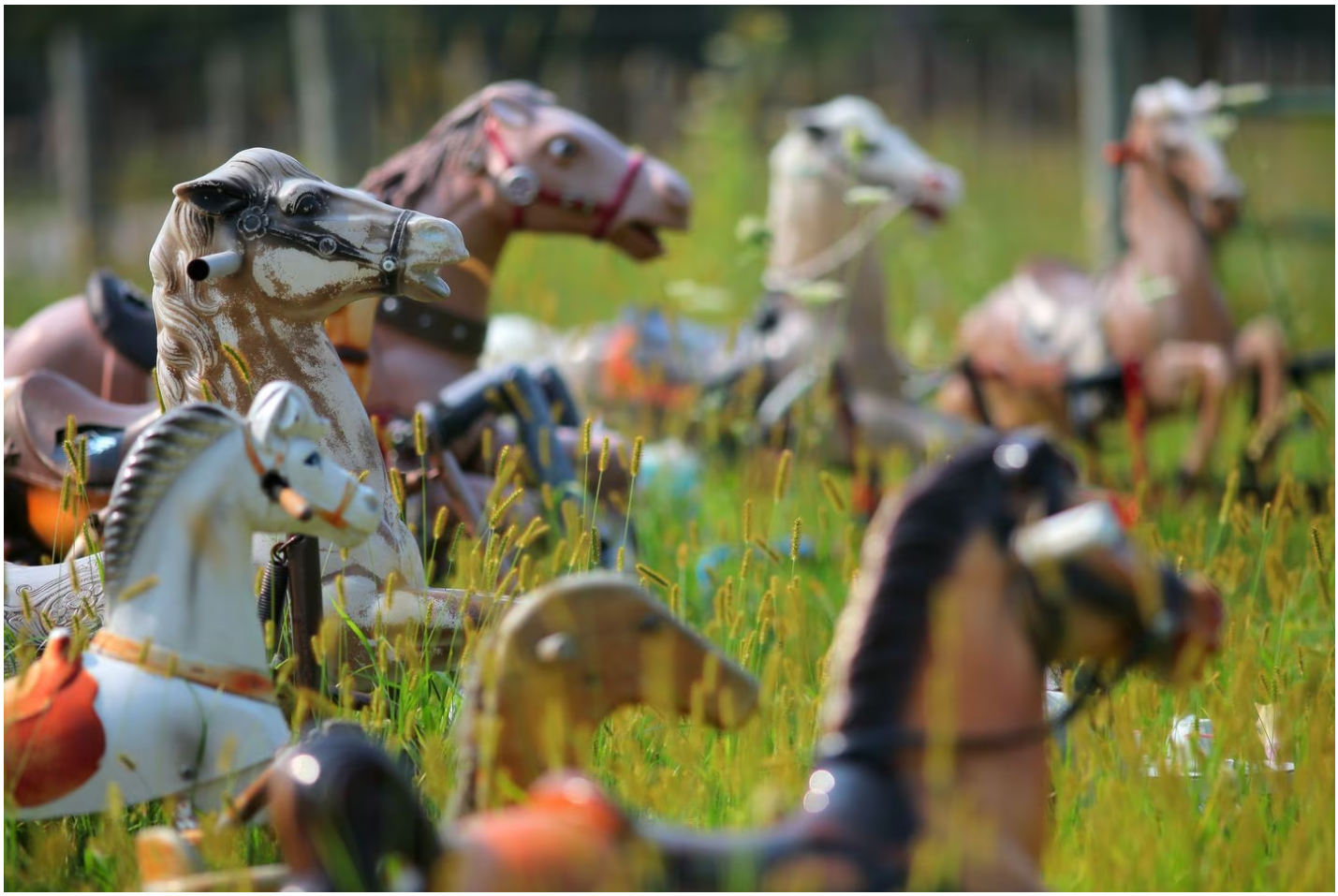
IDEAS

The absurd, haunting, anonymous horses of Ponyhenge

Once we put an old rocking horse out to pasture. Twelve years later, the field is home to a mysterious communal art project.

By **Elizabeth Graver** Updated May 2, 2023, 3:00 a.m.

