

ASSATEAGUE WILD
(Equus caballus, feral)

The moon quivers in shallow backwater,
wrinkled and shimmering like tie-dyed silk
by the crossing of a brindled mare.
She leaves the loose passel of ponies
with indifferent ears and languid tails,
moves toward a hump of beach carved by wind,
fringed with a mane of sea oats.
She pauses on its crest, poses farthest
from the new white-blazed leader
pounding after his wayward conquests.
He circles them tightly; the brindled mare
stays motionless, apart.
Suddenly his nostrils fill with her.
He swings his ebony head like a pendulum.

Watching from a hummock of salt-marsh grass,
the old deposed stallion backs his wounds
deeper into the night. The victor prances
forward, muscles undulating moonlight,
the flame on his forehead igniting flares
in his eyes. The mare turns away.

The flat surf is almost soundless
with the year's lowest tide. The dunes
ripple with shine and shape. The mare
snorts at a scuttling crab, an oblique shadow.
The stallion hurries to block her retreat.
He nickers, nips at a moon streak on her hip.

Claiming his right to her promises, throwing
his ardent cry to the bright blister in the sky
oozing light, he declares himself best
of his remnant kind— covetous
of their last domain, their only home—
barrier island sand biased with silver.