Days of Waterford

A thesis submitted to the
Kent State University Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Departmental Honors

by

Melanie Murphy Cook

May, 2015
Thesis written by

Melanie Murphy Cook

Approved by

__________________________________________
Advisor

__________________________________________, Chair, Department of English

Accepted by

__________________________________________, Dean, Honors College
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAYS OF WATERFORD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973—CHOSES, NEWELL, and SKIPPIN’ SCHOOL</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVENING AT THE FARM—JANUARY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PONY GIRL</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A LITTLE BACK STORY</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PASTURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHEN I WAS FIVE, I GRASPED PERFECTION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SING OUT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE EPIC OF SING OUT</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HORSEMEN OF WATERFORD</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORNING BACKSIDE</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENDER AND THE TRACK</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GIRLS’ ROOM</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATERFORD’S WOMEN</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUTH OR TALES</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNAKE-IN-A-BOX</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF Illustrations

Illustration 1. Training Hours ........................................ 1
Illustration 2. Fat Boy .................................................. 13
Illustration 3. Pony Girl ............................................... 14
Illustration 4. Broodmare Meadow ................................. 17
Illustration 5. Sing Out with Pearl Murphy .................. 20
Illustration 6. Sing Out the Juniors Purse .................... 23
Illustration 7. Tightener ............................................... 24
Illustration 8. Shedrow ............................................... 25
Illustration 9. Thistledown Leading Woman Trainer ...... 29
Illustration 10. Dorothy Gallagher ............................... 29
Illustration 11. Watching the Girls Race By .................. 31
Illustration 12. Jock’s Room photo .............................. 38
Illustration 13. Big Jim the Toothfairy (James Wiegens) .... 49
Illustration 14. Thunder .............................................. 51
Illustration 15. Dad in the Rec Hall .............................. 57
Illustration 16. Lucky Horseshoe ................................. 64
Illustration 17. My Father with Eclipsemator ................. 69
Illustration 18. Gorge ............................................... 71
Illustration 19. Solo .................................................. 72
Illustration 20. Dream ............................................... 73
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude, first of all, to my advisor, Patti Swartz, Ph.D. Your direction, support, and encouragement during the preparation and writing of this thesis has been immeasurable. Your dedication is beyond compare.

I want to thank Leslie Heaphy, Ph.D., Katherine Orr, Ph.D., and Lydia Rose Ph.D., for serving on my defense committee. I appreciate your time and effort in reviewing my thesis.

Thank you, Jay Wooten, Ph.D., for working with me during the fall 2014 semester.

I would also like to thank Craig Paulenich, Ph.D., for his contribution of poetic expertise. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn in your classroom.

Thanks to everyone who so generously and openly shared with me their experiences and memories of Waterford Park.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, particularly my husband, Jack Allen and my daughter Emma. Your support has been so much appreciated. Thanks, also to my mother, Pearl Murphy, for always being in my corner and for your recollections of times preceding my own memory.
Preface

My thesis, *Days of Waterford*, was initially inspired by my study of Louise Erdrich’s novel, *Tracks*. Erdrich writes of the lives of the Ojibwa tribe with deep affection and sensitivity without sparing the reader the rough edges of her characters. As I read her novel, I became aware of the similarities between her Ojibwa tribe and the people from the “backside” of Waterford Park, the horse track where I spent most of the 1970’s and 80’s. Erdrich’s masterful use survival humor is of particular interest to me. Like the Ojibwa, racetrack horsemen tend to find ways to laugh about things that most people would not find humorous. They often forgo the security and stability that most people strive for in favor of the serial exhilaration that comes with placing hopes and dreams on the next good horse, and then the next, and the next. Success and hardship are both common and expected in the lives of racetrackers. Nothing lasts, good or bad—except the stories. In Erdrich’s *Tracks*, there is much emphasis on the oral tradition of storytelling by the main characters. This is another similarity between Erdrich’s Ojibwa and my “tribe” of racetrackers. Racetrack stories usually exist only in oral form; it is very rare that they are written down. The final link between the Ojibwa and Waterford’s horsemen is that both struggle to preserve their identity as modern life imposes its changes upon them. Changes in the racing industry of recent years have all but put an end to the family-run racing stables of the 1970’s.
To write the stories and histories of some of Waterford's horsemen, I interviewed a number of people who raced there during that era. I also studied a number of books by authors who wrote from interviews and oral histories. Studs Terkel's *The Great Divide* was highly influential in my writing. In this book, Terkel writes from interviews with working class individuals across the United States, who talk about their lives and their struggles to get by in American society.

Interviewing the Waterford horsemen was an enjoyable challenge and a struggle in itself. I found that many people readily agree to interviews, but a smaller number will actually sit down to participate. Many people agreed to interview by email, but only one person completed this type of interview. Several horsemen did meet with me in person and sit down to talk with me about their lives, their families, their horses, and their stories.

The high point of my interviewing experiences happened on a cold day in early February. Luck dictated that four or five old-time horsemen would happen by the rec hall at Mountaineer (which was Waterford thirty years ago). It was a beautiful thing to sit with this group of racetrackers and listen as they reminisced between gulps of coffee and spoonfuls of chili, which was sponsored that day by the racetrack chaplaincy. Stories and laughter flowed effortlessly for several hours. I don't think I needed to ask a single question. It was glorious. I hoped to re-create the situation on another day but due to a
long stretch of sub-zero temperatures and a lack of fortuitous timing, it did not happen again.

My father, Richard Murphy, loved nothing more than to hear and tell racetrack stories—for hours on end. I am sure it is from him that I acquired my affection for horsemen and their tales. I have Dad to thank for situating our family in the midst of this dream-chasing lifestyle. Our security came not from steady income and fashionable possessions, but from the firm foundation of familial relationships. I have included my own family’s history and experiences in this thesis.


"The racetrack is just one big, dysfunctional family!"

Long-time horseman, Robin Bates

I became part of the Waterford racing community, this family, by way of my father who bought a farm and moved our young family and his small stable of thoroughbreds to West Virginia in the early seventies. We were a family-run operation, like many racing stables of that era. There was a job for everyone. As soon as children were old enough to have the sense to stay out of the way of horses, they were brought to the barn to clean tack, scrub buckets, and roll bandages. When they were able to tell the difference between clean and dirty straw they were taught to clean stalls. Everyone had work to do in the name of the family’s common good, and so it was with our family. My
mother and dad, my younger brothers, Don and Steve, my little sister, Georgia, and I all did work appropriate for our ages and abilities.

It was in this environment that my brothers, sister, and I grew up—supported by loving parents—in an unconventional, uncomplicated, and resilient web woven of dreams, devotion and spirit of adventure. Our father and mother taught us that simple human experience is not mundane or inconvenient; it is the mortar for life’s touchstones.

In the years since “Waterford,” I have moved away and returned several times. Dad sold the family farm long ago. He passed away in 2011. I now live less than a twenty minute drive from the track and less than thirty minutes from The Farm. I rarely spend time at the track anymore. I find the atmosphere now to be hard and cold, relative to the days of Waterford. The number of horsemen who are deeply rooted in the area is dwindling. No one under the age of eighteen is permitted on the backside, so family operations—that depend on the family unit working together, as ours was—no longer have a place there. There are many outside horsemen who ship in for a few months when their home track shuts down for the season. And sadly, the camaraderie, so prolific during the days of family-centered Waterford Park, has given way to a dog-eat-dog mentality.

