

Frost

Winter.

Not ancient stories about the time, before this one, when the animals were still people, before Coyote messed things up with his hapless machinations. Nor the dark room, warm but still black as the cold, mid-winter night outside, with nothing but the floating voice of the story teller impersonating the people in the stories: crafty Coyote's devious whispering; Blue Jay's shrill admonishments; Frog's old man rasp; Quail, the beautiful of all the people, her gentle-as-brook-water songs. None of those things. But cows - - feeding the cows, their cloven hooves planted in the frost-covered earth, nostrils blowing steam above an unfastened bale of alfalfa.

I would stand, warming my hands in my coat pockets, for hours watching the cows. I had a good eye then, not just for an old cow's swollen knee, or maybe a rheumy eye, but even the faintest rise in her hide, indicating the presence of a grub. And the alfalfa, too: it was best if you could see dried purple flowers, sign of an early June harvest, after just enough warm weather. I was seven. I had no cows of my own, but followed the local dairyman. I wanted a cow.

No Indians at home either. I was adopted. At the time, I knew nothing of my birth father, Emilio Hilario, or my Coast Miwok heritage. That would come twenty years down the road. And I would hear about the things the old timers did. Winter activities; storytelling, for instance. Renowned Pomo basket weaver and doctor Mabel McKay, who I was fortunate to have known, explained the rules about the ancient time stories: "Only tell them in winter, after the first frost and before the last frost. Think about them then, their meanings. Not in summer, when there's snakes and things in the grass and you need to pay attention to where you are going." But that has nothing to do with memory, what surfaces from experience, as I recall winter now.

There was a man named Tommy Baca. He had only one arm, and he was a house painter. My mother said a thousand times no one could mix color like Tommy Baca. He was a stocky man of medium height, with a broad handsome face. He had thick, wavy black hair. He smiled a lot. I marveled at how he kept papers and such tucked against his side, just below his armpit, with the stub of his missing arm, and the way the stub would move, seemingly of its own volition, when he was excited, though I was careful not to let him find me looking. "Don't stare at people," my mother snapped. He was Indian, Coast Miwok; if I knew as much then I don't remember, certainly not the Coast Miwok part. What interested me was that he had cows.

And because my parents were friends with him, I had access to the cows. They were steers, actually; mixed blood dairy calves, Guernsey and Hereford, which in those days you could get for a drop in the bucket, as the dairy farmers kept only their purebred heifers. Out at Tommy's place, west of town, I could spend hours with the critters. Once his son, Mark, about seven like me, asked, "Why do you always look at Dad's cows?" and I felt as if it was a bad thing, like when other kids called me "adopted."

I'm not clear about this next part. What happened exactly. Maybe because for a month or more I was on cloud nine. Did I hear my parents and Tommy Baca talking in the kitchen after

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work one night, did I hear about it that way, before the afternoon out at Tommy's when he said, "Pick out the one you want. Take your pick."?

A Guernsey and Hereford cross steer. I kept him in the field adjacent my parents' house. I named him Harry. Why I picked him from a lot of half a dozen others exactly like him, I don't know, or remember. He proved intelligent. He knew the time of day, precisely, when I arrived home from school, and never failed to stand just inside the aluminum gate - - always the same spot - - waiting for me. He learned to genuflect, lowering himself on one knee, so that you could scratch the crown of his head, and later, when he grew, to make it easier to climb aboard his back. Yes, we rode him - - every kid from the neighborhood in those days has a picture of himself or herself astride Harry. His horns grew, but he was gentle, careful even, when he tossed his head to shoo flies or strew a flake of hay over the ground. Except for the time, head lowered, he charged Alan Chaney, chasing him out of the field. But no one cared since everyone knew Alan was "a bully," and had no doubt provoked Harry.

That was so long ago. A million stories ago. Of course, I found out who my father was - - I can look back and understand things I hadn't the faintest idea of before. The connections between me and Tommy Baca, for instance. His grandmother, Maria Copa, sang for my great-great grandfather, Tom Smith, as he doctored the sick. I can imagine them along the coast and through inland valleys, traveling in a wagon and later in a Model T Ford. That box with the stuff of history spills - - the ancient villages fall out: Olumpali and Alaguali for Maria Copa, and Petaluma and Olemitcha for Tom Smith; then the Spanish galleons and English steamers, oceans crossed, wars, marriages, priests and soldiers, adobe and brick, overalls and Panama Hats, and, still, clamshell disc beads and flicker feathers - - and I see in that chance meeting of an adopted boy and a one-armed house painter the miraculous web that is all of time, nothing more, nothing less, all-inclusive. But it's memory that prevails still. Memory trounces this miraculous web, that is, if memory is not the vantage point from which I gaze upon it. No, not even Grandpa Tom's songs left on wax cylinders, or his ancient time stories left in a graduate student's dissertation; not beads and feathers. Winter. It's feeding the cows - - feeding Harry. And frost. The earth is blanketed with frost. A quarter inch thick at least, on the bare tree limbs, on rocks. Harry too is covered, topped as if with a layer of frosting. Harry steps into the sun to munch the alfalfa I just tossed over the fence, and I see the frost so cold, so powerful begin to fall from his back, barely perceptible, trifling dust. And, again, I'm not sure what happened exactly - - whether I had overheard "fattened" and "spring grass" in a conversation between my parents and Tommy Baca the night before, or months before and didn't understand or chose not to - - but at that moment I got it, understood the whole story, what the words would mean after the last frost, come summer. I might protest but it would do no good. Never mind the purple blooms in the alfalfa. What a complicated and frightening world replaces winter.