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On the Brotherhood of Asses

THOMAS LYNCH

come by my interests in asses honestly.

A thing my late father used to say applies, to wit: “The thing about asses is everyone’s got one.” He’d heard this from his father, who’d heard it from his father, who’d brought it hither from the old country. He’d wink and return to his usual duties. If especially perturbed, he would amplify the dictum thus: “No shortage of assholes hereabouts, my boy; everybody’s got at least one.” Again the wink, the return to duties. He was speaking of anatomy, a science he’d studied in mortuary school: the *gluteus maximus*, largest of the glutes, of which everyone is possessed of three—or more precisely six, if one counts the pair that constitutes the perpetual plural of buttocks or hindquarters. In his amplified version, he was referencing the rectum or, to put a finer point on it, the anus. E. J. Lynch was an elegant man who wore wingtips and homburgs; white-on-white, starched cotton shirts; and onyx cufflinks, so to hear him on such topics was sufficiently at odds with his usual decorum that it remains lodged in my memory as a thing apart. There was a soupçon of W. C. Fields or H. L. Mencken in the way he’d say it—the contrarian’s dose of bombast and humanity, declaimed as if outfitted with a straw boater and big cigar. Maybe he’d stolen it from one of them. Hard to know. Their primes in the first half of the last century were coincident with his youth. I remember him now in the black and white of headlines and old movies about the good war and the greatest generation.

Opposed on principle to insulting speech, these constructs were as near as my father would get to bad-mouthing an offensive man, for in truth such recklessness never trespassed across the gender divide. The asses of women

never entered his conversation with his sons. No doubt he admired a well-wrought rump, as we do, but he was scrupulous in his prudishness. He called it “respect for women.” He was married to one and father to three and never spoke about breasts or bottoms or private parts around his boys. Once I heard him say, “For every Jack, a Jenny” as we watched an especially slovenly couple, suffering what is now called various “wardrobe malfunctions,” as they left a roadhouse under the evident influence of strong drink. They climbed on their motorcycle and sped headlong into traffic as the light we waited at had just turned green. Then, I suppose, wanting to moderate the criticism, lest he be a bad example to his son, he said, “God is good,” and left it there.

Which brings me back around to what I meant to focus on: neither the rump muscle, nor the sphincter; rather, *equus asinus*—the sure-footed, horse-like, domesticated mammal we associate with stubbornness and steadfastness, Bethlehem and Palm Sunday. And how this wee beast has become for me a sort of cipher for the Brotherhood of Man, the fraternity of fellow miscreants, a key by which I gain access to the wider kinship shared with everything. At least everything male.

When I look into the gob of my piebald jack, I see the faces of my mother’s sons, all six of us, me among them, freckled and rheumy-eyed and, if not exactly moribund, still far from youths—brethren of blood and womb and siring, each of us the same but different. No less the handful of brother poets, living and dead, in whose free-ranging verses I do often discern the yawp of lovelorn desire and brooding existential grief that proceeds from the mouth of my donkey, Charles, when he brays from his place in the haggard or stable. Poets, like brothers, like asses—all the same, but different. I make out in his aspect and manner inklings of townsmen and countrymen, strangers in the daily traffic, athletes at their triumphs and heartbreaks, politicians elected to higher office, members of the reverend clergy. In short, I see in my donkey something of the Everyman, the Fellow Traveler, the brother at large.

What—you are possibly asking yourself—the fuck is he talking about? Patience, I pray ye, whilst I explain.

