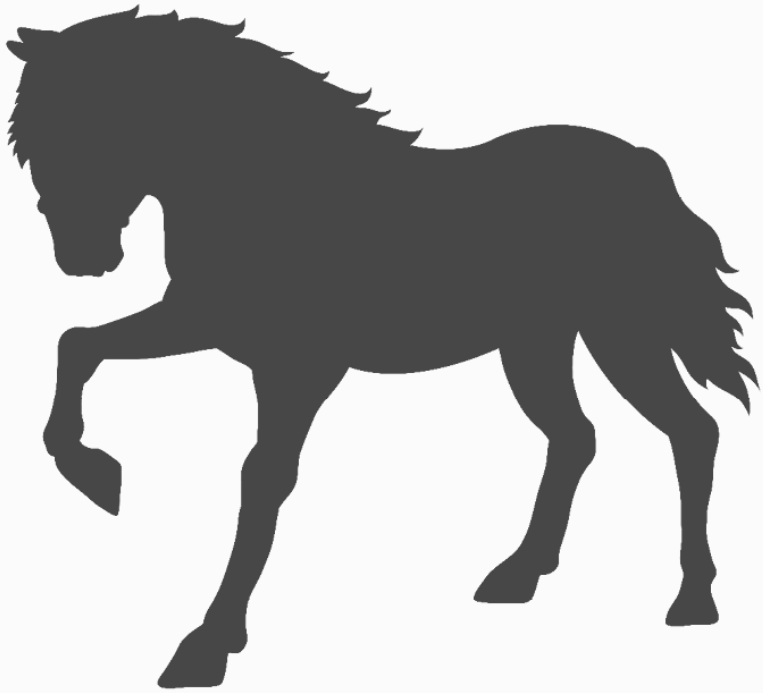

THE BIRDHUNTER

by Sarah Boudreau

SO much of horses, Jo often thought, revolved around rhythm. While riding, she counted out the beat of the horse's stride like fingers tapping a table. Now, she listened to the dig and rush of grain as she scooped it into feed buckets. She measured out joint supplements like an alchemist and with a tap of spoon against rim, dropped the concoctions in. Every morning, after she fed, Jo turned the horses out into the pastures and cleaned stalls in their absence, wisps of grey hair flying about her face. As she worked, she looked like a strap of leather—thin, muscled, worn.

Back when her partner was in vet school—and back when it was unusual for a woman to be a veterinarian—Jo would shake Ann awake in

the early mornings after barn chores. Jo would make her breakfast, peering over her textbooks as Ann studied at the table. Some forty-odd years later, she was still Ann's alarm clock, leaning over the bed and the pile of sleepy dogs to wake her for work. They used to have grooms to feed the horses in the mornings, and she used to rise at four-thirty every morning to bark orders before she began schooling the horses. Even now, with no business to run and no grooms to direct, Jo could never sleep past five. She began her labors while the world snored. The sun rose later and later as the farm sank into autumn, but Jo's circadian rhythm was relentless.

Jo didn't think about this as she moved through her chores. She scooped and hefted with the pitchfork and bounced the wheelbarrow to the next stall. She thought about the new barn dog, the one with the bum leg, the one that trailed behind her, too skittish to come close but too afraid to stray far. She thought about the scheduled disruption of the farm's quiet: the farrier appointment later in the day. Far from the main road, far from people, the only sounds to be heard during the day were the softness of Jo's movement, the sighs of the horses, and the occasional yip of the dogs. Sometimes bird songs drifted from the woods to the barn, but the rafters were barren of nests. Jo disliked the usual barnyard birds. Geese yelled. Ducks bothered. The dogs always killed the chickens.

Later, she knew, those dogs would bark, ears perked, and set off down the driveway, the signal of the farrier's arrival. The truck would stop at the barn in a cloud of dust, and when the farrier got out, the dogs would jump on him, wagging their tails, until Jo emerged from the barn to call them off. She would nod to him, help him carry his equipment into the barn, and one by one he would take his rasp to the hooves of each of her twelve horses, shaving off the new growth. He would place new shoes on some. Jo would watch him for hours. She liked that he would rather work than speak. Aside from the deer Jo would spot in the pastures in the dusk-like mornings, he would be the only visitor to the farm in months.

