



The Balky Horse
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I imagine the creative process as a balky horse, one of those mares that will dig in with her hoofs and brace her legs, close her eyes to slits and lay back her ears as she refuses my tug of the halter rope. Hot sun beating down on the corral, faint rotten-cinnamon odor of long-pulverized manure, shadows of indifferent cumulus floating overhead. I could stand here and jerk at her halter rope all day, but she's not to be budged. Her obstinance infuriates me. If I had a rifle, I swear I'd shoot her between the eyes and leave her to rot. And all the while, I know that once I give up, unsnap the halter rope, and head for the house, she'll relax. She'll wander over to the shade of the barn where she'll sleep on her feet. No more bother in her life than a somnolent switch of her tail for flies.

On a better morning, the mare lets me bridle and saddle her, even ride her a few yards down the road along the pasture fence to bring in my dad's cows for the morning's milking. It should be a pleasant ride through the faint turpentine scent of pine needles and the dustier hint from drooping hawthorn leaves and bristles of hawthorn thorns of warmer weather to come. But the mare watches her chance to lurch against those thorns, hoping that stabbing me in the leg will convince me to turn back to the barn. Or—better yet—maybe she can dive under that low-hanging pine bough and scrape me out of the saddle. If that fails, she'll start to plod, plod, plod, slower and slower, having to be spurred again and again until my legs ache.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 50 describes the poet's journey on a balky horse:

How heavy do I journey on the way,
 When what I seek, my weary travel's end,
 Doth teach that ease and that repose to say,
 "Thus far the miles are measured from thy friend!"
 The beast that bears me, tired with my woe,
 Plods dully on, to bear that weight in me,
 As if by some instinct the wretch did know
 His rider loved not speed being made from thee.
 The bloody spur cannot provoke him on
 Which sometimes anger thrusts into his hide,
 Which heavily he answers with a groan
 More sharp to me than spurring to his side;
 For that same groan doth put this in my mind:
 My grief lies onward and my joy behind.

I first paid close attention to Sonnet 50 in a postgraduate seminar at Rice University in Houston, for which I'd received an NEH fellowship to attend. Discussion around the seminar table, as I recall, focused on the obvious parallel the poet draws between "The beast that bears me . . . plods dully on," and the poet's own reluctance to travel away from his friend. My mind must have wandered, as it often does, to make its own associations, in a cow pasture many miles

from that seminar table in Houston, and suddenly I was struck by the realistic detail in the sonnet's description of riding an unwilling horse.

Shakespeare was living in London by the time he wrote Sonnet 50, and he probably wasn't riding his own horse, but a horse hired from a livery stable, which "answers with a groan" when he is spurred, reminding me of the myriad sounds a rider hears from a horse—the clip clop of hoofs, belly rumbles, gurgles, wheezes, snorts, hide ripples, farts. Meanwhile the livery stable horse, weary of being rented out to one clumsy rider after another, has become barnblind. He wants only to return to his familiar stable, and he'll swap ends in the middle of the road and head for home if he thinks he can get away with it. Failing in that trick, he'll plod, plod, plod, while the exasperated rider tries and fails to "provoke him on" with the "bloody spur."

Of course the "bloody spur" is a metaphor for the poet's pain at leaving his friend, but anyone who has seen the rowel of a spur driven into a horse's side until it draws blood will be struck first, not by the metaphor, but by the raw image. As I looked around the seminar table that day in Houston, the obvious dawned on me: most academics do not spend their teenaged years chasing their fathers' milk cows out of brushy pastures on a balky horse.

Shakespeare, from what we can tell, doesn't seem to have suffered from writers' block, and he didn't need to spur the horse bloody to write the sonnet, but he lived close to his own ground, and I am jolted by the living presence of the man in his sudden "anger thrusts" into the horse's side. I live mostly in my head nowadays, but at least I've gone horseback-riding with Shakespeare.

