

CLIMBING THROUGH



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by Colin John Holcombe

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Climbing Through

Life's not delusional, but sometimes finds
a curious lodgement in its different minds,
and did on the occasion of that note,
the 'summit conquered' folder left the day
that Alan fell in coming back. He wrote
just name and date, of course, and didn't say
'If I have climbed it solo, so can you'
but hardly had to when my name was scrawled
across the note in capitals. I took
the message calmly though his death recalled
a smouldering entry in our climbing book.
I nodded, saw the party to the door,
and Deborah shut the past out as before.

The long months passed. I thought on it, the fall
they'd got no warning on, no mobile call
that he was missing even. *'Broke the rules
right properly did Alan, wasn't found
for days: another of those hare-brained fools
who can't accept how difficult is ground
up there. At least to most of us.'* I thought
of Alan Shawcross as I'd known him then,
my earliest climbing partner, awkward cuss
who kept repeating: *'Dave, you'll climb again,
you know you will: you're one of us.'*
But he had gone, as though that mountain brought
more wayward danger on us than it ought.

We grow on past such idiocies, I told
myself: the rain, the early starts, the cold.
Our life was easier then, not on the go
as now from dawn to dusk, though happy to.
We had another on the way to show
whatever happened we were still that two-
some they remembered, that good partnership
that rose to challenges they too would face.
Perhaps the house was shabby, and could do
with paint and furniture, a toy-strewn place
for Sam and his new playmate — yes, that's true,
but still it offered us, within our reach,
a happiness to share in, each with each.

We both were PE teachers, different schools,
with mine more occupied with grades and rules
but in the both of them you felt the pledge
of strength in bodies bred from healthy minds.
That was the least of it, their heritage,
what any course of exercising finds:
that subtle intercourse of the lungs with breath,
and suppleness of skin with borne-out sense
of balance in the middle way which Greeks
admired and trained for in their track events —
which every pupil learns, attests to, speaks
the truth of, hopefully, though couldn't know
what part is truth and what more outward show.

5. I doubt events had undermined my strength
one jot in what I did, or that full length
I'd go to get their talents used. Most boys
who treat the workouts as another class
can have no notion how the body joys
in constant drill and exercise, which pass
insensibly into a self-regarding
need to make the most of discipline
in track events, gymnastics: run and rest.
It's not the conscious mind or state it's in
that tells the whole ensemble what is best,
but both together, interlinked by trust
to live and move in tandem, as we must.

Not that Debs too often climbed with me
or with the others much, preferred to be
a shade more independent, not so knit
into the team, its schedules, bar events,
and anyway the teams were never split
between the girls and men, no special sense
dividing us. The girls had better balance
on the whole and were more agile on
the tricky hand-spreads and the awkward holds.
The men were more determined, went and shone
the same in rain or sun or winter cold.
Less prey to their surroundings, or to stare
into the vertigo of empty air.

In time, by stages more, we two got hitched,
admittedly not stunned by it, bewitched
by each, but sensibly, as others had
who saw us bond together, where we made
as good a couple as you'll get: both glad
to help the other, have the trust repaid.
What can I say, but simply Debs was best?
She was, the girl our parents would have seen
at once as wholly strong and admirable,
where any mannishness in her had been
refined and kitted out in coloured wool:
a well-knit sexiness I saw enhanced
in college evenings where we stomped and danced.

But still the doubts came forward, working through
reception, wedding guests and what to do
about that ever constant, nagging thought
that all my body's life force came to this
reduced existence, its adventures caught
in routines that were never hers and his,
but ours together, always, bound in tight.
Though Debs was much the best of girls I knew,
indeed had ever known or could have done:
a helpmate and companion through and through,
with warmth about her and a sense of fun,
she had a steeliness that at the time
I only saw as brought on by the climb.

I need to add: in any group it's me
that people look to automatically
to be their spokesman and to push things through.
From choice of route to partner, it's a role
from teenage years I've grown accustomed to:
the centre-forward who can play in goal.
But for the rest, those inward towering peaks
that I have failed on, or I did so once,
it's true they're much more difficult, and raise
the spectacle of hurt in senseless stunts,
though not excessively: there were the days
when I was first and foremost, glad to see
myself as leader and be climbing free.

