

Gap to Gap

The search for the perfect climbing poem - Helen Mort

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In the winter of 2012, I found myself in a glassy, luminous room in Banff, Alberta. The outlines of the Rockies glowed outside the window—their white light familiar, strange, like a word on the tip of my tongue. In truth, though, I hardly looked beyond the room because I was mesmerized by what was happening inside: a reading of a long narrative poem I'd never heard before, each pitch of a climb evoked with finger-scraping accuracy:

*The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks
And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we balked
Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp...*

The poem was “David”—a harrowing account of a climb in the very mountains I was staring at—and the author was Earl Birney (1904–1995). The narrator recounts the loss of his climbing partner after a foothold crumbles: “without / a gasp he was gone.” Birney’s piece has been taught in schools and universities for many years, with much speculation about the possible relationship between fiction and fact: Was this a real life accident? Was the poem an admission of guilt? Birney must have found these questions frustrating. Yet perhaps they were a testament to the vivid detail of his writing, the convincing quality of each measured stanza. Birney specified the detail of a peak “upthrust / Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock,” “the cold breath / of the glacier” and “grating / edge-nails and fingers,” described so painstakingly some readers couldn’t help inferring an element of autobiography.

When I heard “David” for the first time, I was partway through a three-week residency at The Banff Centre, enrolled in the Mountain and Wilderness Writing Program, trying to work on a sequence of poems about women and mountaineering. I live and climb in the Peak District in Derbyshire, England. On days spent gripping the strange, circular holds at Derwent Edge, my attention becomes as fully absorbed as it does when I’m searching for the last couplet of a sonnet. At the same time, I’m often nervous on rock, doubting my abilities. I’d hoped that writing about edges and arêtes could help me access some of the confidence I feel when I’m shaping a line of poetry, allowing me to relive and understand the routes that obsess me, down to the lyricism of their names: Long Tall Sally. The Louisiana Rib. Sunset Slab.

I sat in my Banff cabin staring into the dense branches of the forest. At times, a moose might step regally out of the shadows. A crow might alight, shaking its wings in a blur of sudden darkness.

Something curious was happening: as I began to write, I noticed that the poems seemed to be following their own logic. It was easier for me to write about the idea of other climbers, their history and their stories, and about crags I'd visited than it was to record the act of ascent itself. When I managed to write about climbing directly, I was often doing it through someone else's perspective or imagining another climber making the moves. It was easier to picture Alison Hargreaves high on a buttress at Black Rocks in Derbyshire than it was to turn my own experiences on Peak gritstone and limestone into a poem.

Why should it be so difficult? I wondered. What was Earl Birney doing in 'David' that was so rare? In a paper given to the Alpine Club on May 2, 1939, the poet, mountaineer and essayist Michael Roberts invited his audience to imagine two unwritten books, *The Climber's Guide to the Wrong Mountains* (a series of anecdotes about peaks climbed in error) and *The Climbers' Guide to Imaginary Mountains*, a mythical tome that would deal not with peaks on the map, but with "those nameless, symbolic mountains that haunt our imagination." Describing these hypothetical volumes, he added: "As the Wrong Mountains belong to the domain of humour, so the Mountains of Imagination (if we are cautious enough about the word 'imagination') belong to poetry. One can go astray among these mountains as easily as one can among the more material Alps."

If I closed my eyes, I could almost picture Roberts' imaginary volume—full of airy diagrams and invented names, fragments that might be quotes from a guidebook, but on closer scrutiny, turn out to be rhymes and scribbled images. Perhaps, this tome would be just enough to lead wanderers to the point where they found themselves lost, seeking their own, precarious way. According to Roberts, the 'climbing poem' is an enticing endeavor: "the deep satisfaction that we get from climbing is something that many of us would like to express in poetry rather than prose, partly because the rhythm of poetry is the more memorable, and partly because poetic rhythms encourage us to pitch our sentiments a little higher than we can do in prose without falling into the lush verbiage of that familiar purple bog." But it is also a problematic one. Too often, "the rhythm runs away with us, the mood sweeps us up into the false heroic, familiar epithets come away in our hand and before we know where we are we have stepped off into the empty air."