There is still a racetrack where Waterford Park used to be. Now it is part of something called Mountaineer Casino, Racetrack, and Resort. The main attraction is a large and glitzy casino and hotel complex with video slots, gaming tables, restaurants, and bars where girls in red push-up tops bring your drinks. You can work up a sweat at
the fitness center, get a Swedish massage or eat a fifty dollar dinner. Tour buses bring in loads of patrons who spend the day at the casino. Most never think about the horse races. Horses still race there, but they are relegated to the backyard area behind the casino. The horses are now a minor attraction at best. They play second fiddle to the hypnotic, flashing lights and the electronic sounds that mimic the cha-chang of coinage of an old-fashioned slot machine payout. But if you walk past the fountain in the lobby, through the double glass doors, past the doorman and the valet-parking guys, and look across the parking lot toward the river that separates West Virginia from Ohio, on the far side of the racing oval, you will find a lonely green grandstand, flanked by nearly empty parking lots. This is where the action used to be. A long time ago. When it was Waterford.
1973—Chores, Newell, and Skippin’ School

I moved to West Virginia at age thirteen, with my parents, Richard and Pearl Murphy. In October of 1973, my eighth-grade year, Dad, a horse trainer, shipped his horses from Kentucky to Waterford, the small-time horse track in the northern panhandle of West Virginia. He rented a mobile home in Jones’s trailer park on Route 8 behind Chester and moved our family up from Kentucky. This became home for the six of us until January.

By then, Dad had sold the Kentucky farm and our new adventure was about to commence on forty rural acres in West Virginia. Three winding miles up Route 2 from Waterford, past Arroyo Village, down the hill, a sharp right onto then unpaved White Oak Run, a left turn over the culvert, up the hill about a quarter mile, then left into the dirt drive, our new home awaited. The Farm. The Farm consisted of a five room, brick asphalt sided house, a garage sided in a lighter shade of brick asphalt, an eight-stall bank barn, a small spring-fed lake, plenty of turn-out space, and pasture for my father’s little band of broodmares. Except for a three-year stint in Iowa in the late seventies, this would be our family’s home-base for nearly twenty years.

The house had an old coal furnace in the basement, which my parents opted not to use. Instead, Dad installed a wood burning stove in the living room, the central room in the house. When the woodpile got low, my dad, my brothers, and I would get in the brown Ford pick-up and head across the pasture to a wooded area of The Farm, near the
ravine. (Unless there was snow—then we couldn’t risk getting the truck stuck, so we pushed a wheelbarrow across the field to load with wood.) Dad would drop a tree and saw it in sections short enough to fit into the stove, and my brothers, Don and Steve, and I would load the wood into the truck. Dad hauled it back to the old garage where we split and stacked it.

During the winters, Dad would crank down the damper on the stove at night so the wood would burn slowly and the fire would last till morning. This meant that although the fire did not go out, the temperature in the house dropped all right. By morning, we could see our breath in the bedrooms. Mom always awoke first and got the fire going so the living room would be nice and warm. Before I went to bed at night, I placed my clothing for the next day on a chair next to my bed. In the morning, I pulled them under the covers with me and dressed beneath the quilts. Only then did I venture through the house to wait my turn for the bathroom.

Before breakfast, Don and Steve and I headed out to the barn for morning chores—to feed, hay, and water the horses. This was a simple enough procedure during most of the year. But in the dead of winter, when the spigot in the barn was frozen, we had to beat the ice out of the buckets before we could fill them with water that we carried from the pump house. We returned to the house, with fingers red and ice cold, quickly ate breakfast and gathered our books. It was nearly a mile’s walk to the bus stop—where the dirt road met the blacktop. Sherry Gray and Johnny Brinkley waited for the bus there, as well as Billy and Eddy, the Utt twins.
To get to the Utt’s house, you didn’t make the left at the culvert but continued straight until you came to a house that stood a hundred feet back from the dirt road. It was flanked by woods on either side and the creek ran behind it. An unmown front yard and a row of overgrown evergreens obscured the house and gave the place a foreboding atmosphere. If one was brave enough to venture to the front door, it was impossible not to notice the coffin on the front porch which served as the family’s wood box. It was common knowledge that Mr. Utt kept a vast store of “homebrew.” We had heard that the Utts guarded the still with shotguns. They didn’t care to be bothered by outside folk. On summer evenings, when the sun dropped low behind the hills and the air felt green and cool, a mist would rise from the creek like so many earthbound apparitions. The unique configuration of landscape trapped and held this gloomy vapor. It enveloped the Utt house and ran a quarter mile along the creek. To linger there under such conditions was unimaginable.

Johnny Brinkley and Sherry Gray were track kids, too. Their fathers were trainers like my dad. Johnny’s family came to Waterford from Oklahoma. Sherry’s parents were imports from Montana. Johnny quit high school right after his sixteenth birthday to become a successful young jockey.

Sherry was two years older than I. When the weather warmed up in the spring, spending days at Newell’s Wells Jr. High was low on the list of priorities for Sherry and me. She and I would ride the school bus into Newell, but instead of entering the school building, we would escape into the “hollow” beside the school. In the very early 1900’s,
the hollow was the location of a small zoo. In the early 1970’s it served as a place for junior-high kids who needed a place to smoke cigarettes or hide out while ditching school. So Sherry and I hid in the hollow until we were sure classes had started. Then we walked boldly to the upper end of Newell and paid a nickel to cross the toll bridge on foot. This was a troublesome trek because the wooden footpath was missing a number of planks. In some areas, as many as four planks in a row were absent, leaving a foot and a half by four-foot window into the murky waters of the Ohio River.

Once we made it to the Ohio side, we wandered through the streets of East Liverpool and went “shopping” in the stores. Ogilvie’s Department Store was good for several hours of browsing—from the bargain basement to the mezzanine. In the dressing rooms, we tried on all the latest fashions. We didn’t have anything in our blue jeans pockets but lunch money. But we shopped like we had hundreds to spend. Sherry and I enjoyed our freedom from the grind of junior high school so much that we repeated this caper four days in a row. It did not occur to us that anyone would call our school and report us, but that was exactly what happened. Someone from Ogilvie’s staff ratted us out. When I returned home on the bus after our fourth day of shopping, my mother already knew all about it. That was the end of those adventures.
Evening at the Farm—January

The orchard is a flourish of filigree in frosted lace.  
Purple Damson plums suspend their future forms  
somewhere within the woodish ways of trees.  
Fugitive light of Opera Pink  
slants low and strong,  
projects zoetic color into icicles  
that spill from downspouts and gutters  
like Swarovski chandeliers.  
The barn, bejeweled and banked in snow,  
rises, Zhivago’s palace  
from a field of rose brocade.  
An ermine cloak tossed carelessly  
across the western roof  
blushes for the weathered wood  
and rusty hinges left exposed.

...
Weathered wood and rusty hinges
feel the shame of sows' ears
embarrassed by silk purses.
The sun surrenders up the day.
The barn, self-conscious in extravagance,
finds its comfort in grisaille.
Filigree and chandeliers
relapse to snow and ice.
The orchard rests
in arabesques of gray.
When Opportunity Knocks

During summers, after school let out, trainer’s kids were seen regularly in Waterford’s barn area. One of those summers, alongside my dad, I became a bona fide backsider. My brothers and I cleaned stalls. Lots and lots of stalls. I learned to walk horses. I scrubbed buckets and raked the shedrow. We became important cogs of the workings of Dad’s racing stable.

Dad taught us what not to do at the track:

Never touch, or pet, or feed other people’s horses.

Never stand on the right-hand side of the shedrow. If you get caught on that side of the shedrow when someone is walking a horse, it’s your own fault for not paying attention. Because racehorses are always handled from the left side, they feel just fine about kicking anyone on their right side. “It’s a good way to get yourself killed,” Dad would say.

Never hang or swing on the webbing at the front of a horse’s stall. Dad said if the horse charges the webbing, you won’t be able to get out of the way soon enough. Never sit on a chair or bucket directly in front of a horse’s stall—for the same reason. Those were both “good ways to get yourself killed.” Dad was all about safety.

