

Parting Shot

That was the last day I saw you look out across the door, the last time your ears pricked on seeing me walk up the path. I did not slip, up over your velvet grey muzzle, your frayed, old, blue headcollar, with the rusted buckle. Or lead you out, and feel you pull and prance and jerk your head up high, eager for release. Inside the gate, let loose, you did not swing around, head tossing, tail swishing, nostrils flared, before you leapt and bucked, all four off the ground, to welcome freedom or to warm yourself, of which, I was never quite sure.

In that spot of level ground, a few yards from the fence, you did not pace and paw and gather yourself in, and ballet bow, front legs first, to plop your heavy flanks onto the shallow bowl of earth you claimed for rolling. There were no white scurfy tufts left lying on the flattened clay, or puffs of snowflake hairs on the wind, where you used to stand and shake life back into your old bones.

This morning, I had no call to fork out loose hay to the field and curse when gusts of wind would send stray wisps across my clothes and rolling tendrils onto the lawn.

Nor did I hear your expectant whicker at the sound of the lid being lifted off the black feed bin, the crunch of the scoop and the balm of sweet molasses on the grain, as it fell like candied fruit into your red plastic feed bucket. Not today. You had no desire to lift your laminitic hoof to scrape and spark the rough concrete, while your velvet lips would curl and scuffle and nudge around the bucket, until no single grain escaped. Today, you could not eat. Like yesterday and the day before, when even the succulence of chopped up apples and carrots proffered on my hand could not tempt your failing organs back to working life.

There was no need to lean my shoulder into yours and draw my arm, slowly down, to squeeze gently on the fetlock, for you were always willing and offered gladly, your upturned hoof, to let me pick the flat crescent moon of dried earth and odd solitary stone, lodged stubbornly between frog and metal shoe.

I didn't have the heart to pass my hand through the leather strap of your body brush, to pull it softly, as I would, had it been any other day, down between your ears, and smooth and straighten your coarse white forelock. Another day, I might have pulled your mane or tidied up your tail, and happily teased apart, in the idle space of vacant thought, the knots and burrs of neglect.

But today, I could not bring myself to trace my fingers, one final time, across the familiar pattern of the whorl in the middle of your forehead, perfectly positioned, between your eyes – the sign of a good temperament, true horsemen say. And they are right.

I could not bear, this last time, to raise a dust from curry comb and dandy brush, circling against the grain of your thick staring, Cushings coat, or risk a careless swipe across your stifle, to invite your quick familiar nip, which, by mutual understanding over many years, has become more affection than offense.

Today, with phone in hand, I took this one last parting shot before I drove away, convincing myself that I could not be late for work. A lame excuse for cowardice.

I had made the call. Arrangements had been put in place. Friends, less emotionally invested and more accustomed to the grim process, bravely offered to be there. My Lady Liath would be comfortable in their company, I was assured. With judicious firmness and no weak

display of tears, I was waved off before I'd meet the lorry on the drive. We were tough horsewomen, after all.

They led you down onto the cold hard gravel of the drive. It was easier there, they reckoned, less messy, to lift and load your dead weight.

No doubt, you smelt the knackery air from the raw grey sides of the tipper truck. I wonder did their morbid movements and grave talk instill in you a foreboding fear, making you want to rear, or pull and strain and toss your head and make the task more difficult than it already was.

They never told me any details. I never asked.

I was not there when the captive bolt was placed directly on your crown and gunshot pierced the still air of that December morning.

I was not there.

It is four years now and though grief of loss still visits from the black emptiness above your stable door, a thousand precious memories now come to fill that void. Time, indeed the healer.

Regret, however, is a different beast, that sits upon my shoulder and haunts and gnaws the flesh of my conscience down to the very bone of truth.

I was not there.