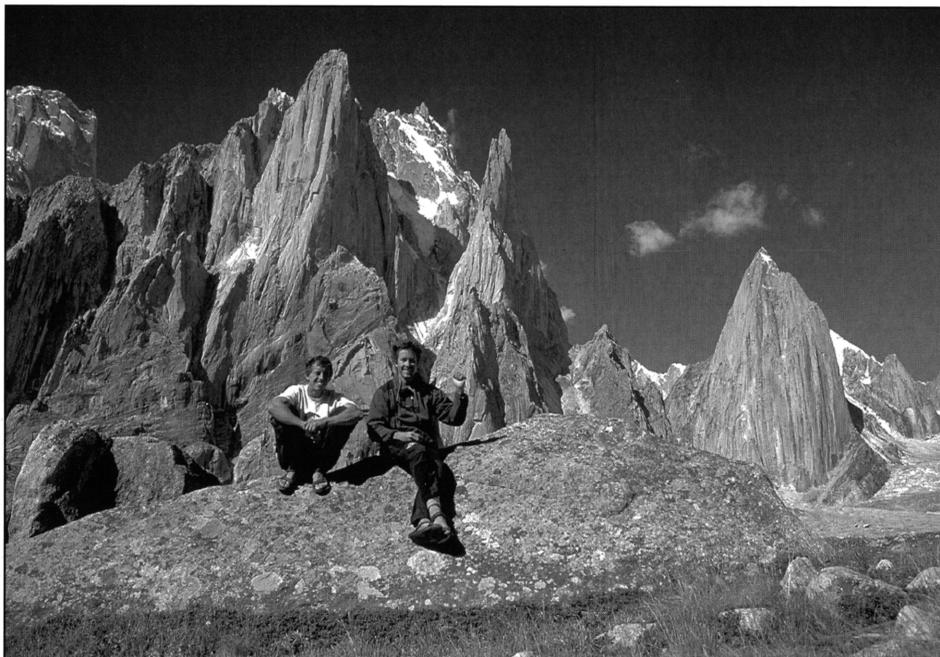


Trick of the Light

A rope, a rack, and a pack on the back

JONATHAN COPP



Mike Pennings, Jonathan Copp, and the triumvirate of their making, a few days after their third and last ascent: Hainabrakk East Tower, Cat's Ears Spire, and Hainabrakk Central Tower (a.k.a. Shipton Spire). JONATHAN COPP

Sprawled in the glacier-fed meadow of Shipton Spire Base Camp, we gawk at the Cat's Ears Spire and its fantastic needle-like summit. Now, within the honesty of satisfied exhaustion, Mike Pennings and I both admit, "That was the wildest summit I've ever touched."

Bursting from the Trango Glacier, Shipton Spire (a.k.a. Hainabrakk Central Tower), the Cat's Ears Spire, and the Hainabrakk East Tower control the scene*. With an understanding of the awesome nature of this land of giants, we had previously enjoyed the idea that even one summit would mean success. However, we have two other objectives: the first alpine-style ascent of Shipton Spire via *Inshallah* (VII 5.12 A1) and the first ascent of Hainabrakk East Tower's 3,500-foot east face. Being graced with the unreal summit of the Cat's Ears

*For a note on the naming of the formations in this region, see *AAJ* 1999, pp. 389-90. As the pronunciation of the formation we referred to in that volume as "Hainablak" differs from its spelling, we will spell it phonetically as "Hainabrakk" to avoid confusion.

Spire was simply too good, especially in the style we relish: hammerless, and with only two ropes. To complete our other two objectives would truly be a trick.

