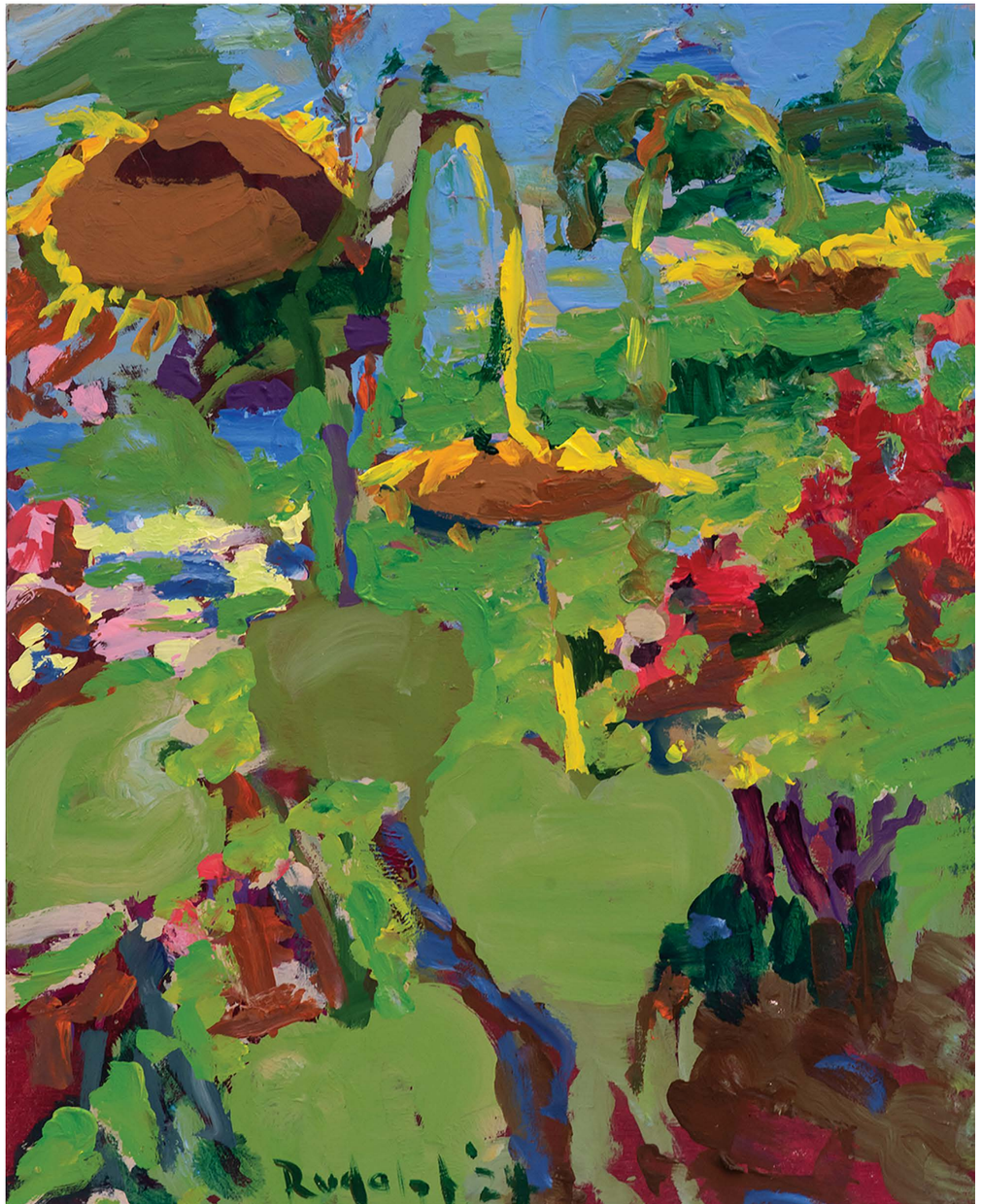
PETER RUDOLPH

Sunflowers 2, 2024
Oil on panel, 20 x 16 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

AMETHYST LOSCOCCO

When We Lived Outside

Life in a family of eight children on sixteen acres

In my childhood memories, we live outside. We didn't, of course. We had the big house my father built for a family of ten, though the house was cursed to lose us all one by one. I know we spent part of our days indoors at a big wooden table we had carved our initials into (and later been chastised for the defilement). There, our mother taught us cursive and fractions and told us to please focus and settle down and just be quiet for thirty more minutes. And we tried. At least, I think we did. But really, our hearts were already outside.

