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Dark Night on Whitewall

Neither solace nor comfort

Will Kemeza



Editor's note: This haunting essay about getting sick alone in the mountains was the runner-up in the Waterman Fund essay contest (cosponsored by Appalachia) in 2008, its first year. The contest yielded no winner in 2016, and that left room for Will Kemeza, who sharpened and edited his piece for publication. In 2017 the University Press of New England will publish New Wilderness Voices, an anthology of winning and notable essays from the contest, edited by me, Christine Woodside, with a foreword by Amy Seidl.

IT WAS MID-DECEMBER. I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I WOKE IN THE windblast that sent the hut's turbine groaning or whether I shivered myself awake. And I don't know how long I had been sitting there, on the ground, with my back against the hut's western wall, snow drifting over my legs. The weather was changing. Clouds frayed at their edges to expose sharp stars, and the wind had taken on a new voice. It was rolling downslope from the northwest and, hitting a house-sized outcropping of schist, drawing back for an unlikely moment before slamming down on the roof. It was like hearing a wave break underwater, like the timpani of your own pulse in your ear.

Despite the cold clarity of this north wind, I did not know how I had arrived at this predicament. My fingers were numb. I rolled my head to the right and saw that someone had vomited and then I realized that it could only have been me. I hauled myself to my feet and opened the hut door with clumsy, ungloved hands. I pulled off my untied boots, struggled out of my clothes—wet and burning against skin where my body heat had melted snow—and climbed into my sleeping bag, zipping it up to my chin with my teeth.

I stayed in bed for the next three days. This may have been a bout with the flu or some kind of food poisoning. I retched far past emptiness, heaving up only the acid memory of food. I ran through miles of feverish dreams—slogging up fields of scree, where dim figures receded into mist upslope. Delirium and solitude made the hut otherworldly. Shadows danced on the walls. The creaking structure spoke. A man sat by my bed, reminding me to drink water. I'm sure that I imagined him—a fact that does not diminish my gratitude.

The view in winter from the porch of Zealand Falls Hut: the rocky Whitewall Mountain at left rises above Zealand Notch. RYAN SMITH

I had been eager for this winter caretaking job. Basic duties (hut upkeep and a welcome to winter travelers) aside, it meant the chance to live through the gray blaze of White Mountain winter. I wanted to try on solitude—if only in the modest dose of several days each week. But the ascetic joy I'd read about in the pantheon of Wilderness Writing was elusive. Solitude did not bring clarity or release. The silence crowded around the hut, stifling as deep snow. I did not know what to do with the mineral stillness of those long hours. I felt like I was losing myself in the constant company of stone, snow, and fog, as if human companionship had been a lifelong illusion that was now stripped away, leaving behind the bedrock truth of isolation. I fought—and denied—my loneliness and wondered whether something was wrong with me. If Thoreau and Muir could do it, why couldn't I? Respite came with weekend visitors, whose Sunday departure I would mourn.

Then there was the cold. The hut was fitted with a little black cast-iron woodstove. The supply of firewood was limited, however, and the stove—per policy of my employers and rigid tradition—was to be loaded and lit once each day, and only after sundown. I was unprepared for the cold's long siege, its indefatigable circling and prying.

The cold slid its fingers around the doors, up under the waist of my jacket, down the back of my neck, up through the floor, down from the rafters. Cold chased me into my sleeping bag at night and grabbed me each morning by the arm, as I sloughed the bag off. In this cold, I was a defender in the citadel of my body, forever ceding the outer battlements and earthworks, always pulling inward and further inward. This endless huddling, this constant reflex to protect the core, becomes a habit of mind as well as body. With practice, the instinct to draw in can outmuscle the desire to reach out. I was becoming trapped in a kind of thermo-emotional sarcophagus.

