



**IN
THE SIERRA**

MOUNTAIN WRITINGS

by **KENNETH REXROTH** | *Edited by* **KIM STANLEY ROBINSON**



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A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

KENNETH REXROTH (1905–1982) grew up in the Chicago area, raised mostly by his mother Delia. She died when he was twelve, and his father, who was never much involved, died when he was fifteen. After that he lived a bohemian youth in the Roaring Twenties, spending his teenage years as a true anarchist and café intellectual, with summer stints as a horse packer in the Pacific Northwest. At age twenty-two, he and his young wife Andrée hitchhiked around the American West, and when they arrived in San Francisco they settled there. “The ocean was at the end of the streetcar line. Down the peninsula and across the Golden Gate, the Coast Range was still a wilderness, and the High Sierra were a short day’s trip away. . . . We decided to stay and grow up with the town.”*

For the next four decades Rexroth did that, becoming one of San Francisco’s leading intellectuals. His life was turbulent; he married four times, raised two daughters, and made his living by literature, though he was also at various times an organizer for the National Maritime Union, a conscientious objector working as a psychiatric hospital nurse, a salon host, night-school teacher, radio personality, and newspaper columnist. Exceptionally well-read, sure of judgment, and clear in expression, he made his journalism into a kind of ongoing education in the humanities. He consistently defended classicism and modernism, also Asian cultures, environmental causes, and the erotic and mystical literary traditions; he just as consistently attacked the military-industrial complex, imperialism, and the New York literary establishment. He was always slightly ahead of the zeitgeist, and many aspects of what we think of as California culture were early interests of his. All his activities together made him the single public intellectual most responsible for the character of the San Francisco Renaissance, which is often associated with the Beat Generation and then the Sixties.

In this tumultuous San Francisco life Rexroth always had an enduring island of calm, located on the other side of the state: the Sierra Nevada of California. This high-mountain range serves as the spine of the California landscape, extending along the east side of the state from north of Lake Tahoe to the southern end of the Great Central valley. Public land from the start, the range has become more and more protected as wilderness over the decades. Like many Californians before him and since, Rexroth took a youthful trip into the High Sierra and fell in love with the place, and for the rest of his life went back as often he could. In almost every summer from 1927 to 1967 he hiked and climbed throughout the southern Sierra, usually taking along rented horses or burros, which allowed him to stay out for a month or six weeks at a time. He also made shorter spring and fall trips, and ski-toured and snow-camped in the winter. In the thirties he took a few climbing classes with the Sierra Club; these were also the years he began climbing and skiing in the Sierra with his longtime publisher and friend James Laughlin of New Directions. In 1937 he stayed in Yosemite so long that his wife Marie had to explain to investigators from the relief rolls where he had gone. During the Second World War, gas rationing slowed him down, as it did everyone, but afterward he went to the Sierra more than ever, often renting a cabin at Grant Grove for the month of June, writing there while the snowpack was still heavy, then in August hiking or riding into the high country. He had a few hiking friends, especially Frank Triest, and he also went frequently with his wives, Andrée, Marie, and Marthe, and with his two daughters Mary and Katherine in their childhood. If you were to add all of Rexroth’s time in the Sierra together it would come to a total of around five or six years, in other words about the same amount of time John Muir spent there.

This intense and sustained Sierra experience was crucial to Rexroth, as he often said himself.

have always felt I was most myself in the mountains. There I have done the bulk of what is called my creative work. At least it is in the mountains that I write most of my poetry. . . . There whatever passion, emotion and experience I choose to recollect and write down, take on most depth and meaning.”¹ Though no single book of Rexroth’s was devoted to the Sierra alone, he wrote about it often enough over the years that a book’s worth of pages accumulated. This is that book; it contains most of what Rexroth wrote about the Sierra Nevada.

The material comes from many sources, and was written and published over a period of about forty years, between 1937 and 1980. His mountain poems form the bulk of the book. Most of these are set in the Sierra Nevada, but there are also some about Mount Tamalpais in Marin County just north of San Francisco, where Rexroth used a small shepherd’s cabin as a getaway; there are one or two about the Rocky Mountains, and one or two about the stars. The mountain poems among his famous translations of classic Chinese poetry are also included. Together they make one of the most striking and attractive groups in his overall body of work.

The second part of this book contains most of Rexroth’s prose writing about the Sierra. Like the poems, these pieces made their first appearance in various places through the years, including Rexroth’s autobiographical novel, his newspaper columns, and a camping handbook he wrote for the WPA, never published but now online. A third section includes James Laughlin’s few descriptions of his mountain adventures with Rexroth, letters between Rexroth and Laughlin discussing the mountain trips, and an essay by California writer Carter Scholz discussing the star references in Rexroth’s poetry. These prose selections form an entertaining composite description of a style of Sierra life common to many Californians in the mid-twentieth century; they also give us some personal context for the poems, creating a kind of portrait of the artist as mountaineer.

