

2016 SALTER TEA AWARDS

The Oxford University Press WRITE 300-Level Book Prize in Nonfiction Writing

and

The Norton WRITE 300-Level Prize in Nonfiction Writing

Taking Names

CHRIS CASSIS

JULY 2002: “KNOCK ON THE WALL, SAY ‘HELLO TUFFY’ and go pat him on the shoulder.” I’ve long since forgotten the face and name of the TA who gave me those instructions. I walked into the run-down stall with weathered floorboards and dirty white walls: they are the same now as they were that summer day. The building is on the verge of collapse as if it has always looked that way.

I remember Tuffy. I remember knocking and saying his name. I remember patting him on the shoulder and running my hand through his short, black hair. The first time I touched a horse. He turned to look at me.

I stroked his shoulder until I was sent back to the lineup of nine-year-olds on the wall. I didn’t want to go to the wall, and I didn’t want to leave the camp when it was over. I was addicted, and Tuffy was my gateway drug.

Tuffy died at the age of forty-three. Horses, on average, live about twenty-five years. Tuffy was the oldest horse in Alberta, and possibly the country, when he died. I don’t remember the day of his death. I remember a poster with his image and a marker on a string so we could write messages to Tuffy. I didn’t write anything; “You were the first horse I touched” didn’t seem important.

Tuffy: 1964 – 2007

October 22, 2015: I had worked my way from summer-camp kid to riding instructor and the barn jack-of-all-trades over the course of thirteen years. Sitting in my room, I glanced at my phone. Isabella, Izzy for short (or “Skinny Bean” as I nicknamed her), was a bay quarter horse and one of my charges. She had seen the dentist earlier that day. I had been on campus, getting information relayed to me via A__, who worked with Izzy as well. They had found ulcers in Izzy’s mouth. Maybe that was why she wasn’t gaining weight. I hadn’t replied yet.

It was 4:45. I had a friend due to arrive at 5:00. While waiting for my friend, I finally sent A__ a text. *I’m glad she’s all cleaned up! :) What is the treatment plan for the ulcers, do you know, or should I ask L__?*

I put my phone into my pocket and went into the living

room. My phone buzzed. 4:55. A__. *Oh Chris, the vet got back with the bloodwork. Izzy has kidney failure. I thought L__ told you? We just got the news.*

I called L__, my boss. “Are you alone?” she asked. I saw my friend round the street corner. I said yes anyway as I opened the door. L__ explained to me Izzy’s kidneys have been failing for a long time according to the bloodwork. The vet recommended euthanasia. “I’m thinking Saturday,” she told me. It was Thursday. “K__ can trailer her out to the veterinary clinic. That way we don’t have to deal with disposal.” I said that sounds good. She agreed and apologized. I had been working with Izzy since she came, moulding her into being the perfect lesson horse. I hung up and collapsed on the stoop, head in my hands.

Tea: Two five-gallon buckets of hot water. It is called tea because it should be steaming. Rooster can’t drink cold or lukewarm water—it’s painful for his sensitive gums. Refill as needed while he’s inside. He can’t drink from the trough outside. Check back periodically to make sure he hasn’t pooped in it.

Feed: Hay is too stringy for him—he can’t chew it. The dust at the bottom of the hay cart is best. Soaked hay cubes with his meds and senior feed and beet pulp, three times a day.

Stall: Permanent diarrhea, the back wall is black-green. Expect puddles of pee and poop-water while mucking. Semi-solid poops are a rarity and should be admired. Put a stall guard up. He’ll stick his head out and let everyone who passes hug him.

Rooster: 1981 – present

Equine melanomas are most common in grey horses. Veterinarians are divided and unsure as to why, but eighty percent of grey horses develop them. Usually, they are small, unnoticeable, and have no effect. Spell—short for Spellbound—was a grey with melanomas the size of cantaloupes in her neck. They pressed on her esophagus and retired her from competitive work, but Spell refused to slow down. She sounded like a lawnmower with anger problems, and the behemoth of a mare left several riders clinging on for dear life. She nearly killed me a few times until I figured out how to handle her. Once I did, there was no one else I'd rather ride.

