

Waterman Fund Essay Contest Winner

Epigoni, Revisited

The trappings of the digital age follow a climber far north

Michael Wejchert

Editor's note: The winner of the sixth annual Waterman Fund essay contest, which Appalachia sponsors jointly with the Waterman Fund, offers an honest look at a climber's ambivalence toward the technology he uses before and during an attempt to climb Mount Deborah in Alaska. We hope that Michael Wejchert's approach to the cell phones and Web-based forums we now take for granted will open a new dialogue about the relationship between technology and wilderness. The Waterman Fund is a nonprofit organization named in honor of Laura and the late Guy Waterman. It is our mission to encourage new writers. See the end pages of this journal for information about next year's contest.

The machine does not isolate man from the great problems of nature but plunges him more deeply into them.

—*Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

We are not in New England. Certainly. Caribou tracks end in small dots beneath Paul Roderick's single-engine DHC-2 Beaver. Denali, where Paul knows glacial landings like city slickers know commuter shortcuts, is more than a hundred miles away. Every once in a while, Paul lets go of the rudder to take a picture, and the plane bucks wildly. Opening the window, offering his camera to the polar air, he snaps photos of mountains without names. Bayard Russell, Elliot Gaddy, and I have all flown with Paul before, but we've never seen him like this. We exchange nervous glances.

When we cornered Paul a few days ago in the small town of Talkeetna, Alaska, he was incredulous.

"You want me to land *where?*"

I bluff.

“Rob Wing from Fairbanks has landed there tons of times, Paul.”

“Wing says he’s landed everywhere.” He scoffs, but it works. Pilots are like climbers. The spark of competition, adventure, is usually all you need to light a fire.

“All right. Get me a map and I might be able to get you boys in there.”

Bayard, Elliot, and I clink glasses at the bar a few minutes later.

We’re going to Mount Deborah.

Alpinist magazine released the news in February. “The Copp-Dash Inspire Award announced the 2013 winners of the climbing grant established in memory of American climbers Jonny Copp and Micah Dash, who were killed in an avalanche in China, along with filmmaker Wade Johnson. In addition to providing financial support to prospective expedition teams, the goal of the Copp-Dash Inspire Award is to . . . help the climbers bring back and share inspiring multimedia stories of their adventures.” And there our scruffy names were, in print. Shaking, I phoned my parents.

“We’re going. We got the money. I need to buy a nice camera.”

There was a silence. My parents remember Copp, Dash, and Johnson’s deaths well. In 2009, the climbers were in China while I scaled mountains on my first Alaskan expedition. Standing vigil by the phone, my parents had been jarred by the news of their deaths. That spring moment, as Paul landed with our own, live, sunburned, emaciated bodies, the moment my mother heard my voice on a regular, non-satellite telephone, must have allowed them to exhale.

Paul actually points out Mount Deborah’s unclimbed south face as the plane slices through the freezing air, although it is not difficult to find. It stands out, to say the least. A shriek of granite churned upward by some massive thrust, sentinel, alone. Unlike the jagged “teeth” of the Central Alaska Range, whose steep walls form a phalanx of igneous molars, Deborah heaves upward sistered by nothing: a rotting fang in an otherwise empty

mouth. The mountain is terrifying: one of the most dangerous in North America, miles from anywhere, swathed in snow.

“There’s the road, if you need to walk out,” Paul says into his headset. I toss a glance at Bayard, sitting in the seat next to me, ten years my senior. Though he can’t whisper discreetly over the thrum of the engine, I can tell he’s never heard Paul say *that* before, either. We can barely make out the snowy Denali Highway, a good 40 miles from our mountain.

In 1964, David Roberts and Don Jensen hiked this distance on a failed attempt at Deborah, only to limp out 42 days later, disappointed and grateful to get out alive. It was Roberts’s book, *Deborah: A Wilderness Narrative* (Vanguard Press, 1970), written in terse, uncompromising prose, which convinced me to come here, though as a daydreaming eighth grader, I might have underestimated the severity of Alaskan climbing.

“Are you bringing a satellite phone?” David asks. We’re in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it’s days before our trip, I’ve just spent more money on parking than I do for a week of food, and the eighth-grader in me can’t believe I’m hashing out logistics with the legendary David Roberts, who pokes at a salad. No one in the restaurant would guess Roberts was at one time a famous Alaskan explorer, but then again, they aren’t close enough to see his eyes, which flare with passion as the discussion dives into crevasses, hovers over safe bivouac spots, or rests on the technical difficulties of climbing in the cold.

