

ANNAPURNA III MIKHAIL FOMIN

# Alpinist 78

KEVIN MACKENZIE ENTERS THE PANTHER GORGE  
HEATHER DAWE DREAMS OF LOST BUTTRESSES  
KAPIL BISHT CELEBRATES PERTEMBA SHERPA  
SHOGUFA BAYAT FINDS HER WAY





# ON BELAY

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## Panther Gorge: Call of Ice and Stone

ADVENTURE-SEEKING individuals—climbers and hikers—occasionally visit the recesses of Panther Gorge, a remote pass between Mt. Marcy and Mt. Haystack in the Adirondack High Peaks region of New York. The cliffs loom close to one another. Rich carpets of moss envelop the talus like hanging gardens. By and large, many people, if they've heard of the place at all, view the Gorge as something “down there,” unfamiliar, untrailed, possibly menacing—as if the storm gales that push through it might give chase like wild creatures guarding their haunt. People look from the summit of Mt. Haystack and think, *I don't want to venture in*. A few tales of its flood-scoured streambeds, ice-blasted glades and gnarled blowdown fields have appeared in print over the decades, but most of its secrets remained unwritten.

My time in the Gorge began in 2009 when I crawled into its maw to climb Grand Central Slide, a 1,400-foot landslide on Marcy's eastern aspect. It looked like a giant closing parenthesis carved through the forest above Panther

Gorge Falls. I could find little recent climbing, scrambling or hiking information about the area except a short description in a guidebook including the six rock-climbing routes that had been established and recorded by then. The description didn't cover how to get to the slide. A brief online conversation with a hiking acquaintance offered the only help. The apparent void of information fueled my curiosity. *What was it like there?* I wondered. *How do I circumvent the obstacles?*

Finding the answers was up to me. They didn't come easily. Some nine miles from a trailhead in Keene Valley, I pushed through shoulder-tight trees, crawled over deadfall, twisted through rocky passages and navigated across water-carved gullies. What I encountered enthralled me: angular buttresses swept toward the sky; fathomless cracks swallowed the ambient light. Overhanging blocks perched atop Marcy and Haystack like gargoyles keeping watch over weather-pocked slabs and enormous stone flakes. Far from the noise of any cars, I felt enfolded by the sounds of nature—wind-rustling pines, melodic birdsong, babbling rills,

popping ice and hissing snow. I returned over the years with a series of tenacious men and women and made first ascents on rock and ice. But I wanted something more: to experience this place holistically, not just tick off routes. With each of my trips—sixteen-to-twenty-two-hour outings, seventy-six times to date—I felt more compelled to learn all the details of this mystical, ice-weathered cirque.

THE LAURENTIDE ICE SHEET once reigned over much of Canada and the northern United States. There were no dense forests, then, just rippling, wind-blasted snowscapes. When the ice gradually melted back, around 16,000 to 14,000 years ago, it revealed a landscape that had been scoured bare and plucked clean by thousands of years of southward ice flow. During this time, sections of bedrock had peeled from the flanks of Marcy and Haystack, exposing masses of anorthosite, an intrusive igneous rock. Below each cliff, now, the slopes are strewn with expansive talus fields. Some fragments were torn off by the ice. Others have fallen over time from weathering and gravity.





House-sized boulders form multi-level cave systems where even J.R.R. Tolkien's Gollum might find contentment. Freestanding spires rise like sentries of Middle-earth.

In his 1899 memoir *Through the Adirondacks in Eighteen Days*, travel writer Martin V.B. Ives acknowledged this range was “a country where every rock, tree and hill has an aboriginal history.” For thousands of years, Algonquian and Iroquoian groups lived and traveled throughout the Adirondacks, and they might have used valleys such as Panther Gorge as byways between seasonal dwellings, hunting grounds and sacred sites—or as refuges in times of strife that arose with the arrival of European colonizers. In 1902 Abenaki chief Elijah Tahamont explained in a Brooklyn lecture, “We go among the rocks to talk with the Great Spirit.”

With the rise of mountain tourism during the nineteenth century—as scholar Melissa Otis recounted in her 2018 book, *Rural Indigeness*—Indigenous people became the first local hunting, fishing and trekking guides, with itineraries that led deep into their stolen homelands. While non-Native settlers soon joined the burgeoning guiding industry, descendants

of original residents dwell, today, on the outskirts of what is now a state park, still passing on their traditions about the range.

