

Land Intimacy: Layers of Knowing and Listening on a Cattle Ranch
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With each step on the storm sodden pastures of Spring, I can feel the Earth feel me. Spring on the ranch is steeped in becoming; the first calves have been born, the mothers have sequestered themselves and their young into the pockets and folds of the land to tend to what is new. We work tirelessly to keep up with the Earth's budding energy; cutting grass, following creeks to their mouths with our arms full of willow cuttings. Wading amongst newts, frogs, and pond turtles in the rush of the water, I laugh to myself at the thought of restoring a creek; sun seeping into my winter skin, mugwort emerging from rock cracks and the trickling sound of water scouring the last season from my ears. Who's restoring who here? The soft soil squelches under my weight; the muscles in my legs tear and repair themselves as I contour the hills of Hicks Mountain. With each step I, ever so slightly, change the shape of this landscape and, in turn, this landscape shapes my body. We are 'of' each other, this mountain and I. And it's not just us bound together by this intrinsic agreement.

As I scale up the slope, I am careful to step in the imprints left behind by the cattle, partly in a small attempt to mitigate my impact on soil compaction, but mostly for the intimacy. Who else has walked this same Earth? What was it all, before it was this? The land has stories to tell, and there are infinite ways to listen.

Earlier this week, Alex told me that there is a valley in the far back part of the ranch, whose arbitrary property lines encompass 1600 acres, that to his knowledge hasn't been explored yet. "It's just too hard to get to, there are no roads there yet. Once, Max tried to fly a drone back there to get some photos, but it crashed and he never recovered it."

There is a covenant here between cattle and coyote. There are lines where the land folds in on itself, where the vastness is victorious, pastures of the ever unfurling that only the hoofed, winged, wild things see. There are layers of stories, like rolling hills, told in creek and stone, in lichen and moss. We are merely interpreters, listening in our own language.

Taking willow cuttings from a well established creek in the back ranch, I am overwhelmed by a feeling that this massive tree I am carving with my chainsaw was planted here with great intention. I later learn that it was planted from a cutting by a former employee who I have never met, but am now bound to with reverence and responsibility.

I take my cuttings to a creek where the fast flows of Winter water is at risk of eroding the hillside. I am moved by the way that water knows where to run, with no hesitation. I think a lot of it happens this way, with an unspoken ease of knowing. Not that the work of living isn't tiresome and difficult, all creatures know this. But that, if you listen, a way will make itself known. I probe the soil for the softest spot, asking the Willows where they want to grow, asking the creek and the soil's permission. There is resistance, sometimes. A rock, just below the surface, claiming its place in the world and refusing to budge.

I look under my sweat stained hat brim over to the mysterious and untrodden valley, with a deep reverence for the way it has done the same. "Couldn't you get there? Hike in on foot?" My friends demand, when I tell them about it. "Yeah, probably. But I don't think it wants me to." I like knowing that the valley has been there the whole time I've been alive. I like to think that at some point, before the cows, before the Spanish Land Grants, before colonization and the National Park Service, there were people who went to the valley. I like to think that, perhaps, they danced. But mostly, I like that I don't know.

All the ways I know the land - the latin names of the plants, the birds' calls and where they nest, when it will be a lupine year and when it will be a thistle year - feed me. But it's all the ways I don't know that keep me hungry, keep me walking the creek to the mouth with armfulls of willow cuttings, looking up where the grass meets the sky asking, "What was it all before it was this? What will it all be next?"