

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Gail Taylor
Tornado

*The birds put up the bars to nests,
The cattle fled to barns* — from *The Storm*, by Emily Dickinson

“**Run for shelter**, girl. Now!” Startled by the fury in her dad’s voice, Anne flashed along the lawn from the barn, pushing at heat that clung like corn silk. Just as they reached the farmhouse, she felt a surge of wind and caught a vignette of thrashing fields. In the next moment, they clattered down the cellar steps. When her father locked the door, the cellar was strangely quiet and still. She cleared a space to sit on the vegetable bin while her dad batted cobwebs at the window.

“What is it, Dad?”

He said nothing, just set his jaw, and squinted through the dusty glass. What had he seen? August, she knew, was a dangerous month, but what did he sense? Something both full and vacant hovered in the day: a sky dragging its dirty belly along the earth, a fat green glimmer around the trees, the air like glue, but there was an emptiness too, no animals, no sheep muddling away on the flat lands, no cattle at the salt block. Anne had seen Minnah the cat leave much earlier in the morning with her kittens, carting them methodically one by one by the scruff of their necks, over the ridge of the lawn and vanishing into the field with an orange flick of her tail. Five times the she-cat had gathered a squealing kit; five times the wheat had parted like a ruff of fur ruffled by a breeze. It had looked like a game: hide the kittens and make them seek, although a foundling barn cat like Minnah never played games. Anne had gone off to her henhouse chores, and thought no more of it.

But she had not found the chickens in the yard at their manic pecking. At high noon, they were inside, huddled on the roost like supplicants, each a crouching mound of quiet, their heads bowed deep in their blanket of feathers. They amused her. Had she stopped to think of it, even Fred Dog had been gone all morning from his usual sunny spot on the porch, not only Minnah and her kittens. Now her father, too, was hiding his young: “Stay down, Anne. I’ll keep watch.”

Earl Stiles was the only parent Anne had ever known since the age of four when her mom slipped into a long illness and never surfaced. Her dad was her constant, her champion, her advisor.

“Only seventeen years old, my girl is, and already you can see she’ll make her mark,” he’d bragged last week to their neighbor, Lyle Hawkley. Lyle had taken a long moment to lick his cigarette paper and roll it tight and snug before rewarding her dad with a slight nod.

“Milking time, Earl. Gotta go.” Without a glance at Anne, Lyle rolled away in his pickup to keep the strict schedule he held at his own farm.

To Anne, her dad would insist, as he had again this morning before the day had hunkered in its humid tension, “Agribusiness, Annie, that’s the future. Stay here and build. With all that sense in your head and your respect for the land” — and here he swept his arms around as if to embrace the trees and the fields of wheat and oats and beans that comprised the

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family farm, casually capturing the Hawkley farm in the sweep— “you’ll be the success story of the county. Buy up the neighbors and build a company. ‘Stiles Farms: Bridge to the Future’.” Then he would press with another of his homemade aphorisms, some variation on ‘reap what’re you sowed’, involving ploughs in spring and harvests in fall.

Town or country, city or farm, stay or go? A professional with a briefcase and shiny high heels? A city girl or a farm operator? Or maybe she could be a vet and a guy like Sheldon could operate the farm. Sheldon Murray and his mother had the neighboring farm on the side opposite Lyle Hawkley. She told her friends she liked Sheldon for his quiet manners. Secretly, his bold muscles were the fascination.

“You use a lot of words, Anne Stiles,” he had said to her last month, while she stared at the flexing in his forearms. “Don’t suppose you’d consider Saturday at the Fairway with me?” He’d taken special care with ‘consider’, turning the word carefully.

Anne knew she had to decide which future to choose, and time was running out. She had offers from two colleges. Which life should she choose: agricultural sciences, or the liberal arts and a society marriage with her picture in the city newspaper? In the middle of a hot summer’s day, a hiding place deep in a cellar was a respite from the endless question.

“It’s beginning,” her father said and pointed out the window. When she stood to look, she saw the wheat collapsing in waves, cringing from the prowl of the wind. The sky had changed moods and smudged from sepia to brown to black.

