Dwelling

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The thunderstorms always came from the south-west. Over the trees, billowing clouds with dark underbellies, stalking their way across the lake to hang over our house, shaking it with every angry rumble.

I loved thunderstorms. They were wild and cruel and angry, and I understood wild and cruel and angry, for it was what I had grown up with every day of my life.

I would lie in my bed under blankets I had piled up because I needed the weight to sleep. They would crush down around me and I would drip sweat as the thunder would shake the third story of the house. I hated being hot but I loved the pressure on my body. I knew that behind the thunderstorm there was relief. Cool air, insects quieting down, damp grass shining and a mist rising as the sun began to burn off the moisture. My sisters would sleep in their bunk beds at the other end of the room, and I would lie awake, listening to the storm.

I grew up with soil in my blood and fear in my bones.

My father built the house. His hands were in every piece, he was there each step of the way beside the hired workmen. My sister and I climbed in the foundation, dug sticky clay up from the ground and made mountains out of it. I watched them bend the rebar, raise the walls. I was there when my father shot a nail through his thumb with a nail gun. He pulled it out and went back to work; he hated hospitals and he was brave. I wanted to be brave like him.

My sisters and I were sure that there was a man living in the attic of the half-finished house. In the evenings, when all the workmen had packed up and left, we would hear hammering and banging. My older sister and I would run from the camper trailers where we lived and try to find him, but all there would be was the basement door, swinging open in the wind, even though it had been locked before. We never saw him, only heard him. Hammering in the attic, disappearing when we looked for him.

My mother had a hand in designing the house, and she wanted windows. Windows in every room, windows on every wall, letting in the warm light. The living room had the largest, floor-to-ceiling and covering most of the southern wall. Before they were installed, my father gathered us up and brought us to the edge of the gap. He folded paper airplanes and handed them out. It was a walk-out basement and so we were on the main floor but two floors above the ground. We watched

the paper airplanes arch above the backyard and down past the shooting range my father had insisted we build, before the white flashes of paper disappeared into the trees. Warm air drafted in and the sun was getting ready to set, staining the sky a curious blue, and somewhere in the depths of my chest there was peace.

My sister and I would explore the woods around our house, tripping over fallen trees and examining flattened grass where moose had lain the night before. Piles of deer poop and tracks deep-sunk into the muddy ground would wind among the hanging bluebells and white daisies. We would gather branches and leaves of different plants and make potions and soup for our imaginary families, going on great adventures in our twenty-three acres of freedom.

Our neighbour came over one day, a rough-edged man with a dozen horses, and said a cougar had caught one last night. Leapt on its back and bit its neck, killing it. All that was left in the morning was spilled entrails and the corpse, no sign of the culprit but the signature kill and tracks in the damp grass.

We were no longer allowed to explore without our Great Pyrenees along, but I couldn't leave the yard after that. I was terrified of cougars and cats, they had eyes like my father.

The morning of the first snow was the day we moved into the house. It was finished enough to hold us, and we left the pair of camper trailers we'd been camped in for the summer and moved into the plywood and lilac drywall of the basement. Icing sugar snow coated the muddy ground and voles crawled up through holes in the floor. They crawled into the beds and my sisters screamed and I was put on the bed the voles crawled on, because I didn't care. I was good at sleeping.

I grew up with a gun in my hands and gunpowder on my tongue.

There was a porcupine in our woods, and our two dogs chased it down and got quills in their noses. Our Great Pyrenees suffered obediently through the pain of getting them pulled out, but it took three men to hold down our skinny Lab mutt. She knew what it was like to be hit, but this was the only time I saw her fight back.

There was a porcupine in our trees, and my father handed me his old .22 break action rifle and told me to shoot it. I needed him to love me, and I knew the dangers of disobeying, so I held the gun to my shoulder and lined up the sites and took a shot.

It fell through the gnawed-white tree, catching on branches and tumbling through the air. I didn't watch it hit the ground.

My father checked it; it was dead. Dead before it hit the ground, shot through the skull. He shot it five more times to make sure, he said, but I knew it was just because he liked to shoot things.

It hadn't suffered.

It was dead, dead before it hit the ground, but somewhere inside myself I was still falling.

