



Grounded

Kathryn Wilder

Amy Brakeman Livezey
Chore Bound, 12" x 12"
mixed media on panel

Grounded

I fall often. Like, down. Like all the way to the ground — on my ass, on my knees. Completely down. Six times in one week, I fell: three while snowshoeing, one on ice, one being hit by spooking horses when snow slid off the barn roof.

Then I fell while holding my one-and-a-half-year-old grandson. We both hit our heads. I tried so hard not to fall with him in my arms, and then not to drop him. But I did — I fell. He was okay. My head hurt. My leg was hugely swollen and bruised purple and black and yellow where I got it

caught in the tines of the tractor which are what tripped me. Or my focus on something other

caught in the lines of the tractor, which are what tripped me. Or my focus on something other than my feet tripped me. Age tripped me.

My grandson is okay. I said that already, but it is important. Still, the fear was large: my son Ken's fear when he saw me on the ground holding his baby, who was crying mightily. My fear during the fall, after the fall, right now. Hurting me is okay — I do it all the time. But Ken's words: "This is why ... " and then the unfinished sentence

Ken is concerned, watching me. So is my other son, Tyler, when he's here at the ranch or hears the stories. For me fear permeates the *now* part of the story, compounded by events like hitting my grandson's head on the 2 x 4 leg of a workbench (hitting mine on the steel tractor). It is the overriding anxiety of age, of questioning my place in my life.

When I would talk to my father and complain about getting older, he would say, "The alternative isn't much better." My classic line, when I tell this to people now, is, "He would say, 'The alternative isn't much better,' and then he died."

He died. He did. He died of "complications of a stroke," eleven days after the stroke knocked him to his bedroom floor.

It's not that I've led a fearless life. I simply advanced. With bullheaded doggedness I faced each fear and dove in. Until three people close to me died. Rebecca, my best friend for 42 years. Dad. Ed, my other father for 37 years. And I was 54, 55, getting older. Feeling fear and pushing against it, or into it, as I had always done. Doing things despite the fear:

Moving to a ranch too big for me to run alone.
Getting a horse too much for me.
Another horse. Another.
Adopting a mustang.

Time kept ticking by. Suddenly six years had passed since Rebecca, then Dad, then Ed — since all three died.

A person can do a lot in six years. And I suppose I did. I had horses, cows. Ran a family ranch with Ken — we irrigated, planted cover crops with a no-till drill seeder each spring and fall to restore the health of the soil, and found rangeland pasture for our cows. Started selling our grass-fed, grass-finished heritage beef at the local farmers markets. Spent time with each other — my sons and grandchildren and their mother and me.

For a while I had some horses. I'm down to three now. I do not have a horse I can ride. I do not push my fear up onto the back of a horse I own. Not Kua, who is too much horse for me. And Maui and Maka the mustang are still "colts" at four years old. Unstarted colts. I am 61. I don't want to start colts. Though we do a lot of groundwork, I don't want to put the first saddle or first ride on them. Because I am afraid. So, shame as well as fear. And shame of my fear. *No shame*, they say in Hawai`i, where I once lived, as in *no need to feel shame*. But I do.

This is when I would say to my father, "I don't like getting old," and he would say ... you know what he would say. Then he died.

I'm working with Maka the mustang. We're alone in the big round pen. He has grown into a big bay hunk of gorgeous horse. No one who sees him believes he's a mustang. I lift up his thick black

wavy mane to show them the BLM freeze brand that marks him as once wild on the range then

way make to show them the best horse stand that makes him as nice wild on the range, then captured.

People don't know the beauty of mustangs.

An easy 16 hands at the withers, his hooves are eight inches across. Salad plates. His hip and hindquarters and knees are huge. So is his heart, or so I think.

I'm in the center of his circle; he's in a rope halter with a lead rope twelve feet long so he has room to move his large yet graceful body around me. I have a turquoise flag — a long pliable metal rod with fabric at the tip that flutters and speaks but will never hurt a horse.

He trots around the round pen so smoothly and easily, lopes the same way, watching me with the inside eye, one ear pivoting outward as he monitors the whereabouts of Maui, Kua, and Ken's horses—Cisco and the family's little mustang Don Quixote—who all roam through the junipers in the pasture that adjoins the round pen. I know Maka needs to focus more on me so I stop him and turn him back, first the hind, then the front, and send him around the circle in the other direction.

