
TERRY GIFFORD

'The Charged Silence of a Summit'

in Contemporary Mountaineering Poetry

*When men got to the summit
Light words forsook them
And their hearts filled with heavy silence*

Ted Hughes, *Remains of Elmet*

For the Ninth International Festival of Mountaineering Literature at Bretton Hall College of the University of Leeds in 1995, I commissioned from 14 climbing poets a new poem on the theme of 'The Charged Silence of a Summit'. This invitation produced the eight poems that accompany this paper, five of which were read by the poets who were able to attend the festival. By way of introduction to this group of commissioned poems, which have never been published together before, I would like to discuss the very different insights achieved by each of the poets in approaching this elusive, but commonly experienced, charged sense of a summit.

John Sewell's poem 'The Ascent of Skiddaw from Dead Craggs' is about an environment that manifests itself as noise: 'what you thought was a mountain/ turns out to be noise'. This poem is one of a sequence by Sewell about this particular mountain in the Lake District. In this ascent, the mountain is challenging his knowledge of it by what appears to be a physical assault on him. 'What could be the mountain/ comes bodying towards you like soiled quartz./ And your chest's in its path.' Annihilation – his word – is by sensory overload as well as by sensory deprivation (the ascetic's route to the summit): 'You can't hear, can't speak, can't see. You almost can't stand.'

But the regular six-line stanzas are persistent, disciplined steps towards the summit cairn, behind which, as the mist clears, 'what you took for a mountain/ becomes one thought'. That 'thought' is actually the name of a special person which cannot be spoken: 'the silence is too great,/ your voice too weak – zero, less than that'. The emotional charge of coming through this trial is transferred to the absent loved one, the 'weight and pang' of whose name induces the need to 'cry' or 'yell'. Such emotional unity between a loved one and the self across such poignant absence is an

expression of the paradox that the moment of self-annihilation can be the moment of self-fulfilment: 'You've never felt so self-effaced/ or so affirmedly alive'. This form of engagement (climbing) with this form of place (a summit) defines self (and the deepest emotions) through self-effacement. One is reminded of Ruskin's humility before the awesome presence of Mont Blanc, which forced him to 'associate' himself 'fraternally with some ants' in order to recover. But more mind-enlarging was Wordsworth's experience of emerging from a moonlit silent mist in his ascent of Snowdon. In the 1850 version of *The Prelude* Wordsworth, the first English rock-climbing poet,¹ abandons the structure of a retrospective 'meditation' upon the experience and suddenly plunges into the physical imagery within this 'spot of time' in order to convey the way the material world connects his mind with a larger one:

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream.

In this charged emotional state the poet perceives that this enlarged mind 'is the express resemblance' of his own 'when thus moved'. He uses the term 'interchangeable' to suggest the reciprocity of nature and imagination. But more significantly he merges the voices of streams with the silence of moonlight to create the 'one continuous stream' of the mountain landscape's 'silent voice'. The oxymoron is the poetic figure that is necessary to evoke the nature of this reciprocal encounter – mind in the world, the world in the mind. In the breathless silence of a summit gained in John Sewell's poem, the mountain has spoken to give him himself. In his archaic, Wordsworthian phrase, he'd never felt 'so affirmedly alive'.

W H Murray knew this kind of elation which he expressed in a curious allusion to music. After a 'hard fight' on the Tower Ridge of Ben Nevis, he wrote, 'our faculties were in balance yet highly keyed, therefore abnormally alive to the deep peace of the summit. Its grace flowed in upon the mind with a touch soothing and most delicate. We need feel but once the spell of that enchantment to understand Schumann's declaration that the true music is a silence'.²

1. *The Prelude's* vivid detail of climbing to the raven's nest to collect the eggs (for each of which four pence was to be gained from the church warden) is based upon real climbing incidents such as that in 1783 when young Bill Wordsworth (with a young Birkett) was in a group of kids who got cragfast on Yewdale Crags, recorded by T W Thompson in *Wordsworth's Hawkshead*.
2. In *The Guardian* obituary for the musician John Cage he is quoted as saying 'that silence is the mother of music' (22 Feb 1996).

