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Learning to climb

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LEARNING TO CLIMB

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Michael Zensius

December 1998

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ABSTRACT

LEARNING TO CLIMB

by Michael Zensius

This project is a narrative poem in blank verse. In the tradition of poets Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder, the poem tells the story of Rex, who through learning the rudiments of climbing rocks and mountains also learns about the world around him.

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PREFACE

In writing a narrative poem in a traditional form such as blank verse, a poet is confronted with two heuristics, two controlling priorities that intimately constrain and sometimes even generate verse. The first is the set of exigencies that are bound up in constructing or reconstructing a narrative. The lyric poet who undertakes to write a long narrative poem quickly sees that the most seemingly simplistic dime novel, the most formulaic work of genre fiction is a complex set of relationships among characters, among events, and between a past and a future that are internal to the work. For that poet, narrative manifests itself as a sometimes problematic multiplicity of considerations which arises out of the intention to write settings, characters, and situations that will consistently resemble reality.

The second heuristic, the condition of adhering to a consistent metrical pattern, is known to anyone who writes metrical poetry. Fredrick Feirstein in "The Other Long Poem" writes:

It's relatively easy to create dramatic moments in free verse, and a number of poets have managed to knit them together into first-rate sequences. But anyone who's tried it knows that it's virtually impossible to develop a book-length narrative without meter--and call it poetry not prose fiction. The conflict of opposites between the metrical line and the prose rhythm of natural speech sustains and poetically mirrors the tension in the dramatic structure itself. It

establishes in sound a series of expectations out of which suspense, surprise, reversal, and so on, can come. In effect it does poetically what the content does dramatically. On the other hand, free verse forces the poet to rely on rhetorical devices that tend to create melodrama or to focus the reader on the poet's "voice" instead of on the action--and so distances him perhaps altogether from involvement in the intended drama (10-11).

Feirstein's attitude towards free verse is not entirely an attitude that I share, especially in the case of Gary Snyder, which we will come to in a moment. I do not agree that the lack of a metrical counterpart to dramatic, narrative expectation and surprise "forces" free verse poets to resort to rhetorical gimmicks with the side effects that Feirstein describes. Even so, what he writes about dramatic tension and expectation and the formal counterpart it has in metrical poetry is true. Moreover, it is just as true in terms of process as effect. At least one poem by Snyder and many of the narrative works of Robinson Jeffers, one of Snyder's ideological, if not aesthetic predecessors, are illustrative of ways in which these heuristics can be mediated. As such these two poets influenced me in the writing of this work.

Free verse narrative poetry is not liberated from the heuristic of effective storytelling in any way similar to its release from meter. As evocative, as imagistic as the best of twentieth century free verse can be, when a free verse

poet chooses to write a narrative, no amount of imagery will compensate for recondite characterization or an occluded sequence of events.

Near the end of the poem "Bubbs Creek Haircut," with the line "all this comes after:" (75) Snyder announces that most of the narrative action of this poem has been a flash forward, and in the coda that follows this line, reader and speaker are back in the barber chair in San Francisco. In this way Snyder gets past the challenge of time continuity in his narrative with frustrating simplicity and ease.

The poem tells the story of the preparations for a trip to the Sierra, and the trip itself:

hiking up Bubbs Creek saw the trail crew tent
in a scraggly grove of creekside lodgepole pine
talked to the guy, he says
"If you see McCool on the other trailcrew over there
tell him Moorhead says to go to hell."
late snow that summer. Crossing the scarred bare
shed of Forester Pass
the winding rock-braced switchbacks
dive in snowbanks, we climb on where
pack trains have to dig or wait,
a half iced-over lake, twelve thousand feet
its sterile boulder bank
but filled with leaping trout:
reflections wobble in the
mingling circles always spreading out
the crazy web of wavelets makes sense
seen from high above.
a deva world of sorts--it's high
it is a view that few men see, a point
bare sunlight
on the spaces
empty sky
moulding to fit the shape of what ice left
of fire-thrust, or of tilted, twisted, faulted
cast out from this lava belly globe.

The boulder in my mind's eye is a chair (72-73).

Snyder's style here is of a piece with that of his shorter works. Subjects attach to predicates only by inference in many cases, and there is neither a traditional romantic conception of wilderness nor an inhumanist view as in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Still, as opaque as some of the geographical and religious references are, there is little doubt concerning what follows what, in terms of narrative sequence. Nor is there any doubt, contrary to what Feirstein writes, that what we have here is poetry. In the end, when the barber chair is swung around, the haircut announced, the flash-forward that is the heart of the poem--and the entire story to be told--is bookended by the barber-shop lines with a symmetry and clarity that are nothing if not formal.

His first two published volumes excepted, Robinson Jeffers was almost entirely a free verse poet. Unlike many of the American free verse poets of the latter half of this century, however, he was steeped in the metrical tradition. He possessed a very clear understanding of the rules he was bending and at times deviating from entirely. In Jeffers' work, partly as a result of a strict Calvinist education, formal--if non-traditional--consistencies prevail. "Tamar," his first published narrative work, is such a poem.