Never talk to other people about your horses. It’s no one else’s business. Dad was also all about privacy. He taught me that (1) things at the track are not always what they appear to be, (2) bad news travels fast, and (3) by keeping your head about you at all times you can make numbers 1 and 2 work in your favor.
A good example of this is the time Dad had a pretty good allowance horse who ran a very poor race. The jockey sent this horse out to the lead on a tiring track, set very rapid fractions, and the horse backed up terribly in the stretch and finished an embarrassing last. Well, Dad was always one to look for something good in a bad situation. When the horse returned to the barn, Dad led him back into his stall. He bandaged the horse’s front leg from below the ankle to above the knee. Into the bandage, he wrapped a piece of a curtain rod. This functioned as a splint and prevented the horse from bending his knee properly. Then he led the horse around the shedrow. The horse gimped along beside my dad and when they reached the backside of the barn, where a very nosy and very talkative gentleman was stabled, Dad said, “Look how this poor son-of-a-gun came back from the race. It must be the knee, he can’t even bend it. He was a pretty nice horse, too. He’s probably not worth three hundred dollars the way he is now.” Then Dad walked back around to his own side of the barn with his crippled-looking horse and waited for Mister Busybody to do his magic. My dad put the horse on a trailer and brought him home to the farm. He waited a month and then entered him for the lowest class race available, a twelve hundred dollar claimer. Word had gotten around about the poor condition of this horse and nobody was interested in him at the claim box. The horse won easily and became eligible for starter allowance, which made it easier for him to win several more that season.

Dad was a straight-up kind of guy. He took pride in the fact that in almost fifty years of horse racing, not a single ruling was ever made against him. He never raced
horses with illegal substances; he didn’t hold his horses; he was not a cheater. But when an opportunity presented itself, he took advantage of it. Not every opportunity got such positive results as the curtain-rod coup.

My dad purchased a big strapping mare named Sail Wind. She was breezing like a champ. He didn’t think anyone could beat her. Dad wasn’t a gambler, but this looked like a good opportunity to make some money. She had a good form so her odds would be short. Dad decided that the smartest thing to do would be to wheel her on top with everything in the trifecta and hope that a big longshot came in second or third. It cost him more than two hundred dollars—probably the biggest bet he ever made. Sadly, the mare bled badly and finished last. Dad was not in a good mood that evening.
Pony Girl

At seventeen, I was hired for my first job at the track. I groomed and ran horses for J. C. Williams. I worked with a young man named George. George and I cleaned twenty-two stalls every morning and took care of that many horses. On race days—Mondays through Saturdays, we readied horses to run, led them to the paddock where we handled them until the jockeys were safely aboard, led them back to the barn after their races and cooled them out. For this, I earned seventy dollars a week. It was hard work and long hours, seven days a week. It was the perfect first job—it made me appreciate every other job I would ever have.

That summer, Dad bought me a lead pony, a four-year-old 4H quarter horse that some young lady had tired of. I named him “Fat Boy.” He ate french fries and drank soda from a can, turning his head sideways and slurping as I poured it between his lips. He became my best friend and partner in my business as a pony girl. I made three dollars every time I ponied a horse in the morning, and I earned ten bucks for every horse I accompanied to the post during the races. By the
time I turned eighteen, I was averaging from thirty to fifty dollars a day. I thought I was “rolling in the dough.” I bought everyone in my family a new coat for Christmas that year.

PHOTO FROM MURPHY FAMILY COLLECTION
A Little Back Story

Nearly everyone who raced at Waterford in the seventies had a history of living and racing at other locations. I came to Waterford in my early teens, but a love of horses was ingrained in me much earlier. My parents’ lives have revolved around horses and racing for as long as I can remember. When I was very young, a trip to the barn, pasture, or racetrack was an experience of mystical enchantment. The sight, sound, or touch of a horse added a new and exciting dimension to the narrow confines of my life as a small child in rural Illinois.

The poems: The Pasture and When I was Five I Grasped Perfection in Two Fistfuls of Chestnut Mane, reflect the wonder of horses from a five-year old’s perspective. The Pasture uses language that frequently cuts back to child-like simplicity. When I was Five . . . employs language that is unavailable to a child. I was unable to accurately describe this experience until I became an adult. My first ride was not on a child’s pony or a riding horse. My father lifted me onto the back of the biggest and best racehorse in his stable. He told me to grab two handfuls of mane and hold on tight. He then led me around the shedrow of his barn at Fairmount Park in St. Louis. I felt like Superman. When I was Five... is based on this experience.
Broodmare Meadow
The Pasture

*I walk in the pasture with my mother and little brother. I don’t know which magical path has led us here or which will take us home. I am surprised by a half-remembered kinship to this mystical expanse of grasses, weeds, and woods.*

*And the horses are here!*

*They ignore our intrusion. They wander freely, picking at this patch of grass, and then that one. We are as they are—just creatures being. I feel like one of them. I suck in the earthy pasture smell. The musty decay of horse manure mingles with autumn incense of the brown and yellow leaves I kick about with the rounded toes of my red rubber boots.*

*My mother wears her blue and red wool plaid jacket. It is more of a shirt than a jacket and the plaid is more like checks than plaid. She picks up a fallen persimmon and gives it to me to eat. The skin makes my mouth pucker, but beneath it is the sweet, warm taste of the rusty orange color that it is. Through half-bare branches, sunlight suspends my world in a musty-orange-persimmon-scented glow.*

*And the horses are here.*

Sometimes, in late autumn, I purchase a persimmon from the grocery store. I hold it to my nose, close my eyes, and inhale. I desperately desire that elusive autumn-orange scent. I bite and orange flesh yields beneath the crush of teeth. Taste buds anticipate that warm earthy-orange flavor. But store-bought persimmons are always as tasteless as the cardboard trays that cradle them in perfect geometric display at the produce counter. I perform this exercise in futility every few years, always thinking, always hoping, that maybe this time – *this time* – it will taste like the pasture, in the fall, when I was five—and the horses were there.
When I was Five, I Grasped Perfection
in Two Fistfuls of Chestnut Mane

With knees jacked up
in artless imitation of jockey style,
I press to root into *latissimus dorsi*
at either side of stalwart withers—
that rock-sure rise of spine.
I perch in the catbird seat of dreams,
the magic fulcrum of lucid fluidity.

Anchored
by a dimple-knuckled clutch of mane,
I rock in the cradle
of prelapsarian Horse-ness.
No saddle, no bridle, nothing
but copper coat.
Not proverbial new penny—
but copper of ancient crafted coin,
distinguished by design,
rubbed for luck or muse,
burnished to liquid slick.
Before me, a crested neck,
primordial isthmus of Tianma,
arches to celestial ears.

Behind me, the unspoken fears
of my mother—*Richard* . . .

*Richard, be careful . . . she's too little . . .*

Below me, twelve hundred pounds of legend
footfall in shedrow dirt-dance.

Earthy echoes resonate in my breath,
the limitations of childish existence dissipate

at seventeen hands.


My father knows these things—

he smiles broadly at the end of the shank.
Sing Out

One of my father’s all-time favorite horses was a large and talented gelding named Sing Out. Sing Out was bred and raised by my parents and had a long and successful career as a racehorse. My father, late in his life, frequently dreamed of racing Sing Out at various tracks. The Epic of Sing Out rose from a fond recollection of my father’s affection for this big chestnut horse.

Sing Out at 1 year of age with my mother, Pearl Murphy
The Epic of Sing Out

The little chestnut mare’s registered name was Chant’s Encore but Dad’s affection rendered her “Ol’ Chant.”
Obscurely bred, Sir Grey Spot was her sire.
Five generations back though,
blood of Dark Ronald on her top line,
Man O’ War on the bottom, flowed into her veins.
Dad always said his horses were “related to all the good ones and just a few of the bad ones.”

Ol’ Chant mothered a myriad of foals.
The best was Sing Out.
Stacks of black and white win photos—
Cahokia, Park Jefferson, Atokad, Fairmount—stand witness to his proficiency.
Sing Out was a deep closer, the kind of horse that could steal your breath at the quarter pole, stop your heart at the furlong marker, and make you speak in tongues as he emerges from the pack at the wire

Dad never tired of his favorite tale of Sing Out: “He’s rolling down the stretch, blowin’ by rivals—like a freight train passing a tramp—
a guy’s yelling, ‘Come on Sing Out! Come on Sing Out!’

