

Meditation on Winter Caretaking.

By Sally Manikian

...we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning-
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty. —Patrick Kavanagh, *Advent*, emphasis added.

There was a time when I viewed heading into the woods for a caretaker stint as a big deal. I would stress over the little things I did and didn't have in my pack, fret about taking one last shower, and sign off my emails to friends as if I was departing for a wild expedition to the ends of the earth.

That view has changed. Over the past two years as a caretaker, in cabins, huts, lodges, and canvas tents throughout the White Mountain National Forest, I've begun to take a more relaxed approach to my time in the woods. I don't measure out my oatmeal packets and coffee filters neurotically, or refuse hardback books because of extra weight, nor do I panic about what time I have to leave for my hike in. I look at the ground on the valley and the snow on the summits, gauge the heft of my pack, and a mental calculator starts clicking. This all is, most likely, due to the fact that caretaking seems terribly normal to me now. With that normality have come systems of motor memory and (unconscious) checklists: an understanding of time expressed in footsteps. I've become comfortable.

Once I recognized my level of comfort, the ease with which I slide between frontcountry and backcountry and the degree to which I deny that there is a 'between' at all, I began to consider the deeper development of a caretaker: how my relationship to my environment and my view of my job have shifted from the grand themes of difference and the exotic to a more subtle appreciation of the small. I have experienced a shift in self-perception, no longer the incredible caretaker, I am now someone who is just doing their job.

This shift was important and humbling; and can be understood as 'jaded in its best form.' I might be ambivalent towards the uniqueness of my position, but I still retain a sense of wonder that I have been able to make an ordinary life in the National Forest. What follows is a meditation on the life of a career caretaker (in the loose way that caretaking can be viewed as a career), an exposition of comfort in my ordinary.

One of my favorite places to look at the world is from a viewpoint known as 'The Quay,'

at the Randolph Mountain Club's Gray Knob. My mantra during my winter as a Gray Knob caretaker has been 'you can never go to the Quay too many times.' I would veer off to the left when coming back from the Perch, swing by on my way up to Mt Adams, and often wander out just to see what was going on. The wintry white drama of Mt Jefferson's Castellated Ridge off to the left, stripe of the rail trail down in the valley, and the edges of the Green Mountains rim the skyline in the distance.

There is always more to the story of that grand view. Seasonal change presents itself subtly. The waves of color in the fall start at the edges of the leaves of a mountain ash. Rime ice in October. And then warm sun begins to soften the frozen world of the alpine zone in January. The parade of birds becomes a crowded chorus by June. The first butterfly of the spring. The changing time the sun would rise not just in the sky, but also over the edge of the cleft of Gray's Knob, and arrive finally at the cabin.

These small things give motion to the vistas, bring the world of seasonal time close, close enough to touch as I peel the first frost off a mushroom, sink to my knees in new mud, and crack through the light layer of icing in the spring.

Vladimir Nabokov posited that 'the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time.' I think that, after awhile, we all feel this to some extent when we're in the woods.

The meteorological dynamics of the alpine zone, the ebb and flow of the snow pack, the accumulation of rime ice on trees and my jacket, the thaw and the solid flow of ice left in its wake, these were the elements of my winter. And these are the opportunities offered to a winter caretaker: the chance to experience wild winter wilderness closely, to learn the patterns, to build a relationship with the landscape.

I fell in love with winter alpine weather one particular week in December. On Monday, new snow fell the day I hiked in, crispy light snow that had me slipping and sliding into hidden spaces between rocks, bruising my shins and knees. Three inches balanced delicately on the thin limbs of the scrappy birches that eke out a living at the edge of timberline. My daily walk over to the Perch was quiet and calm.

Midweek the winds picked up, stripping the trees of snow and upsetting the balancing act I had witnessed earlier. Blown free of snow, the green spruce gave the illusion of melt; a closer look showed the 'melted' fir and spruce covered in minute ice crystals, frosted with moisture wicked from the air. High winds and blowing snow shrouded the summits, and kept this winter caretaker mostly below timberline.

Friday came with freezing fog, cutting a profile of white among the trees and steadying the snow beneath my feet as it thickened with increased moisture. The firs around the cabin changed to white again, stiff with rime ice rather than soft cuddly snow.

As the winter continued, the snowpack hardened and condensed with each cycle of thaw and freeze. Rocks became obscured: tramped out trails become sidewalks. Wide expanses of snowfields above treeline developed.

