

“Bluebelly”

His name was Mr. Cortese, and with the way he peeked around the corner of the old barn when we went to see him, only his small dark face visible, his very long fingers clasped to the sideboards, he made us think of a lizard, or at least he made me think of a lizard, and now, many years later, I am there once more, seeing him for the first time. I am fourteen. I am holding the four month old fawn-colored goat that Mr. Cortese will kill. “There he is,” one of the two brothers I have come with says. By this time, the man is coming toward us, and I can see that he is old and small, crouched it seems in his worn t-shirt and dirt-stiff jeans. His hands are huge, and already I imagine the butcher knife clenched in one hand, the wether’s soft neck secured with the other. I don’t want to watch -- I didn’t want to accompany Heralio and Isidro to this place where their father sent them with the goat he bought for tomorrow’s Easter dinner. No, I didn’t want to see a butchering but here I am braving myself through it because, after all, I am supposed to be brave. And then it’s over; the two brothers are packing the newspaper-wrapped carcass back to the truck, and, somehow, I am following the old man past the barn to the far end of his property where there is a crumbling rock wall. “Help me get the ducks back to the barn,” he commands over his shoulder.

At the rock wall, he stops. Dozens of bluebelly lizards are perched on the rocks watching us. The sun is shining brightly. It’s warm, all at once it seems, as if spring in that instant had jumped over the rock wall and spread itself across the land. The old man points to a small lizard that scurries into a crevice. “I don’t want the ducks to scare them,” he says. “Sometimes they will try to eat the small ones.” He glances down at a couple of large white ducks a few feet from us. I keep looking at the lizards, amazed: dozens of sets of eyes glinting in the sun. “Help me,” he says, and we herd the ducks back to the barn.

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Now, with rich late autumn light over the gravel walkway outside my window, and upon the rock wall farther on, I see lizards again everywhere, stationed at the edges of the walkway, perched on the rocks. Looking at me forty some years later? I am an old man, or an older man. And, after thirty years of living elsewhere, I am home again in Sonoma County, where I was born and grew up.

I live now on Sonoma Mountain, a sacred landmark for my Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo ancestors. Not dramatic in shape, without the sharp peak of Mount Tamalpais or Mount Saint Helena, the mountain seems from a distance a mere assemblage of rolling hills rising out of the Santa Rosa plain. Where is “the mountain”? Yet its sheer size is astonishing, overseeing from its heights San Pablo Bay to the south and Mount Saint Helena to the north. And once you begin to explore the mountain, whether from its eastern side below Glen Ellen, or west from Petaluma, you will find unexpected oak and bay laurel groves, redwoods even, and hidden lakes and springs, surprise around a bend -- a landscape as complex as any in Sonoma County, or as a Coast Miwok elder once said, “as beautiful as the designs in our baskets.” I did not grow up on the mountain, but in town, in Santa Rosa. Still I heard the old folks talk of the mountain then, the place where the beginning stories were first told, when Coyote, along with the help of his nephew Chicken Hawk and several other animals, created the world as we know it today: this mountain; the Santa Rosa plain below, with its winding creeks and swath of meandering lagoon; the coastal hills directly west, and beyond them, the blue sea; and Mount Tamalpais, all the way south, whose peak rises out of the landscape like the pitched roof of a redwood bark house. Quail was the most beautiful woman then -- at the time of Creation, when the animals were still people -- which you will see if you look below her plume and find her black pearl eyes. There is a story from that ancient time that explains how skunk got his stripes, why woodpecker wears a red cap, and why rattlesnake goes nowhere without his rattle. There’s a reason warm winds dance with the fog on this mountain, and a reason too why the bay trees

sing a lonesome young man's song. The sun is the oldest of us all -- even older than Coyote. Bluebelly lizard knows this. No one knows the sun better.