Outside, we ran like a coyote pack of sisters through the desert sagebrush, mesquite, and chaparral, looking for arrowheads, for lost Spanish gold, and filling our pockets with agate, jasper, and turquoise-veined rocks. We were always moving, moving until we inevitably skidded to a stop before a rattlesnake and were forced to back up and turn around.

We climbed the cottonwood and elm trees, jumping from high-notched branches, clinging to a thick rope, and swinging like we were raised by wolves and jungle vines. We did backflips on the trampoline and hung upside down from the monkey bars. We splashed in the irrigation ditches that brought water from the nearby creek to feed life to our farm. We always had dirt under our nails and dust in our hair and the pores of our skin. We marveled at the changing colors of cuts and bruises we accumulated like trophies from our triumphs and tumbles in the wild.

The wild desert was our playground. For a time, which expands large and vivid in my memory but was actually much too short, we thrived outdoors on that farm—an oasis in competition with the fiercely encroaching desert.

In a matter of a few years, my parents had adopted five kids, adding to the three they already had. They bought a sixteen-acre farm thirty minutes outside of the town of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. They wanted fields for us to run in and food planted by our own hands. The property was at the end of a long dirt road in a valley of small farms made possible in the arid desert by the precious water of the Palomas Valley Creek, which drained from the Black Range.

My father built a two-story adobe house with giant windows looking out at the fruit orchard, high ceilings of pine, and brick floors laid in patterns of nested V's. Upstairs, there were five bedrooms, each painted a different pastel color. I shared a pale-pink bedroom with two sisters. We'd

stay up late at night whispering stories about sorceresses and magical potions until we were told, for the third time, to be quiet and, please, please, just go to sleep.

After building the house, my father planted a vegetable garden and tilled the fields to grow squash, beans, and corn. Often before he went to work at his pottery studio in town, he'd call us out of whatever corner of the land we were hiding on. We hid because inside, our mother wanted us to do homework, and outside, our father wanted us to weed the garden, and the garden was huge—an entire field. After listening to him repeatedly yell our names, if he didn't give up, we'd sheepishly come out from the tree we'd crouched behind. He'd tell us to pull the weeds in the row of cucumbers and the row of tomatoes. We looked at our feet and scuffed our sneakers in the dirt as we grumbled under our breath.

The weeding should have been quick work for so many hands, even though they were small hands. But we usually spent more time chatting, making flower crowns, and popping cherry tomatoes into our mouths. We munched on cucumbers or carrots that still had dark dirt clinging to them. Our dillydallying gave the weeds a reprieve to grow taller and thicker. They sent their roots deeper, gripping the earth. I remember the callouses on my sister's fingers as she wrapped her hands over mine, gripping a weed that was taller than both of us. Our fingers slipped on slick green as we pulled and pulled. Burgeoning muscles strained on scrawny arms. Tiny stickers jabbed flesh until finally, with a wispy sigh, the earth released the giant weed. We fell backward as a shower of dirt from the upended roots pattered down on us like hail. We were sure that when we finished one row, the last one had already sprouted new verdant weeds behind our backs.

If there weren't weeds to be pulled, there was always something to harvest. We picked a long row of okra, which made our arms itchy. We crunched emerald-green string beans between our teeth as we plucked them from spiraling vines. In September, we'd harvest the field of corn, tossing ears into a giant wheelbarrow to take back to the house, and peel back leaves, revealing sparkling yellow kernels.

We especially loved the field of striped green watermelons, which, when cracked open, revealed the full spectrum of red to orange to yellow. Instead of pulling weeds, we'd pick small melons from vines that snaked across the ground and split them open on a rock. If we didn't like the watermelon we'd chosen after taking a few bites, we'd toss it aside and crack open a new one. We certainly didn't know the pseudoscience of tapping on watermelons to assess their ripeness. Juice trickled from our chins onto our already-stained T-shirts. We spit out black seeds with exaggerated gusto to see who could spit the farthest.

In the garden was a long row of flowers—the kind of hardy flowers that aren't demure and don't threaten to pine away without attention. We had heavy-headed sunflowers, marigolds the color of distilled joy, and zinnias in every imaginable shade. I'd string together marigolds to make garlands to drape over pictures, doorknobs, and tree branches. I'd stick a zinnia behind my ear, preferably a purple one, inevitably breaking the fragile stem and requiring me to toss it aside and try again.

