

WASATCH JOURNAL

SUMMER 2008



THE TAO OF PATRICK BYRNE: OVERSTOCK'S ENIGMATIC CEO
SWIFT OBSESSION: AROUND THE BEND AT MILLER MOTORSPORTS PARK
MY FIRE: A STORY BY AUTHOR RICK BASS
ARTIST PILAR POBIL DOESN'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK
UTAH'S GOLF REVERIE: A PHOTO ESSAY



SUMMER 2008

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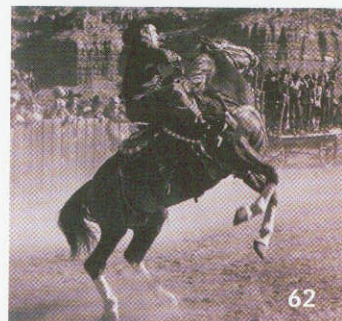
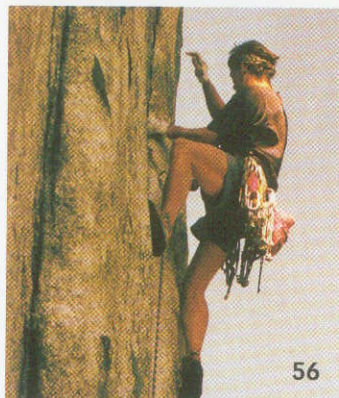
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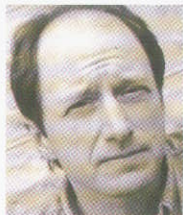
A wildfire lives. It breathes and consumes. It is dangerous and unpredictable. This excerpt from author Rick Bass's upcoming non-fiction book, *The Marsh*, details the minutes, hours, and days of surviving—and learning from—a fire that threatened his home.

110 **Verse: Light**

For summer, the Wasatch Journal solicited poems on the theme of light. Ellen Gregory's "Canyon" and Melissa Bond's "Light of the Troubadours" are meditations on heat-soaked afternoons.



ON THE COVER: Dana Johnson paddles down Cataract Canyon in Southern Utah. Photo by Whit Richardson.
THIS PAGE FROM TOP: Patrick M. Byrne, photo by Matthew Turley; Sean Toren climbing in his youth; scene from *Calamity Jane and Sam Bass* (1948), photo courtesy of Brigham Young University Special Collections; wildfire in Montana, photo by David Fogler.



BASS



BOND



CHESHER



GREGORY



KARRAS

Rick Bass is the author of 24 books of fiction and nonfiction, including a memoir, *Why I Came West*. "My Fire" is excerpted from a nonfiction book, *The Marsh*, which will be published by Houghton Mifflin/Harcourt in spring of 2009. He lives in northwest Montana's Yaak Valley with his wife and daughters.

A longtime writer for the *Wasatch Journal*, **Melissa Bond** joined the magazine staff in March of 2008 as associate editor and poetry editor. She is author of *Hush*, a book combining poetry, prose, and collages, and has written about everything from evolutionary biology to the alchemy of rum cake. She lives a stone's throw from Trolley Square in Salt Lake City with her husband, toothless cats, a quorum of chickens, and their newborn babe, Cassius Fetter-Bond.

Greer Chesher's *Heart of the Desert Wild: Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument* won the Utah Book Award for nonfiction. She has written several other books about Utah's wild country, including most recently *Zion: A Storied Land*. She was a National Park Service ranger for 20 years and now travels the Southwest with her faithful companion, Bo, the border collie, in search of truth, vision, and a good cuppa coffee.

A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, poet **Ellen Gregory** is an Arizona native but has lived on the Wasatch Front already for 16 years. She lives, hikes, and gardens with her husband and five children in northern Cache Valley.

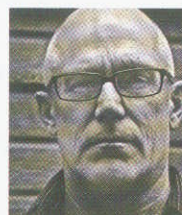
This is the last issue of *Wasatch Journal* for **Christy Karras**, who has been an associate editor at the magazine since its birth. While she will miss arguing with her colleagues over matters of grammar and style, she looks forward to finishing the three books she promised publishers she would write. Look for them in bookstores in 2009.



