

Reflections on Mountaineering: A Journey Through Life as Experienced in the Mountains: Fourth Edition

Alan V. Goldman

Outskirts Press

(232pp)

978-1-977249-57-9

Reflections on Mountaineering is a poetic love letter to the indomitable spirits of Earth's peaks.

Alan V. Goldman's *Reflections on Mountaineering* considers every aspect of mountain climbing in poetic form, from triumphs to moments of insignificance in the face of grandeur.

Here, mountains are often addressed as “you,” and they oscillate between filling the role of a lover and that of an enemy. Their peaks issue siren songs, drawing the narrator near, even as their existence proves to be a test, beckoning the narrator to overcome it. Some mountains occupy their territory “brazenly,” or provoke the narrator’s “ardor,” while other mountains are fortified in “castle-like” ways, with “trap doors or hidden crevasses.” From antagonists to objects of desire, they provoke almost obsessive contemplation and personification throughout the book.

These contemplative poems blur the boundaries between the self and nature to the extent that the line seems to evaporate at times. In “Fated Condition,” the narrator asks: “O Mountain edifice, are you actually part of me, / Or are you a self-contained entity that’s free / Of me—of the key to my understanding my place.” Other times, the mountains issue challenges to the “ego to surmount / Your heights and vainly claim them as my own,” revealing that the mountain and the man are not the same entity, but rivals.

Allusions abound: to Bible verses, to the writings of John Muir and William Blake, to works of art including the Mona Lisa, to proverbs like “might makes right,” and to common climbing brands like Petzl. The word choices are sophisticated, if they border on verbose, as with the line “Am I pusillanimous or prudent in my steps?”

Some verses utilize rhymes, while others do not; still others begin with rhyming couplets and transition to non-rhymed lines. Within single poems, such transitions risk having jarring effects, though they also serve to emphasize the unpredictable nature of mountain climbing. Other texts are prose poems, dictating, in precise language, what the experience of trekking to Kilimanjaro’s last water station is like.

Among the most compelling entries are those that document endurance: one is about surviving a sudden avalanche, and another is about building a snow hut in order to survive for three days in the wilderness. In the latter instance, the poem’s similes have an illuminating effect: the narrator documents what it’s like to hunker down in weather that’s fifteen degrees below Fahrenheit, even if one is wearing the most high tech, moisture-wicking underwear (“it was so cold as to make one feel that one’s / Bones would snap if the angle of pressure was just right.”).

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JEANA JORGENSEN (July 8, 2022)

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