Mountain Mysticism

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Here's the truth: Something happened on that volcano in Guatemala. I'm just not sure what.

Steve was in the lead, talking with two teachers from Canada. I was trailing behind, nursing a bad knee. Yes, Steve was in the lead and I was trailing behind and then it happened.

The volcano in question is Pacaya, that black monster of the western highlands known for its dramatic displays of lava, which surge against prediction and against a landscape so austere it rivals the moon. We found Pacaya in Steve's guidebook one Easter weekend. Something about punishing switchbacks and menacing rivers of lava over which folks could roast marshmallows (and they did), and we were in. It all seemed so sensible from the sturdy haven of our in-laws' lake house, Merlot in hand.

Somewhere around 8,000 feet, that all changed. The lush trees that lined our path gave way to shards of basalt, then rock, then long slopes of rubble that climbed into the sky. What few trees remained were arthritic and bent, their charred branches as hapless as they were calligraphic against the bright sky. Soon there was no path, only a windswept ascent that stratified everyone by ability. We would turn a corner, and strange new vistas would appear: jagged fissures in the earth two yards long, coils of braided rock, and waves, waves of lava having long been cooled, blackened, their motion frozen in time. "Pahoeholes," they call them, these cases of rock becoming liquid becoming solid again. Stray dogs in need of warmth sought the company of the fissures, natural manhole covers that vented sulphur and steam from beneath the earth's crust.

After our final turn, I felt the heat of the lava a few seconds before I saw it. After an hour's hike, it was more than a little disappointing—a small vein of red oozing from a titanic wall of black rock (punishing switchbacks, yes, but a river of hellfire this was not)—until I witnessed the wall itself swell and glow, breathing in ways my Midwestern eyes couldn't reckon. At first, I thought it was just the heat shimmering off the wall, the way a paved road can make the summer horizon dance, but then it cracked. Cracked, I tell you, after centuries, maybe millennia of indifference to the world. The wall cracked and began to crumble, spewing impermanence everywhere as it dismantled itself boulder by fiery boulder until nothing remained but a sea of orange suede.

It was too much for me, all that cracking and dismantling. Nearby noises, Steve's banter with the Canadians, the guide's vamos! vamos!, it all retreated into the distance. And then, with no warning, it happened: My syntax simply departed, leaving my words to float in the atmosphere like dust. My rationality, drifting out there among the birds. Soon enough, the words themselves scattered and dissolved, leaving me to experience the world without categories, without reference. Ever tried to take a math test while falling into a lake while sleeping? Well, it was just like that.

If only I had met Yuri before climbing Pacaya. Yuri, the middle-aged Russian mystic I would meet in Nepal the following year. Yuri, who after 45 days of meditation would invite me over to his mountain shack for incense and a fire. (Mystics are like that.) "There is no I and you, there is only we," he said in all seriousness before turning a watery gaze to the Annapurna massif. "See that man plowing the mustard field? We are plowing the mustard field," he said. Yuri was a man of wide intelligence, a professional back in Moscow, but one of no particular standing since he was accustomed to saying, well, mystical things like "A man..."
who wants is a man at war with himself” and “Are we not all One, the humans, the birds, the sky unending?” and “Words, Joe, they tether us to an impoverished existence.” And of course there was the small impracticality of his silent sitting for months on end, his just being. This is not the kind of guy you put in charge of your new Pepsi campaign.

Even Party Al would have helped me understand Pacaya. Party Al, Steve’s college roommate, who would sit in silence for hours during the blaze of day. Steve would come home between classes to find Al sitting in the living room, upright and motionless.

“What are you doing?” Steve would ask, to which Al would offer a slow “Sitting.”

“Yeah, I can see that. But sitting and reading? Sitting and thinking? Sitting and what?”

“Just sitting,” Al would reply.

As you might have guessed, Al was something of a partier, but what you wouldn’t have known, what no one knew from the looks of him, was that he was also a renowned bagpipe player. Among the students, Al was well known, celebrated even, for his ability to muscle out a performance with terrific prowess before a crowd of thousands while throbbing in pain from the antics of the night before, and that libertine reputation led to less than charitable interpretations of what he was actually doing during all that living room sitting. But I can’t help but think there was something going on behind that blank stare of his, that there was something more to Party Al, or less, a something less than nothing that moved him beyond language to the other side of silence, yes, that there was something less to Party Al than bagpipes and cottonmouth, to which Yuri would have offered a knowing nod. What I would give to see Party Al up on that mountain with Yuri. Yuri would surely be impressed by his bagpipes, but would their silences be two parts of a greater whole?

I know what you’re thinking. No, I wasn’t high up there on Pacaya. I wasn’t low. I wasn’t looking for an experi-