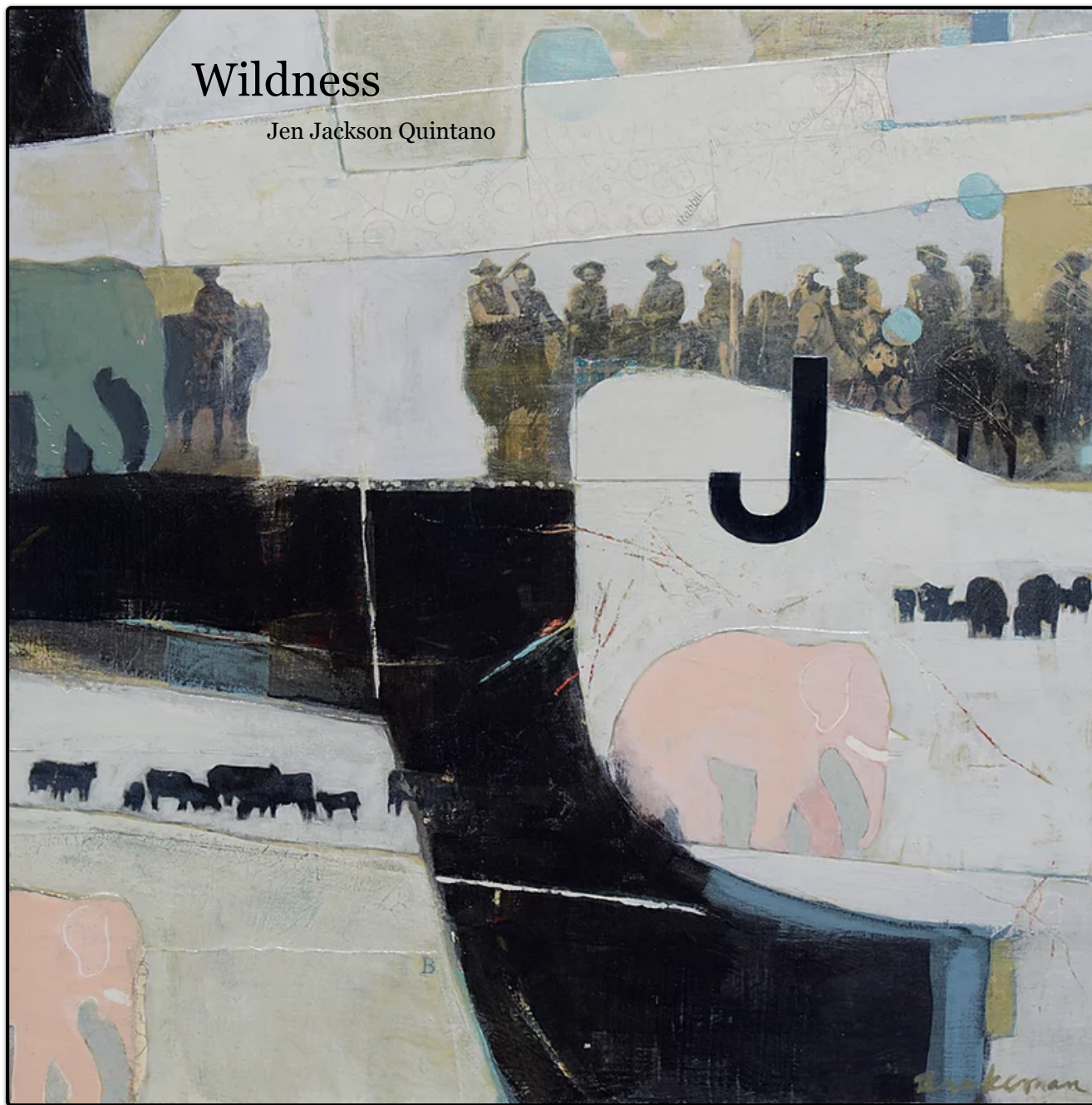


Wildness

Jen Jackson Quintano



Amy Brakeman Livezey
Elephant Roundup, 12" x 12"
mixed media on panel

Wildness

I was meant to be a wolverine, or some such wildness. And I have been at times. Maybe I have always been, and the intervals between are the result of insufficiently remembering. I don't

know. But there is fierceness in me, and sometimes it awakes. At those times, I am my

know. But there is fierceness in me, and sometimes it prowls. At these times, I am my creaturely self.

The Cabinet Mountains were my home — are my home — but now I sense them slipping away, receding into the night. Perhaps it's me that's slipping away, like a padded-pawed creature across the snow, a shadow amongst shadows, weaving the darkneses together into a blanket for burrowing. For burying. It is time for me to burrow and be buried. It is time for a long, cold sleep.

I have been lonely these last years, lone wolf that I am. Mostly lonely from myself. Where did I disappear? Where is the man who built this cabin alone and with bare hands? Where is the man who was capable of love once, who built this cabin for his love before she departed? She was not of this place, but I have always wanted to be. Where is the man who broke his leg under a fallen log while constructing his home, who dragged himself eight miles down the road to the nearest store (and phone and beer) for help? Where is that man? I am lonely for him.

Every night, I go searching for him. Or maybe I leave to escape the man he has become. I open a new bottle, and after perfect osmosis has been achieved — equal amounts bourbon burning in me and beckoning in the bottle — part of me escapes out the window, now of claws and fur and wildness. I roam through hemlock and cedar. My cabin disappears, my body disappears. A tendril of smoke from the dense, dark forest is the only evidence of my solitary human existence.

