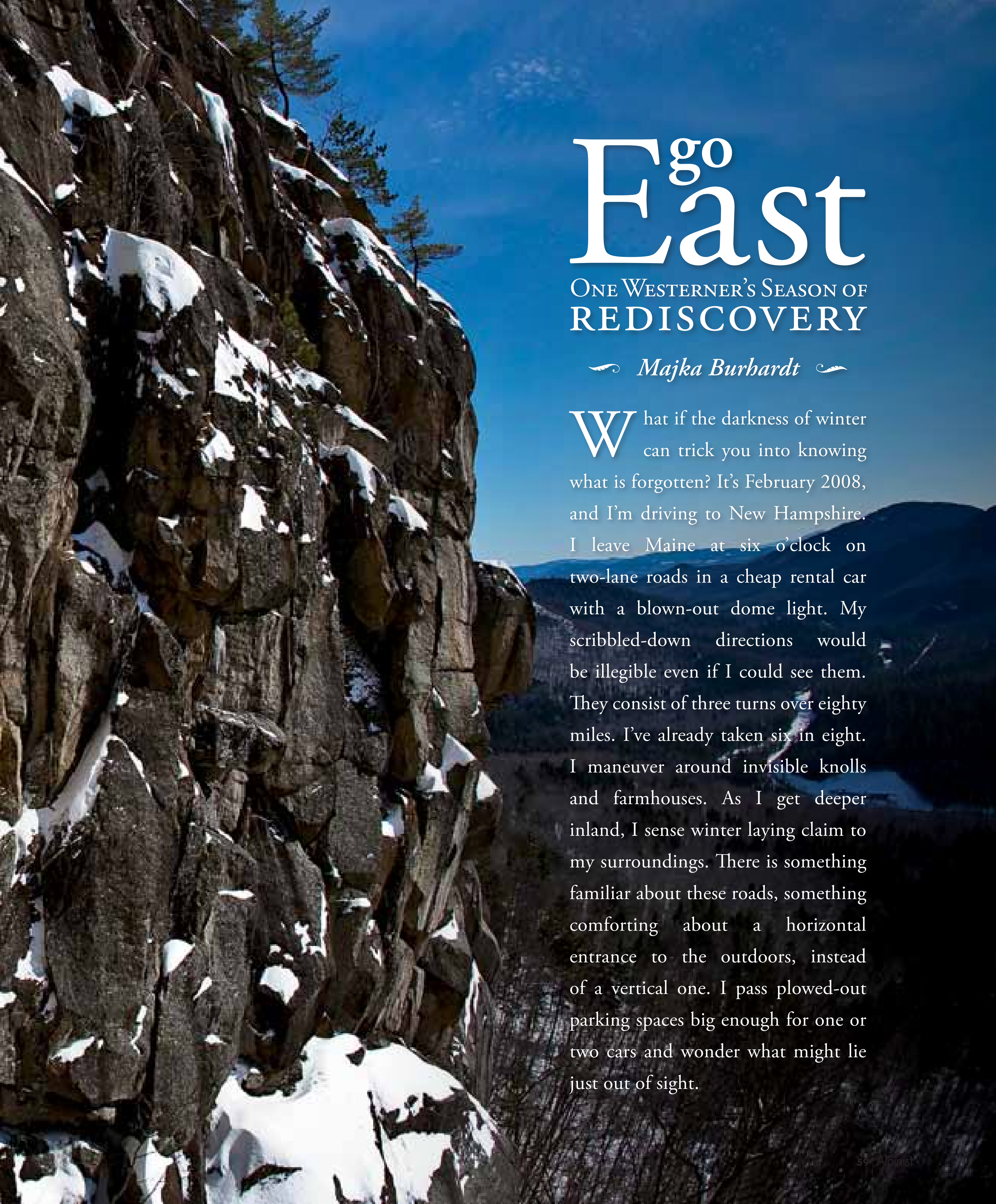

go East

One Westerner's Season of REDISCOVERY

Majka Burhardt

What if the darkness of winter can trick you into knowing what is forgotten? It's February 2008, and I'm driving to New Hampshire. I leave Maine at six o'clock on two-lane roads in a cheap rental car with a blown-out dome light. My scribbled-down directions would be illegible even if I could see them. They consist of three turns over eighty miles. I've already taken six in eight. I maneuver around invisible knolls and farmhouses. As I get deeper inland, I sense winter laying claim to my surroundings. There is something familiar about these roads, something comforting about a horizontal entrance to the outdoors, instead of a vertical one. I pass plowed-out parking spaces big enough for one or two cars and wonder what might lie just out of sight.

