2025 Prism Review Staff Co-Award:
Excellence in Experimentation and Engagement

# *Wild Horses*

by

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I loved Charlie's truck. That we could ride without belts on the bench seat. The spare tire with a picture of a bucking bronco. Mom wore a ring again. I kept putting baby's breath in his hair. It was thick, brown like my father's, wilder with the windows down, air coming in so fast I couldn't breathe.

Of broncos: Domestic animals, bred for bucking and raised for the rodeo. Half-tamed horses who know how to get a rider off their back. Horses who tend to buck when they're frightened or anticipate pain.

He shoved mom into the dresser when she was pregnant.

With my sister's birth came new words: rising chest, cradle cap, startle, root. Palmar grasp: how she clenched my finger. Soft spot: where her skull would fuse. Though I couldn't make the fighting stop, I could touch her soft spot. I could feel it begin to close. I could sigh with relief.

Charlie stood square and taught me how to punch. Throw, throw, throw, into his bicep, hard as a barbell. He threw one at me, in jest, a bruise I liked on my body. But "Oww," I said and rubbed it. "Stop," mom said from their bed beyond the closed door. "We're just having fun," he insisted. We were. I was.

It was my mother who couldn't like the lesson.

“Don’t write that. That’s my story. That’s my life. That’s between him and me,” mom says.

How can one separate birdsong from the forest, the life of a child from the life of the mother?

“You’re right,” mom says. “But you didn’t live it in my body.”

Didn’t I?

As young children we don't perceive a separate self.

"Our separation of each other is an optical illusion of consciousness," Einstein said.

Unlike figures in coloring books, I had no bold line around my body. No border that let me know where I began. That I didn't have to let others' emotions swirl through me like great drifts of white clouds.

The fact of feeling others' feelings.

"Feelings aren't facts," says a friend in AA. Fact in memoir being a slippery slope.

At Hotlicks, Charlie kissed mom at the bar, his hand on her jeans, while I bounced my baby sister. When dinner came, Charlie talked to me the whole time. My favorite story was he ate a dozen rose heads on a dare. "Didn't it make you sick?" Other stories I begged for: cop chases, astral travel, jumping trains, how his left ear came half-off. "See this" he said and pulled the lobe so I could touch the hidden scar.

MOM: When I showed a few pages of your book to Rusty he said, "The mother is not you."

And he said, "Artists use poetic license. Remember in school when you designed a room without a ceiling?"

Her little things arranged on a dresser—in a single stroke he wiped them into the air. “Don’t make me do it,” he’d said.

“Remember that time?” I’d say to mom. “Remember that?”

Would he really? No, not him smiling in his apron. A neighbor said. Someone from the office said. My mom said. My sister and I said. The brain said. Despite what it had seen.

"If I knew then what I know now," she says.

In a state of trauma, the hippocampus stops filing memories.

We all have the ability to twist what happened, adding white space and altering words.

In the barn one night I watched two women tend a wound on a young stallion's leg. One of them touched the gash and the horse reared, his hooves cutting a shaft of light. When he landed, eyes wide, ears flat, the crossties that held him snapped. It happened fast: the women wrestled the horse to the ground. They put their bodies on top of the horse's body. The horse thrashed for a while and then his breathing calmed. Something inside me shifted. They had not frozen or fled. They entered the space where the horse had risen into the air.

What if, when he threatened her, I had seen him as a scared horse, not a monster?

What if I entered the space where his temper rose into the air?

Can you hold the story I am going to tell?

When I was a child I lived with a herd of wild horses. At times we stood beside cool streams, facing away from the wind so we could see what was coming that the wind did not carry. When we galloped, my fingers twisted into their mane.

Later, I did not need to hold on. There was no separation between horse and child. We traveled over twenty miles a day in search of greener pastures, like a memoir I once believed.

“You have to leave,” I begged mom. “It’s not safe there.”

She turned away.

Or, she turned toward the ceiling she was painting, a light she was hanging, floral drapes she was ironing for the front window.

Toward the dove with a hurt wing in a box lined with softest fabric.

