Animal Acts
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Horseback Views: A Queer Hippological Performance

(Stage right stands an academic podium. A tote bag and a coiled white line hang within reach on an overhead hook. Stage left stands a life-sized facsimile horse wearing a yellow horse blanket bordered in black and inscribed with the monogram “GWF.” A wooden box of brushes for horse grooming sits on the floor nearby. Upstage center is a large projection screen for PowerPoint slides. Only a few of the images can be reproduced here.)

Enter dressed to ride carrying saddle, place saddle on horse, turn to audience, riding crop in hand.

In academia, I have found it easier to come out as a lesbian than as an equestrian. Lesbian in arts and humanities circles, at least in the last twenty-five years, is politically cool, especially when harnessed to materialist feminism. Lesbian is subversive; it’s at the margins; its salient stories are ones of coming up from oppression—or, as we are always more specifically and usefully reminded, up from interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. A number of the leading theorists in theatre and performance studies write from an avowedly lesbian position. Lesbian has considerable academic cachet.

Equestrian mobilizes quite a different set of connotations, especially when it is tied, as it is in my case, to being born and raised into a family...
that bred, raced, and showed thoroughbred horses. For me, coming out as an equestrian means owning up to being raised with a lot of money gained through the sort of capitalist wheeling and dealing that our Marxist-inflected profession of theatre and performance studies has been bent on critiquing. And it means owning up to my family’s WASP cultural aspirations and preoccupation with displays of Anglophilic blue-bloodedness that went along with economic upward mobility. These are uncomfortable subjects—not just because they are politically outré but because they magnify that fear that many academics harbor regardless of background, that we will be found out, exposed as frauds who don’t really know what we’re talking about and aren’t as smart as we seem. When you grow up with the kind of wealth and privilege that affords thoroughbred horses, the specter of doubt that you really earned your accomplishments grins most ghoulishly from among the skeletons in the closet.

So, even though these expensive, form-fitting English riding clothes are in many ways my “native” garb, I feel quite naked standing up here wearing them in an academic setting. Now, if I were really being true to my Anglophilic blue-blooded roots, I would have the good taste not to mention these topics at all, for I was raised with the dictum that it was crass to talk about money even though one’s lifestyle exuded it. But then again I’m half Italian, and people on that side of the family will talk about anything—money, sex, food, bowel status . . . More to the point, I’m compelled to raise these issues because lesbian and equestrian, while in some ways at opposite poles in terms of academic political and intellectual cachet, are dynamically interconnected—in performance history, as I’m discovering with increasing intrigue, and in my personal experience. Hearing of my mother’s struggles to get me out of the barn and into a dress, her society friends would invoke the Freudian saw: “Don’t worry, dear, she’ll outgrow horses and turn to boys.” Well, it didn’t work out that way for me, in part because my mother herself didn’t really follow that script, and neither, in fact, did generations of women before or since.

(Cross to podium, remove helmet and gloves. Riding crop becomes a pointer.) As a lesbian academic now trained, or at least practiced, in queer studies and feminist theatre historiography who still rides a thoroughbred horse, albeit on a much reduced scale from what I used to do, I’m looking back at my years of equestrian training and experience and finding a rich resource for historical research. That’s the connotation of my title today, “Horseback Views,” views literally and figuratively from the saddle, back, through horses, into my own past and the wider Anglo-American equestrian tradition. What has been an avocation for me, a recreation separate
from my professional work as a scholar, has now moved into the center as the source of my hippology, or “horse science.” I am writing a book on the subject, tentatively titled “Fashioning the Thoroughbred Ideal,” about women and horses off and on the stage in various theatrical and social arenas mainly in New York from 1865 to 1930. When people think about horses and American culture, if they think about horses at all, they think of the West and the cowboy tradition. Part of the intervention I want to make is that English-style riding and English-derived horses, namely thoroughbreds, also had a profound effect in shaping dominant American culture, especially, I want to argue, where women are concerned.

In the United States, it is in the decades following the Civil War that white middle- and upper-class American women start entering the sport of riding in large numbers. By the 1880s, the numbers are substantial enough—indeed, horseback riding has become the favorite female exercise amid a burgeoning physical culture movement—to occasion the publication of the first riding manual by and for American women, The American Horsewoman (1884). Its author, Elizabeth Karr, strongly advocated the British model of mothers cultivating the art of riding in their daughters, noting that when “a young English lady” is mounted on a “well-trained and spirited horse, . . . each look, each motion, awakes a new born grace,” as well as promotes physical health and a sense of confidence and boldness about going forward into the world (1–3). Those first generations of women who took up riding en masse mothered the turn-of-the-century generations of women who entered college and professions in large numbers, successfully advocated for suffrage, and, in the theatre world, gained unprecedented levels of respectability as well as stardom. I want to investigate what horses and riding did for these women in order to understand the operations of equestrianism as a historical force shaping their lives and actions. In an era of rising immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and attendant racism and xenophobia, the thoroughbred was the saddle horse of choice, as the bourgeoisie strove to perform Anglo-Americanness. Women proved to be especially well suited to thoroughbreds; hence that particular human-equine relationship is keenly at issue here.

