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Waterman Fund Essay Contest Winner: The Warp and Weft

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Waterman Essay Contest Winners

Editor's Note: In this, the fourth annual Waterman Fund essay contest, which Appalachia sponsors jointly with the Waterman Fund, we have chosen two winners. We judge the contest without knowing who wrote the essays, so after the vote to split the prize this year, I was delighted to see that both of these writers had made last-minute debuts in this journal last issue. Bethany Taylor's campaign to rename Adams 4, in the White Mountains, after Abigail Adams, passed the U.S. Geological Survey; she wrote about it for News and Notes. Blair Braverman's piece, "Ice and Ashes," arrived over the transom, so to speak. Both women examine philosophical questions around wilderness. These questions have concerned Laura and the late Guy Waterman, after whom the alpine research and education fund was named.

The Warp and Weft

Bethany Taylor

I WRITE THIS FROM MY HOUSE IN JACKSON, FEET PROPPED ON THE window sill while the Ellis River rushes below. From here, the sound of the water is like distant laughter. The confluence of the Ellis and Wildcat Brook borders my yard. Most days, the presence of the water is as ordinary as the garage. But other times—better times—the weight of the rivers' course leaves me breathless. These rivers first burst open with snowmelt longer years ago than I can ever know and will continue to do so long after I am gone, the water eternally rising and falling with the rains and seasons.

In the rare, crystalline moments when I fully witness forces larger than myself, chills run down my spine and I recognize life as good and sweet and full. I find a scrap of this grace in a certain slant of light coming down at sunset across the alpine zone, jagged rocks the colors of gold and iron. I hear the same in the thrum of the ocean, crashing new waves in a timeless pattern across the sands. The clarity of the stars on dark nights slices to the core of this like a paring knife through an apple. All of these things—either thought or witnessed—are so ordinary as to be comforting yet so primal as to be sublime. It is in the balance of these moments, when I am at once held in place

and sprung free from, aware of, my own limits of being that I feel most alive. Alive, and blessedly insignificant. To be aware of all that is greater than myself, to see for a moment the enormity of time, of seasons, and the capacity of the world to beat on, endlessly, as if past and future mean nothing, this is where I find what some might call wildness, what others might call holiness or beauty or truth. It does not matter what we call this when we find it—the sensation goes deeper than words anyway.

Think, if you will, of your life as a thread being pulled through the fabric of time. I do not know how large the fabric is. The color of your thread, the shape of the line you stitch, and who or what might be pulling the thread, I don't care much about either. Hold faith in those details as you choose. I see my thread as long and the stitches perhaps uneven, but I will, always, eventually pierce through the fabric and pull tight against it, again and again. The moments when I sense the holy-wildness of the world, and my own brief presence within it, are the times when my own thread pulls tight, when I am both joined to and apart from the fabric of time and space. These are the times I feel most alive, for I begin to sense how limited and precious my time here truly is.



Bethany Taylor. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

A FRIEND TOLD ME OF A POET WHO GAVE HIS WIFE OLD BONES AND BIRD skulls as love letters. I can think of few things as sweet. “Life,” the bones say, “is transient and fragile. We will all decay, but here, here while we are so briefly alive, you and I are together in this moment of time.” This is almost what these wild-holy times of beauty say as well. To me, these instances of reckoning with the finite nature of being human, the reality that you’ve got less than a century here are sweetly galvanizing. Better make the short time here, under

the stars and along the rivers, amid the forests and atop the mountains, better make it good. So say the bones and rocks and stars. Listen.

THERE IS NO PLACE ON EARTH I FIND MORE STORIED, POETIC, OR BEAUTIFUL than the Crawford Path, above treeline and at sunset. In the right company, it is all that I might find wild and holy. I've been there many times and cannot get enough of it. Looking towards the sinking summer sun, the mountains to the west unfold and unfold and the gold light kisses the green of the trees and turns them purple and blue. I lift up my arms in the evening breeze, over my head and feel the air on my skin. I hear the ripple of the wind against my body. It is always, almost, the same—more or less, these are the same winds that sweep across these mountains, these rocks and plants and occasional people, every day and have since the rocks were formed in these familiar and well-loved shapes. The molecules of it all are never the same, of course, but the patterns, the sweep and flow of air, these are part of a timeless dance. And just now, just for the moment when I disturb the air and the wind accommodates my movement, I am part of it all. That my disturbance is so small, that the wind and the rocks and the setting sun and the gold and purple glow of the moment is so constant and all encompassing, this is enough to remind me of my insignificance, my mortality, and the wild-holy happenstance of my own existence. My heartbeat and breath change, and I wish the smile on my face could stretch as wide as my arms, as wide as the landscape.

In Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, his Emily cries out a farewell to the world that I wish I had the faith to greet each morning with. "Oh earth," she says, "you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?" "No," another character replies. "The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."

When I watch the sun go down the craggy shoulders of the Presidential Range, the orange glow running toward the Greens and Adirondacks, I may come closest to realizing life.

