MONARCHS, MORGANS, MIGRATION, TRANSLATION

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ONE: DANCE

My grandmother had changed into a tangerine-orange shirt and black pants. “To channel the monarchs,” she told me. The hollow-boned woman is folded into herself, a shock of orange flame billowing up from the multi-tonal scarf resting on her lap. In this pose, my grandmother is reminiscent of a newly hatched chrysalis.

“Grammy, tell me about your scarf dance.”

Susan Delattre, my dad’s mom, lives in Randolph, Vermont. Recently she’s devised a dance that’s loosely hinged upon cultural Native American movement styles. The idea for this performance came to her in a series of dreams. In her mind’s eye, she envisioned intergenerational dancers inviting the audience to pick up pretend butterflies and attach them to a great central tree. The dancers, grandmothers and young children alike, interwove together in homage to the butterflies. “I wanted a chance to honor them,” she told me.

She and I have alighted briefly, just resting, on the floor in one of Middlebury College’s dance studios. Music is still reminiscing through the speakers, and the lingering notes that underscored her fluid dance just moments before now provide the baseline for our conversation. She shimmers her shawl as she speaks to me. Perhaps she’s still rejoicing in how it flowed as she moved. The diaphanous, airy nature of the material mirrors a stately and transient journey through life.

My grandmother’s compulsion to dance comes to her in cycles, she tells me. Sometimes she’s drawn irresistibly and insatiably to the form, and sometimes, like when the ocean’s far-reaching fingertips recede away from a shoreline, it subsides and leaves her in peace.

This scarf dance represents migration. Not only that of her honored Monarch butterflies as they wing to Mexico for the winter, as I come to learn,

but also her own, from Minnesota to Vermont. She originally left Minnesota in effort to escape an impediment to her movement, back in 1997—namely, being stuck on a freeway for hours in a big urban area. When she and her dear friend had the chance to visit Vermont, she wondered at the new landscape.

"I was born and raised in Minnesota," she tells me, and her smile carries me back to my lake-pockmarked home. "That's under the prairie sky, where you get the dome of the sky, 360 degrees in every direction… You must have had something of the same experience when you came to Vermont with the mountains." My mind pinwheels back to flatter lands, and I nod.

"It just changes the whole world you live in." There is wonder in her eyes.

"When I came," she continues, "I was lucky enough to find a rural place, a little village, with the most spectacular hillside gardening area and a beautiful view of the Green Mountains." My grandmother grins impishly. "So I fell in love with the mountains! And have been ever since."

When I ask her whether she considers her journey to be more of a migration or an emigration, from one place to another permanently, she rustles her fabric wings for a moment in thought.

"It's a little taste of each," she tells me. "I would certainly never just stay in Vermont and not go back to visit my family in Minnesota. Even the concept makes her sound indignant. "I would never do that."

My grandmother is an avid gardener, and she didn't even pause when I asked her about that part of herself she gained when she came east.

"Ah, connection with the land." That sunrise smile dawns across her face again. "Definitely a chance to be on the land, to be a steward of land, to observe, to notice, to watch how things grow, to watch the animals—some of which are my friends, some of which I wish would live elsewhere and not chomp down on my broccoli plants."

We laugh together.

She's somewhat of a monarch butterfly herself, my grandmother. Fragile and poetic, something deep in her genetic makeup sends her circling back to visit her Minnesotans. Now, as a dancer on her own land, amongst the kale and the root vegetables she's planted, my grandmother dances in cycles. When the planet rotates and winter puts her plants to sleep under a bedding of snow, she takes to the local community and becomes more active in its choirs and campaigns. When the summer settles back over Vermont like the shawl resting on her shoulders, it finds her speaking to the flow of the seasons and twirling back outside to water and harvest again.

"The land I've found in Vermont is a wonderful opportunity to just be in nature and somehow open my heart to other forms of life than humans," she concludes. In all of her orange-and-black glory, I love watching her glow as she speaks. It makes me hesitate a moment before I ask the second half of the question.

