

The Other End of the World

(from the novel-in-progress, "Hidden Birds")

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They were gauchos of the Argentine, horsemen to their bones. Wanderers, survivors, riders and lovers, their life the life of cattle and horses and stars. The broad grasslands, hum of the stars, meat on a spit. The knife on the belt. The boleadoras, a hiss through the air. Long rawhide, three stones, the horseman's long snare. Child of God, child of the pampa, child of himself. Lover of the long ride.

Straight and steady lover of the long ride. Hard luck and death itself? The gaucho shrugs. Que lastima. Fear cannot touch him. Governments fester and connive and cannot touch him, this child of himself. Judges, merchants, officers, priests, the ruthless leather merchants, they cannot touch him. Lover of the long ride. His soul before him like the bell mare.

It was an easy dream and they fell into it together. Don Fierro and Don Sombra. Sir Fierce and Sir Shadow. And their faithful mounts, Mancha and Gato. A man in the news was riding from Buenos Aires to the Washington White House on horses with those names, and so they renamed their own fresh-broke sorrels to send luck to the man and his 10,000 miles. A year and a half out, the newspapers had the rider in Mexico.

Don Fierro was eleven, Don Sombra thirteen, and if he, the older, was beginning to see girls and his friends in place of the gaucho life, he didn't tell that to the younger boy because there was no point. Riding north on the plains to the Sweetgrass Hills, they never encountered a fence. Hunting knives on their belts. Coiled

ropes. Big lunches from their mother in their saddlebags. Shotguns to hunt birds to roast on a spit. Saddles their only beds, beneath the starry vault.

They were a pair, the younger wiry and gap-toothed and quick; the older darker and solid, well into his growth.

Yes it was September and yes there was school. But Senor Olafson, the Spanish teacher, had so praised Sombra's paper on the Argentine and its dazzling, incorruptible gauchos that the writer's parents had set him loose on a long ride with his younger brother, the other horse lover in the family. They'd done it before, on their own, the hundred-mile circle. See you in a few days, the parents said. Adios. Keep your powder dry. They really did. It really was like that.

And there was another reason to make the ride now. Lindbergh's triumphant tour would carry him, the next day, from the mountains of Glacier Park onto the plains and straight over their heads. They would see the plane up close. They might see the man himself, squinting into the blue. He might wave down at them and tip his wings.

All quiet but for the barking of a dog and the grass-rustle of the low wind. All dark but for the light of the depot, the light of the mother up with the sick child. Their horses, picketed in the field behind the house, were warm and grassy-breathed, and they snorted and stamped a little when the stiff saddles went on. A last gear check, a piss in the weeds, and they were mounted and off, the hooves tocking on the hardpan street, the leather squeaking, their breath and the breath of their animals visible, but barely, in the neardark.

And as the sky began to lighten into the lilacs and the pinks, they snapped into a dreamy valorous state, and the bony prairie, dotted here and there with an oil well, scraped and frank, became something undulating and out of time.

“The stars fell toward the other end of the world,” Aidan, the older, said. It was one of the dozens of lines he’d marked in the novel he’d got from Senor Olafson for his translation project. *Don Segundo Sombra*. That was the title of the book. Gaucho extraordinaire. This, said Olafson, holding it up, is Huckleberry Finn with horses. With grasslands like Montana’s. And with a comrade for the poor orphan who is the embodiment of competence, style, fortitude, and calmness in the face of any fate. The utterly unflappable Don Sombra.

Don Sombra kicked his horse into a singlefoot and reeled off more. “The immense night frightened me as if it were full of my secret.”

“The stars,” he repeated, “fell toward the other end of the world.”

He said it again in Spanish. “Las estrellas cayeron al otro lado del mundo.”

The younger boy, Neil, laughed at the oddness of the sounds. He made up his own Spanish on the spot. “Dee **ah** dee dah, **kee** air lee **ho** vo, **Pecker** dee **lah** dah!” And laughed so boisterously at his fine, brash ear that his horse, the just-broke three-year-old, did a little crowhop and a fast dance sideways, as if a newspaper sheet had blown up from the ditch in all its rustling horror, which made both horsemen laugh and they left the road then, gave their animals their heads, and took off in the new light at a lope.

It was good to leave the road, graveled and straight as it

was, because it would, when full light came, interrupt the feel of the pampa. There would be farmers on it in their wagons and the occasional flivvers, and the oil boys too, heading for the fields. Not many, but some. Enough to matter. Enough to break the spell.

Forty-five miles ahead, the three mountains stood above the grass, full of birds and waiting. They would camp there, roasting their kill on a spit.

But first, miles and miles of prairie. Where you squinted against the wind and the sheeting, unmediated light, the gaze stretching long before it met something that stopped it.

