

The Equilibrium Line



The Equilibrium Line
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smith|doorstop

Published 2019 by
Smith|Doorstop books
The Poetry Business
Campo House
54 Campo Lane
Sheffield S1 2EG
www.poetrybusiness.co.uk

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ISBN 978-1-912196-74-6

David Wilson hereby asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed & Typeset by Utter
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Cover image: Climbers on the Bluemlisalp traverse above Kandersteg, Switzerland, by kind permission of Mike Pescod, Abacus

Smith|Doorstop is a member of Inpress,
www.inpressbooks.co.uk. Distributed by NBN International,
Airport Business Centre, 10 Thornbury Road Plymouth PL 6 7PP.

The Poetry Business receives financial support from Arts Council England



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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For my family and my friends on the hill, with gratitude

Part One

Lines of Ascent

To *W H Murray*, Mountaineering in Scotland

Your book was a tent I slept in each night,
your mountains so fiercely imagined
my London life felt like exile.

I climbed with you up moonlit snow
in glare so bright we wore dark glasses.
Our blue shadows danced beside us.

I watched you work with a slater's pick
to carve holds in walls of green ice,
only halfway as darkness welled up.

From your prisoner-of-war camp you wrote
that retreat under fire to El Alamein
held less suspense than Observatory Ridge.

I studied the guides, unfolded the maps,
but you put the hills at the end of my street,
and every winter your snow still arrives.

Bivouac at Harrison's Rocks

Leaves turn from green to grey.
On the breeze, a scent of hops.
A star appears. A bat.

Beyond silver birches
a train sounds its two-tone horn,
slows for a bend, disappears.

We're fifteen years old
with apple pies, cans of Sprite,
and dreams of the Eigerwand.

Above our ledge a sandstone roof,
below us the drop. Not far
but far enough.

The Slab

This is for Spring ... that you may remember.

– Les Murray

The slab tilted up for five hundred feet or more.
Slate-grey, with veins of white quartz,
it lay in an amphitheatre of rock, split by gullies
that oozed and dripped. All afternoon I'd sat
waiting by a green lake at the slab's foot
for the last climbers to coil their ropes and leave
so I might take it on unseen,
protagonist in my own drama
or making a fool of myself alone.

I tightened my second-hand kletterschue,
slung borrowed rope around my neck,
lifted my arms and touched the rock,
still warm from late sun but now in shadow.
The mountains held their breath.
It was time, time to make my move
and be gone, time to reach for the small flake
I'd studied for hours, to curl fingers round it,
place my boot on the quartz edge and climb,
the slab flowing beneath me, offering its holds,
unrolling in an almost-blur of moving up till
I was higher than the roof of our house,
the science block at school, the church spire,
moving up and up, the lake below shrinking
to a single calm eye. It was time

as it would be time that night to walk
to the edge of heavy-scented pines
beyond all artificial light,
and give thanks to mountains
who'd been generous that day;
time to look up at stars fiercer and brighter
than I'd known, pressing down,
breathing in, breathing out.

Feeding the Crow

In Memoriam Dave Knowles

Hughes' *Crow* explained the world,
your father's early stroke,
America in Iraq.

You translated words into rock,
gritstone cracks which hung in space,
hand-jams that bit our flesh.

You wanted steep, hard, cold,
a printer's landscape of black and white,
and so to Nevis in February,

an unclimbed buttress in a storm.
Crow is loving this, you said.
Your dark eyes shone.

High in a vertical ice-choked groove
your crampons slipped and scraped.
I had no belay worth the name,

prayed to a kinder, weaker god
that we might get out of this alive.
Crow grinned, and flew his black flag.

Summer with Yeats

Our climb's in a zawn
of Bosigran granite
above turquoise sea.

We're near the top
of the graded list,
scene of many falls, but

I know the sequence,
do not stop to
think this time;

each hold finds
me, shapes my
moves. Now. And

now. And now, as
through cold fingers
glittering summer runs.

Gritstone Solo, Sudden Rain

What was here an hour ago has gone;
people, lark-song, sunlit purple,
a shout that would be heard.

Now the climb demands you be
the self you always sought.
Calm legs that want to tremble,

dry each shoe against your jeans,
then commit to one small edge,
your life balanced on its tip.

On top, high, look down the long slab.
It's three hundred million years old.
That's how close you came to time.