When I stare at a blank page in my notebook, the knot of fear in my stomach reminds me of the way I felt at the foot of Flying Buttress at Stanage, anticipating my first gritstone route. In my teenage years, as I learned to rock climb, I was also starting to write more seriously. At nineteen, I drafted a poem called "Like Faith," which imagined a climber clipping a rope to a bridge and swinging:

*You tell me
that when you tire of the logic
of climbing
your endless spider dance*

*you fix your rope to the edge
of a bridge and dive....*

Poetry encouraged me to pitch my sentiments high and let them swoop. But my initial attempt still landed in the “purple bog,” full of phrases like “grafted freedom” and ‘pendulum flight.’

In his 1939 talk, Roberts recommended that the would-be author of a climbing poem must strive for “unwhimsical description.” Robert’s didn’t fully unpack what he meant by “unwhimsical” (matter-of-fact, perhaps, removed from abstraction?), though he argued for instances of it in the poetry of Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge. When I think of the brooding presence of the Lakeland fells in Wordsworth’s “Prelude,” those “mighty forms, that do not live / like living men” or the “unearthly forms” in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” it strikes me that the Romantics often gestured toward what is indescribable about peaks and summits. Both poems bristle with a sense of awe. Roberts believed their authors contrived to express imaginative insight “without falsifying or distorting the material vision” of their work.

The idea of connecting the “imaginative” and the “unwhimsical” puts me in mind of Li Po’s poem “Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain,” which offers a wry perspective on the relationship between people and the peaks they climb, concluding: “we sit together, the mountain and me / until only the mountain remains.” Maybe the ultimate goal is to strip away the whimsies of ego, leaving a state of ‘pure’ perception in which the writer vanishes, becoming part of the landscape. Roberts’ words, however, suggest that these transcendent moments, if attainable, “belong to the poetry of mountains rather than the poetry of mountaineering.” The statement offers up an interesting (and slightly puzzling) distinction: Is it easier to write about mountains as symbols than it is to write about the act of climbing them?

Nonetheless, exhilarating climbing poetry does exist. Scottish poet Andrew Greig has been described by Bloodaxe Books as the “laureate of climbing.” His work can be divided into two parts: poems written before and after he learned to climb. In 1977 his famous book-length sequence “Men on Ice” depicted three climbers undertaking a challenging Himalayan trip, haunted all the while by the possibility that there is a fourth, ghost climber in their company. At the time he composed it, he didn’t have

any firsthand, technical knowledge. As Roderick Watson explains in his preface to Greig's 2011 collection, *Getting Higher*:

Greig's fascination with climbing as a metaphor persuaded the Scottish mountaineer Mal Duff that Men on Ice had been written by an experienced rock climber rather than a keen hill walker. On being disabused, Duff took the poet ice climbing in Glencoe for a true baptism of fire: by 1984, Greig was on an expedition with Duff and others to tackle the Mustagh Tower in the Karakorum Mountains of Pakistan.

Greig himself says of his encounter with Duff: "He had failed to grasp the essentially metaphorical nature of poetry. I may have understood yearning and fear, the draw of the summit and the abyss, the joy and vulnerability of the body—but...I...was scared of heights (still am)."

