

Introduction

Download the LearnEnglish stories and poems podcast. You'll find more information on this page: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-stories-poems.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- the poem that you can listen to in the podcast;
- a pre-reading vocabulary activity to help you with difficult words in the poem;
- two comprehension activities based on the poem.

Before reading

In the poem there are many 'nature words'. Below are definitions of many of these. Study the definitions and then read the words in context in the poems (they are all in **bold**).

Mountains

arête: a sharp, narrow ridge or crest of a mountain
cirque: a steep, hollow excavation high on a mountainside, made by glacial erosion
cliff: a high area of rock with a very steep side
col: a gap between peaks in a mountain range, used as a pass
crest: the top or highest part of a hill
crevasse: a very deep crack in the thick ice of a glacier
glacier: a large mass of ice which moves slowly
limestone: a white or light grey rock
moraine: a mound, ridge, or mass of rocks, gravel, sand, clay, etc. carried and deposited directly by a glacier, along its side
névé: the area above or at the head of a glacier
overhang: the part of a rock that sticks out over something below
peak: top of mountain
range: a group of hills or mountains
scarp: a steep slope
scree: an area on the side of a mountain covered with large loose broken stones
serac: a block or column of ice formed by intersecting crevasses on a glacier
shale: a type of soft grey rock
slate: a dark grey rock
strata: layers of rock, earth or similar material
traverse: a way by which one may cross

Plants

Types of trees:

poplar; pine; larch; fir; juniper; spruce; balsam

Other plants:

fern: a green plant with long stems, feathery leaves and no flowers
gentian: plant of the gentian family, with blue, white, red, or yellow flowers
heather: a low spreading bush with small pink, purple or white flowers, which grows wild, especially on hills
lichen: a grey, green or yellow plant-like organism that grows especially on rocks, walls and trees

moss: a very small green or yellow plant that grows especially in wet earth or on rocks, walls and tree trunks

raspberry: a small soft red fruit, or the bush on which it grows

saxifrage: perennial plant with small white, yellow, purple, or pinkish flowers

toadstool: a poisonous fungus with a round top and a narrow stem

Water

creek: small river

dew: the condensation formed on the ground during the night

inlet: a narrow strip of water extending into a body of land from a lake

swamp; marsh; bog: a piece of wet, spongy land that is permanently or periodically covered with water

waterfall; cascade; falls: water, especially from a river or stream, dropping from a higher to a lower point, sometimes from a great height

Animals

bighorn: a large, wild, hairy sheep from the rocky mountains

grizzly bear: a very large greyish brown bear from North America and Canada

hawk: a type of large bird which catches small birds and animals for food

marten: a small carnivorous animal that lives chiefly in trees and has a long, slender body, short legs, and soft, thick, valuable fur

mountain goat: a large-hoofed mammal found only in North America which lives at high altitudes and is a sure-footed climber, often resting on rocky cliffs that predators cannot reach

mule-deer: a deer that lives in the western half of North America and has large ears, like a donkey

pike: a large fish which lives in lakes and rivers and eats other fish

robin: a small brown European bird with a red front, or a similar but slightly larger brown bird of North America

slug: small, usually black or brown, creature with a long soft body and no arms or legs, like a snail but with no shell

trout: a fish that is a popular food, especially a brown type that lives in rivers and lakes or a silver type that lives in the sea but returns to rivers to reproduce

Weather

frozen: (of water) turned into ice

lightning: a flash of bright light in the sky which is produced by electricity moving between clouds or from clouds to the ground

mist: a weather condition in which very small drops of water gather together to form a thick cloud close to the land or sea, making it difficult to see

rainsquall: a sudden brief storm

Read the poem

David

by Earle Birney

David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey,
All week in the valley for wages, in air that was steeped
in the wail of mosquitoes, but over the **sunalive** week-ends (1)
we climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly

Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid
Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening coltish
Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see over, (2)
Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.

Our first was Mount Gleam. We hiked in the long afternoon
To a curling lake and lost the lure of the faceted
Cone in the swell of its sprawling shoulders. Past (3)
The **inlet** we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned

On a **poplar** prong, in the hurrying slant of the **sunset**.
Then the two of us rolled in the blanket while round us the cold
Pines thrust at the stars. The **dawn** was a floating (4)
Of **mists** still we reached to the slopes above timber, and won

To snow like fire in the sunlight. The **peak** was upthrust
Like a fist in a **frozen** ocean of rock that swirled
Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling (5)
Eastward the alien **prairie** glittered. Down through the dusty