His buddy elbows him in the ribs

‘That’s not the horse you bet on!’

‘I know” he says, “but man, look at him run!”

Heart in a horse is a thing revered.
A holy thing,
a card dealt at birth,
a spell cast to overcome all odds.
No one knows where it comes from
but Sing Out had it.
St. Louis, 1962—Singout—flying from the back of the pack
on a track so sloppy the throwback fills his blinkers,
obliterates his vision,
wins blind.

Heart flung him past the wire.

Half a century later, in my father’s dreams,
the great-hearted Sing Out raced on—
Cahokia,
Park Jefferson,
Atokad,
Fairmount—
rolling down the stretch,
blowin’ by rivals— like a freight train passing a tramp . . .
Sing Out, after the 1962 race described in the poem. His blinker cups are packed with mud and his eyes are barely visible. My father, Richard Murphy stands at his head.
The Horsemen of Waterford

There was once a close-knit community behind Waterford Park’s aqua-green gates along Route 2. Hundreds drove past these gates every day; most were never aware of the modus vivendi behind them. This community was populated by horse trainers, jockeys, agents, exercise riders, grooms, hot walkers, stall muckers, pony girls and pony boys, a couple of outriders, a few veterinarians, an equine dentist or two and about twelve hundred mostly cheap thoroughbreds. This was where Waterford’s horsemen spent the majority of their lives. Seven days a week, from early morning to late at night, the lives of horsemen are tied to their work. Many will say that racing is not a job—it’s a lifestyle.

In Morning Backside, it is my intention to offer a glimpse into the activities, terminology, and atmosphere of the backside in the mornings.

PHOTO BY MELANIE MURPHY
Morning Backside

Shedrow: barricades of baled straw—oat, wheat or rye,
fifty feet long and six feet high, line the right-hand side.
Sheds crammed with alfalfa, timothy, orchard grass,
the bales with clover—send them back.
Buckets hang, bang, slosh, dump,
line up in the wash rack with feed tubs to be scrubbed
Drippy green water hoses, radios tuned to rock n roll,
pitchforks and rakes. Muck tubs manhandled
by salty old grooms—linen rub rags hang by one corner
from back pockets of Dickey work pants.

Tackroom: saddles, bridles, extra bits hang on nails:
ring bits, D bits, Houghton bits’ll keep ‘em straight.
Run-out bits, cage bits, leather bits for tender mouths,
prong bits, rubber D’s, Serena Songs depress the tongues
to keep the airways clear. Citations for the most headstrong.
Nosebands, figure eights, shadow rolls, tongue ties,
spare reins slap the backs of tackroom doors—
red rubbers worn smooth, wait for replacement on hooks
beside weathered leather shanks with brass snaps and chains.
Girths of every length for every horse—
fillies slight of frame, geldings loose and lazy,
crafty old wide-body studs, solid mares, colts lean and green—
elastics strong and buckles clean.

Bandage box: cold waters, spiders for the knees,
velcro’d standing bandages,
old-time Lily-whites secured with safety pins.
cottons, quilts, no-bows, ace bandages, vet-raps.
For leg work: tighteners, liniments, salves and leg paint.
Alcohol, Ball solution, Blue Lotion, Green Jelly,
Harold White’s. The scent of Absorbine takes me back
to childhood when heaven smelled like
liniment, leather, and horse breath.
Savoss, Reducine, Numotizine—that’s the pink stuff.
Horses done up in poultice mixed from Kentucky clay,
wrapped in wet brown paper, cottons, and standing bandages—
it draws until it’s dry.
Scarlett Oil, Blu-Kote, Wonder dust, Furazone,
caustic powder. Bacon grease keeps the skin soft,
heals, and toughens it up.
Turpentine will cure what ails the hoof.
A little packing’s good for that as well.

Feed time: oats, white, whole or crimped,
Omalene, sweetfeed—fourteen percent,
molasses in a hot bran mash makes for a happy horse.
Flaxseed, mineral salt, Red Cell to build the blood,
Stress Dex, DMG, and MSM,
glucosamine and Corta Flex.
Mix it up in the tub.
Top it off with carrot chunks and peppermints.

Its twelve o’ clock noon, training hours over,
Stalls are done, the shed is raked,
Tack is cleaned and put away.
they’re groomed from nose to tail,
legs are wrapped, and feet are packed.
Buckets are full and feed set in,
haynets hang at every door,
all is done, there is no more.
Go home and shower, take a nap,
be back for evening feed at four.
Gender and the Track

"Horseman" is a term relating to persons who work directly with racehorses on the backside of a racetrack. It appears to indicate gender, but when used in this context, it does not. Women who work on the track reject words that signify female-ness and almost always assume traditional masculine titles for their roles. Pronounced, "HORSEmn," the emphasis is on 'horse,' followed by a short murmur which suggests the presence of a subordinate human form and accurately represents the racehorse/human relationship. When spoken, the singular and plural forms are identical. At one time, gender was a big issue on racetracks. Before the seventies, few women were seen on the backside, and even fewer worked there. Owners and trainer's wives, in dresses and heels who were brought by their husbands "to see the horses," were the only women in sight. Dorothy Gallagher, a local octogenarian, was one of the early ground-breakers for women thoroughbred trainers. Dorothy was the third woman in the state of Nebraska to be granted a trainer's license. She says that the license "was only good for the backside." Even though she trained her own horses, she was not allowed by the Nebraska racing officials to handle or saddle her own horse prior to a race, or to even set foot on the racing surface. Dorothy eventually moved on to St. Louis and then to Thistledown Racetrack at Cleveland Ohio, where she became the leading female trainer.
Dorothy Gallagher was featured in an article in "The Cleveland Plain Dealer" ("Thistledown Leading Woman Trainer").

Dorothy won her first race at Waterford Park with a one-eyed horse named Quanah on November 8th, 1962. In 1970, she made a permanent move to Waterford Park with her partner, Cookie, and they built a stable of horses. Cookie had his connections from which to draw business, and Dorothy had hers as well. They worked together as a team until Cookie’s death several years ago.

Dorothy reflects for a moment on the days of Waterford Park and says, “We was all broke, but we still had a ball!” She no longer trains but is still involved in the racing community and goes to the track’s chapel services weekly. In the photo to the right, the Mountaineer barn area is Dorothy’s backdrop on a cold February morning.

PHOTO BY MELANIE MURPHY
Another difficult breakthrough for women in racing involved their battle to become jockeys and compete against men. Several women were granted jockey licenses in the 60’s but met with boycotts by the male jockeys who refused to ride against women. Kathy Kushner won the right to ride in races when she took the Maryland Racing Commission to court after they refused her application. She then became the first woman in North America to be licensed as a jockey. Diane Crump was the first woman to ride in a horse race at a recognized track in February of 1969. (Grisolia)

Women gained acceptance as jockeys at a gradual pace. Many girls began to gravitate to some of the smaller tracks because it was easier to find trainers willing to give them a shot. In time, Waterford Park came to be known as “the home for girls.” I have seen as many as thirteen female jockeys occupying the Waterford jock’s room at one time.

Patty Barton, Donna Shriver Zook, and Kim Rice were among the earliest of the regular women riders at Waterford in the seventies. As that decade leaned into the next, the number of female riders multiplied. Along with a number of others, I joined their ranks by the end of 1980. My poem, The Girl’s Room, is about several of the women who were jockeys at Waterford. Each part of the poem is a tiny window into the personality of a single woman, and as a whole, it describes several of the more general issues that women jockeys had to overcome.
The Girls’ Room

Patty

wouldn’t go back to the kitchen—
She heckled the hecklers
and bucked the boycotts,
one of Waterford’s female firsts.

