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This is a work of fiction inspired by actual events.



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FOR TONY

*It will be the past
and we'll live there together*

PATRICK PHILIPS, *Heaven*

He was as far superior to all horses that have gone before him as the vertical blaze of a tropical sun is superior to the faint and scarcely distinguishable glimmer of the most distant star.

JOSEPH CAIRN SIMPSON, *Turf, Field and Farm*

After him there were merely other horses.

CHARLES E. TREVATHAN, *The American Thoroughbred*

◆ H O R S E ◆

THEO

Georgetown, Washington, DC

2019

The deceptively reductive forms of the artist's work belie the density of meaning forged by a bifurcated existence. These glyphs and ideograms signal to us from the crossroads: freedom and slavery, White and Black, rural and urban.

No. Nup. That wouldn't do. It reeked of PhD. This was meant to be read by normal people.

Theo pressed the delete key and watched the letters march backward to oblivion. All that was left was the blinking cursor, tapping like an impatient finger. He sighed and looked away from its importuning. Through the window above his desk, he noticed that the elderly woman who lived in the shabby row house directly across the street was dragging a bench press to the curb. As the metal legs screeched across the pavement, Clancy raised a startled head and jumped up, putting his front paws on the desk beside Theo's laptop. His immense ears, like radar dishes, twitched toward the noise. Together, Theo and the dog watched as she shoved the bench into the teetering ziggurat she'd assembled. Propped against it, a hand-lettered sign: FREE STUFF.

Theo wondered why she hadn't had a yard sale. Someone would've paid for that bench press. Or even the faux-Moroccan footstool. When she brought

out an armful of men's clothing, it occurred to Theo that all the items in the pile must be her dead husband's things. Perhaps she just wanted to purge the house of every trace of him.

Theo could only speculate, since he didn't really know her. She was the kind of thin-lipped, monosyllabic neighbor who didn't invite pleasantries, much less intimacies. And her husband had made clear, through his body language, what he thought about having a Black man living nearby. When Theo moved into Georgetown University's graduate housing complex a few months earlier, he'd made a point of greeting the neighbors. Most responded with a friendly smile. But the guy across the street hadn't even made eye contact. The only time Theo had heard his voice was when it was raised, yelling at his wife.

It was a week since the ambulance had come in the night. Like most city dwellers, Theo could sleep right through a siren that Dopplered away, but this one had hiccuped to sudden silence. Theo jolted awake to spinning lights bathing his walls in a wash of blue and red. He jumped out of bed, ready to help if he could. But in the end, he and Clancy just stood and watched as the EMTs brought out the body bag, turned the lights off, and drove silently away.

At his grandmother's house in Lagos, any death in the neighborhood caused a flurry in the kitchen. As a kid visiting on school holidays, he'd often been tasked with delivering the steaming platters of food to the bereaved. So he made a stew the next day, wrote a condolence card, and carried it across the street. When no one answered the door, he left it on the stoop. An hour later, he found it back on his own doorstep with a terse note: *Thanks but I don't like chicken*. Theo looked down at Clancy and shrugged. "I thought everyone liked chicken." They ate it themselves. It was delicious, infused with the complex flavors of grilled peppers and his homemade, slow-simmered stock. Not that Clancy, the kelpie, cared about that. In the no-nonsense insouciance of his hardy breed, he'd eat anything.

The thought of that casserole made Theo's mouth water. He glanced at the clock in the corner of his laptop. Four p.m. Too early to quit. As he

started typing, Clancy circled under the desk and flopped back down across his instep.

These ~~arresting~~ compelling images are the only known surviving works created by an artist born ~~into slavery~~ enslaved. Vernacular, yet eloquent, they become semaphores from a world convulsed. ~~Living~~ Surviving through the Civil War, ~~forsaking~~ escaping the tyranny of the plantation for a marginalized life in the city, the artist seems compelled to bear witness to his own reality, paradoxically exigent yet rich.

Awful. It still read like a college paper, not a magazine article.

He flipped through the images on his desk. The artist confidently depicted what he knew—the crowded, vibrant world of nineteenth-century Black domestic life. He had to keep the text as simple and direct as the images.

Bill Traylor, born enslaved, has left us the only

A movement across the street drew his eye up from the screen. The neighbor was trying to move an overstuffed recliner. It was teetering on its side on the top step as she struggled to keep a grip on it.

She could use help. He did a quick personal inventory: Shorts on, check. T-shirt, check. Working in his un-air-conditioned apartment, Theo would sometimes spend the whole day in his underwear, forgetting all about his *désabaillement* until confronted by the quizzical gaze of the FedEx guy.

He reached the other side of the street just as gravity won, prising the chair from her grip. He jumped up the step and body-blocked it. Her only acknowledgment was a grunt and a quick lift of her chin. She bent down and grabbed the underside of the chair. Theo hefted an armrest. Together, crabwise, they shuffled to the curb.

The woman straightened, pushing back her thin, straw-colored hair, and rubbing her fists into the small of her back. She waved an arm at the ziggurat. “Anything you want . . .” Then she turned and ascended the steps.

Theo couldn't imagine wanting anything in this sadness-infused pile of discards. His apartment was sparsely furnished: a midcentury-modern desk and a Nelson sofa acquired at a thrift store. The rest of the available space was filled mostly with art books, shelved on scavenged planks and milk crates he'd spray-painted matte black.

But Theo, the son of two diplomats, had been raised by the commandment that bad manners were a mortal sin. He had to at least pretend to look. There were some old paperbacks stuffed into a beer carton. He was always curious about what people read. He reached down to check the titles.

And that was when he saw the horse.