Then I got sick. After three delirious days in that sleeping bag, my fever broke. I could eat again, if warily. I was weak and tired. But I was desperate to get out of that sweat-soaked bag and out of the hut's haunting shadows. So, after waking up fever free and lolling around inside for a morning and into the afternoon, I pulled on my plastic mountaineering boots and walked out the door. I descended quickly from the porch down the trail, bootskiing over the hard-packed snow and through the biting air. After the quick descent, I made my way down the side of the nearby notch along a wide, flat, windswept scar in the mountainside—a monument to the days of industrial logging. The sun was already trailing south and west behind a wall of mountains, and the light softening. I was craving consolation. I wanted to feel less alone in the world,

and to have the world confirm that, in the grand scheme of things, all would be well. I wanted to feel exactly the way I had so often on top of a mountain.

I have often wondered why I—and so many others—are drawn to mountain peaks. There is, no doubt, something about the physical exertion of a climb that releases a cascade of endorphins, sparks dormant synapses, and scrambles the workaday neural pathways. But you can get that running around the block. And this is not an explanation, just another way to describe the effect. So, why mountains? And why these mountains?

The stacked, totem-pole ecosystem of the northeastern mountains makes climbing a particular sensory experience. The ascension from hardwood to spruce-fir forest to krummholz to alpine zone, all over a rockbound, root-snarled treadway, is its own kind of walking meditation. Hiking the trails of these glacier-scoured uplands, you pay attention to each footfall—but it is a loose attention. The intricacy of the physical task occupies the guard dog of the conscious mind. Other thoughts are free to come and go through the mind's backcountry like flocks of crossbills through the firs. A rhythm emerges, following the percussion of lung, heart, and boot sole. The scope of your conscious attention constricts, as the high vault of maple, ash, and birch tightens, becoming the wet, dark tunnel of squat spruce and fir. Then, suddenly, you break through. Encountering treeline, the doors of perception are kicked open. Having grown accustomed to a visual world of several square feet, you suddenly encounter hundreds of square miles, mind ranging across forests, ridgelines, and valley towns, coming face to face with the fluid undulations of the sky. There is, in the hike of a northeastern alpine peak, a performative rebirth: a movement from dark enclosure toward a chilly, breezy rapture—and the embrasure of a wider, chancier world.

If I had ever felt the need for the ascension of spirit associated with a summit, it was that December afternoon. Knowing that it would take too long to trudge through drifted snow to a peak-bound trail, I decided to bushwhack. I turned to my left, to face the east wall of the notch. This was a small mountain, with a steep western face creased by shallow gullies. The summit was invisible from the trail, tucked behind the lip of the wall, overhung in several places by rock that had been undercut during the latest glacial retreat. Deep snow pooled near the base of the wall, but its angle was steep enough that there would be only a thin crust covering rock and ice higher up. With the weak sun falling west, shadows pooled in the gullies across the snow, marking possible lines of ascent. Facing the wall, I wished I'd brought crampons and ice tools. I had not. But I could see that, despite the wall's slope, spruce and

fir hung on singly or in small bunches along the edge of a deep gully. I started up, looking for places where I could find some purchase, grab trees, and keep away from the hard tongues of blue ice. I climbed steadily, gracelessly. I kept my belly close to the sloping ground, clawing for every vertical foot. Past the midpoint of the climb, the trees became sparse. The snow crust was thin over the ice. I noticed that the stakes, if I should slip, were becoming high. I threw myself sideways over patches of ice, catching a fistful of branches just as I started to slide toward the rubble scattered a hundred feet below. Despite shaky legs, slow arms, and low energy, the immediacy of the climb left little room for rumination on cold, loneliness, sickness, or the sense of grave finality that had swooped in on me that December.

Wildness has a way of attacking our ideas about wildness—about its healing powers, about its place as a locus of easily accessible meaning.

