

On the other side of the paddock

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It's sunny and windy in Helsinki. I walk past intentionally unmaintained swampy patches, small rocky mounts and muddy pathways shadowed by birches. Cyclists buzz by as I settle leaning on a white paddock fence. I've arrived at a herd of horses at the Ruskeasuon stables in central park. I think there are 10 but they keep moving. Some are grooming each other, one is standing higher on a pile of gravel. Most are dozing off upright at a shadowy patch by the gate. They are all police horses and their herd shares the biggest paddock in the park. There are two riding schools and private horses at the premises too. All together there are 120 horses but they are never seen at once. The riding school horses share paddocks too but privately-owned horses are treated differently. Some private horses, the most valuable ones, can live their entire life partially isolated from others.



Horses are kept isolated because they engage in dramatic and physical negotiations, to solve their herd structures and arrange social relations. They can kick each other to resolve who has the right to eat first. They seldom damage each other seriously when resolving conflicts but a bruise or a bite might spoil their looks and a misjudged kick would take time to heal—which would mean they could not be used as intended. Despite the risks, the police horses share a paddock. This is because they are expected to sort out their differences and to establish a working order before they are called to duty. Herd members form deep bonds and some take on the responsibility of easing tensions in the group by blocking competing individuals and comforting group members who have provoked others. As a parent, I enjoy seeing an older horse breaking up a rival pair before they get violent. They are good at managing groups.

I've chatted up quite a few stable workers and police officers at the stables over the years. None recall a horse having injured another enough to be put on leave. On a typical day, they are brought to the paddock at the break of dawn and spend their morning socialising before returning to the stables for lunch. After eating they practice riding with police officers or work on their skills in dealing with irritants, such as loud noises, which they face as a part of their duties. They spend their evenings patrolling the city. These horses are bred for work and can easily serve for over 10 years. Their genes carry traits for a temperament type defined as "cold-blooded", which means they don't flinch easily. Their existence is a result of coevolution which changed the trajectory of both our kin. All horses come to us from a strain of animals which we met 6000 years ago. Their genes carry receipts of this exchange.

Harner, Edi, Ali, Luigi (their official name is *Luigine* and they have worked for the police since 2007), *Kalle*, *Eske* (officially *Ex Boy* born 2005), *Poke*, *Kassu*, *Laku* (translates as liquorice) and *Aissa* (born *Vuorelan Ice Velvet*). *Aissa* is a crowd favourite. They have a long dark mane, and using the sukuposti.net horse pedigree database, their family lineage can be traced back to the late 1800s in the Netherlands. Currently, most of the police horses in Helsinki arrive from Estonia and Latvia.

Citizens are most familiar with these horse through their role mediating public relations for the police during events. They parade at tourist hot spots and pose next to notable landmarks and institutions. On patrols, police officers hand out trading cards that tell the animals breed, a humorous description of their character and a close-up photo. It was explained to me that police horses are required to look pristine and be big enough. The horses have a role to play and they are expected to make their riders look good; the work of a contemporary horse is to make people look good. The height also affords the riders a vantage point from where the officers can monitor crowds, they see people and people see them. Their presence asserts control over public space, a sense that someone is in control. They are respected, feared even—big animals are scary.

Once when cycling home from KisaHalli, a pair of mounted officers stopped a bunch of us driving without bicycle headlights. I think *Poke* was one of the horses in the team. A cyclist in our group panicked and expected to be disciplined, they began protesting their treatment loudly. The horses stared us down calmly as the police handed out gift headlights from their saddlebags. It was a multi-species emotional labour arrangement, fuelled by the officer's belief that using horses to convince humans, that becoming more visible on the streets, is an effective measure for public safety. It felt absurd to see horses as public servants and I felt patronised by their gaze. As if the animals cared for my health. I can imagine that the police, who are used to seeing citizens injuring themselves in easily preventable crashes and even to die in vain, had an interest to keep us safe. But being stopped as a warning and offered gifts as a disciplinary gesture felt condescending. The headlights had police emblems and we all grinned stupidly when thanking the officers. I bowed when receiving mine. We were allowed to continue after mounting the lights. The event triggered something and the person who got provoked kept shaking in their anger as we continued on our way. We rode together for a block sharing a moment of mobile solidarity. Events like this got me interested in police horses.