The second poem takes this for granted. Kevin Borman's 'Stac Pollaidh' is about a test of self-judgement and of a lover, who this time is also making the ascent. Using the language of that place, (the 16th century Scottish word for bondage) he admits that he is 'thirled to this place', and has brought his new lover 'these hundreds of miles to confirm/ my suspicion that you would be too'. But the climbing together of the 'good holds [...] hanging above space' leads to the summit where the cairn might symbolise the triangular nature of this experience: writer, lover and this specific place:

At the cairn we look and look.
Quinag, Cul Mor, the Summer Isles until
a dense veil of rain heads in.

This poet uses place names like a mantra. There is no explicit mention of silence in this poem, but one can hear its echo between the quiet concentration of 'we look and look' and the three places which are repeatedly looked at: Quinag, Cul Mor, the Summer Isles. Quinag, Cul Mor, the Summer Isles ... In this mantra of silence, self has been defined this time by place and a partner who is present, in a three-way dynamic. Here is the true music in Schumann's sense. In the silence beyond the test of this summit, the poet's judgement about his partner has been confirmed as he and she 'stare across a thousand lochans'. Borman's poem evaluates the test, by this ascent, of the poet's engagement with both his new lover and the rest of his natural environment, balancing the two in what is also a test of himself. By the end of the poem, it is not so much the handling of the holds above exposure that is important, as her ability to also 'look and look' – 'to stare across a thousand lochans/ Long enough for me to know that I was right'.

The silence of looking and listening after touching 'warm rock', of being 'aware, not wanting to move', is the subject of Bob Cooper's poem of Zen-like stillness about climbing a small crag in Northumberland. As he and his partner stare, 'a car miniatures uphill'. The use of the noun as a verb draws attention (rather too self-consciously, perhaps) to the poet's giving value to small things and his eventual identification with his fellow inhabitants of this summit, the 'watching finches' of the title. But the intensity of focus in the poet's receptiveness is suggested by the line, 'All my life has brought me here'. Bob Cooper is listening to nature in the spirit of Thoreau, who wrote about his climb of the mountain Katahdin, that

Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more alone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him, than in the plains where men inhabit.

The mountain silences the writer because the writer is letting in the mountain. Bob Cooper finds himself concentrating with all his life, reduced to the inarticulateness of the also watching finches. This discipline has been called 'contemplation' or even 'worship' by some poets – Chris Whitby for example. His poem, 'Breaking Silence', complains about noise pollution from the increased number of mountain climbers: 'Now mountains keep their council through the day/ But met at the right hour will whisper still'. The 'old familiar charm' that is whispered is the Biblical/Faustian deal of the summit view. Whitby half-jokingly admits that he would, indeed does, sell his soul for it in his separated punchline: 'Enveloped in the mist, I bend my knee'. Most of us also bend a knee to sit down at a summit and stare in that heightened state like Borman and Cooper. Usually some Faustian compromises have been made to get there.

But Whitby's poem ultimately plays with a cliché that its opening treats almost seriously:

There was a time you'd climb a mountain top
And find yourself alone to contemplate
Whatever promptings God, your inner soul,
Or nature's trenchant silence might evoke.

'Trenchant' is perhaps a giveaway to the tone here, if 'inner soul' has not registered with the reader as ironic in our post-Lawrencian age. Yet the whole poem's point about wanting, needing, to meet the mountain top at its silent time recognises, underneath the apparent cynicism of its tone, the essentially religious nature of the Devil's or summit's whisper, 'All this I give to you'. That summits do give and that they do whisper has rarely been in doubt.

Ironically, it is the atheist poet David Craig who points out in a book about journeys to the 'great rocks of the world' that 'mountaineer', in Greek, was a common synonym for 'monk'. Writing about the anchorites of the caves of Meteora, he says that this place

was ideal for the practice of *hezychasm*, which cultivated *hesychia*, the peace of solitude, as a means towards *ataraxia*, freedom from anxiety – paradoxically attained, as rock-climbers do, by breaking through the often intense anxiety of the climb itself. (*Landmarks*)

This is a dangerous business. Anxieties in mountain climbing might well not only be justified, but represent an essential survival instinct. Listening to the mountain and to the inner self, that tuned-in dialogue which guides judgement, is a learned discipline as Andean and Himalayan survivors like Joe Simpson know. Simpson's book *Storms of Silence* opens with his standing

on an avalanche-prone slope: 'It was as if everything was holding its breath, waiting to see whether I would pay attention'. The death in 1995 of the experienced British climber Alison Hargreaves on K2 raised questions about her ability to listen to the mountain, read the skies for the storm that blew her off her descent from the summit. I remember her explaining to us at breakfast the morning after the eighth mountaineering literature festival, how she had turned back from the South Col of Everest, despite feeling fit and able to climb it without bottled oxygen, because the intense cold would inevitably result in her losing fingers and toes. She returned and climbed Everest. When she died on K2 her husband reportedly quoted the Tibetan saying, 'It is better to live as a tiger for one day than a thousand years as a sheep.'

