

SCALING THE MOUNTAIN OF WINTER

Luke Bradford

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Designed by Luke Bradford
Art by Anthony Etherin

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THE MOUNTAIN RISES. As men hike knee-deep vertical slopes, icefalls dislodge car-hunks of ice. Winds reach and fall as low as Fahrenheit. The climbers wait months in their tents. They have no margin; routine kills those trapped on its flanks.

This is the way of the climbers who have earned reputations as climbers. They are prisoners of their dreams.

A long-limbed lion of a climber with curly hair goes here and there like an ethereal nimbus. He is a climber and he will be one. We talk in the darkened attic of the valley, looping purple rope in preparation for the subzero. He enjoys deadly challenges. He has climbed.

There's so much to unpack about the hostile tip of the mountain that is high. The task of the individual. Men in the worst conditions. Each knows he may not return. Each has lost limbs.

A decade ago, a younger generation embedded in the spirit the unsmiling bonds of a Cold starting point. Generations flocked to the dark and jagged peaks which rise. Men and women scaled granite walls in summer heat in the belly of winter. When the photographer and I accompanied climbers, snow piled swollen on steep mountainsides and the temperature hovered.

After war and its slaughters, whether factory worker, engineer or mathematician, everyone scuffled for mountains. Climbing swelled in steel hours. An eagle and an ice pick. Climbers each night talked mountains and more mountains, sang songs and drank vodka. To gain admission, a climber had demons prowl outside on a mountain ledge. A mountain his art.

The blue-eyed among the most accomplished climbers will lead the expedition. He remains limber and lively in his decade. He has climbed, and has the bowlegged amble of a man with little to prove. His eyes glisten about his hunger. We climb here, and here, and here. And if you climb, they say you have.

One night I sit in the village, a burly climber joins us. We talk of long-ago mountains. They had finished a climb when they saw a sign. My God! It was Jesus, on bread and wine.

We work Alpine-style, the climbers. Rappel from dawn to dusk. Scale peaks by risky routes. To sit now with the mountains, old and young, is to hear voices rise and laughter roll in like oceans. They tell of supplies piled and a few more miles. They recall frozen feet and fogged brains (they do not use oxygen). Always there were other worlds.

Up there at night, to hear glaciers calve: Boom. Boom. My God. It was like heaven.

Another accompanied them: death.

Climbers perished trapped by swirling tempests of altitude sickness; slipped and catapulted into the abyss. Death rides insistently on your shoulder.

The leader renowned for his solo ascents. His stamina unmatched. I put the question of death's allure to him and he shakes his head. He wanted to live, always, even if along the edge of a knife. He noted an axiom: A young climber is the most endangered, as he does not know enough to worry. To that, he adds another: A climber should not draw too much comfort. That can prove a frail shield in the high.

You need luck, he says.

Rough sleep as dark imaginings
scamper through the cranium. A
climber clings to a crumbling wall. Sees
a friend fall past him. Feels creatures
pulling at his feet.

On the mountain, life becomes the
rope and unclick; secure and dig for
footholds. There is a whack of the pick
and another. They scale puzzles.
Sometimes climbers go a day or two
without food; sometimes they fail.

One climber has a tangle of dark curls
and a mischievous smile, and a love. He
has built a mountain he cannot give up.
He watched a friend slip to his death.
He needs the maw of winter.

The universe narrows to something
mystical. It's not the mountain. It's
you. It's you yourself.

Blood, sweat and climbers gather on a winter afternoon. I decline, pleading. The climbers fill backpacks with iron bars. They retain more oxygen than a well-conditioned elevator. Two nights later, the climbers are deep up the saw-toothed peak. One will mention oxygen. And he has been to the top and is the climber. The climbers also process thin air.

No one can be certain how a body will react at the top of the world. The air has half the oxygen. Climbers enter Death; it is difficult to draw breath, the heart strains to pump blood. When climbers reach the summit, their breathing will be a shallow, fast pant. They will vomit and suffer and begin to hallucinate.

