
DAVID by Earle Birney



I

David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey,
All week in the valley for wages, in air that was steeped
In the wail of mosquitoes, but over the sunalive week-ends
We climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly

Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid
Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening coltish
Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see over,
Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.

II

Our first was Mount Gleam. We hiked in the long afternoon
To a curling lake and lost the lure of the faceted
Cone in the swell of its sprawling shoulders. Past
The inlet we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned

On a poplar prong, in the hurrying slant of the sunset.
Then the two of us rolled in the blanket while round us the cold
Pines thrust at the stars. The dawn was a floating
Of mists till we reached to the slopes above timber, and won

To snow like fire in the sunlight. The peak was upthrust
Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled
Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling
Eastward the alien prairie glittered. Down through the dusty

Skree on the west we descended, and David showed me
How to use the give of shale for giant incredible
Strides. I remember, before the larches' edge,
That I jumped a long green surf of juniper flowing

Away from the wind, and landed in gentian and saxifrage
Spilled on the moss. Then the darkening firs
And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden
Cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.

III

One Sunday on Rampart's arete a rainsquall caught us,
And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and boot-nails
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move
Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me
How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,
And matching of stories from schooldays . . . We crawled astride
The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged
By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. Lingered
There it was David who spied to the south, remote,
And unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback, an overhang
Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.
That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs
Of a mountain goat underneath a cliff, caught
On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of hawks.
And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.

IV

And then Inglismaldie. Now I remember only
The long ascent of the lonely valley, the live
Pine spirally scarred by lightning, the slicing pipe
Of invisible pika, and great prints, by the lowest
Snow, of a grizzly. There it was too that David
Taught me to read the scroll of coral in limestone
And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,
Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.

V

On Sundance we tried from the col and the going was hard.
The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks
And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we balked
Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp,
Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked
To the crest. Then, grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist

DAVID

And drew me up after. We set a new time for that climb.
That day returning we found a robin gyrating
In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David
Took and killed it, and said, "Could you teach it to fly?"

VI

In August, the second attempt, we ascended The Fortress.
By the Forks of the Spray we caught five trout and fried them
Over a balsam fire. The woods were alive
With the vaulting of mule-deer and drenched with clouds all the morning,

Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round
Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright
And sunhot raspberries, eating them under a mighty
Spruce, while a marten moving like quicksilver scouted us.

VII

But always we talked of the Finger on Sawback, unknown
And hooked, till the first afternoon in September we slogged
Through the musky woods, past a swamp that quivered with frog-song,
And camped by a bottle-green lake. But under the cold

Breath of the glacier sleep would not come, the moonlight
Etching the Finger. We rose and trod past the feathery
Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet heather
Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom

Of incredible dawn in the Rockies. David spotted
Bighorns across the moraine and sent them leaping
With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks,
And the peaks to the sun. The ice in the morning thaw

Was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms,
And seracs that shone like frozen salt-green waves.
At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed. Then David
Edged to the west and discovered the chimney; the last

Hundred feet we fought the rock and shouldered and kneed
Our way for an hour and made it. Unroping we formed
A cairn on the rotting tip. Then I turned to look north
At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless



DAVID

Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.
David turned sharp and reached out his arm and steadied me
Turning again with a grin and his lips ready
To jest. But the strain crumbled his foothold. Without
A gasp he was gone. I froze to the sound of grating
Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones, the lone
Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only
The wind and the muted beat of unknowing cascades.

VIII

Somehow I worked down the fifty impossible feet
To the ledge, calling and getting no answer but echoes
Released in the cirque, and trying not to reflect
What an answer would mean. He lay still, with his lean
Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs
Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,
Six hundred feet sheer to the ice. My throat stopped
When I reached him, for he was alive. He opened his grey
Straight eyes and brokenly murmured, "over ... over.
And I, feeling beneath him a cruel fang
Of the ledge thrust in his back, but not understanding,
Mumbled stupidly, "Best not to move," and spoke
Of his pain. But he said, "I can't move... If only I felt
Some pain." Then my shame stung the tears to my eyes
As I crouched, and I cursed myself, but he cried
Louder, "No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself.
I didn't test my foothold." He shut the lids
Of his eyes to the stare of the sky, while I moistened his lips
From our water flask and tearing my shirt into strips
I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid
From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting lichens,
And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore
Of the rock. Then he whispered, "Bob, I want to go over!"
This time I knew what he meant and I grasped for a lie
And said, "I'll be back here by midnight with ropes
And men from the camp and we'll cradle you out." But I knew
That the day and the night must pass and the cold dews
Of another morning before such men unknowing

DAVID

The way of mountains could win to the chimney's top.
And then, how long? And he knew... and the hell of hours
After that, if he lived till we came, roping him out.
But I curled beside him and whispered, "The bleeding will stop.
You can last." He said only, "Perhaps . . . For what? A wheelchair,
Bob?" His eyes brightening with fever upbraided me.
I could not look at him more and said, "Then I'll stay
With you." But he did not speak, for the clouding fever.