In 1865 the poet Alfred Billings Street left the Catskill region where he resided, and he embarked on a trip to four Adirondack passes that he described as “peerless in majesty and awful beauty,” teeming with “horrible gorges, dizzy cliffs, impervious fastnesses, green dingles, lovely lakes, rivers...” After cresting the southern aspect of Marcy, he entered the seemingly unnamed pass between Marcy and Haystack. He followed his guides Loyal A. Merrill and Robert Scott Blin north half a mile through a “pathless but by no means tangled” spruce forest, as he later wrote in *The Indian Pass*. These open woods stood until 1950 when a hurricane struck the Adirondacks and damaged over 800,000 acres of trees. The regrowth was, in most areas, more tightly woven than the old growth.

Street personified the Marcy/Haystack cliffs in his prose. It seemed as if “the two mountains had in old days clutched vast fragments from their breasts and dashed them against each other,” he recounted. “Gloomier scowled the

ravine and narrower it grew, while the rocks completely filled it. Yet above and through them I could see that the tortured mountains had at last locked themselves in a Titan struggle, falling upon their sides to do so.”

Street's group turned around at what he recalled as “a majestic cul de sac” at the northern end of the valley. Before their exit, one guide carved their initials atop a tall stone. While those letters are now likely hidden under moss, Street's name for the cirque endured. “As for the rocks,” he wrote, “they seemed the very home of panthers, and I immediately named the chasm The Panther Gorge.”

Street's sojourns in the High Peaks overlapped with the era of one of the Adirondacks' most active trailblazers, Orson Schofield Phelps, who guided prodigiously during the 1870s. Many of Phelps' outings originated from the Ausable Lakes and crossed west via Bartlett Ridge to the south end of Panther Gorge. Phelps then took clients up the Old Slide on Marcy's south face or through the old-growth spruce along Marcy Brook. He noted a particularly unique feature far within the Gorge—a trio of free-standing spires—at the base of a

[Photo] Mt. Marcy (5,343') and Mt. Haystack (4,960') as seen from beaver ponds in Panther Gorge, Adirondack State Park, New York. In *Rural Indigeness* (2018), scholar Melissa Otis described some of the many Indigenous names for the range:

*Wawobadenik* (“white mountains”) to Abenaki people; *Tso-non-tes-ko-wa* (“the mountains”), *Ah-di-lohn-dac* (“bark-eater”) or *Tsiiononteskowa* (“big mountains”) to Kanienkehaka; and *Latilu-taks* (“they're eating the trees”) to Oneida. Kevin MacKenzie

small cliff on Haystack. In an 1875 article for the *Plattsburgh Republican*, he marveled, “What strange freak of nature has left these immense columns standing here like the pillars of some ancient temple?”

Verplanck Colvin, superintendent of the Adirondack Survey, the first extensive survey of the Adirondack region, was one of Phelps’ most notable clients. Colvin also relied on the extensive geographic knowledge of Mitchel Sabbattis, an Abenaki man who had become one of the most well-respected professional guides in the range. Colvin and his team were the first to perform accurate measurements of the true height of Marcy as well as those of many of the surrounding peaks, spending weeks at a time in the Gorge during the years of 1872, 1873, 1875 and 1877. Phelps cut several trails around the same time. Some old paths are used to this day, including the first trail up Marcy (cut in 1861 before Colvin), one up the southern aspect of Haystack in 1873 and one from the Gorge to Four Corners at the base of Mt. Skylight in 1875.

Because of its remote setting, Panther Gorge remained beyond the edges of most climbers’ consciousness until 1936 when Jim Goodwin guided two twelve-year-old boys up a line “about three-quarters of the way to the floor of the Gorge, to the base of the highest cliffs on the Marcy side.” There’s little contextual detail beyond Goodwin’s quote, so the specific line he climbed is an enigma, but it is likely on the Agharta Wall—the tallest cliff. The first named route in the Gorge didn’t appear until nearly thirty years later, when local caretakers Craig Patterson and Ronald Dubay climbed a plumb line up a vertical crack on Marcy’s northernmost cliff and named it “Panther’s Fang.” In 1999 Christian Fracchia and Charlie Dickens added a single ice route called “Agharta.” Frozen to Marcy’s loftiest cliff, this golden river of curtains and bulges is one of the most appealing winter climbs here.