"Now tell me about a part of you that you lost."
The music, time-keeping like a heartbeat, pulses to measure her pause.

"I was part of a very vibrant dance community in Minneapolis," she begins with deliberation, "and I lost that. Especially the duet form called contact improvisation… I was part of a group that met *every Thursday for ten years."* We both contemplate the weight of that. "When you move with people over that period of time"—here, a sad smile—"basically, there was a core of us who knew each other at that level of exchange of energy that you get in contact improv. That was the finest movement experience of my life.

"There are contact improv opportunities in Vermont, but not in a little rural village." I imagine her aged and papery wings, still stately, but slightly weighed down by regret.

TWO: Horses

I grew up with an obsession. My grandmother counts her migration from Minnesota to Vermont in monarch butterflies, but I would prefer to count mine from a well-worn saddle and track my years in horses.

One of my earliest memories is playing on the floor during a dinner party with the late-90s equivalent of a horse pillow pet. I remember lying on the floor, mimicking the way it had its legs outstretched, and passing a pleasant evening frolicking and galloping around the feet of my mom's cousin from out of town. Something in me recognized a kindred spirit in its lumpy, huggable form, and from there it was only a short skip over a low standard to true horse addiction.

Like dancing for my grandmother, the pull of my connection to horses is cyclical. I remember breaking a saddle when I was little—about ten years old. Darla, the owner, had entrusted me with holding onto two very "adult" mounts. Bubba and Hillary, alpha mares, were only ridden by the crème de la tourist crowd if the out-of-townies were deemed capable of handling more headstrong rides. Darla had asked me if I wanted to hold the horses in the corral or down in the barn, and I remember feeling intoxicated by the power associated with such a decision.

"Oh, the barn is fine." I'm sure I said in a sassy, breezy ten-year-old way.

It was around that time in my history of horses that I thought I knew everything…. and when I realized that Darla was taking a really long time with whatever chores she was doing up in the corral I, out of boredom, decided to make another executive decision—I'd move the horses up to the corral *all by myself*. She'd probably applaud me for it, and give me a horse handler metal.

So I thought.

But first that involved getting Hillary around Bubba, and I decided that I could do it without unclipping the crossties. See, that was a decision that I didn't really have the knowledge to make well. I didn't unclip the crossties, and I kind of pulled one horse under the other, and they kind of got stuck on each other, and both horses spooked, and there was this huge amount of noise and Darla running down to the barn, and I will never forget her face when she said, "you broke a saddle." I remember feeling so bad about it and thinking "I can never go back there—I can never go back to horses, I'm so embarrassed."

The belief that I knew *everything* about horses and could do things *all by myself, thank you very much* sparked the first time I took a hiatus from horses. More than breaking the saddle, I felt like I'd failed because I'd let Darla down. After several months, though, I couldn't remember how not to return to the stable.

The next time, however, I cycled away from horses out of heartbreak. The white steed of my childhood dreams, Patrick, was crazy enough that no one else wanted to ride him, and I was thrilled to have him all to myself. It didn't bother me that he spooked at the rain, jumped at the *idea* of small animals, and spent trail rides practicing his evil eye on the other horses. Unfortunately, Patrick was not a good investment in the tourist riding industry. When Darla sold him at the end of one summer, I couldn't really bring myself to go back to the stable. With Patrick gone, I eased back to riding about once a year. I didn't know how to hold on to the connection with the whole equine community after I'd been detached from my connection to the white-coated representation of the best of it.

I'm not sure when I decided to try to outgrow the idea of being the horse girl. Maybe it happened when I finally realized the exorbitance of the cost of lessons, or maybe when long, backcountry trails and soft whickers became less and less accessible. The pursuit of childhood horse dreams ebbed

from my daily routine as I attended high school and I made no move to rekindle them when I migrated East.

This January finds me in the middle of my longest hiatus from horses yet. I didn't bring horses with me to Vermont. In fact, I hardly brought horses with me to Middle School.

