BARRY MASTELLER

Thicket, 2013
Mixed Media and Oil on Canvas, 53 x 84 in

COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

DAN WHITE

Beyond *Wild*

An interview with Gail Storey and Aspen Matis on facing the wilderness on the Pacific Crest Trail

*When I was hiking the Pacific Crest Trail twenty years ago, the 2,650-mile pathway from Mexico to Canada was a largely male and mostly youthful rite of passage. The letters "*PCT*" might as well have been Greek letters on a fraternity brother's T-shirt. Women were a presence on the trail, but they were in the minority, and I almost never saw women hiking alone. And while women were pushed off to the margins of the* PCT *experience, the trail itself remained obscure: if you were an ardent backpacker, you'd heard about it. Otherwise, if you were aware of it at all, you knew the* PCT *as the crunchy West Coast cousin of the much more well-established Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia, which entered mass consciousness with Bill Bryson's 1998 memoir,* A Walk in the Woods, *and got another huge hit of mainstream publicity eleven years later when then-South-Carolina-governor Mark Sanford used the trail as an alibi for canoodling with his mistress in Argentina.*

That's why the publication and the ongoing gargantuan success of Cheryl Strayed's memoir, Wild*—the recollections of a female long-distance hiker—seemed subversive and ironic to me; it took a female writer to push a male-dominated and not-very-well-known trail into the mainstream and the public consciousness. Since the success of* Wild, *two other strong female voices have risen to the fore with their tales of the trail. Gail Storey has become a cult favorite, and has won an armful of literary awards for her memoir,* I Promise Not To Suffer: A Fool for Love Hikes the Pacific Crest Trail *(Mountaineers Books, 2013), which tells the story of her effort to conquer the* PCT *in her mid-fifties with her husband, Porter—and, in the process, rediscovering her "fountain of immaturity." In 2012, Aspen Matis, who is still in her early twenties, published a high-profile "Modern Love" essay in the* New York Times *that described her thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail after a sexual assault that took place during her second night in college. The article also described her relationship with a man named Justin, who hiked a portion of the trail with her. They later married, and have since divorced. Matis's memoir recounting her Pacific Crest Trail experience,* Girl in the Woods, *is set to be published in 2015 by William Morrow. This summer I had a chance to catch up with Gail and Aspen and ask them to relive their life-changing adventures on the rugged trail that remade them and changed the focus of their lives.*

—Dan White

Dan White: How did you develop a nature consciousness? Is that something that came from childhood, from the way that you were raised?

Aspen Matis: Yes. I never really thought suburbia was my place. I either needed to be in complete, striking wilderness or I needed to be among writers. The reason I felt so comfortable on the trail was that every summer my parents would take us to the wilderness. They would take me and my brothers backpacking in Colorado often, since my mom's parents live in Colorado Springs. We would use their ranch house as a base camp. We would always go back trekking somewhere every summer for two weeks together as a family. My family knot was tied tightest in the woods.

DW: Gail, the very first line of the book is, "I never cared much for nature." I was wondering how the trail complicated your relationship with nature over time. Did you find that your relationship with nature or your attitude towards it was somewhat different at the end than it was in the beginning?

Gail Storey: It was completely different. I grew up in a Cambridge, Massachusetts housing project. I had very little exposure to nature. My family never went camping. We didn't even take vacations. I really didn't have much of a relationship at all with what I'd call the natural world until I married Porter. We did take long-distance bicycle trips cross-country in both directions on our tandem. That was my first experience with being outdoors for long periods of time, but every night we were in a budget motel. The Pacific Crest Trail was a different magnitude entirely. My brief try of the Appalachian Trail was a total failure. I also mention that in the book.

DW: Gail, what was going through your head when you set out, and how did that change over time when you were hiking?