(Cross to horse.) On stage with me are a number of objects that bear echoes of my history with thoroughbreds—and not just echoes, but actual material traces of bodies in action. A key property of leather is that it absorbs skin oils and sweat, stretches and gives with use. Leather horse-riding equipment needs to be “broken in”; it gains value with age. This is the girth that goes around my horse’s belly to hold the saddle in place. It needs to be cleaned after each use and over the years has acquired a gorgeous patina
from sweat and saddle soap. It feels and smells wonderful. I’ll pass it around so you can all feel a bit of the sensuousness of fine, horse-worn leather. This saddle and this bridle are decades old; they came to me from my mother and bear the imprint of our communion with numerous horses that graced our lives. (Mount horse.) Sitting in this saddle, holding these reins, taking the position to ride, there’s an intense feeling of familiarity, a profound sense of coming “home,” and an awareness of reenacting something that’s very here and now but also very old.

Notably absent on this stage with me is the living horse itself, although I’m quite fond of this facsimile. As amazing as it would be to have a real horse here, I can use its absence to invoke the historiographical absence my project addresses. Horses were replete in the social and cultural landscape before 1930, yet most historians who aren’t horse people (which is most historians) look right past them, perhaps dismissing them as part of the background. But they carried people—women—into the foreground and enduringly and transformatively marked their lives. So, absent the physical animal, we’ll conjure it imaginatively and look at some of the traces it left in the print and pictorial records, in this equipment, and in me. (Dismount, cross to podium.)

Let me begin with this 1965 canvas by Lionel Hamilton-Renwick (1917–2003), a famous painter of thoroughbred horses from Newmarket, England, who included several of Queen Elizabeth II’s racers among his commissions (fig. 1). Composed in the venerable tradition of British sporting art showing men of means admiring their prize horseflesh in training, the painting depicts my equestrian progenitors. The horse in the foreground is named Meadow Court, shown at the height of his career as a three-year-old on a break from his training gallop on Ireland’s Curragh, where he won the Irish Sweeps Derby, the first leg of the European Triple Crown. His exercise lad holds the reins, while his trainer watches mounted on the other horse. The trainer is Paddy Prendergast, one of Ireland’s leading trainers at the time and a close friend and associate of the gray-haired man standing on the ground next to him, Meadow Court’s owner, with whom he has been conferring about the horse’s progress. That man is my grandfather, Max Bell, who lived in Calgary, Canada. My mother was the oldest of his six children and step-children, and I’m his oldest grandchild, the one who knew him the longest before he died a horrible premature death from a brain tumor at age fifty-nine. When I was born some eight years before this was painted, he was only forty-five and considered himself too young to be called Grand-dad, so I and my brother after me simply called him Max.

Max Bell (1912–72) was a self-made captain of industry who built a for-
tune in railroad, oil, and newspaper investments from the 1930s to the 1960s. The year he bought Meadow Court as a yearling, 1963, was the year he became the largest shareholder and director of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and 1965, when Meadow Court reached his racing peak, was the year Max’s conglomerate, Federated Paper Publications, capped its holdings with the *Toronto Globe and Mail* and became the largest newspaper syndicate in Canada. The horse and the painting were among the prize trophies of his success. With Meadow Court, he realized his social aspirations as well, for after winning the Irish Derby, he went on to Ascot and a win in the King George and Queen Elizabeth Stakes, considered the highest-quality race in the UK and a real coup for a Western Canadian horse owner. From there Max and Meadow Court traveled to Paris for the Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe run at Longchamps in the Bois de Boulogne. Meadow Court started as the
favorite, but he ended up losing to the French-owned horse Seabird (the story was that the French blacksmith sabotaged him by putting shoes on him that were too small before the race). Nevertheless, he was famous and beautiful enough that the Parisian boutique Hermès put him on one of their champion scarves. Max also had the pattern transferred onto tote bags for the ladies. I don’t have one of the scarves, but I found one of the tote bags among my mother’s things after she passed away. (Take tote from hook.) She used it as a carryall for her pet Chihuahua—that’s who was with her when she died. Tucked inside the pocket is still one of his wee dog biscuits. My partner, Meredith, thinks I should have thrown the dog biscuit out long ago; “Mum,” as she always preferred to be called—that’s British Canadian for “Mom”—has been gone eleven years now. But I’ve kept the biscuit in the tote right where she left it. Mum did always call me a pack rat; now I can say I’m preserving the material archive. At any rate, the extravagance of having one’s Hermès-patterned thoroughbred quilted onto a tote bag was all part of the family horse culture. And the bamboo handles—very sixties, very Jackie O. (Replace tote on hook.)

