ROYAL ROBBINS 1935–2017

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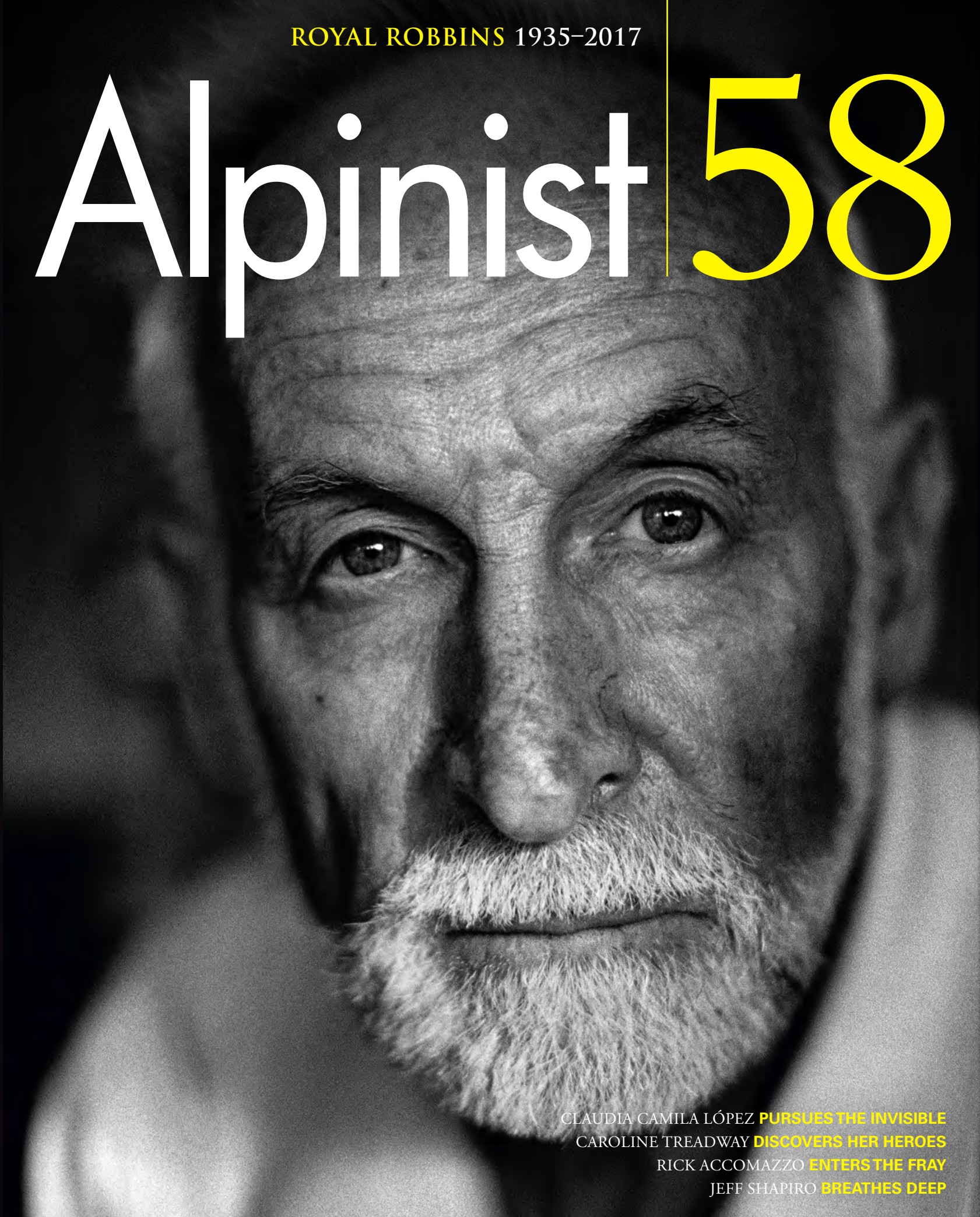

CLAUDIA CAMILA LÓPEZ **PURSUES THE INVISIBLE**
CAROLINE TREADWAY **DISCOVERS HER HEROES**
RICK ACCOMAZZO **ENTERS THE FRAY**
JEFF SHAPIRO **BREATHES DEEP**

became an iconic articulation of self-restraint, Messner argued for free climbing natural lines and leaving too-difficult lines for future climbers.