I completed my fifty-fourth year of teaching and formally retired from the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Idaho in June of 2016. I cleared out my campus office and went home and opened the computer file of a novel I had been trying, off and on, to write for several years. It's easier for me to describe riding a balky horse than to describe writers' block. Probably many of us experience the block differently, although I've listened to a number of writers who speak of a compelling need to tackle long-delayed chores, like gutter-cleaning, floor-polishing, rearranging books on shelves, any task to avoid the computer screen. One man remembered sitting at his manual typewriter and obsessively cleaning the carbon out of its keys with the head of a pin. I can relate to all these methods of avoidance, although I've long been haunted by the words of a friend who, terminally ill with lung cancer, said he'd simply lost interest in the novel he had begun.

A denial of writers' block is common, I believe, and I was in denial from my retirement in June until well into the new year, although, as in any denial, I only realized in retrospect that I'd been in it. Getting any writing done? A friend would ask, and *Oh yes*, I would answer, *now that I've got all the time in the world to write!* Because I really was writing, wasn't I? I sat at the computer every day at first—then many days, quite often, really—for several hours, spending only about 45 minutes of that time playing spider solitaire. Between losing bouts of solitaire, I was tinkering with the shapes of sentences, weeding out adverbs, writing purple passages of description that the next day I would delete. The truth was, my novel was not advancing.

Then my life took a turn as sharp as a horse swapping ends in the middle of a road to return to the home barn. On a Friday in 2017, three weeks into the spring semester at the University of Idaho, I received an email from my former department chairman. One of the creative writing professors had been placed on administrative leave. By law, the chairman could not discuss the circumstances of the leave (naturally everyone was speculating about it), but one of the classes

the professor had had to abandon was a graduate seminar in the history of the personal essay. Could I possibly consider returning from retirement to take over the seminar?

I had never taught the history of the personal essay, but I knew many of the MFA students who would be enrolled in the seminar, and I couldn't let them down. Yes, I emailed the chairman. *When does the seminar meet? Do you have the textbooks and the syllabus?*

That's a relief, he immediately emailed back. *The next class meets this coming Tuesday at 9:30. I don't have the textbooks or a syllabus, but I can put you in touch with a student who does.*

I no longer had an office on campus, so on Saturday morning I met the student at a downtown coffee shop. She was in tears. She had lost her thesis advisor, after all, within six weeks of her final defense. But she had brought a copy of the syllabus and one of the textbooks and told me the students had read essays by Samuel Johnson and were reading those of Robert Louis Stevenson for discussion on Tuesday.

As dark rumors about the state of the Idaho MFA program spread their wings to fly around campus and across the West, I was too busy to open my novel file or even think about my novel because I was comforting bewildered students, gathering up the loose ends of the syllabus, and preparing for classes by burrowing into the readings the previous professor had assigned. I found myself on five MFA thesis committees that his departure had left vacant, which meant five theses, each about 100 pages, to read and comment on. The tearful student who had found a syllabus for me left campus for the university's Week in the Wilderness program, and she and I worked line by line via email on the memoir that would become her thesis which she recently published. And now I will indulge in the pleasure of another metaphor drawn from horseback riding. As that semester came to an end, I felt the way I imagined I might if I'd been astride a bucking horse when it burst out of the rodeo chute for its full-tilt eight seconds: *wow, I'm glad that's over, but I'm also glad to know I could do it.*

I went home from campus on May 7, 2017, sat down in front of my computer, and recorded the final grades for the students in the class I had just ended. Then I opened my novel file and began to write. By the end of the afternoon, I had found what I hadn't known I was looking for: my story.

How-to-write books are full of advice on how to combat writers' block. A popular strategy is the timed free-write, in which the writer is directed to put pen to paper, or more likely, fingers to keyboard, and for the allotted time, not to stop writing or keyboarding, even if that means repeating the same word over and over until another word suggests itself. A new idea, the books insist, is bound to emerge from the timed exercise, even if it has to be dug out of a dross of verbiage. But for the six or seven months in 2015 when I was trying to finish a draft of a novel and never got farther than developing a handful of characters and detailing their settings, timed free-writes frustrated me, finally bored me, and sent me back to playing game after game of spider solitaire. Then I got the email from my former chairman and went back to teaching.

