

Pining for an Oak Meadow

Guy Hand

A western bluebird floats inches above October meadow grass, hovering there, its iridescent blue wings a soft blur, its head cocked downward, its eyes locked onto something hidden from my view. Then it dives and disappears. I hear the dry rustle of fallen leaves, see a shivering in the straw-blond grass, and as the bird pops back into view, I spot the fat green grasshopper clasped within its bill. Another bluebird glides down from the immense oak, kites above the grass for a heartbeat, then dives. Then another. As my eyes adjust to the deep shade gathered under the canopy of this old tree, I see half a dozen bluebirds perched within its dusky light, embraced by thick serpentine limbs and dark leaves, like arboreal sprites, each waiting a turn.

This wide, wondrous meadow. *There is so much life here.* Even at the far end of another rainless California summer, another of this country's annual and utterly uncompromising six-month droughts, this place is teeming. That an oak woodland and all its attendant flora and fauna can survive a waterless half year is miraculous to me, as if the rigid rules of survival have been, in deference to the beauty of this place, waived. The more pragmatic of my biologist friends would call it simple adaptation, the machinations of millennia, the inevitable evolutionary drift that pairs all species to place. I wonder. Over my right shoulder I hear the snare-drum call of a Nuttall's woodpecker as it launches into the air. Over my left comes the querulous cry of a northern flicker. In this meadow I've found mountain lion tracks pressed into soft clay; I've caught the metallic light of the full moon glinting in the eyes of mule deer, fox, raccoon, skunk.

When we bought our cabin, I was slow to warm to the chaparral- and oak-studded mountains that surround us, this wild swath of

