

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

*Katherine Hauswirth*  
**Into the Marbled Mystic**

**I**f you didn't know anything about Dorset, Vermont, and found yourself spending a weekend there, you'd start to notice the white seam threaded through the landscape.

When I first pulled into Dorset and sought my hotel, I got turned around. To reverse course, I pulled into the first parking lot I found, which accommodates the local swimming hole—an abandoned marble quarry now filled with water, excited squeals of teenagers bouncing off the walls. Some stretches of Dorset, as well as neighboring towns, have marble sidewalks that sport a lovely, illuminated look. My stop at East Dorset Cemetery was similarly illuminated by a spate of artfully carved monuments. I made a small study here of the different looks marble can have—nearly pure white, flecked with glittery spots, mottled, streaked with blue or brownish veins, coarse or with a smooth sheen.

The cover of Dorset's 2017 Annual Report features a work scene from a bygone era—men, horses, and carts standing in stark contrast to and dwarfed by gargantuan white slabs that reach beyond the top edge of the photo. Quarrying for Dorset marble started in 1785 and ran until roughly 1920. Slabs pried from the mountains made their way to Harvard Medical School, the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington, DC, and the Beineke Rare Book Library at Yale University, among many other glimmering destinations. For Yale, the marble was sliced extra thin so light could filter in—but not enough light to damage its cherished, antiquarian pages.

The first page of the Annual Report is a dedication to Art, a geologist who retired to Dorset and led the development of the historical society's marble exhibit. He also worked for decades on his mission to have the town expand and preserve Owl's Head Town Forest and area hiking trails.

Early on a July day, I set out on an Owl's Head trail with a dual mission. I want to see the old Gettysburg Quarry, acquired and incorporated into Owl's Head thanks to Art's tireless campaign, and I want to see the marble bench in honor of Art, built by Vermont's Youth Conservation Corps.

The day starts out unusually hot for Vermont, and I am grateful for the abundant trees that shade me and also serve as makeshift grab bars for steeper passages. In the dirt I see "breadcrumbs" in the form of small marble stones that hint at the coming peak of the journey—the abandoned quarry itself. But, until I get there, there is so much more to see. As I'm often checking the path's contours on this unfamiliar route, most things I notice are low to the ground.

I see chicory flowers, some with pink blooms instead of the more typical periwinkle blue. Orange and brown European skipper butterflies hover around them. Here and there I spot abandoned pale yellow, woolly cocoons—I think from Eastern tent caterpillars who emerged to become lappet moths. I witness the first creeping reach of aptly named dead man's fingers mushrooms, clawing their way up from beneath a strip of boggy, decomposed wood. Circular clusters of northern maidenhair ferns flank

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the path, and dark green bloodroot leaves bigger than my hand seem to imply I am someplace tropical.

I'm no good with maps, so I was grateful to find a *Vermont Country Magazine* article that appeals to my text-oriented brain. It tells me to turn left after I pass over the remains of an old stone wall, and to look for the yellow blaze right after the defunct parking area. And then I am gradually climbing uphill.

I find a bleached snail shell among tangles of vegetation, and soon after I see bleached-looking cliffs through the trees, dotted with prolific ferns and moss. I mount a small hill and enjoy a mini *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* moment when I come across a square, ancient-looking block of marble—nearly my height—that is clearly human-carved. It is dirty from exposure to the elements and from flotsam and jetsam that have drifted down from trees. It's festooned with clingy plants and a multitude of deeply etched score marks.

A few more uphill stretches bring me to the trail's end. I crane my neck, scanning the towering, pale wall from where the Gettysburg marble was harvested. It's scarred by large, geometric notches left by cutting tools. The stone that was removed had quite a long and dramatic story—it started as dolomite or limestone and was subjected to intense heat, pressure, and chemical changes over millions of years before it came into its radiant identity so valued by architects, sculptors, and the viewing public.

