



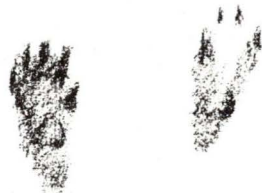
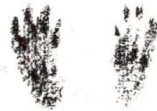
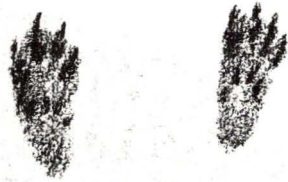
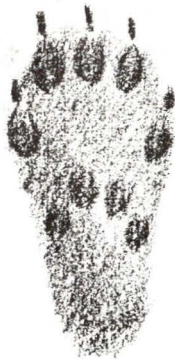
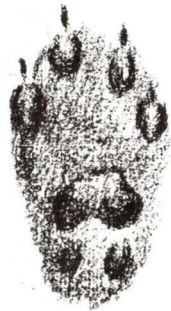
Excerpts from

A WINTER IN THE ILLINOIS WOODS

A Journal, by Marguerite Swift

*annotated by James Koller*

*eastern gray squirrel*



Cover Drawing by Skylark

September 29

Fair day, wind.

Jim dug six post holes, chopped down five trees, oak & elm. We finished clearing the land for the cabin. We put four posts in, packing them with dirt & rocks from the creek.

Last night the moon rose early & set near 2am, orange, with halo. Moon chasing sun across sky, waxing, waning the other way. Crickets, mid-morning. Jim is hunting. I dry apples, cut them in little pieces, leave in the sun. Time is in taking a long time to do anything. It is taking a long time to build this cabin.

Late afternoon, sky clouding slightly. Hauled five buckets of rocks from the creek. The creek is not full, but sluggish & polluted. The people around here say it is very low for this time of year, they say the fish are dying. It's nice down there, tracks of racoon, frogs, jumping in water at my approach.

Jim shot a squirrel today, showed me how to skin it & prepare for cooking. It is easier to skin than a goat, very fast.

Cut trees for house poles, hauled them back through woods, heavy, hard to carry, oak, elm, 16', 20' long. The house is 16'9" on one side, 16'8" on another, 16'2" another & 16'0" on the last. Four poles stand now in the corners & we dug four more post holes.

I chopped wood for kindling, for winter — the logs we will cut with chainsaw later. Near full moon over cornfields, land very bright. This squirrel which Jim shot & which I fried for dinner tasted horrible — like cardboard soaked in vinegar. We talk of the cabin which we build & how it will be good to live in it.

*It is hard to find straight trees. Especially in longer lengths. The poles I needed were about ten feet. There was a great deal of dead wood, two years earlier pushed back by a cat to enlarge the fields. Where possible I used this wood, where not, I cut trees, always with an axe, always talking to the tree as I cut it down, explaining why it was that I was doing it, telling the tree what part it would have in our cabin.*

October 6

Cold clear morning, made cornbread for breakfast & we huddled in the warmest corner of the shade house. Feeling no need for cities & their products, this a natural life, not pressured, at peace. All we must do now is build a cabin & gather the wood.

Jim shot a squirrel — a small female, I skinned & cleaned it &

salted the skin. Walked around the field tracking deer, led us to a ditch & into the woods near the creek.

Took apart pig sheds, the second one, & have now a good sized pile of finished lumber. I was tired & we didn't finish working until sunset. It is tiring this work, hot, boring, & there is not the good feeling about it that comes from working hard in hot dry air in the desert. I enjoy the working, but not the fighting with tools, lifting things I cannot lift. We stacked all the wood at the path to our camp, got in the truck & went to town, bought whiskey, beer & ate out.

October 8

Woke up to rain. Started to cook breakfast, but raining too hard, so we closed camp & went to the city, bathed, washed clothes — it is not good to go to the city, a three hour drive, so often, to leave what we are doing & to go into a society in which we say we no longer wish to live.

October 15

Arose at 7 with the sun orange over cornfield, washed, not too cold but damp, made tortillas. Jim still sleeping & I am now roasting soybeans — dawn is especially beautiful. I thought last night it is good to live in an open spot so one can watch the sky — midnight last night, woke up, saw Orion, Gemini, arising late, stars very bright.

Feeling like a gypsy the day I gathered corn from the neighbor's field, looking to see that no one would catch me.

Two birds as I sit waiting for milk to heat for breakfast, one coo-coo's, the other chirps. Also cows mooing in the distance & cars, trains, planes. One is never far enough away. Crows over cornfields yesterday, cawing in woods today. Black crows, coyote & crows.

