

COUNTRY QUEERS - BONUS EPISODE - ODE TO SHEEP, PART 2

DESCRIPTION

In this "sheep-adjacent" episode, we're diving into some of the ways in which we communicate with animals. The ways they communicate with us. And how that could inform how we communicate with each other.

You'll meet Pony Jacobson who is white, queer and trans and is a sheep-shearer living in the homelands of the Clatsop peoples, in the area surrounding Astoria, Oregon. Pony talks about training a border collie puppy to herd sheep, and about how he navigates conservative rural places and careers as a trans person. We'll also meet, Penelope Logue who's white, queer and trans, and a rancher who raises Alpaca and sheep on Apache, Cheyenne, and Ute lands in southern Colorado on a queer and trans land project she helped found called the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch. Penelope talks about the alpacas, but also about her relationship to her kiddo who is also trans. Both of these interviews were recorded by phone in the winter of 2020/2021.

This is part two of three episodes dedicated to sheep and the queer and trans humans who love them! Find the folks you heard in this episode on our [instagram page](#) and at their websites: Pony Jacobson at www.sugarfieldfarm.com and Penelope Logue at www.tenaciousunicornranch.com

In this episode, we're asking folks who have additional funds, to please donate in support of Medicine Bowl - a land-based strategy for liberation based in the mountains of North Carolina. "Medicine Bowl's mission is to transition back into right relationship with the universe, the planet, and one another. We believe that land-based strategies offer the most wholistic pathways towards the liberation of BIPOC folks in our lifetime." Earlier this year they were able to secure 142 acres of land in western NC. Additional donations will support expanding housing, farming infrastructure, sacred spaces for spiritual work, and so much more. " You can donate on Venmo @kifu-faruq or on their website at medicinebowl.org.

CREDITS

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TRANSCRIPT

EZRA [Intro]: I'm Ezra Maria Ferdinand from Quilcene, Washington, and you're listening to Country Queens, the podcast. [Same intro in Polish]

[sounds of sheep and music]

RAE GARRINGER [host]:

Hey folks. I'm Rae Garringer, and this is an Ode to Sheep: Part Two. It's been about six months since part one came out. Without boring you with all the details, I'll just say that my life has been super fucking hectic this summer. But anyways, because it's been so long, I almost decided to just scrap the rest of these sheep interviews. Not because they aren't wonderful. But because the timing of the inspiration for these interviews feels so long ago. It was the winter of late 2020, which feels like 17 years ago. And I don't have to tell any of you that the world has been a lot this year. My brain space, my inspiration, or my lack of inspiration, has been many other places than focused on sheep since last winter. But I decided not to scrap these interviews. Because animals are, and have always been a huge part of my life. I often spend more time with non-human animals than I do with human animals. And sometimes that is delightful. And so comforting. Then sometimes it's really fucking hard. Like this week, I swear to God, I'm about to murder all of my goats. And they're not meat goats, they're dairy goats, because one of them has learned how to jump out of the only fence that has ever contained her, even when it's electrified. And I'm spending absurd amounts of time chasing her around with

a squirt gun, which is the only thing she responds to. It's one of those weeks where I'm like, Why the fuck am I doing this?

But anyways, in general, I'm just really interested in, and also curious about, cross-species relationships. I'm not as interested in diving into the scientific understanding of what's happening between us in our communications, we'll leave that to Radiolab. I'm more interested in the bonds. The families and friendships that we form with animals. The communication we have with them, within and beyond language. The comfort and healing they can provide, which has been so important for so many of us during this neverending pandemic. These floods, these fires. The state-sanctioned violence, these anti-trans bills, these overlapping simultaneous crises. And so, in this episode, we're diving into some of the ways in which we communicate with animals. The ways in which we live with them, and they live with us, and how our relationships with them could inform how we interact with each other. You actually won't hear a whole lot about sheep in this episode. It's kind of more sheep-adjacent. First up, you'll meet Pony who is white, queer, trans, and is a sheep shearer living in the homelands of the Clatsop peoples in the areas surrounding Astoria, Oregon. Pony talks about training a Border Collie puppy to herd sheep, and about how he navigates conservative rural places and careers as a queer and trans person. And then you'll meet Penelope Logue who's white, queer and trans and a rancher who raises alpaca and sheep on Apache, Cheyenne, and Ute lands in southern Colorado. Penelope helped found the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch, which is a queer and trans haven and an active ranch. In our interview, she talks about the alpacas, but also about her relationship to her kiddo, who is also trans. Both of these interviews were recorded by phone during the winter of 2020 to 2021. Here's Pony.

