

This place we call home.

“I can’t find a crack!” I yell up to Jay with a hint of desperation. He is thirty meters above, in the dark. The wind howls. He doesn’t respond—not that he can do anything anyway—I just need to vocalize my frustration. I have been in this spot for half an hour, swinging from the ends of the rope; searching. The ground is still ninety feet below me. I just need somewhere to construct an anchor, but there is nothing except blank rock. I turn my headlamp’s beam back to the snow-covered granite and continue to scrape at its surface with my ice tool, hoping that some miniscule fissure will suddenly appear. It doesn’t, but I continue scraping. The sound of metal on rock rings in my ears; the acrid, metallic smell curls in my nostrils. Vexation begins to spill over to panic.

I am on what I had hoped was the last of eight rappels—controlled descent using a friction device—down the Cathedral Buttress above the Loch in Rocky Mountain National Park. The day had started out blustery but charged with excitement. Jay and I even had time to stop by the Donut Haus in Estes and pack in a few extra calories. It is the middle of January, and winter climbing in the Park requires every extra calorie you can afford.

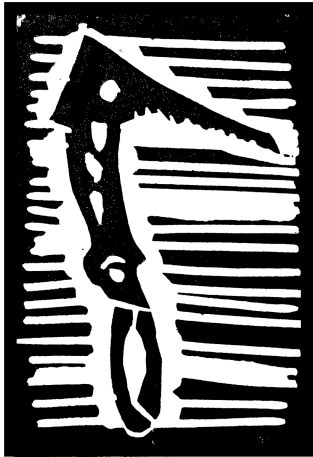


We are excited about the route that we had chosen: “Tunnel Vision.” According to Mountain Project, an online climbing resource, the route was opened by Steve Su and Edward Corder in 2004. The climb ascends 800 vertical feet of variable snow, ice, and rock on the lower end of the large rock buttress that leads to the Cathedral Spires where the Petit Grepon, the famous finger-like pinnacle, resides.

The relatively short approach, protected position, and moderate climbing attract us on a day when the gusting wind and frigid temperature made venturing above treeline a futile mission. After a couple hours of skinning uphill on our skis, we sort and rack our gear at the base of a wide chimney that leads into a deep cleft between the first and second buttresses of the formation. I look at the vague description of the first pitch that I saved to my phone but figure that the climbing would be relatively straightforward. Simple; go up the path of least resistance.

The climb is five pitches—the distance needed to climb from one anchor to the next, with each of the first three stretching our single, sixty-meter rope to its end and the other two measuring about fifty meters each. The route has a walk-off descent, rather than a typical rappel down the rock face that would require two ropes, so we decide to save a little weight by only bringing one rope. The first three pitches are challenging but go as well as might be expected given the conditions. No ice and a lot of snow make the climbing slow and delicate. The rock is fragile, and the cracks are chocked with frozen soil and vegetation. At the top of the first pitch, Jay exclaims: “That was some of the worst climbing I have done for some time!” I agree but convince him that we should forge ahead, citing the fact that conditions can always improve. More selfishly, however, I really like this kind of climbing. I strangely enjoy hooking the tiny tip of my ice tools on improbable features and scratching the steel-spiked crampons attached to my feet on micro edges formed by the rock. I derive pure pleasure from inventing impossible placements for the pieces of gear to which your rope is attached: aluminum wedged-shaped nuts, retractable camming devices, thin steel pitons, and the infamous ice Spectre—the steel hook shaped like an axe pick that you hammer into blobs of icy grass and hope not to test with a fall.

Jay and I met through a mutual friend, and this is the first time that we have climbed together as a team of two. Jay is a strong climber; fit and very psyched to be out in the cold, which is the primary characteristic one wants in a winter partner, especially in the Park. Rocky Mountain National Park is a truly magnificent place that typifies the romantic sublime. For climbers, it is a mecca. The soaring granite faces that dot the alpine landscape attract adventures from across the globe. It is an environment where one is challenged, humbled, and rewarded. Winter amplifies the climbing experience here. Gale-force winds, freezing temperatures, and heavy snow make everything slower, harder, and more painful. But I love it.



I am happy to keep leading and begin the next pitch, advancing our position farther up the deep chimney. I excavate large amounts of snow and loosely consolidated ice, stem and wriggled up tight constrictions and bulges, and beat at giant snow mushrooms until they come crashing down, forcing you to fight the violent jerk as the falling mass grabs at the rope attached to the harness around your waist.

At the top of the fourth pitch we are exhausted. We have been climbing continuously for six hours and are starting to feel the immense ache in our limbs from the intense cold as the sun dips low to the west. With only one more pitch to go, we force down half a granola bar each and sip lukewarm tea, feeling that relief that comes when you know that the summit is close at hand. We feel some sense of urgency to get there, however, as Jay has forgotten his headlamp at the base, and we are not exactly sure what the descent has in store for us.

