



# THE SEEKER

The Mountains  
Breathed Life into  
Kyle Dempster

---

BY  
**ANDY  
ANDERSON**

---

**July 20, 2015.**

Through the rushing hiss of spindrift pouring down the face, they heard only a soft pop when the V-thread failed, then the two climbers were falling—anchor, ropes, crampons, tools and bodies tumbling down.

**LESS THAN 12 HOURS** earlier, Kyle Dempster and Scott Adamson had been just a few hundred meters below the summit of the unclimbed north face of the Ogre II (6,980 meters) in the Karakoram of Pakistan. But near the end of the hard climbing, in the dark, Adamson had fallen 100 feet, his headlamp beam and sparking crampons flashing past Dempster at the belay. He broke his leg, and the two were forced to descend straight down the enormous 1,400-meter north face. Their already slim rack dwindled, and their ropes had to be chopped after a stuck rappel.

Now wracked with fatigue but only 300 feet from the safety of the basin below, Dempster rigged a V-thread rappel anchor, and he and Adamson both clipped in. His mind wandering, he dreamed of being safely on the glacier, of eating and melting snow for a hot drink.

“Coasting on 10 years of placing V-threads and 20 years of experience rappelling mountains and technical big walls, I let my mind lapse, thinking that that anchor somehow wasn’t important,” Dempster later wrote in

Dempster enjoys a local outing, *Harddrive* (M8), Santaquin Canyon, Wasatch Mountains, Utah.

ANDREW BURR





“Student of the Game, Hard Lessons from the Pakistani Karakoram” submitted to *Rock and Ice* when he considered attending this magazine’s annual writing symposium.

When Dempster weighted the V-thread, it ripped.

“I wish I had seen images of family and friends flash through my mind. Instead there was only horrific terror,” wrote Dempster. “I accelerated, bounced, tumbled, and for a moment soared in weightlessness.”

The two climbers landed in a tangle of rope just two feet from one another. Blood poured from Dempster’s nose, but beyond Adamson’s already broken leg, neither was seriously hurt. Their hearts jackhammered with adrenaline. Dempster reached out to Adamson for a fist bump.

**A LITTLE OVER A YEAR** later, I was about to give a slideshow, my first ever, at the Salt Lake Climbing Festival, when my girlfriend, Kim Hall, pulled me aside. “Kyle and Scott are overdue,” she said.

I had been wondering about them all day. The two were back on the Ogre II for their second attempt, and had left base camp on August 21. They had packed and planned for two days on the face, one on the descent. They told Kyle’s mother, Terry, it would be five days, just in case. Now it had been a week.

As I rolled through my pictures of steep, icy peaks and elated summit shots from my three trips to Patagonia, the two climbers were all I could think about. At the end, I had inserted



**ABOVE:** Dempster on the Ogre I in Pakistan, which he climbed with Hayden Kennedy and Josh Wharton. In 2013 they received the coveted Piolet d’Or award for their new route, the third ascent of the mountain. **NEAR LEFT:** Ogre II on the left, Ogre I on the right. **FAR LEFT:** Dempster on the North Face of the Eiger below the Waterfall Pitch during a 12-hour ascent in 2011.

There were sport-climbing road trips to Mexico, summit costumes, desert tower-bagging via bike and packraft, and countless other kooky adventures no one ever read about. One of the first times we ever hung out was while shotgunning beers at the inaugural Great White Icicle barbecue, an infamous annual tradition he helped found. Two pitches up a local ice climb, Kyle was dressed in a traditional Pakistani *shalwar kameez* using the Piolet d’Or to flip sausages on the grill.

Through Kyle’s childhood, his parents, Tom and Terry, were both passionate hikers and bikers who constantly had Kyle and his sister, Molly, in a backpack or a Burley trailer, off to the foothills above their home in Oakland, California, along the winding trails in Marin County or into the peaks of the High Sierra. Though the family ate healthy food and exercised constantly, Kyle’s hefty childhood frame belied the powerful and fit alpinist he’d one day become.