As much as Max prized his horses, he never had any interest in riding. Though a dedicated athlete who had had a brief career as a professional ice hockey player and remained a lifelong fitness buff, he related to horses always from the ground as an owner, breeder, and avid racegoer. The people who became serious riders in the immediate family were the women, which is partly what’s moving me to key into the historical theme of mothers handing on the equestrian passion to their daughters. I don’t know whether riding gave the women in my family physical grace, as Karr would have it (though I dare say I have more grace in the saddle than on the ground), but riding gave us strong thighs and straight backs and so much else. Through horses, we acquired both deep bodily scars and the power to overcome them. That scarring empowerment resounds through three generations. Max’s first wife, Suzanne, my grandmother, whom he married when she was just fifteen years old and he twenty-one, rode in ladies’ races. She claimed her memory loss that began in middle age resulted from head injuries incurred in falls from horses. Still, she took her children and grandchildren on summer trail rides into the Rocky Mountains with her little black book and a pencil for jotting down reminders stashed in her pocket. She would say that the jogging horse helped “jog” her memory. She said it in jest, but the more I delve into the embodied repertoire, the record of repeated physical practices that we carry in our bodies, the more I think she was seriously onto something.

The most horse-crazy of Max and Suzanne’s children, my mother, Diane, at the age of nine was out riding with a group when her horse spooked
and took off at a mad gallop. Unable to stop him, she jumped off. A well-intentioned adult riding with the group tried to help her stand up, not knowing that she had broken her leg very badly below the knee. When she put her weight on it, the broken bone tore through nerves and muscles. She spent the better part of the next two years at the Mayo Clinic undergoing multiple surgeries and skin grafts. The procedures saved her leg, but she was left with little feeling from the knee down, a frozen ankle joint, and arrested growth of the lower leg and foot, causing her to walk with a hitch in her gait that was exaggerated by fatigue and, later, alcohol.

The leg and how to manage it and compensate for the perceived deformity became defining facts of her life. With limited feeling and poor circulation, the leg was always at risk for ulcers and frostbite. After the stint at Mayo she was told she couldn’t return home permanently to Calgary because of the harsh winters and had to go away to school from age eleven, first in Vancouver and then in Toronto. Her letters home speak poignantly about her social exclusion because of her physical difference and her continuing passion for horses in spite of her injury: “Dear Mummy and Daddy . . . the girls here are so mean. . . . Miss Markham said I could go riding this week again . . . [but first] I have to take my [leg] brace to be bent out” (October 11, 1945). Her school years were a cycle of good days punctuated by a relapse while an ulcer healed or she endured more physical therapy. The careers of Max’s horses were major topics of their correspondence and sources of excitement amid her struggles.

By the time my mother was married and I and my brother came along, Max had acquired a large tract of land in Okotoks outside of Calgary on which he built his own thoroughbred breeding operation, called Golden West Farms. Every June when school was out, my mother would pack us up and head west for the summer from our Philadelphia home where my father’s construction business was then based. This thoroughbred breeding farm was quite literally my childhood summer playground. My brother did not inherit the same level of family horse passion that I did, so he went off to boys’ camp in the Rocky Mountains, while I happily whiled away my days and hours with the horses and stable lads. I was too young to have actually seen horses like Meadow Court race except in the photographs and paintings that lined the farmhouse walls; I knew them in the flesh when they came back to the farm to stand as stallions. They were my rock stars. To get to the horses from the farmhouse, I hiked down a steep hill, coming first to the half-mile training track built to train the two-year-olds before they were sold or sent to the races. The grassy oval inside the track was divided into quadrants by double rows of white board fencing. Those were the stallion
paddocks. The stallions had to be kept separate because they would fight. I would fearlessly venture into each paddock in turn and visit my heroes, stroking the satiny coats that stretched over rippling muscles, pulling up clumps of grass to feed them so I could feel their velvet noses and smell their warm breath, watching in wonder as their majestic heads would come up to keen attention at something in the distance, and thrilling with excitement when they would engage each other in competitive snorting, prancing, and galloping along the fence lines.

