

NONA HERSHEY

Transmission, 2020

Watercolor, graphite powder, and gouache, 22.25 x 22.25 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LISA ALLEN ORTIZ

Kendrick's Big Triple

When it became clear that Evelyn and Ernesto were breaking up, Kendrick believed all he longed for would come to pass. Finally, he would have the life he was entitled to. Kendrick believed in the singularity of love. He believed in love's carnality, in love's clarity, in love's virtue, and love's nobility. Kendrick was a materialist, and, for him, love was material. For Kendrick, Ernesto had been an impediment to the substantial reality of Kendrick and Evelyn's devotion to one another.

The last thing a lovesick hammerhead like Kendrick wanted to hear was how demonstrably deluded he was on the subject of love, or how fatuous and puerile was his overall worldview. But assisting Kendrick with reality was part of Saint Paul's job. Wet-nursing the dim light of reason that flickered in Kendrick's brain was Saint Paul's vocation. Saint Paul toiled honestly. He worked gently.

"Kendrick, love is no gospel," Saint Paul said.

"Kendrick," Saint Paul explained, "human affection is inconstant."

"Evelyn and I," Kendrick replied, "have a love that is not limited by barricades or impediments."

Kendrick stared across the driveway at Ernesto and Evelyn's house.

"They live there," Saint Paul explained patiently. "We live here. Such is the composition of the world, Kendrick."

"I'm sorry," Saint Paul said sometimes—not because any of it was his fault but because Saint Paul felt sorry for Kendrick, for the overall situation, for the pickle that was Kendrick's life. Seemed like Kendrick was owed an apology from someone. And since Saint Paul was there, it might as well be him.

Saint Paul was Kendrick's companion. Kendrick, at his age and in his state, could not be left alone. Herd animal, ardently nativist, immoderately loyal, Kendrick would turn neurotic if Saint Paul were not there. He would unsettle. He would colic or founder or realize the capacity of his physical power and kick down the stall walls.

Historically bred for the cavalry, the modern Hanoverian is used for sport, show jumping mostly. That's what Kendrick was. Hanoverian. Show jumper. Once upon a time. Years ago. With Evelyn. Kendrick and Evelyn rode the show jumping circuit. Now Kendrick was twenty-two. Still broad backed, still chiseled, still glittery, still possessed with a refined athletic beauty that humbled every other

living thing on God's green earth, but twenty-two. Horses Kendrick's size live until about twenty, maybe twenty-five. That was the situation as Saint Paul understood it. Kendrick, by contrast, didn't seem to understand any of it. Kendrick lived inside time and was therefore blind to it. What Kendrick was bred for was action. He was bred for courage, bred to leap things. Kendrick's body and mind were guided and shaped by generations of breeders to charge gigantically, to shimmer, to—when bidden—vault.

Saint Paul himself was not a breed. Although donkey breeds exist, most donkeys are not bred. They're born. Donkeys are all one animal. Burro. Donkey. Same thing. Donkeys come in different sizes, in different shades of gray, but such characteristics were not bred. They appeared. In barnyards and homesteads, donkeys succumbed to a casual kind of mating, producing, in the yards of indifferent human beings, unintentional, incidental progeny, nothing that procured upon the human yard status, riches, or nourishment. Yet donkeys were allowed. This was because donkeys could bear things. For centuries, that was the arrangement. Donkeys carried the burdens humans put upon them—quotidian burdens, mundane and cumbersome loads. And now. Now, there are other methods of carrying things. Now human burdens themselves have changed and will no longer fit upon a donkey's back, so burros—burros, donkeys, same thing—are considered, in the modern world, anachronistic, frivolous, mildly charming. The best work a donkey can get these days is to be a companion animal, and that's the job that Saint Paul had. Companion animal.

When Evelyn got her job at ComTechCo and gave up the show jumping circuit, she rescued Saint Paul to bring comfort to Kendrick, as Kendrick would see less of her.

"She's a lovely person," Kendrick said, "to rescue you."

