

University of Alberta

Intimate Rock

by

Robert Sproule

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Dedication

To Meg and to the Rockies, both for
challenging me to new heights.

Abstract

“Intimate Rock” is a collection of original, autobiographical poetry gleaned from my experiences climbing and exploring in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Although many of the poems recall moments spent on specific mountains, the structure of the piece is loosely that of a single climb.

This thesis is an examination of the relationship a climber forms with the alpine landscape. It is poetry of engagement, and articulates the raw reality of climbing by focusing on the immediacy of its most engaging moments. As opposed to poetry of the picturesque, “Intimate Rock” zooms in on the exhausting repetition of climbing, a repetition punctuated by brief moments of terror and ecstasy.

My goal is that readers who have never stood on a high summit ridge will feel moments of instability, breathlessness, and wonder as they become engaged in poetry crafted to express the climbers’ own engagement.

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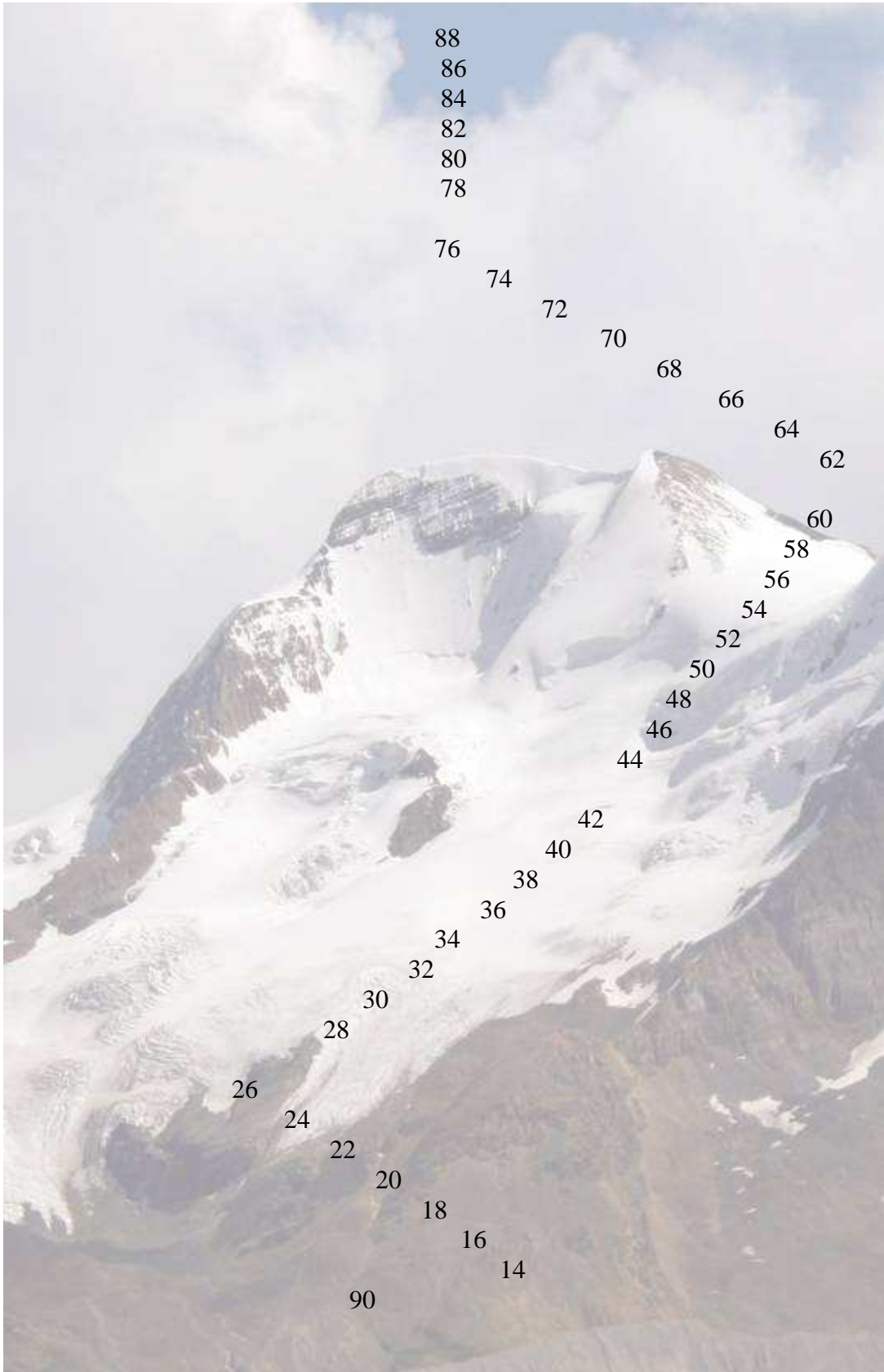
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Foreword

From Highway to Summit:

I grew up dreaming of mountains. As a child, my family would take me on skiing and camping trips to Jasper and Banff. While there, I joined the thousands of others staring silently at snow drenched summits high above. I spent a few precious days at a time in a geography that I never understood but always marveled at. Back home, east of Edmonton, I read, wrote, and dreamed about mountains, but the only angle I could reference them from was from the highway viewpoint.

As I grew up, I wanted to engage with these giants more directly than through a camera, but I didn't know where to start. Between the highway and the summits was an entire world of communities, skills, and rituals that I had neither the contacts nor the lexicon to access. Although I knew that people trod the high summits, to me they remained abstract agents of fascination, apparently lifeless and silent reefs of stone and ice paradoxically representing the life-affirming best of humanity. Normal people didn't go there; they watched from afar.

