

LAURA PRITCHETT

## HOOF MAKING CONTACT

*I have come to believe that both my physical life and my spirit are so deeply connected to that particular plot of land, the family ranch, that I might be a stalk of grass myself, rooted in arid and meager soil.*

— Linda Hasselstrom, *Feels Like Far*

The truck barrels down the rutted, snow-packed road that stretches across our ranch, and I'm going too fast but don't care because there's a good song blaring on the radio that has me tapping my fingers and singing off-tune and I'm feeling light-headed and free since I am alone and outside on this February morning. I lean on the horn and, as if in response, the pickup sends me flying up as it jolts through a deep puddle pit, and I honk some more but this time I slow down, agreeably adjusting to the truck's request. In between blasts of noise, I lean my head out the window into the cold air and yell, *Come boss, comebaws, c'mbaawws!* which I do as some sort of joke with myself: the cows don't need to be called, it sounds ridiculous, but everyone does it anyway and here I am, too, mucking up the world with unnecessary words and noise. Exactly the thing I would normally be loathe to do—coming out here with the radio on, horn honking, voice propelled into the quiet world—but today it seems all right to have a little fun because well, what the hell, and also, if I don't, there's a chance I might sink into a quiet sadness where I do not want to go.

The ruddy-red cows are coming as fast as they can, having broken into a lumbering trot at the first sight of the truck. They are hungry, not only because the pastures are covered in snow, but because of the calves inside them. Curled up in the final stages of forming, the babies make the cows' bellies bulge, their stomachs hungry, and the herd looks wonderfully ridiculous coming at me with stomachs swaying to and fro. I urge them on with a *Come on you sweet mamas, come on now.*

I park the truck in the middle of the back pasture, take it out of gear, and climb in the bed of the pickup with the bales I've brought out this morning. I brace my knee against a bale and pull, bending the rectangle of dried grass enough so that I can slip off the orange twine. I throw sheaths of hay down into the snow, leafy green rows on either side of the truck. The twine I wad up into a ball and toss to the side. Some of the bales are moldy, and a fine gray dust flies out at me as the bale separates. I turn my head and push my nose into the flannel of my shirt until most of the cloud has passed and wisped into the air, and when I look up I notice: now the world is quiet. It has settled around me like fog, a stillness quivering with the smallest of intrusions: a killdeer's song, the noise of the river, the cows' hooves crunching snow. It's a different kind of light-headed happiness I feel now, a quieter and truer sort.

After I pull the truck forward a little, I throw out more hay. I do this several times until two lopsided green lines of dried grass cross the white pasture. *Come boss, c'mbaawwws.* This time my voice is only above a whisper and, anyway, most of the cows are already here, pushing each other aside and scrambling for the food, closing in on each other to block out the few stragglers coming up from behind. The cows are earnest in their eating, but some of the younger ones are playful, kicking at each other good-naturedly, pushing heads, snorting and shaking their noses, and I scratch one such cow on her head and offer a *Yeah, that's how I feel today, too.*

Though I moved off this small ranch years ago and am here only to feed in my parents' absence, I still recognize many in the herd: Elf Ears, who had her ears stunted by frost as a calf; Big Mama, who always looks pregnant even when she's not; Old Mangy, who looks rough and tired; and a younger one, whom I know only by number, who has a playful, teasing light in her eyes so I decide to call her Happy Day, because something about the pulsing blue sky and snow makes me think that such a day works pretty damn hard at pushing fears and sadnesses away, and that, at some point, the creatures of earth just ought to give in and listen.

At the last stop, I stand in the bed of the truck, jabbing my fingers in the air, counting. Okay, forty-two cows, all there. I hop off the truck and mosey around behind them, looking at their rear ends. Calving season is still weeks away, but I want

to make sure I don't see any signs of labor: full udders and teats, tails to the side, calves dropped into birthing position. Perhaps it is their attitude that tells me the most; they are not yet sullen, quieted by an oncoming birth. Instead, they are rowdy, shuffling and nudging each other, even kicking at each other with their back legs.

