

Leto the Shire and Dennis the Goat

Jenny Bobo

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

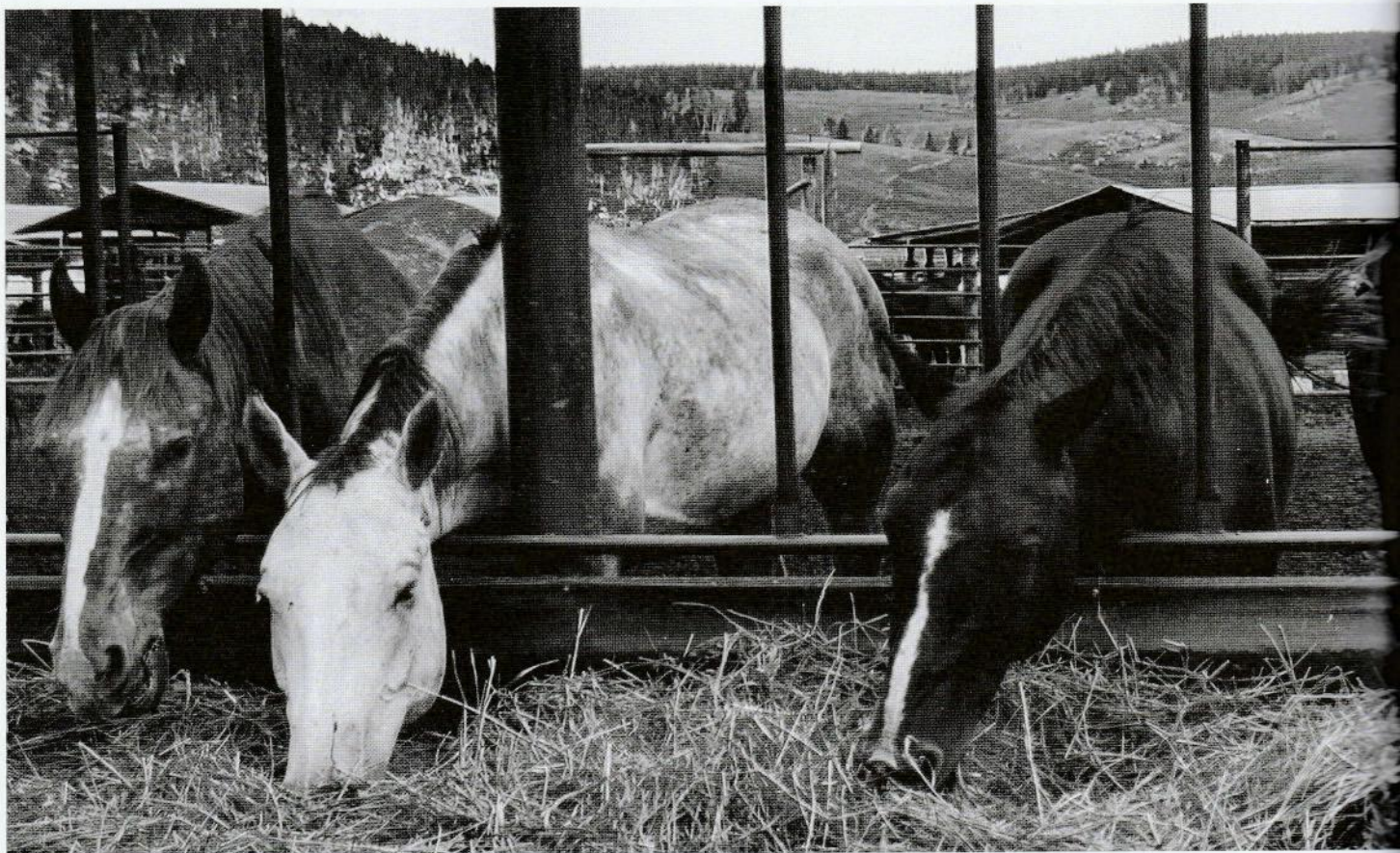
Paralyzed. Leto slipped prancing through an afternoon summer squall, then couldn't stand. It's been known for Shires to break bones, being clumsy creatures, but she was young and strong. Her neck bowed out from its base at her withers to her grass-stained cheek, her white downy hair stained with watery mud. Of the four foals born that spring, Leto was the last, and she was my first baby. That afternoon, two hours passed with Leto sprawled on the ground, intermittently writhing towards her mother's whuffling lips. Nauseous and weak-kneed, I watched her.

I cradled Leto's head in a pink starfish beach towel as my parents heaved at two ropes looped around her back legs and pulled her up the ramp of the horse trailer. Her mother, Kiri, scrambled up after me, and we left for Starkville.

Blood tests, urine samples, MRIs. Dose upon dose of antibiotics. No definite diagnosis and no

improvement. For two weeks and three days, I hardly slept; when I did speak, it was only to coo softly to mare and foal on my daily visits or bombard my parents with questions of Leto's condition when I didn't understand the veterinarians. I only wanted to know: better or worse? Shaking their heads, they would silently blink away away tears of pity.

Leto was euthanized on a Monday morning, three days before I started the seventh grade. During the necropsy, it was discovered that she had Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis, dubbed "possum disease" after its most common host; the disease attacks the nervous system and causes irreparable damage. Leto had probably cropped some grass contaminated with possum feces and died because of it. Kiri, distraught, was brought home and quarantined for a month; she spent that month galloping from end to end of her pasture, nickering mournfully for her baby while I



leaned against a fencepost, crying with her. Then, I blamed myself for not researching her affliction and watching her die, and, sometimes, I still do.

Daddy got me a goat when I was two because he was afraid I'd strangle a kitten. The kid was an African pygmy that ate enough to be a cow. I named him Dennis the Menace, perhaps the best pet I've ever had, but picking my favorite is like choosing among one's children. I spent the better part of fourteen years losing head-butt matches, making clover salads, and happily dragging the Menace away from Mama's flowers. Then, he started dying.

Mama noticed the lump first. Small, golf-ball sized, only apparent if you crouched level with his chin and looked down at his throat. Once it reached tennis-ball size, Dennis developed a cough. A few weeks later, he couldn't hold food down, retching up his cud with panicky wheezes. His breath came in gasps. In him, I saw Leto slipping again. Wiping my hands of goat bile and half-digested bermuda grass, I sat down in the shade and researched goat diseases on my phone. It took an hour to diagnose Dennis with Caseous Lymphadenitis (CL), an abscess disease common in

aged goats. I got scalpel and gloves down from the farm medical box, asked Daddy to straddle Dennis, doused the bulge in chlorohexidine, and sliced. The half-inch cut spewed brown fluid onto my boots. And Dennis breathed.

When you live on a farm, you meet Death early; then you become well-acquainted, almost familiar, with him before your tenth birthday. You kill for food or helplessly watch animals die from old age or disease. I have learned the balance between resigning myself to inevitable death and fighting to save a life when there's still hope. I've accepted the existence of pain but still combat it for helpless creatures like Dennis. With no cure for CL, I lance Dennis's abscess every two months. When he breathes, I see Leto, standing, and smile. ▲

Lined Up

West Givens

Photography