When the family moved to Salt Lake City in 1994, a love for freestyle skiing consumed the young teenager. But after Kyle sustained a string of injuries—broken leg, broken arm and a torn ACL—his interest in skiing waned.

“He thought it had become too dangerous,” Terry says.

During a visit to Utah, Kyle’s cousin Drew Wilson, who’d picked up climbing at summer camp, took the 12-year-old topropping at Pete’s Rock, a roadside plug of quartzite in the Salt

Lake foothills. They used a seatbelt scavenged from an old Jeep as an anchor. Like the older brother he never had, Drew was one of Kyle’s earliest mentors, and the two climbed any time the family got together.

Kyle’s mother insisted that he take climbing lessons, and when he was 14, she began dropping him off at the local gym. Cutting his teeth on plastic, Kyle naturally gravitated toward bouldering and sport climbing. By now puberty had hit, and his stocky physique had grown leaner and stronger. He joined a motivated crew of young gym rats who made regular trips to Maple Canyon, Joe’s Valley and Rifle. Though he and his friends all climbed hard, the typical teenage antics ensued, and when the sun went down, the crags often became the perfect venue for partying. Kyle’s mother once got wind of a kegger in Joe’s Valley when a friend’s mom angrily brought over a treasure map that gave directions to the party. Kyle was accused of being the organizer.

Today Terry laughs about the map. “It looked like a third grader drew it.”

Nathan Smith, who later became a close friend and would eventually offer Kyle his first sponsorship, through Liberty Mountain, met him while working at Rockreation climbing gym in the late 1990s. One night Smith, then in his early 20s, came in to work at the Salt Lake City gym to find that Kyle and his teenage friends had stacked all of the pads from the bouldering cave under the lead area, and were soloing the 40-foot wall and jumping off.

“I thought, *That kid’s gonna end up in jail or something.*” Smith says.

The same crew would often finish a day of cragging in Maple by racing up the steep and bouldery 5.12s on the Ammo Dump Wall. After reaching the top, each climber would grab a beer attached to his harness and chug it before clipping the chains.

By the end of high school, Kyle was beginning to see an alternative to the usual way people lived.

“When I was younger, I perceived a social blueprint for what life was supposed to look like: high school, college, career, marriage, home, kids, retirement,” he wrote in *Alpinist* 49, in the article “The Gift.”

“I thought, *I need to figure out who I am first.* I just wasn’t on that path, and I knew it,” he said in a Spotlight interview with *Rock and Ice* in 2010.

After graduation in 2001, Kyle hiked 900 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail, alone. He and Drew began spending seasons in Yosemite



An M5 pitch on day two on Xuelian West (6,422 meters) in the Chinese Tien Shan. Dempster, with teammates Bruce Normand and Jed Brown, earned the 2010 Piolet d’Or for their first ascent on the 2,650-meter north face.

## TWO PITCHES UP A LOCAL ICE CLIMB, KYLE WAS DRESSED IN A TRADITIONAL PAKISTANI SHALWAR KAMEEZ USING THE PIOLET D’OR TO FLIP SAUSAGES ON THE GRILL.

learning how to climb walls, and at 19, he soloed El Cap for the first time.

In 2004, Kyle found an internet forum post from someone looking for two partners to round out an expedition to the Stewart Valley of Baffin Island in the spring of 2005.

“I was sort of scared. That was going to be his first big climbing trip, and he didn’t know these other climbers,” says his mother, Terry. “[But] when he told me Drew was going, I just had this sense of peace.”