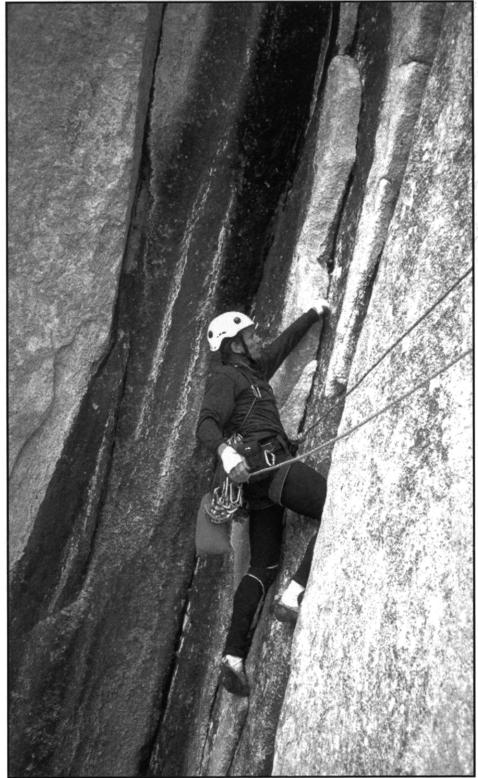
After a day of flying, a week of waiting for lost luggage, two days of bussing along the Indus River, a death-defying jeep journey up the Braldu River replete with washouts, and four days of hiking up the Baltoro Glacier, we finally make Base Camp. Brian McMahon, Josh Warton, Mike Pennings, 43 Balti porters, and I drop our two months of supplies in the green grass and wildflowers. The hearty porters, with the genuine smiles of fine mountain folk and no more than half an hour's rest, bid us farewell in their native tongue: classical literary Tibetan. I stand in realized dream, the world's largest walls and mountains surrounding me.

Mike and I immediately set our sights on the Cat's Ears Spire, wondering all the while why no one has climbed it. Three or four thousand feet of immaculate granite culminate in a frighteningly tiny summit. Within 48 hours of reaching camp, we are packed and afoot, navigating the glacier and ascending talus to the toe of the formation.

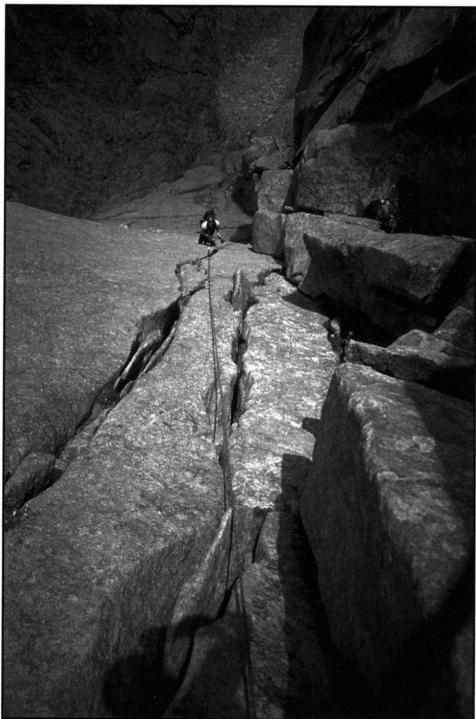
Through the spotting scope, we had linked features and fissures between three snow patches up the initial 1,500-foot buttress. Now, in the heart of it, we find wet and runout climbing as well as sections of perfect gray stone. The buttress ends at a ridge where we gain a small but suitable bivouac perch. Mike and I squeeze into our one sleeping bag and simply pull the small tent over us. With intentions to go light and in good style, we are lucky to wear the same size shoes, mixing and matching between rock shoes and boots. We are also lucky neither of us wanted to bring a portaledge or bolt kit (they can be heavy) or, for that matter, a hammer. I felt really lucky Mike didn't want to fix lines, either. Carrying extra ropes can be a lot of work.

The next day opens clear; the best line of ascent, unfortunately, is not. A somewhat dubious right-trending system is the most probable solution; it seems as if it will take us to a prominent right-facing corner that rises for over 500 feet. The climbing proves to be better than expected, the dubious pitch having only a slightly runout 5.10 section. The dihedral is superb.

