FOR LOVE OF COUNTRY

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tling with nature? I suspect it is fun, at least sometimes, in the way that hard work and productive work can be deeply satisfying. This is some of the allure of ranching and of holding land—that there's an honesty to it and a clarity of the overarching duties. I don't ranch myself. The knowledge I have about ranching comes chiefly secondhand, from watching the toil of my friends and listening to their talk. The very bottom of what they do, the bedrock of their considerable industry, is the nurture of living beings, both plant and animal, so that more living beings, both plant and animal, can live.

I'm not the only one to find this beguiling. The state is presently going through a land boom, in which city slickers are buying country places. This has happened before; it's not new at all. "Land in the past couple of decades has been inflating in dollar value faster than almost any other commodity save maybe computer stocks," John Graves wrote in *Hard Scrabble* back in 1974. "The why of this lies perhaps mainly in the sort of buyers who have been running prices up—city people almost entirely, reacting to jammed urban ugliness as well as to anxiety about the future." The world moves faster than it did in 1974, and it is smaller too. True, investment in land can soothe the shakes brought on by thoughts of a future economic ruckus. But I'm inclined to believe, or hope, that what's really driving a dentist from San Antonio to buy a forty-acre hangout in Rocksprings has more to do with her soul than her pocketbook. Land can bring quiet and slowness to lives blasted by the ceaseless bombast of social media and popular culture. Sometimes the tweets worth noting should come from actual birds.

Plus, there's a timing issue that's pressing, for that old saw about God not making any more land is indisputable. In the 2013 book *Hillingdon Ranch,* which traces the history of a 129-year-old family property in Kendall County, authors David K. Langford and Lorie Woodward Cantu point out that the state's population is expected to climb to more than 45 million people by 2040. Likewise, they say, Texas is losing open country faster than any other state in the nation. Such pronouncements can be slightly panic-inducing. If I can't buy land now, will I be able to later? Will there be any left?

Though I can't claim to be a rancher, I do admire them. And while the little twenty-acre empire where my husband, son, and I live is captivating, I'll admit—only a bit shamefully—that we lust for more land, a bigger place, pastures and canyons and creek beds beyond the reach of earshot and eyesight. This is nuts, I know. The yen for more property isn't a reflection of dissatisfaction or ingratitude with our present place, which, truthfully, pleases us a great deal and suits our present situation. Rather, that want for more country is simply greed, the desire for more aloneness and more majesty, for different varmints and plants and rocks. It's to have the chance to know a place, to start the long romance of finding out what birds nest in which trees, of how the water courses in a heavy rain, of stumbling across a midden of flint from some long-ago knapper or figuring out how to best cover the bare spots of land still raw and sore from when cattle and goats grazed there ages ago.

A piece of country is a living being. It's a chance to do many things. It's the potential for nearly endless work and discovery. If there is enough time, what knowledge unfolds from the stewardship of these acres? Amid the drouths and the downpours, what things do you discover? The answers are probably too numerous to grasp, though the appetite to find out is there. That, in the end, is the pull of the land.