Mid-afternoon. Went hunting this morning for a pheasant we heard in the cornfield across the creek. Missed it & a squirrel, so we have no meat today. Still hot & muggy, heavy, I feel very tired. Took apart two pigshed roofs & got ten boards we can use. Worked hard today & the roof is 3/4 finished. Jim bugged by the way I hunt, hell, I never hunted an animal — better perhaps to hunt alone, feel the animal, know its rhythm, say a prayer.

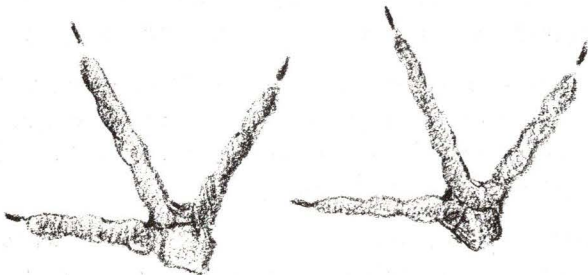
Gathered dandelion & plantain greens, made a good salad for supper. A million ants on the table, attracted by the honey. The cabin is beginning to feel like a house, corn hanging, rafters, roof-floor space.

October 16

Arose 7:30. Fog over land last night & damp in early morning. We walked about the cabin talking over where to put things, shelves, furniture, etc. This cabin is built around our furniture — the table, three chairs, bench & bed. That is all that will fit, that & the stove.

Cooking coffee/rye pancakes. Saw a pheasant in the cornfield, Jim shot three times from the truck & ran to look for it — in the bushes half dressed, wounded it got away. He's in a poor mood now, day's beginning. Looked for the pheasant, saw blood in the woods behind the cabin. I went across the creek & waited for the wounded bird to head toward its home. Jim walked about the dump, looking in the woods, no signs.

*Woke up to hear a pheasant crowing, which usually precedes by a few minutes his flight. Rolled the truck window down & waited. He came down & I shot, hitting him three times before he made it into the brush. None of the shots did more than knock feathers from his wings. I jumped from the truck, wearing only my shirt, ran to where the pheasant had entered the brush. I spooked him & he ran, me behind him, until he stopped in a clump of grass. I parted the grass with the rifle barrel to see him inside a roll of wire that was hidden in the grass. I aimed at his head, somehow missed. The pheasant ran from the wire into heavy bramble & I couldn't follow without my pants. I ran back to the truck to get my pants. Peg was laughing, between me & my pants, taking my picture. When I finally got my pants on I returned to the brambles but could find no sign of the bird. I searched the entire area, the only fresh blood near the cabin, where it seemed unlikely the bird had come. I was very unhappy at the prospect of the wounded bird being devoured by some animal because of the wound I had given it. A month or so later a pheasant again began crowing in the area near the cabin. I'm sure he survived. No other animals/birds near the cabin were shot at.*



*ring-necked pheasant*

Tore the roof off of the sixth pigshed, nine useable boards out of fourteen. Gathered plantain for salad, a bitter/sweet plant, good with olive oil & vinegar. Fetched water & vegetables from L's & the names of some people who might have buildings they want torn down. Came back, had tea. Sit a lot without talking. Jim finished the roof & I hauled six buckets of pebbles from the creek for the porch — am nearly finished.

The roof beams are of oak & elm, hard wood, strong wood. Leaves turning yellow, autumn, a warm, windy, hazy day. Noise of people working the fields, shadows of leaves in sunlight, snakes out for the sun.

Good dinner of cornbread, eggs with peppers, onions, plantain/dandelion salad. Talking about how to arrange cabin, we are changing our minds. Fantasizing. I would like to see it the way we planned.

November 7

Morning, sunlight, patterns of frost on windows, rainbow colors — red, blue, orange, yellow — sun shining across cornfield to southeast, through now barren trees into south window. Am thinking of the colors of the land at Lukachukai — red, blue, purple, green. Here colors subtle, muted, all browns, browns & greys. At sunrise & sunset the land glows golden, but just for a while. Pale sunlight with light blue sky & brown/grey land — different from rose red, green, yellow, purple, blue, black land, brilliant sunlight & dark blue sky of the Southwest.

“So cold at night the water froze.” — Barney's, Rough Rock, Douglas' hogan some winters ago — here.

