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The Time of the Builders

An ode to the carpenters of the Madison Spring Hut

Bethany Taylor



Since 1888, some sort of shelter has sat in the col between Mounts Madison and John Quincy Adams, just below the lip of land that holds Star Lake. Stone and timber huts have risen and fallen numerous times in this place, the footprint of the settled ground changing slightly every few generations. There is something in the air and light of the col that does not seem to change, regardless of the various human-made angles the wind whistles across.

BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 2010 AND JUNE 2011, MADISON SPRING HUT was torn down to its foundation stones and rebuilt. A hiker returning in early summer 2011 would be surprised to find the new shape and new yellow wood in place. These hills put time in an almost geologic perspective—this change happened in the seeming blink of the mountain’s eye. If I didn’t know better, thoughts of magic might take the place of the labor that built this place. But I do know better.

For the duration of this project, I cooked for the many men and few women who rebuilt Madison Spring Hut. In July 2011, some friends and I hiked up to see how the new hut was faring in its inaugural summer. For many people I know from these mountains, Madison hut is a totemic place, and some of these friends of mine needed to see it—touch the touchstones, as it were—before they could stomach something bright and new in place of the crumbling old structure they so loved.

Five of us hiked that day—three to be introduced to the new hut; my friend Steve, who worked as a carpenter on the hut; and me. As we left, Steve spotted a small plaque nailed to the wall by the new entry—an entryway he had framed and shingled. The plaque announces that the stone patio outside was built by the generosity of someone. “No,” Steve half-joked, “that patio was built by six angry men.”

No plaque truly tells of the labor that built these walls. I think of the days when rain and hail fell sideways and these friends of mine balanced on the roof and shingled the building by hand. They shingled with gloved-hands and hammer blows. The cold broke the air compressor that could have fed nail guns. I try to measure out my own days with coffee spoons and pounds

Tucked in the col between Mounts Madison and John Quincy Adams in New Hampshire’s White Mountains, some sort of shelter has protected hikers for 125 years. Three years ago, carpenters rebuilt the hut from the foundation up. It reopened in June 2011.

BETHANY TAYLOR

of butter and flour and bacon, and I am unable to quantify my own labors. The pounds of nails, the gallons of gasoline and propane, the weight of wood and stone and of the steel I-beam that is the new hut's spine, the dark length of the days when the sun set behind the little mountain just after lunch. The fear that newly poured concrete would crack and freeze overnight, ruining days of work. The days we pulled on damp clothes while snow drifted into the bunkrooms. The sleepless nights listening to the snores inside and the wind wailing like a banshee and slamming loose boards against the stones outside. The buckets of snow harvested and melted for water to drink and cook with when the water lines froze. The spring day when we ate lunch as thunder, lightning, and a snowstorm pushed past the new windows. The heaviness of waiting for the helicopter to bring more supplies. The effort of laying new wood out until the alpine zone looked like a lumberyard. The constant burning of debris outside. The south winds that blew down the chimney, filling kitchen and bunkroom with smoke until we could not see and sought cold refuge in the darkness of the new building. The rainy days with smoke and fog and noise until this place I love resembled apocalyptic hell. The barrel stove burning red hot and chugging like a train or a rocket. The clean yellow bones of the new walls and rafters, rising like the ribs and keel of a ship off the stones of the foundation. The sweetness of hearing, from your bunk, an earlier riser lighting the woodstove. The clear mornings when the fog rose up from the dark valleys and the summits were already pinked with sunrise, when it looked like paradise to me.

These are only my recollections of the ragged splendor of this latest rendition of labor. To think of the depth of effort, the volume of energy that has been expended over the years for the building of this place—there are no simple plaques to mention these things. Who could blame a man for being even mockingly angry that his efforts go unmarked?

Madison was built, as all things are, by human, not angelic, hands. I would hate to pretend otherwise and ignore the effort, ignore the humanity that drew up the hut and crafted a shelter in these mountains. I believe that these men and women deserve attention for their labors. In place of a plaque, I give them these words.

I cooked three meals a day and kept the living space clean while the new hut was built outside the door. I spent my days in half the stone building, making soup, and baking bread. By being separate, inhabiting this sphere that keeps watch from within the old walls rather than builds the new, I had almost enough distance to

see the scope of what we do and why. Or to begin to do so. Or perhaps I had the only body and brain not exhausted by the very labors I have the leisure to find beautiful. Or perhaps, being separate, I was the only one who needs to break the silence of the ghosts.

The rebuild began in late summer. There is a golden key of light that comes in September—this brilliance of sunlight infuses these men, bounces off their shirtless backs and rounded arms as they labor up on the roof, along the walls. From where I stand, I cannot see their faces. All I know is the forms of their bodies—gold-lit and silhouetted—along the ridgepole of an old building, with the clear blue sky and rocky gray scree of a mountain behind them. The light is clear, the shadows distinct, and a photograph would be unable to distinguish between these men and the ones who have labored here before and the ones who will come after. The interplay of light and shadow and the truth of nonlinear time that comes alive in that glorious contrast—this makes these men beautiful beyond themselves.