Two hours later, I arrive at Sarah Garlick and Jimmy Surette's house in Bartlett, New Hampshire. Sarah has invited me out from Colorado for the Mount Washington Valley Ice Festival. Though we've never met, I'm spending the week at her house. I walk inside the two-storey chalet and into a conversation about skiing. Jimmy mentions high avalanche danger. "Avalanches, in the East?" I say. In the quiet that follows I hear the hardwood hiss in the stove. Jimmy cringes. So do I. I've been a climber and guide for over a decade; I should know better. "Right," I say. "Of course." I mentally kick myself and blame the fifteen hours of travel, but I know that I sound like a pompous Westerner—something I never wanted to be.

That night, chasing sleep in their unheated guest room, I untangle myself from the layers of blankets and comforters, and walk on bare feet across the icy floor. Moonlight glows on a map. I trace my fingers over the contour lines, feeling their imperceptible ripples. Crawford Notch, Pinkham Notch, Tuckerman Ravine, Cannon Mountain, Cathedral—with each discovery, I set a track to seek out another. These places have only existed as names and half-formed images in my mind, part of that collective unconscious bred into me from years of climbing.

I'm alone, shivering, and woozy from Benadryl. I've been on the road in one way or another for a year and won't be stopping anytime soon. I place my head against the map. At this moment, it seems like the only real thing in my life. Maybe it's no surprise that ten months later, I pack up my van and my poodle and move to North Conway.

Westerners don't, as a rule, move East. When I told people I was moving from Colorado to New Hampshire, their first question was inevitably, "Why?"

"Don't you know it's cold there?" they'd ask.

I'd usually explain that I was going for every climber's dream trifecta: love, work and ice. I'd met a Northeasterner on that first trip. My winter plan had coalesced out of the allure of spending time with Peter, guiding in the East, and exploring abundant frozen matter.

This explanation would temporarily appease people, until they thought of the follow-up question: "But doesn't it rain there in the winter?"

I would go on to describe how rain is good for the ice. Midway through my description of the hundreds of runnels that form on small cliffs, my Western friends would interrupt me.

"Small?"

What no one dared say was the corollary: Why would you move back to small? Aren't we supposed to be trying to go bigger?

Ten years ago I'd followed the usual migration pattern of East to West, for just that reason. My college, Princeton, in New Jersey, had a vibrant outdoor scene of rock climbers, mountaineers and hikers. Everyone took trips to the White Mountains, the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks—but I wanted something more. I'd grown up as a wimpy kid in Minnesota, reading stories about Mt. Everest and the Arctic Circle. Once I decided to become tough, I wanted bigger, colder, harder—anything that would exemplify absolute difficulty. I wanted to climb K2 before I even knew what climbing was.

All of this, in my mind, started by going West. I don't remember even considering the East, which I associated with the early chapters of adventure books, when the heroes are still practicing and dreaming, before they set off for the true wild. I always skimmed those parts. And so in 1997, when I took a year off school to climb, it made sense to skip Mt. Washington and Katahdin and go straight to Washington State, California and Colorado. I wanted "real" mountains: space, height and ice.

That February, I pulled into the Ouray Victorian Inn at 2 a.m. in a snowstorm and spent the next month climbing anything frozen, with Footfangs and straight-shaft tools. I added Ouray to a season of Cascade alpine climbs, and set my sights on Alaska.

