

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