Horses We've Loved

The good ones are truly partners.
Words by John L. Moore. Painting by David Graham.

When the dust begins settling we remember the horses. We recall the mounts, good and bad, the days spent horseback, the scenes viewed through cow-ponies' ears, and the friends who rode beside us. When the dust begins settling we appraise our future by expected days horseback, and as friends pass we say at funerals, "At least he was horseback up to the end." We only really mourn those who haven't this eulogy.

When my father, Johnny Moore, died at 69, his family and friends said it. "He was horseback up to the end."

My partner Lynne Taylor passed at 71. He spent the day before his death working horseback. Horseback up to the end.

My friend Denny Looman died at 69, leaving the track where he'd just galloped his racehorses.

They passed too young, but they were horseback up to the end. And at the end, is there any stronger symbol of the West than the riderless horse at a funeral? And yet, this is seldom the deceased's favorite mount—though it could have been. Definitely, it was his last, and being his last, counted among his favorites.

What great trust we place in the animal that packs us as we age. With what affection we hold them in our hearts.

Yet, this love story begins much sooner with the first horse of our youth. Not the first two or three we're placed on, but the first that is ours to break. Mine was a nightmare. A little blue roan called Ribbon Tail, the ill-begotten product of a poorly planned pairing of a Shetland mare and a leopard Appaloosa stallion. Ribbon Tail had wood for brains but iron for will. He was mean, barn sour, and immune to pain. And when I was 10 he was mine to break. He almost broke me. Finally, after two years of torment, my bantam-sized mother pecked my father into submission and Ribbon Tail was sold to pack-string purgatory, wedged into a long line of mules.

Any love I had for horses could have died with that blue roan but my dad came home from the sales barn one day with a stylish misfit—a crop-out sorrel overo yearling that'd gone through the ring loose. Dad paid $70 for him, gave him to me, and I named him Gusto.

Gusto was everything Ribbon Tail wasn't. As a two-year-old he took to the saddle easily, reined naturally, and galloped smoother than sunlight washing across glass. His eyes were big, soft, and deep, but at their depths burned enough fire to smoke through long days. He stood 14.3 with a long hip, balanced neck, and trim head. His one fault was a round back with not enough wither, but this paled against his athleticism and savvy. He was a natural cow horse. My father and uncles, astride their hardheaded range horses, knew to ease aside when Gusto and I entered a herd to cut dries. It wasn't me they respected, that's for sure. It was the splash paint and what he would do for me.

When adventure took me on the road, into marriage and military service, my kid sister started Gusto on barrels. And she won. It made him too hot—always looking for the crowd, the noise, the nudge to explode into a cloverleaf—but when I returned to ranching with my city-raised wife, Debra, it was Gusto who trained her.

We put him down at 24, his knees and hips arthritic, his status with the cavvy having caved to the bottom. He's buried on a cedar-topped hill.

The next great one was Shogun, a Rapid Bar-bred stallion I bought and cut. Thinking he had 30 rides on him I took him straight to cattle. A dark bay standing 15.1, his eye was even softer than Gusto's and his legs longer. The wife loved him and he loved her, but it was our children, Jess and Andrea, who benefited from his care. Personality bubbled from Shogun like an artesian spring. There wasn't a gate he couldn't open and his nickers and neighs had a resonance that suggested he'd teach us to speak horse if we'd only listen.

We put him down at 25, his knees and hips arthritic, his status with the cavvy having caved to the bottom. He's buried on the cedar-topped hill next to Gusto. Years after his death I learned he'd only been saddled six times when I bought him.

The next and the latest is Shiloh, the result of me trying to reproduce Gusto by taking a race-bred quarter horse mare to a Remount-bred stallion. Shiloh arrived sorrel with a flaxen mane and tail and one white spot over his left ribs. He grew to just under 15 hands with a solid frame, good muscle, and explosive power. A visiting East Coast horsewoman and television producer rode him once and announced, "This is a warhorse."

