

THE SHARP END

THE WORLD BETWEEN THE PAGES | KATIE IVES

The Arcane

DURING THE MID-1970s, a young Michael Kennedy lived like someone turning through the pages of a magazine: accumulating snapshot memories of yellowed limestone and lunate granite, of pillars of blue ice and curtains of flowing spindrift, of light passing through crystals of falling snow, until the world seemed, for a moment, as grainy and monochrome as an old black-and-white photo. When he wasn't out in the canyons and the mountains, trying to compress as much adventure as possible into each day, he was in the office of the *Aspen Times*, in Colorado, putting together issues of *Climbing*, the publication he'd just started to edit.

All of this was long before the instantaneous transmission of news we've become accustomed to in the Internet Age. Opening packages of submissions, at times, he lost himself in wonder at tales and photos of climbs that he hadn't even been aware of and that wouldn't appear in any alpine journals for a few more months. An ascent of an obscure spire in the remote Karakoram. A wall of fluted rock in the Hindu Kush.

He and the typesetter carried out the corrections and layout laboriously by hand before sending them to a printer, located at first in the *Aspen Times* office and later in Boulder. Decades afterward, in a forthcoming memoir, Michael summarized the work: "It was an arcane and time-consuming process, satisfying in its physicality and in its tangible outcome: the printed magazines that would magically arrive three weeks later, packed thirty or fifty to a box, to be scrutinized with a mixture of delight at the concrete manifestation of word and art, and anxiety over the discovery of the inevitable errors."

Angles of Grace

IN JULY 2022, I drove to Hinesburg, Vermont, to see the magazine collection in Greg Glade's mountaineering and polar bookstore, Top



of the World Books. Just weeks before, I'd learned that the regular print editions of *Climbing* would cease after more than half a century of publication. *Rock and Ice*—launched in 1984—was already gone, merged into *Climbing* in 2021. I felt keenly all that's lost when any publication ends: the future narratives that might never come to be. By revisiting other defunct magazines, I thought I might find something: a sense of tangible reconnection, perhaps, with their transmutations of lived experiences into stories.

So many US publications have vanished over the decades, including ones few young readers may recall: *Off Belay*, *Onsight*, *North American Climber*. Lifting old issues from cardboard boxes (and remembering others that I kept at my home), I felt as if I were opening portals into innumerable past worlds. In black and white or faded color appeared images of young climbers who have long since aged or died: a group of women, sunlit and laughing above a narrow gully in *Sandstone and Tile*; a silhouette of a man, hunched along a shadowed ridge, on a cover of *Ascent*.

Editors' notes hinted at idealistic visions and economic struggles. In a 1987 issue of *The Climbing Art*, founding editor Pat Ament wrote of his desire to publish only "genuine art." In a 1997 edition, a subsequent editor, Ron Morrow, wrote to his readers: "Thanks for sticking with us, this is a hell of a big job, and the financial losses are sickening."

Small, independent magazines offered spaces for the experimental and the quirky, the noncommercial and the gloriously unmarketable. "Someday, I hope, the so-called 'major ascent' and 'first ascent' will be things of the past," declared Dave Skultin in *Summit's* copious (and frequently heated) "Letters" section in 1956. Instead, he proposed (quoting Frank Symthe), "we can all progress to realizing the 'greatest gift of the hills' in the 'scenery through which one has moved, the joys that one has discovered, the laughter, freedom and good fellowship.'"

Full of parodies of famous climbers' self-aggrandizing tales, the *Vulgarian Digest* began its inaugural 1970 edition with a premise outlined in John Hudson's 1968 letter to Joe Kelsey: "We could hopelessly confuse real and imaginary events...until even we would forget whether the orcs had appeared on the summit of Geikie or had merely been seen at a distance as they scurried from our tent."