10. It's neither enemy nor quite your friend:
the rocks look distantly on how things end.
You mount upon a tough and tactile thing
resisting every ligament and bone,
which mimics how you're powered up to cling
upon that rough embodiment of stone.
And there you're tensed and swaying in the air
your muscles pulling on you, climbing belt
and ropes and buckles, boots and stanchions tensed
to just the limits you have maybe felt
but never tested quite that much, or sensed.
When all is threatening, your confidence
must reach on outward to a wider sense

Of kinship with the wind, the sun, the rain,
the growth of lichens and the softening stain
of weathering in joints or rock's thin skin
that seems a living thing, and one to last,
but isn't really, or it doesn't win
a second glance when novice climbs are past,
but to the rookie all important, should
he draw the parallel from rocks to bones.
He feels the force of things and won't oppose
the anchoring certainty that locks in stones
as part of him indeed, especially those
that leave the centre standing: inner peak
to urge him on and up if stone could speak.

In fact I see that morning all too well:
the hoar frost on the ground, the half-felt swell
of breeze about the pine trees where we camped,
and then the crisp white sunshine without heat
that stoked long shadows in the grass and stamped
a crisp vitality beneath our feet.
A bright, fresh day for climbing, where the early mist
would clear and lift the moisture from the rocks
and leave them hard and subtle-joined, apt
to serve our stratagems and belay blocks.
It seemed we had the towering future wrapped
about our waists or hung on climbing belt:
a perfect start, in short, or so we felt.

The four of us were keen to go. We made a simple breakfast, packed the camper, paid the last of calls and so were ready near to eight, each kitted up and in his thoughts the moves rehearsed and sequenced, standing clear as far as anyone of usual sorts could see ahead to what was here quite new — a looped ascent across the eastern spine and then straight upwards to the central face that rose near vertically, a rough incline of steep-grooved granite rolling from the base to wispy clouds that half obscured the view of that spiked summit we must take in too.

We started out. I led. The first high face was actually demanding, and the place where even veteran climbers come to grief, the spans extended and the handholds few. It needs a certain order, which in brief we knew about, and practised, and so climbed through. Two hours went past and then the eastern spine extended smoothly up, a curving sheet of granite needing rock nuts all the way. But five hours later we were done and had our feet upon that flattening obstacle that seemed to sway above us as the scattered cumulus seemed not so far, or even part of us.

15. Beyond, there was a ridge-way walk, no more, which led up winding to the central core that made the next objective, open patch that needs some discipline to not look down. For here a moment's carelessness can snatch at kept-in self-possession, fill and drown your body's inbuilt confidence with sudden rush of vertigo, of being thrown down ever-emptying mountain distances that pull on either side. And you alone can counter this, at least in instances that anyone will speak of. Each instead must keep a gaze upon the path ahead.

Because so ordinary I don't know why there came that dreadful draw-down of the sky that sapped my self-possession. Drops below then rushed to meet me. Stopped, and then appalled to find no rope restrained, I couldn't go on or back, but was completely stalled. Odd that on the easiest stretch I froze and, like a rookie on his earliest climb, sat down to wait. It happens. There came a pause. The party idled as I took my time to check equipment, boots, as though the cause lay in my tools, not me, when all around there came a shrilling and unnerving sound.

Anyone who climbs has had his times like these
that leave him snagged and shaky at the knees.
Continually I hugged myself and stared
hard at the ground, though this too failed. I swayed
light-headed at the distances that flared
around as some diaphanous brocade
of hurtful, ever-buzzing lights. I then
felt ill, found hands were trembling, violently,
which all had notice but ignored. I was
by now an all-too-obvious casualty,
a stretcher case, in fact, not least because
of that great interval we'd climbed on through
which now, and awkwardly, we must undo.

The next few hours of vague and drugged events,
of swaying, rope-supported, long descents
are far too painful to be brought to mind.
It was the shame of it, when no one spoke
but swung me cautiously, as though they'd find
a raving lunatic if tension broke.
Once down, all quietly changed and packed and left,
by signal someone driving in my place.
The van was parked outside the house. I fled
without a word but thankful not to face
what Deborah, out at shopping, could have said.
But there it was, my leadership was gone
as something from that mountain moved me on,

Though that I fought. The next weekend I went to test myself, if more by terror sent up cliffs and boulder climbs, beginners' slopes, to get back confidence in some degree. The which I did, but in the end the hopes were not sustaining, nor could turn the key on that dark spectre in my mind. It lurked and warned that any time it still might strike. It gibbered at me, like a passing thought that never speaks of what that day was like beyond the deep discouragement it brought. I thought of going back to that hard climb but friends excused themselves: another time.

20. The weeks, the months, the long years passed. I hiked a bit, wrote climbing articles, and biked about in Italy, and Debs came too, another character, and the wild, rough places we hardly visited, as though we two could simply put ourselves through other paces. What had happened, happened: she never asked, awaiting patiently what never came. And so it was we lived together, married, had a child, Sam, while all the same the episode, still hibernating, carried doubts and forecasts for me: every day I walked more trammelled up in what to say.

