

# OUTSIDE

Donn steps past us and walks away, silently, slowly, down a frozen slope that is white in the moonlight against a dark violet sky. I watch him move away, a pitch-black silhouette trailed by swirling streams of snow that blow and howl across the ice like desert sandstorms and make the ground seem alive.

And the wind, oh my, the wind. It comes in frigid, freight-train gusts loaded with sharp ice crystals in search of bare eyeballs and skin to rake. It slaps my face with the loose collar of my coat and blows hard enough to halt our forward steps. There are times when the gusts are so fierce, so roaring loud, that all we can do is plant our ice axes, dig in our boots, and stand still, braced like statues against the wind, until it pauses for another breath.



Donn Venema, John Bonin, and Corey Mowery

It is with my back turned away from this abuse that I watch my friend Donn make his way down the snowy slope. The 4 a.m. alpine moonlight is striking and pretty, but it is also surreal and deceptive to me. This would make a perfect photograph — a lone, dark figure backlit in lunar light — if only I could grab my camera through three pairs of gloves and a cinched-down pack.

Guess I'll just have to freeze this moment in my mind: the sparkling snow; the moon and stars and mountain; the rumbling winds that knock three of us around while pushing Donn closer and closer to the moon and the edge of what seems to be a white cliff.

Down he goes, I remember, down and nearly out of my vision and then . . . over the edge.

He does not disappear, though, but only descends back to our camp, and the relative luxury

of our tents, at 9,800 feet on the southern flanks of Mt. Shasta.

At 14,162 feet, Shasta is the second tallest of the Cascade Mountains, outdone only by Washington's 14,410-foot Mt. Rainier. It sits near the southern terminus of the Cascades — Lassen Peak caps off the range — filling the northern California sky with a mass of beautiful mountain.

In training for a prospective early summer climb of Rainier, four of us — myself, Donn, Corey, and John — set out for Shasta's Casaval Ridge route in the sunshine, blue sky, and still air of May 17.

It was an ideal day to be on the mountain. Even so, looking now at some of the photographs I took from the parking lot, I see the mountain looming high and grand above, but white plumes of snow stream like banners off its summit ridges: harbingers of what was to come.

We had a pleasant hike up from 7,000 feet through the trees and snow and sun. But just above a small rock outcropping at 9,000 feet, the winds whipped up seemingly out of nowhere, and for the next 16 hours, until we slipped below 9,000' again, they never relented.

In search of a camp, we trudged against the wind up a small snow slope and found a shelf already carved into the side of the ridge. After a little excavation — and after random gloves, hats, water bottles, and, Corey thought, perhaps a tent, had gone sailing by in the gulch below — our tents were up and we were inside.

From a journal entry at 7 p.m. that night:

*"The wind outside ruffles and rattles the side of our tents, and grains of snow sift down the edges. It is only 7:00, and outside the sky is blue and*

*sunlit. But it is cold, very cold in the wind here at 9,800 feet on Mt. Shasta. I am hoping for a break in the wind."*

That break never came. We rose at 3 a.m. the next morning and set out up the mountain. From our initial steps, the wind pummeled us. If it sounded like a freight train blowing past our faces at 10,000 feet, in the distance up toward the summit, it was the heavy, constant roar of the ocean.

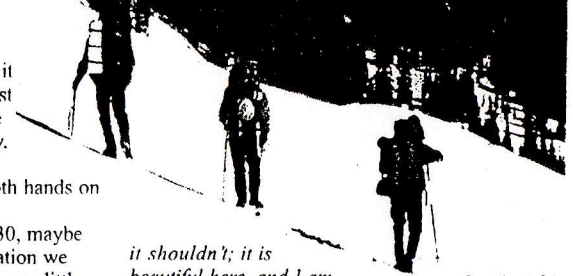
Three steps up; stop. Head down, both hands on the ax, hold on. Five steps up; repeat.

We went through these motions for 30, maybe 40 minutes, and with each foot of elevation we gained, the resistance only grew. There was little to do but turn around and, as described above, head back to camp.

From a 7 a.m. journal entry, back in the tent:

*"It is blowing in gusts stronger than 50 mph. We headed out, only to be forced back into our tents by howling winds that knocked us around like bowling pins. The summit looks like a wild, white sandstorm in the moonlight, and from our relative safety here, it sounds like crashing surf. The attempt is over. That bums me out, though*

*"There are times when the gusts are so FIERCE, so ROARING LOUD, that all we can do is PLANT our ice axes, DIG in our boots, and STAND STILL, BRACED like STATUES against the wind, until it pauses for another BREATH."*



*it shouldn't; it is beautiful here, and I am alive."*

Photos by Jon Bell

Later that week, as if in consolation — although climbing isn't always about the summit — Donn sends us all the official weekend climbing report put out by the rangers at Shasta.

"It was a crazy, windy weekend with tents collapsing left and right due to winds well over 50 mph. No one that we know of was able to make it to the summit . . ."