While new rock routes continued to spring up on Adirondack roadside crags, the establishment of Panther’s Fang didn’t seem to inspire others to explore the Gorge’s unclimbed cliffs until the dry-weather summers of 2003 and 2004. Local climbers Bill Schneider and Adam Crofoot, whom I later befriended, were

intrigued by the lack of activity there—and by the scarcity of information, even after they spoke with older adventurers. When Bill and Adam set out to establish routes on three of Marcy’s cliffs, they expected grungy, lichen-covered stone. Instead, they found vast tracts of rock that didn’t need cleaning.

A similar allure drew me to Panther Gorge in 2009: the notion of a mysterious wild place, only a dozen miles from my home. Back then, I was the associate registrar at St. Lawrence University. To alleviate the lengthy hours of coding reports and creating spreadsheets, I needed long days of carrying a heavy pack, crawling over blowdown and navigating untrailed woods until I felt exhausted, yet

**The abrupt view of Panther Gorge from the northern entrance was a revelation: the crags opened up so suddenly before me. Who would have thought that there was so much clean, untracked rock?**

renewed. I began bushwhacking and scrambling up slides, seeking rarely seen views of the High Peaks from unusual places—and all the while practicing control over my fear of heights, or more accurately stated, my fear of falling.

Grand Central Slide seemed like an intriguing challenge. Merely to get to the start, I’d have to claw up a drainage full of boulders to a waterfall and find the path of least resistance around an overhanging cliff. Once I was on the slide, its creases and ledges were an ideal vantage point for gazing on Haystack. I hoped to see the mountain from the perspective of a hawk soaring on thermals.

When I finally got there, I encountered only blowing mist, but my curiosity merely

grew. Within a couple of years, I’d become fascinated with Marcy’s 1,200-foot-wide east face, a steep slab that required ropes and protection. By then, I was comfortable soloing low-angle slabs, but I was still learning to climb harder routes with a rope, often skidding with unsure feet, leaving marks of rubber and droplets of blood. So I invited my friend Anthony Seidita, who was more experienced, to wander with me up the crystal-sharp edges of the rock below the southern headwall. Poised below this arc of stone that seemed like a wave about to break, I gazed around, and my anxieties rose before an almost incomprehensible vastness.

While these peaks may be “just the Adirondacks”—not the high mountains in the West or across the seas—my first new route on Marcy nearly ended my climbing ambitions. In September 2013, Anthony and I skittered down a slippery glade below the Panther Den, the northernmost cliff. Following him up the climb we named “Ranger on the Rock,” I knew that if anything went wrong, a rescue would be slow and involve vast resources. I felt like a droplet of water, part of the environment for a moment but destined, perhaps, to be swept away in a torrent.