The popular culture of mountain climbing is one of adventure, danger, and larger than life characters like Edmund Hillary and Reinhold Messner. These men constitute the mythology of mountaineering. They are larger-than-life icons who make extreme adventure look easy under the bite of their crampons. But while the awe they inspire fascinates us with stories of peril, it also blinds us to the reality of the endeavor. Between the picturesque passivity of watching mountains and the terminal extremes of high-altitude climbing there is a world of

exploration and engagement that is rarely spoken of. My discovery of this world, and the army of weekend warriors who dwell within it, is how I went from fascination to engagement, and from engagement began to nurture a deepening appreciation of these complex systems and how I might relate with them on an intimate level.

I climbed my first mountain by accident. In 2004 my girlfriend Megan (now happily my wife) and I were spending a few days in Canmore and decided to go for a challenging hike. By mid-afternoon we found ourselves atop Mt. Allen's inspiring Centennial Ridge and I was hooked. Every season since I've gone climbing with whoever was willing to climb and play and meditate among the peaks. Having developed a relationship with the icy rocks that litter the summits towering over highways 1 and 93, I'm no longer content to be a bystander, choosing instead to strengthen my relationship with mountains one laboured footstep at a time.

These are epistolary poems. They are, as my wife refers to them, love-letters to the mountains I've known. For better or worse, I am a writer and as such I can only appreciate the meditative silences of summits for so long until I feel the need to capture them in a weave of words. These poems are a personal archive of my relationship with mountains, a relationship that I wasn't content leaving unarticulated. Writers are, after all, experience collectors. Even though the shocking silence of the high alpine is no place for words, in the months following raw experience begins to coalesce into words. In archiving my memories of the mountains I've known I've created my own symbolic mountain. Just as

mountains are rich archives of Earth's history with their vast stores of geographic secrets, I've bound a piece of my history in this collection.

Mountain climbers are notorious for their repetition compulsion. I never tire of sharing with others what I've seen because when I'm on a summit ridge or in a deep glacial valley, the exclamations of the scenic highway lookout fall silent and are replaced by an appreciation that is deeply impacting and intensely personal.

The inarticulate nature of a climber's relationship with the mountain is what I, as a writer, both cherish and attempt to supplant.

For all the awe it inspires, the act of engagement with a mountain that constitutes mountaineering is usually routinely idiosyncratic and exhaustingly repetitive.

These poems don't attempt to intellectualize this engagement; they catalogue it as a physical act. Sprinkled into the routine and exhaustion are also moments that seize the senses and impact deeply upon us before we can articulate or reflect upon what just happened. These moments, whether of cresting a ridge to behold a hidden glacial lake, feeling a foothold give way underfoot, or hearing the cataclysm of a nearby avalanche, can only be recreated when the senses remember them. "Intimate Rock" is a litany of stone, sweat, taut ropes that attempts to capture the immediacy of the moments from which the intimacy between climber and mountain subtly emerges.

A Brief History of Engagement

The dichotomy of being fascinated with as opposed to engaging with mountains has been a staple in our relationship with them throughout history. Before the age of mountaineering, the inert mystery of the mountains was often interpreted as

ungodliness. In 1691, Thomas Burnet postulated his “sacred egg” theory, wherein God created the earth in the shape of a smooth, flawless egg. For Burnet, it was the violence of the deluge which cracked and disfigured the shape of earth into the chaotic landscape it’s in today. Mountains were personified as the most obvious examples of this grotesque and unholy disfigurement.

The Romantic era heralded a shift in European perceptions of alpine landscapes. With the help of writers like Percy Bysshe Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the reading public began to see mountains as personifications of sublimity rather than ungodliness. While visiting the Vale of Chamouni in 1816, Shelley was moved to write the canonical “Mont Blanc”:

“Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: the power is there,
 the still and solemn power of many sights
 and many sounds, and much of life and death.
 In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
 in the lone glare of day, the snows descend
 upon that mountain; none beholds them there...
 ... The secret strength of things
 which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
 of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 if to the human mind’s imaginings
 silence and solitude were vacancy?”
 (127-132, 139-144)

Here, the power of Mont Blanc is expressed by the narrator comprehending it; the power of the mountain emerges in the imagination of the poet as he watched it.

The engagement, while fruitfully inspiring, happens at a distance as spectacle.

The notion of the picturesque was, like Romanticism, a reaction against a purely Enlightenment view of the natural world. It emerged at the end of the 18th century as a way for observers to appreciate the interplay of Burkean beauty and sublimity within landscapes. The picturesque presupposes a certain voyeurism in

that a picturesque landscape is something to be admired from afar. The root of the word, “picture” is something meant to be looked at rather than touched.

As the rhetoric of sublimity became the standard lexicon for speaking about mountains, they became more engrained in our popular imagination as something to fear. I’ve trembled before mountains my whole life; they were always distant and magical to me. But when I started climbing them, and felt sharp scree cutting my fingers and realized how bafflingly complex they are as systems, I started to appreciate them on a level much less magical, and much more compelling.

The 19th century was a major turning point in our perception of mountains. The century began with the Romantics popularizing mountain landscapes with the rhetoric of personified sublimity. It ended with upper-class Europeans climbing and hiking as much and as often as they could in the much publicized wake of Edward Whymper’s famous and tragic first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865. By the end of the 19th century, the European history of the Canadian Rockies had begun in earnest with the completion of the Trans-continental railway, the building of Canadian Pacific’s first Swiss-style hotels, and the death of Phillip Abbot on Mount Lefroy in 1896.