All I love about Madison collides in that day. I think of golden shadows, blue skies, and the angular shapes of men, arching and curving with an unwitting grace, as they break the hut down to its bones. In silhouette, from a distance where I cannot hear their familiar voices, they seem to step in and out of time with every other man who has labored on the buildings of this place. As the boards start to fall from the frame of the building, the solid walls and right angles of the building bend and curve with the same fluidity as men's bodies.

The larger history that they join with every hammer blow is as much a part of the beauty as the shape of a strong arm, wielding a pry bar in sunlight. Nothing other than this work in this place, the collapse of time in a place thick with beauty, could lend them this particular grace.

Palimpsest means drafts of older writings on the page of the new—a place where the past shows through and becomes legible with the present. I wish the word were easier, more intuitive. The feeling is the easiest thing I know—I can see, for a moment, time pooling up. To me, when everything seems lit from within and without, this is ecstasy.

Soon, there is nothing left of the old wooden building. The walls ripped down to the floorboards, and the floorboards pried up, leaving only the stones.

The men pile the jumbles and angles of the wooden debris in the yard. Destruction is not clean—a chunk of the end gable lies roughly against the

window frame of the western wall and shards of plywood from the attic walls. Largely, though, what was so iconic and totemic becomes unknowable in the randomness of how the pieces were hacked apart, thrown from the roof, the walls.

I have a small clutch of memories of the old Madison Hut. I know many who dearly loved what seemed to be contained, identified, by these walls, held by this roof, these windows and doors. I think of how great poetry uses words to summon an understanding beyond words. We loved the corners and walls of Madison for a similar reason—the building caught some of whatever vital, unsayable thing it is we seek in these mountains. We loved the place for the echoes of that, all those variations of light and words and memory, each as unique and universal as the next, held within its walls.

When those same walls lie broken in the yard, I am not sad. I had thought that I would be. But as the wood, soaked with the rains and snows of 70 years, begins to smolder and burn from the fire pits in the yard, the smoke seems alive with the stories, the thought of how many memories of how many people have for this one place. When the smoke clears, when the wind blows hard across the col, this sense remains although the walls do not.

Our mistake was in thinking we loved the place, rather than whatever invisible thing—light or ghosts or memory—that dances within and without the structure itself. All this time, we thought the walls held that in, when the walls only held us long enough to see that which is everywhere and always was. I think of this when the new walls are framed and the landscape is sliced into squares, visible through rafters and studs and doorframes, like a frame around a painting. And someone built the frame, crafted the wood to draw attention to this painting, this landscape, to here.

We could well be surrounded by the ghosts of the other men who have raised the walls on this patch of land, the released ghosts and particles of memories and light formerly trapped in the old walls. I believe that we are. Perhaps you will accuse me of being a Romantic, of romanticizing labor and hard work and knitting a magical ghostly love story to cover the hardness of this all. Such accusations stand. I am a Romantic. I believe that the world warrants such passions, such terms, that the past deserves to be seen as ghosts, even as we—the living and the ghosts—labor in this space for whatever shall come next to here.

We stacked the wood that was salvaged from the destruction against the kitchen wall. I feed the woodstove constantly, keeping the kitchen warm. This

stove was a refitted 50-gallon drum and looks as if it was found in the bottom of an ocean liner or a hobo camp. We dried clothes over the stove, huddled around it at and after meals. When the rains came and the temperature dropped, the hut felt as isolated as a ship bobbing across the ocean. One day in October I watched from the windows as two of the carpenters, a man and a woman, ripped down the last shingles of the old entryway. When I read the history of Madison Spring Hut, I learned of a stormy night when people too young to make such a decision huddled in that entry, choosing whether to go and rescue a man lost in the storm or no. As I watched those last shingles come down, that story filled the air before me. I thought of the man who died in that storm, and the ache it must have left on those who stood beneath that roof that is going, going, gone. I also know people who have held each other close and kissed in that same space. I like to think of those reckless joys and fulfilled desires being released alongside the ponderous grief of the stormy night.

Later, when I fed the fire with stacks of old shingles, in the pop and hiss of the flames, I wondered what other stories are being set free, what other secrets these walls have held. The air in my kitchen filled with the scent of burning cedar, and the room felt crowded with ghosts. I would have it no other way.

We burn the history to survive the present to build the future. I thought of this each time I fed old wood to the barrel stove. To know that we are not the end, that all those memories of men and women to whom we are braided do not end with our own lives is something great. I hunger for ghosts and always have, as if to know the past ensures my present. What I have given little thought to is the future. I begin to understand that we are the ghosts and the living and the unborn, all mottled together in and beyond these totemic spaces. In 70 years, the men and women on the roof, ripping down what is built in September sun and November snow, will mimic the beautiful bodies before my eyes. And so, the present must mimic the future as much as it does the past. And this is not mimicry but re-creation. These labors are real, every time. For the ghosts may be here now as wisps and thoughts and hints on the wind, but once they were as mud-bound and mortal and wise and fallible and slouching toward greatness and all that we all are, all that we may be.

