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Constellations and the sound of hooves
Constellations et le bruit des sabots

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Constellations and the sound of hooves

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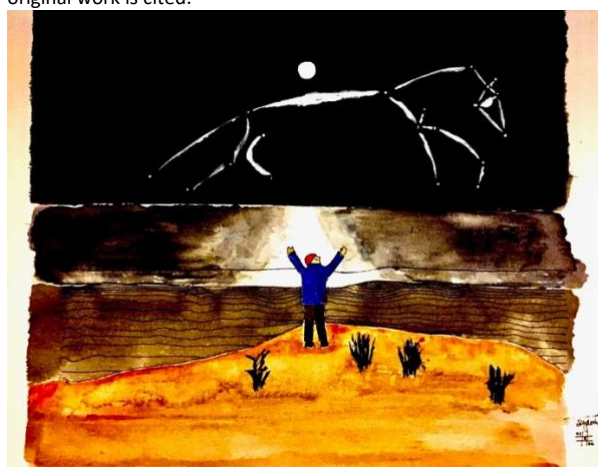
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Ekphrasis in a fifty-five word story

hear the sound of hooves?

it's likely not a dazzle of zebras

see poop?

it's not rocking-horse manure

you have to learn a lot

to take a decent history

then the problem is kidding yourself

seeing pictures in the stars

it is a measure of

man's intelligence

that he discerns patterns

where there are none

Commentary

In Harari's book, *Sapiens*,¹ man's 'rise' is charted through four ages: (i) the cognitive revolution, (ii) the agricultural revolution, (iii) the unification of humankind, and (iv) the scientific revolution. The basis for this progress is human intellect—related to superior pattern recognition ability,² its imputation of cause and effect, and associated predictive capacity. Moving from the general to the specific, this capability is the basis for scientific and medical practice: the keystone for history, examination, diagnosis, prognosis and management.

In this picture, the child-like human figure in the dunes contemplates his place in the world, and beyond: the cosmos. There are patterns in the sand, the sea, and the sky. We experience these on an aesthetic level³: '*Nature's patterns and the mathematics that explain them have a deep appeal to our aesthetic sense ("beauty").*' Humankind has reached far; some would argue too far, for the constellations are subjective: why should there be a horse in the sky? The companion text for this picture is: "*it is testament to Man's intelligence that he discerns patterns, even where there are none.*"

Pattern recognition is part of our talent for conjecturing hypotheses (and designing experiments to refute them). However, we are prone to a multiplicity of biases,⁴ seeing patterns where there are none and making wrong inferences about cause and effect (for instance confusing correlation and causation). This 'ability' then, when applied erroneously, is the basis of prejudice and superstition.

Media

Ink and acrylic on canvas, JS Huntley, 2020

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