

# THE CLIMBING LIFE

## How to Climb or Fly or Be

IT'S A COLD RAINY DAY AT INDEX, so we keep driving. Farther east. Up the slope to Stevens Pass. Everything everywhere is green and grey. Nothing but grey cloud and grey raindrops falling on green everything. Ferns, conifers, lichen, moss, algae in puddles, green light through the trees—if the sun ever comes out. I'm with Megan and Brad. Don't worry; you don't know us. There's a lot about the Pacific Northwest and its climbers that remains obscured by the green and grey.

Brad and I do the typical climber thing and talk shop. "Dude, have you tried \_\_\_?" "Yeah, that shit is sick. That mantel is like \_\_\_." "Yeah, for real. But the \_\_\_ is way more heinous." "Dude, you don't \_\_\_ on rhar, do you?" Etc. Then Brad's speech flows like a river from its source into countless branching distributaries. "You know the timing belt on the three-cylinder five speed is actually incredibly easy to swap out. You can find the parts cheap down at the shop in SoDo, right by the \_\_\_ dumpster. Did you know they've been shredding their returns just so homeless people won't be seen sporting their label? And homeless people in Seattle die every year of exposure. It's really tragic. Which reminds me, you should check out the play my seventh graders are putting on." I try to follow his stream of thought without getting lost in my own: *What am I doing with my life? What good is all this climbing? And what good is writing about it; or writing in general? Am I a good boyfriend, son, brother, friend?*—all those questions that climbing pacifies and that come back up when I'm in the car, traveling from where I've been to where I'm going.

Brad speaks the way he climbs: this hand will go here, that foot will go there, both will dart out quickly, and neither will move from their spot until Brad decides it's time. He looks like a martial artist flowing through the intentional, choreographed patterns of his Kata. I try to emulate his style, but find that I lack the endurance, be it mental or physical. Although I've never watched myself climb, I suppose I look more like a scared animal clambering feverishly away from whatever beast is chasing me—the fear of falling, failing, maybe

both. I've spent enough days at Index to realize that almost all the locals develop unique styles there. I used to believe this phenomenon emerged from the complicated cruxes. But the better I get to know the climbers, the more I realize that their particularity extends far beyond the way they move up rocks. "Like Super Dave," Brad tells me, "that guy is amazing. He doesn't even own a rack, but climbs

hard Index routes off the couch. Did you know that Dave Morrison taught himself to paraglide against the urgent objections of everyone else in the sport? He is in many ways like Indiana Jones. And Leah, she's pretty bold. She rode a DR350 from Seattle to southern Utah without even having a driver's license let alone a motorcycle endorsement."

