‘Climbing my Grandfather’
Andrew Waterhouse
Andrew Waterhouse (1958-2001) grew up in the north-east of England. He was a poet and musician, and was very passionate about the environment. After winning a prestigious poetry prize in 2000, he gave up his job teaching to devote his time to writing.

He was a very private person, who struggled with depression, and the following year he took his own life. This memorable poem is a portrait of his grandfather but from a very unusual perspective.
What is the poem about?

The narrator imagines climbing his grandfather, using the extended metaphor of himself as a climber and his grandfather as a mountain.

The narrator may be imagining or remembering himself as a child, playing with his grandfather and observing things about him, or he may be using climbing as a metaphor for getting to know him as an adult.
Feelings and Attitudes in the poem.

The speaker has a simple, child-like curiosity about his grandfather. This interest is reflected in his adventurous and fascination with small details.

The narrator wants to make the effort to get to know his grandfather and to be close to him – this is shown in the physical nature of the climb and the exhaustion he feels at the end.

The way the narrator affectionately describes exploring his grandfather, and the way the grandfather smiles, show that they feel comfortable with each other. Their physical closeness as he’s climbing reflects their close emotional relationship.
Present tense – the reader feels like they’re witnessing the climb happening, which creates a sense of adventure.

He feels confident and comfortable with his grandfather, but there’s also an element of risk. This climbing vocabulary shows the reader that the poem is going to be an extended metaphor of an imagined climb up a mountain.

This adds danger and excitement to the child’s game.

I decide to do it free, without a rope or net. First, the old brogues, dusty and cracked; an easy scramble onto his trousers, pushing into the weave, trying to get a grip. By the overhanging shirt I change.

Enjambment reflects change of direction.

Comparing the shoes to the dusty foot hills of the mountain. Also language about age

Metaphor for trying to get to know his grandfather.
This suggests that he’s run into difficulty and is taking a different approach.

Use of oxymoron creates a child-like simile – it’s simple and contradictor. It creates an affectionate image – the grandfather isn’t cold like ice is.

Detail that a child would notice from playing with his grandfather. It suggests he likes gardening, which hints at a connection with nature – possibly explains why he’s described as a mountain.

**direction**, traverse along his belt to an **earth-stained** hand. **The nails are splintered and give good purchase,** the skin of his finger is **smooth and thick like warm ice.** On his arm I **discover**

He’s making progress in getting to know him – the scar possibly represents a past that the climber didn’t know about.

Splintered nails sound ugly, but here they give the climber a good grip. This may reflect treatment of old people generally – people don’t always value them, but they have a lot to offer.
Just as a ridge is part of a mountain, the scar is part of the grandfather and is something to be explored.

The grandson is sensitive and understanding – he doesn’t linger over what might have been painful past experiences for his grandfather.

The glassy ridge of a scar, place my feet gently in the old stitches and move on. At his still firm shoulder, I rest for a while in the shade, not looking down, for climbing has its dangers, then pull.

Climbing imagery turns into the familiar image of a child sitting on an adult’s shoulder.
The grandfather enjoys playing with his grandson.

Possibly a metaphor for taking in the things his grandfather says. Also shows that the narrator feels better for talking to him.

for climbing has its dangers, then pull myself up the loose skin of his neck to a 

smiling mouth to drink among teeth. Refreshed, I cross the screech cheek, to stare into his brown eyes, watch a pupil slowly open and close. Then up over

Double meaning - he’s also a pupil because he’s learning things about his grandfather.

Child-like fascination with simple things.
The grandfather’s white hair is compared to snow on a mountain top. His exhaustion shows that it’s been a difficult climb – he’s been making the effort to get to know his grandfather.

The child may physically feel his grandfather’s heat and heartbeat, but this also hints at the grandfather’s steady and warm love for his grandson. The simple monosyllabic line slows the pace of the poem, imitating the grandfather’s heartbeat.

Definite language compared to “trying to get a grip” (line 4) and “discover” (line 10) – this emphasises how the narrator has gained knowledge. The short line and enjambment prepares us for some kind of conclusion.
Poem Dictionary

Brogues – strong leather shoes
Traverse – travel across something
Purchase – firm foothold
Screed – a mountain slope covered with loose stones.