My question for myself became, why did my months of work, including free-writing exercises, fail to spur the balky mare? And could I draw a line that connected those months of futile work, its interruption by full-tilt emergency teaching under short deadlines, and my deep breath when I submitted those final grades and reopened my abandoned novel file? Because—I can hardly believe this, even as I write it—that day the balky mare threw up her head and her tail and

streaked for the horizon. In 30 days I had written a first draft of what would become my novel *Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin*. During those 30 days I hardly left my computer. If I tore myself away to feed the dog or get the trash out to the curb ahead of the garbage truck, I was imagining my next scene, and I tore back to fling more words across the monitor.

A first draft is only a first draft, of course. For the next many days I revised and revised, cutting and pasting, deleting and expanding, but by autumn I was hitting Save for the final time and opening a file to begin another novel.

How could I have done this? I think of the great writers—Wordsworth, defining poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in a period of tranquility, or A.E. Housman, describing his creative process as taking an afternoon walk for two or three hours after drinking a pint of beer and allowing images and emotions to flow through his mind, bringing a few lines of verse and sometimes a complete stanza, which he later would write down. But overlooking the audacity of putting my name in the same sentence with theirs, I puzzled over Wordsworth's period of tranquility and Housman's beer, which, as he points out, is a sedative for the brain. No one could describe my final semester at the University of Idaho as tranquil or sedating.

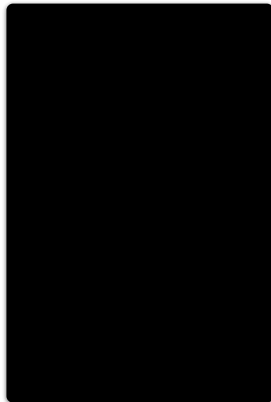
In an essay by the great French mathematician Henri Poincare, he describes his experiences as he struggled to define Fuchsian functions, beginning on a night when, out of frustration at his lack of progress, he drank black coffee and could not sleep. Out of his exhaustion, he notes, "ideas rose in clouds" and "collided," and in the morning he had only to write out the results.

When the next step in his research was interrupted by travel, he says that he forgot about his search for Fuchsian functions, only to have an idea come to him just as he was about to board a bus. Home again, he verified his findings, but before he reached a conclusion, he was called for military service, in which, he says, he "was very differently occupied." Once again, a crucial piece of his puzzle came to him as he walked down a street, and on returning home, he tells us, "I wrote out my final memoir at a single stroke and without difficulty."

Military service. Hmm.

To be interrupted in problem-solving, whether mathematical or literary, by a very different and demanding task at least sounds very like my experience in closing my novel file and taking up that final seminar, not to speak of the five thesis committees and the anxious students. That the seminar turned out to be one of the best I've ever directed, with great material and bright, talented, and challenging students, was probably a plus in releasing the creative spontaneity from wherever it was lurking beneath my conscious thought. Nor do I discount the months I spent in revising and deleting, playing with the shapes of sentences, trying out one verb or another, the hard work in futile pursuit of the story I didn't know I was searching for.

Have I outlined a recipe for novel-writing here? Of course not. Like greater talents before me, I can only describe what the process felt like, including the hard work as well as the years I've spent trying to master the writing craft. If you're going to ride the balky mare with spurs, you'd better learn how to ride.



Mary Clearman Blew has written or edited fifteen books of fiction and nonfiction. Her short fiction collection, *Runaway*, won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, as did her memoir *All but the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family*. A novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, won the Western Heritage Award. Her most recent nonfiction book is *This Is Not the Ivy League: a Memoir*, which depicts her educational path, beginning with enrollment in a country school in Montana and culminating with her professorship in creative writing at the University of Idaho. Her novel *Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin* was released in September 2018, and a linked novel, *Sweep Out the Ashes*, is expected to appear in 2020 as the second volume in a *High Plains* trilogy.