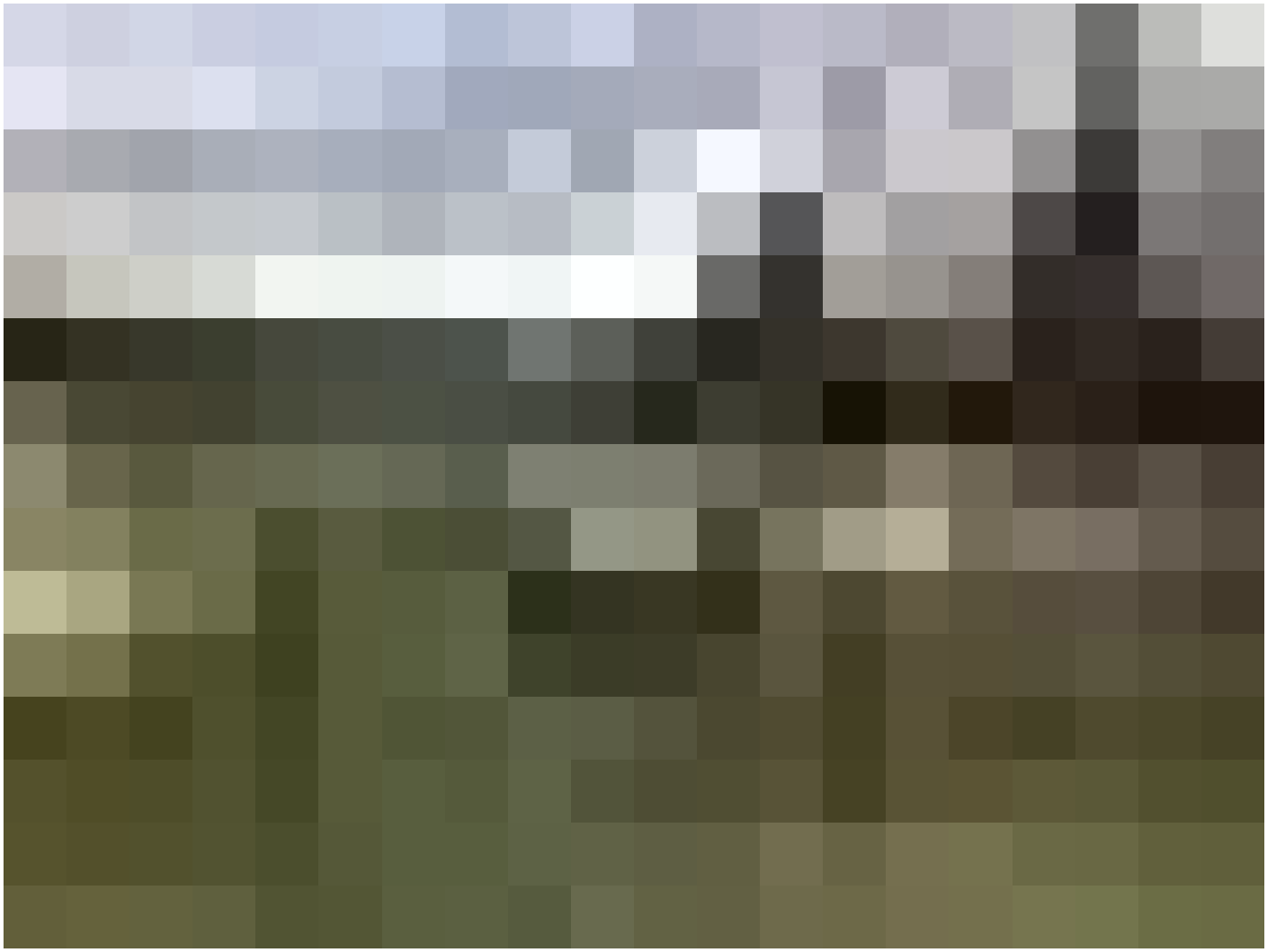


Rocking horses in the field in Lincoln in 2015. LANE TURNER

The first horse, dappled gray with a blue metal stand, came to us 20 years ago from the swap shop at our town's transfer station. *A quick bounce*, we thought, as we set our 2-year-old daughter in the saddle. Her glee was so abundant that

we took the pony home. For years after that, it lived in our house. Our daughter, joined eventually by her little sister, would climb up to bounce wildly and belt out the song they called "White Neigh-Neighs" — "*She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes . . .*."

