

An Evening with the Pillars

Fading light of mid-September shrouds the library when I come to spend time with the sandstone. White tear drops and patches in the dark rose columns, signature of Apostle Islands area brownstone, stand out like the lenses of a hundred lighthouses, or dozens of full moons in a sunburnt sky. I hope to witness swifts swooping into any of the three chimneys, where the covers have been raised a foot to accommodate them—these birds that paste a nest to the rough interiors or cling with toes in groups overnight before migrating away. While I wait, my eyes rove over the stone, my fingers touch the stone. The outer columns are rougher from battering winds and weathering—they are the original pillars, placed here one hundred and eighteen years ago. Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy built the walls and windows, the columns and steps, this place where books wander out into people's lives for a time, return to these stones and brick. The inner columns are smoother, carved weeks ago. These pillars are silky with carving dust, alert with the memory of nimble men who finessed the crane inches at a time, the careful toppling of the eroded tons that needed to be replaced. They are tense with the freshness of fingers that squeezed between the new pieces of the column—between massive lower piece and massive middle piece—to arrange the spacers for mortar, breathless that the crane would hold until fleshy digits were removed. These pillars know the worry of the measurements, the machines that removed what needed to be removed to reveal the tapering bores, the red-complexioned tree trunks rising to the leafy flutes of the capitals atop. These columns know the secret of the miscalculated height, the brilliant solution to carve away the weathered part of one of the removed lower pieces to substitute as a refurbished upper piece. These ruddy columns know how the stones in the stairway walls were tapped for soundness, disassembled, unsound ones traded out, reassembled. They know the colors of the mortar, the chatter of the men through cold wet spring and hot summer work. They know the generosity of the givers who made the restoration a reality. These pillars know Teresa peaked out the window watching. Watching the drama and the skill, the humans and the stone. Always the stone. Perhaps the columns, original and replaced, have a faint, oh-so-faint recollection of when they were sand grains millions of years ago, those grains of quartz and flecks of mica that tumbled and washed to an inland sea, collected together, cemented and hardened. Perhaps they remember the press of time and the quarry from which they were cut, extracted, hauled. Perhaps they recall the cutting and shaping by craftsmen, with such tools from "then," to create such an imposing edifice on this hill here in Bayfield. Perhaps they have a vague knowledge of the sister blocks shipped far away—Chicago, Canada. Who would have thought that stone embedded in a building in Québec would be reclaimed by a stone carver, laid out in a resting spot waiting for the suitable time and project to be repurposed—right here? Perhaps the new pillars learned Québécois and could speak to the heavy-accented man who recognized the tear drops of the Bayfield sandstone to bring those stones home. Perhaps the returned pillars, the newly carved ones, speak in Québécois to the ones that never moved—haughty in their well-travel past, exuding confidence, elegance conveyed by far-city life. As the dusk light dims from these rubicund pillars, I realize no chimney swifts are coming. The breeze rustles the leaves in the nearby trees. Crickets chirp. A car horn sounds with the faint swoosh of traffic. I leave knowing the pillars will be here tomorrow, will stand renewed for countless tomorrows. The streaks of amber over the lake dissolve into indigo sky. Ruby lights blink across the bay.

Lucy Tyrrell 9/10/21 On the occasion of the reception for the completion of renovations.