The late 20th century has seen an explosion of the number of people climbing in the once remote Rockies. With the publication of books like Alan Kane’s *Scrambles in the Canadian Rockies* in 1992, record numbers of sometimes ill-prepared people flocked to the slopes. Kane’s book popularized the pseudo-sport of scrambling, the hazardous activity of climbing easier routes without a rope. The book was seminal because it obliterated the intimidating pre-requisites of expensive gear and the complex skill set that went along with it. The secret world

between the highway and the summit was exposed and as a new generation of climbers (myself included), bringing with them a new batch of problems, challenges and opportunities, began to dig their fingers into the scree of the Rockies.

Love Letters to the Mountain:

The poems ahead challenge the dominance of the rhetoric of the picturesque as it relates to mountains by positing a language of engagement which is meant to be felt before it's reflected upon. The irony of the dominance of the rhetoric of the picturesque is that few things are more defined by their physicality than a mountain. With its imposing cliffs, scouring glaciers and labyrinth moraines, its immensity of form is what makes us stand back and stammer in awe. That same immensity makes it one of the most dynamic systems on earth. An individual mountain is a decaying ecosystem of stone and ice, a fossil risen from beneath ancient seas. Mountain slopes are a vast archive of earth's secrets; everything from trilobites to secrets about the ancient atmosphere is hidden amongst the rock.

On any given Friday during the summer, hundreds of weekend warriors head to the mountains with carefully packed gear and meticulously measured bags of trail mix. We go there with people whom we sometimes barely know in any context but the mountains, but whom we are ready to trust with our lives. We know we will get little sleep, risk injury, and come back fatigued from 14 hour days as we start work again on Monday. It's an expensive, dangerous and bewilderingly rewarding hobby. We come back having earned the sight of places that few people on this earth will have the luxury of laying their eyes on. We

come back having been to a lifeless place that is void of any civilization except what we bring with us. This thesis is about sharing a little of the experience I have on the rock with the reader in an effort to show the reader that other types of rhetoric other than the picturesque are possible.

Although the individual movements of dancing between stone and ice to climb a mountain are complex, the overall trajectory is famously linear. As the climber goes “up”, the essence of the climb is startlingly and symbolically simple. The summit is the universal symbol of great effort that emerges justly into triumph. While only being the halfway point of any climb (with the majority of accidents happening on the descent) the summit is the embodiment of a climber’s achievement. Ironically, these symbols of achievement are rotting away as their prehistoric shale, once mud clinging to reefs on the sea floor, erodes away and now clings to the shelter of the reefs, now fossilized to limestone ridges.

The Canadian Rockies are a rarity in the world. There, climbers can leave their car in the morning and hike through trees, trudge across moraines, cross glaciers, engage in technical rock, climb to a high summit and get back to the car in the same day. The poems ahead are organized to reflect the linearity of a single climb. When you look at the Table of Contents, imagine climbers pouring over topographic maps and discussing the twists and turns of the routes. Once you start reading the climb will become more complex than you thought it would be but the symbolic trajectory will remain clear.

The poems delve into the immense and complex physicality of a mountain and explore how a human body interacts with it. Many are taken from moments in time, memories of being frozen on a precarious stone or of looking back at the

summit after a climb. Some poems take longer and present a portion or an entire climb in a different perspective.

I chose to pair a photograph with each poem to emphasize the role that spectacle plays in mountaineering. While mountaineering is all about spectacle, the nature of the spectacle changes as one ascends from the panoramic safety of highway lookouts to the precarious close-ups of exposed ridges. The more we are engaged, the more focus the terrain demands, thus monopolizing the view. For most of my climbs, the view consisted of a few square feet of stone or ice directly in front of me, sometimes only inches from my face. Once I would find stable footing, however, and with it the luxury of looking around, the view I had earned was much different. A few of the poems (“Postcard”, “Surfaces III”, “Offerings”) engage directly with the difference between the visual aesthetics of the distant spectacle, as seen in “Mont Blanc” and the visual aesthetics of direct engagement.

The photos included are not directly tied to the poems. In most cases, the photos are of a different scene than the poem describes, and unlike with traditional ekphrasis the photos were all chosen after the poems had been written. Although the photos accompany the poems, they are not intended to provide direct commentary. They are another agent to engage the reader with the immediacy of the imagery and emotions depicted in the poems. To borrow from Roland Barthes, I’m interested in the photographs’ punctive qualities over their formal qualities.

Although the majority of the photos depict mountaineers engaging in some way with the mountain, very few of them personify the sense of triumph we’ve come to expect from the photographic genre. Many of the photos emphasize the

repetitive toil of mountaineering, which is the unglamorous essence of the sport. Although the summit photos are the most commonly represented, a typical climber in the Rockies will spend a day or more ascending over a vertical kilometer to snap it. Toil is as intrinsic to the sport as triumph, and many of the poems ahead highlight their complex relationship (“Spite and Tendon”, “Scorn”, “Ascent”, “An Open Letter to Poets.”)

The inherent danger of mountaineering has led to its development as a highly ritualized sport. Whether it’s tying off a rope, building an ice anchor or cooking a high-altitude dinner, a normative and sometimes militaristically detailed standard based on efficiency and safety has developed. While it makes a dangerous sport much safer, this standard also problematizes the image of the lone mountaineer forging a path to the top. In anticipating a climb ahead, the pronoun that makes us drunk with potential is “I”. However, in retrospect it’s the pervasive application of “we”, whether it was a hand up a crux step or a morale boosting gift of snacks, that carries us to the top. A successful climb relies on teamwork and the redundancy of ritual, as illustrated by poems like “Glacier Walk” and “Snow Slope.” In the Rockies, personal passion is assumed, but teamwork and knowledge of the skill-set are required.

