Ginger

CHARLES BUTTERFIELD

After Sam's truck clears the hill, all Lucius hears is the cooing of wild pigeons in the cavernous haymow. More worn out from two days of decision making than from heavy lifting, he leans against the doorjamb of his emptied barn as Sam's truck carries away the last of what has turned out to be six loads of farm tools, odds and ends of machines, barrels, boxes, baskets, rolls of sheep fencing, stanchions, drinking cups and plumbing, milking machine parts—nearly thirty years' accumulation from his own and others' small-scale farming. Swept down, the nearly vacant space looms, as if it will take more steps now to traverse the building that used to be full of things needing care and attention.

Lucius and Peg had never intended to farm the place seriously. Their work at the college precluded their keeping more than a kind of petting zoo. They raised a few Herefords during their first couple of years. They tried keeping milk cows, but dairy farming proved too confining. When the cattle were gone the fields had quickly grown unsightly, so when Moses Reed asked if he could rent some sheep pasture, Peg jumped at the chance. Sheep came and went for a dozen years, until the bottom fell out of the local wool market. Then it was goats, by arrangement with the lesbian couple, Tess and Paula, who had a thriving goat-milk soap business for another half decade or so. Morning and evening one or the other of them came to milk and to chat. And on it went, pigs on shares for a few years, llamas for two

summers (that's all they could take of those haughty creatures). And Beth's palomino.

Because the animals came chiefly at Peg's instigation, after she died the horse had the fields to herself. Then Cushing's disease put Ginger down and she was buried in the long field beside the house. After that Lucius bought a cutter bar attachment for his tractor and mowed the fields himself. He hired Sam to bale the hay, and he sold a few tons each summer. Little profit in it, if he didn't count the value of open-field views in all directions from his house.

Pigeon shit. Mouse turds. Lucius pushes himself from the door frame and pulls a worn drop cloth out of the junk pile left for Sam to carry to the landfill sometime. He drags it past the few bales of his best timothy hay set aside for mulch (and because Sam had said, "You never know") to the back of the barn where the single-seat sleigh and breastplate harness Beth didn't want him to get rid of, not yet, wait. What's to become of them in the long run? Until spring, he'll store these precious reminders of what Ginger meant to his daughter during those hard years after her mother slowly, painfully left Lucius and Beth to carry on. Come spring, though, Beth will have to take them.

He spreads the cloth over the red sleigh and the harness straps draped across the dashboard, the leather redolent of neatsfoot oil and the camphorous smell of Absorbine.

He ought to oil that harness before cold sets in and the leather stiffens. The thought amuses him. Why can't he savor a sense of accomplishment that emptying his barn ought to provide? Why does he let his mind run to what more there is for him to take care of?

His worrywart character, Peg called it. He'd always had it, and she

expected it to bloom when they added an element of arcadia to their academic careers. The health of their animals, or those they called the guests, the condition of their machinery, the quality of the hay crop, "the upkeep on the downgrade" Sam said whenever he showed up to help Lucius with building repairs, and that thin margin between go and no go—all continually worrisome. Peg and Lucius were not exactly novices, and from the beginning they knew what children raised on farms know, that worry goes with the territory.

Lucius smoothes the tarp, pats the shrouded curved seatback. Good times there. Beth liked nothing so much as driving Ginger in her sleigh after a good snowfall, a couple of high school buddies beside her. Ginger was the center of her teenage life. The gentle mare was the best thing Lucius could have provided for his daughter.

That wintry night Mike Hoskins' battery ran down while they were enjoying a dinner-and-wine work session on the anthology of environmentalist poetry Lucius and Mike were compiling, Beth hitched Ginger to the sleigh and drove Mike home in the snowstorm. He talked about that adventure for months after. "Miles to go before I sleep," he'd say. Only it turned out he didn't have miles to go, and the book project died with him.

Lucius remembers dozens of evenings when Peg cooked (she excelled in the kitchen as she did in the dean's chair) for their friends on the faculty or for his students in the modern poetry seminar. Only eight miles from campus, the farm was a handy retreat. Usually after dinner, especially when they were hosting students, at Beth's suggestion everyone walked out to the barn or the pasture to see Ginger up close.

The house attic, he knows, will be the next big job. Then the closets and rooms. Emptying the house will be more work than clearing out the barn, and those decisions will be harder. The thought of it all exhausts him. Beth will have to help, and she said she would, come spring.