Having made those rounds, I would pass by the breeding shed where I learned some impressive lessons about the mechanics if not the romance of procreation. Then it was on to the training barn where the lads were saddling up the two-year-olds for their daily workouts on the track. A bodily fact of horses working is that they sweat profusely through their skins over their whole bodies, just like humans do. After their exercise, these youngsters would be hosed down, sponged with a liniment wash, and walked out under wool cooling blankets in the black and yellow stable colors and monogram of Golden West Farms. (Cross to horse.) This is one of those blankets, now more than sixty years old. My earliest memories of riding entail being lifted onto the backs of these fiery but usually compliant steeds and sitting on top of the wool cooler, which to me was like sitting on top of the world, while they were led around the stable yard. I loved feeling the springy power of their stride, even at the walk, and drinking in the hot, steamy odor of wet hide and wintergreen. Whether the colors meant black for the black Alberta soil and yellow for prairie wheat, or black for oil and yellow for the gold that resulted from it, I relish the coincidence that at the University of Iowa, where I have taught for the last twenty-three years, black and yellow are the school colors, and the letters GWF mean Gay White Female.

(Cross to podium.) Well before I could ride on my own and experience it for myself, I had an inkling of what horses could do for women because of my mother. In my favorite snapshot of her (it’s in this tiny brass oval frame that she kept on her dresser), she is riding Meadow Court around the training track at Max’s farm. This blazing race horse and trumpeting stallion was extremely well mannered when she rode him, willingly going along at an easy trot on a loose rein in a snaffle bridle. It took her a while to get ready to ride, as she had to wrap her leg with an Ace bandage, dress the often open sores on her toes, tape the toes together so they wouldn’t rub, and pack the foot of her boot with lamb’s wool. But once she was in the saddle with the horse moving under her, the physical problems disappeared, as did whatever depressive thoughts were eating her, and her spirit soared.

Along with enhancing one’s sense of self-confidence and beauty, as
Meadow Court certainly did for my mother, a major part of the appeal of horses is the relationship one can have with them. Horses compel a fully embodied connection and a sense of partnership with another living creature that is unique. As women moved into riding in large numbers in the late nineteenth century, commercial illustrators frequently portrayed them in affectional poses with the animal, wrapping their arms around the horse’s head or neck, kissing or stroking its nose, smiling with unabashed adoration as it softly nibbles a treat from the palm of the hand. Rarely are men in civilian life portrayed in similar postures. While this echoes familiar historical constructions of women as nurturers, it also might partly explain some striking statistics, at least in the culture of English-style riding (the world of rodeo is different). Membership in the United States Pony Club, the major national organization made up of state and local chapters teaching grade schoolers to ride English, is more than 80 percent female. On the horse show circuit, except in the upper-level jumper classes, the overwhelming majority of competitors are female. In schools where riding is offered as a varsity sport, team membership is almost exclusively female. Long after the internal combustion engine provided other vehicles for speed and excitement, many more women than men in the United States opt for horses for recreation, at least in English riding.

My first in-depth relationship with a horse came with the pony Max bought me for my tenth birthday, an adorable Irish Connemara pony named Irish Coffee. This pony was my constant companion outside of school for two years. It was with him that I started through the ranks of Pony Club and began my indoctrination into the rules of the British Horse Society, learning the Manual of Horsemanship, which reiterates Elizabeth Karr’s admonition of 125 years ago that even “ladies of refinement occupying the highest positions in the civilized and fashionable world” should personally attend to their horses and not leave all the ground work to grooms if they wish to cultivate the best equestrian performances. Accordingly, riding is at the center of what you do with the horse, but it occupies a relatively small portion of the time spent on a daily basis. You also must feed and groom the horse, clean all the tack, learn how each piece of equipment works and needs to fit, muck the stall, keep the barn clean, monitor the pasture for hazards, hold your horse for the vet and blacksmith. Keeping horses properly is hard work that must be done on a regular schedule. Along with the joy of being around my pony, I learned a work ethic and a level of discipline and responsibility that in retrospect I believe carried over into schoolwork and other areas of life. Working around horses is also a tomboy’s paradise—wearing jeans or breeches all the time, engaging in hard manual labor, sweating, getting
dirty, learning how to use tools (wheelbarrows, pitchforks, hammers, saws, drills and screwdrivers for hanging buckets and fixing fences), and of course, those rough-and-tumble wild times when the routine work is done, and you wrestle with your tomboy friends in the hayloft or, best of all, climb on your ponies bareback in the pasture and, well, pony around.

