



Pam Houston

The Sound of Horse Teeth on Hay in The Snow

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This morning the wind woke me at first light, howling against the storm window and threatening to tear a loose piece of flashing off the kitchen gutter. I'd been awake, writing till two, and hoped to sleep till 8, but William, my Irish wolfhound, was worried, emitting a micro-squeak about every thirty seconds or so—just long enough for me to have nearly dropped back off to sleep—and so now I was worried too. Not about the house, but the horses.

We've made it to February first, which means, hopefully, there won't be too many more nights of thirty-five (or worse) below zero. We've had a lot of those nights this year, in December and January, too many for the comfort level of my elderly horses who just keep hanging in there, year after year. A storm like this will elevate the temperature to zero or above. Still, a forty mph wind can turn twenty

above into twenty below, and I am starting to suspect that Isaac, the mini-donkey, who has a bit of a Napoleon Complex, has begun bullying the horses, keeping them out of the giant stall I leave open for them. If he's successful, it means two tiny donkeys are (relatively) warm and dry right now, while the horses are doing their best to use the angles of the barn to stay out of the wind.

I roll out of bed and cautiously open the door to the wood porch. I've lost doors to big wind twice in the past, but this wind seems to be from the south, and though the snow is swirling around the porch like some kind of ghostly special effect, the door opens normally. I tump the snow off of a couple of logs and bring them inside, knock the coals around in the wood stove and add the logs to the fire.

If there is any doubt about how cold this winter has been, my wood and hay supply attests to it. I am going to run out of both, probably by mid-March, and since the pasture doesn't come in until late May and since it can snow anytime until the fourth of July, I am going to have to buy another two cords, another hundred bales.

It's not the buying that is punishing; hay and wood are reasonably priced around here. It's moving the hay from the plowed part of the driveway to the barn, and moving the wood from that same spot, across the front yard and around the house to the covered porch—all of this with four feet of snow still on the ground. It will involve packing a trail with snowshoes, and then sledding the rounds of wood/bales of hay, one or two at a time to their destination. And then there is the stacking once I get there.

Rick will help me move and stack the hay—he's too much of a gentleman not to, but I tend to move the wood alone, a half cord a day if there's no snow in the forecast threatening to bury it, or all at once if there's a storm coming in.

It's easy to lose track of the days out here, but I know this is Sunday because the blizzard was supposed to arrive Thursday, but only amounted to flurries until yesterday (Saturday) morning, when it started to come down in earnest. The forecast kept edging the winter storm warning forward—increasing its duration by two and four hours at a time, as if they didn't want us to notice—but now they've gone ahead and said we are in for it pretty much continuously until Tuesday night. There is so much wind it's hard to say from the kitchen window whether we've gotten two feet or four feet, but I know the drifts will have made the driveway out of the question, even in Greg's old reliable Toyota truck with the manually locking hubs.

I'm mostly here by myself during the winter, or I guess you might say, more correctly, that I am the only human on the ranch, which feels, to me, the opposite of being alone. I am in the good company of a wolfhound, two elderly geldings, a bonded pair of miniature donkey jacks, three Icelandic ewes and a ram, and one aging mouser named Mr. Kitty. I have well stocked cabinets, and there is always something in the freezer to make soup out of. Randy Woods, who plows my driveway, usually gets to me within 24 hours, unless it is a three-day storm and then he gets to me twenty-four hours after it stops. Being snowed in on the ranch with the wolfhounds, tending the barn animals, doing my work, makes me happier than just about anything else on earth.

I make some Cinnamon Tea—double warmth—and dress in layers of wool, fleece, down, and whatever it is that snow pants are made of these days, and step out onto the dog porch into the blow. I squint to see the horses in the corral, their manes, backs and tails frosted with snow. No sign of the donkeys nor the sheep, who have wisely decided to stay inside their enclosure.

I have always preferred the company of animals to the company of people. I've been told this means I am emotionally stunted in some way, and perhaps I am. But when I compare myself to the people I've known who can't handle being without the company of another human being for even five minutes, I think I might be less emotionally stunted than they are. My childhood home did not have any safe places. When my parents were drinking, when my father stomped through each room of the house looking for a target, I often hid in the basement, in the clothes dryer with the round Plexiglas door cracked just enough for air. Beginning with a loyal, loving babysitter named Martha Washington who entered my life when I was two days old, I have felt safe in the presence of more than enough human beings to offset, at least cognitively, all the ways I was conditioned to distrust them. My partner Greg is excellent company, and very good at giving love of the human variety. My decade-long membership in the long-distance family I've made with him and his daughter Kaeleigh has made me better at giving love to humans too. I have good friends spread from coast to coast and elsewhere, who I visit, who come to visit the ranch, who have enriched my lives in more ways than I can enumerate. And if I say, even so, that it has been only the rare human who has given me an animal's worth of love back, it's not because I underestimate the power of human love. It's because I have been lucky enough to live all my life in the unconditional, unwavering, uncommon, gale force of love directed at me from my animals.