She's not at all sure, she's let Lucius know, that he isn't calling it quits too soon. She thinks he should give himself more time to decide what really follows the realtor's pounding the FOR SALE signpost into the ground. The Rivermead apartment they looked over is lovely, with every convenience, but she cannot picture her creative, vigorous dad in an assisted living home. Nearing eighty he still doesn't use hearing aids or a cane. She's afraid that despite the care and attention he'll have, maybe *because* of the care and attention, he'll wither.

One winter more. After twenty-six years without Peg, and ten of those with Beth married and moved to Wolfeboro, Lucius is ready for a warm and comfortable place where he can watch the snow pile up with impunity and indulge himself in whole long days of reading and writing. For these and three good meals a day he's put down a deposit. He's talked to Polly Morgan, who's been in real estate for fifty-odd years, and he believes her when she says that the long, smooth field beside the house is enough to sell the place. The other twenty well-kept acres, the big barn, and the central-chimney cape are all gravy, she tells him. He wants to believe it, just as he wants to believe he can still put his good health to use, just not with the hard hauling he's had enough of.

It would feel good to compose an essay again. He's convinced he can still make a good case that David Perkins' characterization of

contemporary verse as emphasizing "man's vulnerable and suffering body and mortality"—what Perkins labels "creatural realism"—is vividly contradicted by those modern poets who draw on their direct experience with animals to discover personal renewal and spiritual connection with the natural world. That could be the theme of his essay—Lucius Barnes' interpretation of creatural realism.

Rolling the barn door closed seals off the sepulchral space behind it. Lucius shivers. The late November afternoon is sucking away the light, and so its meager warmth. He has worked up a sweat loading the truck and heads to the house to change his cold shirt.

Something, probably the gold light on the field behind the row of sugar maples, leafless now, that he and Peg set out when they moved to the farm, draws him past the kitchen door. The trees' shadows stretch far into the field, almost to the rim of forest that borders the mowing's eastern edge. Right there, in a corridor of light between the end of shadows and the dark forefront of pine woods, two hundred feet from Lucius, she stands, looking his way into the sun.

It takes a few seconds for his tired brain to process the sight, to shift from apparition to fact. "Who the hell are you? Where'd you come from?" he says out loud. He knows all the landowners nearby. None keeps a horse. But here she is. He can see, even from his distance, the glint of sun on the halter strap over the mare's nose. No piece of broken rope dangles from the halter. Probably jumped a fence somewhere. But where? How far away?

She's a young mare —three, maybe four years old—and looks to be in good shape. Not tall, 15 hands or so he guesses, she has the bulky neck and shoulders of a quarter horse. Her thickening palomino coat,

the color of Beth's Ginger, is golden in the low, late sun.

"Well, Ginger, come back from horse heaven, have ya?" Lucius advances slowly toward the mare. She lifts her nose, ears back, watching his movement, stays her ground briefly, then turns and lopes into the pines. "Okay lass, you go on home now. You've got traveling to do before nightfall." Lucius waits to see if the mare will reappear.

Did he see what he thought he saw? Would anybody believe him? What proof does he have? Without evidence folks might chalk it up to a mini-stroke in his visual cortex.

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A washed Russet in the toaster-oven to bake, Lucius heads for his chair and the TV remote, but instead picks up the phone. He calls the Martins next down the road, the Gosses on the other side of the pine woods, the Carpenters who used to have two horses years ago to keep their boys out of trouble (that didn't work), and last, a long shot, Chief Gallagher, luckily at home for supper. No one he talks to has heard anything about a stray horse.

While he waits for his potato, he thumbs the new alumni magazine, a splash of Jack Daniels over ice at his elbow. He comes across an article written by the son of the college's late forestry professor. The son has discovered index cards the father carried to jot down his thoughts. "Always a bunch of them in his shirt pocket," the son writes. On one card: "There are no answers. There is no evidence. There are only data, and the interpretation of data."

Maybe because Lucius's mind is already running along those lines, the forester's wisdom locks itself in his brain. He turns the pages of the magazine, scans the alumni notes for names he might recognize, but in

his head he hears"...there are only data, and the interpretation of data."

While he eats supper—hot potato, cold chicken—he watches the news, though he's tired of hearing pundits talk about the complex state of the economy. He's befuddled by the contradictory positions supposed experts take even with the same numbers in front of them. How is a retired poetry professor and part-time farmer supposed to comprehend what's happening?

After the news, he watches a program on wolverines. He's impressed by the straightforward way wild animals go about their lives. Wolverines know what it is they have to do, and they do it without any agonizing search for answers. Whether they live or perish depends strictly on their interpretation of sense data.