With the ambition of a twenty-year-old, I informed my seatmates on the Talkeetna shuttle that I was planning to start with the Moonflower, end with the Cassin, and maybe run up Foraker in between. Six hundred feet into a Moonflower reconnaissance trip, I was vying for leads with my partner Eli Helmuth. I had to have the hardest ones, or if not all the hardest, at least an equal number of them. Then, during a four-day warm spell, the sun beat every surface in the range. When a cold snap returned, we were back on the route. But now the ice was nearly gone. Seeping water rained everywhere. Suddenly, I wanted nothing to do with this climb.

Eli and I spent one last night under Hunter's North Buttress. In the morning, we woke to Alan Kearney's shouts from the top of his final, solitary rappels. The day before, a giant snow mushroom had collapsed, and Alan's partner, Steve Mascioli, had been killed. We waited for Alan, then shared a rope to get him safely back to base camp. The next day, I watched a helicopter short-haul Steve's body off a pitch I had "won."

My dreams of climbing didn't include death. I was supposed to be racking up big routes that month. Instead, we flew home.

Shortly thereafter, I moved to Colorado and got in three car accidents in three years. Recovering, writing, building a house, rock climbing—all these excuses disguised the fundamental reason that I

only picked up my tools to guide easy ice flows. The truth was: I felt that I should begin alpine ice climbing again where I'd left off, four pitches into the Moonflower, with a headstrong will and the misconception that I had nothing to lose.

All around me, every winter, high icefalls and thin, mixed lines came and went in Rocky Mountain National Park. The longer I waited, the smaller the climbs I felt comfortable with seemed to be. Soon I'd lost my desire for frozen mountains of any size.

Until I went East. Eleven years after the Moonflower, I woke up that first morning in Jimmy and Sarah's house, long after Jimmy had donned his ski gear and Sarah had gone to work. I went upstairs to see local climber Doug Madara's phone number written on a Post-it, *Call if you want to climb*. I picked up the note and went to the window. All I could see was a checkered landscape of clean and dirty snow. I had no idea where the ice was. I did not know how big or small, thin or fat, easy or hard it was supposed to be. Doug was a perennially youthful local; he'd bridged every generation of hard climbing in the East since the 1970s. I'd never met him, but he was apparently game to rope up with visitors so long as they were ready to *climb*.

Three hours later, on the way to Frankenstein, I was trying to keep up with this stout half-century-old hardman. Doug had faster footwork on snow-covered mountain alder than anyone I'd ever seen. At the base of an hourglass-shaped flow, he spilled open his pack and handed me one screw after the other: "I'll follow."

The thick humid air felt comforting. At times piercing blue, then fading white, the ice nestled into grooves of rock, and I nestled into the ice. It took my picks so easily; the newness of the terrain removed all the past decade's white noise and replaced it with a pure, simple emotion: desire.

I didn't know the names of anything that first day. Doug just deposited me at the base, and I went up whatever frozen portal he picked. The mile-long cliffband overflowed with icefalls. Between each runnel, Doug pointed out our other options. We only had three hours that afternoon, and we finished the last climb while the sky turned the dark gray of a cold winter night. Fresh snow covered the railroad tracks on the way back to our cars. As I followed Doug's long strides, I wondered whether I needed everything to be new to find what I had lost.

Driving back to North Conway that night, through a dark mist, Doug gave me a verbal tour of climbs I couldn't see. It was a constant stream of opportunities. For the next three days, I drove over icy roads in my rear-wheel-drive rental with my hazards on, so I could crane my neck and look out the window at all the ice surrounding me.

[Opening Photo] **Peter Doucette enjoys a Way in the Wilderness (WI5, Cole-Dunn-Hartrich, 1978), North Conway, New Hampshire. This line requires perfect conditions to form; luckily New England's abundance of frozen waterfalls means there's always something "in excellent condition somewhere" (Rick Wilcox, *An Ice Climber's Guide to Northern New England*).** Anne Skidmore | [Facing Page] **Todd Swain on Fafnir (IV 5, Bouchard-Martin-Zajchowski, 1975), Cannon Cliff, New Hampshire, 1981. Swain comments on the legend that he climbed 100 first ascents in the winter of '82–83: "I can't remember setting a particular number.... I know I did a lot (75 or so)...that winter."** Ed Webster | [This Page] **Majka Burhardt repeating Guido's Delight (WI4 M5 [originally M6, before rockfall altered the route], Frost-Synnott, 1999). Trollville, New Hampshire.** Anne Skidmore