Kyle and his cousin joined the three West Coast climbers, Grover Shipman, Ross Cowan and Pete Dronkers, and after five flights and

an arduous half-day approach via snowmobile over the frozen sea ice, they spent 12 days pushing a new route up a striking unclimbed 2,220-foot wall. Most of the team decided they weren’t up for the climb, so Drew and Kyle led nearly all of the pitches, laughing their way through difficult free climbing, A4 hooking between thin seams and arctic temperatures. They called their route *Grin and Barrett* (VI 5.11 A4-), after the middle name the two cousins shared, their mothers’ family name. After summiting and completing most of the descent, Drew accidentally clipped into the short tail of a fixed line, and rappelled off the end of the rope, falling 700 feet to the talus below.

“See you at the bottom,” he had said as he weighted his Grigri.

**THOUGH HE RETURNED** home from his first expedition heartbroken and exhausted, the tragedy of Drew’s death did not deter Kyle’s ambition.

“He would never, ever want me to stop climbing,” Kyle later said in the 2010 interview with *Rock and Ice*.

Everything in his life became about facilitating more climbing. Odd construction and rigging jobs, stringing up Christmas lights 10 weeks a year, and living in his parents’ basement helped him save for the next big trip, always right around the corner.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: HAYDEN KENNEDY, HAYDEN KENNEDY, BRUCE NORMAND

BRUCE NORMAND



In early 2007, Kyle accompanied the Salt Lake City adventure climber Mike Libecki to Venezuela's Acopan Tepui, where they put up the *Dempster-Libecki Variation* (VI 5.11 A2). A year later he spent the winter ice climbing in the Canadian Rockies before his first trip to the Alaska Range. Over two months, he climbed *Shaken, Not Stirred* (WI 5 M5) on The Mooses Tooth; had a close call in a cornice collapse on Peak 11,300; climbed a new route on the Mini-Moonflower with Drew's brother Erin; and went up the *West Buttress* of Denali with his sister, Molly, and Erin. On the summit, they spread some of Drew's ashes.

That fall he made his first trip to Pakistan, alone, and spent 24 days on the unclimbed west face of Tahu Rutum (6,651 meters). Exhausted and malnourished, he retreated in deteriorating weather only a few hundred meters below the summit, but he got the adventure he came for.

"I'm completely worked," he told the camera from back in his portaledge after the 30-hour summit push. His voice was hoarse and icicles hung from his mustache, but a large smile stretched across his face. "It feels good."

Five days later, four of them without food, he finally reached his basecamp. The trip cost him 40 pounds and a portion of his left-hand ring finger to frostbite.

"The love I have for climbing burst open," he wrote of the trip in *Alpinist*, "and it was more powerful than the dark."

In the spring he was back in Alaska, where he and Nate Opp climbed the *Moonflower* on Mount Hunter to the top of the north buttress, and eight weeks later he flew to China to meet Bruce Normand and Jed Brown. There they made the first ascent of *The Great White Jade Heist* (M6 WI5 5.7 R, 2,650 meters), on the north face of Xuelian West (6,422 meters) in the Tien Shan Mountains.

"Alpinism felt less like a progression than like a circle," he wrote in *Alpinist*. "It was as if the sum of all my experiences had prepared me for some greater objective."

**BETWEEN EXPEDITIONS** and the work that supported them, Kyle had squeezed in classes at the University of Utah, and he graduated in 2008 with a Geography degree. He knew he couldn't pound nails forever, and he needed something that would accommodate his months-long absences and allow him to be his own boss. When the small local coffee shop where he often stopped on his way to the gym



ABOVE: Kyle (left) with his cousin Drew Wilson atop their new route *Grin and Barrett* in Baffin Island in 2005. Drew was to die on the descent. TOP RIGHT: Kyle on the summit of Djigit, during his 2011 solo bike trip across Kyrgyzstan, popularized in his film "The Road from Karakol." BOTTOM RIGHT: At his coffee shop, Higher Ground, in Salt Lake City, Utah. Dempster opened the shop in 2009, funding it with money set aside for college.

went up for sale, he emptied the remains of his college fund and bought the place with his long-time friend Ty Snelling. The arrangement was ideal—Ty would manage the shop while Kyle was gone on his summer expeditions, and Kyle would handle things while Ty skied in the winter. In 2009, they opened Higher Ground Coffee.