We cross over Stevens Pass. Light sifts

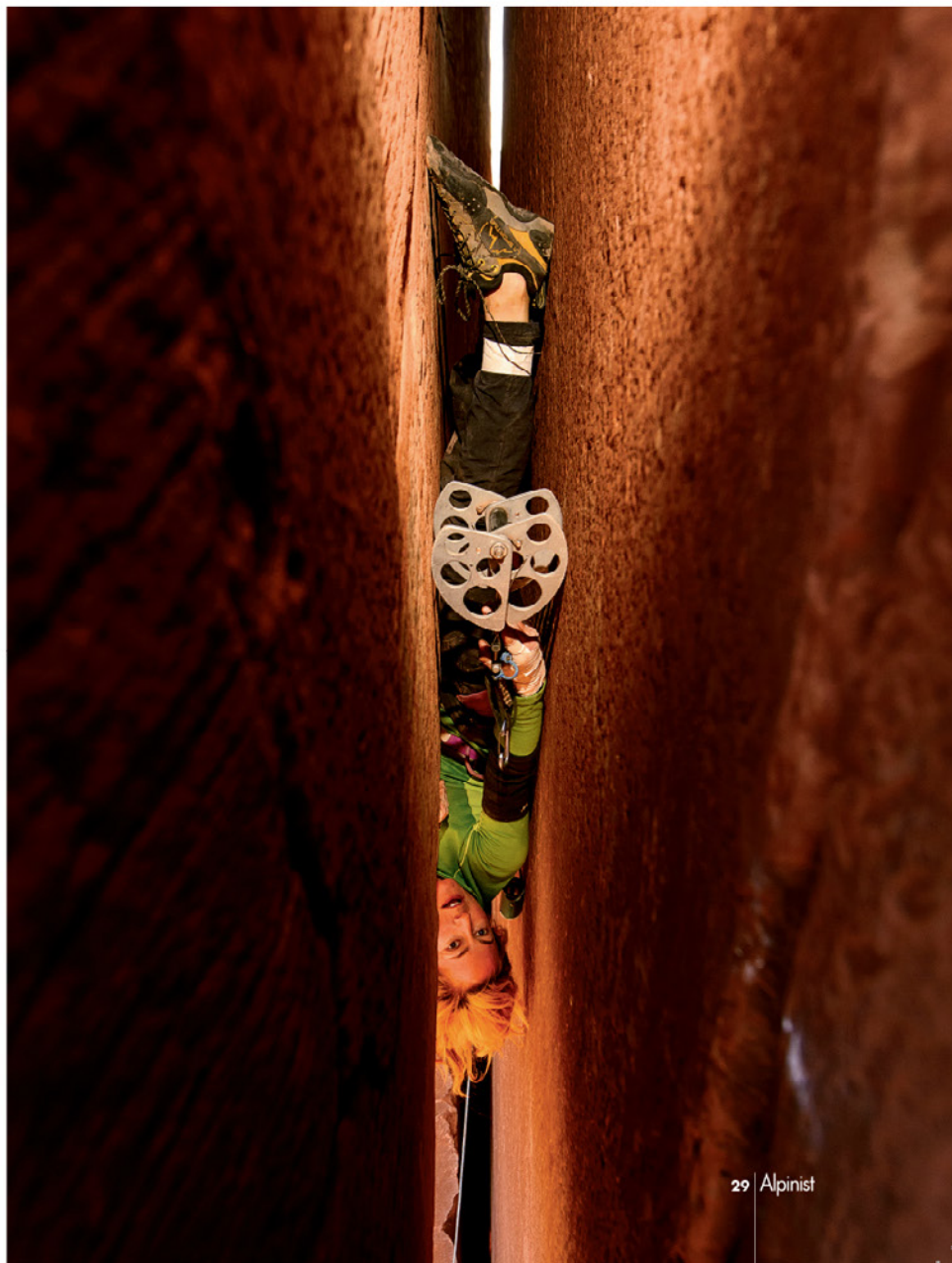


Photo: Fredrik Vermstad



through thinning clouds, playing here and there on roadside puddles. Patches of asphalt dry beneath tiny wisps of evaporation. Descending into the rain shadow, we watch the sky transition from grey, to spots of blue, to spots of grey, to blue. I've come to learn that Megan and sunshine react like baking soda and vinegar. As the sky clears, exclamations of joy and contentment bubble out of her. By the time we pull into camp, the air is not just warm—it's hot. A cool gust of air kicks up off Icicle Creek and washes over us, and for the first time in a long while, the temperature is actually perfect.

"I was thinking of maybe doing this classic alpine route tomorrow on Snow Creek Wall," I tell Megan, as we prepare dinner. "Yeah, that would be fun," she says. "Or we could just eat those mini-wheats." She looks at me sidelong with a mischievous smile. Brad is karate-chopping lesson plans on his laptop, oblivious to our scheming. After dinner, we fall asleep to the sighs and pops of the fire, and the cool air drifting down from the mountains.

I WAKE UP, BLINKING. Sunlight enters our tent in long golden shafts through the pine boughs. We've slept straight through the cool part of the morning. I kick off the sleeping bags to body-temperature air, and I wonder whether I'm still dreaming. The sky is one unbroken dome of electric blue. I make a mental checklist: *Get up. Eat quick. Pack a lunch. No time. Just some bars. Get water at the base. Light rack, rope. Couple packs. Let's go!* I look over at Megan, and her eyes are closed. She stretches and lingers in the morning slowness like a cat in a sunspot. The air is really clear. It seems thinner somehow—maybe it's just the lack of moisture—and in it, everything seems amplified: the sounds of birds chirping and ground squirrels scurrying; the verdant outlines of young pine cones and needles against the ruddy ponderosa bark and that electric blue sky pulsing with energy. Megan smiles at me and yawns. I remember her suggestion from last night. Forget climbing, I think, and I reach for the little bag hanging above us in the tent canopy.

