

## Object Lesson: Horses

In yet another summer of Russian regret, Marie's father fed apples to the soldiers' horses. *No need for the servants of tyrants to suffer*, he said before approaching them and peering into the world of their black and uniformed eyes. Marie, at the curb, could not see behind the blind, but she could imagine the horse's wild pupil floating there behind the stiff, black disc, her humble afternoon filling with the scent of sour hay and new leather. That evening she grew afraid of the mare's teeth, living as they do in the mouth, rein and strap falling away to deliver noise and unseen purpose. Years later, Pierre distractedly crosses the *Rue Dauphine* in fat rain and is struck by a dray. Some say his mind was off and thinking of Marie. Some say it was the umbrella held to the globe of his head as a black shield from the rain. The rain: the hoof: its quick: the strike: the light: a shroud: the black of the shield. The horses of her childhood did not eat kindly, but tore the whole small globe of the apple out of her father's hand. Who would then protect her body, frail and offering itself like a branch to the world? The division of parts made clean by a horse. Even the beloved atom sings harm in its loss.

## Petites Curie

Initially, Pierre thought women a distraction. Distracting, yes, but specifically, it was their hands' imprecision and perilous hair. This he thought in the small basement lab where the walls sweated the Seine into air, studying moments of small magnetism as they passed through the gap of his instrument. The careening needle at the center was never meant to pierce or mend, but was, at a certain temperature, electric. The first X-ray published was of Frau Röntgen's hand laid on a photographic plate, the shadow of bones circled by a wedding ring. Later, there would be a nail in a boy's lung, a horse's skull, a soldier's hip shattered by a bullet in the field. The public took the ghostly images to be premonitions of death, or worse: a sight into the inviolable body, which is the domain of God. In Greek, the word *atom* means *indivisible*, as in *not to cut*. During World War I, Marie and her daughter Irène manned mobile X-ray units which became known as *petites Curie*. Once, as Marie posed her patients against the shaking wall of a tent, a legless soldier asked to hold her hand as they captured his ailment's image. This is how she came to know her heart, years after Pierre's death, as she set to work unworried and clinical in the field. The image made quite by accident, the bones surrounding her sentimental organ in a little black cage and its imprint tender as lace.