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Skiing Antarctica, Back to Buffalo

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Skiing Antarctica

-February 2001, Liv Arnesen and Anne Bancroft become the first women to ski unaided across Antarctica

Middle-aged, we'd come south before where raw fog hushes the screech of gulls, the last edge of green disappears. We'd heard ice hawk and moan, watched sunset dissolve into sunrise, austral summer, the three-month day. Icy lawlessness at the earth’s base, the unknown expanse of its curve—an anchorage.

November, we strapped heavy sledges behind us, skied into that bitter desolation—a solitary human train, our strange locomotion of arms and legs. The first frigid fields were rippled, blown like dunes. Frost-blue passages of pure shape, silence. Through the Ulvetanna Range—switchbacked slopes of splitting ice, the heat of our effort nothing against the glacial chill. One four-day blizzard, I tracked time on the walls of our tent.

Finally tailwinds, glassy meadows. We opened our parasails, flew in a blur. Snow blind, we were dreaming at noon, eyes open. Unseen birds called from hidden
perches. Stars blazed in the whitewashed night.
Where were we? Lost in the swirl,
a sheeted hinterland of fear.
And found, through the opened portal,
freed of time, temperature, as if our bodies
had dispersed. We were nothing,
Just a wordless strumming
in the crystalline air.

Back to Buffalo

You listen for old people's accents—
Polish, Italian. No, nothing but a little hip-hop.
Our Lady of Sorrows turned Baptist,
Sacred Heart's a makeshift mosque:
stained-glass Son, virgin Mother draped
like Yemeni women you pass.

Your folks are in the suburbs now—
every yard with the same unfamiliar tree,
streets making one hopeful claim:
Greenhaven, Greenbank, Evergreen.
A long breath away from beggared steel mills,
obsolete docks, that life of hard work,
good beer, Sundays at the beach.

Stroll the edge of Lake Erie,
its endless release of children. Families
still crowd on weekends, pry open chairs,
lay blankets on dirty sand. Toddlers jabber
in unknown tongues, spill out battered
buckets, bury ragged snarls of dried reeds,
gulls rotting in the sand around them.
In memory this was a wide swath—
a white shore with waves big enough to ride.

But you're pulled in now. You wade into
the easy current, let it rock your legs.
The lifeless body of a striped bass rolls by, iridescent driftwood.

Someone who looks like your brother paddles a canoe toward sunset. The gray ripples begin to turn aqua, mauve. Clouds float underwater, sunken white treasures. The sky opens its own lake—streaked, lit—and a line of geese swim across.