The dog with the bum leg barked at something outside. She wanted to tell him to stop, but it took her a moment to remember the dog's name. She wanted to call him Louie, but that was the arthritic shepherd mix one of her clients had in the eighties. She wanted to call him Bill, but that was the three-legged terrier Ann once brought home from a horse show. She remembered he had come with the name Rusty and that Ann refused to change it, even though that was the name of Rob's golden retriever all those years back.

Remembering Rob made Jo's jaw clench. In the barn's heyday decades ago, Rob had worked as assistant trainer. She had been bringing home blue

ribbons for her clients for years, but the upper middle class women who boarded their horses at the farm preferred dealing with the blond, consistently cheerful young man in his tight breeches.

Jo called out for Rusty to quit his barking, and when he did not stop, she finished cleaning the last stall, leaned the pitchfork against the wall, and went to investigate.

The dog still didn't trust people, and he skittered sideways when Jo approached, moving like a rocking horse as he limped away. His belly dripped with dew collected from the grass. Outside the barn, the aisle continued into a straight dirt path with rows of pastures on either side. Jo leaned over one of the wooden fences, where the white paint splintered. She rested her arms on the top rail and watched the horses, as she did most mornings. If one lifted its head from its grazing to walk, Jo would study the gait for signs of lameness, but usually the horses and Jo sank into serenity as the horses grazed and the sun began to rise behind the trees, throwing spears of light between the branches.

A small, red bird shot out of the trees and twittered as it flew loop-de-loops. Jo would not have noticed the bird if not for Jack, the bay gelding who lifted his head, ears pricked up as he stood at attention. She watched him follow the bird, trotting to keep up with it, and she admired the ease of

his gait. She pulled him from his mother one cold spring night some twenty years before. He was one of the last offspring of her prize stallion, whose champion ribbons hung with a photo in a special corner of the tack room. Jo, like dozens before him, had bred Jack to have that lofty, elegant trot, the muscles of his shoulders and hindquarters rippling, and to have the deep brown coloring of his father. Jack was one of the last of his dynasty, and despite his relatively old age, he chased after the bird with a youthful exuberance. Jo almost smiled.

Jack quickened his pace, urgency in his wide eyes. He snorted and extended his neck, his haunches bunching as he threw himself forward. Leaping, he opened his mouth and plucked the bird from the sky, teeth closing around the small, red body, and Jo was not sure if she heard the snapping collapse of hollow bones beneath teeth or the shock of Jack's hooves as they hit the ground. Jack slowed to a stop, and the body fell from his mouth like a cat's prize left on a doorstep. He lowered his head, the whiskers on his nose brushing the little red bird as his nostrils flared.

Jo squeezed between the fence posts and walked to Jack, numbness slowing her brain. The other horses in the pasture had glanced up during Jack's brief sprint, but now lost interest, heads sunk into the grass. She crept slowly toward Jack, her brow furrowed. She was not afraid of horses

—how could she be? Angry, perhaps, though she never lost her temper. Never afraid. She wondered if fear was what she felt now, some toxic emotion pumping through her veins and clouding her thought. She could think of nothing but the sight of the small, red body caught in Jack's jaws, in teeth made for uprooting grass and scratching the itches of herdmates.

One of her sneakers caught in the mud, and she stopped to free it. When she looked up again, Jack had his lips curled back, exposing his teeth, and with a delicate precision usually reserved for surgeons, nipped a piece of flesh from the bird's breast.

The breath escaped Jo's lungs in an unwilling howl. Jack looked up, startled, and she saw the gentle smear of blood on the fuzz of his nose. She stepped toward him, waving her arms to shoo him, and he turned and lumbered away, his ears flicking back. Jo looked down at the bird and felt pity rise in her chest. The bird lay on its side, chest crushed nearly flat, its downy crimson feathers twitching in the wind. Its beak lay open though its eyes clamped shut, its expression a permanent anguished scream.

Jo was afraid to examine the corpse. Surely, she thought, the bird's red feathers would camouflage the wound Jack tore from it. She wondered if the bird's beak was chipped like china.