Sitting now by warm stove, fire sputtering, hissing, Jim in bed, saying it's too cold to make love, too cold to get up. Wearing one t-neck sweater, one wool sweater, Father's mohair vest, black wool sweater, three pairs socks, skirt. We went to bed at 9, I woke up at 6, lit fire, sun rose 6:30, now 7 & wind coming from the NW. It is always the wind which makes it cold. Chicago, “windy city,” reality of that was not considered when I decided to come here with Jim.

Three shadows form a cross on the windows, sunlight & frost. Thoreau says nature best companion — yes & no. One must fully realize that to understand it, not to miss people. I walked about Lukachukai, but missed people at times.

2:30 afternoon sun coming in window, sitting by stove, cabin bright, messy with burlap sacks strewn about floor. Jim unhappy because nothing is going the way it should — door molding won't fit tight enough — he cut branches in a hurry. I tell him we did not give

ourselves enough time & so are pressured by wind, weather, & approaching winter. We are trying to do in six weeks what it would take someone many months to do. We are trying to do in six months enough to fill a lifetime – all works with time, takes time to do well. Humph, he says.

It is cold & there seems to be an incredible amount to do. Jim has started to dig the hole for the outhouse. There is wood to be cut, the other inside walls put up, outhouse built, boards scraped, cracks filled – & we must hunt & grind corn, tan skins.

I ask: what can I do with beans with nothing to add to them. There is little to eat but corn & beans, not an onion.

November 14

Moved into the cabin. It is really beautiful, with counters built & kitchen all together – first time I ever moved into my own house – became sad because of the beauty of it all.

Finished the north wall in the morning, Jim swearing like a seaman all the time as nail after nail bent. He built the counter & shelves in the NW corner – my desk, & then put up his shelf – twice the wood broke. Swore, knocked chairs about, swore, so angry that had he not finished the shelf I thought he'd throw the hammer.

I had the first good day of working in the cabin since we've been here, actually for the first time working in a house that was my own. Washed piles of dishes, ground corn, soy beans, made a good potato soup, apple sauce with honey (New Mexico honey definitely thicker, richer than mid-west honey), raisins, cloves, oil, & made also a wholewheat bread fired in hot fat, poori.

At night we moved in. Jim caulked & puttied & put in the two missing panes. Hung owl claws over the door, corn & sage, hawk & magpie feathers. Ate late, Jim so tired he fell asleep at table. Two days of hard work.

November 23

Early morning, red dawn, waiting for snow. Creek frozen & cold enough to see one's breath. Fire, burning the remains of C's fallen cabin, makes a lot of noise, sparks. Jim still sleeping & I watch the grey sky turn still greyer. We both went to bed early.

Chopping a lot of wood lately, working hard in the cold, a good feeling.

Reading about the energy that exists in the under thirty group in

the Siberian far north. They are not escaping, not rejecting their society, but are trying to build it — in our way we are too. We are of the people who live apart from the existing American society, thereby creating our own. Yet we are not completely apart, for yesterday we 1) went to laundromat, 2) bought tobacco, 3) food for dog, 4) boots for Jessie. We continually buy things for our use, things we could do without, & then we are given other things in quantity, cake, sweets, gifts of no practical value, basically bad for us. I want to live in a pure manner.

Skinning the possum that C found by the road. We have 2 deerskins, 2 possum, 3 coon, 13 foxes, 3 sheep & many many goatskins — “looks like Hudson’s Bay Co.”

Warm weather met cold weather last night about dusk, a diagonal line across sky, grey/blue.

Two nights ago the stars were clear, like those before Christmas & that time of year anyplace, reminding me of my childhood in Germany.

*I was standing outside, looking at the sky, the dark line running nearly east & west, when I heard a buzzing in the air that sounded like hundreds of bees, not close, but not far, just over the trees. I couldn't see anything. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I thought it must be a visitation, but from where, who. Several times while chopping wood I had the sense that someone was watching me, & turning, I saw someone's overalls, but looking up they disappeared. Looked like an old man's overalls. The closest place to us, only barns now, the house burned down, was once lived in by an old man who lived alone for as long as I can remember. Thought maybe it was him. Peg one night refused to go to the outhouse, said a ghost lived there & I told her I had seen him several times.*



*possum*

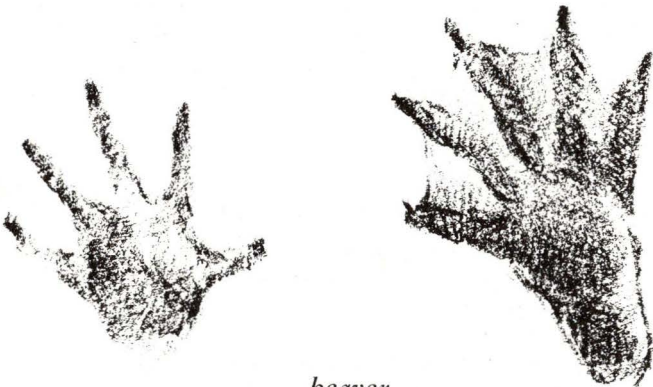


November 28

Some days after Thanksgiving, which in this part of the country is celebrated with little prayer to the god of food-providing. We are back in our cabin in the woods after an over-long visit in the city.