"Rescue is relative," Saint Paul responded, but he knew for Kendrick nothing was relative but to Evelyn. For Kendrick, Evelyn was centermost. Saint Paul existed only as an adjunct to Evelyn. Ernesto existed only as an impediment to Evelyn. Evelyn was always forefront in Kendrick's mind. She was the eclipse and the moon behind the eclipse. She was both night and day, both shade and sun. She was hunger and she was satisfaction. Aside from Evelyn's face and hands, legs and vibe, her heart's song, her mind's imaginings, the arrangement of her skeleton, her electrical field, Kendrick's mind was nearly empty. His mind was an empty

arena. But for Evelyn's floating conception, Kendrick's mind was dragged and watered. His mind was on tenterhooks, waiting for a show to start. When Evelyn was away, his mind studied obstacles that his mind set up to amuse or madden itself, to ready itself for Evelyn's return, her re-appearance. His mind built the arena. His mind groomed the arena and then his mind arranged baffling patterns of jumps inside that arena, vexing itself. His mind, afeared of its own imaginings, pleaded to Evelyn, to her absence, her scarcity, her imagined reappearance. His mind asked: *This green vertical first, Evelyn?* His mind asked: *What angle for the oxer, Evelyn?* His mind asked: *Evelyn, are the two verticals after the liverpool? Evelyn? How many strides between the triple, Evelyn? What angle for the brick wall, Evelyn?* His mind said: *Evelyn? Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn.*

"Kendrick?" Saint Paul said. "She may have to sell this place."

Kendrick pinned one ear and glanced with impatience into Saint Paul's stall.

"She always has a plan, Donkey," Kendrick said.

Kendrick was a tall horse, his horse head was heads taller than a human head and such height afforded an angle of dominance, which—from Kendrick's point of view—translated to a superior comprehension of the world.

By contrast, Saint Paul was short. Even for a donkey, Saint Paul was smallish. The lower half of the Dutch-style stall door was of greater height than Saint Paul's eyes. Only Saint Paul's ears stuck up and over the top. He was a smallish, grayish donkey with longish ears. To see the world from his stall, Saint Paul had to lower his head and look through an opening in the door beneath the hinge. Through the hinge crack, the world appeared rectangular and fragmented, but donkeys are intelligent animals, and Saint Paul's limited, rectangular view was augmented by his considerable skill of inference.

What Saint Paul inferred was that Evelyn and Ernesto's fourteen years of marriage was in catastrophic disarray. So too, he inferred, were their finances. He inferred this from the intensifying decibel level of conversations in the house and the tone of the wheels on the vehicles as they exited and entered the driveway of the house at less and less predictable hours of the day. From his acquaintance with human beings and from the hours spent alone in his stall, examining his own thoughts and desires, Saint

Paul further inferred that should the marriage dissolve and should attendant emotions surrounding the dissolution escalate and then financial and logistical matters further complicate, it was likely that, amid the hurly-burly, animal husbandry would concurrently disintegrate. Already evidence pointed to a trend of declining care—since Evelyn had started at ComTechCo, the human effort at the barn (y), measured against time (x), had graphed into a line that tumbled steeply toward the right.

Indeed, Saint Paul could imagine and interpret such a graph. This may surprise some readers because many readers are human beings, and human beings have grown so deluded and incurious that they have not noticed the evolution of thought and sensitivity in the animals around them. In the decades that humans have devoted to their own betterment and technology, animals have also been tending their consciousness, cultivating their own psyches in the hopes of improving their own lots in life. In their paddocks and kennels, the animals have been pondering, internally wrestling with the questions attendant to the charge of being, considering the implications of sentience and mortality. Saint Paul particularly occupied himself thus. In the viewless solitude of his darkish stall, Saint Paul was not idle. Without compromising his vocation as companion to Kendrick, Saint Paul also took time to ponder. Furthermore, not only had Saint Paul, in that monkish stall, learned to understand spoken human language—which many animals can translate and understand—but Saint Paul had learned to read.

It was the serendipity of Saint Paul's hinge-crack view and the provident height of his eyes that allowed Ernesto, unwittingly, to teach Saint Paul to read.

It happened this way. On weekends, starting back in the waning years of Kendrick and Evelyn's show jumping career, Ernesto came out to the stalls to sit in the sun and read the *Chronicle*. Ernesto liked the way the eaves of the barn shaded his head and his newspaper but allowed his feet and legs to stretch out in the sun. He leaned back in the chair that was kept in front of Saint Paul's stall, and he read the news. He read out loud to Saint Paul because he found Saint Paul to be good company, and reading out loud to a being is a way of saying that you like that being's company.

"Want to hear what's up in the world, Saint Paul?" Ernesto asked.

And Saint Paul did. Ernesto held the paper up in front of his face as he read, blocking the sun, his back to Saint Paul's stall. Saint Paul, inside his stall, looked through the hinge crack. He moved his head as Ernesto read. His donkey eyes scanned left to right and his donkey head swayed right to left. He followed along as Ernesto read, deciphering symbols, perceiving patterns of phoneme and diphthong, gleaning meaning of sound and icons from a cascading breadth of context.