PONY JACOBSON:

My name is Pony. And when people ask where I'm from I'll usually say Oregon, but I was raised in New England. And my path towards being a rural queer has been a very long and diverse one. I was raised in the suburbs. And then I went to art school in New York City and I lived in New York City for nine years, and moved out to Oregon and changed careers, went into the restaurant business. That led me to politics and farming. And so then I left Oregon for a little while and went farming around the country and ended up back in Oregon started my own farm. And that led me to sheep.

RAE [host]:

Pony spent several years running a livestock farm, where he raised a flock of Jacob sheep. If you've never seen them, Google them. They have four horns, they're really cool-looking. After several years, he found himself spread too thin from trying to run a farm and a business as a solo operator. And so he's since moved on from running that

farm. But during those years, raising sheep led him to learn how to shear sheep. At the time of our interview in December of 2020, he was working on a commercial shearing crew, traveling throughout the Midwest with a group of guys, sharing huge flocks of sheep. Here's some audio he sent in from the road.

PONY

[Indecipherable speaking in background] Yeah. [Indecipherable speaking in the background.] Yeah. I got kicked a bit. At every job last year. And this year. Oh, yeah. [Sheep shearing sounds and country music in the background.]

RAE [host]

In addition to introducing Pony to the world of shearing, raising sheep also led him to the joys of working with herding dogs. In early 2020, Pony posted on social media about suddenly losing his Border Collie K'ass, which stands for Kick Ass. I just lost my own sweet pup, Junebug, a few months earlier. And I was completely heartbroken in a way I'd never quite experienced before. I reached out offering to exchange letters about our dogs, which we did. You'll hear Pony mention that letter.

PONY

So I had a herding dog, K'ass, and she got hit last January by a car and she died. So I'm now for the first time experiencing what it's like to raise and train a puppy. And I started him on sheep. And we're going to work this afternoon with some sheep. So he's just learning his basic commands and directions.

RAE

And your, your dog's name is Possum? Is that right?

PONY

Yes, possum.

RAE

That's such a good name. [Laughs] And he's a Border Collie?

PONY

He's a Border Collie. I very specifically - when I lost K'ass, she was my first herding dog. And, I mean, I know I've written you a letter about her after I lost her. And Bill. I mean, if you still have the letter, feel free to use any of that if you want. But like my experience with her, was truly incredible. Like she not only taught me how to herd sheep, I mean she, she took moving sheep, from four hours of me trying to move them down to 40

seconds. I got her and it changed my world. I mean, she taught me so much about sheep and herding and instinct. And she became a co-worker, she's just as much of a workaholic as I am, which is so hard to find. I mean, we spent every moment of every day together, we work together, we live together, we adventure together. So losing her was really, really, really hard. And it actually kind of cracked me open in ways that I'm just now trying to figure out because it, losing her really turned me into a mess. That was really, really hard. But I knew, I knew that I was hooked on herding dogs. So I interviewed a couple of dogs. And then I decided to get a puppy. And I don't know I mean we're just starting our journey together. So we've been together for nine months. And I am trying to figure out how to teach him how to herd.

RAE

Yeah. I feel like watching herd dogs with a flock of sheep is one of the most incredible things I've ever seen. And I think a lot of people haven't seen it. It's a hard thing, I think, to explain to people what it's like. If you were going to describe watching a Border Collie work a flock of sheep for someone who's never seen it, How would you describe it?

