

## Home (October 2024)

My house is surrounded by trees. Spruce, maple, pine, oak. Trees that morph into bronzed renditions of red, yellow, and orange when the days become shorter in autumn, then burst back to life with all the verdant richness that is expected of them when daylight extends in the spring. Stepping outside at the break of dawn I'm greeted by the sun shining on their branches, intensifying the smell of morning. Dew glistens, padding the ground. Its wetness both absorbs and reverberates sound, making everything calm and bright. Birds sing their songs because they are birds, and that is their duty, their instinct, their soul. Fresh crisp air ripples over what little skin I have exposed, encouraging me to pull my robe a bit tighter around the shoulders, clutch my coffee a little closer.

I lean against my deck railing with ease, heart full of gratitude that I get to wake up and be here, at my house, surrounded by nature. The natural world has always existed before me and will always exist after me. I am a visitor in its life, not the other way around.

A landscape of native plants, mature trees, and woodland creatures encompasses the exterior of my home, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Let nature rest as it can, given that humankind has bullied its way into Earth's natural state. Guilt creeps in, and I consider all the destruction and devastation my European ancestors have caused on the land where I reside. How driven we were by greed and possession. Killing by any means necessary, destroying indigenous communities and the land where they lived in harmony, all so we could make it "ours." As if it were up for the taking. I cannot change the lineage that precedes me, but I can pretend it's within my power to alter my future.

I arrange belongings within the four walls of my home. Sprawling built-in bookshelves frame a wood-burning fireplace, and there's a couch and a few reading chairs scattered about. My writing room is upstairs in the loft, secluded enough to provide privacy, and yet close enough to prepare a cup of tea within minutes. I decorate with local art, pottery, and found objects from my travels. Most of my furniture is either handmade or antique, using what was already built before me, continuing the lifespan of what previous generations made to support their families, their lives.

While this was never my land for the taking, it's where I live now. In partnership, not ownership. I do not oversee this house and the grass and the trees. It's under no supervision, a wild landscape that rebirths and bounces back each time humans attempt to tear it down. Not our concrete nor our wars can stop the natural order from pressing on. Climate change or not, the Earth will still be here. Will we?

My house has everything I need and nothing I don't. It holds me in guardianship and grants every freedom I desire. It is the place where I feel most grounded, the most relaxed, where my very best writing is done. And though this place feels real in my mind's eye, it does not exist in the material world.

There are no pine trees that deliver the most delightful of scents. I have no reason to purchase or chop firewood. I do not lean on the railing of my deck and hug my coffee close to my chest. None of what I have described is mine, yet.

I do not live in a house. I am a 32-year-old woman with a husband, two cats, no children, and no property to my name. I don't even own my vehicle; it's a lease.

I've been told that if I hadn't bought so many lattes, I'd have enough money for a down payment on a home. That if millennials weren't so wasteful, careless, and irresponsible we wouldn't be experiencing a housing crisis. That if we'd just worked harder and saved more, we could buy a house like our parents did in the 1980s, when interest rates were double digits and everyone was struggling. They did it, so why can't we?

"Are you house hunting?" People will ask me this question, hopeful that I'll respond with a confident, "Oh yes, we're looking at three properties this weekend and plan to put an offer in on one of them." But I've never spoken that sentence aloud. My husband and I have never been close to putting an offer in on a house. You'd have to be pre-approved for a mortgage for that to happen. Something we have tried and failed at, three times.

Guests have cast judgmental glances when I've had the audacity to host a party in my 1,000-square-foot apartment. Everyone crowds in my living room, which is also my kitchen, and pretends they aren't wildly uncomfortable with my lack of space. As if providing a space that makes them comfortable is my responsibility

"What do you want the house for?" A dear friend, thirty years my senior, posed this question six months ago. I stammered and stuttered and realized I didn't have a good enough reason, other than to have daily access to trees, walls of books, a cozy fireplace, and room of my own to write. Other than the yearning for a postal worker to smile as they shoved mail through the slot in my front door. Mail addressed to me, in a house that was mine. A place where I could drop my shoulders and breathe a sigh of relief. A house like the one I grew up in.

Her question was practical, and so it deserved a practical answer which I could not provide. I will never have children. I do not plan to convert my basement into an Airbnb. I only need about 500 more square feet than what I've already got in our two-bedroom apartment. Is a \$400,000 house (plus interest) worth an extra 500 square feet?

It feels like the ultimate gamble to take every penny you've managed to save and put it all on a building that will inevitably betray you with a broken hot water heater that causes floods, toilets that suddenly stop flushing, and a heating system that will fail on the coldest night of the year. To put everything you've earned into a place that will continue to suck you dry, leaving you with no disposable income for travel, and no time for leisure. Houses own you. They force you into their yards on the weekends and into linen closets in what little spare time you carve out. They require you to call roofers after a severe storm and water restoration companies after the washing machine fails in the middle of a rinse cycle. They are swept away in hurricanes and catch fire while you sleep.

In my dreams, my house is the ideal place to write, enjoy life with my husband, and serve as a landing place while I make something of this one wild and precious life, as Mary Oliver instructs us to do.

But then I wake up and look at our bank accounts. I think about what we would be giving up in exchange for 500 square feet and a backyard. I wonder about the rows of wrinkles that will inevitably grow from our eyelids, lines showcasing just how stressed we were over money, house repairs, time. I wonder how many fights we'd get into about broken components of the house that would hold a mirror to the broken components of our relationship.

Growing up, I watched my dad spend almost every weekend doing yardwork. In Delaware, there wasn't much responsibility in the winter months, other than shoveling snow from the occasional and long-awaited snowstorm. But April through November, my dad was in the yard. Gardening, mowing, raking leaves, planting, un-planting, wintering, laying mulch, weeding, sweeping, and building structures to keep deer from eating the vegetables he carefully planted. It never seemed to end.

Do I want that for us? Working to pay for a house that keeps you handcuffed to its chores in your spare time? Perhaps I'm villainizing the thing I cannot have and may never have, trying to make myself feel better about what I deeply want. My rational brain wants to rig the game so I'm right, and they're wrong. So that I'm happy with the cards I've been dealt, instead of jealous and resentful of the ones they're holding in their 1,500-square-foot cottages in the woods.

Truthfully, I am jealous and resentful. I drive through the back roads of northern Delaware and ache for the quiet, glorious comfort of a home tucked among the trees. I yearn for smoke to be puffing from a chimney—my chimney—and to snuggle close with my husband and our cats, enjoying a Saturday night together. I would love to chase down a plumber to fix a squeaky pipe, or to hear an irregular sound from upstairs and have a wave of panic run through me, wondering what the hell it could be.

I want the pedigree of living in a home that has been there long before me and will be there long after me. To step inside of a structure that has housed and protected and raised families, seen deaths and births, heard divorces and held newlyweds. A house is a living member of a family. It's a place that holds people through a season, a chapter, or maybe a lifetime. It serves as a container for memories, constantly reminding you of what has been with every squeaky