Scree on the west we descended, and David showed me
How to use the give of **shale** for giant incredible (6)
Strides. I remember, before the **larches'** edge,
That I jumped on a long green surf of **juniper** flowing

stormcloud: thick black cloud carrying rain

sunalive: full of sunshine

sunhot: made hot by the sun

sunlit: receiving a lot of light from the sun

sunset: the time in the evening when you last see the sun in the sky

thaw: a period of warmer weather when snow and ice begin to melt

Other nature words

dawn: the period in the day when light from the sun begins to appear in the sky

mire: an area of deep wet sticky earth

prairie: a wide area of flat land without trees in Canada and the Northern US

Away from the wind, and landed in **gentian** and **saxifrage**
Spilled on the **moss**. Then the darkening **firs**
And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a **fern**-hidden
Cliff and splashed unseen into **mist** in the shadows. (7)

One Sunday on Rampart's **arête** a **rainsquall** caught us,
And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and bootnails
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move (8)
Till the ice had steamed from the **slate**. And David taught me

How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
Remembered from poets, the naming of **strata** beside one,
And matching of stories from schooldays ... We crawled astride (9)
The peak to feast on the marching **ranges** flagged

By the fading shreds of the shattered **stormcloud**. Linger
there it was David who spied to the south, remote
And unmapped, a **sunlit** spire on Sawback, an **overhang** (10)
Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.

That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs
Of a **mountain goat** underneath a cliff, caught
On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of **hawks**. (11)
And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.

And then Inglismaldie. Now I remember only
The long ascent of the lonely valley, the live
Pine spirally scarred by **lightning**, the slicing pipe (12)
Of invisible **pike**, and great prints, by the lowest

Snow, of a **grizzly**. There it was too that David
Taught me to read the scroll of coral in **limestone**
And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites, (13)
Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.

On Sundance we tried from the **col** and the going was hard.
The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks
And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we balked (14)
Till David clung with his left to a dint in the **scarp**,

Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked (15)
To the **crest**. Then, grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist

And drew me up after. We set a new time for that climb.
That day returning we found a **robin** gyrating
In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David (16)
Took and killed it, and said, "Could you teach it to fly?"

In August, the second attempt, we ascended The Fortress.
By the Forks of the Spray we caught five **trout** and fried them
Over a **balsam** fire. The **woods** were alive (17)
With the vaulting of **mule-deer** and drenched with clouds all the morning,

Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round
Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright
And **sunhot raspberries**, eating them under a mighty (18)
Spruce, while **marten** moving like quicksilver scouted us.

But always we talked of the Finger on Sawback, unknown
And hooked, till the first afternoon in September we slogged
Through the musky woods, past a **swamp** that quivered with frog- (19)
song,
And camped by a bottle-green lake. But under the cold

Breath of the **glacier** sleep would not come, the moonlight
Etching the finger. We rose and trod past the feathery
Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet **heather** (20)
Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom

Of incredible **dawn** in the Rockies. David spotted
Bighorns across the **moraine** and sent them leaping
With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks, (21)
And the peaks to the sun. The ice in the morning **thaw**

Was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms,
And **seracs** that shone like **frozen** salt-green waves.
At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed. Then David (22)
Edged to the west and discovered the chimney; the last

Hundred feet we fought the rock and shouldered and kneed
Our way for an hour and made it. Unroping we formed
A cairn on the rotting tip. Then I turned to look north (23)
At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless

Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.
David turned sharp and reached out his arm and steadied me (24)
Turning again with a grin and his lips ready
To jest. But the strain crumbled his foothold. Without

A gasp he was gone. I froze to the sound of grating
Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones, the lone
Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only (25)
The wind and the muted beat of unknowing **cascades**.

Somehow I worked down the fifty impossible feet
To the ledge, calling and getting no answer but echoes
Released in the **cirque**, and trying not to reflect on (26)
What an answer would mean. He lay still, with his lean

Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs
Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,
Six hundred feet sheer to the ice. My throat stopped (27)
When I reached him, for he was alive. He opened his grey

Straight eyes and brokenly murmured, "over... over."
And I, feeling beneath him a cruel fang
Of the ledge thrust in his back, but not understanding, (28)
Mumbled stupidly, "Best not to move," and spoke

of his pain. But he said "I can't move ... If only I felt
Some pain." Then my shame stung the tears to my eyes
As I crouched, and I cursed myself, but he cried (29)
Louder, "No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself.

I didn't test my foothold." He shut the lids
Of his eyes to the stare of the sky, while I moistened his lips
From our water flask and tearing my shirt into strips (30)
I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid

From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting **lichens**,
And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore
Of the rock. Then he whispered, "Bob, I want to go over!" (31)
This time I knew what he meant and I grasped for a lie

And said, "I'll be back here by midnight with ropes
And men from the camp and we'll cradle you out." But I knew
That the day and the night must pass and the cold **dews** (32)
Of another morning before such men unknowing

The way of mountains could win to the chimney's top.
And then, how long? And he knew ... and the hell of hours
After that, if he lived till we came, roping him out. (33)
But I curled beside him and whispered, "The bleeding will stop.