"Are you sure she's not going to die, young man?" a visiting coach once asked me as I rode Spell in her clinic. I assured her Spell would be fine. Gliding past after a dressage test later that day, I could hear the coach mutter, "Weird one, but I like that mare. Got heart."

A week later, I entered the tack room. Melanomas in Spell's intestine had suddenly been aggravated. They were inoperable and, unlike her neck, something Spell couldn't adapt to. R__, a nineteen-year-old with a half-shaven head and lip piercings, was putting on her riding boots. I walked to the hook with the duct-tape label "Spell" and took a keytag off her halter. "You don't need to take her tack down right away," R__ said and held up a boot. "This one yours or mine?" She and I were close friends, but offering comfort was not something she did well.

"Mine, I think?" I said. I pocketed the nametag and R__ tossed me the boot.

I have a jam jar in my room. It has a collection of plastic keytags, still with the small metal ring that attached it to a bridle, halter, or girth. The names are handwritten. The oldest have printing I don't recognize, but most of them are either in my hand or R__'s. Spell's tag is orange and written in my hand. Her halter now belongs to Steel, a grey gelding with two small melanomas under his tail, but the tag is mine.

Spell: 1996 – August 30, 2014

Sassy heaved and her front legs buckled. "NOOOOPE!" R__ and I said at once as Sassy flung herself down and tried to roll. R__ pulled the lead rope and I hit Sassy with the lunge whip. If she rolled, she'd do irreparable damage to herself. She was only ten: there was hope for her yet. I hit her as hard as I could and Sassy sat on her side. We could let her rest, but colicking horses were not to be allowed to roll. It could literally knot their intestines or further impact a blockage. Her owner, A__, was in shock. A mom of two and a nurse, she once excused her late arrival to a lesson by saying to me: "I had someone fucking dying on me, man. Fucking dying!"



But different. A__ had always appeared to me to be a woman who'd seen it all. But this, I realized, was a situation she had never before handled. She had seen minor colics, cases of gas or mild intestinal blockages; all of those situations were ones where the horse survived.

Sassy's ten, she'll be fine. She's only ten. We got Sassy up and walking. R__ staggered. Both of us had been on our feet for the previous ten hours. A__ took the whip from me.

"I'll do it—can you check on my daughter?" I nodded and darted back to the tack room. I'd given A__'s eleven-year-old daughter my phone for her to play some games on as a distraction. I poked my head in, and she looked up, losing a life in the game she was playing. She asked if Sassy was all right. I said she was hanging in there and that if she got bored with the games on my phone, she was welcome to download more so long as they were free.

Phoneless, I did not know the time. The vet was tied up in traffic. I think it was near six, but I couldn't be sure. Sassy hunched her back as she walked—it looked as if she'd lost several vertebrae. When the vet arrived, she gave us a ▶

grim smile. She sent me to get seven litres of water.

Sassy was taken to the veterinary clinic and died as A__ was driving her daughter home. Sassy had begun to thrash, her displacement colic turning into torsion. Her intestines knotted, cutting off circulation to the knotted part and quickly killing tissue. Half an hour before, A__ had sent me a picture of Sassy getting hooked to an IV: *5L of fluid going in, still abnormal rectal exam*. It is the last picture of Sassy either of us have.

Sassy: 2005 – July 6, 2015

Snowball. Small and mild-mannered, she tolerated the eager, awestruck hands of children all over her and carried the disabled and struggling beginners alike with patience unparalleled. Besides all that, she helped me earn my closest friend.