OWENS-LISTON



TOREN



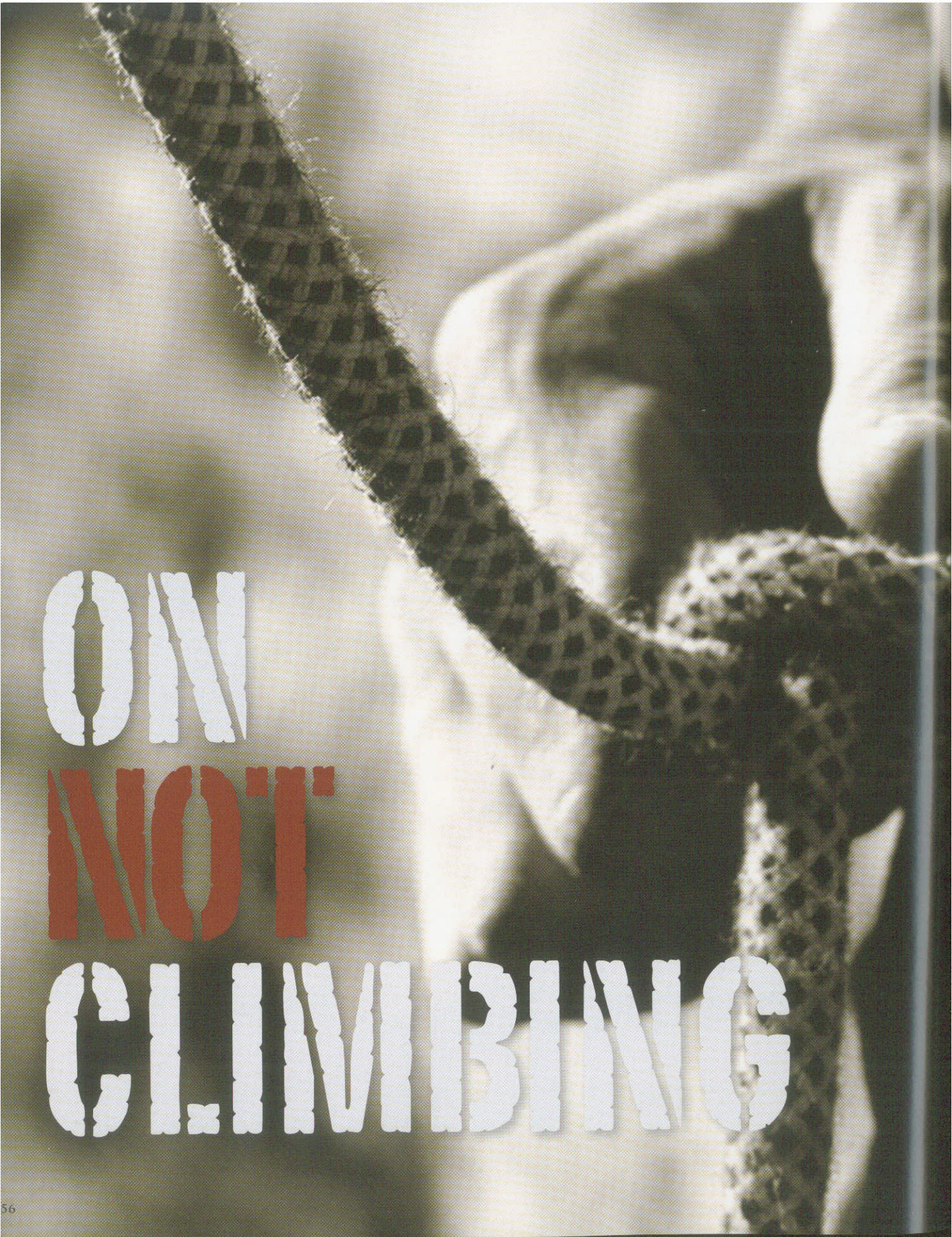
TOTTEN

Peta Owens-Liston is a freelance writer and a Utah-based reporter for *Time Magazine*. Also a photographer, Owens-Liston is currently working on a photo-essay book about judgment and perceptions. Owens-Liston shares her life with her husband and two boys in Lake City, where she can be found cursing vacuum-devoured Legos and collecting rocks from the washing machine.

Sean M. Toren has written about such diverse subjects as tango dancing, the use of deadly force by police, and amputation surgery. His short stories have appeared in *Climbing* and *The Laurel Review*, and he recently completed his first novel, *The Big G*, the story of two climbers traveling across the West toward Yosemite.

Joe Totten has been writing fiction and creative non-fiction since before there were blogs. No subject is too large or too small for Totten to obsess over. Born and raised in Texas, Totten has lived in Park City, Utah, for the past 12 years.

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**ON
NOT
CLIMBING**



FINDING

NEW

ROUTES

AFTER

A LIFE

IN FREE FALL.

SEAN M. TOREN

A FEW WEEKENDS AGO, I went down to a local bouldering spot and laid my hands on the sweet, cold, ever-patient rock. I pulled down on an edge and then I lifted my right toe high and rocked up onto it, suddenly free from the horizontal flatland, as the vertical world stretched into the sky above me.