GS: I thought it might be the end of me. I felt that if it got to be too hard I could bail at any time, but I actually began to like it, even though on the first day we had to hike twenty-three miles to get to water. Then after seven days we encountered a huge storm in the San Felipe hills. There were challenges right away, but for some reason I really took to it. It affected me on a very deep level. First you grow stronger physically, and then you're pushing your physical limits, and your body starts to get injuries, some subtle and some more serious. Your most exterior level, the body, is deconstructing. You're in that new relationship with your body and thinking, "I love it out here. How am I going to keep going in spite of these difficulties? How can I use the strength that I'm building at the same time to compensate for the body's limitations?" You begin to become emotionally very raw. For me, there was a fair amount of crying. Not whining and carrying on kind of crying necessarily, but more like being deeply moved and feeling vulnerable to the intimacy with nature. I felt that my psychological self was growing stronger, and then issues started to resurface. Things that you haven't thought of in years come to disturb you all over again in ways that you didn't expect. Even though I'm putting it in a linear way, it really isn't linear. It's more of a spiral down and up, an ever-occurring process of going deeper and deeper and coming to resolutions.

DW: Aspen, how long did it take for you to think to yourself, "Okay, this is the next step. I'm going to go hike the PCT?"

AM: The PCT has always been a dream of mine. I can thank my parents for this. I learned of it when they sent me on a whitewater rafting course when I was fourteen. There was this boy on that trip. He was my first crush and my first boyfriend. On this trip, he told me that his mother had walked from Mexico to Canada on a continuous wilderness path called the Pacific Crest Trail. I just didn't believe him. I thought it was impossible. But I was also secretly and intently intrigued. Then a few summers later on the John Muir Trail, I met a guy who was actually doing it. Then after being sexually assaulted in college, I decided "Now is the time." I always thought I would do it when I graduated college, or when I was changing jobs or some more opportune time in the future. But then, it just seemed like the right time.

DW: Gail, it seemed to me that those extreme moments on the trail, even the kind of miserable moments, you were really fully alive then. You said, "I was shocked into my own existence, born wet and confused on all fours on the muddy earth deep in the loamy musk of it." That felt like the end result of a total remaking. Like a new person is coming into existence.

GS: That's it exactly; it's a rebirth. A new existence.

DW: Would you say the wilderness is a place of healing and a place you could return to? It was almost a second home by the time you did your hike, Aspen.

AM: Not as much a place of healing, yet, but it was the safest place. In the woods, it's like nothing bad can really happen. People are afraid of what they don't know. I knew the woods. When we went camping as a family, my dad being a great storyteller, he would tell stories in the tent every night. It was an oasis in the forest. The wilderness was the safest place—I was afraid of men at that point, after the rape.

DW: That's what is really striking for me. You were not afraid to be alone after that in the woods.

AM: I've never been afraid to be alone. I seem very outgoing and people always think that I'm very social—and I am—but I can spend days or even weeks alone and be fine. It might be because I'm a writer. I can write on the road every night. I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm a little bit defiant. People always ask the same questions, like, are you carrying a gun? Guns are the only dangerous thing out there. I grew up in Newton, the safest city in America. There has been one murder there in the past twelve years, in a city of 87,000 people. Until I was sixteen, though, my mother would not allow me to walk alone to Newton Center, which is less than a mile over clean, safe suburban sidewalks. My brother Michael was allowed to walk to the Center alone when he was nine. Once I confronted my mom about that. I asked, "Why can Michael go on his own?" She said, "Michael carries a baseball bat." He was always walking to his little league games. But they were afraid that something bad would happen to their little girl.

DW: One thing I've noticed is that the voices that are getting out there about Pacific Crest Trail experiences in books have belonged to women in the past few years. I remember that women seemed almost marginalized on the trail. You rarely saw women, even in romantic partnering, on the trail in a group of any kind.

GS: I find it fascinating too. A particular favorite of mine is Suzanne Roberts' *Almost Somewhere.* First of all, I do agree with you that when Porter and I hiked the trail in 2004 there were very few women. The women that were out there were usually part of a couple. I'm surprised that so many more women are hiking the trail and are writing about it. I think that we're reconnecting with the natural world, and women are playing increasing roles of leadership in that. Women are more interested now in connecting in a deep way with the natural world and having extended periods of time in the wilderness.