One October — the girls were 8 and 10 — we set up a spooky Halloween labyrinth in the field on the far side of our two-acre property, a spot separated from the house by a U-shaped driveway. We made a headless horseman from clothes stuffed with hay and dragged horse and rider to the field, arranging them near the fortune teller's stool and the bowl of eyeballs. As night fell and the bonfire flickered, our daughters and their friends shrieked and darted, half-pretending to be scared.

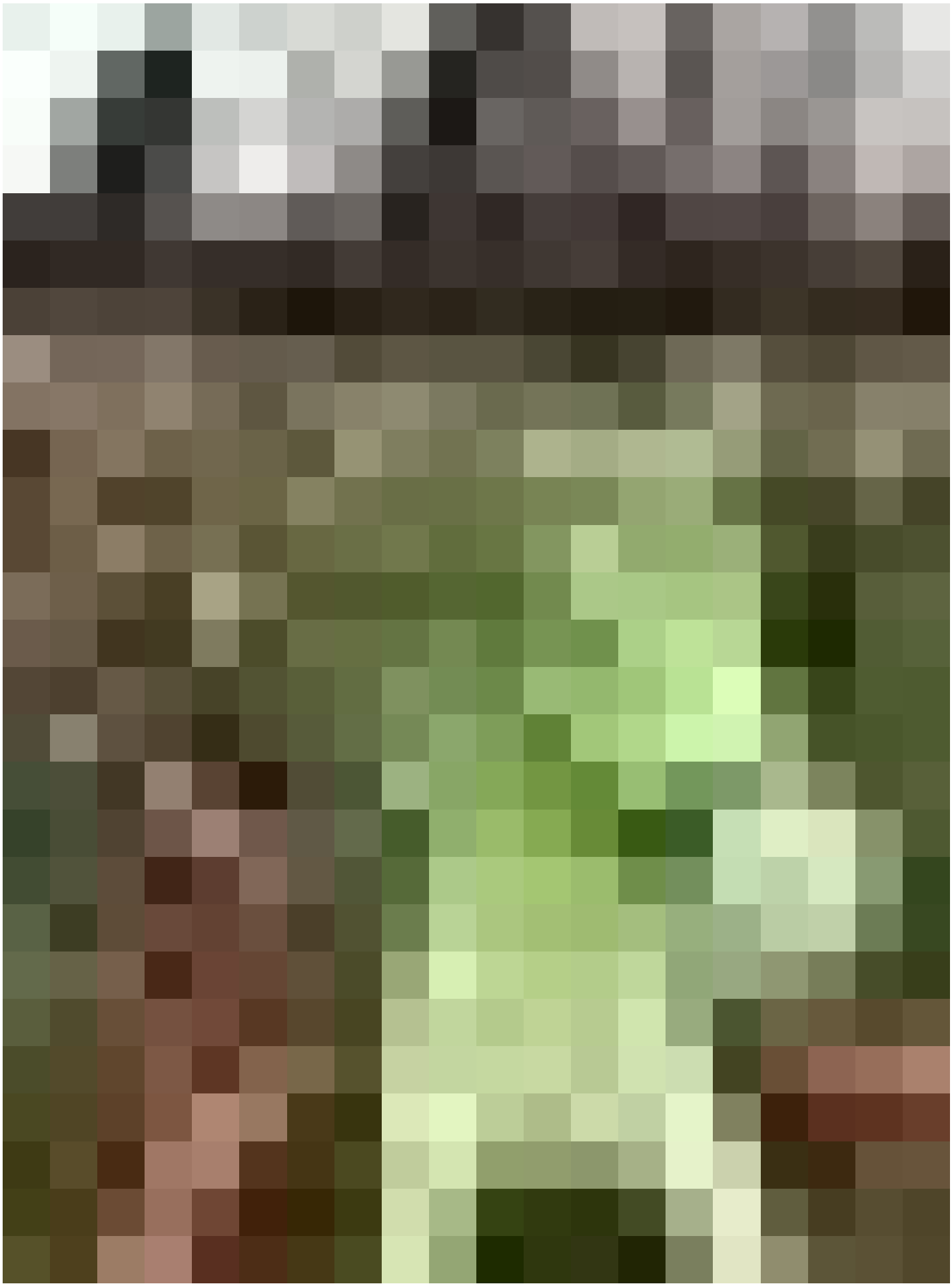


The field in 2022. HEATHER HOPP-BRUCE

We cleaned up the party but left the horse in the field. Our girls had outgrown it by then. Why not put it out to pasture? October turned to November. Winter came. Snowdrifts pooled around the horse, and spring came, and if you were driving by (forgive me if I don't share the address), you might have noticed a horse, ears alert, springs starting to rust among the greening grass.

