

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:  
Written in 2005, this essay is about Yale Creek Ranch,  
the late Tim Franklin, and his wife Beth.

## The preservation of apples: A story of Yale Creek Ranch

by Melissa Matthewson

We are between the old and new. One season unfolds into gold and orange as the other rolls back into the soil. We do not play in water. We bring sweaters from the closet with dark morning chill and cold on our cheeks. The air smells of smoke and wood and damp leaves. The harvest comes. We toss pumpkins into pick-ups and shake sunflowers of their seeds. In our pastures, the great blue herons have come to stay, if only for a moment. They lay grace on the ground and move slowly over the hay, where wings go *whoosh whoosh whoosh* and then take off over oak and ponderosa as our dogs chase them on. Here, on the threshold of fall, geese fly low in heavy flocks finding homes in the grasslands of our southern range. The songbirds collect their seed and nut in our trees, building homes from leaf and branch. We find bear scat everywhere and watch our wild apples and manzanita dissolve into earth. At the sweet end of summer, with each day's decreasing light, there is movement. And as everything fades into fall, what remains are the smells of farm—the mixing of sweet and bitter, dung and manure, fresh grass, old wood and hay, wild mint, chicory and cold water rolling over rocks.

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I drove into the Little Applegate on a wet morning with Beth, who lives on Yale Creek Ranch with her husband, Tim, and their two children. They raise Angus cattle, Suffolk sheep and chickens as well as vegetable and flower seed. But they are not your ordinary farmers. Their land folds with pockets of lush grass and old oaks. The creek runs clear between slopes of willow and hazel. There are birds and bear and fox and flowers without a single, noticeable boundary between farm and wild. It is a healthy place. And Tim is the sort of farmer whose herd comes when he calls; just one solid whistle and the cattle push through the gates to fresh pasture.

As we drive along the three-mile stretch of windy road, a canyon that goes from mountains to narrow hills to pastures and barns in the bottoms, Beth points out her neighbors. "That's old Campbell's place on Grouse Creek." And, "Those folk, they are traditional farmers, mostly Angus." And, "Those folks there, they are famous artists." We drive along the country road and I am amazed as she describes the valley, the neighbors, the hills, the grasses, the animals. In her own language, with her own eyes and patient smile, she tells me of her experience, her own intimate knowing of place and ranch. She reminds me of an old woman I used to know in a distant valley of poppies and mariposas. Strong, resolute, cultivated and lean, Beth is a mother with a genuine understanding of her neighborhood hills and pasture. We reach Yale Creek, where she points out a low green pasture. Old mailboxes on posts line its east side. "Mailbox Field is what we call it."

We walk the farm where we find black Aztec heritage corn, Hokkaido winter squash, flax, statice, zinnia, strawflower, and Sweet William. Lichen grows on the fence in tiny masses, blending green and brown against a backdrop of tall flowers and sprawling squash. The flowers tip their heads to the ground, dying,

growing seed, stalks heavy with chaff and pit. Something tells me that Beth and Tim preserve more in this place than just fields of heirloom seed and fruit. Theirs is an old life come alive in a new time, interwoven into the layers of rolling hill and ranch. They are tied to the land and its preservation curls tightly into their hardened hands.

We pass the shed—once the old schoolhouse—and over a wood bridge, across the water to the cows and blackberry. I smell pasture, compost, manure, leaf litter, aging trees, honeysuckle and wet grass. I smell all these things as they come together in one earthy mixture of farm and wood. We make our way up behind the farm into dry native grasses and sage where we find an old watercourse that runs ephemerally down into Yale Creek. It is September, and the creek is dry with grass and stone. As I kick rocks and pick up smooth madrone, we follow a trail where we find old man's beard trailing onto the branches of an oak. I think they must find hope in this place, a middle ground where farm meets forest, heaven meets earth, family meets peace in the shadow of an oak hillside.

