

Whymper on the Matterhorn

By Alice Herve

At first, it sated me to sketch the mountain:

festooned with fringed mists, riven with chasms;
durable, defiant, and dreadful in shadowed reflection,
the tortured frosted tower of lone spire soaring.

Spellbound I heard the ethereal sound of wind-driven
snow swarm down from above like damaged language.

I cannot name the snows. There is no language
jagged or chill enough to limn this mountain.

Obsession overcomes me. I am driven
to pick out punctures on the veiled chasms;
to stand among the eagles swirling, soaring,
defying God with my untamed reflection.

I shall surmount that face of stony reflection,
which fires in me a pledge without a language.

I shall prevail upon that spiny, soaring
triangle of threat that crests the mountain;
dazed by sugared ice and ragged chasms,
satisfied, at peace, no longer driven.

Embarking from the east, the snow is driven
in squalls, to whet and whittle my reflection,
unsettling my resolve to conquer chasms.

It worries from my mouth the sacred language
which, climbing, I whisper to the mountain;
and it sends my hushed words wild and soaring.

I essay the peak and now my spirit is soaring

itself among the eagles and the driven-
down, feather-bedded, pebble-leaded, mountain
spiralling all around me. On reflection,
I realise I recall this language,
the howls and whimpers echoing in the chasms.
And oh the deadly and the deathly chasms,
where griefs I do not dare to dwell on, soaring
into my mind, leave only caustic language;
as four friends into the depths are driven.
And I see that hell too has its reflection
here on this murderous, mutinous, mountain.
The whiteness in the chasms is ash, driven
from the bones of soaring hopes and vain reflection.
My lips chill with the language of the mountain.

(Edward Whymper (1840-1911) conquered the Matterhorn in 1865. Four companions were killed)