Proud of her masculine physique,
she once dropped her drawers post-race
for all to see
the raised red imprint of a whip
on her bare ass, and named the offender:
Clifford Thompson.
She’d laid in wait
and coldcocked Clifford.
He never saw it coming.
Patty’d rough it up with any of the boys.
She didn’t put up with chauvinistic shit,
got in a knock-down-drag-out with Roy Cave.
She mouthed off and Roy said,

*You wanna talk like a man—*

*I’ll beat you like a man,*
so she punched him.

Took two guys to tear them apart.
She was tough as anybody.

But Patty could finesse a horse. Her fighting fists
were light on a horse’s mouth, where it really counts.

Until she was trampled at Fairmount.

Busted and crumpled,

the fight bled out,

and was swallowed by sand.
Kim

was perfect platinum.

Color-coordinated pom-pom
atop a bubblegum pink helmet-cover,
14 karat gold hoop earrings,
Coppertone tan,
and pearly whites
of exquisite uniformity.
The boys chased her,
the girls wanted to be her.

Kim rode horses for her daddy, Don,
an ex M. P.,
he barked blame at her in defeat.
Creative crying was her defense.

Kim took a vacation
and came back a D cup.
First girl I ever knew with a boob job—
she set the whole track abuzz.
If you’ve got the looks, use ‘em,
and she did. They earned her
the starring role as the jockey
in that Mello Yello commercial.
Jackie

Jumpin’ off Jackie,
Whacky Jackie, they called her,
rode with her ass three feet
from the saddle, all elbows and knees,
looked like a monkey
fuckin’ a football, they said.
She got the job done.
Maybe she just scared the shit out of horses.
They ran like crazy trying to get out from under her.
Henry Earnhardt didn’t care why they ran—
he only knew they did.
Jacki rode his whole stable, racked up the wins.

Jackie had a big mouth, they said.
She said what she thought; she didn’t care.
Shiflett, a former bantam golden glove,
got pissed at her and her big mouth one night.
He picked her up and tossed her against a cinderblock wall.
Knocked her stone cold.
She slid down the wall in a heap.
When she awoke, she shook it off
and went about her business.

Jackie sure could take a hit.
Susie

was a nice girl

who looked like a boy.

It took most people a while to figure it out—

with her square face, coarse brows,

and the biggest feet of any jock I ever saw.

Susie wore an undershirt,

never a bra—

she had nothin’ to put in it.

She said perfume made her smell

like shit on a lilac,

she never wore it.

She didn’t set the world on fire,

a natural she was not,

but she worked like damn animal

and deserved every dollar she got.

Susie’d rather lift weights

than go on dates.

Nobody messed with her.

She was a tough old girl.

She took up professional boxing

when the riding gig got old.
*Donna*

made history
as first female ever
to boot home four winners
in single day.

She won sixty races with a bun in the oven,
back in the saddle right after the birth.
Then a mount taken down by a fallen rival
shattered her career—along with her T6 vertebra.

A month in the hospital flat on her back,
released after two months of rehab,
Donna’s back at the track in a chair,
and friends hoist her onto a horse.

She’s mane hanging, legs dangling,
keeping one on each side,
when husband Dana yells:
Get off that fuckin’ horse, you’re gonna get hurt!

“I can’t get more hurt than I already am,”
she says and she stays where she is.
Dana couldn’t remain faithful to a girl in a chair,
Donna raised the boy by herself.
The Initiation

Tradition held that a jockey’s maiden win
is marked by soapy water drench,
generous douse of shaving cream,
and a forcible de-pantsing,
right down to the skin.

The finale: a crotch-full of boot-black—
Smeared on with a sponge.
What went for boys went for us.
To prove we belonged in this small-men’s’ club
we requested no special treatment.

We weren’t the fairer sex.
We didn’t make a fuss.

We could fight,
or grin and bear it—
The result always the same
when the entire riding colony
lined up to play the game.
Photograph taken in the girl’s jock’s room at Waterford Park. Left to right: Kathy Antus, Diane Haney King, Robert Reed (Clerk of Scales,) Melanie Murphy, Linda Richmond.

*Waterford’s Women*

Besides the five women named in *The Girl’s Room*, other regular female riders at Waterford have, at various times, included: Barbara Jo Rubin, Carol Cook, Kris Craft, Mary Pease, Debra Burt, Diane Haney King, Linda Richmond, Lois Meals, Linda Blum, Debbie Lakin, Melanie Murphy, Tammy Brinkley Durbin, Lisa Misciewtz, Kathy Antus, Barbara Suitor, Patty Cooksey, Mary Sue Henry, Jane Thurocy, Sherry Gray, Jayne
Thompson, Liz Lumberg, and others.

Janeen Painter, Donna Skolnick, Kelly Hunter, Patty Volkwein, Deseree Kiser, Valerie Beasiz Valerie, Torn Rice, Nancy Tillova, Debbie Spyrock, Nina Matt, Cynthia Herman,

Bumhahn, Johanna Kapulin, Leola Gort, Colleen Frank, Claudia Whike, Doreen Notaro,

Sylvie, Marjie Sylvie, Verna Kirby, Judy Whilney Monihan, Rosann Dewitz, Donna
Truth or Tales?

Like any small community where everyone knows everyone, a racetrack does not escape small-town-type social strife. Waterford Park was no exception. When old relationships end and new ones quickly begin, fodder for gossip is plentiful. Stories are told, based on truth, or not... “Snake in a Box” is one such story.
Snake-in-a-Box

Red to yellow, kill a fellow,
Red to black, venom lack . . .

She gave him the best years of her life.
Well, she gave him several good years.
At least she gave him the time it took to
bear a son, maybe two.
How dare he throw her over for
that little tramp from J barn.

Her face stung hot and
the jilt-venom rose
like bile in her throat.

He moved to Idaho
with his fresh-faced child-bride.
She pictured them, in their coupled Eden,
upon a bed of evergreen,
captured up in a love song draped
between the mountain and the pines.

And she grew accustomed
to the venom that rose
like bile in her throat,
She traveled south till steam-scorched air
matched her inflamed temperament.
Within, without,
the heated breath offered no relief
for the fever in its angry fester-flare.
The rosacea of rejection
scarletted her skin.

The venom rose into her throat
and she found
she liked the taste.

She wrapped the package carefully
with paper cut from a grocery bag.
She licked two dozen stamps.
With a black magic marker
she wrote: Fragile. Glass.

*Red to black venom lack*

*Red to yellow . . .*
The Stories They Told . . .

Through my day-to-day contact with Waterford’s backside population, I acquired a sincere affection for them, as well as an appreciation for their diversity—they were a mishmash from all walks of life. They were former doctors and lawyers, millworkers, nurses, bartenders, office workers and school teachers. There were some who had worked on the track for their entire lives. They were all brought together by a love for horses and racing, along with a desire to live apart, to some degree, from mainstream society. They shared a kinship not of blood but of lifestyle. Most had hard exteriors and soft hearts. They were tough, gritty, and vulnerable. They swore like sailors. They cried like babies—mostly over horses. And they told stories. Some were true, some were based on truth, and others were just pure unadulterated bullshit.

Horsemen’s stories often originate from simple tales of common things. They care little for convoluted characters and plots. They will tell, for years, stories of such uncomplicated things as stolen stocking caps and broken horse trailer hitches. They think it is hilarious to tell of a pitchfork thrown at someone—as long as it missed. They understand the urgency of getting a horse to the paddock on time, regardless of the problems encountered. These stories may change over time. The names of the characters might change: the time, the place, or the situation could be revised, but they will be revered as truth, whether or not they are known to be true, and especially if chances are slim that they could be true. Such is their nature.
Apocrypha I

_The Stocking Cap Caper_

Face worked for old Herb Jolley
mucking stalls and walking hots.
    He was rarely on the receiving end
    of favors or rewards.

Then Herb gifted him with a stocking cap.
Face treasured the token,
    wouldn’t spoil it with use
    in even the harshest weather.

He kept it, all nice and clean,
immaculate, pristine
    upon a shelf in his tackroom,
    like a shrine.