A petite redhead in her mid-20s, with a reserved manner but kind disposition, Jewell Lund often stopped into Higher Ground for coffee on her way to Rockreation, where she worked and Kyle was a fixture. Jewell had seen Kyle in both places, but never made the connection.

"Do you go to Higher Ground a lot?" she asked her one day at the gym.

"Yeah."

"Do you like it there?"

"Yeah, the coffee's good. It's pretty nice."

"Oh, I own it."

She started going more often to support him and his new small business. Though Jewell had just gotten out of a serious relationship, Kyle drew her in.

"Even in just the most surface-level interaction with Kyle, you can tell he's really

present," she says. "And he really wants to hear your thoughts, and he comes up with these really astute questions. I found myself thinking, *Shit, I want to spend time alone, but I'm so interested in who this person is. I just couldn't help it.*"

Kyle took Jewell on some of her first trad climbs, and one of their early trips together was to climb ice in the San Juans of Colorado.

"I just went and bought a complete set of ice gear and was like, 'Will you teach me?'" she says.

At the top of the first pitch of *Bridalveil Falls*, above Telluride, he showed her how to build an ice anchor.

"Feel free to lean back. It's super bomber," he said as he led around the corner and out of sight. Still, she was reluctant to hang on the screws.

A short while later, Lund heard a scream, and the rope zipped tight. She peered around the corner. Kyle had taken a massive whipper—his



In 2008 Dempster did the first ascent of *Happy Hour*, a trad mixed line to a hanging ice dagger in Big Cottonwood Canyon, Utah. Later that same day he decided to reattempt the route. On the FA he had placed a screw in the dagger, and during his attempted repeat the entire dagger sheared off when he stuck a frontpoint against it. Luckily, he hadn't yet clipped the ice screw.

KYLE DEMPSTER COLLECTION, KYLE DEMPSTER COLLECTION, NATHAN SMITH

NATHAN SMITH



first fall ever on ice—and his tools were firmly planted 60 feet above him.

“I’m sorry, it’s not supposed to be like this!” he said.

Making dinner at Jewell’s house some time later, they talked about their goals in life, things they wanted to do someday.

“One of the dreams I had was climbing mountains,” she says. “I think I had this pattern for myself of being like, *Oh, that’s cool but I couldn’t, I’m not good enough, or I wouldn’t be strong enough*, and he kind of just threw that out the window for me.”

A few years later, Jewell began a string of impressive trips to Alaska, climbing *Deprivation* (Alaska Grade 6 ED+ 90° ice, 6,000 feet) to the summit of Mount Hunter with Kyle; *The Escalator* (5.5 AI3 4,000 feet) on Mount Johnson with Kim Hall; the second ascent of *Polarchrome* (5.9 WI5+ 3,300 feet) on Mt. Huntington; and the first all-female ascent of the south face of Denali via the *Denali Diamond* (Alaska Grade 6 5.9 A3 7,800 feet) with Chantel Astorga.

Kyle’s mentoring of Lund deepened their relationship, and it showed that he often believed in others as much as himself.

“He really understood in detail how difficult something would be, but it never occurred to him that he couldn’t get there, it was just, ‘What exactly do I need to do?’” Lund says. “And then he’d start moving forward immediately.”

**IN THE FALL OF 2010**, Kyle and Bruce Normand set their sights on the unclimbed east face of Mount Edgar in China’s Sichuan Province, a notorious objective on which an enormous avalanche-prone approach gully drains the entire face. It was here that the renowned alpinists Jonny Copp and Micah Dash and the young filmmaker Wade Johnson had been killed in an avalanche only 18 months earlier, a loss that had deeply shaken the climbing community.