The bluebelly lizard, formally known as the Western Fence Lizard, is a staple of the rural Bay Area's long, hot summers, along with the dry grassy hillsides and the sharp smell of bay laurel trees. From light gray to black in color with multiple dark splotches, essentially the colors of the earth and rocks it inhabits, this lizard has a distinctive sky-colored belly, more pronounced in the males. Sentinel-like, the bluebelly perches atop rocks, tree branches, fences, watchful for food -- flies, small moths and spiders, fleas -- as well as for predators -- hawks, snakes, and larger species of lizards. The territorial males, known for their push-ups, will, during the mating season from late May through July, stage fierce wrestling matches during which one may lose his tail. But the bluebelly lizard, after losing its tail, will grow another. Perhaps the bluebelly's most distinctive feature for anyone living in or close to Bay Area rural landscapes is its ability to stem the spread of Lyme disease. According to countless studies, ticks that feed on its blood are much less likely to carry the disease.

My ancestors always knew the bluebelly was important. He knows the sun better than any of us, after all. According to the old stories, the sun gave bluebelly a piece of its home -- the sky -- to wear as a sign of kinship. Sun said to Bluebelly, "With my home on your stomach the people will always know to remember me. When they see you each spring, again sitting atop the rocks, they will know too that I have returned. Your belly will match the sky where once again I'm looking down." That's why he's one of the first creatures in the spring, and why he sits where the sun can see him.

The bluebelly figures prominently in Native California lore. According to a story told among the Sierra Miwok of the western sierra foothills, when Coyote made people, Lizard was the one who persuaded Coyote to give humans hands like Lizard's so we could use tools. Among the Chumash of coastal southern California, the bluebelly lizard was a person of great

importance. There, in the sierra foothills and southern California coast, bluebelly is no doubt an important character in the warp and woof of the storied landscapes.

But I don't know those landscapes.

Home is Sonoma County.

Santa Rosa was, forty years ago, still a relatively small town surrounded by agriculture, apple and prune orchards, dairies and chicken farms. Post World War II sprawl had not yet claimed all the pastures and orchards from the town's edges. I remember once coming upon an abandoned dairy farm and seeing a developer's red flags crisscrossing the empty fields. The milking barn lay in ruins, a pile of heaped cinder blocks, as if the farmer, out of spite over the new zoning ordinance that forced him from his land, had blown up the building. There, in the rubble, were countless bluebelly lizards, vigilant, watchful, but trusting it seemed that nothing -- no hawk or snake, nor imminent bulldozer -- would destroy their kingdom.

One of the first things that appealed to me about my new home on Sonoma Mountain was its numerous rock walls. I moved into the house on a July day, when the mountain was warm, dry. There were plenty of lizards; the rock walls are a perfect habitat for bluebellies. But I didn't think much about them. There was the frenzy of moving, the unloading of boxes, then a water pump to repair, a broken window to replace. And then I experienced something I hadn't counted on: anxiety. Could I find my way here after having been gone for so long? Could I settle in? What of the mountain's silence, after my years of living in L.A.? Was there a door I could pass through and find myself home again, or might I find myself forever wandering in the dark, dissolved by the silence?

More and more my life on the mountain felt like a vacation that was lasting too long. Yes, I grew up in Sonoma County, but in town, never so far from neighbors; my home now is near the top of the mountain, at the end of a steep and winding dirt road. Not far from my property line, a large Coast Miwok community once thrived. But now? And what of those old stories I'd heard as a kid? The chasm between then and now felt impossible to cross. Was

there ever a home here? Maybe I should have picked a house in town, I told myself. But, alas, even the town has changed, become unrecognizable: a huge mall where the movie theatres had been; the open fields and orchards I'd remembered now buried under housing tracts and strip malls advertising submarine sandwiches and all-year tans.