Take a drive down any road in New England, and you can understand why people who start climbing here eventually come home. Locals, when asked directions to a town that looks close on the map, will often utter the infamous, "You can't get there from here." The notches, valleys, mountains and hills create a labyrinth of roads that force exploration and offer an entrance map to adventure. Each crest and nook reveals another drip, a potential new line. Each corner opens to another story of a great climber, known or unknown to the outside world. Each day brings a new combination of rain, sleet and snow. Taken together, all of these elements result in constant variability. And that changeableness, for ice climbers, means an unfolding of endless new possibilities—something I hadn't felt for a long time.

It's December 10, three weeks after I settle in New Hampshire, ten months after that first day out with Doug. I've already climbed more ice in New Hampshire than I have anywhere else in the past nine years. Peter Doucette and I are in the Cannon parking lot. Our boots creak as we lace them with already cold fingers. It's -5ºF at 6:30 a.m. Peter was leading WI5 as a junior in high school, twenty minutes north of here. Even for him it's a frigid day. But he has that vertical tenacity: as the ice gets thinner and scarier, he gets better.

By the time we get out of the car, our only exposed skin is the swath around our eyes. Darkness still envelops Cannon. Our objective, the 450-foot Omega, lurks off to the left. Yellow-puckered ice slithers down the first pitch like split-pea soup frozen mid-boil. Just a tap of your tool and a nudge of your foot gains tenuous stances suspended between golden nubbins.

Peter has spent twenty-eight of twenty-nine winters within a few hours of Omega, but he has only climbed it once. The route rarely forms the full length of Cannon's east face. When it does, even I know that you don't ask questions, say you're cold or consider going down. I set out for my lead with our rack of predominately stubby screws. Each gentle snap of my wrist feels utterly my own. I go up, cross my feet through left, and trace a personal dance. The only rhythm on this just-off-vertical smear is the one I'm making.

A pitch later, Peter leads out into the crux, modifying every swing for the composition of the ice. The chandeliered bits get a pick at an angle; the convex micro-bulge a quick wrist flick; the smoky back runnels, set up against the broken black granite, a straight elbow slam. By the time we rappel down, Omega looks like a dozen different lines to me.

As we pick our way down the trail, Peter points out other climbs on the cliff: major flows, minor pieced-together ribbons and hidden corner systems. The Black Dike is shrouded in the shadows behind the Whitney-Gilman buttress. Later I'd learn that Yvon Chouinard, in the 1971 *Ascent*, described the Black Dike as "a black, filthy, horrendous icicle 600 feet high. Unclimbed." His call to action resulted in John Bouchard soloing the first ascent on December 18 of that year, jamming and abandoning his rope, breaking a pick, losing a mitten, and finally topping out right before dark. Bouchard had used everything in the collective arsenal—new tools, techniques and the raw determination of a singular vision—to complete it. And in that one moment, something that lay

[Photo] **Zoe Hart climbing Diedre (FWA: III WI5 5.9 M4, Madara-Trocchi, 1976), Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire. Wilcox writes: "The exact severity of this route depends entirely upon conditions." When Doug Madara and Tony Trocchi made its first ascent, the last overhanging pitch "was sheathed in verglas and dripping with icicles."** Anne Skidmore

just outside the perception of the possible became a reality. Today, when the Black Dike comes in, it signals the start of the ice season on Cannon. Then, it symbolized the beginning of a revolution.

I didn't know all of this that day on Omega. I just stood beneath the Black Dike and thought it looked cool. And I thought, for the first time, that I wanted to know why it looked so cool.

I'd abandoned all my adventure books as soon as I started climbing full time. Perhaps I didn't have enough time to read history anymore. Perhaps I wanted to live my own story. Most likely, I didn't want to be slowed down.

