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Kittitas Horses · *Mark Halperin*

From far off we heard the din
of trampling horses and howling dogs,
and by noon were seeking the camp's center,
a coolness of children through which we moved
cautiously, not to breach
their etiquette. And that night
the braves went about stealing our horses,

our kettles no sooner on the fire
than five or six spears bore off their contents.
The next day, by luck or grace,
I thought to fetch a paper-cased looking glass
and a little vermilion too
to Eyacktana, their chief, with whom I criss-crossed
the camp as he shouted, *deliver up the horses*

and more softly, *I have spoken well in your favor,*
snatching beads as fast as I fished them up,
two buttons, then two rings. My fear
had long since passed into lassitude.

I told myself, I am reading a book
with marbled covers: two men, both white, meet.
The first cradles a rifle. Under a huge cliff
of brow, his eyes are black, blank
until the second, mounted and resembling me,
comes abreast. When the horse passes
he drops to one knee

and fires. I was free
to pay the toll of my disposition: not axes
for beaver pelt or horses
but our lives in my impossible calculations,
my refuge. I see Eyacktana
grabbing the knife from one of my Canadians,
the man, enraged, making toward him;
for a longer time, Indians chinking the gaps.

Here my friend
is a chief's knife, I said, with no book
the outcome of which is hidden only by
dirtied paper. Eyacktana
held it aloft as he would hold the stone pipe.

At that moment, he was
no more mysterious than my own kind
in the settlement or the man in the story,
gratuitous as all of these exchanges:
the eighty-five Kittitas horses I got, the presents
of Eyacktana—two horses, twelve beaver,

dark, luxurious pelts. I sent
my men off then, but before I left,
gave away my belt, my hat and pipe,
and when their women brought a variety of eatables,
ate hungrily, like a man who has just passed through
a great danger
or become its prisoner.