PONY

Yeah. It's unbelievably, magically amazing, actually. I mean, everything about it, it's this bizarre. It's like a mix between a dance and a video game? And I'm not a gamer, but I imagine it to be like playing a video game because you are also participating. It's not just the dog and the sheep, you are also the controller. It's a dance, it's a sport, it's this very precise action, where there's a goal, there's a focus, and it's manipulating all of these creatures, working off of their natural instincts to stay safe, and stay away from predators and stay together. Because the more that the sheep stay together, the less likely they are to get picked off, right. And it's using this dog's natural instinct of their predator instinct that they've been bred to keep, but only to a certain point. They're not bred to kill the sheep, but they're bred to move them, and work them as if they were like a coyote or a wolf, as part of a pack, hunting a sheep down. It's kind of a very similar thing. But, because we've specifically bred them to only keep certain attributes, it's not terrifying to sheep, it's not terrorizing the sheep. We've developed this dog so that they can move the sheep without anyone getting hurt. Then with it being fast and efficient. And all it takes is for a person to be connected to that dog and understand how that dog learns. Whether they're a hard dog or a soft dog, a confident dog or, or a shy dog, and how to properly work with them to open them up to this, this world of what they were bred to do. So it very much is about the handler and the dog having a connection to each other. And understanding how each other work. And being able to work together. [Audio switches to another recording of Pony with his dog.] Stay. Stay Stay. Stay. Away! Steady. Hey! Steady. Steady, lie. Walk up, lie. Walk up. Lie down. Good boy. Good boy. Yes, good boy.

RAE

And then like, what's it feel like when it's working well? Like, I'm just, my guess from my own hellish week with my goats this past week is that there are days where it's like working so well and it feels so good. And then I'm sure there are moments where it's like the communication is not working that well and it's getting frustrating. [Pony verbally agrees.] This is like a hard thing. It's a hard thing to put into words. I feel like there's like communication and relationship we have with animals. But I think about it when like I've done the rodeos. Like team roping is my favorite event because you can watch when the rider throws the rope out towards the calf. The horse knows and is stepping backwards. There's this teamwork that's so beautiful to watch. But anyways, I just wonder how would you describe what it feels like, this relationship and communication you're having with the dogs?

PONY

It's so simple. Euphoria. Like when everything is working well, it is euphoric. Like there, I can't imagine feeling more high, more accomplished, more in tune, more smooth. Like everything just works. You feel like a rock star, you feel like the coolest person on the planet, you feel so hot, like you are it! And it's because, it's not because YOU are it, you COLLECTIVE are it, like you and your dog. And then the days that things aren't working so well. It can be really frustrating and you have to remind yourself that that your dog is doing its best. Your dog is not trying to mess things up. They are trying very hard to do what you're asking them to do. And you know they try harder than most people do. You know, you have to have patience. And you have to, I think, that even when things get tense, try to find a good note to end on. And always appreciate and compliment your dog.

RAE

What you were just saying made me wonder if like, working with dogs, working with like herd dogs has, like, does it...has it taught you things about interacting with humans?

PONY

Oh, absolutely. I mean, also, I didn't start thinking about it until this year. But I think it's also a lesson that I need to take to heart when dealing with myself. I mean, I am my biggest critic, I am my harshest, my harshest boss.

RAE

Yeah.

PONY

I rarely give myself compliments. And I rarely feel like I've done a good enough job, no matter what I'm doing, or what I'm trying or what the circumstances are. And I think it is a really important lesson. You know, to treat my...well, to treat myself the way I treat my dog!

RAE

Right!

PONY

You know, like, like, that's such a good lesson. And I didn't really think about it, but it's true. And I think just across the board, having activities that connect people with animals, there are so many lessons there to connect us to ourselves, and the way we treat animals is oftentimes good lessons for how we should treat ourselves and others.

RAE

Okay, that's most of the questions that I feel like I have right now for you unless there's something you feel like we missed that you would want to talk about. About sheep about sheep dogs about, I don't know, rural queer stuff. I didn't ask a whole lot about that.

PONY

You know, we didn't talk a lot about my queerness.

RAE

Yeah!

PONY

And I don't know if that's something you'd like to touch down on. But I think I think it's been a really, for me, it's, I think, like queerness has, in a way been really easy. And then another way really, really challenging and difficult. And maybe, maybe I could or should explain that a little bit.

RAE

I would love that. Honestly, I think that what you were saying before I was recording about like not being out in your professional world has me a little hesitant with not knowing what to ask you like what you're comfortable talking about.

