

Dog Songs of the Arctic

It felt like we were climbing to the edge of the Earth. It felt like soon, everything else would drop away. It felt wrong. The dogs knew it too, and my team kept looking back at me as if they knew I doubted myself: six pairs of eyes glowed from my headlamp's reflection. I kicked from the back of the sled to encourage them, and they pulled forward like they always do.

It was December, and I was guiding a dog sledding trip on Svalbard, the archipelago halfway between Norway and the North Pole. I was visiting for the dark season and a friend of mine had gotten me the job. We had spent the previous summer mushing dogs on the mainland. I was addicted to the wildness of mushing, the unpredictability. These are the same reasons I'm drawn to the Arctic.

The polar night feels like a dream, like one long hibernation. In Norwegian, they say "mørketid," or "the dark time," and sometimes it seems like the landscape is two-dimensional, one vast shadow with no end. I trained my body: set an alarm to go to sleep; ate at timed intervals; used a 24-hour clock to differentiate between three in the morning and three in the afternoon. A certain wakefulness is lost, and everyone on the island reels in imagination, stares out the windows of their homes into their own reflections.

Once we were on top of the plateau, I decided to turn back. We had gone too far, although it was hard to see where we were. I had three people with me: one woman on my sled and two people on the sled behind me. They were German-speakers, but with the help of body language I had taught them how to harness a team of dogs and balance on the sleds. Language barriers taught me to be as basic as possible with instructions.

When we turned the dogs around, we switched drivers. I waited until both people were standing on the skis until I instructed them about the way down.

"Whatever you do," I said, "don't let go of the sled." I raised my voice against the increasing wind, the dogs' impatient barks. "Always hold on." I grasped the handlebar to demonstrate.

I sat in the passenger seat, on top of a reindeer skin hardened with ice. I dimmed my headlamp; the brighter the beam was, the more it bounced back from the snow and darkness. I trusted the dogs' instincts. They knew where to go.

It all happened fast. Our sled tipped on the sharp downhill curve, and I tumbled into the snow. The driver was lying on her stomach and holding on to the sled, which had stopped.

"Don't let go!" I shouted.

"Let go?" she asked. She let go. The dogs took off.

"Stop!" I yelled after them, although they were already gone.

The two others on the sled behind ours were waiting. They had almost fallen as well. The good thing about driving dogs is you learn how to think fast. I grabbed the rifle that had fallen out of our sled—at least we still had that. I tried not to think about any unexpected polar bear visits. I checked my phone: no service. I couldn't call my coworker to drive out on a snowmobile.

All four of us piled on to the remaining sled: two people in the passenger seat, one person on each ski in the back. I stood on the left ski and kicked to help our dogs carry the

weight. We were six kilometers from the kennel. All around us, the landscape blurred from wind-blown snow. Silhouettes of mountains loomed overhead.

“Adventure?” One of the passengers asked. We all laughed, although my mind was racing about the dogs. *Where did they go? We’re in the middle of nowhere. Will they run home?*

We found them halfway home. Luckily the anchor on the sled had fallen and caught on some rocks. We stopped behind them and I ran over to my sled, praised the dogs, breathed.

“Look,” my passenger tapped my arm, pointed at the sky. In the distance, it looked like an eel swimming towards us, a faint green aurora tumbling forward in a wave, growing until the whole sky unfolded into a rip tide. I turned my headlamp off. I never knew about transformation until I went north. The weather can change in an instant; the sky opens as quickly as it closes. Nothing is permanent.

As we examined the sky, the dogs went crazy in their language—head-thrown howls into the night. Who or what were they talking to? I never knew, could only wonder, but maybe that’s all you can do on the edge of the world.