WHAT HUMBLER ME IS THAT I USED TO THINK THAT THE EARTH WAS only wonderful far from people and paved roads. Wildness was solely the province of the green areas on maps and only in such isolation could I feel the threads of being snap taut and awake. My environmentalism, my ethics and way of being, was never anything but selfish. I wanted, in the marrow of my bones, to preserve the places—mostly mountaintops and shorelines of

New England—where I had begun to realize life, where I had first become conscious of my thread squeezing through the warp and weft of time. I felt my best self in wild places—the sad and frightened parts of myself melted away in the face of wildness. I was afraid of that without wild spaces I would come apart, unstitched like a rag doll.

To hold wildness, I imagined my life going in the way of a hermit-explorer. I would go farther and deeper and wilder from the mainstream culture that was choking the rivers and bringing toxic rain to the mountains. So I dreamed of islands and mountain cabins, longing to pull far and farther away. But I began to know and know of men and women who died in pursuit of the same, to feel the wide nets of grief that catch loved ones like minnows and my longing for isolation tempered. I clung to my familiar landscapes as a life raft—they would be my wilderness, my only source of wildness. Still believing that the salvation of, if not the world then certainly myself, lay in wildness, I needed and asked everything from these few places. I did not believe that any sort of true wild beauty could lie outside the boundary lines.

And then, several years ago, far from my beloved and known New England wilds, I drove through Portland, Oregon. A bridge spanned the Willamette River and caught the fading sunlight in rusty steel trusses and brown-stained cement, lit this old industrial structure with the exact key of gold-light as I find in the mountains of home. Alone in a creaking car and gridlocked in rush hour traffic, to find beauty at all was as unexpected as a valentine in August. Let alone for the beautiful thing to be so opposite and foreign to my ideals of beauty, of wildness. And yet . . . there is my heartbeat and breath and the tug of a thread, all just as if I were in the mountains. If I could take my hands off the wheel and stretch toward the bridge, I would. Rather than the timelessness of the rocks on a trail, I thought of the rivets in the bridge, of the mortality of tough and fragile men who built the bridge, whose hands had maneuvered the cranes and placed the beams. I did not know their history, and judging by the red-gold of the rusty bridge, their time passed years ago. But here I was, seeing the same sun as ever hit the same bridge, and I felt small and safely lodged in the vast fabric of time and space. How could I have lived my life, ignoring the chances for beauty and wildness outside of wild places?

The poet Frank O'Hara's tombstone reads, "Grace to be born and live as variously as possible." I hear those words when I find wildness in strange corners. I whisper them to remind myself to look. The words, and imagining

a hand carving the words into a poet's headstone, are a scrap-smile of wildness unto themselves.

T. S. Eliot writes,

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

The wildness of other places and odder corners does not diminish the sublimity of my original landscapes. Rather, each time I see the most familiar places and again find in them both tonic and sanctuary, I also hold small pieces of the other times and places of wildness in my heart and the pulling of the thread through time sounds like a symphony, deepened with the wealth of instruments.

SOMETIMES I THINK THAT IF WE GOT RID OF ALL PROTECTED LAND, all Wildernesses and National Forests and Parks, that might be a good thing—perhaps we would learn to value all land, rather than lionizing certain geographies while destroying others. And that would be a worthy goal. A sort of land-use golden rule, do unto this landscape as you would do unto the land you most love. Perhaps we may grow to that ethos. But, for now, I see the need and merit for such designations and protections. For all that I believe with every fiber of my being that there is the possibility of wildness, of beauty, of sanctity in even the ugliest places, I still hold wilderness and remote, untrammeled landscapes dear. We need, as a people, space in which to conduct our explorations. We crave the sublime cliffs and roiling waters and distant stars to shock us awake, to open our eyes to what has always been here, what will be here after we are merely bones and dust. In wilderness, we learn to see wildness, to feel beauty. The trick is to bring those sharpened senses back from the woods, home to the mundane, and be pierced by wildness into realizing the sublime wonder in every, every minute of our briefly stitched lives.

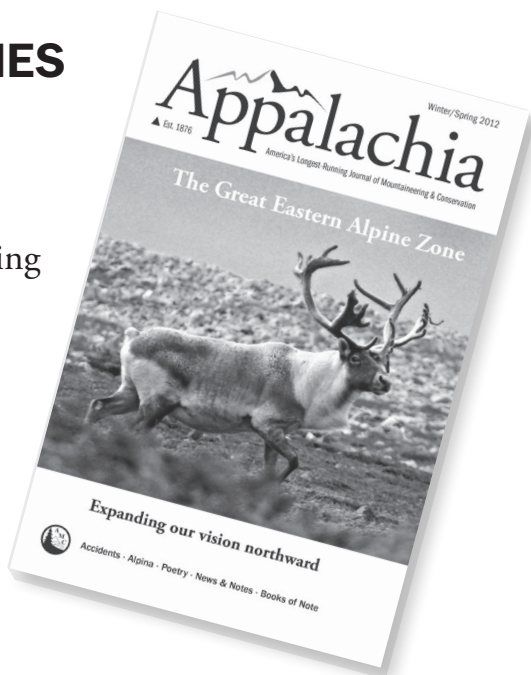
BETHANY TAYLOR of Jackson, New Hampshire, earned a master's degree in environmental studies at the University of Montana.

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