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Skiing Antarctica, Back to Buffalo

Beverly Burch

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Two Poems

BEVERLY BURCH

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.