I hauled myself over the lip at the top of the slide, light-headed with hunger and chilled by sweat. I looked east, the direction in which I'd been moving, up at familiar mountains: ice-glazed trees white against a flint-gray sky. Then I turned around, to look down the long valley. There, already obscuring the peaks at the southern end of the notch, was a towering wall of the darkest cloud I'd ever seen. The cloudbank was moving north and east, toward me. It crept slowly but with unflinching intent, like a slow flood or a black glacier on the march. It enveloped everything: the sky's fading light, the peaks, and the valley's trough. It was like seeing a negation, like watching the advance of absence. I had climbed that mountain with the last of my strength, looking for the solace of the peaks. Instead, in the gathering dark, I felt crushed by the full iron weight of winter. This time, there was no solace.

Wildness has a way of attacking our ideas about wildness—about its healing powers, about its place as a locus of easily accessible meaning. And this may be the final—and the greatest—gift of mountain peaks. They remind us that the story isn't all about us. Mountains constitute an irruption in the landscape. They stick out, and they seem to have discreet points of origin and cessation. A mountain is a story with a clear narrative arc, unlike the undifferentiated sweep of steppe, forest, or open water. We are drawn in by

the particularity of a mountain—its seeming singularity. But it is also clear—with a little imagination—that mountains are events: waves that rise and fall on a stony sea. As ocean waves express the fluid energy of wind and water, mountains make tangible the longer rhythms of uplift and subsidence, of self-organization and release. In this sense, they make tangible to us the immense forces that ground and surround all creation. Including us. And they remind us that the world will be what it will be—not what we want it to be.

On that cold mountain, facing those dark clouds, I felt neither solace nor comfort. I did feel, suddenly, the futility of my fight against the season. I had been trying to force the wild world to be what it was not; I wanted only flaring sunsets and major chords, not impersonal cold or the forces of dissolution. On top of that mountain, I was forced into a surrender that was also an acknowledgement; the world must be taken as it is—darkness, cold, loneliness, and all. It was, and is, sufficient. More than sufficient. And, in that moment of surrender, I felt as fully alive as I ever have, before or since. Alive to the reality of the moment, alive to the nature of reality. The experience has stayed with me.

Later that winter, having made my peace with the season, I became a caretaker at a different hut. There, a fellow caretaker taught me the constellations of the winter sky. I would shuffle in circles around the ice of an alpine lake, leaning into the wind, face skyward, tracing the lines of old myths on the fathomless depths of space. I was aware that these stories were told to project human meaning into the void. I was glad for their company and their humanity. But I was also aware of the darkness behind them, of the great trackless wilderness of the cosmos. I had learned that winter to be comfortable with that darkness, the wildness that surpasses human understanding, and that defies our aspirations for control. I had learned, too, to be even more grateful for places like the White Mountains, where the darkness still burns down through the light of human artifice, and the light cannot overcome it.

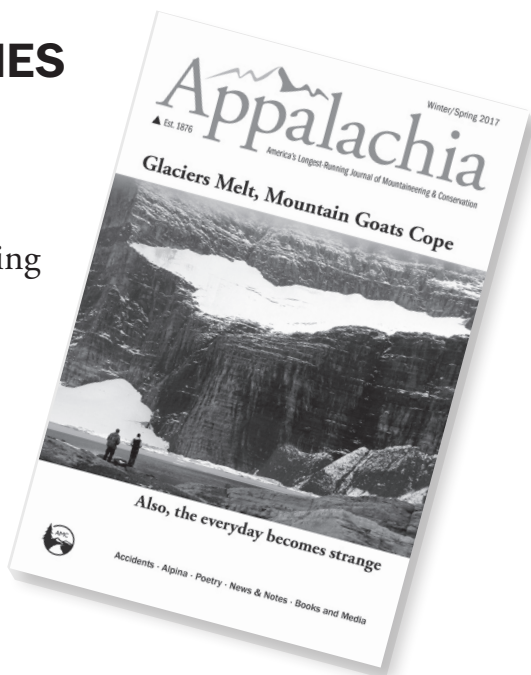
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