I hurried to finish college and get back to the "real" mountains. It never occurred to me that I might have had a bit more breathing room if I'd gone back and read those skimmed parts more thoroughly, if I'd looked north, before West. I was focused on what seemed like the most direct route to my dream: to become a full-time mountain guide. A winding road of self-discovery was unacceptable.

But what I loved most about ice was the ability to go anywhere. It didn't matter that I couldn't reach a hold or find an edge; I could create my own path. Sometimes, you get what you need one way or another. Suddenly I felt a yearning for the one-piece suits I'd so willingly put on eBay years back—and an even deeper longing for that sense of freedom I'd had when I climbed in them.

January 24: Janet Bergman calls me to go climbing. "What do you want to do?" she asks. Originally from Ohio, Janet is homesteading in a twelve-by-twelve-foot cabin with her partner, Freddie. She has the typical female full-time climber identity that builds in another full-time job—nonprofit management consulting. Today, we're both squeezing in a climb between a morning and evening of computer work.

"Anything," I respond. It's true. I'm almost two months into my Eastern winter, and I am happy hiking two hours for one pitch, or ten minutes for a whole cliff of choices. It feels as normal to have an ice tool in my hand as it does to hold a pen. I don't know whether I'm back to where I was a decade ago, or whether I'm in a wholly different place.

I've been wanting to climb Super Goofer for a month now. Every time I drive into town, I see its dagger plastered in a right-facing corner on Cathedral Ledge, in plain sight from the road. It seems like a romp up a somewhat thin pillar, a quick tick and pump that should be easy for me, given what I now think I can climb again.

Twenty minutes after leaving our car, we're at the base. Janet leads the first pitch and hands me the rack for the second. I take the screws and draws distractedly, my head still in a writing project. Three moves into the meat of the pillar, I down climb. At the crux, the ice arcs like a blade of water from a wide-mouthed pitcher. I reach between picked-out placements with hot-white fractures. I don't want to kick too hard, but I can't seem to use my feet without more purchase. I shake out my already too-pumped forearms. I look at my gloves—they're my big pair; I wanted to start leading in them to stay warmer. I thought I'd try them out today on what was supposed to be a moderate lead.

I head back up. My body keeps kicking out to the right when the ice goes left, but my placements won't hold the fulcrum back left. I reposition myself against the rock and try to find a stance. I switch between tools and pull my gloves off, one at a time, with my teeth. The left glove rambles down the ice below me. My liners slip on my tools and soon go the way of my remaining glove, into my pocket. The teeth of my picks poke through a window of ice. They start to shake. My bare hands begin to slip down the black hockey tape that I'd chosen for its stickiness.

I down climb again, put my hands in my pockets, and look at Janet.

"Somehow, I don't think this is supposed to be this hard," I say.

She shrugs in that noncommittal supportive belayer way that means she'll let me try again.

We rap down. *I am not the same girl I was ten years before. I don't have anything to prove now. I don't want it so badly.* But it is the first time I've had to back off something this winter. Too many days of success have made me greedy. I shake off the past, and promise Janet I'll work on my glove system for the future.

Later that night, I talk to Bayard Russell, a local whose casual, loose-limbed climbing style makes any upward progress look like a goofy dance (sometimes in unlaced Sorels)—until you try to repeat his moves.

"You were on Super Goofer today?" he asks. Before I can answer, he shakes his head. "The trick," he says, "is to wait until it's ready—not just when you're ready."

Bayard takes a swig of his PBR and starts talking about duck hunting. We've moved on from climbing, but I know he's still paying attention. It's what you do out East. You listen to other people's experiences, you watch the temperatures, you feel for when the rain turns to ice, and you look up every cliffband you pass, no matter how big, small or out of the way. Some route is always on its way in, formed in a new fashion, or about to fall.

Local guide Kevin Mahoney has been known to establish first ascents, with clients, just because a route came in the day he was working. In 2008 Kevin and some other New England guides/climbers—Freddie Wilkinson, Ben Gilmore and Peter—all wandered up to the base of Cannon to see what was possible and ended up doing a first and probable second ascent, respectively, on two parallel lines, Firing Line and Mean Streak.