(Cross to horse.) The intimacy of caretaking helps prepare you and the horse for the intimacy of riding. (Mount up.) In no way are you just sitting up here along for the ride with the horse doing all the work, though that is the impression some nonriders have. The key to good riding is a good seat. You maintain your seat mainly through balance, and to stay balanced, your core and pelvic muscles must be fully engaged and moving with the horse. The worst thing you can do is to try to stay on by gripping with your legs, which stiffens your whole body and causes your seat to come up out of the saddle, a detriment because your weight through your seat is itself a powerful means of communication with the horse. Your limbs need to be supple and free to administer the aids, the subtle signals you convey mainly via your inner lower leg on your horse’s sides and your hands through the reins to the horse’s mouth. At the end of an hour’s ride working your core, staying supple and balanced, applying the aids, going through the paces of whatever training routine you are involved in, you and the horse will be drenched in sweat. When you dismount, you’ll have the feeling that every fiber of your body has been exercised, and you are quite spent.

Imagine the power of that exercise for the first generations of white middle- and upper-class Victorian women who entered the sport of riding (fig. 2). These were women for whom that amount and intensity of physical activity and movement, especially of the lower body, was expressly forbidden. On horseback, they could vigorously agitate the thighs, pelvis, and buttocks while maintaining a ladylike silhouette. This movement was possible even when Victorian women were enjoined to ride sidesaddle, which remained de rigueur for respectable ladies until about 1915. Riding sidesaddle, you only have your left leg on the horse. (Cross right leg over saddle.) You compensate somewhat for the absence of your right leg with a crop. As asymmetrical and challenging as sidesaddle seems, there were some significant advantages that enabled women quickly to equal and even surpass men in equestrian abilities. As Figure 2 shows, crossing that right leg over puts the length of your right thigh bottom in the saddle. This magnifies the seat as a vital point of contact and aid in communicating with the horse. Riding sidesaddle you have to learn to use your seat properly.

Moreover, because lady riders aside lacked a major means of control with only one leg on the horse, they had to be ultra-attuned to what the horse was
doing and even more willing than riders astride to go with rather than force the horse's movements. From men’s perspective, women seemed mysteriously able to meld with horses and get them to do their bidding even absent the right leg. In this caricature from *Puck* (fig. 3), the illustrator draws the logical, if ironic and wonderfully queer, extension of women’s apparently extraordinary communion with the horse. This is a communion achieved
Figure 3. From “Fashion's Fillies—A Fancy for Horse Show Week,” drawn by C.J. Taylor, *Puck*, November 18, 1901.
through that most ladylike of riding styles—sidesaddle—yet the result, in effect, is gender inversion, as her lower body becomes one with the horse, and she turns into a centaur in her man-tailored riding habit, literally assuming the horse’s phallic power.

All these aspects of relationship and intimacy with the horse—the need to be attuned, the willingness to give as well as take—are especially critical when dealing with thoroughbreds because of their special characteristics. They combine speed with endurance and agility. Temperamentally, like their Arabian progenitors, they are the most spirited, sensitive, and responsive of breeds. Well-seated women riding sidesaddle proved to be particularly well suited to these animals, so much so that the attributes of the thoroughbred horse and an ideal female type, the thoroughbred lady, were constellated in tandem in the horse show and fashion worlds.

(Dismount, cross to podium.) As much as I adored my pony, by the time I was twelve and entering puberty, I didn’t care so much about boys, but I yearned for a big horse, a thoroughbred of my own. That was 1970, and by that point, Max was seriously ill, having been diagnosed with a brain tumor and undergone a series of debilitating operations. Although mostly confined to a wheelchair, he could still use the phone and took delight in arranging for me to go to Ireland to stay with his trainer friend Paddy Prendergast, gallop on the turf where Meadow Court had run, and find a horse.

