

Katy McKinney

Big Lava Bed in the Gifford Pinchot

August afternoon. Coarse chunks of rock,
Blocky and gray as sunbleached pavement,
Cover the ground. The rock is lumpy,
Dark with lichens, olive-green with moss,
Encrusted with orange needles. No
Firs, just spindly pines, branches and trunks turned
Gray as the rock. Toothpick trees, alive.
How dry it is—even moss crunches.
Irregular bare riverbeds run,
Join in a 3-dimensional maze.
Kinnikinnick continues the growth
Lichen began. Cool air exhales from
Mouths of caves, where ledges trap moisture,
Nurture damp moss and schools of insects.

Occasional lava monoliths
Perch rectangular, out of place. Such
Quiet suggests stasis, but white clouds
Raft overhead, bring to mind that fierce,
Superheated explosion the day
Twenty-five years ago when out from
Under its ice cream dome, with pent-up
Volcanic fury, Mt. St. Helens
Went berserk, turned entire forests
Xeriscape. How one day can explode
Years into nothingness, lives back to
Zero. How you have to start over.

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Pruning Lilac Suckers After My Sister's Diagnosis

I sharpened the shovel,
sharpened the axe,
grabbed the loppers,
then yanked,
chopped, cut,
dug, slashed
through tangled webs
of fibrous roots,
through stems,
through suckers.

On my knees, out of breath,
jerking and pulling
I shook dirt loose
from the invading roots,
but their claws held on.

Above my head, swallowtails
worked the purple blossoms
but on this day I ignored them,
heaving uprooted piles
onto the lawn, into the sun,
to dry, to die—
doing everything I knew,
everything I could
to stop their spreading.