Over at Lyle Hawkley’s place, a chimerical wind chimney jerked a mad polka.

“Doesn’t look good,” her father said. “Lyle has the oldest barn in the county. It’s a wonder that tough old building is still standing.”

Above them, the bones of their old house creaked and groaned. Even down in the cellar the air felt as if it could snap at any moment. Anne wondered if the ceiling would cave and trap them. Then came the sound of glass shattering upstairs, and she felt her knees turn to water.

“... blown window . . .” Her father’s voice came in ragged snatches. “Stay down . . . wind current . . . like an undertow. Mind what you learned in school . . .” All that Anne could remember at that moment was a poem from grade nine:

The wind begun to rock the grass
With threatening tunes and low,
He flung a menace at the earth,
A menace at the sky.

Out the window, she could see the corn bending and breaking, the leaves ripping from trees, pebbles skittering across the driveway. Her dad’s Buick began to shift, an inch forward, then another, headed toward the lawn chairs that still lazed about in leisure, oblivious.

“Oh no, not the car,” he moaned. Farm implements and cars, he always

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told her, are the capital assets of a farm. The first is a means of living, the second a means of movement.

The car stopped.

Anne gaped. It made no sense: how could an invisible wind shift several thousand pounds of Detroit machinery but leave standing a couple of flimsy chairs of aluminum tubing? It was hard to know where to look; the very ground seemed to shiver. Then she remembered some more of the poem:

The leaves unhooked themselves from trees
And started all abroad;
The dust did scoop itself like hands
And throw away the road.
Anne's legs melted and she staggered back to sit on her carrot bin.

Lyle Hawkley, one county road over from the Stiles farm, was milking his Guernsey cow Cora in the barn. No modern machines for Lyle: he ran a small mixed-crop farm the old-fashioned way and kept only a few sheep and pigs, and just the one cow. He kept things simple and clean and neat. That afternoon, at his usual time, he sat on the edge of the three-legged stool crafted decades earlier by his grandfather and worked his muscled hands, streaming the warm milk into the bucket in the rhythm he'd known since a boy. Cora was particularly irritable that day, kicking furiously as he worked. The air hung heavy with an unusual calm. Even the crickets in the hayloft were silent.

As Anne and her father watched from their cellar window, a jagged burst of light tore the sky in half and stabbed in crazy anger at something on County Road Five. Within an instant, a great explosive crack threatened to split their ears. There was a strange beauty in the crooked light, a horrible ugly beauty, and a lassitude to the thunder that reminded Anne again of the poem:

The wagons quickened on the streets,
The thunder hurried slow;
The lightning showed a yellow beak,
And then a livid claw.

She couldn't remember the last verse. How did that poem end? How would this day end?

Over on the farm at County Road Five that afternoon, Sheldon Murray was cultivating his Soya beans, even though his mother had told him he was a fool.

"A half day won't kill the crop, Sheldon," Mrs. Murray said at lunch. "Look at that sky." She stood at the window, orange and red apron tied at the back, hands on ample hips. "That sky," she said with authority, "is proper shouting at you, Shell. Mark my words, there'll be rain."

Sheldon broke off a piece of bread and mopped his plate.

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"Pro'bly wind and hail, too." She shook her rubber spatula at him. "Good day to sit tight and clean the combine, oil the cultivator, not be rambling about bean fields."

But Sheldon Murray knew nothing if not his own mind. So when the lightning struck, he was humming along on his old red tractor, turning up black earth, probably dreaming of his supper of stew and rhubarb pie. He never felt it. He simply ceased to breathe, sitting stiff and upright, eyes wide open, while the tractor headed to the edge of the field and through the fence and beyond until it smacked a tree.

Anne regained her feet and went to the cellar window. Rain punched the ground. Some rains are tender, like the night her mom died. But this rain was rough, dropping water like great wagon dumps of rocks. Lightning stabbed the ground in sharp, raw spikes. Thunder reached inside and thumped her chest. Balls of hail, larger than eggs, and round and solid, drummed the earth. The world trembled: Missiles of light. Flying ice. Anne shook her head. Then something dark slithered into view.