The feminist climbing poet Kym Martindale reflected upon this Tibetan saying in relation to the death of Alison Hargreaves in her response to my commission. Her poem is called 'Tigers and Summits'. They are both, she suggests, 'a dangerous faith'; they can be 'lost/ without drama/ while you were looking away', as perhaps we all were in August 1995. Tigers and summits, she writes, 'carry the same tawny light'. This phrase recalls the title of an essay by Gary Snyder, 'Tawney Grammar', in *The Practice of the Wild*: 'The grammar not only of language, but of culture and civilization itself, is of the same order as this mossy little forest creek, this desert cobble.' In order to survive, mountaineers have to understand the way the grammar of their culture 'is of the same order' as the grammar of the performers, their 'clean-limbed ambition', their 'narrowed eyes/ and squared palms', but she knows the electricity she herself really deals in: 'I think of the electricity of arriving,/ the fire in my fist'. This is the risk taken 'for a live, silent moment' of a summit gained. Finally the meditation upon the saying which launched the poem becomes a personal acknowledgement of that enlargement of mind which Wordsworth struggled so often to articulate. Martindale jumps for joy in leaps of lines:

My mind stretches
awake
to summits
leaping with light.

Alison would have applauded her, I think. So would Aldo Leopold, who in *A Sand County Almanac* proposed the notion of 'Thinking Like a Mountain'. This is, I believe, the same essential discipline that Snyder is referring to in 'Tawney Grammar'. The opposite of this is 'Thinking About a Mountain', as in Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni'. The emphasis on silence in this poem is too insistent to carry the conviction of true worship. Indeed, the mountain ultimately becomes a mere idea, an abstraction:

Risest from forth thy sea of silent pines,
 How silently!
 [...]
 Thou dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,
 Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
 Didst vanish from my thought; entranced in prayer
 I worshipped the Invisible alone.

Coleridge's poem is derided by contemporary critics as either a projection of his Lake District experience upon 'grander external objects' such as Mont Blanc, as David Craig puts it, or as 'a paraphrase and elaboration of a work by the Swiss poetess Frederika Brun' in the words of the Romantic scholar Karl Kroeber. Kym Martindale warns that 'Above the soft meadow,/ the sky crackles'. Those poets confronting mountains unaware of this are either dangerous, or faking it like Coleridge. Martindale's acknowledgement of the potential for both danger and elation in outer and inner electricity qualifies and deepens her claim that 'My mind stretches/ awake'. In his 'Hymn' Coleridge's attempt to stretch his mind by sheer force of rhetoric only succeeded in raising 'the Invisible' to what Shelley called 'vacancy'.

In Shelley's address to Mont Blanc, he also works earnestly towards his climactic poetic thought, but his silence is of a different, observed order, with no abstract 'Invisible' sleight of hand. For Shelley, Mont Blanc is a physical example of the paradoxes of the natural world. It is a 'city of death' that nevertheless 'rolls its perpetual stream'. 'The wilderness has a mysterious tongue/ Which teaches awful doubt', yet 'Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal/ Large codes of fraud and woe'. The natural energies of destruction could be the very energies of social reconstruction, if only the human mind could 'interpret' or 'deeply feel' them. Once again the oxymoron is required for the interpretation of that voice of the mountain. Shelley shows how Mont Blanc speaks by accumulating combinations of silent winds, silent snow, and 'voiceless lightening' towards the ultimate question:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 If to the mind's imaginings
 Silence and solitude were vacancy?

What would be the meaning of a summit if its eloquent silence were not heard, felt, interpreted? It is in itself a mountain, but as soon as poets put pen to parchment about it, it becomes a metaphor. Kym Martindale warns mountaineers who might follow the example of Coleridge that the metaphor can drown out the voice of the mountain, with fatal consequences.