Brad is cooking sausage, bouncing around like a billy goat, spilling coffee, telling us—not to worry—he has breakfast under control, talking about this "sick proof" of the fundamental theorem of calculus that he's going to show his math class. When I explain to him what's in store for Megan and me today,

he's a little taken aback. "What? Oh, you're joking. No, wait, you're not. Uh, well, I'm not responsible. I'm not going to, you know, like, babysit you guys or anything. Uh, I'm going to go climbing. I'm going to take your car. You guys... well, I'm going in five minutes. If you want, you can just come along." Five minutes pass. We all pile into the van, and Brad drives to some small writhing pullout on the side of the road, with an intricate path through dense underbrush leading to only Brad knows where. "OK," he says, in his talking-to-a-child voice. "I'm going up there, with these crash pads to boulder. Maybe I'll see you up there."

Of course, Megan and I never make it there. We get lost staring at the reflections of ourselves in one another's pupils, and forgetting who is who. Something about this all makes sense, somehow. I pass through thoughts and emotions like roots through soil, water through trunks, light through the leaves. Veins of feldspar, and dikes of quartz weave their way through grey and white granite. The granite crumbles into the soil. The soil holds the roots. The roots break up the soil, and take up their constituent parts, turning rocks into trees. Everything melts together, like glaciers and granite, rivers and mountains, Megan and me. Climbing seems to find its way into my life, and my life seeps into climbing. I try to pull the two apart, but you can't pull apart pieces of your self. Somehow, our senses make all this about something.

IT'S THE CLOSE OF THE DAY. Brad, Megan and I are now perched about forty feet above a small eddy in an otherwise raging river. None of us is seriously considering taking the leap, but all of us peer over the edge. The sky glows with lavender, pink and violet hues. The water reflects this palette like an oil slick. Some cliff swallows buzz by, and dive down so close to the rapids I swear that I can feel their wings get wet. Brad cracks his knuckles, stretches his forearms, and opens and closes his hands; the way you do after a good day of bouldering. Megan and I are not so much coming down as we are reintegrating. Brad is talking to us as if we're adults again, although in many ways, we're still acting like children.

"Dude," he says. "So I was reading about robots."

Megan and I giggle, and the river bubbles.

"So, do you know about overactuation?" he asks.









We shake our heads.

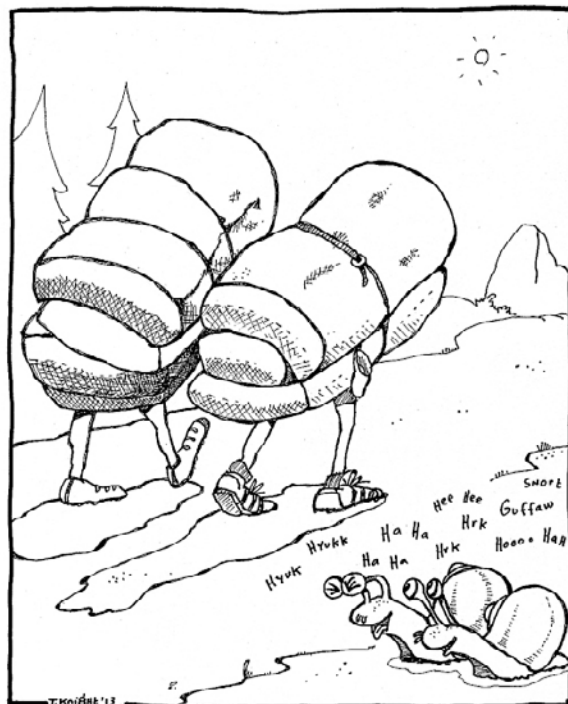
"All right, so check it. Basically you know how a robot is all jerky," Brad pantomimes some jerky robot moves. "Well, that's because they are overactuated. Basically, the number of actuations is equal to or greater than the degrees of freedom. So everything is precise and mechanical. They never fall, but they never move smoothly either, because each actuator can only control movement in one direction or another. This isn't how normal animals move at all. Like those swallows. Their flight is an example of underactuation. In addition, rather than having every movement planned out and preprogrammed, each of their movements is a spontaneous reaction to the spontaneous movement that came before. It's not like someone says, 'If this air current brushes this feather, do A.' The wings just do. And flight occurs, fluidly. Fluidity, for them, is also an absence of preconception."