There was the sense of being seen. Of yourself through a high hawk’s eye, one that noticed you but didn’t care. Still, it produced a small quiver of self-consciousness. As you moved, two flies across a table, you were watched.

From a distance, the Hills floated above the plains like an idea that was easy to understand. Up close—among them and on them and up them—they would be different. The light there became dappled, variegated. The summer’s last leaves, very thin leaves, maroon and apricot, flickered on the chokecherries. There was shelter: hollows and coulees and lees. So the wind became an unsteady thing, starting and stopping and starting again. In the suspensions, there was the sound of birds at rest, birds perched and adjusting and talking. You gained cover. You became unwatched. You moved into and out of the dappling and the pinewater smell of leaves. Sweetgrass. Kinnikinnick, snowberry, Oregon grape, cinquefoil, creeping juniper, lodgepole pine. And if you climbed high enough to survey the scraped plains, you became the hawk.

They would camp at the base of the Tower, the perfect cone. The one that seemed always very still.

To the Tower, they said to themselves. *Childe Roland to the dark tower came*, thought the younger boy, also a memorizer.

At its base, he, Neil, wanted to separate for hunting advantage and meet in a couple of hours at the camp spot they knew. It was mid-afternoon and they had five hours of light, easy, and he wanted very badly to do this, though it was the single rule from home. Stick together.

The boy made his case in his fake Spanish, lifting the palms of his hands to the summery sky. Aidan had to laugh. He was charmed. What, really, was the harm? The kid, Neil, sat his horse like a burr. He knew what he was doing. They both knew where they were, and where they would meet in a couple of hours, when the sun was three inches above the far-off line that separated the light blue from the tawny. The crease that opened upon the other end of the world.

The boy could handle himself and he needed this. He needed this knowledge that he could handle himself on his own. And the horse, Mancha, was all right. Quite the self-spooker, quite the dramatist, but surefooted and strong.

“Si, si, Don Fierro,” Aidan said.

“I will si si you at the camp,” Neil said, and he was off with a clatter.

He had his shotgun in a scabbard on his saddle. He had his hat pulled low over his eyes. He followed a game trail through the creeping juniper and the kinnikinnick, across an expanse of yellow grass, through more brush. He got to a copse of quaking aspen—animal tracks here—and he had a drink of water and the last of the sandwich his mother had packed in waxed paper. He thought about birds. Pheasants and grouse. Where they were hiding. He'd have

to picket Mancha and set off on foot, to sneak up on a pheasant. He thought of a low place with cattails, maybe a mile ahead. He remembered it now. He seemed to see the very tree where he'd tie his horse, and he seemed to see many bird wings rising in the late-afternoon light. The wizard green of the pheasant's neck.

He knew exactly where he was going. He urged Mancha into a trot, then a lope. He ducked when the trail took them through a thicket of chokecherries and was glad he wore his chaps. Mancha seemed to know where they were headed. He stepped up the pace. Neil gathered himself low on the big red back.

He heard a gunshot, somewhere off to his right. He stood a little and turned in his stirrups to see.

And then he fell out of time.

And when he returned he was on his back and felt that he had perhaps been on his back for many hours, many days. His hand covered an eye and his head felt axed in two. A fly crawled along the top of his hand and his hand didn't seem to be listening to the signal he was sending it to move. Finally, the fingers curled. Finally, he could lift it off his face. He felt detested by some large force, some borderless fist that had knocked him to the earth to be broke. He brought his fingers to his head and felt the sticky blood and the shocking lump. His face felt bathed in blood.

There was a red horse standing in willowlight. Its head was lowered but it didn't eat. It seemed simply to think. One stirrup had flung itself over the saddle. Reins fell to the ground. *Horse*, he thought. *Come here horse. Tell me your name if you have a name.*

The red horse walked toward him out of the green. It had a long scratch on its wither. It walked with a slight limp. It huffed, disgusted at something that had happened, something the boy had missed.

Horse, he said. Come here. And he thought about the process of getting to his feet. He sat up. His head lolled to the side and he puked a little. Horse. Come here. To me. He couldn't recall his name. He knew that he had a name but he couldn't, at the moment, know what it might be.

He stood still until he felt his weight evenly distributed between his wobbly legs and he gathered the reins of the red horse and led him under the big branch that had knocked him off. What the horse had experienced, he couldn't know. Had the animal's head been pulled around so fast and hard that he'd fallen? Who could tell? What was the horse's name? What was the name of the person trying to retrieve the horse's name? It made him want to cry, the effort of it and the fact of the big hand that had thrown him onto the ground, so unfairly, so without warning.