'Are you mad?' Debs said. 'We have a child, another's on the way. The time for wild assert-yourself adventures in the past. It's over, finished, done with. I don't care just why or how you couldn't make that last attempt. For God's sake give it up, and care for something closer to you, though that comes between us, doesn't it? And more, between the people were then, who took events as they encountered them, were only keen to test themselves against that constant sense of danger in the rocks that everywhere now swells to horrors which you will not share.'

How blissful were the times when Debs and I would climb and hang against the windy sky, her body filled with shadow but the soft, warm sunshine haloing her close-cropped hair when she and I in stages climbed aloft to look down on the very steeps of air. Such exhilaration holding her, the breaths there warm on cheeks just tinged with evening chill, as under sweaters, jeans and anoraks we felt the body give its muscled will to going upward through the hidden tracks, that lead to solaces when, deep in bed, we gave ourselves to what that longing fed.

*Look, it's not a phantom, but a living thing —
and if inside me not some childish fling
against the humdrum lives we have. That rush
of fun and laughter, taking stock, the slack
that underlies the mountain's grit and slush:
the days we had will tell you: don't attack
as though I merited this mountain storm.
Which way is up or down? You hardly know
but hold to ropes and hang on, till at last
the fury slackens, slowly, and you go
on and carefully upward, having passed
the worst the elements can throw at you
into the sunshine and the smiling blue.*

*Debs cut across. 'If you go solo we
are finished. Understand me? Done with. Be
your age, for God's sake, can't you, Davie, show
you have the family, this four, at heart.
I won't say more. I didn't then, although
how many times I tried to make you start.'*
Amen to that. Besides, what did I want?
To see once more the climbing hours evoke
the quietness of those mountain-tops, the view
of calm magnificence, the fretted smoke
of high peaks lifting into limpid blue —
which eyes approve of as the team skills bind
to one contenting, tested, breathing mind.

25. The summer came. I drove to where we'd been, the four of us, the muddy, pine-clad scene of rocks, the river, high part where we camped. It seemed but yesterday. I looked around as though the intervening years had stamped inherent purpose on this patch of ground. From here we'd gone on, and the same from here I'd go to conquer where I failed. I slept not well that night, but dreamt at times of stumbles on a path that climbed, rain-swept and windy, up to falls from dizzying climbs, but put it all behind me: on I went that morning through the pine-leafed steep ascent.

A solo climb is worst of all, a hell for climbers even when they functioned well and climb in rhythm, taking cautious routes and all precautions, checks and hourly stops. It has a treachery that ropes and boots are not sufficient proof against, and drops into your consciousness with added force. Immensely difficult, it tests the things that climbing makes in you, not merely sends, and tests you well, at length, remembering a fumble here can lead to painful ends. There were some easy routes, but very few would take the smooth and daunting north face too.

I did. I climbed as one possessed. Each nut or crevice fastened held me, held and shut out retching distances in falls below. I knew I had one chance, and that was all. One slip, one shaky handhold, and I'd go a dead weight down to where the eagles call across the wind-stilled intervals of air to one, if lucky, terminating course. I didn't think of that but took in power of rock and windblast, held them, turned their force to climb on ever up that gleaming tower so inwardly that I would never stop on that mere pinnacle that marked the top.

That frenzied concentration found its path across the ridge-way, and I knew that half my obstacles now lay behind. But still there rose in front of me that polished wall of smoothly jointed granite, where my will to move methodically would stay on call, each action relayed to the mind that held its own reserves but could well fail. I fed it long familiar climbing skills, and times when it would waver, shift, there were instead the replayed actions of my perfect climbs. I hung above the abyss, and the smooth grey rock reached out, took hold of me, rewound the clock.

What hours then passed I do not know. Each hold
and stride passed slowly, rhythmically, and rolled
away, an endless spidering up that loop
I went, the towering confines of the wall
preceding, urging me, as though some stoop
of air and cloud contained my wherewithal
and built me into some high hoist that scaled
deliberately the marks of earlier climbs.
I felt as they did, took my strength from holds
and hexagons they'd fastened, oftentimes
I hung there in the emptying manifolds
of peace, security, and then was there,
one man among the fierce, uplifting air.

30. I felt it breathe in me, the tonic air
resplendent in the sparkling sunlight where
the last of evening's incandescent light
fanned on out from backlit mountain top
that, like a slanted knife, cut off the height
of growing darkness, mine, which could not stop
the overflowing joy that sang above.
Each makes the steps that measure him a man,
the things he'll strive to do, or will not do,
that imperceptibly draw up a plan
to act as its occasions come in view,
and must unless that trained and tough physique
become in middle age the pale and weak.