Actually this is exactly what the next poet, Dennis Gray, does in his poem 'A Summit Gained'. As a grizzled and well-travelled climber, he knows a bit about Shelley's 'silence and solitude' of a summit. But his starting point is Gerard Manley Hopkins' notion that 'mind has mountains'.

'A Summit Gained' is a recognition that some inner summits may be impossible to gain and indeed self-annihilating if they were, in present social conditions. 'The hills in my head [that] have still/ not been trod or tried in any way' are a potential, a temptation even, but

If I could get there I know
that a silence would reign over me
with a force of such power
it will be the end to my life.

This text is open to the criticism of abstraction, of residing finally in an oblivion as abstract as Coleridge's 'Invisible'. But one could argue that the poem is a recognition of limits to the mind's capacity to reach some summits, to grasp some thoughts such as the nature of death, or some aspects of self such as, say, homosexuality in the context of a macho climbing culture. Read in this way 'A Summit Gained' asks: Is our capacity to use summits as metaphors a potentiality, or a delusion?

The answer is both, of course, as David Craig reminds us in his remarkable poem 'The Height of Great Moss'. Craig gives us the silence of the Clearances, the historical reality surrounding many of the summits of the Scottish Highlands. David Craig's poem might be read as a reply to Dennis Gray's. Summits can only become metaphors after we recognise that they are physical and have a history in which we too are implicated. To choose one as the place of one's death, even metaphorically within the discourse of a poem, is to idealise into what Craig calls 'fantasy'. Dying is, Craig says, inevitably 'filth' and 'struggle', not an 'embarkation/ Onto the inland sea'. Ironically, by denying himself this fantasy, the poet honours the familiar place and its complex history in both its geological and human dimensions. Craig denies the spiritual and celebrates the silence of the summit as

the grizzled head
Of an old peasant who will not be moved
Even by civil war,
Who is bothered not at all
What politicians and banks are fighting for.

David Craig is reversing Shelley. Rather than evoking energies for social change 'to repeal/ Large codes of fraud and woe', Craig's mountain evokes individual stoicism in the face of change, although the confession of a personal war-time gesture by the young poet, laying 'fenceposts up the summit slope/ In V's for Victory', does introduce a degree of youthful complicity in 'what politicians and banks are fighting for'. The significance of Craig's poem is its resistance to the notion that any mountain summit can represent transcendence from temporal reality, even as an ideal place on which one's temporal reality might end.

Graham Mort might appear to be presenting a different case in writing a poem which ends in the silence of beyond words. His long poem 'Bidean nam Bian' seems to want to articulate all that can be described about an experience of climbing this Scottish mountain on a hot, still summer's day when, having reached the summit, 'Thirst and silence have stilled/ all thoughts but one:/ [...] to fall into the cool stare of the lochans'. The poet asks his partner the English meaning of the mountain's Gaelic name and the answer concludes the poem:

Bidian nam Bian -
 meaning highest; meaning peak
 of the mountains; meaning summit
 which we've hardly begun
 to understand we do not know.

Mort invests the silence of a summit with a meaning that is straining at the limits of human understanding. Perhaps this is the 'silent knowledge' of Gary Snyder's *Cold Mountain Poems*. These are translations of the seventh century Chinese mountain hermit, Han-shan, whose name means Cold Mountain. Snyder says he 'takes his name from where he lived [...] When he talks about Cold Mountain he means himself, his home, his state of mind'. Having reached, with Graham Mort's poem, the limits of what can be articulated about 'the charged silence of a summit', it would be wise to fall silent with Snyder's version of Han-shan's four-line poem:

Spring-water in the green creek is clear
 Moonlight on Cold Mountain is white
 Silent knowledge – the spirit is enlightened of itself
 Contemplate the void: this world exceeds stillness

The Eight Poems

The Ascent of Skiddaw from Dead Crags

Frictive, clawling, thuggish –
 what you thought was a mountain
 turns out to be a noise.
 A gale with the roar of water,
 its pitch strengthening, then fading a little, then strengthening again.
 A roar you place your whole head under.

A thousand feet later, the gale
having out-faced sound, scribbles out light.
Layer after wafery layer
of what could be the mountain
comes bodying towards you like soiled quartz.
And your chest's in its path.

