

# THE CLIMBING LIFE

## The Geography of Absence

July 2021

THE HELICOPTER'S ROTORS LIFTED us above the ancient yellow cedars. The machine lurched, then steadied. The pilot shot us a look over his shoulder.

"Where are we going?"

James laughed as he pulled his phone out of his pocket to open a map app. He pointed to the ridge's arced topographic lines on the screen, and he lifted his finger to trace the horizon on the helicopter's fishbowl glass.

"Up a little higher here," James instructed. Green slopes gave way to rocky spines that rose to ridges crusted in rotten, grey snow. "Now left." James bent his arm into a cyclist's gesture to indicate. "Your next right after the col." Instructions so banal, we could pass for backseat taxi passengers.

The helicopter deposited James, Suzie, Claire and me on the bank of an unnamed lake beneath the Avalanche Glacier. As soon as we disembarked, we threw our bodies onto our piled gear—rope, camera bags, loose helmets, a tripod with a crane's neck and a bendable head. We wove our arms tightly over our packs and each other to protect ourselves from the departing helicopter's muscular wind.

The Avalanche is one of the remaining glaciers on the Ktunaxa, Syilx and Sinixt land now known as the Selkirk Range in interior British Columbia. The glacier today spans 800 acres. By 2085, models predict it will have vanished. For now, it is suspended on the nearly-never-visited northeastern side of the Mt. Sir Donald massif. I'd come here to study the glacial forefield—the space leftover after melt gives way to new earth. Our research methodology entails starting at the historic terminus,

where the glacier once ended, and finding a route up the wilderness of new rock until we arrive at the new edge of the icefield. Along the way, after every fifty meters of elevation gain, we'd stop to collect data with tiny metal instruments—tools to make meaning of the scale and pace of change.

To early researchers, receding ice had once seemed a marvel. In 1887 Johann Coaz—a Swiss alpinist, topographer and scholar—was on his second trip up the Rhonegletscher when he found waxy yellow saxifrages growing where there had been ice only three years earlier. Downslope, where the glacier's recession had occurred one decade prior, Coaz counted thirty-nine species of plants. "Serious thoughts

took hold of us," he wrote in an expedition journal. "Amazed and awe-struck we gazed across this magnificent mountain world."

When glaciers shrink, what remains is like a contour map whose scale is time. As years pass, lichen turns mineral dust into dark, carbon-carrying soil. Fireweed grows in cracked granite. The cracks widen, and in them, trees seed, sprout and tower.

Analyzing a 1902 photograph, I thought that the Avalanche Glacier might have receded more than half a kilometer. It took hours to scramble from the marshy helicopter landing pad to the 1902 terminus location: down a steep moraine, over newborn bedrock, and across silty, braided streams. We skirted the outer edge of the glacial basin until we arrived at the base of the forefield. From there, we had to find a path up what would have been the middle of the glacier a century ago. Massive boulders—glacial erratics—balanced at unlikely angles on the ledges above us. Later, during our daily safety debrief, James observed that the place had the eerie, electric feeling of still being unsettled. The forefield was just an assemblage of discrete parts that hadn't yet found their final place of repose.

The eight data collection stations along the midline of the forefield were pitched out like a convoluted climb, separated by talus fields and tiered cliffs. I have never been more confident that I was part of a first ascent. When we arrived at the penultimate station, my hands were raw from grasping at the vine-like roots of krummholz trees. The final pitch was relentlessly steep—too technical for two of my colleagues to follow, too new for lichen to have landed and taken hold. But the granite was sturdy, sticky enough for my stiff-soled boots. It felt like part of a classic route. Where the rock

