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### Essay by Amanda M. Capelli

#### The Risk of Failure, the Promise of Success



We didn't talk about the divorce that day. Instead, we stood at the foot of a driveway, the middle space between someone else's property and the road. The house in Salem, Alabama, had been Keegan's childhood home, and he started the conversation talking about his horses.

"KC was my mom's horse—that's *K* for Kathy and *C* for Chris—but Logan was for us," he said. Logan was an oversized American quarter horse that Chris, Keegan's father, had trained for his children to ride. There are many stories about Logan. It's still not clear to me if his size was relative to other quarter horses or the memory of a particular 7-year-old. He was gelded when he was three years old; he had been "cut proud," as old folks would say, after he had started exhibiting aggression and other stallion-like behaviors when the family moved him to a stable. The horse needed space and mares, and not having either made him ornery. After he was gelded, you could walk him through the house like a

child, or so the story goes.

In this particular memory, Keegan recounted watching his father take Logan's head and cup his hands around the horse's nose. His father leaned in and breathed deep, in and out, sharing the horse's breath with his own. Keegan told me these stories as they'd been told to him, as he'd heard them told before in a circle of plastic folding chairs and cigar smoke. He went right into the next story, one I've heard now told from the perspective of both the observer and the rider: "Logan took my dad home on his command on two occasions, both after a night of drinking. The first time he brought him to the barn, and the second time, my dad rode him straight into the house."

Perhaps it was a marker of its truth, how little the story changed despite who was telling it, or perhaps it just showed the depth of the mark the story had on the listener. Either way, Keegan's stories always had a deep sense of place. But the stories felt different this time, the only time he told them to me against the same backdrop in which they had occurred.

The Chattahoochee River separates Phenix City, Alabama, from Columbus, Georgia, and Central Time from Eastern. Time, here, is described as either slow or fast; truth depends on perspective, on which side of the river you're on. I understand now why everyone I meet down here is a kind of storyteller. Growing up here is to be in a geographic and temporal limbo. Growing up in the spaces between place and time changes how you see the world, the awareness that these constructs are malleable, ingrained at birth.

I knew none of this at the time of my first visit in 2007, when we stood there talking about horses. We'd flown down together from New York, in the middle of an April snowstorm, for Keegan to get the chance to finally introduce me to his family, to the characters I had only heard about in stories. People here go by Catfish, Bobo, Peewee, and have last names like Greathouse. They prefer J-bo instead of Justin and Cousin It instead of I'm not sure what. I lost my grip on the characters early on, and fifteen years later I still struggle to keep those narratives straight. Most of the buildings I see are flat, only one story, blending in with the horizon. I feel lost at first; I can't tell which way is north.

Growing up in New York, I never thought about the South. If it ever came up, the descriptions felt rigid to me, as if it was all either cotton plantations or strip malls. My experiences actually in the South were sanitized, controlled, and seen only through limited visits to my grandparents' condo in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The placelessness of the pastel walls, beige couch, and abstract wall art made the condo feel like it didn't necessarily have to be in the South at all—and a brief trip to Florida to visit the equally anywhere-yet-nowhere simulacrum of Disney World. I had no sense of the South as a place, no sense of what place really meant.

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Keegan's mother, Kathy, had driven us there, to the family's old house, the last place they had lived with all five of them together, but she stayed in the car. We had expected her to join us, to tell us her stories of this place—how she had raised three children here, what it had been like to build the house, which tree was her favorite—as she had done at the high school in nearby Smiths Station, the Phenix City Riverwalk, and the big mural on the antique shop in Salem a few miles away—the other landmarks of their lives. But her memories are different from her son's, and she did not share his enthusiasm for showing his old home to his new girlfriend. Instead, she slowly pulled away. We watched the car disappear around a curve.

The split-rail fence that ran around the twenty-acre property, the white house with its wide front porch, and the long driveway were simply structures, but place holds onto things, to memories, joy, and pain. Pine trees lined the street; brown, brittle needles carpeted the shoulder. The sandy, red-clay loam—"Bama soil," as it's called in this part of the country—kicked up into tiny spirals in the dry wind. From the outside, the house itself seemed unchanged even though their family hadn't lived there for almost twenty years. It was a stranger now, the details of its inner-life unknown to us, but it had held onto their ghosts, and returning to this place had unleashed them all.

As we waited for his mother to return, Keegan told me another story about how he used to race up the driveway, Kathy clocking his speed in their old, champagne-colored Pontiac Bonneville. He pointed to the willow in the front yard: "My parents planted that to help dry the land." After rain, the red clay formed a deep mud that dried and cracked and warped, bending upward into craggy cliffs. Following an Alabama summer storm, the heat would grow even heavier,

more intense. There was no release from the heat in the summertime. When he was young, Keegan would go out in the rain and cover himself in the mud, watching it dry red-brown on his skin. He would flex his fists, and the clay would crack and flake, a metamorphosis in real time.

When Kathy returned, we stopped talking about the house and its memories. “I wanted to see the dump,” she told us. It was a place they used to go all the time, to drop off unwanted furniture and find treasures others had left behind. We didn’t ask any questions and got back into the car. She took us to visit Smokey Pig BBQ in Phenix City, and her excitement to share some of her life with us, with me, returned as she recounted her first time trying to order a hot tea in the South. She had moved down from New York to raise a family in the place her husband was from. She’d lived here for more than a decade, but Alabama would never be home to her.

