THE SCENT OF A HORSE

BY CHARLES CAPALDI

Far, far back in our dark soul, the horse prances. The horse, the horse, the symbol of surging potency and power of movement of action and man.

D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

Ask 20 people to name a famous horse, and Mr. Ed, Black Beauty, Flikka, or Silver are likely to figure prominently on the list. Horses are so firmly entrenched in Western civilization, that few people are immune to the mingled odor of leather, sweat, manure and musk which is immediately recognizable as the scent of a horse. They have helped us win wars, tame the West, and it could be argued that America never would have evolved into a world power had it not been for them. Small farmers and ranchers aside, how does society thank them for their contribution? The unfortunate answer is: Not with anything resembling good faith, good stewardship, or honesty. Our children play with toy cows devoid of teats, and toy stallions devoid of genitalia. As a society, we whitewash the facts of life, especially when it comes to our children. Black Beauty is no mere gelding in plastic, he is completely emasculated.

We smack our lips in anticipation of the beef lying on our plate; calling it cow is too close to the reality. Yet, the very idea of eating horse meat spurs Congress to outlaw the slaughter of horses for human consumption. Congress

didn't pass the amendment in 2006, but it generated more debate (both pro and con) than universal health insurance coverage, affordable college tuition, and the war in Iraq combined. We don't have another name for horse meat in this country, because by and large, WE don't eat it. Dogs do. Lucky for them, it will still be a legal ingredient in dog food. Our treatment and perception of horses can be measured on a sliding scale with complete liberty at one extreme and overbearing dominion at the other. Where man, horse and nature are in harmony with one another, we find the best examples of liberty. Where horses are little more than slaves to be discarded when they no longer serve their intended purpose, we find the worst.

Frédéric Pignon and his wife Margali Delgado are clearly on the side of liberty. Both grew up on small farms in France, and are the stars of an equine-human ballet called Cavalia. Fifty horses cavort under a huge white tent with 32 acrobats and aerialists. The similarity to Ringling Brothers Circus ends with the Big Top. In a traditional circus, the horse tamer runs his horses through their paces, whip in hand. While the performance may be beautiful, it is demanded, not freely given by the animals. In contrast, Pignon plays with his 22 stallion in much the same way they frolicked together on the Cevennes mountain range near Avignon.

In one memorable scene, Delgado, and her sister Estrella, astride matching white steeds, face each other in flowing white dresses, through a wall of rain that hangs like a curtain between them. The movements of horse and rider perfectly mirror those of the other, in time to the music. It takes dressage to the next level and is magical, no doubt. But most impressive is the means by which it has been achieved - with the freely-given respect and cooperation of horse and rider.

Horses were central to the development of the United States from its beginnings as a colony, although none were as important as the draft animal. The easily tilled, friable soils of the Northeast were nothing compared to the heavy soils found further West. Colonial farmers once eked out an existence on

the land, sometimes with a single draft animal (often an ox), but more frequently by hand. The generations that followed relied on their teams to provide transportation and power on a much larger scale. By the early 1900's, the population of draft horses in America had reached a height of 26.4 million animals, and the average farmer worked 100 acres. By the 1950's, the average farmer rode a tractor to cultivate his 205 acres. By 1969, the average farm encompassed 400 acres – too large to be worked by a single farmer and his team. Society's perception of horses slowly shifted toward the realm of "companion animal". The speaking horses of the Anglophone world illustrate this evolution.

In 1877, Black Beauty: the Autobiography of a Horse, became an immediate best-seller. *Translated from the Equine* by Anna Sewell, Beauty tells the story of his life as a foal on a small farm in England, to the difficulties of being a cab horse in London, to his carefree and happy retirement in the country. The author claimed that her story was intended to "induce kindness, sympathy, and an understanding treatment of horses."[1] Sewell was an animal lover, sympathetic to the plight of working animals. The novel ignited a public outcry which some credit with the abolishment of the checkrein in Victorian England – a bearing strap that keeps a horse's head high but can prove painful and damaging to a horse's neck.

Fast forward to the 1960's when Mr. Ed was beamed into homes across the nation – a talking horse who wanted to be human. He played baseball, chess, had his "hoof" read by a gypsy, courted Clint Eastwood's filly, and even went to medical school. Bamboo Harvester, the horse that played Mr. Ed in the series, was *quietly* euthanized in the 1970's to avoid a public outcry.