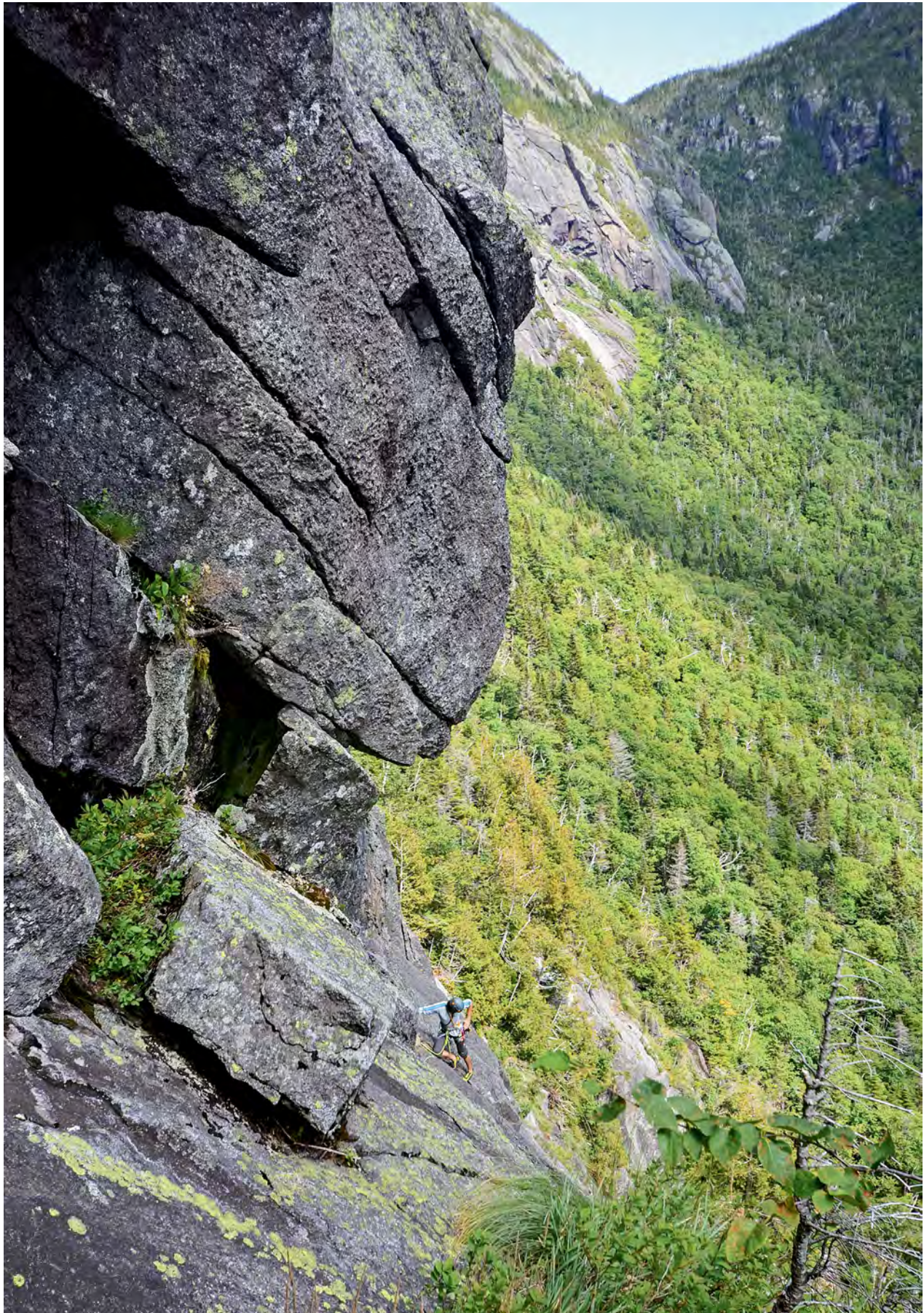
Yet each trip increased my endurance and refined my movements until I began to sense a harmony with the mountains, the cliffs, the ice. The abrupt view of Panther Gorge from the northern entrance was a revelation: the crags opened up so suddenly before me. Who would have thought that there was so much clean, untracked rock? To the south, a giant seemed to have cleaved the earth, leaving dark walls of rough, shattered stone. A carpet of stunted evergreens swept 600 vertical feet to the valley floor where Marcy Brook became a voluminous stream, not just condensing vapors and pencil-thin rills.

At 4:45 A.M., AUGUST 16, 2014, Adam Crofoot and I walked toward the northern entrance of the Gorge again, the bouncing lights of our headlamps illuminating hazy woods. The forecast called for a 40 percent chance of rain, and the dew point was equal to the temperature: it was unbearably humid. The odds of finding a dry route weren’t in our favor, especially since it had rained the day before. But our double

[Facing Page] Steven St. Pierre below a distinctly dragon-like feature during the 2017 first ascent of Anorthofright (5.9-) on Mt. Marcy, with Kevin MacKenzie. The name is a nod to the intrusive igneous anorthosite rock and the headiness of the runout slab route. In his 2019 book, *Panther Gorge*, MacKenzie recounted, “Two thousand feet deep and lined

with broken cliffs rising above a remote forest lies one of the last great Adirondack enigmas—Panther Gorge.... Early accounts in the purple language of [the nineteenth century] attribute words such as ‘terrible’ and ‘awful’ to the chasm.... It’s difficult not to feel a sense of humility, respect, and curiosity for what lies within.” Kevin MacKenzie









[Photo] Adam Crofoot assessing a new route on Mt. Marcy's Agharta Wall. The wall is named after the Miles Davis album *Agharta*, which is itself named after Agarthā, a mythic lost city at the center of the earth. Kevin MacKenzie

ropes and rack were training weight if nothing else. With miles of unclimbed lines before us, I was enthusiastic, though I still had no idea what I was getting into—even after a few years of roaming the Gorge.

