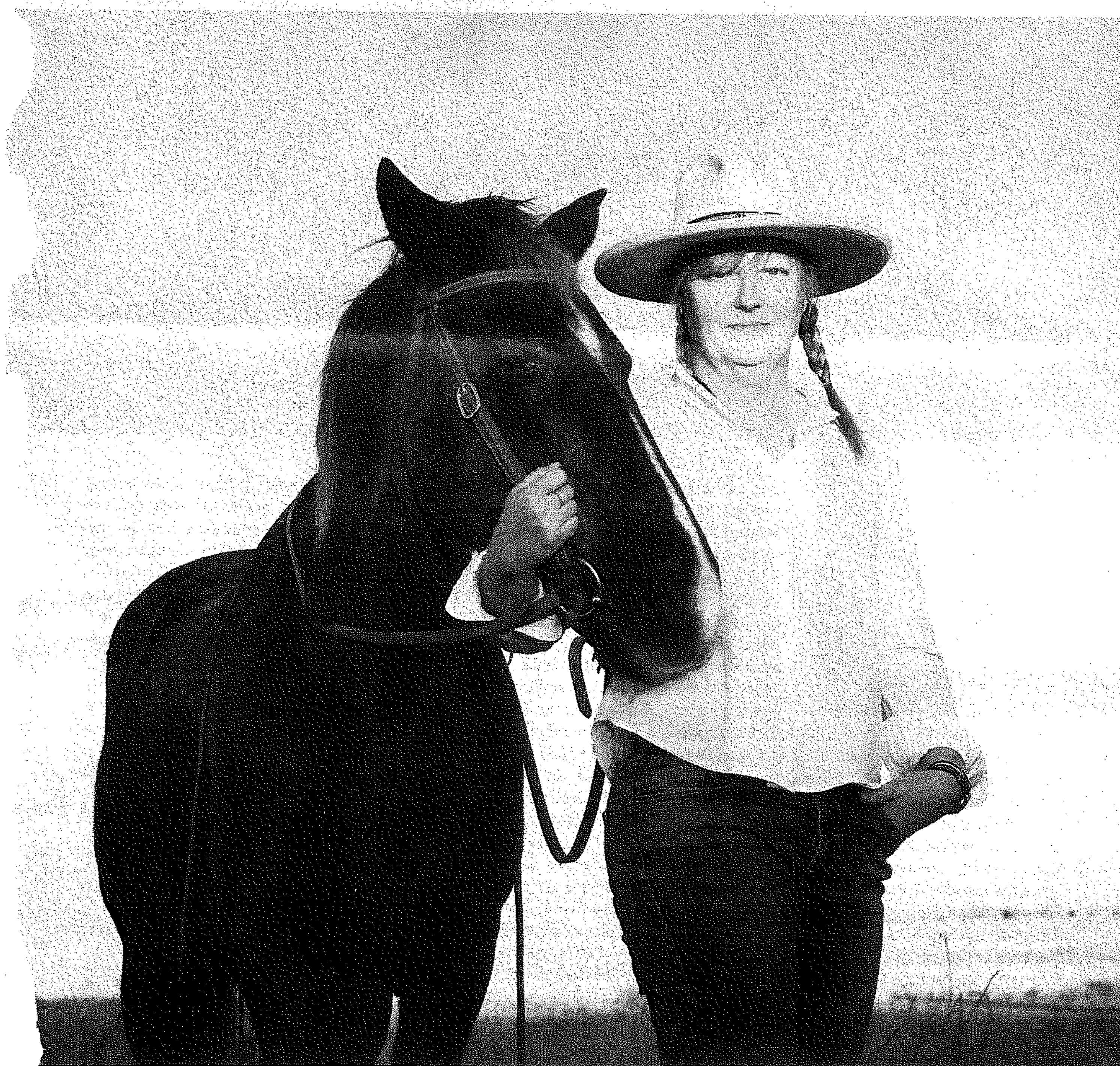
What I have learned from horses. ***by* Sterry Butcher**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES H. EVANS



