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The Long Way Home: Really Going Over the Mountain

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Really Going Over the Mountain

Going up there and being blown on is nothing. We never do much climbing while we are there, but we eat our luncheon, etc., very much as at home. It is after we get home that we really go over the mountain, if ever.

—Henry David Thoreau, in a letter to a friend

THIS IS AN ANSWER TO THOSE WHO ASK WHY, IF I'M SO SMART, I hike alone.

I came from a big, noisy family full of males. It operated on the principle that problems resolve through loud arguments and even tantrums. Maybe sometimes they must. But I did not realize when I left home at 18 that I'd fallen so deeply into the family dynamic that I did not even notice the emotions and even anger with which I approached most people and all situations. Keeping up with the boys, I had unlearned the younger me who just looked up for the planets.

I discovered backpacking when some friends towed me along to the White Mountains for four days when I was 24. I shut up and let the wind blow. Some people can hear their own voices amid the din of regular life. I can't. I need the mountains.

People ask if I'm afraid, alone on trails. Sort of. When I'm alone in the woods, I think ahead of what might scare me, discard the unfounded fears, and take steps for the rest.

Alone, I look at plants. I draw them in my notebook to remember their shapes. (And, why must we know the names of things? It's the recognition that matters.) Alone, I see boot marks, moose tracks, and animal droppings, and I know what the animal has eaten. When I'm alone, I see the ruffed grouse, the snowshoe hare, and the American toad. I used to let other people show them to me.

Last June 12, on my second night out, I woke to a damp, sagging tent barely a few inches above my forehead. I should have known not to take this rotting old one. The pattering intensified. In the dark, I placed one finger and my thumb on the prominent ridge of my nose and sighed. My father had the same nose. Suddenly he was with me. *Dad*. The recognition flashed for a second.

The next morning I took down the tent and retreated into a crude A-frame some adventurers had cobbled together from pieces of the former shelter. The old one had been dismantled because it does not follow federal Wilderness policy. I silently thanked the ambitious shelter-builders I'd laughed at only hours before. Underneath the assemblage of tied-together logs and corrugated roof pieces, I sat on a crude log bench, pushing handfuls of granola into my mouth and swatting black flies. As usual, I asked why my trips always came to moments like this. I did not "eat my luncheon, etc., very much as at home." The tent fly dripped on the rope clothesline. Maybe it would dry a little under here. A half-empty bottle of whiskey leaned against a post: ghosts. The rain whooshed; I packed up and set out into it.

I slipped and mucked over the soaked fallen trees. I had to stop for water at a rushing tributary of the Wild River. My hands were prune-cold as they maneuvered the teetering old water pump on its teetering rock platform. My raincoat acted as a water transfer membrane. "What were you trying to prove this time?" I asked myself.

Suddenly, I wasn't trying to prove one thing. I was just getting water and living with my choices.

Hours later, I sat in the sun outside the bunkhouse at Carter Notch Hut. I read a taped-up hardcover of Robert Service poems a former assistant hut-master had left behind in 1977. "There's a race of men that don't fit in,/A race that can't stay still. . . . Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,/And they don't know how to rest."

The poem goes on to say that those who don't fit in won't succeed in the standard sense; "it's the steady, quiet, plodding ones/Who win in the lifelong race." And yet, "He's a rolling stone, and it's bred in the bone;/He's a man who won't fit in."

Absurd—that I would find my settled modern female soul in a poem about a cowboy from the nineteenth century. But I do feel that sometimes I must roll like a stone. Once in a while, everyone must reassemble her cluttered mind or live with regret.

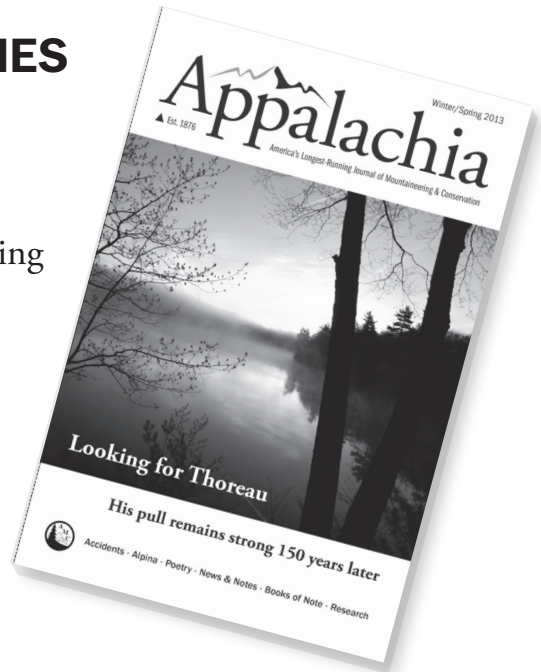
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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