While "Tamar" contains no sustained repetition of a standard metrical pattern, sections in the work alternate

between having lines 10-15 syllables long and lines about double that length. These longer sections, the majority of the poem itself, invoke introspection. The longer lines are where the unspoken thoughts and broodings of the characters can be found, and where authorial intrusion most often takes place. Sections made up of shorter lines are more often dialog, and include the kind of pragmatic motivations that propel narrative. A metaphor for this kind of alternation might be opera, specifically the nineteenth-century Italian opera of Rossini and his contemporaries. Like the operatic works of these composers, (as opposed to Wagner, for instance), "Tamar" has definite moments where the language has greater significance than in the connective tissue that surrounds such aria-like sections. As for the more pragmatic, connective lines, their counterpart in my opera metaphor would be sections of recitative, where much of the dialog, and by extension, much of the motivation for the sequence of events is laid out. These sections are clearly subordinate to the "arias" where the most important statements are made, and to the accompaniment of the most beautiful music.

The very beginning of "Tamar" presents an example of these two contrasting modes. The poem opens with Lee Cauldwell having a very bad riding accident on the edge of sea-cliffs, a setting inspired by those where Jeffers made his home:

A night the half moon was like a dancing-girl,
 No, like a drunkard's last half-dollar
 Shoved on the polished bar of the eastern hill-
 range,
 Young Cauldwell rode his pony along the sea-cliff;
 When she stopped, spurred; when she trembled, drove
 The teeth of the little jagged wheels so deep
 They tasted blood; the mare with four slim hooves
 On a foot of ground pivoted like a top,
 Jumped from the crumble of sod, went down, caught,
 slipped;
 Then, the quick frenzy finished, stiffening herself
 Slid with her drunken rider down the ledges,
 Shot from sheer rock and broke
 Her life out on the rounded tidal boulders.

The night you know accepted with no show of emotion
 the little accident; grave Orion
 Moved northwest from the naked shore, the moon
 moved to meridian, the slow pulse of the ocean
 Beat, the slow tide came in across the slippery
 stones; it drowned the dead mare's muzzle and
 sluggishly
 Felt for the rider; Cauldwell's sleepy soul came
 back from the blind course curious to know
 What sea-cold fingers tapped the walls of its
 deserted ruin. . . . (3)

It bears repeating that even the shorter lines at the
 beginning of this passage are not written in any regular
 metrical pattern. They are only generally shorter than those
 that follow, their syllable count being at times as few as
 six and at other times as many as thirteen. Nor are the
 shorter lines, which I have suggested are connective tissue
 (in this case, mixing metaphors, a kind of prelude,) totally
 devoid of image or other lyrical device. It is not my
 assertion that these connective passages are, because they
 connect more lyrical stretches, in some way more than
 relatively prosaic. Verse is verse, and prosaic verse, in
 the end, is mainly a contradiction in terms, with all due

respect to Frederick Feirstein. Nonetheless, a couple things other than lines double in length signal that there are new emphases after the double space.

First, the "you" that is addressed from the very outset of the new section must refer to the reader, and only the poet/speaker/narrator, by extension, can be making the address. This rhetorical device is an embodiment of the novelistic authorial aside, where true to his philosophical leanings, Jeffers is explaining to us just how "little" what has befallen Lee Cauldwell is in the greater scheme of things. Almost a decade later Auden would write with the same kind of bleak perspective in his much shorter, lyrical work "Musée des Beaux Arts":

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything
turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster;
.....
 . . . the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into
the green
Water; . . .

This is not to claim that Auden was influenced in this poem by the opening of Jeffers' "Tamar," but the fact that Auden is writing about a painting suggests at least one aesthetic correlation. In the painting by Breughel that Auden is reflecting on, the plight of Icarus is ignored by the world he is falling towards. There is a near-pastoral stillness to the scene which is amenable to the lyrical

treatment by Auden: the actual fall of Icarus is downplayed such that if a viewer of the painting did not know its title the figure falling into the ocean might be at first unnoticed and then, when seen in its vastly subordinate position, inexplicable. Similarly, the aftermath of Cauldwell's accident in the seaside wilderness is a largely still scene which Jeffers promptly diminishes in importance by placing it in a context that can only trivialize it. While young Cauldwell drifts in and out of consciousness there is little going on that would propel any kind of narrative. Here is an instance where the heuristic of narrative coherence lets up, in the sense that a realistic portrayal of events allows for the kind of stillness that allows lyricism without the feeling that something is being objectified and depicted entirely outside of narrative time. This allows Jeffers, in longer lines and long, periodic sentences, to render the significance (and relative insignificance, for him,) of this incident lyrically, in a mode different from the active narrative that opens "Tamar."

