





While They're Still Here

What can we learn about grief and joy from our glaciers?



PHOTOS AND WORDS BY RICHARD FORBES

When Tass was still strong, we would sit in her garden. Plants surrounded us, lovingly hemmed by rock beds she had built with her husband George. Behind her home, the hillside sloped down to a cottonwood-lined creek, through blue grama grasses and shrubby mountain mahogany—two species whose names she'd taught my class on our first field trip in college. I'd asked her to be my advisor a few months later, drawn to the way the world looked when I saw it at her pace—the soft serration of a leaf, the fringe of a petal.

We had our first meetings in her plant-lined office in the ecology department. As we grew closer, she brought me to her garden, where we'd talk and drink dark roast coffee. I'd come to Tass's botany class driven by fears of climate change, desperate to find "the best way" to fix the planet. Tass gently and repeatedly told me I could make the most impact by giving myself grace. I tried to believe her.

The cancer took her slowly, turning her small body brittle. I graduated but stayed near, visiting when she could manage it. Visits were difficult. Each time I drove to her home I steeled myself for what I would find, the way her body was disappearing in the days between each hug. I was afraid to watch her die but could not stay

away. I knew, with her presence and her dying, she was showing me how to live and to lose, and I wanted to be with her through it all.

Near the end, we would sit inside, looking out at the mountains, and Tass would tell me about books she thought I'd like. She didn't want to talk about passing. She wanted to help me imagine futures I might find, the writer I might become. And then she died.

I BEGAN VISITING glaciers a few years after her death. I had moved to the Pacific Northwest and wanted to climb mountains but glaciers blocked the way, so I learned to cross them. And one day, in the heart of the North Cascades, I found myself on the edge of a half-mile-wide glacier. The shadows of broken clouds scudded across the melt-lined white,

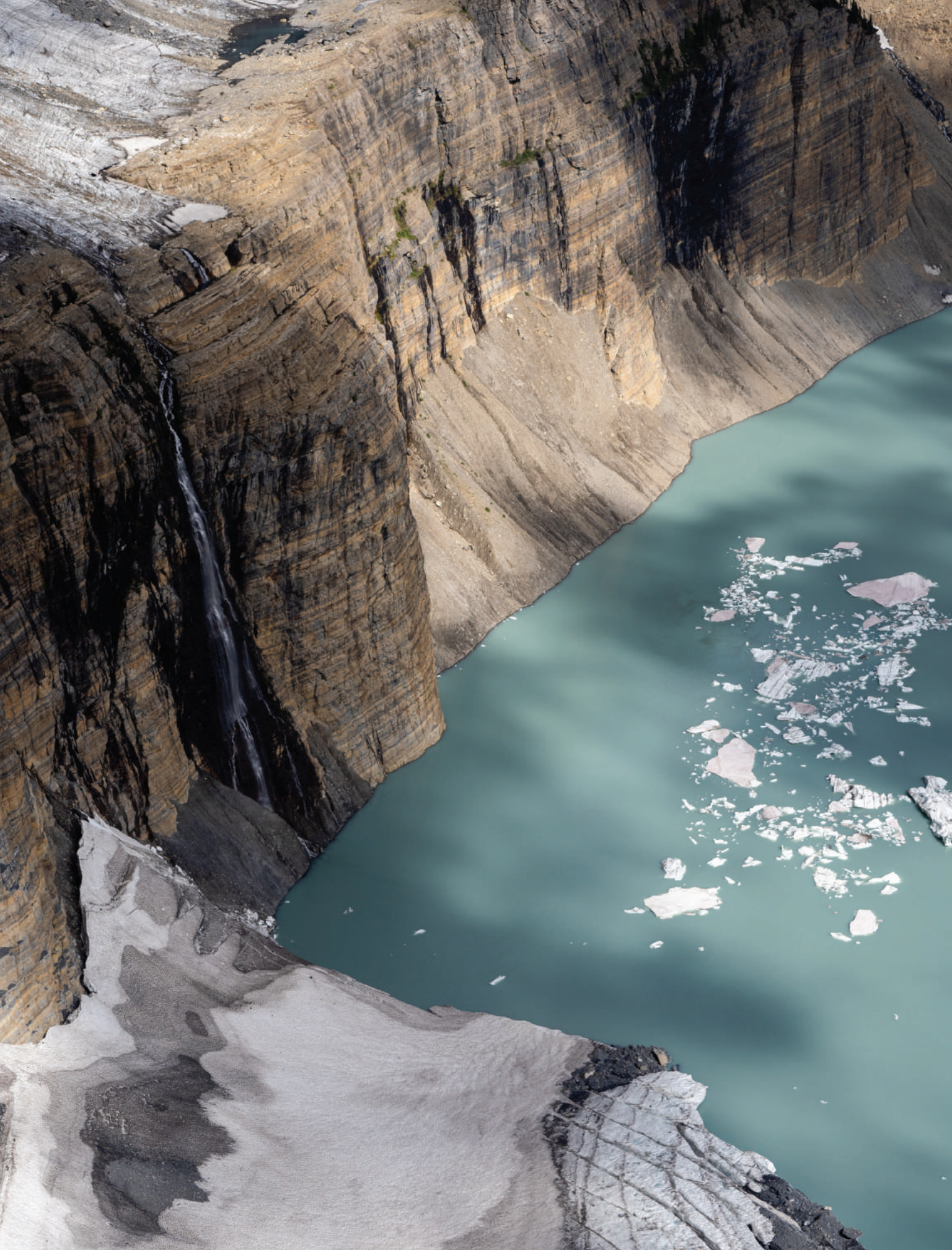
surrounded by peaks, crevasses hidden beneath spring snow. I stood still and watched my climbing partner cross, tiny against the vastness. I'd found something I hadn't known I was seeking, even if I didn't yet understand what it was.