There is precious little poetry that explores an intimate level of engagement with the Canadian Rockies. With the rare exception of writers like Jon Whyte, who wrote extensively about his beloved Rockies from his home in Banff, climbers aren’t often poets. Whyte’s poetry, especially *Wenkchemma*, his book length study of the mountains towering above Moraine Lake in Banff, taught me

how much can be gleamed by focusing my poetic gaze acutely, like a scientist, instead of inhabiting the abstractions of language.

Our mountains are often overlooked in popular literature as writers gravitate towards the remote altitude of the Himalaya or the historic romance of the Alps. While it's true that in the Rockies you won't see a 25,000 or even 15,000 foot summit, it's also true that you can go from your car to one of the highest points the country and back again in a day. Rockies don't enjoy the classical history of the Alps, but their own history is made remarkable by the eccentric personalities who built it. I think that the poems ahead demonstrate that our Rocky mountains have more than enough dynamism and diversity to deserve their own poetic identity.

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SCREE

String Line

I make this trail
and these tracks
rapturously, as if I'm yielding the mountain
to my boyish will by curving a string
around its flank,
tying it down
so the next climber will thank me.
Sometimes I'll stop,
wipe sweat out of my eyes and admire it,
panting, as it arcs
to a horizon of tossed and scarred stone,
strung and softly eroding around my love
as I admire expanses I've earned,
snowy peak pierced horizons
and secure
that when my awe is exhausted
I can find my way back
before the mountain wriggles free.



Mount Perren, Banff.

**Shallow Life:
Roche Miette, below the saddle**

So much about a mountain embodies depth
that we forget the life clinging to its slopes is shallow,
groping between stones until rolled away
or spreading across a sprinkle of spring thaw.
Life here is fleeting,
it barely belongs and is as helpless to the mountain's twitch as I am,
wandering its slopes and calling myself conqueror
while seeking safety by sunset.

Every sciff of lichen branching across centuries
is turning the mountain into a fertile field
impossibly,
and as I beat it into a quarry with my boots.



Roche Miette, Jasper.

**Scree Trail:
Mount Temple, above Sentinel Pass**

Step pivots into step
each impressing
the precipitous scree
gingerly in broad boots
thumping my weight cautiously
on a slope lace fragile
slumping shingles into shingles
slip, mound and forming
a trail barely discernable
as the mountain teeters 1 degree
from cataclysm.

Stumbling boots slump scree
into scree
carving with every jolted heart beat
a sliver of stability -
sculpting angles almost human
into a mountain of salt
that flows tirelessly
rinsing.

Scree trails are an archive of absurdity -
a whisper that I dwelt
a moment in defiance
of my humanity and left my testament
to be consumed by the mountain.



Mount Burstall, Kananaskis.

**What the Mountain Remembers:
Mount Babel, South ridge**

Earth's memory is in the scree
as it peels away, shale shorn
from limestone ridges and suspended
one degree from avalanche
above you, a planet's history
bound in shingles absorbing, stacking and
slumped into oceans.

The stone slides under my boots
bringing my body down hard
sliced fingers and a skipped heartbeat.
My face rivets against the shingles
frozen, hearing the shale sluff over cliffs
plunging.

As the mountain witnesses
me helpless, an ant on sand –
I realize this is how my passage will be bound
in the shale archive, slumping to oceans.



Mount Bowlen, Banff.

Towards Definition

Plod -
and watch abundance asphyxiate in thinning air
as you climb from life
into the stoic scarcity of firn and stone.

Seek desolation,
and the somber satisfaction of passing
berries, scrub and lichen
to where the mountain stretches terminally thin
and thinner
until life freezes
and plummets down slopes.

Up here
death echoes
and the mountain collapses us into ourselves,
until everything defining us
hangs off our backs
and thumps against rock
and pants.



Mount Galatea, Kananaskis.

Mount Temple

[illegible]



Mount Temple, Banff.

**Hollowing:
Mount Alymer**

I

We travel together, but we climb alone
our thoughts emerging like peaks around us
spread into an absorbing sky.
Scree slopes unfurl in front of us unending and
calloused as a fallen tree,
and as we march across its bark the silence
drifts and sweeps through us, carrying the world we know
to hungry emptiness.
The mountain hollows us as we trudge
leaving us lonely in hair-dripping fatigue
atop earth's naked density.

II

Our companions and the thoughts we started climbing with
push out of our bodies like steps as our head down,
heart thump and boot crunch forms fall forwards.
We are motions without gesture,
forms that stagger across a shape cleansing simple,
being purged under afternoon sun.

The irresistible purpose of the mountain,
slope unfurled into a stone horn that catapults into sky,
pants the self out of us, breath
droplets hovering before the thin air takes them.
We stumble upward, exhale and diffuse
until the wind passes through us,
devoted to absurdity and grinning with purpose.

III

The hollow men march for the shape without form,
landscape reduced to the prayer of a trail
sloped upwards into altitude's purity,
panting as we find the summit
and our burning feet shuffle to the cairn and we rest.
Hollowed, we collapse onto each other and
gaze vacantly at the horizon eating mountains,
inhale thin air and whimper,
beginning to condense again.



Mount Burstall, Kananaskis II.

GLACIER

To the Glacier

Beautiful corpse
flesh perfectly preserved
smooth blue and chill to my touch.

Silent-
so serene under a white shrouded
repose between her guardian peaks
as if a goddess
knowing she was dying
carved a bed into invincible stone and nestled,
laid her head against the great mountain
and stretched her legs to the river
that would carry her
to sea.

