

— Contest-Winning Poem —

A Sweet, Wild Passion

David J. Rothman

1977

November and the alpine team began
 Snow sessions, driving up to Waterville,
 Thin ribbons hard as ice, my careful plan
 To carve it up and prove I ripped with skill.
 Got off the lift and turned and they were gone
 Like loping wolves, nonstop, fluid attack
 And carve and glide, me just a hanger-on
 To Phil and Allan, Tim and Klaus, the pack.
 They galloped off. All I could do was trot,
 Dead last, nuts busted by this sudden trial,
 No more alpha-dog high-school hot-shot,
 But suddenly an exiled juvenile.
 You have to choose. And I chose then and there
 To feed my hunger in the cold, cold air.

Sport works because what seems is true is true.
 I wanted their approval and respect,
 To step up to their level, grow, break through,
 To prove my worth, throw down with the elect,
 To find in speed a new way to believe,
 Arc every turn, fly far beyond myself,
 Like Pelops on Alpheus' bank, achieve,
 Come home with medals, letters for a shelf.
 Well — it turned out different than I planned.
 Klaus, from Squaw, who'd raced NorAms, was so
 Much faster, I looked like I'd waxed with sand.
 Carnival season came, he got to go.
 Work hard, I'd thought, and I could be the best.
 I had a lot to learn. That's not the test.

It's no small thing, this season of competing,
Especially among young men, who dream
Of something greater than their work, repeating
Ancient odes of victory supreme.
This tantalizing object of success,
To live forever in a triumph's hour,
Is one way we wrestle with emptiness,
Lacking other kinds of fruitful power.
To leave a mark, to win some glorious race
Of public note, be sun among the stars —
It feels like one path to eternal grace:
Raised fists, with cries of "Dude!" and air-guitars.
And so I vowed that I would feel the burn
Until I learned to make a varsity turn.

Then all that year and all the next I worked,
Ran up and down the stadium to train,
Sought out each course's seconds where they lurked,
Eluding both my body and my brain.
I went on runs, I studied evidence,
I lifted weights then ran another stadium,
I learned to walk like Klaus on hurricane fence,
Clutched my mill bastard file like a palladium.
And then at a GS at Sunapee,
Sleet sticking to our goggles, I was able
To punch it and hold on, suddenly free,
My line, technique, desire, intention stable.
"I guess the team has its fifth man," Bruce Crane,
Our coach, said smiling at me in the rain.

And so I went and ran with the big dogs
At all the D1 carnivals. Real stuff.
We studied in the van on the long slogs
We drove up north just to get whipped. Tough.
Melander, Lyons, Tiger, Smith, Tim Itin —
These guys were faster than a mystery.
We once watched Itin punch a flush flat right in
Front of us at Pat's Peak. That's my history:
Mine. Ours. He broke each gate off at the snow
Like toothpicks. We stood course-side, thinking "Well..."
He flashed through and was gone. We watched him go
And shook our heads. I thought "Someday I'll tell
That story to my kids." It's worth it to
Remember things like that and know they're true.

And what sweet courses: the Dartmouth GS,
Three turns then suddenly you have to launch
A waterfall where you can only guess
The line, then pull a right-footer and punch
The flats to a right-angle left-foot turn,
Where you fly off the second waterfall,
Your nerves and brain beginning now to burn
As you drop through adrenaline free fall
Into round gliding, aching for the finish,
Working the smooth snap off each turn to float
That gift speed out so that it won't diminish,
Holding your line like a deep whole note.
I wound up way back in the pack each time.
But I don't care. Ski racing is sublime.

And in a ski race, just one athlete wins.
Every one of scores stands in the gate,
The cry of “Course!” gone down, and then begins,
Kicks out the wand, tempts gravity and fate.
Yet in every race just one guy wins.
And then the gifted winner must advance
To the next ladder, where it all begins
All over again, but harder, this fast dance —
Nationals, Europa Cup, World Cup —
And even there only a few will win,
And those who do will soon enough trip up,
Retire, lose, get injured, throw it in.
So what’s the point? How can it be we each
Aspire to what’s beyond what we can reach?

Strange and difficult, though of our making,
This is the test: to learn from being there,
To be there so completely that you carry
A sweet, wild passion into your whole life,
The knowledge that whatever sorrows come,
Whatever loss, such joy is possible.
But pull the gates, we’re done. It’s dusk. It’s cold.
Snow melts, those days are gone, and in New England
Abandoned trails grow in, like cemeteries
And corn fields. Forest will reclaim the trail
On Berlin Mountain and the Thunderbolt,
Obscuring all the splendid striving there.
Though close your eyes and you can almost hear
Young people cheering, playing in the hills.

David J. Rothman, as a young man, studied with Czeslaw Milosz, Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Mark Strand, and Robert Fitzgerald. His most recent books are a textbook, *Learning the Secrets of English Verse* (Springer 2022), co-authored with Susan Spear, and *My Brother’s Keeper* (Lithic 2019), a finalist for the Colorado Book Award in poetry. Over the last 40 years, his poems and essays have appeared in *Agni*, *Appalachia*, *The Atlantic*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Hudson Review*, *The Journal*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Sewanee Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and scores of other newspapers, magazines, and journals. In 2019 he won a Pushcart Prize for the poem “Kernels,” which originally appeared in *The New Criterion*. In 2024 he won the Karen Chamberlain Lifetime Achievement Award for Poetry in Colorado.