They are haunting me, though. More and more I get the sense that my life wasn't supposed to include permanently cycling away from a lifestyle of horses. All it took was watching Hidalgo the other night, where the man and his horse travel thousands of miles together from desert into ocean, for my compulsion to flare up again. Thus, I've turned into a madwoman this January, calling people to pester them for horse-access. I'm bound and determined to see what kind of impact horses in Vermont have on my narrative with this place. I could rekindle something life-shifting here, in this barn, and I'm wiling to overlook the questionable legality of my endeavor to find out.

THREE: Legalities

"I'm fairly certain this counts as breaking and entering," I'm telling Aaron as we throw our shoulders into prying apart the colossal white doors. The darkness of the barn within provides stark contrast to the blinding winter day. Vision blurs at the edges as the seemingly sub-zero temperature pulls tears from my eyes. I make him reread the text message.

"The building looks closed from the outside on the upper level, but the door is open. Go on in and downstairs to where the horses are. They're there to help!! Eureka."

It's too cold to do anything else. "Sounds perfectly legal," Aaron placates, maybe semi-convinced. Aaron and I have shared a bevy of glorious but questionably advisable escapades in the year and a half that we've known each other at college. The most recent of these, however, landed us on the Middlebury police call-log when we tried to scale the Otter Creek dam for his 20th birthday. My ambition for today is to avoid any similar consequences.

The next text message from my professor reads, "Things are HAPPENING. GO FOR THE GUSTO." I pause in frigid consideration, inhale sharp Vermont air, and finally step through the double doors.

For the last two weeks I've been a lady looking for a horse. At 9:15 am this morning I was checking emails before my feet even touched the floor. My last hope for a riding lesson today answered the phone, *finally,* and apologized for not calling me back earlier.

"It's too cold—the horses probably won't get turned out this week at all," Andrea tells me. Her previously warm voice was made tinny by an un-gappable distance between us. "Let me give you Mary's number, though! I don't teach when it's less than 10 degrees, but she's braver than I am. She might be able to do Friday. Hold on."

Hold on has been the refrain I've been fidgeting through for two weeks. I started searching for horses by calling every trail-riding facility in the state of Vermont that offered winter riding. Mad River Inn wasn't taking horses out, and neither was Pond Hill, because of ice on the trails. The Icelandic Horse Farm told me that because of the weather, their horses hadn't been out at all this winter, and they would be "pretty frisky" their first time out. It's very difficult to explain over the phone to someone you've never met that respectfully, you are an experienced enough rider to handle an enthusiastic mount.

Next, I considered borrowing a car and driving down to New Jersey to visit a horse-rescue facility that I've been following on the internet, but the 10+ hour round trip proved unmanageable in light of my other J-term commitments. Connecting with people who live nearby Middlebury and own horses for pleasure seemed another promising route. *Sorry, crazy week,* I was met with. *You need footage by when?? Oh, I don't turn my horses out when it's below zero. We could try in a couple of weeks.* Vermont winter was trying to tell me to *hold my horses,* and I was lamenting bad fortune and fighting a snippy comeback about not having any to hold.

The lead from my professor this morning, then, came after more than twenty phone calls, a dozen "no's" and at least half that many excuses as to why not. I was unhappy with these illusive horse-people. I wanted *neighs,* not *no's.*

Egged on by that "GO FOR THE GUSTO," though, and equipped with the dubious set of instructions for getting to my cherished steeds, I had called Aaron around ten. Within fifteen minutes we were on our way to Morgan Horse Farm. And now here, showerless and mostly breakfast-less, stand I, examining the upper level of the UVM-owned barn and more than ready to see my first horse up close this January.

There is no signpost more pronounced than the strong horsey, homey smell.

"Down, he said."