A non-climbing friend of mine jokes that someday they'll install an open-air elevator on my favorite walls, and he'll ride past me laughing. I wouldn't mind sometimes having an elevator for the descents. But shortcuts would miss the point.

The ideal of progress by hands and feet alone is at the heart of what free climbers do. We use the technology catalogued here to place ourselves in a position of willful weakness. I think of this position as if I am entering a clearing. Outside its perimeter, I constantly overcome my meek resources: a fixed wingspan and the energy contained in a single human body. But once I step inside, I accept those limitations again. In such vulnerable moments, at once intimate and sublime, our machines actually bring us closer to nature.

The freedom of the hills is not the freedom to do anything you want. It is much narrower: to do only what you can, by your own lights, in a place otherwise out of reach. We discover it most vividly in brief interludes when our movement is least encumbered by the technology that nonetheless enables it.

I submit this catalogue as proof of something true of much of modern life: the social and environmental cost of reaching these out-of-reach places, and returning safely, is unsustainably high. Yet I still think the modest freedom we exercise there deserves the name. In an era of overflowing means, self-restraint is a virtue worth celebrating. We need more, not fewer, ways to enter into contact with the Earth, our home. We also need a lower price of admission.

—Spencer Gray, Washington, DC

K'é yił yał tx'i': Saying Something

Along the Tohickon, which may originate from a Lenape word meaning "Deer Bone Creek," cliffs of red Lockatong argillite and Brunswick shale form the unusual High Rocks of Pennsylvania. I balance beneath the shadow of leaves stubborn enough to withstand the blunt of winter, my feet planted on either side of an exposed root, on the slippery slopes of a gorge entangled with fallen trunks. Through my zoom lens, I study my husband, a splash of warmth against a canvas of rock, as he lifts our giggling kids above his head by their belay loops. Apart from the sound of a hawk landing on a branch of tulip poplar, the roar of the creek drowns even the noise of my breath.

My camera rests gently on the wispy black locks of our five-month-old. She is so quiet, so content swinging her legs from the sling across my chest that I sometimes forget she is now part of this scene. On the buttress above, our eleven-year-old, Kyra, has worked her way up a crack and is trying to find a hold on friable shale. Since age three, she has been determined to win a NASCAR race or to earn an Olympic medal in Snowboard Cross, maybe both.

I feel my heart quicken when I see the uncertain dance of her fingers across a smooth lip. I don't want those fingers to become mine, scarred at age twenty-one, fingertips raw from scaling peaks after I lost both my birth mother and brother to liver cancer. I don't want her to climb the way I did, without fear, the higher and riskier the better, because I thought the worst thing that could happen to me had already taken place, and I was untouchable.

Kyra sweeps glances of awe at the world from her height. Only after she touches the roots of a cedar growing at the top of the cliff does she take the time to find me.

Everything in the Diné (Navajo) worldview is bound by four Sacred Mountains. Shortly after my birth mother died, I met Ursula Knoki-Wilson of the Táchii'nii or Red Running into Water People Clan. She folded my rough and calloused hands inside hers. I became the daughter she never had.

She used to tell me to call her "Rez Mom," but now she has borne the weight of "Mom" longer than my birth mother had. One day, we walked in Monument Valley until the red sand worked its way into the creases of our faces, hands and heels, between our toes and in our hair. Thunderbird Mesa towered above us. Cooling off in its shade, Mom bent down and sifted the earth through her fingers. When she lifted her hand, the red sand coated my face.

"The thundergods are housed here. Sometimes I will come here and sit, just to feel the energy. The sand will protect you wherever you go," Mom said, and then she handed me a bag to collect some of it. Resting my right hand on the earth, I felt heat lick like flames up my arm. I closed my eyes and sank on both knees.

Mom pointed at the Ye'ii Rainbow in sandpaintings and explained that mountains talk to each other. She taught me how to orient myself according to the four Sacred Mountains. Placed at the cardinal points to deflect or absorb harmful energies, they allow life on Earth to exist in balance.

The East Mountain, Mt. Blanca, also known as "white shell mountain," is in Alamosa, Colorado. Mt. Blanca is a Fourteener, the highest and most difficult of the four to climb. Symbolizing thinking, the east is the direction of new beginnings or a time to revisit a journey.