Hours of hiking later, we were surrounded by wet cracks. Grey sky reflected off a water-slick slab and dripped from nearly everything, including the spruce branches against our shoulders and the canopy overhead. Small lenticular clouds hovered over Mt. Skylight to the south. I shivered from the chill.

From the entrance col, we walked past the named walls: Panther Den, Feline Wall, Agharta Wall. They were all soaked except for a slightly convex buttress on the southern edge of Agharta. Adam scrambled higher to inspect serpentine cracks, dimpled slabs and small ramps. “You ever belayed using double ropes?” he asked me.

“Nope,” I replied. I felt a little embarrassed.

He shrugged and said, “Eh, you’ll figure it out.” After a few words of instruction, he headed up, his long hair blowing around the green knit beanie he wore like a talisman. He ascended the slab with the nimble confidence of someone who’d been climbing for decades,

his fingertips gripping nearly imperceptible ripples and edges in the stone.

I had ample time to work out the rope handling while he ran it out twenty or thirty feet to a horizontal crack with a few tufts of grass. Traversing across seemingly featureless stone, he made the first moves look effortless, and I thought, *How the heck is he staying attached...? How will I?* He reminded me of a gecko defying gravity on a windowpane; then I realized there was a crystal digging into his sole. *There’s so much to learn.*

The buttress had succumbed to the pressures of the retreating glaciers: rifts ran from top to bottom. Water streaks glimmered near Adam’s chosen line. He was aiming for a crack about as wide as his fingers with a rickety block at its top. The larger fissures seemed obvious, but my perspective wasn’t yet attuned to some of the nuances he could see. He ended the pitch beyond a thin blade of stone, the leading edge of a giant flake, and he put me on belay.

I wanted the painful, but reassuring bite of triangular feldspar shards against my skin. Instead, my fingertips slipped from greasy stone. *Don’t panic, Kevin.* As if on cue, my acrophobia crept back into my awareness. Once I removed the last piece of protection

## NAMESAKE

**Khumbi Yullha** The longing for home draws me to Mt. Khumbila. Rising to 5720 meters, in the Mt. Everest region of northeastern Nepal, the peak completes the childhood place that I picture in my mind, thousands of miles away from where I now live in the Pacific Northwest. If anyone is so fortunate as to be walking through the villages in Pharak, it is hard to miss this geographical feature. ¶ The mountain does not begin or end with the visible dark rock for the Sherpas who live on its lap. It extends to the surrounding hills, valleys, villages, people and streams. It connects the earth to the sky. This mountain is considered too sacred to climb. To set foot on its upper flanks is a spiritually polluting act that may result in sickness, death and destruction. Sherpas are careful not to disturb the deity who lives there or his associates (called “khor”), which include the yeti, as well as yaks, goats and sheep. ¶ Although popularly known as Khumbila, the peak really is Khumbi Yullha. In the Sherpa language, this name identifies it as the village deity, or Yullha, of Khumbu. The deity resides in the physical landform that our eyes are able to see. The work of Venerable Jamyang Wangmo, a Buddhist nun, informs my lived knowledge of the peak. In *The Lawudo Lama: Stories of Reincarnation from the Mount*

on the traverse, I knew a misstep would mean scraping across the wall. My six-foot wingspan helped as I reached to the right. I imagined my fingers transforming into spider legs, sensing small edges until they worked themselves into the crack. With a quick torque of my hand, they compressed against stony nubs and locked together. Only then did I relax.

For another hundred feet, we followed cracks that looked like strands of a colossal spiderweb. Our 470-foot route, Wreck of the Lichen Fitzgerald, a tip of the hat to the storm-wrecked *SS Edmund Fitzgerald*, was done.

As we rappelled, Adam asked if I was up for another route. I was. We walked northwest up Haystack toward a thin crack that split one of the free-standing spires that Old Mountain Phelps mentioned in his 1875 article.

