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an excerpt from

*Moments of Being: An Antarctic Quintet*

By Gretchen Legler

I.

I had been lying on my back, taking notes, looking up into the crystals and into that blue that still amazes me—blue so blue it was as if my eyes had broken; blue so blue it was like gas that faded away into more and more intense blue violet; beauty so expansive I could not contain it—I had to break to let it in. The first time I had been in an antarctic ice cave, months earlier, the person who took me there said that often people who go down into crevasses and into ice caves are so overcome by the blue that it makes them cry. I remembered that as I lay there on my back, taking notes, trying to draw the crystals that hung like blooms of flowers above me, trying to figure out where the blue began and where it ended.

I had gone with nine others on this expedition to the ice caves that were part of the Erebus glacier tongue, a long spit of ancient ice spilling out onto the frozen Ross Sea from the base of Mt. Erebus, Ross Island's active volcano. The caves were about an hour's drive over the ice from the United States' main scientific base at McMurdo Station. We had signed up for the field trip on a sheet of paper outside McMurdo's galley—it was a jaunt of sorts, free to anyone who wished to go—electricians or galley cooks who had the afternoon off, a scientist who wanted out of her lab for a few hours, or me, a writer in Antarctica as a guest of the National Science Foundation's Artists and Writers Program. As the orange truck plodded across the frozen sea, heaving over humps in the ice, we passengers packed snugly inside rolled and bumped into one another like children at a carnival ride, smiling to one another over the great roar of the truck's engine.

We went to two caves. One of them was easy to get into. You climbed a hill of snow, wriggled through a rather large opening, and slid down a slight slope into a cavern about as big as an average living room. The other cave you would miss if you didn't know it was there. You kick-stepped your way up a steep incline, then pressed your body through an opening just large enough to fit your shoulders through. Then you slid down a thin, icy tube until you landed on a shelf of thick blue ice. Next, with the aid of a rope, you climbed up and around and through a maze of tight ice walls until you reached two larger caverns, luminous with the deep turquoise and violet of glacier ice, and still as a tomb. Standing on

the cold, flat floor of this second cave I felt and heard a seal's high-pitched call bounce through the ice.

It was in the first cave that I lay upon my back, so intent upon studying the blue around me that I was startled when I realized I was alone. Suddenly everyone else was gone. I packed up my notebook, reluctantly, and rose to leave. Once I was out of my grotto, I realized that there was one person left in the blue room. It was my friend Gary Teetzel, an engineer from the Crary Lab at McMurdo. He and I had spent time together weeks earlier in the observation tube—an eighteen-foot-long tube set by scientists into the cold sea near McMurdo, which you could climb down into and sit in and watch creatures in the dark ocean around you.

“Oh, it's you,” I said to Gary jokingly, as if, if there was anyone left in the ice cavern, still it would be *him* and *me*. He seemed a kindred spirit—a lover of quiet and contemplation. We stood at opposite ends of this ice cavern for another ten minutes, until we heard a voice calling us to come away and board the vehicle. As I stood, I cupped my hands around my eyes so that all I saw was the blue, and as I stared, my heart began to beat faster and my breath started to come faster and tears came to my eyes. It was that blue that made me cry. That blue. That blue violet that seems as if it is pulling you in, that makes you feel as if you are falling into it, that compels you somehow to look into it, even though it blurs your vision and confuses you. It was that blue, so enigmatic that for a moment you lose your balance in it. You don't quite know if you are in the sky or under water, or whether for an instant you might be in both places at once. The blue is like a frosty, vague, and endlessly deep hole in your heart. It has no edges, just color and depth. It is a color that is like some kind of yearning, some unfulfilled desire, or some constant, extreme joy. It just burns there, burns violet, burns blue.

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