It doesn't sound like much, but after nine years of cumulative, chronic injuries, I hadn't thought I'd ever be able to climb (or take care of my house, repair my bike, or cross-country ski) again. This, after a youth spent as a gymnast and a skateboarder and a wrestler; after years spent working as a carpenter and a painter; after finessing red Zion sandstone in Utah, cranking 10-foot roofs in Australia, and humping up Yosemite National Park trade routes like The Nose and The Prow and Zodiac.

It started with a bike accident on a rainy ride, when I landed on my right shoulder after taking a turn too fast. I blew out a rib head at the facets of its vertebrae, the ligaments stretched like a T-shirt torn from my body. But the trick rib head, which went in and out with a sharp, violent pain, didn't stop me. A year later, I tore ligaments in my left shoulder when my feet popped out of a crack at Devils Tower. That didn't stop me, either. But a hideous, tingling numbness in my left hand, from ruptured discs at C6 and C7 (from an old ski accident), did. I was in graduate school by then, and since I couldn't climb hard, I decided I wouldn't climb at all. I spent my last year in school sitting in front of a computer with my hands constrained to the few square feet in front of me.

A couple years later, I was writing full-time for a magazine, and things went from bad to worse. The magazine folded, and I started picking up carpentry jobs again, including building a new roof. In my off-the-couch, couch-potato state, the hammering and nail gunning set off a wild bout of tendonitis and then something worse: clicking in both elbow joints accompanied by extreme pain. It was as if my first injury—that bike accident—was a sketchy piece of gear on a nasty route, and I was gaining momentum as I ripped out each piece below it.

After a year of hideous free fall, my arms degenerated to about 5 percent of their original function. I couldn't even pick up a soup can without pain. I finally landed at Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minnesota. Two surgeries later, after doctors removed large folds of ligament that had grown into both ulnar joints, they patted me on the back and sent me out the door, telling me things would get better on their own. They didn't.

Well, okay, I could pick up that soup can, but a year later

I still couldn't pick up a gallon of milk. I went back to Mayo and begged for some kind of help, but again I was told that things would heal naturally, and also that, surprisingly, "Some of us just have to live in pain."

Whew. I went on with my life, slowly constraining my actions, truly depressed, though I didn't know it. And though I grieved the loss of my body and being able to work with my hands (and pick up a chair), what I grieved losing most was climbing.

C LIMBING HAD CHANGED MY LIFE—time and again. At 18, for example, when I first started climbing, I led a short "traditional" route (where I placed my own gear for protection). Almost to the top, confident I was finished, I fell and tore two pieces of protection out of the rock, actually grazing my feet on the ground before the rope finally stopped me. I learned a lot in that moment—something about luck, but mostly about what it meant to focus (or rather, what it meant when I didn't, even for a millisecond).

Just two years later, I got into big trouble on the vicious, yellow granite of Vedauwoo, Wyoming, off route on bad gear and frozen with panic on moves two number grades harder than they were supposed to be. I can still see the tiny, kidney-shaped crystal I used to refocus myself, staring at the greenish, neon-yellow lichen that encircled it, while I breathed myself calm so that I could reverse moves as hard as any I'd ever done.

I found that calm place again (and learned about doggedness) when I laybacked right off the smooth granite of Val di Mello, Italy, tumbling sideways for a nasty fall, banging an elbow and a knee—and then getting right back on the horse.

And I even learned about acceptance—and my limitations—when I lost all gumption during my first attempt of The Nose route on El Capitan. It was all too big—the rock, the gear, my inexperience—and I was relieved when my partner cranked the haul bag so tightly into an overhang that by the time I'd jugged up to it, the haul line had turned into a quivering, iron rod. The only way to free the bag was to cut the line, and the overstretched 8.8 mm rope seemed to explode at the touch of my knife's blade. I was relieved at the time, but back down on the valley floor I vowed to return when I was more experienced (and I did, successfully, two years later).

Climbing was the cleanest, brightest thing in my life, and it had made me the best that I could be. Simply going to the crag or on a big trip when things were bad was enough to get



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me through the hard times, especially the most difficult time in my life: when the relationship I'd been in for more than 12 years blew apart at the seams.

I left sub-zero Minnesota weather for the desert sun of Hueco Tanks, Texas; Red Rock Canyon, Nevada; and Joshua Tree National Park, California; keeping to south-facing rock as the low desert sun warmed me through the winter months. Then I hit Yosemite, which became my home base through spring and summer. To recharge between attacks on big walls, I visited friends and other crags all along the West Coast, and by late summer I was healing, if not quite healed.

Much of this healing I attribute to the acts of climbing itself: to placing my toe tip on a granite edge, snapping it into place like a quarter into a coin slot; to the heavy calluses that grew on my fingertips (as if my body were expressing the opposite there from the tender repair my heart was doing); and to those moments when everything was in its place—the sky, the earth, and even me—when I pulled the rope high to clip it in.