It may not be necessary to decide whether this alternation of narrative and lyrical modes show Jeffers reacting to heuristics of the creative process or making controlled aesthetic decisions. To say that Jeffers extends the line length at this point early in "Tamar" to somehow facilitate the authorial aside, or that the section is more lyrical because, as is the case with Auden, a relatively

still, actionless moment is presented by the course of events in the narrative may be to make a distinction without a difference. Both of these suppositions can be supported, and they are not mutually exclusive. But what we do know is that Jeffers makes no clear attempt to fashion this 61 page narrative as one continuous lyrical burst. In other words, Jeffers cannot fail to sustain the interest of the reader if he never tried to do so in the tradition of shorter, lyric poetry. It could be suggested that this is the way that he dealt with the twin challenges of a narrative and a near-metrical, consistent, poetic system.

"Learning To Climb" is blank verse. Drawing on the free verse narratives of Snyder and Jeffers as influences, I somewhat smugly looked on my work at the outset of composition as more rigorous, more aesthetically valid for being metrical than it would have been if free verse. The metrical imperative of iambic pentameter lines was to mirror the sometime paradoxical constraints that climbing and the wilderness put on someone who would venture into them safely, much the way that Feirstein says it does in these kinds of poems. To a certain extent, it did. Like Jeffers, I connect lyrical stretches in my poem with lines which, if they are still metrically accurate, are meant to be much more transparent conveyances of plot than the sections they connect.

At times this felt like a conciliation on my part; I am not in a place with this aspect of my craft where I want to stay for long. A narrative expressed in one continuous lyrical stretch is a contradiction in terms, but it still seems as though this is an impossibility that should be striven for. Snyder's "Bubbs Creek Haircut," while much shorter than either "Tamar" or my poem, was influential in the way that it flashes forward and back with confidence. It was reassuring to see in Snyder's work the extent to which the reader can be expected to puzzle out aspects of the narrative sequence. This was the most difficult aspect to writing this poem.

In the end of his book about the failed British attempt on the South West Face of Mt. Everest in 1972, Chris Bonnington writes:

But for us the Face had proved impossible. We had been beaten by a combination of high winds and extreme cold. I am confident that no other party could have done much better than Autumn, but even this does not mean that the Face is impossible in the Autumn. Given the right trick of circumstances, a few days of freakish, windless weather at the right time, a party could climb the South West Face of Everest at this time of year (267).

Though I hope I was more successful in my poem than the British were on Everest, Bonnington's account occurred to me now and again as I crafted this work. Each of the heuristics I write of in this preface make demands on the poet that are

both generative and restrictive. During the writing of "Learning to Climb," the imperative of telling a coherent story was difficult such that it sometimes reminded me of the passage by Bonnington above. As much as I hope was accomplished here, more was learned. A poet undertaking to write a long narrative poem in meter has, like a climber, many and diverse exigencies to surmount.

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LEARNING TO CLIMB

PROLOGUE

The real wind and storm of mountain peaks
will have its say though I might never ask,
existing such as thwarts and confounds tense
the howling blasts, such words as were, and are,
and did, and would, and was, and lastly, is,
torn from their anchors to these snowy cliffs
and lost. Yet still, I ask for music wind,
just as it blows and piles corniced death
upon the rocky crenellations of
the utmost border of our striving, I
would order its pitch and rhythm such
that even as my limbs are locked around
my tools and I know that all of this
is but a clawing at the glassy face
of nondescript foreshortened life, the last
most desperate chance is best, when nothing else
unlocks a way the seizing rot of time
might be undone. I would my rigid verse
gave voice to truth as met by Rex, a friend,
who learned, and learning, grew and changed from what
he was to something new, far more than he
had been before.

PART ONE

1.

I work a real job these days. I guess I have grown up. I don't see Sarah much, more now and then than regular. I say I'd like it to be more than that but I know that is less than true. In grammar school a priest told me to tell him what I did the week before and he would tell me then what my priorities must be. Okay. Whatever. She and I have less to talk about these days. The operative cliché would be that we have grown apart. It's true there are things I should have done and things she should have done. It just seems sure it never would have worked. Besides, I have moved on, if only in a sense. She's tried much more than I to stay in touch with Rex, and yet the few times that we've talked I sincerely get the feeling I know more of what has filled the years for him than her.

Sometimes I am not sure. Sometimes I hear her say what I thought he would never tell her of. I know he cherishes the stretch

that he has made, the distance he has put
between himself and where we were when all
of us were closer than we are. It gives
him maybe too much credit saying that
he is above it all, I think.

2.

He told me once about a dream he had.

He had imagined Nineteenth Avenue
for years, ever since his grandma took them to
The Palace of The Legion of Honor,
to see some touring art he was too young
to care about. Almost thirteen, what worth
he later knew there is in any art
that finds its way into a showing at
a venue such as that was lost on him.
It was impressive nonetheless the way
the place was set on that blunt point of land.
Land's End his father called it and he told
his son about a trail that wound around
the situation of the art, down past
the view of that not unmajestic site,
and as his father told it, past, like time,
the rusted hulks of bunkers, machine-gun nests,
invisible in all the unwatched wind

and rain of decades since such placements were
installed to hold at bay but one half of
the world war that was current conflict.
On other shores that conflagration burnt
the husks and hulls of all that earnest war
away in instances like days, like seeds
that fall from planting hand into the wind
and land just short of where they might have grown.
His father said the trail went to end
at Fort Point, under the Golden Gate.

