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Listening Against the Stone

Brenda Miller
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When braiding hair or challah bread dough, the original strands that make up the overlapping finished product are the same texture and composition; the result, if done well, is satisfying enough, though not especially nuanced. How different is the richly complex braided essay, made up of seemingly disparate and unrelated ingredients which, in the skillful hands of a master mixer, emerge so tightly woven and yet so distinctly themselves, it's not entirely clear where one strand ends and the other begins.

This is the sort of delicious treat that Brenda Miller's new essay collection, *Listening Against the Stone*, serves up for nonfiction readers. Her twenty-three carefully curated, yet never contrived essays make up a stunning mosaic, pieced together not perfectly, but as an intricately compassionate offering: each tiny, loving, and whole piece is a crucial part of the bigger puzzle.

In "Opalescent," a story about choosing a stained glass window for her new home, Miller plaits stories about seeing Chagall's art, childhood jigsaw puzzles, broken bones, the lampmaker Tiffany, friends building a patio, color, light, trees and leaves—and instead of a mixed pot of tidbits, she emerges with a lovely fusion of ideas and images. Even early in the piece, Miller hints at links: "All the way home, I'm aware of the stained glass in its box beside me: a container of pent-up brilliance, already broken, put back together again."

In color vision tests, one looks at a field of multicolored dots to find the number hidden within. Miller's essays instead begin with the dominant, popping numeral and work back, out, and sideways to contemplate, *what else is this connected to?* The prose and questions raised invite readers to consider where the unseen cords lurk and how the visible strings exert their pull.

Miller's six Pushcart Prize-winning essays are all included. They showcase the author's soft hand, which firmly moves readers along, covering spirituality, yoga practice, youthful escapades (innocent and not), animals, living alone, friendship, music, trees, loss, fellowship, and toast (why not?). In all, she gently asks her reader to stop, if only momentarily, and consider—anything, everything.

In "How to Meditate," with a charming second-person point of view, Miller writes: "Say good-bye to the blackbirds and their red shoulders. Think you will always remember this, and know that you won't … Hug yourself. Feel your hands against your upper arms, holding yourself in place."
LISA ROMEO (November 17, 2011)

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