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WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO MARCI ROBERTS

i don't remember the first horse I saw or touched; I just know that horses have always been with me. In them, I see what I hope are the best pieces of myself. Horses are at once familiar and unknowable. Each of their individual parts, a razor ear or a knobby fetlock, is fantastically peculiar and ungainly looking, but taken together, the whole is a graceful machine. They are brave beyond reason. They smell good. They have complicated emotional lives; they remember and forgive. There are other things about horses, harder to fathom, that also draw me to them. This resonance I don't understand fully, but there it is, as native to me as the dimple in my cheek. Genetics are partly to blame. My father loved horses as a child growing up in New York City, where he cadged rides by working at a tony Bronxville hunter/jumper stable and hand-walked hot Thoroughbreds after their morning workouts at Belmont Park. After he was drafted into the Korean conflict, he gave up horses and did not return to riding as an adult. Life got in the way. At times, life has gotten in my way too. But even during the long stretches when I did not ride—periods of a suburban Fort Worth adolescence when riding wasn't possible, or dark years at a rainy Oregon college where horses seemed distant and unavailable—the desire never left. ¶ I drew horses, dreamed horses, saw make-believe horses in my backyard. My parents, hallelujah, allowed me to take riding lessons when I turned seven. My teacher, Myrna, was friendly and bright-eyed, with quickness in her movements and her speech, like a grackle with a checkered scarf at her neck. She was probably in her forties then, the matriarch of a close-knit confederation of grown kids, shirtless toddlers in diapers, slouchy teenagers, sons-in-law, and benign ne'er-do-wells wearing welding caps and permanent squints from cigarette smoke. I'd never encountered a family like Myrna's, in which women wore kerchiefs to batten down the high-rise of curlers in their hair and everyone lived in a thicket of mobile homes parked amid the barns. Their world, full of slinking cats and apologetic dogs, was as exotic and beguiling as a gypsy camp. Myrna was a wonderful teacher, patient, exacting, quick with a correction or a you-can-do-it, but life among her tribe was complicated. Sometimes we'd drive out for a lesson and there'd be no parade of wash hanging on the line, which meant Myrna and her crew had bugged out, maybe for a week, maybe a couple of weeks, with no word of where they'd gone or why.

I rode next at a barn with fine-boned, sensitive Arabian horses and, after that, with an encouraging college student who taught me to jump and told me I had talent. I was in middle school by that point, and taking weekly lessons

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was expensive and sometimes tricky to schedule. I loved it, but I let it go. We could not support a horse. I could not get myself to lessons. I didn't necessarily want to compete, but going round and round a ring wasn't what I wanted either. I was thirteen, after all. I didn't know what I wanted, much less how to get there.

Decades passed. I'm a colossal late bloomer and come to things slowly. My first horse finally materialized in my thirties, a tall, solemn red gelding called Alazán, the Spanish word for "sorrel." My husband, Michael, and I had settled in Marfa, and along with our house in town we owned a scrubby seven-acre plot where Michael kept a cabinetmaking woodshop. For years, buying a horse was always something that would happen someday, but never right now. Other things were more important: a roof on the house, a crown for a busted molar, vet bills for our aged red heeler. Then one afternoon a rancher friend mentioned that he was taking horses to auction, older animals that could no longer do the work required of them. They'd likely be sold to the meat men for 60 cents a pound. Inside my chest, a bowknot untied. Someday became right now. I announced I'd match the meat price for the red gelding, and 24 hours later, he was chewing hay in our pen.

Alazán was a ranch horse who had hauled cowboys and chased bulls for years in some of the roughest country Presidio County offers, which is saying something. He was rather a giant, more than 16 hands and 1,250 pounds, his bone heavy and his mane and tail streaked with white and gold. Alazán had not been abused as a ranch horse, but he'd been used hard, and consequently he wasn't much of an optimist in terms of what to expect from people. It was months before he came to me on his own. He used to turn his back to me when I went in the pen. I spent afternoons reading on an upended bucket, ignoring him. Eventually, curiosity won over, and he tiptoed behind me and whuffled my hair with his nose, then exhaled with a great sigh and smacked his lips. After that, he brightened up when our family came to see him. Never an overtly affectionate animal, he'd slide near us and hover while we cleaned the pen or washed out his buckets, hoping for a scratch or currying.