I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,
The glistening hair of a creek on the rug stretched
By the firs, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge,
The moss, and David still as a broken doll.

I hunched to my knees to leave, but he called and his voice
Now was sharpened with fear. "For Christ's sake push me over!
If I could move . . . or die . . ." The sweat ran from his forehead
But only his head moved. A hawk was buoying

Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.
The purr of a waterfall rose and sank with the wind.
Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger
Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.

Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there... And I knew
He had tested his holds. It was I who had not . . . I looked
At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked
At last in his eyes. He breathed, "I'd do it for you, Bob."

IX

I will not remember how or why I could twist
Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty
Horror, and over the traverse alone. I remember
Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It

When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund.... reeling
Over the sun-cankered snowbridge, shying the caves
In the neve . . . the fear, and the need to make sure It was there
On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping

Of gaping green-throated crevasses, alone and pursued
By the Finger's lengthening shadow. At last through the fanged
And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling
Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge

DAVID

On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,
Alone. By the glooming lake I sank and chilled
My mouth but I could not rest and stumbled still
To the valley, losing my way in the ragged marsh.

I was glad of the mire that covered the stains, on my ripped
Boots, of his blood, but panic was on me, the reek
Of the bog, the purple glimmer of toadstools obscene
In the twilight. I staggered clear to a firewaste, tripped
And fell with a shriek on my shoulder. It somehow eased
My heart to know I was hurt, but I did not faint
And I could not stop while over me hung the range
Of the Sawback. In blackness I searched for the trail by the creek

And found it... My feet squelched a slug and horror
Rose again in my nostrils. I hurled myself
Down the path. In the woods behind some animal yelped.
Then I saw the glimmer of tents and babbled my story.

I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,
And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.

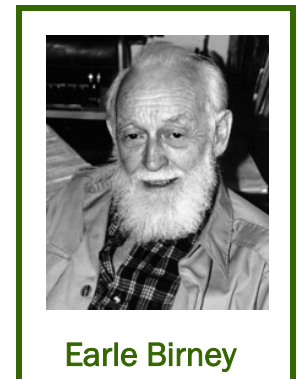


The Man who killed David *by Al Purdy (1974)*

A GENERATION of Canadian schoolchildren and university students has grown up knowing the story of a mountain climber who fell 50 feet to a narrow ledge, was badly injured, then pushed off the ledge to his death by his friend in an act of mercy. The climber's name was David, also the title of the story. Its author was Earle Birney.

At one time or another in the last 25 years, David has been required reading for high schools and universities in every Canadian province. Mountains that are actually on the map near the Banff-Lake Louise area - Inglismaldie, Assiniboine and the Sawback Range - form part of the setting. Reaction on the part of teachers and students has been swift and marvelous: many fancied themselves literary detectives, deciding that Earle Birney had pushed his friend David off a high ledge to death in a remote Rocky Mountain valley. Which is murder, by some definitions.

Birney was exasperated and frustrated by these interpretations of his fictional story. Carried to a most fantastic length, it didn't seem entirely improbable that he might be hauled into court and charged with homicide. And sentenced to real death for committing a fictional murder?



In fact, a number of schoolteachers in Ontario protested against having to teach a poem that "advocated mercy killing". One Alberta university professor said in a 1971 essay: "... there is proof that this was no fictional story. Birney's companion on that fatal mountain climb was a real David. His death was reported as being due to a rockslide." In a 1963 Canadian Alpine Journal there's an article about Birney's imaginary Finger Mountain, entitled "How Many Routes on the Finger?" It begins: Modern legend, based on a poem written by Dr. Earle Birney, has led at least 10 climbing parties in the last few years to an intriguing rock climb near Banff. It is not known whether the hero in David actually climbed the spire..." Of course that article assumes David to be a real person. Another odd thing: when Birney wrote his poem, the Finger was imaginary and did not exist. But since that time (1942) a mountain near Banff has actually been given the name.

Chills must run up and down a writer's back as the people in a fictional landscape gather round him with accusing glances. It's little wonder that Birney doesn't want to include the poem in his university readings. Or that he displays impatient irritation if some fledgling

The Man Who Killed David

sleuth says to him: "Why did you kill David?" Especially since the poem's genesis actually derives from a newspaper story in the twenties, about a student mountain climber. This man had broken his spine while ascending a mountain. His fellow climber, unable to move him, had guided rescuers back to the accident within a few hours. But the real-life David was dead from his injuries and exposure. Birney appropriated his name for the poem.

Birney is sick of the subject of David, and since I've known him for some 20 years, I have some idea of his feelings. It must be like being taken over by a Doppelgänger or the ventriloquist's puppet into which you've thrown your own voice. Still, I'm fascinated by the idea of part of your personality getting away on you, having an existence of its own. And that is the ultimate tribute to the writer's art, and to Birney himself.