



# Western Pastoral

Emily Strauss

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There are sheep, hidden in folds  
of the mountains, up the washes  
where green shows a little  
and shepherds, grizzled old  
Basque descendants living

in a run-down trailer parked  
in a bare field with a dog,  
a low mangy animal watching  
for coyotes and cars  
no women live up there  
with water scarce, dirt roads  
always dusty, sun baking  
and winter freezes.

There are tin buckets to collect  
water, milk, firewood, dung chips —  
urns would never have survived  
the long journey West — instead  
wives packed looms, rugs, brooms,  
butter churns and bread pans,  
raised their kids in filthy dresses  
and stiff pants, tried to comb  
snags out, baked soda bread  
and beans, the men out herding,  
red sun setting through the dust.

Days were more than lonely  
with a thin deer trail connecting  
neighbors, with a rail stop two  
days distant, a ride across hills  
and draws, bitter waters, a town  
of three buildings, more filthy  
men and horses. Now the roads  
run straight, still empty, hot,  
the towns left with crumbling  
storefronts and barns, broken  
gasoline pump from the 1920's  
when hope reigned for a while and  
hard-rock mines overtook sheep.

Now the land is burnt-dry eroded,  
fenced but neglected, with shacks

falling down in the canyons  
or up the rocky slopes with the open  
pits of failed gold diggings, tailings  
the windows left open and rags  
of curtains flutter in the wind  
cows wander the yard, sheep  
graze the sagebrush to the ground,  
the shepherd must ride for days  
to round up a herd in fall  
before the snows push them  
down to holding pens  
so wool can be shorn, yearlings  
branded, inoculated, men  
relieved of their work, dogs  
resting up in a warm room

Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry, which she has written since college. Over 400 of her poems appear in a wide variety of online venues and in anthologies, in the U.S. and abroad. She is a *Best of the Net* and twice a *Pushcart* nominee. The natural world of the American West is generally her framework. She is a retired teacher living in Oregon.





