

# David

a poem by Earle Birney

## I

David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey,  
All week in the valley for wages, in air that was steeped  
In the wail of mosquitoes, but over the sunalive week-ends  
We climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly

Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid  
Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening coltish  
Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see over,  
Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.

## II

Our first was Mount Gleam. We hiked in the long afternoon  
To a curling lake and lost the lure of the faceted  
Cone in the swell of its sprawling shoulders. Past  
The inlet we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned

On a poplar prong, in the hurrying slant of the sunset.  
Then the two of us rolled in the blanket while round us the cold  
Pines thrust at the stars. The dawn was a floating  
Of mists till we reached to the slopes above timber, and won

To snow like fire in the sunlight. The peak was upthrust  
Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled  
Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling  
Eastward the alien prairie glittered. Down through the dusty

Scree on the west we descended, and David showed me  
How to use the give of shale for giant incredible  
Strides. I remember, before the larches' edge,  
That I jumped a long green surf of juniper flowing

Away from the wind, and landed in gentian and saxifrage  
Spilled on the moss. Then the darkening firs  
And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden  
Cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.

Reading this poem will help you:

- write a eulogy
- practice delivering a eulogy
- explain foreshadowing



### III

One Sunday on Rampart's arête a rainsquall caught us,  
And passed, and we clung by our blucing fingers and bootnails  
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move  
Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me

How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments  
Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,  
And matching of stories from schooldays.... We crawled astride  
The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged

By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. Linger  
There it was David who spied to the south, remote,  
And unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback, an overhang  
Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.

That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs  
Of a mountain goat underneath a cliff-face, caught  
On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of hawks.  
And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.

#### IV

And then Inglismaldie. Now I remember only  
The long ascent of the lonely valley, the live  
Pine spirally scarred by lightning, the slicing pipe  
Of invisible pika, and great prints, by the lowest

Snow, of a grizzly. There it was too that David  
Taught me to read the scroll of coral in limestone  
And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,  
Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.

#### V

On Sundance we tried from the col and the going was hard.  
The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks  
And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we baulked  
Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp,

Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,  
Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,  
Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked  
To the crest. Then, grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist

And drew me up after. We set a new time for that climb.  
That day returning we found a robin gyrating  
In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David  
Took and killed it, and said, "Could you teach it to fly?"



## VI

In August, the second attempt, we ascended The Fortress,  
By the Forks of the Spray we caught five trout and fried them  
Over a balsam fire. The woods were alive  
With the vaulting of mule-deer and drenched with clouds all the morning,

Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round  
Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright  
And sunhot raspberries, eating them under a mighty  
Spruce, while a marten moving like quicksilver scouted us.

## VII

But always we talked of the Finger on Sawback, unknown  
And hooked, till the first afternoon in September we slogged  
Through the musky woods, past a swamp that quivered with frog-song,  
And camped by a bottle-green lake. But under the cold

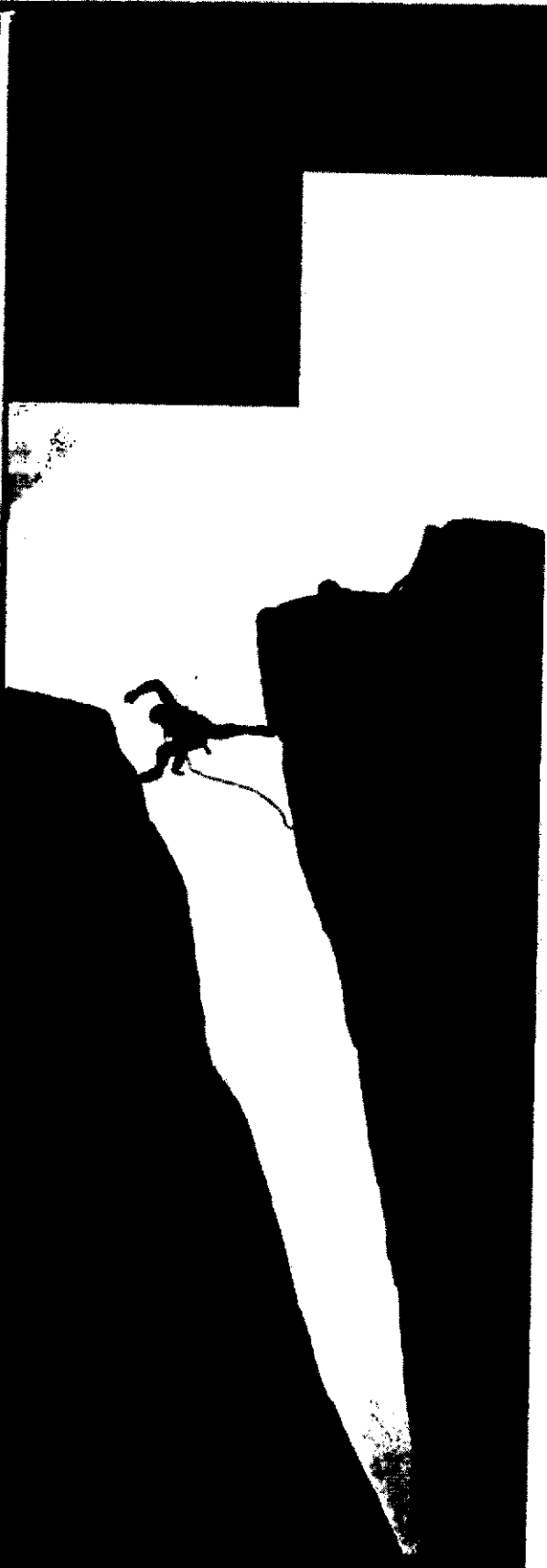
Breath of the glacier sleep would not come, the moon-light  
Etching the Finger. We rose and trod past the feathery  
Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet heather  
Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom

