

# Learning from the Land

*Anita Tanner*

LONG AFTER MY FATHER'S KIDNEYS FAILED, I keep in a willow box under my bed the two letters he wrote to me in the thirty years since I left home. Mother did practically all the letter writing and she wrote fairly often, so these two yellowing pieces of paper are rare. I have thumbed and turned, read and re-read as though by handling them I could extract more meaning and memory. I unfold them sometimes at night and admire the small meticulous penmanship. He wrote slowly like he lived and like he worked on his cattle farm in Wyoming. I can't remember ever seeing him in a hurry. He never paid much heed to time except for the seasons rolling in and out. He seemed to resent rushing things, giving whatever he did its own due.

"I wish winter wouldn't be so anxious to come," he wrote. Near the end, when we knew he couldn't keep hanging on indefinitely, I felt the same way, September and October hinting he'd be gone by winter. As it turned out, he didn't last through October. His hope that "a long sunny spell will last and last," now becomes my hope for his memory and his teaching.

I learned attention to detail from him, mostly the detail in nature. He could recognize and name dozens of trees in Wyoming and could distinguish between all sorts of weeds and grasses. After going to college, marrying, and taking an interest in writing, wanting the right word for a poem, I questioned him once about the height of timothy. His answer is folded in the box under my bed, "Not as tall as a tree but taller than alfalfa depending upon the soil where it grows. For horse feed it's unsurpassed, makes horses hard and tough so they do little sweating while working." He commended me for my search for words and the right expression. My ongoing search, much like his for words to church songs he couldn't quite remember, becomes a perpetual reminder of lyrics he made up and laughed about. Reading now, I hear the stir of his breath and his laughter, remember all he was good at.

He was good at reading weather, good at waiting—for the right time to buy and sell, plant and harvest, for the weather to change, for his

handmade wooden horse trailer to be finished and painted deep green.

He was good with color. That subject seemed to be my father's favorite conversation. He loved discussing different hues and shades, and his favorites depended upon the object of the color, whether it be cars, houses, clothing, or horses. He had a particular leaning toward deep green, and he used to emphasize how color could change one's mood. He said warm colors were more inviting. I suppose, since he lived through eighty Wyoming winters, he favored rich, warm hues. Mother took particular pains in picking out his casket. The color must be right. I think he would approve of her choice, a rich deep mahogany. When I first laid eyes on his casket I thought of the color of horses, how he whispered color names I'd never heard of in describing them—raven, liver, onyx, blood. He would be pleased to ride a horse of mahogany for his final journey home.

He was good at loving animals, wild or tame. When mountain deer wandered down into his haystacks almost every winter and sleeked through his barbed wire and slab fences, he'd comment on the pain of their hunger, the beauty of their regal heads and deep eyes. He loved to stand at the kitchen window and count deer in the far fields as if he were a statistician.

I learned a love of horses from my father. He could work with saddle or work horses for hour upon hour while I stood in the harness room, watching him curry their manes and run his hands across their broad backs. All the while he spoke to them, patting their sides. After a day in the hayfield, they'd come in wet, white foam dripping from their bits, oozing from under the leather. When he lifted the harnesses, moisture marked their place like huge ink blots. In those configurations I learned to read the subtleties of Father's silence, watched for signs of his feeling the movement of his jawbone, in the bent slowly forming in his lower back. I still see him after his work team sniffs the earth for a place to lie and roll, bathing in barnyard dust. I know exactly how he looks heading toward home, his step small and slow, his head slightly down, under his hat in his sandy hair a dark, moist band circling.

He held no degrees, only an eighth-grade education. Experience, not books, became his teacher when he took over the family farm at age fourteen. Little wonder that after almost a century of farming he felt pain when the government condemned his land to put a new highway through, sliced it at a long angle, dividing it like a sandwich to be eaten by progress. But he kept farming, doing what he knew, loving what he did, learning from the land.

I remember Father visiting our new home in the southwest corner of Colorado more than ten years ago. He came over the Million Dollar Highway between Silverton and Ouray. I thought he'd never stop talking

about the beauty of that narrow, treacherous road and the vivid fall colors in the thick mountain aspen. I admitted maybe we had come too far west, at the edge of the desert where the vegetation was dwarfed and the climate milder, less spontaneous. His response, almost a correction, was firm in his voice, "You can put down deep roots here. Your heart is large enough for this arid land." I thought of Wallace Stegner, whose facial features always reminded me of my father, commenting about the desert being an acquired taste. It seemed as if my father knew how I would come to feel about this obscure corner in Colorado, how I would soon call it home ground. Living all his life on one farm, he knew about roots, how they twist, descend, and grab hold in almost any soil, like my fingers reaching under the bed for the willow box where I find him.