We walk down a winding ramp and I check my excitement by whispering to Aaron that mules are better over steep inclines like this, because unlike horses, mules can see all four of their feet at once. That's why people ride mules on mountain treks, I babble. Ahead of us, there are thumps coming up out of the darkness. Aaron indulges my nervous steam of horse-default trivia wordlessly.

We reach the bottom of the stairs.

"Hi-I'm-Brennan-Delattre-Peter-Lourie-sent-me" made it out of my mouth with the quiet and somewhat apologetic tenor of a person whose agenda most certainly does not include being labeled a breaker-and-enterer. Between the man and the woman present, she hadn't even had time to finish a "who are you?" before he was coming toward me with a hearty "Ah, Brennan!" and his hand outstretched.

Part of me realizes that I had stopped keeping track of individual horse people at least five calls ago in light of all of the failed scheduling with various Lisas and Lindseys and Donnas and Andreas. I am appalled to realize I didn't even know this man's name. Formality-less enthusiasm leapt from him to me like a brushfire spark anyway as he beckons me forward

and

there

is

a

horse.

Big eyes. The black-chestnut stallion might as well have been a mythical beast for as much as I believed this moment was finally happening. The man in charge, whip-smart and exuding jolliness through his no-nonsense demeanor, whisks a soft brush into my hand, informs me that this horse had just been worked, and that he was thinking that I could help out.

Of course!

The brush in my hand is a natural extension of my arm. No amount of shock at being whirl-winded into the morning at the Morgan Horse Farm could compete with the familiarity of this pattern. I am grateful for something to do with my hands, and I take to trying to sponge up the calm and warmth that seep off the horse as I absorb in my surroundings. The man and the woman are chatting and Aaron is filming, and I resume the quest to break through my coma of glee so I can contribute coherently to the conversation.

AHH YESSS YAY HORSE FINALLY LOOK, LOOK, WHEEEEE!!

It takes a moment.

My coherency flirts forward like an anxious, wobbly-legged foal as I breathe into this horse's nostrils. Long ago I picked up the habit from a trainer who told me that this is how horses approach one another, familiarizing themselves with each other's scent.

Finally, *finally,* I catch our hosts' names.

The young woman is Kimberly, an Addison-county native, and she's been riding since age seven. She used to work at a doctor's office, and once upon a time owned her own horses, but now she spends every day here at the

Morgan horse farm. She tells me the story of the first horse she fell in love with. Tanner was a little appaloosa Morgan mare that she had from the age of seven until college.

Steven Davis the director of the Morgan horse farm. More than anything else, Steve addresses me as "lady." When I ask him to tell me his story, Steve crow-hops sideways into the history of the stable instead. After, he tells us that the Morgan Horse farm has forty-nine horses and seven foals expecting in the spring. The first is due on Saint Patrick's Day, and if it comes on the due date, everyone will drink green beer.

"Right, Aaron?" the director jokes merrily with my companion, inviting him to join in with robust laugher.

It's no wonder Steve has offered us a complementary history lesson. He's worked with the Morgan Horse farm for *forty years*—twice as long as I've been alive. Unbidden, my grandmother's voice flutters back to me on gossamer wings, tinged with lament. "People who stay in one place have a deep connection to their place, you see. If you can stay in a place that you love, want to be in, and feel connected to—that's a gift!"

I quickly learn that Steve is the kind of man who offers *neighs,* not *no's.* Today this pair has thirty Morgans with the equine equivalent of cabin-fever because of the cold. Not ten minutes into our acquaintance, the director offers to let me ride one of them.

FOUR: TRANSLATION

In Australia, the monarch is called the wanderer butterfly, known for its massive and far-ranging migration. My grandmother dreamed about an intergenerational dance to represent her butterflies, and this is particularly apt for the monarchs. Each year the species migrates from Canada and upper regions of the United States, flying more than *2,500 miles* to overwinter in Texas and New Mexico, before winging back up the country in the spring. What is most remarkable about this north-south mission, though, is that *no individual butterfly* makes the entire round trip. One generation of monarchs flies to the overwintering location, where the females lay their eggs, and then the long-distance travellers die. Theories abound as to how that generation's offspring navigate the South-North leg of the journey, and these hypotheses range from inherited flight patterns to circadian-clock-based Sun compasses that depend on the butterflies' antennae, to photoreceptor proteins that are sensitive to violet-blue light and allow the butterflies to use earth's magnetic field for orientation.

