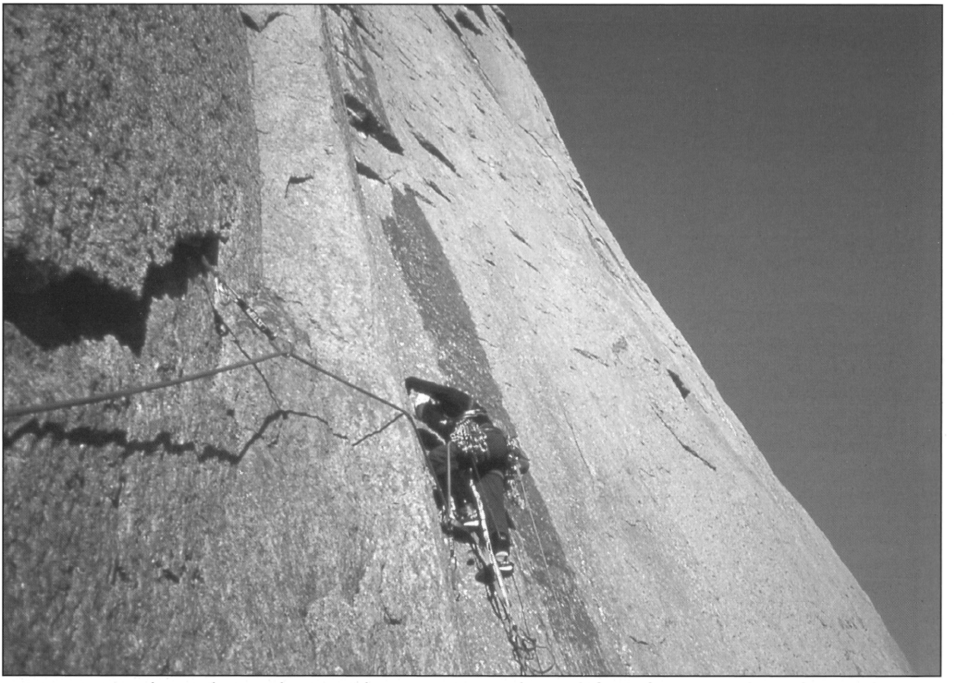
Holy Baffman!

Speed climbing Mt. Asgard's Scott and Porter routes, Baffin Island.

Cedar Wright



Jason Singer Smith speeding up the 40-pitch Porter Route on the north face of Mt. Asgard. *Cedar Wright*

Three thousand feet and over 24 hours up the north face of Mt. Asgard on the second ascent of Charlie Porter's visionary wall route, tears were streaming from Singer Smith's eyes.

"Do you believe in fate?" I asked him.

"Believe in it? My whole life operates on it," he said between sobs. It had been one year to the day since Singer had been kidnapped by terrorists in Kyrgyzstan, and now here we were, committed to the point of no return, without a bolt kit, on the first-ever single-push of a Grade VII, and Singer had just been hit by a falling rock.

"This is what it's all about, Singer; we paid good money for this," I joked, staring up at the 14 pitches of wall climbing between us and the summit, then down the 30 pitches to the glacier below.

Our dreams had brought us here, but now our shared dream seemed more like a nightmare. Blame it on Peter Croft, who Singer and I idolized in our climbing adolescence.

He was the one who ingrained in us the importance of style. He was the one who sparked our dreams of becoming world-class speed climbers. Blame it on Robbins, Fitschen, Frost, and Pratt: they set the standard years ago, bringing the Nose down from 47 days to seven and a half. We wanted to take speed climbing to Baffin Island the way Robbins took wall climbing to Proboscis, in the Northwest Territories. We wanted to stake our claim in the history of style. Now all we wanted to do was live.

Four years on Yosemite Search and Rescue had given me plenty of time to hone my skills, and I had learned from the best, clocking speed records with the likes of Dean Potter, Timmy O'Neill, Ammon McNeely, and Singer. While I did get a buzz from rocketing up Grade VIs, I felt that even with one rope and no headlamp, the level of commitment was never that extreme, and I always considered the climbs training for something larger and more committing. Baffin Island hovered in the back of my mind somewhere between myth and legend, promising me the epic challenge I longed for.

