



The Slaughterhouse

Bethany Maile

When I arrive back in Idaho on a Saturday morning, my father, the only lawyer at his one-lawyer practice, a man who taught me to shoot a gun and ride a horse, picks me up from the airport and we head downtown—him to his office, me to the scatter of just-built strip malls that have, in the last decade, made Eagle something of a yuppy mecca in the Treasure Valley.

The retail-hungry come for Thai brunch or sales at fashion boutiques, where Italian denim and handbags are priced like used cars. They come to picnic in the gazebo. They come to set fidgety kids loose in water-fountained jungle gyms. They come to pinch tomatoes at the farmer's market, where produce was trucked in from Fruitland or Kuna or some other town 40 minutes away where people still garden. I order a latte and sit in the town square. I'm back from grad school in Tucson, back from warm evenings and late night discussions of narrative theory. Unaccustomed to the 40-degree temps, I cup my drink to my chest and part of me feels like an outsider.

Beyond the parking lot, the Boise River rolls behind the cottonwoods. The river used to be important; it meant cattle ranchers could drive their herds to drink. Even into the 1980s, when I was a kid riding my bike downtown, buying bubble gum and jerky sticks, Eagle was little more than foothills, ranches, and a river shore. At

this very intersection there was a barbershop that shared its backroom with the local library. A mercantile next to that. A gas station. A five and dime. And on the bank of the river, the Boise Valley Packing Plant. Stencils of horned Herefords on the cinderblock storefront. Slump-backed horses penned by the shore, muzzling dust and waiting their turn. Trapped in an idling school bus, I'd watch the old mares. Russ Vogel, who lived down the lane and had 87 cats[1] and a dirt bike, would lean over and say, The meat packer's son hanged himself there, swingin' between beef slabs. I'd stare wide-eyed at the slaughterhouse door. I'd listen for gunshots.

Like my latte, there are good things that have come of Eagle's transformation (a transformation that is typical of certain Western towns, those close to thriving urban centers, those with beautiful snow-capped mountains in their backyard, those with major universities nearby[2]). But it's the slaughterhouse I miss most. The packing plant made my hometown seem like something from a movie. It symbolized the last stop of one of the West's most enduring legends—the cattle drive. Think *Trail Drive*, *Red River*, *Far Country*, *Born Free*, *Overlanders*, *Lonesome Dove*, *City Slickers*. Each recounts the drama of shuttling thousands of steers thousands of miles. It's that old story of the strong, usually rugged and seriously handsome cowboy riding months in the saddle, braving 100-degree temps, blizzards, waterless creek beds, snakebites, and frostbite just to move his herd to fresh meadows. Though I shivered, thinking of those gunshots, when I looked to the slaughterhouse, I saw a Western myth, a Western hero.[3]

In 1996, after 83 years of operation, the Eagle slaughterhouse closed and in its place a Montessori preschool, a gourmet cupcake shop, and the aforementioned Thai buffet sprouted on the river shore.

Three days later, my father asks if I want to go to a cattle auction in Caldwell. He says he'll buy me a burger. I follow him to his pickup. It smells—as it always has—of dust and coffee and horsehair. The sun beats through the window, and I press my hand to the pane, thankful for the warmth.

While Eagle has switched out dirt lanes for highways, farm fields for subdivisions, slaughterhouses for cupcakeries, Caldwell mostly hasn't. Ten minutes out of Eagle, the subdivisions thin and grain elevators shine on the horizon. The next 20 miles are fields—onion and alfalfa and sugar beets. Just inside Caldwell, boot shops and farm supply stores line the main drag. Longhorns and river canyons are painted on billboards. Plastic horses stand hitched in the Ranch Supplies' parking lot. Tin cowboys lean against shop windows. The Treasure Valley Live Auction (TVLA) is a low, long, paint-peeled building that looks like a Bingo hall or run-down office complex. In front of it a digital American flag waves on a billboard. Every billboard and shop window seems an assertion of the town's Old West identity, an attempt to resist, perhaps, the inevitable decline. But I don't want to belabor this evolution, or wallow in its arguable sadness. What I want to suggest, rather, is that this cattle fixation (didn't the words "cattle auction" get me off the couch and into my father's truck?) is at best anachronistic and at worst delusional.