Maybe the horses outside the round pen are running around with the weather, wind blowing in more rain or snow, but I don't really know — I'm watching my big beautiful mustang and my world has shrunk to him and me, my heart pounding love through me hard enough to crack my ribs. Like all young girls, which I am no longer, I want this horse to love me back the same way — with equal intensity. Yet his outside ear stays focused on the outside horses, and I know he is divided.

I keep him circling, asking his body to bend around me, his attention to focus inward. He curves in his slow trotting circle, so graceful in his size, the lead rope loose between us except when he turns his head to monitor the other horses and I give a quick jerk: Put your attention here, this tells him.

When he does, I stop him. Not through the rope but through my body — a single step back, my forward-pushing momentum withdrawn.

He stops his trot and turns toward me, first his hind, then his front, his back feet stepping over each other first and then his forefeet taking a cross-step to align him with me. Butt to the fence, head to me. I walk to him.

I think I walk to him to rub his forehead, to pet him, reward him in my human way. Touch. Words. My heart swollen with love.

I think I step slightly to his right side, his neck bending so he can look at me, and I don't know what I was going to do, I don't remember, I only remember being close to his big brown chest and heart and eyes, the reasons for his name, Makanani, beautiful eyes and heart and spirit, my focus so inside the small circle I have made of him and me that I do not have any consciousness of the world outside this circle or the bigger circle of the round pen.

But he does.

Something I will never know happens. I think I hit the ground and sit upright in seconds but when I look for him he is standing at the fence fifty feet away and he's still, not heaving with frightened breathing but standing calmly, watching me, the lead rope stretched out in front of him, as if he's ground tied. He's looking at me, at the lead rope, hip cocked, resting.

Does this tell me the passing of time between the tackle of his chest and me sitting up in the dirt? I don't know. Won't ever know.

I try to stand. Bad idea. So I sit there, knowing I hit my head or my head was hit, and I cannot stand and my ears are blocked of sound and my vision soft as I search my brain for answers.

I sit in the gravelly dirt of the round pen for a long time. I cannot stand. Or think. So I breathe. In, and then out. Maka does not move. He knows that if he does the snake of the lead rope will whip around his legs, biting him. I know that if I move I will tip over.

I'm on my butt, legs crooked in front of me, one arm supporting me. Maka's big chest or shoulder knocked me back and sideways. Or I fell back and sideways. Now as I sit crookedly I think I want to lie down. But I cannot. *Call Ken*. Cannot. I have no phone. I can't find my shades. I cry a little. My shades are behind me, launched off my face with the impact and lying in the dirt a few feet away. The flag is in front of me, probably dropped when I dropped. My body doesn't hurt (yet), but my brain won't focus. Fuzzy eyes, fuzzy brain.

I know I cannot sit here forever. Since I cannot call Ken, I have to go to him for help. I guess I know that much: I need help.

I'm sure I sit for a long time. Eight minutes, ten. And then I roll over and push myself up, knees to standing. I get my shades. Do I pick up the flag then, or later? I don't know. I walk to Maka. Pet him. Do something, lead him in a circle? Put something between the wreck and turning him out with the other horses. It is a small something. I don't remember it.

Somehow I stay walking, leading him. He follows like the big puppy he is, or can be. He follows me to the big heavy gate of the round pen. I remove his halter, not wanting to risk him jumping free out the gate with me still holding on to him. I rub him on the shoulder, I think, or neck. I don't know I smell of blood, don't know I'm bleeding, that the gash in my head will require seven staples; I only know I am living in two realms, dreaming while aware of my actions, undoing the halter, opening the gate. He stands there, unsure. I step to his hip, slight pressure, and he moves out through the gate before the other horses crowd in.

I think I close the gate. I don't remember picking up the flag but it is in my hands with Maka's halter. I think I manage to push the other heavy gate open and closed, and I'm outside the round pen. I know the way to Ken's. I know how far it is. It is a long way.

And there coming down the road is my friend Mary. She is visiting from Alaska and has gone on a walk. I remember this. She looks like an angel, her silver hair haloing out with the wind, her arms moving like wings. She catches up to me and passes, her walk brisk. I step slowly, placing one foot carefully in front of the other. I cannot speak. She slows, matching my deliberate pace.

"Are you okay?" she says. I feel her peering into my world.