My father taught me to shoot when I was very young. I don't remember my first lesson, I just remember growing up with cold metal in my hands and a rifle butt against my shoulder. I grew up with guns as much as I grew up with my siblings; I lived in the gun ranges and hunting stores and boxes full of ammo.

My father loved his guns, as much as he was capable of loving anything.

Once he got a new gun for his job. A small pistol, dark grey and heavy. It had a kick to it, too powerful for me to try, but still he wanted me to be there while he shot it. He ordered me close to his flank, levelled the pistol into the trees and shot over and over, the bullet casings flying out. They were hot, hitting my face and arms and burning me, but I wasn't allowed to move, just close my eyes in hope to protect some part of myself.

The bullet casings glittered, crushed into the mud that seemed eternal, the mud that only dried on the hot mid-summer nights to lay cracked and gaping, waiting for rain to fall again.

I grew up with wildness in my claws and a fire in my belly.

Fall evenings came fast and cold, and the trees surrounding our house changed colours quickly. One day they were green and shining, the underbellies of leaves flashing and reflecting the sun with the gusts of wind in them, the next they were yellowing and drooping, waiting for a long cold winter to bury us all until spring.

Evenings I would stand out on the hill where I was as tall as the trees below me, in a t-shirt and torn jeans, arms around myself, and yipped and howled. My voice was high, unchanged, and the sound of it tore at my throat. When I paused, the coyotes answered back. All below me I could hear them in a half-circle in the woods, howling in return. They sang and I sang back, and I was cold to the core of my chest but I gripped the wildness between my teeth and held it, it was mine, and they were mine.

I grew up with something unholy inside me.

I was always angry. My body hit puberty and I hated the changes and hated my life. I screamed at my sisters when no adult was around to hear us, I hit things and shouted and raged, a

helpless whirlwind destroying everything around me. I challenged my father and his strict beliefs, always carefully, always fearfully, but driven by the anger inside me.

I remember the first time I stood up to him. Thirteen, all of five feet and eighty pounds, painfully skinny and dangerously unwell. It was bedtime for the young ones. My brother screamed, voice thin and wailing.

I was cold. Colder than winter, colder than the snow that would fall knee-deep, colder than the ice that would slick the steep driveway until it was all but impassable, locking us down in our regal dungeon.

I went into my brother's room. I saw the pain.

I spoke up.

I put my brother to bed, hugged him and wiped his dripping tears, tucked him in firmly. My father lurked, a dark presence over my shoulder.

My father waited for me to apologise.

I made nice, but I never said "I'm sorry." I gripped the wildness in me between my teeth, it was mine and I would not give it up.

I grew up with feral cats, chasing them through the woods. We got our first cat from our neighbours, staunch christians with eight children and a homestead. They had dozens of cats, all congregated in a shed, snapping over their food. We picked out a young adult with sharp eyes and a slim face from the rainbow of half-wild creatures. She was friendly. At my feet, a pair of cats tangled with one another, rutting and yowling and making more kittens.

I can't remember our first cat's name. The memories of my childhood slip through my fingers like grains of rice in a colander.

As it happens with farm cats, our cat had kittens, and those kittens had kittens, until we were overrun. We'd see them darting between the trees and running under the house, gobbling up the food left for them and sleeping on top of the dogs when winter soaked the land. I was named the cat whisperer, given cages and thick blankets. I spent eight hours each hot summer day tempting cats with canned tuna and a gentle voice. I caught almost all of them, depositing them in our locked garage. I talked to the tiny kittens, petting them when they were old enough to wander around the garage, socialising them so they could go to good homes. One of the cats gave birth when she was caged, six tiny babies I was the first to see. I checked on them every day, watching their tiny black eyes creak open for the first time as they wiggled around on the blanket in their

cage. Five of them made it. The other got caught between the litter box and the edge of the cage one night, and I was too late to save it. I was early enough to hear it mewling, to pull it out of its trapped area and deposit it into the kennel inside the cage, but it had lost too much strength already.

My hands and arms are still scarred from the feral cats. One all-white female with smoke-tipped ears and clear blue eyes scratched my hand from the pinky knuckle halfway up my forearm. I had to use a rope to catch her. Once she was caged I had no choice but to leave my hand in there to loosen it, otherwise she would strangle herself. There was no adult around to tell me not too.

