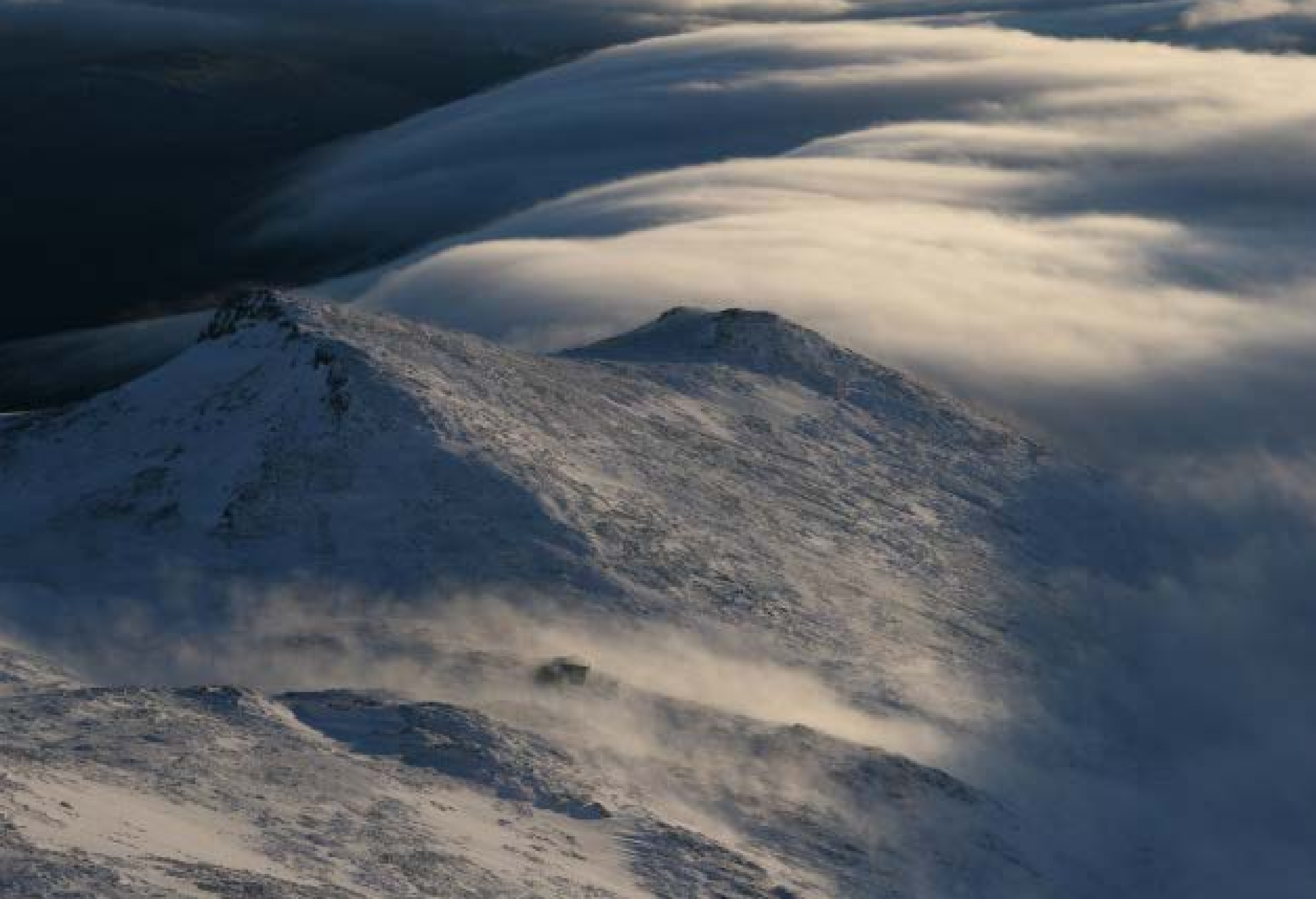


ON BELAY

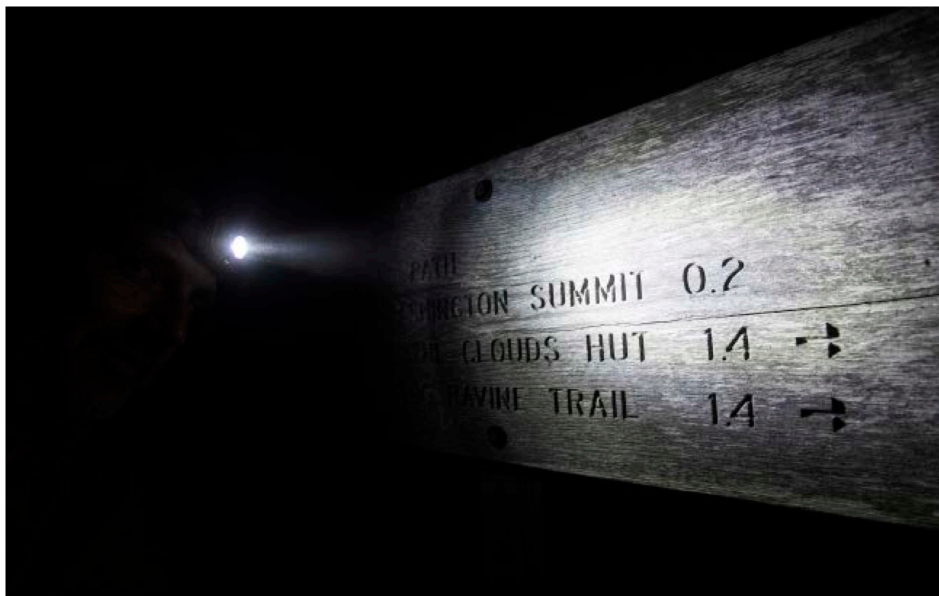
The Wild Nearby

We had not expected such darkness. The fog creeps up our headlamp beams, snow and sleet slicing the little lights. The trail, concealed under the cement that passes for snow in New England, is one we've crisscrossed hundreds of times. My smartphone—which for sixteen hours has guided us across our little Presidential Range—dies. I stare at Justin and Ryan, cursing into the murk. Normally, the sign we're hunkered next to guides hundreds of people the last tenth of a mile to Lakes of the Clouds hut, the most popular shelter in the White Mountains. In winter, though, the hut is closed. Its grey shingles have faded into the scoured snow and green quartzite and schist.

This is ridiculous, I think. Through the gloom we cannot see forty feet. Our softshell pants are soaked, our down jackets wads of nylon and useless eider. Our lightweight bivy tarp isn't waterproof and we are out of fuel for our stove. *If we get hypothermia outside Lakes of the Clouds...* The absurdity of the scenario isn't stopping it from happening. *I've been here hundreds of times. Where is the hut?*

Justin stays by the sign, moored to the lettering routed in the spruce softwood while Ryan and I venture farther and farther out past Justin's headlight beam, until we can't see him anymore. Our boots don't make any tracks. The ice is still bulletproof and the sleet turns to rain. We hadn't expected to be lost, least of all so close to home.