Mixed lines appear and vanish in a moment. It's all a matter of how you see your choices in this landscape, how much ice you need to get to where you're going, and how much effort you want to put into getting there. Kevin calls it the dollar menu of ice climbing: anything you want, in any combination. If you know where to look.

February 18: It's raining, hard. I lie in bed with the poodle snoring next to me, and I stare through sheets of water to try to glimpse the trees out my bedroom window. All I can see is wet. All I can hear is ice melting and snow disappearing. I imagine the raindrops as bullies in school who had to repeat the seventh grade and can get what they want in the lunch line. Winter, in the West, is marked by a distinctive change in precipitation. When moisture comes, it comes as snow. Not here. Winter here means a bit of everything. People leave the East because of the often-gloomy, always uncertain weather. But that same volatility creates the newness that keeps the ice climbers around. Drips freeze, rewarm, delaminate. Broken sketchy rock becomes solid with an icy shellac. Pillars touch down the day before a rainstorm and offer yet another

[Facing Page, Top] **Madara on Diedre, thirty-three years after its first ascent, "before cameras were made," he jokes. "What was once a major effort, is now a 'Hey what do you feel like doing today?'"** Jim Surette | [Facing Page, Bottom] **In 1971 Yvon Chouniard described the Black Dike as "a black, filthy, horrendous icicle 600 feet high." That winter, nineteen-year-old John Bouchard soloed the first ascent, ditching his stuck rope. Today, as Ed Webster writes, Bouchard's story still casts a legendary "mystique."** Ed Webster

version of an old climb now new—with an expiration date.

The phrase *If you don't like the weather, wait a minute* rings true in the Mt. Washington Valley. At the confluence of three major storm tracks, its weather system plays tricks on climbers and skiers with a continual flux of snow, rain and wind (including the 1934 world record of 231 miles per hour on the summit of its 6,288-foot peak). Climbers could expand the saying to *If you don't like the ice, wait a day*. But don't wait too long. Sometimes it totally disappears.

Maybe people climb here because there is little better to do in the winter. Back in Colorado, I can run, ski, hike—out here there is always something to be climbed, or a new condition to climb it in, or a new way to push yourself to the next level. To do any of these things means I first have to get out of bed, and then go climbing. In the rain. I sigh. *I'm going to have to get over this if I want to be like the Northeasterners.*

Two hours later I'm at International Mountain Equipment on Main Street in North Conway listening to stories about those Northeasterners, instead of trying to be one.

Rick Wilcox, the owner, greets me with that smile on his broad face that won't go away for the whole day. When I walk into the store, he likes to ask me if I'm just coming from a quick run up Repentance or Remission—both 450-foot chimneys with varying degrees of pillars and ice-choked slots that pierce the middle of Cathedral Ledge's east face. Rick made the first ascent of Repentance with John Bragg in 1973. He now calls it, and its sister Remission, "Climbs you kids do before having a bagel for breakfast."

Rick has been at the intersection of the New England climbing community for four decades, and if you time it right, he will lean across the glass counter filled with Warthogs and ratcheting ice screws and tell you tales of extraordinary feats accomplished by the cadre of area climbers, many of whom look up to him as a father figure. He'll tell you about his climbing if you ask, but he'd rather tell you stories of the people around him. Today he talks about Todd Swain.

In the winter of '82-'83, according to Rick, Swain set a goal of one hundred first ascents. By the end of March, he was grabbing any willing partner and going to any possible frozen chunk taller than ten feet.

"But he did it," Rick says, shaking his head. "And you could probably do it, too."

I look outside. It's still dripping. "I bet he climbed in the rain." Rick nodded. "He climbed every day."

"Did you know about…," Rick says, but a customer comes through the front door. I make myself move away from the counter. I could listen to these stories all morning, and I don't usually like climbing history. Or I haven't, not since the years I was so sure I'd create my own.

