

ELSEWHERE

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AN INTRODUCTION BY THE WRITER

Tamara Linse

Do oysters hope for pearls? I don't think so. They're a cancer that eats them from the inside. They don't think pearls are beautiful. They hate them and only wish to get them out. In that sense, "Where the Bluebellies Are" is my pearl.

In 2000, I had the honor of attending John D'Agata's University of Wyoming workshop on the lyric essay. "Cicero!" he would say. He explained that the word "essay" has its origin in the Medieval French *essai*, which means "to try." We could never pin him down to an exact definition because that's what the definition seems to be for him—to leave yourself open to let the work be what it will.

To me, the lyric essay is a prose essay that uses the tools of poetry to supercharge its effects. It's not a prose poem, which is a poem in the structural form of prose (a paragraph). The lyric essay is nonfiction, but it stretches the form, placing personal truth above factual accuracy. It has license to keep itself open.

This essay had its beginning in John's workshop. I had written the first few pages but wasn't sure where I was going with it, so I went to see him during office hours. He told me, "Don't worry about its form. Just put it down. Keep writing. Put stars between each section and keep going with it. It will find its form." When John talks to you, always a smile in his voice, he tilts his head, and you feel drawn into his golden confidence.

He was right. Six years and innumerable drafts later, "Where the Bluebellies Are" has found its form. Someday I'll write a book-length *essai* about my family and my childhood. May I have nacre enough.

WHERE THE BLUEBELLIES ARE

Tamara Linse

1. Bluebellies

There is a place in northern Wyoming where bluebellies live. Bluebellies are small—small enough to fit in your hand. They are pale tan or gray, mottled to merge with sagebrush and dune. They can be a trick of the eyes, nothing but a whip of shadow as they fade into the sand, and you are left with air seeping through your fingers. If you are able to catch one, its scales are smooth and cool and dry. Wire-like claws cling to your palm, and as if by spell the bluebelly freezes stonelike and lifeless. But beauty will not be denied—turn it over, Phthalo blue.

This place where bluebellies live we call the Red Hills—a strip of rust-colored butte, dune, and coulee, as if a careless painter slipped with her brush. A red gash. Here, only desiccates survive—sagebrush, bluebelly, and an occasional coyote. It is the creek that is the land's lifeblood. Its water supports the dapple-green valley, and, like a lover's body, the Red Hills molds to its curves.

2. Memories

Memories of my childhood are like bluebellies. In your hand, they show in muted colors. They are fixed, stonelike and lifeless. But they're hard to catch. As quickly as you grasp for them, they are gone. Sometimes, all you're left with is the creature's still-twitching tail.

3. "To Range the Open Heights"

Sometimes, I would trail my two older brothers into the red wastes, and we'd roam the rusted landscape, ravaged in slow motion, shadows disappearing and reappearing under the weight of the sun.

To me, then, my brothers were the smartest and strongest boys in the world. My brother Rob had the best arm. He inherited our father's reach, and he could peg a running jackrabbit. He was high school quarterback the year we took state. Our older brother Jim took apart broken clocks and radios and put them back together so they worked. He also pushed Rob out from under a dropping dragline bucket, and then he had to wear a full body cast.

But now I remember—or do I imagine?—the thinness of their arms as we pulled ourselves over boulders, how fragile their necks looked under the raggedy ends of their hair, how dirty and misfit their clothes were, the gaunt looks in their eyes.

4. Special Adaptations

Creatures in this unforgiving place have special adaptations. Although cold-blooded, bluebellies can survive the arid heat and the bitter cold. They retreat to burrows and under shrubs in the heat of the day to cool, they bask in the sun every morning and evening to warm, and they hibernate in winter. They're shy, and at the first sign of threat, they scurry to safety. But, if caught by the tail, they will wrench themselves free, pulling their body apart, in order to live.

Scorpions and rattlesnakes live here too. Their special adaptations are as hypodermists who can level the largest of enemies. To un-naturalists, these creatures are nightmares, death—pits of writhing snakes, attack of the twenty-foot scorpion, snakes on

a plane. In these fictions, these creatures kill heroes. Really, though, you never see them in groups, swarming over unwary lovers. They are antisocial and shy, their aggression reserved for those weaker than themselves.