As we stand at the belay, a small rock ledge where we built an anchor into the rock, we shiver in unison as wind-blown spindrift from above continuously pours loose snow on our hooded heads and the temperature drops further. I read the description of the last pitch: “Continue up icy mixed terrain in the large corner system, possibly past an enormous snow mushroom. Then burrow through the ‘holy shit, Batman’ passage to finish the climb.” Like the rest of the route, this seems straightforward enough. Just go up, find the tunnel, and squeeze your way through to the summit. There is indeed a large snow mushroom that guards the entrance to what looks like a small alcove. The potential entrance to the tunnel is positioned below a car-sized chockstone where the chimney constricts and becomes an overhanging series of small roofs.

I find a thin smear of ice that is just thick enough to take half the length of a stubby, thirteen-centimeter ice screw. I gingerly twist the hollow screw into the ice and tie it off with a length of nylon webbing and hope it will hold if the snow mushroom decides to collapse as I attempt to surmount it. I painstakingly carve out a body-wide gap between the mushroom and the ice that allows me to squirm up and into the alcove. I sit there panting after the acrobatics. After getting most of the snow from out of my jacket and managing to zip up the now frozen collar of the layer below, I look up in search of the “holy shit, Batman” passage. To my disappointment, no such feature reveals itself. I climb as far up and into the recess as I can, scraping at the loose rock to see if maybe the entrance is just concealed or blocked. No luck. My best guess is that the tunnel collapsed and filled in with impenetrable debris.

We have few options now. The way above is too steep and difficult to protect with the gear we have. The only way to continue up would be by aid climbing, a technique that necessitates pulling on protection placed into the rock to make upward progress—a laborious process that would push us into darkness. I pound a metal spike called a piton into a small crack, clip a carabiner to it, and

lower myself from this point back to the belay where Jay stands shivering. We discuss what to do. The gully that we climbed up does branch to the right, but to get there would require rappelling, traversing, and then venturing up another chimney system that we know nothing about. I'm not quite ready to admit defeat, so I go back up to the alcove for one more search of the elusive tunnel. My search is in vain. "Perhaps if we had more daylight..." I mutter to Jay after coming back down to him. In the end, Jay makes the only call we can: "I guess we're rappelling."

We immediately regret our choice to only bring one rope as we realize just how many rappels it will take to get back to the ground. On a rarely climbed route such as this, there are no bolted anchors, permanent fixtures drilled into the rock like you find at a popular sport-climbing crag. A few make-shift anchors have been established by previous climbers, but single-rope rappels require that we construct a series of intermediate anchors, because a sixty-meter rope only provides a thirty-meter rappel. I always have pitons and an assortment of nuts for just his purpose but descending in this manner is time-consuming. We rappel for nearly three hours, stopping to find appropriate locations to fix gear, which goes smoothly—until the last rappel.

I am at the ends of the rope, swinging from the knotted tails caught in my rappel device. I move from side-to-side, straining to see the topography of the rock under the snow and searching for any constriction to set a nut or insipient crack to hammer a piton. There is nothing. I move back and forth across the blank surface for another twenty minutes. It is now dark. I find a number of potential spots to place something, but the nut pops or the flakey granite crumbles. I clench my teeth and sigh in exasperation. Finally, out of pure desperation, I begin pounding a heavy, oblong-shaped piton called a "Universali"—the kind of bulky thing that you grimace at when hefting its weight but bring anyway just for moments like this—into a shallow break in the rock face. To my surprise, the piton holds. I clip into the single piece and yell to Jay that I am off rappel. I figure that I have about ten minutes to find another placement—a solid anchor ideally needs two equalized points—before Jay gets to me. I knew that I had a little time because we were both struggling with frozen carabiners that required a bare hand and our own warm breath to heat up and open. Just as I begin to hear the clanging of Jay's tools on his harness, I am able to find a pathetic constriction that accepts a small aluminum nut after I pound at it a bit with my axe point.



One final rappel from my desperately-built, but seemingly solid, anchor brings us the ground. We laugh at the silliness of our endeavor, our easily preventable mistakes, and the fact that, looking at Mountain Project one more time, we discover that the climber who wrote up the route's description had actually bailed off of the fourth pitch as well, writing that "the rest is a guess." But we are happy. We pack our bags and click into our skis, preparing to glide back into the dark cover of trees. It only takes a little over an hour to reach the car and then a little more to be back in Boulder. But these are the adventures I thrive on. Little experiences close to home that feel big at the time and remind you just how special it is, this place we call home.