It seems almost magical, but one way or another the next generation is compelled back up.

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Steve's first question to me:

"So how much time do you have, lady?"

"I need to be back for my shift as a Portuguese waiter for language tables in an hour and a half.'" His next question becomes whether or not I am fluent in the language.

My first question to Steve:

"So what can I improve upon for next time?" My boots have just hit the floor after I've dismounted, and I'm eager and exuberant for feedback.

"We don't have two years," Steve replies, not unkindly. "You managed to keep the horse between your legs, and that's what matters."

I'm coming to discover that riding at a new barn is like translating between two romance languages. If my horse knowledge from the Midwest is the equivalent of being proficient in Spanish, then here at the Morgan Horse Farm, it's like I'm trying to communicate to them in the equivalent of native Portuguese. There are things that are the same in this barn as in ones I have known, and things that are most decidedly not. Just like being a language table waiter, I have to watch out for false cognates.

Beleza, belleza, caballo, cavalo. Steve is telling me about the horse that's scheduled to be worked next. Xenophon is the tallest stallion here, and I ask for the horse's height in hands. The hand system, for instance, is universal; four inches always equals one hand. No matter where in the country you ride horses, a sixteen-hand horse is sixty-four inches tall at the shoulder. Interlopers like me can find comfort in familiarities like this as foreigners in other stables.

When I go to help Steve and Kimberly saddle Xenophon, the tack is nearly identical to what I've used in Minnesota, and I have no trouble attaching the girth. Just because I know where everything goes, however, doesn't mean that I'll be putting on the tack to their standards. For instance, there is no across-the-board measurement that I've ever seen to determine how tight a trainer prefers for the horse's girth (the part of the saddle that goes around the midsection). I try to make light of the necessity to ask:

"Aaron, did I ever tell you that I spent summers helping lead trail rides in Wisconsin? As you can imagine, those horses probably weren't very

happy about having to carry tourists around the woods all day long. Whenever one of us went to tighten a saddle, though, the horses would suck huge amount of air, and then wait until they had those heavy riders on their back to blow all of the air out. Suddenly the saddles wouldn't be tight anymore, and the rider would go sliding off one side."

Steve laughs. "We'll check the saddle again in the arena," said the head trainer, dispelling my fear that my unfamiliarity with their methods might compromise my safety.

Especially once perched on that saddle, the language barrier proved intimidating. No matter who you are, sitting a horse you've never ridden in front of people who clearly know both that horse and horses in general is an unnerving experience. Just like any international student uprooted and tasked with communicating in a language where she lacks necessary vocabulary and verb tenses, I have moments of being afraid. Though the horse's strides feel as regular and comforting beneath me as my own breath, it takes several passes over the chilly sawdust of the indoor arena before I feel confident with how I am posting in the saddle.

More than once as I ride at the Morgan Horse Farm finds Steve giving me an instruction that I know how to carry out, that *he* knows I know how to carry out, and yet still somehow, it does not get performed. The way the instruction is conveyed would have made perfect sense to the hypothetical Portuguese speaker, or someone who is used to this barn and to the Morgan breed. For someone attuned to the equivalent of Spanish—*me*—what Steve was saying gets lost under verbal nuances, instead. As a result, the poetic flow of communication between horse, rider, and trainer is disrupted.

This was frustrating for each of us.

I'm dismayed that I can't convey my understanding of horseback riding and the years I've invested in becoming better at this sport to my new friends at the Morgan Horse Farm.