We made giant salads from the garden's bounty. We chopped up carrots, radishes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce into a huge blue ceramic bowl made by my father. One of the older kids started the tradition of "the lucky." The lucky was a chunk of carrot carved into a die or a house or sometimes just a plain square, depending on which sibling made it and their mood and carving skills. The lucky was then mixed into the salad, and we waited eagerly for someone at the dinner table to yell out, "I got the lucky!" holding up the chunky orange trophy we envied. I suspect the winner was not always as random as it seemed. The older kids got lucky more often, perhaps because one of them had the chore of serving the salad into eight wooden bowls.

Once, I reached into the bottom of my bowl of salad to pick out a square chunk of carrot from the pool of salad dressing at the bottom, inhaling at the sharp sting as lemon juice seeped into a cut on my thumb, dampening my victory. I had sliced my thumb earlier, helping my father take a load of pottery out of his giant kiln. Sometimes, during the firing, the glaze would drip, sticking to the surface of the shelves and leaving behind a sharp edge when the pottery was removed. I had to touch it.

Occasionally, we were asked to pick wild plants, like the pungent chaparral my mother mixed into herbal tinctures. Once, she asked us to pick wild lamb's-quarter that had grown near a grove of pecan trees. The monsoon season had arrived, and wind tugged at our clothes as the sky darkened with the arrival of a thunderstorm. As we haphazardly plucked dainty leaves, we sang nonsense songs over the sound of the wind, imagining we could sing away the thunderstorm. Later, we plugged our noses and quickly shoved forkfuls of steamed lamb's-quarter into our mouth. We hated the acrid taste of these greens, sometimes called wild spinach or pigweed. My mother insisted they were nutritious, good for the blood, and, look at that, just growing wild and lush like us. Why waste the gifts nature provided for free?

Nature provided us with endless entertainment and lessons. The land was rich with critters to catch, stalk, or stand back from. We chased families of quail into the thorny mesquite brush where we couldn't follow. From a distance, we watched the progress of horned lizards, diamondback rattlesnakes, and vinegaroons. At night, we sometimes shivered under blankets, listening to packs of coyotes howl with longing or a beloved kitten shriek as a giant owl carried it away.

We found scat from a bear that had come down from the mountains to the orchard to eat our apples, tearing down tree branches with splitting cracks. The bear found our beehives and smashed them to pieces. I examined the wreckage of splintered wood and honeycomb the next day with my father. Distraught bees circled the ravaged hives with us. In what I can only describe as suicidal despair, one bee flew straight at my forehead, stung me, and died instantly in my lap.

We woke up one morning to see two gray lynx cubs that had climbed up into the cottonwood tree outside our bedroom window. Two sisters and I sat on our deep-set window ledge gazing at them—cubs staring at cubs. The lynx cubs had wide golden eyes and twitching black-hair spiked ears. We discussed what treats might lure them to our hands so we could make them our pets. "They're not pets. They're wild," I can imagine my mother saying. *But* we *are wild too*, we thought. *Maybe we could join them.* After a while, my mother told us it was time for school and to leave the poor things alone so they wouldn't be too scared to climb down from the tree.

When our schoolwork was finished, we stalked turkeys as they pecked through the orchard. We one-upped each other with outrageous stories about which turkey—the one with the flashiest fanning tail, obviously—had spoken to us and let us ride on its back because, of course, each of us was probably *the chosen one* waiting for our witchy familiar to awaken our magical abilities or a wizard to come call us to quest. Any day now, it would happen. Surely, that deer with its giant antlers and too-bright eyes would tell us that only *we* had the power to stop the rising dark and save the world. We didn't yet know what dark was rising.

Inside, there were chores and homework and rules. Outside, there were rules too, but who could keep eyes on all of us at once? Inside, my older brother was dying slowly of a seizure disorder. Inside, some older sibling was yelling, saying they hated it here. Someone slammed a door so hard it broke. Inside, my father was leaving us, slowly and then with such force that it left us breathless and unmoored.

But for a brief and precious time, we were children who ran barefoot all summer and howled at the moon. We didn't yet know the jagged shapes of loss or prejudice or anxiety. We fell asleep easily to the sound of crickets and desert doves in the cottonwoods. We believed green was the color of magic and untold treasures were awaiting us outside. We believed if we looked carefully, we'd find a limitless future in the glittering path of the Milky Way that blazed so brightly at night in our oasis in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the desert that raised us.

Amethyst Loscocco is a multi-genre writer. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Pinch*, *Electric Literature*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Gone Lawn*, *Tiny Molecules*, and elsewhere. She has an MA in science writing from Johns Hopkins University. She grew up on a farm near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, and now lives in Oakland, California. She's currently working on a memoir.