OPENING SPREAD, FROM LEFT: The funeral procession for Tigie Lancaster, whose beloved burro Applejack is led by the author while her son, Huck, carries Tigie's polo mallet; the author with her current horse, Mouse. **THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT:** The author and Huck, with Haystack Mountain in the distance; Tigie, photographed in 2011; Huck riding Beavis.

Most of my rides were alone. We would mosey down a dirt road, Alazán dancing and snorting as we passed the pasture with llamas. I admired his mane riffling in the wind and the lightness of his step in spite of his size. Riding disguises your humanity and allows you to go almost unseen by wildlife. Jackrabbits don't zigzag away when you pass. Coyotes trotting a ridgeline take a glance and look away. The badger trundles to his burrow. One day my friend Sherman, a rancher and a former game warden, came out to admire the horse. "He was a fine, fine-looking fellow when he was young," Sherman said. "I bet he loved to work." Indeed, if we were out and spotted cattle, Alazán would perk his ears and swing toward them on his own in a long-strided trot—in his mind, there was work to do. We sometimes rode on the ranchland of friends, where I let Alazán open up. He leaned forward, accelerating keenly, the rush of wind a roar all around us and the passing mountains a blur. It felt very fast. Perhaps it was.

A BONE DISEASE IN ALAZÁN'S FRONT FEET EVENTUALLY MADE OUR rambles too uncomfortable, and he was retired from riding. Well, almost. Our son, Huck, was six then, and I wished for him to know what I knew—that the world is different on the back of a horse. Because Huck was small and would not burden the old horse unduly, and because by that time Alazán was not inclined toward speed, I figured they were a good match: big horse, small boy. The combination made my husband fret. Michael did not come to the marriage horsey; he's had to become horsey through association with me. Over the years he's learned to back up trailers, shovel shit, load hay, string fence, and all the other unfun, unlovely, and very necessary elements of horsekeeping. Bless his heart.

"What if something happens?" he asked the first time I sat | CONTINUED ON PAGE 139

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THE EARTH IS THERE TO CATCH US WHEN WE FALL

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Huck up on Alazán. "What if he falls?"

Good question. It's lunacy, when you think about it, to put your adored child atop a half-ton creature who sincerely believes that the flapping grocery bag snagged on the fence might kill him. Surprising things can happen even with the gentlest of horses. A stirred-up bee can sting a horse's belly, provoking a kick or a startle. A mightily barking Chihuahua rushing from under a truck can cause a horse to teleport twenty feet to the left in less time than an eyeblink. A burr under the saddle blanket can result in crow hops worthy of the National Finals Rodeo. Or, as happened to Huck, there might be a time when you just lose your balance and plain bounce right out of the saddle. As Huck recently observed, correctly, "It's not *if* you come off your horse, it's *when* you come off your horse."

There is value in dealing with horses, though. You must learn to be clear in the things you ask of them. If you can do this, riding will teach confidence and balance. You can go places with a horse, tell them secrets. A horse is so sensitive to mood and subtle shifts of the body that, if you're quiet and focused, there are times when it can read your mind. You simply think, "Stop," and the horse stops. Or you think, "We should go left," and the horse is moving left before the thought is complete. That's pretty powerful when you're a kid. It's pretty powerful as a grown-up too.

Long before all that, I taught Huck how to simply be around horses. First came lessons about staying safe, respecting a horse's speed and space. You can't be a spaz and you can't daydream, instructions that must be repeated with some frequency to small boys. Horses must be brushed, hayed, and watered. You must pick out rocks and mud from their horny, heavy feet, which is hard for a sixty-pound boy working with a creature that towers over his head. Each day of minor success was a triumph, for a scare can ruin forever any confidence you have around a horse. Huck initially struggled to catch Alazán, but he learned in time to drop his eyes as he approached the horse. By taking the pressure of his gaze away, he drew the gelding toward him, and after a minute or so, the horse lowered his head and shuffled to the boy.