Tangles of birch groves and short, stubby softwoods blanket New Hampshire's White Mountain region. Fast, icy brooks weave through hollows and thick valleys. The swath of terrain above tree line in the Presidential Range, dotted with rare alpine vegetation and the occasional stubby krummholz tree, is the exception. Shelters, full-service huts, a summit station on Mt. Washington and the range's proximity to cities like New York and Boston conspire to keep the mountains from feeling truly wild. The northern summits—Mts. Madison, Adams, Jefferson, and Clay—rise like a crooked, arched spine toward Mt. Washington. At 6,288 feet, Mt. Washington is the highest mountain in the northeast, though not the wildest, having been manacled by a paved



[Opening Page] **Mt. Monroe (5,372') appears above a stratus layer flowing over the southern summits of the Presidential Range. The infamous weather of the range has been monitored from the summit of Mt. Washington (Agiocochook) since 1870.** Mount Washington Observatory | [This Page] **Joe Klementovich lights up a sign on the Crawford Path to the summit of Mt. Washington.** Joe Klementovich

road since 1861 and a tourist railway since 1869. From the vantage of Mt. Clay, hikers encounter the roar of motorcycles, the smell of cafeteria food, the sight of a weather station and the billowing of a train smokestack. But apart from these intrusions lie haunting sweeps of alpine trees and the dark grey schist of the summit cone. To the south, the spine continues toward Mts. Monroe, Franklin, Eisenhower and Pierce and then on down Crawford Notch. In summer, running the well-cairned trails across twenty-or-so miles of rolling terrain requires little more than shorts and a water bottle.