After acclimatizing with a new route on Mount Grosvenor (6,376 meters), Kyle and Normand charged up the 1,000-meter approach gully in three hours and established a bivy at the base of the face, out of the objective hazard. The next morning, a catastrophic serac avalanche flushed the entire gully, obliterating their tracks.

They continued on through difficult ice and mixed terrain before cresting the south ridge and continuing to the summit. *The Rose of No Man’s Land* (VI WI5+ M6 2,400

meters) completed one of the great unclimbed challenges of western China, but Kyle returned feeling they had toed too close to the line. Mount Edgar had killed Jonny, Micah and Wade, and Kyle knew that he and Bruce hadn’t survived because they were better—they had just been lucky.

“Mount Edgar has a high level of risk and objective hazard to it—not something that I am comfortable or proud about ascending,” Kyle stated in an online report on Alpinist.com about the climb. “I don’t ever want to climb a mountain with levels of danger similar to Edgar ever again.”

Perhaps as a way to protect them, Kyle rarely discussed the hazards of a climb with

## AT THE END OF A SHORT CLIMBING DAY, THEY PILED INTO THE TENT, AND APPREHENSION GREW AS WHARTON COUGHED THROUGH THE NIGHT, HIS FACE SWOLLEN.

his loved ones. More often, his sister, Molly, would find out about his accomplishments and their risks by hearing from others, or reading about them.

“He would be more willing to voluntarily put forth information about cultural aspects of the trip or people he met,” she says. “Then he would always be like, ‘What about you?’ We never talked about alpine climbing much.”

“He didn’t want to talk about what he had done, he also didn’t want to talk about what he was going to do—it was always about right now,” Smith says. “But he’d be the first one to try and tell everyone how great someone else was.”

Though Kyle was not often forthcoming with the details or dangers of a particular mountain, after overhearing phone conversations and finding pictures of icy, foreboding peaks lying around the house for years, his mother was well aware of the possible repercussions.

The two began having very open and direct conversations about what would happen if he didn’t come back from a trip.

“I rationalized it with myself that, what if I told him not to climb this mountain, and he went on another trip and something happened on that mountain?” says Terry. “I just learned to trust him. I know he didn’t want to die in the mountains, but he understood that was a risk, and he was willing to take that risk. I’d say, ‘Just be as safe as possible,’ and, ‘You’ve got to come home.’”

Kyle trusted his mother, and he listened when she expressed concern. Once shortly after Drew had died, some friends came to pick Kyle up for a weekend of cragging down in the desert. Terry had come out to say goodbye, and to her dismay, Kyle’s friend’s van only had seatbelts for the front two passengers. “I freaked out,” she says. “And Kyle got out of the car and said, ‘All right, I’m not going.’”

In June of 2013, he and Jewell were days away from departing for Pakistan when a group of militant terrorists descended on the Nanga Parbat basecamp and executed 11 people. His mother asked Kyle not to go, and he canceled the expedition.

After trips to the Alaska Range, Kyle would often spend time exploring the wild yet more hospitable corners of Alaska with his father’s cousin, Brad Meiklejohn, who lives in Anchorage. Uncle B, as Kyle and Molly called him, was a climber, skier and boater who’d spent a decade as an avalanche forecaster in Utah and who has lost nearly 30 friends and family members to the mountains and rivers.

“Those of us who have been in that game understand how the rat can gnaw, and you can get restless and need to get out and get that hit,” Meiklejohn says. “I was trying to expose him to some other points of view. I admired and respected what he was doing, I just wanted him to do it for a really long time.”

They often had long intense conversations about the risks Kyle was taking, and how he rationalized and accepted them. As the years went by, Meiklejohn became more and more blunt.

“I said, ‘I’ve been there in that adventure mode where I need that fix, and I think there’s a way to get as much joy without risking your life,’” he says. “It’s easy to die doing what you love.”

Though Kyle was responsive and respected Meiklejohn for challenging his motivations, they’d often reach an impasse.