I'd wondered about the "Gettysburg" name, since I'd only heard it in association with Pennsylvania's famed Civil War battlefield. In Tyler Resch's comprehensive book, *Dorset*, I learn that as many as 20,000 headstones came from this spot and were used to mark the graves of fallen Battle of Gettysburg and other Civil War soldiers. In the 1980s, someone from Gettysburg remarked that acid rain was eroding the marble in the hallowed war cemetery. But I'd noticed the same thing Resch did: not much erosion of marble markers at East Dorset Cemetery, even on the oldest examples. Resch wondered if a special quality marble had been cut for local use, or if overhanging maples and cedars had prevented much of the caustic rain from reaching the stones.

The hollowed-out rectangle that is Gettysburg Quarry is filled with murky water, and a lone green frog calls from its depths. In the corner, I see a tall pile of sticks—probably a raven's nest.

I wonder what other life forms might favor the quarry. Scientists recently found that tiny microorganisms have inhabited marble as well as limestone, boring tunnels to use the nutrients in calcium carbonate and leaving a fine powder behind—a microcosm of the human industry that once bored through thick rock and left its own remnants. Creatures with an affinity for stone are called *endoliths*. I relish the mystery of this newly discovered endolith species—scientists aren't sure whether they are still alive somewhere or have gone completely extinct.

Finally, I have soaked in enough quarry majesty, mystery, and history to seek out my next stop—Art's Bench, off a small, nearby spur. Within just a couple minutes I've found what is truly the perfect place for a bench—a window through the cliff-top trees onto Mount Equinox, Mother Myrick Mountain, and Antone Mountain. I don't relish heights, so I navi-

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gate with caution and take my seat gingerly. I look out past the canopy's edge, spotting far-off rooftops and fields and wondering about the lives down there. Will anyone look up from their day-to-day goings on and spot me occupying this bench? Is anyone seeing me now?

Mother Myrick, of said mountain, was a midwife, teacher, and, yes, a mother—of seven kids. She died in 1881, at 92 years of age, and it sounds like, even before her death, the mountain she lived close to took on her name. In a *Medium* article contemplating the mountain's moniker, Rebecca G. Breslow notes that midwives not only delivered babies but also used herbal remedies to tend to the sick. Mother Myrick's status as midwife and healer likely helped her gain a healthy dose of local respect, forever memorialized in the gently rounded peaks across from the bench.

If she had walked the trail I walk today, Mother Myrick might have collected maidenhair ferns to aid digestive or skin problems, or sore throats, or menstrual discomforts. And she probably wouldn't have passed up chicory, which can also be used for digestive issues, as well as sinus problems. Did she know her mushrooms? If so, those grasping dead man's fingers have been used traditionally to promote lactation—perfect for a midwife's medicine bag!

As I sit on Art's Bench, I wonder about him, too. Unlike the namesakes of other benches I've visited, Art, born in 1929, is still with us—from what I can ascertain online. I've accumulated some facts about him. I know he pushed to preserve this land, and that he wrote books about walking and driving through Dorset. The town historical society valued his commitment and contributions, perhaps especially the marble exhibit he put together. I know that many generations of his family have lived here. In fact, the town report notes that Gilbert Lookout, another vista reached by an Owl's Head trail, is named for Art's grandfather. It recounts how Art's first trip to the lookout happened when he was just three, in 1932. Art also studied the town's cemeteries, and he must have lingered over the many renditions in marble, just as I did. Putting these bits of information together, I think I would like and admire Art, should we ever have a chance to converse.

But Art and I might vary, in terms of our instinctual perspectives on the landscape. Art's training and life demonstrate a heavy appreciation of geology, and I've always been lukewarm on the topic. Stone seems so. . .static! Cold, too. And gosh, it is, by and large, gritty and heavy.