Now, my dreams were becoming reality. Singer and I were going to Baffin Island, "the land that never melts," realm of Yosemite-sized big walls and no night. Actually, it was a dream, but the kind that you live while you are awake. Bouncing along on the air currents, I stared with anticipation out the window of the plane down onto the fifth-largest island in the world, a big-wall climber's paradise, with a thousand lifetimes' worth of rock. Had I known what the Arctic held in store for us, however, I might have asked the pilot to turn the plane around in mid-flight.

Our plan to go to Baffin was completely spontaneous. The late spring had proved fruitful for Singer and me, and we shattered several speed records: Southern Man and The Prow on the Washington Column, and Lurking Fear on El Cap, which we completed in 4:27, the second-fastest El Cap had ever been climbed. In the same day we linked up the South Face Route on Mt. Watkins with Lurking Fear for the first-ever link of those two walls. We topped out completely worked and yet hungry for something more. We wanted to suffer even harder.

While walking up to a roof crack, Singer said, "You know, we really should go to Baffin this summer."

I replied with an unequivocal "Let's go!"

Two weeks later, with some invaluable help from our friends and The North Face, Singer and I were on the plane.

Singer had already survived Baffin once, during his epic solo second ascent of Midgard Serpent on Mt. Thor ("Alone on Mt. Thor," *AAJ* 1999). I met Singer right after he returned from this legendary trip and was awed by his tales of walls even bigger than El Cap. I remember being impressed not just by his commitment to climbing Thor, but to going about it in good style. He humped all the loads the 15-plus miles to Thor, completely unassisted, and clocked the fastest ascent (12 days) of one of the most famous and formidable big walls in the world.

Now it was time for us to up the ante and leave the creature comforts of portaledges and haulbags behind. We made jokes about how it was going to be "Summit or plummet, do or die." They wouldn't have seemed so funny had we known what was in store for us.

We touched down in the isolated town of Pangnirtung. Like all of Baffin Island's outposts, there are no roads out of "Pang" and the only way in or out is by plane or boat—or, for the adventurous, by skidoo during the winter when the sea ice is frozen. The locals are Inuits, which translates as "the people," and they still hunt caribou, polar bear, whale, seal, and walrus as part of their daily diet. This is a people only decades removed from a nomadic hunting life. We paid our park fee, chartered a boat to take us and our 600 pounds of gear the 30 miles across the fjord to Auyuittuq National Park, and were soon waving goodbye to our boatman.

We packed up our first loads and began the three-day hike to Mt. Asgard, a trip that would become painfully familiar. Along the way we were forced to wade through countless streams fed by the hanging glaciers that surround the valley. We moaned and wailed our way through the ice-cold crossings and cried quietly under the burdensome packs. We passed the occasional trekker, but mostly we went at it alone, seeking comfort in a good book during the resting hours.

As fate would have it, I sprained my ankle at one of the stream crossings. I rested impatiently while Singer humped the climbing rack the last leg up the glacier to the base camp below Asgard. Luckily, a four-day storm ensued and not much climbing time was lost.

After two and a half weeks of carrying way more weight than I ever thought myself capable of, we were finally at base camp with all our gear. I had come this far and I had to try my best, but my ankle felt weak, and I wavered somewhere between nervousness and terror.