"Look, Dad," she managed in a small voice. A black funnel twisted above their neighbor Lyle Hawkley's farm and tore through the line fence ripping up posts as it came. It aimed straight at them. In the next moment, all that she and her father could see were swirling dirt and weeds and stones. The world outside the window boiled with debris. Anne dove to the floor.

As Lyle Hawkley told them later, he never really understood what happened. One moment he was milking Cora the cow, seated comfortably on his stool in the dimness of his barn, and the next moment he and the stool and the cow sat exposed to the sky, planted firmly in their milking stall, no pen around them. The tornado simply lifted the barn, hayloft, roof, and walls, just gathered everything up and set it down in the pasture. And over there the barn stood, still erect and mostly intact, while Lyle and Cora continued their milking with fat drops of rain splatting upon them. It was only when the hail began that Lyle decided to pack it in and slapped Cora on the rump, sending her off to a corner in the back field while he ran for the house, milk pail slopping as he went.

Anne and her father heard a roaring rush above their heads and then a splintering sound at the back of the house.

"Stay down, for God's sake," yelled her father. "Keep your head in your arms. If the house goes, we're safe in the cellar." Anne wondered if he really believed that.

Bella Cuttlar and her eighty-year-old mother on Concession Four were sitting down to tea. The wind had paused for a moment outside and Bella was confident that all the animals were safe in pens. She knew, though, from looking at the clouds gathering their swollen fists over the western part of the county that the storm was already battering her neighbour's fields. She had taken care to lock the gates to the lane and to make sure

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that the chickens had their feed for the night. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and her mother had made a coffee cake. The scent of cinnamon and warm brown sugar soothed their thoughts.

Busy with the ritual of boiling the water and brewing the tea, they set the table. Bella loved the kitchen, painted bright yellow, with the loyal fridge in one corner that had been members of the family since the time of Bella's father some thirty years before. On the other side of the kitchen, partly visible through the doorway, just around the corner of the L-shaped home, was their drawing room with their very best furniture, never used and well protected by bright-embroidered coverlets. The bedrooms were on the second floor.

When the kettle whistled, Bella poured a stream into the squat little Brown Betty, folded her towel into a crisp square, and hung it on the stove handle so the stencil showed. She sat down at the arborite table and her mother began slicing the cake.

"Belle, dear, pass your plate, will you? You get the first piece because I know you like the crust."

That word, "crust." Then their house cleaved in two.

When Anne and her father emerged from their cellar, they wandered through the rooms of the main floor, wondering at the civilized order of everything. The den was tidy and inviting. Upstairs, Anne's sincere little room was neat and ordered, as she had left it that morning. There was her mother's brush set just so on its mirrored tray and Anne's new notebooks in their tight stack, her cup of pencils with the sharp ends pointing up. Her mother's old hope chest sat at the foot of the bed, handsome and proper.

Everything was fine. Why was her father so upset? They could have slept through this storm. Well, everything was fine, except for the back window, which now lay in shards on the carpet.

"I always planned to double glaze that," her dad said, brightening at the task. "No excuse now."

They searched outside for the handiwork of the bouncing funnel. Her bike stood beside the porch door at the same lazy angle she had propped it earlier that morning. The grass, washed of dust and grit, offered the scent of a Monday morning washday, while the driveway, stripped bare of gravel, was a pond of clay with the gloss of pudding. In the yard, nuggets of ice bunched in strange little piles like bits of broken glass. Surreal piles of winter in the middle of summer. Time was upside down.

Fence posts torn up by the roots lay about them. The big Buick, a good two yards from the parking pad, nosed the leg of a canvas chair that stood virtuously in place, preening in its cheerful stripes of red and yellow. Rounding the corner of the house, Anne and her father moved to the backyard, like foreigners in a strange land, testing the give of their footing, the veracity of their eyesight. A pile of boards and straw was all that remained of Fred Dog's house, punctured by the broken trunk of the cedar that had always stood outside her dad's bedroom window. The tornado had severed the tree, planted by her parents before she was born, driven

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the branches into Fred's home, and scattered the cones and needles into the cornfield far beyond the yard.