He led the horse and watched its careful steps, then hauled himself into the saddle. He would go home. He looked at the sun and started to remember something about it, where it appeared and disappeared. He looked at the conical mountain, got his bearings, and turned in the opposite direction. *This way is home and I will now go home.* And so he rode, his horse's long shadow stretching to the east and the meadowlarks curling and piercing the air. As he left the mountain behind, a stiff little wind picked up. An owl, somewhere, began to hoot him onto the huge landmarkless night.

If he had possessed his faculties entire, he would have remembered that he had ridden away from town with his older brother, Aidan. And he might have remembered, too, that Aidan had, on their long rides, told him the stories that now squeaked and babbled in

his head. *The horse will know the way.* He said it out loud, trying to impose an interior silence, and brushed his fingertips across his face and tasted them. Blood, dirt, the tears he couldn't seem to stop. His mother was waiting for him in a bright kitchen pouring him a glass of milk.

As the day darkened, Neil moved onto the silver-tipped prairie utterly alone with his calmly breathing horse. There were no lights to aim for, but there was the feel beneath him of an animal that had an idea about where it was going. There was the feel behind him of the mountain. There was also the growing sense of himself in some afterlife. He wondered if he had perhaps died.

The tumbleweeds began to look bony and white and phosphorescent. Coyotes yipped and chattered behind him and were answered by something low and harrowing, a long long way away. A wolf.

They traveled carefully, he and the horse whose name he didn't know, while the sun drifted off the far edge of the prairie, leaving a red line, then a deep blue one. Stars began to sharpen themselves, a few and then many, and a moon came up that looked like a dead eye. Clouds floated across it from time to time.

Something large flew by him, by his face. He saw nothing, but he heard it. He felt its slipstream; he felt its tug. He could have reached out and touched it with his hand. The horse felt it too. It skittered sideways and Neil had to grab the horn to stay on, and when he did, all the ribs on his left side cried out. He kicked the horse forward and yelled at it—go!—because they were traveling too slow and his mother wasn't going to wait for him in the kitchen forever. They loped now in the dark. He had tied the reins together and let them flop on the horse's neck and held with both hands to

the horn. The sage, the tumbleweeds had taken on an evil light. The bones of the dead. Evil lights that wanted to lure him to a buffalo jump, where he and the horse would sail into the air like the hundreds of buffalo roaring down to their deaths. He wouldn't let that happen. He would keep his head. He would stop running and start to wait, as Aidan would have waited, for daybreak.

There it was, his brother's name. He remembered it before he could remember his own.

The clouds moved off the moon and he noticed a curving line on the grass, which turned out to be a dry creekbed. A shallow indentation. The suggestion of a cut bank. He could huddle against it and think about what to do next. There was nothing he could build a fire with. There was his saddle for a bed, his saddle blankets for cover. He made his bed. He had his rope but there was nothing to tie it to, so he worked off one of the saddle cinches and fashioned crude hobbles for his horse, who stood quiet while he knotted them, then crowhopped gently to a better patch of grass and began to eat. The boy remembered water and gave the horse half of what was in his canteen, pouring it into the tin pie plate he'd brought along for a reason he couldn't remember now.

The idea of his brother came to him. Aidan. Calm, wry, solid. Keep your head, Aidan said. Hang on. Keep your head.

So he did. He lay down and closed his eyes. He could feel the ground move gently beneath him, a low, syncopated sway beneath the tiny clatter of the stars. He listened to his calmly breathing, calmly chewing horse.

Mancha. There it was.

Mancha! he called. His voice sounded very high and thin. He was only eleven. The tearing sound of grass stopped for a few

moments, then started again. It occurred to him again that he might be dead. It occurred to him that this was the aftermath. So when the wind switched in his direction and he began to hear gunshots, up near the hills, his gaze fell on his own gun, but it didn't occur to him to fire back because the shots he heard came from someplace that was not, in this new life, a possibility for him.

Sometimes, on their trips, they were Meriwether and his horsemen, riding this very prairie, just twenty, thirty miles to the west. They liked the ominous and fateful nature of the side trip Meriwether took with his three best men on the way home, a loop straight into the heart of Blackfeet country. They passed twelve miles of unbroken buffalo, a river of them, the wolves haunting the border of the animals, lolling and howling. They camped with some nervous Blackfeet teenagers they met, and then bad things happened. One of the boys tried to take guns and horses in the night, and there was a melee and they shot the boy dead. Another too. And then the explorers ran from the spectre of avengers, of howling and brilliant warriors bearing down on them. But not before Meriwether put a peace-and-friendship medal with George Washington's profile around the neck of the first teenager who was shot and left him there for the crows or his comrades. Neil and Aidan didn't like that part of the story much. There was bluster and unease in it, a preening that they didn't much like.

The Meriwether party ran all day and night across the prairie, this prairie, to arrive stupefied and sore and panting at the Missouri at the very moment that their comrades fired a gun to announce that they were there in their boats. Aidan and Neil liked that, the idea of high adventure culminating in such a neat and fateful way.