In 2007, the ubiquitous Barbie™ doll is accompanied by her trusty steed, Forever Tawny™, a mount referred to alternately as both horse and pony. No matter that the stirrups only reach midway down Barbie's thigh, or that she rides with her legs extended out in front of her, or that all the tack and saddle blankets are in hot pink. Barbie™ herself is an anatomical impossibility. How could we expect her to ride like a *real* equestrienne? Where Black Beauty struck a blow for the humane treatment of living horses, Barbie™ and Forever Tawny™ are off on their next video game adventure, *Wild Horse Rescue* – where "Barbie™ and her friends find the lost horses missing from the local riding school." Wild horses, indeed!

Riding stables and equine programs abound to help counter the impact of misinformation and anatomically incorrect horses. If only similar programs existed to counter the effects of an anatomically impossible Barbie™. Maybe that would reduce the incidence of anorexia and bulimia in our society. My daughter, in her third year of riding lessons, is pretty intimate with the handle end of a pitch fork, and the heft of horse manure and bedding. She's also familiar with its value as fertilizer and as an addition to the compost heap. For her, a horse represents freedom.

"When I turn sixteen and am old enough to drive," she repeatedly insists, "I want a horse of my own so that I can ride him anywhere I want to go."

[1] Merriam-Webster (1995). "Black Beauty". *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*.

Somewhere between an idealized love of horses and having the skill to ride *everywhere* on horseback, a young rider has a lot to learn. Most of that occurs in small rural stables like Missisquoi Valley Arabians in Newport Center, Vermont.

Donna LaPlume and Joe Durocher run the stables from their farm. For years, they boarded horses in a converted two story dairy barn. Last year, they built a large indoor arena with two aisles of adjoining box stalls. Neither looks likely to slip into a pair of Jodhpurs before mounting a horse. Joe, a New England farmer at heart, still makes some of his hay with his two teams of Percherons – just for the pleasure of it. While many of their boarders ride Western, others are of Hunter-Jumper ilk. Some of the horses lay claim to a wardrobe that rivals my own. They also probably have better access to health care than most of the people in the county. A $60,000 horse isn't unheard of, and in more affluent sections of New England, some young riders only emerge from the air-conditioned tack room of their horse trailers to ride multiple horses at the same show.

Sue Babineau, a single, 37 year old veterinarian, has been riding since she was 8 years old. She boards her horse, Maybe, at Missisquoi Valley Arabians. She spends the day seeing patients in a small animal veterinary hospital just a few miles down the road from Missisquoi. And in the evening, she trains with Maybe in the arena. Maybe is jet black and stands 16 hands 3.

A spirited Thoroughbred gelding, a Native Dancer son, he retired after 4 years at the track. His experience in competition pays off every time Sue shows with him.

"When we start out on a competition course, he just seems to know that it's for keeps." She said. "When we are in a show, he's *on* like nobody's business." By her own admission, Maybe is the Black Beauty of her childhood dreams.

"Growing up, I boarded my horses, first a white pony named Silver, and later, a Thoroughbred Quarter Horse named Isaac, at a neighboring farm. My arena was a big, open field with a trails running through it." She said. "A big old farm truck with high wooden sides served as a horse trailer." In exchange for his room and board, she washed out hundreds of sap buckets each spring, among a myriad of other farm tasks. When Isaac died, Sue donated his body to the Purdue Veterinary School.

"I was pretty broken up about his death," she explained, "so I felt much better knowing that he would be around to help educate the next generation of vet students." She still feels connected to him by his front legs and skull that reside in the Purdue Veterinary School equine anatomy collection. There weren't any fancy stables or fancy horses in her childhood. It doesn't seem to have hurt. Today, she competes in the 3-foot Amateur class of the Vermont Hunter-Jumper circuit, astride the horse of her dreams.

Claremont Riding Academy near Central Park in New York City provided a similar haven for urban equestrians. The 4 ¼ mile bridle path through the Park passes under many of its most recognizable bridges and arches. When the bridle path was closed to equestrian traffic earlier this year, the final blow was hammered into Claremont's coffin and the Academy closed. People walking dogs, pushing strollers and joggers made it too congested for horse and rider - a bridle path with no horses.

These days in the Big Apple, you are only likely to see the horse drawn carriage rides on Central Park South and the mounted police who sit atop their trusty steeds, looking out over the concrete jungle.