It wasn't wise of course, but all the way
returning, carefully, just what to say
to Debs went through my mind, an episode
I saw relinquished to the shut-off past:
one reckless, wild adventuring that showed
me cured and justified, myself at last.
'That's what you call it, do you?' Deborah said.
*'You cannot own up to the small child's pride
in sheer defiance and pigheadedness.
Good God, the fears you bottled up inside
have bred a sickening self-righteousness.
You found the hurt. You healed it. That is all.
You risked the four of us so one walk tall.'*

She said a good deal more, all out of court,
but had been scared of course, and no doubt thought
there was some justice in the hot words said.
I smiled and overlooked it, but the same
regarded this adventure to have led,
perhaps through pathways that were far from blame,
to places we were happy in, could smile
at how imaginary those fears had been.
Like mere creations of a mind at large
that conjures from a simple, hard-rock scene
horrendous possibilities that charge
each step with nightmares, so this day at last
removed the phantoms of a withheld past.

Of course she'd reconsider, and in time
would give some recognition to a climb
that was indeed a game of pitch and toss,
where all I had in this wide world was thrown
into the hazard of a total loss —
that's manliness, I think, and it had shown
the further prospects that awaited us:
a country towering on that other side
of what we'd known before, which, come to that,
was surely better for my new-found pride.
But not for Debs: she turned the hope down flat,
and, if we talked, it was as daggers crossed,
not iron in the soul but winter frost.

From that day on there was a doubtful look
about each prospect in the stance she took.
And often she was looking hard at me
as though this animal had changed its coat,
and I was not the man her destiny
had chosen, husband whom she ought to note.
A nonsense, clearly, but for me instead
there rose a darker picture as to what
my hopes on marrying Debs at one time meant.
Agreed, I had been then a sorry lot,
but that was done with, and a sentiment
bred out of circumstances: in its wake
I grew more certain of the path to take.

35. Of course I have to say that what I'd done was done for me, and me alone, but none the less was scarcely reprehensible, but what most anyone with guts would do who wants the fruits of this hard earth in full as real and self-fulfilling, felt as true and not facsimiles at second-hand. I would be chief in my own house, and make my children love, respect me, do the things that children practise for their parent's sake. No more than that at first, but doing brings that deep determination to excel, arrange things properly, and do them well.

As Debs at one time did, though she in bed I have to say was not the newly wed, and seemed disparaging at what I tried quite consciously to mend the rift. I'd turned each park or playground outing, pushchair ride into a happening and had discerned a shut-in disappointment in their looks if I once failed. I didn't. With that jolt, admittedly she found that high, strong wall was now refashioned out of previous fault, and what was missing only served as call to help her as I used to urge on men, and more my family, remade again.

Perhaps I shouldn't use these images
but you will see how hard the climb to 'yes'
I was committing to. A solo climb
which this time, surely, was more difficult
because it brought no certain end, but time
to see how much I could be put at fault —
perhaps a lifetime even to consider
and grow despondent in, since if I won
the kiddies over with some silly stunt,
some party hat I wore, or stand-up fun,
our Debs would promptly intervene and shunt
the audience off to bed, when all I said
about our family spelt hers instead.

It then got worse, much worse, and when in me
there brimmed that force of raw-boned energy,
I went off on a Himalayan course
for would-be climbing guides. So much
for promises, you say, but it would force
my wife to play the game she'd put in touch,
try things without me for a change, and find
what life is like to one who's solitary.
A gamble, certainly, but one I thought
we owed each other, or our company
was only branching out of hopes we'd brought,
if not admitted, when we first had wed,
those shades and details that we left unsaid.

Not as Ulysses returned to wife,
I have say, when I got back, and life
again was small and burdensome and fraught
with wary looks and silences. In time,
there came that all too obvious thought
that family was on some other climb
and, though I'd see them, and receive a wave
at times, they went on under other skies
to new objectives that were no part mine:
another world without me where my tries
at compromise were some discarded line
which now looked tawdry, an embarrassment
in life that's always learning, onward sent.

40. I'd hoped the four of us would stay good friends
but this is where my mundane story ends.
Of course I have the usual parent's rights
to see the kids and choose what school they're at,
but now I look down from those mountain heights
on climbs not pointless but more staid and flat:
the features of a life I left long years ago
and not that easily, requiring strength
and total honesty, and hard recall
of what I might have been, but which at length
becomes the norm or second breath, which all
the shapes of past disasters might construe
as those my purposes were heading to.