We lead in blocks of four to five pitches, the second jugging with the pack. As I approach the end of the second block of the day, I'm faced with featureless granite buttressed against a wall of ice. Mike and I are also "lucky" to have left all our ice gear on the ground (that can be heavy, too). By the time I'm top-stepping the third cam placed between ice and rock, snow begins to fall,



Mike Pennings navigating an iced-up crack on pitch 14 of the first ascent of the Cat's Ears Spire. JONATHAN COPP



*Jonathan Copp on a "glorious" 5.10 pitch, day 2
on the route, on the Cat's Ears Spire.*

MIKE PENNINGS

and I'm not feeling too fortunate. But I'm lucky enough to grab an edge just as my last cam shears through the ice. When Mike comes into view, the white stuff is coming down, and we are shaking our heads. Mine shakes with a bit more vigor, not wanting to believe that last pitch was for naught. But our bivy gear is atop the first buttress, so we decide to descend. Twenty hours later we are at BC under fallen skies.

Our next attempt on the Cat pounces without warning. After the third stormy day, I roll from the tent to relieve myself. It's 3 a.m. as I cast my gaze upon star-choked heavens.

"Mike! Check this out!"

Within an hour we are astray among icefall and boulders. Sparks of sunlight begin to dance, making travel easier. We reach our stash of wet ropes and gear and begin. Since we have been here before, progress is fluid through the first 1,500 feet of climbing.

Mike sends the crux pitch, a bulging seam leading to a shallow corner, even after breaking a foothold above questionable protection. We make the top of the

buttress with daylight to spare, and so decide to try for a ledge we had seen on the first attempt. But the extra 800 feet of sustained climbing proves to be too much, so we fix two pitches and bivy, once again, on "Siamese Ridge," a name inspired by our one-sleeping-bag system.

The next morning's sun is accompanied by tapping rain. We sit in the tent all day, wondering why we didn't bring more food and maybe a book. But then we remember we are lucky we didn't have to carry that stuff.

At dusk a massive rumbling from above brings us wide-eyed to the door of the tent. A bus-sized pillar of rock falls through the air and explodes, decimating the ledge we had intended to sleep on that evening. Before the violence has ended, Mike and I cower in the tent, staring at a large hole ripped by a granite shard.

The night bleeds in as stars appear. Sleep is restless, and the sun, laughing the stars into blue, is welcome relief. Now, with Gore-Tex, two liters of water and a few food bars, we go. As I top the second of our two fixed ropes, I notice with horror that our gear harness, hanging only ten inches away from the fixed rope, has had a good smashing from part of the rock fall.

After 400 more feet of climbing, I pull onto the ledge we had planned to sleep on. Brilliant white shards and jagged edges are dusted with pulverized granite powder. Waves of thought pulse, memories and loves surging.

The veins of cracks and corners continue to connect. Difficult offwidth climbing is

mandatory in the main arteries. Mike grunts up the high-altitude crux offwidth. “Glory pockets” of perfect hand and finger cracks also present themselves. We flow, but the summit still seems miles up.

With an hour of daylight left, the tip of the Ears finally seems tangible. A sinuous lead brings me to the base of a dull arête. The summit, a mere 40 feet away, has no cracks leading to it, and I once again feel lucky we brought no bolt kit. Palming the arête, I find the friction. With 15 feet for me to go, a pocket, laced into a seam, accepts a TCU.

The top of the Cat’s Ears Spire is like that of a marble coffee table. I stand breathless, somewhere around 19,000 feet. K2, Broad Peak, and endless mountain chains extend to the horizon, making insignificant all the borders they contain. There are no gear placements to be had on the summit, so, feeling lucky, I am eventually forced to downclimb the arête. Mike re-leads the final 40 feet as the sun dips out of sight.

We descend through the night, prodding each other on, drawing on our last energy reserves. Rappelling the route, we leave slings and stoppers.

“We’ve been here before. Remember the crack, horn, roof, etc.?”