But the barbeque, or even just the memory of the barbeque she no longer ate, did. To have a sense of this place, these memories, requires an understanding of Smokey Pig. It was mentioned in almost every conversation we had about Alabama. Food carries a place better than a photograph. I understand this more clearly than any of the stories I heard on this trip. Look at the brick smoke pit, layered with red paint and creosote so thick that it’s difficult to differentiate one stone from another. Pile barbecue sandwiches and paper plates onto the plastic trays, and carefully sit down, only to have to get up once more, the back of your legs sticking to the laminate booths, for your side order of Brunswick Stew. Taste the syrupy-thick coolness of sweet tea for the first time. Drink it straight from the cup, without a straw. Let the ice hit your lips. Afterward, bite into the rim of the Styrofoam to clean the sugar off your teeth.

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We come back to Alabama ten years after standing in the driveway of Keegan’s childhood home to attend his cousin’s wedding. Before the ceremony, Keegan and I, now married ourselves, drive by what is now an empty plot of land. I remember the house that used to stand there from our trip in 2007. The house had been emptied, condemned by the city, and ultimately destroyed. The copper had been stripped out of the walls; the family artifacts were divvied up—and perhaps some were stolen—and the rest left behind to be buried along with the black mold on the drywall and peeling wallpaper, rotting porch wood, old doors, and broken windowpanes. The land, now untethered, becomes another ghost.

A decade ago, we had gathered in the now demolished kitchen around the 1950s laminate table. The house had belonged to Keegan’s great uncle. Big Bro (the *o* shortened to sound like the *uh* in *brother*) was his honorary title, bestowed upon the oldest brother of three. I met Big Bro once before he died. In the kitchen, Big Bro ate a bowl of saltine crackers and milk. I know this because I have a photo from this moment, of just Big Bro, holding a gallon of milk, in mid-sentence, a blue bowl filled with crackers in front of him. He’s wearing large, red-framed glasses and a checkered short-sleeve polo. His blue jeans are held up by two-inch thick, camo-print suspenders. He looks like I surprised him; maybe I did. I don’t remember taking the picture, but something must have compelled me. My flash reflected in his glasses.

Place isn’t just geography. It can be anywhere, can exist without and in spite of us. Like Hemingway’s Paris, place is both a physical location and a memory—if we are lucky, we take it with us when we leave. When we talk about identity, the “who we are” collides with “where we are from” and “where we have been.” Geographies and experience and history intermingle, and the result is unavoidably transformative.

When you visit a place with someone you love, with someone who loves that place even if that love is complicated, the geography changes into something much more than simply land. You absorb a piece of it through them; it spreads through you like honeysuckle vines. There are people and places in Alabama that I have never known, never been to, that no longer exist, and yet, they cast a shadow on my life. These are fragments, pieces of other people’s memories that I’ve borne witness to, that have now become part of my own story. The earth is shallow, as Faulkner says; “[it] don’t want to keep things, hoard them; it wants to use them again.” The spirits and burdens of the past are recycled and renewed within us. We absorb them whether we want to or not.

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Breaking any horse takes time—days, if you’re lucky; weeks more likely; years, if you’re raising it from a foal. When

Keegan's father worked with Logan early in their training, he would use a buggy whip to get him to run in the round pen, one way and then, "Whoa," back the other way. Once the horse is both tired and used to you being in its space—this is the part that takes the most time—you can introduce the other elements of its conquest: the bridle, the blanket, the saddle.

The goal is to get on the horse's back. This goes against everything in their nature. A thing on their back means danger, but we do it anyway. When the horse is finally broken, it's hard to tell if it's because they've bought into the promise of our partnership—trusting that the risk they are taking by letting something onto its back is worth it, is right, even though their instinct says that it's not—or if they've just decided to acquiesce, tired of our games.

It's a lot to ask an animal—to give over to us, to trust us even though we know that by letting us onto its back its life is no longer its own. We push them beyond their natural thresholds because the risk that they might reject us, might throw us off their backs and hightail it out into the countryside, is outweighed by the reward if they don't. And we ask the same of people. Relationships are dangerous. In them, our lives are never our own. People will break your trust even as they swear they've given all of themselves to you, and a horse can still turn wild again even after it's broken.

I talked to Keegan's dad on the phone recently about what happened to Logan after the divorce. He told me that Logan liked to hang "two houses up" with the neighbor's horses, that the neighbors would call and he would walk up there to bring Logan home. One time, he forgot to bring a lead, but when he took his belt off, Logan raised his tail and ran straight home. After the divorce, he gave Logan to that family. He said that they didn't want him to ride or race or work; they just liked having horses in their fields.

People leave, places decay, and horses get sent to the neighbor's pasture. Change is inevitable, but part of what makes everything special is its impermanence. Sometimes it's the risk of loss or failure or pain that makes the promise of success or love or joy seem that much sweeter, even if we never get it.





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### Publishing Information

- “If you are lucky to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.” —Ernest Hemingway, 1950 letter to a friend, *A Moveable Feast* (1964).
- William Faulkner’s “The Old People,” from *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

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## Shallow Earth

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