Obsidian Fields

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I was twenty-one years old the summer Elaine and I backpacked into Three Sisters Wilderness. I was an urban creature, from a long line of same. My grandparents had emigrated from Greece and Italy, landed in the Bronx, and never went farther. They were factory workers, saloon keepers, a butcher. My parents called suburban New York “the country.” I had lived my whole life in and around New York City. And then, in the summer of 1977, I took a Greyhound cross country (three days and four nights) to see the West, work a job, and (if I’m being honest) to pursue a poet I knew who was living in Oregon. After the thin, eastern woods of southern New York, the height and breadth of the Cascade pines were astonishing. I kept my forehead pressed against the bus window, eyes riveted to those trees, as we climbed up and over the pass into the Willamette Valley.

I found two summer jobs, both in collectives, and rented a room in a communal household. The master tenant was Elaine. She was a year or two older than I, with a thick mop of short brown hair and striking blue eyes. Her arms and back were sculpted from years of climbing and kayaking. She had just come back from leading a two-week backpacking trip with the University of Oregon outdoor program. And while she had that wild and relaxed look of folks just in from the wilderness, she was not sunburned. Even in the mid-seventies, she was aware, from her mountaineering medicine training, of the hazards of sun exposure and used liberally what sunscreen there was in those days.
Elaine slept in a small, roughed-out room in the basement, which fit her full-sized mattress and a narrow set of shelves on concrete blocks housing a library of topographical maps, travel guides, and mountaineering handbooks. The rest of the basement was dedicated to her prodigious store of equipment with names I had never heard before. I wrote them in the journal I kept: alpine skis, carabiner, crampon, belay rope, self-arrest ice axe. She had an easy way of talking about these things, attuned to my level of interest. And I was very interested. There was something beautiful in the clear, concise language with which she described the technical use of each tool, and from her answers I discerned a larger story. She touched the spiked tip of the crampon I held in my hand, explained how a climber kicked the point into an ice fall to gain purchase for her next step. Elaine had been one of those climbers, roped up on the Villard Glacier Route, summiting the North Sister. I could see her in winter gear and helmet, reflecting sunglasses, crampons embedded in the sheer ice wall, one hand on the rope, the other holding the handle of an ice axe she had just swung in. She was already far along in her life goal of summiting each volcanic peak in the Cascades. Mt. Shasta alone required three separate trips: the first time, forced into retreat by a windstorm; the second, deterred from climbing above the summit ridge by an illness in the group. Third time was the charm. Great ski down! She flashed that smile and the sadness in her eyes, a quiet, background feature, dissipated, just like that. Tenacious, persevering, and cautious. The more I knew her, the more I trusted her.

In August, Elaine, by then my dear friend, took me backpacking. The Three Sisters — North, Middle, and South — are volcanic peaks in Oregon’s Cascade Range, each over ten thousand feet, and together housing fourteen glaciers (one of them, Elaine’s Villard). We would be hiking a route up the west side of the North Sister. I did the trip in T-shirts, corduroy trousers, and a pair of Adidas sneakers. Elaine supplied the rest of my gear from her basement. For three days before our departure, the living room floor was covered with wool clothing, dehydrated food, wilderness first aid supplies, water cleansing pills and potions, water bottles, sleeping bags, cook kit, headlamps, Elaine’s outer clothing (made of a newly invented material called GORE-TEX), and a cagoule for me, a traditional mountaineering garment made of rubberized material, reaching to my ankles. Elaine analyzed, reduced, and replaced one item after another — no detail too small—halving the roll of adhesive tape, minus the plastic spool (less weight), adding an extra sheet of moleskin (anticipating tenderfoot blisters)—teaching me to respect and prepare seriously for the wilderness.

We hitched a ride out of Eugene in the bed of a pickup. Had the trip been just that ride, lolling on our packs, the wind whipping our hair, taking bumps hard, it would have been a fond memory to last this city girl a lifetime. I had no idea what was to come.

At the trailhead, as the truck drove away and Elaine was showing me how to adjust my straps, a great quiet descended upon us, weighty and still, like nothing I had ever felt or heard before. The soughing of our footsteps on the loamy trail. The sound of dew dropping to the ground. The suck and squash of stepping through drip lines. My first experience dropping a pack after hours of hiking, how it makes you feel you are weightless. I hopped from foot to foot thinking, This is what the astronauts must feel. We walked for days and
days, and I was astounded that there were regions within mountains. I had only experienced mountains as
distant behemoths, seeming two-dimensional, singular in aspect. We scrambled a boulder field, and I felt joy I
hadn’t felt since I was a child let loose on a playground. Food never tasted so good. We slept long and woke to
serious mountain cold, pulling on wool socks and sweaters, our bodies coursing with animal urgency against
the chill. Each day warmed to a hot afternoon. Many days in we climbed to an alpine lake where we swam, just
us. We hadn’t seen other people since the truck dropped us at the trailhead.

