Prologue

Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were just ready to flow into other forms.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

My father was trained as an archaeologist. When I was small, he wore a beard and often smelled of earth. He had sculptor's hands and an astral stare that could see right through me, into some part of myself that would take me years to know. In those years, he worked with Chumash Indians who lived in and around Santa Barbara. We took long walks together, and he would point out arrowheads and shards of pottery in the dirt. Archaeology eyes, he called them. To me, his perceptiveness was a small miracle. It could produce something to marvel at, to wonder about, from the bare vastness of exposed earth. He was a scavenger, a finder of lost things. His imagination could piece together village histories from soil, sky, and stones. There was hawk in him: piercing, graceful, and often alone.

My mother is a painter. When I was small I would sit in her studio as she made collages, working with her hands. To my mother, anything torn apart could be reassembled. There were no wrong lines. This sense of creativity enlivened her. That seized moment of seeing and then seeing again is etched into her. Even now, more than three decades after I was born, I can imagine her as the young mother she once was, a long braid down her back and a glint of remembered sadness fixed in her expression and her movements. She has never liked sharing her studio with other people. But as her child, and therefore as an extension of herself, I was allowed to join her in the studio. We made our own things. I see her now, still, crouched in her studio, the white expanse of walls cluttered with her different reckoning of art. She kept a shrine in the corner — feathers and stones and other found offerings — above which was tacked a small piece of paper. "Go, little picture!" it read.

In those early years, my parents lived vivid lives, wholly intertwined.

I suppose that California in the seventies was anything but *normal*, but when I was small, Kraft macaroni and cheese and Barbie dolls were my exotica. Instead of a swing set, we had a sweat lodge in our backyard. On weekends or after long days at a

dig, the house would be given over to my father's colleagues. I watched as the crew of Chumash and longhaired white folk stripped down in the California sun and crawled into the lodge, with its willow branch spine and eucalyptus leaf skin. Part of me was embarrassed by the bareness of it all – the incongruity in what was otherwise a suburban tract house neighborhood, near the freeway – but I still love the smell of white sage and steam rising off rocks. And something of those early days observing, not quite old enough to participate, initiated me into the discipline of anthropology: watching and being watched, toggling between insider and outsider, even in my own backyard.

Sometimes the differences between my upbringing and those of my schoolmates jarred, embarrassed, disappointed me. I can remember longing for my mother to pick me up from school wearing anything but her shimmering Dolphin running shorts and cutoff T-shirt, invariably splattered with paint. "My mom is an artist," I would say to my friends as they glanced at their mothers with their station wagons and matching pantsuits, and then stared at my mom. In my heart, I felt I knew what being an artist or an archeologist meant. I could sense, if not articulate, someting of the intersubjective tension that is at the creative heart of what has also become my discipline, my vocation: the practiced desire to move between worlds as a way of finding meaning in the world. But I also learned to live this dissonance, and to accept the fact that some things just didn't translate. In that sense, I have been preparing for Mustang for as long as I can remember.

But to say that my upbringing prepared me for Mustang is not quite right. Rather, my parents nourished my curiosity and, by virtue of their own choices, helped me to feel comfortable living between worlds. And, as much as painting and archeology are intuitive, my parents gave me confidence in my own ability to decipher, to draw lines, to dig things up.

I remember being small, thigh-high against my father's wiry legs. He had taken me out to an archeological site on the northern edge of Santa Barbara, near Point Conception. Years later, I would come to know Point Conception as the most westerly jut of the California coastline and the point at which, according to Chumash cosmology, spirits leave this world. As a girl I simply knew it as place where dolphin

streamed through the Pacific and osprey flew in circles overhead. Still, I could appreciate it as sacred ground.

When we arrived at the site, my dad and I took a walk around, looking for things. My hand stretched up to reach his. Eucalyptus trees rustled in the afternoon wind and the air grew still. An eagle feather lying on the ground caught my attention and I reached down to pick it up. The shaft of cartilage felt cool in my hand. I knew eagles were rare. The brittle plume felt like a gift – a way of imagining flight.

I shook the feather. As I shook it, the earth itself began to shake. In seconds, the asphalt buckled and kneeled. My father picked me up — feather and all. We tried to stand still while the ground beneath our feet swayed and rumbled. As a native Californian, I had experienced earthquakes before, but, for me, there have been none like this one since.

