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*Andrew C. Miller*

## **PRECARIOUS CLIMB**

The sky was clear, the air hot—maybe 80 degrees—and all I could think of was ice. I wasn't on a frosty hill, but a steep pile of discarded slate, remnants of an abandoned quarry near Monson, Maine. The shards under my feet weren't white, but bluish-gray, eggshell smooth, hard as porcelain. And, all sizes, from thumb-nail sized chips to flat slabs. Afraid that I might lose my footing and clatter back down, I searched about for a handhold. But no trees grew here, no exposed roots or clumps of vegetation to grasp. To my left was a fledgling mullein plant, but it was only a few inches tall and stalkless, just a rosette of furry leaves.

Once on top, I stood at the rim of a coliseum-sized, rectangular tomb: the excavation site. At the far end, at this distance looking like toys, crouched the machinery that worked this pit. A dull orange excavator with metal tracks, a yellow front end loader on rubber tires. Some distance away, a rusting crusher, then a wobbly conveyor belt that carried pummeled slate to a red dump truck, tires flat. Outside the pit was a massive wooden building, its vertical siding weathered black. Likely used to store vehicles and equipment, but now abandoned, surrounded by broken glass and weathered strips of asphalt roofing. Close to the building was a yellow dump truck, last licensed in April 2015. Next to it was an old black car, windows broken out, tires flat, no license plate. Scrap slate was scattered everywhere inside and outside the pit and heaped in piles like the one I just climbed. Vegetation was sparse, just a few feeble clumps of grass, scattered oxeye daisy, red clover, poplar saplings, and mullein from last year, their stalks brown and crusty.

Miners first worked this pit in the 1880s. They cleaved out huge slabs of slate to be processed into floor tiles, countertops, sinks, walkways, shingles, and blackboards. By World War II, when

alternative products became available and market conditions changed, operations slowed. Once it was no longer profitable to mine this site, it closed. Likely there was no thought of making restitution for the animals, plants, and soils that had been displaced or destroyed. Now this quarry is only used occasionally as a source of scrap slate for roads or parking lots.

This chiseled slatescape gave me an eerie sense of vertigo. Yesterday I hiked near a rocky stream along a section of the Appalachian Trail. Quite a contrast. In this quarry there wasn't even standing water, and the scraggly herbs and undersized poplars couldn't provide much food or cover for small mammals, reptiles, or birds.

Clean it up. That's what popped into my mind when I first saw the slate piles, unused building, rusted vehicles, and idle equipment. The wooden structure could be dismantled and, along with the machinery, hauled away. Guidelines for abandoned quarries require that wastes be removed and the terrain restored. Steep slopes should be revegetated with rapidly growing plants. That's exactly what happens at Rolling Rock Building Stone, Inc., in Boyertown, Pennsylvania. According to the president, Gary Weller, after a segment of their mine has been stripped of useful product, they cover it with rock bits and soil, then plant grasses and trees. Very appropriate, and it would be unreasonable to ask for more. A mature forest can't be instantly created—likely the Monson quarry replaced one—but given enough time, one will develop.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection has Performance Standards to regulate mineral excavations. Exhausted pits must be graded to a slope of 2.5:1 (2.5 horizontal units to 1.0 vertical unit) or less, and vegetation must cover at least 90% of

the terrain. Continuous restoration is required so pit size is always less than 10 acres. These regulations don't apply to Monson since operations initiated prior to 1970 are exempt. When activities are "grandfathered in," there's tacit understanding that early owners could not have anticipated present-day concerns. "Grandfathering" is often bantered about in reference to environmental issues: stack emissions, wastewater discharges, unneeded dams, even personal residences built near natural waterways.

That term was first used when the 15th amendment, which prohibited racial discrimination against voting, was adopted. The legislation caused some states to create requirements—literacy tests, poll taxes, constitutional quizzes—to keep Black people from registering. But because many poor, uneducated southern whites couldn't meet those requirements, and since they had voted previously, they were "grandfathered." The Supreme Court later ruled that these clauses were unconstitutional, although they continued to uphold segregationist laws.

As I picked my way back down the tailings slope, I spotted more mullein. So intent on climbing up, I didn't realize there were lots more, all about the same size. I wondered, how do they hammer out a living on this shattered slope, find water amongst this slippery jumble of slate?

Referred to as a pioneer species, *Verbascum thapsus* is often found in disturbed areas, neglected construction sites, and abandoned farmlands. During summer, they produce a single stalk clustered with soft, buttery flowers. Each one lasts about a day, and produces a capsule packed with seeds that germinate best on flat surfaces exposed to direct sunlight. Bury them in loam like you would beans

or squash, and often they don't sprout. Like carrots, these plants have tap roots, perfect to store water and nutrients. Years of natural selection adapted them to thrive in harsh, exposed areas without much soil. They appeared to be doing well and didn't have to wait for a legislative mandate to begin restoration.

Occasionally, abandoned quarries are reclaimed rather than restored. In Portland, Connecticut, an adventure park was built where limestone was once mined. In San Diego, California, a former quarry was used for multifamily housing, retail stores, and commercial offices. The city of Atlanta plans to construct a combination water storage reservoir and park in an unused stone pit. A 19-story hotel was built in a former quarry near Shanghai, China. It took 12 years and 5,000 people (architects, engineers, designers, construction workers) to complete the project. It's called the Groundscraper Hotel since 16 of its 18 floors are below ground.

I can't imagine the abandoned Monson mine being reclaimed for other uses. Multifamily housing, a below ground hotel, or retail stores to support a Maine village with less than 1,000 residents? And, since it's 'grandfathered in,' there are no restoration plans. The quarry must heal itself. It could take several thousand years and just as many mulleins clinging to tailings piles before enough organic matter is captured to provide habitat for grasses and herbs. And, many more years before those plants are replaced by brambles, sumac, evergreens, possibly even hardwoods.

It's easy to be despondent about the world's environmental crises. Whether it is climate change or toxic effluents, biodiversity loss, destructive fires, or diminished freshwater, we have lots to ponder. As a youngster, the first environmental essay that I read was "Death

of a Pine Tree". Even then, I appreciated Thoreau's bitterness, his sense of irony. If he could be irate by loss of a single tree, then I can be bothered by a neglected slate quarry in central Maine. Thoreau lamented the absence of mourners when the pine tree fell. I am grieved by modern society's collective indifference to environmental issues, large and small. In the grand list of important issues, the Monson quarry must lie near bottom. But leaving its restoration to a handful of mulleins can't be appropriate either.

*Northern New England Review* is published as a creative voice for the Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine region. If you live here, were once from here, found your heart here, or are currently searching for it among the dappled forests, luminous ponds, and ghostly coasts, *NNER* has the poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction you want to read.

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