After the trip to Pakistan, Greig began to pen what he calls "real climbing poems." And yet "Men on Ice" remains the sequence that attracts the most critical acclaim. Watson has said of Greig's later poems, "They do not seek the symbolic scope of Men on Ice." Watson praises them for engaging with the camaraderie and challenges of climbing, but he does so guardedly, noting that we shouldn't "underestimate how difficult it is to capture the nature of physical effort as well as these verses do." While the later poems often explore the symbolism of mountain landscapes (a piece called "Little Green" begins tenderly: "because on the map she has no name / I believe in the lochan Little Green") they can't quite match the energy and immediacy of an extract from "Men On Ice":

*This is the truth of it:
bunched together on crumbling handholds
under a crazy overhang, the wind
screaming personal demons,
the snow outrageous, night setting in....*

In "Men on Ice," crumbling holds and exposure are metaphors for otherworldly risks, appealing to an archetypal notion of climbing. Perhaps the post-Karakoram pieces reflect a more nuanced vision of experience. "These late poems look for actuality and connection and sustenance," Greig commented in one of his own introductory notes. Could it be that the closer we get to the real, the more our words falter?

I love Andrew Greig's poetry and—curiously—if asked to identify a piece of his that captures the mixture of trepidation and freedom I often feel when I'm out soloing in the Peak District, I'd pick a poem from his first book, *Into You*, called "Freefall," which isn't about sport at all but about the distance between people: "she would say to discover / the true depth of a well— / drop a stone, / start counting...." When I read "Freefall," I get the same feeling that I get before I commit to a move on the

crux of a route, or when I look down and realize I'm far above my gear. Do we capture experiences best in poetry when we're trying to write about something else entirely? Does that mean my "climbing" poems aren't really climbing poems at all?

Some of my favorite poems of physical landscape gesture towards emotional terrain, conjuring a world Gerald Manley Hopkins might have recognized when he said:

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there...*

In *A Dream of White Horses*, elite climber Edwin Drummond attempts to unite those inner and outer topographies through scattered poems. I say "scattered" not just because they are dispersed throughout his prose memoir, but also because the effect of reading these poems is disjointed, as if he has tried to convey a climber's stream of consciousness, fragmentary thoughts in a moment's movement. This form is particularly apparent in pieces like "I Fell" and "Night-Fall":

*Gripped – tugged – jiggled
juggled – flakes – fingers
fumbled – footholds stumbled*

British climber and poet Mark Goodwin takes a similar approach, letting his work dance and dyno around the page, creating an energetic, disconnected sort of feeling. His poems often teeter on edges. "I Turned" describes walking the fringes of a city, undertaking a balancing act reminiscent of climbing:

*...I'm here

on the city's rim.

It's perfectly still
as it spins; I hurtle

off...*

Goodwin's poems are alive to the way the world can seem stationary and in flux at the same time, catching paradoxes in their weft.

Recently, cutting-edge alpinist Andy Kirkpatrick—an award-winning author of prose memoirs and instructional books—has grappled with the idea of attempting poetry:

I think one reason to try my hand at this is that it's Alpine-style writing, not the normal siege of words used in prose, where you've got vast armies to try and make your point, the battle you want to win to move someone, that it's not just a junk of words, but a goosebump, or small laugh, or little tear. In all my writing I've tried to keep it short and simple, to get to the point, a simplicity (that) is harder than long and complex (writing). With poetry it seems you're stripping those words down to just the armature of the meaning.

I love the idea of poetry as “Alpine-style writing,” pared back to its essence. In the poems I started writing at Banff, I often found myself obsessing over tiny details: the precise width of a crevasse, the flight pattern of a crow over Stange—fragments that might distill my notes and impressions into singular instances. I started to visualize each stanza as a move on a climb, as if I were making small steps with my feet, getting them into the right position before reaching for a hold. I was thinking of Earl Birney, but also of Marya Zaturenska’s poem “Inscription on a Mountain” and how she describes elements that might be otherwise invisible: how the “colorless pure air...sculptures a clean branch / From storm and avalanche.” Perhaps the “goosebump” form is well placed to capture those minute observations, the kinds of features you notice when you’re studying the detail of a route: a single pebble, a lost cam rusting in a crack. Poet Michael Donaghy describes the poem as a “diagram of consciousness.” Does his comparison imply that poems are well-placed to mirror the thought-processes a climb might invoke: the unfolding of thoughts in the space between one hold and the next?