All looks well, so I take a moment to look across the ranch toward the first foothill, a rocky ridge spotted with yucca and brush sticking out from the cover of snow. Atop the highest rock sits a blue heron, facing the river. I follow its gaze and see a hawk circling. The horses are bunched together in another pasture, and if I squint I can see the flares of mist escaping their noses. To the east is the white farmhouse and barn, bull pen, corrals, chicken house, sheds—all clustered together around bare cottonwoods. Up on the hill rests the old cemetery where some of the town's early settlers are buried. I turn around and around, like a child's game, except I do it in slow motion. In this way, I can see the hundred acres of valley land below the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. As a child, I believed this to be all mine, but now I know that I ought to start saying good-bye.

As I get in the truck, I see that one of the cows, in nuzzling the leftover hay in the bed of the truck, has pulled an orange loop of twine down. I don't want to leave it there since the string can bunch up in a cow's intestines and wreak havoc. I bend over to pick it up. A crow squawks in the far-off distance, I wish for a cup of coffee, I hope to hold onto this light feeling for a while. Then I feel it: the knowledge of a danger, the presence of an oncoming hoof. I exhale. I don't move—I don't even know which way to move—and then it's there, moving right past my left ear, scraping my skin only lightly.

I laugh—out of surprise, or perhaps because the moment was nothing after all, though it felt like it was. I stand up, take a step back, and look at the cow that has just kicked at me. She is calmly chewing the hay crammed in her mouth and pauses to rub her head against the stomach of another cow.

A fraction of a second, that's all. But this moment will become slowed down in my mind and I will later think of it as the closest I've come to serious danger. The speed and momentum of the hoof and the way it would have cracked against my skull give me pause in a certain very slow, very still way.

Often I will remember this moment as a strange mix of light joy and sudden terror, and how both held on with equal strength in my heart. And often I will think of how lucky I was to just hold still, to pause, to let the danger come near but not catch me after all.

*It's killing us, my mother e-mails her nine children. Something has got to be done with this place. None of you kids love us, or you'd notice that, and I repeat, this place is killing your father and me.*

She describes possibilities for the land's future, interjects her own opinion, tempts us with figures. The family would get two or more million if they sell the place to developers; several million more if they let the place "be graveled" to store water for the city in the huge pits of earth that would be left. They could put a conservation easement on all or part of the place. They could let the kids who want to build small houses on the eastern side, the side already bordering development along Overland Trail, and let the rest remain open space. They could sell it to a rancher or wealthy landowner who would keep the place intact. They could donate it to the university. They could donate it to the Catholic church in repentance for some of the kids' betrayal of their religion.

I stop in for a visit and am warned by my mother: She's putting a *For Sale* sign out along the road tomorrow. She's turning it into a bed-and-breakfast, only no—then there'd be sheets to wash. She's going to give it to some nuns. She's going to give it to the next person who drives in.

*Now, now, says my father.*

*You kids aren't worth a damn anyway, my mother adds.*

*Well, Rose, says my father. That's not fair.*

She bows her head and turns away from us so she can go inside and cry alone. She is *that* tired: of sifting through options, considering taxes, thinking of her children, not getting any help.

They both want to be fair. They want to keep everyone happy. They want to do what's right. And mostly, they want out.

The place *is* a lot of work—constant physical labor and the inside-at-the-desk variety as well. It's a small ranch, to be sure, but it's more than enough for two aging people: cows must be fed, checked, doctored, birthed, weaned. Endless

weeds need to be killed, fields irrigated from May to October, trees watered, fences mended. The garden needs tending and the apple trees pruning. The pump needs to be fixed, several sheds are in disrepair, the cows escape regularly. The peacocks need to be fed, the chickens put in at night, the horses ridden, irrigation pipes monitored in the summer, indoor plumbing kept from freezing in the winter. There are meetings to attend, taxes to pay, books to balance, cattle to sell.

All this for nothing, in the common understanding of things—meaning that, in all the years my parents have owned this ranch, no profit was ever made, and in fact all this effort has been given for a loss of ten to forty thousand dollars a year. The place proved to be a great tax write-off and investment, but created a cash-poor existence, and this fact translated into duct tape patches on kids' shoes and the heat being kept very low and strict limitations on water use and food consumption and other stories of living below the poverty line that we kids share now, as adults, sometimes still with the pang of embarrassment or hurt that such poverty brought, this poverty that became, thankfully, less overbearing as the older ones moved out of the house and the younger ones entered teenage years. This loss of money was forecast by my parents before the place was even purchased and deemed worth it because this land was a place to *belong to* and a place to raise children, a hobby ranch that was so small it could never be economically viable, which didn't matter because, as is often the case, hobbies are also loves. Since my father worked for income elsewhere, as a professor of animal genetics, there was the knowledge that we children could be supported, if humbly, and so this land was chosen as the recipient of all extra monies and efforts. For that reason, some of the kids grew to hate it as it meant sacrifice, and others grew to love it because of that sacrifice. In any case, we grew up riding horses and chasing cattle and fixing fence and bringing newborn calves into our kitchen in the middle of the night. We grew up and left, and what remains are layers and layers of work for two people who no longer can do it all.