*Separate Reality* (5.12a), Yosemite Valley, California. Dempster was best known as an alpinist, but he was a talented all-rounder and enjoyed all disciplines.

“Uncle B, this is what I have to do to be happy,” he’d say.

**BY THE SPRING OF 2011**, the coffee shop was busier than ever and consumed much of Kyle’s time.

“I felt more comfortable paying bills, managing employees, fixing broken appliances, doing building remodels and making mochas than I did climbing,” he wrote in a blog post. “Even hiking through the mountains felt unfamiliar.”

He craved time to travel, both to think and to seek a sense of equanimity that he knew the mountains provided. In March two close friends died—one from suicide, and one in an avalanche—within a week, one of them on Kyle’s birthday. But as always, plans were being made for the next adventure.

Jewell’s interest in alpine climbing had blossomed over the previous year, and she was planning on joining Kyle on that summer’s expedition—a long-distance bike adventure with climbing gear through the mountains of Kyrgyzstan to western China, up and over Khunjerab Pass, and down into Pakistan to attempt big peaks in the Charakusa Valley.

In early April, Jewell lost control while skiing a steep couloir, breaking her wrist and sustaining a severe concussion with minor brain bleeding. A few weeks later, when it was

clear that Jewell’s injuries would keep her from going on the trip, Kyle told her he’d still be going.

“He just felt like he should go,” she says.

The seven-week bike trip, later made famous in the film *The Road From Karakol*, was a testament to Kyle’s creative spirit and his love of solo adventures. But it also laid bare the struggle between his insatiable passion for the mountains and how it could possibly affect the people he loved.

“If something shitty happens, I love you all, an incredible amount,” he solemnly tells the camera before a harrowing river crossing. “I want you to know that if I die, I was definitely doing something I’m totally, totally psyched on, and I’m loving life, for sure, right now.”

**BY THE TIME KYLE AND I** got to know each other, almost as an addendum to the close friendship of our girlfriends, Jewell and Kim, he was already established as one of the great alpinists of our generation. In 2012 he and Hayden Kennedy had pulled off the audacious “Pakistani Double Header,” climbing two major objectives—the east face of K7 in the Charakusa Valley with Urban Novak, and the south face of the Ogre I on the Choktoi Glacier with Josh Wharton—in a single trip.

Kyle and Hayden had become fast friends—

they had met years earlier in Yosemite, but first climbed together in the mountains on what was essentially a blind date to the Charakusa Valley the year before.

“When we first met, we really just clicked,” Kennedy says. “Kyle was one of those people, really special friends who you can open up to. We really got to know each other quickly ... and we left really hungry to come back and climb together.”

The Ogre ascent won a Piolet d’Or, but the circumstances of their success had a dark undertone.

Initially the three made fast progress, simulating the lower part of the route in perfect conditions.

“Kyle was kind of charging—climbing really fast, not taking breaks,” Kennedy says. “I remember it being a strange energy.”

After Kennedy led a horrendous 55-meter traverse through crumbling X-rated choss, the three bivied below the peak’s overhanging headwall. The next morning, Wharton felt sluggish. He handed over the lead and complained of headaches. At the end of a short climbing day, they piled into the tent, and apprehension grew as Wharton coughed through the night, his face swollen. In one of Kennedy’s short video clips, Kyle appears slightly detached, manning the stove near the door of the tent while Kennedy and Wharton





Callitwhatyouplease (WI 4 M5), Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah, in less than ideal conditions.

crack jokes.

“Just a little cerebral edema, no big deal,” Wharton says in the video.

They discussed their options, and Wharton told them to go for it.

“I’d like to say our decision to blast to the summit while Josh rested in the tent was difficult,” Kyle later wrote honestly in the *American Alpine Journal*. “But there was very little discussion of the devastating possibilities.”

After several pitches of difficult mixed terrain above 7,000 meters, Kyle plowed through waist-deep snow up the final snowfield to the summit.