He never went to check. He only saw
the trail in his mind, a memory
encrusted with the jewelry of youth
later recalled.

One night when cold and fear about a route
ahead were laid low by fatigue, and rest
gave way to sleep, he dreamt he was back there
again, on Nineteenth Avenue, but now
he was alone, save for the crowds of folks
that would be out on any given day.
He found himself out walking down the street,
north on the avenue and through the park
until the road ends or stretches across
the airy lonesome yawning gap in land,

the mute west end of nation, all the life
he knew. It took him all a day to reach
the promontory, walking in his dream.
Just as the sun rescinded its demands
on the slouching angle of its route
across the sky, there, at that crux of dream
was nothing waking nothing sleeping, none,
no further scene to take that blinking stage
as what morning would call another dream.

He woke up quicker than he thought he would,
and stared up at his tent. The wind had stopped.
Outside he knew the sky was choked with stars.
His eyes adjusted. He could see his breath
ascend the corner of the tent his head
had sought out while he slept. The nylon bag
of clothes that he had jammed last night into
the head space of his sleeping bag was loose.
He didn't turn. He searched with fingers out
across the bitter cold of nylon floor
outside his bag. He hooked his book instead.

Everest: The South-West Face it read. He stared.
He felt as if he had been living with
the people in the book. Sometimes the words,
the denotative payload of the climb,

the story there to read would fade,
and it would seem all metaphor for life.
The siege, the teamwork of it all.
The way life could depend on how much rest
you got, and how much food you ate, how much
you had to carry and how high, became
for him the nested truth of day to day,
so that he did not climb along with them
as much as just escape into that world.

He said he realized this when he learned
how many of the men in that first book
had died, not from old age, but other climbs,
some of which had summited, some not.
He learned this all eventually. It went
unsaid, he thought, as if he'd known it all
along.

Still I could hear it in his voice,
the way the climbers seemed suspended. Not
in air, abseiling down from conquered routes
on rock, taking this last one slow so they
could catch the view from that rappel just one
last time, instead they seemed suspended in,
for him, imagined time, their climb a kind
of place where he could go to be himself

or what it was he wanted that to be.

I didn't like
the reasons I remembered he would want
to lose himself in these pursuits like that.
I don't see Sarah much, it's true, the years
can tear all but the most tenacious guilt
away, but talking showed how guilt can change,
even the dregs of it remaining after
reflection and the passage of the years
can melt and dry it almost all away.

That trip was not to climb per se, instead,
the goal to hike up high with some new friends.
And yet it seems so much a part of all
the same big thing that he could scarcely tell
the one trip from the other, lesser hike,
as all bound up as it was with itself.

He said that trip was well away and past
the start of things, as much as all of this
had a specific start. He looked up at
the fabric of his roof. He could not see
the dampness in the dark, the beads of dew
he understood the night was leaving there.

3.

I met him when we were both younger than
we knew.

When Sarah lived downtown, she threw these big
and loungy barbecues on Saturday,
out back of home, for then a slouching wreck,
victoriana wincing in the cracks
and seams of plywood panels, drywall, like
the aged fighter needing money not
as much as rest will try to squint through eyes
just puff and flush from far too many bouts.
Even now the students move through those
dilapidated firetraps, just as
they sidle through the university
that skulks mere blocks away--most with as much
awareness of the places where they live
as what they say they want to learn just down
the street from there.

So Sarah opened up
her codeless wonder every weekend and all
would more or less arrive from noon till dark
and pretend that was as good as it could get.

That was the summer of my junior year.

The weekend after Wednesday's July fourth,
and Sarah had me park the cars out on
the street again, to clear the back just like
we had for Independence Day. Her new
boyfriend that year was Rex, and I thought,
just like I'd thought before he came along,
that like the other guys, he seemed all right,
if out of depth here in the neighborhood
so old and settled in the surveyed lines.

4pm, except it felt like noon,
so even way back when in slacker days
I figured that I should be getting off
some real paying work someplace, where I
would need a shower not as much before
coming even here as want
one. Early felt like lazy, heat
lapping up from the street,
Sarah's second floor place. Half-assed
hiding in from out the sun.
I drank her beer and told myself it cooled
me off. I wondered where I was to crash
that night. Sarah looks a little warm
in denim, and a funky cotton T-shirt--

Her hair draped forward over bare shoulders, light

from streetlights level with her window, gold,
a shimmer of a frame, her face, her hair
draped forward over mine, afraid to look
but in her eyes, I crane to gaze, head back
until I spin through darkness limned and framed
with golden hair and emptiness.

I slid
down, back against the cool of inside wall
and drew the life out of the latest beer.

4.
The conversation had some trouble with
the fact that we just spent a little too much
time with each other and in Sarah's place.
4pm still just enough in preparation for
some talk around open this, talk of that,
create some rumor to hash through.

