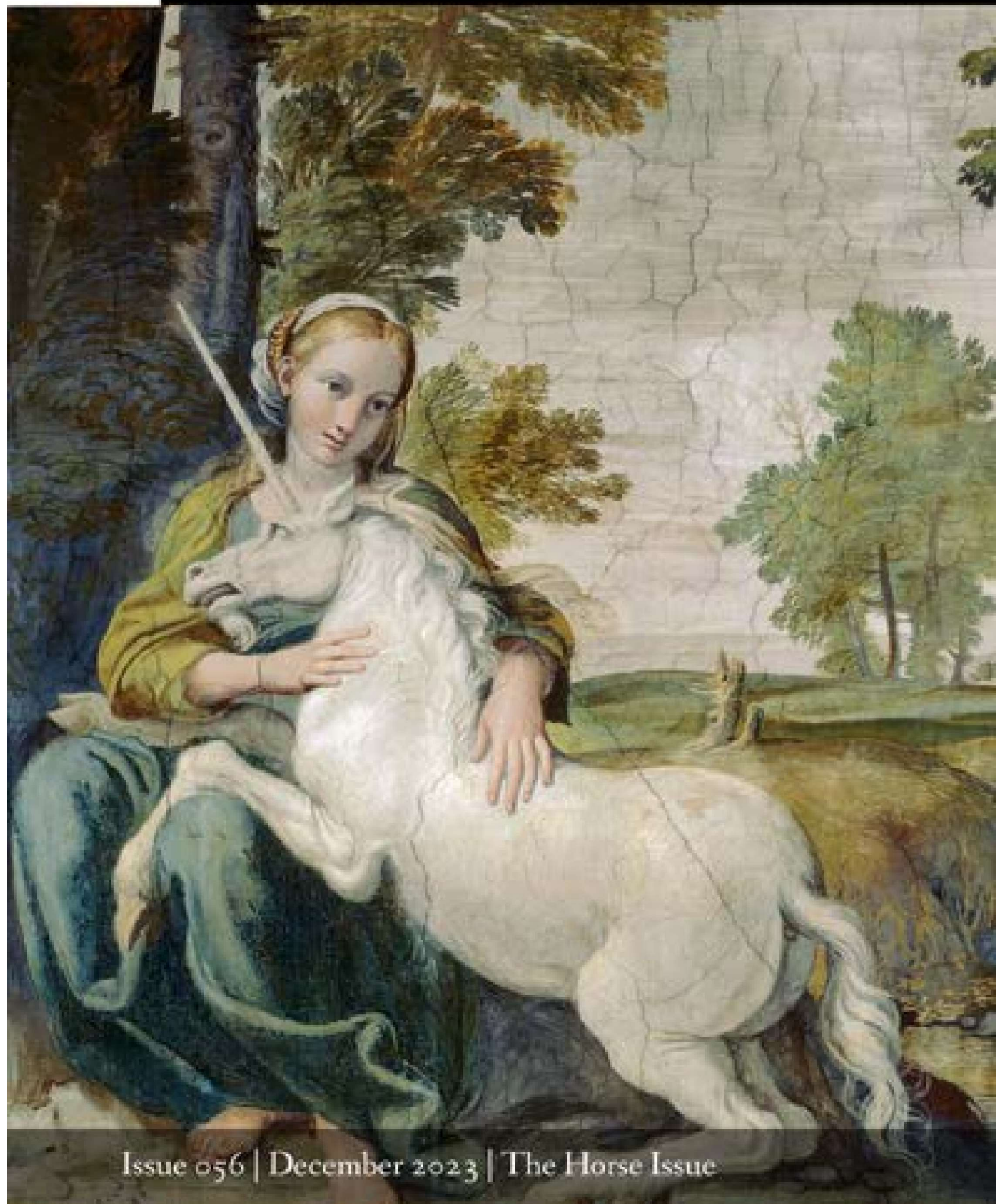




LUNA STATION

Q U A R T E R L Y



Issue 056 | December 2023 | The Horse Issue

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The Horse Issue

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The Last Ride of Rivke Grinkin

Reyzl Grace

Reyzl Grace is a poet, essayist, translator, short story writer, and post-Soviet Jewish lesbian from Alaska. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, named a finalist for the Jewish Women's Poetry Prize and Best Literary Translations, and featured in *Room*, *Rust & Moth*, the *Times of Israel*, and elsewhere. By day, she is a teen services librarian in Minneapolis—by night, a poetry editor for *Psaltery & Lyre* and *Cordella Magazine*. You can find more of her at reyzlgrace.com and on Twitter/Bluesky @reyzlgrace.

In the thirty-fourth cavalry regiment, there was some discussion whether Komot Rivke Grinkin or her horse was the more disciplined soldier. In truth, Rivke wasn't sure herself, but if she'd had a kopek to spare, she would have bet it on Dvora, who had kept her alive at Bataisk and brought her through Egorlykskaia.