Later, I am alone in a wet pasture beneath tall cottonwoods, white oak, willow and pine. Dragonflies zip above and around with chickadees and barn swallows resting in the trees. The sun burns my ears as the Suffolk quietly munch grass. They have black heads and pointy ears with narrow eyes and snout. They rip at the grass with jerks and pulls, a rhythm of *pull, rip, munch, glance, pull, rip, munch, glance*. One watches me closely, probably wondering if I pose a threat to the herd. They are growing big and round, gaining muscle and fat for fall slaughter. These sheep remind me of older times. Another piece of the past preserved at Yale Creek Ranch. Another piece of Yale Creek sealed for the future and cherished in the present.

There was a time not too long ago when I lived in Montana where I felt like every piece of land and home was preserved for a reason, either to remember the past or to hold steady for the future. For instance, one winter I got stuck in a cattle drive near the township of Wisdom, Montana. Men on cowponies drove the herd over our two-lane road covered in Angus muscle and sweat, the cattle's highway to winter range. There was the crisp thud of hoof on pavement, the low *moo* of livestock and an occasional "Haw! Haw!" from the lead. A woman followed behind with her bundled baby on the saddle, a pink face poised against the thirty-degree wind. Tough and weathered, the woman and baby drew close, calm behind the herd like a dream. I wanted to ride with them toward the Anaconda-Pintlers across the great plains of Montana and never look back. With them, I wanted to rinse my hands in the Big Hole River and kick my boots against the chutes and fences of the grazing pasture. I wanted to hold onto them forever, reins and sweat and grit and all. I wanted to preserve their fortitude, their fragility. I wanted to preserve their extinction.

Like the cowboys and the cattle and the tough Montana women, Beth and Tim wake every morning in order to preserve a place that shudders with intersecting beauties—the spring return of the yellow breasted chat, the collection of eggs from coop and barn, the run of steelhead up the river, the drying of flower seed on racks, the birth of calf and chick, and the scraping of metal in the old wood forge. This preservation of intersecting beauties, of farm and nature, gives me hope in an increasingly fragile world.

At the end of my day at Yale Creek Ranch, I walk one of the pastures as evening sets in. I climb a low grassy hill and follow the fence line along the lower paddock. In my hands, I play with a stick of oak and fumble to peel the usnea from the wood, then stick the lichen into my book to carry home. The sun begins its downward pull below the mountains. There is the sound of Yale Creek. There are dead oaks on the rise, a dying line of white branch and wood. I see fescue and wild blackberry. There is star thistle too. The cattle are quiet. Swallows dance above the grass. Though the station wagon waits for me back at the house, I want to climb to the top of the oldest oak on the highest ridge and watch, in my tree, as this land cycles and turns and lives and dies. Three bluebirds line themselves onto the nearby fence posts, their bright blue feathers and gray

bellies in quiet formation. They stay with me only for a moment before taking wing, mewling softly, gone over the highest pine.

I move to my knees next to a pile of dung, the swallows still in dance, up and down and sideways when suddenly, all the birds of the farm come together in one spontaneous union of flight and song. Back come the bluebirds, along with the woodpeckers, swallows, blackbirds and chickadees, every one congregating along the ridge into the old oaks tipped by wind. Here, it is all twilight and gold sky.

It is then that I hear the crickets chime in from the creek.

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Weeks have passed since my visit to Yale Creek. I pick apples straight from my trees, the branches laden with green, crisp fruit. I shave the skin from the apples and cut them into pots to make butter. As I stir the thick juice over high heat, stealing scoops every so often to taste the syrup, I think about the preservation of apples. I am surrounded by heaps of fruit spilling from baskets, and instead of enjoying each crisp bite, I am frantically pulling out canning jars in the hasty need to preserve the fruit in glass. I wonder why I do this with such urgency and action. Partly, I know it is because I want to keep their sweet taste with me all winter, but also because it offers me comfort, safety and hope that no matter what happens, no matter if the sky falls or the ocean collapses or the moon cascades down over trees and ground, I will have apples—thick, sweet, sugary apples. And so I continue to stir and spoon, preserving the fruit for winter, just as Beth and Tim preserve the ranch at Yale Creek for the continual and inevitable rolling out of seasons, for the pure and simple beauty of its wide earth and rustic substance.

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