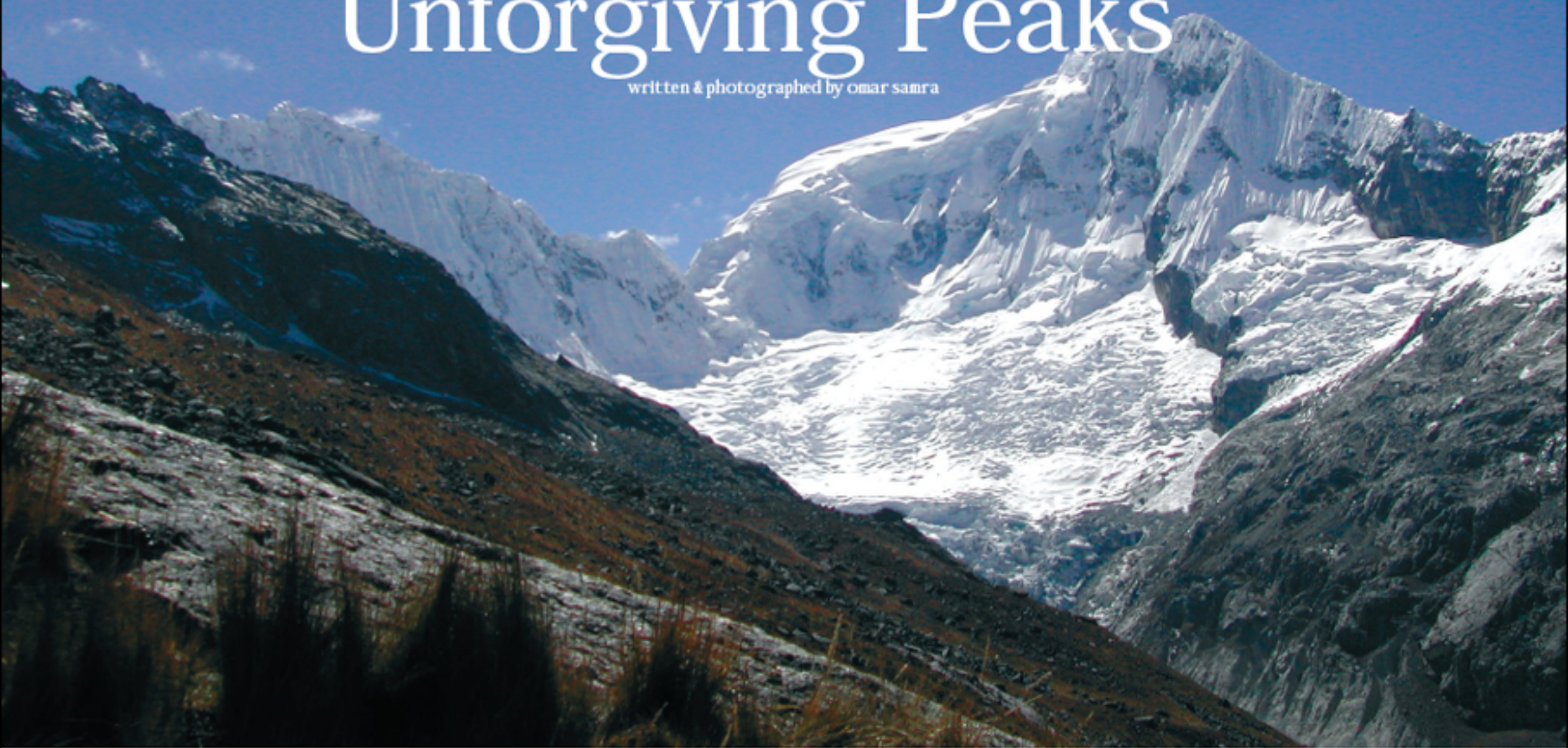


“I wasn’t alien to the pain; I’d experienced it before in the Nepalese Himalayan Mountains and knew enough that the initial symptoms of altitude sickness must be regarded with extreme caution. Altitude sickness can be fatal, but despite everything I threw caution to the wind and kept persevering.”