The summit's first building was constructed in 1852, and another was built the following year. The competing structures housed weary guests in the summer months. Even at the time, the presence of buildings stirred controversy. "The top of Mt. Washington should not be private property; it should be left unappropriated for modesty and reverence's sake, or if only to suggest that earth has higher uses than we put her to," Henry David Thoreau complained in his journal in 1861. Despite the summit buildings, Thoreau managed to find plenty of adventure. Though he had spent years exploring New England and had worked as a surveyor, the naturalist became disoriented in the dense fog at Tuckerman Ravine, taking bearings from rock to rock as he and his party made their way up to the summit. "It is unwise," he warned future visitors, "for one to ramble over these mountains at any time, unless he is prepared to move with as much certainty as if he were solving a geometrical problem. A cloud may at any moment settle around him, and unless he has a compass and knows which way to go, he will be lost at once." Thoreau acknowledged true wildness hinged more on mindset than place, more on our connectedness to nature than our difference *from* it. "It is in vain to dream of a wilderness distant from ourselves," he wrote in his journal in 1856.

Mountaineering on the East Coast had long juxtaposed the wild and the known. In winter, the mountain range's amenities close down. Rubble-strewn drainages transform into thousand-foot snowfields. By the 1900s, the tight contours of Mt. Washington's ravines drew a growing number of climbers

NAMESAKE

Ben Nevis In March 2012 a mischievous young climber, Kimihiro Miyagi invited me to attempt a new route, "Ben Nevis." The name, of course, refers to the iconic winter crag in the UK, but Miyagi was referring to an unclimbed line on the north face of Peak 4 on Shakujo-dake (2168m) in Japan. Soaring approximately 300 meters high and composed of steep, volcanic rock, the face forms a good ice gully in the winter. Since the 1930s, the crag has served as a canvas where many alpine climbers have painted metaphorical trails over its walls. In the early 2000s, the famed Giri-Giri Boys practiced "creative route selection" here, climbing without consulting topos or worrying about opening new routes. Today, young alpine climbers continue *Zanchi-mushi,* a climbing style that doesn't allow for the use remaining pitons. ¶ On March 4, under a dull grey sky, three adventure seekers—Yusuke Sato, Suguru Takayanagi and myself—headed out with Miyagi for "Ben Nevis" in Shakujo-dake. After three hours of walking through the snow, we stopped below the face. "What! This muddy wall?" We had been deceived! ¶ Kimihiro led on the first pitch, splashing frozen mud and snow around. Next, Suguru climbed over an extruding pitch of rock,

and skiers. In 1929 three American climbers accompanied the Englishman Noel Odell—the last person to glimpse Mallory and Irvine alive on Mt. Everest (Chomolungma) five years before—as he chopped his way up an ice climb in Huntington that now bears his name. The same year Odell's Gully was climbed, an *Appalachia* article remarked that "apparently nothing remained to be done" in the Presidentials. A year later, Yale students Sam Scoville and Julian Whittlesey climbed Pinnacle Gully, Huntington's most difficult gully, tucked in a tight corner and buttressed on either side by massive rock walls.

Growing up in Connecticut, I spent many summers backpacking and hiking in the Presidentials with my mom, dad, and younger brother. One February in high school, my dad took me up Yale Gully, the broad, easy ice climb in the center of Huntington Ravine. As we crawled toward the Alpine Garden, the flat plateau that separates the ravine from Mt. Washington's summit cone, a break in the clouds hovered over the east face snowfields for an instant and I was hooked on winter climbing. Connecticut felt worlds away from the mountaineering literature I devoured, but climbing on Mt. Washington linked me to figures like Odell—at least in my own mind.

When I graduated high school in 2004, I wanted nothing to do with the East Coast. As a student at Colorado College, I relished escaping to ice routes on Longs Peak and alpine climbs in the Canadian Rockies. Crowded New England seemed stifling; the most difficult terrain on Washington induced more yawning than excitement. But in 2008, with no full-time employment lined up and a recession looming, I moved to New Hampshire, where I got a job delivering supplies to the eight backcountry huts maintained by the Appalachian Mountain Club. That winter, as the days grew shorter and the frost line crept down toward the valleys, I stayed in northern New England, washing dishes and training for my first Alaskan expedition by sprinting up the ravines and ice climbs.

> [The] cadence of the seasons of the East Coast force their own kind of creativity.... Here, adventure lies in finding new ways to interpret what little terrain we have.

I fell in love with expedition climbing that spring. High up the north face of Mt. Wake, the ghostly shapes of mountains appeared across the Ruth Glacier. To the south, the glacier snaked toward Mt. Church and Talkeetna; to our north, my eyes traced swath of frozen glacier towards the Moose's Tooth and Mt. Dickey, where snow walls flanked our little tent. The scale of Alaska overwhelms the senses; there, it's harder to zoom in. Later, in 2014, two friends and I completed a sixty-mile traverse from Kahiltna base camp to Wonder Lake on the northern side of Denali National Park in bad weather. Crossing the expansive terrain provided its own enjoyment. I loved how creativity, logistical details, fitness and drive had to come together, no matter the mountain range.