I recall a guest geology lecturer at my Master Naturalist program who carried an admirable enthusiasm for the many rock samples he hauled to the base of our hike site, where he gave a talk about local stone to notice as we walked. His car sagged under the weight of his specimens, each nestled in a burlap bag. While I couldn't help but "catch" some of the teacher's zeal that day, I typically get much more excited by organisms that *do* something—breathe, move, photosynthesize, make a noise. Considering this, and the fact that I was a nurse for 11 years, I might, at least on the surface, have more in common with Mother Myrick than I do with Art.

But, as these bench visits always seem to do—if they are long and thoughtful enough—occupying Art's marble bench and seeing the quarry has the effect of lending me some lenses I don't typically wear. It has me

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wondering about the role and meaning of stone. I started to dig through what other folks had to say about it, mining seams in the literature for geologic perspectives.

Early in my excavation, I come across the phenomenon of rock-licking—an activity that had not *once* crossed my mind in my nearly six decades on this earth. In 2023, geologist Jan Zalasiewicz won an Ig Nobel Prize for his essay on why geologists love to lick rocks. Ig Nobel Prizes honor achievements that make people laugh, and then think, and the rock-licking treatise does just that for me.

I learn that field guides from the 1700s include instructions on identifying minerals by taste. Is the specimen musty, sweet, salty, dusty, bitter? But licking rocks has more than just this purpose. Getting a rock wet (and, of course, the licking-averse can do this with water!) helps to reveal its texture and structure. And doing a bite or grit test can help to loosely quantify the grain size found in sediments. Sand will create an uncomfortable grating sensation between the teeth (as anyone that's had a beach sandwich can testify!). Finer substances won't have the same degree of grating. Dry soil that contains clay will stick to the tongue, as will fossils, given their porous nature.

Years ago, I wrote a piece about foraging called "Eating the Earth." It rhapsodized about the possibilities touted deliciously in Nelson Coon's 1960 book, *Using Wayside Plants*—sorrel soups, inky cap mushrooms, elderberry waffles, and the fancy-sounding Irish moss blanc mange. Never did it occur to me that some might take the phrase "eating the earth" even more literally, rolling the planet's tooth-jarring crust around in their mouths.

While my palette continues to shudder at the thought of hard grit on my tongue and teeth, the novel idea of quite literally tasting the earth gets my mind going in a new direction. What else might I learn about the pebbled sector of nature that I mostly ignore?

In an On Being podcast interview, Robin Wall Kimmerer encourages all of us to think about even rocks as their own persons, worthy of our respect and attention. Thinking in this way, she says, "forces us to shed our idea of, the only pace we live in is the human pace."

Ah, *pace*. That has been my whole issue with geology. Geology speaks in eons, millennia, the glacial tempo of earth rearrangement, and I feel unsettled in the face of what seems unfathomable. I am not alone in this. In his essay, "The Geological Sublime," Lewis Hyde provides a handy summary of Darwin in the face of eons: "In a typical passage in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, he writes that 'the mind is stupefied' when trying to think on the 'lapse of years' needed to produce a two-hundred-mile wide bed of porphyry pebbles [igneous rocks with crystals], or that 'it makes the head almost giddy' to think of the years required for ocean tides to wear away three hundred feet of solid rock. Such a case, he confesses elsewhere, 'impresses my mind almost in the same manner as does the vain endeavor to grapple with the idea of eternity'."

Darwin's stupefaction is a familiar sensation, and it makes me wonder if my sometimes dismissive attitude about geology as "boring" may mask a deeper uneasiness about time that cannot be grasped.

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My scan of geological reflections, from the taste and mouthfeel of stone to Darwin's recurring remarks on the ineffable warms me to the idea that I should give geology a fresh look. And I found someone to help soften my aversion to daunting spans of time—Marcia Bjornerud, a professor of environmental studies and geosciences at Lawrence University.