Jo did not recognize the bird. Too large to be a finch. Barn swallows were never that bright. Not one of the cardinals that darted between the pine trees in the winter. Smaller than the fat robins that hopped across the pastures in the springtime.

She wondered if she should bury it, but the sun rising behind the trees reminded her that Ann would wake soon. Leaving the carcass behind, she crawled back through the fence and resumed her chores. She hung up the pitchfork on its peg and dumped the wheelbarrow into the manure pile. She thought of making breakfast for Ann and wondered if the cracking of eggs into the frying pan would remind her of the snap of the little bird's bones. She thought of the blood on Jack's lip, the screaming beak, the piece of meat torn from beneath downy feathers.

She wondered about Jack's appetite. Someone once told her that horses in Iceland were fed salted fish by their owners in the wintertime when grass was scarce, but that was different. She had never heard of a horse as a predator, a horse with an unfeeling ferocity. It seemed to her that Jack snapped that bird in his teeth simply because he could, and for the first time in a long time, she felt surprise tickle her brain. She thought back to conversations with veterinarians, trainers, farriers, any other professional who might have mentioned a bird hunter horse. Jo wondered for a moment

if she should ask the farrier when he visited later that morning, but she shook the thought from her head and resumed her barn chore rhythm, pulling the hose from its keeper and turning the faucet.

She robotically swept the stream of the hose back and forth, crawling toward the end of the aisle. The water plopped to the ground to weigh down the dust. There used to be thick, rubber mats that needed to be swept clean twice daily, a time-consuming feat for the grooms she hired. The new barn help would always complain of blisters on their hands from the broom handles. Jo couldn't remember when she dragged away the mats and left the floor bare—it was at least ten years ago—but now she tended to the aisle like a beloved garden, raking the dirt free of hay and debris and hosing it to keep the dust down.

She did not break her routine to throw water at the cobwebs that connected in the corners and bars of the stall doors. She did not wash off the layers of dust that clung to the line of show halters hanging on their hooks, equipment that used to be expensive but now faded into uselessness, the leather brittle. The silver and bronze nameplates screwed into the leather were too tarnished to read. They belonged to long-dead horses who won Jo the rows of faded ribbons that lined the windows of

the tack room and of their living room, the bottoms curling into a spiral as if they topped a birthday gift.

Jo thought of Ann, surely still asleep in their bed upstairs. She would be curled up on her side, hands clasped together as if in prayer. Jo sometimes thought of her twenty-one-year-old self, who lived in a trailer behind her old trainer's mare barn. That Jo, a year before she met Ann, galloped thoroughbreds in the mornings for extra cash and rode the wildest horses her trainer had, a crash test dummy in the days before seatbelts. And when activity would hum through her body, keeping her awake at night, she would drink whiskey until it quieted. That Jo would never believe her still and quiet life, her still and quiet home. With a farm of her own, even if money from Ann's veterinarian practice kept it running, she could relish in her independence. Perhaps a thick layer of dust coated everything, but at least the halters were hung up properly.

Jo tried to imagine the barn through the farrier's eyes. Clay had seen the barn in its loud glory days and had watched it sink into silence. She had a hard time seeing him as a forty-five-year-old with large, rough hands like baseball mitts. To her, he was always the eighteen-year-old apprentice who always grew frustrated with Rob's pestering, or the twenty-year-old who made the barn roar with laughter when Jack's sire kicked him in the crotch.

Clay, she thought, would see the clutter of molding tack in the aisles. He would see that the hay loft was now jammed with old furniture. Many of the stalls now held miscellanea: old hot water heaters, box fans, plastic bins of faded clothes. One corner was taken up by the old gas stove that Jo insisted on keeping, since one of its four burners still worked.

Jo finished her chores and walked up the back steps into her kitchen to find a note on the door from Ann, explaining that she had left for work. Nobody but Jo would be able to decipher Ann's scrawl, and nobody else would notice that Ann wrote "I love you" in lieu of a signature.