The eleven o'clock news-and-weather is on when he wakes. Freezing rain is forecast for tomorrow night; tonight, though, will be clear and in the single digits.

He switches off the TV. When he turns out his reading lamp, the room gradually fills with white moonlight. The high, full, beaver moon beckons. He pulls on his down jacket, fishes his wool cap out of the cubby in the mudroom, and slides his stocking feet into his Bean Boots. Cold air at the door slaps his face hard and catches in his throat. It's bright enough that he has no need of his flashlight as he heads directly into the moonlit field behind the maples. The dry grass is white as snow in the pale light, and its brittle blades give way with an icy crunch under his step.

It surprises him that he is not surprised to see the mare's outline against the white ground, her head down as she nibbles the stubble in the crisp shadow her body makes. Lucius stands at the edge of the

field and watches the horse take one slow step at a time as she forages for a meal of dead grass. Maybe it's satisfying to have something in her stomach, but a wolverine would not waste its time on food it could gain nothing from. A domesticated horse, a haltered horse, is not a wild animal. It will starve to death without some human care. His thought urges Lucius deeper into the field.

His steps, so carefully taken, do, too soon, startle the mare. She raises her head, looks his way in the wintry glow, bobs her head, and with just the hint of a whinny, more a kind of "huff," moves toward the trees with the unnatural side-step movement of a saddle horse. She's had training.

She fades into the dark pines, and Lucius, cold hands deep in his back pockets, strolls to where she's been standing. The odor of still-warm manure hangs in the frigid night. *Ah, evidence.* A thought cuts into the spell. There is something he can do.

He walks briskly out of the field and to his barn. Rolling back the door to dark hollowness, he reaches for the light switch, and by its baling twine picks up one of the bundles of hay Sam made when the timothy grass was at the peak of goodness. It smells of summer days. He shuts off the light, closes the door, and in the light of the high and distant moon carries the forty pounds of June hay into the November field and to the spot the horse had claimed. He takes out his pocketknife, cuts the twine with two muffled pops, and opens and scatters the blocks of compressed fodder in a circle around him. His scent mingled with that of good hay may give her the idea that he's not dangerous.

Lucius stands in the aromatic circle. Far above his head, miles

away against the cold stars, a plane moves without a sound. Two hundred passengers ride behind rows of dark windows. They read by narrow lights, listen to music on iPods, key their laptops, watch a movie; their anticipations, their frustrations, their anxious fears all carried far from him. Tiny flashes from the wingtips and tail, too small even to convey distinct color, are all that connect the red-eye to his solitary figure in the illumined field. Alone in this frigid space, he pulls his cap down around his ears, and for the mare's sake vacates the field so that she will come back for the fragrant meal he has delivered.

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His sleep is as segmented as baled hay. Is it his preoccupation with the horse that breaks up his rest into chunks, or does he only begin to worry about her when body ache left over from the day's loading or some physiological flutter wakens him? Is he stuck with Ginger? How can he see her through the winter if she won't come closer to him than the width of his field? Can she survive in the rain and snow all winter on what he can put out for her? She'll need shelter of some kind. He could build a lean-to. Would she use it to get out of the wet wind? What more can he do? In the morning he'll call the Monadnock Humane Shelter. If anybody has lost a horse, surely someone there would have heard, and if they haven't, they at least will have some idea about how to get the horse to a safe place. Are there horse rescuers around? He hasn't heard of any, but if dogs are rescued, why not other animals? Lucius is ready for morning long before dawn breaks. He is eager to get on the phone.

Predawn clouds are tinged with crimson when he lugs a pail of water to Ginger's place. She has visited the hay, dropped more manure, but is nowhere in sight though he senses she is not far off. He settles

the pail, and kicks some of the hay into a pile for her convenience. What is she expecting of him? If she doesn't want to smell him, why has she chosen to wait where she can watch him? Is she looking for clues as to what to do next? Is she thinking that he has answers?

As soon after his breakfast as he figures offices are open, Lucius begins to make inquiries. The Humane Society has received no calls about a missing horse. The woman he talks to suggests he try putting out some horse feed in a bucket. She thinks that with time, the horse may even eat from the bucket while he stands near, and she pictures Lucius eventually luring the mare to his barn with the feed. In addition to such visionary hopefulness, she tells him how to contact a horse rescue operation in Wolfeboro. Beth and Ralph are near Wolfeboro. The call to Beth is next.