Flesh bound carefully
and layered in synthetics and down
to huddle life's heat from the vast cold.

Creep
silently across jagged scars on the corpse
reposed between looming guardians,
trespassing in a slumped shoulder shuffle
before she awakes,
twitches
and sucks our bodies into her flesh
and to the sea.



Fay Glacier.

Glacier Walk

Together in the car, laughing,
gear up and trudge to the glacier

talking about whatever
occurs to us at the moment,

snacking as we find its toe,
the lake of ice before us, rising.

We check our buddy's biner with gloved
fingers testing spinning locks,

loop our prussics tight amidst metal
dangling from our jangling hips.

We issue our 10 meter lengths
measured from the center and clip in

stoically, one after the other
and step

onto the glacier thickening,
cracking and stares at us from deep fissures.

Ice pops as steel teeth sink into it,
biting a trail across as we trudge, step

and hop across the cracks
with a puffing panic when we catch the other side and teeter.

We walk alone, our heads down and
eyes tuned to our shared umbilical

as it nudges our hips forward and
tugs them back dancing

10 meters apart so when the glacier

fractures

it doesn't devour us
together.



Peyto Glacier.

**Glacier Light:
Wapta Ice fields**

This place
consumes a man with light,
driving him mad with a sun's glare pushing him back
until staggering, vision scarred by light,
across a tempest frozen
in its violence.

This place
drowns in a fog like flood
filling valleys
with the chaos of white
on whiteness
leaving eyes grasping like fingers
in a throttling river,
desperate for contrast.

This place
is either blinding or blind,
burning anvil searing holes in sight
or a madness of white swirling sight away from you.



Wapta Icefield.

Glacier Ghazal

Sun flash stainless teeth bite-step-biting into the snow crust.
Chewed up trail snaking behind me, nibbling from a white horizon.

Blue depth curving to a wedge cold cradle. Light funneling
to a tapered radiance. Fatal beauty bathed in a beckoning glow.

Walking into my hips, persistent pressure coaxing silent unison.
Bound to our brother's every step and plunge: steady rhythm forward.

Open hand of the mountain, receptive and calloused,
inviting as the sun seers it; squint strain and burnt cheeks.

Thunder tear and turn around, our tracks slush in the sun,
watching seracs plunge pulverize. Thunder crescendos back into silent.



Peyto Glacier II.

**Postcard:
from Mount Thompson**

I took a picture, postcard perfect, that could swirl on a spinner stand
of a storm erupting over mountain tops
blotting daylight like a galloping army,
its ranks and purpose fanning out across the glacier
swallowing.

I couldn't resist the beauty of fury descending,
the sky's long clenched mouth about to hack
into an ice valley.

I wasn't in the postcard
but from atop the next mountain I looked up from my ecstatic camera,
heard thunder in the taut silence
and knew that sometime between here and safety
my perfect depth of field would swirl into white blind madness
and I'd stagger through a beauty eaten sky
desperate for shadow.



Mount Rhonda.

**Punching:
approaching the Neil Colgan hut from Marble Canyon**

We bow our heads in sweat,
feet sliding forward and
crampon snagging on the ice.
The rope jerks from behind; being jerked ahead.
We're too tired to holler jokes,
to sing the tunes crooned since dawn.
We watch the sun falling
and the hut
squat
on the col ahead – a glacier between us.
Dizzy hot dinner dreams
glaze our thoughts as we trudge
over the sun rotten ice bridge

falls
waist deep
scream
bruising harness
and legs
dangle
over tapered silence.
The stunned rope team
braces
as I hover there
torso in life,
legs adrift in death.

I scramble crampons slice pants and my buddies yell,
yank and I'm
free,
stomach flat,
panting.
And when I stand it's to stare down

-compelled-
into the throat that swallowed me,
its trachea layered with protracting blues
freezing light into the deep memories
of earth,
unspoken
and absorbing.



Towards the Neil Colgan.

**Trickling Memory:
Mount Fay, south glacier**

Ice exhales earth's memoir
with every silent breath.
The planet's hoarded history trickles
around rivulets and rocks
under papyrus ice shimmering
as a rotting glacier swirls
chews into itself, releases and thaws.

Ancient moisture seeps into my boots.
The chorus of drips and swirls echoing in the valley has been silent
since a tsunami of ice consumed it.
Frozen, now free
to trickle down moraines and swept into swift streams
feeding the rivers that serve oceans.

On an August day I'm watching history
end and begin,
earth's archive exhaling and splashing
around littered limestones
sunk deep into ice and excavating secrets,
a planet's memory in trickles
abandoning the valley.



South of Mount Fay.

**Night at the Abbot Pass:
Neil Colgan hut**

I might not have noticed that the night was radiant
as I staggered to the outhouse
through gale force winds
trying not to be blown off the col.
But bracing my feet enough to look
up
at stars river thick arcing over me
I saw life pulsing across this barren place
and I could have reached for it
but would have fallen.

Here,
amidst the desolation
stars take shapes of galaxies
splashed and stained upon a velvet canvas,
luminous layers painted over each other
towards light that was borne before
mountains or earth
and discovers me
here,
reminding me
I am a prisoner
and as embedded in the sky as they.



Neil Colgan hut.

FACE

The Limits of Care

Stone frightens us
because it won't teach
so we keep coming back to it.

We fear the glacier
not because it will swallow us whole
but because we'll swallow it
and wander it aimlessly and forget life.

We fear ourselves
because it's only after we've swallowed the mountain
atop the world
that we finally feel alive.

