Muerte de un caballo
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Barba's short novel is an intense examination of inner life and one's conscious and subconscious response to situations, looks, gestures and words. It is a love story of sorts, but one in which the action is minimal (although intense and dramatic when it does occur) and almost always takes place inside the mind of the narrator, who uses the death of the animal as a background against which to examine his feelings towards a young woman who eludes him.

We learn at first that the nameless narrator is interested in a young woman called Sandra, who is 'only twenty-two, no more than a girl'; that he teaches literature at a university and is about to be given a permanent post; and that he feels alone and sad. They appear to have a relationship that borders on the romantic, although it hasn't gone further than an 'almost accidental' kiss soon after she appeared in his circle of friends, and ever since then the two have been moving around each other carefully, the narrator examining her every word and gesture in minute detail.

They set off on a trip to stay with friends in a house in the country, but stop on the way in the woods when they pass a young man whose horse trailer has gone off the road with the animal inside it. Miguel, the young man, borrows their phone to call a vet. Once they realise the seriousness of the situation they decide to stay with him, and the bulk of the book takes place in the claustrophobic space around the dying animal, which functions as the uneasy, shifting focal point around which the narrator and Sandra move tentatively.

The horse's flank is torn and its guts and other innards are poking out through the flesh; it is a miracle it has survived the accident. The narrator and Sandra try to help Miguel give it water to drink, tuck its intestines back into its body, and generally soothe it, and as they perform these small but challenging actions the narrator observes Sandra, thinking all the time about her movements, words, the way she is responding to the situation, and what it means in terms of his relationship with her. Very little happens, and yet a lot happens under the surface, and Miguel's presence and the panting, wide-eyed creature at the centre add a tension to the proceedings and means the dynamic is shifted away from an obvious romantic story, but also that the narrator can use this tension to examine his and Sandra's relationship to one another.

Underlying the detailed and often gruesomely vivid description of the horse's damaged body and its wounds, there are three main presences: the narrator's attraction towards Sandra and his consciousness of the age difference between them; his mother's recent death; and the knowledge, gained halfway through the book, that the horse once killed a man and then survived an attempt to put it down. The dying animal brings memories of his dying mother back to him, and allows him to process unfinished or unexamined thoughts he had about her and her death, while the awareness that the horse was responsible for a man's death leads to uneasy speculation about the tender and

possibly irrational feelings one has for something or someone that has harmed or is seen as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ in some way.

In the end, Miguel shoots the animal as it becomes clear it is suffering too much, and the two leave him alone with the body. They make their way to their friend’s cottage, and after avoiding each other for a while in drinking games and laughing with the others, end up in bed together, despite his initially maintaining that ‘we can’t love each other’. It seems somehow that their shared experience of the horse’s death has allowed them to see each other differently, to love each other in a way that is different and more meaningful to how they might have done so before.

The style is very precise and measured, and frequently follows the pattern of a description of something, a gesture or someone’s reaction to a phrase or object, followed by a phrase starting with ‘It was as if…’ (‘He’d spent so long thinking of it simply as “the horse” that the fact it had a name now felt a little disconcerting. And if he concentrated it was as if the whole head had been impregnated with this name.’) The effect is that the reader feels very much inside the head of the protagonist, highly attuned to his thoughts and feelings about Sandra and the situation they are both in, but a little separate from the events at the same time, trapped in his over-analysis of things and unable to fully be in the action (which in any case is minimal, although heavily weighted with meaning).

The alienness of the horse – its size, its ‘enormous, dense brown eyes […] like two huge precious stones’, and its ‘brutal face’ – and yet at the same time its similarity to a human (in its response to pain) make it almost a physical representation of the incomprehensible yet often familiar emotions being described – unruly, often terrifyingly powerful, capable of switching almost in the blink of an eye from one extreme to the next.

This is a summary of the report by Rosalind Harvey