I keep a small cottage on the west coast of Ireland—a hovel I inherited from my late cousin, Nora, a spinster who went to her reward in her ninetieth year, early in the last decade of the last century. It is the house my great-grandfather left in 1890 to find his future in southeastern lower Michigan. He made his way working as a prison guard, a housepainter, a janitor in an underwear

factory. He married a woman named Ryan, sired a teacher, a priest, and a civil servant—like winning the trifecta for the immigrant Irish—and died never seeing the home place again. Neither did any of his children or grandchildren. Eight decades after his emigration, I was the first of his line to return, and two decades after that, Nora, my second cousin, was the last in her line to take her leave. To paraphrase the apostle Paul, sometimes things work out as they should. She left the “house and haggards, out-offices and cow-cabins” to me, and at my suggestion, she left her land—28 adjacent acres of pasturage and meadow—to P. J. Roche, the young farmer who, together with his wife Breda, were Nora’s helpmates and caretakers in her later years. It’s a long time now since P. J. and I, over pints in a bar in Carrigaholt, came to the first of our many agreements. He’d made known his eagerness to buy the land, if and when “God forbid anything should happen to Nora.” He knew I’d be her heir and executor. “Take care of her,” is what I told him, “and I’ll take care of you.”

In the fullness of time, I got the home place that was ours by blood and happenstance. P. J. got the land and the work that goes with it—grazing and hay for maybe a dozen cows. I needed someone to keep an eye on a place that would be vacant much of the year. He needed an easement through my inheritance to get to his. Nora had, by her last will and testament, cast P. J. and me into a kind of partnership.

As for the asses, I got the first one mostly to keep the lawn shorn. I couldn’t abide the notion of a mower. This was farmland on the westernmost peninsula of County Clare, on the narrowing land between the River Shannon’s mouth and the North Atlantic, three miles equidistant between the Victorian seaside resort of Kilkee and the estuarial fishing village of Carrigaholt—a windswept, treeless townland of small freeholds that got electric light in the 1950s, slate roofs in the 1960s, and the great civilizers, the four T’s I call them—tractors, toilets, television, and telephones—at the rate of roughly one per decade after that, until I found myself, at the turn of the current millennium, the every-so-often occupant of my ancestral home, looking out the window the ancients in my family looked out of, on all that changes and that never does.

I got Charles in the spring of ’02, off John Green in Newtown for 200 euros. He was just gone two at the time. I named him for the prince on the neighboring island. It was the ears, the breedy look of self-importance, the little insult in the namesaking. It’s a character flaw, bred in the bone. I have not prayed sufficiently for its removal.

I let him into the overgrown “haggard”—as it is called in West Clare—an L-shaped field that bounds the cottage on the north and east, contained by stone walls and ditch banks, whitethorn and alders, fuchsia and oleria. There’s little shelter from the worst of weather off the ocean just two fields away. Of old, it was the yard in which the woman of the house kept ridges of spuds and onions, cabbage and turnips. It was the field to which she might repair for certain duties of her toilet, hence the shrubbery. And the field into which she’d pitch the tin cans and brown bottles that accumulated in her kitchen. It was the field where a sickly cow or newborn calf or pony foal might be kept for easy access by the vet or householder. It was the cottage yard in which, in former times, before the first blue Ford 2600 tractor ever appeared, the ass and cart were kept that hauled milk to the creamery every day, or dung to the meadows every other season, or the faithful to their weekly liturgies.

Maybe this is why Charles took to it like coming home, as if he’d just returned from a long hiatus, when in fact he’d never stepped foot in it before. First he buckled the hinges of his legs, fell to the ground, rolled on his broad back, hooves in the air, and bathed in the earth and dirt of it all, like a pope kissing the tarmac upon landing in a new nation, to signal, I suppose, his regard for the place. In no time he went to work, gobbling up the greensward, shitting at random, sleeping under the hedgerows, staring at the wall. I could see in his routine, which I monitored closely from two of the cottage’s kitchen windows, something like my own—an effort to achieve some healthy balance between contemplation and production, intake and output, ease and effort. His appetite for the mundane seemed, like mine, insatiable—endlessly chewing on his surroundings, his attention always cast earthward or straight ahead, considering the intersection of two white walls for hours, as if the blank corner he stared into held the key to the mysteries of the universe—much as I myself sometimes get myself cornered, so fixed and wriggling between ruminations over the past and future that I’m blind to the here and now I occupy.