The wind stills for a moment and the whole world is silent as a church. In the aftermath of a blizzard, the snow looks more like a painting of snow than snow itself. Everything sculpted and softened by all that power pushing it for hours in one direction. The hill that rises behind homesteader Bob Pinckley's old cabin looks less like landscape and more like contemporary art. White on white, a tiny row of fence poles the only distinguishing factor. And then the wind starts howling again.

I go back inside and call Randy Woods and get on his schedule for Wednesday morning. I slice two apples and break eight carrots into pieces while William sits patiently beside me. I don the hat I bought right out of an Inuit lady's kitchen in Arctic Bay, Nunavut, Canada, last year (the warmest hat I have ever owned), my neck gaiter, my winter work gloves, and my Carhartt barn jacket. No need to call William who is already standing at attention in the mudroom. I open the door and off we go.

From what I can see, and I can't see all that much in this gale—even though it is full daylight now—we've gotten about two and a half feet of new snow since midday yesterday. But the drifts between me and the barn run anywhere from one to three feet higher than that. My beautifully engineered two-weeks-in-the-making snowshoe packed trail to the barn is nothing but a distant memory. Still, it behooves me to try to stay on top of old footprints, as when I fall off I sink yet another foot and a half down into the last storm's unpacked snow. I get about thirty steps into my trek when a wind blast stops me cold. I realize I've left the porch without the snow shovel. Back I go, using the boot-sized post holes I have just created to retrieve it.

William doesn't really love snow this deep. It gets up in his paws and makes ice balls which eventually bleed, but he's nothing if not loyal, so he returns to the porch with me. Thirty steps doesn't sound like much unless you're walking in snow that varies from 18 inches to 4 feet deep and are trying to use your memory to stay on a trail that is now at least a foot and a half under.

Today, I don't need to shovel my way to the barn, though one year we got five feet in one storm and then I did have to shovel my way there. In this wind, any progress I'd make trying to use the shovel to remake my old trail would be erased in minutes. I'll need the shovel once I get there, though, to shovel out the orange gate, which lets me into the corral, and then to shovel out the barn door, which lets me get to the hay.

But first things first. The remaining hundred or so steps to the barn.

It seems impossible, but it is snowing even harder than it was five minutes ago. A giant gust of wind lifts more snow into the air, and the barn, which is only about a hundred yards from the house, disappears entirely. This is the kind of day that makes a person believe in those stories where the farmer gets lost between the house and the barn, and freezes to death in a snowdrift while his wife cooks dinner. If I get lost in a snowdrift today, no one will know I'm there until the spring thaw.

One time, after a big storm, I fell off the side of the ghost of my old trail into a very deep drift. My legs were trapped under me in a strange position, and being more or less armpit deep in snow, there was a moment when I wasn't sure I could get myself out. I gave it another try, and got one leg around to the front of me, and then another, until I was more or less in a half-buried sitting position. I tried to use my arms to roll myself over, to get on my hands and knees, but everything beneath me still felt bottomless. I wasn't exactly scared, I hadn't yet had time to get scared, and though it was well below zero with a moderate wind, the sun was shining. I decided to rest for a minute before the next try, and lay back in the little cave I had inadvertently fashioned to look at the sky. No sooner had I gotten into that prone position and let out a long slow exhale than William was right by my side—the windward side—the whole length of him tight against the whole length of me—body to body. His first instinct to block the wind, to keep me warm until I got out or until help came.

Today we make it—without falling—to the corral where the horses are waiting, and I distribute apples and carrots through the rails. In spite of the wind, the horses seem calm, a function of the temperature. Ten above beats thirty-five below in their book no matter what the weather channel tells us the wind chill “feels like.” When it is coming down like this it simply can't be 35-below—those conditions are mutually exclusive, and I believe the horses, at this stage in their lives, would choose the snow over the deepfreeze on every occasion.