Of incredible dawn in the Rockies. David spotted  
Bighorns across the moraine and sent them leaping  
With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks,  
And the peaks to the sun. The ice in the morning thaw

Was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms,  
And seracs that shone like frozen saltgreen waves.  
At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed. Then David  
Edged to the west and discovered the chimney; the last

Hundred feet we fought the rock and shouldered and kneed  
Our way for an hour and made it. Unroping we formed  
A cairn on the rotting tip. Then I turned to look north  
At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless

Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.  
David turned sharp and reached out his arm and steadied me,  
Turning again with a grin and his lips ready  
To jest. But the strain crumbled his foothold. Without



A gasp he was gone. I froze to the sound of grating  
Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones, the lone  
Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only  
The wind and the muted beat of unknowing cascades.

### VIII

Somehow I worked down the fifty impossible feet  
To the ledge, calling and getting no answer but echoes  
Released in the cirque, and trying not to reflect  
What an answer would mean. He lay still, with his lean

Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs  
Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,  
Six hundred feet sheer to the ice. My throat stopped  
When I reached him, for he was alive. He opened his gray

Straight eyes and brokenly murmured, "over...over."  
And I, feeling beneath him a cruel fang  
Of the ledge thrust in his back, but not understanding,  
Mumbled stupidly, "Best not to move," and spoke

Of his pain. But he said, "I can't move.... If only I felt  
Some pain." Then my shame stung the tears to my eyes  
As I crouched, and I cursed myself, but he cried,  
Louder, "No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself.

I didn't test my foothold." He shut the lids  
Of his eyes to the stare of the sky, while I moistened his lips  
From our water flask and tearing my shirt into strips  
I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid

From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting lichens,  
And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore  
Of the rock. Then he whispered, "Bob, I want to go over!"  
This time I knew what he meant and I grasped for a lie

And said, "I'll be back here by midnight with ropes  
And men from the camp and we'll cradle you out." But I knew  
That the day and the night must pass and the cold dews  
Of another morning before such men unknowing

The ways of mountains could win to the chimney's top.  
And then, how long? And he knew...and the hell of hours  
After that, if he lived till we came, roping him out.  
But I curled beside him and whispered, "The bleeding will stop.

You can last." He said only, "Perhaps.... For what? A wheelchair,  
Bob?" His eyes brightening with fever upbraided me.  
I could not look at him more and said, "Then I'll stay  
With you." But he did not speak, for the clouding fever.

I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,  
The glistening hair of a creek on the rug stretched  
By the fire, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge,  
The moss, and David still as a broken doll.

I hunched to my knees to leave, but he called and his voice  
Now was sharpened with fear. "For Christ's sake push me over!  
If I could move.... Or die...." The sweat ran from his forehead,  
But only his eyes moved. A hawk was buoying

Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.  
The purr of a waterfall rose and sank with the wind.  
Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger  
Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.

Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there.... And I knew  
He had tested his holds. It was I who had not.... I looked  
At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked  
At last in his eyes. He breathed, "I'd do it for you, Bob."

## IX

I will not remember how or why I could twist  
Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty  
Horror, and over the traverse alone. I remember  
Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It

When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund...reeling  
Over the sun-cankered snowbridge, shying the caves  
In the névé...the fear, and the need to make sure It was there  
On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping

Of gaping greenthroated crevasses, alone and pursued  
By the Finger's lengthening shadow. At last through the fanged  
And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling  
Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge

On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,  
Alone. By the grooming lake I sank and chilled  
My mouth but I could not rest and stumbled still  
To the valley, losing my way in the ragged marsh.

I was glad of the mire that covered the stains, on my ripped  
Boots, of his blood, but panic was on me, the reek  
Of the bog, the purple glimmer of toadstools obscene  
In the twilight. I staggered clear to a firewaste, tripped

And fell with a shriek on my shoulder. It somehow eased  
My heart to know I was hurt, but I did not faint  
And I could not stop while over me hung the range  
Of the Sawback. In blackness I searched for the trail by the creek

And found it.... My feet squelched a slug and horror  
Rose again in my nostrils. I hurled myself  
Down the path. In the woods behind some animal yelped.  
Then I saw the glimmer of tents and babbled my story.

I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,  
And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered  
Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,  
That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.

### **Responding...**

1. Assume the role of the narrator (Bobbie) and write a eulogy for David's memorial service. With a partner, practise reading your eulogies aloud.
2. In Section V of the poem, the narrator and David find a wounded robin. Explain how David's action foreshadows his request of Bobbie at the end of the poem.