

At The Top Of The World

By David Copson

At the summit only one had a name, “Sherpa Tenzing”.
But we might have discovered his surname, ‘Norgay’,
if we read a little further. Nowhere would we read
about his countrymen sleeping on the floor in the garage
of the British Embassy, urinating into a bucket.
But that was when the late queen was young and
just receiving her weighty crown; in a world where
news travelled slowly and the Empire was still in the sun;
just after the blanket of India was torn in two.

Shipton’s footprints may have shaken them briefly,
but they skirted around their fear and superstition,
while the giant westerners smiled into their hands.
Hillary would come back later to search for the mythical Yeti,
but his heart was never in this secondary quest.

We went to them with our greatness tucked behind
our backs, and they came outdoors with their twinkling eyes
and beaming smiles. They had heard we were mad as dogs
and needed to conquer one more thing before we started sinking
beneath the once-ruled waves and the decline of manners.

Hunched, stacked high, legs bowing, leading their faithful
yaks into the snow, these men cheerfully burdened through
the thin air towards the goal of another nation. They were
strangers in their own land: the cameras were not waiting
for them but for the tall men from afar. And those who spoke
‘the Queen’s English’ gulped air from tanks while the unsung
Sherpas nudged them to a summit that had rested in the sky
forever, untroubled by men of gentler ambitions.

And when it was done, the flag planted, only one of them
had been acknowledged among the tide of servants paid in
reflected glory to haul and heave the others to fame.
We may know this ‘achievement’ was in their land,
their mountain the most spoken of all, their beasts of burden
better known than them. But what of the unknown Sherpas
who never heard their names in song? Surely their souls
will hear trumpets when they rise into the misty heavens
above the peaks at the very top of the world.