In time I took to standing out in the haggard with him, as a kind of daily office, an hour every afternoon, between the morning’s labor and the evening’s obligations—an exercise in reconnection with my place and time. I would clear my mind and consider only what was in the moment—the small birds at the berries in the whitethorn, the constant din of the sea over the high neighboring fields, the sweet aromas of slurry and silage, the rain or the drizzle or the lack of same. It hardly mattered. In time I began making

mindless conversation with Charles, who would consider me from a safe distance and make no effort at response and seemed in all ways incurious about my being. He would approach at an angle for a whiff of me and turn away just as I'd extend a hand to scratch the broad flat forehead between his huge brown eyes, which put me in mind—can I be forgiven this?—of my true love's eyes, which are of the same deep, inextinguishable hue. The monk's life that I lead in Moveen—the townland in West Clare I call home—distant from the pleasures of the flesh are to blame, no doubt, for such imaginings.

His indifference to me had its advantages. I told him things I knew he'd never repeat: the depth of my contempt for certain people who can't be named in a public document; my disappointments, in general and in particular; my hopes for the future, however outlandish. Nor did the low-grade, free-range existential fears, a feature in men of a certain age, about life and time, the way of the world, the proper conduct of love with another of your species—none of that bothered him. I could speak them outright in the same voice as I might say, "Sunday gives way to Monday, everytime," and he'd take it quite literally in stride.

"I'm frightened of age and infirmity. I'm frightened that my sons and daughter will not know my heart; that I mayn't know theirs; that my wife doesn't love me. I'm scared witless at the prospect of a bomb or cancer out there with my name on it, waiting to pounce." None of these confessions seemed to shock or bother him. Nor was he put off by the sudden flashes of residual anger—surely a near enough cousin of fear—that I do oftentimes need to tap, like waking in the night to piss, whether I want to or not. "Ya fooking eedjit!" I'd say to him. "Are ye as stupid as ya look?" Or, "For fook sake, Charlie, was there ever an ass as ignorant as ye?"

Nothing would budge him from his insuperable calm.

It was the year after George W. Bush invaded Iraq, declared the mission accomplished, left the rest to Messrs. Rumsfeld and Bremmer, and didn't find his weapons of mass destruction, that Charles began to bray with purpose. He was a full stallion now, four years old, all ache and desire. My sighting, for the first time, of his massive pink erection, a thing which seemed, as in most male things, apart from him and yet himself, immediately connected to the roar he would wake me with most mornings. By now we'd become truly brethren—me seeing in him the perfect confessor and scape-ass, able to bear whatever burdens I brought him of rage or love or dread or their variations. I'd

found that a bucket of rolled oats, soaked overnight in warm water, would make him endure my touching him. I'd hold the bucket in one hand while he bent to sup from it, and with the other I would pet him. The sound of his chewing was soothing to me. I thought it might be a balm to himself and divert him from the pains of his chastity. I'd scratch the broad flat of his noggin, under his jawbone, between his ears. I bought a stiff brush at the grocers and found he'd stand for my using it on his back and hindquarters. I loved tracing with the brush the tuft of dark hair that formed the cross on his back—a feature in his breed—that signified the ancient, blessed burdens of Mary the Virgin Mother, and Christ on his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. The parish priest, when he heard about my ass, brought by a verse he'd seen in *Ireland's Own* by G. K. Chesterton called, unremarkably, "The Donkey," the final quatrains of which I quite inadvertently committed to memory.

*The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.*

*Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.*

By this time I had come to the conclusion that the leader of the free world, Mr. Bush the younger, was an ignoramus. The invasion of Iraq, notwithstanding the deposing of the tyrant, struck the Irish as an illegal trespass. The conduct of that war and the woefulness of his presidency is a matter of record only history can judge, though I am impressed that the titles of books so far—*Hubris*, *Fiasco*, *The Dark Side*, *The Bush Tragedy*—seem to hint at the early verdict. No volume titled *Way To Go, George*, or *Well Done, Decider* is yet in print or under consideration, so far as I know. And I'm certain that Charles has always sensed my and my fellow Americans' embarrassment that first the robed blackguards on the Supreme Court, then some nitwits in Ohio had voted to elect him, not once but twice. I have a sense that he empathized with my sadness that while no American president could get the