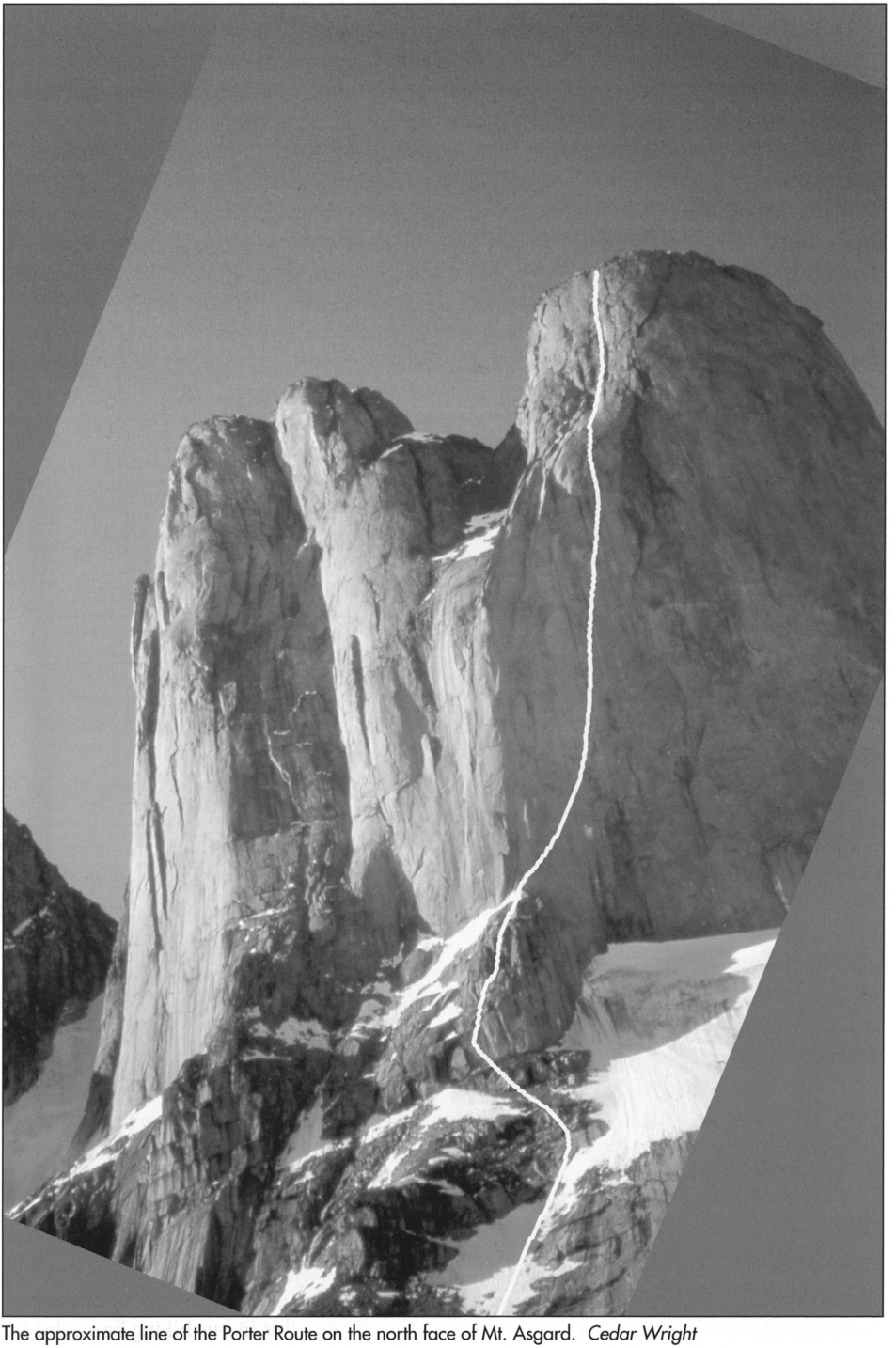
Our first goal was the Scott Route on Asgard. We awoke to clear but frigid weather and saddled up for our first climb. The 3,500-foot route was put up in 1972 in an epic 30 hours by Doug Scott, Dennis Hennek, Paul Nunn, and Paul Braithwaite. No bolts were placed. I had the pleasure of leading every pitch with Singer climbing simultaneously behind me. The first 3,000 feet go at 5.10 or easier, and we free-soloed most of this with the rope tied between us. I called for a belay on a couple of the upper pitches, including the classic and crux overhanging chimney (5.11), and Singer followed on jumars.

Three hours and 56 minutes after starting, we topped out on the north tower of Asgard, psyched to have finally climbed something, and in record-breaking time. We rapped contentedly back to base camp, for a tent-to-tent time that was half the previous fastest time on the route.