Riley, our three-year-old, orders her dad around while he fits her into a full-body harness. At the start of the trail to High Rocks, she had already organized us into her favorite characters from *Frozen:* her dad is "Kristoff," she is "Elsa," I am "Anna," and Joe Forte—the learning center director at the resort where my kids train on a snowboarding team—is "Olaf."

Our eight-year-old, Ethan, sits at Joe's feet and flips through a trad rack. Ethan runs his tongue nervously over his front teeth held in place by a splint after a freak flag-football accident that ruined his snowboard season. His forehead crinkles with irritation until suddenly a smile ripples across his face. Later, Ethan tells me that he's finally figured out what to do with his life. He could become "Batman" through rock climbing.

Joe is spending one of his days off with us. With years of experience as a guide, he thinks Kyra could develop more trust in herself through the methodical, slow-paced act of rock climbing. "There's no one she has to compete against except herself," he said.

Now, he speaks to Kyra in a steady voice, calming her as she struggles to remove an extra cam he placed in a crack. Beneath a worn beanie and kind hazel eyes, you'd never know that he struggles with Lyme disease. He always places the needs of others before his own, even though he suffers from headaches, blurred vision and dizziness. This is the character of the man roped to my kids: as selfless as the mountains he loves to climb and ride.

The South Mountain, Mt. Taylor, also known as "turquoise mountain," is in Grants, New Mexico. Mt. Taylor can be hiked within a day and is the easiest to scale. The south is the direction of planning and learning, a time to implement and act.

A few months before we climbed at High Rocks, Mom came to help me with the birth of my fourth child. In front of our fireplace, she kneaded dough to satisfy my craving for fry bread. Her fingers pulled then pushed the dough against the mixing bowl in a rhythm that always brought me back to the Rez. Thwump. Thwump. Like the sound of my weaving fork against the yarn in my loom.

"Everything has a spirit and needs to be respected. *Thwump. Thwump.* In Navajo, we call it K'é yił yał tx'i', which means 'it's saying something with a kinship feeling.' We are all related. That's why you have to ask permission of the mountains, water, trees before you have an adventure on them. *Thwump. Thwump.* You don't just come into my house without knocking on my door, right?"

Sprawled on her stomach, Kyra wrote down every word she heard. Ethan paused his Minecraft game to listen. "Mountains all over the globe are our cousins," Mom said. "They are mothers and protectors. That's why you have to do the honoring. *Thwump. Thwump.* When I went to Tibet and stood at the foot of Everest, I could feel the rhythm of that mountain in my soul. Before I climbed her, I found a water source." Mom explained that girls offer white shell or coral, while the boys offer turquoise or obsidian. "If you don't have any of these things, then you can pick a young flower with berries or a rose. Make sure you face east, like the way I taught you to always begin with Mt. Blanca, then move in a clockwise direction while saying a prayer."

I wrote down the prayer that Mom taught us and memorized it. Before we leave the house, I always remember to ask permission from mountains, rivers and trees, but once I'm outdoors, much to my frustration, I forget.

A month before we went to High Rocks, I left the baby and toddler with my neighbor and hiked with my husband, Kyra, Ethan, Joe and several other snowboard coaches to a glacial pothole that rose out of the Susquehanna, which may derive its name from a Lenape word meaning "Muddy River." The temperature that day hovered around 25 degrees, so cold I could see my breath condense into phantom curls.

We crossed sections of the river in various stages of thaw or freeze. A whisper of movement underneath the ice lured me to an oak leaf preserved at the peak of autumn with all its imperfections. I felt a kinship to remnants of another season. A breeze long gone had carved artful designs deep into a portion of the river that had pooled and frozen, thick and white.

Trailing after the others, I hid behind my camera. When I could no longer hear footsteps, I took off my gloves and ran my hand over the surface of the river, reading the patterns of snow that melted into rain, rain that turned into sheets of sleet.

The wind blew my down jacket open. I looked over my shoulder, feeling exposed, and then pulled the hood down over my eyes. Without the chatter of my kids, I became uncomfortably aware of the thoughts that have hunted me since my birth mother died. Life pools in my cupped hands like water, and I can't figure out how to hold onto moments of joy before they slip through my fingers: a mother's kiss, a first ascent, the words *I do,* the tiniest baby toes.

At a fork in the trail, my husband waited as still as the river birch grove, pretending to check his email. He shook his head when I tangled my cold gloveless hands in his.