Everything quits and runs from itself, or wants to.
The white blast shifts so quickly
when it hits, nothing seemingly stays firm.
You can't hear, can't speak, can't see. You almost can't stand.
This is anti-matter face-on,
as close as you can come to it and survive.

But annihilation misses.
And what you thought was impossible
against all known odds,
becomes suddenly just a few steps more.
You find the cairn
and turn your back on it.

And all at once the roar gives up,
as if it didn't see you anymore
as if there never was a roar, now or ever.
And then a milkiness spills through the mist
which lightens, slides
and lifts away, top to bottom.

And when you look down,
what you took for a mountain
becomes one thought.
Whoever it is you think of
after the struggle, when you're restored to yourself,
you think of them. And you want to cry,

or yell their name,
at the weight and pang of it inside you.
But the silence is too great,
your voice too weak - zero, less than that.
You've never felt so self-effaced
or so affirmedly alive.

John Sewell

Stac Pollaid

For TL

From below, by the road,
it looks improbable, impregnable,
a dragon's spine petrified.
As we gain height
the slope tilts up incrementally,
loose, eroded, awkward under foot.
You are daunted by the
frozen rock profile sawing the sky,
though you don't say so until later.

Then we are there. The blocky ridge, with
air buffeting in from Suilven.
Hunched into a niche,
a Torridonian sandstone windbreak,
we stop for an apple and the view.
I am thirled to this place
and had to bring you
these hundreds of miles to confirm
my suspicion that you would be too.

Aeons.

Then ice scoured the old, old rock.
Water became cold grey lochans.
Peat, slow and acid,
raised itself with infinite patience.

We turned among pillars, working west,
rounding pinnacles from where
winds fall, ravens etch themselves on pale sky,
all Coigach stretches away.

Then we come to exposed moves. They have
good holds but are hanging above space.
You haven't met this kind of thing before
but you size it up and go
like a natural, stepping up and round.

At the cairn we look and look.
Quinag, Cul Mor, the Summer Isles until
a dense veil of rain heads in,
the coast steadily dims and is lost to grey.

No matter. We have had the moment,
long enough for you to put your hands on rock,
To stare across a thousand lochans.
Long enough for me to know that I was right.

Kevin Borman

Watching Finches

Swifts screech, cattle shift.
We climb warm rock then stare
over fields to a sun hanging
slow over Berwick. A car
miniatures uphill, shifts gear,
disappears in conifers.
All my life has brought me here
to gaze at light, untie and coil rope
then sit like the finches around us,
aware, not wanting to move.

Bob Cooper

Breaking Silence

There was a time you'd climb a mountain top
And find yourself alone to contemplate
Whatever promptings God, your inner soul,
Or nature's trenchant silence might evoke.
To do that now, you have to beat the dawn
Or settle for arrival with the dusk
(Having doggedly threaded through the Goretex exodus
to curious looks and snippets of sharp advice).
Now mountains keep their counsel through the day,
But met at the right hour will whisper still
The old familiar charm: 'All this I give
To you, as far as eye can see, and more,
If you will but bow down and worship me.'
Enveloped in the mist, I bend my knee.

Chris Whitby

Tigers and Summits

It is better to live as a tiger for a day than a thousand years as a sheep.

Tigers and summits
carry the same tawny light
and charged silence.

Their symmetry
is the symmetry of focus:
with narrowed eyes
and squared palms,
sinews and heart coiled,
tigers consider
the warning plume;

and summits frame them,
model their passion
and clean-limbed ambition.

Tigers
and summits
fool you,
one minute clear-eyed and whole,
holding you in the eye
of their own storm,
then lost
without drama
while you were looking away.

Tigers,
summits –
a dangerous faith.
Above the soft meadow
the sky crackles;
I think of the electricity of arriving,
the fire in my fist
for a live, silent moment.
My mind stretches
awake
to summits
leaping with light.

