

## STEPHANIE HEIT

*Continuum*, 2017  
Oil on canvas, 48 x48 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## PAM HOUSTON

### Ranch Almanac: Donkey Chasing

The mini-donkeys vs.  
the dogs in competition  
for pack leader

When the mini-donkeys first arrived at that ranch, there was some—I would have to call it good-natured—chasing. And to be fair, the wolfhounds were used to my returning from work trips with a squeaky toy for each of them. When I brought home the mini-donks, they probably just thought I'd out-done myself.

One thing I had not considered when I agreed to rescue the bonded pair was that my pasture was fenced to keep horses and cattle, but nothing much shorter or skinnier than that. My corral, especially, was not mini-donkey-proof, and neither were a few of the pasture corners that had been left with a small space open so people could slip through. Also, the donkeys really liked people. They would follow me around the yard while I did my chores. They'd pick things up in their mouths—a hose, a rope, a stuffed lobster dog toy—and play tug-of-war with it, mostly, it seemed, for my amusement. They had no problem negotiating with their little high-heeled hooves the three steps that led up to the dog porch where they would spend several minutes sniffing the bowls and beds as if solving a great mystery. If I had let them, I believe they would have followed me right through the front door into the living room and curled up with me on the couch.

The wolfhounds at first were curious about the donkeys and then affronted at their hubris. Fenton, especially, had a strong belief system around animals staying in their place. He felt Mr. Kitty belonged outside, in the mudroom, or in the basement. The sheep and the chickens belonged in their enclosure. Horses belonged in the corral, the barn, and the pasture. Who were these newcomers who'd been given the run of the place?

Fenton would watch them nervously for hours until his outrage got the better of him and then with no particular provocation, he would leap up and chase the donkeys around the yard. And because William did everything Fenton did exactly one half second later, the donkeys found themselves on the run a couple of times each day.

The wolfhounds are just about a head taller than the donkeys, and the donkeys were younger and maybe even a little smaller back then. I don't believe the dogs had any intention of hurting the donkeys, but wolfhounds are bred to chase fast-moving objects, and those little donkeys can turn it on, in spite of their super short legs.

*I rewarded peace when it occurred and was vigilant about calling off the dogs, bringing them inside with me so the donkeys could enjoy some quality yard time alone.*

Sometimes Isaac, the bigger, brassier, donkey, would manage to turn the tables, would reach out his big square teeth and take a nip at a wolfhound haunch, and then the chase, for a little while, would go the other way. This strategy backfired of course, because the dogs thought that game was even more fun than the original, and so did everything possible to encourage them. On the one hand, everyone was getting lots of good exercise, but on the other, said my nascent rancher voice, someone was eventually going to get hurt.

I could fix the spaces in the fence given a little time, but I would need poles and a bag of cement and a few days when I didn't have writing deadlines, so I decided to give communal living a try. I rewarded peace when it occurred and was vigilant about calling off the dogs, bringing them inside with me so the donkeys could enjoy some quality yard time alone.

After a couple of weeks, I needed groceries, sheep feed, and a mineral lick, and about a million other things I would think of once I got to the Monte Vista Co-op, a little over an hour's drive away. I locked the dogs in the house and left all the gates but the front one open, so the equines could graze in the yard together where the grass was the greenest and sweet.

Five hours later, the truck loaded down with a month's worth of barnyard supplies and groceries, I got out to open the gate at the end of the drive. I heard Deseo whinnying and whinnying as he trotted nervously up and down the fence line. Deseo is a worrywart, the fussiest of all the animals on the ranch—a little like someone's urbane great-uncle set lose against his wishes on the farm—but he's also a very good alarm clock. When anyone or anything is threatened, Deseo makes sure to let me know.

I wrenched the gate open and went flying up the driveway to see who was injured or dead. I took a quick head count. Six chickens, five sheep, two horses, two donkeys, and pressed up against the kitchen window, the noses of two dogs. I caught Deseo with a lead rope, looked him over, and petted his neck. He was a little frothed up but seemed unhurt. All the other animals were strictly business as usual, Roany ingesting as much tender yard grass as he could before I turned him back to his 120 acres of pasture, Simon and Isaac on either end of a knotted rope dog toy, pulling each other across the driveway.

I let Deseo go and turned back to the truck to unload the groceries. When I carried the first bags up the walkway to the dog porch, I didn't at first comprehend what I was seeing. And when I tell you that the dog porch was covered in donkey shit, I want to make sure you don't picture two or four or even ten piles of steaming donkey pucks placed here and there on the wooden decking. The dog porch is roughly eight by eight, and every square inch of its surface was covered in donkey poop. I mean to say that those donkeys shit and shit again and spread it around with their little hooves, and then they shit some more and spread that around, and then they shit again. They shit on all four dog beds, and in the case where there was more than one bed piled on top of another, they had pulled or kicked the beds apart so they could shit on the ones underneath. One of them shit into an open rectangular cooler that I had washed and put out on the porch to dry. They had upended the trash can that lives on that porch and kicked the shit and the trash together. They had even somehow smeared shit on the porch railings.

It had to have been a premeditated attack and it seemed utterly impossible that it had been committed by only the two of them. Had they somehow saved up for days? And if so, how had they known I would pick that day to

go to the valley? The transgression had the scope and feel of a well-executed fraternity prank, though there wasn't a college within three counties.

I had always heard that donkeys were smarter than horses, and I imagined how much satisfaction they must have taken, shitting away, kicking stuff around, while the dogs' noses were pressed tight to the kitchen window. I believe Isaac wanted me to understand there was no insult directed at me personally, because nothing that was not on the dog porch had been tampered with.

This was what Deseo had been trying to tell me as he trotted up and down the fence line while I fumbled with the gate. "Ohhhhhhhh . . . she's gonna see the do-o-o-o-o-o-g p-o-o-o-o-orch," he whinnied, at the first sight of my car coming down Middle Creek Road. Closing up those spaces in the pasture fence moved right up to the top of the chore list. It was a brief but effective revolution, and the donkeys maintain their sovereignty to this day.

Author **Pam Houston**'s most recent book is *Contents May Have Shifted*, published in 2012. She is also the author of two collections of linked short stories, *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Waltzing the Cat*, the novel, *Sight Hound*, and a collection of essays, *A Little More About Me*, all published by W.W. Norton. She directs the literary nonprofit Writing By Writers, is professor of English at the University of California, Davis, and teaches in the Institute of American Indian Arts' low-residency MFA program and at writers' conferences around the country and the world.