I came back from Ireland with a big strapping Irish thoroughbred named Rossmore. Figure 4 shows me riding him with my mother in a Pony Club mother/daughter class, she on her thoroughbred, I on mine—a snapshot of female equestrian passion and knowledge being transmitted across generations. The class challenged us to go through the gaits in unison, which required us to sync our body movements and use of the aids. Note that our horses’ legs are perfectly aligned here at the walk, ready to strike off simultaneously from the same hind foot into the canter. This moment of mother-daughter harmony was fleeting, however; the following year, I took Rossmore with me to the Madeira School, a girl’s boarding school outside Washington, DC, which had a riding program. The father of one of my classmates happened to be Major General Jack Burton, who was affiliated with the US Equestrian Team. Attending one of our school horse shows, he saw in Rossmore a prospect for one of the team riders, an Olympic veteran named Michael Plumb, then based in Chesapeake City, Maryland. General Burton set up a meeting, and we arranged an exchange: Mike would take Rossmore, and I would take a smaller thoroughbred mare he had in training who was actually better suited to me in size. This also opened up the opportunity for me to begin training with Mike.
Both Pony Club and the riding program at Madeira were geared toward three-day eventing because it is considered the complete test of horse and rider, but working with Mike took my riding, my understanding of the relationship with horses, and the conditioning of horses as equine athletes to much more advanced levels. In three-day eventing, you need a horse who is obedient enough to do the dressage test, requiring precision and suppleness in a small arena on the first day, yet fit and brave enough to gallop for miles of cross-country jumping over imposing obstacles on the second day, and still sound enough to clear a course of show jumps in an arena on the third day. With origins in cavalry training, the sport was still male dominated in the 1970s, but that was changing. In the Olympic Games, equestrian sports are one of the very few where men and women compete on equal footing in the same events, as do male and female horses. Even before I had had much intellectual exposure to feminism, I was entering a world where women quite literally were doing what men could do, even physically, and often doing it better. And that knowledge of equality was coming through the body.

I worked with Mike during the summers until I graduated from high school.
school, deferred college matriculation for a year to ride and compete, attended college for two quarters, and then took a leave for another two and half years to train with him full-time with the National Velvet dream of making the 1980 Olympic team. When Max died in 1972, at the beginning of that odyssey, most of his fortune went into a foundation dedicated to various Canadian causes, but my mother inherited enough to keep a smaller-scale thoroughbred breeding operation going in Pennsylvania for about fifteen years and to buy several top event horse prospects for me and Mike to ride.

(Remove eyeglasses, cross to brush box by horse.) During the two and a half years I was training full time, it was total immersion. I was one of three working students. We worked for Mike in the mornings, mucking out the barn, grooming the eight or nine horses he had in training before and after he rode them each day. I still use this trophy brush box that I won at a show for the job I did taking care of one of the horses assigned to me. In exchange, he gave us lessons on our own horses, whom we also took care of, in the afternoons and evenings. The schedule was grueling. We started at 5:00 a.m. and often weren’t finished putting away our own horses until 9:00 at night. We worked seven days a week; there are no days off with horses.

(Sitting on the edge of the stage close to the audience.) It was in the middle of this intensity that, like my mother and grandmother before me, I had my own scarring, life-altering experience of the dangers of working around horses. Over the years I had had several falls—those come with the territory; fortunately, I had never been seriously hurt. The ethic was, when you fall off, you get right back on and keep going. This injury happened not while riding but while working in the barn. It was August 1, 1977, three weeks before my twentieth birthday. A new horse had come in for Mike to train. He was big and gray and very dirty. In the crunch of the morning’s routine, we were trying to get him into the wash stall to clean him up for Mike to ride, and he wouldn’t go in, so I prodded him from behind to try to move him forward. He kicked out with his hind legs, and I didn’t get out of the way fast enough. The force of his hind foot hit me in the face, opening my skull, crushing my nose, left cheekbone, brow, and eye, and knocking out several teeth. I lost consciousness and was helicoptered to the nearest trauma center, which was at the University of Maryland Hospital in Baltimore, where I underwent extensive neurological testing and many hours of surgery. When I woke up, the doctors told me they had pieced my bone structure back together with metal plates and wire, but that I had lost my left eye and that it would be many months before I was healed enough to be fitted with a prosthesis. Meanwhile (standing), I could wear this cool eyepatch. (Remove patch from pocket and put it on.) The doctors added that I had also lost two tablespoons of gray
matter, which they quickly assured me were expendable. But who knows? Maybe there went rocket science and ballroom dancing . . . maybe there went heterosexuality . . . *(Cross to podium.)*

I was in the hospital for almost three weeks, a forced time-out from what had been a thrilling but hugely unbalanced lifestyle with little time for reflection or contemplation or even reading. At no point did I waver from wanting to continue riding and pursuing my Olympic dream. I had lots of encouragement from family and fellow riders. But whereas before the injury, I had toyed with not going back to college and making my life in horses, I resolved to take the riding as far as I could toward my goal and then return to school. So while it’s true that I nearly died from this injury, if it hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t be here, in this place, in this academic life.

