

On Seeing

“The garden is a world filled with secrets. Slowly, I see more each day. The black pines twist and turn to form graceful shapes, while the moss is a carpet of green that invites you to sit by the pond. Even the stone lanterns, which dimly light the way at night, allow you to see only so much. Matsu’s garden whispers at you, never shouts; it leads you down a path hoping for more, as if everything is seen; yet hidden. There’s a quiet beauty here, I only hope I can capture on canvas.”

The Samurai’s Garden. Gail Tsukiyama

This paragraph, which describes a special Japanese garden in the village of Tarumi, in many ways represents the essence of my walks through the quarries of Rockport and Gloucester. The quarries symbolize my secret gardens of quiet beauty, which I have tried to capture on silk. The following narrative represents my thoughts ‘on seeing’ after taking many walks in the Cape Ann quarries over a three year period.

I make my way down well-trod footpaths, flanked on either side by tall pine trees slowly bending in the wind, small ferns, sudden outcroppings of boulders and granite, covered with lush moss-green lichen or last year’s gnarly black lichen waiting patiently to become resuscitated and succulent once more. In May I was surprised and delighted to see sudden outcroppings of purple and white lady slippers, a brilliant counterpane of color on the forest floor. My companion was especially thrilled to see the white lady slippers, a rarity in our northern climes, requiring special woodland soil and climate conditions to thrive. One of my favorite woodland plants to come across is lily-of-the-valley, which grows in thick carpets of tiny bell-shaped whiteness and sweetly scents the air if you bend down to lightly touch it.

All around the forest pathways are different kinds of moss, their textures gently beckoning me to look closer and touch. Some mosses have dark green hues and thicker leaves, and seem to lie astride the paler shaded, more delicate moss. Others carefully line the path, showing me the way to go without any danger of accidentally treading upon them. I love the sensuousness of moss growing in the wild, the feeling that if I were to stumble I would land softly, without being hurt.

I walk gingerly down a little-traveled path, just minutes from the bustling harbor and tourists taking in the brilliant expanse of ocean and cloud-flecked sky. It feels like a secret world. On either side of me are solid granite walls, their sides chiseled out by quarry workers who labored in the 1930s. When I used to think of granite, in what now seems eons ago, I thought of smooth, gray surfaces, granite sculptures, countertops, buildings, sidewalks, and posts. I did not think of the rocks exposed by glaciation

millions of years ago, and then cut, dug out, picked at, and shaped by men. The sides of the granite walls present me with myriads of different stories: of sharp cuts that leave pointed angles, of deep and geometrically precise incisions on the rock, and of gently rounded chiseling that reminds me of a female's form. Initials of ancient quarry workers lie hidden in deep crevices or underneath a quarried cut resembling a sword stroke. Some of the rock is wet from ancient water sources seeping through. Within the wetness a deep green or sometimes rose color beckons the walker to stop and look. For these are somehow the colors of both fantasy and mystery. Vegetation finds a way to create its own wild garden upon these granite walls. Spiny trees perch on the tiniest outcroppings of soil lodged in narrow rock clefts. Vines claw their way through veined rock surfaces. Hardy shrubs take root on what looks like sheer rockfaces. Sometimes, in the brilliant light of a summer's afternoon, the light falling on the water reflects onto the rock, creating a rippled symphony of dappled luminescence. At other times, at dawn or dusk, the light shines from above on just one part of the wall, brilliantly illuminating one area of rock, while throwing the rest into dark shadows. I walk slowly, attentively and quizzically, my mind whirring with stories and questions.

I walk beneath a canopy of skinny limbs flanking either side of the quarry walls—a bridal bower sculpted by nature, not man. I am beckoned along the path towards a stone bridge created by quarry workers, who thrust deep into the heart of Cape Ann's granite rocks. If I stand under the bridge for long enough, I sense a pulsing energy, of male and female, jagged and soft, deep gray and vibrant green. I cry out and clap my hands. The echoes reverberate. My mind wanders to another time when I was six or seven. I had escaped from an adult's vigilant watch to run under the trestle bridges built over a century ago in the Shropshire countryside of my youth. I waited in trepidation for the steam trains to plough through on their way from London to Wales. When I was young I used to scream and shout under train bridges, urging my companions to sing wild songs and listening to the echoes, doubled up with laughter. I remember the suffocating, sulfur-pungent smoke from the trains, and the thunderous roar as they passed above us.

I am reminded that the path I am following in Cape Ann was once a railway bed, built to transport granite, and think back to grainy old photographs of a train passing under the granite bridge, laden with quarried rocks destined for faraway cities. I wonder whether the children of the quarry workers came down here to play the same games under the bridge? Probably not, because they would not have been allowed to climb down the dangerously steep ladders to enter the quarry area.

The path meanders beyond the bridge, until it splits in two, and I have to choose which path to take. I choose the path that in midsummer lies almost covered in thick vegetation. In springtime it lay much more clearly delineated, the trees bare, rock outcroppings springing from the earth. A tree lay horizontally, flanking the path. Surprisingly, it was still alive, and thin threads of catkins dangled from its branches, like musical notes shimmering in the gentle breeze. A perfect lesson in the resilience of nature.

The footpath suddenly begins a slight ascent and I hear a very faint sound of falling water. “Welcome to Rockport’s only waterfall,” my companion says, with a twinkle in his eye. I climb onto some jagged rock outcroppings and am suddenly facing one of the most extraordinary natural sights. There is no waterfall in the conventional sense of the word, but there is a slightly bulging wall of granite that is itself drenched with water, which suffuses all the natural ores, minerals, and lichens with an array of colors. These colors appear to drip into the surrounding pool of water, and then dissolve in the reflections. Hues of deep greens, purples, pinks, streaks of white, black, and orange glisten and shimmer on the granite wall. Water seeps from every little crevice and from a little streambed at the top of the wall, forming a constant trickle into the pool below. Vegetation grows above the granite, perching on the side of the granite wall that is not suffused with water. A vertical wild garden. There are rocks under the water also, clearly visible in the afternoon sun. When I first came here it was winter, and the rocks were encased in a veil of ice, like a frozen city that only emerges with the first thaw. Eventually, I am told, this wall of granite will collapse upon itself, with the force of the water seeking to escape its stony hold. Perhaps so, but this could take many years. The shimmering colors, the wetness of the rockface, the trickles of water that gently splash into the pool, and the sounds of distant birdsong all combine to awaken me. I realize that I am seeing one of the most extraordinary natural wonders of Cape Ann. I quiver with newfound energy as this profound understanding seeps into my very being.

Here, in this secret—yet also completely public—world of waters, colors, rockface, and reflections I realize that my task this year is to paint these new revelations of nature onto silk. And to undertake a journey of artistic collaboration with my companion, who has gently led me along the meandering pathways of Cape Ann.

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July 2012