“He was like the Hulk,” Kennedy says. “He’d become stronger when the storm came, or when he was tired. He thrived on it. When he was in the mountains ... a lot of his character was ‘all-in.’”

Kyle and Kennedy completed the route, and they returned to Wharton and all safely descended. But the what-ifs lingered.

“I experienced a totally different energy when we climbed the Ogre ... a side of Kyle that I don’t think many people know,” Kennedy says. “I felt really strongly that we shouldn’t have [left Josh]. I saw this fanatic energy of being driven by the objective ... and it pushed me away.”

“It’s a route that we’ll continue to live with,” Kyle wrote.

Though they’d never again climb together in the big mountains, Kyle and Kennedy remained close.

“It was really hard for me to express those things because I really love Kyle, and he was one of my dearest friends, but there was this part of him that was so driven,” Kennedy

says. “In a lot of ways our friendship became stronger, he listened to what I was saying and it didn’t push him away. We started doing other things.”

Despite the details, the success of the 2012 trip opened a new door of possibility for Kyle—every grant proposal he submitted from then on included two major objectives.

“It certainly doesn’t hurt to dream big,” he wrote on one application.

“He was fully present for his life, and was full of joy, and that’s not something a lot of people can say,” Meiklejohn says. “[But] Kyle had a dark side that he didn’t show many people ... these hungry ghosts that drove him. He would admit to me at times that this was an addiction.”

**KYLE WAS MORE** motivated than ever, but a string of unfortunate events would conspire to keep him from roping up in Pakistan the next two summers—the Nanga Parbat massacre in 2013, and the death of his climbing partner Urban Novak’s mentor, Ales Hole, in the Chinese Karakoram in 2014.

While climbing in Pakistan was on hold, life at home continued. His sister, Molly, and her boyfriend, Sam, were married, with Kyle serving as the maid of honor. The couple lived in a small cabin community in Little Cottonwood Canyon, where Kyle had been climbing since he was a teenager and still loved to push himself. He imagined moving out of his parents’ basement and setting down roots of his own with Jewell. This seemed like the perfect place, close to his two loves: family and the mountains. Not easily deterred by the fact that no houses were currently for sale, Kyle scoured public records, and wrote personal letters to absentee homeowners in the neighborhood who might be interested in selling. In the fall of 2014, he closed on a small cabin down the road from Molly and Sam.

“Forty-five-second walk to the nearest bouldering, and I could fish from the deck,” he wrote me in an email. “I’ll also be a very poor man. Worth it.”

But the glimmering summits of the high Karakoram were never far from his thoughts.

**HE AND SCOTT** returned home safely in 2015, but that first trip to the Ogre II had been born of difficult circumstances. Just a few months before Kyle was to leave, his father had died suddenly from cardiac arrhythmia.

As the departure date approached, Kyle struggled with the possibility of burdening Jewell, Terry and Molly with his own death as well.

“From past experiences and the death of loved ones,” Kyle would later write, “I know that it is the living that are confronted with the dark labyrinth of anger, despair, and confusion.”

Kyle and Scott Adamson had grown up less than 30 miles apart and had come up climbing many of the same routes, but they had only met through mutual friends in the last few years, and had only climbed together a few times. Not only was Scott likely the only person in the state who could compete with Kyle on technical ice and mixed terrain, he had a hit list of difficult new routes in Alaska and had done the first ascent of Pangbuk North (6,589 meters) in Nepal.

“On ice, I don’t know that I’ve ever seen anyone, anywhere as smooth and confident and comfortable as Scott was,” Smith says.

Kyle wrote on his grant application for the 2015 trip, “I can’t think of a better suited and more psyched individual than Scott to climb these mountains with.”

But Scott had spent the months leading up to their departure away in Kentucky, working on cell towers to pay for the trip, and they hadn’t been able to train much together. When they arrived on the Choktoi Glacier on July 4, temperatures were at record-breaking highs, creating dangerous conditions and forcing them to acclimate by climbing at night. They had only been in base camp for two weeks when they launched on the route.