Soon after, Huck's riding career began. We'd bought a mare, Mouse, as my saddle horse, and I'd hold on to Alazán's lead rope as we meandered along, side by side. Unlike his mother, Huck did not have horse fever. In the beginning, he mostly sat as a passenger and prattled to me about dinosaurs or video games or hijinks at school. He saw horses chiefly as friends, which was okay with me. Gradually, he began to want more. We allowed him to steer with reins, and he'd nose Alazán around the place, the wise old horse refusing to go faster than a walk. In time, he started complaining about Alazán's lack of go, so we looked for a more suitable horse. Enter Concho.

When Huck was almost eight, we brought home a leopard Appaloosa whose adorability and doglike friendliness was accompanied by an incorrigible impish streak. For better or worse, much of what Huck learned about riding he learned with Concho. Heels down, light hands on the reins, sit in a balanced way so that head, shoulders, hips, and heels fall in a natural line. These foundational skills take time to lay down. Huck started with Concho on a lunge line, riding in a circle around me. Walk ten steps, stop. Walk ten steps, trot ten steps. Trot seven steps, walk five steps. Whoa. After some weeks, when Huck could trot without balancing on the reins, we removed the lunge line, and he had a degree of freedom and control.

But control over a horse, or control over a child on a horse, is relative. Concho, clever boy, was not mean or ill-tempered, but it did

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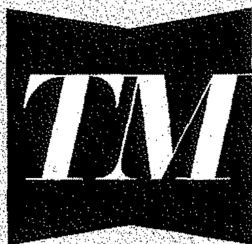

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not take him long to figure out who was in charge of this duo. The horse had very clear opinions about what he did and didn't want to do. Huck could climb on him bareback and out to the pasture they'd go, Huck happily whacking at yucca stalks with a homemade sword, murmuring a narrative as they ambled companionably along. This they did for many hours. Take Concho to a 4-H practice, though, and he'd act like he did not know Huck. Manners and training went AWOL. He'd back into other horses. He'd trot, but too fast. Twice he suddenly dropped to roll in the arena sand while Huck was aboard. I could get on Concho, and after some discussion, he'd do for me what he would not do for Huck, but this was not a good fit for either of them. Riding a naughty horse can uncover an otherwise unknown and bottomless well of frustration, anger, insecurity, and even embarrassment, none of which are useful emotions in dealing with animals who have their own opinions and the strength to make those opinions known.

"It was frustrating, because we'd do well together sometimes and then sometimes he just wouldn't cooperate," remembered Huck. "I'd feel so upset."

The Concho issue had me baffled. Most of what I know about horses I learned from books or from my own gunsel mistakes, and I had never before encountered a problem like this. Thank goodness for Tigie Lancaster. We met Tigie when she moved to Marfa in 1998, after retiring from years in the horse business and as a grief counselor who specialized in helping people cope with the deaths of loved ones, both human and animal. Her family was linked to the Texas and Pacific Railway, and her privileged childhood in Dallas in the thirties and forties involved servants, high manners, private school, and horses. She was a world-class contrarian from birth, preferring the stable and poodles to party frocks and cotillions. A nanny found her so ferociously willful that she dubbed the baby girl "a little tiger," and the nickname Tigie stuck forever after.

