

New Nonfiction from Patricia Contaxis: “Luminous Things”



It is late October and the season is turning. The morning chill is not the surface cool of fog, the chill you feel in summer here at Point Reyes National Seashore, but the deeper cold of coming winter as the hemisphere tilts farther from the sun, a cold that settles in to ground, rocks, trees, and your body. I am on Trail Patrol, carrying my usual pack and a radio strapped to my hip belt.

Volunteering for Trail Patrol with the National Park Service was a gift to myself, to celebrate my coming retirement. For sixteen hours each month, I rove the park freely. My pack includes supplies for visitors in need—extra food and water, a medical kit, everything needed for an unexpected night out—and I'm trained to warn against hazards they may not realize. The park calls this preventive search and rescue. I'm also encouraged to share my continuing education as a naturalist, which the park calls interpretive work. I might explain leash laws to a visitor with a soft start-up, an offhanded invitation to view, say, the small, camouflaged snowy plovers nesting in the sand above the wrack line. When a dog tears through the nesting area, it destroys the nests. When a plover is frightened off-nest, it won't return and the chicks won't hatch. Over time there won't be any more plovers. On a good day you can see the light turn on in a visitor's mind.

I've only had to use my training in wilderness first aid once on Trail Patrol, to recognize that a horseback rider, who was diabetic and nine miles off piste at the end of the day as the sun was going down, needed rest, water, to stay warm, and have some food available while I drove into town for help.

My assignment each shift is to choose a route through these seventy-one thousand acres of wonder: a peninsula of coastal ridge jutting out ten miles at its widest point, bordered by wild beaches; a hot spot for migrating birds; home to wild, free-roaming tule elk, to bobcats, and one shy mountain lion. As I wander the actual landscape, an internal world opens to me, maps itself onto the wild and familiar terrain of Point Reyes. And on this particular day, I am forced to take account. At the trailhead I call in my location and planned route. The radio squawks back: "Copy. Have a good day."

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In the slanted morning sun, I walk through a corridor of orb weaver spiderwebs. Beaded with dew, they glisten and wink at

me as I pass. I feel charmed, delighted by them. Then I climb the first rise, noting the effort it requires, and feel the first frisson of fear. Twice in the last few years, an episode of exhaustion has overtaken me while hiking, as if someone pulled a plug and all my vital energy drained. Both were brief. A drink of water, a bit of food, and they passed. But these are not things I felt in my younger body. Walking the long, deep quiet of Point Reyes, I feel more alone than in my usual daily life, a solitude that harkens to a much bigger, far longer solitude.

I enter a valley whose steep walls prevent me from hearing the ocean on the other side of the ridge. Within the valley sound is amplified. My boots thudding on the rutted, hard-packed trail remind me of a saying both chastening and reassuring: You are not the only pebble on the beach.

Rabbit, raven, spotted towhee, and quail. A downy woodpecker, vociferous and hardworking. Rounding a bend, there is a gorgeous, healthy coyote. A big one, close to fifty pounds. Coyote sightings this close up are not common in the park, in my experience. In three decades I have only seen coyotes from my car as they slinked across the road ahead of me and disappeared into underbrush or foraged in a field far from the road. This one has staked out a gopher hole, snout down, back curved, still as death. I wait and watch. The coyote leaps into the air and pounces, missing its mark. It swings its head toward me. I could feel that I am seen. A chill. Sharp intake of breath. And then it faces forward, trots away so swift and smooth, it is as if it were skating.

In late morning I climb the rise that will take me out of the valley and begin the long descent to the beach. I have warmed up through the morning's hike and acclimated to my pack. I feel loose and strong. A thought surfaces that I am deep into the park, hours away from any possible rescue, which is true, factual, but not imminently relevant. I take a moment to check my surroundings in case my intuition is ahead of a situation I

haven't completely registered. But I see no actual danger. I keep walking.

I decide to note my fears as I would note thought and breath while meditating. I list them as they float through my mind:

~ I'll meet a dangerous human. (Possible.)

~ I'll be stung by a bee and go into anaphylaxis. (I carry an EpiPen.)

~ My hip or back will go out, and I won't be able to walk.

~ I'll stumble and break a leg or arm.

~ I'll fall down a cliff.

~ I'll choke on my sandwich, and no one will be with me to squeeze my diaphragm and blow it out. (This one made me laugh at myself a little.)

~ My heart will give out.

There it is. My father did not live to be my age. He died of a broken heart. Stroke. Heart attack. Years of heart disease claiming his every breath. I was twenty when he died and have lived most of my life without him. But his decline haunted me, and as I approached the age at which he died (he was sixty), some subtle thought line worked its way out, as if entering a narrows in a small skiff, the disturbance of the waters increasing, my grip on the gunwales tightening. And then I was through. Slight disorientation from a future foreclosed to the usual unknown: bright, hectic, and sweet.

Still, something lingers. The visceral shock—unfathomable, really—held in the body that we are here and then we are not. I am sixty-three now. I'm retiring. I'm happy. I'm writing and playing music. I am in love. My father was none of these. The radio squawks, a ranger calling dispatch to check a license plate and VIN number before issuing a parking ticket.

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At noon I reach Coast Camp. A large group of high schoolers is packing out after a week-long service project of trail restoration. They trudge in knots of chatting, bumping magnetism, edging me to the side of the trail. I seem invisible to them. I walk to a picnic table and slide my pack off, enjoy the lightness. I sit on the table, eating my sandwich while watching a dark-eyed junco flit from campsite to campsite. A song sparrow supervises from a post and then from an unused grill. The sun is directly overhead in a clear sky. I can feel its warmth on my arms and face and on my back, where it dries my park-issue khaki shirt, damp from carrying a pack all morning. After lunch I amble down a wide cut through the coastal bluff that leads to the beach. Halfway down the gentle descent is a broad-canopied eucalyptus with a rope swing on which my daughter played all the many times we camped here when she was a child. On the beach a wide wrack line tells the story of a stormy night. But the surf is mild now, a gentle lap followed by a longer, quiet interval. At the shore sound surrounds you, even the sounds of an easy tide and amiable breeze. Climbing back to camp, sound resumes its directional quality, comes at me from identifiable points, and the air around me feels different, heavier, ground-stilled.