# Unforgiving Peaks

written & photographed by omar samra



The night bus journey from Lima was comfortable yet uneventful. In seven hours we had climbed 3300 metres in elevation and I could swear I felt the air thinning. We must be close. I rubbed my fingers over the glass window to clear just enough of the condensation that had formed due to the cold to take a peek through. It was still hard to make out anything outside, as it was so dark. I couldn't keep my eyes open yet continued to fluctuate from sleeping to waking to sleep again. However, when I once woke up from my interrupted sleep to the sight of those distinct white giants that I knew all too well shinning brilliantly in the midst of a black background, I knew I had arrived. It seemed only fitting to the romantic mind that my first encounter in the depth of the Andes should be attempted alone. During the many days I had spent trekking in the mountains, I had formed a special bond with nature, an affinity with the mountains. There was something powerful and majestic about these giants that people from all walks of life sought throughout history. Poets wrote about their beauty in verse, and prophets took refuge within to meditate and unite with their creator. I too had been spellbound. In the mountains I felt peace, a perfect and pure sense of satisfaction that is hard to describe yet so real to the point of tangibility. Many a time I had experienced moments of clarity where all of life's plights seemed utterly insignificant. The world became a far simpler place. When you are up there in the mountains alone, it's like being touched by the divine, and everything makes perfect sense.

Only a couple of days were wasted in acclimatization and planning. On the third day and in true intrepid fashion, I rented a tent, gas cooker and took off into the mountains with a poor sense of direction and not a map to guide it. My hired ride took me to the starting point, below an inspiring waterfall and just a few meters short of the ancient Incan ruins, Honcopampa. The magnitude of this endeavour could not be discerned from the start but it seemed fairly intimidating nonetheless. I would have to head through an immense canyon-like gateway, created by two towering mountains. The hollow space created by the two peaks was gigantic and seemed to stretch forever. One thing was for sure; the going was steep and the trail uncertain. Luckily, at this point, whatever I lacked in confidence, I more than made up for with sheer excitement. The 15Kg of my backpack seemed feather light. I took a deep breath and set forth. My transport had already dropped me 3500 metres above sea level. There was no easy way to break into this. The rocky path hugged the right peak and twisted

continuously making it hard to see more than a few metres at a time of the path ahead. The trail began steeply and then became even steeper. Whatever progress I made from now on would be vertical and so with every step, the air thinned and every breath became more difficult to take. Soon enough, the pack was not so light and I began to gasp for air as I continued my now snail-pace higher. After an hour of toil, it seemed that the goal had not diminished at the slightest. The same two rock surfaces enveloped my passage as far as my eye could see and I felt my resilience falter for a moment. The sun was strong and seemed to be working against me. I made a short stop resting the pack on the ground and quickly shed one layer of clothing. The heat relief was instant; I stood for a moment to catch my ever-shortening breath and pushed on.

Half an hour more of climbing took me to a premature edge of one rock face, the end of the path and a bridge to the next rock outcropping. The crossing was fashioned of adjacent logs precariously rested over a narrow gushing river linking one face of the mountain to the other. I tried not to look down as I could hear nearby water crashing down to what seemed like a few hundred metre drop off.

Immediately after negotiating this section and for the next 2 hours, I would be hiking up with the river crackling at my side and the overgrowth shielding me from the strong rays of the sun. It was a much welcomed change. The difficulty persisted nonetheless and I found myself making occasional stops for rest, or to fill up my water bottle from the stash in my pack. The more I drank, the better I felt. The liquid hydrated my high altitude-plagued body and decreased the weight off my shoulder, and so I drank lots of it. However, nothing would stop the inevitable. As soon as the water ran out, it needed to be refilled again from the river, thus renewing the load. Mineral water was now officially spent, and from then on I would have to survive on the far less tasty Iodine soaked purified kind. I drank less and less.

Feeling drained, my pace slowed down further. As if the physical pressure weren't enough, my mind began to play tricks urging me to take more and more frequent rests. I did my best to ignore it but felt weaker, my mind and body detached and working against me as if tugging at ends of the same rope. I could feel my oxygen-starved muscle tissue and lactic acid creeping into my thighs





rendering them weaker and weaker. Suddenly and seemingly god sent; I began to notice inscriptions painted in fairly equal intervals on the rocks. It started as '0+600' then progressed in increments of 50. I felt like the knights templar as they uncovered the secret of the Holy Grail underneath Solomon's temple. Boyish fervour pushed me on despite a fatigued body feeling as if I was unlocking an ancient hidden code. My brain was too tired to object. Later the signs read '1+200', '1+250' and an hour or so later, '4+200'.

This was a positive sign. No matter how unlikely it seemed at present, it was an indication that others have walked that very same path and that whatever the writings meant, it was a mark to progress of some kind. If only I had a definite number to work towards, a ceiling to this upward-spiralling puzzle. Unfortunately, I had nothing of the kind. Sadly, such is the way the human mind works, or mine at least. I kept setting goals for myself, "keep going for another 500 then stop for rest" I would tell myself. The 500 would come only so that I'd realize that I was deceiving myself and keep going longer. Such mind games continued until, with no forewarning, the markings disappeared altogether. Suddenly and after a two hour long trail of hope I was once more left with no indication of how far I'd come in relation to what lay beyond.