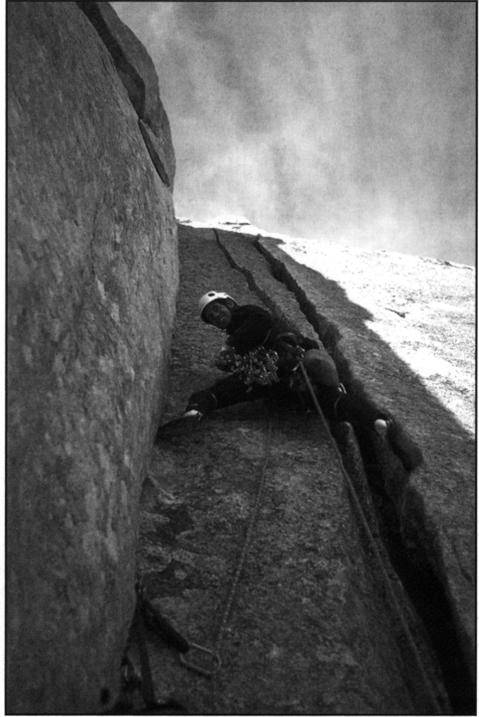
We pray all night for clean rope pulls. Thirty-five hundred feet and 12 hours later, the glacier is underfoot. Freshwater pools quench the thirst as a storm moves in. We name the route *Freebird* after a massive raptor that flew past us while we were on the route. The bird was never seen again.

Folks at BC present us with flower necklaces and simmering curries. Mike and I happily nestle into tent life for a few days as the maelstrom passes. With the receding of the storm, we lie in the meadow, grinning into the spotting scope. Miles of HAG (high alpine granite) move through the eyepiece, from Shipton Spire to the Hainabrakk East Tower to Uli Biaho. The golden line finally becomes apparent, straight up the prow of Hainabrakk’s east face. The subtle features seem to connect, with only one suspect area.

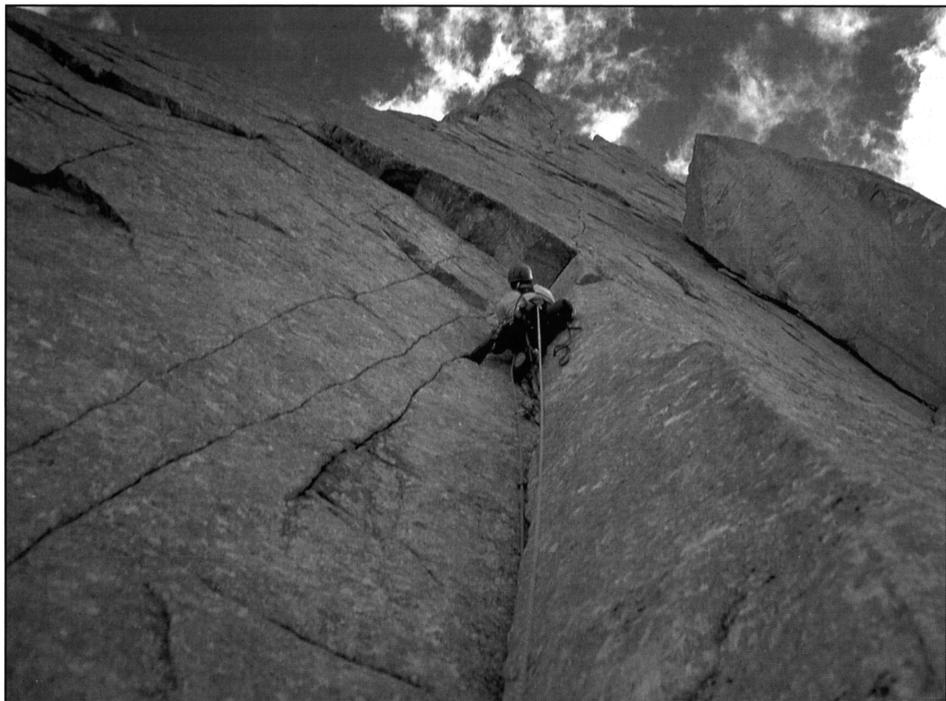
Within a day and a half, the stars fill the night sky. We move.