French to love us, only George Bush could get the Irish not to. Though the Clare genealogical industry has taken pains to connect notable Americans from Ronald Reagan to Muhammed Ali and Barack O'Bama to some small parish or derelict homestead, churning out found or forged documents for a handy stipend for every class of seeker, no such effort has ever been made or allowed on Bush's account. A photo of him in the *Clare Champion* waving from the tower of Drumoland Castle in June of that year belied the fact that a security force of 7,000 police, military, and private guards was required to keep him from being thumped by the local hooligans, many thousands of whom demonstrated in Dublin and Galway and Cork and Shannon during his 16-hour visit to Clare for an EU-US confab.

But it was Charles, The Moveen Lad, as we had begun to call him after P. J. Roche rode him to glory that summer in the Loop Head donkey derby—about which more, alas, anon—who brought me round to a more measured accounting of my president. In the brotherhood I shared with the ass that led me to think of Bush as “one of our own,” a brother after all. It was in the sad, wise eyes and steadfast bearing of himself, that oafish look he'd get when asked too many questions, in which I saw not only my own failings and foibles, but my own worthiness, my own good intentions, my own best efforts as a man to carry on. And by turns—here is the mystery and the miracle—my own kinship, my own fraternity with all the asses of the world, even one so ponderously feckless as the 43rd president of the United States. I could see that we were, Charles and me, then George and me, all the same but different.

Like George, I liked getting away from it all, quittance of the suit and tie, freedom from duty and detail, and to breathe deeply the insouciant air of summer—he to his ranch in Crawford, Texas, a town with no bars and five churches; I to my holdings in West Clare, where bars outnumber churches five to one. Of course, there are differences. He flies on Air Force One with an entourage. I fly steerage with hopes for an aisle seat. His ranch runs to 1,600 acres. My cottage sits on something less than two. He fishes for bass stocked in his private lake. I fish for mackerel in the North Atlantic. Still, weren't we both just trying to reconnect with our roots and home places—Mr. Bush and me? Hadn't we that in common? He identifies as a Texan in the John Wayne sense as I do with the Irish in the Barry Fitzgerald. We were both around 60, both white, both male, both Christian and American with all the perks. We both went into our father's businesses: he does leadership of the free world;

I do mostly local funerals. We both married up, avoided Vietnam, quit drink for all of the usual reasons, pray for our children to outlive us, and have the usual performance anxieties. He works out a couple of hours a day. I go for long walks by the sea. We both occupy that fraction of a fraction of the planet's inhabitants for whom keeping body and soul together—shelter, safety, food, and drink—is not the immediate, everyday concern. We both count ourselves among the blessed and elect who struggle with the troubles of surfeit rather than shortfall.

Why was it, I asked Charles in a fit of insight, what with all that we had in common, I still thought of the president as a “fooking nutter, a head case from another planet?”

He was, as was his habit, mum on the subject. He looked at me balefully, bent to his oats, whereupon some lines from Yeats came to me.

*Out of Ireland have we come.
Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start.
I carry from my mother's womb
A fanatic heart.*

It was in August of 1931 that Yeats wrote “Remorse for Intemperate Speech,” which includes this remarkable stanza. The poet had witnessed the birthing of a new Irish nation through insurgency and civil war. He had served as a Free State senator and, after winning the Nobel Prize for literature, was the country's public man of letters. An Anglo-Irishman who had ditched High Church Christianity in favor of swamis and Theosophists and his wife's dabbling in the occult, he was torn between the right-wing politics of between-wars Europe and the romantic, mythic past of Ireland. His poem confessed and lamented that reason and religion, blessings and breeding, imagination and good intention are nonetheless trumped by the contagion of hatred and by the human propensity towards extreme and unquestioning devotion to a cause—whatever cause. It is what links enemies, what makes “terrorists” “martyrs” among their own and patriots on every side—a fanatic heart beating in the breast of every true believer.