And then, one day, the gray horse had a friend.

Was this the beginning? It's hard to attach chronology to something that belongs to many people and thrives on mystery. Maybe we have an inkling as to who left Horse No. 2, or maybe we don't. As our neighbor Ellen, who raises (real) sheep across the street, once put it in a lovely short film about the horses, "Rockers," "they just arrive." A few months later, another horse appeared. It wasn't quite a herd yet; you'd still hardly notice if you were passing by. But then another, and another, materializing when our backs were turned or we were at work and our girls at school, sometimes even in the middle of the night. We arranged them in circles or rows, only to return to find the pattern changed.

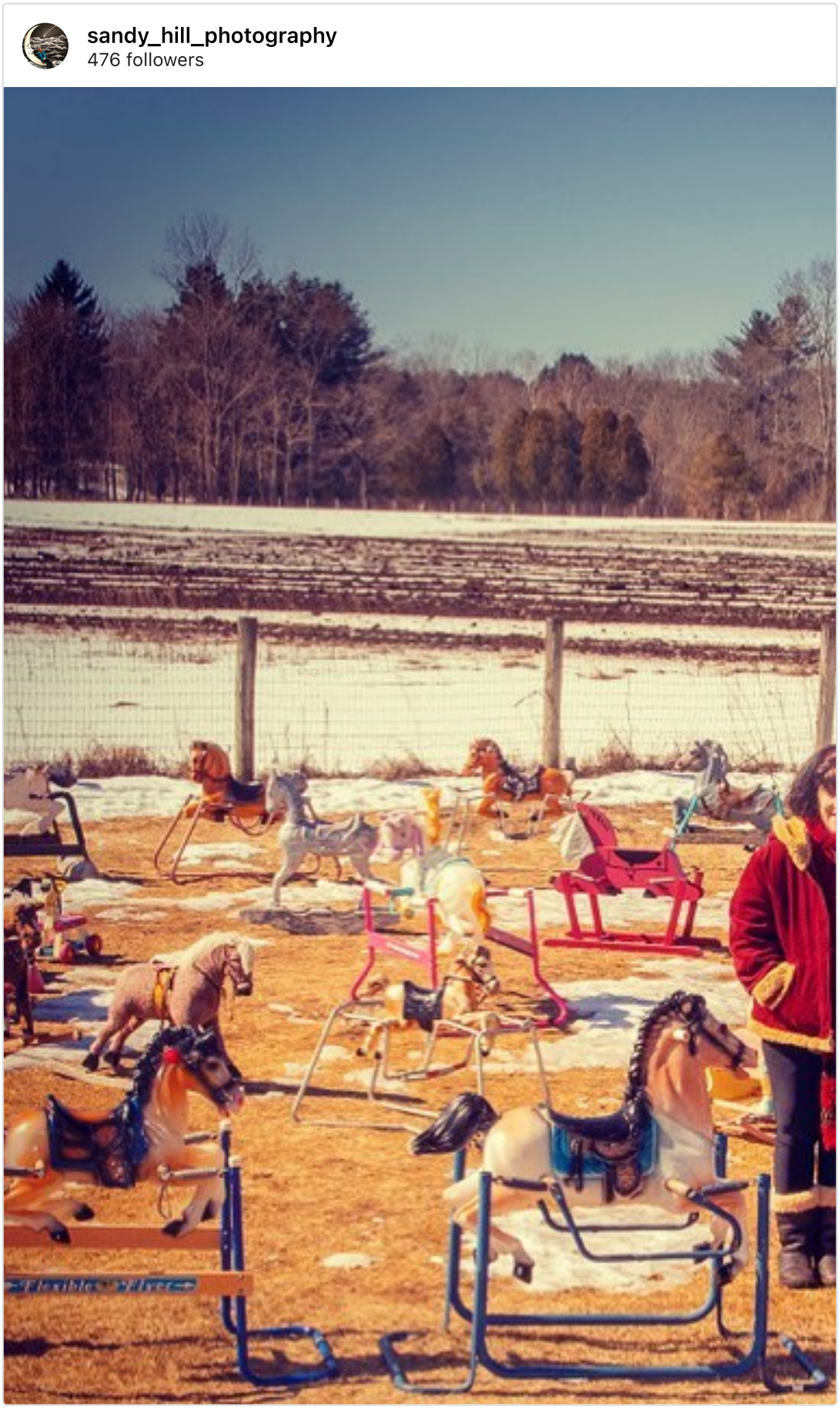


Ponyhenge in 2022. HEATHER HOPP-BRUCE

One day, the horses were featured in a front-page story with a large photo in the Globe. For a while after that, we were inundated. I pictured a dystopic proliferation: snapped springs, bent frames, piles of horses on their sides and backs, our good field turned to trash. Our primary duty by then was clear — to *curate*, a polite term for culling the herd. We threw out the broken ones and tried to find homes for the plush, antique, or wooden ones. If a horse offended our aesthetic sensibilities (I'm thinking of a bulbous pink plastic pony with a leering expression), it might be doomed to the proverbial glue factory. The swap shop wasn't an option; the horse would come right back.

Somewhere along the way, a stranger on Instagram dubbed the place Ponyhenge, and it became a hashtag. Then an Instagram account called Ponyhenge appeared, promising "merch to come." At this, we sprang into action, messaging the account — "NO MERCH! We own the field!" — and took out a copyright on the name. In truth, we'd long had a different name for the horses, but some things are private.

