

MY FATHER'S ARMS

by Robert Olmstead



Robert Olmstead,
author of
Coal Black Horse

EDITOR'S NOTE: Robert Olmstead's sixth book is set in the heat of the Civil War and is the story of one boy who tries his best to get his father back home, astride his

When I was a child, on the farm there was a stout and headstrong black pony we used to ride. It was my grandfather's farm, and though tractors had taken over the work, he still kept draft horses, and I remember the cadenced tread of their great steel-shod hooves, the risen puffs of earth, their soft eyes as detached and serene as the blessed.

Back then the days had promise. I believed in becoming a buckaroo and sported a cowboy hat and a very fine pair of six-guns and was a shootist nonpareil. We played cowboys and Indians and one time my brother shot me in the mouth with a homemade arrow. Fortunately, I have long since retired from the gunman's life, having killed everyone I imagined and never once being killed myself.

On the farm, horses and cows were our constant companions. Like people, horses love to be touched, and, like people, there

only hope, a noble horse. Though set over a century ago, Olmstead's book felt so viscerally true that we had to ask how he knew this territory so well.

are horses just waiting for you to make a mistake. We all knew the story of our great-uncle. When a boy, he turned up missing, only to be found in the horse barn, killed by one of the horses. I imagine the horse wheeling its hind end around and cocking a hoof. Maybe to kill a fly. Maybe startled by the boy. He was only two years old and killed by a horse. I think now how odd it is that we knew that story, because tragedy was rarely spoken of.

When in my book Robey Childs is given the coal black horse who will carry him through war, I had no idea the proportions this event would assume. But lying in wait, my ancestral mind sprang a trap on me. Suddenly, I was the boy with the given horse and I was beginning one of life's ancient journeys accompanied by a companionable being. As

to horses, there is no puzzle to their meaning: the horse that pulls the sun, the winged horse, the water horse, the demon horse, the shape-shifting horse, the

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horse half-man. These are the horses that are pure air and fire and defy the dull elements of the earth. It was this moment, the boy receiving the horse, so like the sound of a key turning in a lock, that became the novel.

But that pony I was just talking about. It was a Saturday. The roof was steaming in the drowsy morning sunlight. My mother was snapping the ends off string beans. I was still a child and it was my turn to ride. Across the macadam road distant I remember my father coming from the barn, the sleeves of

his shirt rolled to the elbows. He was lighting a cigarette. I wanted him to see me ride and waved to him and that's when a cousin whooped and gave that pony a good crack on the ass and that pony bolted. I grabbed the mane, hell-bent to hold on for dear life.

Then came the moment when I realized I could not hold my seat. I knew something terrible was going to happen. I was going down and the hard road would be meeting me. But when I fell, I fell into arms—my father's arms. He'd crossed the distance and caught me as the pony swept by in all its panic. He held me and then let me down on my feet. He knew enough to stand me upright, a smile on his sun-touched face, and not to make a big deal of how frightened I was.

I had experienced the blood thrill of the runaway saved from tragedy. This moment did not require a photographer to take a pic-

ture because already in the flash of my fear-bright eyes it was forever taken as memory to me.

I think I have always written about fathers and sons—my father and me—and writing *Coal Black Horse* was just another chance to spend time with him. However difficult my father's need for the alcohol that eventually killed him, there was goodness in our lives. There were sparkling and edifying moments. I learned from him that when you go fishing it isn't all that important to catch a fish. I

learned from him how to grow tomatoes. I learned from him the pleasure of reading. I learned to mind the true things. Even his drinking taught me how desperate a life can be, how quickly darkness can descend.

I am constructed of these memories. I remember them and they can be seen in the tell of my eyes' floating reminiscences. The memories come in daylight. They come in the dark illimitable night. They come unbidden and appear as seamless and beautiful and mysterious and full-borne at inception as silver vessels floating in darkness. And then, drawing on my imagination, I rewrite them as little dramas and they become stories or novels. And here I have gone and helplessly written another one. I think of *Coal Black Horse* as one of those mystical bridges in life, one that crosses between me and that pony and my father. They are not so far away. They chase my blood. Nothing you love is ever dead. ■