January 3 was my first subzero day and I decided to hike to Adams with my dog Quid. Like most stupid cold days, the sky was clear and the winds were high. Clouds of blowing snow

misted the summits, swirled wildly around my legs and turned my black dog white. My body rocked with the wind long after I had returned to the haven of Gray Knob. My walk to the Perch was through a landscape of alpenglow.

I celebrated the leap year day of February 29 with an 'Adams Family Tour' over the sub summits of Adams: Adams 4 (or 'Abigail' as I began to refer to her), Sammy, JQ, and then big ol' Adams himself. It was a day relatively cold by mercury standards (4-6F), but there was no wind. I sat on the summit of Adams for almost an hour, just resting in the sun. Quid stretched out beneath the summit sign, while I chose the view of the Carters and the Great Gulf from the rocks on the edge.

There were also a few adventurous hikes into the windy whiteness of winter. On my first subzero morning (it warmed to zero by midday), December 6, the day dawned mostly clear, but high winds whipped the new snow into ground blizzards. I decided to see how far I could get above treeline before I became too frustrated to continue. I sank into deep new snowdrifts, only to slip on ice the next step, and then scramble up bare rocks. Ice and snow seeped in, through the zipper of my jacket and clung to my facemask. I almost lost a mitten in a strong gust while I was fixing my gaiter. I made it to Adams 4, and then had enough.

Later that evening on radio call, Bill Arnold, my nightly radio contact, commented 'Things looked pretty blustery up there today, hope you weren't crazy enough to go out.'

I became aware of the many emotional pulls that lead me to know that I can never be far away from such a landscape again. Days like January 29 would be missing.

I had no real plans for January 29. At least not until I heard the 7 AM weather report, and then I decided to walk to Mt Washington, for no particular reason other than it was a beautiful day. Clear skies. Little to no wind. Trails mostly free of snow, alternating between ice, hardpack, and occasional rocks. A radical inversion had it 36F at 4,370 ft, and 6F down in the valley. I hadn't been for a significant walk in a week or so, and was curious about the world south of Jefferson. I looked at the dog and said 'Let's go get lunch at the Observatory.'

At the Perch Path junction, I shed my hat, jacket, and mittens. I couldn't wait to reach the glow of light over the ridge at Edmand's Col, where we paused for a sunlight break. Quid rolled in the grass and played puppy-like among the humps of sedge. I looked to the spine of the Carters, reminded of the summer past when I'd salute the Presidential Gentlemen from North Carter.

As always, it took awhile to get around Jefferson, mostly because of the steep snowfields that awe me with their beauty. After passing little Clay, the summit buildings loomed close, and my pace picked up. Clear water ice was thick on the mountain; but Quid still wagged her tail as she walked behind me with a steady step.

Many friendly and familiar faces both expected and unexpected were at the Observatory that day. After I raided the leftovers from the fridge (turkey! Stuffing! Chocolate cream pie! Such treats for a caretaker), and Quid received a sound smack on the nose from the new cat Marty, we headed back to our own neighborhood.

The clouds dropped soon after we left the summit. The snow began to fall as we passed across Monticello Lawn, pelting and pinching my face, and crusting Quid's coat white on the windward side. Yet even then, when we made it back to Edmand's Col, it was warm enough for me to not need my hat. On the Randolph Path I could smell the cool melt in the damp fog.

Wisps of moisture, clouds of weather surrounded Jefferson behind me. Drops and drips of melt and slush from the trees. Fragrant aroma of spruce. Snow fleas flecked my foot prints on the Perch Path.

The next day, the mercury held high through to the morning, a damp and wet 40F at 7 AM. But by the end of the day, the thaw had frozen: it was 10F. It was a temporary window of thaw, a good day to be a caretaker.

It started getting cold inside in December. I was slower leaving my sleeping bag, sighed with resignation when my water pots froze solid, and scraped hoarfrost off the windowsills to keep myself moving. Writing in my journal, my hand grew numb and stiff with cold as I drew it along the chilled pages. I chipped a tooth on a piece of frozen chocolate, and added another layer under my down.

I maniacally scrambled to keep things from freezing: the gray water bucket had to be dumped almost immediately, water could never be left in the red water jugs used to transport it from the spring, I traveled to chip the ice off the spring twice a day, and was always carving away at the material in the outhouse. Occasional cracks echoed in the main room as moisture gave way to ice. I thought of the stories of other winter caretakers: a cork popping out of a wine bottle with the report of a gunshot, the description of water freezing inside our own bodies in frostbite.