After returning home to Utah in August after the accident, Kyle decided he wasn’t going back in 2016. For the first time in nearly a decade, he didn’t apply for grant support. He sport climbed and bouldered with friends. He and I talked a lot about hunting, something I had grown up with, and he finally took to the woods with a bow in pursuit of elk; the quiet of the forest giving him the space to ponder what had happened.

“In the silence I often thought about what it would be like to kill my first animal,” he wrote. “Could I do it? How would that experience help me address my own fears about death? Would killing an elk help to better understand my own mortality, or maybe, reveal more clearly the narrow window of chance that Scott and I escaped through as we limped away from Pakistan?”

He went fishing with Molly, and they



The North Face of the Ogre II in Pakistan, where Dempster and Scott Adamson disappeared in August, 2016. Despite an intensive search, no sign of the two climbers was ever found.

talked about their relationships, and how they worried about their mom. He also began work on a project he seemed more nervous about than many of his big expeditions—authoring the second edition of Mark Twight’s seminal tome *Extreme Alpinism*, a book that had helped inform his earliest notions of alpine climbing.

“I want to include a section called, ‘The Fine Line Between Ultralight and One-Time Use,’” he joked to me one day at a crag. We talked often about each other’s writing projects, and he had found a unique voice over the last few years, his words gifted with honesty, introspection and clever, well-placed humor.

“In a lot of ways, I was more excited about his prospects and potential and future as a writer [than as a climber],” says Smith.

Then in November of 2015, as Kyle continued to grapple with the loss of his father, his close friend Justin Griffin slipped and fell to his death while descending Taboche in Nepal. The loss echoed his own close call just a few months before.

“This middle ground, a crossroads where life is rocked and the direction ahead remains in question, is where I currently exist,” Kyle wrote in a blog post.

Sometime in the spring, a switch flipped. He and Adamson had talked about what happened

in 2015 and committed to training for a second attempt. Some close to him questioned the stark contradiction between the tumult and sorrow of the last year—with the deaths of his father and close friend, and his and Adamson’s close call—and his outward enthusiasm to return to the Ogre II.

“I felt that all the things that were happening up until this were saying no—there were so many reasons for him not to go,” Kennedy says. “Sometimes going to the mountains can be a healing thing, but it can also be an escape. Whatever it was, it was just too good. [The mountains] had him.”

**FOR WEEKS I’VE** searched for some way to summarize Kyle’s life, to convey his love and passion for life, and wrap up his story in a meaningful way that not only makes me and everyone else feel better about his death, but about the risks we’ve all taken and rationalized. Like finding my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I find the terrain familiar but still disorienting.

If the mountains give you everything, what are you willing to risk for them?

“Death is a terrible teacher,” Meiklejohn says. “You never get a chance to learn. We can have this rational understanding of death as finality, but we can’t ever experience it.”

In May 2006, a year after his cousin was killed, Kyle returned to Baffin Island. He traveled back to the Stewart Valley alone and spent two months bouldering, kite-skiing nearly 400 miles, and reflecting, seeking closure for the loss of his closest friend, climbing partner and cousin.

“I thought that returning to the Arctic and spending this time alone would bring an end to Drew’s death,” Kyle says in a video he shot about the trip. “I have learned that searching for a conclusion is not the appropriate way to manage the loss of a loved one, but instead to view these experiences as gifts or lessons.”

In the video, perched on the ledge where his cousin died, with vast granite walls stretching out in the background, he fights back tears as he spreads some of Drew’s ashes.

“Everywhere I go, everything I do, I’ll take with me everything you taught me ... Thank you so much.”

Maybe the best I can do is offer the same words back to Kyle.

*Andy Anderson is a contributing editor at Rock and Ice.*

ANDREW BURR

KYLE DEMPSTER COLLECTION