PONY

Yeah, so, Rae, what I guess I'll just repeat or summarize what I said before you start recording was that I am queer and queer-identified, I am I'm trans. I consider, I'm definitely masculine-looking, but I do consider myself more nonbinary. And I've gone

through many different steps in my identity, from just being queer, to being trans, to back to being queer, to now, you know, as I get older, I just feel more nonbinary, because I don't think I really fit the hetero, or the very narrow definition of masculine or feminine. But, so I am queer in my personal life and with all of my friends and my social groups, but I'm not out in my professional world, and I actually never have been. And that is something that for, for my own reasons, I've chosen to take that path, I think, because it's where I feel most - even though it causes a lot of discomfort for me internally - I think it's what has made me feel comfortable in pursuing the rural careers that I've pursued. I think it makes me feel safe. And it mean, I'm currently living in the Midwest where I don't think it's socially accepted. I don't think it's very welcomed. And I think by staying in the closet, I'm protecting myself. But it does cause a lot of distress. And it causes a lot of isolation. You know, not being able to fully feel like I'm representing my authentic self or, or you know, there's big parts of my life that I don't...but there are big parts of life of you know, general life that I don't get to participate in. Like I don't know if you're ever gone on Tinder or not. But...

RAE

Oh, Jesus! [Laughs]

PONY

In the Midwest, for a queer person, it is bleak!

RAE

Yeah, well, central Appalachia is no better, let me tell you.

PONY

So because I live and choose to live and work rurally, and maybe also because I'm not out in my professional world, it is very isolating. And it can feel pretty lonely and it can feel like you are the only queer person ever to exist. And that you know, the chances of meeting other queers, much less meeting someone to date, is just almost I mean it's, it's zero!

RAE

Yeah, I feel this very strongly, can I just say? And I always, I am I'm like such a summer human that in the winter I'm like, oh, there's...in the summer, I might think there's some hope whether or not that materializes. But in the winter, I'm like, cool. Giving up now! 35 and it, this is it, like.

PONY

Totally! Like my three months in, in Oregon this summer was like, I had a couple of goals for myself. And one was, Oh, I'm going to go backpacking with my horses. Two was I was going to start training with my herding dog. And three was I was going to go on a date. Yeah. I didn't accomplish all of those goals. Let's just put it that way.

RAE

Oh, gosh, yeah. Well, I do I'm glad you brought this all up. Because I kinda, I do want to ask you more questions. Like, this is the thing that, um, it's a funny thing with Country Queers cause, cause I have my own experiences. But I'm also really interested in other people's. And I think people have really different experiences of dating, of isolation, of like, all of these things in rural spaces. And part of that is that like, "rural" is a very large category that means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, you know what I mean? But one thing that I - I guess am recording this - but I find myself increasingly frustrated sometimes that like, urban, queer, and trans scenes, in particular, it's just really different. And I think that there's a reality for a lot of like rural queer people, a lot of real trans people that like, you can't just be like, fully out in every space. And I think for some people, that feels really bad. And I think other people that I've talked to, and I know for myself, it really shifts. Sometimes I really don't care that much, because it's like...

PONY

Yeah.

RAE

I actually really, I think, because of growing up in a farming community, like I love old farmers more than almost anything. Like, I love them. And, and! I know that if I talked at all about my politics, about my like, gender feelings, about any of the things, right? We probably wouldn't be able to have the kinds of wonderful moments we have together.

PONY

Yeah.

RAE

And in those moments, like, I don't feel like I'm, I don't need to bring any of that up. Because I'm like, so excited to meet this old farmer who's selling me alfalfa hay, who takes me on a tour of his beautiful mountain farm on his side by side, you know what I mean?

PONY

I do.

RAE

And like, offers to teach me how to drive a tractor, or whatever. It's like, that is so important to me, that it's like these other pieces of myself don't feel like they matter in that moment. And so then, but then it's like, I worked in rural public schools for two years in West Virginia, where I couldn't be out at work. And there were all these queer kids coming out to me, because they could of course, tell that I was queer, right? But like, it was really, I would never do that, again, in that kind of professional space. It just wasn't, it felt really bad. It was really bad for my mental health. So that was not a question, that's like me talking about my own stuff for a ramble. But I'm...