Just six of us were there, Sarah making food,
I thinking of the night, too much of her
and all the golden bordered void.

That night at Sarah's I, at her place I,
attending the party/drink-in I, early on,
mostly just sat and drank and did not blame

the hostess for the stalking want-to's my heart
and-less-prone-to-guilty-feelings head
were harboring. Back against the cool
of inside wall, there in the hall, the clear
intention of the ogle felt to me
like blasting light, a silent shout
recedes but not before the guilt that should
come next.

So Pete and Laura got there more like five,
and Pete immediately launching to
the latest escapade, the latest move,
the latest grand and flailing lurch across
the void of never will you get a job
where doing that is doing what the world
will cut a check for very soon; and damn
you maybe Pete, just maybe just goddamn
your ass to hell sometimes for it, and all
the ways you might be right as well,
just like the folks who wonder at the talk
of how Olympic starlets may just get
just clear of all the teenage funk just like
the rest of us, or more or less, and then
these optimistic pricks, exposing all
of us for clutching jealous drifting fools,
all smirk and condescension as we watched

the golden medal-children grin and spout clichés, the world at their feet, and yet we knew, were sure, that years to come would make these virgins sacrificial to some god we thought that they, like us, but even worse, to pay for their success, they more than us were doomed to serve.

So, like I said, that's just the way Pete was. That's not to say he wasn't liked.

Laura was his latest longest run of girlfriend, the prominence for me of Peter's dating history.

Laura went to Sarah, tried to help, such as it was.

So Pete and Rex and Kevin sat and drank. I split the difference, slouching in the hall.

5.

They weren't drunk enough to keep the talk away from politics. I was. But still, I heard, and thinking back on it, that may

be when it all began for Rex, or just,
at least, the start of all of it.

It sprang
from Pete, his latest greatest thing.

He said, this weekend on the Sunday shows
I saw some stuff that really made me sick.
Sam Donaldson and all the rest were full
of shit about the way the truth of all
the sex and lies would someday show in votes
and other public outrage.

Kevin wondered whether it would not.

Of course it won't. Or maybe after all.
The real laugh is how they figure this
is going to be something people care
about, that somehow folks who slept through all
the rest might wake for this. What really is
the problem is, Pete took another swig,
before he went around the bend of this,
his latest circular rant, the real thing,
the real problem is the way that they
all think that people don't. That people aren't
all out there listening to this. He paused,

and pausing, stopped.

But Kevin wouldn't let it go.

He said, ah, finally we get you to admit
the way things really are. At last the great
and mighty optimist has let it slip
that all is not placed at the feet
of the almighty voting mass. His voice
was louder, alcoholic for the hour,
and yet his heart was hardly backing this,
seeing the things that Pete had said for what
they were, just circles spinning, spewing forth,
a dilettante their source.

And Rex just shook his head, in time with mine,
one of the few times we'd agree, and rose,
and walking over my sit-in in the hall
he went to see the girls. I didn't care.

In answer Pete
just shook his head, so Kevin tried to change
the subject, turning as he did, to me.

So Dave, where have you been? The rest of us
went camping last weekend out at the beach.
Was Pete's idea, like we should bond, like some

retarded throwback to the stuff they used to do when we were living in the dorms. Remember all the bullshit they contrived for us to get to know each other back when we first started school? As if they had to help, as if we didn't want to screw-- excuse me, get to know--the chicks that then, that suddenly were living down the hall... Damm! So anyway last weekend we, that's Pete and I, and Laura, Sarah, and some other folks got out to one of these state parks that Pete had all scoped out and we just hung out there from Friday night through all of Saturday and hit the road back here--

Well gee, I said. It sounds like it was fun. I must have missed the messages you left.

By this time Pete had mellowed out, or gone to bitterness, sometimes those were the same. You weren't working morning shifts last week?

Was true enough, I shrugged. I wasn't as frustrated as I looked. It could be said back then that Kevin didn't have a life.

Sometimes it seemed like he could have had fun out in the rain, as long as all the rest of us were there to soak with him. Back then I thought that he was just a lonely dork, but looking back on it I realize that his priorities were better than the rest of ours. For him, to spend the day with friends was all there was. He didn't know, maybe, that this was how he thought, but still, as time went on I realized that I was getting this a little late.

6.

More people came. And then they left. The heat unseen gave out in darkness, like a rod, that broken crumbles into breezes, blows over the horizon and is gone. The middle of the night found Pete and me out on the stoop where Sarah's stairs came up to meet her door. I asked about the trip.

You got Sarah to go someplace outside?
I asked offhandedly, when we had both been silent for a while.

Sure, he said. And Kevin, Laura too.

Well yeah, I would have figured them, I said.
It's just that Sarah's never seemed the type.

Well yeah, he said. It's true, but Rex was more
convincing than I could have ever been.

It seems he is a backpacker, at least
back when he was a kid. He said he'd dig
a trip like this. He called it car-camping.
It was a blast. She doesn't often date
guys quite like this. He's very new for her.