When I began to work Saturday mornings, I was unwelcome. R__, then fifteen, hated me. We worked in silence at 8:00 a.m., sullen teenagers dropped off at the barn to manage children without even a babysitter's course. I was seventeen and technically her equal at work, but I kept my distance and let her call the shots. R__ didn't let me do or say anything. If she had had tea and breakfast, she might humour me—we'd trade idle small talk until she had enough and buried herself in her phone or went to tell some child they'd done something wrong.

One morning, R__ ordered me to get Snowball. I was surprised, but complied. Every week afterward, I got Snowball. After a while she began asking me to get other horses: Willy, Rooster, Babe, Patches, Scratches, and Spud, and soon she even spoke to me without her tea in hand. Years later over lunch, R__ explained, "That was the first time I thought, 'Hey, you're not so bad, maybe I'll let you do something.'" It had been her test of sorts; if I messed up getting the docile Snowball, I was not worth her time. I laughed and told her it was the first time I thought she didn't want me dead.

Snowball: 1975 – April 2013

Winter: Blanket if below -25. Be mindful of his getting too warm while blanketed. If Rooster gets too warm, he can't breathe. If he gets too cold, he won't walk and his legs will swell with fluid and get stiff. Pray he makes it through.

Summer: Soak him until he's freezing so he can breathe. Bring him into his stall all day with tea. Get extension cords and a standing fan. Tie it to his stall and watch him bask in the cool breeze it generates. Pray he makes it through.

Rooster: 1981 – present

Chris: An instructor, TA, and barn staff. Dark curly hair, skinny, half-Arab.

Kris: A lesson horse. Thick long hair, dun, sturdy build, half-Arab, half-Fjord.

Inevitably, someone would ask for the horse and end up with the TA, or vice versa. L__ called me Kris' namesake because he was several years older than me. I found it great fun and would often announce when going to get Kris that I was going to get myself. I then put the halter on my head and would stride out of the barn. Kris, less a fan of dumb jokes, was known around the barn for a bouncy trot and stoicism.

Stoic horses are awful and I never want one.

Stoic horses never show pain until it's too late. Stoic horses make you feel as though maybe, if you hope enough, things might turn out okay. I want a horse that is a princess, one who will let me know when things hurt at the slightest tummy ache. Kris' intestines flipped around—a displacement colic—and he acted as though nothing was wrong. "It is probably a mild one," L__ said to me as she walked Kris around the arena. "The vet will be here soon." We thought it was gas. The vet told us otherwise. We had two options: euthanize him or lunge him periodically, hoping he could somehow flip it back. Kris, standing nonchalant, allowed us to hope. The third option, surgery, was impossible due to cost and age.

I taped the sign "STALL REST, DO NOT FEED, COLIC" on Kris' stall. "C'mon buddy," I urged him, "You gotta get better. We gotta get better." I played with his nose and ran my thumb along his dorsal stripe, then heard a child drop a saddle and ran around the corner.

Kris was stoic until he couldn't be, until the pain got too bad, and then he only politely tried to lie down and roll, giving no resistance when we needed him to stand. I called L__. "I was stupid for being optimistic—now he's in needless pain. I just thought," she paused and sighed. "I thought maybe we were due for a miracle." I told her we had to try.

I took my keytag, but a month later, Kris' nameplate is still intact. We need the room—we have more horses than nameplates—but no one is willing to touch it.

Kris: 1987 – October 8, 2015

October 23, 2015: Rooster, aged thirty-four, nickered at me, upset that he wasn't getting any carrots. *I'll give him carrots later. He has a later.*

My breeches' pockets were filled with carrots. My phone was beside me because my jacket pockets were filled with carrots. My hands were filled with carrots. On the counter

in the feed room was the biggest bag of carrots I had ever set eyes on, still half-full.

