

TRISH CARNEY

Bobcat Mt. Tamalpais, 2009
Color pigment print



COURTESY THE ARTIST

HELEN REED LEHMAN

Wildcat An American Life

The wildcat was tawny and whiskered, with impossibly large feet and a muscular body. His ears were tufted in black. So was his stub of a tail. He weighed about forty pounds. That year, 1946, he would come about three times a week to look at Ted and Helen Reed through the picture window in their living room in Rancho Santa Fe, a wealthy and countrified suburb of San Diego.

Their daughter watched the wildcat too. I was also named Helen, but I was called Tigger.

When Ted and Helen were quarreling, the sight of their lovely visitor made them quiet down. Sometimes they speculated about why he came to look at them. Maybe he had been tame at one time. If so, what was done to him was a double betrayal. The people who had “owned” him betrayed him by releasing him into the outside world, and the men who set their dogs on him betrayed him with their harassment.

It was not the only betrayal in my family at that time.

The cat bounced around outside of the window as though inviting the humans to come join him. We contented ourselves with looking. He was beautiful.

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The wildcat was driven into a culvert near our house and cornered there by men and dogs. It turned him into a snarling, spitting beast. The culvert was about six feet long and three feet wide. It was roofed by dirt. It carried water off the road in the rainy season.

Helen was a shy woman, but she tried to remonstrate with the cat’s tormentors. “What you are doing to that beautiful animal is wrong.” The men stared at her in disbelief, then resumed egging their dogs on. When some boys came by on their bikes, she said, “Children, these are wicked men, and you shouldn’t watch what they are doing.”

Shame-faced, the men sniggered at Helen. The boys moved on. The men went back to jumping around and encouraging their dogs.

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Helen was the daughter of a lumber baron named Hiram Stewart. Her father owned stands of timber in Wisconsin and Oregon. Helen grew up with her parents and her older brother in Wausau, Wisconsin. In 1898, when she was ten,