When I have thought before that time is fluid, I have only ever pictured a river, flowing one direction. At moments like this, in labors such as these, in places such as these, time swirls and pools around our boots until it ceases to matter at all.

WE WORKED THROUGH NOVEMBER AND BEGAN AGAIN IN MARCH. BY May, the carapace of the new building was completed and the interior walls and ceilings and bunks and shelves and stairs and wires and drawers and doors were being built. From wood and stone came a living thing—the studs as bones, the ridgepole a spine. The builders filled it with pipes and wires, conduits of water and fire and blood, as if breathing life into a beast. The newness, the rawness of the space, was overpowering. The air smelled of new wood and finish, and the snow that wrapped around the hut like a cocoon began to melt. This time, our time of destruction and creation, when past and future swam past each other in the air, is drawing to a close as summer comes on and the building becomes more and more solid. The present eclipses imaginings and ghosts.

These are only my recollections of the ragged splendor of this latest rendition of labor. To think of the depth of effort, the volume of energy that has been expended over the years for the buildings of this place—there are no simple plaques to mention these things.

One late spring evening, I had light to hike by after dinner. I left the men—all men at this point; the five women who worked on the project had come and gone—and hiked the four nearest crags to the west. To be in the alpine zone at sunset, at the top of the world with solid stone underfoot, a riotous pink and purple sky overhead, and a dark blue-green valley spreading out below—I love nothing else as I love those moments. To be out in the light and landscape that is held in the frame of the building—these are times of peace and ecstasy. This night was all that I could have hoped for as a farewell as I prepared to no longer live daily in this place.

I lingered in the dying light and felt my way down the last bit of trail in the falling darkness. We were building big bonfires by this time, burning new wood scraps to erase the construction debris before the hut opened in June. That night, the men had built a larger than usual fire, and I found my way through the darkness by going toward its light and the sound of laughter bouncing off the odd angles of the mountain stones.

The guys had been on the cusp of coming to look for me, but when I came to the fire—glowing from the hike—they picked their drinks back up and settled back in to the fire. They had been drinking and smoking since I left, and I had arrived from my high hills at a carnival. Someone handed me a beer, and I too settled in to the fire and the glee at being there. A small rocket was built to put into the bonfire. We had a BB gun and took turns shooting at the rocket, trying to launch it from the fire. When the rocket blasted off, it twisted and arced, almost crashing into the corner of the new hut.

Tell me this was rankly irresponsible behavior and I will agree, but to treat this newly created building as our toy felt sweetly, correctly deviant. The months of labor had created a friendly familiarity with the place and its ghosts. This relationship goes unmarked, unnoticed, and largely uncelebrated. In a few days, the hut crew would arrive, flush with blissful pride at being the first to make a home in the new hut. Daily, then, from June to September, hikers would arrive, filling the new space with their breath, letting their stories soak into the new walls. This is all the swirling eddies of stories and ghosts and light that make the place, this is the endless dance. But for now, for this time, the place belongs to the builders, these builders, of this iteration of the timeless.

Part of the beauty of this place is its plurality. It holds everything between spiritual ecstasy and raucous joy, all mottled together as we are with the ghosts and the shadows, each moment and each player in the place at once distinct and indistinguishable, gorgeously unique and universal. I am sure they who are my ghosts laughed and did strange and mischievous things when they lived and built here. I am equally sure that they had quiet moments where the sacred beauty of these mountains overcame their weariness. It would be unconscionable if either were not true. That the now ghosts did, that we do now, that others will soon—this is the promise of the sunlit silhouettes upon the roof, tearing down and rebuilding the walls to frame this place, this light, this beauty.

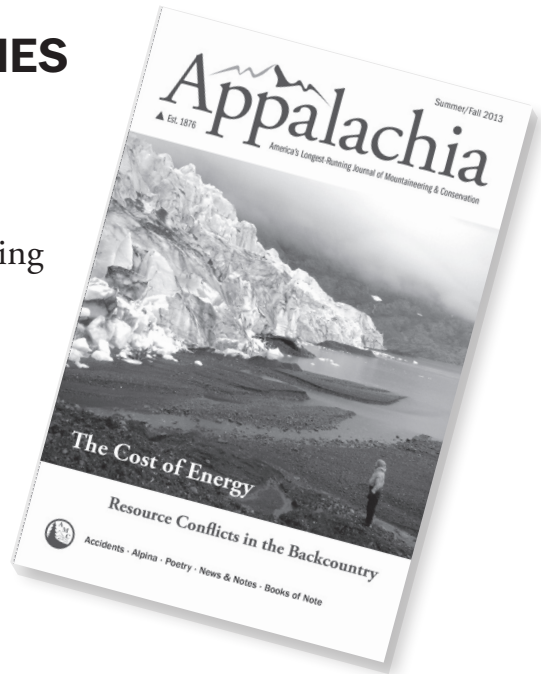
BETHANY TAYLOR was a winner of the Waterman Fund's 2011 essay contest, which *Appalachia* co-sponsors. She is a New Hampshire native who earned her master's degree in environmental studies with a focus on writing from the University of Montana.

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