

## Lizard Dreams and Our Same Hearts

*Waterman Fund Essay Contest runner-up*

**Liesl Magnus**



*Liesl Magnus sits in a hole she chopped in one of the Carter Lakes trying to reach liquid water. Later, friends arrived with a new ice augur. LIESL MAGNUS*

I want to disavow the idea that winter is cruel. I want to purge the feeling of resentment and dread, and every melancholic essay that describes winter as cold and bitter (in anything but the literal) can get balled up and tossed on the fire I'm going to make tonight. I want to take anyone who has ever said anything biting or miserable about this jewel-encrusted season and smack

them upside the head. And then I want to take all that back and then kiss them on the mouth. Repeatedly.

I was sixteen the first time I spent a night outside in winter, and I remember the beech grove we camped in on the first night we were out. Their trunks were bigger around than I could hug, and in the nighttime light of early March, they stood like pillars of some fallen temple, their highest branches trembling in a breeze I could not feel. I had torn myself from my sleeping bag with a reluctance that bordered on painful, shoving my warm feet into frozen boots to hobble across the iron-hard snow to pee. On my way back, I looked up. The stars shone like half-remembered gems, scattered small and shining across the wild expanse of night. Deep in the valley between Mount Chocorua and an unnamed ridge, the familiar constellations were truncated by the hemlock-lined walls that sheltered us. Later that trip, in a younger forest on a higher ridge, I was able to pick out the entirety of Orion, club raised high in the southwestern sky. Something in me turned over twice and settled, like an old dog coming home.

Six years later, I stood with my headlamp off in the middle of lower Carter Lake, the wind *shhh*-ing its way across the ice and the barest sliver of a moon rising over the furthest shoulder of Carter Dome. The same silhouette of Orion rose in the southwest; Alnilam, Mintaka, and Alnitak strung in succession across the old warrior's waist. The smell of burning birch rose from the chimney of the hut, sweet and dusty and clear in the January night. A trio of Boy Scouts crouched next to a hole in the ice, quietly arguing over the easiest way to get water. On the upper lake, the ice shifted and cracked in the cold that had taken over from the brief, fleeting sunshine that had come midday. It echoed off the Wildcat Mountains, bouncing high and thunderous around the valley.

"Wait, so, do you do this *every* night?" one of them asked, looking over at me.

“Uhhh,” I stumbled, Orion’s spell shattered. “Well, not *every* night. If I don’t have guests I don’t tend to use a lot of water, so I can go a few days without doing it.”

“That’s lucky for you!” the boy scout replied. “This sucks!”

The Scout in question was lying on his stomach wearing insulated rubber gloves up to his elbows. He was using a large metal measuring cup to scoop water from the bottom of the hole in the ice, being as careful as a 14-year-old boy could be to avoid getting sticks, leaves, and other bottom-of-the-pond detritus into the jugs. He switched off with his friend after about five minutes, and he was absolutely right. This did suck. The ice hole was more than two feet deep, the chore was tedious, and it took hours to warm up afterward.

After the summer rush has come and gone and all the fall crews have spent days elbow deep in a year’s worth of accumulated grime and the helicopters have swooped in and gone as quickly as they came, five huts are boarded up and at the remaining three, a handful of brave souls (or stupid, depends on if you’re one of them) stay behind. For the winter caretakers, what the interview process lacks in a concrete description of the job it makes up for in about seven different versions of the question: *Are you sure you can avoid going insane alone in the woods? It’s not at all like The Shining, but it’s a little bit like The Shining. There mostly aren’t ghosts. But then also sometimes there are, so do what you want with that.*

Black coffee, hot and dark and bitter, mingled with the memories of apple Jack Daniels and Fireball the morning I said goodbye to all my fall crew friends, squashing a brutal hangover with a burrito from the Sunrise Shack before heading south to meet up with the rest of the caretakers in Franconia Notch for a quick training trip. At Lafayette Place, the clouds hung low in the notch, the last of the fall leaves still clinging to birches and ash trees in the campground. Conversation and the hike were easy, flowing from our mouths and legs on the way up to

Lonesome Lake. That night, we watched an almost full moon rise over the Franconia Ridge, pushing through the clouds, the last scraps of a dripping shroud spun to threads in the moonlight.