New York City's mounted police unit is 120 uniformed officers and 80 horses strong. There are stables in every borough except Staten Island.

"Their impressive visibility makes our mounted police officers and their horses great crime fighters and outstanding ambassadors to the public." said Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly. "It is only fitting that the horses have the best accommodations possible in Manhattan, close to the action, where they are often needed."[2]

In a big city, the action happens near the center of things. Out in the country, it tends to be on the edges. The town of Northfield, New Hampshire seems like any other typical New England town, where suburbia slowly encroaches upon once rural landscapes. There's plenty of green left in these hills, and where there's green, there's usually a farmer. In this case, an old one. The trick was finding him.

Sue Babineau agreed to serve as my guide. She grew up in nearby Franklin, and boarded her first horse with Bert Southwick, the wizened, 83 year old contrary farmer, who still raises chickens and delivers eggs by horse and wagon. He's been on this egg route longer than most of his customers have been alive – and long enough to have outlived five of the six horses who have pulled his wagon over the years.

We found his house nestled in the center of the 250 acre farm his father bought after World War I. The same wood cook stove dominates the kitchen. The same wallpaper desperately clings to the walls, and a bare light bulb sticks out over the table where eggs are cleaned and crated. Bert still uses an outhouse nestled in a corner of the attached barn. He doesn't need to walk out in the snow to answer the call of nature, but he still has to brave the cold - reason enough to hurry up and take care of business.

[2] March 20, 2007, The New York Times, "New Stables Clear Way for Hudson River Park Expansion" by Maria Newman

We headed toward the outskirts of Northfield and sure enough, there he was - bent over from a lifetime of hard work, planting pumpkin in the middle of a 20 acre field – a hoe in one hand, and a handful of pumpkin seed in the other. He'd drop some seeds, use the hoe to cover them up and tamp down the dirt before moving on. Seed by seed, mound by mound, row by row, the field was slowly getting planted, fertilized only with horse and pig manure from his barn – all in plain view of a relatively new suburban house that had sprung up improbably at the field edge.

A Yankee through and through, Bert didn't have much to say – short of a curt "Ayuh" which doubles for "yes", in these parts. Sue, on the other, had come prepared.

"Bert," she said, "I brought you a treat." From nowhere, she produced a handful of chocolate bars. For the first time since we arrived, a smile crept over his face. For the briefest of moments, Bert was downright talkative - at least, by New England standards.

"I reckon' that ought to last me a while." he said. Then the hoe was in motion again, and he was off to the next mound.

"How much more do you have to plant?" Sue asked as she reached out and picked up the bucket of seed at his feet.

"I reckon' the rest of it." He replied. It was unclear if he meant the rest of the field, or the rest of the seed in the bucket.

In 1937, Bert decided to have a go at selling eggs. "At the start, I used a bicycle," he said, "then I bought an old milk wagon from the neighbor down the road. Been at it ever since." And so have his horses – first Dinah, then Dolly, Misty, Miss Gray, Bob, and now Mischief with her foal at side. His wagon has a "Baby on Board" sign hung in the rear window. "When the foal gets tired or cold, I bring her into the wagon with me." he explained.

Mischief and Bert are doing what horse and man were intended to do ever since they domesticated one another. In this place, at this time, the man, the horse, and nature are in harmony with one another.

"Mischief knows where to stop for each customer," he said. "If I lose a customer, we only have to pass by the house once and she won't stop there again."

His route takes him through town on Fridays, letting everybody know that the end of the week has arrived. Local school children named the new Southwick

School after him – both he and Mischief figure prominently on the sign. Space for a glass case has been reserved in the lobby for his milk wagon, when it is finally retired. Judging from the acres of beans, corn, squash, pumpkin and hay, that doesn't seem likely to happen any time soon.

As Bert explained to another reporter while hitching up Mischief, "I never cared much for cars. To tell the truth, I've never driven a car in my life ... thought of buyin' one, but never did. What good is a car on a farm?"[3]

As we headed off the field, he called out: "Suzie! Ah reckon' ya' carry the time on ya'?"

She looked down at her watch. "Yeah Bert, it's 3:30."

He nodded curtly, muttered "Ayuh" and bent back over his work.