The first time my kids climbed outdoors was two years ago at the New River Gorge. On a pitch that day, my son froze too scared to move. Kyle Kent, a grade school teacher and rock-climbing instructor, counter-balance ascended to Ethan, and he said the only words that could've gotten our stubborn little "Batman" to take action: "I'm your Robin." A

Photo: Ethan Welty

half hour later, my son became the first in our family to rappel off the Endless Wall.

When my son, my daughter, then my husband disappeared into a sea of trees without a sound and it was my turn to walk backward down a lip that receded with each step, I choked. I wished that I had rappelled first so I could have captured photos of the first time our kids found courage. My husband never asks why I take so many pictures, and

I never say what's running beneath the surface, like decayed and swollen wisps buoying up. I no longer remember what my brother and mother look like or how their arms feel around me. When my mother was dying, I swore to her, *I won't get married. I won't have kids without you.* I thought those words could hurt her enough to hang on to life. She had told me that becoming a mother was the best thing that ever happened to her. I didn't want to understand what that meant without her. I broke that oath, and now I see how it protected me from loss.

Every muscle strained to stay on the micro-edge foothold, refusing to obey Kyle who yelled, "Let go."

Our mind is our biggest limiting factor and our own impression of ourselves is what holds us back, Joe once said. By the time my toes slipped, my mind had already moved on to concerns about how my body had changed with childbirth. Gravity yanked me swiftly down into branches and leaves. I entered another dimension, dark yet familiar, layered in sandstone and shale deposited by ancient rivers.

And just as every muscle resisted spinning, I leaned back against the ropes and gave in to leaves drifting down on my face like snow.

The West Mountain, San Francisco Peaks, also known as "abalone shell mountain," is in Flagstaff, Arizona. As Arizona's highest summit, San Francisco Peaks is the most visited of the four Sacred Mountains. Symbolizing the activities of daily living, the west is the direction where you learn from your mistakes.

The coaches eyed the rising Susquehanna River nervously as Kyra and Ethan used etriers to aid past the first six feet of blank schist to reach the start holds. Neither of them seemed to mind the cold or the difficulty. Joe's teaching of Arno Ilgner's irrational vs. rational fear was working:

"If you checked your harness, rope, carabiners and your belay device and you communicate with your partner well, you should have no fear of hitting the ground. That's an irrational fear. We know all the systems are in place. It's safe. How would you apply that to snowboarding?"

"Being afraid at a competition to do a trick I've practiced all season?"

"Yes, if you've done the trick a million times, you have no reason to be scared. On the flipside, if there's another athlete that's trying to pressure you into doing a trick you've never done before, that's a rational fear."

As I packed away my camera and made my way toward the family, my daughter asked for another turn. By that time, the river, nearly the same color as the schist, had risen about a foot. Without informing her belayer, Kyra leaped onto the first etrier and missed. Because the rope wasn't yet taut, she fell waist-deep into water so cold and translucent that you could count the rocks beneath the surface.

Before I could react, Joe pulled Kyra out of the water and back onto the wall. Everyone extended a hand to bring her in, but she shook her head. Only one word did she utter between shivered gasps, "Climb."

When I arrived at her side, she had completed the pitch twice as fast as she did earlier. The coaches patted her on the back. Kyra handed Joe back the soaked fingerless gloves that he lent her. He poured her a cup of hot chocolate and told her about another one of Arno's concepts: "You have to have a certain amount of confidence and trust in yourself but not so much ego that you think you are undefeatable." I checked her little hands. Nothing bleeding, just mud caked beneath the nails. I kissed her fingers before I warmed them in my gloves. None of us had brought an extra change of clothes, and she still had about a mile or two to hike out to the car in her wet shoes and socks. She didn't seem to mind.

She announced, punctuating each word with chattering teeth, "Never give up."

The North Mountain, Hesperus Peak or "obsidian mountain," is north of Mancos, Colorado. Hikers say their favorite of the four is Hesperus because of the difficulty of route finding. The north is the direction for reflection and evaluation, for looking forward.

Back at the gorge, the Tohickon rushes by with such force that it's hard for us to hear each other. Joe says to Ethan, "If the crack in the rock is parallel, then you use a cam. If the crack forms a *V*, then you need a nut. See how they are shaped like a wedge?" He smooths his red beard.