From the pillar's base, I stared up and knew my place as a novice: the sides looked slightly overhanging and the holds were unobvious; my fingers lacked tendon strength and my mind lacked any solid knowledge of crack-climbing technique. Still, while my hands ached from the exertion and the cool, damp air, I felt tranquil. Around me, birch leaves had turned yellow and ferns were withering. The forest was preparing to sleep for the winter, its life-sustaining functions slowing in a peaceful, natural transition. I recalled Phelps' many trips through Panther Gorge, more than a century before. I was keenly aware that my body—as

well as the memories I was forging—was transitory, a minor arrhythmia in the great pulse of time. Phelps, Adam and I were just passersby, humbled by a beauty far more ancient than our minds could comprehend.

Adam and I climbed a crack that ran up the largest pinnacle. The fissure was much like the landscape, sometimes jagged and shattered, sometimes fluid and uniform. Adam kept to his theme of the day—lichen—and named the new line “For Whom the Lichen Tolls.”

THE PERIOD FROM 2014 TO 2020 might represent the “golden age” of new climbs in Panther Gorge. I participated in thirty-six first ascents of rock routes and sixteen first ascents of ice climbs during that time—including ones on seven cliffs that seemed to have no prior climbing history. Every adventure taught me valuable lessons about efficiency, body positioning, mental fortitude, weather prediction and risk management. The sense of mystery endured.

Over the years, I took hundreds of photos, each with a different perspective of cliffs in various seasons. I spent the close of many evenings studying these pictures, documenting finished routes or visualizing potential ones. This process helped me keep the lines independent of one another even as the spaces between them narrowed. My imagination reveled in possibilities. If there was a trickle of ice, I'd evaluate it. If there was a shadow in the stone, it might

yield a new rock climb. Wet stone, fickle ice or foul weather stymied roughly 10 percent of my trips. But many lines were somewhat predictable based on the aspect of a cliff or my growing knowledge of the topography. Furrowed gullies, dark corners and seeping water hinted at places where ice might form.

One particular route—a deep chimney on Marcy that was unclimbed in winter—always resurfaced in my thoughts. Through several attempts, I'd learned how the Great Chimney transformed in the cold, turning into four segments of thin, brittle, slightly overhanging ice, each one delineated by a small shelf. Without substantial runoff, the upper snowpack and freeze/thaw cycles played key roles in each year's incarnation. Rime-coated rock, melted runnels or solid ice? Climbable or unthinkable? I could never predict its current metamorphosis ahead of time.

ON FEBRUARY 22, 2020, at 10 a.m., after five hours of hiking and 4,000 feet of elevation gain, I felt awake and present. Local climbers Katie Vannicola, Emily Schwartz, Harold Sutton and I were high on the northeast ridge of Mt. Marcy and still hiking, headed for another attempt on the Great Chimney. To get us there, all I had left to do was locate the exit bowl from the trail and navigate 600 feet of elevation loss using two minor drainages as guides. I broke through knee-deep snow. *Will it be in? Do I have enough*

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*Everest Region*, she depicts the mountain spirit Je-gyal Tritsen Nyen as “radiant, his body dressed in white silks and his head adorned with a white silk turban.” His image, placed on altars of Khumbu families, shows him riding a red horse. “He holds a lance with red silk ribbons in his right hand and a red lasso in his left,” she adds.

¶ The relational connection of one being with the other defines this place. It is believed that his wife, Tamo Sermo (“Yellow Horse” in Sherpa/Tibetan), resides on Thamserku, a mountain not far away. Local residents make incense offerings to the Yullha every morning. The smoke is said to rise to the sky to reach the deity. Sherpas also perform the lhapsang ritual annually, each village with its own slight variations, to appease the deity and to request continued protection from him. The relationship between the Yullha and the villagers requires constant effort to remain strong. It cannot be taken for granted. ¶ To talk about this mountain is to talk about home. It is to talk about how Sherpas belong to Khumbu. It is to understand the vitality of the old soul it represents. It is to acknowledge the countless life-forms it has continued to support. It is to recognize the brief human presence in comparison to its existence over the ages. PASANG YANGJEE SHERPA



Ice veneered the walls, smooth as a lake's surface brushed by a whisper of wind. I felt as fragile as a feather of rime, stuck to the mountain, but easily broken off. I knew how steel-hard ice can be in shadowed nooks at 4,000 feet.