PONY

But it's so good to hear. Because, I think, I mean, honestly, I think I mean, I don't know much about you at all, except what you're sharing. But I feel very similarly: That most of the time, I don't feel the need to have queerness be the forefront of my identity. It's not that I'm, it's not that I'm ashamed that I'm queer. And it's not that I wish I weren't queer. I love being queer. But I also don't think it's necessary for it to be my first and foremost identifier, in my professional world, or in most of what I do. Where it really matters, and where it does need to be known, is in my social scenes, with my friends, with my peers, with the people I share my stories with, with the people that I share food with, with the people that I share love with.

RAE

Yeah.

PONY

They need to know. They need to see that part of me. But it's okay that Farmer John doesn't know. We don't...have...it doesn't matter.

RAE

Totally.

PONY

Farmer John needs to know that his sheep are going to get shorn, and that they're going to look good and healthy when I'm done. And that, you know, he's going to give me some money to do it.

BREAK

Hey friends. Because we know the ongoing impacts of colonization on people, land, and resources. We like to use these episode breaks to encourage our white listeners who have extra funds to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. Today, we're asking folks to contribute to Medicine Bowl, a land-based strategy for liberation based in the mountains of North Carolina. I'm going to read you from the description that Kifu Faruq, founder of Medicine Bowl, sent me. Quote: "Medicine Bowl's mission is to transition back into right relationship with the universe, the planet, and one another. We believe that land-based strategies offer the most holistic pathways towards the liberation of BIPOC folks in our lifetime." That's the end of that quote. Earlier this year, they were able to secure 142 acres of land in western North Carolina. With the funds raised, they'll continue to expand housing, farming infrastructure, sacred spaces for spiritual work, disaster preparedness, and tiny home construction for queer, trans and gender non-conforming folks. You can donate on Venmo @kiku-faruq. You can also donate on their website at medicinebowl.org. That info is also listed in the Episode Notes and over on our website at countryqueers.com.

END BREAK

RAE GARRINGER [host]:

Next up, we'll hear from Penelope Logues. Somebody on Twitter actually connected me to Penelope. When I put out a call that I was looking for queer and trans people who raise sheep. I'd never heard of the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch. They've been getting actually a lot of publicity lately. You can Google them and find all sorts of interesting articles about them. But I was really excited because when I was a kid growing up on a sheep farm in West Virginia, for some of that time we had llamas. Some sheep farmers will keep llamas as guard animals. Same way some folks will keep donkeys or guard dogs. Ours never worked that well as guard animals, but they were fascinating animals and I spent hours with them. I loved their long eyelashes and their big noses and their soft lips that they would sort of rub on your cheek, giving these little kisses. They made these really cool noises. And so I was super interested to hear from Penelope about the alpacas on their ranch. And to be clear, alpacas are not sheep -at all - but they are fiber animals. And so there's some overlap here. I had such a good time talking to Penelope. I hope you enjoy it.

PENELOPE LOGUE:

So my name is Penelope Logue. I'm in Westcliffe, Colorado. I run the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch. We're a queer haven, and we, and an active ranch. And we started like two and a half years ago.

RAE

So like, how many alpacas do you have?

PENELOPE

So we have just under 200. I have 186 head of alpaca right now.

RAE

And then you also have some sheeps and some other animals, it sounds like.

PENELOPE

Then we have 25 sheep right now. And then we have two goats. And we have a flock of ducks and we have chicken, and then a whole bevy of puppos, the two dogs we started with are Appa and Naga, and they had a litter of puppies of which we kept five. So we have Jordi, Wharf, Seven of Nine, and Data and Lore and, and then we have some cats as well.

RAE

Oh my god, it sounds so dreamy. [Laughs]

PENELOPE

[Laughs] It's pretty dreamy.

RAE

Yeah. So, I guess I'm curious. Like, did you grow up ranching. How did you get into alpacas and like fiber animals in particular?

PENELOPE

Well I grew up on a farm. I was adopted by my grandparents. So my adoptive mom and dad were computer programmers, but my dad grew up Depression-era, where you don't, you know, like you kind of just don't do just one thing you know, so we had a fully active farm on top of his programming. We didn't keep animals, but I wanted to desperately and so you know, I was in 4H, and I would go like our neighbors had animals and I would go take care of them. And so I learned all of like my husbandry from kind of that, that era of my life.