Although I thought of my climbing poems as a series of discrete moves—almost like smearing my feet up a slab—the finished versions always seemed more general than I had intended, more sweeping, less specific. As I wrote, I felt that I was leaving sensations out, describing the idea of climbing rather than its physical expression. Ultimately, I suspect that such problems relate to the fundamental similarity between an ascent and a poem, a theory Roberts implied back in 1939: “Perhaps, in the end, pure descriptive poetry, whether of mountains or of mountaineering, is not possible: the underlying significance that we read into our experience is inseparable from the experience itself.”

If the realities and subjective impressions of a route are hard to untangle, it’s partly because the act of climbing can intervene in the ways we think, disrupting everyday forms of consciousness—a phenomenon that the climber and artist Dan Shippersides describes as a form of “pata-perception.” Psychologist Raymond Gibbs describes a similar idea of “embodied cognition” as the ways in which human language and thought emerge from patterns of physical activity. To put it crudely, I might say, “I climb, therefore I am.”

The inseparable nature of reflection and motion puts me in mind of Muriel Rukeyser's poem "King's Mountain" in which she reflects: "In all the futures I have walked toward / I have seen a future I can hardly name." An ascent is a particular kind of embodied cognition, a way of thinking through the body. This experience is often linked to the concept of "flow," articulated by Csikzentmihalyi—a state of complete absorption, in which emotions are not just contained but channeled. Csikzentmihalyi conducted interviews with thirty rock climbers to try and find out how they interpreted their sport. He suggested that these states occur when the climber's resources are well-matched to the challenges of the route, so that their actions merge with their awareness in a fluid sequence.

The deep immersion experienced in flow states makes them singularly difficult to express linguistically. They can only be understood through breath and muscle. They must be enacted, not described. Like good poems, they can't be paraphrased. When the poet Don Paterson defined a poem as "a little machine for remembering itself," he meant that poems are preserved in their entirety, to be carried around and repeated by the reader. Climbs are little machines for repeating themselves too. Sets of instructions, suggestions for the body. You can't understand a rock climb fully by watching someone else do it; you have to climb it for yourself. A poet quoted in Csikzentmihalyi's book described climbing as a form of "self-communication"

The justification of climbing is climbing like the justification of poetry is writing; you don't conquer anything except things in yourself.... The act of writing justifies poetry.... The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not a moving up but a continuous flowing.

If the purpose of the "flow" is to keep flowing, perhaps a climbing poem can never truly be finished. But the Scottish poet, mountaineer and scientist G.F. Dutton (1924-2010) refused to be daunted by that challenge. There's a constant emphasis on process in his poems, which he often likens to physical exercise. In a poem like "fault" (from *Rock: Facing Up to the Stars*) he describes a climb in which "each logical grip" is "a grope towards luck." His images are brief, resonant and exact like the "Alpine-style" of writing Andy Kirkpatrick described. "The movement of [Dutton's] poems," Gerry Cambridge explains, "with their enjambment and at times uneven line lengths, seems in fact the lineal equivalent of a mountaineer's questing of a cliff face to a—hopefully—revelatory conclusion."

In "solo," Dutton even manages to incorporate a sense of what cannot be said about climbing, what cannot be reached:

*that clean white rock, no winds to cry
about its sharpness, no one by*

to check how near the top

he who set it up

climbs with delicate hands

gap to gap

glad of the almost absence.

It is these “almost absences,” by which we so often measure our climbing and our writing: the blank space on the page that informs us something is a poem; the difference between what can be held and what can not; the relationship to silence or to air.

As Andy Kirkpatrick concluded after trying to write poetry for the first time: “What matters is not the words, but the music they make, whatever order they come in, even of discordant; that I sing in my head, and write down what I hear, that you read them there and hear them played back.” What matters is not always the climb but the experience of it. A poem may never capture that experience exactly (not even Earl Birney’s detailed, unraveling narrative can do that) but it can gesture toward it, beautifully.

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