Waiting for me at Mike’s when I was released from the hospital was the best horse I ever rode, an amazing mare named Poltroon. We had bought her in Kentucky just two weeks before I was hurt. The daughter of a thoroughbred sire and pinto pony dam, she had inherited her mother’s small size and spotted coloring, but she was built like her father and had the thoroughbred’s elegance and sensitive, fiery temperament. When we got her, she was a bold, athletic jumper, but she lacked dressage training, which is considered foundational, as it builds muscles and supple the body for optimal performance in all the disciplines. So that’s what we focused on. This turned out to be not only what she needed but what I needed during my recovery as I adjusted from binocular to monocular vision, a process that according to the next manual in my education, *The Art of Seeing with One Eye*, could take several months to a year. Since the mechanics of binocular vision are a major part of how we find our balance and orient ourselves in space, regaining that equilibrium with one eye requires a reprogramming of the brain.

Never having met this challenge before, Mike intuited that we should go back to basics with a training tool called a longe line *(remove from hook, cross to horse, attach to bit)*, which enabled him to direct the horse as she moved around him in a circle so I wouldn’t have to worry about controlling her while I relearned how to ride. *(Mount up.)* He had me work without stirrups, an exercise that compels balancing and deepening the seat. Unsteady at first, I clutched at her mane even at the walk and nearly bounced off with the rapid two-beat thrust of the trot. Mike kept calling out those all-important riderly reminders: “Sit up! Look up!” “Sit up! Look up!” I was barely hanging on, but we persisted. Somehow he intuited that it might be easier at the canter. Sure enough, within just a few strides of feeling that three-beat rocking motion, I was able to start righting myself. Before long, I could take my hands off of her neck. Frustration melted into elation: “Hey, I can do this, I’m staying up here! It’s a miracle!” What was supposed to take months to a
year was really happening in a matter of days. Soon I had to take the patch off as well—it just got way too wet in there with all the sweat and the tears. In just a couple of days, I took Poltroon off the longe line, stuffed the patch in my pocket, and began working the dressage exercises that made her more supple while she made me whole. Feeling each other’s intentions through our bodies, we became so attuned that I barely had to form a thought about what was next, and she was right there with me, whether in the dressage ring or over jumps.

The recovery was so rapid that I was actually able to compete in the events of that fall’s competition season. I entered Poltroon and an older mare, Bristol, whom I had campaigned before. Determined to overcome my injury, I rode better than ever. Dressage is the only phase of the three-day event where the judging is partly subjective, based on aesthetics as well as execution, so I wore an eyepatch with my formal riding attire, which definitely added a distinctive touch to the ensemble. In the rougher cross-country phases, I could go patchless. As my mother would often say about everything from a stain on a shirt to a missing eye, “Who’s going to see it on a galloping horse?” Bristol was steady and good, but Poltroon was spectacular on the cross-country course, bounding over imposing obstacles she had never seen before and never putting a foot wrong. There were moments—like this one captured in Figure 5 of us jumping over a gaping ditch with a big drop on the other side—where it truly felt like we were flying.

That sensation of bestriding such a powerful, athletic, and willing creature is more than an adrenaline rush; it truly transforms your sense of what you are capable of. Having recovered on horseback from losing an eye, I understand another key aspect of how those women rode sidesaddle: the horse rights asymmetries. Whether it’s a missing eye or a missing leg, the horse fills in for what your body lacks. So I connect with those women a century ago, the legions leaping over jumps in the hunting field, like the lady in Figure 6, being carried beyond whatever physical and emotional limitations they had known before. No wonder the reigning icon of the woman suffrage campaign, in the United States as in England, was the iron-jawed angel on horseback who led a phalanx of women in man-tailored riding habits, all practiced in sidesaddle but parading in the nation’s capitol mounted resolutely astride. No wonder so many women’s colleges founded in the early twentieth century had riding programs, and no wonder many still do.

With Poltroon, I both found new capacities and realized my limits as an equestrian competitor. We trained through the winter and had some successes in the spring of 1978, but when the time came to move up to the next level, my confidence began to slip away. Looking back, I think it was a combination of the increased demands of the sport and a need to emerge from
Figure 5. On Poltroon on the cross-country course at the Radnor Horse Trials, 1977.