Scorpions are specialists. They carry tools. One of their tools, the barbs on the ends of their tails, delivers venom with a hinged snap like a mousetrap. When threatened, they wave this barb defiantly, shouting "I warn you! I warn you!" They also have pincers on each forward arm. Size matters—the smaller the pincers, the more venomous the barb.

Rattlesnakes are also specialists with tools. On one end, there's the rattle. Like the scorpion's wave, it shouts "I warn you! I warn you!" One the other end is the weapon, the fangs. Deadly poison for defense and offense.

These tools are not just for defense. These are disingenuous creatures. It is another of their special adaptations. In order to live, they must lure or stalk insects or small animals close enough to inject their venom. They must look into the eyes of their victims as the breath leaves them.

Bluebellies and scorpions and rattlesnakes have another thing in common. They are all cannibals of their own kind.

5. Emotional Poverty

I hated—hate—my childhood.

6. Rimrocked

We kept sheep pastured near the creek. One year some of them wandered into the Red Hills and disappeared. We found only one—it was on the rimrocks overlooking the valley. The animal could not climb down and would not retrace its steps into the bowels of the hills. We could hear its painful bleating all the way to the house. There was only one thing to do. We climbed up the cliff and threw the sheep off. It let out a startled "Blaaat!" as it bounced, then scrambled to its feet and trotted off shaking its head.

7. Familial Guilt

At one time there was a thriving community up and down the creek. Lots of farmsteads. Now there are only shells of cabins, overgrown with creeper vine and sagebrush.

Only my family remains.

Why? Was it the natural outcome of changing economies? Or was it because of things done or not done by my family?

8. Relations I

My great-grandfather Frank was a horse-thief.

In a drunken rage, Frank chased his wife—my great-grandmother Ellen—with an axe.

My grandmother Bessie and her sister Edna horsewhipped each other in a fight over the man who would become my grandfather, Billie.

Bessie broke Edna's arm with a shovel in an argument over the water in a ditch. In the second of her three marriages, Edna's husband busted his back but could still walk. Then Edna ran off with the hired hand, abandoning her two kids and her broken husband.

My uncle Lloyd beat my grandmother Bessie—his own mother.

Lloyd pushed his son Hip into calling out my brother Jim in order to beat him up. Jim, seven years Hip's junior, won because he wrestled and knew "funky Chinese wrestling holds."

After Lloyd's other son Will threw a punch at a cop, Lloyd urged Will to move to Australia to elude police. Will moved.

Another uncle, Bob, moved away from the ranch after college. Lloyd's daughter beat up Bob's son and the son's wife with frying pan.

Bob's son eventually killed himself.

Lloyd's family and ours started to feud. This prompted decades of legal battles, guns waved, fist-fights, tractors sabotaged, dogs killed, and my brother-in-law's fatal heart attack at the age of 45. I think it also killed my father, though he died of cancer and strep-pneumonia.

9. Relations II

My great-grandmother Ellen, who was known as Ma Strong, married my great-grandfather Frank, even though she knew that he'd been in prison, and followed him as he made his way west.

Ellen wrote long letters to her sister until the day she died.

Ellen took in strays—children and animals of all sorts showed up at her door and stayed.

My grandmother Bessie, when she was a teenager, delivered mail. One of her delivery stops, an old trapper, would sometimes get a cake along with his mail.

My father Royce, in World War II, gathered all the valuable possessions in a huge French house and locked them in the vault so that no one would steal them. He later mailed the key.

My father, for years, gave no resistance to my uncle for the sake of the ranch.

My father quit hunting in his older years: "I'd rather shoot them with a camera."

One of my sisters stayed on friendly terms with my uncle's family, even with the feud.

10. The Stories that We Told

It wasn't difficult to think of the stories of violence and cruelty. It was hard to think of the ones about kindness. That's because the stories my family told themselves and each other were the violent ones, not the kind.

11. Humidity and Humanity

People like wet green places. They don't like the Red Hills. Like the craters of the moon, the mind rejects this landscape, thinking it lost, beyond knowing. It has not been claimed by the human hand. No street signs to mark territories, no phones to call ambulances, no recognizable markers to warn of dangers. You can only read the land after you've known it for a long time.