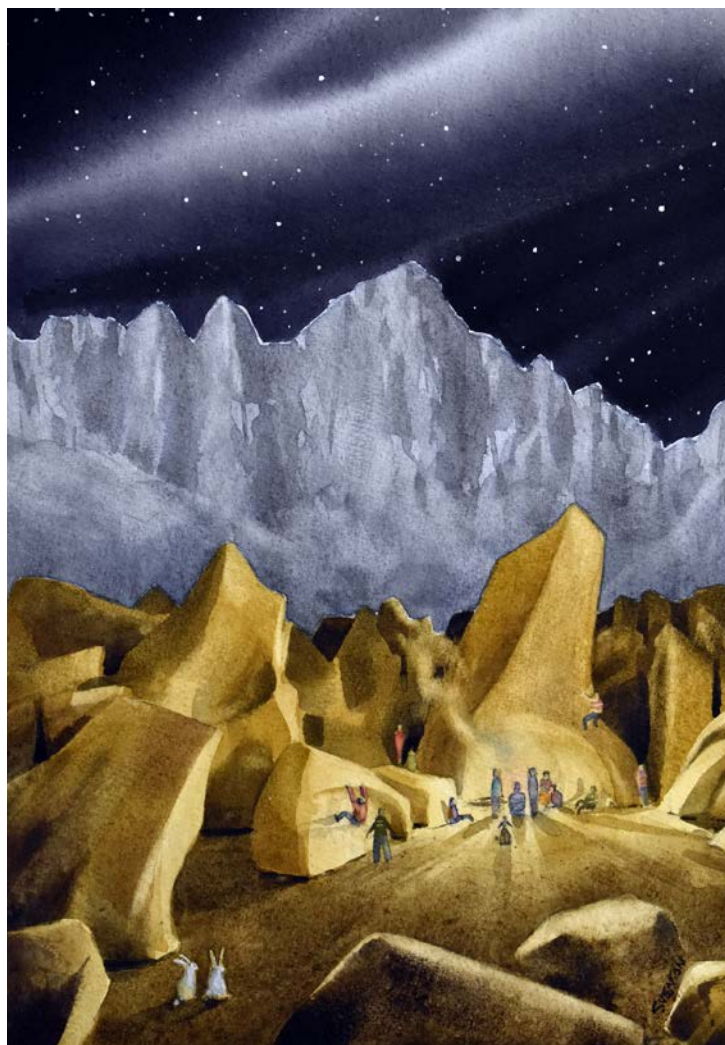






Photo: Alex Eggermont. Climber: Brittany Goris

had chipped away under the glacier's weight, handholds were large enough to grasp with four fingers, two or three pads deep.

While developing my research plan, I'd pored over Google Earth satellite imagery of this landscape. I'd dragged the app's 3D-rendered peaks around and around, learning their crannies with new love-like desperation. I'd delighted at how winter softened the valley's rough edges. I'd looped through Google Earth's daylight simulator so I could watch the sun rise and set through four decades of melt. I'd occupied the better part of a year this way, but the momentum of that long intimacy did not prepare me for the thrill of finally making contact. Suzie laughed at my stunned expression. "It's no wonder that humans dedicate their entire lives to closing the rift between representation and experience," she said. Her shoulders rose as she took a deep breath, her dark hair wisping out from under the three hoods she'd pulled over her helmet. She started to climb.

Finally, we arrived at the glacier's maw. Cool air shot off the ice. The alpine wind whistled. I was surprised by the sudden inhale of fleeting cold and the crushing noise of calving and caving in. As Suzie and I unfolded the tripod, we heard something deep shatter and echo out. We looked at each other. I felt my shoulders tense. *Were we safe here?*

Suzie is an artist, as well as a naturalist and a climber. In 2021, for an exhibition in Chicago, she'd stitched and soldered together images of coyotes and wildfires, delicate slugs and meadow fields. In the perimeter of the gallery, she'd hung wire and red glass like a fladry line, typically used to keep livestock predators at bay. *Step behind the line*, the piece seemed to invite the audience. *Take a closer look*. In an accompanying poem, Tamara Becerra Valdez wrote about the "tender complexity" of "grass growing through slab." Some things are alive, Valdez insists, despite the mess we've made. The fireweed in the granite, the grass in Valdez's rock: both remind me that some love hinges equally on grief and tender curiosity. The poem ends just like the climb: "Here," Valdez writes, we are "getting used to the geography of absence./ An incantation of renewal/ here is the collapse we've been calling in."

Suzie turned to speak, but I couldn't hear her. The glacier's groan drowned out other sound. There was no birdsong, no gently rustling leaves. The overhang of the ice sent drips sparkling onto never-before-seen quartz. Ore that had, until a few weeks ago, perhaps,

never before been warmed by the sun. The gleaming rock was still too new for yellow-petaled flowers. I read once that the climate crisis presents a crisis of narrative. There are also stories on the far side of every change. There are forefields in the wake of all great meltings. I leaned in to get a closer look. As I stood in puddles fed by the metronome drip of glacier thaw, I knew that this ragged blue edge was a threshold.

[Suzie's art, which inspired parts of this piece, can be found online at [suzannazak.com](http://suzannazak.com). —Author.]

—Astra Lincoln, *LOCATION TK*

## Dreams of Rising Waters

THERE WAS A TIME before this, but not the one we remember. That one is as real as our imagined futures, as starkly different from the *now* we made as the *now* we had intended, then.

So, now: smoke-choked throats and burning eyes, as predictable each season as the snows had been, once. Bands of pale dust crumble into sandy-bowled reservoirs. The land is drier than it ever was, even before we flooded it. Fewer birdsongs, if we'd ever noticed them before. We wonder where the birds went, thinking, hoping, they've discovered new migratory patterns that we haven't. Except we know that thousands or millions of them have simply died. The rock still feels the same, though, cool or hot to the touch, depending on the weather. We are all always depending on the weather. The susurrous scrape of rubber on granite, a soft yielding as the shoe grips. Slips, occasionally. As we all do. To go up, you have to give in.

A summit still has that open air feeling that's like nothing else; it never matters how high (or low) it actually is. We ease our bodies over awkward bulges or out of rippling cracks and into sky. Soon—if we don't succeed in blocking out the sun with clouds of reflective aerosols—a manufactured perennial gloaming layered over manufactured perennial suffering—it may be the only feeling we can still remember from before. That open sky, a sense of "above-ness." Everything else has changed.

It wasn't intentional. We throw our hands up and say sorry, we never meant to do this. We only wanted to grow grain for our families, to harness a little bit of the river to mill it, and later, to pull a little bit of ore from the earth for our satellites and our solar panels, to remove the tops of just a few anonymous mountains.