Yeats's remorse was real, and well it should have been. The century he wrote his poem in became the bloodiest in the history of our species. Wars and

ethnic cleansings, holocausts and atom bombings—each an exercise in the God-awful formula by which the smaller the world becomes, by technologies of travel and communications, the more amplified our hatreds and the more lethal our weaponries likewise become. Great hatred, little room, indeed.

So far our new century proceeds apace: famines and genocides, invasions, occupations, and suicide bombers. Humankind goes on burning the bridges in front and behind us without apology—our own worst enemies, God help us all.

And maybe this is the part I found most distancing about my president: not his fanatic heart—the unassailable sense he projects that God is on his side—we all have that. I certainly do. But that he seemed to lack anything like real remorse, there in that second summer of Iraq and the third summer of Afghanistan, in the middle of what would be his presidency, for all of the intemperate speech—for the weapons of mass destruction that were not there, the Mission Accomplished that really wasn't, for the funerals he would not attend, the mothers of the dead he would not speak to, the bodies of the dead we are not allowed to see, and all of the soldiers and civilians whose lives have been irretrievably lost or irreparably changed by his, and our, "Bring It On" bravado in a world made more perilous by such pronouncements.

Surely, I further confessed to Charles, we must all bear our share of guilt and deep regret, some sadness at the fact that here we are, another summer into our existence, and still no history could record that we'd progressed beyond our hateful, warring, and fanatical ways. Even on holidays we couldn't hide from that—my brother, the president, Charles, and me.

Like any brother, Charles follows the stoic Epictetus's wisdom about why we are given two ears and one mouth, to wit: we should be twice as good at listening as giving out. In truth, he goes us all some better, and keeps his ears peeled 23 hours out of every 24 whilst braying maybe six or seven times a day, a racket often coincident with some darker urges.

It took me until the summer of the following year, between the erstwhile pontiff's death and Katrina, to find a suitable consort for Charles. I'd kept an eye on the want ads and the little notices that appear in shop windows. I made discreet inquiries at the marts and fairs. I went to Mullagh and Spancilhill and the county show in search of a mare ass to quiet him. When I found the little piebald filly, just gone two, at Michael Morgan's tidy farm near Inagh, I knew she was the one for him. The little patchwork of browns and black over the snow-white coat of her, the way she moved, like a fish among her stable

mates. I plunked down the thousand euros he had the brass to ask for her, having made out I was a Yank when I called on the phone.

And when I saw them in the haggard together, I knew that mighty nature would take care of itself, and that Charles and Camilla, as I could not help but call her, those lovebirds on the neighboring island having pledged their troth but weeks before, would become the stuff of song and story.

Of course, never one to leave such things to chance, I set to work, when I should have been doing some gainful trade, writing an epic called “The Names of Donkeys,” after the fashion of Donald Hall’s famous “The Names of Horses,” hoping that it might find its way into the world, bearing the cargo of my gratitude from all that I’ve learned on account of him. I append it to this document as a grace note and coda.

Years have passed since then, of course. There is too much to account for in this tiny space. After two months among Sinon Flanagan’s harem of mare asses, The Moveen Lad came home deranged, thinking himself a true stud and trying to kill everything male in the stable, including one of P. J.’s Registered Irish Draught stallions, a specimen that stood as a yearling over 15 hands, but was no match for Mad Charles, who chased him around the sand ring, biting his flanks and fetlocks. He’d have run him into the ground if we hadn’t got them separated. We had him castrated, to quiet him—the ass, not the draught horse—but not before he’d fathered “George W.” one summer, and “Hillary,” a snow-white she-foal, the following year. He runs much faster now and has accumulated his share of trophies.

Now we know the president will likely go down in history as a war criminal, and for my part, I’ve been stricken with sciatica—a pain in my ass—the only cure for which seems to be fast and prayer. Oh well. We are all brothers in the end.

As with poetry, so with such kinships—all a matter of keeping count, addition and subtraction, rhyme and meter, finding metaphors—bridges by which we all connect, one way or another, in spite of ourselves.