A 1958 *Sierra Club Bulletin* provided advice that seemed far more pertinent to me than most tech tips: precisely how to experience a moonlit ascent of Mt. Whitney. By selecting a night "when the waning moon is about seven-eighths full," Raymund F. Wood explained, a reader could reach Whitney Pass "in time to see the moon hanging like a resplendent jewel in the western sky, before it drops out of sight into the maze of peaks and canyons."

For some readers, certain publications appeared at just the right time and became a part of who they are. In 2002, when Lizzy Scully founded *She Sends*, she was responding to a scarcity of work by women writers and photographers in US climbing media. She

struggled to find advertisers, she later told me, and never made more than enough to cover her costs. She faced backlash from people who claimed she must “hate men.” But until the magazine’s closing in 2004, she mentored and published women climbing writers who might otherwise have never entered the genre. And the magazine reached an audience of readers who felt, for the first time, a real connection with its stories.

From time to time, I’ve met others who were moved—as I was—by Molly Loomis’s *She Sends* essay “Angle of Grace,” a manifesto for those who have long felt lost and out of place. Expelled from ballet school for clumsiness, the narrator encounters something on a granite cliff as miraculous-seeming as a “secret.” Racing an oncoming storm, she adjusts her body to flow over each nuance of stone until movement becomes effortless. At the top, she realizes, “I have danced my way up and found my angle of grace.”

Strange Places—Outside and In

IN 2004, WHEN I BECAME AN EDITOR, the way I read old magazines changed. I thought I could sense the human life behind them: how cold windowpanes blur from black to blue during a long night of work; how the shape of a story arises from an ever-shifting jumble of recollections and dreams, sharp and radiant as the blocks of an icefall; how countless experiences fold into the creation of a single sentence, the unconscious choice of a particular word.

The very act of climbing can transform people into writers, if they aren’t already. In one edition of *The Climbing Art*, associate editor Christiana Langenberg observed: “We put ourselves in strange places—outside and in—before we know completely how we’ll get out.” By connecting scatterings of holds up a wall, we create stories with our bodies and minds. A sense of flow found on a stony ridge, a cadence of footfalls in deep snow, can reemerge in the pulse of words on a page. An instinctive shift of body weight on a cliff or an impulsive lengthening or shortening of a sentence—both represent searches for balance and grace.

In a recent email to me, Pat Ament recalled: “Each of us has a unique view of the world and of life.... It’s important to keep that uniqueness when editing.” The most genuine stories preserve fragments of a person’s

true, dreaming self. Between their words arise soon-vanishing glimmers of *being* and *becoming*, like slivers of moonlight. To collect such tales for a climbing magazine is to create an atlas of outer and inner journeys: the rush of spindrift down a couloir, the straying of a mind into memories, the silver sound of a glacial stream trickling over stones.

By the Numbers

IN A 1964 ARTICLE for *The Mountaineer*, “By the Numbers,” Harvey Manning—guidebook writer, *Freedom of the Hills* editor and occasional prankster—satirized what he saw as excessive competition and ranking in post-war mountaineering reports. Mockingly, he suggested a new grading system to try to reduce the ever-varying conditions of alpine routes to mere algebraic equations. “*Numbering peaks* is merely a preliminary step,” he added. “Ultimately some way must be worked out to *number* climbers.”

Today, one might argue, climbers sometimes do get numbered, not by “*lines-published-in-journals*” (as Manning joked) or by grades and records alone, but by “likes” on social media pages. John Long—longtime contributor to *Rock and Ice* and former editorial assistant at *North American Climber*—has observed the growth of “clickbait addiction.” It seems, he recounted to me, to be part of the “big push to monetize everything” in our society. How much easier it is, for businesspeople, to judge the metrics of clicks and shares, to choose sponsored content designed to sell products and to promote brands—than to recall the value of unquantifiable things, such as stories that stir us to think more critically and dream more deeply.