Izzy's head was in my lap. "Who wanna carrot? Skinny Bean wanna carrot?" I asked her. I kissed her nose. Her ears were pricked forward. I offered her a carrot piece in my palm and she ate it, then sniffed my pockets. I handed her carrot pieces as quickly as she could eat them. My phone buzzed. She lipped my phone, bopping my hand out of the way. Awful manners, but I don't care anymore. "You wanna text?" I asked. I giggled and sniffled, tears in my eyes. "Okay, you gotta text." I unlocked my phone and she sent a string of random letters to a friend. "So good!" I cooed. "You did so good. You always did so good, yes sweetie, you did." I kissed her forehead. She wanted carrots. I gave her more. I had made three trips into the feed room so far. I will make so many trips for carrots I will lose count.

The 7:30 class, last of the night, was advanced. I ignored them after a cursory "Don't be stupid, don't die, ask me if you need help, but otherwise leave me alone" and they complied. Izzy nudged my hand and licked my pockets.

"Morrrrrrre carrrrrottttt," I said, feeding her more. "There are always carrots for my Skinny Bean!" My voice quivered. I fed her more carrots and wiped my nose on my sleeve. This many carrots could make her colic, but what does it matter now? I wiped my eyes on my other sleeve and my students pretended not to notice.

When I got home, I checked my texts. Izzy's text message was answered with *Chris, are you drunk?*

I responded: *No, but I wish I was.*

Czar was a king and he knew it. At thirty-nine, he was the eldest since Tuffy's death. He also loved water, so even after he was technically retired, I would use him in summer camps on hot days. We'd let the kids hose him off. He even loved being sprayed in the face, which was handy: children have terrible aim—"shoulder" may as well mean "eyeball." I'd demo how to cold hose on one side of Czar's body, then turn him around so they could do the other.

One summer day we cold hosed Czar and when we had finished, I looked to the TA I was training and told her to turn off the water while I held Czar and the hose. I answered a few questions from the kids ("Do all horses like being hosed? Can we hose you off?"—"no" and "absolutely not," respectively) until the water stopped spraying and I put the hose down on the grass. To do so, I made Czar's lead rope longer and turned my back.

That was when the screaming started.

I turned around to see children leaping out of the way as Czar decided to roll, taking advantage of my momentary distraction. Czar went down exactly where the children

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had been standing. "They do this sometimes," I said. "They like to roll after baths." I don't add: usually after they were put back in their paddock.

"Czar," I tugged the rope. "C'mon," I tugged again. He looked at me, put his head back in the grass and continued to roll. I gave up. The children laughed. Czar never moved anywhere he didn't want to go, and I knew better than to try to force him.

Czar colicked one late December night. We don't know why or how he did. He refused to walk around the arena. He stood in his stall, planted his feet, stuck out his neck, and wouldn't budge. He decided to move when they opened the door not to the arena, but outside—and the hay shed.

"He knew his time had come," a co-worker said to me the following day. "He was done, and I think decided to be done."

Czar: 1972 – December 2011

November 15, 2015: R__, J__, and I stood at the back of the cabin, eating pancakes and chatting before the meeting began. R__ was in my way as I reached for the syrup. "Move, little soufflé," I said. J__ looked at us and R__ and I laughed. "We were mucking out yesterday," I explained. "We turned the bin over."

"I said the pile looked like a little soufflé," R__ continued my sentence, "and Chris turns and looks at me and says—"

"You're a little soufflé. Why, I dunno, but—"

"It fits because I am kind of small and temperamental." R__ still wasn't moving, so I stood in her space to get the syrup. A leaning contest began as staff meandered by, used to our nonsense. Years of working and riding together had rendered us as close as siblings. We'd worked together ►

through frostbite and heatstroke alike—the aging barn has neither heating nor air conditioning—and we had amassed plenty of inside jokes and strange stories. When the meeting began, we each found a chair, an improvement over the last meeting a year ago when the three of us had shared one.

Midway through the meeting, Danny was mentioned. He'd been having many health problems. He'd been dropping weight. He refused to stand inside or wear a blanket. "We don't make this decision lightly," L__ said. The staff heaved a collective sigh. It'd been the worst year we'd ever had. "We consulted several vets and have to adhere to his owner's wishes."