Brad looks around to see whether we're getting this. I'm watching the swallows deftly navigate the air columns that rise and fall above the many currents of the stream. I see each drop between wing flaps as the gaps in a graph of Riemann's sums. As the rectangles grow narrower and narrower, they come closer and closer to approximating the path of the curve. The triangular spaces between the rectangles and the curve get smaller and smaller. Hard angles smooth as each shrinking rectangle becomes a line, achieving tangency with the curve. Brad's words leave multi-colored trails that swirl out behind them in my mind. Holy shit, I think. This is the fundamental theorem of calculus. The way we move is the diminishing gap between movements. A robot steps, pauses, thinks, and steps. A tiger prowls. A dolphin swims. A human climbs.

"I've been thinking about this in terms of climbing a lot, you know?" Brad says. "I mean, imagine if you could underactuate your climbing. I think it would look a lot more dynamic. Free flowing. What if you could just climb freely? Incorporate shifts of weight and direction into your upward momentum. I bet you'd improve."

The landscape begins to yield to dark-

ness in shadowy patches and dimming lights. To the east, the horizon is a deep dark blue; the western sky is the color of salmon flesh. Somewhere in between, the sky is violet, the crescent moon glows white, and the North Star dances. Silently, we, too, give in to the coming night. As we meander back up the hill to the van, the valley turns still and quiet. I feel as though I'm approaching the final pitch of the day. My body is tired, but some unknown energy now compels my feet and my mind forward. My mind races ahead of my tired body: Pursue what you dream most deeply. Try hard, and don't be afraid to fail.



Failing is just falling. Falling is part of flying. Act spontaneously, and deal with the consequences when they come. Don't be afraid to miss; don't be afraid to fall. Write more, don't ask why. Write about this. Write about Index, Leavenworth, Washington, Megan, Brad. Write about underactuating. Underactuate the writing itself. Let the story screw itself up. Get all cumbersome and off balance. Start to waiver. And right when you feel as if you're already falling, as if everything is lost, reach out. Stick it. And hope that it holds.

—Chris Kalman,  
Seattle, Washington

## The Surface Of Rocks

HE STANDS THERE on a dilapidated wooden lookout, looking south toward the coast. A low-slung, grass-covered hill fades in and out of ashen cloud. He stares past the hill, above dark andesitic columns and walls of conglomerate that plunge, unseen, into the space where the earth ends abruptly. The ocean is beyond, slated and churned by winds that blur directly from the great southern ice. Dirtied-white horses froth at the peaks of swells, slugging away at coastal stacks hundreds of meters beneath him. Even at the

lookout, the salt spray films his face, damp and caustic.

His chest constricts against the vortex of wind. He struggles to focus. *This isn't love*. Driving out along the convoluted gravel road, he hadn't decided, or didn't know that he'd decided. But the sway of the grasses back and forth, the sweep of the thick clouds with the wind, the sound of the surf's last throes—the abyss that lies within each of us, sometimes so close to the surface.

He cups his hands and rubs them. The cold makes him feel better, more in the headspace he wants to be. The edginess is now a familiar feeling: a tightness in his neck and shoulders, a way that certain objects appear glass-clear while others fade toward insignificance. "I just need time to myself, to see where I'm at," she'd explained a month ago, in a cafe boisterous with lunchtime excess. He'd caught his breath, holding back the sudden words he wanted to shout.

The scuff of coffee cups, the voices at the next table formed a dull white noise that seemed to compress against him. Her face blurred out of focus. He scraped back his chair and stood without replying. He'd already known.

A faint, narrow path leads down a spiny ridge on the far side of the lookout. Muddy and slippery, it jags steeply through scrub and rotten sheep droppings. He grabs a fistful of grass and grovels his torso over a short bluff. Here, the track is undercut with erosion, and part has collapsed entirely. The air is heavy with spray and the sounds of the waves. Through the vapor, a spire of