Inside the TVLA, the auction grounds are divided into two rooms. In one, the Cattleman's Café offers beefy tomato mac and cheese soup on special (though I find it hard to imagine eating beef in such proximity to all those big-eyed cows). At 10 a.m. on a Friday, two men drink coffee and butter toast. They sit at the diner bar in near silence, and a woman in short jean shorts and a long ponytail stands behind the counter, rubbing spoons with a dish towel. The men eye her as she bends for fresh rags. She pretends not to notice.

"You buying cattle?" she asks, eyebrow lifted.

I tell her I'm with my father, who's already gone into the other room, the bidding corral.

She tells me she grew up in Caldwell, the daughter of a cattle man, knows the industry inside out, but her father sold his ranch and now she works here. She likes it alright because business is slow and sometimes in the afternoons, between lunch and dinner, she can sit in a booth and read *Glamour* because nobody's here and nobody minds. She moves efficiently behind the counter, keeping coffee mugs full, joking with the men hunched over their eggs. She knows them by name and asks after their kids. One of them asks if her transmission has been fixed. It is as familial a place as any, and I think that if she can't work on her father's ranch, maybe this countertop is the next best thing. Maybe here she finds a familiarity and shared history that wouldn't exist in a different job, a different town.

I leave the sleepy café and enter the corral, where the real action is. A half-moon of bleachers, five rows high, and the whole place smells, not surprisingly, like cow shit—which is to say it smells like the hot summer breezes of my childhood. I sit next to the only other woman in the crowd. She wears pink boots and a tight t-shirt. Rhinestones bedazzled across her chest read, “I suffer from PMS: Putting Up With Men’s Shit.”

In the corral, one feeder stands alone. Coat clumped, the animal is downright mangy. Two men with shovels prod the animal. The auctioneer, in his little box, mumbles, “Sixty, I got sixty-five, six-and-a-half, seventy, I see eighty, eighty, eighty, sold.” The cow sells for 80-cents a pound. A door flies open. The outside light shocks the dim corral, and the steer flies down the chute out of sight.

More cattle tromp through, and the auctioneer calls another few bids. The ranchers tap their brim or flick a wrist. The auctioneer rattles numbers and names, weights and dollars, breeds and ages. My father leans toward a rancher in soiled jeans and says, “I usually buy on Craigslist.” The uncharmed rancher stares ahead.

Sure enough, my father leaves empty-handed. Next week he will find a man on the Internet selling a sweet Hereford named Meg. She will graze his pasture for the next year, and then there will be a barbecue.[4]

Outside, ranch hands move the cattle from one pen to another. The breeze is sweet and rank with cud and manure. It is Friday: feeder day. The herds of newly weaned cows are fidgety. A teenaged kid in full Carharts taps a pole along their rumps. The chute is clogged, not nearly wide enough for all the cattle, but they barrel through like salmon in a rapid. A black steer, little rebel, kicks and leaps. It spins and runs upstream not knowing where it is heading, but wisely suspecting the corral will be even worse than the chute. The young cowhand racks its legs with the pole. The cow tries to leap through a closed gate, and its head lodges between slats. “Not real smart critters!” the boy yells. The cow twists and kicks, its neck bending at impossible angles, until finally it breaks free and enters the stream, heading toward the bidding floor.

Maybe five years ago, a decade even, I imagine the cowhand went to auction with his father, borrowed \$1,000 and chose a calf from the center of the corral, an Angus with warm breath and Bambi eyes and a muzzle soft as buffalo grass. By summer’s end, the calf plumped, he returned to auction and doubled his money.