The fickle conditions and cadence of the seasons of the East Coast force their own kind of creativity. If I lived out West I'd probably chase trails and summits and climbs I'd never seen before. But here, adventure lies in finding new ways to interpret what little terrain we have.

In 1994 Kurt Winkler and Doug Huntley traversed from Mt. Washington over to Mt. Madison in five days, bivouacking and linking summits and ice climbs. After climbing Pinnacle Gully, the pair dug a snow cave at Sphinx Col, the narrow corridor of rocks between Mts. Jefferson and Clay. Continuing north, they endured a mid-March rainstorm before they climbed a new route in Madison Gulf, one of the ravines that sweeps down from the stubby summits of the Whites. Over the years,

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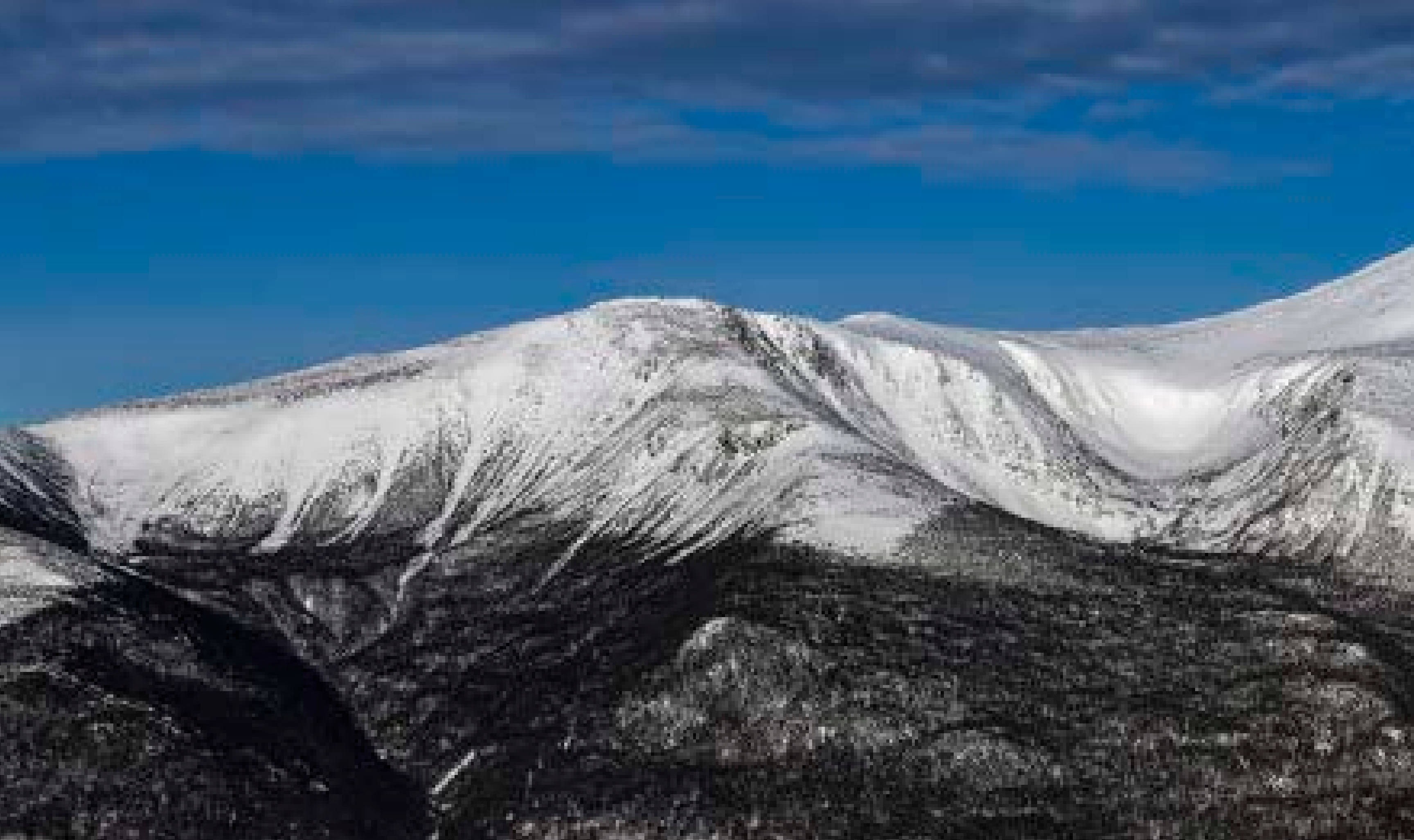
placing passive gear with playful delight. The third pitch was my turn. In order to avoid a wide crack in the overhang above, I attempted traversing the weak point to the right, but it was still too difficult for me so I asked Yusuke to switch turns. Yusuke worked through the overhang wide crack, opening the most difficult passage on the route at last. Now leading the fourth pitch, I made my way up a snow couloir. A massive cornice hung overhead as we quickly traversed up to the ridge. ¶ From there, we could see that the ridgeline leading up to Peak 4 was covered in even more cornices that seemed ready to break off at any moment. Yusuke quipped, "I haven't been to the top of Peak 4 yet. Let's do it." With that, the four of us made our way up the treacherous ridge to the top as a single unit connected by a rope. "Ben Nevis" was complete. ¶ The heavy clouds that day made me wonder if the sky in Scotland might look the same. Climbing an unknown line with only passive protection and an uncertain outcome reminded me of playing adventurous games as a child. Now, the memory of the climb on "Ben Nevis" is another scene filled with adventure and laughter that I can return to anytime. MASAMI ONDA