It has been a real pleasure to gather all of Rexroth’s mountain writing and realize it makes one of the great books about the Sierra Nevada. It can be thought of, perhaps, as the replacement for Rexroth’s lost WPA handbook, but hugely better—something to take a permanent place on the shelf of American literature, somewhere between Muir and Snyder.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

¹ Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel* (New Directions, 1991, p. 367).

² San Francisco Examiner, August 7, 1960.



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From In What Hour (1940)

CLIMBING MILESTONE MOUNTAIN, AUGUST 22, 1937

For a month now, wandering over the Sierras,
A poem had been gathering in my mind,
Details of significance and rhythm,
The way poems do, but still lacking a focus.
Last night I remembered the date and it all
Began to grow together and take on purpose.

We sat up late while Deneb moved over the zenith
And I told Marie all about Boston, how it looked
That last terrible week, how hundreds stood weeping
Impotent in the streets that last midnight.
I told her how those hours changed the lives of thousands,
How America was forever a different place
Afterwards for many.

In the morning
We swam in the cold transparent lake, the blue
Damsel flies on all the reeds like millions
Of narrow metallic flowers, and I thought
Of you behind the grille in Dedham, Vanzetti,
Saying, "Who would ever have thought we would make this history?"
Crossing the brilliant mile-square meadow
Illuminated with asters and cyclamen,
The pollen of the lodgepole pines drifting
With the shifting wind over it and the blue
And sulphur butterflies drifting with the wind,
I saw you in the sour prison light, saying,
"Goodbye comrade."

In the basin under the crest
Where the pines end and the Sierra primrose begins,
A party of lawyers was shooting at a whiskey bottle.
The bottle stayed on its rock, nobody could hit it.
Looking back over the peaks and canyons from the last lake,
The pattern of human beings seemed simpler
Than the diagonals of water and stone.
Climbing the chute, up the melting snow and broken rock,
I remembered what you said about Sacco,
How it slipped your mind and you demanded it be read into the record.
Traversing below the ragged arête,
One cheek pressed against the rock
The wind slapping the other,
I saw you both marching in an army
You with the red and black flag, Sacco with the rattlesnake banner.

I kicked steps up the last snow bank and came
To the indescribably blue and fragrant
Polemonium and the dead sky and the sterile
Crystalline granite and final monolith of the summit.
These are the things that will last a long time, Vanzetti,
I am glad that once on your day I have stood among them.
Some day mountains will be named after you and Sacco.
They will be here and your name with them,
“When these days are but a dim remembering of the time
When man was wolf to man.”
I think men will be remembering you a long time
Standing on the mountains
Many men, a long time, comrade.

NORTH PALISADE, THE END OF SEPTEMBER, 1939

The sun drops daily down the sky,
The long cold crawls near,
The aspen spills its gold in the air,
Lavish beyond the mind.
This is the last peak, the last climb.
New snow freckles the granite.
The imperious seasons have granted
Courage of a different kind.
Once more only in the smother
Of storm will the wary rope
Vanquish uncertain routes,
This year or another.
Once more only will the peak rise
Lucent above the dropping storm,
Skilled hand and steadfast foot accord
Victory of the brain and eye.
Practice is done, the barren lake
That mirrors this night's fire
Will hold unwinking unknown stars
In its unblemished glaze.

“Now winter nights enlarge
The number of our hours,”
They march to test their power,
We to betray their march.
Their rabbit words and weasel minds
Play at a losing game.
Ours is the unity of aim,
Theirs the diversity of pride.

Just as my eyes rise to the level
Of a small cave, two white owls
Fly out, silent, close to my face.
They hover, confused in the sunlight,
And disappear into the recesses of the cliff.

All day I have been watching a new climber,
A young girl with ash blonde hair
And gentle confident eyes.
She climbs slowly, precisely,
With unwasted grace.
While I am coiling the ropes,
Watching the spectacular sunset,
She turns to me and says, quietly,
“It must be very beautiful, the sunset,
On Saturn, with the rings and all the moons.”

TOWARD AN ORGANIC PHILOSOPHY

S

The glow of my campfire is dark red and flameless,
The circle of white ash widens around it.
I get up and walk off in the moonlight and each time
I look back the red is deeper and the light smaller.
Scorpio rises late with Mars caught in his claw;
The moon has come before them, the light
Like a choir of children in the young laurel trees.
It is April; the shad, the hot headed fish,
Climbs the rivers; there is trillium in the damp canyons;
The foetid adder's tongue lolls by the waterfall.
There was a farm at this campsite once, it is almost gone now.
There were sheep here after the farm, and fire
Long ago burned the redwoods out of the gulch,
The Douglas fir off the ridge; today the soil
Is stony and incoherent, the small stones lie flat
And plate the surface like scales.
Twenty years ago the spreading gully
Toppled the big oak over onto the house.
Now there is nothing left but the foundations
Hidden in poison oak, and above on the ridge,
Six lonely, ominous fenceposts;
The redwood beams of the barn make a footbridge
Over the deep waterless creek bed;
The hills are covered with wild oats
Dry and white by midsummer.

