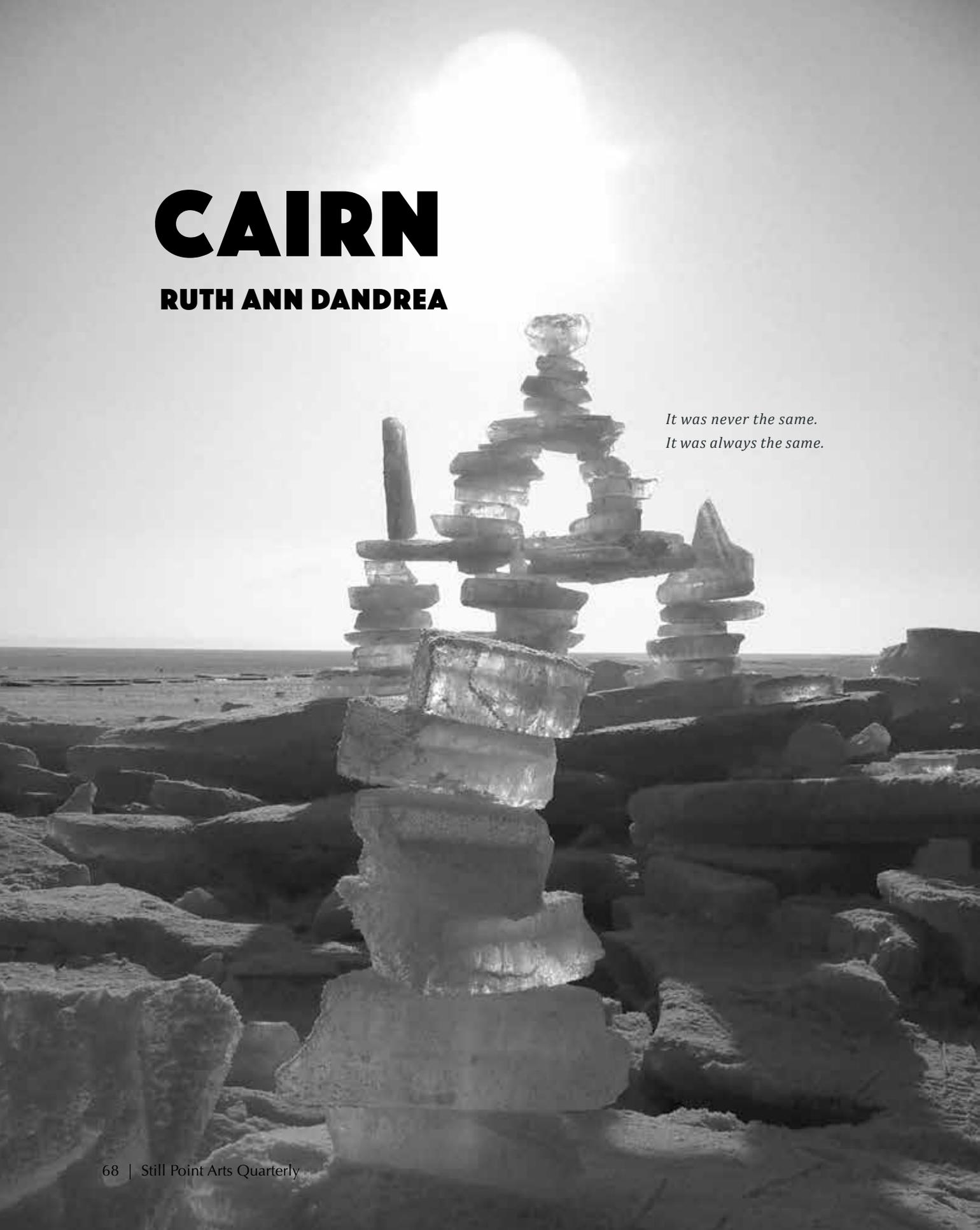


# CAIRN

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*It was never the same.  
It was always the same.*

IT WAS DIFFERENT EVERY TIME HE PASSED it, the old stone cairn. Rock on rock, stone on stone, pebbles piled on top. Sitting there at the stream bed's edge as if it had grown up out of water or been dropped by a careless god.

He never touched it.

He read the article in the tiny mountain town's newspaper warning that too many people were building cairns, that cairns were where they were for a reason, that they had meaning, that they shouldn't be erected helter-skelter, confusing hikers. So whenever he hiked this patch of trail, he paused, crouched before the cairn, and wondered. Where did it point? What did it mean? Did it mean anything at all?

It couldn't have been a sign for water, could it? After all, the stream flowed smoothly, obviously, even in the dry parts of summer. He'd lived in the small town now for over a year, had passed this particular cairn in all seasons.

He'd have chalked its existence up to trickster teenagers or lost lovers unable to share their emotions any other way, but he'd also spent days, nights camping just beyond the site and was sure no one approached in the dark or light. And yet come morning time, there it would be: one more stone, the pile of three askew, the new, the changed, the already re-constructed rock on rock, stone on stone, pebble-topped cairn.

It was never the same.

It was always the same.