I don't know how or why my hopes can be still with that jean-clad figure climbing free, the sunshine lighting up the cap and hair, small hands reaching, holding, body tensed till silhouetted in the backlit air
it overcomes and follows, movement sensed as one unbounded stretch for life. The thick brown leather boots, the socks there filled with ankle joint and webbing tendons, all there pulling on the sturdy bones to build a human being: upright, strong and tall — the one I had, and one that I have lost at some unguarded but still grievous cost.

The mountain heights are me, of course — my urge to keep on adding to the body's surge of energy by which our fears are overcome: a mind that holds and steadies round the clasp of rope that holds us and the rocks that come to be our enterprise in stretch and grasp. Each person fails at what he cannot do inherently and makes his earliest days: and though he track about that central tower, it rises out of him and shadows ways where he must recognize and use its power. Mine you know by now: uncertainty with what I was, or am, or still could be.

I run a two-week summer climbing camp
where kids, or folk of any age, can ramp
up skills of belay, rescue, scaling free
where only grit and strength will get them through.
Though safe, with several faces, each will see
them facing panic and what fear will do.
Some gain, some lose at this, but all who stall
are taken back into the parcelled why,
that pack of bone and muscle, how they hold
their body supple through the lift of sky,
the tug of rope, the handholds tensed and cold.
It's not the air or elements they fight
but what is building in them out of sight.

So in this world I think we hang about
as phantoms built as much by repressed doubt
and roped anxieties that thread the street
and tug us mindlessly in slack-kneed droves
of skeletons to shamble, watch our feet.
Who knows if under suit and tailored clothes
the repetitions that our limbs dispose
undo themselves in endless numbing tasks?
To climb is to inhabit warm, tight skin,
a mind that breathes in distances and asks:
where lurks that long day's goal you cannot win?
Success is difficult in our flat lives
but upwards to those mountains lifts and thrives.

45. Through this we sense the spirit in those heights,
by which, and climb by climb, we set our sights,
that shimmering watermark beneath the blue,
more bright and magnified in that chill air.
But mostly, they're themselves, where all we do
will make no impact on that ice-held lair
of overwhelming certainty. We look
on vistas of the cut-through rock, the view
of ledge and strata with their folded stacks
in brute millennia we climb on through.
There's something obdurate the mind attacks
but pointlessly the same: it stays on there
impermeable to small and human care.

The rain and snow, the splintering winter frost,
undo the handholds, as we know to cost.
High paths will fall away, and avalanche
remove whole mountain slopes of piled up snow.
This world is as it is, and lives its tranche
of what's eternal in us, how we go
howling to eternity and have our bones
reduced to phosphate and to mouldering lime.
Inveterately and silently, what was sheer
becomes the starting climber's route in time.
But what's essential is to never fear
that brute pugnacity of rock but try
to be as airborne as the arching sky.

No doubt that's difficult, and takes a mind
complexly toughened by its upward climb,
where practice, comradeship and relay rope
become determination not to yield.
And this goes further than imagined hope.
We need to dominate that inward field,
make mind the image of supported sense.
Each feeds the other, and will draw its strength
from how that other there inclines to act.
Failure waits on that, but it at length
becomes subconscious and accepted fact,
and if I lost that second climb it's not
from holding back from what true strength I'd got.

In short we shape ourselves by exercise
in hope and body, and there lies
within the rock-girt valley of our thought
some place that's ours, where we attempt
to be the man our own self-image wrought
long times ago, though incomplete, exempt
from all the enterprises we'd become.
Though paths go upward they can end in air,
and suddenly, moreover, where the mind
is left exposed to every terror there.
So in the ultimatum of that day I'd find
some thing about me that I didn't know,
a furthest point from which I couldn't go.

To me the body has its hourly shows
of hidden wonder and of darkness, throws
a shadow on the screen of what we are
in that empyrean desire the Greeks
made both our measure and our home. The far
world spoke to them in oracles, it speaks
to us the same on those sheer mountain sides
that draw the body up with elements —
extend with air our waiting limbs, and fling
to furthest mountain tops that inward sense
of corded muscles in some well-wrought thing
that, conquering, will give us such a peace
beyond contentment in the climb's small lease.

50. I think of Deborah as a sometime dream,
a sense of passing even, which may seem
apostasy from what was wholly good.
Perhaps it is. But also, if that's true,
despite the lapsed or put-off parenthood,
it brings a sentiment of climbing through
the web of muscles, limbs and knuckle joints,
each knitting seamlessly, each stretched and bent
around some phantom of a person thrown
into particulars, where each event
ignites a body hung there, toughly known,
when over me, above me, small breasts bear
their canticles of tightly fisted air.