

Appalachia

Volume 73
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2022: Cataclysms in
the Catskills and Taconics*

Article 26

2022

Shark's Fin

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Recommended Citation

Steele, John Whitney (2022) "Shark's Fin," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 1, Article 26.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol73/iss1/26>

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Shark's Fin

On their second attempt, in 2011, Conrad Anker, Jimmy Chin, and Renan Ozturk became the first climbers to summit Meru's Shark's Fin.

I transfer weight onto a ten-ton slab
of granite. It starts to move—surface fractures,
loose rock, the dreaded House of Cards.

I tap the fragile surface—hollow flakes—
drive a piton in—it holds. I promised
Chai I wouldn't die. Leading Renan

and Conrad up this knife-edged pinnacle,
to twenty-one thousand feet, where Shark's Fin slices
heaven. Many have tried; not one has made it.

We push through wind chill, frozen fingers, numb toes,
exhaustion, hunger, unrelenting snow—
stuck in our tent, suspended from a ledge.

In the Tetons an avalanche swept me down
two thousand feet at eighty miles an hour—
so this is how, I thought, *I'm going to die*.

Renan outdid me: backcountry skiing,
flew off a cliff, broke his skull,
his neck, cut off half the blood-flow

to his brain, comatose.
He walked and spoke again. Conrad
let him join this expedition.

Last night we nearly lost him—confused,
speaking gibberish, like a stroke;
no way to get him down.

Today he's climbing strong, leading us up
the final stretch to Shark's Fin summit:
you get a taste for this adrenaline.

Mount Meru, axis of the universe,
source of the Ganges, circles through the night;
above the Himalaya the stars kill.

John Whitney Steele

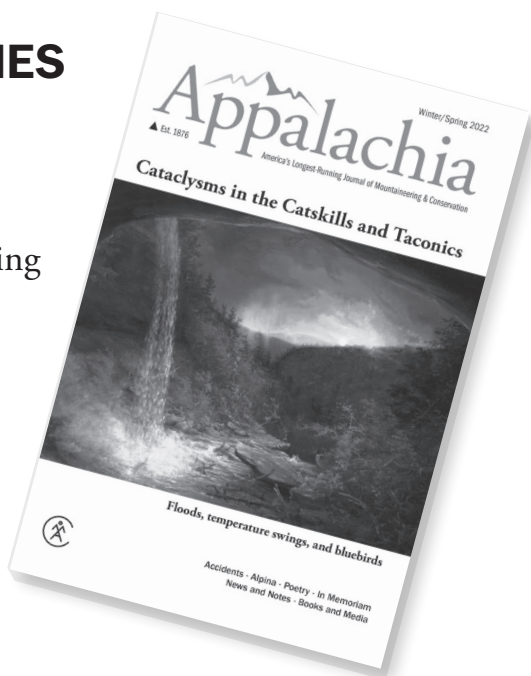
JOHN WHITNEY STEELE is a psychologist, yoga teacher, assistant editor of *Think: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction, and Essays*, and graduate of the master of fine arts poetry program at Western Colorado University. His chapbook, *The Stones Keep Watch*, was published in 2021 by Kelsay Books. He lives in Boulder, Colorado, and loves hiking in the mountains.

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