*skill? Should I have just stayed in bed?*

Finally, after a six-and-a-half-hour approach, we peered up the shaft. Emily and I made an off-the-cuff estimate that the grade was around WI4. Ice veneered the walls, smooth as a lake's surface brushed by a whisper of wind. I felt as fragile as a feather of rime, stuck to the mountain, but easily broken off. I knew how steel-hard ice can be in shadowed nooks at 4,000 feet.

Today, the upper curtain appeared as gnarled as dragon's teeth. It took all my discipline to make the first strike. The sound of my axe rung off the walls. Harold was all smiles at the belay, but he shifted back and forth, a little tensed, while I slowly climbed past a lichen-splotched rock. Ahead, a narrow, water-eroded runnel emerged above an overhang—the crux. After a few tries, I got a reassuring stick in brittle ice with my left axe. But my right one sat on a thin gabbroic edge, and my frontpoints were on other stone projections, none of which felt particularly secure. *All I need is a single move. Then I can take a rest.* I shifted an inch to the right to get a better look and found myself hanging only from my left axe. My heartbeat doubled. My feet had ripped off the undercut rock as the right axe slid from its perch. *Do... not... fall. That axe has got to hold. It will hold.* The remnants of my composure kept slipping until I regained my stance. *That fall would have been nasty.*

When I reached a tiny ledge, I rested for a moment. More than five years had passed since the day I first thought I could climb this route. On December 27, 2014, I'd watched Adam try to lead it. Halfway up, he'd encountered glass-smooth stone covered by an inch of snow. Water infiltrated his jacket as he tried to figure out how to get past the obstacle. Cold and wet, he had to retreat. He down climbed a verglas-coated wall and then rappelled from a Spectre and a nut. It was obvious this route required more than straightforward ice climbing—it was a puzzle. I felt compelled to fit the pieces together someday. I didn't realize it would take me more than five years to build

enough strength and technique to get this far.

A chilly updraft swept my body. *It's time to move.* I checked that the nut I'd placed was secure, and then I stretched one foot across the chimney and dug a frontpoint into the veneer on the other side. From a half split, I saw where the runnel continued. It was only slightly overhanging and led to a couple of slabs that form an upward-facing V: the point where Adam had to retreat. Today the smooth stone was laminated with a couple of inches of ice. I made a hard backhand swing with my left axe. The pick sank in, and I tugged. The placement felt solid, so I struck overhead with my right axe. The ice answered with a reassuring *thunk*. I pulled up. For a moment, both feet dangled in the air before I slithered onto the slab and into a small alcove. Another rest. My heart raced. Katie later told me that I yelled down that I might vomit. I only remember shaking with a thousand thoughts swirling around two central themes: *I cannot get hurt here.* And: *What am I doing? I've only been climbing vertical ice for six years.*

Merely a sliver of hillside appeared through the chimney below me, but I watched Katie moving around taking photos and Harold belaying close to the shaft, just out of harm's way. Emily occasionally walked past as she paced to keep warm. Each friend was keeping a close eye on me, looking for signs of distress and occasionally shouting reassuring words. I felt less alone. *Someone will have to make a final push up the ice curtain.* "Anyone want to take on the last bit?" I shouted (half pleaded).

Silence. Then Harold yelled, "You've got this!"

I took a few deep breaths before I stepped from the security of my cliffside ice hole. Soon, the hollow, almost metallic thud of my axe echoed down the brittle curtain along with the tinkling of ice chips. I made a three-quarter split, one frontpoint embedded in the curtain and the other wedged in a lightning-bolt-shaped fissure on the opposing wall. I felt locked in place again and a little more relaxed. After thirty more feet up a tannin-yellow flow, I



[Photo] Katie Vannicola enjoying herself in Mt. Marcy's Great Chimney during the first ascent of the winter route Passion and Warfare (WI5/M5+), with Kevin MacKenzie, Emily Schwartz and Harold Sutton. The climb took place in February 2020, over the course of an eighteen-and-a-half-hour day, including the hike in and out (ca. sixteen and a half miles). Here, Vannicola is at the bottom of the final curtain of what MacKenzie describes as "a rather angry-looking flow of brittle overhanging ice." MacKenzie explains the route's name: "I liked 'Passion and Warfare' because it took so many winters to put this up...it was a passion of mine as well as a battle in the end.... And I like Steve Vai [the guitarist who produced an album with that name]." Kevin MacKenzie





crested the curtain, but I still needed to climb under a fifteen-foot-long stone that leaned across the chimney like the roof of an ancient tomb, an eroded obelisk split across its center. By the time I reached the top, I'd placed my last ice screws, and as I anchored myself to a black spruce, I shook from exertion and relief. *Why do I do this to myself?*

Emily yelled that she was going to climb first. Not long after, her head popped over the curtain and then out from under the chockstone. Between heavy breaths, she said, "That was *not* a WI4"—another valuable lesson about foreshortened perspective and estimating the grade ahead of time.