Kurt has spent countless hours tracking up remote drainages, searching out new ice routes in the hollows and hills near his home.

In 2011 Alan Cattabriga and Gabe Flanders attempted a Presidential Traverse with three ice climbs in a single day. After wallowing through thick spruce traps and running out of water, they called it quits four miles short of their goal. "What started as a simple thought has now become a map of memories that reappears each time I look at the paper version," Cattabriga wrote in *Alpinist* 37. The climbs most remembered are often viewed as failures, the ones which verged closer to the impossible than the possible.

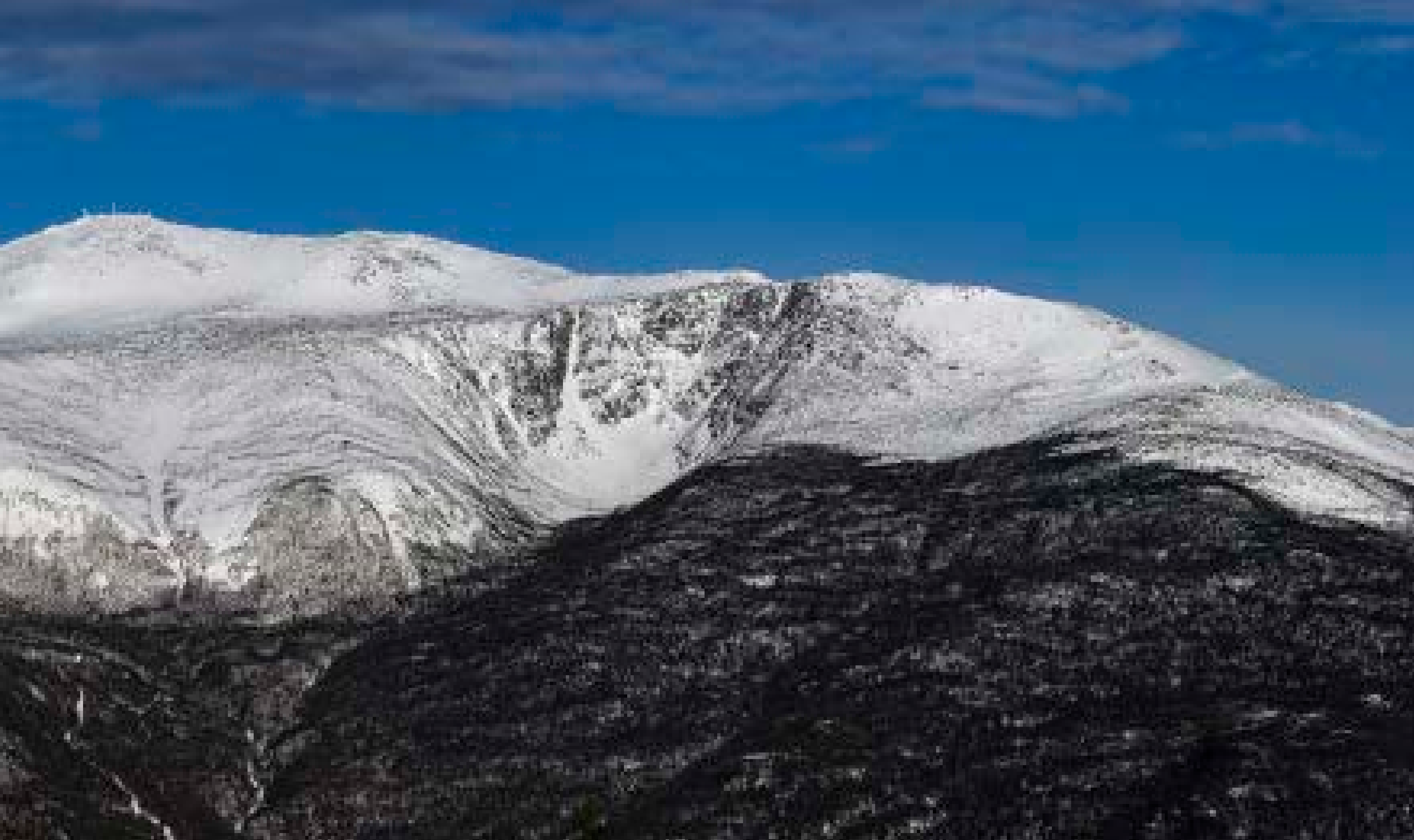
Over the years, I flipped through my own dog-eared topo maps and guidebooks and marched across the Presidential Range with guided clients. The increased familiarity allowed my own version of a traverse to take shape, no less arbitrary or absurd than Kurt and Doug's enchainment or Alan and Gabe's. The guidebook listed five ravines as having winter climbing in them. Summiting each peak in the Presidentials and completing a climb in those five ravines would cover twenty-seven miles and ascend 5,000 feet of climbing terrain. A traverse like that would gain a total of 14,000 feet—the height of Nanga Parbat's Rupal Face—just ten minutes from my driveway.

