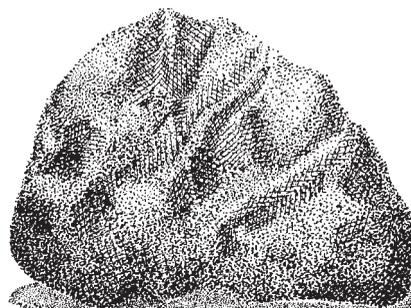


The Art of Seeing

She was, at the time, 75, maybe 80 years old, and still living at the cutting edge. Nothing could stop her—heart attacks, the death of friends, the death of lovers, the ruination of the natural world she so loved, the twentieth-century breakdown of society, the physical breakdown of her own body—nothing held her back. Every day before dawn she was off to the woods with any one of the various dogs that she owned in her life, looking at things, plucking things up to look at them more closely, or stepping back to look at them from afar. There seemed to be nothing in the natural world that she was not interested in—birds, flowers, mosses, algae, rocks, fish, salamanders, and anything else that moved or grew. She was, in short, a member of the old school of naturalist, a species that is sadly in decline in this era of specialization.

From time to time, she and I would go out to a local quarry in search of minerals. It was not the type of place you would expect to find an old lady and a young man together. The road in was rutted and strewn with beer cans and assorted forms of litter. There was an old rain-soaked couch by the entrance to the quarry as well as a number of split mattresses and an abandoned, burned-out car. But she saw only the beauty of the rocks.

As soon as we would step from the car she would streak across the floor of the quarry in her English tweeds and her sensible shoes to clamber up a scree of broken rock at the far end. Halfway up, she would begin picking out rocks, inspecting them closely, and then heaving them down onto the quarry floor to retrieve later. Sometimes she would leave the jumble of rocks and begin to scale the sheer walls in search of finer prizes, holding onto the thin ledges with one hand while she struck off some new chunk of rock with her mineral hammer.



To me, the quarry wall offered nothing more than a blank slate—a confusing jumble of half-broken rocks, sheer faces, drill lines, and deep cracks. But she could see the whole history of the earth there—vast expanses of time, tumultuous volcanic explosions, continental shifts, storms, earthquakes, floods, and extended periods of quiescence. She could also see exquisite, delicate beauty.

All the colors in the world were there, she used to say, all the delicacies of precious stones, and all for free.

She would regress dramatically during these outings. She would become a child again, discovering the world for the first time. Her enthusiasm would mount with each new find, so that by the end of the day she would be seeing marvels in mere flecks of stone. And more often than not, I would see them too; or at least could appreciate her excitement.

It's all a matter of learning to see, she used to tell me. "If only people could see. If only they could learn to really see...."

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