"That was 'kinda hard,' Kevin," Harold said with dry wit while he followed. "Stout!"

A few minutes later, Katie shouted, "Oh, shit!"

I chuckled because I knew she was on the curtain. From her wide smile, however, I could tell she was having fun.

"I can't believe you led that," she said as she neared.

"Neither can I," I muttered.

I'd learned much about how I functioned near my limit over the two hours it took to climb those 160 feet and finish the first winter ascent of the Great Chimney. I *could* hold it together, outwardly at least. Inside, I still

lacked any semblance of a zen mind. I ran the name "Passion and Warfare" (after a Steve Vai album) by the team, and it stuck with a WI5/M5+ rating. As we headed out, I felt thankful to be walking above the intermeshed spruce branches that I'd waded through during summer. Beneath my snowshoes, the trees were entombed in ten feet of drifts. Only the top foot or so revealed their existence.

Darkness fell as we approached the trail. We stopped and looked up toward the heavens. One of us turned their headlamp off, and the rest followed suit. Our eyes adjusted, and we soaked in the blue-steel-tinted snow slopes under a cloudless evening sky. The waning





[Photo] MacKenzie on Passion and Warfare. In his book, he wrote, "[The Gorge] allows a chance for reflection without distraction and a chance to find parts of ourselves that might otherwise remain hidden." Katie Vannicola

crescent moon barely illuminated the hillside. The sky was black as ink in the spaces between the stars. The Milky Way looked like a galactic dragon spreading its wings. We stood speechless.

My thoughts drifted to the philosopher William James' experience in Panther Gorge during the summer of 1898. He was a notable leader in his field, but in the Gorge, he was simply another hiker on a deeply personal journey. He overnighted at the south end near Mt. Skylight, where he felt what he described in a letter to his wife as a "spiritual alertness of the most vital description." The moment unlocked something in his mind that he attributed to helping him complete a series of lectures—which he later incorporated into his classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. In the postscript he wrote, "The only thing that it [religious experience] unequivocally testifies to is that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace."

I realized I wasn't partaking in such a profound moment, yet I knew that the emotional imprint would linger. Gentle wisps of wind swept through spruce needles and across snow crust. The quietness of the winter forest and the rhythm of my heartbeat, the sense of peace in the company of friends—all this replaced the frenetic thoughts of tool hooks, ropework and fear that had dominated my mind just hours earlier. Tensions sloughed off like ice on a warm window. *It wasn't the climbs themselves*, I thought. *It was the spaces between them, those experiences of utter stillness.* The Gorge was where I'd often felt my strongest connection to God, sometimes while I was wandering by myself along the hidden rills of talus caves, other times, such as tonight, in the company of friends, listening to the music of falling ice shards, gazing at mountains covered in winter's white veil.

We walked for another seven miles to end our outing near midnight. At home, the images lingered and wove into my dreams.

## Epilogue:

*By 2022, my friends and I have added sixty-nine total lines, almost three miles of new routes, in Panther Gorge, ranging from 5.3 to 5.11b for rock and WI2+ to WI5/M5+ for ice/mixed. The remaining unclimbed rock routes tend to be chronically wet or very difficult. Many of the unclimbed ice lines are rare phenomena that require the right mix of weather and timing. Some set up only after a hard rain and flash freeze before the warmth of sun on dark stone bakes them off. Change is a natural, recurring theme. Rockfalls displace swaths of forest and can modify summer and winter climbs. In spring, ice that felt solid and consequential becomes only a trickle of water. A shorn tree or gouge in the earth from a collapsing column may be the only evidence of a melted route. But the memories of each adventure with friends will last, at least for our lifetimes. Every climber in the Gorge has shared time on a unique journey whose end is still unwritten.*

—Kevin "MudRat" MacKenzie, Upper Jay, New York