Even here, at full gallop across a Polish field with a rain of mortars to either side, she feared nothing so long as Dvora's hooves were under her. Had the corner of her eye not caught the two left hooves rising like a pair of slow moons over the flank of the Russian Don, she might well have gone on fearlessly, straight through the young woman who apparated in front of them as though born from a glint of sun off a horseshoe.

But her eye *had* caught them, along with a spray of dirt from the ground her horse was being swept off of, and she flinched, twisting the reins tighter around white knuckles. When she opened her eyes again, she was still being carried forward by the inertia of twelve hundred pounds of airborne mare, but the rotation of the earth seemed to have slowed, as though matching the patience of the young woman, who grew neither larger nor more alarmed as she browsed the head of the horse that should have been colliding with her, examining every detail as though she

were deciding whether to buy it, though she did not look at all like someone in the habit of doing her own horse trading.

Masses of platinum hair spilled over epaulettes, and rivers of Austrian knots flooded the sleeves of a sumptuous vermilion riding coat, its every detail as exactly tailored as its wearer's cheekbones. For a soldier who had run Denikin's men to ground, she recalled the mist that draped the Caucasus on dawn patrol. To a peasant from Zaporizhzhia, she looked like a Romanov princess at riding lessons.

"Who...are you?" Rivke whispered, almost to herself.

The young woman's pale blue eyes flashed like flame from the mouth of a cannon, and she snapped them from the horse to its rider. Her head tilted. "You can see me?"

Rivke's brown eyes widened to match. "*You* speak *Yiddish*, blondie?"

"I speak whatever you need me to," the young woman smiled.

It was hard to reconcile the perfectly normal movement of her lips with the slow flail of Dvora's hooves as the horse's panicked body rotated languidly through open air, like a dancer in a music box coming to the end of its wind. The horizon was moving too, creeping leftward like a minute hand run in reverse. For the moment, it was still shy of vertical, but close enough to be disorienting as puffs of dirt and grass flew with all the gentle leisure of drifting dandelion seeds from right to left with every landed bullet. Over Rivke's head, another horse swept with the dynamism of an airplane but the speed of a slow cloud, its head and hooves stretched wide from one end of her vision to the other. Its rider was another of the squad leaders, who spoke like he came from Kharkiv. She couldn't remember his name.

Rivke's mind swam—in possibilities, in folk tales, in Yiddish and Ukrainian and Russian, in that shining hair, in cool mountain lakes where she used to go skinny dipping, in sloshed cerebral fluid rapidly growing shallow against one side of her skull. “Are you . . .” but before she could find the words, the wind off a second nearby shell swept between them, and the young woman, trying to brush the hair out of her face, looked down.

“A *woman*!?” she gasped, picking up fistfuls of curls only to let them drop against her chest again and again. “Yes—yes, I am! This has never happened before! Look!” Rivke watched, awkwardly mesmerized, as the stranger carefully felt out the contours of her jacket with both hands. Ages seemed to pass before the young woman looked up again with moist eyes and a tremble tugging at a plump lip. Her voice was suddenly very quiet. “I always wanted to be a woman. No one has ever imagined me this way.”

Rivke's eyes felt dry but she couldn't blink. “What? No! Are you . . .” again she struggled for the words, “. . . here for *me*?” It all sounded strange coming out; she was sure the words were what she meant to say, but she wasn't at all sure what they were trying to ask.

“Oh! No, dear.” The young woman said this very simply, but her face grew somber, even as one hand continued to pat obsessively between her waist and her hip. “I'm here for the horse.”

This phrase ricocheted off Rivke slowly. “For the horse?”

“Yes.” The young woman's nod was earnest. “I like horses. The Name lets me see to them.” She returned her attention to Rivke's mount. “Does your horse have a name?”

Rivke felt like she'd just come up out of a lake with ears still full

of water, someone on the shore waving and yelling something she couldn't make out. "Yes. I mean, it's Dvora."

"Of *course* it is!" cooed the young woman, admiring the shine of the Don's golden chestnut coat. She repeated softly, as though to herself this time, "Of course it is. She would have liked this horse, too."

At that moment, the shockwave that had called attention to the young woman's hair caught up with the horse that was, from Rivke's perspective, running on its side overhead, sweeping it suddenly straight up out of her field of vision, as though it and its rider had been taken by Elijah. The nameless man from Kharkiv was gone, but this didn't seem to trouble the young woman in the least.