Saint Paul learned the words *housekeeper* and *moonbeam* when Ernesto read out loud the *Chronicle's* coverage of the 2010 California governor's race. He learned the many and nuanced definitions of the word *freedom* from reading alternately about WikiLeaks, Glenn Beck, and the SeaWorld orca Tilikum. He learned the words *subsidy* and *socialism* from coverage of the Solyndra bankruptcy. He learned the word *oversight*. He learned the word *equity*. In coverage of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, he learned the word *epicenter* and what iodine-131 was and where Ōkumo, Japan, was in relation to Saratoga, California. From coverage of the war in Libya, Saint Paul learned about colonialism, Nasserism, Marxism, theocracy, and demagoguery. He learned what Twitter was. He surmised what collective intelligence could do. He read editorials about justice and editorials about revenge, patriotism, faith and fundamentalism. He surmised the power of narrative. He deduced the potential of collective action and emergent properties.

"What do you think of that, Saint Paul?" Ernesto asked.

Alas, although Saint Paul had many thoughts and had developed profuse opinions, Saint Paul could not answer Ernesto. Fortune did not allow the donkey the right arrangements of folds in his larynx nor a suitable-size pharynx nor an appropriate oral cavity to convey to Ernesto, in a way that Ernesto could understand, the opinions and insights Saint Paul had concluded from his readings and from his nightly ruminations on those readings, alone and mostly quiet in his stall.

When Evelyn started working weekends at ComTechCo, the nature of Ernesto's inquiries began to change. Less interested in the World section of the *Chronicle*, Ernesto tore through the pages, looking for something else.

"What do you know about money, Old Man?" he asked Saint Paul. "What do you know about love?"

Looking for a clue, Ernesto read the Technology section, and Saint Paul read it too, through the hinge crack. Together, they read the Business section and the Entertainment section and the lovelorn advice column. Ernesto put the paper down. He crumpled the whole paper into a ball.

“Where is she?” Ernesto asked.

Kendrick pinned his ears.

“What does she want?” Ernesto asked.

What did Evelyn want? Why had she started at ComTechCo and why with such furious devotion and why at the cost of her show jumping and her marriage and, by all appearances, forsaking the life she’d built and seemed to like well enough before?

What Evelyn wanted was something. It was something she had never wanted before because she had not known it before, and when she knew it, saw it, smelled it—even though it wasn’t really a thing to see or smell—she gave herself to it, to the wanting of it. The thing was not describable exactly and the more it was ineffable, the more her desire for it grew. It was something like the inside of a silent car that slides along when your finger touches a button, it was like show jumping but without the teeth rattling and without the manure, without the swollen hocks, flies, sweet itch, or horse piss. It was like money, but it wasn’t exactly money.

Although she said, “Yes, Ernesto, if ComTechCo goes public, we can pay off the house. We can put in a pool. We could travel—wherever.”

Ernesto wasn’t into pools or travel. He was into Evelyn. “Money,” said Evelyn. “Money.” She was trying to explain, although *money* wasn’t the word that she wanted. She felt the word that she wanted on the edge of her tongue, and it did feel a little bit like *money* on the tongue but much more profound, too heavy to spit out. She exhaled. The word that explained what she wanted or that was what she wanted was shorter than *money* but had more letters than *money*. It was a word with numbers inside it. It was a word that was easy to say but perplexing to spell, a conceptual word, an empty art gallery word, a word understood by its own implication, a word with a pneumatic quality to it, a word that implied spaceship and imperialism but without the cunning or the genocide, a clean word, a word like *Mars*, a word like *galactic* but not that dusty, a word that encompassed unfathomable solitude while retracting any connotation of despair, a word that roamed at velocity and

with confidence, a word that implied worth and demarcated privacy, a word like *castle* but without the drafts or damp stone, a word like *democracy* but without all the crowds, a word that was immaculate and silent, an ancient word like a fortress on a northern island—maybe the word *island*, maybe an island—although what Evelyn was looking for was also the rough sea around the island but seen from above so the fortress, the island, the sea became serene, slightly theoretical, a word without the calamity of inference but a word that still implied fathoms, star to star, but all compressed, encoded, handheld, pocket-size. That. That’s what Evelyn wanted, and she went to work to get it.

Kendrick waited. Saint Paul waited. Ernesto waited.

But Ernesto didn’t wait forever.