As there are only ten police horses in service in Helsinki city, a horse is a rare sight. Contemporary citizens are not accustomed to their presence and some insist that horses don't belong here. They are wrong. The horses constitute the city and any effort to imagine a future depends on our relationship with them. The combustion engine paved the way for the current post-equine period but horses have overcome the change. A contemporary city horse typically works in a riding school and their profession is centred on emotional labour: they are tasked with providing a demanding horse-hobbyist community with an experience of what horses are like. Horses are professionals in providing their clients with relief from their work identities, they comfort us in times when **COVID** restrictions have impacted our physical interactions and perform passing moments of companionship. As a socially skilled species horses are well equipped to handle the emotional labour they are assigned.

The police deploy horses as negotiators. They are tasked to relieve tensions that arise in crowd control events such as rallies and when football hooligans are about. I've been told numerous times by the police in Helsinki that when mounted units engage with the public to control crowds, the encounters are less violent than when ground troops are deployed. People approach them as something other than a police unit. An officer confessed to me that before joining the mounted forces, every time they got out of their patrol car, they were met with reservations and sometimes outright hostile stares. But when on a horse, for the first time in their career as public servants, they felt that people were happy to see them. The public wants to be in the presence of mounted officers, and they want to be seen with horses. Horses interface. On patrols, casual exchanges with the public provide the police with a vibe for the area they patrol and people are more likely to give information about disturbances. Approaching a horse offers a discreet line of communication.

Currently, in Helsinki, citizens are most likely to spot the horses' presence in our habitat from the dung police horses leave on the pavement. Practically all the dung found on the streets arrives from them. Have a close look next time you spot a pile. The police, or any other possible riders, are not obligated to clean them up. This is because the dung consists of digested hay and it dries fast. It is picked by the wind or washed away with rain and it does not leave a trace. Their shit is clean—I don't know if it counts as a **vegan product**. Elderly citizens collect it as fertilizer, and there is no shame in this. You'll need to mix it with soil and allow it to settle for a while before you use it. It is very potent! Try it on your plants; imagine the aura they will manifest! But be careful. Horse dung also has surprises in it. Every poop is an emerging ecology: they are filled with seeds from the plants horses eat. Poop is part of the process through which the animal terraforms the planet.

An old friend, Sande, has a story about vesakkomummo. Relatives didn't want to go for walks with them because as they were walking, they kept pulling encroaching bushes and kicking down saplings along their path. Because of this, they ended up being late for appointments and family affairs. Years after they passed

away, the paths they had used and strayed along became inaccessible. In their absence, the trees and bushes grew wild and took over. This revealed that their activity of cutting down emerging trees and kicking down plants was necessary to keep the routes and pathways around the settlement accessible. Without their constant work to keep the paths open the forest took over.

Vesakkomummo shared trades with horses, who eat bushes, saplings and keep the emerging plant life of their habitat from taking over the landscape. Horses and humans desire to keep certain paths open and our cohabitation affords particular futures. Our desires are intertwined, and in fact, we don't know what our environment would look like without them. They are ingrained in the notion of a city. Early 1900 Paris had a horse for every 25 humans. They were here when Helsinki was built, laying the soil and moving the rocks which current infrastructure rests on. If we'd use 1900 Paris as a model, it would mean that my current apartment building would have six horses to attend to. A common description is that a horse accounts for the labour efforts of ten humans. The police safeguard this belief and argue that when working in crowd control a mounted unit is equivalent to ten ground troops.



The mounted police force has operated in the city longer than the Finnish state has existed. They have patrolled continuously from 1882 onwards. A horse can have a longer career in the mounted forces than a human. They can serve in the unit for their entire working life, while humans might only commit for a couple of years before moving on. This means that in some instances, the horses are more experienced in performing the duties of the mounted forces than the officers that mount them. I was told that a now-retired horse *Palaad* (whose pedigree can be traced to 1776 Russia, where their ancestor *Gnetalka* was bought from the nobility of the Ottoman Empire) would react to disturbances before the officer riding them. The horse read the intentions of a crowd better than humans.

It was suggested that daily patrols had established *Palaad* with a territorial awareness, and when they spotted abnormalities, they were motivated to investigate the disruption and even to counteract

aggressive behaviour. Perhaps ~~Palaad~~ approaches citizens as a herd whose interactions they deem themselves fit to manage. They are really good at managing groups.

