

## Kittitas Horses · *Mark Halperin*

From far off we heard the din  
of trampling horses and howling dogs,  
and by noon were seeking the camp's center,  
a coolness of children through which we moved  
cautiously, not to breach  
their etiquette. And that night  
the braves went about stealing our horses,

our kettles no sooner on the fire  
than five or six spears bore off their contents.  
The next day, by luck or grace,  
I thought to fetch a paper-cased looking glass  
and a little vermilion too  
to Eyacktana, their chief, with whom I criss-crossed  
the camp as he shouted, *deliver up the horses*

and more softly, *I have spoken well in your favor,*  
snatching beads as fast as I fished them up,  
two buttons, then two rings. My fear  
had long since passed into lassitude.

I told myself, I am reading a book  
with marbled covers: two men, both white, meet.  
The first cradles a rifle. Under a huge cliff  
of brow, his eyes are black, blank  
until the second, mounted and resembling me,  
comes abreast. When the horse passes  
he drops to one knee

and fires. I was free  
to pay the toll of my disposition: not axes  
for beaver pelt or horses  
but our lives in my impossible calculations,  
my refuge. I see Eyacktana  
grabbing the knife from one of my Canadians,  
the man, enraged, making toward him;  
for a longer time, Indians chinking the gaps.

*Here my friend*  
*is a chief's knife*, I said, with no book  
the outcome of which is hidden only by  
dirtied paper. Eyacktana  
held it aloft as he would hold the stone pipe.

At that moment, he was  
no more mysterious than my own kind  
in the settlement or the man in the story,  
gratuitous as all of these exchanges:  
the eighty-five Kittitas horses I got, the presents  
of Eyacktana—two horses, twelve beaver,

dark, luxurious pelts. I sent  
my men off then, but before I left,  
gave away my belt, my hat and pipe,  
and when their women brought a variety of eatables,  
ate hungrily, like a man who has just passed through  
a great danger  
or become its prisoner.