**A Morning on the Farm**

Helen Beer

The mist settles, rises, settles once more, a battle between the sun’s rays and cloud vapors ensues; the latter dominates. Orchard grass, fescue, ladino blend and blanket the pastures in variegated shades of green, heavy-laden with dew.

 The golf cart bumps and rumbles down paths of crushed stone screenings between the dark brown, four-board fencing, the nutty aroma of grains emanating from multiple buckets—precious cargo, breakfast for twenty horses.

 It’s a methodical task, a daily routine. Drive the golf cart between the fence rows, stopping at each pasture shelter. Wait for the snorts, the thudding hooves, the whinnies, the farts. The horses know the routine, know their individual stalls, wait for their human caretaker to close their stall doors, and dispense feed in wall-mounted buckets.

I know the routine as well; I’m their human. It’s my life, day in, day out, every day, twice a day. Scoop, measure, fill buckets, drive, dispense. Check each horse’s legs, eyes, feet. All good? Move on. Repeat at each pasture, then swing back from the start, medicate as needed, apply fly spray, slip on fly masks, open each stall door, and allow the horses time to wander, to graze, to socialize before their precious charges arrive. These are therapy horses—sturdy, older, protective by nature, gentle, forgiving.

Last pasture, almost done. Socked in by mist, I see only two horses; there should be three. The discordance of the image rattles me. Danny Boy and Jo-Jo secured in their stalls, their feed dispensed, I call for Ruthie, moving slowly towards the rise, my paddock boots disappearing in the wet, deep grass, my eyes searching the gray void for the strawberry roan of Ruthie’s massive body. A Belgian Draft, she’s our largest equine resident—and by far the kindest soul. She can accommodate our older riders, and even tandem rides—a buddy system of able-bodied paired with physically challenged riders.

I pause to make sure that what I’m hearing isn’t my own breath, my own heart pounding. No, it’s not me; it’s labored respirations, far too frequent, signaling distress. I run towards the sound, like running through waves without resistance, losing my feet, losing the horizon, until I stumble and fall.

I’m lying in the grass, its dampness penetrating my t-shirt, my thin breeches; my body shivers. I see her eyes, I crawl to her, she’s down, heaving now, her front legs thrashing, her body drenched in sweat. The strawberry roan coat is reddish-brown now, the color she turns when bathed after warm-weather rides, and after the kids finger-paint her body with vegetable-based paints, then hose her off.

I place two fingers under her jaw; her pulse is rapid, far too rapid. Her nostrils flare, her gums are gray, her brown eyes follow me, the whites showing—all signs of pain, of extreme physical stress. I lower an ear to her belly; guts sounds are sluggish. And then I see the bone of one hind leg. Its whiteness contrasts with the red blood of the wound, with the bright green of the grass. A compound fracture, the bone is stuck fast in the blood-soaked soil beneath her. The how, the why are unimportant now; she’s been down for far too long.

“Ruthie girl,” I say, stroking that spot she loves behind her ears, allowing my fingers to run through her forelock, through her thick mane. “I’m here now. You’re not alone.”

I reach for my cellphone, dial the farm’s owner.

“Barb, listen, it’s about Ruthie. It’s bad. We can’t wait for the vet to get here through rush hour traffic,” I say, my voice steady, insistent. “Bring my rifle. Bring a tarp. Northwest quadrant of the pasture. Stay on the line… I’ll guide you to us.”

And then I lay my head on Ruthie’s neck, my tears wetting her already-drenched coat, the metallic smell of blood reaching my nostrils, glints of sun reflecting in the dew, cellphone to my ear, listening to Barb’s sobs, first through the phone, then echoing over the rise, through the mist.

“Over here,” I say, all the while visualizing the intersection of an X, above the eyes, below the ears, talking myself through it, intellectually, knowing it’s the right thing, the humane thing, the only thing we can do to end Ruthie’s suffering. It’s another thing entirely to look into those trusting brown eyes, at this sweet, loyal mare, knowing she’ll never again make her kids smile, or give them respite from their wheelchairs, as they ride her broad, sofa-like back, their bodies moving in rhythmic harmony with hers, whole, able, full of joy.

I hug her neck once more, say, “I love you, Ruthie,” and take the gun from Barb’s shaking hand. It must be me to do this thing, to carry out this final act of love.