A week later I fought with my packboard, struggling to get it into a position on the bed of my dad's truck that would let me get it on my back. The leather shoulder straps cut into my bare skin as I turned up the Zealand Trail. It was the end of October. For the next two and a half months, I switched off with another caretaker—a week each—in the care and keeping of Zealand Falls Hut. Perched on the edge of the Zealand Falls, a half-mile-long cascade on Whitewall Brook and at the place where the Zealand and Whitewall Valleys meet, Zealand Mountain is invisible from almost every direction. Even at night, the light from the windows doesn't make it far, the forests and rivers around it wrapping the hut in blankets of snow and ice.

As the weeks went by, the darkness crept into the day. Every morning, the radio report from the observatory announced sunrise and sunset, ending with the total length of day in hours and minutes. Toward the end of November, the sun would drop behind the hill well before four, leaving me to finish my chores in the dying light. The cold crept in, too. Nights dropped below freezing, frost forming in gossamer sheets on the grass in the clearing. In mid-November, hard frost and a few inches of new snow closed the Zealand Road for the winter. Guests were few and far between, the closed road and the short days putting the thought out of their minds. The few day-hikers I saw were as surprised to see me as I was them. There was one week where I saw five people, total.

In the growing dark I explored the valley, running out to Ethan Pond, scrambling up and down the walls of Thoreau Falls. I ran up to Zeacliff more times than I can count, and made the trek out to the peak of Zealand once or twice. I split the firewood that the construction crew had left for us, old habits returning hard as I swung the maul again and again and again, strength that

had slipped away since summer returning to my back and arms. The birch rounds exploded open, clear, straight, sweet grain showing bright against the mud in the woodlot. The heartwood was amber, the same color as fallen leaves and cider, while the sapwood was almost white. I propped a piece up on the shelf next to my bed where I could run my fingers over the grain, tracing the place where the maul ripped it open.

Snow and rain alternated, filling Whitewall Brook to overflowing before it froze solid, ice dripping in cathedral formations, crashing as it fell away in the thaws that came again and again in November. Sometime in the beginning of December, the river went silent. The quiet roar that had been a constant presence since October vanished under a foot of new snow. It left a hole in the normal landscape of the night. When all was still and the guests had gone to bed, I would lie in my bunk and listen to the water, its song mixed with the wind. As the woods sank into their settled silence, I split wood in the new snow, took out the gray water buckets, cleaned the kitchen, shoveled the porches, waited, and watched. Most days I adored the silence—the way I could move through the world without disturbing it, my footprints around the hut blowing over in less than an hour. The snow softened everything, deep drifts building to a downy quilt that tucked the world into sleep with all the affection of a mother. On the days the quiet bothered me, I split wood with a fervor, bringing the maul down over and over, shattering the silence again and again until blisters formed on my hands and I started to cry. One night I heard a friend's voice on the radio from where he was filling in over at Lonesome Lake, his warmth and familiar cadence like a candle in the night; I cried then, too.

The winter solstice came and went, and I left Zealand to work the second half of the winter in Carter Notch. One day, a storm rolled through, dumping six inches of snow near the hut in a matter of hours and, in the valley, covering the roads and trails in sleet. On the way up to

Carter, wind pushed snow over the height of land and down beyond the ridge. After the quarter-mile sign, drifts deeper than my knees swept across the trail and I staggered into the cold. Down on the other side of the ridge, the same wind sent great clouds of snow ripping across the ice on the upper lake, obscuring the trail that balanced on the rocks between the two ponds.

Those first few weeks at Carter were held captive by a brutal cold. It settled into the mountains and valleys and made its mind up to stay. Air temperatures held around  $-20$  at night, barely rising to  $0$  during the day. When the wind was blowing, which was almost always, temperatures were closer to  $-40$ . Every morning, the observatory gave the average windchill expected for the day. One morning that first week, it was  $-90$  on the summits. It was too cold to go outside, and even inside my hands burned when I touched the metal counters. Any water spilled on the floor froze instantly. Out on the lake I got frostbite through two pairs of gloves trying to fill up the water jugs but even so, I could not bring myself to hate the cold. It was miserable, maybe. But comically, joyfully so. Even when my lungs burned after a trip to the bathroom, even when taking out the grey water buckets required two pairs of pants and every layer I could fit under a jacket, I still found it wonderful.