While I am Googling around for handy and quick explanations of our planet and its inhabitants, Dr. Bjornerud is studying the physics of earthquakes and mountain building. She has me at "Wrinkled Time," the title of her piece in *Emergence Magazine*. It makes me think of Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*—a novel I have devoured several times over. In it, protagonist Meg has the *tesseract* explained to her by her genius brother and the ethereal and wise Mrs. Who and Mrs. Whatsit. It is a way of visualizing the concept of time dimensionally that, in the book, allows a unique way to cross time and space. Reading Bjornerud's take on geology and encouraged by warm memories of Meg's interdimensional quest, I find myself feeling gradually less stymied by and more impressed with—dare I say more *affectionate* toward?—the rocky features of the world.

I hadn't thought much about Earth's properties, as compared with other planets. But Bjornerud points out that our planet, unlike our neighbors in space, has "maintained such a long and contiguous rock record." Eons are accorded and juxtaposed through the medium of stone. And this author appealed to my love for language, too, adding that rocks are best understood as verbs that signify events and processes, rather than static nouns—"If nothing happens on a planet, there will be no new rocks."

And this: "We live in a vast, labyrinthine library of time"—a story told via Earth's continental shelves—a liminal zone that persists to tell the planet's story. In this zone, events on both land and sea are recorded, complete with mass extinctions, shifting tectonic layers, evolutionary progress, and climate effects.

Reading about this chronologic "library," my thoughts immediately travel to the geologic "wall of time" at Fort Lewis College, my son's alma mater in Durango, Colorado. Here, masons used local rock to depict geologic development over 1.8 billion years. I can't name the tiers, nor find a key that does, but I relish the visual journey from wide, dark stone at the bottom through pinks, greys, greens, oranges, and blues that ascend to the narrower, brownish peak at least 18 feet up. The wall is an armored layer cake that speaks of wonder + time. It calls me to run my hands along it, to feel the various textures and marvel at the millennia needed to create this "sermon in stone"—a phrase borrowed from Shakespeare, who commented that our lives can be used to find these sermons, as well as "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks."

I feel a mixed sense of shame and good company when Bjornerud writes about how most of us ignore the myriad stone stories (or sermons, if you prefer) over which we walk, judging this "prehistory" to be irrelevant. But rock can remind us that the time we occupy is much, much vaster than what we are even *capable* of fully perceiving. And, like the tombstone portents that were once in vogue—"As you are now, so once was I; As I am now, so you must be," Bjornerud uses the lessons held by geologic layers to underscore how "our own moment will one day be long ago."

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Ultimately, I agree with Bjornerud—it *is* ironic how what I have tended to perceive as cold, unfeeling, lifeless stone in fact offers an intellectual and philosophical window on Deep Time. What else on this earth inventories messages across unplumbed eons?

In *A Wrinkle in Time*, Mrs. Whatsit muses, “Have you ever thought about time? The continuum that connects the dust of the ancients to the pollen that lands on our noses? Have you ever looked and thought. . . that thing needs a wrinkle in it?”

Would that we, like Meg in the book, could fold time and cross over past, present, and future in the blink of an eye. But, absent this capability, we can use our musings, observations, and imaginations, together with science, to piece together meaning in our world. I think that I’ll continue to prefer moss to the stone it grows on, but, with the help of minds wiser than, and different from, mine, I can now appreciate stone as our Earthly messenger, one that manifests how far all creatures have traveled on the evolving planet.

Jewish tradition includes the placement of stones on grave markers, and I like what Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, rabbinic director of the New York Jewish Healing Center, has to say about this practice. He notes that the Hebrew word for “pebble” is *tz’ror*, and it also means “bond.” A memorial Jewish prayer asks that the deceased be “bound up in the bond of life”—remembered by the living and signified with the stones we leave—morsels of eternity that connect prehistory, memories of life, and the yet-unknown future.

It could very well be that the elder lauded by Art’s Bench favors geology because of its immediacy, its tangibility, the way that rocks can be measured, tested, dated, and definitively labeled. Has he waxed poetic and philosophical about the reaches of time for which stone is a record-keeping proxy? I may never know, but I thank Art, the bench that honors him, and the marble-strewn trails and forest he insisted upon, for leading me to epiphanies worth pondering.