"I'll look into it, Dad. You certainly can't keep that horse all winter. You'll have to find a home for it, and the sooner the better. Why don't you call Doctor Tenney? He might have some advice. He certainly knows horses. I'll call you back after I speak to someone here. Are we still on for Thanksgiving? See you next week, then. Love you."

He hangs up, harboring the notion that Beth has the same mixed feelings he does. Has he attached himself to *this* mare, or to the general idea of keeping a horse again? If he winters Ginger will it change his plans to move to Rivermead? Will one horse lead to another? Will he be in the horse-rescue business? Is he trying to turn back the clock?

When Beth calls it is not with news Lucius wants to hear. The horse-rescue place is beyond full. A bunch of neglected horses was confiscated by the sheriff's department a week ago, and that brought the number of animals to more than the maximum the operation

can handle over the winter. They might be able to take Ginger come spring.

Matthew Tenney knows every horse in the vicinity, but nothing of any loose mare. He volunteers to come out to see her, but if she isn't allowing Lucius to approach, then there's no way he can examine her. He doesn't think the animal-shelter advice is sound—trying to catch her with some oats. He takes the opposite tack: "She just might eventually get it in her head to move on if she isn't getting fed at your place. Don't give her any more hay or water. She'll leave. She knows she doesn't belong where she is. Unless you want a horse to keep, you'd better not give her any encouragement."

When Lucius raises the possibility of capturing the mare, Tenney says if worse comes to worse, as a last resort, he can arrange for somebody in the Fish and Game Department to tranquilize the animal as a public nuisance. He isn't sure he's a good enough shot with a dart gun to bring her down himself. "Tricky even for the experts. You don't know how much she weighs, or how much she has in her stomach. It'd be easy to overdose and risk putting her down for good." He closes off with, "Besides, Lucius, you'd still be stuck with a horse, only a very drowsy one. Get in touch if you want me to do anything."

Just like the economists on TV. Exactly opposite interpretations of the same data coming from so-called experts. It was like that when Peg's esophageal cancer began to metastasize . The best people in oncology drew different conclusions from test results and the research. In the end, Lucius and Peg could only trust that the path they chose was the best one. There were no answers, no conclusive evidence to draw on. When it was clear to everyone that Peg wouldn't make it,

Lucius was left with the meager comfort that she had participated in each step they took during that frightening summer.

So it was when they took up farming. All he and Peg could know was that they were solidly together in choosing to add a new venture to their life together. Their best friends counseled them with opposite advice. There were no assurances. They could not know before they acted how it would turn out. Now he's getting conflicting guidance from animal experts.

No more phone calls. He puts on his boots, his coat and cap, and goes out again to stand in the field. Ginger is pawing the hay. She has knocked over the pail. Did she drink first? She looks up and toward him. He makes no move, and she stays in her place. Most of an hour they stand the width of a field apart. She eats a little in his distant presence, but only a little. She waits and watches Lucius, and Lucius waits for the mare to give him some hint that she might move forward with him.

He looks past the horse and into the steely sky above the pines. The sun can only suggest itself through the thick cover. A harsh wind blows out of the east, fanning the horse's white mane and raking his cheeks. A November wind is like no other. It signals change. It prepares the earth for winter, pruning the woodland for coming coats of ice. It says to all who can move, "Find cover, not from me only, but from all that I herald." Lucius swipes his eyes with his coat sleeve to clear away tears the biting wind brings on.

In the blurred distance, a sound horse. Intelligent and with instincts. There must be some sort of homing device at work in that proud skull. A three-year-old who knew the person who buckled a halter behind her ears must know that the edge of his field is not where

she belongs. Sooner or later some elements of memory may fuse, and she'll remember the barn she knows the smell of.

Lines from Maxine Kumin's *Credo* rise to the old professor's conscious memory:

> I trust them to run from me...I trust them
> to gallop back, skid to a stop, their nostrils
> level with my mouth, asking for my human breath
> that they may test its intent, taste the smell of it.
> I believe in myself as their sanctuary
> and the earth with its summer plumes of carrots....

The wind picks up. He can smell the freezing rain closing in, coming on sooner than the meteorologist predicted, pushing its way over the pines and into Lucius's hillside field. Who can tell how long it will last? An hour? All day? Days and nights? What are the signs? Who can read them? Will this be the night that freezing rain will soak through Ginger's coat, and she will lie down under the pines, shivering into a final sleep?

He turns, snugging his coat collar against the wet wind, and leaving the field to the mare, walks past his warm house, climbs into the cold pickup and eases the sluggish truck into the road. *Blue Seal feed for pleasure and performance horses. Oats. Straw bales. Curry comb. Horse blanket.* □