Moving across the country is also translation. We move through life translating between places, between languages, and learning a new dialect every time we're introduced to someone new. Some parts of myself are harder to convey than others. Coming to college, I've had to decide which parts of me are worth working finding new words for. At the barn this morning, for instance, I don't have my white childhood horse Patrick beneath me, just like my grandmother didn't have her contact improv group around her when she devised her scarf dance in a dance studio in Vermont. She worked alone.

This horse story is a puzzle piece to help me understand more wholly who I am, though. I don't want it to get lost in translation or translocation.

Really, ultimately, what matters is keeping that horse between your legs. Migration can be hard. Not all monarch butterflies make it to Texas or Mexico to overwinter; my grandmother no longer has her dance community, and throughout my lifetime, I've lost track of of my horses. Even here, with one at the end of the lead rope in my hands, I've lost the ability to communicate myself to the horse people around me.

Translation can be messy, and sometimes it seems to require breaking and entering. Now I'm doing what I can to break through the language barrier.

In this arena, as in life, we move cyclically. Cantering from one letter on the wall to another is just like the ebb and flow of my grandmother's fluid, oscillating scarf. I delight in the aortic sound of my horse's hooves pounding the ground—th-THUMP, th-THUMP—much the way I imagine my grandmother exalts in the flow of her scarf as she moves. She dreamt an

intergenerational dance, and that's what we are performing, her and I, moving in cycles around stables and studios. We embrace the circles and, by asking something of our companions, we learn something about ourselves as we travel. If migration were easy and we walked into new places knowing how to navigate every situation, I'm sure, we would lack the compulsion to move forward.

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When Steve learns that I'm only a sophomore, he tells me that I'm welcome to come volunteer at the Morgan Horse Farm regularly. "What with all of your free time…" he jokes, referring to my three on-campus jobs.

I rested a hand on the dark, furry neck beside me. The heat thawed my fingertips more effectively than anything else to date this winter. "Some things are worth it, though," I say, as the horse exhales steam.

Here is the core of my connection with Steve:

"What do you love most about horses?"

"Oh, golly," the man, cheerful and frost-flushed under his green cap, considers my question as he reaches under the stud's chin to unhook the cross ties that have held him still as we groomed him. "I love their beauty." He leans into the dark stallion. "Their beauty… and their intuitive intelligence. They can sense our emotions. Have you heard the term "horse sense"?

"Love" is the same in Spanish and Portuguese—pronounced a little differently, but still *a-m-o-r.* Each person's "the first time I fell in love with a horse" story translates no matter what barn you go to—we each have one. The connection, what ties us to these animals and ties us together, transcends language. Immediately I establish roots with Kimberly when I

hear about her little mare Tanner, and I'm thrown back to memories of horses that have caused me to speak of their antics with that same gooey expression.

My grandmother roots herself in Minnesota and Vermont, but more than that, she roots herself in dance. She is an admirer and proponent for growing things, and as such, she can ground herself anywhere.

And ultimately, I'm thinking, as I'm cantering around the ring, *there's a scarf in her hand and a horse underneath me, and that's enough*. "Love" is the same word in Spanish and Portuguese… *yes.* I'm flying around the arena, happy that my adventure included discovering that some sentiments cannot get lost in translation.

My grandmother retells her journey in monarch butterflies—and mine? I'm not a hundred percent sure yet.

But horses can be part of the answer.

FIVE: Epilogue

My adventure this January has shifted my way of thinking. All winter long I've talked about going "back" to horses, going "back" to Minnesota, and mistakenly thinking that if I worked hard enough I could go "back" to the person I've been.

We don't *go* back to horses, or Minnesota. We can't. Like monarchs, no one version of ourselves will complete an entire round trip—to a place, or a love, or a state of being.

In travelling, we flutter to a new place as interloper butterflies and become reborn. Our old selves tenderly lay the fruits of thousands of miles of flight as a foundation for our new selves to move forward. Deep within our genetic framework, our childhood and adolescence notions have given birth to reverence, and give us a map to return to where we've been.

We can't circle back, though.
Instead, we cycle forward.