Well, Donnie gets the bright idea
to pull a prank on Face. He creeps
    into his quarters and snitches the
    unblemished beanie from its shelf.

At the loss of the beloved lid
Face comes thoroughly undone.
    Donnie tells him Herb’s boy, Wynn,
    nabbed the knitted cap.

On a rampage, Face strides down the shedrow,
demented by rage, eyes cold as a shark’s.
    He seizes a pitchfork perched
    on a bale of straw.
Wynn, in a rare innocent moment,
    is busy mucking a stall
        and minding his own business,
            unaware of the unraveling of Face.

The pitchfork whizzes past Wynn’s head,
    he hears the twang of tines
        as the implement’s trajectory
            drives them into oaken plank.

Face’s hulking form barricades the door.
    Wynn, frozen with fear and confusion,
        is trapped like a rat in a barrel as
            Face bellows damnation and accusation.

Donnie produces the purloined prize
    just in time to save Wynn’s life.
        He offers up a full confession,
            Wynn’s character is vindicated.

The precious headgear now regained,
    Face calms his breath and cools his boiling blood.
        He smooths the furrowed knitted rows,
            folds it neatly, places it, gently, upon the shelf.
Delmer and Robin drive to Sugarcreek
to haul a horse to auction.
    They have to get back as soon as they can;
    Delmer has a horse in the first.

They’re hustling home,
heading south on 30 out of Lisbon,
when Delmer’s car takes off
like somebody plugged it in.

The hitch has broken,
the trailer’s come off the ball.
    It's coasting along at the speed of traffic,
    and veers sharply to one side.

Robin’s riding shotgun
when horse trailer passes Delmer on the right.
    From her passenger window
    she can count the rivets that hold the thing together.

Delmer steers like he’s riding a cutting horse;
    herding the trailer to the right-hand side of the road.
    Robin envisions the wreckage
    that seems about to occur.

She screams: Delmer! Delmer stop!
    He eases off the gas.
    The solo trailer rolls on by
    doing 55 miles per hour.
As soon as Delmer is outrun
    the trailer turns hard left,
    crosses both lanes of traffic
    and rolls into some family’s front yard.

Delmer has nothing to fix the hitch
    and no time to find someone to tow it.
    He’s got to get back to the track—
    He has a horse to run.

He knocks at the door of his bewildered host,
    and promises to return tomorrow
    to remove the wayward trailer,
    but right now—sorry, he has to go—
    he has a horse to run in the first.
Track Legends: Three Poems

The people who populate the race tracks have wide-ranging personalities. Some become so entrenched in the local lore of a racetrack that they become legend-like. They are there, for seemingly forever, and then suddenly gone, but the legends remain. Jodie Mack, Francis, and Jim the Toothfairy are three men of many who, in my opinion, have achieved legendary status at Waterford Park.

Jodie Mack

Jodie Mack blew in one day
looking like Yosemite Sam.
He was five foot nothing,
a ragged cowboy hat
tilted back above long sandy hair
and a thick handlebar mustache.
Jodie Mack married a girl twice his height,
half his age,
pregnant
with another man’s child.
Her name was Barb,
he called her Babe,
took care of her and the boy
for a dozen years or more.
The Tooth Fairy

Big Jim was a horse dentist,
better known as "Tooth Fairy."
He carried his tools
in a bowling ball bag.
Jim filed equine molars
and removed wolf teeth and caps
for a fee.
In 1986 he missed
a thirty thousand dollar trifecta
by a dirty nose.
He just laughed
and talked about it
for twenty-five years.
Francis came to Waterford from New York.
He was a big man in his prime
with hands like a pair of meat-hooks.
He never spoke of his past.
His obituary said
he was a longshoreman.

Francis took on an ascetic life.
He lived alone in a tack room,
read art magazines,
and painted pictures of an emaciated Christ
and Mother Theresa.
He rode a bicycle three miles to mass every Sunday,
summer and winter,
rain or shine.
The Dark Side

In The Midnight Handicap, I deal with the dark side of horse racing. A sad fact of racing is that sometimes horses and riders get hurt; sometimes they die. It is a harsh and painful fact. Some are able to come to terms with it. I have never been able to do so completely. I do not judge or defend.
The Midnight Handicap

Two tons of horseflesh,
too tight quarters.
Aluminum plates spark,
shoot stars beneath electric lights.
Riders, like synchronized swimmers,
dive into dirt.
Limbs entangle, vertebrae grind.

Blood mixed with horsehair—
a concoction to wake the racing gods.
They brush remnants of sleep
from providential eyes
and peer down from their mountain
in search of worthy sacrifice.
They study the form,
analyze the bloodlines,
compare the Beyers.
It’s first fruits they’re after.
The Rec Hall

I sit in the rec hall at Mountaineer Racetrack and Gaming Resort on the final February morning of 2015. The walls are tan. The floors have tan tiles with intermittent nine-squares of light and dark green. Two coke machines, with red illuminated Coke signs and double glass easy-access doors, stand ready to provide sparkling refreshment for a buck and a half cash, or a swipe of your debit card. The jukebox uses CD’s these days. The pool table costs a dollar a game. The cigarette machine charges seven bucks a pack. Twenty-two knobs dispense the brands of your choosing. The ad on the front of the machine suggests: Kool. A video bowling game—Silver Strike—stands along a side wall beside the cigarette machine. A ten by ten foot nine-light floor-to-ceiling window offers a panoramic view of the racetrack. The temperature outdoors is ten degrees and the infield is snow-covered. Tomorrow is the first day of the meet.

The hall to the restrooms is lined with win pictures, both ancient and recent—the only reminders of past horses and purse monies. The only way to make a win last is with a picture. Horses pass through stables and money is spent before the purse clears.

Through the panoramic window I can see horses on the track training—jogging or galloping—riders in Carhart coveralls under safety vests and jackets, faces reduced to pairs of eyes in horizontal slots of skin below helmets, above knitted scarves wrapped around noses, mouths, and cheeks, or neoprene face masks, to block the breeze that increases in briskness with speed.
Across the oval, the glassed-in grandstand appears much the same, but looks are deceiving. The once endless row of tote ticket sellers has been reduced to a few windows. Much of the crowd seating upstairs has been removed. All the good seats are gone. The endless metal benches, bolted to steel floors, are still there. Children used to make such a racket running from one end to the other, while their parents poured over programs, trying to pick a perfecta or risking two bucks on a long shot. But now, night after night, these benches sit silent, the vibrations of children’s footsteps of long ago sealed forever within the floor.

The degenerate gamblers were all downstairs—hanging around the Winner’s Circle Bar, in the summer, leaning over the rail to watch the horses emerge from the tunnel en route to the track. They watched for clues—lather between the haunches or dancing on tiptoes. They imagine meaning to jockeys’ twitches—did he scratch his nose or was that a sign to his buddies to bet?

The upstairs grandstand seating was for the lightweights. The same crowd was always in the first three rows. My favorite patron was the fat lady in the sunhat and snap-front housedress. She bet two dollars on every race. She never made the effort to notice the name of her chosen horse. From gate to wire, she flapped her arms like goose's wings, fingertips quivering as if electrified—as she shrilled “Threeeeeee, threeee-ee-ee-ee, come on threeeeeee! (r whichever number she had chosen for that race). I wonder what ever happened to her.
Trees along the turn stand black and stark against the bleak winter landscape. Cerulean sky fades to white before it touches hazy blue-gray hills on the other side of the frozen Ohio. The white shapes of Ergon insert geometric forms into an otherwise organic design.

