Over the Hill

EDWIN DRUMMOND

The first ascent

took nine months.
Wintry, skin-deep streams filled
harebell-blue as the two hills swelled. . .

The red slopes inched: shaken,
when a head appeared at the rim you yelled.
Then the avalanche – held
by the rope she slipped.

Now between her lips
the summit drips.

A Little Exercise

It glows
looking up from the rocks
Stopping me

a red hole

On Stanage
beneath the heathery edge
a basin of shimmer a great raindrop
living on a ledge

rocking the sky

And I
Enough to bathe a son or daughter in
a mirrory mortar
cupped by the tors
above the swollen November moors

Elbow deep
clear as cider
A mouth asleep in the grit

I dipped and played my hand like a crab
clouding the sand

waking
breaking the waters over the lip

The wind moans and pushes
bearing down the bone
brown buttresses

I must make a move

Gripping spreading my legs
I take my monstrous mother
earth
just in time by these last dregs of light
and quickly clinging climb

into sight of the road.

Bête Noire at White Ghyll

Rabbitberries, black, wet,
on ledges set with juicy grass.
A nice morning to pass . . .
Blue sky, the streambed dry,
and a climb.

Then: there – and
here – grey, woollish hair
stuck to the rocks . . .

Warm as week-old underwear,
it has my climbing smell.

I tuck some at my waist
to send – from the hill and me –
post-haste to you, alone in Italy.

Until – back down –
I see the drained teabag-eye,
in that sheep that bounced
bounced

bounced. Out of the sky.

The Climbers

(*Yosemite Valley, California*)

They smell of salami and vintage socks.
They keep food in huge, locked boxes
from the bears, though since they rarely fall
too far, they sling their long, lank hair
with sweatbands and gay bandanas,

a dash of feminity in hard rock men.
Often thin from fasts on higher things
and a lack of ready cash
– apart from an open fire – at bivouacs
they talk of hash, steaks, pancakes.
In the cracked, well-weathered hands they have
for plates, a can of tuna, and dried fruit,
for the night suffice. And sometimes ice . . .
There are no leftovers
or seconds in their world.
And very few older women.

They are the climbers, pirates
of windswept, stone seas,
blithe of the perils of society,
or who won yesterday's war in the Middle East.
Theirs is the west, and their one,
recurrent dream's to climb
out of reach of whatever long arms
would tie them down.

Slow readers of vast, hard pages,
lifers in the circle of Camp 4 boulders,
scarecrows of the white fields of light,
who would guess the poles of fear and elation
they've reached? The arpeggios of eye
-hand coordination, silently
running out on the Apron?

Puritans of straight-in cracks,
yet stretching tendons and belief
with hardware racks as keen as the Inquisition's.
Aid or clean, each move they make's a fine line:
if their holds don't break,
for days on end they take
their minds in their hands . . .
And after levitating quietly up El Capitan,
they need more cans of beer
than surgeons pints of blood in a transplant,
to cure their fear of flatness.

Solo, gamblers of eerie weightshifts dealing
with poker-faced death on the rocks
– staking all on a crystal, a smear, an expanding
flake. Reared on handshakes of golden granite,
that the sun stays up as long as they do
is their main hope. And if they cry out
– for a rope.

They hate towns, and tend to view
churches as failed spires.
Yet each would-be
engineer, erecting himself
thousands of feet above the deck, requires
the odd tool to check gravity.
With pitons, nuts and hooks they forge a way,
paying for certain sins of omission
– barely scratching the surface of the mountain.
Lean orangs of patience,
you could take one in
to clean your windows, swinging from sill to sill
for the bittersweet fruits
of years of solitary pullups.
Hairy blokes, you'll recognize one
in a city, as
he strokes the foot of a tall building.

Sometimes they hang in their hammocks for days,
trembling beneath a white sheet,
brushing off the rain.
They can take it: at worst,
in their cool eyes tears freeze.
Whose music is the silence of aloof walls,
when they're gagging with thirst a breeze;
a piton singing.

Though the best of them pause
at the bridalveil of a young spring fall,
they cannot sit still for long.
El Cap comes in . . .
gleaming granite sails a mile high.
Where they voyage deep air,
fingers sifting, juggling, weighing
how many grains of quartz,
jugs, nubbins and knife blades
will get them to port.
Where no one generally meets them.
After each safe passage
they hold only themselves,
the old block each carries
– a body of knowledge we've almost lost:
the human form, living, warm,
climbing on from the cross.

Comfortable in the clouds
these leopards – of ledges
like home – drawing no crowds

other than tourists with a telescope
seeing bright spots, believe me,
I too will not forget
my many, heavy, one night stands
with a wet sleeping bag in my hands.

What is this ocean
I seem to have been hanging around in
for thousands of years?
An old saurian
shuddering out of the granite and sandstone.
Mother Earth, Father Moon,
is this worship – reaching further than I ever have?
Can such crawling be progress,
the golden flesh
a shivering, critical mass?

The umbilicus of rope floating
below: waiting, shaking,
on the spot for hours – even days
at the same blank
I seem to have drawn myself
into a corner: the last piece or the first?
of a jigsaw, the big picture
I saw no one in before

I was held.
Spellbound – vertical dolphins
of a world full of light
half the time
on the other side of the valley
that cannot finally hold us for ever,
our rooting fingers – fins
wings dendrites
of a nervous system called civilization;
old masters yet of the gentle art of persuasion:
that it might just go.

A chess against Death: moving
here, there,
protecting our king of joy.

It has been raining for a long time.
Now the rock is clean again: an empty page,
another day. I lift up my hands,
a kind of surrender, paean
to the way
blood climbs too, the old red and blue
rope unbroken, that lowered me down
the slippery slope when heaven opened.

Fisherman-still – one of those that get away –
on the brink of something much deeper,
hoping my luck holds,
that the wind that shook me out of bed
with the swifts swishing past,
doesn't turn cold. Steeper,

slowing down fast, over my head
a huge roof, the galaxy
– all I want to have read.
As once I climbed to reach a ledge
before night fell,
the last six feet
is out of reach.

Evening.

Grey woodsmoke,
quiet conversation. Hiss
of a stove.

Chink of carabiners in the woods.
They've been missed for a week.
Dusty, redskin-cheeked
from the sun glancing back.

'How was it?'

Cups are offered,
and placed by the fire
in a small, tribal circle of tents.

All night the wild bay laurel throws its scent.

To Be or . . .

(*on Mt Sumbra*)

On the butterfly-tattered ribs
I kick some rocks,
loose, jigsaw-jagged blocks

granite gasps

– Frozen: no other climbers around
the ground inching . . .
Glancing down is that blood-drop

the car?
The crash of a stream far off
– I hold my breath –

has stopped.
All a dream?
If Berkeley were here
would he shout for help
– hoping Johnson was hiking nearby?
Or fall,

silent, written on by lichen in a decade or two?
And where do
these fingers and toe-keys fit?
I climb therefore I am
so far: on the spot
where the hawk pits the mouse like a plum,
and caterpillars
crawl for the shape of wings to come?
Or back home where you are,
reading the newspaper, listening for the car?

A ring
-piton: I slip my finger in.
Time to thi –
I blink: where the sky floats,
standing at the brink, stark-white . . .
goats. Who've seen a ghost.



30. Edwin Drummond on way to poetry recital.