Balancing one hand against the red argillite, a trad rack in the other, Ethan braces his feet in etriers. There is no toprope, but he is only about a foot off the ground, and Joe can look over his shoulder to evaluate his placements. I wish that someone like Joe had introduced me to climbing in this way instead of college boys showing off their skills to try to win my heart.

When he and Joe finally settle upon the nut that fits the crack best, Ethan shifts his weight to one etrier. Joe helps him unclip the other and reattach it to the protection he just placed.

"OK, now ease onto it. Do you think it will hold you? Give it a good bounce to make sure." The pieces of gear hanging around Joe's waist clang against each other like bells. It's a sound I fell in love with when I joined the Mountaineering Club at the University of Sussex.

Once Ethan realizes the protection he placed is solid, he looks at me and raises his eyebrows in delight. He gingerly aids up and down a few times, then repeats it with more confidence. I can see his mind firing connections: from this "aha" moment to the triumph he felt the first time he scaled a 55-foot climbing wall to perhaps one day rescuing someone by aiding through nightfall or storms.

Our three-year-old climbed for the first

time at a gym last year. Without any hesitation, she had moved from one colorful hold to the next with an elegance I had no idea someone so young could possess. There was no expression on her face, as if she had been doing this for years.

At High Rocks, the minute her dad hoists her up on the argillite, she bursts into laughter. She can't concentrate. As if the sun, wind, water, or rocks are having a conversation with her, she keeps bubbling over with giggles. Joe boulders at her side, patiently returning her hands and feet to holds. She's more interested in "flying," and the only words she manages to string together over and over are: "Olaf don't fall down."

As we pack up to leave, our son takes off his helmet. He is careless with it, and it rolls, then bounces faster and faster down the gorge toward the creek. The descent is so long that we can still hear one *thunk* after another even though it has disappeared from sight. He retrieves it only to let it slip out of his fingers once again. This time, he collapses in a heap of frustration. Joe smiles at me and nods.

None of us hike down the gorge to help Kyra and Ethan. We can't hear what they are saying, but after a long while we see my daughter return with the helmet, which she then promptly clips to her bag. My son trails far behind her. Both of them complain that they got more bruises from retrieving a helmet than from the climb.

I am overwhelmed with pride and jealousy that my kids are understanding lessons that have taken my lifetime to earn. They will be eager to tell their friends what happened, but disappointed that no one gets it, because how do you explain something as personal as realizing a profound truth about yourself.

Without acknowledging that there is the weight of a baby strapped to my chest, I feel my bones settle reluctantly into my new relationship with climbing. *It's OK,* I comfort myself. *It's no longer all about you.*

K'é yił yał tx'i', I whisper to my five-month-old. Like my camera, she zooms in on Joe, her siblings, her dad, the cliffs, creek, trees. She chews on the cowhide of my climbing gloves. Her eyes are wide, fascinated by all that is being said. When I place her hands against the argillite warm from the sun, she presses her palms gently against the stone the same way that she touches my face and hands when she nurses, both hesitant and confident, an exchange so private and raw I have not acknowledged it until now.

I don't need to tell her to respect the mountain. She already knows how.

—Leslie Hsu Oh, Delaware

Tea Song

Dad sings his tea song as he pours warm tea out of his flask into a plastic mug. Only the two of us know the tune. I unwrap a coffee-flavored sweet, and I ask the question that most six-year-olds would on a journey, "How far is it, Daddy?" He looks up from under his thick spectacles, and he squints against the early morning sun. "Not far," he says. He smiles through the black moustache. "Only an hour or two away." He starts putting the flask, the mugs and the sweets back into the old dusty rucksack. I long to see the top. Dry, rugged slopes dotted with rocks rise toward the blue sky. Thistles sway in the breeze. A grasshopper jumps from behind a rock. I glance at my dirt-speckled boots and pick out the thorns stuck on my big woolly socks. He tells me how well I've done so far. Far below our sleepy town of Karaj, Iran, blinks its lights. Mum must be still in bed. I am so high up! I bounce to my feet and say, "Let's go."

Twenty-five years pass. I strap my one-year-old son in the child carrier, which I have stuffed with toys, drinks and snacks, and I shift the pack onto my back. It feels heavy. But I need to train for Damavand. At 5610 meters, it's the highest peak in Iran. I leave the terraced

Photo: Rich Wheater