THE `OLD MAN’ HAS MET HIS MAKER: NATURE:

On my first trip of the summer, I visited Franconia Notch in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I went there to see the place where the "The Old Man of the Mountain," New Hampshire's state symbol, used to be before he collapsed into rubble in May 2003. Though part of me was sad to see him gone, another part of me was glad.

I didn't have a death wish for the old man. Actually, I liked the rugged, 40-foot-tall granite face formerly visible above Profile Lake. What I didn't like about the Old Man was the way some people treated him, as if he were some sort of deity. They came, stood at his feet, gawked upward and accepted his granite profile as rock-solid proof that God created us in his own image. Daniel Webster in the 19th century said so himself. His words are visible for all to read on a prominently featured sign at the viewing site:

Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades;

Shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe;

Jewelers a monster watch,

And the dentist hangs out a gold tooth;

But in the Mountains of New Hampshire,

God almighty has hung out a sign to show that there He makes men.

Times have changed. America is a nation of many faiths. The separation of church and state is tested daily. Patriarchy is being questioned. The attitude that nature exists to serve us is now seen by many as arrogant.

God can erase men, too. That's the message I got when I looked up and saw only a blank slate on the cliff. It reminded me that nature is a place where human control is usually local and always temporary. Even men made of granite will dissolve into boulders, then into dust. Nature always has the last word.

Somehow, this message hasn't quite reached most folks near Franconia Notch. At viewing spots, there are impromptu shrines where the bereaved still bring memorial flowers and say prayers. In the lodge where I stayed, there is heartfelt grief; employees still choke up at the thought of his passing.

In Franconia Notch State Park, there seems to be denial; the official map and trail guide still describes the Old Man in the present tense. At the local museum there is a sigh of relief; everyone knew that the Old Man was gravely ill and could die any day. Each year of the past few decades he had received an annual checkup by a team of rock doctors. He'd already had surgery in the form of waterproof shielding and caulking, and was being held together by steel cables. They even cleaned his ears. They knew it was only a matter of time before his life would be snuffed out, perhaps during an ice storm or a seismic tremor. In the end, he passed away quietly in the night, the collapsing noise of his demise muffled by thick clouds.

Daniel Webster was just having fun. He must have known that the Old Man wasn't really the storefront sign of a tradesman-god who made men. He must have known that the profile of a human
face was little more than a curious coincidence of dark rock ledges and backlit sky, the result of a game played by gravity in which nature pulled out blocks of granite, one at a time.

Sign or no sign, God didn't go out of business in Franconia Notch. In fact, I think Franconia is more beautiful than ever, now that the distraction of the human face is gone. Now, tourists can focus more clearly on the beauty of the weather-tarnished crags, cliffs and spires, where glaciers and gravity have carved the real face of nature, one that need not contain our graven image.

I'm truly sorry for those who still grieve for the Old Man. But at least we had his company for a few centuries. Besides, I suspect that the Old Man will last longer as myth than he did in the material world of precariously balanced ledges. I know that another old man or old woman is being carved somewhere else in the mountains, where God made humans, along with everything else.