

*From: Lord of Misrule by Jaimy Gordon, © 2010, excerpted by permission of McPherson & Company, Publishers*

Around noon, the van finally rolled down the driveway, and she was off in the Grand Prix over the mountains and up the river, while Tommy and the van man took the long way, the slow way, dropping and loading horses for racetrackers who paid cash. But what had she done with her morning, while she waited in the fly-loud barn for Tommy and the van man? Maggie had found a bottle of eye-stinging brand X pink wintergreen horse liniment in the Pichots' tack shed, mixed, for all she knew, according to the late Gaston Pichot's secret recipe, and with it and strong fingers, she worked on Pelter, more or less making it up as she went along. Why did she so love the slant-eyed bump-nosed horse that her hands wished to parse every inch of his famously long back? It was true she had no scientific reason to believe she knew what she was doing, but surreptitiously she did think so. For all her stamina, as a human girl she knew she was lazy and unambitious, except for this one thing: She could find her way to the boundary where she ended and some other strain of living creature began. On the last little spit of being human, staring through rags of fog into the not human, where you weren't supposed to be able to see let alone cross, she could make a kind of home.

Her hands felt their way blindly along the ridges and canyons and defiles of the spine, the firm root-spread hillocks of the withers. She rolled her bony knuckles all along the fallen tree of scar tissue at the crest of the back, prying up its branches, loosening its teeth. And it must be having some effect: when she walked Pelter these days he wasn't the sour fellow he used to be, he was sportive, even funny. She had walked him this morning until the rising sun snagged in the hackberry thicket. As they swung around the barn, she took a carrot from her pocket and gave him the butt and noisily toothed the good half herself. He curvetted like a colt, squealed, and cow-kicked alarmingly near her groin. Okay, okay, she said, and handed it over. She was glad there was no man around just then to tell her to show that horse who was boss. When they were back in the stall and she turned to leave she found he had taken her whole raincoat in his mouth and was chewing it—the one she was wearing. She twisted around with difficulty and pried it out of his mouth. He eyed her ironically. Just between us, is this the sort of horse act I really ought to discipline? she asked him, smoothing out her coat. I simply incline to your company, he replied.