Fuck, not again. I thought, not Danny too. But Danny wasn't Rooster. Danny could barely walk in the cold at the best of times. He had none of Rooster's mild manners and tolerance and refused almost all treatment. He would kick down a door if left in a stall, even if for only a few minutes.

I remember jumping Danny in lessons years and years ago. He was the first horse I had ridden outside of lessons with R__. When a 102-year-old woman wanted to sit on a horse for her birthday, he was the pony she chose. In turn, R__ and I were selected to hold him and not drop the woman.

"The vet says he wouldn't survive the winter," L__ said, "but I don't want you to spread this info around until after it happens. He'll go to the clinic on Thursday. He can eat whatever he wants. Be sure to say your goodbyes." The meeting went on: concerns were raised about the structural integrity of the barn, staff duties, tractor repairs, and delayed construction due to an unmarked gas line.

Kittens were brought to the cabin at the end of the meeting—Danny was briefly forgotten. Puma, one of our barn cats, had to be rehomed. Puss was old. Stripes doesn't hunt anything. The solution was two kittens: each eight weeks old and now owned by the barn. They will be mousers, the next generation of barn cats. R__, J__, and I played with them while the rest of the staff left. "Kittens make everything better," J__ said. "Especially after hearing about Danny."

Danny: 1981 – November 19, 2015

"Skinny Bean... Skiiiiiiiiinny Bean." Izzy turned and looked at me. I hopped the fence and walked into the paddock. Her black mane and tail are braided with purple and blue silken ribbons. She'd been groomed until she glistened. She had been trailered to the clinic that morning, and A__ and her daughter had gone with her and gave her the best day they could. They'd worked with her a bit after losing Sassy. A__ wasn't allowing her daughter to be there for the end and didn't want to be there either. I had worked

until 3:00 p.m.; Izzy's appointment was at 4:00 p.m. and L__ had given me a ride to the clinic, saying it was the least she could do. We had arrived late, but the vets had agreed not to proceed until we were ready.

"Oh Skinny Bean." I said my goodbyes again, besides the ones I had said before she left, and left the paddock. R__ had offered to come with me. I'd declined, wanting to go alone, but told her to brace herself for miserable texts. A__ hugged me as she left.

The vet and her assistant had a bucket with four syringes in it: three big, one small. Each was loaded with a Powerade-blue liquid: anesthetic. "You've all seen this before?" L__ and I nodded. We went outside. The assistant brought Izzy into a small wire-fence enclosure. One side was open for now. Izzy stood there, basking in the unusually warm October sun. The sky was almost as bright a blue as the ribbons Izzy wore. The rich blues contrasted with the dull grey fence meant to keep scavengers out.

"First the little one," the vet took the standard-sized syringe out of the bucket and explained everything out of habit, "so the other injections don't hurt. We're going to give her an overdose of an anesthetic. She might go down a little heavy, but she'll already be basically asleep."

I felt eyes on me. Izzy was watching me. Two of the three big syringes were unloaded into her neck. She blinked once, then opened her eyes. I was watching her eyes; she was watching mine. I could see my shadowy reflection in them. My heart lurched as she stumbled. She kept herself upright—horses normally sleep standing—then her hind end collapsed. She sat like a dog for a moment before falling sideways. I saw a flicker of panic in her eyes and she kicked, realizing her balance was gone. The vet deftly avoided the limbs. On her side, Izzy snorted and panted, then quieted. She was still watching me. I was silent, but I rambled in my head, as though eye contact could establish telepathic links. *It's all right, it's okay, shh. You're fine, everything's fine now, everything's fine. Just sleep. Close your eyes, just sleep. It's all okay, I promise. It's gonna be okay, Skinny Bean. This is for the best, you'd only be in pain and cold in winter, then you'd go in the hay shed in pain instead of after the best day—I bit my lip and swallowed my heartbeat. I didn't want to panic, as she might if she read my body language, even in her groggy state.*