Gently, she patted Dvora's wet nose and whispered in her ear, while Rivke watched in astonishment as the distressed animal settled under the touch of the young woman's painted nails, which gleamed like little revolutionary banners snapped taut against peach-colored clouds at sunset, but with their yellow stars and sickles replaced by impossibly fine gold-leaf knotwork. Something about the design against the backdrop of Dvora's head stirred Rivke's memory; it seemed like something she might have seen when she was young—like some bit of old Rus gold-work in a Kyiv museum.

The horizon continued to shift slowly, sky giving way to earth as the torn mud and grass of the field expanded leftward, rising to meet her in a lancework of shrapnel and stone. What remained of sky was silence, thick over everything she could see, so that the only sound was the phrase ringing in her head—*I'm here for the horse*.

Every soldier knows the day may come and gives some thought

to what they might say when it does. And in this moment, Rivke Grinkin—champion sharpshooter of the Sixth Division, terror of the Whites, daughter of Abraham and Job and Habakkuk—drew herself together to tell fate what she truly thought of it.

“I, uh...I like horses, too.”

The young woman’s eyes shone and her voice soared. “Aren’t they *incredible*?” she gushed, gesticulating eagerly over the whole length of the lofted animal. “Such powerful creatures, like a rising constellation remade in flesh! And yet so effortlessly graceful—slender as the limits of bone and muscle will allow. And then,” she brought her distant hand back in toward the horse’s head, “it all comes to its zenith here, and you can see in their eyes, even when you don’t feel it on your hand,” she chuckled as Dvora’s lips smacked against her palm, taking a treat that seemed to have come from nowhere, “how deeply *gentle* they are at the very core of their being.” Her eyes moved from Rivke back to her mount as she stroked behind the horse’s ears. “Speed and strength that make legends”—the words were almost a lullaby—“and asymptotic tenderness. They’re like angels...”

“It’s even better when you ride them!” blurted Rivke. “They experience everything so differently than we do—so much more directly.” Her courage flooded back to her, and for a moment she forgot she was on a horse headed into the ground—could imagine herself on the ground getting ready to climb in the saddle. “When I started riding, I thought of the horse like a partner; I tried to talk to them—communicate with them like I would a person. But then I realized that’s not how horses do things! To Dvora, I’m not another horse in a herd—I’m *a part of her*; she treats me like an extension of her own body. I don’t give her commands any more than my lips give me commands when the coffee’s too hot; there’s just a *knowing* that flows through us both when I get my damned

head out of the way and let myself *know* in the hands that are on the reins, in the feet that are in the stirrups . . .”

Rivke searched for the words for something more, but she could feel Dvora’s back quiver, her anxiety rising, and she realized that the young woman’s hands had left the horse. They were cupped, instead, under her gently cleft chin, red-nailed fingers clapped to rosy cheeks as she hung, rapt and waiting, on Rivke’s next word. When it didn’t come, she simply sighed, “That’s amazing!”

Rivke fumbled for another thought that could meet the expectation. “Um...do you ride?”

“Not like you do. How did you learn? Tell me about your first horse!”

“Oh, Persik? I actually never got to ride her. I grew up on a farm, and, when I was five or six, my father gave me one of the old mares as mine to look after. I fed her and brushed her every day and *begged* to ride, but my mother said I needed to wait until I was a little older. But Persik was old already, and the next year she broke her ankle, and my father took her out behind the old barn and shot her.” Rivke’s eyes were far away—far past the waning slice of sky on the left side of her vision. “That’s the terrible thing about this war, you know. My father will wave a red banner if it means he gets to shoot a Cossack, but he shot a loyal worker just as easily when she wasn’t useful to him. To a horse, all of us are kulaks. And if that’s how we treat animals, what makes us think we’ll treat people any better?”

The young woman still had her eyes locked on Rivke, but they had grown sad. “Why fight, then?”

“It’s a chance to live until I don’t. What’s the alternative? Let the shadkhnte have her way with me—give me over to be ridden

by a man who...who doesn't understand the intelligence of my body?" Dvora was flailing again, but Rivke was atypically at ease, although the young woman hadn't touched her. *The young woman*...All in a moment, Rivke's focus returned to the foreground, and she remembered whom she was talking to. Her eyes scanned the curious face for any hint of condemnation, but found none. The waiting was unbearable, swelling like a blister on her brain until she had to lance it.

"They serve pork in the mess tent," she said suddenly.

A smile pulled at the young woman's lips, but she held her face steady. "I figured."

"And I eat it," Rivke added, emphasizing the word *eat* in a note of defiance.

"You have to eat something." Heaps of curls slid from the young woman's shoulders as she shrugged. Rivke's mouth opened again but the young woman cut her off. "Let me guess, you missed shul last Yom Kippur."

"Not what I was going to say, but yes."

The young woman nodded matter-of-factly, her voice level and kind. "We all do what we have to. You said it yourself—it's a chance to live. Pikuakh nefesh. That's not why I'm just here for Dvora."

