



KELSI VANADA

## *This Is the Horse Poem I've Been Trying to Write*

Photograph circa 1944: this horse's head's cut off. Its hooves are, too. Who manned this camera? Central: my great-uncle Eldon, Marie's little brother, two years old, astride the horse. His hair's so blond it's non-existent white in the light of day, or of the camera. Shiny bright spot where a boy's forehead should be. His ear to her coat the only touch-point between him and the Lakota woman he sits behind, riding double with her. *Mrs. Sam Butcher*, he tells me when he sends the photograph. *She was our sheepherder when Dad ran sheep on rented reservation pastureland.* Holding the colorless print, I can't meet his eyes. Her face's blurred, flaw in the developing, or she's turning away from the camera's snap, like its moment came a half second before she'd planned, or she's speaking to Eldon, turning to face him: don't fall off. My great-grandfather's brand is on the horse's shoulder's flesh. Behind its flanks a man's torso-less legs: feet hidden in tallgrass, his head's blocked by the woman, did he just set Eldon on the horse for the photograph? In the sky, gray, winged specks're surely not birds. The Cheyenne River Reservation's just a mile from Faith.

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*Photograph courtesy of the author*