Yet even with all this cold, I never got more than chilled around the edges. I was always shivering cold down in the valley, when I walked from a centrally heated house to the smack of 10 degrees. The temperature differential between inside and outside at Gray Knob is conducive to acclimation.

I said to myself on January 21, 'huh, it's a little chilly outside.'

It was -20.

Spring brings an amazing thaw: a rapid change in the visual fields of terrain and topography. Every day reveals new of rock and ground, pieces of trash, and in time a few blades of green grass. A tree I snap off the Perch Path on Sunday because it was thwacking my knee was at chin level by Friday. Tiny Star Lake melts free, with the tinier Storm Lake close behind.

Water rushes everywhere, roaring down Castle Ravine in a waterfall and forming a puddle on the Gulfside Trail that I grew especially fond of. A few nights of below-freezing temps would halt this mountain-wide flow into glazed melt on the snowfields and frozen drips on the trail. This is only for a moment: the sun will come out the next day. A winter is full of teasing thaws, so when spring came I reminded myself that this thaw was slightly more permanent.

With the departure of the prohibitively cold, inside and outside, the rigid schedule I held over the winter slackens a bit. I stopped scrambling maniacally to keep gray water from freezing. I flitted around barefoot outside, and my abandoned layers of down cluttered the caretaker room.

Longer days translate to a fuller days. Walking to Mt Washington was no longer a daunting prospect. After mornings of chores, reading in the sun, and clearing downed trees, I would leave for 'long way to the Perch' hikes in the mid to late afternoon, no longer wary of the

4 PM setting sun.

One of the things I find fascinating as a caretaker is what transpires in that nexus between people and wilderness, how individuals, myself included, behave in and interact with the mountains. People come with so many different characteristics and habits, and also from so many different backgrounds. Certainly one of the things one must accept about the Whites is the presence of people, and in my time here I have come to enjoy the people who frequent these hills, and the many ways in which they enjoy themselves.

To be a good hostess, a hospitable caretaker, one can't pull rank on visitors. It's a fine line between making conversation and undercutting the experience of others by imposing my own standards of experience. This can be a challenge in the winter, when there is always a time when it has been colder, windier, or snowier (and I'm not just talking about my own experience of the cold and the snow). There is little room for dialogue when no one is allowed to feel comfortable.

For a winter caretaker, who can recall the darkness of December and the deep cold of January, March is spring: balmy mid-teen temperatures, a warm strong sun, and a long stretch of daylight. However, for many people (eight Baltimore college students who have never been in alpine zone winter for example) the world of March is winter: blowing snow, breath-snatching winds, limited visibility, and persistent subzero windchills. An individual's understanding of definitional signs and the signified is grasped through experience and memory, and as a good caretaker, I refuse to force a hierarchy of standards into that shared realm of experience.

An additional challenge becomes demystifying the aura of a caretaker, the vision of a carefree life in the wild, but also retaining the subtle power of the unique position in commanding people's respect and thereby their attention. I expand on frequently asked questions in order to explain my job and to show that I am a person with practical duties and demands. I want to show the small in my own life.

In some ways, attempting to connect the daily minutiae of a caretaker with the grander image of an idealized lifestyle is just as important as and akin to connecting the small steps of seasonal change to the grander scale of mountain time.

There are branches of political theory and philosophy that argue that the nature and direction of politics begin small scale, with an individual's self-understanding and minute actions. The personal is political; specific actions become tied to the grander scale of change.

Caretaking is a lifestyle composed of small things: the changes in the landscape and the changes in your own habits and routines to fit the landscape. You form a strong relationship with a place. It is a uniquely backcountry life.

But maybe I'm suggesting something a little more ambitious. In sharing these experiences, I'd like to think that I'm gesturing towards how something as unique as caretaking is not completely unfathomable or alien. And, likewise, the backcountry of the National Forest is not so unreachable either: seasonal change occurs in the suburbs. In describing the winter weather, the walks I went on, the minutiae of my day, and the sorts of interactions with those

who wander into my neighborhood, I'm trying to show that there are aspects of caretaking that translate to life outside of the backcountry.

I am concerned about this partially because I am now at a point where I will be altering my own relationship with the backcountry, as I shift from caretaker to a steward of a different kind. Yet I trust that what the backcountry changed in me is not bound to the ridges of rock and ice. Indeed, there already are aspects of caretaking that have wound their way into my life out of the backcountry. The small effects of seasonal change and human action, understandings produced in the nexus of people and wilderness in landscapes I have come to love, do not disappear so easily.