Jo put her face to the window, cupped her eyes, looked through the window at the clock on the new electric stove, and realized she had been running late with her chores. She knew Ann would stop for a fast food breakfast on her way to work, and she felt herself sink. The last time she missed a breakfast was eight years ago, the morning after she broke her collarbone and Ann insisted she stay in bed. Standing on the porch, Jo tried to comfort herself with the fact that she had put coffee on before she left, so Ann could at least enjoy that.

The sun peered over the treetops and barely over the roof of the barn, and for a moment even the calls of familiar birds stopped, leaving Jo in the silence of her own breath. She felt stiff and idle, like she would turn to

stone if she remained on the porch, and for the first time in many months she felt the urge to leave the farm. Years ago, on fall days like this, she would have Rob hitch the trailer and he and Jo would take a group of ladies to ride on the beach. The show horses would snort and spook at stray seaweed and the group would race down the shore.

She imagined herself hitching the trailer—the two-horse, not the old six-horse they had used for shows. She would coax a horse inside—the mare with the long legs and the stride that gobbled up the ground. She would drive the twenty minutes to the beach, where she would throw on the saddle, leap on her back, and gallop in the sand. There might not be anyone to race against, but maybe, she thought, she could still feel like she was winning.

She knew that if Ann were to see the new tire tracks in the mud, and if she saw sweat stains on a horse's back, she would be upset. After Jo's broken collarbone took extra months to heal because she pushed herself through her chores, Ann kept a stern eye on her.

Jo took a breath, glancing down at her battered and muddied sneakers. She scraped some of the mud off on one of her porch steps. She had worn a similar pair the day she broke her collarbone and lay in the mud, alone, until Ann returned from work hours later. In her teaching days, if

one of her students had ever shown up to the barn in anything but polished paddock boots, she would have been aghast, but without the pressure of a professional image, she could justify the shoes.

She missed the horse show mornings where she would fumble with her tall boots, the flashlight in the tent too dim to see the zipper. She and Ann would camp at the show grounds, rising far before dawn to pump their veins full of coffee. Jo and Rob would ride out the horses' jitters and get them accustomed to their surroundings. Sometimes fairgrounds, sometimes horse parks, sometimes stables of the enormously rich, but always mornings.

The blue haze of pre-dawn would cover the sleepy show grounds as the other competitors woke and argued over pitchforks and saddle blankets. Jo rode her clients' horses into the warmup arena, their hooves sinking into the moist footing. After warming up cold, stiff muscles, they would jump. She counted their strides between fences—one, two, three, four—using her reins to release them and lengthen their strides or pull her reins in to shorten them, the horse coiling like a spring. And over the fence they would go, thirteen-hundred pounds of beast and leather and Jo, hurled four feet in the air, suspended for a split second of soaring before the

immense impact of their landing, known to shatter bones. And one, two, three—Jo and the horse did it again.

As the day progressed, each ribbon her students won would be hung above their temporary tack room, pinned beside the silk banner emblazoned with the barn's name. Jo always put her own ribbons on the right of the row so she could gauge her personal success.

Jo knew there were many people who celebrated when her career toppled into retirement like a glacier slipping into the sea. She imagined toasts raised to the end of her competitive career and rumors spreading from barn to barn like a disease. Ann always told her it meant Jo was someone to respect and fear, and that had comforted her, but now Jo had nobody to respect or fear her, except perhaps the dogs.

She walked to the barn, the dog with the bum foot trailing warily after her. She thought about the farrier's visit. She drew the cell phone out of her pocket—the one Ann made her carry, the one she often forgot she owned—and checked the time again. She had an hour.

A few days before, one of the mares had loosed a shoe, somehow overstepping and prying the nails out of her own foot and leaving the glimmering crescent moon in the long grass, and Jo swore to find it so that

her farrier could hammer it back to the hoof. On an ordinary day, she might have taken to the pasture on foot to comb the ground in a grid, but something about seeing the little red bird made her want to do something different. She would ride around the pasture, she decided, and find the shoe that way. Ann would not worry about something so quiet.

