

I have portrayed the caisson horses of Arlington National Cemetery in the United States. This is the national burial ground where U.S. service members are interred, located outside the country's capital city of Washington DC.

These animals, housed at Fort Myer, Virginia, are among the few left to perform a duty for mankind that dates back centuries. No longer used in warfare as such, they now have the sole and exclusive privilege of accompanying soldiers to their final resting place.

My photography often focuses on animals that work, and whose function and appearance in our daily life continually diminishes with time's passing. Practically speaking, these animals are deemed no longer necessary, but they are of such importance on other levels that – by their disappearance – we miss out on the reflection they offer us, that allows us to process much that happens around us.

The horse, as used in warfare, has always been a tragic figure. So many have lost their lives on battlefields worldwide in recent history: in the U.S. during the Civil War, and in Western Europe and other countries during World War I especially.

Russian author Isaak Babel wrote of his experiences as a journalist on horseback during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920. However painful to read, filled with violent anecdotes, his descriptions of the horses he was assigned to ride on – despite his lack of prior experience – show great respect and empathy for these animals that had no voice in their ordeal of being at war. They comforted the soldiers they carried, and there was often an affectionate relationship between rider and horse during these dire circumstances.

I am drawn to this part of the relationship that can exist between man and animal, when one must rely on the other in order to survive, and to thrive. This matter of our connection to other living creatures is still of crucial importance for our existence, as they are our witnesses. Trying to find situations where this bond still occurs has led me, in the beginning of my career as a photographer, to portray police horses in Rotterdam and New York City, and army horses in Rome.

I continue to find myself, time and again, facing the same subjects in a different context and location. In that sense, I try both to convey the situation as it is today with the animals' gradual disappearance and changing role in society; and what they stand for as a metaphor so embedded in our history.

I photographed these horses when their working day was done, as they were falling asleep in front of my eyes and camera. I believe there is something more to these portraits than in my earlier images of horses. They not only convey their vulnerability at rest, but also reflect a falling, the losing of consciousness. As I spent time with them I felt this was maybe one of the most intimate and private moments to witness: the gap between wakefulness and slumber, a space for dreaming and reverie.

Charlotte Dumas September 2012