

Upstart in a Stetson

I'm surrounded by sunburnt flats, homogenized smell of sagebrush and manure and the hot forge. Letting loose my accumulated nosiness and trying to wear my hat so it doesn't look bought yesterday. I'm a writer soaking up the West in a week.

This guy's name is a surprise: Basil. Nothing you'd expect for a horseshoer south of Albuquerque. Hell, I'd have bet he's pure Navajo. I wanted to learn some of his words--like maybe a few phrases the Japanese couldn't crack in WWII.

His next words are newsroom familiar as he straddles a horse's hind leg and it flinches to remind ole Basil he's vulnerable. I want to ask him if that happens often as he betters his position to finish filing the hoof.

The animal is pied, not as big as my fine roan back home. Wiry and jut-angled like the sculptures made of coat hangers at Taos art fairs. You'd swear this creature eats cactus. I venture to ask what it is. Cayuse, he says. He implies more with a tobacco juice exclamation point, the commentary as likely for me as the horse. If Basil already thinks I'm citified hopeless, I might as well clinch it. Yeah, well, what exactly is a cayuse? I say it out loud.

Indian pony originally. Mustang. Bronco. Wild stock. This one's fast. For some reason he's developed a crossfire. Basil looks up, knowing I need to ask. This hind leg collides with the opposite front leg. I'm correcting it by raising the heel of the rear shoe. He gestures with a hammer. I make noises like I know that.

I've got a platter foot back in Baltimore, I say. Had an infected frog. I put him to stud. Daisycutter but good blood. I square up with Basil's glance.

Another exclamation point hits the sawdust. Good hot shoer can fix all that, he says. By now Basil has another horse in that dangerous slot. By now he's reading me like the Times. This shoe is called an eggbar, he informs me. It's therapeutic.

(cont.)

(stanza break)

Guess you've been shoeing a long time, I say, wanting
him to say his father taught him. Wanting him to say
he's at least part Indian. Then I see the sign
burnt in wood: Dr. Basil Cauldron. Veterinarian.
Four years, he's saying. One more year at this
and I'm off to New York.

He reads me as I frown at the sign then the iron oval
he's nailing. The vet's my grandfather, he says.
We make a good team. But I want to see the East.
My mother was from New York. The old man's betting
I won't stay long. He may be right. He usually is.
Basil straightens, committing his eyes to a grin.
Granddad's a full-blooded Navajo.

The picture is perfect again with the far mountains
and free-ranging horses in the foreground. You speak
his language? Was he in the war? The big one?

Yeah. But I can't speak Navajo worth a road rose.
I speak my mother's tongue well enough though.

You sure do. You sound like an Oxford graduate.

USC, he says. I didn't mean English. Mama was a Mohawk.

--Glenna Holloway