When it is 35-below, the sky is clear, the wind is still, and it is as quiet outside as the beginning of time. Ice crystals form on the aspen tree outside the kitchen window, on the lead ropes that hang from the barn door, on the horses' coats and eyelashes and whiskers. When the light is right, and you train your eyes just a few degrees off the direction of the sun, you can even see tiny crystals suspended in the frigid air. When I come out to check the animals right before bed, ice crystals swirl in the light of my headlamp. When it is 35-below, I take one step outside and the inside of my nose freezes, and the crunch of my boots on the packed powder path is the definition of the word dry on my tongue. On those mornings, the equines eat the apples and carrots out of my hands quickly, before they turn into carrot and apple flavored popsicles, and I must do everything with great care because one minute with exposed skin is enough to cause frostbite.

But today there is time to pet under a forelock, to reach down into the snow to pick up a dropped apple or carrot bit. The mini-donks, Simon and Isaac, crowd in for their share. Simon won't eat carrots, only apples. In between bites he occasionally likes to take a benign flat-toothed love nip out of my hip or thigh. Isaac thinks he's the boss around here even though he is shorter than the wolfhounds. He puts his little hooves up on Roany's neck sometimes just to push him around. Roany, a big Roman-nosed quarter horse, seventeen hands at the shoulder, has been on the planet for more than thirty years, getting along with pretty much everybody, and so lets him.

At one time, Roany was the most powerful beast on the ranch by far. He could have kicked Fenton the wolfhound over the fence with one back hoof if he wanted to stop his barking once and for all, stop all his showing off. But even when Fenton would chase Roany from the middle of the pasture all

the way back to the barn, the big gelding would take care where he put his feet, would turn and pin his ears in warning, but never do anything more than that.

Roany was thin this September and thinner in December. He's staying closer to the barn than he ever has and I fear he might be losing his sight. I've been sneaking him a coffee can of senior sweet feed most afternoons when the others aren't looking. In December I feared he might not make the winter, but here we are in February, and he rubs his ice-crusting eye lashes against me and reaches his giant lips toward my pockets to get another carrot. Maybe the old Roan will get to see another summer on the ranch.

When I made the decision to slash my time at UC Davis in order to spend the coldest part of every winter here, I worried that a ten week solo stint at the ranch might make me antsy or lonely, or just plain weird from only talking to animals. It has not.

My writer's life often puts me around people, 24/7 for weeks at a time, and I like that version of my life too. This summer I taught eight back-to-back seven-day workshops in Chammonix, Big Sur, Port Townsend, Provincetown and Santa Fe—with only two days off over the entire period—and for the most part managed to keep both my humor and my good will. But I've also recently realized that what I've never had enough of since I was a kid is alone time. That kid who hid in the clothes dryer had almost unlimited alone time and she quickly came to realize it meant both safety and the possibility of unrestricted adventure.

At eight, on a vacation to London with my parents, I memorized the entire map of the Underground, got myself to the Tower of London, and took the terrifying beheadings tour at sunset before my parents—who were quite happy in our hotel bar—ever realized I was gone. At five, in the Bahamas, I befriended a giant dappled grey horse and his Bahamian rider, who scooped me into the saddle, galloped me all the way down the beach and chest high into the waves before my mother looked up from her beach towel. (From that moment on, I was horse crazy.) From the time I was ten until I turned 16, I rode my bike through the corn fields of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to the truck stop on Schoenersville Road, where I racked up ten games on each of the pinball machines and sold them at half price to the truckers.

Here at the ranch, my adventures involve snowshoes, cross country skis and an occasional run down to Pagosa Hot Springs. William and I can ski as far as we want for as long as we want. We can drive down those dirt roads we never had time for just to see where we end up. Back home, I can clean the pantry at three in the morning, or do a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle on the kitchen table or eat a whole bag of frozen peas for dinner with one pat of butter and thirty six shakes from a bottle of Crystal hot sauce. I can take a bath in the middle of the day and stay in there until I shrivel. I can sleep anywhere I want to: out on the couch by the fire, in my bed with William or in his dog bed with him. I can take the bathroom door off of its hinges, bring a four foot silver water trough in there, and raise six Plymouth Rock chicks from pullets.

Every time an alone spell comes to an end, when I'm excited to welcome a friend, or Greg and Kaeleigh to the ranch, or I'm off to a city to teach or speak or be public, there is always a sliver of regret as I watch the hours wind down and I find myself wishing for just one day more. Today, though, potential visitors would have to be dropped in by helicopter. On a Sunday, mid-storm and this late in the season, I doubt I'll even see the plow out on Middle Creek Road. My octogenarian neighbor to the west, Margot Lamb, descendant of one of the original homesteaders of the Soward Ranch, moves into town every winter. So for these cold months I am the last occupied house on this side

of the river. My closest neighbor back towards town are the Albrights, and they are about two and half miles walking, when it is walkable, which today it is not.