Though the neighbor kids kept 4-H cows,[5] I never even considered it. When I was five, my father brought home a jersey I mistook as a pet. At dinner, my brother leaned over and—mouth rolling mid-chew—said, “You know you’re eating Little Dot, right?” Tears ensued. But the real farm kids in Idaho learn this lesson young, and they respect the system and take pride in being a part of it. When most beef comes from factory farms and low-grade, corn-fed burger is served with chips of bone in the patty, a kid grass-feeding an Angus and taking it to market is a rare moment of Western idealism: aspiring cowboys, healthy cattle, small-town slaughterhouses, the cowboy myth turned reality, the myth at its best, but this is tangential.

More to the point: if a 21st-century cowboy exists, it is here, at the TVLA. As has been suggested, part of this culture’s fixation with cattle must be rooted in the collective attachment to the actual cowboy. Excepting my father (who typically buys cattle online), this place is crawling with modern day cowboys, the TVLA their cattle drive. Men gather, buy a herd, load them in a trailer, and drive back to a pasture of bluestem and saltgrass. No thousand-head roundup or open range ride, but a collecting nonetheless.

A collecting in the spirit of those epic roundups, sure, but to what end? As the Cattleman’s waitress so wisely observed, things are quiet around here. A few sales on a Friday morning, feeders going for cheap, taken back to a small plot, taken out of state for slaughter, and maybe, by the end, the rancher makes a little money—but only maybe.

Still, cattle remain a big slice of the Idaho Ag pie. So big, in fact, that Eagle is home to the world’s largest Rocky Mountain Oyster Feed, an \$8.00, all-you-can-eat ball buffet in the corner of a weeded, vacant lot. A fundraiser for Eagle’s firemen, the feed is rooted in the tradition of frying bull testicles after ranchers performed their yearly castrations—though inquisitive patrons learn that the “cowboy caviar”[6] is usually purchased frozen these

days, as the only true way to get them fresh is “straight off the range,” and by range I assume the nut-purveyors mean from the corral of someone who still ranches...somewhere. But that’s not to say the market hasn’t changed. For much of the early 20th century, sheep ranches were the real moneymakers.[7] But all this industry talk only reveals a greater transformation.

When Boise boomed as a tech town in the 1990s, the state’s economy changed. Now, science and technology comprise 25% of Idaho’s economy, and Idaho (known—if known at all—for its big mountains and pick-up trucks and cowboys) ranks #11 nationwide for the provision of technological jobs. Agriculture, providing so much of Idaho’s identity, accounts for a flimsy 6% of the state’s workforce.[8]

Fifteen miles east of the auction, in Nampa (Caldwell’s twin city), a much weirder scene unfolds. The ad for the Idaho Cutting Horse Association Aged Event and Weekend Show is a ten-page insert in the Idaho Statesman. Bareback riders dress in buckskin and war paint. Fine boots, custom tack, and plush saddles will all be for sale. Oil paintings of wild horses, muscled and stampeding against a neon sky—a scene worthy of a *Napoleon Dynamite*[9] tee-shirt, perhaps—are framed in buck antlers. On Sunday, a bluegrass band and then a bizarre and a fair. The place will be hopping, a real cowboy get-down. I’ve never seen a cutting competition, but I imagine it will be something like a rodeo. I imagine elephant ears and cotton candy. I mark my calendar.

The cutting show is held indoors in the Idaho Horse Park, a steel-sided building that more closely resembles a garage than a barn or corral. A few booths are set up in the corner: boxes of cowboy boots clutter one; neon canvases of bucking Appaloosas line another. Most of the kiosks are empty. There are no buyers, no crowds. The show is like a party without guests. It is quiet and sad.

Instead of bleachers, about 20 fans (or participants? Supporters? One can’t be sure of the appropriate verbiage) sit at round tables where they enjoy the lattes and scones from the park’s Java Hut. Women sporting severe perms and glossy acrylic nails share muffins. They look like Julia Roberts and Dolly Parton in *Steel Magnolias*: hair-teased, giddy with gossip. Men, as flannelled-out as the ranchers at the TVLA, dab cappuccino froth from their moustaches. Industrial fans whirl overhead, killing the must of horse sweat and manure. Inside the corral, a woman pulls herself into the saddle and rides toward a waiting herd. With no signal—no waving flag or cracking pistol—the clock ticks.