We walked through a lava field where no trees grew, nothing green. It was as if a distant volcano had splashed
this part of the mountain and turned everything to cinder, a vast acreage of pumice, gray and black and rufous
golf balls made of moon stuff. And the Obsidian Fields. A landscape of black ice, jet-black, shining. How did
this happen, I asked, and Elaine knew. Surrounding us, as far as we could see in any direction, was glistening
rubble, a treeless boulder-field of ebony glass. Elaine gestured across the wide swatch. *Imagine everything we
are seeing as molten magma flowing from the volcano. A river of magma, above ground, and as it hits the cold
air, and maybe water, it cools so rapidly the atoms stay smooth, no time to form the crystalline structure that
makes rock rough.* A black glass river, stilled, mid-undulation. Over time, big geologic time, the obsidian
weathered and broke into an array of sizes, some as big as refrigerators. Elaine hefted a chunk the size of her
palm. She pointed to where the rock cleaved to expose curved surfaces, black and striated, a fractal version of a
bend in the lava river. The natural formation of knife-like edges made this, among First People, the go-to
material for arrowheads and cutting tools. She placed the obsidian back from where it came. This wilderness,
long in making, could quickly give way to human hands. Leave no trace, she taught me. Where and how we set
up camp, what we did while there, and how we broke camp in the morning, all were done with great care
toward least impact.

The summer passed. I had long given up pursuit of the poet. The fantasies that got me onto a Greyhound at the
start of the summer had been replaced by actual pleasures. My two jobs, one in a daycare center, the other at a
café. Riding a bike everywhere. The river path in Eugene, smelling of blackberries and something else—
aromatic, savory—that I would associate with that summer for the rest of my life. Residential streets lined with
plum trees, fruit ripe for the taking. There were more backpacking trips, and a day at the ocean with Elaine and
a carload of her outdoors mates, watching them roller-coaster sea kayaks in a rough surf.

In the fall I returned to New York, to resume school. After my summer in Eugene, I hardly recognized the city
where I had lived my whole life. On that first morning I trotted down the four flights from my tatty tenement
apartment in Manhattan’s East Village, headed to the Italian bakery on my block for cappuccino and biscotti.
This had been my morning routine, waking up with the city, feeling its energy surge through my body, full of
possibility and promise. I expected to ride that familiar current. Instead, I felt knocked back. It was as if I was
seeing for the first time this broken cityscape. What had always been backdrop and easy underscore to
wonderful adventures now flooded me. It was harsh. The noise was relentless. The streets were grimy, littered.
The sidewalks were lined with battered metal garbage cans that reeked. The doorways were busted up and
graffiti. Even the curbs were broken down, ground concrete spilling into the street like alluvial fans, the runoff of urban despair. I stood on the corner staring at the curb, warm coffee container in hand.

I could not locate myself, could not feel what I had longed to feel when I was in Eugene and missing New York. And now I was missing Eugene, how I felt there: strong in my body, the stiff spring of my bike cornering the river path, the peaceful joy of the wilderness. That clean moment, having broken camp, everything stowed in your pack, when you step onto the trail and look back at where you had been…where you cooked and slept, made love, talked into the night…no trace now but richly felt, tucked inside, where it warmed and glowed. It had all gone missing. And I could not locate who I was, neither there nor here. I had become dislocated. And I understood my dislocation as a condition of grief: bereft not only of the lost object but of the sense of self—the self-perceived through one’s senses—that had been deeply rooted in place.

Gradually I got used to the city that was no longer my familiar and went about the business of making something new. It is what we do. I never returned to the Three Sisters. Elaine went on to summit all the volcanic peaks in the Cascade range. After I drove my daughter to Montana, where she attended college, I met Elaine in Glacier. We spent a few days hiking and swimming. Her status as a world-class mountaineer didn’t prevent her from enjoying the park’s fireside programs or poking around the historic lodges. The following summer, she met my daughter and me in Alaska where we spent time in Denali. I always felt safest in the wilderness with Elaine.

Recently, she posted on FaceBook:

“My friend Patty and I did a backpack trip into the west side of North Sister through the obsidian fields to a lake in the 1970s and we did not see one other person at the lake, and just a very few people on the trail on the way out. Hard to imagine it mobbed now. Kinda sad.”

Her hiking buddies lamented:

“We were just there. Throngs of people.”

“The Forest Service plans to implement a permit system to control access.”

“You already need a permit to camp in the obsidian area.”

I could sense their bewilderment describing the difference between the wilderness they once knew and the crowds they now encountered. Beneath the obsidian fields, incinerated in the first rush of molten lava, was another landscape entirely. It may have been a continuation of the alpine forest at the edge of the fields or an ecotone one can only imagine. Life goes on, they say. Layer upon layer, each tinged with a soft missing.

For me there is a place, a timeless space somewhere between forty-four years ago and my present, time-sweetened memory, where two young women are wending their way up the west side of North Sister. They are
alone on the mountain, delighted by the world around them, enlivened by the good fortune that brought them together. They are scrambling over boulders, washed in mountain waters. They come upon obsidian fields only they—as if they were the first—will ever know.

THE END

Patricia Contaxis’ work has appeared in The Pluralist, Wrath-Bearing Tree, San Antonio Review, Rivanna Review, Pithead Chapel, and Notes From The Seashore. Retired after more than thirty years as a marriage and family therapist, she now spends her time on Trail Patrol with the National Park Service, and as a Hawkwatcher with the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory. She also enjoys playing mandolin and fiddle with her band and wandering the coastal hills with her family, their very good boy, and a pair of 8x42 field glasses.

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