A past-exhaustion night climb. He huddled inside a tiny tent and made tea for two: himself and his companion.

I felt him. And he was not there.

All of which brings us to climbing.

The favored mountain is without fixed ropes. A willingness to subsume the collective high on the mountain. Men will scale cliffs of pre-collisional granite as a rain of avalanches. The summit will pull up and sleep. As they draw within the peak, they go forward without.

All we need is weather and we will get to the top. Climbing.

Climbers should embrace suffering. If you want to feel great emotion, you must write a story. Their obsession was to conquer. They were not hand-holders. Climbers trained and came of age. Mountains came rapid-fire, as did sorrow. Two grew exhausted near the top, and that nightfall crushing cold approached. The slower perished. The brotherhood of the rope. Ice forms thick on nostrils and goggles. Hands, feet and arms go numb. A tomb forms around you.

On a mountain in winter, your state of mind eludes words. Beyond all fatigue. The weight of too many deaths. A storm coiled around a mountain. He lost his balance and fell. His body remains in a Himalayan crevasse. A climber said in a grand cathedral People die in the mountains, even the best ones.

If a storm approaches, if darkness descends, the climbers must turn back, even within sight of that summit. If I say come down, they must listen. That is how we die. Logic competes with emotion. Everyone wants.

We wander the medieval streets with the climbers. The question of to risk all falls unevenly across their shoulders. Sometimes I wonder why I do this. I don't like to climb. But we are on a mission.

That mountain, mythical and deadly, consumed him. He grew up in a shipyard, and came to climb. He took trips alone across the high winter. He lost a friend, watching him slip. Dark eyes flicker and hang on a leather cord around his neck.

I will keep climbing. Mountains are the original world, a place of passion. I need winter.

Days later, the old legend and I watch snow fall on a frozen lake. Danger weighs on him as it did not decades ago. He twitches as he moves up a rock face.

And yet, God, that mountain.

Those who stand in the shadow of that monolith in winter describe a sensation akin to an extraterrestrial world. All is black and white and gray with periodic wild flashes of razor-blue sky and sun. A path that threads the glaciers. Ice flows disgorge bones of dead climbers. A geographer making a survey gave the mountain its indifference to life and time.

The mountain will wait days and weeks and months. Here and there, they will climb and lay on its sides. They will slip into sleep. They will pray.

Why climb? Glory is not the reward. Climbing is about pleasure and pain. You are every minute of every day. But the great emotion of making, of making, is immense, diamond-hard and deadly.



SCALING THE MOUNTAIN OF WINTER is a strict erasure of the article “Scaling the World’s Most Lethal Mountain, in the Dead of Winter,” by Michael Powell, originally published in the online edition of the *New York Times* on May 9, 2017.

The article documents a group of Polish climbers as they prepare to attempt K2, the world’s second-highest mountain, in the winter — a season when no human being had ever set foot on the summit. K2 kills one climber for every four who reach its peak. In the end, the Polish team ended its 2018 expedition before reaching the summit due to bad weather.

A Nepali team became the first to reach K2’s summit in winter in January, 2021. Ten climbers reached the peak and lived; four others in the group lost their lives.

“Scaling the Mountain of Winter” was created by deleting sections of the text. The only further alterations to Powell’s article were the capitalization of newly formed sentences and the addition of line breaks to further delineate stanzas.

Erasure, a form of constrained writing, more often keeps the text in its original position on the page, with other content obscured by physical marks — classic examples include Doris Cross’s dictionary erasures beginning in 1965, and *A Humument*, Tom Phillips’s 1970 erasure of the Victorian novel *A Human Document* by W. H. Mallock (1892).

In “Scaling the Mountain of Winter,” physical markup is swapped for digital deletion, leaving behind no trace of the original piece other than the text itself.

LUKE BRADFORD is an experimental poet living in New York. His work has been published by Timglaset, *ToCall* magazine, No Press, the Blasted Tree, and others. His most recent book, *Zoolalia*, is available from Pentract Press.

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