AM: First of all, eighty-five percent of the people who walk the PCT are men. I was fleeing a fraternity culture into a world of men. I agree, most of the women on the trail are in a couple. I would say that the most stressful thing was men. In the beginning I was afraid of the men who were walking the trail—not all of them. I was making myself vulnerable to these people I didn't know in the woods, where anything could have happened and there would be no one there. I became almost hypothermic once in Washington. I also ran out of food and had to hike sixty-four miles without food. None of those things were as scary to me as being alone in the dark with men, because I didn't trust myself or my ability to make my will clear. I didn't trust that I could stop a situation that I didn't want to happen.

DW: Gail, you talk about the trail being a fountain of immaturity, but at the same time, your book in no way glosses over what it's like to be in your fifties hiking. There's that feeling of vulnerability. You must have predominantly run into people who were half the age of you and Porter.

GS: Most of the people out there were in their early twenties. They were mostly really tough, strong men. We ran into some really athletic women, so I think they were sur-

prised to see us. There were very few people who were our age. But everybody was so wonderful and so helpful that we never felt that people looked down on us. We felt that we were all in the same situation together and very supportive of each other.

DW: Aspen, you describe your mother's reaction when you told her about the sexual assault you experienced in college, and she was justifiably horrified. I would also think she would have been really scared to find out that you were going to go on the PCT solo.

AM: They were horrified and upset. There were lots of conditions, like I had to carry a satellite telephone and call them every night and give them my GPS coordinates so they would know my latitude and longitude. They were still supportive, though. I think that's partly because I had already walked 1,000 miles alone on the PCT. They knew I could do it. I had proven myself. I was so unhappy. I could not stay at the school. My parents didn't think I should stay there either.

DW: For you, it sounds like it had a real healing power. If you're in the right head space for it, you can find redemption, but also learn more about one's inner working because there's so much contemplative time. Is that how it functioned for you?

AM: In my mind, there are two types of people who are walking from Mexico to Canada. There are people who are trying to overcome something. They have a problem, like a rape, and they're trying to find their place. The other type of person, like Justin (her hiking partner on the trail and her former husband), is not walking to find their place in the world; they're walking because they do not believe a place for them exists in this world. It's a pause button. It's not a solution.

GS: At its deepest level, the hike of the Pacific Crest Trail was a pilgrimage. It was a way of walking into the question, "Who am I?" I feel I lived through that question. Porter walked deeper and deeper into it with me. Now, I feel that that question continues. It's very alive for me. It continues as the book takes its own journey in the world. Something that has been a very welcome surprise is that so many people are responding to that question, "Who am I?" It's not a question to be answered. It's a question to be lived. It's a mystery to be lived on a daily basis. Our profound relationship with the natural world helps us live that mystery.

DW: Sometimes the Pacific Crest Trail can't bear the expectations that we put on it.

AM: It's not about what the Pacific Crest Trail can handle. It's about what you want and whether or not it's realistic. I wanted to become empowered. I felt disempowered. In the beginning, I didn't truly know why I was walking. I thought I wanted to be alone. What I really wanted was to put myself in a dangerous situation, and for nothing bad to happen, and to prove and prove again that people are good and the world is safe.

Aspen Matis's work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the memoir *Girl in the Woods*, forthcoming from HarperCollins April 2015.

Gail D. Storey is the author of *I Promise Not to Suffer: A Fool for Love Hikes the Pacific Crest Trail*, Winner of the National Outdoor Book Award, Foreword IndieFab Book of the Year Award, Colorado Book Award, Nautilus Silver Award, and Barbara Savage Award from Mountaineers Books. Her first novel, *The Lord's Motel*, was praised by the *New York Times Book Review* as "a tale of unwise judgments and wise humor." Her second novel, *God's Country Club*, was a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Selection.