Nightly, I am transformed.

I am no longer a man battling the ever-encroaching forest, hemlock seedlings sprouting from all barren surfaces.

I am no longer a man battling the rocky soil while digging a well, while digging a latrine.

I am no longer a man battling the snow with a shovel, the firewood with an axe, the garden weeds with a spade.

I am no longer a man battling the bottle.

Instead, as a creature of tooth and claw, the forest is perfect exactly as it is. The forest provides exactly as it is. I am perfect and provided for exactly as I am.

The moon pours platinum into my cabin through high windows on this clear night, making my surroundings feel arctic and icy. I forgot to feed the fire; not even an ember remains. I was too busy romping wild and away from here—as a pine marten or a lynx or maybe a wolverine. Because maybe that's what I've always been and have often forgotten.

Wolverine. Wolving. Wolfling. Little Wolf. Lone Wolf.

Tonight I am pulled back into a body crumpled on the pockmarked wood floor, caressed by incessant drafts of cold air. The cold air is clematis vine, tendrils snaking through the cabin, climbing my shoulders, my hips, dipping into my nostrils and ears. It corkscrews so tightly around my fingers, I can no longer feel them. It blooms on my tongue, now too thick to speak.

The Cabinet Mountains are receding as I am receding. I am slipping away from a place I always hoped to belong. Perhaps, if some kind soul finds and buries me here — if the worms and grubs

and beetles do their work, if some wolverine happens upon my creaturely self, if a hawk takes

and beetles do their work, if some wolverine nappens upon my carrion-self, if a nemiocock taps into my ribcage—then I will attain the rootedness for which I forever fought in life.

I moved here at the age of nineteen from Iowa. An uncle procured acreage in a card game. He had no intention of moving to Idaho, let alone the backwoods, crazy-making, Panhandle part, so he gave the land to me: five acres, nine miles up Rapid Lightning Creek, a million trees, and not a soul in sight. I moved in a heartbeat. I was never meant for the Midwest, for flatness, for a life in which one's soaring gaze only has corn stalks on which to perch. I was meant for topography, for a furtive, forested wildness.

I was meant to be wild.

My sense of that first summer here is soft around the edges. After the snow receded and the tide of wild strawberry blossoms rolled in, my girl from back home came out to be with me. We camped in a tent and howled at the coyotes, entwined and entangled by firelight. The days were filled with my cabin-building labors. I wanted her to have a home, to feel safe, to stay with me forever. I've never toiled so fiercely, ached so greatly.

But there was time, too, for the northern lights, for gathering huckleberries. We listened to the nighthawks dive and boom overhead. All the while, our log cabin slowly rose from the forest floor, trees resurrected from death in order to harbor life. I imagined our children populating its interior, kits in our den.

But it was too wild for her. I was too wild.

Come fall, when the light departed, the rains rolled in, and the bears arrived—ransacking our tent three times in one week—my girl launched the kindling axe at me and bid me farewell. It took her a full day to get the eight miles down Rapid Lightning Road. October downpours had so mucked the lane, the two separate rides she caught got mired in the mud. She eventually walked the remaining distance to the general store, chilled to the bone, and called home.

Now, all I am is with my home, seemingly sinking into its floor. All I have is loneliness. And walls. And moonlight. Might the moon silver me to safety? Might the night spirit away my wolverine-self so that I may wander in wonder forever?

I am aware of disrobing down to fur, my clothing confining and foreign and dangerous. I am aware of leaden movements, of a pile of my one-time attire now in the corner. I am slow and feral. Am I finally becoming wolfling, wolverine, little wolf, lone wolf? Is my body finally going to follow my mind into the ghosted forest?

Some male wolverines don't mate, and their territories are so vast, they never see another wolverine soul. They are solitary. I am solitary. I think I have always been a wolverine. I just didn't always know it.

Now I feel the urge to burrow, to be of the earth and in it. In agitation, I pace, I find my den in the small space between the dormant wood stove and the wall. I circle and curl and wait. I am waiting for something I cannot apprehend. I am diminishing to instinct. Or perhaps ascending to it. I am waiting for my fate, my purpose.

It is cold — so cold — but I am burning away.

memory sparks across my inside-eyes.: MID-AUGUST DIVING INTO THE WATERTAIL SWIMMING NOISE, tiny fish silvering against my sides. Larch releasing July sun in rainy autumn, shooting golden spires skyward. A spotted fawn under fern fronds, too new to be afraid, still of womb-space, not yet of earth-space. A great-horned owl ghosting over my shoulder in pursuit of a shrew, displacing my cold-plumed breath in its single-minded dive. A woman who once loved me and wove ox-eyed daisy crowns for our heads.

This forest is full of magic. I now see clearly — though fleetingly—that in trying to escape the struggle of this place, I abandoned the wonder, too. In trying to pursue my wildness, I caged myself in. In trying to find my belonging here, I made estrangement. I was a stranger. My choices brought me fleeting wildness and lasting loneliness. And a lot of empty bottles, now filling the latrine.



Jen Jackson Quintano is the author of *Blow Sand in His Soul: Bates Wilson, the Heart of Canyonlands*, and her landscape-inspired essays have appeared in numerous publications and anthologies. In addition to writing, she runs an arborist business with her husband in Sandpoint, Idaho. Though the two kinds of work are vastly different, they both keep her connected to—and curious about—place.