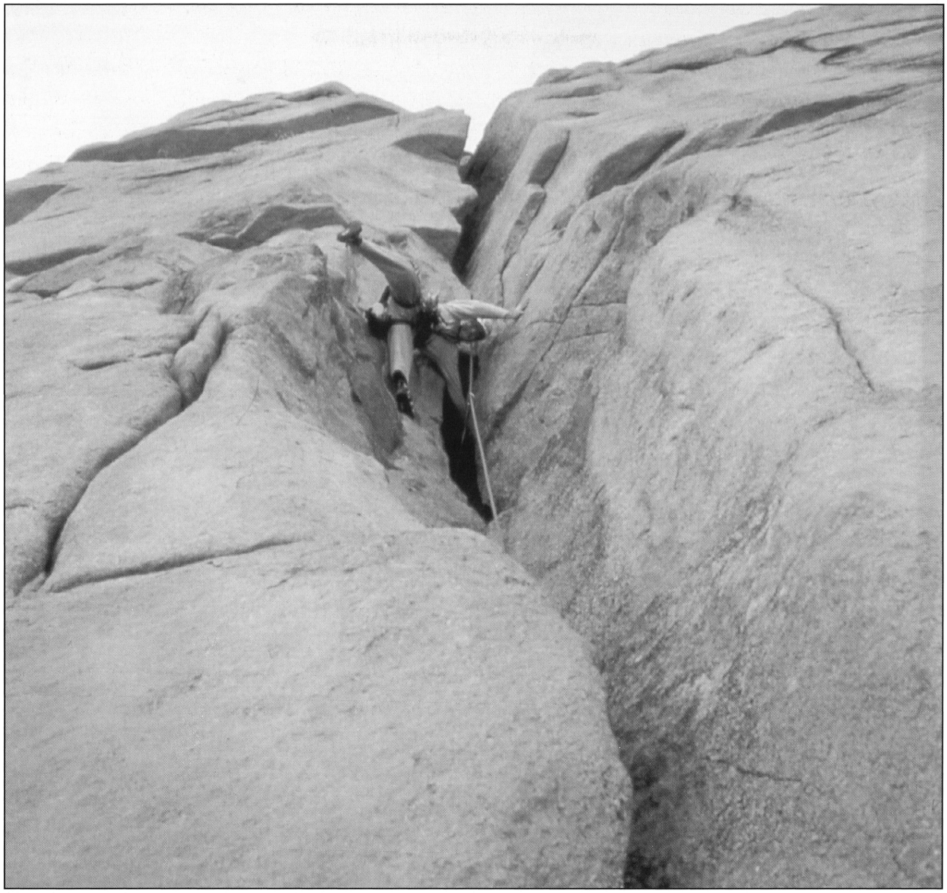
The next day we hiked three hours to the base of the north face of the north tower of Asgard, site of Charlie Porter's ground-breaking big-wall route of 1975. Doug Scott described the route in the book *World Mountaineering* (1998) as follows: "Using just one bolt and his ice axe, Porter gained the prominent dihedral to make a direct route to the summit. He made 40 pitches—the most remarkable achievement on Asgard, Baffin Island, and probably anywhere!" We took one look at the perfect overhanging dihedral that he had climbed, wiped the drool from our chins, and started making plans to climb it.

After motoring the Scott Route, we were perhaps overly confident. We mistakenly assumed that Charlie hadn't had any copperheads, so all we would need was a few pins. After all, Charlie had not had cams, so how bad could it be, with all of our modern tools? I remember saying that this was going to be like the Nose Route of Baffin, and we genuinely thought that we would climb it in about 12 hours.

A few days later we were standing at the base of the 2,000-foot "approach" to the 3,000-foot wall. On the approach, which most would consider part of the climb, we encountered quite possibly the worst climbing known to man, consisting of fresh rock fall/talus scrambling, and wandering, sand-covered 5.8. We free soloed all of this in our hiking boots, loaded



The approximate line of the Porter Route on the north face of Mt. Asgard. *Cedar Wright*



Cedar Wright stepping out of the chimney on the crux pitch (5.10) of the 3,500-foot Scott Route, put up in 1972 on the south face of Mt. Asgard. *Jason Smith*

down with 50-pound-plus packs, grimacing and moaning all the way. By the time we reached the base of the wall, we both agreed that we'd rather totally epic and spend 60 hours on the climb than bail. We hucked our Gore-Tex, boots, and other unnecessary gear off the approach, and watched in glee as it fell free for 1,000 feet, smashed into a 50-degree ice slope and then rocketed to the base.

Four pitches along, looking up at 60 feet of copperheading, we realized that, as we lacked enough copperheads, beaks, and pitons, we were completely underprepared. The diagnosis: Charlie Porter was bad ass. This became our mantra of suffering as we rapped the four pitches down the wall and 15 pitches down the approach. Along the way, we found Charlie's ice axe, film, and bolt kit. We were psyched to have found this little piece of big-wall history, but we both agreed that nothing was worth doing the approach again.