The big orange gate swings out from the corral. It is the main access to the barn as well as to the large pasture, the gate through which Rick Davie so expertly backs his truck. In winter, the gate does not need to open big enough for a truck, but it's important to shovel it out wide enough that if a horse had to be taken out in an emergency, the horse would not be afraid to walk through. The gate is about 20 feet wide, so, with a couple feet of snow drifted against it, it takes about twenty minutes of bust-ass shoveling to get it to open double horse-width wide. Then there is the barn door, which is smaller, but has the added challenge of the frozen solid horse briquettes that seem to collect there, and must be pried up along with the snow. By the time I finish both tasks I can feel a new set of blisters rising on top of my calluses.

In this much wind I would normally put the hay in the three-sided windbreak on the barn's south side. But this is an unusual wind, from the south, which accounts for its unseasonably warm bearing, so I drop the bale in the corner of the corral, on the north side of the barn, hoping the sheep pen will block most of the wind when it starts to clock around to the west, as it is predicted to do in a few hours.

I cut the orange twine with the hay hooks, making sure to pick it up and zip it in my pocket (hay twine wreaks havoc with a horse's digestive system,) and close up the barn. If it were grain day, I would give the horses their mix of beet pulp and senior mix for horses with metabolic conditions, joint formula, multivitamins, Gut-Sure, and a scoop of Horseshoer's Friend. (We are all big believers in supplements in this house.) Deseo's metabolic condition means he can't handle grain too often, so we stick tight to our every fourth day plan. Today is day two, which is going to work out great, because Tuesday, when the storm moves out and it really gets cold, they will be happier for the grain to warm them up, even than they would be this morning.

The wind has calmed for a moment so I stand and listen to the sound of four equines chomping good grass hay on a snowy morning, and think about all the mornings, over the last twenty-five years, I have spent standing right here in the snow.

2009 was the coldest January. We went through six whole cords of wood even with propane back up. For the first time ever the dogs had to be encouraged to go on walks, and Mr. Kitty wouldn't even go out to the barn to hunt. He stayed in the basement for days at a time, cozied up to the big gas heater. There were five feet of snow standing and no warm days to melt any of it. The white ground reflected back all the sun's rays and couldn't soak up enough heat during the short days to raise the temperature even to ten below. The three-foot split rail fence that surrounds the house went completely under in early December, and we walked daily on a white moonscape between the house and the barn. The roof slid so many times eventually there was nowhere down for it to go and it formed an igloo around the house that actually kept the wind off and raised the temperature in the back bedroom by several degrees compared to a lighter winter. The house threw off enough heat to cauterize the insides of the igloo-like what a candle does on the inside of a jack-o-lantern. It was beautiful, for the month it lasted, living inside a big jack-o-lantern of snow.

But now it is edging toward 15-above, and the horses are feeling it. The wind picks up again and Isaac lets out a big donkey bray that means he is either mad at the wind or happy about the hay or about to climb up on somebody's neck, so I exit the orange gate and start the hundred-yard trek to the water trough.

On a normal day, even on a normal winter day, this is easy, but today I have the challenge of memory again, trying to stay above my old trail. Sometimes if I hold my head just right, I can see the faintest ghost of the path on top of all the brand new snow. It's kind of like one of those magic eye drawings, the way I have to look not directly at it and soften my eyes to see. Only then can I see the slightest change in the snow surface that princess-and-pea-like, indicates a change in the surface several feet down.

I know the trough will barely need topping off—snow has been falling into it for twenty-four hours and this kind of weather does not engender big thirst in the horses. But I have learned, over the years, that the best way to care for animals, especially barnyard animals, is to repeat the exact same tasks, in the exact same order, every day, forever and ever. A change in the barnyard means trouble, and if I do the same things the same way each day, I am more likely to notice a change. Also, any local will tell you that Murphy lives on a high altitude ranch in a snowstorm. Were I to decide the trough did not need topping off today, this would be the day the trough heater failed, or the bottom seal wore out, or the pump froze, or a rat with Hanta virus drowned himself in there and Issac would be just churlish enough to eat it.

I am not a good farmer. I am not even a real farmer. Rick Davie is a real farmer; I am only pretend. But the hyper-vigilance I learned in childhood serves me well on the ranch in general and in big weather in particular. My mind runs a series of potential calamities, and my actions, in so much as they can, guard against them.