Summits excite us
when we think they notice
our boots creasing their snow.

We pull ourselves up the mountain
because it is already inside us
and we need to know
if it cares.



Above Rockbound Lake.

Route-finding





Opal Ridge.

**Against:
Mount Joffre, north face**

I've never been as penitent as gasping
into the ice against my face
dissolving as I stared at it,
paralyzed –
the rotten fractals of an ice-slope
melting under a baking bold sun.

We had ascended salivating while a dawn fog
shrouded a summit still drowsy,
vaulting toward it
as we gnashed our steel teeth and plunged our eager axes.
When the ice arced steeper we bit harder
into flesh still so frozen from night's vice chill
that we tiptoed up on canines
to our prey's windswept throat.

We crested out of mist
onto an island adrift in fog
and lunged to the summit.
The sun pierced the clouds
revealing glaciers pouring into the valley
with gaping jagged grins.

We celebrated our prey as the sun
thawed and turned night clenched flesh
into a thousand feet of heat baked lace
waiting for a careless caress to
drop us like pebbles
and tumble end over end
down.

Now pressed penitent against the steepest ice
I wait,
forced to trust this rotted flesh long enough
for a rope to reach me,
feeling the lace under my trembling canines crumble
as the glaciers beneath me grin.



Mount Joffre.

**Slope Sluff:
Mount Woolley, ledges**

Don't think about the

exposure
steep
shale
stacked like shingles
shift under broad boot crunches.

Head down
pant
wiping out the sting
staring at stone I don't trust
trying
to find somewhere to step,
hold
and climb without the mountain slumping under me.

Amid the scree brambles
I spot a rock knob
limestone solid
and decide to trust it,
pant,
slow leg lift
shifting
weight from the right boot
starting a scree slide
as my left thumps on the knob
hard
and I stop,
glance back
at the tent a mile under me
and watch the slide I started
sluff a shingle
over the cliff
falling silently.



Mount Babel.

Spite and Tendon

Climbing I
stomp my grit against the mountain
staring into the stones and the dirty firn
as if my gaze were a crutch,
its rubber stump thudding into the scree
and I limp forward.

The summit evades me
and skips back as my body pivots forward.
Defiance is my final fuel, a spiteful spat at a frame
of thin tendons strung together
like a raft,
a flake of calcium conquering an ocean of stone
thrust up from the deep.

As it rots into the valley,
the carbonate cliffs heaving
remind me that I'm rotting, too –
that if a mountain can dissolve
then this raft of frayed tendon rope and calcium flakes
will melt like the old snow
crouched in this barren place.
Knowing my bones will buckle before these cliffs
turns sweat into spite
and I spit my gaze harder against the stone
and pivot myself onto the ridge
that snakes its way to the summit
finally exposed.



Mount Athabasca II.

Snow Slope: Mount Woolley

We were conquerors this morning with brows held high,
 headlamps bouncing in the inky sky before a Jasper dawn.
 The sun broke over the broad east peaks
 as we drew near and eyed the ice funnel
 anxiously
 a steep ramp of ice flanked with restless rubble walls
 wedged into the mountain like a chopping axe,
 about to be roused by heat and crumble.

We entered man after man,
 rope unto rope.
 His head nodded, the lead man pulls his foot forward,
 crampon gleaming hungrily and striking the
 slope like a flint.
 Ice explodes in sparks.

It doesn't take long
 for a trust glacier dense
 to replace doubt with the reassuring routine
 that makes a friend of fear.
 My axe flashes as I drive it packed-snow deep,
 test,
 and step up
 body teetering on bitten teeth
 while the others draw back
 grinning cold canines
 and sinks into the crude step,
 improving it for the next man.
 Rope slacks and rest step,
 stealing breath
 until steel teeth flash and the rope slithers on.

We subdue the mountain with ritual:
 with a well cut foothold
 and an axe sunk deep,
 keeping the rope that binds us as tight as breath
 jerking upwards.
 The man above can save me;
 I can save the man below.
 We follow our rituals as much as each other,
 panting towards the undisciplined summit.



Mount Woolley.

**Scorn:
Mount Rae**

“Look how the light brightens the peak, how clouds seem steam,
 how dragon’s tooth enfangs and snags the sky,
 ribbles, ribs, and vaults the mountain’s shape,
 how aged seems the rubble at its base.”
 (Jon Whyte, “Sagowa” from *Wenkchemma*)

Climb
 and emerge finally from the canopy of trees and broken green
 to rolling scree slopes
 sprawling to a jagged scepter
 of summit.

Craving
 trudge to the peak piercing
 brash into clouds’ quiet waltz
 tearing them to pieces.

Leg across leg,
 boot over boot
 from the car into the troposphere
 addicted to the absurdity
 of stone still smooth
 from its violent expulsion from earth’s core.

Hurl your cravings into the singularity
 vaulting above you into a crooked fist
 where sweat and footprints and broken bodies
 are forgotten.

Climb out of exhaustion
 to catch your breath, finally
 brash as the peak
 and scorning everything below you
 as you descend.



Near Mount Joffre.

Of Sweat and Balance

I

Shingle shale steps, sliding back,
so I dig my boot in to the mountain, churning up
and lurching forward, tripping into
shingle shale steps collapsing and
just catching myself with carved fingers bleeding on the
shingle shale steps beating a foothold
until I can stand and begin to trust it, trembling.

II

The cliff is rotting off the mountain,
rubble flakes off every hold as I swallow, reaching my fingers
to a nub above me, investing weight with a whisper that
scratches scree off a trickster
cliff that's rotting off the mountain,
but it holds and I can mount the ridge, stand and stare down
at the rotting cliff,
and weathered peaks around me like an ancient city
I've stumbled into, crumbling.