The work of a race horse lies in stark contrast to the job Mischief does delivering eggs with Bert Southwick. Sure, she pulls his wagon year round regardless of weather – but she also gets to spend a sizable chunk of time on pasture, in the sun and fresh air, grazing and cavorting with the rest of his horses. A race horse is a commodity compared to the average working hack. As such, earning power and market value take priority over mere emotional or ethical considerations. When a race horse has outlived his usefulness, his reward is less than certain. In the best of cases, he shares the fate of Sue Babineau's "Maybe", who retired to a single rider, and an increasingly challenging progression through the Hunter Jumper circuit.

When Barbaro fractured his ankle at Pimlico, the nation gasped. Then it held its collective breath as an army of equine veterinarians struggled to keep him alive between press conferences. The empathy felt for this horse was palpable from sea to shining sea ... most likely, in direct proportion to the dollar amount of his winnings and the earning potential of his sperm.

A week later, Lauren's Charm headed into the homestretch of the Preakness Stakes and started struggling. Her jockey, sensing that something was wrong, pulled up and jumped off. Minutes later, she collapsed on the track where veterinarians pronounced her dead – victim of a heart attack – a freak occurrence that happens in less than 1 in 20,000 horses.

Lauren's Charm dropped dead in broad daylight before a crowd of 4,000 spectators, not even a flicker of which registered on the national radar. Why not? Because this horse wasn't a Kentucky Derby winner; she was a 4 year old filly who had yet to prove her mettle. Her loss went largely unnoticed, unreported, and unmourned.

[3] October 2002, New Holland News Online, Richard O'Donnell

Undoubtedly, an injured Barbaro would have been put down had he not been a winner – which as I see it, is no different than culling a barren ewe from my flock, and putting her in the freezer. But if I raised horses instead of sheep, that might soon become a criminal offense if the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is passed.

Ninety thousand horses are slaughtered in the U.S. every year and butchered for meat – meat that is sent off to countries where it is treated as matter-of-factly as beef, pork, or chicken. Frankly, most of the world eats horse, with the notable exception of Brazil and the English speaking countries like the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Australia. In Sweden, horse meat outsells lamb and mutton combined. It is also commonly consumed across Western Europe, although Belgium and France head the pack of horse eaters. Horse meat was deemed a ready and inexpensive source of protein in France during the famine of 1866.

Few countries that produce horse meat actually raise the animals for that purpose. Ex-racehorses, riding horses, and other horses sold at auction provide the bulk of the supply. Unlike Barbaro, who had unlimited access to medical treatment and national support, Ferdinand, the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner is believed to have been slaughtered in Japan – most likely for dog food – after serving his purpose at stud. The contrast between Ferdinand and Barbaro couldn't be more stark and the logic of it proves elusive. If we are going to ban the slaughter of horses for meat – shouldn't we also ban the slaughter of steers, lambs, hogs, and chickens?

The book of Genesis explicitly gives man dominion over animals, but does that mean we have a right to do to them whatever we will? Or, does it mean instead that we share as much in the responsibility for their care, as we share in the benefits derived from them?

I'd like to believe that we have a mutual obligation toward our animals, regardless of the purpose for which they are raised. We provide additional shelter, food, and care. In exchange, they provide meat, fur, milk, work, or companionship.

There is great honor in raising them when the symbiotic relationship between man and beast is respected and great dishonor if it is ignored.

Modern agricultural practices and factory farming methods put the emphasis on profit and loss, production capacity curves, and acceptable losses. They don't see the individual losses and they no more assign a dollar amount to the honor involved in farming, than the nation spares a collective sob for a filly that died before winning anything. When the implicit contract between the farmer and his livestock is broken, the obligations incurred by such a bond lay disregarded. The animals give up their meat, fur, milk, or work, but they get nothing more in exchange than the promise of release from a form of dominion akin to slavery.

Our culture seems to rank certain species above others. Take our squeamishness about eating horse or dog, and compare that to our willingness to slice into filet mignon without a second thought. We should be attuned to the dangers of including ourselves, the human animal, in this equation – something I fear we've already begun to do.

It's easier to get access to affordable health insurance policies and credit terms for companion animals, than it is to get the same for the untold percentage of Americans who do not have ready access to health care. It's striking that our government wants to legislate the moral codes we should follow as far as horses are concerned, yet fails to establish working moral codes regarding members of our own species.

A horse's freedom ends where ours begins, and if we aren't careful, *our* freedom could one day end where someone else's begins. As small farmers, we know better ... and it's up to us to keep the faith.