How do you mean? I asked. He didn't speak
at first. He drank some of his beer, then said,
impracticalities like how to camp,
and stuff like that. He moved our tent away
when we had set it up. He picked it up,
the whole entire thing, and carried it
back to some trees away from all the view.
It bothered me at first a little bit.
But sure enough we had more privacy
away from all the folks who showed up
late on Friday night.

There didn't seem
a lot to say to that. I drank my beer.

One thing was a little strange, Said Pete.

Oh yeah, I asked, and didn't try enough
to sound as though I cared.

It seemed as though he didn't like the beach,
Pete said.

I asked him what he meant by that.

Just that it seems--no that's not right, he said.
More like it didn't seem that he had liked
the beach till then, like when you meet someone
and spending more and more time with her,
she starts to seem as if--unique, like there
is nothing in your past you can relate
to this. And then, just when everything
seems right, it's not that something goes awry
as much something old and long since thought
discarded and forgotten flashes past
her face, or rides out on something that she says.
A thing she doesn't, couldn't understand.
Some sick familiarity just might
attract you more to her for this, but still,
the past you thought you left has shown itself--

she doesn't know, but things have changed. It was like that with Rex that weekend. I don't think he thought I noticed it, and yet I can't escape the feeling that he might have liked the trip even a little more if we had picked another place to go.

I wasn't finding much at all to say to this, and it was late, long past the point when it was rude not to respond. We sat and watched the bugs fly at the bulb that was the landing light. Some minutes passed, then Pete got up to leave. He staggered in to Laura, stopped outside again to ask if I needed a ride. I answered no.

You're the only one still here, he said.

Yes.

Even Rex has gone on home, he said.

Softly through the window I could hear the kitchen radio, some all night jazz, and Sarah singing barely to be heard.

I looked at Pete. I looked away. And drank.

He didn't even shake his head. They left.

PART TWO

7.

Rex wondered later why he hadn't thought to invite the rest of them, to say something about his plans. In truth, they were not plans as such, and maybe that was part of why he went alone, of why he stuffed the pamphlet pitch into his pocket as he left the mountaineering store.

The sunset caught us by surprise he talked. The pitch for the beginners climbing class was so benign, covert reading in the car outside the store. A photocopied sheet, the kind get folded over twice and mailed but not to me, at least not yet, so that I had to go and get my own.

I felt a little dumb, he said, and thought I made too much of all of this, and yet just picking up the pamphlet felt like first

moves up from someplace I had better leave,
if only in the end to fail, falling back.
My sense of self descended on my mind
and even on my body like a weight,
as if to throw my balance off and send
me falling back to where I'd started from.
Bathos and self-centeredness that come
from terror, stepping higher as you go.

They say traverses are as scary as
it gets.

I later found my first ascent
was not a real climb at all, and yet
the clarity has been the very same
as then, when I found what a top-rope was.
There hasn't been a real difference,
the end is only a little sharper on
the lead for me, only a little scarier,
and no more real than then, in most respects.

It was two days. I wasn't talented.

The first was actually at night. I went
down to the store where I had heard about
the class, had got the famous flyer. Steep,

with all the slickness of the nervous sweat of beginners, the indoor wall was harder than it looked. I fell and dangled over folks who shopped for hiking boots and asked about the people flailing above. I might have laughed, myself.

On one attempt I reached a point above the rest that night, and looked up at the neon lights that ran the store from front to back. The woven spiral in the rope went up away much farther than I'd come up from the ground. I was about to fall, my fingers glittered with the fear of not yet swinging safely from the rope and I was far from Sarah, you, and all the rest, and being that far was being free, so I could fall as often as I would, and never want for more success than what I had already gained and known.

Even then there was an aspect to it all that lured me away from all the rest of life, a point it made for me, a hiker though I was. A kind of shout, a howling frigid numbing truth rang out,

and shouted out above my knowing then
that this may be the real thing, the knot
I tied, however bombproof manmade point
of anchorage above, instructor and
the bolt there in the concrete floor where he
attached himself with daisy-chain against
my greater weight. Right then, though I
could not have said it as I say it now,
the safety making all this bathos and
ridiculousness, I had senses of
the greatest part of all of this.

9.

Remembering that night these days it seems
as though it went by slowly, filling in
the gaps in my own memory of all
those years. School went even worse that fall,
completely forgetting to even go enough
to pass, slipping into spending too
much time at the job I worked back then,
a coffee bar just far enough from school
to make my compromising ego think
that it was actually a real gig,
the abject foolishness of thinking that
has made me wince of late, now paying for
embarrassingly huge amount of days,

of time that slipped down through the cracks of life.
There really is a cost to all of that,
I think about the time I spend each day
in reading rumors in my mail, the talk
that resumes should be updated, job
security that flutters, shivering,
a badly hypothermic heart, the pulse,
the afterimage of the beat of what
just may have been my livelihood, had I
just thought a little more, (or just at all,)
of what I would do next. I hated Rex
a little bit, as far as he had come,
but not enough to be so ignorant
to think that he had done this all as if
through alchemy.