Walking down by the creek, silently, slowly through the woods, listening to many brown/grey one-striped-winged birds as they fly back & forth across the creek. Sky grey, damp, silent but for the birds, rustling of leaves. A cardinal – bright red against grey/brown of winter – flies across the creek in front of me, a beaver walks into the water, doesn't see me. I stood beside the big oak tree which hangs over the bank & watched in silence. Have not looked at one leaf, one flower, the pattern of ice & water or dead autumn leaves for a long time. Felt a joy, happiness, that I have not felt for a long time. Each leaf, clump of dry flowers, ripple on water, filled my mind. A stand of red-brown bushes, bright against the otherwise muted colors of this land, lies on the western edge of the cornfield across the creek, behind it, trees with leaves still hanging, each a subtle shade different than the others, all still in morning mist. Walked to upper field, wider horizons. Here this is anyplace, not Illinois so much as England, France, cold damp, grey, mist & muted colors, northern Europe. Illinois does not exist for me here, I walk around, watch a big bird rise from the brush & a squirrel hide a nut in his cache & watch the same white-tan weeds I photographed in Arizona swaying in the wind, sway in the wind here.

Went down to the beaver's house by the creek. Stood on the bank & talked to him, asked him if he had such a hard time with beavers as I sometimes did with humans. Keep to oneself, yet be open, not distant, is what he told me. It is all possible.



*beaver*

Walked past the tree of many acorns, down the path to the lower crossing, past a field of cows which stood at attention & stared at me as I passed by, although I was some distance away & quiet. One was particularly black & big & glaring – a bull & I thought of the big pigs & that I don't like them & how sometimes I fear these domesticated animals yet wild ones don't bother me. Some cows – & other signs of civilized life (from Lewis & Clark journals).

Must be alone at times, feel the wind, weather, see the leaves, stones & subtleties of life – too often overlooked by people changing roles, cooking, caring for kids, chopping wood, visiting.

I do not know if I want to be completely domesticated, but to have some wildness in me. When I walk around as today & look at trees who are one with me & birds & all, I know this is what I must be doing & that I want to live, simply, have children, live in the woods.

Still grey, waiting two days for snow to come – due, according to the Farmer's Almanac. R brought us water on the tractor. Fields muddy, we walk. It is good to walk in winter, in summer it is too easy.

Very softly it is starting to snow, very gently – more like rain & I must bring in wood for the fire before it gets too wet. I have only added 4 logs in three hours. A year is nearly past, a year since I wrote in a book like this in Nambe, wrote of woods, snow, rain, wind, weather, wood & fire, night/day. All is peace now with the wind, I miss at this moment the mountains, yet it is good here with snow falling, fast & hard, the ground becoming white.

Snow heavy now, ground white, branches white, world transformed. In the fields the snow comes driving from the southwest, hard, in the woods it is gentler, one side of each tree white, the other brown. There is magic in a woodland snow, on the plains there is no magic but the strength of the storm. Indian tipis in barren fields & the strong snows of winter. I am just beginning to feel how it was here, to know the duality of fields & woods.

December 14

Jim cutting wood with a chain saw. I think of how I want to live. Like this life, but would like it more if there were people about. Want to live simply, but not this isolated, forever. Raining, roof leaking, creek rising, grey.

Rain, mist, smoke from the cabin, barley/venison soup on stove. We eat venison nearly every night. Made a sauce from red New Mexico chili bought one year ago & soaked, peeled & strained with onion, olive oil, tomatoes, garlic, coriander. The yogurt isn't working for me, it gets

too cold at night. My rug is good, wide bands with black crosses. The loom works well, but there are some mistakes & I would be nearer the reservation so I could correct them.

December 22

Winter Solstice — cold, clear. Prayed at dawn, noon & dusk. The rebirth of the sun. Rose red sunset, clouded crescent moon high above in west. Evening sky of pink, purple, grey, blue. Creek in sunset, wind soft yet cold from south, fire burning & venison roast cooking. Jim cuts wood with a chain saw, tomorrow I will help him & will weave.