In February 2017, two companions and I hiked up the Valley Way Trail in the White Mountains at a slow, steady pace with ice tools, crampons, some spare layers, 6,000 calories of food, a stove and a collapsible kettle. The forecast had promised near-perfect conditions: it is warm, but not above freezing, and there's no wind. The snow has melted and hardened into a névé ideal for cramponing. But low pressure is predicted at 8:00 p.m.: snow turning to rain. For now, the sky is cobalt. The three of us whoop with joy, dancing across a dense snowpack.

Though I'd thought of doing the traverse alone, I'm happy to have partners, and not just to divvy up the stove or break trail. Ryan Driscoll's tree-trunk legs break trail in deep snow with ease. His generally positive outlook balances my own mercurial alpine temperament. The first time we climbed together, awash in a deluge of spindrift, we scratched our way up a moderate mixed climb. Even after my piton hammer broke and clonked him on the head, he gushed about the day. Rolling a cigarette before we hiked back to the car, he said, "That's the best climb ever." (Ryan talks in absolutes like this.) Over the last few years, Justin Guarino has been quietly ticking off New Hampshire's hardest traditional mixed climbs. Between the three of us, our morale and our combined knowledge of the area make us all a little stronger.

We descend from Star Lake and climb Point du Pinceau, technically the hardest of the five climbs we plan to do. But we're able to crampon down 600 feet with ease in the morning névé, literally running to the base. As we solo next to each other, we swing our lightweight ski mountaineering axes into buttery, blue ice. When I relax on my ice tools, I can see across to Mt. Washington and the Auto Road, miles away. Ryan, who has omitted his helmet to save weight, looks like a climber from another era. A dangerous thought creeps into my mind: *we might pull this thing off.*

Hours later, as we crest the summit of Jefferson, a barred owl stands on the trail forty feet below us, spackled white and grey, cocking its inquisitive little head, as surprised to see us



as we are to see it. What is it doing up here? With the owl's presence dawns the realization we've not seen another living thing all day.

Halfway through our planned route, at Sphinx Col, we take out the stove and brew up. The memory of hiking here with my mom and dad at age eight—green rain jackets, red bandanas, gorp—pierces me all of a sudden. How many alpine zones since then? How many memories can you squeeze into a single coordinate? The contours of this place have not changed, though I have. Years in other mountains bolstered my appreciation for these ones: Ryan loves to joke that our time in Alaska or the Canadian Rockies is perfect training for the Presidentials.

A humid wind picks up for a moment: the barometer drops, snaps me into the present. Moving again, we descend into the Great Gulf, choosing our own routes over rocky buttresses and blobs of plastered névé. The climbing is fun; a fantastic break from slogging over the summits. My legs are becoming leaden. Against the blackening sky, I shut off my brain and head toward Washington. The summit isn't far away, but as we plunge-step parallel to the cog railway tracks, darkness swallows us.