Izzy did not close her eyes, but a few minutes later I felt her gaze falter and fade. I knew she was gone before the vet placed her thumb against Izzy's eye, checking to see if there was a conscious reaction or merely an instinctive one. I saw one slow, delayed blink. "She's gone up here." The vet gestured to Izzy's head. "I'm going to use the final syringe to stop her heart." The next time the vet touched her eye there was no response. "She's gone," she

said. L__ patted Izzy's body. When L__ prompted me to do the same, I declined with one sharp shake of the head. I played with Izzy's nametag in my pocket as they covered her with a tarp and closed the gate.

Isabella, Izzy "Skinny Bean:" 1993 –
October 24, 4:24 p.m., 2015

October 31, 2015: As I was leaving work, Bailey was standing in her pen. "Ponieeeeeee," I called. I walked over and scratched her favourite place behind her ears and above her left eye. Bailey has a small scar over her left eye from when she jammed several long slivers up there scratching on the fence. I've made it a habit to scratch her face since. This time last year, her eye was swollen shut, oozing pus, and we weren't sure if wood was in her eye cavity or not. I remembered waiting with my phone out in class for a call from the vet. I remembered thinking: *What if she loses the eye? Will she be put down? There's no way to have a one-eyed lesson horse. Maybe if that happened, L__ would let me buy her. She'd be mine. I wouldn't be able to afford her, not if I*

want to eat, but I'd do it anyway. What are life savings for if not for this? Last winter had been a three-month-long ordeal of healing and hoping, but luckily the splinters hadn't gotten into her eye cavity and were removed. She was healthy.

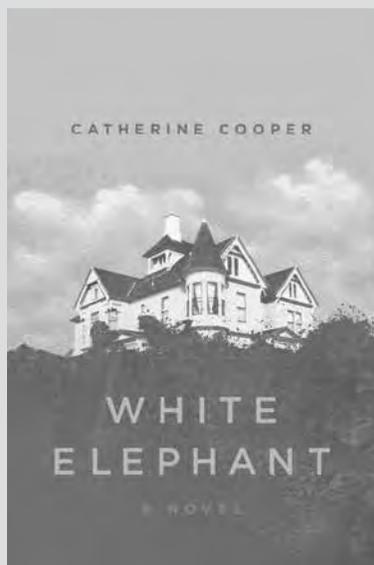
Bailey tossed her head and knocked my hand aside, curling her upper lip skyward and showing me her teeth in a horsey grin. She turned her head to one side, lip still up, both eyes bright. "You dork," I said, then pulled out my phone to take some pictures. Bailey realized she was being photographed and put her lip down, instead posing at me with the "treats please" face. *Horses are big, fragile, lovable dorks.*

I will outlive all the horses I work with now. I'll keep all their names in my jar. R__ is moving away. I promised to visit and she promised to Skype. J__ and I no longer share a riding lesson. The barn I touched Tuffy in, the barn I work in now, was slated for demolition and a new one will be built by mid-2017. Buildings fall. People don't stay forever. Horses aren't immortal—but I'll keep all their names. 🐾



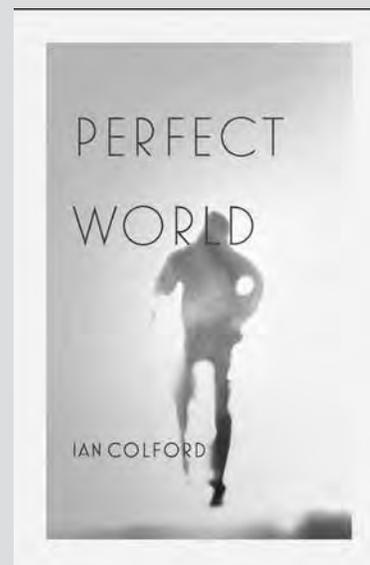
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