Traveling in the same style we had employed on the Cat’s Ears, we pass by the first 1,700 feet fairly smoothly, the crux being some loose 5.11 climbing. At the first bivy ledge we melt snow and contemplate the ensuing traverse that will set us on the central prow. The last rays of sun bounce from Great Trango Tower. Masherbrum fades in the distance.

By 10 a.m. the next day we are there, afloat on the massive sea of granite, tiny specks in the photo we had been dreaming into while at work in Colorado. The east face of Hainabrakk (Balti: Looking Glass Mountain) lights up in the early morning sun. We move



Sweet jams on day 3 of Tague it to the Top: Mike Pennings three pitches above the second bivy on Hainabrakk East Tower. JONATHAN COPP



Jonathan Copp on Hainabrakk East Tower. MIKE PENNING

from steep-grooved finger cracks into thin dihedrals. Just after passing the prow's major roof, we are abruptly stopped. The suspiciously blank area we had been worried about from the ground now appears worse than we had imagined. What we had tried to believe was a soaring finger crack is a knifeblade seam. With only one knifeblade on the rack and no bolt kit, we look up in despair.

I begin our last hope—aid climbing out a roof—only to pendulum from its apex. On the third swing I latch a hollow flake and peer left; nothing.

"Mike, belay me on the second line!"

With gear behind the disconcerting flake, I pull, then push, then smear across 80 feet of the nuttiest tension traverse I've ever done. The rope and Mike have long disappeared around the arête when I reach a finger and hand groove. I backclean about 100 feet, self-belay another tension traverse, then scrape together a belay. It's Mike's turn to sweat as he lowers off with the pack. He ends up having to cut loose, and spins across the wall.

From here, one pitch of aid climbing brings us back to our system of choice. We reach a ledge just after dark, headlamps glancing off holds and gear placements. I suddenly hear a voice. Tying in short, I move right and up to a corner. There, across a bottomless gap, team Schneider's portaledges are alive with headlamps and voices.

"Hey! Catch this rope!"

Steve Schneider fixes the line for Mike and me to swing across on. Hot soup is brewed and we all laugh. Steve Schneider and Heather Baer, along with Roxanna Brock and Brian McCray, have just finished a brilliant 28-day ascent of Hainabrakk's northwest face. Meeting here, on the prow of these two great faces, within the vast solitude of these mountains, is truly

amazing. We relish the gift.

Mike and I wake at 4 a.m., find some ice to melt, and peer up from the airy ledge. A massive right-facing corner pulls us in. We are now in summit mode, traveling without bivouac gear. Six hundred feet of Devil's Toweresque crack systems send us into steep offwidths and chimneys.

Pulling on the Gore-Tex, we negotiate ice water flowing over one section. By 2 p.m., we are on the summit's snow-corniced sanctuary. As we look to the east, an avalanche blows off Uli Biaho. Cumulous clouds travel the jet stream, but K2 and Broad Peak still stand prominent.

The descent is more eventful than we like. One rappel over a huge roof leaves me dangling 20 feet from the wall. I twist in breathless air like lint on a strand of spider's web that has broken free of its anchor. The panorama silently streams by: peaks, valleys, wall, peaks, valleys, wall. I close my eyes, feeling the surrounding space.

"Mike, fix the blue rope!"

After ascending the line, I rappel into a chimney system to remedy the problem. Then, 400 feet above the snow ledge, the rope jams in a flake 80 feet above us. Mike ascends the rope as I give him a back-up belay. Without being able to get much gear in at all, he reaches the flake, letting out a sigh of relief.

"I hate rappelling."

By noon the next day we wear flower necklaces and savor steaming curries. Within hours of reaching BC, a flurry of hail fronts the parade as a storm marches up valley. We smile, once again, at having "luck" on our side. We later name the route *Tague it to the Top* in memory of our friend Cameron Tague, who died last summer on the Diamond in Rocky Mountain National Park. It's a bit fantastic, but, in retrospect, I imagine Cameron was watching out for us from some omniscient place.