Dan White's second nonfiction book, *Soaked to the Bone*, which he describes as "an embodied history of American camping," is set to be published in 2016 by Henry Holt & Co. His first book, *The Cactus Eaters*, (HarperCollins) was an indie bookstore bestseller and a *Los Angeles Times* "Discovery" selection. He was a Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University in 2007–8.

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Construct Three, 2013
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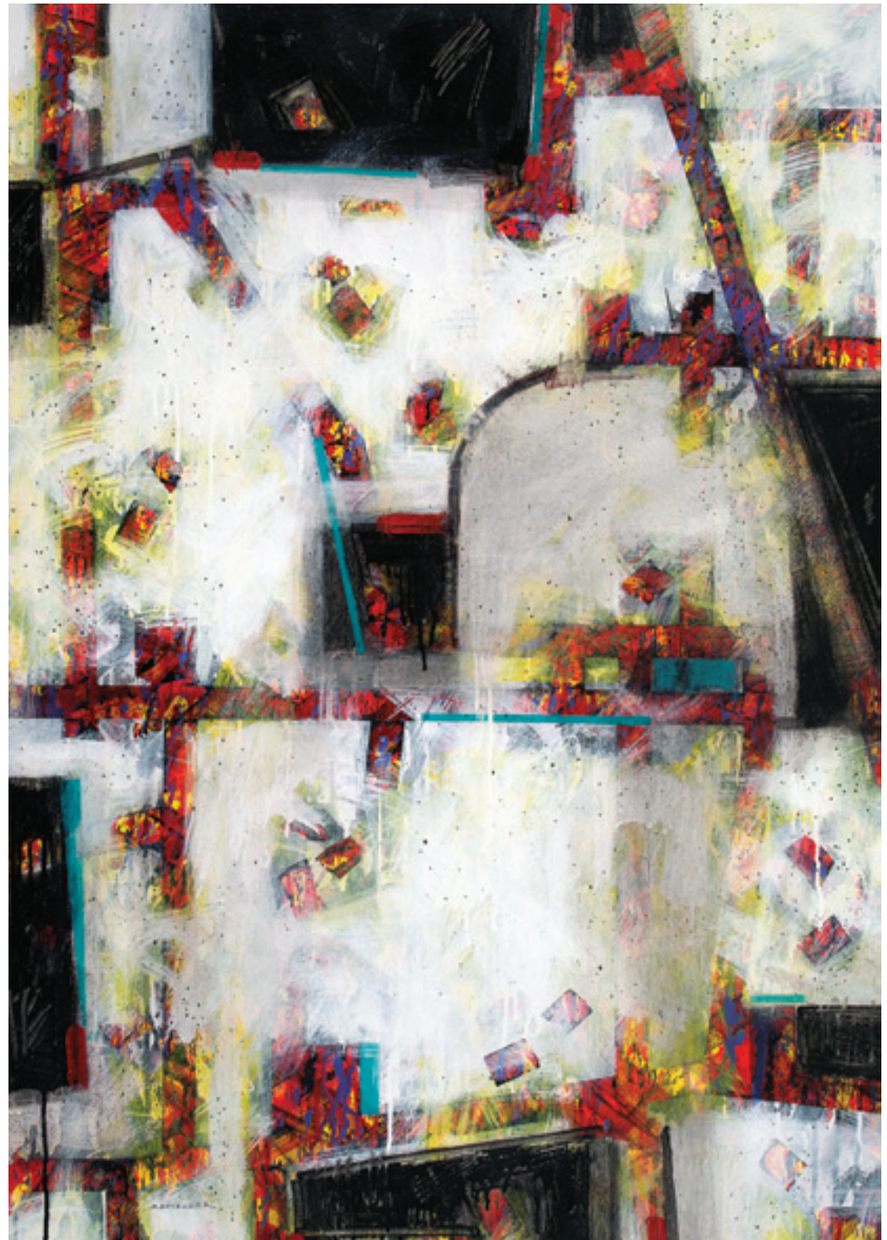

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