Once the cats and their kittens were old enough, they were given to a no-kill shelter, fixed and cared for. Slowly, the garage emptied out of the cages borrowed from the angry lady who sold her services as the cat trapper. We were not the only acreage around with out-of-control cat populations.

There was one cat we couldn't catch. A black female, patches of white on her face and paws, always wily and smart. She'd been the first of the original litter to give birth. She'd had them in a pile of scrap wood in the trees, unlike her sisters who gave birth in the garage. She'd always been wily, and even as we coaxed her kittens to love us she remained uncertain and wary. Her name was Blackstar Two, named by my little sister. The original Blackstar was her mother.

My father took me out onto the roof. I sat and he stood with his gun at his side and waited for the black cat to come by. I don't know why I had to be there. He had said that was what we were going to do, so that is what we did. "No" had never been an option.

It took hours, the dark surface radiating the blistering summer heat, but eventually the cat sprinted across the wide gulf of the yard, the short grass and bright sun.

My father shot. The rough blue-grey shingles grated against my thighs as I watched.

He missed, and I was glad.

We kept a few of the fixed adult cats to keep the rodent population in check. We kept one of the friendliest ones, a long-haired white one named Olaf. We discovered he was a female after he had a litter of lovely, long-hair grey and white kittens of his own, but the pronouns and name stuck. He was our favourite of the cats.

I left my window open one night. It was the first night I had done it, the first night I had the room I shared with two of my sisters to myself, and the heat of summer had already made the room heavy.

As I fell asleep, Olaf's scream cracked the air. I called out to my mother.

There was nothing she could do, she shouted at me, too tired to deal with another crisis. It was nothing, go to sleep, she said.

I looked the next morning for Olaf, then for blood or fur. I didn't find any, but no one saw Olaf again. For all the work I had done to save them, the world around me continued to be too powerful to fight.

We moved from the acreage eventually. It was too large, too expensive, for a single mother with no job or degree and five traumatised children. I wasn't sorry to say goodbye to it. Six years of blood and sin lay in the floorboards, built into the concrete and rebar that he laid himself. Terror was carved into the shed and tangled around the trees, thick and seeping into the roots of every growing thing.

Six years of memories. Or rather, the lack of. The conspicuous hole where I should remember my tenth birthday, where I should see and hear and feel the events I know transpired. The gaping hole of my first period, of my younger siblings' first words. Holidays and birthdays, family reunions and quiet afternoons, disappearing like silt in flowing water. These are the only ones I have left, fragmented and hard to grasp, cutting my fingertips when I try to write them down. These are my good memories. The best ones, the ones with a sweet taste among all the bitter.

I grew up wild. I grew up fragmented, left to gather what remained of myself and make something new. I am what survived that house, and I don't like everything that came out.

I imagine going back some day. It would be nicer now. The grass would be mowed, the trees kept to the edge of the yard in a neat row. The house would be different inside. The walls wouldn't be painted all the wild, cheerful colours my mom had chosen in a desperate attempt to add some light to the darkness inside. The owners would be confused, but let me inside, show me around their home. It would reflect their wealth, as it had ours, and in it they would be happy. They would be at peace. The house would be a home, at least to someone.

I would ask if the cougar was still around. If it had torn apart another of our neighbour's horses this year. If their children were able to play in the woods without fear. I would look for the pieces of myself I had left behind. The fourteen-year-old anger, the will to fight. The hours of patience and wonder watching the kittens.

I have nightmares about that house. About being there again, unable to escape, trapped in room after room full of flies and crying children. I think maybe I would shatter if I went there, or I would shatter it. Something would break, I don't know what it would be.

I grew up wild. Knee deep in mud and underbrush, the metal a pistol heavy in my hand and my own blood on my fingers. I grew up hungry, always starving for something I could never find.

I've grown up. Within me, the wildness has flattened like the long grasses beneath moose nesting for the night. It has become matted, tired.

I watch my younger siblings grow up. I see how they're able to say no, how they're allowed to speak up for themselves without being afraid. How they dream of bigger things, believe that they're capable of anything. A three year or eight year gap in age feels like a lifetime.

I grew up dirty. Ankle-deep in mud and tangled in the underbrush, catching cats and shooting milk cartons. I grew up with the thunderstorms, standing in the yard and howling at the coyotes.