III

I'm balancing my boots on a knife in the sky
watching the summit, lifeless across a ridge so narrow
that vertigo hurricanes through my head almost overwhelming
my balance, perching on a knife in the sky
I'm choosing steps slowly, fighting the wind until with
I can navigate the knife edge ridge
and reach the summit squinting my eyes,
and I can breath before descending.



Mount Niblock.

Ascent

“ And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart,
and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.
(Luke 9: 28-30)

As I ascend
my eyes became sharper
lengthening horizons around me
and catch air currents in their corners
like dim stars
disappearing when I look around.

As I ascend
into thinning silence
the shockwave of eagles
fills and ricochets in my ears
as the sound of earth fades.

As I ascend
the mountain hoards oxygen
leaving my lungs to scrounge
what they can
widening my throat
as my eyes
overlook the curve of earth.

And as my senses
slowly evolve into a cobalt sky
I begin to understand
gasping
how clinging rags can be radiant
and how my face
bleached tired,
can be visible from a mile beneath me.

Across a wasteland
of ice huddled between wind-worn rocks
life bursts into view
arcs across the horizon like a second sun
and leaves me alone
glowing
to discover God on his terms.



Mount Victoria.

SUMMIT

Prairie Boy

I come to be between stone hands squeezing in shelter
from the prairie sky,
slowly smothered by the gentle mass of earth's rapture
as I tip my pint toward tomorrow's climb.

Meg says I'm still a prairie boy
at heart
and I scrape myself up scree and stagger over crevasses
to find my way back into massive skies,
peaks like hay bales dotting new shorn fields.

I come to be imprisoned and escape again,
from a prison more daunting to the same reward
each escape more clever than the last
to see the prairie without horizon
and hear the silence that I've never known.



From Mount Athabasca.

Cornice:
Castle Mountain, north side

There's nothing as elegant as curled snow
carved by wind lace thin and layered across itself
arcing
into an open hand reaching
from its ridge fortified by impossible cliffs
across a chasm,
tempting gravity as its fingertips
desperate
grope for something,
stretching till
with a deep throated snap
knuckles fracture and
elegance turns to cataclysm
as long sculpted fingers
cataract down cliffs
their plight echoing across a deaf valley,
condemned to the chasm
they reached over.



From Helena Ridge.

**Birth Rot:
Mount Niblock**

Kneeling on the summit
I can still smell the salt water of its birth,
every calcium corpse fused into limestone
when earth heaved
and in the deep silence
defined into a gothic spire
slicing the blizzards that swirled across it
wedging snow in its tiny fissures that
thawed and
froze, cracking stone from stone
fracturing deeper
into larger cracks where water sinks
and tears a scar into a summit
disintegrating like a leper,
shale platelets dribbling
to moraine heaps.

The summit contradicts itself,
the primordial vaulting into the ethereal
that rots as it's born.



Mount Niblock II.

**On Cloud:
Mount Bryce from Mount Athabasca**

Summit simple, tusk upon a white so silent
that we stare until we forget that it is perched upon
a cataclysm of stone
churning back chaos.

Summit simple,
tusk atop a precariousness we spend our lives
avoiding,
when one of us loves it he is alone,
with one boot stable and one
churned away,
stumbling until he can stand
where the rest of us stare silently,
proud to have remembered
desperation.



Narao peak.

**Trust Dissolving:
Mount Rundle**

The summit
is the only thing you can trust
at the threshold of a void
beaten
by territorial winds
slowly rotting into scree slopes
rivulet polished into the
river running into the lowlands
before piling the remains
of a brash summit
across the ocean floor
compressing summits beneath it
and piling summits atop
compressing it
deeper into the magmatic
strain of the lithosphere
compressing and pulled
into the furnace to be consumed
into a molten mould
and forced upwards
breaking through the surface again
towards a summit.



From Mount Burstall.

**Surface:
Mount Victoria, south ridge**

These are the surfaces that have been heaved so relentlessly from earth's guts
that they tear primordial wounds in the mind
as they disintegrate.

They are serrated knives slashing into steep glaciers that collapse into valleys
and rotting walls flanked by towers of ice.

They are geography twisted into the distended violence of cliffs
pouring raw stones over their lower slopes, tearing scabs open.

My breath catches in my throat;
eyes on my boots.

My whole world is reduced to the next nub that might be stable hidden
among piles of shingles teetering.

Everything depends upon where my foot falls next,
steel teeth scraping over scree and through
crumbling sun rotted ice for a breath of stability.

My home is a pillow of firm snow
that supports my body weight as I puncture and pivot,
strained leg muscles relaxing for a moment of
rest-step until the next step
collapses and snow spills off the cliff,
jarring tendons.

I heard this ridge is beautiful and came to see
giants strewn across the horizon and to look into the cameras
snapping from the Chateau, invisible.
When my boots stay where I step I'll
look at more than the path ahead,
but for now nothing is more beautiful than a well anchored stone
and a packed snow patch.



Mount Victoria Ridge.

Summit Ghazal

Horizon unfolds like hands, jagged prairie on blue canvas.
My vision unleashed vaults over far peaks and glaciers into obscurity.

Wind erupts my cheeks, catapulted from the valley
tearing silt off the mountain and into flesh.

The silence is a vacuum pulling breath and moist heat
from my body into the blank pure.

Blown ice crouches behind worn smooth stone,
every shadow is shelter as it peels away, slowly.