RAE

And where was where were you raised?

PENELOPE

By Longmont, Colorado, so yeah, so about four and a half hours from here. Just outside of Boulder, if you're familiar with Colorado.

RAE

I love that you grew up in the 4H and now run a ranch, P.S. [Laughs] And so I'm going to come back to the farm in a second, but like, I'm curious, what are the ways that you identify and also kind of like, what your childhood was like, what kind of your like, life before this ranch?

PENELOPE

So I grew, I grew up in a Christian home, which didn't make being queer possible, like publicly. I identify - oh, by the way, I identify as queer, I'm a trans woman. My pronouns are she/her. And I, yeah, I mean, growing up. So I was born in 1980. And there wasn't language, or at least like language that would have filtered down to me in Longmont, you know, podunk Longmont, Colorado, that would have given me the ability to come out. So I was, you know, and my parents were both, I grew up in a...not Evangelical, but a Southern Baptist and Greek Orthodox home. So I was in, I was in church, three days a week minimum. And that, and as soon as I started kind of hitting that puberty age, and making, you know, sexual decisions of my own, or like, you know, like leaning one way or the other, I was sent to camp to get that out of me. Because I was presenting male, then, of course, and I was very attracted to men, you know. And that was disallowed heavily, although, my parents were on the more liberal end of conservatism, if that makes sense.

RAE

Yeah, totally!

PENELOPE

Yeah, like, you know, like, they loved me to death and when what was best for me, and they were trying to do that, in their pursuit of making me, at least not stand out gay. And there was no word to describe being transgender back then there wasn't a way I could have communicated that to them. Although I tried, you know, like, I think that a lot of queer people my age, tried desperately, in their teenage years to convey what was going on, and it just wasn't received. I got married and had a kid at 18 and then I joined the military because making ends meet is very difficult. And that was during Don't Ask,

Don't Tell in the military. And I don't talk about my military career, I was combat arms during, you know, the onset of the war and things like that. So we're going to skip over that period of my life. And I got out of the military and I mean, I was in a lot of ways last for a long time. I tried various things. I was a help desk manager for IBM for a while, I was a barista for a while which I really thoroughly enjoyed. And then I got my broker's license and I, I was a broker for a long time. And, and then the weight of...well, I mean, I so I sought counseling for my PTSD. And through that counseling, was able to open kind of all of those doors that I had shut in my teenage years, and came out then fully as transgender and, and kind of like that's where, in all reality that's where I mark my life beginning. And I kind of hit the ground running. I've always been a little bit of an activist, but I really like stepped up my activism, as far as like, you know, like just basic equality for trans people. And, you know, like, ecologically speaking, like you were tilting over an edge that matters so, so fucking much. And during that period I had, I should say, right after I got out of the military, I have another child with a girl that lives in Oregon. And they came out as trans, my child came out as trans, they're using their non-binary, so they came out as trans. And that kind of is what started me down the path of like, realizing I had issues that I needed help with. And in creating, in trying to create a safe environment for a trans child to just go to school, I learned a lot about the inequality that affects queer people, because I'm white, like, I have blond hair and blue eyes, like, I, up until that point, I had not faced a lot of adversity in my life. But trying to just get my child educated without it being a risk to their life was kind of an awakening for me, you know. And then, you know, down the road was it was a solid 10 years later that I came out, and just kind of embrace that fully. And then, yeah, and then so I had to move out of my house because I was living in Commerce City in Denver, and I was the, the threats became routine. And I just was kind of in fear of my life, like, really. And so I moved back to Longmont. And I got a job at Target, like I kind of just wanted, like to heal a little bit and have like, no pressure, like being a broker is extreme amount of pressure. And so I just kind of, you know, I was waiting to get surgeries and stuff, and, you know, just kind of, I was a line manager at Target and just kind of, you know, like, experimenting with, you know, like, really dating for the first time and all these things, you know, like, going to my second teenage years as it were. And, and then Trump got elected. And that, I mean, having watched societies collapse firsthand, I saw all of the warning signs that was Trumpism. So I started gathering good people around me. And I started the process of selling my house in Denver, in order to make a haven, a safe place for queer people. And so, like it was it was kind of just like a reactionary, we've got to do something, and then an opportunity to get a ranch in Livermore came up, to rent a ranch in Livermore. And I had wanted alpaca like for a minute, but never had like the like the ability to justify getting alpaca. [Laughs] You know, like couldn't really explore, you know, like, But then we got 40 acres in Livermore, Colorado. And I had been talking at that point to a couple that was retiring, and like their herd was becoming a little bit too much

for them, but they wanted it to stay together. And so I inherited 72 alpaca from this couple. And then we launched from there, the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch was born in October of 2018. And we, and we've just been running forward ever since trying to make it work, you know?