In the days of the open range, herds mingled. In the spring, ranchers had to isolate their cows from the tangle so they needed low-to-the-ground horses that could move more lithely than a steer. This competition is the most overt remnant of the great spring roundups.

The woman moves her horse slowly—really slowly. It appears, at first, that she’s just killing time, riding in haphazard circles. Finally, she squares off with one steer. The cow bolts to the left, to the right; the gelding charges each time. Its chest brushing the sod, the horse is as low to the ground as the young steer. The match beats on: the cattle darts, the horse lunges, a stalemate. The cow can’t get back to the herd, but as the final seconds drop, the steer bolts backward. The horse can’t cut off its path quickly enough, and the cow escapes to the far end of the pen. If this were open prairie, the cow would be running into unending pasture, disappearing, lost. The cowgirl would be screwed. On a neon sign, 40 flashes, a low score.

The sport is painfully slow: two-minute rounds with long breaks between each. The crowd members chat or text on their cell phones. One man, riding straight-backed in the saddle, scruffy-jawed and handsome as a Marlboro Man, pulls off a glove with his teeth. From his hip pocket emerges a Blackberry, its lights flickering in his palm. Finally, another round begins, and almost nothing happens in the first 90 seconds, which isn’t to say it isn’t exciting when the horse thrashes and the cattle leaps, when the sod goes flying. Watching the animals stomp and charge is a rush for sure but this only lasts twenty seconds—a jolt of adrenaline in a long lull of horse circling herd.

The TVLA and the cutting competition are empty echoes of each other. The cafe was quiet. The boot booths are empty. As Idaho industry indicates, the cattle world is in full decline. But accepting that Idaho’s economy (identity?) rests on microchips is asking a lot of its residents. Idahoans, like most Westerners, take pride in their rural image,

their rugged badassness. See the TVLA parking lot as proof: stickers of cowboy boots pressed to rusted-out fenders; eagle and elk and leaping trout decals fixed to rear windows; NRA stickers everywhere.

These romantics (the cutting competitors, keeping an old tradition alive; me, the nostalgic spectator; even my father, buying that yearly cow for fun or pride or principle but not necessity) cling to our cowboy roots because our toughness has waned. We've evolved from gritty cow-rustlers to soft-palmed office workers. We've traded cattle trails for fluorescent-lit, temperature-controlled cubicles. We've taken the cowboy and jacked his chaps and spurs and decked him out in Dockers and tasseled loafers. And though I've been heartsick for this Western hero, I lack the grit required to be a part of this culture. Hadn't I cried at the dinner table at the words "eating Little Dot"? Even though Idaho's cowboy is a remnant, we refuse the necessary evolution that takes us from the tired story of downtown slaughterhouses to the reality of Saturdays spent lounging on the river's shore, cupcake in hand, the sugar gritted on our lips.

Maybe that the slaughterhouse closed doesn't matter. Maybe the thing can die but our enchantment can persist. Like a kept-away fossil, the shell of something gone but loved anyway. Maybe our affection for the old story doesn't occlude the creation of a new one. Maybe we can love the past and still move forward. Or maybe we should look for new things to love.

After the round is over, the contenders stay mounted, watching the next match from horseback. The neon lights in the horse corral have triggered a migraine, and my temples are bolts of pain. The smell of horseshit is stomach-flipping. I order a coffee, swallow two pills, and close my eyes. Any delusions about personal toughness have totally flagged. I hear the quarter horse snorting and sniffing its way around the herd. The cattle maw and shuffle into each other. It is late in the day, and on the other end of the valley, downtown Eagle is slowing. The boutiques are closing, and shop girls refold sweaters and steam trousers. The park, cast in dusk's chill, is emptying. A boy at the cupcake shop flips the sign from open to closed and takes the garbage out back and watches minnows flit through the river shallows. He breathes deep the smell of river water, moss, skunk cabbage, the garbage in his hand, stale cake and sugar. Outside Rembrandt's Coffee, where tired mares used to tail-swish in a pen, where fattened calves crowded a corral, where the crack of a gun echoed off cement walls, the sun is leaving its last traces of warmth on an empty park bench; dragonflies flit through the fountain.