THE NAMES OF DONKEYS

*Truth told I got the first one for the lawn—
to keep the haggards shorn. An idyllic
notion—nature taking care of nature,
naturally—a daft Arcadian’s*

nature-ignorance. Still, it's a farming townland.
 Grass is fodder here. The yearlong traffic
 is in pasturage—round bales, heaps, and silage—feed is
 everything. "Where there's dung there's money,"
 P. J. Roche once said, mucking out the cabins
 where he kept his cows all winter, before
 he built that massive slatted house
 that lets the slurry ooze through spaces in the floor
 into a tank that's emptied twice a year,
 "There is fierce growth and greening in it." So,
 it wouldn't do to have a little mower.
 This patch of West Clare's not a city lot,
 or subdivision parcel. Not at all!
 This cottage is my people's first freehold,
 a shelter fashioned out of thatch and stone,
 against the rising damp, god-awful elements.
 That's the ocean noising over those high fields.
 The pike's Mouth of the Shannon's just a walk.
 On this peninsula we are surrounded.
 Grass and ground are holy. Thus, the donkey.

Of course, I called it "Charles" from the start,
 after the prince. I couldn't help myself.
 I love a little dagger of contempt
 tucked in the warm cloak of celebration,
 in every deference an intimation
 of darker purposes or metaphor.
 In Charlie's case it was the ears, of course,
 the piebald prepossession, its upright bearing,
 that bonnie, if at times buffoonish, look
 as if it knew how ridiculous it is—the planet, the humans, the
 other animals—we're all pretending, always falling short,
 always aspiring to something that we're not:
 I felt a kinship with him, like a brother,
 driven by selfsame hungers and desires,
 creatures of the parable and paradox,

*agreeable at times, at times contrarians,
 our own worst enemies, our only friends.
 I'd watch him at his duties in the yard
 gobbling the greensward and geography,
 shitting, sleeping, staring at a wall,
 content by all appearances, serene,
 bearing his crosses, keeping his own counsel,
 much as I figured I myself was doing.*

*It took awhile before he'd let me touch him.
 The bucket of oats, the sup of water,
 the dumbly standing by while he was at it—
 these were the tools by which I gained his trust.
 In his own time he'd let me brush him
 and take the nipper to his growth of hooves.
 One day, for sport, P. J. Roche was up and on him,
 grabbing on his mane, his legs tucked round him,
 racing down the field. He was so fast!
 We knew we'd chance him in the local derbies
 and made his racing name "The Moveen Lad."
 He ran in Cross and Doonbeg and Kilkee
 and finished in the money every time,
 although the first-place cup eluded him.
 In Carrigaholt, we thought he took the prize,
 but the Garde, Charlie Killeen, said John McMahon's
 breedy Spanish ass won by a nose.
 It was more than he could manage, I suppose:
 To have his donkey namesake win the day.
 "I call them as I see them," is what he said.
 "Same as ourselves," I nodded, smiling.
 Then into Morrissey's for pints around,
 figuring and refiguring accounts—
 we make out Charlie got it either way.*

*It was the braying, that unholy yawp—
 it would wake the sleeping neighbors and the dead—*

so full of primal vocatives. I thought
 some vexation's left him crazed and overwrought
 and wondered what it was until I spied
 that length of mighty throbbing member. "Holy Christ!"
 I said to myself. "I see now. Yes, of course,"
 and promised that I'd find some consort for him.
 I watched the want ads in the Champion,
 the Farmers Journal and the Buy & Sell.
 I went to fairs in Ennis and Kilrush,
 I asked around, I made a couple calls.
 "Surely by Christmas," I told him. But no such luck.
 All winter that mad-anxious roaring rose
 out of the old cow cabins P. J. turned
 into three fine stable stalls and stable yard,
 we built a huge corral for training horses—a syndicate we called
 "Roche's Stables,"
 because P. J. had that gift bred in the bone,
 and I—a here-today-and-gone-tomorrow Yank—
 wanted shelter for himself when I was gone.
 That April in the Champion we saw:
 "Fine piebald donkey, filly, two years old."
 We quibbled at the cost but brought her home.