Former *Climbing* editor Matt Samet and current *American Alpine Journal* editor Dougald MacDonald (who was once, himself, an editor of *Climbing* and *Rock and Ice*) agree that readers still long for in-depth narratives—though the question remains of how to continue to pay writers and staff when some advertisers are increasingly unwilling to support independent media and many readers are increasingly used to obtaining free content online. “We live in a world that is constantly on the verge of substantive emotional, factual, and spiritual bankruptcy,” Pete Takeda, editor of *Accidents in North American Climbing*, wrote to me. But the pursuit itself will

still lend itself to future forms of creativity, he hoped: “Every climber, the beginner and the pro, the most soulful and the most shameless, the wisest and naive, has within them that original spark that only climbing provides.”

There Are New Mountains

“WHAT BECOMES of the contributors?” Matt Samet asked in a June 2022 interview with the podcast *Clipping Chains*, soon after *Climbing*’s regular print issues ended and he was laid off. With the closure of any publication, its editors can no longer offer remuneration, space and mentorship for emerging writers, artists and photographers. And this support remains vital in an era when our genre is finally starting to become more inclusive.

For a long time, American outdoor media often failed to represent climbers from marginalized groups. In *Alpinist* 62, Joe Whittle—a descendant of the Delaware Nation and an enrolled member of the Caddo Nation—recalled leafing through outdoor magazines during his youth: “I rarely saw any faces of color. Articles about ‘bold’ adventurers in ‘raw’ and ‘desolate’ landscapes generally left out the cultural legacies and ongoing existence of Indigenous inhabitants.” In recent years, more and more writers from a wide range of under-represented groups have worked to transform the landscapes of climbing literature. They have highlighted figures who had been ignored, excluded or erased, and they have shattered old stereotypes, barriers and formulas. And in the process, they have created brilliant and ever more varied visions of the hills. As U.K. Le Guin said in a 1986 speech at Bryn Mawr College, “If you’re underneath, if you’re kept down, you break out, you subvert.... All the maps change. There are new mountains.”

Year by year, these ranges have grown vaster. Women climbing writers, today, are more numerous than they were when *She Sends* began. Melanin Base Camp and other websites now specialize in stories by “Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous and Queer People of Color who love the outdoors.” And at its best, social media, as Kathy Karlo observed in *Alpinist* 75, can also “amplify] voices that used to be seldom heard.” Many of these emerging storytellers, she noted, address topics that “once seemed too forbidden or awkward and daunting to speak about,” sometimes in magazine stories. Luke Mehall—publisher

of *The Climbing Zine*, one of the newest print publications—has noticed an increased “appreciation for intersectionality” among writers and readers alike. “Climbing is always more than climbing,” he wrote.

One of the most important responsibilities for all remaining climbing magazines, including *Alpinist*, will be to help support those who are striving to make the genre more imaginative, unfettered and diverse. For there is much more work to be done, still, to open the gates of its restricted realms.

For the Magic

IN A 1991 ADDRESS for a Montagna Avventura conference, former *Canadian Alpine Journal* editor David Harris quoted Don Serl: “We climb to live.... The fears need to be confronted, the abilities need to be tested, horizons need to be gained, paths need to be followed.... We climb for the magic of it.” And then Harris continued, in his own words, “And we write about climbing to share that magic.”

At times, something about my own wanderings—in the mountains or on a page—has felt almost like merging with a cosmos, in a dusting of ashen schist, a flicker of stars, the pieced-together fragments of a soul. And over the years, I’ve come to believe that imagination *is* magic in a way that goes beyond words, but still needs them to approach it. That climbing and storytelling are among the most powerful acts of imagination that we have. And that listening to each other’s tales can give us something we urgently need, what the American author Marilynne Robinson called, in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, “an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love,” a prerequisite for creating better communities in the climbing world and beyond.