Then the land itself came out, pushed open the door I'd been looking for, and poured through. Or say, Coyote, as tricky and surprising as the mountain he created, came out. Like this: I am driving home, up the mountain, with a bag of groceries alongside me in the front seat, and I spot a coyote as he trots past a fence post and disappears into the brush. Probably looking for a rabbit, I think. Maybe going back to its den someplace. Isn't that what coyotes do, hunt and live in hollowed tree trunks? And then there's a tickling sensation in my brain, and I'm laughing, laughing at my foolishness. Coyote hunt? Coyote live in a den? What was I thinking? Where had I been? No; Coyote created the world up on the mountain, along with his nephew Chicken Hawk; and, after he was disrespectful to his wife Frog Woman, she left him, living forever after in a lake, which is why to this day he howls at the moon. Quail; she doesn't just lay eggs in my lavender. She has the secret the lonesome young man from the bay laurel grove needed to seduce the woman he loved. And this lizard, the bluebelly on my rock wall, who else but the best friend of the sun? And now what's before me but trails of stories, one story leading to another, my known home, up the mountain and down. In town, on the Santa Rosa plain, voices rise, up from a below a cul de sac or McDonald's: a heavy-set Pomo medicine man in suspenders and a top hat who walks with the grace of a hummingbird; a girl with a gold tooth who eats a raw egg to exorcise a demon; an old man with a butcher's knife and a million lizards.

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I had presumed Mr. Cortese was Mexican. "No, he's Portuguese or something," said Heralio and Isidro, who were Mexican. Someone else said the old man was Indian, not Coast Miwok or Pomo, but Yurok or Hupa, from Humboldt County.

After my visit with Heralio and Isidro, I went again, one more time. His house was small; the yard was littered with box springs and rusted car parts. He raised goats and sheep and ducks, which he traded for staples -- rice, flour, a crate of apples. I didn't understand then that, like many recently displaced farmers, Mr. Cortese no doubt rented his small farm for a pittance from a developer waiting to build houses on the land. His ducks were Muscovies, big white ducks with fleshy red faces, known to raise large batches of ducklings that grow fast. A cousin wanted to start raising Muscovies. "Feed them well. Do good to them. They'll give lots of babies," Mr. Cortese said, after placing a wooden crate containing ducks on the bed of my cousin's pick-up.

"I'll help you get the ducks back to the barn," I offered.

I looked to the edge of Mr. Cortese's property, to the rock wall, but no ducks were there, and suddenly I felt stupid.

"Ain't no little lizards now. No lizards at all. Not until summer again." To make his point, he stomped his thick leather boot on the rain-soaked ground.

Looking out my window, beyond the rock wall with its sentinel bluebellies here and there, I see the curled dry leaves of a large oak scattered on the ground below the tree, and falling, one at a time it seems. Behind my house, clumps of poison sumac have turned red. The old bay laurels drop their fruit -- peppernuts my ancestors harvested for eons, along with acorns from the oaks. The birds are full-feathered. The deers' coats are long. In two weeks a first frost will cover the land, visible on the summer dry grass and thistle. Then rain. Short days. Lizards hibernate. No more atop the rocks walls. Not one.

Mabel McKay, the late Pomo medicine woman and renowned basket weaver, warned that we should only tell stories during the winter months, after the first frost and before the last. "You must pay attention in summer to where you are going," she said. "Don't be thinking about the stories then."

In the old days people had to pay attention in the summer, lest they step on a rattlesnake or scorpion. And they didn't need stories in summer; they could see where they were going, find their way in a world renewed by the sun. The winter nights, with hours of idle time, certainly provided the opportunity for storytelling, but wasn't it the long hours of darkness that prompted the need? Wouldn't one recall a washed out hillside after a storm and worry about the changes to the landscape? Would the hill be recognizable? What of seeing the entire Santa Rosa plain under water? What of a memory in that long darkness of a broken path, long from the home village? Wouldn't one then welcome the stories, sing for the animals to chart again a known world?

I've been home five years, settled in. In the waning light outside my window, I see the cusp of winter. I know the long winter nights; I've known too the broken path. Winter? Darkness? Bluebelly, that fellow on my rock wall, hibernate? No. What I know, following him, now and again, is that there will be sun, that there will be a thousand more stories, some told with the pencil in my old man's hand, stories about Coyote and Frog Woman, stories about a medicine man who walks with the grace of a hummingbird, a gold-toothed girl who casts a demon from her body, and an old man with ducks and endless lizards, stories and more stories, until the sun returns to the mountain again, and there are new leaves on the trees I know, quail in the lavender and bluebelly lizards on my rock wall.