So often, my mother calls me: *Dad is out feeding again, working himself to death, and if you love him, you'll get out here and help.*

I love him, I love him! I'll drive out to help, I'll be right

there! But so many chores can be done only by a person who's actually present—if a fence breaks, if irrigation water comes a little early, if cows get out, if a horse founders—for all these things, a person must be physically present to help. And there's no place for my own family—my husband and two young children—to live there. So we live in town, only a few miles away, but far enough that I'm not there to see and respond. I am busy changing diapers, taking classes, making dinner, cleaning dishes, hugging a sick child, doing laundry, tending a garden, editing a story, kissing an infant on her nose, and writing. I want to do all this, and I want to help my parents, and I want to protect the ranch, and so when my mother calls I bow my head and with my palms press the tears back into my eyes.

In the meantime, we kids are presented with options. Some voice opinions loudly because they fear they won't be heard, and others refuse to comment at all because they doubt their opinions matter. *Piss on it*, says Jim. *Nobody ever cared what I thought anyway. I don't know what to do*, says Alan softly. *I'd like to live out here, but it'll never happen*, says Andy. *I just want a teepee*, says Mary. This what-to-do-with-the-ranch conversation reaffirms understood alliances and different perceptions of the past: there is the camp that has had enough of this family, the camp that still coheres strongly, the camp that has no interest or time to care at all.

Of those who speak, most are careful not to be pushy or greedy or demanding—to turn into the circling vultures our mother tells us we'll be. Instead we remain what she also accuses us of: being so warily watchful that inaction is the only result. We mumble things about it being *their* decision, and what do *they* want, and besides, we acknowledge that every option is so complex—taxes and legal agreements and rules and regulations and documents—that after a while, most sink into the it's-too-complicated-you-decide routine. All I know for sure now is that I see a hoof recklessly swinging in the ranch's direction. Whether it makes contact or not remains to be seen.

*Turn it into a golf course*, e-mails my brother Rex from his home in Boston. Luckily, this is one option the other eight of us can discard easily with a bit of eye-rolling. The last thing

this arid-climate landscape needs is another water-needy golf course, and anyway, Rex's ideas always seem a bit suspect. He has been gone for so long, returns so infrequently, and has so little interest in the Western tangent of the family that he, along with another sibling or two, seems barely inside the family circle.

Brother John wants the money. As much as he can get. He's all for graveling the place. He admits that for five or ten years, the land will be wrecked-up and ugly. Bulldozers, semi trucks, deep pits in the earth. *But look*, he says, *the world needs gravel*. And local cities need a place to store water. And in the end, if landscaped correctly, what will remain is an attractive fifty- or seventy-acre lake. With proper care, it could provide great habitat for ducks and wildlife. Certain funds could be set aside to restore it—bushes and trees and natural grasses introduced and tended to. This option could be combined with later family development. Because of the graveling, we'd all have the money to build the log cabins several of us yearn for, or set up teepees as Mary suggests, or to start a vet clinic as Andy desires. John also points out: most of his lame siblings still live near or slightly above poverty. Several million dollars would be a lot. Jim could get help for his autistic son. Alan could get braces for his ten-year-old. Karen could quit her minimum-wage job. Andy could quit ruining his back shoeing horses. *You are all stupider than I thought*, writes John in an e-mail. *If you're going to turn down this money, and p.s., no, I am not being a selfish jerk, I am telling you to watch out for yourselves and your children*. I write back that I don't need any money. He responds by saying I haven't been kicked in the ass enough by life to understand hardship, to understand what giving up this money would mean, and I write back and suggest that it's possible I have, and he responds only by saying I must then be a very slow learner.