But what happens when you change signs? When the signs you read are not the ones everyone else reads? You start making up your own signs. "Be tough" and "Fear is for the weak" and "Might makes right" and "We can't afford emotions" and "The individual does not matter." I don't matter.

12. Red Rage

In the spring, droplets of rain beat the dry red soil. Droplets ran into drops and pulled together its cousins. Soon drops became rivulets became streams became floods. The water rolled off the Red Hills, scraping away the soil, tumbling rocks. It swelled to a red rage, its roar challenging the landscape. It ripped whole trees from their roots and broke them over its rocky knees. What was left were gullies sculpted and rarefied, the sandpaper lips of drop-offs scoured, bowls formed where the water fell to the earth and crashed and then the dirt eddied out along the margins.

13. Cradled in Stone

We kids made bonfires in the basins of sculpted sandstone. After dark, the red hell of the flames reflected off the tortured red of the rocks. But the rim spread its wings over us, protecting us from the dark unknown. We took comfort in the red we knew.

14. Marking Time

Skylined against the blue-white sky, three buttes rise like circling dust-devils. They are the highest point in the Red Hills, and they mark the outer boundary, the point where you break free.

On hot dry summer days, I wandered coulees and climbed cliffs to reach these buttes. Spent, I'd rest in the slim shade of a boulder at the buttes' base. Names—sisters, cousins, friends—were carved in its sandstone hulk, time spent to hold off time. Then I'd take the buttes in stages.

First, the sandy floor cupped among the buttes. I humbled myself on my knees, with ants waving their antennae at my breath, to find petrified sea creatures, the remains of the bluebellies' liquid-breathing great-great-great-grandparents. Snail shells like imps' toenails, endoskeletons like bullets, and tiny stars in slate—petrified vertebrae, alone or stacked in tiny Athenian columns. Searching for the stars in the dirt.

Then I'd climb each butte. The shortest, the easiest, nothing more than a steep sandy grade. The second, a few cliffs. The third and highest, a rampart of boulders and crevices. Hand over toe over hand, testing each move for the uneasy hold, I'd pull myself to the top.

Standing on that highest butte, I was equal to the hawks that caught the updrafts and pitched their cries into the wind. I could see the earth curve. I could see all the way over the barrier cliffs next the creek to my home's front door. Why did I only look toward home? Why didn't I look the other direction toward towns and houses, toward civilization?

Then, drawn like a bluebelly toward the morning sun, I'd launch for home, bailing over the edges of cliffs in arm-waving jumps, hurtling down steep embankments, the sand giving way under my feet, falling. I'd circle cactus patches and skip over stones, round drop-offs and blind alleys. At night's entrance, I'd descend the barrier cliffs, the smell of wet places in my nostrils. I'd soothe my stoned feet in the creek's aching cold until I was ready to face that last half-mile.

15. What's Hidden

Even in dry places, you can find water—if you know where to look, if you know how to let go. Follow a well-worn game trail, and if you're careful, you can creep up on a deep

coulee choked with electric green. Damp earth and wild spearmint fill your nostrils. Was that the throaty sound of frogs? A seep wells up high above the water table—much higher than water's supposed to be—to trickle for 100 yards before vanishing. A huge cedar tree presides. Bushy succulents, blue-green reeds, and whispery grasses jostle on the sandy bottom. But you must spring upon it. You can't see it from more than a few feet away because it is quickly contained by the crushing swell of red.

16. Let Go

Late in the fall, with bluebellies in hibernation, after all the leaves were off the trees and snow stood deep in the high country, we trailed cattle down to the home place. The end of that frigid three days was the Red Hills. Every year, we'd trail into the Red Hills at dusk of the last day. We'd push the cattle until we couldn't see them any more, the tired horses stumbling in a dull slow trot, and then we'd let the cattle drop as we made our way home.

You have to trust. You have to let your horse make its way in total darkness, through the cliffs and cactus and coyotes barking on the rim. You have to turn over physical control. It does no good to tense the already worn-out body or to get off and lead the horse. You'll only end up rimrocked with cactus in your feet. Not only that, but you have to let your mind go. Don't think about the dangers, about the bluebellies. Don't let the past or what you know about the land make you afraid. You have to relax, move forward with the horse, and trust the inky dark.