“It’s not the money you’re after,” he said to Evelyn. “It’s power or something. I don’t get it.”

“You don’t get it, Ernesto. You definitely don’t.”

Evelyn slammed the door as she left for work.

Kendrick pirouetted in his stall.

“See, Saint Paul?” Kendrick said. “See that?”

But Saint Paul couldn’t see, not really.

Through the hinge crack he noticed that Ernesto left the porch light on. But with his ears he didn’t hear Evelyn’s car come back. With his nose he smelled Ernesto drinking gin. With his ears, he heard Ernesto playing all the Van Morrison albums. Through the hinge crack he saw the bedroom window and Ernesto alone at the window, his phone glowing in his hand.

In the morning Ernesto came out and gave Kendrick and Saint Paul their hay. He filled their waters.

“The fucking VP of sales,” he said.

He said to Saint Paul, “Sorry, dude. I’ve got to go.”

“You’ll be okay, Fancy Pants,” Ernesto said to Kendrick, who flattened his ears.

St. Paul heard Ernesto throw his suitcase in the back of the truck. He heard the truck turn on Mount Eden Road.

“He’s gone, Saint Paul!” Kendrick tossed his head. He shuffled happily in his straw.

“She’s packing for Las Vegas probably,” Kendrick said. “That was our favorite show. She’ll be here in just a bit and pick me up. She’ll be here all the time now, Saint Paul. You’ll see. She’s coming now. She’s on her way.”

Saint Paul listened to Kendrick happily chew the hay that Ernesto had left. He listened to Kendrick finish that

hay and slurp up his water. He listened to the afternoon settle into evening. The crickets started up. The oak leaves crackled. The roof of the stalls shifted.

“Evelyn?”

The great perk of domestication is its lack of deviation. For barn animals, regularity is the prize. Schedules are the fabric of the domesticated animal’s existence. Whatever early ancestors to the cow, the goat, the horse, the sheep dragged or were dragged into the human yard, those ancestors traded liberty for two squares a day. Sovereignty was sacrificed for the prize of breakfast served at a regular time. Such a trade is difficult to reverse.

Ernesto left on Friday morning.

Friday evening. Saturday morning. Saturday evening. The porch light was on. The house lights were off. There was no hay. Nobody came to fill the water.

Kendrick said, “Vertical. Oxer. She’s making a plan.”

Kendrick lapped at his bucket, the remaining measure of water that couldn’t be sucked up with his lips.

The sky grew bright. The blue of it cut itself around the serrated oak trees.

Horses can live three days without water.

Sunday morning. Sunday afternoon. Dull hunger. Thirst. The dust that neglect leaves in the back of animal throats. Sunday night, and the porch light flared the filaments of its insomniac eye.

“Kendrick,” Saint Paul said, clearing the roof of his mouth of its drought, “the hay barn is just over there. If you kick down the door. There’s a fountain out front.”

“Evelyn,” Kendrick rasped.

“Kendrick,” Saint Paul tried again. “If you just kick down the stall—”

“Evelyn,” Kendrick said.

The streetlight on Mount Eden Road hung under the oblivious moon. No cars on the road were Evelyn. No cars were Ernesto.

“Kendrick,” Saint Paul’s tongue was so dry. “I got a letter from Evelyn.”

Kendrick made a rasping sound.

“She wrote that she loved you. She wants you to—”

Kendrick kicked morosely at the back of his stall.

“It’s not a paper letter, Kendrick. It’s a mind letter. She sent a letter to my mind.”

Kendrick weaved against the stall door.

“Kendrick. She misses you. She says there’s a big show coming up, Kendrick. There’s a big show in Vegas and she needs you. She needs you to meet her. She wants you to come to her, Kendrick. She’ll meet you. She’s crossing a giant arena.”

“Arena,” Kendrick said.

“Do you see her?”

“Evelyn?”

“It’s her, Kendrick. There. Just past the first vertical, over that oxer. Do you see the line, Kendrick?”

Kendrick hoisted the weary luxury of his head. He backed up two paces. He exhaled an arid snort, and with his dusty tail lifted at an elegant angle, Kendrick leaped out of his stall.

“Evelyn!”

He landed on his left lead in the yard and leaped the paddock fences with two strides between. He angled the ditch of the driveway and picked a quick line for the split rail fence that ran along Mount Eden Road.

“Evelyn!”

