

Mapping Bloodlines

Coming to know a Montana Valley

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There is no doubt about it. In fading light, crimson red puddles snake through the driveway. The signs and characteristics are unmistakable: the liquid is viscous and slightly greasy; the bulls-eye of the droplets is raised and not quite yet dry. On the edge of the largest puddle is a small-paw print.

Off the driveway, for a few feet in each direction, I track the bloodline. It vanishes into receding prairie. Beyond that, in both directions is forest, beyond that federally-designated wilderness area. The wind picks up, rushing down from the mountains, refracting off alpine lakes, moving down into the valley, through the gulch. A deep shiver runs through me, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. I look deep into the darkness. The wind dies. I hear nothing.

I go inside and listen to Montana public radio to fill in pieces from the day I did not hear: the number of deaths by deer, forecasts of impinging frosts for the valley, predictions for the onset of hunting season. The radio signal ebbs and fades.

Although only four miles from town, the topography of the valley, wind, and forest prevents the radio signal from always reaching us. Like our neighbors, we sometimes reposition the radio around the house. Others farther down the road have constructed large antennas—some twenty feet long, others thirty or forty-feet long in order to harness the signal. Our lives move to the rhythm of this valley.

“But we have methods of control,” a neighbor tells me. Indeed, although there is more space than the East, there is a certain order in the double fences to keep deer out, separate piles for manure and compost, irrigation systems, and dogs who watch over the property in the day. Somehow this is different from cloistered properties of the East and ridge-lined communities in California with multi-zone sprinkler systems. I look at pictures of these places on my wall.

Then there is an audible pitch from the smoke detector. Quickly, I run out to the door--- it is connected to the same circuit as the electric fence outside-- to see what has been tripped. I creep into the blackness searching out the tapetum—eye reflection from whatever mammal might be prowling out. From the garage the voltage regulator ticks away. I step over the wires which run to the fence and sweep my headlamp through the night, past the resting Pulaski axe, along the perimeter of the fence, past the compost to the edge. Nothing but large tracts of rumped grass. I creep farther to examine the carnage of the night before last.

Two nights ago a bear broke through one of the edges of this electric fence, gorged itself on partially decomposed compost, became sick, and as my neighbors saw, climbed up into a tall lodgepole pine, and leaned back upon a limb, looking so pathetic from the fifteen gallons of compost that he spent hours in a stomach-sickened vigil before slowly trudging back into the wilderness area. Looking at the dented trash can with paw marks, I wonder about this attack.

Was it like a distant tribe in the Amazon; people who create signs to let you know that you are coming too far into their territory? Could the wild outside the door be drawing a line, clear across the driveway, or is this another sign—like the bear's stomach ache, one of passive acceptance?

As my coffee steams the next morning, two groups of turkeys make their way up opposing ends of the driveway—one from behind the house, another in front. In the early morning haze, they march up to one another stoically. Instead of confronting one another like British and Colonial army troops, the groups converge and turn en masse. They commence to march through a portion of the yard and up to the steps of the house. From my desk I count them along with the ones and zeros in the ledger of my checkbook. They pick at seeds left by chipmunks in busy winter preparations, dead plants, the last of the service berries. They scour the remains of the garden like bandits.

There is a story about these nonnative birds that the locals talk about bagging for Thanksgiving. There was apparently a local woman who was forced to move out of the area. Destitute, but with an immediate job offer elsewhere, she left her pet turkeys to fend for themselves. Although neighbors at first fed them, they eventually grew hungry, feral, broke out of their pen and have been multiplying since.

I too am a vulnerable transient. To shake this thought, I put away the checkbook ledger, pull on a wool sweater and step outside with my camera. I head down the driveway, cut down past the water pump, pass deer bones, and cut through the stream in a place where the water doesn't quite breach the tops of my boots. I follow the tributary, listening for any sounds I might hear above the gurgle of the river. Shafts of sunlight cut through the canopy, change light, and cause me to pause as I look for lines upon the land. On this walk, and on others recently, the landscape is surprisingly revealing.

Magpies alight in branches in the low sections of canopy in search of carrion. Upstream, a beaver pauses to rest in the sun. A chipmunk—in half terror-- stays under a downed log as I pick my way through a deadfall. Her large pupil follows my own, while nursing babies cling to her. Nearby a red squirrel freezes under my gaze, a large mushroom stuffed in its mouth. He looks at me quizzically and nonchalantly, like he has placed some decorous saucer in his mouth intentionally.

Animal tracks, grasses parted by deer, bears, and perhaps mountain lion create lines on the landscape. Further up the gulch there are cabins built into hillsides--one or two which may be abandoned mines. Although the transient can only

begin to guess at the history, these are places where loggers and men carved lines upon the land. People who knew the wild landscape made it a part of their daily lives. Designated as wilderness area twelve years ago, this place remains relatively unchanged from fifty--or a hundred years ago.

In a wilderness area such as this, the social fabric meshes with a wild fabric. At the end of the day, there are many in this town who pack up their backpacks, trade space of aluminum cans for food cans, and head into this wilderness area. There are many lines upon it. It is home. There are dozens of secret campsites. It is a refuge for the human and wild alike.

The season is beginning to pass from one to another. Weekend bikers and hikers begin bulking up with larger backpacks and layers, the last of some bird species migrate. But as seasons change in Montana and the wilderness area, the rules change. Mammal populations shift in elevation, searching for places to winter out. Those of us who live near this edge work the last plots of our garden, use Pulaski axes for the last plantings, cut the last bit of wood. This shift is dramatic, and it is often events which signal change.

I came upon one of these recently. On a bike ride I rounded a bend and met the eyes of a black bear. Minutes after he sauntered off I met a lone woman running down the trail.

"Did you see him?" she breathed.

"Yes," I hesitated, "he's not the only one I've seen around here."

"Me too." She spoke quietly. "What I'm afraid of is a mountain lion."

We conferred for a few more moments and I continued up the trail.

Minutes later another runner approached me. I did not say a word. As I streaked back down the other side of the gulch, towards home I passed a few more. I still didn't speak.

There are events which shape this turning of season: day turning to dusk turning to evening, the crucial second a bear goes from hind legs to haunches and sauntering off into the woods, the way he looks back at you, a point, timed to light when turkey groups converge and the image changes from one of humor to hunger. An increasing weight and thought is given over to hunting and deeper excursions into wilderness, and what we might let live and die.

Here, lines of the natural world, culture, neighbors, towns, and regional life are not far apart. Although this wilderness area has become a refuge for a rapidly developing town, it is lines of migration, development, politics, and movements that make us who we are and place us on this western map. There is a certain power in this place.

The bloodlines on the driveway are dry. I walk past them each day. They remind me of shifting seasons, non-casual events, places from which we come from, and all that we live with in Western Montana.

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