It drew him like a watering hole draws a thirsty horse in desert country, the way plants grow toward a window.

It soothed him the same way too. He knew this much.

What he didn't know was what it was this old pile of rocks provided, what it was for which he thirsted, how he was intended to grow. What he mostly wanted to know was how it happened.

So he made it a point to visit the cairn at least once a week.

He read about cairns, how they often marked burial grounds or were used as game-driving lanes or buffalo jumps by Indians out west. But this, of course, was the east. There was always the possibility, though he tried not to think of it because he'd given up on god a long time before, that this perfectly balanced, intricately constructed, carefully arranged pile of rocks was part of some religious ceremony. Or had been. That some modern or ancient worshiper had journeyed here just to pray or give thanks or beg forgiveness or ask for bounty.

And it happened that he often found himself kneeling before the rocky structure, peering between its layers, noting the change of color from rock to rock. Afraid to touch it, but yearning to learn its texture in his fingertips. To taste it even. To lay his tongue on the topmost rock and let the slate or granite or

whatever made the stone a stone seep into his mouth.

Once he fell asleep between the cairn and the creek.

Woke.

Found himself stretched out, head to the north, feet to the south, and either arm reaching toward the edges. His left hand made misty by its nearness to the flowing water, his right fingers curled in on his palm just missing contact with the wide strong base stone of the cairn. Close enough to feel its coolness in the hot August afternoon.

Another time he huddled down before it in the rain.

Watched.

Looked as drop by drop dotted the old stone man, as he'd begun to think of it. Followed every rivulet that ran first around the pebbles scattered on flattened top rock, then dripped over its edge, the edges of the rocks below. Tiny waterfalls. Soundless in the greater clatter of rain on leaves, rain turning stream into river. Rain drizzled from his hat into his ears, down his neck, soaked his shoulders, wetted his thighs. Drenched, he sat and let rain do what rain does. He simply mimicked the cairn.

And so it happened that he came to meditate here.

Not every day, but every day he could, he came.

Sat cross-legged, spine erect, crown of his head seeking sky, sitting bones striving toward earth. He sat stone still. He sat with his

forearms lightly rested on his legs, his hands meeting in the middle, forming of themselves a small circle, like a rock. Right fingers cupping left fingers and the important thumbs almost but not quite kissing above. Hands empty and expectant. Chin tucked. Eyes to the earth at the foot of the cairn.

The only part of the posture he couldn't maintain was the lowered eyes. His sought the cairn, always. Every bit of it. Until he knew it. Every bit of it. Every time.

Flat gray rock. Thicker pink-speckled rock. Rounded pure white pebbles. A fossil once. Jagged edged and smooth. The cairn seemed to enter his day, his life. To send him back with all his work, his play, his problems, his loves piled up, balanced. Sure.

Away from the cairn, he worked its magic, placing an answer here, easing an issue there. His friends, his family marveled at his equanimity. A quality he'd read about, never known.

He enjoyed it. At first. Being the dependable one. The calm one no matter what storm. He was a caretaker, and he liked that people trusted him to do that job, didn't resent his maneuvering the solid problems of their lives into changed shapes. How his words, his deeds rearranged things so they could see and smile and act.

They would come to him on his front porch swing to talk so he could clear their minds.

They would stop him in the market so he could stack their thoughts like groceries in the cart.

Then they stood in grateful awe. Looking at him, he supposed, the way he looked at the cairn.

He got tired of being their rock though, as any flesh-born being might.

He got tired of sitting up straight, of paying attention, of always, always being there.

He wanted something, anything to change.

He started to wonder about the difference between being strong and being stuck.

First he experimented with moving—just a finger or a toe—during meditation. When nothing happened, he stretched an arm over his head, pushed a leg out from under him. His mind, it's true, began to jump around. But he sort of liked the feeling of excitement that brought him.

Once it happened that the ball of a stretched foot made contact with the base of the cairn, pushed there, and he felt the whole wobble. It wasn't until then that he realized the possibility of it falling. Of it not being there. Of no stone on stone, of separate stones, unconnected and unpiled. Of stones scattered. And he began to wonder what pattern he might find in strewn stones.

He was tired of being a flying buttress.

He was tired of trying to maintain balance on this swiftly spinning planet.

He thought and thought and thought he might like to let wind lift his hair, let water wash away his efforts, let sun burn accomplishment out of his soul. He thought he might like to fly, be a being of air rather than earth. He thought

he might like to swim, be a being of water rather than of ground. He thought he might like to just be.

To not be quiet.

To shout, sing, sway, and sally forth, like any body, soft-skinned and organ-filled.

He wanted to be for a bit, not to become.

He walked away from the cairn and didn't walk back.

It didn't matter.

It turned out, the cairn was inside him. Maybe the cairn was him. He was built, it seemed, of an ever-changing pile of rock on rock, stone on stone, particular pebbles piled in particular ways. He carried them inside everywhere. When he dreamed at night or day time, he saw his spine's vertebrae sorted and stacked, an ascending bone cairn. The impossible rock of skull tipsy on top. But trying. Always trying. To sit still. ❖