The structure in which I sit, Mountaineer’s rec hall, I am ambivalent about. It is much better to look out from than to look at. It functions as intended. It is a spacious, clean, modern facility. The couple who run the kitchen put out good quality grub and accommodate the horsemen’s hours and preferences. Donna has added homey touches like the hammered copper welcome sign. The prep area is modern and clean stainless steel. A state-of-the-art coffee maker with tiny red and green lights to indicate its numerous and impressive functions sits behind the counter next to a hot chocolate/cappuccino machine that dispenses brown powder, heavy with high fructose corn sweetener and hydrogenated solids which, when blended with hot water, emulsify to form a dense sugary concoction with syrupy dregs that settle in the bottom of white Styrofoam cups. On the green Formica counter, a woven basket holds two bunches of bananas—a bright contrast to the dominating tan of the room. But this modern building with its fully-functioning, sanitary, inspection-worthy, industrial ambiance, pales when I compare it in my memory to the old Waterford rec hall.

The Waterford rec hall was aqua-green, inside and out, just like everything else at Waterford. Bill and Shirley ran their own small stable out of “A” barn. When the barn work was done, Bill would wash up and go flip burgers in the rec hall. On the counter,
hot dogs rotated on rollers inside a glass cube—some fresh and pink, some wrinkled and withered like a few of the old-timers sitting around smoking and playing Racehorse rummy. A section of the open grill was dedicated to a mixture of hot peppers and onions that, when piled onto an Italian sausage sandwich or a cheeseburger, validated the purchase of either. Donald Duck orange juice and small square cartons of chocolate milk were handed out personally by Bill from behind the glass doors of the refrigerator. Slices of pie beckoned from their glass case.

A high stool stood in front of the pinball machine for those who tired of standing. A wooden bench ran the length of wall along the pool table. In winters, it was piled high with coats and sweatshirts shed in the indoor warmth. In summer, teenagers parked themselves on the bench, flirting, with pool cues in hand. Young skinny girls pointed firm fannies and dropped necklines to expose, as much as possible, their blossoming breasts spilling from colorful brassieres. Shirtless boys spread trapezoids and flexed biceps as if the pool cue was made of lead.

Life happened there. Romances were begun. Horses were bought and sold. Too many beers into hotheaded boys, and you could be certain that a fight would need to be broken up. The phone on the wall could connect you to anyone who cared enough to call long distance. It was a fine place to spend your time if you were waiting to run a horse in the last race. The rec hall provided company; no one had to be alone.
Rec Hall: 2:00 P.M.

Inside the rec hall,
men smoke Marlboros,
and play Racehorse Rummy
at the round table.
On the wall hangs a tapestry
of dogs playing poker.
Some say the one with the cigar is J. C.
Others say it is Choina.
A push-button phone
on the wall
at the end of the bench,
the single link
to the outside world.

Mid-afternoons, cntrics closed, overnights out,
quiet settles over the grounds.
Horses full from noon feed
munch hay or stand at rest—
eyes close, lower lips droop—
or stretch flat out in fresh straw.

The only sounds,
the shoosh of rubber tires
on backside pavement
as muck-wagon trains
trail behind tractors—
dump their contents in a pile
to await the mushroom-growers' trucks,
or the clinnk...clinnk...clinnk...
of a blacksmith hammer
tapping nails, curved and elegant,
through rectangular holes of aluminum shoe
into pliable hoof.
In the Rec Hall,
Marlboro smoke swirls the air
and card players play on,
constant as tapestry dogs.

The wall phone rings.

“If that’s my wife, I’m not here.”

Bill Kantsis answers, “Rec Hall...”
Joe? No, he left an hour ago.”
Joe takes a long drag from his cigarette,
“After this game, boys, I gotta go.”

The deck is shuffled, the dealer deals.
Cards deftly spin across the
worn white Formica,
soft-edged patches
of permanent brown
boast of Bicycle cards,
perpetually drug, face down,
flipped up with a plastic-coated “pop,”
and inserted into hand.
The game plays out,
Joe pays up, gets up,
and a waiting player slides into
the warm chair.

The push-button wall-phone jangles.

"If that's my wife, I'm not here. . ."
Artifact

A barstool stands
sentry at the
Rec Hall pinball
machine.
Legs of tubular chrome
elevate a seat
of coffee brown Naugahyde,
cracked and taped,
a throne
for the pinball pony boy
who free-plays himself
off his feet.

Five steel orbs
blast in turn
from a spring-loaded
piston plunger,
clang-bang
from flippers to
ricochet rubber
bumpers.
Bells and buzzers drive
stroboscopic lights
across the belly
button
of the voluptuous
bikini clad babe
beneath the Plexiglas.
Lucky Flush

The racetrack has a history of superstition. There are endless suppositions of what draws good luck or encourages fortune. Even those least prone to superstition do not take chances when it comes to racing luck. While there are a number of general “rules” for racing luck, most people develop individual superstitions as well. The most pragmatic of folks will, in time, find themselves repeating certain rituals. This may mean eating or not eating pickles or peanuts, or finding a lucky pot and flushing three times before post time. A person may find himself turning his hat around backward to shake off bad luck. Rules of Luck for the Track lists many common, as well as some lesser known, racetrack superstitions.
Rules of Luck for the Track

Don’t piss in the stall on race-day.
No pictures either.
Especially not in the paddock.

Don’t let reins touch the ground and
never let them cross.
Hang all halters in the same direction.

When morning work is over
and it’s time to go home,
clear the straw from the tines of your pitchfork.
Same goes for your rake.
Don’t leave a broom on a horse trailer.
For luck, when racing a horse:
Wear the same clothes.
Eat the same food.
Watch the race from the same place as the last time he won.

Never wear green or eat peanuts at the track.
Wear green—it’s the color of money.

Never loan a helmet.
Never put your trusty Caliente on the table, bed or floor.
When you take it off, hang it up or let it rest in a chair,
open side up—so the luck won’t run out.

Nail a lucky horseshoe on the tackroom door,
open end up—so the luck won’t run out

Never cut a bridle path on race day.
I saw a guy in the receiving barn cut a bridle path on race day.
Scissors too sharp, they cut too close.
He scalped the poor son-of-a-bitch.
Blood ran down in streams,
dripped from his muzzle and jawbone.
He was a vet scratch.
A cross worn under jockey silks will protect.
Saints are also helpful.
Lucky underwear can’t hurt.
If a cat comes to your barn and stays,
you will have good luck.
Black cats are bad luck unless it’s your cat.

If a pigeon shits on your shoulder on race day—
your chances to win are excellent.

When a horse is castrated,
the testicles must be thrown onto the roof for luck.

If you are on a winning streak—don’t change anything.

If you have a lucky shirt, wear it.
If you have bad luck while wearing your lucky shirt,
turn it inside out.
Hopes, Dreams, and Possibilities

My life has been deeply influenced by my father. Dad was a dreamer. He was unorthodox and cared little whether he was popular outside of our family. He became a chiropractor, as both his mother and father before him. But from the first time he visited the racetrack as a young man, his heart was with the horses. And he followed his heart.

My mother was a college student at Portland State when she met my father in 1957. They married two months later and bought a horse trailer and two thoroughbreds for two hundred dollars. In a venture that most would consider outrageous, they travelled across Utah, Wyoming, and Montana, racing at “the bushes,” and using the horse trailer as living quarters when the horses were stabled at one fairgrounds or another. In the early years, this nomadic lifestyle took them across most of the western mountain states and the southwest. They lived for a short time on an Indian reservation in what had been Japanese prisoner of war barracks near Prescott, Arizona, where they had no refrigerator. Milk and butter were kept cool in a nearby irrigation ditch. I don’t think Mom could have imagined these things to be part of the deal when she said, “I do.”

In time, children were born—four of us—beginning with me in 1960, the boys, Don and Steve, following in ’62 and ’65, and finally my sister, Georgia, in ’69. Waterford Park’s year around race schedule provided stability for the family, so Dad decided it would be a good place to race and settle permanently.

We spent most of the rest of our growing-up years at The Farm, near Waterford. The sense of adventure that my father brought to the family never wavered. Whether he
was thinking about purchasing a mare with good pedigree to produce a homebred foal, building a barn, fencing a pasture, or implementing a new training technique, my father went forward with well-planned calculation and determination combined with equal parts of child-like excitement and enthusiasm. Dad viewed the glass not as half empty, but as a chalice half full of hopes, dreams, and possibilities—held aloft like a guiding beacon. He saw setbacks as adventures in problem-solving. Obstacles were invitations to travel uncharted paths.