Neil sometimes got the moonlit ride away from the young dead Indians conflated with a story he'd heard from an old cowboy in town, an old rummy who'd wrecked his leg in a horseback accident years earlier and gimped around the horse sales, ready to tell stories to the kids. He'd been riding one night, drunk, heading in a direction he thought was the ranch where he worked, yelping and howling. Alone and on fire with the booze and riding across the world, breakneck, barely able to stay in the saddle. His horse, out of sheer disgust with him, he said, threw him off and thrummed away into the night. When he woke in the pink and frosty dawn, his entire body an ache, he found himself—

At this point, for the benefit of his young listeners, who couldn't hear it enough, he slowed the story way down.

The cowboy felt his moving fingers scout the terrain, any question of opening his eyes still ludicrous. His fingertips felt his face, his head, and moved down his neck. There. There. Everything here, it seemed. He felt, then, a twig, a stick, on his chest. An arrangement of sticks. Sticks with nodules. With knuckles. He flattened his hand and lowered it very slowly onto the sticks. He lifted his unbroken neck, sweat bursting from every pore, and opened his eyes upon his hand atop a hand of bones. He lay in a shallow, open grave. Like lovers they were, he said. His own ear, the cowboy's whirled and gristled ear, rested a scant inch from the hole in the skull that had once held the ear of his new friend.

The boy thought about that story. *Hang on*, he thought. *Keep your head, Neil.*

Neil. The name came to him in a burst of insight and now he knew he could lie down and sleep because he knew the name of the person who was going to go unconscious. But the story of the

cowboy in the grave had come back to him fully in all its detail, and he had the terrible sense that if he moved his hand in any direction on the ground, he would feel bones. Neck bones hung with a government medal. In the far distance, he heard another shot.

They shot me, Neil, he heard someone say. I lie here shot.

He woke to two short whistles and a long swooping one. His horse's ears flew forward. And out of the dawn there grew a horse and a rider, small and then not small, and a call.

Aidan had his hat pulled low over his eyes. He rode his horse at a singlefoot, that go-forever step between walk and trot, and he posted easily. He looked as if he could have ridden a day like that, or two.

He dismounted. He looked tall and exhausted and happy. "Hey, Neil," he said. "How you doing out here?"

The boy drank in his brother's face. "Fine," he said, hating the crack of grief in his voice. Aidan examined the head bump and Neil's ribs, his touch light. He examined Mancha's hobbles approvingly and removed them and reattached them to the saddle. They'd head for Portugal, he told his brother. It was a little rail stop, and not far. Their mother's brother, a doctor, had a little egg-colored hospital there, and he could check Neil over and they could stay the night.

"What about Lindbergh?" Neil said, everything coming back to him now.

"We'll see him from there. He'll pass over. And you know what? You've been riding this nag long enough. Sorry, Mancha. Your rider is done for awhile." The horse whickered contentedly as if it was going along with a bad joke. "You lost your hat when you

got knocked off by that big branch,” he told Neil. “I found it just when it was getting really dark. You were gone. I fired some shots.”

He reached out and touched the boy’s forehead, where the big egg was. Tears started, but the boy stopped them by thinking about Lindbergh. Lindbergh all by himself in the night over the endless water. Feeling lucky.

Aidan saddled Neil’s horse and mounted his own, offering an arm to his brother to pull him up behind him. Neil put his arms around his brother’s hard waist. They moved off, Aidan leading Mancha. Neil rested the side of his head against his brother’s warm back. He could feel the muscles moving neatly. They traveled quietly for a few hours, saying nothing. Sometimes Neil slept a little. Waking, he breathed his brother’s strong back, then dozed again.

Finally, there was the scrabble of a town ahead. It glinted in the morning light. When they moved into it, down the graveled

main street, people milled around them excitedly, as if they’d been eager for the boys’ return. But they were watching the sky. Dogs and children ducked among the taller, watching ones. A murmur grew. The sky returned a high, thrilling drone. And out of the west, lit by the climbing sun, came a bright little monoplane. Neil couldn’t sit still. Hands on Aidan’s shoulders, he pulled himself to his feet atop the steady horse. He watched the growing plane, the high metal bird in the morning light, hands on his brother’s hat.

He cheered with the rest, with Aidan, and waved an arm to make Lindy tip his wings. On the sidewalk, a sour-faced woman in a nurse’s cap called to him and shook her finger at him. The horse was stepping in place, nervous now, and so he sat. The little plane tipped its wings and the crowd cheered. Neil yipped like a coyote, and then he turned to the woman in the nurse’s hat and shouted a string of fake and bawdy Spanish at her, laughing as he yelled, laughing so hard he could scarcely make the words.