Bicyclists stopped by to take group selfies, posing in Lycra. The van from Sunrise Senior Living and kids from the nearby preschool visited on regular rotations. More horses appeared — big and little, plush, wooden, plastic, metal, antique, tacky or lovely, sometimes both at once. Once in a while, a twin — a Radio Flyer or Wonder Horse — was reunited with its double.


sandy_hill_photography
476 followers

What draws people to the horses? It has partly, I think, to do with how they hold opposites: childhood joy, an analog world without motors and beeps, but also aging. They are spirited and jaunty. Tired, done-in, breaking down. They are public and private, endlessly various but full of echoes in their forms. To some people, they're pleasingly creepy. To others, they're whimsical. Somehow, they shapeshift to meet their visitors' desires. They evoke time's relentless march forward but also its kind cycles, the field turning from green to gold to white to mud to green. A few years ago, my artist friend Gina Kamentsky spent countless hours on her belly in the grass making a haunting time-lapse short film, "Pony Henge," where you can see the horses' rusty springs and bolts in motion as they disassemble and reassemble in the field.

Some of my favorite Ponyhenge residents: the vintage wooden duck we let stay until it disintegrated because it had a baby seat and comical charm and was (we were pretty sure) a duck that identified as a horse. The giant wooden horse named Toby, made by a young couple from Allston who showed up to read Toby's life story aloud and built a box into his saddle where people could (and do) leave notes with jokes, prayers, and memories. The Kentucky Derby set-up, horses decked with hats, ties, and ribbons printed with "First Place, Field of Lost Ponies." Valentine's Day garlands. An equine tea party, tiny porcelain teacups full of grass. One day, we found a small live Christmas tree in a pot

with the price tag — $65 (pricey!) — still on. We planted the tree, bought solar string lights, and attached ornaments from the swap.

