

Appalachia

Volume 63
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2012: The Lure of
Alaska*

Article 2

2012

The Long Way Home: Memory Fails, Loss Magnifies

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Recommended Citation

Woodside, Christine (2012) "The Long Way Home: Memory Fails, Loss Magnifies," *Appalachia*: Vol. 63: No. 2, Article 2.

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Memory Fails, Loss Magnifies

LAST YEAR, A FEW MONTHS APART, TWO PEOPLE I LOVED DIED. One day my mother-in-law shooed me away as I tried to help her stand; a day soon after, she lay in the hospital. One day our friend Bill laughed raucously at my joke; soon after, an ambulance carried him away from his house. And for good measure, my poodle, Charlie, whom I loved beyond love, was taken with seizures and within 24 hours, he was watching me dig his grave, and then he was gone.

Melancholy sharpens the edges of vision. The sting of loss measures the beauty of those three. I see clearly what's lost now.

Gretel Ehrlich wrote, "Loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life." But last year all this dying—and, admittedly, some boundless joy, like my daughter's college graduation—left no time for my usual backcountry trip. I could not get away and so could not find my way back.

In November, I sat by the woodstove reading through my old manila folder of crumpled diary notes from prior backcountry trips. I came upon a scrawled entry from several years ago: I'd returned to a shelter I'd remembered clearly from a still earlier trip, but found nothing familiar. It lay in a small clearing below a gently, sloping ridge surrounded by ash, oak, and maple. I had remembered a grand, light yellow, capacious shelter, safe and luxurious by trailside standards. But I'd ducked in under dark, weathered boards, and it was obvious that even though the boards had weathered from their original yellow gleam, I'd prettied up my memory with a larger, airier space.

The shelter turnoff from the Appalachian Trail in Virginia I'd remembered as a treed-in, short path, with a gentle grade. Revisiting, I'd instead swept steeply downhill from a narrow trail into Cow Camp Gap. The ridge actually dwarfed the little building, which was no grand, clean oasis at all. That first time I'd trudged through there, I had arrived after walking across ridges

for two months, and I had ceased noticing the oaks, grass, ferns, and rocks. I had seized upon anything civilized that differed from my daily trail life. I had minimized the mountains and maximized the buildings.

Surprised by how minuscule the camp really was, I'd wondered if I had connected with the natural world at all, the first time. Often, even today, when I'm in the mountains, I feel that I don't fit in, that I'm different than a bear or snake. And yet, I believed, when I returned to Cow Camp Gap—and still feel now—more at home in the mountains than anyplace else. This ought not make sense. It's like loss. Lose someone and love him better. Look back in nostalgia for what you could not see when it stared at you. Leave home and yearn for it. Return from the mountains and forests and wish for them. That's living well.

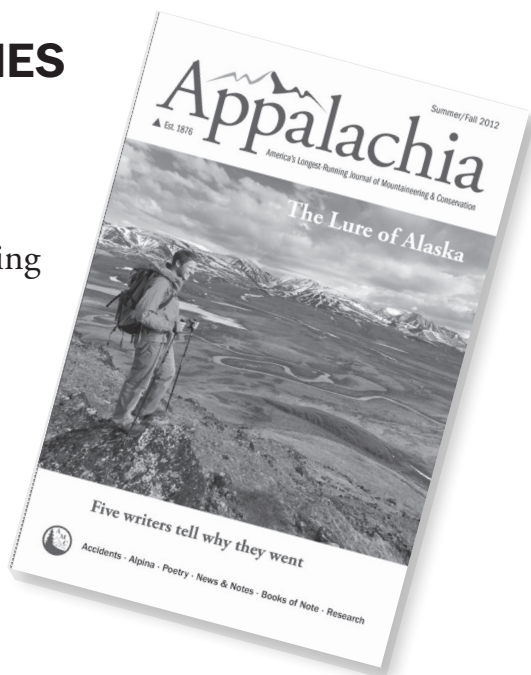
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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