Feeling slightly de-motivated my code-inspired pace slowed down to a mere crawl. I began to ponder the logic that made those little signs give me so much drive then snatch it away from me in an instant. Shouldn't I be deriving my stamina, my will to keep going from the energy stores of my body or the toughness of a mental condition that I have tried so hard to nurture? As silly it may seem, the thought troubled me and I began to have serious doubts whether I was ever cut out for this solo adventure. I was even unable to comfort myself in the fact that I had succeeded in similar attempts before. I became weak, both mentally and physically. And now as if my shortcoming had opened a portal to other misfortunes, I began to feel a strong piercing pain at my temples. It may have been there before and I was oblivious to its nagging pressure but now it was there and it hurt badly. I wasn't alien to the pain; I'd experienced it before in the Nepalese Himalayan Mountains and knew enough that the initial symptoms of altitude sickness must be regarded with extreme caution. Altitude sickness can be fatal, but despite everything I threw caution to the wind and kept persevering. Actually, persevering is the wrong word to use as it was foolish to keep ascending. One should immediately stop climbing and if the situation doesn't improve, descend straight away. I did the exact opposite.

Suddenly the overgrowth that had been accompanying me for hours gave way to a massive open plain. Lush green grass with yellow and purple flowers beautifully dotted around. Butterflies were fluttering everywhere. The river was still making itself heard but now the sound took backstage to that of birds chirping and the cool brisk wind passing through the long uncut grass. For all I knew, I was back at sea level. It was incomprehensible to me that such life could exist at over 4000m. I cherished every second as I walked through the fields. For those glorious moments I felt the pain in my head wither away. The flat terrain stretched for over 300m and then came to an abrupt end at the foot of yet another crushing peak. By now it was approaching mid-day and at this instant I had no energy reserves or will to tackle such an adversary. I found myself surrendering to the pain. I sat myself down in the grass, took off my now painful boots and got some rations out. The cold chicken sausage, slices of cheese and semi-stale bread's taste were more akin to caviar and smoked salmon. For a second, I closed my eyes and delved into a world of my creation where formidable mountains can be crossed with one simple leap and one could travel great distances with the speed of thought. For an instant more, I was back to a semi-reality where the next obstacle seemed to be lifted off my mind and I was left to revel in the beauty that surrounded me. I must have been famished, my body in dire need of rest. I dozed off and when I woke, looked at the time and found that it was half an hour later. The bitterness of my reality came in one crushing blow. Instantly I felt the muscle fatigue through my thighs, hamstrings and shoulders. The gruelling headache was still making itself felt with full vigour. Looking back, I now know the best course of action would have been to descend straight away but to my delirious altitude-affected mind, I could only see one option. I kept on going.

Not so long ago, a climber friend had recounted to me how, in extreme altitude, a simple act like tying the shoelaces of his climbing boots once took him 20 minutes. I remember my disbelief but now I knew he was right. With great difficulty I put on my shoes, packed and shouldered my pack. It now seemed heavier than normal and the exercise left me gasping for air. I was in no condition to keep on going by any stretch of imagination, but the throbbing pain in my head had withered away the little judgment I had. The going was now even slower. I could feel the air thin with every step and was therefore constantly taking in deep forced breaths just to maintain any pace. The pain all over my body was overshadowed by that in my head and left me unable to appreciate the beauty that surrounded me. Despite that, I somehow managed to pause for a photo. I think my motor nerves relayed information to my brain that I was looking at something aesthetically pleasing but I could not associate any feelings with it.



Looking up, the sky was a rich blue colour and immediately below to the horizon, amazing snow covered peaks took centre stage. To my right, a few hundred metres below, a large waterfall magnified the sheer force of nature as it sent floods of water crashing on the rocks below. For a moment, I lost my footing and was about to slip and fall, which would have certainly resulted in me tumbling to my death. I felt shaken, realizing that I had been walking in a daze, almost unconsciously for the past half hour. The mistake however sent a rush of adrenaline into my veins leaving me more aware of what I was doing. It was almost an hour and a half now from my mid-day break. I was now at over 4500m in altitude and for once I could see more than a few meters ahead and beyond the immediate rocks that faced me. Still there was no sign of Laguna Akilpo that marked the end of today's march. This section of the climb however was coming to an end and I could see the path widening about 30 minutes ahead and giving way to open pastures. I hoped the lagoon would be just beyond that, conveniently out of sight. Still there was a bit more strenuous climbing to do and I was by no means feeling any better. I had not thought about the pain for some time and I had somehow discovered a way to let it drop somewhere deep into my sub-conscious. It hadn't really disappeared but I'd taken a liking to it; I found a kind of sick pleasure in the infliction of pain on myself, and in my ability to bear it. Like I said before I had become delirious and now I was beginning to show signs of delusion. Being that I was in no condition to make any radical decisions, the easiest thing seemed to be to just keep going and bare the pain, so I did just that. Somehow I held the vision that if and when I got beyond that next rock outcropping, that ledge, those 10 extra steps I would feel better, that the pain would subside. There were always 10 more steps and the pain got worse but I maintained the vision all the same.