When Roberts and Jensen tried Mount Deborah in 1964, their two-way radio broke down early and they had no communication to the outside world. For day after forlorn day, the pair sat in isolation, whiling away their hours, thwarted by an unyielding mountain and each other’s psyches.

I wonder how Dave feels about us making a film, which is our plan. Is it sacrilege? Years ago, when Talkeetna was a tiny spot on the map, when Dave and a few others made tentative prods into the stunning peaks of the Alaska range, mountaineering wasn’t so much of a commodity.

For my part, I feel as if our plan, involving thousands of dollars of borrowed camera equipment,

promised pictures to various sponsors, the inevitable trip report and Facebook updates, and above all, a 248-mile flight, is preposterous and unfair to the mountain.

Part of this stems from an impassioned letter Dave penned to *Alpinist* magazine in 2007. “It hit me that the young climbers of the day were what the Greeks called *epigoni*: the born-too-late, the hangers on.” The letter stopped me in my nascent tracks. “There are still, to be sure, magnificent challenges left for climbers . . . but . . . nearly all the hardest mountains in the world have been climbed.” Going to Dave’s mountain, to the place that had sprouted a title with the words “a wilderness narrative,” in Paul’s shiny new aircraft with our solar chargers and iPods—were we hammering the nail in the coffin?

Had technology finally tripped over adventure?

According to Facebook, 76 people “like” the fact that we’re heading to Mount Deborah. As the plane leaves the tarmac, Bayard’s iPhone loses service and we stop sending photos of ourselves to his wife Anne, who has been posting them. Accurate weather forecasting, satellite phone updates, and Paul’s prodigal ability to coax an aircraft into locations other pilots cannot all have warped one of the most remote places on earth into a playground for alpine climbers. This paradigm shift convinced the three of us to unearth an obscure objective such as Deborah, where we would almost certainly not see another soul.

The irony is not lost on me that to finance our monkish stint of isolation, we’ve ended up promising footage, photographs, and words to our sponsors. In our doing so, Deborah becomes a little less legendary with each click of the shutter.

None of this runs through my head just now. If writers ever state they are thinking these delicate thoughts in the mountains, they’re liars: they’re just horrified, like the rest of us. At the moment, I am not wondering if our impact on Mount Deborah is valid: Elliot has just skied into a crevasse and he might be hurt or dead. There aren’t any blog posts, just Bayard and I trying to dig an anchor in deep snow, praying that one of

our best friends is alive.

When we landed two days ago, the south face of Mount Deborah took our breaths away. In our 40 collective years of climbing experience, we'd never seen anything like it. From the air, we could feign aloofness, but as Paul flew away, stranding us on the West Fork Glacier, we felt vulnerable.

Sweat tinged my back despite the cold. We were utterly alone in one of the wildest places on earth. When we intruders stood still, nothing moved. No animal lived. No raven's wings made silent brushstrokes against the shockingly blue sky. Four miles up the glacier, past all the sleeping crevasses, past all the avalanche-soaked passes, lay the apex of years of dreams—and nightmares.

This place could kill us instantly if it wanted to. I think of Copp, Dash, and Johnson. Did they have time to turn the camera off before the avalanche rang its final note?

After half an hour or so, Elliot emerges again. My friend is fine. His sunglasses have fallen off and his skis dangle below him. Skiing back over crevasse fields is indescribable: an odd mixture of boredom and constant, nagging fear. Flat, uninteresting terrain cloaks the menacing possibility of breaking through to the world's underbelly. As we return to base camp, all of us cringe, waiting for another plunge.

“Why do you need to go to Mount Deborah?” The question is simple, but grating. I am streaking across Vermont in my Toyota Corolla with my friend Anna. We have just come back from a hike, one we've both done dozens of times, though each time is different, and crystalline in my mind: new snow on scraggly cedars, a resilient hobblebush, a slow pace, our nostrils stinging from cold on the summit.

“It's *new*. It's unexplored. It's *mystery*.”

“Why isn't this enough? Why aren't these moments significant for you?”

I offer my best: that to find adventure in wild places these days you've got to construct your own, that to

keep pace with helicopters and cell phones and idiot-proof GPS devices, you've got to burrow further, create challenges, go to mountains without names. I neglect to mention, of course, we will rely on all of these things on our trip to some extent.