In a way, climbing had saved my life by bringing it back

to me. But with the source of my strength cut off by injuries, how would I ever heal myself again if things got bad?

I FINALLY HAD TO ADMIT that things *were* bad, two years after the surgeries. I mean, I could ride my bike, and I could do a little house painting, but I was also wretched, often in real pain (though it wasn't until the pain truly abated that I realized just how much pain I had been in). I was also ornery and hard to be around, and my inability to be happy took its toll on another relationship. She left, but the process of breaking up forced me to gather my wits about me, and I grew determined to live as well as I could with what I had, mostly by finally accepting my lot: I obviously would never climb again, but if I were to be caged off from climbing, I would at the very least be happy with what I *could* do.

I recommitted energy to finishing a novel I had started years before. I jumped back into the dating scene and fell in love with a woman who happened to be a climber. We moved in together, we traveled. We didn't climb. Then, on a scuba diving trip to Borneo, we got pregnant.

I PULLED ON MY SHOES, BREATHED IN THE SCENT OF CHALK ON MY HANDS, AND THEN I WAS MOVING GINGERLY ACROSS THE SANDSTONE WALL, WORKING MY FEET DELIBERATELY TO AVOID FULLY LOADING MY ARMS. AMAZINGLY, IT WAS ALL STILL LIVING IN MY BODY: THE BALANCE, THE TRUST, THE AWARENESS OF THE EARTH'S GRAVITY AND MY OWN GRAVITY.

Although my life had shifted radically in just a few years, it was the birth of my son that changed everything. Well, it wasn't so much his birth as it was the four-month mark, when he hit 13 pounds. Picking him up, carrying him—even changing his diapers—was too much for my elbows and left me in excruciating pain. I managed to argue my way back into Mayo Clinic and they put me through an extreme round of tests, all in one day: the injection of 10 cc's of imaging fluid into my left elbow capsule, a CT scan, an MRI, some nuclear imaging, needle-conduction tests, and of course, X-rays. The surgeon's diagnosis: the joint was chewed up and they could perform a synovectomy if I wanted them to. Any time I see two *y*'s and a *v* in one word I get worried, and for good reason; a synovectomy is a complete removal of the synovial lining on the ends of the bones, which may or may not grow back well. It's like clear-cutting a forest to get at a few dead trees. They had no other solutions.

This time I was undeterred. I went to a local hand surgeon, then to a rehab specialist. He sent me to an amazing physical therapist and, after only a few months of therapy, I could carry my son without pain (a miracle). While doing lots of ongoing therapy, I was also able to replace windows in my house—and even pick up the phone when one of my old climbing partners called and slyly asked if I'd like to go bouldering with him. He knew how I'd suffered over the years (he had suffered from some chronic injuries himself), and he knew that I was slowly getting better. But I balked. I had accepted the fact, years before, that I would never climb again, and was finally *happy* with the inside of my cage. To open myself up to the excitement of climbing again, and then experience the frustration if I couldn't continue, made me frantic. I said, a little exasperated, that I couldn't go.

Instead of pushing or prodding, he didn't say a word. He waited. To fill the silence, I held up the soft, uncallused fingers of one hand, ready to list off all the reasons why I couldn't go. I realized that I didn't really have any, besides the fact that I had simply gotten myself into the habit of *not* climbing. Without knowing it, my body—and maybe even climbing—had snuck up on me.

The joy of digging out my shoes, of getting in the car to go bouldering—of letting myself out of my cage—was beyond anything I'd felt in years, even the birth of my son. It was a sign that my life was becoming whole again, in a way that complemented having a family. I was ready to be “me” again, but simultaneously afraid that my body would let me down.

But it didn't—or not enough to matter, anyway. I pulled on my shoes, breathed in the scent of chalk on my hands, and then I was moving gingerly across the sandstone wall, working my feet deliberately to avoid fully loading my arms. Amazingly, it was all still living in my body: the balance, the trust, the awareness of the earth's gravity and my own gravity. The love of climbing.

I bouldered for maybe 15 minutes—a far cry from the three days in a row I'd spent on big walls in the Yosemite Valley—but I was almost as psyched stepping off the rock that autumn afternoon as I had been topping out on El Capitan.

When I looked at the sun smiling on my friend's face, just before it set, I knew, in a single rush, that the perseverance, the will to act, the ability to focus hard on one thing and also to learn from my mistakes—the ability to keep heart and to stay honest and to live life hard—had been with me for the last nine years. In fact, it had more than been with me; even though I hadn't been able to climb, I realized, I'd been climbing the whole time.