She took Jack's halter off its hook and paused for a moment, bending the leather in her hands. Jack was her boy. She was the first person to ever throw a saddle over his back and in that same day was the first person to fall from him. In the two decades they had spent together, she had ridden him a thousand miles in circles around the arena, clung to his back over hundreds of jumps. She had not fallen from him in over a decade. When Ann's sister and five-year-old nephew visited the farm three years ago, Jo had hefted the kid onto Jack's back, and Jack had dutifully walked around the arena, hanging his head low, ignoring the child's furiously kicking legs.

She wondered why she felt fear now. She had seen Jack chase other horses around the pasture—he was a bit of an ass around feeding time—had seen him kick out at them, bite at them—once even at Jo, but she corrected him with a pop of her elbow on his nose. But he had killed that bird. He ate its flesh.

Jo replaced Jack's halter on its hook and instead chose Ann's horse, Penny. She walked to the pasture, caught the mare easily, and brought her back into the barn to saddle her. Jo fell into the routine of grooming and saddling: brushing the last puff of dust from her coat, easing the metal bit into her mouth, pulling and adjusting straps. Before she led Penny back outside, she did what she almost never did, the thing that made her mock horse-crazy teenagers. She threw her arms around Penny's neck and let her face sink into the horse's fall coat, a golden fleece. Penny stood patiently as Jo inhaled deeply, trying to get a hint of the equine scent her nose had long ago grown accustomed to. She felt embarrassed for a moment as she straightened back up, grasping the reins in her hand and leading Penny down to the pasture. She knew she was alone, but something made her want to look behind her just to check. The farrier was coming, after all.

She closed Penny inside the pasture and lined her up by the fence. Jo climbed on the fence so she would be able to put her foot in the stirrup and swing herself onto Penny's back. These days, with her popping hips and strained knees, Jo would not even try mounting from the ground.

Comfortably in the worn seat of her saddle, her limbs knew what to do. Her legs lengthened, her seat deepened, her shoulders relaxed. Her muscles did not resist movement as Penny began to walk. Penny did not

have the powerful walk Jack did, but Jo could feel her stride lengthen in her hips. Jo's eyes scanned the ground for the missing shoe as she steered Penny around the perimeter of the pasture, but sometimes her gaze strayed to Jack, his head down, eating grass instead of bird's flesh. She stayed away from where she knew the bird lay, a flash of red in the tall grass.

The farrier would arrive soon. He had been an apprentice around the time Jo had hired Rob all those years ago, and his visits always reminded her how Rob would hold the horses while Clay trimmed and shoed them, and by the end of the day the two young men would bicker until they would not speak to each other. This had made Jo crabby, but after Rob left, she grew to appreciate Clay more.

The end of Rob began when a woman with a penchant for Tiffany necklaces—who had dutifully paid for her daughter's two show horses for years—struck up a limited conversation with Jo. As she waited for her daughter to put her horse away after a lesson, she mentioned that she was surprised by the barn's change in pricing. Rob had done the braiding for the last show, and though she was happy to pay more, she would appreciate more warning. Jo's eyes hardened and she caught a passing boarder by the arm. She asked if Rob had told her about any changes in price. The surprised girl said yes.

Over the course of the week, Jo interrogated almost everyone who boarded at the farm. They said that they had happily paid Rob the difference, that there was no problem.

After ranting to Ann over the kitchen table for several wine-drunk nights in a row, Jo finally decided to fire him the next day for lying and padding his paycheck, but in the morning, she could not find him. He had cleared out his belongings in the night: packed up his saddles, loaded up his horse, and left for God knows where. He did, however, leave his golden retriever, who slept curled up outside his trailer for years before giving up.

One of her clients must have tipped him off, she thought. One of them ruined her chance to scream at him, to cast him from her life, to make him take his dog with him. Jo did not know which of her clients to trust. Soon, the only time she would speak was to bark an order or a correction. By the time Ann put Rob's old dog to sleep five years later, most of the boarders had left and their stalls lay empty. They did not like Jo's criticism; they liked Rob. Instead of driving to shows every weekend, it was every month, then it was not at all.

Now Jo rode through the same pastures that once held champions long dead. She and Ann mostly had rescues now, taking care of other

people's throwaway animals. The farm was a sanctuary for bum-legged dogs, old horses, one bitter old woman past her prime.

