

Copperhead Quandary

Placing a copperhead in the middle of your first solo aid climb is part excitement and part trepidation. I can high step to a hook off to my left, reaching up with my left hand I try to see the ledge with my fingertips, recreating granite landscapes like a fisherman reading sonar. Place a hook and stare at the flat tip rock back and forth; I step back down and rest on my fifi.

A quarry has the benefit of being a pre-destroyed crag. Epoxy and drilled handholds already grace the shattered face and so, placing a copperhead becomes less of an ethical quandary. I tell this to myself. Scan the rock face in front of me fully aware of the finite nature of all rock and all routes. Who aids at Riverside Quarry anymore anyway? Do I screw up the route for the next; did the one before do me the favor of not screwing it up? Would I care if they hadn't; will the next care if I don't?

I clip the carabiner with my chisels to the keeper sling of my hammer. Every time I place a head, I start with the flat punch chisel on the copperhead with the intent of doing this one perfectly. I remember reading on an internet forum about climbers noticing the difference between a punched head and a bashed head. Their connection to the prowess of the climber is as silly as the fact that I'm pulling memories from the internet. I have failed in the face of those who came before me with nothing more than wrinkled magazine pages if they even had that.

Within seconds, I've ditched the punch and instead use the pick at the end of my hammer. The copperhead dissolves into the rock and I create a few scratches on the adjacent corner wall like cartoon whoosh marks to let the reader know that an object is moving, or at least about to go splat on a wall.