

the levelness of the game

Dustin Miller

You've seen the game, and likely played it.

Roll the golf ball up the short wooden incline. It comes back to you unless it drops into one of the holes first.

One point.

Three.

Five.

The horse advances at a walk, trot, or gallop based on your precision—
or the levelness of the game.

Ah, the carnival horse race.

More players, bigger prize.

I had forgotten that part.

I thought the object was simply to get the horse to the end.

My friend says this is what my job search looks like.

I tell him yes,

except the track
runs between
my heart

and

my head

Then Houston moves.

HOUSTON

one point

text message

one point

call

three points

meet the team

one point

another call

one point

another

the horse
keeps walking

step

step

step

not fast

not stopped

every time
I look up

closer

closer

closer

to whatever
we have agreed

the end
means

Houston is furthest along.

Houston pays the least.

At the carnival, every lane appears identical.

Same painted horse.

Same length of track.

Same holes cut into the same sloped surface.

1 3 5

If one lane had seven holes and another had twelve, if a five moved one horse six inches and another two feet, everyone would notice.

We would call the game unfair.

Or broken.

Or interesting.

DENVER

five—

phone screen five—interview five—responsibility five—salary five—scope—

the horse is already halfway down the track—

five—

another conversation another five another answer another—
wait
I thought
we had
more—
five—
time

Denver began behind Houston.
Denver is running very fast out of nowhere.
Maybe I am good at Denver.
Maybe Denver is simply a game where every hole is worth five.

A horse moves and the body wants to call the movement evidence.
They like me.
I did well.
This is going somewhere.
This is meant for me.
But the mechanism between ball and horse is hidden.
I only know I rolled.
I only know something moved.

SAN FRANCISCO

I rolled.

waited.

waited.

for so long
I thought perhaps
the ball was jammed
somewhere inside the machine

then—
five.

The horse jerks forward.
Not far.
Enough.
Then still again.
The horse is far from the finish line.
I keep looking at it anyway.

Perhaps the horse is the job.
No.
Perhaps the horse is the city.
No—
the life.
Houston life.
Denver life.
San Francisco life.
Santa Barbara life.
Philadelphia life.
Perhaps the golf ball is the application.
Or the interview.
Or the job itself.
Click **submit**.
A horse advances.
Answer the phone.
A horse advances.
Tell someone about a time you demonstrated leadership.
Somewhere a kitchen changes.
A running route appears.
A bedroom empties.
A grocery store I have never entered becomes the place I buy hummus.
All because a golf ball fell into a five.

SANTA BARBARA

the horse

is still

there

still

there

PHILADELPHIA

I rolled the ball.

I never heard it land.

NASHVILLE

game over

SEATTLE

game over

For a moment after a lane closes, I still feel myself sitting there.

Hand out.

Waiting for the ball to come back.

An actual carnival game requires one body per seat.

This becomes increasingly inconvenient.

I appear to be sitting at all of them.

at the same damn time

my hand in Houston

my eyes on Denver

my body leaning toward San Francisco

some quieter version of me

still seated

before Santa Barbara

Philadelphia

holding

nothing

and waiting

for something

to return

How many versions of a person can play before one of them has to stand up?

No one explains how many balls are in each lane either.

Houston may have given me twelve.

Denver, four.

San Francisco may have kept the first one for weeks before deciding I could roll again.

Santa Barbara may contain an entire bucket beneath the counter.

Philadelphia may have taken my last ball without saying so.

The horse race does not end with the horse.

The horse merely determines who gets to stand beneath the wall and choose.

Small prize.

Medium prize.

Large.

JUMBO.

The absurd animal hanging from the ceiling, too big to carry comfortably, which is how everyone knows you really won.

More players, bigger prize.

Another rule I do not remember consenting to.

Denver pays the most.

Denver asks the most.

San Francisco is where some part of me already wants to wake up.

Houston may reach the finish line first.

Which of these is the large prize?

Which is the small?

Does salary determine size?

Title?

Responsibility?

Desire?

Distance?

Escape?

How much of my current life will no longer fit around it?

Maybe the largest prize is the one that changes everything.

Maybe that is also what it costs.

A giant stuffed Pikachu under one arm,
trying to get it through the car door.

I won this.

I cannot fit it
inside the life
I came here in.

The head likes a scoreboard.

Houston: closest.

Denver: fastest.

San Francisco: behind.

Santa Barbara: still.
Philadelphia: unknown.
Nashville: out.
Seattle: out.

The heart does something less useful.

It looks up.
It looks at the prizes.
It asks which one I would carry.

I know how to lose.

A rejection arrives and one horse disappears.

The lane goes dark.

The body absorbs one fewer future.

One of them may win.

Houston walking.

Denver galloping.

San Francisco—

still,
then movement,
then still.

And I may be asked to choose while there are still balls to roll in the other lanes.

But I'm not finished, I want to say.

The attendant is already reaching for the prize.

Maybe the first horse across does not win.

Maybe it only changes the question.

A possible city becomes an address.

Salary becomes rent.

Reinvention stops sounding like freedom and starts requiring boxes.

Escape and beginning stand so close together I cannot tell which one I am touching.

I thought I was trying to get a horse across a line.

I did not understand that the line would eventually reach back for me.

Jesus, am I the horse?

One point.

Three.

Five.

walk

trot
gallop

Houston
Denver
San Francisco

heart
head
heart
head

the ball returns
until it doesn't

the horse moves
until one of them
moves far enough

and somewhere above the lanes,

waiting to be chosen,

a future large enough
that I may have to leave
something behind

just to carry it.