

Learning Curve

In the job interview to be a field guide, they'd told me
everyone chose the program voluntarily,
but rehab or an orange jumpsuit didn't sound
like much of a choice. Those from well-off families
had a different framework. *Go to treatment*
or no more money from Mom and Dad. Some women
did arrive grateful their insurance covered
the expensive months of backpacking. The cold chicken
we ate from a can, the holes we dug to shit in,
the root-buckled ground where we slept. At intake,
each woman handed over her cell phone and cigarettes
that we bagged and locked away, then she stripped
naked beneath a paper gown, squatted and coughed,
changed into her issued gear. For everyone, the same
beige trail pants that zipped off at the knee. Matching
dirt-brown sleeping bags labeled thirty degrees. Zero
for the women admitted in winter. Instead of headlamps,
we handed out keychain lights that glowed a faint
and flickering blue so no one would run off in the night,
that desperate time when the mountains' gnarled walls
of rhododendron and blackberry
became the underbelly of fairy tales.

As a guide, a headlamp burned on my forehead
for each quick descent into the coal mine of night,
into the recurring dreams where my mother kept dying.
Back in Indiana, she was perfectly fine. Still,
for weeks I woke to tears. Night seemed endless.

I was always a little too hot or way too cold, curled inside
my mother's sleeping bag, goose down but thirty years old.
I saved my paychecks to buy a new one, and meanwhile
each day broke as a storm of feathers floating in my tent
like I'd slaughtered a bird. On cold mornings,

I savored my coffee, lifting and pressing the hot cup
to my cheek before packing up camp. Sometimes

I found a feather in my braid and blew it into the sky.

I knew the sleeping bag would only thin,
the temperatures only sink lower.