Tigie was lured to Marfa by the sere beauty of the landscape. She was not much taller than five feet, with frowsy gray hair she tended to cut herself and a penchant for crazy sunglasses and stripy socks. One eye was blue and the other was cracked half brown and half blue, like a Catahoula cur. Her back and hip were gimpy from horse wrecks years before; decades of smoking in the pre-Marfa chapters of her life had left her perpetually short of breath with emphysema. Her preferred mode of transportation around town was by mule, in an English saddle; later, when climbing up and down from the saddle was more of a problem, she tooled around Marfa in a golf cart. She preferred going slow, observing the world at about the speed of a walking horse. She was contradictory, sometimes charmingly so. And she was blunt. When Huck began having trouble with Concho, she told me, "Life's too short to ride a bad horse. Send him down the road." I protested that Concho wasn't a bad horse, he just needed more time. She'd shake her head. "Life's too short. If something needs fixing, make a change."

Tigie was full of these pronouncements. Horse keeping and horse riding come with myriad rules. Some of these rules are universal (stay out of a horse's kicking range), and others are particular to whatever barn or outfit you're riding with (hang the bridles here and the halters over there). Tigie's rules covered considerably more territory. Along with the everyday concerns about which bucket held horse cookies and how and where the oats were stored, there were other, highly idiosyncratic rules about things like the proper feeding of oranges to her donkeys (peel the oranges first, and then offer the donkeys the peels as well as the fruit). Then there were the directives about household tasks: how eggs must be scrambled, how score shall be kept while playing dominoes, how one should stack dirty dishes, precisely how the golf cart should be parked, and so on. A misstep in any of these countless and unpredictable directions resulted in a barking "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" followed by a barrage of instructions about how and why to correct the infraction.

Slowly, our stories and her stories knitted together, as lives will do. We did not see her every day; her social schedule was far too full for that, plus she had thrift stores to prowl and animals to spoil. She commonly arrived on our doorstep with presents, maybe a particularly nice brush for the horses or, when she was trying to start a team, a box of polo balls. Huck's first saddle came from Tigie, a model from the fifties or sixties. It is long outgrown, but we will not give it away.

At her place on the edge of town, Tigie kept a revolving array of horses, mules, and donkeys, many of which ended up with her because she felt sorry for them. There was Slim, the poky ex-racehorse, and Pearl and Pearl Light, two sad-sack donkeys from a fencing crew that often walked in tandem, as though still tied nose-to-tail on the job. The donkeys brayed to her when she rolled up in the golf cart or stepped outside her kitchen door, and the sound brought her joy as vivid as Christmas. "Oh, listen to that aria!" she'd exclaim. Tigie loved horses, but she had an unshakable belief in the perfect wisdom of donkeys and mules. "They think great, deep thoughts," she told Huck more than once. "You can't convince them of anything; whatever

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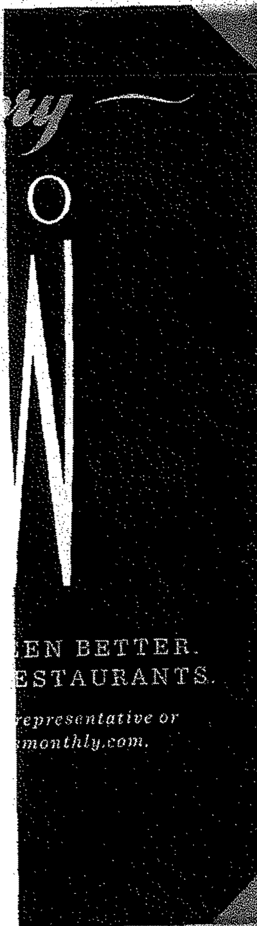

you ask of them must be their idea first. They are far more sensitive than any horse, and they deserve to be treated so."

Tigie was right, of course, about Concho. His fate with us was decided the night I nursed a black eye with a bag of frozen peas. Horses are good teachers that way. He'd sulled up at the end of a long 4-H clinic, and I'd bailed off him a moment after realizing, with an absurd rush of pride, that I was riding a bucking horse. The resulting shiner festooned most of the left side of my face and elicited comparisons to kaleidoscopes and sunsets for weeks that summer.