I open my eyes. My scalp tingles, my vision a web of flashing lights. I zip my jacket and head for the door. On my way out, I look once more to the cowboy, and I don't think of the slaughterhouse or handsome cow rustlers. I return to lattes warming me in the sun, to the dream of a cashmere sweater picked from a boutique window, worn right out of the store. The cowboy looks small, his horse tired. The crowd of 20 has thinned to 10. He cuts the herd, this time more successfully than the last contender. He breaks the pack earlier, a minute in, and one steer stands alone. The cow bolts, but the horse is faster, anticipating his next move. He keeps the animal stationary, never allowing it to look back to the far end of the pen. The seconds drop. The steer is stuck. The judge yells seventy, a high enough score, and in this cowboy's mind, he and this steer are alone in the Owyhee plains. The sun beats hot on his cheeks and neck; he smells sweat and sage and saddle oil. The only sounds to be heard the animals' heavy breathing and low snorts, the murmuring Snake River tripping beyond an unseen bluff, the groan of a leather stirrup swinging, that hot wind humming through dry brush, and he leads the cow away.

Notes:

[1] Russ claimed there were 87 cats, and though I never counted, I have no reason to doubt him. The cats were everywhere—napping in their driveway, curled on carhoods, cleaning themselves in the kitchen sink. Once, Russ ran the cats into a pit and shot them with his BB gun. He offered the gun to my brother who declined. He shrugged, lifted the gun to his shoulder, and I looked away.

[2] Granted, for every Eagle there are countless towns too far removed from a major city to experience this kind of revitalization. Push out of the valley into the high desert and find the boarded up gas stations and single dive bars, the occasional Clip and Curl or Food Town but not much else. Find the towns with the welcome signs posted on the main drag, the population number newly printed and smaller than before. Find the places ghosting away.

[3] Perhaps what I really see is an American hero. After all, Americans everywhere are susceptible to Dodge Ram commercials, with their sun-leathered cowboys hauling trailers of longhorns; or consider how folks love a good cattle-drive flick; and think of how Toby Keith, famed crooner of "Should've Been A Cowboy," draws fans all over the country. The cowboy and his calf woo all of America, and so maybe their disappearance, and this fixation with them, transcends the West, Eagle, me.

[4] Meg almost wins over my father. She follows him through the pasture as he changes irrigation lines. She rubs her muzzle on his shoulder as gently as his best mare. When he calls her name, she trots right in. "More dog than cow," he told me, and so I am a little surprised when he says the freezer is full again.

[5] Russ Vogel raised a dairy cow, but he went too long without milking it and when it got mastitis, his father got the gun. Russ led my brother and me to the field and showed us the stained dirt where the animal fell, the air metalliced with the smell of blood.

[6] The testicles-turned-appetizers are also known as swinging beef, prairie oysters, dusted nuts, tendergroins, bull's eggs, calf fries, and bull fries, should you ever want to search them out.

[7] Sheep ranching was much more influential in developing Idaho's economy than cattle ranching, but few people seem to remember this. After all, a shepherd lacks all of the cowboy's rough appeal Stillman described: the stoic heartbreaker singing his calf to sleep. How can the shepherd and his flock, so mired in Biblical imagery, contend with the tough—and usually sexy—cowboy?

[8] Forgive the stats and data. Throwing "industry" under the microscope is only meant to underscore Idaho's shift in identity; after all, industry—like a myth—shows us who we are. If Eagle has been shaped by its proliferating strip malls, then Idahoans (especially in the TV) are equally shaped by all these microchips.

[9] *Napoleon Dynamite* is one of the few films set in Idaho (though Gus Van Sandt's *My Own Private Idaho* and *Smoke Signals*, based on Sherman Alexie's short story, round out the list). The film generated enormous hipster-love and a rare attention (and even rarer affection) for the Gem State.

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