Kym Martindale

A Summit Gained

There are mountains of the mind
that never do yield an easy route
Soaring spires of dread delight
their forms inspire us in our dreams

We try to keep these high peaks
just for our own selfish human needs
Safe from those with the fever
to trample them under their feet

The hills in my head have still
not been trod or tried in any way
They offer me a new route
if I can only reach their crest

This I know will be so hard
climbing up steep rock faces all alone
Snow and ice may bar the way
'fore the summit can be attained

If I could get there I know
that a silence would reign over me
with a force of such power
it will be the end to my life

Dennis Gray

The Height of Great Moss

That scalp of hoar is permanent on Cairn Toul
Whether the weather on the Moine Mhór
Is blowing fine or foul.
The blade of the glacier dozing over
Laid bare that stony flay.
Its skull of granite weathered old-man-grey
Before the ptarmigan flew in from Jutland,
Even before the pine.

It is the colour of a silenced brain,
Bloodless and motionless as the coffined dead.
It is the grizzled head
Of an old peasant who will not be moved

Even by civil war,
 Who is bothered not at all
 What politicians and banks are fighting for.

I have breathed this air before:
 On Burrival midway down the western islands,
 Little square belvedere above the waters,
 Where crofters cleared from Sollas
 Wintered along Loch Eport, passed on south,
 And left it to its silence;
 On Morven in the second year of war
 Where I laid fenceposts up the summit slope
 In V's for Victory,
 Paused to let in the stillness of the moor,
 And heard a single Heinkel grunt and snore,
 Black as a condor in the summer sky.

The Great Moss lours above them all,
 Spreading its blanket for a giant's bed.
 Here I will lay my own expiring head
 Only in fantasy
 When life dissolves in ideal resignation
 And dreams of dying as it ought to be -
 No filth, no struggle, only embarkation
 Onto the inland sea.

David Craig

Bidean nam Bian

Here the road shimmers into the day's
 tide of heat, taking the tourists away
 to pry at curios of tartan, brooch-pins,
 the rusted blood of Highland feuds.

Pipers quarrel in the car park
 at Glen Coe, their Strathspeys
 and reels strut out, clashing faintly
 above birch leaves, the clucking
 water in this gully;
 its rocks are crampon-scarred
 though most snow is gone -
 just that pale cravat tucked
 into the corrie's throat ahead.

The air is thick here,
trees exhale a chest-tight damp;
granite glimmers, choking the valley
with its unpronounceable history.

Above us, peaks vibrate to struck
notes of summer heat
our tongues swell in mouths that
have nothing to say except curse
the angles of rock, this mad glare
flinching our eyes where the snow slope begins.

We toil up it, touching its illusion
of cold, staring at the sun through the sting
of sweat and sun-cream, staggering its last
groove through an avalanche of light.

Five ravens circle the summit;
their cries fall from throats of bone,
their plumage shines then tilts
into blackness.

The loch's iris of white sand sifts
into its hourglass eye - a prophet's
burned out pupil, blinded to futures
that falter from our mind's certitudes.

A skylark sings briefly
then falls; the sky's blueness
hums in electric gatherings of light,
in crackling gusts of static, in a
vacuuming momentousness that the grass
makes ordinary at our touch.

A breeze laps at us then gutters
into massed horizons where the mountains
stare us down, asking to be named;
the shock of the rock's stored heat
is a hand put suddenly in snow,
an insect zings by, gleaming
in its war-gear.

Thirst and silence have stilled
all thoughts but one:
to reach the ridge below, to fall

into the cold stare of the lochans,
 into the corrie's shadow, hugged
 close as unspent breath, covetous
 as a dark conscience.

Descent is a treachery of skipping
 stones and dust, it's a mirage
 of cold beers lined at the bar,
 buckets of ice, draught darkness,
 bubbles rising into white necklets
 of foam through which our mouths
 would sink to drown this skidding
 into unremitting waves of light.

We drink the rock's resolution
 into rock, and more rock, and more
 until we're plunging over bogland
 to gulp our heads at the burn's jacuzzi,
 swallowing its snow-melt cold,
 its stinging effervescence,
 scooping its joy of ice, saying how we'd made it
 and never thought we would,
 how Christ's climb to Calgary
 could not have been harder in such heat.

But the mountain isn't listening.

Our breath hollows out its silence,
 our ears balance on their stirrups
 of bone, predicting scree's slide
 towards another winter.

I'm asking you what it means,
 the name on the map. Those
 words clumsied as your mouth
 translates a mountain
 to the English tongue –
Bidean nam Bian –
 meaning highest; meaning peak
 of the mountains; meaning summit
 which we've hardly begun
 to understand we do not know.