But these moments at home *are* enough. Sometimes. I remember completing a hut-to-hut traverse in the White Mountains with my friend Tristan, our feet pounding 52 miles of New Hampshire schist and granite, naked save running shoes and shorts. But the summer's heat, the closeness to buildings, people, had allowed us to take no possessions or food. Deborah offers no such choice. The farther north I get from the trappings of the digital age, the more of it I seem to carry in my bag.

“Isn't it contrived? Or selfish? To fly in to a place like that?”

For this I have no real answer.

Not long after we've arrived, I stop worrying about contrivance, or about being fair to Mount Deborah. It's clear that although we have planes and satellite phones in our quiver, the mountain can still surprise us.

“I've never been so goddamn cold in my life,” says Bayard flatly. Bayard, at 36, is one of the best U.S. winter climbers. I had a picture of him on my wall long before I met him. I was too nervous to talk to him when I first moved to New Hampshire. I've seen Bayard laugh off 30-foot falls, wend his way up serpentine cracks chocked with ice, defy physics. The clothing company Outdoor Research is paying for him to be here, and he adds an air of legitimacy to Elliot's and my youthful, angst-ridden drive.

Polar air, a freak occurrence even for April in Alaska, settles over base camp, and we begin to freeze. Everything—hand sanitizer, meat, bagels, contact lens solution—becomes a solid block. We will find out afterward it is the coldest spring on Alaskan record since 1923.

The snow squeaks when our skis touch it. In the silence, the sound is almost deafening. We keep our cameras tucked inside our shirts, even at night, and I live with the battery for the satellite phone in my pant

pocket. Our plan is to climb Deborah with day packs and a single stove, in a push, descend over the other side, and trudge back to base camp. This requires perfect weather, total confidence in our abilities, and the complete willingness to live in unspeakable danger for three or more days.

“Michael. This isn’t going to work.” Bayard and I talk a day before we decide to launch. I try not to think of my parents, a world away. “We’ll freeze our toes. Best case scenario. No question.”

After a sleepless night, we awake at 4 in the morning, the three of us chattering as we melt water in the tent. It is –40 here, at 5,000 feet. What will happen when we climb higher? I force myself out of the tent and stumble around, shouting at the violent cold.

“C’mon DEBORAH!” I scream, a jilted lover. “Let us CLIMB!” Our systems have failed us. I do not snap photographs; exposed skin means frostbite. After everyone wakes up, we ski toward the wall in our down jackets. Our feet, buried in neoprene-lined double boots, are without feeling. For a second I am detached. I start weighing how many toes I am willing to lose before I turn around. For a minute, I contemplate this perverse absurdity in the arctic dawn. The rope between the three of us suddenly comes tight. Bayard, stopping, 45 minutes away from base camp. The virgin face looms above us still.

“I’m going back. I strongly suggest you guys do the same.” Our plans are unraveling. By now, success seems impossible. But just a few minutes of footage, Elliot and I climbing on the face . . . *something* for the grant committee. I take some rope from Bayard. Elliot takes some climbing gear. We keep going. *Is this what Jonny and Micah thought as they pushed forward with Wade? Or Dave and Don? Does the camera make us any less vulnerable?*

I realize the mountain doesn’t care who we are, why we’re here, or what we’ve brought. My frozen fingers unzip four layers and finally fumble with the camera lens. I manage 30 seconds of shaky footage almost automatically: Elliot below the mountain, swinging his feet like a football punter to stay warm. I don’t need the film to remember the moment though: We two grown men doing jumping jacks, miles from anywhere, beneath

a hunk of granite no one really cares about, pistons of humanity bobbing up and down, fighting for enough warmth to stay alive. The climbing ceases to matter, and the movie, too. Sometimes, surviving is enough.

After fifteen minutes of this, we clip into our skis, still intent. I cannot feel my feet.

“Elliot.”

“Yo!”

“I’m calling it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. This is suicide.”

A pause.

“Yup.”

In the end, it’s that easy.

Bayard clasps our disappointed shoulders. He hustles me into my sleeping bag and hands hot water bottles to shove next to my feet. Six hours later, all our gear packed, we hear the thrum of Paul’s single-engine DHC-2 Beaver, stabbing through two weeks’ silence. The bright red and blue of the plane’s fuselage against a clear sky, against the white of Alaska. For a moment, everything fits, as Paul lands to pick up his grateful *epigoni*.

MICHAEL WEJCHERT works on the Appalachian Mountain Club’s construction crew and as a climbing guide for International Mountain Climbing School in North Conway, New Hampshire. Both jobs keep him outside all day, and well equipped to take annual trips to Alaska and South America, where he attempts to climb remote mountains with varying degrees of success.