Twenty-four hours after leaving the tent, we returned, tired and dejected. The bad memories were already beginning to fade, however, and Singer and I formulated a plan to walk out the 30 miles to the park entrance, where we had more copperheads and pitons stashed.

We couldn't go home without giving it our best. The next day we began the hike out. The fun had ended long ago. We were now men possessed.

On the way out we ran into park wardens Daniel and Tommy, with whom we had become acquainted while ferrying loads. They had already impressed us with their generosity and impeccable knowledge of the park, and we were happy to have some contact with the outside world. Daniel entertained us with stories about clubbing seals and fending off polar bears, and Tommy made fun of our desperate appearance. They gave us rejuvenated motivation and things almost seemed fun again.

Five days and 60 miles later, we were back at base camp, just in time for a six-day storm. We were already on our last reserves of sanity, and our tent-bound antics would have made great blackmail footage had anyone been filming. I tried not to stress too much, but my nights were mostly sleepless, and my dreams anxiety ridden. We both knew that this would be the hardest, most committing climb of our lives.

On day seven we awoke to cloudless skies and began suiting up for battle. On the initial rappel down the bergschrund that brings you to the Parade Glacier, a van-sized boulder rolled across our rope, but, miraculously, it wasn't cut. A few hours later, as we neared the 2,000-foot "approach," Singer nearly plummeted unroped into a bottomless crevasse. Ravens circled above, ready to pick at our bones should things go wrong.

We looked up at the initial approach and realized that Charlie's fixed lines, which we had hand-over-handed in a couple spots on the previous attempt, had been completely chopped by a catastrophic rockfall in the last few days. For 26 years the ropes had remained unscathed. We leave for a week, and come back to chopped ropes! Had we brought more copperheads on the initial attempt, we might very well have been wiped off the face. But, right or wrong, we had too much time and energy invested to turn back now.

With the increased burden of extra pitons, food, and water, our packs were even heavier, and now the approach was covered in a gritty layer of rock dust. Things were very grim, and we exchanged more than a few desperate looks. When we finally arrived at the base of the wall, we realized that the pillar we had lunch on during our previous attempt had been ripped off the face by the rockfall. The seriousness of our situation was highlighted by the occasional rock bullet whistling past our heads.

Singer chopped steps up the final ice cone to the base of the route proper. I followed it free and took a fall. Singer caught me on a hip belay without an anchor. We hadn't even started the wall climbing, and I was shaking visibly.

With rocks and ice rocketing down all around us, we cut our rest short, and Singer started up the first block of the climb, styling it in about four hours. I followed, removing the beaks and tied-off blades, and lamented the fact that my block was next, and that it started with the crux A4 pitch. Night fell as I got onto a fixed head placed the year I was born, and then placed one of my own. It was probably good that the darkness hid the string of junk gear below me. I placed two tipped-out beaks and 11 copperheads and clipped two fixed heads that Charlie left behind before I finally reached the A1 crack that marked the end of the A4 section. The sun rose on the glacier landscape below as I climbed another five hours, linking the strenuous and continuous nailing of pitches six and seven.

After nine and a half hours of leading, I was more than happy to pass the lead off to Singer. He toiled for another nine or so hours, taking us to the start of pitch 11 in a mix of dicey nailing and free-climbing.

"Can I send you up any gear?" I asked.

"Yeah, send me up the .38 Special!" he joked.

"Who needs a gun when you've got rock fall?" I replied.

With almost 24 hours behind us, I took over again and drunkenly started up pitch 11—only to find out exactly where the rockfall had come from. The next three pitches were completely buried in rock dust and littered with precarious, car-sized loose blocks. Rocks were whizzing past my head regularly now, and my slow and steady pace became frantic and furious. As I swam in vertical 5.10 sand with no pro, Singer let out a scream of pain. Hit in the knee by a softball-sized rock. Singer was understandably shaken, though conscious that the injury could have been much worse. Our lives flashed before our eyes more than once in those three pitches of rockfall climbing. We were like scared children.

We had been hauling up to this point, but now, with Singer injured and the loose rock everywhere, hauling was no longer an option. We gathered everything that we absolutely didn't need, including the trail line, the extra pitons, the Gore-Tex, and the extra hammer, and threw it into the abyss. Singer was incapacitated for leading, so now the burden lay upon me.

