

Email from Michael Salinger

Hi guys,

I'm glad you asked. "Belay Off" is a term used by the person who is providing the safety line for a climber. When you begin a climb with a belayer—you click the line onto the harness with a carabiner and announce "On Belay" and the person holding the other end of the line responds "Belay On!" Conversely when a climber unhooks from the safety harness they shout out "Off Belay" and the person who had up til then been their safety system acknowledges this by responding "Belay Off." There are various reasons a person might go off belay. They may be on a safe ledge where they are resting, they may have reached the summit of their climb, or as I envisioned in this piece they have gone as far as their line will allow.

Since my son is a rock climber I felt that this was a perfect metaphor for a poem to be given to him on his graduation from college. I researched climbing terms and equipment to include in the piece and I hoped to recreate the tension of clinging to the side of a rock. I thought about this piece for several weeks before writing it—then out of nowhere the line "they tell you to never look down" just came to me and the poem just flowed from there. The term "Belay Off" was a revision added after the rest of the poem had been written, as bookends to the piece.

Michael Salinger