Weather observatory lights shine through sharp rime. "We're in the Upside Down," Justin says: a reference to the dark underworld in the television series *Stranger Things.* He's right; Netflix could easily use the eerie landscape of the deserted summit cone as a set for their alternate-reality horror show. After eleven hours of moving, we drop down toward Huntington Ravine and find the edge of Central Gully, the easy snow ramp climbers use to descend back down to the floor of the ravine. Ryan descends first, I go next and Justin follows. A grating sound. Rock against crampon.

"Rock! Rock!" Justin is yelling. I watch a flat, plate-sized rock careen down towards me and I pin it to the slope, carving out a little spot for it to stay put. Ryan keeps downclimbing.

"Whoa. That was close."

"Yeah," says Justin. "Sorry."

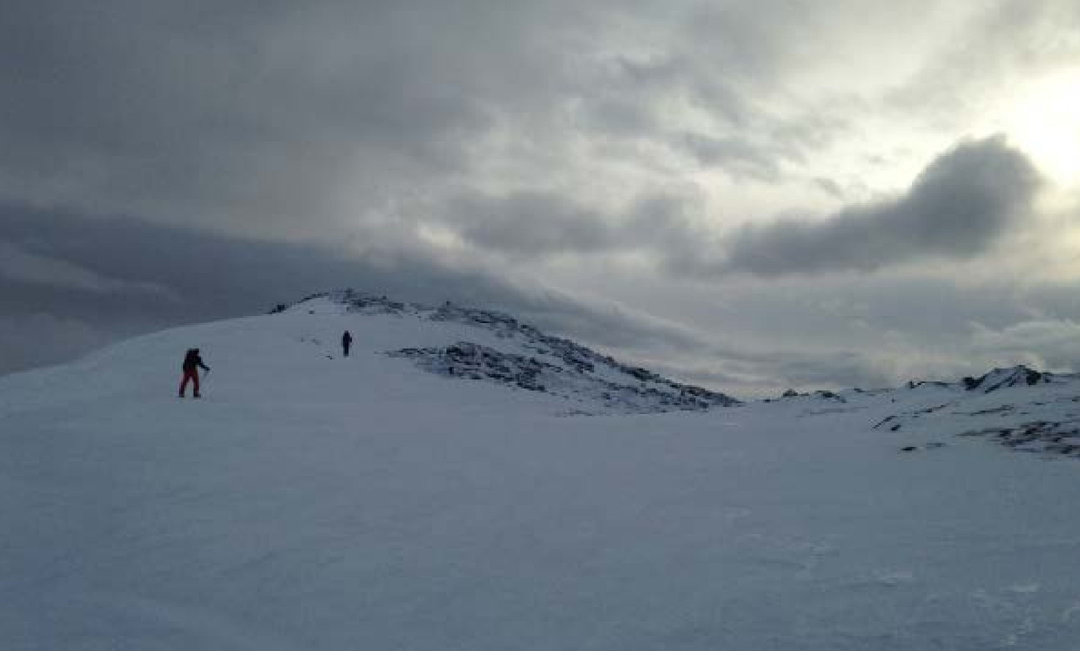
The three-pitch Pinnacle Gully (an initial ice bulge followed by a five-hundred-foot ice and névé ramp and one of the most popular winter climb in the Whites) is normally a pedestrian outing for us. Now, warm weather has undermined the ice, and our tools prod running water. I hadn't planned on the traverse feeling dangerous. Yet the conditions and the eerie swell of darkness edge out my sense of control. Open sky, carved cirques, easy climbing, the thrill of movement. But dread, too. At least in the dark.

We pick our way carefully among the rivulets of ice, calves burning, waiting for each other so we won't be hit by anything. An hour later after descending to the base of Tuckerman's Ravine, the stove comes out again. I take my water bottles and dunk them into the river. My hands feel the cold rush of freezing water, the cuffs of my puffy jacket soak. It feels odd, sitting on the most popular trail around with our stove out. We have unlocked the exhaustion you find on fifty-mile trail runs or long alpine climbs.

"I'm knackered," I mention to my companions.

"Yeah." The other two nod in agreement. No one can muster anything else in the way of conversation.

Hillman's Highway, normally a ski run, is a sheet of ice. My calves feel like jelly, my mouth has the same thin, tense feeling of plodding to a summit at high altitude. *Don't fall. Don't*



[Previous Spread] **The east side of Mt. Washington (6,288'). In 1929 Milana Jank and Fritz Wiessner completed the first known ski traverse of the Presidential Range. Before the trek, Jank endured two nights on the highest summit as temperatures dipped below -40 degrees. "I have never had in European mountains such a powerful wind," he reflected in Appalachia.** Brian Post | [This Page] **Justin Guarino and Ryan Driscoll head toward the summit of Mt. Clay (5,533').** Michael Wejchert

screw up. Don't fall. I've skied this! Ryan drops his trekking pole and it shoots into the mist enveloping us. Once we're on top, I pull out the phone to navigate. But every few feet we are lost, fighting for terrain, fighting to stay on the trail, heaving for breath. It is raining now. Our window has closed shut and we cannot find Lakes of the Clouds.