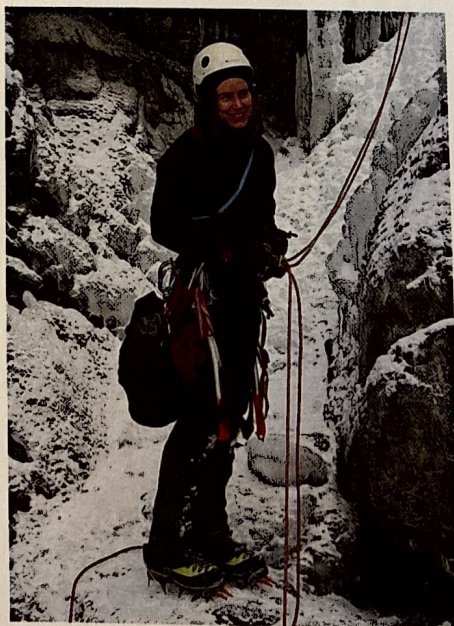
Writing a story, I’ve long thought, is like composing an intimate letter to people whom you may never meet, but who will glimpse something of your hidden, dreaming self. And that sense of connection can last a lifetime. Among all the *Climbing* articles I’ve read, one sticks with me in particular, distilled into a single image like a glowing crystal. Of a solitary, nocturnal ascent, Chad Shepard once wrote, “A glimmer catches my eye: moonlight has overtaken the face.... Hundreds of feet up, I allow an indulgence in the moment, a pure right-now instant.” Most of my night

journeys have been on ice, not rock, and in the best moments, I think of only what’s in front of me: a sparkling of frost on a gully wall, a rippling of blue in a headlamp beam. Yet that story will always accompany me, like a moon-slicer deep in my mind, whether or not I remember the words.

An Epilogue and a Beginning

IN THE BOOK *Editing Fact and Fiction*, Leslie T. Sharpe and Irene Gunther quoted an unnamed editor who said that to edit well “you must be able to enter into the author’s mind, mode, and purpose.” It was a statement that I’ve taken seriously, striving to see the world through the shifting perspectives of each *Alpinist* writer—to

“My face feels flushed, one knuckle is bloody, and I am smiling.... I have danced my way upward and found my angle of grace.” — Molly Loomis, “Angle of Grace,” *She Sends*, 2004



the extent that’s possible.

For nearly eighteen years at *Alpinist*, I’ve had the opportunity to encounter the intricate topographies of so many people’s memories and imaginations. By lamplight in a small, dark room in Vermont, I’ve roamed labyrinths of hanging glaciers and perched on summits of golden towers under the dark blue Karakoram sky. Off route and unroped on a granite dome in Wyoming, when the sunlight flashed, bright and sharp as fear, I’ve paused to remember how a writer described his own regretted solo and I’ve wondered, *Was this what he felt?* Each time a writer I know has died, I’ve felt an indescribable loss, a tearing of their innumerable dreams. Each time a writer has completed a story and all the fragments have come together into an unpredictable, gleaming whole, I’ve felt as if I’ve witnessed, close up, something beyond wonder: the creation of a world.

The notion of finding your voice is synonymous, in numerous people’s minds, with the journey of becoming a writer. Since 2004, I’ve often worked with beginning authors, trying to help them with that quest—even as I’ve kept seeking my own. And yet the way is nebulous, impossible to map, along paths found more by instinct than by reason. There is an attentiveness to recurring motifs and syntax patterns, a paring away of clutter and noise that conceals something that feels profoundly individual and real. But those are only some of the initial steps. Another journalist once asked me to describe what my own voice might be, and I found that I could do so only in terms of the acts of writing or climbing, not by the resulting words on the page: a sense of losing myself entirely in the rhythm of breaths and images, motion and sound. And I know that I have a long distance to go.

It has been an honor to accompany other writers and *Alpinist* staff for parts of their journeys. And an honor to share our tales with you, our readers, to receive your support, advice and feedback—and to experience the connections that have grown between us. After more than ten years as *Alpinist*’s editor-in-chief, I am leaving for other paths. The magazine will go on, with your help. And I hope that I will continue to meet you, in the mountains and in our words, as we encounter our own unexpected angles of grace. ■

[As a summary of her *Alpinist* career, portions of Katie Ives’s *Sharp End* for this issue are adapted from past articles she wrote for the magazine.—Ed.]