

The Climber

by David Wilson

In Memoriam Wanda Rutkiewicz 1943 – 1992

i 1961

Wanda pads her way up a warm slab,
curls her fingers round a spike; hesitates,
then reaches for the heart of a chimney-crack,
back-and-foots and jams against its sides.
She's climbing solo. Friends are shocked.
But she's finding all the holds she needs.
Tonight there will be vodka and songs,
Stalin jokes, a dry cave for sleep.
Churches, smokestacks, lamentations
fall away below her into white mist,
Five Year Plans, queues for food, the broken
walls and people in her twice-betrayed house.
She finds a pebble at the top, smooth,
round, containing nothing but itself.
From today she'll build from summits,
snow, ice, a hundred floors of air.

ii 1992

Crouched in a niche carved from snow
Wanda faces down the Kanchenjunga night,
alone, at twenty-seven thousand feet,
no water, sleeping-bag or stove.
She should have followed her torch-beam
down the breadcrumb trail of ice-axe marks,

to fixed ropes, food, warmth. But then
to where? And what end? With who?
Instead, the long Polish night continues.
The blood-red, ash-grey courage
of Winged Hussars, W-hour, Gdansk
keeps alive her eight thousand metres plan.

Dawn breaks at minus twenty, silhouettes
Everest, white against grey-blue.
Frost-nipped fingers paw at frozen boots.
Breath comes hard, air burns her throat.
But still she climbs, her steps inches now.
And should we imagine her happy?
The girl who ran a ruined home at five,
the woman who spurned the token slots
on men's expeditions, early Solidarnosc.
Sheltered by seracs, embalmed in ice,
Wanda will never be found.
The summit wind howls her eulogy.