jkulis
Ponyhenge, Lincoln, MA

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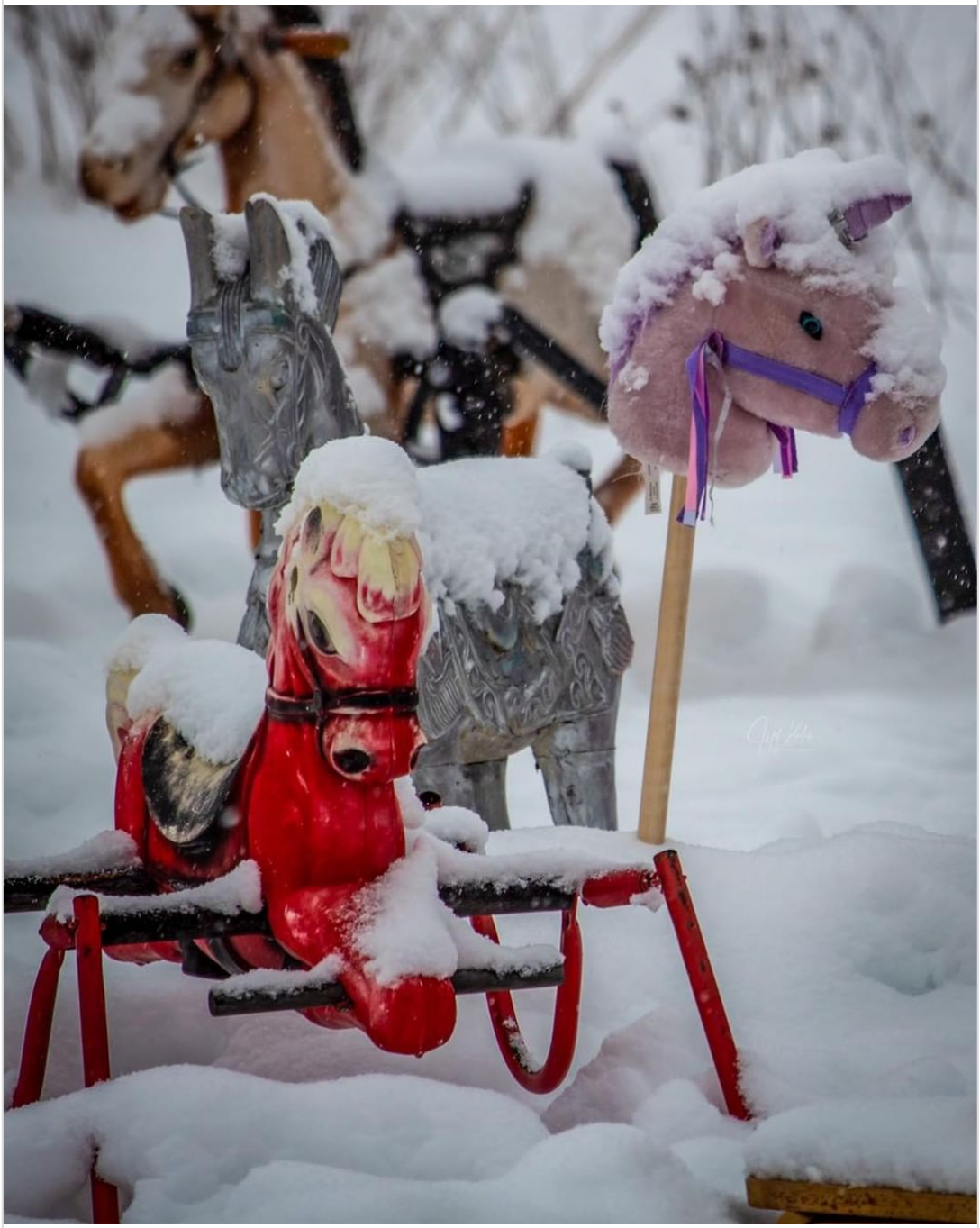

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I don’t know how this place keeps getting creepier each visit. But it does.