Rivke's eye was steady, but her voice was uneven. "And I'm glad. I always thought that, when all this is done, she will be free. I've been saving some pay to buy land—to take her far from here. Somewhere out east. Maybe Tajikistan. And when we get there, I'll hop down from her back and let the bridle fall, and I won't tie her up or put her in the barn or anything. And then, if she stays with me anyway, I'll know we'll be together for life."

The young woman pressed her lips, and Rivke felt the pressure in her chest. "I'm impressed the two of you are together now," she said. "You're a fine rider; not many people would still be in that saddle." She looked back at Dvora, took the horse's head in her hands again and calmed it as she added, "Though even you won't be, in a moment."

At the edge of Rivke's vision, all four hooves were now cantilevered above the level of her shoulder. Her breathing grew shallow, but that could have been coincidence. "Horses are *all* you do?" she confirmed. "All the time? I mean, surely you like other things, too?"

The young woman's cheeks flushed the color of her coat, and she busied herself harder in smoothing the muzzle. "Ah . . ." she chuckled. "Um, well...There was this one time . . ." Her blue eyes flicked up like the tail of a mischievous horse before becoming buried in Dvora's coat again, leaving Rivke with an inexplicable tickle on the end of her nose. "I mean, the Name just has me care for horses now."

In Rivke's eyes, ground had all but occluded sky, and the young woman was the only thing that didn't grow darker. "Do *you* have a name?"

The young woman looked up at her again, and for a second time her eyes glistened with tears in the corners. "You want to know my name? Now?" Her glances flitted around Dvora's tack as though she might find it written on a label somewhere, but finally settled again on Rivke's face. "You can call me Tsariel."

To a girl from the Pale who spoke no Hebrew, this sounded grander than it was, and Rivke played with the sound of it under her breath for a little while, until it dawned on her that she couldn't hear it. Bullets struck the earth but did not whistle. Men

were unhorsed but did not scream. The world ran like a film, as though stunned into silence by Tsariel's perfect serenity.

"I can't hear anything but you," she confessed, and once again she wasn't sure what she was really trying to say.

Tsariel nodded sadly. "You're deaf—bleeding out both ears, actually. You just haven't noticed the trickles yet."

"Then how can I hear you?"

"That's not how I talk to you."

"Then why are your lips moving?"

"Because people are disquieted when they don't. But you understand what that's like—going through the motions so as not to alarm folk."

"What do you mean?"

Tsariel took a thick lock of blonde hair between her fingers, and a sly smile winked at the corner of her lip. "You like Russian girls," she teased. "What would your mother say?"

"Does it matter?" asked Rivke. "It's not like I'll ever get to bring one home, anyway."

"Well, that's the point, isn't it?"

Tsariel's words hung in the air between them for a long moment before Rivke repeated herself. "What do you mean?"

The blonde bit thoughtfully at a knuckle. Her eyes grew more intense. "Do you think you could want me to be different?"

"Different how?"

“I appear as you want me to appear. Do you think you could want my hair to be darker, my face a little longer, for there to be a little more color in my hands? How have you imagined Miriam when she was young? Or Rachel at the well?”

Rivke looked at her, and Tsariel seemed just a little less solid than before. “I think,” she said slowly, “that I could want you to be anything you would like to be.”

Suddenly, the young woman to whom neither horse nor rider ever seemed to get any closer stood face-to-face with Rivke. The Romanov princess was gone, and in her place stood a girl from the shtetl—the prettiest girl in the shtetl, to be sure, but a girl from the shtetl all the same—with masses of russet hair curling into fine-cut cheeks that glowed as Tsariel surveyed her new arms and again drew out locks of hair in her fingers to admire. Several times, she looked as though she wanted to say something, but no sound came out, and Rivke wondered if her companion was simply overcome or if she had gone deaf in a new and deeper way looking at her. But at last, the words came through. “Thank you.” She was close enough now for Rivke to feel her breath on her face. “Thank you. It’s perfect! No. It’s more than perfect...” Tsariel’s eyes came up off her hair to meet Rivke’s. “It’s the closest I’ve ever been to being free.”

Rivke’s own breath was heavy, and she didn’t know if it was because the ground was so close or this girl was. “I think,” she said, and her voice was small even as her heart swelled, “that this is the nearest I’ve come to being alive.”

Rivke closed her eyes, and, though her face was now fully in Dvora’s shadow, the feeling on her lips was like the warmth of the sun on a winter day, ethereal and tangible at the same time, bleeding into every part of her body. On the other side of her eyelids, Tsariel’s hand shot at the bridle, only for her elbow to

lock preternaturally short of grasping the leather. Unseen, her lips were again formless—able, simultaneously, to hold the kiss, be bitten through, and form a litany of curses around the words “so close” in a thousand languages.

Rivke sighed.

The horse came down.