RAE

Yeah, yeah. I want to come back to the ranch in a second but there's a couple of things I wanted to ask you more about, from what you just said. And one was just like maybe I'm like putting words in your mouth that you didn't say, but it seems really sweet to me that like it sounds a little like your kid coming out as trans, like helped you in some ways come out as trans. Is that is that true?

PENELOPE

Well, undoubtedly. Yeah, I had to wrestle with all of these things when Chris, my ex-girlfriend, when she called and said, you know, like, hey look, like, I know you don't know anything about this. Like, this is what's going on like, what who you thought was a "she" is a "he" because when they when they first came out, they came out as binarily male. And since hitting, you know, teenage years, they're way more comfortable with they/them pronouns, which I think that's great. But wrestling with that was a big, like, yeah, it was a huge thing for me because you got to let go of the ego and just be like, okay, well look like my kid's not stupid. My friend isn't stupid. And these things are real, and we have to deal with them. And, you know, like, I think that a lot of people were telling me to shut it down, right? A lot of people were like, "Oh, no, like, that's evil." You know, like, we faced a lot of people telling us that we were wrong about allowing our child to exist kinda, you know what I mean? Like, yeah, yeah. And I just couldn't, I couldn't subscribe to that. And so that made me face...because I think that all of my resistance was based in me not wanting to look at myself. Like, I think it was a very, like, I don't want to explore this part of me. So I'm just gonna, like, ignore this, you know. And it made me face a lot of that and really come to terms with: a) I don't know everything, and b) this three-year-old child knows what they're fucking saying. And I am going to damage them irreparably if I don't listen. If I don't participate, you know.

RAE

Yeah.

PENELOPE

And that woke me up to a lot of realities. It wasn't until much, you know, it wasn't until down the road that I really started getting counseling. And I really came to terms with my end of it, but yeah, I, without question, I traced that back to them coming out. And

what they had to go through just to be themselves, you know, like...yeah, I don't know, it really, really it did peel the scabs off my eyes as it were.

RAE

Yeah. I guess I'm curious, you said kind of like you'd wanted to get alpacas for a while, but you didn't have a reason to really. And I wonder, where did that start? Did you meet an alpaca? Did you just read about them with, how did you get this idea that you wanted to raise alpacas?

PENELOPE

So it's this weird thing, right, like so I had never been introduced to them. But there was at my church when I was about seven or eight, there was a family that was doing missionary work in Peru, and they brought back photos of these fucking mythical creatures called alpaca. And I had never seen anything like that in my life. Like my mom is Armenian. And so like camel - sure! I understand the camel. But an alpaca is like an adorable camel. [Laughs] It's everything you want a camel to be.

RAE

Like furrier, and shorter...

PENELOPE

Shorter and not as threatening. And like, adorable, like because in Peru during the festivals, they dress them up, and like, yeah, no, it's just like everything you want a camel to be. And I had never met one. It was just fascinating to me. And so just call it kind of always in the back of my mind, like: alpaca, you know? Like, that's, if I could ever make that work.

RAE

And now you have! You have almost two hundred of them.

PENELOPE

And now I have two hundred of them.

RAE

Yeah. And then, I never got spit on by a llama as a kid, my mom did once, which I thought was funny. But, um, so we would talk about their spitting because I feel like it's the thing that, for people who might listen who've never been around an alpaca or a llama or a camel, spitting is that's a part of how they like communicate with each other. And it's so different than so many animals. And I just wonder if there's stuff you could say about that.

