

Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2017: Glaciers Melt,
Mountain Goats Cope*

Article 5

2017

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Recommended Citation

Piccirillo, Aaron (2017) "Getting Lost in a Familiar Woods: A Brief Encounter with a Wild Place,"
Appalachia: Vol. 68: No. 1, Article 5.
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Getting Lost in a Familiar Woods

A brief encounter with a wild place

Aaron Piccirillo



To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence.

—Oscar Wilde

I WAS WALKING IN EARLY SPRING THROUGH FAMILIAR WOODS NEAR my western Connecticut home. I had hiked this area of the woods so many times before that it felt as if I had every tree and rock committed to memory. Actually, I often drift into a kind of mental autopilot when hiking there. I have come to expect certain things of this place. I know the trees, rocks, and exactly how long I will take on my usual loop. I can afford to get lost in my thoughts. Everything generally goes according to plan.

On that day, somewhere in the back of my mind, I am sure I was congratulating myself for getting out. I had been looking forward to connecting to my creative and inspirational source all week. My body would be forged anew. The only problem was that, in reality, I could have been walking down a familiar sidewalk in New York City and my experience would probably have been the same. I went into autopilot mode. I became lost in the tumult of everyday thoughts: Have I been calling distant friends frequently enough? Did I offend anyone at that party last night? What were the details of that dream I had? I should write those down. Use them in a poem. Oh, and I needed to get something at the drugstore on the way home . . . what was it again? On and on and on. After about half an hour, I found myself looking up into an unfamiliar area, not knowing quite where I was. It was a simple mistake. I had veered off the usual path.

Suddenly, I was not just on a routine hike in the woods. I was in a wild place.

I felt a flash of exhilaration when I glanced up and realized the woods did not look how I expected them to look. I felt like a wild animal. The leaves shimmered more brightly, the scents of dirt and bark burrowed deeper into my lungs, and my wandering, unfocused thoughts instantly vanished. Instead, visions flickered in my mind: running through the woods as a child at dusk, prickles sticking to my pants. Looking at sunsets from a distant hill-top. Standing in damp, muddy fields, in March, hungry. Places I have never

Stone walls march through the understory of the forest in Kent, Connecticut.

JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

seen before shot like lightning bolts in my mind's eye. I don't know what they meant or why they appeared.

The feeling was of something mysterious and Other showing itself to me in a fleeting moment, in a part of the woods that otherwise would have been typical or commonplace if I had I been hiking or exploring as usual. The forest became truly wild and alive, in all of its strangeness and its inability to ever truly be known.

After this moment passed, I brought my mind back into focus, looked to my right and my left, and chose a way back to the main trail. For the rest of my trek, my thoughts swarmed around that brief moment in which my thoughts had ceased and something opened up around me. I recognized errors in how I had been relating to the forest. Initially, I felt that I understood those woods, that they were familiar and almost familial. The forest was not a mysterious Other. It was a part of me, and I considered it akin to a home away from home. It was always there for me in the same way, and I could always count on its permanence and predictability. It was a sanctuary, or a haven, and I walked through it ceremoniously. I had started viewing the forest as a kind of tool—healing force or, as Raymond Williams has put it, nature had become “a refuge, a refuge from man; a place of healing, a solace, a retreat.”¹ I sought a spiritual antidote to the material life, but, ironically, this led to a rigid routine that made a spontaneous relationship to the forest much harder.

When I found my way back to a familiar path, I looked down at the rocks I had seen hundreds of times before: rocks that perhaps, in the past, might have conjured thoughts of strength, permanence, and resolve. I looked at the trees, and I thought of what acorns had meant to me: the fragile beginnings of things, the majesty and strength that can come from nurturing and tempering oneself through a season of darkness. Perseverance. I looked at everything around me and thought of all the meanings I had previously placed on the forest. All of those meanings had vanished in that brief moment when I felt like a wild animal, when there was no meaning—only mystery and unknowing, and the rapid influx of the entire forest into all of my senses.

I came to realize that my preconceived notions of the forest, of what I would find in the forest, and even of what the forest is, had blocked my experience of the forest. It may seem odd to say that, but it is worth saying

1. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980, 80).

Was I wrong to seek meaning in the forest, or was I merely projecting my desires and wishes onto the wild places around me?

again: my idea of the forest blocked my experience of the forest, and it took getting lost to come to this realization. I had placed so much expectation and obligation onto nature to be what I envisioned it to be, that I may as well have been walking around in a mall, searching for a specific product that I knew would serve a specific purpose. When that expectation was short-circuited for a moment, I was not just looking at the forest, as Oscar Wilde might have said. I was seeing the forest.