Anne finally remembered the last verse of the poem:

There came one drop of giant rain.
And then, as if the hands
That held the dams had parted hold,
The waters wrecked the sky,

But overlooked my father's house,
Just quartering a tree.

A knot of people stood in the Cuttlar driveway. No one was supposed to be on the roads after a storm. But some ancient instinct had gathered them. Anne and her dad got out of the car and went over to join the group. Bella Cuttlar was there, and her mother. So were Jake Sears, the chief of police, and Budd Huckabee, the township reeve. They were all talking quietly.

The Cuttlar place was carved in two, like a sliced-up cake, layers exposed. The tornado had opened the house like a tin at the seams, pried it open to a tasteful display of domesticity: an old fridge perched on the edge of a precipice; a dishtowel on the stove handle, neatly folded and imprinted in gold with the words, "Buckingham Palace"; worn kitchen furniture with a brown teapot on the table. On the second floor of this improbable sandwich, Anne saw the comforting gestures of life: a shawl thrown across a bed, a wicker clothes hamper, pink slippers on a rug. She could see the lines where the rooms once joined, where the walls changed from green to pink.

The lane filled with sirens and the township water truck careened around the gravel strip of the Cuttlar lane, leaning at a perilous tilt, and slid to a stop. Two men in fire gear jumped out with axes and hoses and waddled like overgrown children in padded snowsuits. After two steps, they stopped and stood with their mouths open, dropping the hoses and resting the heads of the axes on the ground. Then they lumbered imperiously around the exhibit to perform an inspection. When they joined the cluster of people, everyone clucked and shook their heads.

"You're very lucky, you two," said Jake Sears. "You survived. Not everyone fared as well this time." And then he and Budd Huckabee told the story about Mrs. Murray's son.

"Just sitting there, like he was in church," added Budd, "pretending to pay attention to the sermon. Stiff as a pitchfork, he was, staring straight ahead."

"His mother found him," said Jake. "Went looking to call him in for supper, and found the tractor still churning sod, her son staring from the world beyond."

The group trembled in unison, a hydra in shock. At least it was quick, everyone said of Sheldon Murray's demise, and my, wasn't Lyle Hawkley the lucky one, they said. Anne felt something unhinge in her head.

But there was more, Budd and Jake said. With neither pattern nor plan, the storm had gouged through virgin bush, clawed some farmlands

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raw but left others pristine; ruined power lines and choked the roads, but ignored whole subdivisions in the town, leaving people to cower for hours for no reason. Then, its anger weakened, the storm had juddered onward, swiping a claw through a couple of cottages at the lake.

Bella's mother stared out blankly, her face a portrait of disbelief. She was murmuring a soothing refrain as if willing her world to be whole again: "Belle made tea and I made cake. Belle made tea and I made cake."

"Of course, you'll move into town now, Bella." Reeve Sears gave her a kindly pat on the arm. "Take up one of those nice apartments the government built."

Bella Cuttler, everyone knew, had never been away from the farm for a night, never stayed in a hotel, never taken a train ride, never been anywhere on a plane.

"That'll be lovely, won't it, Mrs. Cuttler?" said Jake, turning to Bella's mother and yelling into the old woman's good ear. "A nice new apartment with a dishwasher and central vac and all?"

Bella's mouth clenched tight and thin. Her eyes burned bright.

"Mother will go and live in town a spell with my sister's girl, Jake, while I build another house, small and flat, all on one floor—what do you call them? Oh yes, a bungalow, like those ones they have on the town line. Then Mother won't have to climb the stairs at night."

"Now, Miss Cuttler. . ." said Budd, but Bella drove on.

"My barns and sheds are still here, the animals are fine, and the crop is almost in. I can get a third cutting of hay, most likely, from all this rain."

No storm, Bella Cuttler made clear to them, was herding her like a frightened sheep.

Anne stared at this woman, made of grit and willpower. To separate Bella from the family farm was to rip away part of her flesh, a limb from her body.

