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Covered in Ice

A landscape too large to see

Blair Braverman

WHEN I WORKED AS A DOGSLED GUIDE IN ALASKA, I CAME TO KNOW well the kinds of questions that tourists asked—to predict them, even. I'd load up my sled, then drive groups of two or three people in a loop around the lower tongue of Norris Glacier, where I lived in a cluster of tents with my co-workers. There were usually several minutes of silence at the beginning of each ride, as the tourists settled into their surroundings—took in the dark mountains, the ice field, the sky as shifting and colorless as water. Then, as we rounded the first bend, they would twist in their seats, turn to me. What were the dogs' names? they wanted to know. Did they like to run? Often people would point out the dog in the team that most resembled their own pet at home, hoping, I think, for a sense of connection in a foreign landscape.

Next came questions about me, asked in a lower, more intimate tone of voice. How old was I? What was it like to be a young woman working mostly with men? I was 19 at the time, and often older women asked me how I met my “female needs” while living on the glacier. Once I'd stuttered an answer, and the surprise wore off, I realized that the women's questions were less about me than about themselves. They were trying to imagine living in a place like this, wondering how they would manage, if it was even worth the daydream.

What people really wanted to know about was the glacier itself, though they rarely brought it up before the end of the tour. First, they needed a period of simply being there, on all that ice, between the mountains, amazed. It was impossible to stand on the glacier without a feeling of intense vulnerability, and I think it was this unacknowledged vulnerability—this sense of smallness, even helplessness—that finally let people ask their questions uncensored, in the way that a small child will ask whatever occurs to him without embarrassment. “Where does the white go after the snow melts?” I was asked once by a solemn man from South Africa, who had never before crossed the

equator. He kept digging his hands into the snow, packing it together, and dropping the snowballs suddenly, as if testing to see if gravity still worked up here. “Is the glacier healthy?” people asked, earnestly. “What’s the ice made of?” “Can you cut a hole and go fishing?” Or, pointing to crevasses, “Did you make those cuts in the ice?”

Until the practice was forbidden by our manager, the guides kept a list of such questions, scrawled on a sheet of yellow paper in the kitchen tent. It became a game, a challenge: Who would receive the most bizarre question? It was a way to make fun of outsiders, and, in that sense, unfair, because it let us pretend we weren’t all outsiders.

In the seven months that I lived on that glacier, I don’t think I stepped out of my tent once without catching my breath, momentarily stunned at the size, the depth, the clear blue desolation of the landscape before me; then, just as quickly, I had to turn off my reaction, to move on to whatever job needed doing. The glacier was a half-mile deep: can you even imagine? Ice straight down, cracked like shattered glass, blue not from minerals, as many suppose, but because its own weight so compacts the ice that most light simply vanishes into it. But you can’t live like that, knowing at every moment what’s beneath you. You’d tip from the vertigo. And so to function, we learned to block our sense of wonder, lest it become more than we could stand.

Perhaps my favorite tourist comment came from a New Yorker, an elegant woman with black leather gloves. She shook my hand graciously after her tour, but her smile was false, thin. “It’s just—” she started, then sighed. “I came up here so excited about the glacier, you know? And I thought I’d get to see it, but everything’s too covered in ice.”

It was a comment begging to be put on the list, the kind of thing we’d have chuckled at for weeks when we passed it on our way to meals. But at that moment, it struck me hard. Because it expressed perfectly how I felt—how I’d felt for months without realizing it. That I could never really see the landscape for the force of it all. The glacier itself was too much to see, too big to let yourself see, and instead there was just rock and sky and ice, more ice, ice everywhere, endless.

The woman was waiting for my response. Then she sighed again. “Maybe I’ll get to see a glacier somewhere else,” she said, almost to herself. “I bet they’re really something.”

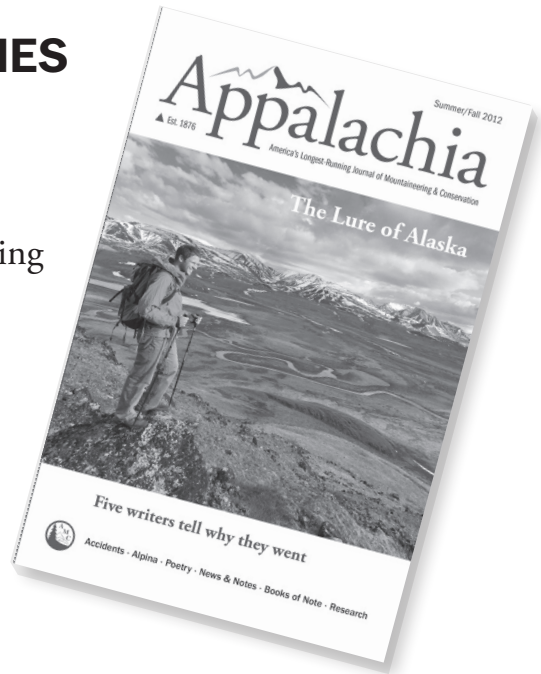
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