And in the dark of that early Monday morning, before any human was up—Kendrick had it all. That morning, he had what everyone wanted, all he deserved, the life he was born to. He had love in his heart and the entire world under his hooves—thick lawns and oak-studded, circular drives. He had three-story Italianate homes and four-bedroom ranches with three-car garages. He had fast cars and big cars and vanity gardens with kale laid out in rows. He had a few chickens. He had tennis courts and grape arbors and apple trees. He had so many swimming pools, and he had purpose. He snorted. He galloped. He drank long, deep drafts from kidney-shaped pools and infinity pools. He grabbed mouthfuls of lawn and trimmed a hedge of flowering quince with his teeth. He foraged oat grass and radish and rye. He sipped water from a koi pond and from a tiered front-yard fountain. He snacked on roses and peppermint. He tried catmint and yarrow. He galloped between rows of grapes at a vineyard off Via Regina and leaped over a Hummer and hedges and white estate-rail fences.

“Evelyn!” he cried.

“Evelyn, Evelyn,” he whinnied. He cantered down Deer Trail Court and back up Pike Road. He leaped Prospect Creek and finally galloped up the wide, empty lanes of Saratoga Avenue. It was Kendrick’s show now, and there,

just as the night was pinking to day, there Evelyn stood, just as Saint Paul had described. Across Highway 85. On the other side. She called: “Kendrick!”

A sound wall, two lanes of southbound, the median, then two lanes of northbound with a sound wall on that side. It was a triple. Kendrick knew about triples. He’d been over countless triples with Evelyn and this one he could do on his own—not with her but for her.

“For you!” he whinnied, and then Kendrick circled. He collected himself. He fixed his gaze on the other side of 85, over the obstacle, not at it, over at Campbell or maybe it’s West San Jose, over where ComTechCo was, where Evelyn waited. Kendrick lifted off.

Midair, in the dusk of that early morning, in flight over the sound wall, Kendrick must have realized the truth. He must have understood in one elevated moment that this whole time he’d had it wrong. Love is not lofty. Love is not glory. Love is not wrapped up with power. Love doesn’t imprison or train. Love attends. Love doesn’t need spurs or a bit in the teeth. Love allows. Love lets us go. Kendrick looked down.

“Saint Paul,” he said.

That shadow on Kendrick’s right was a Tesla in the fast lane. That Tesla weighed more than 5,000 pounds while Kendrick came in at a fit 1,400. One horsepower versus a thousand. It was never really a contest. The heart of a beast cannot survive the impact of such a machine. Still, Kendrick didn’t die right away. The Tesla driver, who survived, described later how the horse stumbled along, how he threw himself at the wall he’d just jumped as if trying to return back in the direction from which he’d appeared. His eyes rolled. His teeth bared.

“He was thrashing around as if trying to speak,” the Tesla driver said later to friends. “He appeared to be cursing the stars.”

Traffic was backed up until noon.

Saint Paul heard all the sirens. His ears drooping over the top of his stall, he heard the leap and the fall. He heard the crash. He inferred: a most splendid creature had thudded to earth.

Then there was a lesser sound—the sound of a smallish, grayish donkey lying down. That donkey had been a companion. A companion is, by definition, a lesser. The companioned is always considered the greater, and in this

tale, the lesser made a decision about what end should come to the greater. The greater, the lesser decided, should not expire starving and ignored in a stall. Better the greater should die deluded but big, splashy and seen, that his death should be tragic but the kind of tragic that is read about, discussed, an ending that makes the pages of the *Chronicle*.

We want the world to be good. We do the best that we can for our friends. We know the world, beautiful as it is, to be better with someone beside us, someone to serve with our presence. But every someone comes to an end. The best we can do is make the end as appropriate as we can for our friends.