I descend to camp,

To the young, sticky, wrinkled aspen leaves,
To the first violets and wild cyclamen,
And cook supper in the blue twilight.
All night deer pass over the snow on sharp hooves,
In the darkness their cold muzzles find the new grass
At the edge of the snow.

F

This morning the hermit thrush was absent at breakfast,
His place was taken by a family of chickadees;
At noon a flock of humming birds passed south,
Whirling in the wind up over the saddle between
Ritter and Banner, following the migration lane
Of the Sierra crest southward to Guatemala.
All day cloud shadows have moved over the face of the mountain,
The shadow of a golden eagle weaving between them
Over the face of the glacier.
At sunset the half-moon rides on the bent back of the Scorpion,
The Great Bear kneels on the mountain.
Ten degrees below the moon
Venus sets in the haze arising from the Great Valley.
Jupiter, in opposition to the sun, rises in the alpenglow
Between the burnt peaks. The ventriloquial belling
Of an owl mingles with the bells of the waterfall.
Now there is distant thunder on the east wind.
The east face of the mountain above me
Is lit with far off lightnings and the sky
Above the pass blazes momentarily like an aurora.
It is storming in the White Mountains,
On the arid fourteen-thousand-foot peaks;
Rain is falling on the narrow gray ranges
And dark sedge meadows and white salt flats of Nevada.
Just before moonset a small dense cumulus cloud,
Gleaming like a grape cluster of metal,
Moves over the Sierra crest and grows down the westward slope.
Frost, the color and quality of the cloud,
Lies over all the marsh below my campsite.
The wiry clumps of dwarfed whitebark pines
Are smoky and indistinct in the moonlight,
Only their shadows are really visible.
The lake is immobile and holds the stars
And the peaks deep in itself without a quiver.
In the shallows the geometrical tendrils of ice

Spread their wonderful mathematics in silence.
All night the eyes of deer shine for an instant
As they cross the radius of my firelight.
In the morning the trail will look like a sheep driveway,
All the tracks will point down to the lower canyon.
“Thus,” says Tyndall, “the concerns of this little place
Are changed and fashioned by the obliquity of the earth’s axis,
The chain of dependence which runs through creation,
And links the roll of a planet alike with the interests
Of marmots and men.”

FALLING LEAVES AND EARLY SNOW

In the years to come they will say,
“They fell like the leaves
In the autumn of nineteen thirty-nine.”
November has come to the forest,
To the meadows where we picked the cyclamen.
The year fades with the white frost
On the brown sedge in the hazy meadows,
Where the deer tracks were black in the morning.
Ice forms in the shadows;
Disheveled maples hang over the water;
Deep gold sunlight glistens on the shrunken stream.
Somnolent trout move through pillars of brown and gold.
The yellow maple leaves eddy above them,
The glittering leaves of the cottonwood,
The olive, velvety alder leaves,
The scarlet dogwood leaves,
Most poignant of all.

In the afternoon thin blades of cloud
Move over the mountains;
The storm clouds follow them;
Fine rain falls without wind.
The forest is filled with wet resonant silence.
When the rain pauses the clouds
Cling to the cliffs and the waterfalls.
In the evening the wind changes;
Snow falls in the sunset.
We stand in the snowy twilight
And watch the moon rise in a breach of cloud.
Between the black pines lie narrow bands of moonlight,
Glimmering with floating snow.
An owl cries in the sifting darkness.

The moon has a sheen like a glacier.

THE HEART UNBROKEN AND THE COURAGE FREE

It is late autumn, the end of Indian summer.
It was dry and warm all day, tonight it is cold.
In the light of the quarter moon the hoarfrost
Glow dimly on the dry long grass. A breeze starts
And stops and starts and makes waves on the hillside.
At the edge of the wild raspberry bushes
Four sooty spots bob about against the white frost.
They are rabbits with cold noses and cold toes.
Castor and Pollux blur in the first edge of fog.
Your breath is visible like fine autumn down,
Your eyes are polished with moonlight,
I look at them, they are the color of snow.

VALUE IN MOUNTAINS

1

There are those to whom value is a weapon,
Collectors of negatives and ascertainables,
And those to whom value is horror,
Themselves collected by evaluation;
Who, recurrently dispossessed in each judgment,
Seizing or seized by presented fact,
Explode in a fury of discreet instants.