Inclement weather hounds us for a week, and we love it. Two different Spanish teams have over the course of the last month tried for the second ascent of *Inshallah* on Shipton. Not wanting to upset another team, we had cast off our initial idea of climbing the stunning line. But as we squirm from our tent after the storm, the Spanish are descending. Without much hesitation, we begin packing, our one sleeping bag and tent combo stuffed and ready.

One hitch to our light style is the route's relative lack of snow and ice: very few ledges exist to hold any. Without access to water, we will have to carry all reserves. This extra weight forces the leader to haul up a small pack at every belay, the second jumaring with a considerable load. We wonder if it's possible to climb a grade VII in this style—but only momentarily, the questioning thoughts quickly giving way to jovial anticipation.

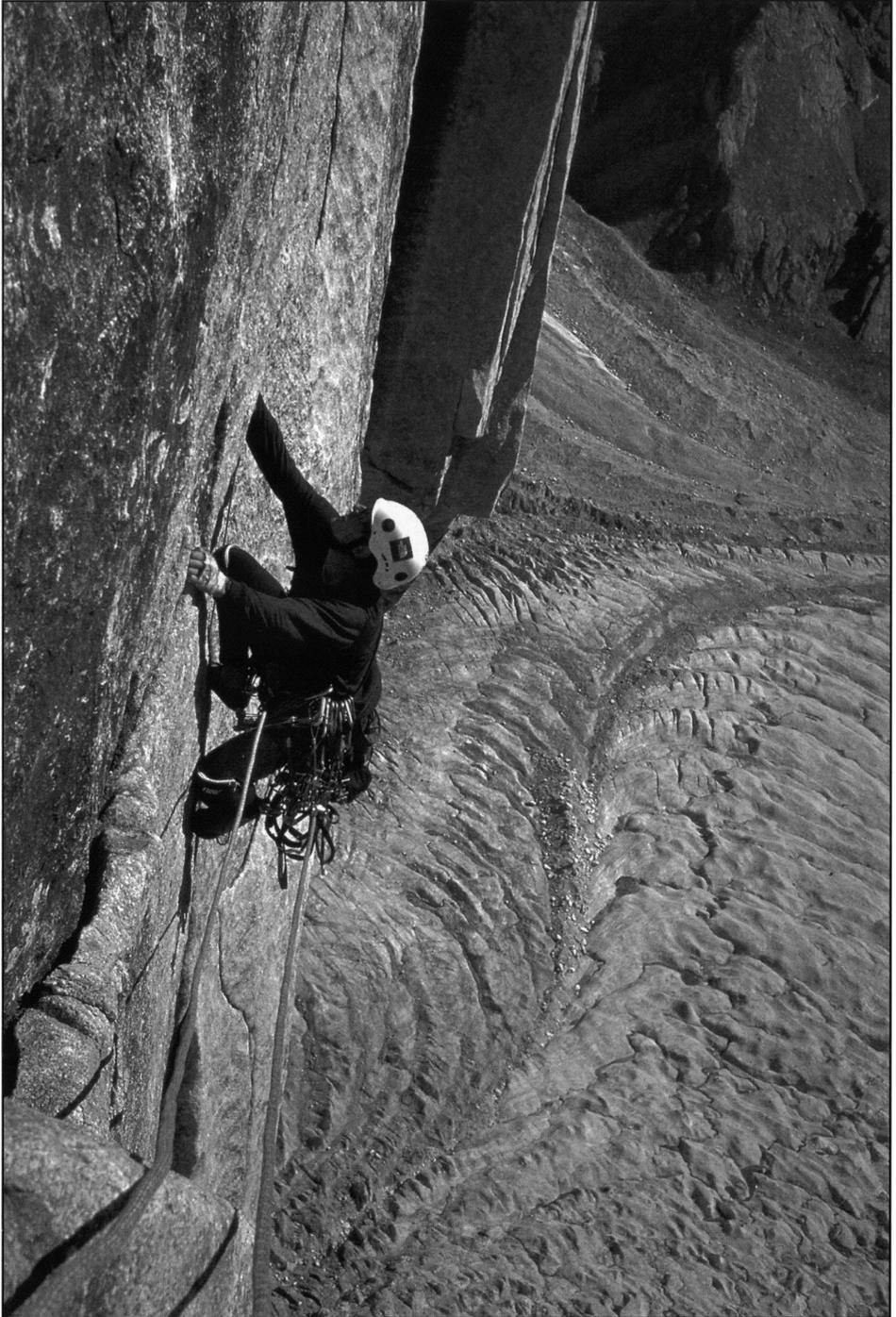
Shipton Spire has commanded attention from the start. Standing sentinel there at the convergence of two glaciers, medieval in design, it conjures dreams of magnitude. Being there, gripping the sides of its 4,400-foot southwest face, brings the dreamscape to life.

