

THE BEND

The first wide river shone silver. The best crossing was as it curved slightly, before it split into two channels that narrowed and deepened. That night, as the sun set, the twin streams that fed the high lakes were lit up as though with fire, and Mt Tūtoko cast an upward shadow on the sky. I crept under a low overhang and felt cool, stale air, like an exhalation from somewhere back in the dark.

The next day, up a broken rib, then on along a vacillating schist ridge. The sky glared flat and white. UV ricocheted back and forth off the shiny rock, becoming trapped, blue-tinged, just under the top layer of my skin. We crossed into the Forgotten, above river braids splayed out below across golden flats. Upriver, I slipped and cracked my head on a rock, stumbling back to the packs holding my hands to it. They came away bloodied as the skin over my eye socket swelled and split.

We drank cold water that ran over slick slabs. As we climbed up, the plateau began to open out before us - flat and strange, dreamlike, with cloud-shadows shifting across its surface. It felt contained, hidden between Intervention Ridge and the spines of Climax and Blockade, and limitless. The sun beat down. My head throbbed. From a vantage, we looked down to a grey-green lake everything tilted and plunged toward.

Below Gyrae, the icefalls cracked and boomed. I was lying under a rock, resting to better close the red swollen opening above my eye. I had to curve my body to stay within the cold blue shadow, and as the sun moved and shadow shifted I shifted too. Every now and then, a crack would echo and I'd leap up to see if I could see falling ice. Occasionally I walked to a spot where snow was melting to see if the drip had strengthened enough to collect water. I was thirsty. I looked for a small figure in the distance as it climbed peaks. Mostly, I couldn't, but then I did see a curving line arcing off a ridge, and later, tracking under the slanting black silhouette of Darkness Peak. Fluid movement, as the light wobbled, pacing swiftly back towards camp at dusk. I walked up to the crest of the spur to look down at the locus lake. Plunging down dizzily. A crack rang out.

We left the plateau, stepping carefully over narrow crevasses. Deep blue incisions, fading to black. Thousands of kilometres to the north, a glacier creaked out from the Rakaia, its sides rising hundreds of metres up the sides of the ranges that lined it. The light shifted, the weight of the cloud pouring up from the plains began to bear down upon my body until I was pressed against an incoherent shingle bed.

Red Mountain came into view to the west, vivid against the grey and black rock we stood on. The map had promised more ice - the Trinity Glacier, blue and smoothed among the tight contours of steep rock faces and spurs. Instead we encountered a crumbling mass of broken rock, a restless place, "one you don't want to hang around in too long" someone said, with recent rockfall smeared dark down the remnant snow patches. Yet it was perfectly quiet, still, and hot, that afternoon.

Writhing on down through thick bush. Serpentine vines writhed alongside, eating their tails. Rocks cracked open to reveal asbestos fibres. The sides of Limbo Stream turned on themselves, slanting in

disarray. We climbed up a steep green wall and rested briefly, looking across at the mountain. It rose up burned and raw looking. The scrub below was stunted. In swampy areas, the water glistened with an oily sheen. Nickel, chromium, cobalt. I saw an area of bush swaying under a ray of late-day sun and headed for it, finding cairns. They led across slips and down to the twisting Pyke. Streams coursed down, flood-torrents that dwindled to trickles as I passed, leaving deep incisions in the earth thick bush grew from. I became tangled up, again and again. After another crossing of the river I was spat out by the gorge, gasping. Dusk fell, then night, and we began to hear the distant roar of surf. The track underfoot became softer and sandier, until at last our torches lit the edge of the Awarua River, flowing low. It was midnight. We waded into the black water, and out the other side onto sand. I felt disoriented, the sea still sounded distant, and I perceived the edge of the river we walked alongside to be a strangely becalmed sea. We walked, curving, the white flashes of waves finally breaking to our right.

In the night I woke hot and confused. I walked along a moonless path to the slow tidal river. Small iridescent spheres bobbed just below the surface. The sea to my left began rising, an irrepressible grey mass. In the morning, my eyes streamed and I couldn't bear to stay still. I wandered on the beach under an overcast sky, looking along sweeping sands to bush, fringed low with sea-haze. South west.

Then north. Leaping boulder to greasy boulder. Losing my temper. Looking back to see the dark fringes of Fiordland, until they were swallowed by a southerly front that swept by, grey and swift. We crossed smooth beaches, bluffs, rivers. I kept my distance from the swells that surged up and back with a roar. Once, further south, around the shore of a high lake, I heard a sucking sound. Just left and below the rock I stood on I saw a swirling vortex, a tiny maelstrom, where the lake was leaking. Gravity strained and pulled the whirling water away to somewhere deep below.

That last night, the river was silky under a bright clear moon. The cries of kākā, kererū, kākārīki, ruru, and tūi rose and diminished. Masses of ice creaked and slumped. Mountains shuddered upward, jutting. The wind hummed as it poured over the ridge. I stopped on the way home at a rest area just off the state highway and dove into a soft green pool. Oil leaked and pooled under the bonnet of the car. A hot wind blew.