We brought the meat in from the barbecue.
I only closed the screen, giving up
on keeping out the heat. We each sat down,
at either side of one end of the table.
Another beer. We drank too slowly to
get drunk, I thought. Rex continued talking.
I was glad at least for that, because
it seemed it could be bad to volunteer
anything that maybe led away
to anything from which it would be hard

to make it back.

The second session of the class was up at Castle Rock, a park where I had hiked a couple times before, having even seen some folks top-roping like I would at Goat. I climbed much better there, tafoni in the sandstone causing giant holes like rungs so even I, when stumped, stumped even here, the easiest of climbs that could be called a climb, the Swiss cheese bottom of the front of Goat Rock that saw a half a dozen ropes the day that we were there, the rating five-dot-oh-you-must-be-joking, I, stumped there, could at least stand in those gaping holds too big to fit that name and figure out the rest.

Eventually I almost made the top.

Hiking out I felt exultant, juvenile, silly little day pack filled with rope, my righteous share, the gear that we had used. Out on our climbs. I clutched at those like holds, the pronouns that gave me connection with what we had done that day. The hike was short,

a breeze blew down the creek towards us and made
me glad that we were moving the cars,
the trailhead, but still--I've had worse times.

10.

School got the blame for making fall go by
without a try at stepping up, or just
a try at getting back to Goat, at least.
School got the blame, but it was really you
and Laura, Pete and Sara and the rest.
The hanging out at Sarah's place was what
I think of now, if only when I wish
that my priorities had been in line
with what I want these days to have in life.
I mean it when I say that I don't mean
to say that it was your fault, I know
you think that sometimes, Dave. I can tell you
feel I've had some kind of born-again,
faux-enlightenment, and like they say
converted smokers are the worst in that
they cannot help themselves, they must
win over all the rest to living right,
or so they think. I hope I know enough
to keep from trying that. I hope. I should.

There was a summer after all of that

I wasted mostly in frustrated climbs
on boulders, most again at Castle Rock--
It was the only place I knew. Too scared,
self-consciously, to find a better way
so to improve at all of this. The book
for Skyline Boulevard was only one
of all the guides and trip reports I read
that summer, after work and weekends stuck
in town. I didn't learn till later how
these guidebooks would at times derisively
ignore the easy grades.

One morning up at Summit Rock the wind
was cool, the sky for once blown clear of smog,
so blue, the air, across to Mission Peak.
I didn't know it was a slab, what I was on,
some sloping sandstone in behind the top
of upper Summit Rock. Just three moves up
the edgy holds, the features dissapeared.
I looked back down. My little route was gone.
It would not be reversed, I thought. I could
not get back down I thought. It was
insanity to jump, the angle far
too low to clear, the ground too far below.
I stopped. I stepped behind and down, almost
hoping I would fall, and get it over with.

The foothold/handhold re-appeared, and then the next. Too scared to shake, I reached the ground and fell against the slab, to soak in all the coolness in the shaded rock. I walked around the base a while, and then I left.

11.

So I could rest, could sit and think of what to do when they finally died. That would be soon, or so I thought. It didn't seem that they could keep from falling, coming down not just from the height but also from their own so overreaching hubris. None of this made sense. The scenery was suddenly a great I-told-you-so, a great tableaux of laughing peaks that agreed with me: my friends were quite insane.

The bouldering they said was great, the rock just smooth enough so that the friction gained by sticky rubber soles seemed like some kind of spell, some bargain struck with gravity.

We met the day before, in camp, their tents between the creek and mine. The rocks behind our camp rose in a crumbled bushy cliff

a couple hundred feet then easing back
away unseen. An infinite amount
of boulder problems at its fractured base,
and not a single chalky smear to mark
that someone else had been here first. They found
me struggling along the base of one
of these. I was halfheartedly at work
on a traverse ridiculously hard,
and I was starting to believe that I
had been more coddled than guided back at Goat.
The class had been a year ago by then,
and on this backpack trip from Cedar Grove,
I thought of my first trip with Sarah to
Yosemite and how, guidebook in hand,
while she was basking near the river I
had gotten duly whipped by even routes
up boulders big as houses that the book
summarily denoted as descents,
unworthy climbs only sufficient for
returning to the ground. A couple hours
in the heat of this, sometimes not strong
enough, and other times just terrified
by ropeless height, committing moves way off
the deck, so far beyond the point where one
might even jump to ground, much less retreat,
somehow climb down and shake the fear in limbs

away, only half an afternoon of this
had left me sweaty, angry, frustrated.
Sarah caught the worst of this, though by
then largely tiredness and lassitude
and day slipped wasted into valley dusk.

So by the time I went to Cedar Grove
I had resigned myself to walking up
into the mountains only as far as trails
would go. Backpacking I could do,
by then, and would.

The loneliness was fine, he said, then paused,
though not as if he had a point per se.
The point he could have had, I thought
about. I looked away, squinting like I had
to shake the acrid vestige of a dream
unwelcome even as it is unreal.

