

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 44
Number 2 *Spring 2022*

Article 31

Spring 5-1-2022

The Fathoms Below

Becky Lindhardt
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr>

Recommended Citation

Lindhardt, Becky (2022) "The Fathoms Below," *The Prairie Light Review*. Vol. 44: No. 2, Article 31.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol44/iss2/31>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact orenick@cod.edu.

The Fathoms Below

Becky Lindhardt

A stone blended in with the exterior of a cliff, waiting for any unfortunate pressure to dislodge it from its pliant home. Among sturdier stepping stools, there was no evidence that revealed how insecure this stone really was. Even the wind glided past the stone, incapable of uncovering its unstable nature. The stone was large, with a triangular shape. Its surface was smooth, but the edges were sharp enough to cut the hand of any climber that dared to clutch it. The longest side of the triangle was exposed to the outside world, while the point opposite was buried into the rock wall. That tip, however, did not create enough traction for the stone to stay in place, should any strain be placed on it.

The stone was stuck near the top of its barren cliffside home. Any sign of vegetation was gone from the harsh sun's heated incubation of the cliff's side. The gray rocks on the cliff were speckled in parts where the light drizzle of a coming storm darkened the crust with rain. The sunlight had been covered with dark rain clouds; its rays absorbed by the condensation.

A third of the way up the steep bluff, two figures sprawled against the wall, trying to avoid a fatal fall. One figure was a bit higher than the other, his dark-haired head turned down to his companion, wincing from a raindrop hitting his scalp. His feet held securely to the cliff's stones; his hands severely grasped two points on each side of his head as if he was able to steer the cliff with his grip. The stones under his exposed hands dug into his palms like wooden splinters. The storm clouds had appeared out of nowhere, though did nothing to cool the already boiling rocks below. It was like the clouds were taunting the two climbers as they made their way slowly up the crag. The bottom climber struggled with finding a solid point to apply his weight; his blinding, white-blonde hair blown into his face by the abrupt wind. Sweat and rain mixed together on his forehead, forming a cooling stream down his eyes, yet also obstructing his vision. The smell of ash, sweat, and dirt kept his nostrils in a constant scrunched up state. His partner, who seemed quite nimble, kept looking back down, making sure the other did not slip.

"Stay close to me," the nimble man said, his soft-spoken voice booming off the rocks. His voice was hoarse but still quite pleasant, as if lack of hydration did not obscure the fruitiness of his tone. It was comforting, like a father reassuring his child of a safe journey. Of course, the blonde was more concerned with his shaking arms than being able to follow the path of his more agile counterpart. While the dark-haired man had the strength to lift himself up fairly easily, the blonde had barely enough muscle to reach up to the next stone, let alone put all his weight onto it. After a while, both were able to reach a ledge halfway up the cliff for a rest. Much to the nimble man's surprise, the blonde had barely slipped at all. But, with most of their energy depleted, the second half of the climb would certainly be more treacherous. Plus, the fact that they were even higher off the ground made their potential fall not only fatal, but cataclysmic. A plunge from that height and countless rocks would jog loose from both the impact and the echo of its sound.

The short bout of drizzle ended, replaced by more ominous storm clouds that seemed to darken the higher they got. It was surely becoming night, though neither of them could see the sun's position from their vantage point. The slope they rested on was the only way they could find that made it fully up the mountain. Everywhere else, there was either the remains of a rock slide, even steeper cliffs,

or the rocks were just sharper. So here they were, climbing the sheer cliff of a mountain that was definitely not safe but, perhaps, a slower death than the other possibilities. The nimble man had been searching for someone, or something, in the night. It had called them both to the cliff, but the only way to get to it was to climb.

After catching his breath and resting his screaming limbs for a few minutes, the blonde watched as the nimble man stood up, eyeing the rest of the cliff. The dark-haired man nodded, as if reassuring himself of the course, and jumped up to grasp a secure-looking rock. He began to climb, and the blonde silently followed. The sky lit up as lightning struck somewhere to their right. Thunder crashed so loudly that the cliff shook with its sound. It began to drizzle, but the drizzle quickly turned into rain and then to a downpour. The climbers' grips became much more slippery, though the water finally allowed the stones to cool, and steam rose from any spot where a raindrop fell. It took what felt like forever, but the dark-haired man finally reached the top of the cliff, his entire body soaked from the deluge of water. The rain obstructed his ability to see more than an arm's length away. He wanted to help his fellow climber, but he could not do much while blinded by water.

The blonde's eyes were squeezed shut against the stream engulfing his face as he gingerly felt his way higher up the cliff. He closed his eyes against the exhaustion, and when he opened them again, he was in the ocean. His arms and legs wailed, not from climbing, but from violently attempting to tread water. The remains of a boat floated around him, waves lapping the broken shards of wood. The blonde gasped for breath, but every inhale brought water in with it. He tilted his head down to see how far above the ocean floor he was. The sea was dark, however, and he could not see the bottom or anything else below the surface. The bright, twinkling stars reflected all around him as if the sea was just an expansion of the endless night sky above. He tried to swim towards a bit of wood that floated close by, but his arms felt weighted down and his legs could barely kick.