Officers apply to the mounted unit for different reasons. Some are burdened by their prior service and see it as an opportunity to renew their relationship to policing. I ^{know} imagine it is emotionally exhausting and sharing the workload with a horse makes sense. The horses comfort officers whose faith in humanity is being tested daily. For a few the work is a lifelong dream and they have stayed with the unit past their designated pension date. An officer I've talked to has ridden in the city for over 40 years, so I trust what they tell me of the horses understanding of their habitat. They tell me the horses enjoy it here. The process of indoctrinating new horse candidates to the force is an interesting ritual. The fresh arrival is accompanied by two older horses on a patrol. They head to a busy street corner by the opera house, where they stay to observe the movement of the city. The spot is great for learning to deal with the trams. The tremors of the wheels through the pavement, the squeaks and colourful tram carriages gliding in all directions is a definite cause of tension for horses that have not visited the city centre. The young horse looks to the elders for guidance and as they do, the old horses take a deep calm breath, indicating that there is nothing to worry. This is the way old horses teach the young how to work in the city.

Generations of horses have stood in the same corner, observing the arrival of trams, bicycles, automobiles and electric scooters. The police horse community has maintained their culture for nearly 140 years, adjusting to the feel of this habitat. The city corresponds with this particular community of animals. Its soundscape ~~is the techno~~ is the techno they listen to. The horses afford the officers a particular kind of city and very possibly different dreams for its future. In 2017, I had the opportunity to follow a few training sessions closely and to accompany the police on their patrols. I observed training sessions that simulated methods that protesters might use to disturb the mounted officers. These included loud noises and unexpected, erratic movements. An officer leading the session called the troops to organise in different formations while shooting

blanks at random. This afforded the horses and riders the experience to operate as a unit while under stress. The leading officer fired training mace so that the animals would grow a tolerance to its odour. After an hour-long session, the trainer touched the animals with an enormous flag while feeding them treats. The obscure shape and unpredictable movements of the flag were meant to cause stress. The stress was counterbalanced by the officer's calm gestures, softly spoken words of encouragement and trust asserting presence. They fed each horse in a row and the event felt like a ceremony.

The most astonishing session I attended was a tactical crowd control rehearsal conducted in partnership with a group of 50 young conscripts of the Finnish Defence Force at the Santahamina barracks. The horses and the police were fitted with armour. The conscripts were tasked to act as a group of protestors and to perform a public protest. I bet acting as a dissident was a welcomed change from barrack life and the young conscripts definitely took it as an opportunity to let off steam. I followed them closely with my camera and through the viewfinder, the event manifested as an insurrection. Kids in army uniforms went over the top to unnerve the police. They were supplied with an assortment of disruptive props like plastic bags filled with cans to rattle, kettles & pans, blank banderols and flags which didn't signify any organisation, whistles and drums. They were commanded to chant protest cries, occasionally aided by senior police staff who participated in the confrontations yielding foam batons and shields. Knights in plastic gear.



They went through a variety of scenarios over the course of the day. The police stood next to a marching crowd to simulate a passing protest, and they rode around the group to contain them. Smoke bombs were released while the police drove around with lights blinking and screaming sirens. The kids shouted abstract protest chants and it was a beautiful mess. Everyone was excited by the training mace. Eventually the police ordered the conscripts

to form a tight gang and to hold their ground. The kids kept shouting, locked their arms together and some pretended to be drunk to explain their **berserk** behaviour. Then a trainer commanded the mounted forces to assemble themselves into a horse-human-diamond. Without making a sound, the troops organised into a **salmiakikuvio**, an airtight wedge with four equal straight sides. The horses and mounted officers merged into a singular unit which split the protestors' gang with ease. The kids were overwhelmed and went silent as it occurred. It was frightening to see that the animals knew the formation and understood how it would perform against the crowd. I could see their confidence grow with the officers. For a while it seemed the diamond could cut through anything.

At the end of the session, the police handed out tennis balls to the protesters. I remember a trainer shouting that the balls should be thrown **FOR REAL** but the kids were hesitant. Most threw their ball intentionally over the mounted troops or rolled them by the ground. The young conscripts didn't want to hurt the animals.

I'm now standing indoors by the police horse pens. Their stable is a modern facility initially built for the Helsinki Olympics. It's hard to imagine that these animals, which I'm hearing munching hay in their pens, are capable of assembling into a billion-carat diamond together with their human colleagues. They are chewing loudly, while officers are cleaning their gear and gossiping. Their voices are mixed with the choir of bird chatter. The choir has built their nests in the stable ceiling structures. Birds like horses because of the insects their dung attracts. Later today the first team of the horses will be sent to a meadow in the suburbs. The remaining gang will join them soon after and they'll spend their annual leave eating fresh hay outdoors.

Their paddock will be empty for the rest of the summer. To consult them, regarding how to develop the city, I'll have to return to the stables in autumn. For now, I have to leave them and return home bearing unresolved questions. While walking, I take comfort in the memory of a conscript being openly hesitant to throw a ball against a horse.