Mom says he saw things not as they are, but as he wished them to be. Mom was the family’s grounding force. She kept Dad in check while she supported his dreams. When Dad hatched a plan that was just a little bit over the edge, Mom called him on it and brought him back to earth. While he researched new scientific horse-feeding theories, Mom was tending the garden or canning green beans and tomato soup for the coming lean months of winter. Ice and snow often forced racing cancelations and the already sporadic income became even sparser.

Dad’s “keep your head in the clouds and follow your heart” mentality became my own as I grew, and he reinforced it. As a small child, when I said I wanted to become a jockey (in the mid-sixties, when no woman had yet been granted a jockey’s license), he said nothing to discourage me. When I was nineteen and announced my intentions to actually become one, he said, “Then be the best you can be. Eat, sleep and breathe it.”

Yellow Dragon Kite and A Dream of Horses reflect my father’s continuing influence on my life.
My father with *Eclipsemator* at The Farm. Dad was always happy when he held a horse at the end of a shank.
*Yellow Dragon Kite*

I was three. I rode on your shoulders.
The view, over your dark hair
combed straight back,
was freshly foreign
to my grounded world.

I was six. In the cornfield
across the road from the blue trailer,
you showed me how a yellow dragon kite
evanesces into evening clouds.
One ball of string wasn’t enough—
Stratocumulus requires two.
You used a square knot.

I was twenty, in racing silks.
You lifted me by one black-booted leg
and I flew
at forty miles an hour, six feet above the ground.

I was fifty, and your last birthday two weeks past.
“Oh, the places we’ve been
and the things we’ve seen . . .”—I said.
“Maybe you’ll write a book”—you said,
and you passed me another ball of string.
A Dream of Horses

The horses are loose.
They leap and twist
and charge unchecked.
They fly headlong into the wild.

A lone gray horse waits behind.
He comes to meet me face to face.
He stretches his muzzle out to me—
I slide my hand down the side
of his long gray face.
Eyes, large brown orbs in younger days
are clouded and scarred
from years of running reckless
through this thorny place.

His head over my shoulder,
we move through an open door.
A passage dark and narrow directs our way.
We walk a corridor so tight
the horse must follow behind me.
At journey's end, a door awaits,
it's form described by slivers of light
around ragged edges of ancient planks.
I swing it open, hinges groan.
I look over my shoulder,
but the horse is gone.

In the shadows of the passage
stands my father.
He watches me as I step
alone
into the sunlight.
In Memoriam

Gerald Choina Bill Owen Alexis Finkbeiner John Romanowski Betty Hall
Dale Kacnel D.D. Smith J.C Williams Oral Powell Tony Richard
Zana Powell Russell Applebee Dale Baird Jerry Norwood Wayne Crago
M.D. Armstrong Freda Armstrong D.C. Armstrong John Brinkley
Richard Murphy Frank Reed Mollie Simonetti Armand Caprino
Beda Caprino Richard Chambers Richard McCraw Michael Tornambe
Johnnie Tornambe John Dunn Charles Shiflett Marcia Baird Roy Cave
Raymond Hancock John Semer Lesta Adkins Barbara Cave Andy Kacher
Steve Goydich Francis Sapia Jack Wilson Wayne Stake James J. Thompson
Gerri Stake Joyce Armstrong Randy Reed Merrill Sample Mary Sample
I.B. Sample Lou Johanning, Jerry Pillar William Floyd William Floyd Jr.
Jake Norwood Red Robinson Jodie Mack Pittman Jim Wiegers
James Andelmo John Yaquinta William Kantsis Shirley Kantsis Oscar Cordle
Ray Pompaselli William Pompaselli Don Rice Loren Williams
Jimmy Andrews Charlie Sims Eldon Mularkey Otho Cook Richard Perl
Linda Perl
Glossary

allowance horse—class of racehorse higher than a claimer of any level.

backside—stable area of a racetrack.

bleeder, bleed, bled—when a racehorse experiences exercise-induced pulmonary hemorrhage, blood often appears at the nostrils. This is commonly known as “bleeding.” A horse that suffers from this condition is a bleeder.

bridle path—an area of mane, approximately four inches, just behind the poll that is cut very short to accommodate the bridle.

Caliente—a brand of jockey’s helmet.

Citation bit—a bit to control a very headstrong horse. It is named after 1948 triple crown winner, Citation.

claim—to purchase a horse from a “claiming race.”

claim box—a locked box into which a “claim slip” is placed, prerace, indicating that a person has purchased a specific horse. That person will be the new owner after the race, regardless of place of finish.

claiming race—a horserace in which all participants are at risk to be “claimed” for a preset amount, i.e. $5000.00.

cold waters—a type of bandage that is placed on a horse’s ankles after a workout or race. Cold water is poured onto them at intervals to cool the legs.

cottons/quilts—padding placed between a horse’s leg and a bandage.

figure eight—a piece of equipment worn under a bridle that crosses over the bridge of the nose. It increases the rider’s control.

groom—a person who cares for all of the needs of a horse.

lily whites—standing bandages made from white Canton flannel.

No Bows—a brand of under-bandage quilt that is believed to be more protective of the tendon.

noseband—a piece of equipment worn under the bridle to increase the rider’s control.
overnight—the list of horses entered on a certain day for a racing card.

paddock—the area of a racetrack where horses are saddled prior to a race.

pony girl/boy—individual who rides a lead-pony to accompany racehorses to the gate before a race.

rub rag—a soft linen cloth used in grooming horses.

rubbers—nubby rubber coverings for reins. They increase the gripping ability of the rider for better control. When they wear and become smooth, they must be replaced.

rundown—an abraded area below a horse’s ankle. If this is a problem, running bandages will be used to prevent it.

Serena Song bit—a bit to keep a horse’s tongue from blocking its airway.

shadow roll—a piece of equipment that corrects head carriage if a horse holds its head too high.

shank—a long leather strap with a brass chain and snap at one end. It is used to lead a horse. Also called a lead-shank.

shedrow—walkway in a barn or stable.

spiders—bandages used for a horse’s knees.

standing bandages—bandages used to protect horses’ legs while they are in a stall.

starter allowance—an allowance race for horses that have run in a particular class of claiming race within a specified period of time.

tackroom—room at a barn or stable where saddles, bridles, medicines, bandages, etc., may be kept.

tongue tie—a strip of cloth used to prevent a horse from getting its tongue over the bit.

Vet-raps—bandages used during races or exercise.

webbing—a flexible barrier that keeps a horse enclosed in a stall.
Sources


Blankenship, Donald. Personal interview. Feb. 2015.


Fat Boy, Waterford Park, Chester, WV. Personal photograph by author. N.d.


Headlund Photography. *Girls' Jock's Room Photo.* N.d. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.


Medina, Cynthia. E-mail interview. Feb. 2015.


Murphy Garman, Georgia E. *Dad in the Rec Hall.* N.d. Georgia Murphy Garman, Ashland, OH

*Shedrow.* N.d. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.

Murphy, Melanie M. *Dream.* 2000. Watercolor (cropped). Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.
Gorge. 2013. Oil. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.


Solo. 2013. Oil. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.

Thunder. 2001. Watercolor. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.

Tightener. 2015. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.

Training Hours. 2001. Oil. Pearl Murphy, Chester, WV.

My Father with Eclipseator, Photograph, New Cumberland, WV.

Dorothy Gallagher, Mountaineer Racetrack, Chester, WV. 2015.

Murphy, Richard H. Broodmare Meadow. N.d. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool.

Sing Out with Pearl Murphy. 1960. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.


Pony Girl. 1979. Melanie Murphy, East Liverpool, OH.


Thompson, Susan. Personal interview. Mar. 2015.