Figure 6. Lady jumping side saddle, c. 1900. The Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia.
that immersive lifestyle that was still bound up with my mother’s influence. I wasn’t fully aware of it, but some unconscious instinct was telling me I needed to forge my own life; I was, after all, twenty-one years old. What I was fully aware of was that galloping down to a cross-country jump, Poltroon started to back off, something she had never done before. Being so attuned to each other, I knew it wasn’t her, it was me. Rather than try to make her go over the jump, I pulled her up, dismounted (dismount, lift the reins over the horse’s head), and led her off the course. That was it for me. (Pause; a difficult letting go of the reins, cross to podium.) I loaned her to another, more talented rider working under Mike’s tutelage, Torrance Watkins. They formed a brilliant partnership, placing in the top ranks of international competition in 1979, winning two of the three Olympic selection trials in 1980, and winning the individual bronze medal at the alternate Equestrian Games in Fontainebleau, France, after the Western boycott of the Moscow Olympics. Poltroon was then retired and had five babies.

(Replace eyeglasses.) Meanwhile, I returned to college in January of 1979, found theatre history and American studies, and became a full-time academic. For twenty-two years, I hardly rode at all. In academia, I also found a more liberal environment where it was possible to live an unconventional life. As much as horses trouble sexual and gender categories and men and women compete as equals, the world of equestrian sport has been politically conservative, a legacy of its class associations. It has only been very recently that top gay riders have started coming out of the closet. While proud of my scholarly accomplishments, my mother was never really comfortable with the lesbian I became as an academic. Adept at the social graces, she would appear to be accepting but then pointedly relate her belief to me and Meredith that when the father of one of Mike’s closeted Olympic teammates learned his son was gay, he had a fatal heart attack.

In the summer of 2001, the desire to ride that I had suppressed for so many years amid the rigors of graduate school and tenure track overwhelmed me. Meredith and I found a wonderful stable, Wyndtree Farm, with very well-kept school horses near where we live in Iowa, and Meredith gamely joined me in taking lessons. It turns out that there are several women riding at the stable who, like me, rode very seriously in their youth, gave it up while they built their careers, and are now compelled to return to it in middle age. Some are doing it with their young daughters, continuing the cycle. This, too, is part of the larger historical scenario of women and horses. Hearing I was riding again, an old event rider friend, Mary Hazzard, to whom my mother had given Poltroon’s last baby, a colt named My Turn, born in 1989, was ready to retire him from competition and offered to give him back to us. My mother’s farm, horses, and almost all of her money were
long gone, but she helped arrange for him to come to Iowa. He arrived over Thanksgiving of 2002.

Mum died very suddenly in her home three weeks later—of a heart attack, more from smoking, alcoholism, and anorexia than from any old news about my sexuality. The timing was such that I felt like it was her dying wish that I have this horse. Lest I become too sentimental, the stable owner and trainer Teresa Mulhausen, who has become a dear friend as well as my riding teacher, revealed some months later that the week the horse came she had received one of my mother’s infamous boozy late-night phone calls. Mum confided to Teresa her wish that this horse, this son of Poltroon, would somehow rival Meredith for my affection, and I would “turn straight” again. Maybe she was hopeful after hearing about the British survey taken in the 1990s, which found that three-quarters of married horse-owning women would as soon give up their husbands as their horses (cited in Melissa Holbrook Pierson, Dark Horses and Black Beauties, 86). Maybe it was more twisting of Freud: that instead of giving up horses and turning to boys, in her mind I gave up horses and turned to women, so now, in turning back to horses, I would turn back to men, or at least to that time in my life when heterosexuality was assumed. Whatever her logic was, it’s been eleven years since Poltroon’s son arrived, and I still have the horse and the woman, now even legally, thanks to the 2009 Iowa Supreme Court ruling authorizing same-sex marriage. So, back at ya, Mum! . . . and your little dog, too!

(Put on helmet and gloves.) Friday morning is the time I reserve for me and my horse. Meredith stopped riding with me six years ago after some nasty falls. Having come to riding late in life, she doesn’t have the muscle memories or instincts in the saddle that I do. (Cross to horse.) So now it’s just me going to the stable on a regular basis. We jokingly call it my “infidelity.” Poltroon’s son—we call him Mylo, short for his registered name, My Turn—is bigger and not quite as elegant as his mother, and he presents charms and challenges all his own. But there are also stirring similarities. The soft nose that I can’t resist is identical in shape to hers. When I get him groomed (lift reins back over the horse’s head, mount up), climb into the saddle, and start with a few of the same suppling warm-up exercises I used with her, some of that old restorative sense of communion comes back. I have no desire to compete anymore. I’m not as fit or as finely skilled as I once was, but then again neither is he; twenty-four is getting on in horse years. So, we recreate—re-create—together, here and now, the sweating rhythms of a long, confounding history. I hear my teacher calling: “Sit up! Look up!”