I love the way the snow silences the world, how the wind comes clear and cold above the valleys, how it can be still and silent down below while the clouds race in a hundred layers and a hundred colors across the sky, how gusts will pick up the blown snow and toss it again, higher and higher until it comes back to earth and drifts and drifts and drifts, tapering off in long fingers across frozen ridgelines. I love the tracks that appear in the snow after a storm, and I love the creatures that make them. I love the way a blizzard makes me feel like the only person on earth, and I love the joy that comes to life on friends' faces when they watch a storm clear and a glowing dawn replace it. Most days, I stood out on the ramparts for as long as I could before I

felt my face turning numb, watching the wind throw snow a thousand feet high in triumphant spirals. I ran up and down the hill next to the bunkhouses to keep warm and had solo dance parties in the empty hut when the dark and quiet got to be too much.

Eventually, it was still light for 5 o'clock check in. The cold broke and the balsam fir that surrounded the hut glittered in the sun, melting snow dripping from their gnarled branches. On sunny days, I took a foam pad up to the lower bunkhouse, tucking myself into the corner of the porch where the morning sun crept in and sat with my face to the sky. With the winter sun came hikers, and my quiet valley exploded with life. So used to the silence, I could hear people coming from a mile away (sometimes literally). Voices echoed off the Wildcat Cliffs, bouncing around the bowl and floating down to wherever I was working. The hut filled on the weekend, the frozen silence replaced by full dining rooms and even fuller days.

I think so far I've painted a picture of a deeply solitary existence—one driven by sunrise and sunset and snowstorms and dropped trees—but that's only half true. The half that is true is that so much of the life of a winter caretaker is spent in a dubious, contentious harmony with the world around us and its patterns and whims. Some days are too cold to be outside, sometimes the shoveling has to wait for the hurricane-force winds to die down. Some days the winter sun begs dalliance, its apricity convincing even the most task-oriented of us to savor a minute or fifteen on the roof before heading down to rake the composting toilets. The half that I haven't told yet—because I'm still trying to figure it out myself—is that caretaking, winter caretaking, and winter itself, is a human endeavor.

Every time something broke at Zealand, which was often, someone hiked in to fix it. Every night at five, the radio call cut through the dark to check in on us, and I pictured glowing lines tracing the ridges, connecting me to you. When the hole in the ice froze over at Carter and

the bottom dropped out of the lower lake, it took the willpower of a dozen people to get it open again, and when worry over mice in the main building turned into stress dreams about lizards in my sleeping bag, I called a friend. Three thousand miles between us, we laughed away my rodent (reptile?) problems, and I slept soundly that night, lizard-free.

Here's what I think I'm trying to get at: I'm not convinced that the wilderness, the cold, or our experiences of either have the power to erase our humanity. We go to the wild and to the cold because we want to be both something less of ourselves and something more. We want less of the people that we fear we are and more of the people we want to be. There is that, but also in solitude comes the magnification of humanity, where the things that make us human are thrown into sharp relief. Where instinct blends with the thing that rises above it, and that's the thing that makes us human. If I had to give that thing a name, I think I'd call it love.

See, I had visitors maybe a half a dozen times that winter: Brave, wonderful souls that put up with the ice and snow and hiked into the night to see me. They brought food and drinks, missing tools or parts for broken things, and they brought themselves and all their light-soaked joy bursting through my doors and spilling out into the dark.

In January, a friend sent me a letter and in that letter was a poem. *Men Ask the Way to Cold Mountain* by Han Shan, and the last four lines read: "How did I make it?/My heart's not the same as yours./If your heart was like mine/You'd get it and be right here." In her letter, and in my response to it, we both noted our remarkable fortune in having friends whose hearts *are* the same as ours, who, by no small miracle, are right here with us. Driven, dragged, or dropped here into this deep, breaking cold, we found the very best of ourselves in this place. In leaving, I'll say this: May the people we were here be held between the rocks and firs, and may parts of us live



on unchanged under the cliffs and stars. May we take with us the lessons the cold teaches, and may kindred hearts be right here, a part of which is ours, and will always be.

LIESL MAGNUS is a New Hampshire native whose interests in conservation, natural resources management, and the power that wild places can have over the human experience have led to work and study all over the world, from Patagonia to the wilds of Idaho. A recent graduate of St. Lawrence University, she has worked as a caretaker for the Appalachian Mountain Club in subzero temperatures.