Looked for arrowheads & found three in muddy fields some days ago — people long gone, only their signs remain.

*There are two places on this farm, another near by, where there were obviously either large or prolonged settlements. Each spring & fall the plowed ground when washed by rains yields up arrowheads, spear points, knives, drills, what have you, all of flint. One of these places is within a hundred yards, once sheltered from east, north & west by trees, from the south by a small hill. A stone axe was once found, never any iron, nor even pottery. From the great number of war heads found here, the land changed hands several times.*

January 16

It has been cold, is cold, a seige, below zero, -25 at night. All frozen, eggs, water, oil, if water falls on the floor it freezes. The water jugs are solid. Two nights we have slept in our sleeping bags under the bedcovers, with sheepskins piled on top. Tomas (Jim's malamute dog) sleeps tied to the trunk under the table. The cat under the stove & has burnt her tail. Jim stays up till midnight keeping the fire, I try to get up at 2am to put wood on, then we get up early to clean it & build it up again.

One either burns or freezes here.

Now it's slightly warmer, three pm & a south wind, 5 degrees, but a chill factor of -30. Grey, going to snow.

For the past three days we have sat by the stove, one on either side, burning our knees, freezing our backs, Jim reading Celtic myths, me typing the Navajo journals, talking some.

Walked along the ice on creek to check my traps each day. Creek cracking under me. High yesterday -5.

During the time we are not reading or talking, we bring in wood, cook, eat, thaw water, melt snow & try to keep warm — can sit by the

stove, two feet away & see one's breath easily. It is very cold, & tiring, this cold – always tense from fighting it. Have wrapped up all of the freezable food in clothes in my trunk, eggs in a blanket.

January 17

Seige over. Sunny. Temperature 36. A sixty degree change since night before last or morning before this, when it was a cool -25. Wind from the south, 25 mph & today was the first time here I have felt the warmth of the sun, real warmth, as in the Southwest.

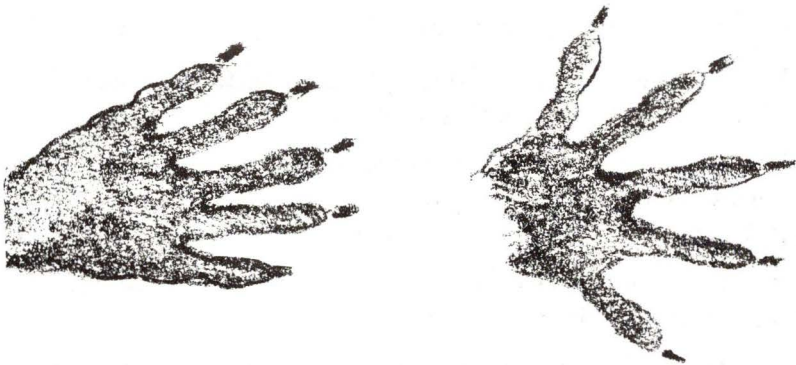
Walked along edge of creek, some few feet away a red-tailed hawk chased smaller birds around, great commotion. A beautiful bird, amazingly graceful. Saw a lot of little birds, woodpeckers, cardinals, others. Looked at the traps, nothing even though I sprinkled corn over them two days ago, now covered with snow. Walked up the creek, ice frozen thick in some places, creaking under my weight.

Some days ago, after the snow, we took the sled across the creek & slid down a hill, but there wasn't enough snow. Saw a fox on the farm north of us, & a pheasant flew out of the brush in front of us, right past us. Jim said he could have gotten it, imagine so, if he'd a gun. Beautiful bird.

That morning we'd looked out the east windows, saw two big red foxes out in the field, heading north. Maybe the same one we saw later.

Animal tracks, in fresh snow. I look at them, not so much figuring it all out, but knowing we're all doing this together. Jim is wondering how it would be to live in a hole, like a fox, or in a log, like a bear. The truck is frozen in this weather.

*Truck starter wouldn't engage when below about ten. Had to warm it up, then usually started unless it accidentally flooded.*



*raccoon*

January 22

An eagle — golden eagle above the mud/grey & bleakness of Illinois fields, crows circling above. The land is grey, the spirit barren. The wind blows.

We are both depressed, wanting to go away. Me scared at night to go to the outhouse because of the spirit-which-haunts-this-place (I am afraid of strange Anglo spirits), took a shit outside in the wind.