That day my novel let me down, he said,
so that I tried my luck on that traverse.
The leftward moves almost convinced me that
they went the other way, or that they were
not there at all, when Jason and his friend,
who I would later meet as Derric, watched.
The moves were but a couple feet above

the ground, but as if to compensate,
they were sloping nothings greasy from
my sweat and inefficient ragey work.
It was lost to me that I had not
come here for this. The umpteenth time I slipped
I landed leaning back and fell onto
my back, pine-needles and small stones sticking
in my pumpy reddened hands and arms.

Are you OK? asked Jason, lending me a hand.
I dusted off and looked back at the move.

Yeah, I said and then a moment. Thanks.
I brushed my hands against my shorts just by
instinct, then shook hands. Dave.

Jason. Derric just said Hi. I looked
again at the traverse. It doesn't go
up top or anything, but still it's hard
as hell.

Agreed, said Jason, looking at the moves.
Where I was working sections at the end
of what I'd strung together Jason scoped
the whole of the traverse. Sometimes he held
his hands chest high, palms out, and marked the moves

in pantomime while walking on the ground.

Jason asked if he could take a shot at it.

I said of course.

He coasted past the start

like I had missed three giant holds that made
it possible for him to hang from straight
and therefore stronger arms and swing one through
and underneath the other, stepping sure
with feet as well, so that when he got where
my hands were coming off each time he had
so much more strength than I that he had time
to make the move around that glassy spot
controlled, not lunging as I did each time.
Part of the end gave him a little work
so that I kept from feeling like a dork,
some backpacker out to break a leg
three days from road or phone.

He went up higher at the leftward edge,
and pushing up on palms he heaved himself
onto the top, really a giant ledge,
the very bottom of the blocky rise.

He didn't say a thing. He looked at us,

then out, above our heads, and up into
the pine and cedar, afternoon of sun.
There was a gully back behind the start.
Descending that, his shirtless arms and back
only barely pumped, and having hardly raised
a sweat, he came around and looked at it
again, and looked at us and smiled. We talked.

The next two days we shared the trail,
before we reached a junction where my route
left theirs. Inspired by their climbs behind
our camp the day we met, and knowing I
would never see the two of them again,
I felt no fear of asking stupid questions.
I asked about their gear, the way they trained,
the things that I could think to pick their brains
about. At dinnertime I wrote down books,
the trip reports to far flung peaks that they
had read. They only chuckled once or twice
at what I asked. We came to where we were
to separate and Jason told me what
I later knew was what I need to know
the most. No one is looking, Jason said,
just do your thing and try your best to do
it well. But even if you don't, try not
to trip, he said. The biggest thing, he said,

is knowing that nobody else
is ever really there, that is, to see
you do your thing. Don't watch yourself, he said.
Just be yourself. Just do the things, he said,
that are the things you want and need to do,
and watch for all the bigness of the world,
and watch for all the ways that it will not
react to what you've done. It doesn't care.

Our lives are hardly conversational.
There isn't any venue for the talk,
the discourse we presume that we engage
our world in as if it were debate.
The distance that we think is there is closed.
It's best not to presume the nouns and verbs
that we deceive each other with are what
delineates the world at large. If you
and I both climb, and fall, and falling die,
where is it heard that we did not deserve
the thing that must be just another thing
that, happening, is merest movement in the air
and done? You're going back along this route.
A couple days will see you at that rock
again, the one that gave you all the work,
the one I finished off the day we met.
Try it again. Or don't. Just realize,

no matter what you do that not a thing
depends on that, except for what it is
that you decide to want for it to bear.

We smiled at each other, then they left.

I watched them round a bend and go. I stopped.

PART THREE

12.

Rex didn't speak for some time after that.

Outside a car was started, drove away.

My neighbors had their television on
and I could hear it out their windows, in
through mine. The stillness of the heatwave night
was comforting. I felt as though I'd sleep
straight through to noon, too early though it was
to be that tired.

He began again, but it was like

I had asked him what he did for kicks.

He talked of gyms, fake practice rocks he climbed,
he said for fun. He talked about the time
he first climbed snow, the way the spikes he clamped
onto his boots tore holes in almost all
his gore-tex clothes. The lateness of the hour
made the stories melt into one another.

I'd like to say we talked about some other things,
the way that Sarah left him, the way that I,
he never said he knew, had been the cause
behind the whole thing going south. I'd like
to say I had the nerve, or that I would
have had the nerve, had it come up. I was
the one who had the act I wanted to
confess. But what I won't soon forget of all
of this is the proof of what he might have known,
some see I told you so that he, (and I
was sure he knew) was nowhere to be found.
He did not have to vindicate himself.
As much as I was struck by what he knew,
by what he learned, and how he'd grown and changed,
he didn't seem to need to tell me that.
The dream was just a dream, the art the wind,
the climbing that he loved, if in a way,
were just the things he did. The clarity
of that is harrowing to me. It does
not work that there should not be more than that.
And yet that's all there was. I did not hear
from him again.

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