Was I wrong to seek meaning in the forest, or was I merely projecting my desires and wishes onto the wild places around me? Is seeking meaning in nonhuman nature a valid way of relating to wild places, or does this place a responsibility on nature that it should not have to bear? David Harvey has noted in his book *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Distance*, “‘Nature knows best’ is to presume that nature can ‘know’ something,” and Raymond Williams has said, “The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.” The tendency to project a static, human ideology onto the dynamic, nonhuman world is common. How are we to experience nature, then, when even with the best of intentions it seems so easy to project our desires, fears, and ideological constructs onto it? What is left after the objectifications and expectations are removed? How can we properly relate to that which we cannot entirely know? I couldn’t articulate these questions properly at the time, but I knew that something had changed.

A COUPLE MONTHS LATER, I WAS BACK ON THE SAME TRAIL. CROSSING over a small brook, I came across the fresh shards of a large tree that had been struck by lightning. The inner bark was a light brown, free of any sort of blemish or discoloration. The shards measured about four feet long, and they were very sharp. They did not look like they belonged in the middle of the forest. They looked too perfect, almost as if they were crafted by an artist and belonged in a museum. My first thought was to gather up five shards and plunge them into the ground, in a semicircle, for no particular reason. One

piece was bigger than the others; it had its own semicircular mass of wood sticking off the top of it. It must have been wrapped around the base of a branch before being struck. I placed this shard in the middle of the other four. It looked like a giant eye. Happy with my makeshift installation, I stepped back, put a few finishing touches on it, and continued on my way. I looked back to see how it looked from a farther distance. It looked good. I imagined other people walking here, lost in their everyday thoughts, looking straight ahead and missing it. Then I imagined hikers who might randomly look to the side of the trail just at the right moment, only to find the sculpture staring back at them. I had not assigned any meaning to creating the sculpture, but I walked away feeling that I had just cultivated a new relationship with the woods.

Reframing the forest as something I relate to, rather than use for my purposes, reduced my frustration if I didn't have a profound experience every time I hiked. When I walk these paths now, I observe what is around me, but I do not actively attempt to extract meaning, as if the forest were a novel. I do not expect to gain anything specific, nor do I get disappointed if a bad mood lingers and everyday thoughts do not cease. The path will still be there next time, and on better days, unexpectedly, I will dissolve into the essence of things, or I will become inspired for an unknown reason. I will be that wild animal again. But I make no demands and expect nothing. In the meantime, I focus on the trees, and the rivers, and the rocks, and I acknowledge their Otherness. I admire their beauty, and perhaps even take a picture or two, but I do not attempt to own their essence. I do not know what they mean. Every so often, something opens up and that strange feeling breaks through, or I get a peculiar urge to do something like create a sculpture from shards of wood. I do not know why or how. Weeks may pass until this happens again, but I do not expect it or become upset with the forest when it does not happen.

THE WILD PLACES NEAR MY HOME HAVE FELT FAMILIAR AND YET STRANGE for a long time. And now they are stranger still. They no longer fit neatly into the same categories I once placed them in, and they do not exist solely for my personal well-being, aesthetic tastes, or spiritual aspirations. They have become more than just the recharge center of my life. Now, I relate to them—not on my terms, or on their terms, but somewhere in the middle. The trails I once walked so rigidly and ceremoniously I now walk more playfully. I find

more space and more room to breathe. I allow for something unexpected to wander in. Sometimes, when I wander off the path, or when the tumult of thoughts cease and the wild animal takes over, I communicate with the forest, and the relationship I have with the wilderness evolves. The path wanders on to me, and the phenomena that have no names, categories, or trails running through them burrow into my thoughts and actions. And they remind me of something important I have forgotten.

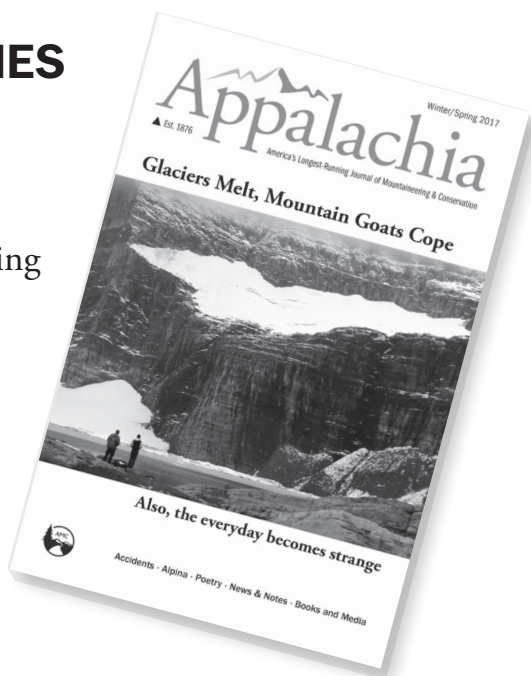
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