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Greenhouse

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Prologue: Home

[college application essay, 2018]

I am most at home in what is ugly.

I grew up in a house unfit for public display. Walls I drew on as a child were never painted over. Scribbles aged like fine art.

When something broke, it was fixed with what was easily handy or not at all. Cracked windows were boarded up and hung with strategically placed blankets. Decomposing bathroom tiles were obscured from view by a stool placed on top. The dryer would work off and on; a homemade clothesline resulted, yellow rope lacing the hallway and packed with damp shirts and jeans, water dripping rivers between floorboards.

When the bathroom sink stopped working, we moved our toothbrushes to the kitchen without comment. Mint blobs dotted dirty dishes like molded cherries on top of half-eaten desserts.

A dim house greeted me often, courtesy of overdue electric bills. We developed a routine. In winter, I carried frozen food outside and packed it in snow. I made ramen noodles precariously balanced over vanilla candles in triple the estimated time. I washed my hair with bottled water and put on mascara by the glow of a flashlight and wore the same jeans to school for days in a row, my classmates none the wiser.

In summer, I approached the heat with folded paper fans. My brother fashioned a generator out of an old lawnmower that powered a third of the house. Extension cords weaved around the furniture like a three-dollar basket of odds and ends at a garage sale. We traveled from room to room with ease, never tripping, at home in the way a stray cat roams a junkyard.

My sister and I drifted outdoors. We waded through streams, searched for salamanders beneath logs, revived games we'd made up years before. Once, we ventured so far as to walk to the only park in our small town, forgetting that fields and forests stretched far between houses rather than sidewalks. We turned back barely a fourth of the way there. I headed immediately to the shower, sweating and exhausted, and for a moment, I didn't miss having a working water heater.

Nostalgia intertwines with discomfort. Stickers over boarded windows. Days spent searching for loose change to use at the gas station and the excitement at the discovery of a wrinkled dollar bill. Brightly patterned skirts bought at yard sales or dug from haphazard Goodwill aisles.

When I recount my upbringing, I don't have extravagant tales of vacations or trips to the beach. I have family bonding in the way of Walmart excursions funded by food stamps. I swam in a pool made out of an old satellite dish. When I find myself homesick, I long for clutter and spontaneity. We'd turn trips to the convenience store down the road into expeditions, routed through the woods; I remember clearly the elation from a bite into a cheap candy bar after such a journey.

I grew up in a house that was messy, chipped, cracked, dirty, filled to the brim and overflowing—a place where mismatched furniture held dull pennies and keys and glossy candy wrappers all at once, and hardwood floors told the stories of everything that had ever walked across them through the dust in each crevice and the lines etched over the surface. It was a house all-too lived in, a home and more. Its capacity for life stretched far beyond its frame.

I see the world through smudged windows and in the faint illumination of backup candlelight. I see life and humanity in its most potent form in what perseveres. A mess is thought of as something abandoned, given up on, left to rot—in my experience, the opposite is true.

I know chaos as vitality. My most cherished memories are eyesores to others. I approach the world in all its variation and whim in the best way I know how: by making myself at home.