Following that feeling, I gave myself a project after moving to western Montana. There are, at this moment, 26 glaciers remaining in Glacier National Park. The glaciers are melting due to climate change. I decided to visit as many as I could reach, and along the way, to find people who could help me understand them.

In the last two years, I have visited 20 of those glaciers, several of which are small enough to be on the brink of being downgraded to snowfields.









I've spoken and traveled with people whose lives are intertwined with glaciers—artists, glaciologists, therapists, poets, mountaineers, young people. In these visits and conversations, this is what I've found: There is more to glaciers than their melting, in the same way that there is more to us all, even as we are all dying. There is loss, yes, as the glaciers shrink. Yet there is also glory and joy in the presence of those that remain.

Glaciologist M. Jackson wrote that narratives describing glacial loss as “inevitable” narrow our perceptions of the “limitless future into a certain tomorrow without ice and perpetuates overall fatalism in the face of climatic changes.” She reminds readers that glaciers “are not gone today...and that regardless of

what is imagined, the future is made and remade each day.”

VISITING GLACIERS is not a simple undertaking; only a few of those in Glacier National Park are accessible by trail. Before I visit a glacier, I spend hours researching my route. And still, every time I leave the car, I carry questions with me, and I go to see what I'll find. If, at any point, I get the feeling that the glacier doesn't want me there—if I find bad weather or impassable cliffs—I leave. If I reach the glacier, I slow down, say hello, and sit. I tell the glacier about my project. In an attempt at reciprocity, I read each glacier a poem from a collection I've gathered. I don't know if they can hear me, but I think it's worth trying. Then I listen. Then I say thank you and go home.

I AM NOT SAYING we need to accept climate change and its impacts. Melting glaciers, of course, are only one of the ways our land is changing. You've felt it, whether you're watching glaciers, weather trends, wildfires, animal migration patterns, river flows, or unpredictable precipitation. The Fifth National Climate Assessment, released in November 2023, lays out clear and realistic actions Americans must take nationally and globally. But as we take those actions, we must also give ourselves time to feel. "We need to get more comfortable with grief," Sarah Aronson, a climate-aware therapist and writer, told me. "If we don't change, we'll need to grieve what we lose to climate change. And if we do change, we'll need to grieve the way of life we've lost."

The English language does not have many words to describe what it feels like to live with change and loss, so I find myself returning often to the word "hospice." Providing support through a terminal illness. Balancing the need to fix with "the quality of being present with the dying," a phrase from a 2014 scientific paper interviewing hospice nurses. I ask myself: How can we provide hospice to ourselves and the land? And how can we be brave enough to fight to protect what we love and rely on, while also learning to grieve alongside our landscapes?

Earlier this winter, I found myself back in the heart of the park, just after dawn. A glacier lay before me, swathed in fog, gently melting. Streams ran from beneath the ice across clawed slabs, through scattered pebbles and pools gray-green with suspended silt, before falling over cliffs to treed valleys below. Freshly-fallen snow clung to the cliffs, blanketing the ice. Where the snow had melted, horizontal stripes showed the years like tree rings. In the dripping silence, I sat and tried to hold myself in the presence of this glacier, still here, still softly creaking as it moves, reminding me no future is inevitable. ¶