You can last. " He said only, "Perhaps ... For what? A wheelchair,
Bob?" His eyes brightening with fever upbraided me.
I could not look at him more and said, "Then I'll stay (34)
With you." But he did not speak, for the clouding fever.

I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,
The glistening hair of a **creek** on the rug stretched
By the firs, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge, (35)
The moss, and David still as a broken doll

I hunched on my knees to leave, but he called and his voice
Now was sharpened with fear. "For Christ's sake push me over!
If I could move ... or die ..." The sweat ran from his forehead (36)
But only his head moved. A hawk was buoying

Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.
The purr of a **waterfall** rose and sank with the wind.
Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger (37)
Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.

Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there ... And I knew
He had tested his holds. It was I who had not ... I looked
At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked (38)
At last in his eyes. He breathed, "I'd do it for you, Bob."

I will not remember how or why I could twist
Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty
Horror, and over the **traverse** alone. I remember (39)
Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It

When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund ... reeling
Over the sun-cankered snowbridge, shying the caves
In the **névé** ... the fear, and the need to make sure It was there (40)
On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping

Of gaping green-throated **crevasses**, alone and pursued
By the Finger's lengthening shadow. At last through the fanged
And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling (41)
Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge

On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,
Alone, By the glooming lake I sank and chilled
My mouth but I could not rest and stumbled still (42)
To the valley, losing my way in the ragged **marsh**.

I was glad of the **mire** that covered the stains, on my ripped
Boots, of his blood, but panic was on me, the creek
Of the **bog**, the purple glimmer of **toadstools** obscene (43)
In the twilight. I staggered clear to a firewaste, tripped

And fell with a shriek on my shoulder. It somehow eased
My heart to know I was hurt, but I did not faint
And I could not stop while over me hung the range (44)
Of the Sawback. In blackness I searched for the trail by the creek

And found it ... My feet squelched a **slug** and horror
Rose again in my nostrils. I hurled myself
Down the path. In the woods behind some animal yelped. (45)
Then I saw the glimmer of tents and babbled my story.

I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,
And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger, (46)
That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.

After reading

Exercise 1

In the table are the names of six mountains that they climbed. Below are 12 events that happened on those mountains – two events per mountain. Can you match the mountains to the events?

Inglismaldie	Mount Gleam	Rampart
Sundance	The Finger	The Fortress

1. David fell from the mountain and died.
2. David frightened some large animals by making loud noises.
3. David reached the top of the mountain with a death-defying climbing manoeuvre.
4. The author learnt how to 'ski' down a rock slope.
5. The author was taught a lesson in geology by David
6. They caught an injured animal and put it to death.
7. They cooked meat near a lake at the end of the day.
8. They discovered the remains of a dead animal and learnt a surprising fact about it.
9. They found signs that a big dangerous animal had been there before them.
10. They saw different wild animals moving in the woods.
11. They spent sixty terrifying minutes without moving because they were afraid of slipping off the mountain.
12. They went fishing and ate their catch and also wild fruit.

Exercise 2

Below is a summary of the part of the poem where David dies (verses 22-39), but the verbs are missing. Can you put the verbs from the table into the correct blanks?

asked	broken	did	fell
grabbed	lay	lost	managed
reached	refused	removed	saved
slipped	started	tried	turned

It took them an hour of very difficult climbing to get up the last part of the Finger. When they [...(1)...] the top they [...(2)...] their ropes and then the author [...(3)...] to admire the view of Mount Assiniboine. He [...(4)...] and [...(5)...] to fall, but David [...(6)...] his hand and [...(7)...] him. While doing this, however, David [...(8)...] his footing and [...(9)...] over the edge. The author somehow [...(10)...] to climb down to the ledge where David [...(11)...], six hundred feet above the ice below. He was alive, but had [...(12)...] his back in the fall and could feel no pain. The author [...(13)...] to give him medical attention but David [...(14)...] him to push him over the edge. At first he [...(15)...], saying he would get help, but in the end he [...(16)...] what David wanted.

www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish

Answers

Exercise 1: *Inglismaldie:* 5; 9; *Mount Gleam:* 4; 7; *Rampart:* 8; 11; *Sundance:* 3; 6; *The Finger:* 1; 2; *The Fortress:* 10; 12

Exercise 2: 1. reached; 2. removed; 3. turned; 4. slipped; 5. started; 6. grabbed; 7. saved; 8. lost; 9. fell; 10. managed; 11. lay; 12. broken; 13. tried; 14. asked; 15. refused; 16. did