

## Inside Out

Aged 18, I bought a 1970s caravan for £100 through a small ad from a bloke in a car park. I kitted it out with the colourful cushions that I needed to call a place home, and handed in the notice on my city centre flat. Towed by a friend to a derelict farm south of Dartmoor in Devon, I positioned myself away from the other site dwellers in a quiet spot overlooking a stream. I had read Henry David Thoreau and was after a transcendental *Walden* experience, with as little as possible coming between nature and me. I may have had the dreadlocked hair and the rainbow knitwear of a New Age traveller of the early 1990s but I had a late nineteenth-century soul. Utterly naïve and wholly urban, I had no idea what I was doing, of course. I saw a frog in the wild for the first time as a total revelation. Naturally, there was no electricity. Candlelight was charming until my waist-length hair intersected with a flame. The nearest drinking water was a tap in a graveyard, an hour's round trip by foot. Five litres was as much as I could carry by hand so I began to use the liquid from cooking pasta to fill my hot water bottle at night; I'd then wash in it in the morning. Eventually I found an old pram at a rubbish tip and wheeled water containers about like precious offspring. In good weather I wrote poetry in my deckchair and felt at one with the earth. I made fascinated drawings of the unfamiliar insects that landed on my notebook but at night I couldn't sleep for fear of earwigs and the sounds of field mice nesting in my jumpers. In bad weather I was utterly bored. I watched rain drip through the gaffer-taped gaps in the roof onto my paperbacks, slowly spoiling *Food for Free* and *The Old Straight Track*.

Anna Chrystal Stephens' work, over the last several years, has explored many of the same tensions: the fantasies and realities of the countryside for metropolitans. The promise of meaning in the rejection of modern conveniences has become ever more pressing as the world heats up. The English pastoral tradition manifests in different ways at different times but it revives the rural like the changing of the seasons. Stephens explores the sites and objects of these desires as an artist-botanist-anthropologist, making records, keeping tallies, accumulating data and pressing flowers. Hers is a foraging practice, hunting and gathering, but it is also an act of cultivation. She compiles ordered bodies of information from the natural world, adapting its systems of classifications by grouping material into genus: the multiplicity of guides for self-building arranged as an archive; miscellaneous tools of fire-starting displayed as a specimen chart; typologies of tarpaulin structures, in all their homely variety, boxed into grids.

At the same time that Stephens works with the flora and fauna of the natural world, a central preoccupation of her artistic practice has been with the material culture of outdoor living, especially the intersections of voluntary simplicity with the commodity culture of camping. Survival as a leisure practice has its own abundant equipment list, from crampons and carabiners to tent pegs and tow hitches. Freedom is the ambition but the gadgets can pile up to create a kit bag of burdens. Yearning nomads aim to get closer to the elements, whether in tents, caravans or houseboats. Certainly their dwellers must become more aware of the weather; protective strategies to keep it at bay dominate proceedings. Water must be resisted; wind must be cheated. Whether it is Opinel knives and Kelly kettles or old prams and sticky tape, every kind of wilderness needs tools to tame it and run it smoothly. Gore-Tex, polyester rope and ripstop nylon are the textures of twenty-first century camping. These mingle with the twigs and pallets with which Stephens improvises shelters and makes banners and wands. These methods test out alternative housing strategies for times of rising rents but also reflect on the spiritual hunger for hardihood that may be felt by the comfortably off. Technical apparatus and rudimentary tools might seem to be strange bedfellows but they share a common sleeping bag.

The culture of camping is often framed as a pursuit of a simple life but what constitutes simplicity is always shaped by historic conditions, from changing manufacturing practices and aesthetics to shifting expectations of necessity. Through my research into the woodcraft movement of interwar Britain, I became fascinated by how anti-modern ideas about going back to nature were simultaneously profoundly modern. This contradictory position was embodied in the stylistic and material choices of those who clustered into camp circles under home-made tents, decorated staffs and hooded cloaks of Lincoln green. Would-be Robin Hoods of the 1920s and 1930s turned to forest and field in opposition to what they perceived as an artificial culture of radio, cinema and the fripperies of fashion. To live close to the land was to reject up-to-date accoutrements but the shorts and walking shoes they wore and the rucksacks they carried were enabled by a new market for hiking and natural health that was *a la mode* and well served by commercial products from detailed maps to convenience foods. The signs and symbols woodcrafters applied to tents were stylishly primitivist and notably close to the logos of early twentieth-century advertising. These historic repertoires become resources for Stephens as she gathers the apparatus for alternative futures.

The continuum of interwar outdoor cultures in the craft revival and hippy homesteading of the 1970s was lampooned in Mike Leigh's famous play *Nuts in May*, where the idealistic expectations of the rural, encapsulated in a Dorset campsite by central characters Keith and Candice Marie, are shattered by the intersection of modern life, that is, by those who do not share their high-minded vegetarian values and rustic romanticism. Theirs is a managed experience of Morris Minors and Marmite, but the message prevails: the countryside is an idea as much as a place. To sleep and shelter in the outdoors is to domesticate the space; the methods by which survivalism and simple-living play out are as influenced by the interior design styles and consumer practices of each period as much as its moral codes. Nature is usually perceived as timeless, enduring and external, but we shape it in our own image again and again.

Under canvas or afloat, temporary homes are made within tight limits. There's a literal and metaphorical narrowing of parameters in barge living; a drawing-up of borders in the space of a tented field; a setting-out of moorings and awnings. Rough sleeping is a desperate necessity for far too many; camping as a leisure choice is an entirely different premise. Its practices are performative acts; through them a particular mentality is pitched. Between these two poles, however, is an expanding grey zone of those who are priced out or otherwise excluded from conventional housing. The lines between luxury and necessity, transitory and permanent are increasingly blurred.

On my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday I went to court to fight the eviction order imposed on my temporary autonomous zone; within a few short months I was back in bricks and mortar, marvelling at hot and cold taps and at lights operated by the touch of a switch. The caravan was scrapped and I returned to a double-glazed and centrally-heated state of mind. Stephens is still out there, digging away, with mud under her fingernails, ruddy cheeks and tousled hair, covered in grass stains. Her hands are marked with berry juice and her dirty feet are bright with blood. She is sowing seeds, scavenging food and making charms. These gathered ideas and objects are bundled, festooned and distributed at edge lands, at the threshold where outdoor and indoor worlds collide.

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