

Zaran

Simone Poirier-Bures

(For Alice Walker)

When we first moved here there were two of them - beautiful white horses with a kind of smoky look. Arabians, with huge, firm haunches and a deeply masculine mien, like athletes with oiled muscles. Zaran and Zarif: It took me a while to learn their names. Sometimes they stood by the side of the fence and snorted while I passed, friendly snorts, their huge faces leaning over the wire. Sometimes they'd gallop through the field, their heads and tails high and proud, like thunder, like a roaring waterfall, like tap dancers on drums.

Then Zarif died. He caught some disease, or perhaps it was food poisoning. In any case, a few days later, he was dead.

Zaran missed him. You could tell by the way he moped around, as if he no longer knew who he was, as if Zarif's presence had defined him: *I know who I am because of that other, like me.*

Then a young colt arrived. Brown and shiny like a ripe chestnut. Bob, they called him. He was small and frisky, and towered over by the solid, broad-shouldered Zaran. Who became coltish himself in the following months, charging up and down the field with Bob. When they weren't running, they'd stand side by side facing opposite directions, the way horses do, companionable, silent, feeling each other's body heat.

Bob grew up and it was time to have him trained. No one had ever ridden him, and it was thought that one of the girls who lived in the house might want to put a saddle on him. He would have to be sent away for this.

The day the horse-trailer arrived, Zaran pulled his ears back, suspicious. The same horse trailer had carted off Zarif to the vet and he had never returned.

Two men led Bob out of the paddock and put him in the trailer. Zaran watched, pacing back and forth, the muscles in his neck taut with worry. The men went into the house for a few moments. Bob, in the trailer, whinnied. Zaran whinnied back, and soon the air rang with the frantic calls of the two horses.

The men came out and started up the truck. As they drove down the road, Zaran ran the whole length of the field beside them, his eyes huge, his voice an agony of protest and disbelief.

All summer his grief was huge and silent.

But Bob came back. I heard a ruckus horse--sounds--and looked out. The horse-trailer and Bob were coming down the road and Zaran was practically leaping out of his skin, running up and down the fence line in anticipation, the two horses calling to each other. I never saw such happiness. There was thunder in the field again. I thought of a huge sun shining in a blue blue sky.

Last winter, a sudden storm dropped six inches of snow. Bob tripped in a small sink hole and broke his leg in several places. Nothing could be done for him. He lay there in agony, until someone came with a rifle and put him down. They buried him in the same field the two horses had run in.

So Zaran is alone again. Neighbors bring him apples and carrots and talk to him, but none of that removes the deep loneliness from his eyes. He's like an old man with nothing much to look forward to. Does he miss Bob? Zarif? Does he remember them? Or is this just anthropomorphism, the imaginings of an overly sensitive writer?

One night a few weeks ago, I went out for a walk after dark. It was bitter cold, but there was a big moon and a fine dusting of snow, so everything looked bright and magical. I heard a low snuffling sound and looked over to see Zaran standing in the middle of his field. Why was he out there like that, instead of in his shed, where it was warm and sheltered?

A small movement caught my eye. Ten feet or so away from him stood two does, quietly feeding on the stubble sticking up above the snow. They were brown and sleek and small-boned, like

young horses.

I'd like to think that he finds their presence comforting. I'd like to think that something stirs in his memory, something dim that doesn't quite have a shape. He stands there in the moonlight, listening to their snuffling and snorting, feeling the heat from their bodies. And though he knows that there's something different about them, something not quite like me, it's all that he has, and for now, perhaps it's enough.

Biography

Simone Poirier-Bures is the author of three books: 'Candyman' (1994), a novel set in her native Nova Scotia; 'That Shining Place' (1995), a memoir of Crete; and 'Nicole' (2000), a collection of short fiction and memoir, also set in Nova Scotia. She has published twenty-two short stories, ten essays and works of creative nonfiction, and several poems. Her work has been included in eight anthologies and more than two dozen journals. She is the recipient of a Virginia Commission for the Arts grant, six prizes for short fiction and memoir and the Evelyn Richardson Award for 'That Shining Place'. Currently she teaches in the English Department at Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, Virginia, USA.

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