But now I want to hear more. I walk out of IME, past the shelves with books I used to line up on every bookshelf I had from age sixteen to twenty, titles that showed anyone who was looking that I was a climber. Rick's stories seem more interesting to me than those of Everest and K2 ever did. His tales are thicker and more complex, and involve more players and more places—and it all matters in a personal way now. This web of local climbs and climbers can wrap you up in a sense of community, past and present. Somehow, I've become part of this landscape. Its narratives make me feel as though I could also live inside them.

It's noon when Peter and I pull up to the Frankenstein parking lot. Water drips from The Hanging Gardens' ice curtains. The constant stream dulls their sharp edges. But behind the ice, the rock is still frozen. We zip up waterproof jackets, tuck cuffs into gloves, and don our

[Photo] **Burhardt heading up Remission (FWA: IV NEI5+, Cole-Rouner, 1976), Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire. Both this climb and the nearby Repentance (FWA: III WI5, Bragg-Wilcox, 1973) represented Northeast breakthroughs in the 1970s ice-climbing revolution. Now, they testify to New England's rich climbing history. Despite the warm-looking colors in this photo, the thermometer that morning read -30°F.** Anne Skidmore

hoods. When Peter smiles, water trickles off the tip of his nose and onto his mouth. "Want to know the best thing about climbing in the rain in New Hampshire?" he asks. "At least you can't get any wetter."

The rock moves are solid with good gear. I break around the hanging icicle, and a full stream of water pours down my neck. I swing above the attachment point, and the soft ice almost sucks in my pick.

I belay Peter up to the anchor and look back at the road. It took me less than forty minutes to get from a dry passenger seat to a soaked, elated stance on top of a mixed climb. Maybe something is wrong with me that this feels like a normal thing to do with my day. Or maybe something is finally right again. Peter climbs with half as many moves as I did; the route disappears beneath high placements and easy stems. When his tool unleashes a water spigot straight at his eyes, he doesn't flinch.

This is why Northeasterners excel in the big mountains, I think. Bad conditions don't slow them down, they just remind them of home. These small training cliffs have created some of the best alpinists of the past three generations, from Mark Ritchie and Joe Terravecchia, to John Bouchard and Rick Wilcox, with first ascents from Alaska, to Asia, to Patagonia. In 2008, four of the nine parties that completed the Moonflower were from New England. Freddie Wilkinson and Ben Gilmore, with Québécois Maxime Turgeon, sped up the route to Hunter's summit in fifty-two hours round-trip, on their way back from the first ascent of the Bat's Ears (11,044'), one of the highest unclimbed peaks in the Alaska Range. A week later, Peter Doucette and Silas Rossi (from Maine) romped up the Moonflower in forty-four hours, camp to camp. Peter led every pitch.

As I rappel, my ropes squeegee a stream of water, covering my harness, carabiners, screws and pants. Any part of me that was still dry is now soaked. Within a half hour, after the sun goes down, the rain freezes, and an icy shellac coats everything in sight, including me. I trudge back to the car. This must have been how a young John Waterman learned to be tough for his 1978 epic solo of the Southeast Spur and his traverse of Hunter—by sucking it up in the rain, the sleet, the fog and the cackling cold. I wonder what it will feel like for me when I next go into the high alpine. I don't know whether that kind of climbing is still a goal, but for the first time in a long while it feels like a possibility.

Back at home, I peel off layers of wet Capilene, fleece and shell. I take a shower and sit by a fire. Outside, the rain beats the same rhythm on the deck as it did this morning. Nothing has changed, except me. I feel a growing pride, and I check it. I need years of this to claim any sort of toughness.

In the meantime, I dry my gear and pack it for tomorrow. The rain is supposed to stop, the temperatures drop, and new lines will be everywhere when I wake up. My sense of anticipation is no different from what any of us feel in all the places in the world where we dance on the ephemeral freeze. But I had to come East to discover my rhythm again. I had to find it where there was no other option except to bend with the weather, the roads and the movement, where land stretches out on a horizontal plane and you have to move sideways to find a way up. Where there is no way you will be able to see what is possible unless you go and look for it yourself. ∎