*Behind the Scenes* with Emily Carlson

*PR: The story is dominated by blank spaces. Did you always intend this formatting or did your original idea look different?*

EC: Great question—I have a couple of answers to this. My choice to use white space has a lot to do with content. A friend had told me that he wanted to write a book about his father but was going to wait until after his father died to avoid having to face the conflict. I knew I couldn't wait that long to tell this story. As a teenager, I believed that my silence would protect my mother. When I became a mother, I began to see that this wasn't true at all, and that it probably wasn't what my mother wanted either. I knew I had to share my experience with my mother in this lifetime and believed that, somehow, it would bring us closer. So, I began writing and sharing what I wrote with her. This was very difficult at first. She'd leave drafts I'd given her in my mailbox, all inked up, with lines crossed out and her own memories in the margins, memories that contradicted, seemed to erase, or nullify mine—but it's not quite that. Her memories were so different than mine that I wasn't sure how to fit them into the same story. What would it mean to listen deeply to what was emerging? The "blank spaces," as you call them, became a way of doing that.

The blank spaces also emerged out of an interest in the idea of cutting—architecturally—into a made thing or, as the artist Gordon Matta-Clarke calls it, "anarchitecture." I had been drawn to the work of Matta-Clarke since my mom and first stepdad's divorce when I was a teenager. The piece that stood out to me was *Splitting,* a house he cut vertically in half with power tools. I was interested in the cutting, and I was also interested in the light—the way it entered the house differently now, the way it moved. Matta-Clarke talks about the notion of mutable space being taboo, "especially in one's own house." In an interview in *Arts Magazine,* he describes the draw of making this type of work: "the severed surface […] reveals the autobiographical process of its own making. There is a kind of complexity which comes from […] redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present."

As my mom returned sections of the book I was writing with her marginalia, I started to think differently about memory—or I should say I started to *feel* my own memory differently. I started adding my mom's marginal comments into the manuscript. At that same time, I began cutting what I had written and my version of the past, the story I told myself, cutting it open and letting the light come in.

*PR: There are many mentions of aspects of your mom's past throughout this piece. Why did you focus on the hurt dove and unfinished ceiling?*

EC: When my mother and father first divorced, my mother returned to school for interior design. She had always made the spaces where we lived beautiful. She could see possibility in a basement apartment with few windows, a house with gaping holes in the floor. She saw each space's potential and helped bring that potential to life. In Buddhism we say that everyone has Buddha-nature, the potential to achieve enlightenment through practice, whether we are aware of it or not. Growing up, my mom saw my sisters' and my inherent potential, our luminosity. And she also saw that in the places where we lived.

The ending to this excerpt in *Prism* reveals my mother doing what she does. She had work to do: a ceiling to paint, a light to hang, a hurt dove to care for. But what about caring for herself? And more broadly, what does it look like to act with true compassion, to tend to the self with the care we offer others?

*EC: Was there a reason you connected to wild horses? What about your piece's narrative influenced your mention of them here?*

Horses appear throughout *Majestic Cut*. They're prey animals, they're herd animals, they're incredible communicators who rely on communication to survive. A horse notices another horse's flick of the ear: *Listen, something's rustling in the bushes.* During my mother's third marriage, my sisters and I became hyper-vigilant, as many of us do who grow up in homes where there is abuse. We learned to pay attention like horses do, to notice the flick of an ear, a raised head, wide eyes.

I also grew up around horses. When I was four, I had a pony, Gingerale, who was my best friend. When my parents divorced the following year, my father had to sell my pony. I didn't get to say goodbye. I came home one day and the stall was empty.

This past year my youngest child asked if I wished I had a pony. I told the story of Gingerale and said, I think I've always been looking for my pony. Soon after that, a friend who runs the stable where I ride called. She'd recently bought a one-eared pony, Skippy, and he was afraid of everyone. My friend was going out of town for a few days and asked if I could help with him. My dream had come true! I only had to find a way to build trust with the pony. What would help him feel happy, feel safe? What motivated him? When he felt afraid—and his ears pressed flat against his head, or he kicked his hind legs toward me, or he acted as if he was going to bite me—I felt afraid too.

Now we go for rides through the woods, and he licks peanut butter from my hands. My youngest child was the first person he let give him a hug. I'm learning how to relax when he's afraid, how to breathe, how to move out of love instead of fear. This is a lesson I've been learning my entire life, a lesson that is central to this book, a lesson I am learning from horses.

*(Thanks, Emily!)*