

When I applied for my week at Dorland for mid-February of this year, it was still fall in Los Angeles and I wasn't thinking about the weather. Over twenty years of living in southern California had created a blind spot in how I thought about the seasons, and it wasn't until the day before I had to leave that I checked the app on my phone and saw a series of numbers that I didn't expect—29-degree nights, 55-degree days. Words from my residency contract suddenly sprung to mind: a list of appliances in my kitchen; a wood-burning stove and two space heaters. I double-checked, and indeed, amidst all the wonderful amenities like a coffee maker and a rice cooker, there was no mention of central heating in Horton cottage. I realized that I was driving ninety minutes from home to enjoy unheated solitude during the coldest winter weather we'd had in my twenty years in California.

I won't bore you with the details of my subsequent anxiety. Mostly, a tape ran through my head, punishing my New England-raised self for getting so lax about forecasts. I've always been a planner and a worrier, or at least I had been, before I moved west and abdicated my organizational skills in favor of a form of procrastination I could call "laid back" if it weren't for the panic it created when I found myself in situations like this. I might freeze to death, I thought. Or crack a tooth chattering in bed. Or—my biggest fear—use the wood stove wrong and start a forest fire. My parents' wood stove started a chimney fire when I was young, which led to it becoming an obtrusive, ice-cold coffee table for many years, so I felt these fears were not unfounded.

But when I arrived, Janice was kind enough to give me a brief fire-building tutorial, and the porch held a generous supply of wood. Out of necessity, I quickly went from fearing winter to embracing the daily ritual of waking at sunrise and starting a fire while my coffee brewed. I learned that the success or failure of that first daily fire was a predictor of my mood, at least until the wind changed. If my fire blazed easily, I believed anything was possible, and I wrote multiple pages without stopping. If my fire didn't take—because of wet wood from the rains, or insufficient kindling, or the capriciousness of the gods—I felt on the edge of a frustration so great, it eclipsed all other inventions. But anything in the middle—a slow, glowing-ember burn, or a dying flame that suddenly popped to life and licked the stove walls—was full of all the drama I could ever want from a book or film. These desperate, desolate lows and jolts of joy and pride kept me entertained when I wasn't working.



Pretty soon, I found that the wood stove became more to me than a source of comfort and survival. It became a companion, and the tasks attached to it—cleaning it, loading it, opening the door a crack to stoke it—changed the rhythms of my days. When I woke one morning to get my ash bucket off the porch, I looked out at the valley and saw three hot air balloons in the sky and one on the ground. When I went out an hour later to get more wood, the balloons were gone as if they'd never existed. On another day, I went to sleep to the sounds of rain and wind, and awoke to see snow on every distant mountain, and even a little on the ground around me. On another morning, the cold-stove temperatures that woke me gave me the gift of watching out my kitchen window as three coyotes explored the edges of my neighbor's cabin. Every morning, silent, peaceful scenes like this unfolded before I even went to my desk to write. I found a satisfaction in simply observing them.

I suppose I am meant to talk in this newsletter about my writing practice or how much work I got done while at my residency. I did write some pages of my novel, drafting a scene I'd been avoiding and writing character dialogue for another scene I hadn't planned on starting. I also wrote daily journal entries, some of which I'm repurposing to write this note. But I'd be lying if I said my creative progress was the best part of my week. A few years ago, I wrote an essay for a friend's website, about my experience finding and reading conservationist Anne LaBastille's memoir *Woodswoman*. LaBastille's chronicle of living alone in the Adirondacks both inspired and shamed me, because I knew the comforts of suburban and urban life had claimed me too fully to ever allow me to do what she'd done in the name of ecology or art. I would not forgo electricity or make a wild fox my pet. I would not row a boat across a frozen lake to meet up with a friend from town. But in my week at Dorland, I did talk for three days to a spider (the only other living thing sharing my space) and flushed the toilet a whole lot less than I would at home. I sat outside bundled in multiple puffer coats to watch the sunset. I played guitar by fires I'd started. Dorland may not be wholly wild and outside of society, but by taking away instant heat, it does remove one small but significant piece of ease from the world and replaces it with the deeper comfort of knowing who we really are, or can become, when we allow some distractions and conveniences of city life to be stripped away. In this way, it was a transformative week for me. When I returned home, my husband said I was unrecognizable from the woman who left.

"You're more confident," he said.

And when he said it, I felt it, and I knew it was correct.

Is there any greater gift to an artist than that?

Kristen Havens

Kristen came to Dorland to work on her first novel, a coming-of-age story about a non-human character in the near future.

Her website is www.kristenhavens.com.