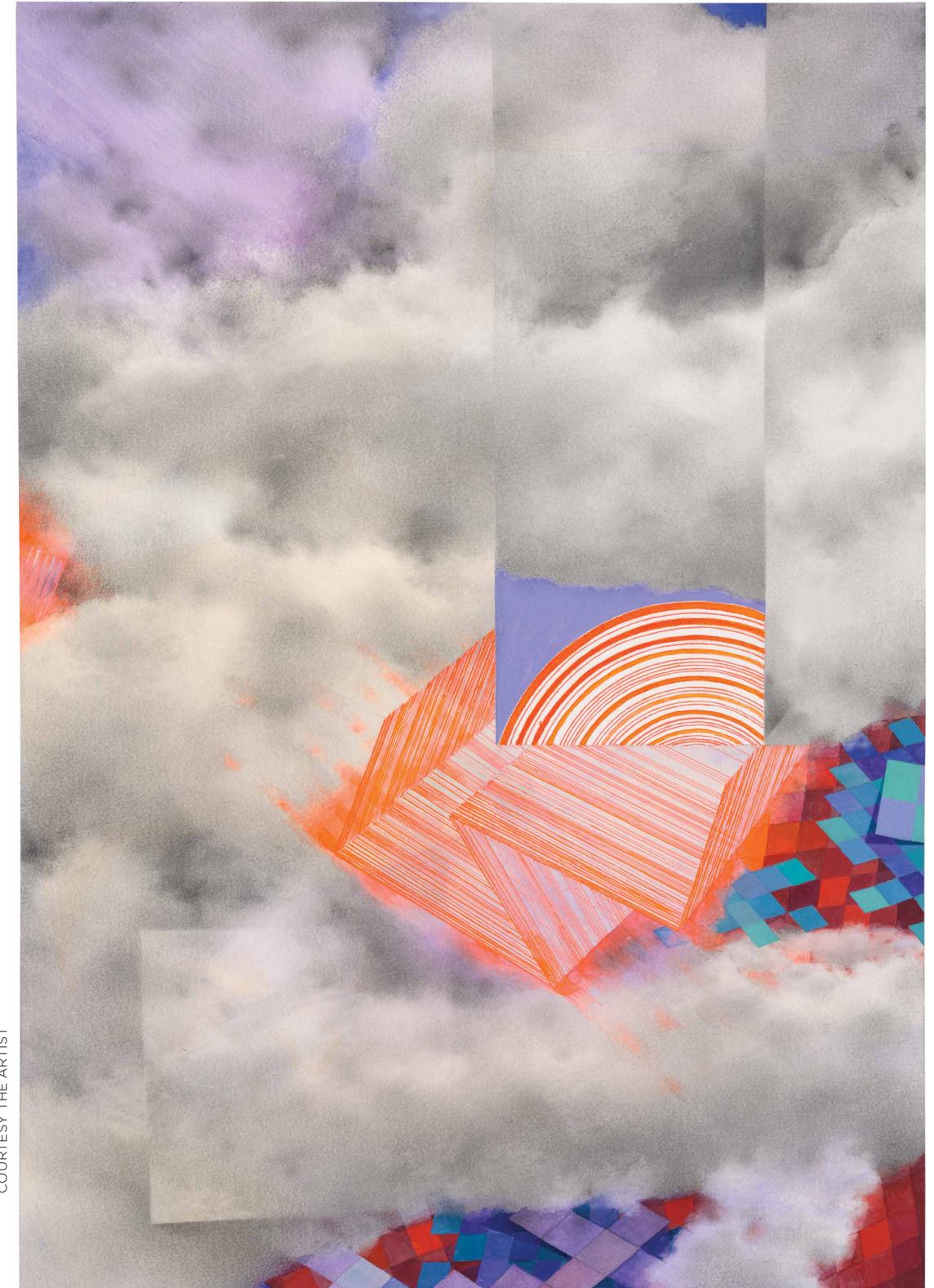
And what of our friend the little donkey? What might happen to him—now that he’s landed, neglected and starved, in the filth of his stall. We can imagine any outcome we like. Almost anything is possible in a world that contains Hanoverians and advancing technology and donkeys who can read. Saint Paul was rescued before. Perhaps he’ll be rescued again. Or he might follow his own instruction and kick down his stall door. He might be his own companion that way, liberating himself the way he assisted (for better or worse) in the liberation of Kendrick. He might kick that stall door right off its hinges—and through its aperture, he would suddenly see the whole picture: wide wet lawns, air-conditioned houses, infinity pools, abundance, private property, democratic ideals, the mirage of universal suffrage—and, seeing the full range and complexity of the world, all that still needed bearing, Saint Paul might get right to it. He might trot through his kicked-open door and yank out a bite of wet grass from its roots with his teeth. He might grab a donkey-sized share of the world. But, how long could that last. How long will this last.

In the end Saint Paul lay where he landed. He gleaned what he could from that moment: fraction of barnyard, split rail fence, a section of house with the porch light still on.

Lisa Allen Ortiz’s second poetry collection, *Stem*, was published by Lost Horse Press in 2022, and *The Blinding Star: Selected Poems of Blanca Varela* (Tolsun Books, 2021), a work collaboratively translated by Ortiz and Sara Daniele Rivera, won the 2022 California Translation in Poetry prize at the Northern California Book Awards.

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What Is Happening to Us?, 2020
Watercolor, graphite powder, and gouache, 26 x 18 in.



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