"Are you alright? I'm coming, don't worry!"

The blonde's head snapped around until he spotted a shoreline in the distance where a figure stood and waved vigorously to him. He tried to wave back, but his arms clenched the board tightly, refusing to let go of the lifeline. A sound behind him warned of a coming wave and he turned just in time to get muffled by it. For a few moments, he was pummeled by an onslaught of fatal liquid, his lungs protesting against the pressure. After the wave passed, he gasped for air; his face freshly cleansed by the ocean's spray. The blonde turned back to the shore where the dark-haired man had begun wading towards him, his arms showcasing the strength it took to push himself out into the sea. Another wave overtook the blonde, this one even worse than the last. He could barely keep his head above the water afterwards. His breathing became shallow and panicked as his limbs grew numb. The physical exertion had finally taken its toll. He floated on his back, his face the only thing he could keep above the lethal height of the emptiness below him. He closed his eyes, listening to the crashing of the waves around him.

The nimble man knelt on the side of the cliff, squinting his eyes against the constant flow of water cascading down his face. He leaned over, just in time to see a hand reach up and grasp a stone. Suddenly, the rock slid from the cliff's wall and the hand, still grasping it, fell with it.

Lindhardt: The Fathoms Below

A wave that seemed to reach the meeting point of the sky and its aquatic reflection overtook the blonde and swallowed him whole. The lights from the stars went dim as the numbness of his limbs quickly spread to the rest of his body. He sank lower and lower to the ocean's floor; his eyes opened to the horror of watching himself drown. He wanted to try and swim up, but his body would not allow it. It had given up. Knowing this was the end, the blonde closed his eyes and let the sea consume him. That is, until he heard a splash from above.

The dark-haired man quickly stretched his hand back over the cliff and grabbed the wrist of the other climber. Fingers trembled against his arm as he hoisted his shivering compatriot towards him, adrenaline coursing through his veins. Once both were safely on the top of the cliff, the rain let up, as if it had been waiting for them to finish their feat so it could reward their hard work. They breathed heavily, both from exhaustion and from relief. That stone had looked so secure, but its false sense of security almost led to a horrible, untimely end. The blonde nodded at his rescuer, a silent "thank you" exchanged in between gasps of breath. He lay there as sharp rocks bore into his back. He gratefully let the fresh, sweet air of the dry cliff top enter his lungs. The air was sticky, however, revealing the aftermath of the thick rain that had pummeled them as they trekked up the mountain. The dark storm clouds now dispersed to reveal the clear night sky, sprinkled with millions of stars.

The blonde dared to look over the precipice as he tried to regain his sea legs. The bottom of the cliff was nearly invisible from their height, though the crevice that had once held the stone that made the blonde fall was shrouded in deep shadow as if it knew how nearly fatal its resident had been. The once putrid air was washed away by a crisp draft from the mountain. The lingering humidity was the only factor that remained in proving their harrowing feat. The smell of sulfur was replaced with the smell of wood and something more distinct. The scent was sweet, almost too sweet. The delicious aroma of freshly baked cookies and warm hot chocolate wafted its way towards them as if beckoning them further into the mountain.

"Wesley." A voice called, bouncing around in his head. "Wes, you need to get up. Please."

Wesley opened his eyes, his clothes soaked and his body shivering. He looked up at the face of his father, whose dark hair was plastered to his forehead; his eyes filled with concern. Harlan wiped Wesley's hair away from his face in relief, a gold band on his finger twinkling against the starlight. Wesley coughed as he tried to breathe, water expelling itself from his lungs. He could feel the coarse sand under his body as seashells pushed into his back like sharp rocks on a mountain. The sky was a dark blue, its endless array of sparkling lights shining on the glassy water underneath. Towards the moon, the remains of a small ship sank, half of its hull hidden underneath the blanket of water. Somewhere over there, Wesley knew that jagged rocks pointed up from the depths like treacherous stalagmites in an underwater cave. The sharp points of those rocks had been covered by the thick waves that had caused them to crash. Wesley's father had tried to steer the boat away, but the storm pushed them into the rocks, blinding their vision and making it impossible for them to see each other until it had passed.

"Papa?" Wesley asked, his young voice frail and frightened. "Where are we?"

On the other side of the island, a woman stood; her hands wrapped around the rails in front of her. The white, painted lighthouse where she was perched shot its light onto the dark waters ahead. The beam searched for any boats that happened to wander into its path. The woman spun a thin, gold band on her finger, anxiously watching for the shadow of a boat to hit the light meant to guide it. She stayed there, all through the night, barely giving herself a second to blink. On the other side of the lighthouse was a tall cliffside with a house perched on the flat top of its precipice. The abode glowed in a soft light as the sweet smell of chocolate slowly died away into the hopelessness of twilight. A table was set for three in the kitchen with rich mugs of hot chocolate and scrumptious cookies set on the counter for dessert. The food chilled as the night grew colder and the candles dimmed as the wind carried the damp sea breeze through the opened windows. But the lighthouse shone on without a flicker. The bright light of hope peered into the darkness, waiting, and watching for any kind of life in the fathoms below.

Chiaroscuro Model of David, Angelo Mendez

