

THE HEART OF THE COWBOY POET

*A writing workshop created
and led by American Folk Artist,
Leah Grams Johnson.*



INTRODUCTION:

When we think of the cowboy of the American West, we often imagine a gruff, gritty, unattached character. Toughened by the wind and rain, and life as a whole. The world has not been gentle with him. In triumph or defeat, he maintains the ability— through making the choice— to ride on. But what lacks representation in the innate traits and qualities of our beloved cowboy is the softness of his heart. The cowboy as an artist and poet.

Since there have been cowboys, there have been singing cowboys. Working people have been out on horseback, herding livestock, mending fences and making up songs since the beginning. They've been singing to keep themselves company on long rides, to pass the time of methodical labor, to soothe the animals they care for, and to instinctively try— as the human spirit does— to capture, *somehow*, the beauty, the hardships, and the sheer aliveness of the day. To try to find a way to make a memory last instead of fade. To tell a story. And to keep our own personal and collective history alive. The poems and songs of working cowboys have survived for generations, passed down through oral tradition as well as captured through the work of musical anthropologists such as John Avery Lomax and his son Alan Lomax.

Examples: I will sing a two songs a cappella— one that is familiar to the average listener, and another that is not.

FRAMEWORK:

To be a poet as so many cowboys have been and continue to be, a person must have three things:

- 1. A softness of heart, contrary to the classically tough exterior of our cowboy archetype.*
- 2. A presence of mind and heightened awareness of our sensory experience.*
- 3. A deep attunement to the natural world.*

Now think of our cowboy through this lens:

Here is a man basing his life around his reverence for the natural world, a gentleness towards and understanding for the care of animals, and a desire to live distinctly free from modern day concerns and distractions. He gets his gold from the morning sun on the back of his favorite horse.

Understanding the cowboy this way makes his inclination as a poet as natural as the ground he sleeps upon, or stars he sleeps beneath.

Now let's come back to the three qualities and talk about what can be cultivated and practiced for this necessary disposition for poetry to occur naturally in our lives.

1. "A soft heart". One of the greatest tools of a songwriter is empathy. Whether you are writing about your own life experiences or from another character's perspective. A heart must be open and able to feel fully.
2. "A present mind." Remaining relaxed, open, and attentive. Developing and practicing a heightened awareness of our sensory experience.
3. "Attunement to the natural world." We are in a constant and evolving relationship with the world around us. Everything is a conversation. Everything has a story, if we are willing to listen. Nature is pure creativity...if you need something to write about, turn off your phone and go outside...for an hour, a day, a month, or a year.

TEACH:

"Sensebound writing" through timed writing exercises. This will be elaborated on and shown through examples.

* Instruct the group to begin with five minutes of silence, stillness, and relaxed attention. Ask participants to mentally note one smell, one taste, one sound, one sight, one sensation, one movement.

*Next, ask the group to translate their sensory experience of the present moment onto the page, for ten minutes. With the timer rolling, participants may go anywhere in their mind and on the page, so long as they come back to translating their experience through the lens of any and all senses: sound, taste, touch, smell, sight, kinesthetic.

*Last, participants are given a character-based prompt. They are instructed to do a timed sensory free-write, putting themselves in the mind and body of the character.

SHARE/FOSTERING CREATIVE COMMUNITY:

Participants have the opportunity to share their writing out loud and receive supportive feedback.

ENDING:

Q+A, along with an acoustic performance of several of my songs to close out the session.



ABOUT LEAH:

Leah Grams Johnson is an artist and songwriter, hailing from the rugged coast of Northern California. With a distinct timbre akin to the untamable spirit of the American West, Leah's authentic take on Folk and Country music has resonated with fans of all musical backgrounds nationwide. Raised on the voices of strong impassioned women like Emmylou Harris and Joni Mitchell, Leah discovered early on her path the magic of music and power of a well-written song. She is an alumna of both the Berklee College of Music and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and has been a finalist in numerous songwriting contests including the Telluride Bluegrass Festival and the Rocky Mountain Folks Festival. As she prepares to release her debut full length record in the spring of 2026, Leah divides her time writing songs in Nashville— where she has resided for over a decade— and riding horses in the West.

Like those who came before her she so deeply admires, Leah is a woman of heart and mind. She is her own breed of cowgirl mystic, living on gut feelings, with an unshakeable love for the world.