When she heard the dogs bray and the rattle of the farrier's truck up the gravel driveway, she dismounted quickly, feeling the impact ring through her bones. Mentally cursing, she hurried to bring the horses into their stalls so they would be ready to have their hooves done. She rushed back and forth with halters and horses. After she shut the last stall door, she looked down the aisle at the truck at the other end. He usually got to work right away, but he busied himself with his cell phone, waiting for her to finish. She felt a rush of appreciation.

He glanced up and saw Jo waiting for him, holding Penny. He then hauled out the supplies from the back of his truck. He nodded to her before he got to work, propping Penny's hoof up on a metal stand and taking a file to the excess. He and Jo moved around each other, never speaking. Jo always knew the exact moment to push and shift the horse's weight to a different foot. She knew neither of them cared for small talk.

Jo wondered if she should ask him about Jack's bird hunting, but she did not know if he would have an answer. Watching him trim her horses, she still saw him as a naïve teenager, the boy who could handle a horse with ease but who had once brought his hammer down on his hand rather than

the horseshoe. She doubted he would know anything, but the sound of Jack's teeth clipping into the bird still rang through her ears.

She tried to speak, but at first the words stuck. Clearing her throat, she realized she had not spoken a single word that morning, except to yell at the dog. She asked him if his own horses were doing well, and he looked up at her for a moment before replying. He said yes. He turned back to his work, his words muffled as he added that his daughter's pony had nicked himself on the leg that past week, but he would be fine.

They fell into silence again. The farrier sawed the file back and forth across the horse's foot in the rhythm of progress. Jo's mind wandered. She remembered that a friend of a friend owned a donkey that would chase dogs. The thing would pound her hooves into their chests if they did not slink between the fence boards fast enough, and though she never killed one, she looked like she wanted to. But Jo knew donkeys were more protective than horses. She figured it must have mistaken the dogs for coyotes. Jack was no donkey. He had nothing to protect.

After the farrier trimmed two more horses, Jo's curiosity overcame her.

"Clay," she said carefully. "Have you ever heard of a horse killing a bird?"

"A bird? No."

Jo was not about to pursue the question further, but after a pause the farrier reconsidered.

"I used to shoe a thoroughbred who went after a mouse once. He just chased after it through the grass and grabbed it with his teeth."

Jo nodded. "Jack did that with a red bird today."

Clay nodded. Jo held the horses as he pried shoes off, trimmed feet, and hammered them back on again, a rhythm and repetition uninterrupted by the unexpected.

He finished and began packing up his truck. Later, she would feed the horses before she fed Ann, leading them back into their stalls and delivering their buckets of grain. She would throw flakes of hay into their mangers. She would sweep down the aisle. She would think about the farrier's story. She would think of her Jack, taking a bird from the sky simply because he could.

The farrier returned for the check Jo had written him. But, before he reached for it, he turned, furrowed his brow and pointed into the pasture. "A red bird, you said?"

Jo looked outside. By now, the sun hung high above the trees and would make the missing horseshoe glint in the grass, but instead it illuminated the scarlet feathers of the flock of birds bursting out of the trees. Jo squinted, studying the shape of their tufty heads, the arc of their wings, and she looked to the ground for the bird Jack had killed.

Yards away, the corpse stirred. Its wings twitched and its beak clapped together. The body seized, rising from its grave of grass. It lurched forward, its wings flicking out like a rust-jointed machine, and it took to the sky, pulled to the flock as if by a magnet. Jo felt her face twist as she wondered if her eyes betrayed her, if the bird had never died. She did not know.

The bird blended with the rippling mass as it twisted through the sky. Jo glanced at the farrier, who leaned against the fence as he watched the flock. Her eyes returned to the red birds, following them until they ducked back into the trees. She heard nothing but quiet: the rush of the flock, the breathing of the horses, and the soft scuffle of the farrier's boots.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Boudreau is a recent graduate of Young Harris College, where she earned her Bachelor's in creative writing. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Profane* and *Columbia Journal Online*. She aspires to be a grouchy old horsewoman like Jo.

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