When the ground stopped shaking, my eyes darted between the wrinkled road and the feather I still held in my hand. "Papasan, did I do that?" I finally squeaked. "Maybe," he said, smiling. He had seen me shake the feather, and had witnessed the sense power and magic that accompanied this gesture and its aftermath. Of course, we could both rationalize that my shaking the feather and the timing of the earthquake was coincidental. Yet for that first kinetic moment, my shake was eagle and earth and energy through me, beyond me, toward something deeper — the ways humans and other animals share worlds, bleed into each other. I had more to learn about this, when I was ready.

I am an only child. As parents went, and as far as I could tell as a child, mine seemed well matched. But this match, made young, ended with difficulty by their early thirties, as I was turning ten. I got my first horse around the time of their separation, and my adolescence passed mostly at the barn. I mucked out stalls, fed oat hay and alfalfa pellets to my four legged charges, and swept the aisles. These tasks earned my horse's keep. My fingernails were never clean, but my mare's coat glistened like a wet seal in the sun. I kept my brushes and hoof pick, fly spray and bandages in a tin trunk painted blue. It bent easily, and after a few weeks of my sitting on it as I pulled on my riding boots, the top caved in. But it was mine, and the mare was mine, and that was

enough.

In the years when my parents' marriage incinerated, I found solace at the barn. The other girls who hung out at the stables were more sisters than any friendships since, and as surrogate siblings go, they filled me. We spoke first of horses and only later boys. We watched each other's lessons with a sense of ritual obligation and all gathered on the fence like crows when our trainer schooled a horse. In this sense, we were initiates, learning through particpiation and observation to belong to this horse culture, to know its language. After our rides, we played in the hay barns until dusk. But my barn sisters had their own families to contend with. There was little to say or talk through with them, about my parent's dissolving marriage. I could talk to horses, though.

Summit, a chestnut-colored gelding with a dished face, was neither the strongest nor the most beautiful horse I ever rode, but he was the best listener. On days when I didn't want to be found, I would sit in the corner of his stall, just talking quietly to him. Summit would nibble alfalfa, using his upper lip to separate it from the wood shavings that made his bed, as I confided in him about late-night arguments and my worries about our dissolving family. If I happened upon Summit early in the morning or late in the evening, when he was lying down in his stall, he would let me curl up next to him — something horses don't usually tolerate. That gesture felt more intimate than the arms of most lovers since. One winter, when Summit was nearly dead from pneumonia, he took to laying his entire neck and head in my lap — a heavy weight for a twelve-year-old girl to bear. But I was strong and I managed. I would stroke him between the ears as he labored for breath.

None of us girls at the barn felt the need to explain the language we shared with our horses. It was simply understood. On weekends, once we had hosed the sweat off our horses and picked out their hooves, we built jumps out of old baling wire and scraps of wood, and took turns galloping through these obstacle courses. Such "horse" shows went on for hours. We made ribbons from construction paper and bought each other candy bars from the corner store as prizes. Our horses dozed in the crossties as we played.

By the time I was a teenager, I had ridden and cared for a succession of horses,

each of which was more challenging than the last, and had had success in competitions. The ribbons that lined my bedroom walls insulated me from the domestic chaos beyond them. During those years, horses kept me sane. I worked hard at the barn and stayed focused on riding and school. While my parents were breaking up, I think I spoke to their answering machines more than I did to them. I would tell all to the tape: school grades, slumber party schemes, details of that afternoon's riding lesson, or even deeper murmurings. That way my parents would register something of my daily life, would know where I was, and would show up on time, I hoped, to take me home.

In summer, when barn days were as long as I wanted them to be, I would take my old silver thoroughbred, Flynn, to the beach. He was a fine mount, fit for fancy horse shows, but I rode him bareback on those trail rides. Flynn would snort at the water, work the stainless steel bit between his tongue and teeth, and arch his neck. His chiseled head resembled a marble statue and on certain days he left me feeling like one of Xenophon's horsemen, eternally poised. Beneath his white coat, in the center of his forehead, was etched an even whiter star. It is fair to say we loved each other. I sold Flynn to help pay for college.

College wasn't really a place for riding. I dreamt about horses, though, and I still counted paces in horse strides and imagined sidewalk cracks as fences to be cleared. I even spent one year as a member of the Brown University Equestrian Team. But the Californian in me had a difficult time riding indoors, and the academic demands of college precluded long afternoons at the barn, when time seemed to stop.

During my tenure at Brown, the world's religions fascinated me and likewise directed my studies. I knew that I wanted to go abroad, and was drawn to Asia. In 1993, during my junior year at college, I went to Nepal for the first time. The last month of that semester was devoted to conducting an independent project. As with many of my classmates, Tibet intrigued me. I entertained the idea of living with Tibetan nuns. That is, until I found out that there were horses and a rich 'horse culture' – in a place called Mustang, no less.