And when I first clapped eyes on her I saw
 what Michael Morgan meant when he said "fine"
 because she was—so fetching, a small, lithe
 fish among thick animals—well worth her price.
 And to see them, Charles and Camilla,
 as, you will forgive, I could not help but call her,
 because those nuptials were in the news,
 that and the pontiff's death and funeral,
 but to see them, together in the yard,
 the gratitude and rapture in his eyes,
 her reticence at first and then the signs
 by which she signaled she would not refuse him.

*“Mighty nature,” P. J. Roche once called it—the mystery by which
 two separate things
 become one thing to make, somehow, another.
 And there it was, not quite the full year later,
 one morning there in miniature, a creature
 out in the haggard, shining and piebald,
 with its mother’s ears, the body of a hare,
 shivering, suckling, standing upright there,
 as if the lesser beasts made up its retinue.
 It had this oafish, overeager look,
 a little swagger and a boyish grin,
 and so I called him George, George W.*

*Word got round about my stallion Charles,
 “The Moveen Lad” was whispered in the pubs:
 a rocket racer, a willing sire, a blood
 line certain to be the stuff of legends.
 We got a call from Sinon Flanagan
 who’d four mare asses and no able jack.
 Might I consider sending Charlie back
 to spend a month in service to his harem?
 What male thing wouldn’t rise to such occasions?
 I’d often fantasized the very thing.
 What harm, I thought, the more the merrier.
 But I was wrong. Poor Charles came back wrecked.
 His kindly gratitude turned brutish lust.
 The former tenderness gone bollocks mad,
 he’d hunt all other male things from the shed
 and chase the ponies round the stable yard
 biting at their fetlocks, manes, and private parts
 and could not be trusted round the calves and cows.
 We locked him up in solitary hold,
 like shuffling captives at Guantanamo,
 thinking the confinement would restore his calm.
 But when he worsened, with regrets, we settled on
 castration as the only way to go.
 Where more’s the pity, less is sometimes more.*

*Before that remedy, old Charles spent
 one late midsummer evening with Camilla
 a last hurrah, a second honeymoon,
 their old romance rekindled in the dark—
 whatever happened, something surely sparked
 because before the solstice, that following June,
 behold, a snow-white she-ass foal appeared
 beneath the hedgerow where Camilla sheltered.
 By which time Charles, lately gelded, was
 no less the head case than he'd been before—
 more daft than ever and a little sore—
 so, for his own sake, re-incarcerated.
 We bring him oats and nuts, a sup of hay;
 and pray he has forgiven what's been done,
 and let him out to roam between good gates.
 Sometimes we race him and sometimes he wins.
 Whereas for George, George W., what an ass!
 Feckless and unrepentant, as if he knew
 his kind bore saviors through Jerusalem
 or gravid virgin girls to Bethlehem.
 Witless as a tin of tuna, craven, crass,
 donkey stubborn, donkey stupid, dull as soap,
 for all his epic bloodline, little hope.
 We've put him up for sale but no one calls.*

*We call the little she-ass Hillary,
 though truth be told we had some choices.
 When it comes to names and asses, there's no shortage.
 With foals at foot the future's up for grabs.
 So, fools at heart or honest brokers,
 much the same as with our sons and daughters,
 good naming doesn't shape the outcomes; still
 we nurse our little dreams and leave the rest
 to whomever is in charge here: who's to know?
 Fate? Chance? God in His heaven? I don't know.
 All we can hope for is for time to tell—
 another day, another season, donkeys' years*

*to undo some the mess we've made of it,
to make amends, to make some small repairs,
reset the table, rearrange the chairs,
to let the ones we love know that we love them
and let the others know we bear them no
especial malice, then leave well enough alone.
And sometimes when I am out among them
in the evening, when all the work is done,
I think I hear the voices of those gone
before, who stood this ground in their own times,
and bore their burdens—great and small alike—
and all they ever say is, Carry on.*