Kevin, Andy, Alan, and sometimes I, depending on the day, would all like to build on the place. There are disagreements about lot size. Should everyone have ten acres? Or should we cluster our houses and leave the rest as open space—either run it as a small cattle ranch or something else and manage it together? The county rules on this are complicated; various maps are drawn up, meetings are held with the county com-

missioners, but clear answers are few. And what, really, would be the logistics of this? Can we really live next to each other? Do we really want to? Mom reminds us that none of us could afford to build more than a basement on the place, let alone pay for utility lines and roads. She also keeps reminding us that, in her opinion, the greatest gift a parent can give is freedom: to nudge kids out of the nest and then yank the nest away. *I don't want to leave you anchored*, she says. *That would be the worst thing I could do.*

Well, the anchor is there.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to live there. I do, since there is no other way I could ever get a patch of land outside town and build a log cabin and have a goat and pony and milk cow and a chicken or two, which, plain and simple, is my *dream*, a dream otherwise unattainable because land prices are so high and open spaces so few—especially in a place like this with the aesthetics I call my Soul Place, for lack of a better phrase, meaning that it feels exactly right. For me that includes either the anonymous place in the Arizona desert I passed one time on a car ride years ago when I was struck with the utter *rightness* of that place; or Walden, Colorado, a place that takes my breath away every time I pass through it, which is a number of times per year, or a place much like my family's ranch, with irrigated pasture and beachy paths next to a river. Places that seem right like this are few and my heart cries out for them to an extent even I find to be silly and sappy, but nonetheless I feel the way I feel. So yes, I want to live there.

I ask that the entire place be put into a conservation easement. To leave the place alone, unchanged, forever. I e-mail everyone a little rhapsody about why the land should remain as is, why once it's paved over or dug up, something of its soul will be lost, why its preservation is paramount. Don't they remember walking down the gravel lane with fishing poles in hand? Don't they remember sliding across the snow in a tractor inner tube being pulled by the truck? Don't they remember galloping a horse up the back hill, finding arrowheads, floating down the river, and, yes, fixing fence, collecting eggs, birthing calves? How can they imagine such a place *paved*? Dug up? Trampled, shifted, ruined? Leave it alone. Let's leave it alone. Let's give it the gift of our absence.

I get sympathetic responses from one or two siblings. Some want to see a conservation easement combined with limited development. From three or four, I get e-mails filled with impatience and condescension for continuing to be so naïve and idealistic well into adulthood. Where do I get my high-and-mighty ideology and can I please keep it to myself and, along the way, try to grow up? A conservation easement will reduce the land's value significantly, tie the family's hands, put siblings' futures in jeopardy. I should get some perspective: people have been using this land for centuries—using it to best fit their needs and bound only by their technologies. Besides, the whole area is already “ruined.” Development is so rampant in the area that it's not like this small parcel is going to save the wolf, the mountain lion, the bear (though the latter two are taking up residence on the place right now). What do I envision I'm saving, anyway? This is no paradise; it's a tiny piece of land crowded on all sides by people who need a place to live too. Also, who will manage it? It's simplistic to think it could go back to native grasses. It won't. Weeds will take over the place; without my father's battle to combat thistle and leafy spurge, the grassy fields will be overrun. (*Get sheep?* I suggest, to which no one responds.) Anyway, my parents have discussed such an option with several groups: it's too small to be of interest to the Nature Conservancy and, so far, no other group has offered to manage it. Interested groups want my parents to remain on the place and continue to do the work, and this is something my parents cannot do. The county has offered to buy a partial easement but wants to put a bike trail down the middle, something that my parents strongly object to. The city has offered to buy it as well, but similar problems would ensue. But yes, a conservation easement is something they're considering and I smile, catch my breath, hold still.

For a while, advice and opinions get thrown back and forth across the Web. Someone suggests that we talk through the realities of living next to each other. This prompts us to start talking behind each other's backs, or, as is more often the case, *not* behind each other's backs: One person's house will be surrounded by stuff. Another sibling would never do his share of the work. Some people don't like other people's spouses. There are real differences in ethics. Tangential issues

get brought up: so-and-so's depression, temper, finances, and my—and here I brace myself for an attack on my liberal politics, my I'm-sure-I'm-right attitude. Instead I get a few stings, about, of all things, my good-natured disposition, which I share with my brother Alan and which has infamously set us apart from the rest of the mopey crowd, and which is found to be genuinely offensive to some, who imply that this attitude can only be the result of deficient intellect or childhood amnesia or both. The rampant e-mail squabble goes on for some time.