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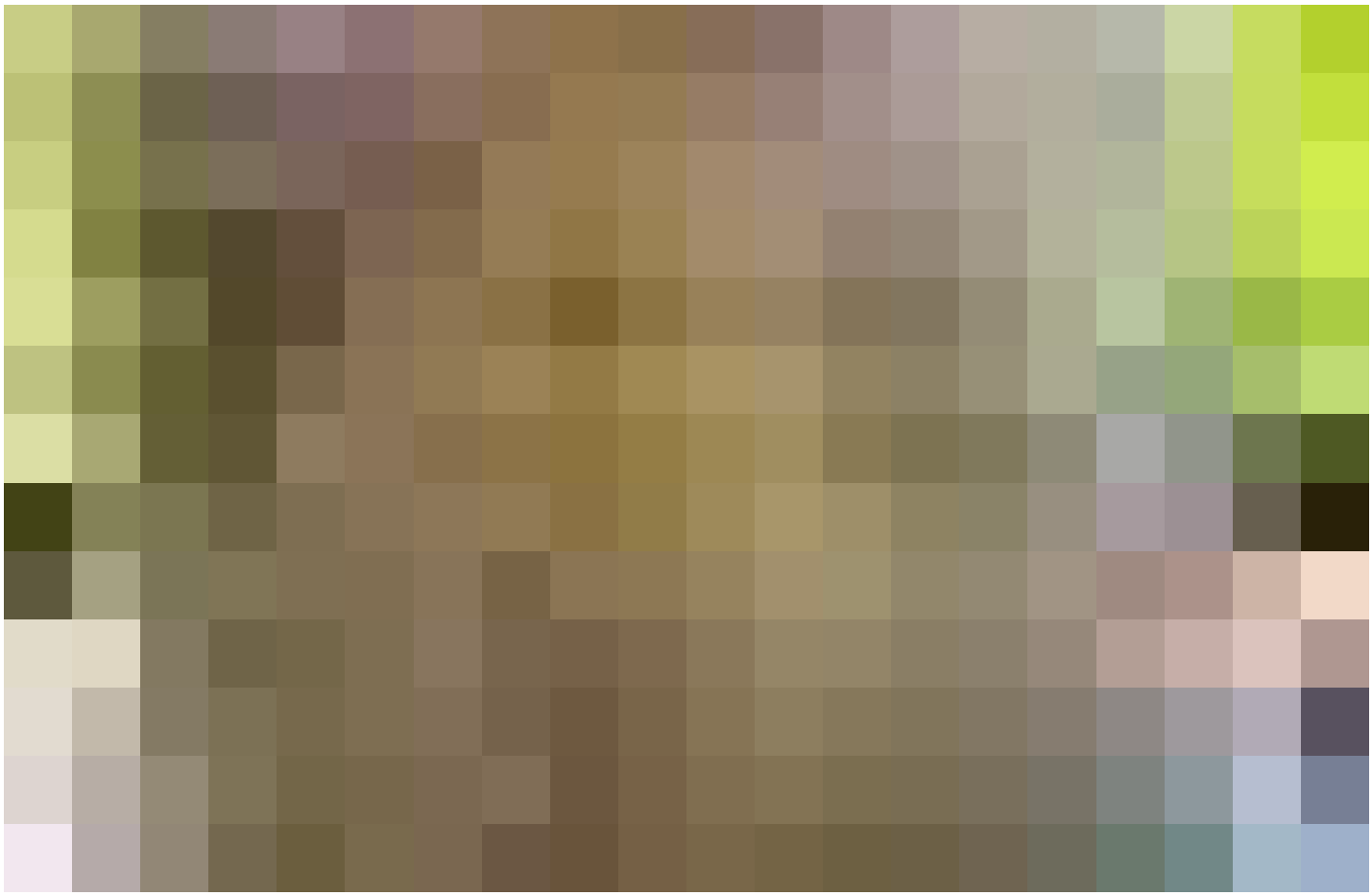
In November 2020, a Trump sign appeared next to the "Bucking for Biden" sign we'd made. I called the cops: "Somebody left a Trump sign on my property!" The officer sighed. "Ma'am, no one knows it's your field." Some of the Instagram photos aren't so family friendly (is there such a thing as cowgirl porn?), but others are lovely — the horses in a blizzard or captured by a drone from above, a wide, loping circle in the grass. Close-ups of hoofs and long, horsey faces, each one slightly different, even the twins', and carrying a silent history. Some ponies are memorials, the deceased's birth and death date written in Sharpie on a flank. This doesn't thrill us — it brings down the mood — but we're only the caretakers. Not in my graveyard.