Trying to move with fluidity, we make pitch 15 in a day and a half. The golden granite ripples into oceans. Clean edges and soaring crack systems take us through roofs and up dihedrals. Our bivouac halfway up the wall leaves us hanging, sitting, and kneeling all night. With no way to sit together on the small chunky ledge, we trade off the one sleeping bag throughout the evening. As the blue hues of dawn morph to reds, we rack up and stack ropes, leaving the ledge with a day's worth of supplies. More of the immaculate steepness consumes us. By mid-day we are climbing perfect hand cracks at over 18,000 feet. Our laughs are contagious.

Where we are, still over 1,000 feet from the summit, icicles hang throughout a cavernous corridor. We climb loose bulbous features cemented together with the summit's frozen melt



Mike Pennings descending Hainabrakk East Tower. The steep raps meant the duo had to keep the swing going. JONATHAN COPP



Mike Pennings on day 3 (pitch 22 or so, after a very small bivy-ledge night) of the three-day, second-ascent blast of Inshallah, Shipton Spire. JONATHAN COPP

water. The air thins, but we feel good, having been above 15,000 feet most of the summer. We stare from the shadows; the sun's glow, feigning warmth, glances from the summit cornices. By 5:30 p.m., we dangle our legs off the east face. At 19,700 feet, there is no higher to go. The contagious laughter turns to cheek-cramping grins. Rippled cornices and points of rock bathe in the final hour of light. I once again feel lucky and light. Truly a grand adventure. What a trick—a trick of the light.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Pakistan Karakoram

ASCENTS: *Freebird* (VI 5.11d A1, 3,500') on Cat's Ears Spire (ca. 18,800'), July 15-17, first ascent of the peak; *Tague it to the Top* (VI 5.11 C2, 3,700') on the east face of Hainabrakk East Tower (ca. 19,024'), July 26-28, new route, and second ascent of the peak; *Inshallah* (VII 5.12 A1, 4,300') on Shipton Spire (a.k.a. Hainabrakk Central Tower, 19,700'), August 4-6, second ascent of the route

PERSONNEL: Jonathan Copp, Mike Pennings (recipients of an AAC Lyman Spitzer Climbing Grant)



Jonathan Copp, born in 1974 in Singapore, learned how not to climb at Tahquitz and Suicide and Joshua Tree with an electrician's harness and nylon tow rope. He later found better friction when he traded in his Vans tennis shoes for a pair of Boreals. Since then he has pioneered new routes and climbed in places like Patagonia, India, Canada, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the illustrious Black Canyon of the Gunnison. He is a white male, with a medium build and passions for music, writing, photography, and drag racing. Also known as the "Drag Queen," Jonathan enjoys wearing tight plastic and high heels.

Mike Pennings and Jonathan Copp just after summiting Cat's Ears Spire. With no anchors on the summit, each man had to lead the last 30 feet of the route and downlead it as well. The all-night rappels are still to come. MIKE PENNING'S