Later she will tell me I said no. I don't remember. But if I said no, then I was not okay, because usually, still, I push through the thing that hurts or scares. Usually I am okay.

We keep walking and then there's the shade of piñon and juniper and she sets me down. I don't know that I need shade as the afternoon is chilled, but somehow it makes sense. A line in the dirt road between sun and shade and I'm on the shady side of the line.

"I'll go get the car" Mary says and asks directions to the house which I manage to give. But I

I'll go get the car," Mary says, and asks directions to the house, which I manage to give. But I don't manage to think *Go get Ken*.

Her rental car comes back, and I'm sitting in the road in the shade. Mary waits for a second before realizing that I cannot rise. She gets out and helps me up and into the car. I think we talk about the hospital, and finally I say, "Get Ken." She drives back down the driveway and finds Ken's wife, who gets Ken.

My son takes over, and together they put me in my Toyota and find my purse and Ken drives us to the hospital while Mary calls ahead. I am in an altered world. I saw Angel Mary walking down the road. Now Ken floats us to the hospital.

They have to help me into a wheelchair. I cannot walk on my own. But I'm not hurt, I think; I don't hurt. I don't know that I'm bleeding — no one has looked at the back of my head to see the gash where I bleed into my hair, into the collar of my down jacket, which I don't remember putting back on, blood in the hand-rolled Navajo silver necklace I always wear, turning it pink. Blood in my shirt. I don't know any of this until later. I only know I'm floating. I'm dreaming in the other world while talking to people in this one — this hospital world.

They take three cat-scan photos. They put seven staples in my head, closing the three-inch gash without shaving my hair. Sometimes, I think I'm lucid — I'm glad they don't shave my head — but when I try to tell Ken and Mary and the nurse and the doctor what I'm seeing, I can tell by their faces that lucid I'm not.

We're there for hours, and then angels Ken and Mary drive me back home. They make scrambled eggs for me. Mary washes my bloody neck. Ken goes back to his family and I dress for bed and climb into it, already dreaming.

Dreams I won't remember. Though I remember colors. And horses. Rainbow horses.

I don't know when it will start, but I know it will: their fear for me. Tyler calls with it in the morning. Even TJ, who lives out in Disappointment Valley fulltime, hiking and riding all over, mostly alone, mentions it: What if you were out here. Alone. You're an hour and a half to medical help, she says. I know.

Tyler asks if he should tell my mother. No, I say.

At the hospital, Ken looked at the back of my head. "It's clean," he said. "No gravel or dirt from the round pen. It was Maka's hoof," he decided. "He knocked you over and his hoof struck your head as he went by." Maka's big, salad-plate hoof.

I don't want it true. And I don't want to tell you why I don't want it true because I don't want to put words to the thought. My big beautiful mustang spooked, that is all. I was in his way, that is all.

I am fine now, a week later, staples removed, brain healing.

I am fine now, a month later, having rested my brain and body for weeks, but I have not yet worked with Maka again. I am still a bit wobbly, and nauseous at times.

Two months later, I am really fine. No longer fuzzy, confused, I am stacking hay bales, calving out cows, getting ready for irrigation to start. We have horses — a red bay, a palomino Paint, a dark

bay Ken's buckskin and the grandkids' grulla mustang — rainbow horses. I am looking for

day, her's backskin, and the granddads grand mustangs. I am looking for another — ranch-broke and wise in the ways of cattle work and taking care of a rider — a horse a kid or a woman in her sixties can ride. Because I am not ready to be grounded just yet. Because I still love seeing my world from the back of a horse — a broad world of redrock and rimrock and juniper and piñon pine and basin big sagebrush and those native grasses that thrive in this desert despite hardship.

Because I am aware that I want my life to change. I want the alternative to be better. Better than fear. And that is all.



Kathryn Wilder's essays have been listed as Notable in *The Best American Essays*, and published in such places as *River Teeth*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Midway Journal*, *Fourth Genre*, *High Country News*, and *Sierra*; many Hawai'i magazines; and more than a dozen anthologies. A graduate of the low-rez MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, Wilder was Artist-in-Residence at Denali National Park and Preserve in 2016, a 2016 and 2019 finalist for the Ellen Meloy Fund Desert Writers Award, and a 2018 finalist for the Waterston Desert Writing Prize. She lives among mustangs in southwestern Colorado, which are the subject of the work-in-progress from which "Grounded" emerged.