Balance a flat stone on the squatting cairn, carefully,
needing to alter it, this place eroding me.



Mount Woolley Summit.

Windswept

The summit reminds me
that the million distractions
are mounds of shale
rolled around the desolation
of a windswept survivor,
the exposed and remaining
when shale dribbles off,
accumulates,
leaves lone summit bare.

The summit reminds me
of the purity of exhaustion,
to treasure every gasp
as the thin air
erodes me a moment
and for a moment I understand
endurance,
and its impregnable silence.

The summit reminds me
to crest and be exposed
until the wind yanks out my breath
blowing the shale off my flesh
and mounding it
around my windswept legs
while I gasp,
exhausted,
beginning to endure.



Diadem Peak.

MEMORY

The Right to Remember: the base of Mount Athabasca

It's not until I'm at the bottom of the mountain
lazing at its glacier's cracked toe
that I look up at the summit,
snow spindrift off a distant tusk,
squint for tracks that have vanished
and realize that my boots,
drying in the sun,
have trodden untouched rubble.
That the ridge my fingers can still feel
slicing into them as I knelt
penitent across it
is a streak in the distant sky
now.
Now the mystery I leapt into
is the scree I've panted across
and from the toe of the glacier as my boots dry on the rocks
I drink the mountain
as the right to remember pours over me with the sun
and reassured that this summit,
froze in its cobalt cold world,
travels with me when I remember the thump of my boots
and my breath seared into it
discovering.



Mount Athabasca Summit.

Transactions

"Being in the mountains reignites our astonishment at the
simplest transactions of the physical worlds."

- Robert MacFarlane, 275

With each illusion gabbing at me a
scab grows across my senses, spreading even as
I'm dazzled by their guile.
By now,
I've been so dazzled
and so damn often
the scab covers my eyes
and into my ear canals and up sinuses
clogging smell and throats with cheap-trick-bland.

While I drown in our invented cleverness
a hunger,
like a frigid wind
cuts my flesh and emboldens rediscovery
of a reality with shapes naked simple
and ageless rhythms echoing
the deep play of stone and water
distorting Euclidean landscapes.

Droplets tear a scar in an unassailable ridge.
A cornice delicately sculpted plunges,
echoes through the valley and another sculpts.
The mountain isn't performing;
it is the flux of earth laid bare.
On its ridges and into gullies
its transparency bewilders guile
and tears the scab off my senses so
I can be stagger through a frozen sky,
gasp thin air and
see the curvature of earth exposed
finally speechless.



Above Marble Canyon.

Edmonton, -45 Degrees

It's mornings like this, when I'm pulling frozen air into my lungs
and cold becomes so intense that it goes rouge,
randomly cracking windows and flattening tires,
that I think of summits floating over clouds,
ridges where the wind blew me off my feet
and ice fields sprawled like white lakes, wind sculpted,
knowing they are silent now -
gripped and desolate.

I carry their image huffing across parking lots
and checking my furnace, again, seeing them stoic against a death-cold sky
and knowing that I was intimate
with a place that can escape me, escape humanity
and be empty,
a place I return to
to remember the cleansing weight of silence.



The Mitre.

Offerings

“For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to
endure
and are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.” - Rilke, 1st Elegy

I
Faced with the mountain we all become poets
holding metaphors in our trembling arms as
offerings,
as if the mountain would bear down on us
if not pacified with praise,
its weight pressing us to water.

The terror of the mountain is that it is nothing but what it is:
the deep guts of earth expelled and scabbed over,
stone mangling stone until layered
to a density so crushing that it symbolizes
nothing.

We walk to it boldly,
the sacred, ancient emptiness blocking the sky
and our words fall like sweat among cathedrals of spires
inspiring but not caring.
Stone upon stone, the vacuum of passion
makes us desperate,
having finally found Gabriel amid the cliffs
he doesn't answer;
the stone absorbs everything.
Exhausted,
we stagger back to the poetic panoramas
as our words dry to salt on the scree.



Fay Glacier Crevasses.

An Open Letter to Poets

Don't tell me you know the mountain
until you've huddled in her pores for warmth,
smelled the carbon of her tantrums
and scoured the miniscule of her flaking flesh
digging fingers in jagged scree
until sweat blurs your eyes, forcing them shut
and you're terrified.

When you think a mountain is poetic
it's because you're dragging poetry up with you.
Its poetry is sweat
and the low throb of exhaustion leeching deeper with each
boot and breath trudge
grinding pride into necessity
and illusions into an undifferentiated real
that smells of pore clogged dust
and staring at stone never ending.

By the time you stand on the summit
you've conquered each other.
Your ecstasy is the creeping addiction
of fatigue,
of her shocking stillness
and impossible blue sky.
To conquer is to be conquered,
to return and return to its jagged bared stone.
No longer a muse; it is the reality
that now remains when muses fail,
that you can return to
without poetry
unashamed.



Mount Athabasca III.

Skyline from Highway 1

These are shapes of earth's beginning,
the stone bore up from its gut
and the ice that devours, retreats and exposes.

These are the movements that snag our stare with a blank
fixed gaze at the raw rhythms haunting us,
tricking, heaving, and cascading through.

Here are the memories of a forgotten past
and the shame of not remembering,
standing before them awed, desperate and stumbling
as our crude tool echoes off rock.

We puncture the silence to imagine our shouts rippling between
giant temples of an ancient world,
making them shudder and stone shifting across creased faces
so our words can pave roads deep into valleys.

We come here from the shapes of earth's end,
the spewing flat that scoured, tamed and stilled,
paving rhythms into the roads bringing us here.



South side of Mount Fay.

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