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Considering the Heartache of the World: A Girl Whose Mother Never Came and One Whose Mother Did

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Considering the Heartache of the World

A girl whose mother never came and one whose mother did

Elissa Ely



WHERE TO BEGIN WITH THE HEARTACHE OF THE WORLD? ONE evening, I walked up Square Ledge in Pinkham Notch, which has a view of New Hampshire's Mount Washington from the top. It was near sunset: too late for a long hike, too early for dinner at the Joe Dodge Lodge. I wandered across Route 16 (which can feel more dangerous at dusk than any wilderness) toward Lost Pond. The trail splits after a pleasing bog bridge, and I headed left.

I was thinking about a conversation I'd had a few days earlier: A woman I knew only slightly had been reflecting on one of her earliest memories. It might have been a true recollection, or it might have been an embroidery; either way, the image she painted was full of loss. She was standing in her crib, holding onto the slats, crying and crying for her mother, who—as was always the case—never came.

The route up Square Ledge is a very short scramble. Its lower half meanders without pretensions or particular magic. Total elevation gain is modest, only 400 feet, but toward the top, after winding around the back of a series of boulders, the trail requires a bit of breath. Sometimes, rock climbers practice their technique up the vertical front instead. I don't know anything about rock climbing, but I thought, picking my way past them, that it looked like a lot of work to get from the lobby to the top floor.

IN HER MEMORY, THE WOMAN'S NURSERY HAD NO WINDOWS, AND THE DOOR was shut, but a toy chest stood across the floor. She could see fur ears and doll eyes peering out, and she cried for them, too: one toy, just one, to keep her company. But no one came.

When I reached Square Ledge, I found an older man, just up himself, sitting on a cluster of rocks. There was something about him—the helmet and rope, maybe—that seemed lithe, acrobatic, and highly able. A woman about half his age leaned over the front of the ledge, looking down. They were talking about dinner.

Then I noticed the pair of braids near them, and their owner, maybe around 12 or so, clattering out of a climbing harness. She tossed her helmet down, shook out her braids, and half-skipped over. She, too, was just up. I had not seen the moment of arrival on what might have been a maiden

Scrambling up the Square Ledge Trail to the cliff-top ledge above Pinkham Notch, New Hampshire. CHRIS SHANE

climb, but her watchful grandfather (as I imagined him to be) and mother (as I imagined her to be) were full of first-time praise. Fabulous job! Perfectly done! Granny would want to know all about it!

Reaching into his backpack, her grandfather pulled out a baggie of something appealingly multicolored, and the three of them started into it while conducting a technical review. They agreed she had been meticulous and unafraid, cautious but forward moving; in sum, marvelous. She sat between the adults, grazing and gazing around. It was clear she had no doubt of her worth to the natural and human worlds, having arrived on top of both.

“Look at that sky!” she said all of a sudden. The three of them looked up. I did, too. Clouds were spreading over Mount Washington and Tuckerman Ravine straight ahead, the Great Gulf on one side and Mount Isolation on the other. They were taking on the start of last-light color, and their beauty was sliding into everything. Even the sky had been timed to arrive in her honor.

A minute or two later, they finished their snack, coiled the ropes, and started down the trail I had walked. She led, still half-skipping, and I wondered whether a more traditional route down might be disappointing after such energetic accomplishment up. As they passed me, the older man and I exchanged smiles, and he offered commentary in a collegial way. “Loud and full of energy she always is,” he said in a British accent. Full of love his own voice was.

That night, drifting off, I recalled the sad woman. I happen to know she spends most of her day in a group home, rolling tobacco in cigarette papers to save money. Mounted on the wall of the common room is a television set, which runs a constant stream of sitcoms and celebrity talk shows. Maybe looking at it is kind of like looking at a sky.

She is not a hiker. She will never know the satisfaction of exchanging upward work for a vista. But imagine: What if she ever found her way to Square Ledge? What if she looked up and noticed the sky—the real sky, which does not distinguish between joy and heartache but spreads over us all, the abandoned and the beloved alike? What if she felt it had arrived in her honor? If only she could see it, maybe the sky would hold her.

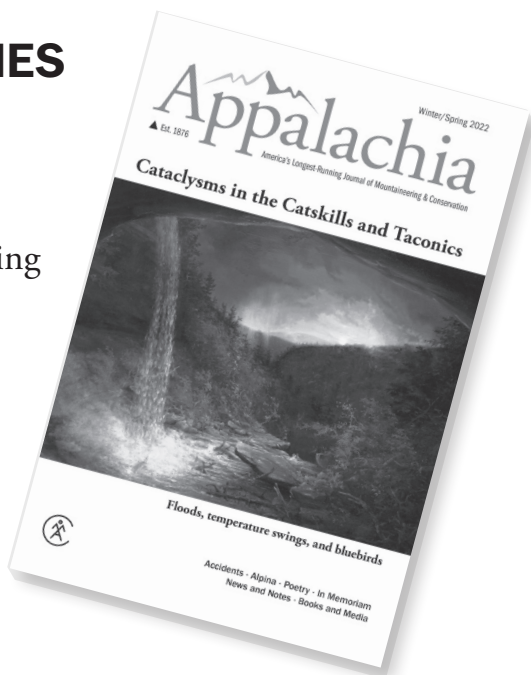
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