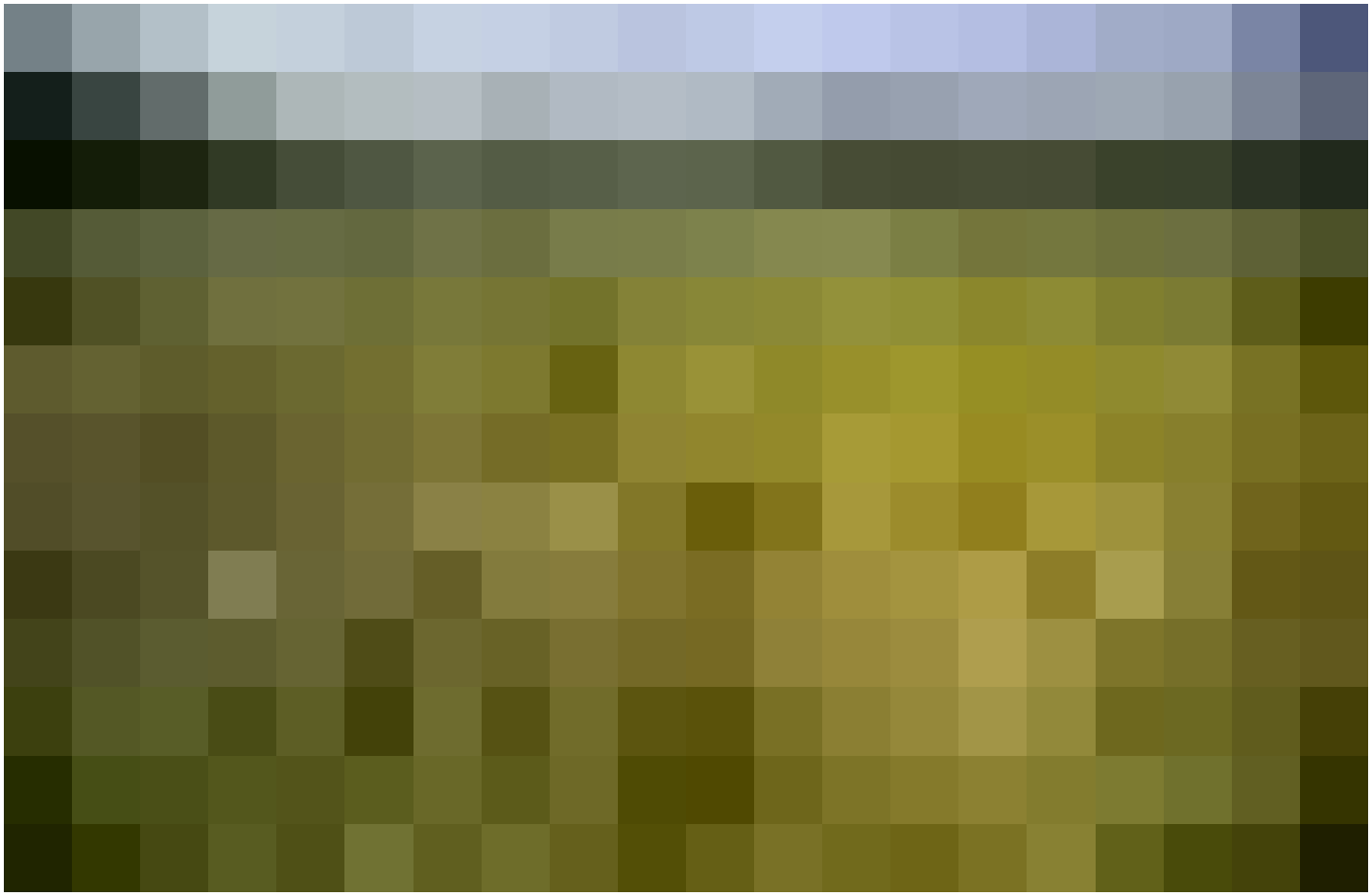


A horse with a personal marking on it, 2015. LANE TURNER

A few instructions if you come to visit the ponies. 1) Don't park on the grass or in the driveway. 2) Take a horse home, or three, or five. They're free. 3) Promise not to sue us if your kid catches a finger in a rusty spring or gets stung by a wasp that built a nest in the cavity of a broken horse (we can't always keep up). 4) If you leave a horse, don't be upset if you return to find it gone. Maybe somebody adopted it.

Our daughters, 20 and 22 now, no longer live at home. Over the years, a few horses have moved into our house — an antique wooden one with a real horsehair mane that was getting wrecked by the weather; an aluminum one from a carousel, its chipped coat a pentimento of its past. The very first horse, the one our girls rode, lives safely hidden away now, tucked further back on our land. I dragged it there one day after I realized that it would break my heart to go out to the field and find that it had disappeared.

Elizabeth Graver's new novel, "Kantika," was inspired by the migration story of her Turkish Sephardic grandmother. She teaches at Boston College.



LANE TURNER