

Ellen Meloy

Bluff

Perhaps it began with the wind. For weeks, the wind blew its dry burden of red dust down the canyons and across the open desert into our ears, our pockets, our nerves. The wind lifted up the top three inches of Arizona and dropped it on our heads. The gusts made the roots of my hair ache. No one in Bluff could remember so much wind blowing day and night, day after day.

People grew testy and distracted, but we knew our land well. We knew the stillness would return, even as we longed for it. Then one day the wind did stop. The earth tilted and Bluff slid.

After killing a policeman in nearby Colorado, three anti-government extremists surfaced east of Bluff, where one of them shot and wounded a local deputy. Within hours, the somnolent little town turned into an armed camp with roadblocks, helicopters, SWAT teams, canine tracking units, and hundreds of edgy men in uniform darting madly about with small arsenals on their persons.

Early in the manhunt, my husband Mark and I were allowed through a roadblock late at night. We drove to our isolated house above the river. Where Bluff should have been, there was a blank space, an inky darkness. The entire town had disappeared. No one told us that residents had been evacuated.

From some obscure heap of dust balls, Mark unearthed his old shotgun, put it next to our bed. The damaged gun barrel was unnervingly curved. The label on the ammunition box showed a pleasantly plump pheasant.

As a thudding fleet of choppers passed over us, Mark told me that if I had to use the gun, I should aim for the crotch. "Whose crotch?" I asked, certain that the outlaws were all at once somewhere, anywhere, everywhere. When I took a shower, it felt like the movie *Psycho*.

The Bluff school, used as a command post, swarmed with troops. The testosterone was so thick a woman could get pregnant just by walking down the hall. The map room was strangely chilly, an oasis of detumescence.

When it was discovered that we had not evacuated, that our isolated property had not been checked, and that I was alone while Mark worked, I was given two sets of advice.

A sheriff's deputy said, "Get yourself some guns."

The FBI said, "We'll give you an escort." I took the escort.

"Get guns?" I mumbled as five FBI guys led me down my driveway. "Get myself some guns?"

Obviously, I was the only person in North America without them. One token, squishy, white doughball of liberalism who still believed that if you hated government, maybe you should do something really radical to change things like vote.

I wondered if arms against arms created an endless spin into violence. I wondered why the world had turned so vicious. I wondered why the FBI guys wore bulletproof vests and I did not.

They poised their rifles as we reached the house and, with quiet courtesy, asked me for permission to enter.

I stood outside in a limp noodle posture, my wildlife menagerie around me—lizards, rabbits, ravens, the bullsnake that napped under the mint bushes, the flycatcher and her nest of baby birds in our eave. I looked through the glass doors at the way too many books, my stupid little piles of river rocks, the fetishes from Mexico, the Navajo mud toys.

The armed search precipitated a wholesale destruction of the lyrical. It felt dreamy and unreal, like hand grenades in a monastery.

These days, people still recount manhunt anecdotes. They recall the endless rumors, such as the one about the outlaws hijacking a UPS truck and terrorizing the Four Corners region in little brown suits.

Countless stories are told, all but the most critical one. That is what really happened and why did these men disrupt so many lives with their survivalist fantasy, one that arms itself to the teeth and touts violence as a virtue.

Two of the fugitives remain at large. They will likely surface when they become bold or miss their mommies. Meanwhile, people in Bluff slowly reclaim the river and de-spook their yards, trails, and canyons. I look at my neighbors' faces and see a bone-deep fatigue.

The wind has returned. It comes up every afternoon, pushing heat and dust, rattling the dry cottonwood leaves and thrashing my hair about my face. We long for stillness.

This time, no one is sure that it will come again so easily. In Bluff's deep peace, there is a severe crack.

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