The next pitches were a blur of suffering and endurance. The routefinding was difficult and I bailed from several different cracks, logging almost 1,000 feet of off-route climbing. The constant movement kept me relatively warm, but Singer spent most of his time sitting at the belay shivering uncontrollably.

We began to wonder if hucking all our gear might have been a bit hasty. I looked down at the glacier 4,000 feet below and wished that I'd never come to Baffin at all. I just wanted off. I might have screamed for help if anyone could have heard us. We both knew that if I didn't find the route soon we were going to become permanent fixtures on the north face of Asgard.

Thirty-eight hours and 4,500 feet after beginning the route, I finally mantled onto the summit and into the sun. Singer asked me if, knowing what I knew now, I still would have climbed the route.

"No," I said. "But ask me in a couple of months and I'll probably say yes."

After a couple of hours of basking in the sun, we began the 20 rappels that led to base camp. The descent was sketchy, but compared to the climbing we had survived, it seemed like a walk in the park. Following the rappels was a mile of talus and two miles of glacier walking. After 38 hours in tight climbing shoes, we could barely walk. We cut the toes out our Five Tens, relieving the excruciating pain, then slipped and slid down the glacier, toes poking through our shoes. Fifty-four hours after departing, we stumbled joyously into base camp.

The next day we awoke to the worst storm we had seen in our month and half on Baffin. It was snowing sideways outside. If we had been another day on the climb, we would have been dead for certain. We both knew that we had expended every ounce, not only of skill, but of luck, in achieving this climb. We dreamed of sandy beaches and tropical sunsets.

We were down from the climb, but we had thrown off our boots, Gore-Tex, and backpacks, and with the storm raging we had no way to retrieve them, even if they were in a retrievable location. After two days of sitting out the storm, we began packing up. I clipped the entire rack to my harness, then packed all of our gear into stuff sacks and looped them over my shoulders with slings. With my painful makeshift backpack, I skated down the glacier in my running shoes and a fleece jacket. When I began to slide out of control toward one of the numerous crevasses, I would just lie down and dig the climbing gear into the ice.

On the three-day hike out, I was loaded down with most of the gear, and Singer limped out behind me. One night I awoke to Singer screaming frantically, "Where am I?" In his dream the storm had moved in while we were on the climb, encasing us in ice. He awoke, clawing furiously at his imaginary icy tomb.

Three days and 35 miles later, we were on the boat, motoring back to Pangnirtung and civilization. The sense of closure on the climb was beginning to sink in. Now I just had to survive the plane, then the car ride back to Yosemite, and I would feel like the expedition was a success. We were happy to be alive and eager to get back to the friends and family that we loved so much. It had been the climb of a lifetime.

Back in Yosemite I reveled in the simple pleasures of good food and a loving girlfriend. One day in the cafeteria I relayed my story to Tom Frost and TM Herbert. They both listened with wide-open eyes to my epic tale of speed climbing in Baffin.

"Good God, son" TM said when I had finished. "I'm going to have nightmares. You obviously need to be institutionalized."

A few weeks later, I ran into Peter Croft in Camp 4. "Nice work up in Baffin," he said. "I think it's really proud that you guys went for it in a push without a bolt kit." Here was my biggest hero, complimenting me on my climbing style. I couldn't help but beam with pride.

Now it all seems like a surreal dream, and I can almost reason that it wasn't actually all that bad, but I know that realistically, if it had been any worse, I wouldn't be telling this story. In the days that followed our return, the World Trade Center collapsed and America turned frantic and paranoid. In spite of this horrible tragedy, with my personal near-death experience behind me, I felt more at peace than ever before. Singer reacted differently, jumping on a plane to Thailand only weeks later in an effort to escape all the personal and national chaos that ensued.

As weeks turn to months and the details fade with each day, I long for the next fix, but I know that nothing will likely ever compare to Asgard. In the meantime I enjoy the sunny exposure and perfect cracks of Yosemite with a rejuvenated, child-like wonder, knowing that in the big picture all this nonsense about style and climbing is completely meaningless.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Auyuittuq National Park, Baffin Island, Nunavut Territory, Canada

ASCENTS: Mt. Asgard: The Scott Route (3,500 feet, VI 5.10), Jason "Singer" Smith and Cedar Wright. The Charlie Porter Route (40 pitches, VII 5.10 A4).