After a time period of which I am unsure of at this point, the hellish climb was over and I was amidst those wide pastures I'd spotted not so long ago. The colours of these pastures weren't as vibrant as the ones I'd lunched in but they were lush green nonetheless. Much more importantly, they were flat. The lagoon was nowhere to be seen but I couldn't care less at this point. I guessed it must be close and was sure that if I had come this far there would be no stopping me. All looked rosy in my delusional mind until winds started to build up. I could feel it and hear it at first, then saw it when I looked up at the sky. In just a few moments, a menacing grey cloud had formed right above my head. My high spirits remained: my will was resilient as I kept my steady plod forward. Seconds later, it began to rain; it was a drizzle at first then a fierce downpour. My day seemed to have come to a premature end. In a matter of minutes, with the temperature almost instantly dropping to sub-zero levels, the rain crystallized thereby morphing itself into a mean hailstorm. It was impossible to continue any further. So far I had been walking for the best of 7 hours. My goal was definitely imminent yet impossible to pursue further at this point. Setting up tent in such conditions is difficult as the insides of the tent will inevitably get soaked. Sleeping in a wet tent is uncomfortable and very cold. It was now only 3pm and with the storm showing no signs of letting up I would have to spend the next 17 hours in the confines of my tiny one-man tent.

That I was feeling claustrophobic is an understatement. The remainder of the day and night I could not begin to describe, it was horrid. Shivering, unable to move and with the head pain now worse than ever, I lay huddled in my sleeping bag. I felt weak and famished but I could not summon up the energy to cook something for myself or even grab a cold snack. How nice would a bowl of noodles be right now I thought. I felt thirsty. The bottle of water lay next to me but I couldn't summon up enough will to retrieve it. Turning over, reaching for the bottle, unscrewing the lid, drinking then repeating the whole process again was too much for me. I couldn't go outside and there was nothing else to do, I'd have to sleep for 17 hours till daybreak. Of course I couldn't sleep. It seemed like the unfriendly sounds of the hail beating on the tent and the winds threatening to blow it away would never stop. I drifted from sleeping to waking then back to sleep again, fighting thirst, hunger and an excruciating pain. It all seemed impossible to bear. Being alone with nature is a beautiful and soothing experience, yet being stuck in a body bag with terrible conditions is not. I kept trying to focus on happy thoughts, praying that the tent would hold and that I could go to sleep. It wasn't that easy. I must have stayed awake on and off for a good 10 hours during which the hail kept beating over me. It was only after some 15 hours later from the time I walked into the tent that I woke up. The storm had seized, the pain gone and I summoned enough energy to drink some water. I necked down a litre in a matter of seconds then went back to sleep. It was a more comfortable sleep now. Soon light began to creep in and fill the tent and I could make out the shapes of the things around me. My backpack was shoved to one side, a lit torch lay there without me noticing it the whole night and my frozen boots were thrown carelessly at the end of the tent. Under normal circumstances, I wasn't fine, I was far from fine but I felt pretty good. In fact I remember smiling, beginning to giggle then bursting out into uncontrollable laughter. That didn't last long though as the human instincts of thirst, hunger and need to urinate began to dawn on me once more. But this time I could do something about it!

I slowly got out of the tent to find that the many evil clouds of the day before had been replaced with a very few white fluffy ones, like the kind you draw when you are 6 or 7. The sun was up spreading its rays around me. It had not reached the little space I'd pitched my tent in but it would just be a matter of time until it did. I had survived the night and even better came out of it with my body acclimatized to this frightful altitude; the absence of the pain was a sign of this. I urinated; it was almost green but felt good. I cooked myself some noodles, they came out half-cooked but tasted great. I drank more water, it reeked of iodine but it was bliss. I was alone in the midst of these beautiful yet unforgiving mountains, they had tested my strength, I persevered and here I am, king of the world, the king of my world! @