For the first time in a long time, I seriously consider my family. I realize that half of us don't keep in contact with the others, not even at Christmas or on birthdays—the only exception being the flurry of e-mails about the ranch. *Why?* I wonder. Perhaps there are too many of us, gone off in too many directions, too busy with our own lives. Or maybe it has to do with the fact that several of them left this place in order to leave their past behind. Perhaps it is our personalities. Most are introverts, but some are uncomfortable around other people in the extreme. I realize that only one of nine currently has a job that involves working for someone else. There is an independent stubbornness and a hardness born out of a hard upbringing. There are very deep and sincere bonds, to be sure: John and Jim, Jim and me, me and Alan, Alan and Andy, Mary and Rex—but all nine of us getting along? I was the only one who believed it could happen, and I got enough you've-got-to-be-kidding responses to give up in defeat.

This discussion about what to do with the ranch, prompted as it is by the knowledge of my parents' increasing age and declining health, has started tentative communication where none was before. But soon the e-mails lapse; everyone is too tired of everyone else to think anymore. Another year goes by. My mother sometimes writes us: *This place is killing your father and me.*

Another winter is coming. This past weekend, at the end of October, I am asked to come help round up cattle—the calves need to be weaned and the cows pregnancy-checked. My father drives the pickup ahead of the herd honking and calling, *Come boss, c'mbawws* and most of the cattle follow obedi-

ently. I walk behind the cows, keeping them going in the right direction, chasing back the belligerent few who try to turn around. It seems that all the whips have disappeared, so I swing an old bamboo ski pole about good-naturedly, whacking a cow or calf on the butt only when they turn around to seriously challenge me.

Once we are in the corrals there is the ruckus of separating mother from calf, but after enough dodging-around, hand-waving, and cussing work, we get them in different pens, bawling at each other. Then the cows are run through the chute and I am in charge of filling syringes and keeping the records—the job that has been mine since I was a little girl. Miraculously, all the cows are pregnant, five months, and they'll give birth at the end of February or beginning of March. There is the usual banter about them all going into labor the same night, that bull doing a good job, whether or not number 701 should be sold because she's got bad feet—*Where's the syringe? Will someone get that dog out of here?*—the bad corral system that will never be fixed, the cow shitting on the hand of the man who is reaching inside her to feel her unborn baby.

The calves keep bawling and the cows bellow back, and this noise will continue for the next three days as they are kept separated. The cows' milk needs a chance to dry up so that their energy goes to the making of their new calves instead of nursing their yearlings, and, for once, I don't feel sorry for the calves, because they should have been weaned long ago and their mamas are probably tired from nursing all this time, and, yes, a time comes when a baby needs to be pushed away.

At the end of the day, as we walk out of the corral together, I refrain from turning to my father. I don't want him to see me protesting my separation from him or this land that is so much a part of him that sometimes the two are equated in my mind. I know the look I have in my eyes—I have seen it in my own toddler's eyes and I'm sure it has seeped back into mine—a look that demands, wants, begs. Instead I keep my eyes on the land in front of me.

I now know that the most recent decision is to gravel the place. My father knows I object and that I object strongly. We both know that it is not such a remarkable thing to forgo

money and the relief it can bring. It is not impossible to set aside one dream in order to realize another, but also, as I now understand, it is not impossible to give up in defeat and step back from a decision and a place that is not mine. This past year I have been saying good-bye, and now I am nearly ready.

For this moment at least, I allow myself to entertain dreams, and as my father and I walk to the house, I list to myself the things I want. To protect this ranch, to help my parents, yes. And to stop the ache in my heart that comes from desiring something too badly. Because somewhere, someday, I want to drive out back on a cold winter day and bring hay to hungry cows, sometimes with music and light making me giddy and sometimes keeping myself and the world quiet and still. I want to be a steward of the land, a very good one, and teach my children to do the same. When I take them arrowhead hunting or fishing or cross-country skiing, I want them to understand themselves within the parameters of the natural world, and I want that for myself, too. I want them to know the force of a bond to a beautiful place, even though I know that, as with all new loves, some pain is apt to come flying at them, and will surely make contact.

The best I can do, perhaps, is to hold onto the light joy of a cold morning and hold steady when danger comes and hold still and hold still and *feel* it.