The junco and sparrow have moved on, also the high schoolers. I have the place to myself, and I sit on the picnic table a while, gazing at an outcrop of sandstone halfway up the western slope of the coast ridge. It is enormous. Sections have weathered into shapes like ramparts and parapets, looking like a medieval castle. I can still remember the rush of joy I felt the first time I saw it, thirty-one years ago. It was 1987, the year my wife and I moved to the Bay Area. It was our first hike in Point Reyes. The castle loomed above us, standing alone, as it does, on a dry flank sparsely dotted with rubble and low scrub. We were on the upswing of a ten-mile loop from ridge to beach.

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The radio crackles, then falls silent. Sometimes the radio helps me feel less alone, but sometimes it reminds me of how alone I am, how far from base, as I ramble into the peninsula. There are dead spots in the park, places where radio repeaters cannot penetrate. In the months following the death of my wife, I took to this landscape like the balm of Gilead. I was fifty-six years old and full of pent-up vigor that wanted to spend itself on these hills, quick-stepped and blind, all motion and breath. It was as if movement through this landscape would scrub my grief, rinse my hot, swollen eyes with the cool waters of wonder and awe and possibly, if ever again, promise.

In those days, not so many years ago, I walked fast. I pushed my thumping heart ahead of me to its limit. It was as if I dared it to break. "Go ahead," I might have said. "Try it!" I traveled light: an ultralight pack, a small bottle of water, my EpiPen, a map. Nothing like the pack I carry on Trail Patrol. Fear was not part of my landscape, inner or outer, then. I may have been too exhausted for fear, my shock and grief having wiped out a wide swath of emotional range. I was just doing everything I could to feel alive. I kept moving.

My mind cleaved, in the aftermath of my wife's death, into an altered, bifurcated state I both inhabited and observed. On the one hand, I was a small creature standing on the crust of an empty world in a vast, cold universe, completely alone, with a galactic wind whistling around me. On the other hand, it seemed the natural world had been lit from within, and I was transfixed by that glow evident everywhere I looked. I moved through the world—pushed myself through it, really—to keep seeing the next luminous thing. All objects sentient. All events sacred.

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The radio squawks again, another parking violation and also a call for maintenance to repair a utility shed near the lighthouse. I take up my pack and hike along the base of a low escarpment. Soon I enter a riparian clutch, singular and unexpected, an oasis in this otherwise dry expanse of low coastal scrub. And then I am out along the exposed bluffs. I spot the red bandana of a northern flicker and watch it for a while. Further along a pair of red-tailed hawks hovers over the pale-blond hills, hunting. I stand still a long time, watching. They hover and dive, hover and dive. They pop up, glide, circle round, and return to the same spot. After a long, long time, they catch nothing.

A group of three hikers pass me. The women are in shorts and sneakers. The man carries a light day pack. They're in their late sixties, a few years older than I. Trim and fit, swift and chatty. They blow past me with cheery hellos and disappear over the rise.

The red-tails move south. Two ravens catch up to the hunting pair. They dog the hawks, fly over the hunting ground, circle out over the beach bluffs, and swoop in again. I stand in the shade of a tree and watch.

At the Sculptured Beach trailhead, I size up the path. It's a steep trail along a narrow drainage down to the beach. My companion on this particular day of Trail Patrol—inchoate fear—organizes itself into questions. What if I can't make it back up? What if I get hurt on the beach and the tide comes in? Are there bees?

I hesitate at the trailhead. I imagine how I would feel back at my car at the end of the day if I allow myself to get this far and then turn away out of fear. Turn away from something new. I have never been to Sculptured Beach. My radio has been quiet all this time. I am out of range.

I force myself to continue down the trail. It briefly winds

down a scrub hump and then narrows precipitously through a cut in the coastal bluffs, a corridor with cliffside that are sheer and very close. The trail becomes a section of rough steps cut with long plateaus and inhumanly high risers. Turning sideways, I step down from one riser to the next. The weight of my pack forces a harder landing than I would like. I hesitate on one for a moment, for no reason, really, perhaps an intuition, when a terrible crash comes from my left. I freeze. Sudden as a lightning strike, something passes in front of me. It is too fast. I cannot comprehend. My mind is wiped clean. An explosion of fear racks my body. I feel as if I am inside an enormous bell that has been hammered. And then I see the three deer. They had leapt from the sheer cliffside on my left, onto the path before me, and then up onto the cliffside to my right. I could have touched them, they came that close. One after another. Pow! Pow! Pow! Having descended the cliff to my left, they could not stop and wait for me to pass. They committed. By chance, we crossed one another's paths at that very moment, a miracle in a world of a thousand trillion encounters. The deer bound up the cliff in a few jumps. Once near the top, they pause to look at me. Three young does. Tails erect, ears like radar saucers. One ear twitches.

My adrenalated body feels wispy, as if cool air were blowing through holes in my existence. I feel like a ghost. We stare at one another, having cracked open time. I laugh. When else had I seen such a thing? Joined by these three wild characters that are poised on the hillside, looking over their shoulders at me, we are line breaks in a poem, something sudden and new, cheeky and fresh in the seconds before leaping up and over the ridge top.