Huck is twelve now and rides Beavis, a classy and soft-eyed former cutting horse bought from friends who understood Huck's struggles with Concho. Beavis nickers when Huck walks into the pen. He fishes in the boy's pockets for peppermints and drowses as Huck untangles his long tail. Beavis doesn't flinch when Huck accidentally bangs his side during saddling and makes Huck look like a champ at whatever they do: side-passing, opening a gate, flying lead changes. "He is a really good friend," Huck says. "I like everything about him."

At a ranch clinic this fall, Huck had his first chance to try out Beavis's cutting-horse moves on cattle. The clinician called out directions and encouragement as Huck guided Beavis to split the herd. Huck waited for the cattle to trickle past until one heifer remained in front of him. He sat deep, and Beavis began the dance, dodging and dipping to keep the heifer from rejoining the herd. The horse knew what to do when Huck did not. When Huck was late with a cue, Beavis waited for him and only went as fast as Huck asked. "Look at that horse," a rancher told Michael. "That boy loves that horse and that horse loves that boy. They are exactly what the other one needs."

Tigie never met Beavis. She tended to become ill every December, her birth month. Skin cancer. A perforated gut, twice. The ICU. Infection. No breath. Months in the hospital, hundreds of miles from home, more than once. A broken hip that she hobbled around on for a week before she consented to go to the hospital in Odessa. (You can get attention in the ER pretty quick, I've found, by announcing you've got a 77-year-old woman with emphysema and a broken hip in your truck.) Two years ago she decided to no longer seek treatment for her diminishing breath and the pneumonia that stalked her in winter. No more doctors. No hospitals. This was it.

As she was dying, her friends gathered close. We talked a lot in those last weeks, including about her own death. There was, unexpectedly, a lot of laughter. Her beloved cousins visited, and Tigie ate anything she desired, trailing an oxygen tank into Marfa's chic restaurants. Brandy Alexanders, date pudding, tenderloin. My friend Maiya and I sat with her bundled up one night at the after-hours grilled cheese joint, watching the drunks roll in and drinking Maiya's good champagne until very, very late. She was awfully weak by that point. We would've taken her anywhere or done anything that would make her happy.

Tigie died in her sleep at her house, just as she wished. Michael and two friends built her coffin, its interior lined with horse blankets. She was buried in her pasture, with the ashes she'd saved of her sister and a favorite dog. The grave is unmarked except for the hoofprints left by pronghorn as they graze. The Davis Mountains rise to the north, blue and serrated.

Now there are two graves in the pasture. After Tigie's death, we'd moved our horses to her place. Last December, I went to feed Alazán one evening and found him down on the ground. It was the last few minutes of a sunny day, and at first I thought he might be napping. Upon my approach, he lumbered to his feet and came straight to me, lowering his head into my chest, so unlike his shy self. I stepped back in surprise, and he again thrust his head against my chest before his back legs quavered, then gave out, and he collapsed to the ground. He was colicking badly; I've never seen an animal so clearly ask for help. In his pain he grunted with every breath and thrashed, his great hooves tearing at the grama and the earth all around him. Michael ran for a gun while I sank my hands into Alazán's woolly neck and thanked him for being the good horse he was for thirty years. His ear swiveled around to listen as I spoke; his frightened eye stopped rolling and looked directly into mine. We shot him where he lay. I like to think that I gave him a fraction of comfort in those last moments. I hope I did.

Learning to ride takes time. It's about love and letting go, accepting the what-ifs and understanding that events beyond your power are simply that—beyond your power. I'm still learning. What's important with horses turns out to be what's important in life. You give your heart knowing there will be risk. You go fast anyway. You get back on anyway and laugh anyway. You go forward with whatever brilliance and clarity you can muster. This is what I want my son to know. There he is, loping and stopping in time and in tune with his horse, safe and coming back to hold the herd with a million-watt grin. My husband hangs on the fence, watching. The sun is to my back, and I have the whole world. The earth is there to catch and hold us when we fall.

STERRY BUTCHER LIVES IN MARFA. THIS YEAR SHE WILL BEGIN CONTRIBUTING A REGULAR COLUMN TO *TEXAS MONTHLY*.

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