CHELSEA WHITTON

A Few More Lines for the Torturer’s Horse

—with Auden & Bruegel

There is a contradiction in the darkened barn where your tack hangs—stirrups and halters, stainless bits, hoof trimmers, forceps, buggy whip, iron hooks like little violent moons, the scythes of lesser gods. These tools of upkeep, ownership, and care have near-twin siblings, hung up elsewhere, used for different purposes. But you don’t know this, horse. His tools are innocent, easily cleaned and put away, and every inch as unaccountable as you were the first day your master hitched you to a doomed man’s jerking limb. And afterwards, he washed you gently, rinsed your hide until the water ran off clear—not red, or red and brown. He rubbed you down, called you a good horse, cleaned your teeth and picked the rocks out of your shoes. He whistled darling clementine and led you out to graze beside your favorite tree. He used his tools that day in ways that made you love him. Horse, I know how you love him: hopelessly, as any kept thing loves whatever is most merciful to it. And this is innocence itself, and you are blameless in your love of his warm hands, coarse as they are, against your withers, teasing clots of blood out of your tangled mane.