Being is social in its immediacy,
Private in final implications;
Life is built of contact and dies secretly;
So existants live in history and die out
In fulfillment of individuals.

Thus value is a food and not a weapon
Nor a challenge, process, not result, of judgment,
The morituri te salutamus
Of unique atomic realizations,
Enduring only in their eschatologies.

2

The shields of the peltasts of
The imagination quiver in the
Imagination the flourish
Of fire curves on the border
The eyelids gold and blue

The place of penumbras

Iris and pupil

Frosted or a star

Falling past Deneb

Past Aldebaran

Falling all night

Heavy as the songs

Arhythmic atonal

That drift with smoke

Across water

Or the cry rising

From between the buttes

The myrmidons

Of the imagination emerge

From stones

And sleep

3

Peace above this arch urged and bent, rising out

The frieze that not till high cold air in that time

Grown earthward vatic, incomprehensible

In trees inverted and copper galls of bloom,

Spoke death as speaking wrought; rhymed the butterflies;

Pared away rinds of thinking finer than thought;

Constructed tissues of a death of moments;

The translucent frieze of petals, of blue leaves,

Opposed blocked men with red granite molar hands;

Opposed the somnolescent will in its fact;

Bespoke the exfoliation of decay;

Compressed the angles at which the rods had leaned;

Stirred in the mind; settled the beams of passage;

Spoke death as fact, as fiat of becoming.

 The three shamans in their castle cubicles

Restored the prisms; replaced the discs and cubes;

Wrenched the taut lines welded in the cone of rays.

 Death spoke in atoms, speaking fine blown parsings

Of collected passage, syntax of the crumb.

4

He strikes the two rocks

He casts the four seeds

He marks in the dust

He draws three triangles

He burns the five feathers

He barks like the coyote
He paints his face white
He runs away

Has the arrow stood erect
The cones falling in cold water
All night the bell
And the delicate feet
A thousand leaves spinning
In the cube of ten thousand leaves
Or the cube that descends like a mist
The speaking voice will issue
From between immaculate red
And white alternates

The immediate fact
Is not perdurable
And speaking is being memory
The prisms falling in snow
Or web of air
And silver target
And the unique
Note
Of the stricken

A LESSON IN GEOGRAPHY

*of Paradys ne can not I speken
properly ffor I was not there
— Mandeville*

The stars of the Great Bear drift apart
The Horse and the Rider together northeastward
Alpha and Omega asunder
The others diversely
There are rocks
On the earth more durable
Than the configurations of heaven
Species now motile and sanguine
Shall see the stars in new clusters
The beaches changed
The mountains shifted
Gigantic
Immobile
Floodlit

The faces appear and disappear
Chewing the right gum
Smoking the right cigarette
Buying the best refrigerator
The polished carnivorous teeth
Exhibited in approval
The lights
Of the houses
Draw together
In the evening dewfall on the banks
Of the Wabash
Sparkle discreetly
High on the road to Provo
Above the Salt Lake Valley
And
The mountain shaped like a sphinx
And
The mountain shaped like a finger
Pointing
On the first of April at eight o'clock
Precisely at Algol
There are rocks on the earth
And one who sleepless
Throbbled with the ten
Nightingales in the plum trees
Sleepless as Boötes stood over him
Gnawing the pillow
Sitting on the bed's edge smoking
Sitting by the window looking
One who rose in the false
Dawn and stoned
The nightingales in the garden
The heart pawned for wisdom
The heart
Bartered for knowledge and folly
The will troubled
The mind secretly aghast
The eyes and lips full of sorrow
The apices of vision wavering
As the flower spray at the tip of the windstalk
The becalmed sail
The heavy wordless weight
And now
The anguishing and pitiless file
Cutting away life

Capsule by capsule biting

Into the heart

The coal of fire

Sealing the lips

There are rocks on earth

And

In the Japanese quarter

A phonograph playing

“Moonlight on ruined castles”

Kōjō n’suki

And

The movement of the wind fish

Keeping time to the music

Sirius setting behind it

(The Dog has scented the sun)

Gold immense fish

Squirm in the trade wind

“Young Middle Western woman

In rut

Desires correspondent”

The first bright flower

Cynoglossum

The blue hound’s tongue

Breaks on the hill

“The tide has gone down

Over the reef

I walk about the world

There is great

Wind and then rain”

“My life is bought and paid for

So much pleasure

For so much pain”

The folded fossiliferous

Sedimentary rocks end here

The granite batholith

Obtrudes abruptly

West of the fault line

Betelgeuse reddens

Drawing its substance about it

It is possible that a process is beginning

Similar to that which lifted

The great Sierra fault block

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