PENELOPE

People get weird around, like, the animals spitting at them. I have been, so, you learn right away when you start with alpaca that it's not like saliva that they're spitting at you. It's actually regurgitation that they're spitting at you like it is it is essentially bile that they're spitting at you. And it smells thusly. I have been coated in it many times. When do you have as many as we do and you like, go through shearing or feeding even, like, because it is a pecking order thing. They use it to be like, it's it's their way of being like: Fuck off! You know, like, they just start spitting. And you know, it's a very, it's a clear message.

RAE

Very clear communication. That's true.

PENELOPE

Yeah, like it is the most direct you can get. And yeah, it's gross, but also, you know, like, it's just part of who they are, and and how they - you said it very well - it's how they communicate. It's a way for them to let you know that they're uncomfortable or scared with what you're doing or what's going on or what the situation is. Some of them, like I have alpaca that have never spit at all, like ever. And then I have alpaca that it's like their go-to move. It's how they say hi. When they're happy, they spit. When they're mad, they spit. It is their go to move, and that's, you know, like, you love 'em all the same. But yeah, it's pretty vile. Like it's it has a smell that doesn't ever truly wash out of your clothes. And you just kind of deal with it, you know. They will like, an alpaca does not care. Like, they will sit directly in your face. They will look you in the eye and spit directly in your mouth. They don't care. It is 10 levels of gross, but it's just grass. You know, like at the end of the day.

RAE

Slightly fermented or something, grass, right? [Laughs]

PENELOPE

Just...yeah, it's well fermented grass. You paid for it. You might as well enjoy it. Yeah, I don't. I have many a green-stained shirt. And then, you know, it's just part of, part of raising alpaca. It is less prevalent than people I think fear. But once you catch that first wad in your face, you realize, like, you just got to feel like it's gonna happen, and it's gross. But you can get over it. [Laughs]

RAE

Do they, did they sort of like hum to each other? I remember the llama would make this almost like humming noise to each other.

PENELOPE

Yeah. We call it "alpaca indecision." Because they go [makes alpaca humming noise a few times.]

RAE

Yeah! [Laughs]

PENELOPE

Yeah, like, they only make that noise when they're nervous, or when they're unsettled. And they use it as something of a communication, like you'll hear a hum, like you'll hear wolves howl. And then it'll go through a valley. It's the same with alpaca. They'll hum all the way through a herd. And that's, you know, it's enchanting. When your herd is settled, and you know, you're doing everything, right, like they're fed, they have enough water, they feel comfortable. It's their silence. And that's how you know. You know? So when they're humming, I tend to like perk up and make sure we know what's going on. And then they also yip when they're in trouble, and that'll pass through the herd too. They go [makes repeated yipping noise]. And it's like their warning noise, and it's pretty, that one's pretty incredible.

RAE

When you do the hum again, and I'm going to mute myself because I was laughing too much when you did it before. The indecision? So good. I'm gonna mute myself.

PENELOPE

[Makes humming sound]

RAE

Thank you! [Laughs]

PENELOPE

No problem. [Laughs]

RAE GARRINGER [host]

That's it for Ode to Sheep: Part Two. Thanks so much to Pony and Penelope for sharing your stories. Y'all can find cute pictures of them, also of Pony's dog Possum and of some of the alpacas at the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch, on our Instagram. Thanks also to

the sheep of my stepdad's farm for some audio contributions to this episode. Thanks to Tommie Anderson for the original music that you hear in this episode. And as always, to the Editorial Dream Team, Sharon Patricia Holland, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Hermelinda Cortés. They've all been putting in so much time and care towards helping make Season Two really beautiful and powerful. By the way, Season Two is dropping later this fall, so stay tuned. But that means that for this episode, editorial feedback comes from my good friend Kenny Bilbrey. And their dog, Melvin. Thank you, Kenny. Next up, Ode to Sheep: Part Three! If you think this is getting ridiculous, you are not wrong, but I also promised that you don't want to miss the third and final sheep episode. In it you'll meet Tash Terry, who grew up on the Diné Reservation in Arizona, learning about Churro sheep from her grandmother. And you'll meet her partner, Elena Higgins, who brings us stories of visiting her cousin and uncle who raised sheep out in the countryside of New Zealand. Tash and Elena run an organization called Indigenous Ways, and you'll also hear about that in the next episode. Alright y'all, that's it. Until next time, stay queer out there.

[Sheep bleating and music]

END