Every time I expect the hut to materialize, my expectations are dashed, turned to vapor along with our breath. We slump against the sign and pull out a paper map. My phone has enough juice left to use the compass app, and we stumble in the direction of the hut. After an hour of searching, a wooden bench appears out of the gloom, then another, then a low-slung roof covered with wet snow, the grey shingles and peeling green trim. The rain is coming down in horizontal sheets. The temperature is thirty-five degrees, and we will get hypothermia if we do not keep moving. We have hurtled into a trap of our own making. Despite our careful tracing of contour lines on the map, we will be committed in a way none of us had foreseen.

Of the three of us, I've walked the nine miles down the Crawford path the most, and so I lead on through the mist. By instinct, I turn my body toward Mt. Monroe, a bearing divined from memory. Soon we are stumbling up its gentle slopes, Lakes of the Clouds once again dissolved in the mist. I am exhausted, but there are enough cairns to find the way. We spread out, yelling to each other as we arc in a long line back and forth. Thoreau and his companions, hemmed in by fog over a century-and-a-half earlier and less than a mile away from the summit, must have felt a similar cocktail of fear and absurdity. I am shivering uncontrollably. Justin hands me another jacket.

"When's the last time you ate or drank anything?"

"I'm fine." A desperate snarl.

As we descend Eisenhower, Ryan slips and tumbles, losing his temper, too.

"I just wanna stop! I just wanna stop for a second and sit down!"

"I gotta keep moving," I implore between chattering teeth.

Eighteen hours in, by Mt. Pierce, our final little summit, I stop and vomit. My companions stare back at me before we resume our hike on a path that's turning to slush. A few trucks groan through Route 302, three miles away. No lofty, clever thoughts left. On any mountain, I realize, my aim is the evaporation of the original goal. The peak or objective's name dissolves. Now we are simply three souls walking.

When we reach the car, all of us are too parched to eat any of the snacks we'd stashed. The taste of vomit still hangs in my mouth.

After an exhausted car swap and an hour of shivering in soaked layers, I pull in to our little log cabin, strip down, start a fire, and crawl into bed. My partner Alexa murmurs slight protest at my sweaty, cold feet.

"We did it!" I whisper.

"That's nice," Alexa groans before rolling over.

Over the years I've continued to seek out blank rock buttresses and seldom visited corners of the Presidential Range. I have catalogued our traverse in my "map of memories," as Alan Cattabriga had described his own travels years ago. Each trip across the same trail enriches my own personal connection to them. After eleven years of living here, I have embraced the smallness of the place, though I have no desire to leave; the list of undone link-ups and bushwhacks and training days keeps growing. Running past Lakes of the Clouds in summer, or navigating a whiteout with clients on the summit cone of Washington jogs those memories loose, enriches the well-travelled contour lines further. I can't stop losing myself on expeditions, but I can't help thinking how the mountains I encounter on expeditions change the way I interact with the ones just beyond my doorstep.

In 2019 Justin and I traveled to Peru with another friend from New Hampshire, intent on climbing on Taulliraju, a three-thousand-foot incisor of blackened granite, ringed with frothing cornices. Though neighboring Alpamayo was once deemed the most beautiful mountain in the world, Taulliraju's granite bulwarks provide no easy way to the summit. It is an alpinist's mountain.

Before the climb, we sat drinking coffee in a small café, where black-and-white photographs of mountains plastered the walls. I fixated on the outline of a mountain that looked vaguely familiar. Justin did, too, our eyes adjusting to the aerial view of slight, muted ridgelines and snowy, pillowed drainages. It took a minute or two and then we made out a few tiny cairns dotting the landscape.

"Wait a minute, that's Mt. Washington!" I exclaimed. Tucked amid other photos of far-off peaks, the little mountain looked as wild as the cresting, wave-like snow formations of the Cordillera Blanca. For a second, the memory of our long night flooded the café.

"Ah yes. The Upside Down," Justin said.

Five days after attempting Taulliraju we were back in New Hampshire, reduced wallets and waistlines the only markers of our expedition. I took my worn map from the shelf, running my fingers across the spots I couldn't wait to revisit.

—*Michael Wejchert, Madison, New Hampshire*