She turned to consider the broken house. Placing both hands on her cheeks, she pushed her fingers up to make her eyes squint to frame the world and soften the contours. A broken dollhouse stood a few inches in front of her, with tiny furniture and dishes. A tree branch nudged the little fridge. Space was inside out.

Why, she wondered, had the wind seen fit to pry open the Cuttler house but to leave untouched the teapot, the towel, and the slippers? It was preposterous. It was equally unreasonable that Lyle Hawkley should be spared as he hunkered beside Cora the cow on that warm summer's afternoon, while Sheldon would die, seated upon his tractor, purring along in a bean field. Maybe thinking of her? How could a storm take one life and leave so many others untouched? How could the power of wind carve through the Cuttler house but leave her dad's lawn chairs alone? How come Sheldon Murray but not Lyle Hawkley? Who "deserved" this? Did any of them merit anything that they had, good luck or bad?

Overlooked my father's house, Just quartering a tree.

Once, she overheard Lyle Hawkley telling her dad that a good rain was like a random act of kindness—you didn't deserve it and you didn't not

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deserve it. She remembered feeling empty at the thought.

Her dad drove home carefully, picking a route around the fallen tree limbs and live hydro wires. The first thing that appeared when they came into the driveway was Fred Dog. He was advancing over the lawn, not with his usual lazy gait but with a determined trot. A wriggling bundle dangled from his jaws, one of Minnah's kittens. When he reached the porch, he nosed the kit into Minnah's nest of towels and did not wait for Anne's rub behind the ears, but pivoted and shot back over the lawn. She watched him make four more trips, carrying the rest of the kittens, each complaining at the affront. He nudged them a bit then rooted his crooked legs and glared at her.

In that moment, in those intense eyes, focused like the eyes of Bella Cuttler, Anne knew that Minnah was gone. A fleeting thought burned through her. Perhaps one day, on an autumn walk in the woods to gather nuts or mushrooms, she would find white shards, as delicate as china, crushed by a fallen oak. Or perhaps a faded tuft of orange pinched beneath a rock. The way Mrs. Murray had come upon her frozen son, driving his tractor to eternity.

Fred issued a command in his guttural way: the kittens needed nourishment. She knew that she must go now and bring the food and the water dish. She must prepare the supper. She must tend to her father and the chores. Just as she knew in that instant, with a quiet certitude, that she was not Fred, she was not her mother, and she was not Bella Cuttler. She was Bella's house split apart. No, she was Lyle Hawkley's barn, set square and firm in another place.

Her father's rubber boot clunked the stone edge of the porch. His face was tired but smoothed with relief from his review of the barn. She narrowed her eyes and pitched her back as straight as possible.

On the last step, he stopped and put his hand on her shoulder, searching deep within her eyes. She met his gaze and did not waver. She could tell that he knew. He looked at Fred and the kittens.

"I'll get them something," he said. His tone was gruff, terse. He stepped on the porch and went to the screen door. With his hand on the latch, he turned and looked, first to her, and then to the barn in the dying sun, and to the fields of broken grain and corn, and through the rolling woods of Hickory and Black Walnut, and then beyond to the future.

"Annie," his voice now steady and calm, "you're doing the right thing." She had never seen a smile so sad.

The darkness of the doorway beckoned and her father disappeared into the brightest room in the house.

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GAIL TAYLOR is a Canadian writer whose short fiction won the Random House of Canada student award and was short listed for both the Random House award and the Marina Nemat award at the University of Toronto. Her non-fiction has appeared in the ezine Canadian Actor Online, and she has produced several reports and studies for government. In 2010 and 2011, her short fiction appears in several literary journals in Canada, the UK, Turkey and the USA including *Cantaraville*, *Dark Coast Press*, *The Evansville Review*, *Full of Crow*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Ink Monkey Magazine*, *The Istanbul Literary Review (Turkey)*, *Menda City Press*, *Piker Press*, *Short Story Library*, *THEMA*, *Twisted Tongue (UK)*, and *Ygdrasil (Canada)*. In late 2010, a collection of her short stories, *Tornado and Other Seasons*, will be published in ebook form by Punkin House Press.