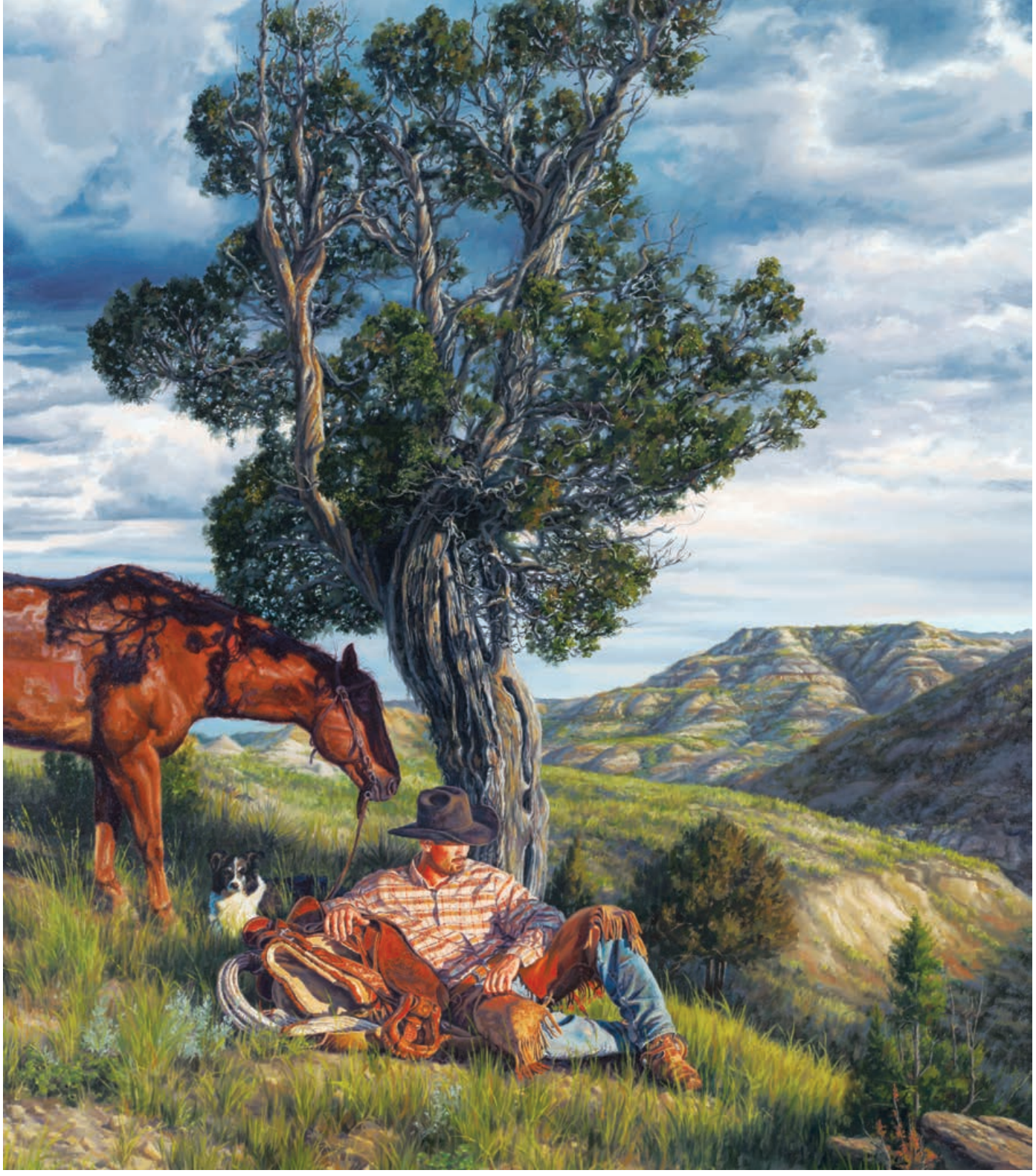
And he was. Even into his 20s there was not a short-course prairie race he didn't know he could win and, just for fun, I let him do it on occasion. We retired him at 24 and the last photograph of him at work shows he and Debra dropping a string of yearlings off a gumbo divide.

For the next two years I forced Shiloh into nanny service. Two years ago he babysat a stud colt through a tough winter in rough country because I couldn't get to them. He came out thin that spring but showed no dimness of fire. Last summer he ran with a Three Bars mare from Texas and her Kingbred filly. A week before my 60th birthday I spilled them some cake, got distracted, stood in the wrong place, placed my hand on the wrong spot and got soundly kicked in my right knee. It was my fault. Not his. He thought it was the filly chewing on his tail. My result: broken tibia, displaced and sprained knee, burst bursa, and torn meniscus tendon.

Two months later when I could hobble around with some certainty, it came time to put him down. There was no revenge in this. Winter was coming. His knees and hips were arthritic. Dignity was leaving him. We dug a grave between the corrals and the creek so deep I led him into it. He's buried there but sometimes I think I hear his heart beating through the earth.

How well I will always remember the cattle we roped, the miles we jogged, the times we walked to the tack room at dark, both of us tired, neither of us feeling regret. Some think a horse is only a tool, some ruin them as pets, and others imagine them a friend. The good ones are partners.

Now although I am only nearing 61, the wear and tear and injuries and abuse have aged me. My knees and hips creak stiffly and a freak neck injury has disrupted the wiring to my hands. At times my fingers are numb.



At other times my thumbs and palms spark with pain. I feel like I am losing place in the cavvy. It hurts to recall being limber, quick, and almost reckless because I detest being awkward, slow, and excessively cautious. But like Dad, Lynne, and Denny, I am determined to stay horseback to the end. Yet, in this I encounter my own selfishness. Is this best for me, for my grandchildren?

But how do you explain the love of horses and the greater love, I think, of being horseback? Can you measure it in a Will James' sketch, an Orren Mixer painting, a photograph by Jay Dusard, William Albert Allard, or Kurt Markus? Can you corral it in the poetry of Laurie Jameson when she writes: *"I do not dream of him or the way he once held me. I dream of him and his horses—their names sliding through fingers of consciousness like butter-soft reins on a worn-out summer day—Peanuts, Diamond, Blackie, Buck, Duchess, Claude, Tequila, Bill, Honda, Shavano, Honeybee, Ned..."* And I would add Gusto, Shogun, Shiloh...

But I am not ready for this to end. There are miles to go, horseback, until I sleep. My heart yearns for one more good horse. One to outlive me. One to be saddled, riderless, at some point, some time, a long ways yet away. I hope. ■

John L. Moore is a writer and rancher in eastern Montana. The lines by Laurie Jameson are from the poem "His Horses" from "Across the High Divide" (Ghost Road Press). They are used with permission.