We sit, after dinner, Jim reading the Golden Bough, me reading on Zen.

Went walking in wind & grey, warm, 40's, to look at traps, ice on creek melting, nothing, but for the wind. Sky became angry with me for thinking bad thoughts.

*golden eagle*



February 4

Moon in Libra. Tree silhouettes strong black against red, orange, white of sky. Cold, 5, wind from west. Walking in heavy snow, down creek on ice — not much moving about today. Baking bread of wheat & soy, waiting for darkness to fall — waiting, it has been a day on either side of the stove, waiting for wind & weather to cease.

Lamps burning first at 5pm. Night. Crisp, snow creaking, floor creaking, branches of trees coming together for warmth, strong silhouettes against blue/black sky & lights of house & lights of stars, red Mars & Orion, the Pleides, Castor & Pollux. Such nights are good.

Ate too much sausage for dinner, drinking parsley tea.

Noises of cold, of woodpile, of floor creaking, of fire & water. Dancing with Tomas, the jig. Jim & I Russian dancing — the whole cabin

shakes & one of the floor boards begins to split. The beam above the stove has split from the heat, the one on which we hang the cast iron pots.

Juniper ash & blue corn from the Hopis, water & salt enough to make a good bread. More dreams, vivid dreams, dreaming of smoking again — Pall Malls — of parties & people. Jim reading about Soma, mushrooms. Me thinking of going to India, or just living quietly, simply, riding horses — through storm & wind & lightning — herding sheep & goats.

February 7

Moon in Scorpio. The cabin is too small for the two of us, little privacy, peace. I try to read & Jim interrupts too often. I can't read, I am upset, & we fight. He sharpens the chain saw, a terrible noise & so I can't read — we are both unhappy, pissed off. Bad feelings vibrate about the house, trees, creek. The sun hides itself — it should be possible to live with someone without crossing them.

Yesterday Jim carried the water jug down in the knapsack, leaking, down his back, pants, 25 mph wind & 0 temperature, cold & dripping ice through the fields.

The kettle sings, whistles, hums, hisses, a high-key wailing, the women at the Wall — Easter Jerusalem. When the kettle sings the fire needs wood.

Read about a good house, walls of two foot long logs piled like firewood, mud & straw between the logs. Very warm, wind-proof. I ache from the cold & dampness.

*Such buildings currently in use in Siberia, at -70 cattle can keep themselves warm with their own body heat in such a building. A low ceiling, I imagine very like the roof of a hogan, logs & dirt.*

February 25

Bread baking, snowing, big white flakes, maybe last snow of season. Magic of world again, sounds of wood burning, water boiling, snow coming from the east. That is how it is with the snow here, comes from the east.

Last night, walking home, white fields, white moonlight. A full circle about the moon. World white, cabin peaceful.

March 1

Three bees, buzzing the honey. Jim cut his beard, threw it in the

creek with the melting ice, trees & branches.

Wove a lot on the rug. Last night late a fox barked, a fight between two animals. A rabbit hops around now by the outhouse, curious about Tomas. It is the one whose tracks we saw all winter in the snow.

Creek still swollen, dark brown muddy water flowing past, blocks of ice around the island. Geese fly north, honking, rain on the roof, foggy grey day.

Walking through fields yesterday, soft fog on horizon & the sun set large & orange. Walked through incredible mud, many feet deep. Sunk down often, a loud sucking noise as I pulled my mud-coated boots free of the fields. Full soft moonlight, damp wind walking home. Dead leaves of winter softly blowing past.

Cabin getting darker, been dark all day, now darker. Wove three & a half inches, hard because there is little room to pull out the heddles. Strong wind from the north, getting colder, 15. Light from kerosene lamps throws muted shadows, guns, feathers & claws hang on the walls. The cats sleep.



*rabbit*

March 9

Beautiful, blue, clear, warm sun & warm fire. Windows washed, house well cleaned, a good cornbread baking. Sheepskins shaken, dog shit raked, junk thrown away. A good day.

Walked yesterday through the fields, saw tracks of a large cat, saw places where the creek had run into the fields. Bright stars, & Orion was lower on the horizon, disappearing, summer coming. A great beauty lay on the land yesterday, freshness of spring.

Very windy, windows rattling, fields drying in the wind. Light shines through the house, a fairy-tale cabin in the woods, feeling of magic, spirits. It is woods & the beams of the house speak of woods. Sunlight moves shadows across the floor.



*bobcat*

