

THE POETIC JOURNAL OF MOUNT WHITNEY

I

If I had a rear-view mirror,
I would have seen San Diego
Swallowed by the Southern horizon.
Having none,
I saw a highway
Littered with cars.

II

Venice beach
Bottles.
Dead birds.
Cigarette butts.
Environmentalists.

III

In a Bakersfield hot tub
My muscles warmed,
Surrounded by desert.

IV

Lone Pine, CA.
\$318.92
Spent.

Equipment checked.

Rucksack.
Canteens.
Dehydrated food.
Ice axe.
Dome tent.
Sleeping bag.
Hiking boots.

Later to learn
I forgot the iodine.

Thirteen winding climbing
Two lane miles
To reach the head
Of a trail
At 8000 feet.

One hour,
Eat,
Ready gear,
Go.

Cigarettes left behind.

Climbing
Four miles of steady trail,
I take pictures,
Film.
Mind.

Two and a half hours.
I am there.
Camp.
Outpost.

The campground
God left behind.

VI

Steep beige and tan cliffs.
30 foot trees like twigs.
A valley of shadows.
Sun lit eastern peaks.
Evergreens
With orangish-brown bark.
Never devoured snow
In mountain grooves.
Snow encased spring
Sends molecules flying
As it falls.
At night an ice shield forms.

The flesh of my heel

Torn.
Cold blowing wind on calves.
Fresh mountain air
Burns lungs
With purity.

Iodine obtained in trade.

Food brought to life
By iodine flavored water.
Blooming flowers caught
By the breeze
Sent to please my nose.

Mountain Orchestra.
Inescapable.
Why want to?

Water falls,
Splash,
Crash,
Soft cymbals.
Felt mallets
Drum roll of current.
Hard chop
To accent.
Tiny leaf chimes,
Played by the wind,
Who sings
Sweet flute whistle
In trees,
And gusts
As french horns,
Layered.
Solos and duets,
The birds.
Screech,
The hawk
Cries in the distance.

Human booming voice
Pushes all else back.
Muffled jets.
Crunching steps
On stones.

Fire cracks,
Snaps.
Wrist watch,
Tick.
Pages flipped.

And man has joined
God.

VII

5 AM.

No rest at night.
Cold.
Tent too small.
Loud people.

Begin before the sun.

Unzip tent.
Eat iodine breakfast
Urinate.
Change.
Snow capped goose bumps.
Pack tent.

Sun caught up.

Go.

Never tiresome view
Of mountains,
Streams,
Lakes,
Sky,
Walking.
Lonely.
Occasional strangers.
Then no one—
For hours.

Thoughts.

What have I done?

What will I do?
Achievements.
Goals.

What got me here?
Where will this get me?
Who will I meet?
Who have I met?
Association.

To pass time.

Beauty.
Love.
Long blonde hair.
Angelic face.
Gorgeous body.
Solid mind.
Perfect person.
Love.

To pass time.

Two hours pass.
New view.
Same trail.

Another stream
Covered with thin ice.
I fill my canteens
For the last time.

No more iodine.

Sitting,
I loosen my rucksack
And rest.

Stubby green vegetation
Brings the meadow to life,
The last
Before the tundra.

Arctic elevation.

Dirt trail turned to ice,
I attach my crampons,
Equip my ice axe,
Continue.

Steeper trail.
More concentration.

Rationed water,
No gulps.

VIII

The trail became crowded
After the last camp passed.
I followed a group.

Stumbling over boulders
We made our way
To the first challenge.
200 foot climb.
60 degree grade.
Snow covered slant.

I watched a fat man,
Out of shape,
Worn,
About to die,
Try his hardest.

Twenty minutes.
Not easy,
But not as difficult
As it gets.

The real challenge.
1500 foot,
80 degree,
Cliff of snow.

I started without delay,
But the delays came quick.

Huge rocks tower above
Capping the cliff,

Waiting and laughing,
At us.

Fat man sweating,
Partners bitching
About his slow fat ass.
Except one.
The leader
Encouraged and helped
The fat one,
Even carried his rucksack.

I was beat.

Watching mountaineers
Zig zag up
Without delay, nor rest,
I tried to do the same,
Slid,
And stopped.
If I were to make it,
It had to be straight up.

My body heat
Melted the snow
That filled my boots.
Wind skied into my face.
No gloves,
Hands frozen to ice axe,
I was boiling.

Frequent rests.

Someone from above yells, "rock"
And I echo,
As one tumbles down.
Rocks broken free
By climbers
Occasionally fell.
Only once at me.
I moved quickly.

More frequent rests.
Fat man just behind.
Finally there.

One and a half hours,
1500 feet.

Dropping,
I rest in the snow,
Not caring about my wet jeans.
Their leader
Congratulates all.

Fifteen minutes recovery.
Goodbye to group.
Now to top.

My face stung
From wind and sun,
No sensation
Of touch.

High,
Thin mountain air.
No sight of outside world.

Trail narrows,
Some times to
One foot
In front of
The other.
One side,
Cliff face up,
Other,
Cliff face down.

One canteen left.

People on way down
Proclaim beauty
Of summit.

A sign,
“Danger,
Lightening strikes.”
I knew I was close,
Just a few miles
Of eternity
On rubber legs.

Mood swinging,
Everyone offered encouragement.
“Don’t worry. It’s worth it.”
“You’re almost there.”
“Keep going.”

And soon I *was* there.
Climbing those last rocks
I saw everyone’s smiles
As they returned from the top,
And ran the last of the way
To over look the country.

IX

One page of the journal
Of an easterner
Was Written
At the top
Of Mount Whitney
On June 9th, 1999.
It was too late,
I was too tired,
And the view
Was too beautiful,
For me to write more.

I intended to eat,
But the same reasons
Kept me hungry.
Plus,
Some animals.
Fury little things
Crossed between
A beaver,
A racoon,
A ground hog,
And seagulls at McDonald’s.

As I shot
The last of my film,
I cursed myself
For not bringing more.

And then I climbed
The last few boulders
To the sign,
14,496 feet
And some odd inches.

Eight hours to the top.
One half hour on top.
Then,
Back down.

X

Climbing down,
Though quicker,
Is just as difficult.

Rubber legs
Turned to sponge,
Give way easily.
I was lucky
To have my ice axe
To stop my fall.

I finished the last
Of my water
Before I took the
1500 foot slide
Down what had been
A challenge to go up.

I could not take a chance
Getting sick on mountain water.
I pushed on
For four hours.

When I reached my truck,
I drank
Clean,
Sanitized water
In mouth fulls.

Then slept.