The trough is less than an inch down, but I top it off anyway. All systems go. Then it is back along the trail, easier the second time through, to the sheep pen, and another door that needs to be dug out.

I decide to feed the sheep inside their enclosure, something I don't do often because it radically increases the amount of inside poop. But even with five pounds each of the warmest wool money can buy on their backs, the sheep don't want to be outside today. I give them their four flakes of hay, and drag my feet around in the snow in the outside portion of their pen until I find the three black rubber feeders, which went under hours ago. I dig them out and split a coffee can of grain among all three so they don't ram each other fighting for it.

Outside the fence, William is watching Sheep TV. The whole time I am in the pen he sits perfectly still in the same exact place he sits every day, staring hard, his face so intent, so utterly concentrated, waiting for one of those sheep to make a wrong move so he can tear the chicken wire open with his teeth and rush in to rescue me from them.

I leave the sheep pen and head back on my water trail to the frost free pump and fill a bucket to carry back to the pen. Last winter, because my back was ailing, I discovered that if I carefully plucked all the icicles that hung on the back of the barn—there were hundreds hanging at half inch intervals in accordance with the corrugated tin of the roof—and added those to the sheep's water, I could save myself a good many bucket carries. The icicles are beautiful; they renew themselves every day until it warms up enough for the roof to slide, and they feel delicious when you hold them in your hand.

Every time I walk one of these little connector trails I improve the conditions. But when we turn back toward the house, the trail we made an hour ago has been utterly obliterated. I decide to wait at least until it stops howling to shovel the walkway to the house, or—a much bigger job—remake the path to the propane tank.

Last month, in a long spate of 30-below zero nights, the propane company called to say their man couldn't deliver propane because I did not have an "appropriate path dug from the driveway to my tank." In 25 years I had never been asked to dig a path to my propane tank, appropriate or otherwise. I'd always figured that any propane man worth his salt owned a pair of snow pants. But perhaps the propane company had hired a new delivery guy who had recently moved here from Florida.

The day I got the call I channeled my outrage into action, went outside immediately and spent three hours digging a walkway to the propane tank so beautiful you could have rolled a red carpet out on it and used it for the Oscars. When I got to the tank and checked the gauge it turned out the lady on the phone had been wrong, that the guy had crawled through the deep snow and filled it after all, which made me feel better about him generally, and happy to have spent my afternoon making him such a nice path.

Today has eliminated that path, along with the driveway, which is just a suggestion of itself between the ridges Randy Woods made the last time through with his plow.

Back inside, we both shake off snowballs in the mudroom. I put some oatmeal on for breakfast, the steel cut kind that takes 45 minutes because why not? It's as good a day for writing as there has even been. I join William on the couch, open my laptop, and get to it.

Monday and Tuesday are much of the same, but Wednesday morning dawns clear, as predicted, and thirty degrees colder. I open the back door to utter stillness and ice crystals in the air. Every living being in the county, it seems, is either resting this morning or frozen in place. When I start across the path toward the corral with my apples and carrots I can hear a car crossing the cattle guard three miles and two deep bends of river canyon away.

In a few hours, Randy Woods will be here with his giant blade to reconnect me with the rest of the world, and after I finish shoveling the walkway and the path to the propane tank, William and I will drive to town, pick up the mail, drop off the recycling, get a few fresh vegetables and a pint of Talenti sea salt caramel ice cream.

It will be nice, after all these days, to speak to a member of my own species, someone who can speak back in the same language. But there is another part of me, some eight-year old part, who wants Randy's plow never to come. It's not only that the eight-year old feels safer at the snowed-in ranch than anywhere, it's that the snowed-in ranch was a story she used to tell herself—she is certain of it—when she needed a place for her mind to go, when she needed a reason to make it to nine, then 10, then 17, then freedom.

Pam Houston is the author of two novels, *Contents May Have Shifted* and *Sight Hound*, two collections of short stories, *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Waltzing the Cat*, and a collection of essays, *A Little More About Me*, all published by W.W. Norton. Her stories have been selected for volumes of *The O. Henry Awards*, *The 2013 Pushcart Prize*, and *Best American Short Stories of the Century*. She teaches in the Low Rez MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts, is Professor of English at UC Davis, and directs the literary nonprofit Writing By Writers. She lives at 9,000 feet above sea level near the headwaters of the Rio Grande and is at work on a book about that place.



