Post-Nature Writing

Blair Braverman

One summer, in college, I worked as a naturalist on a mountaintop in Aspen, Col- orado. The mountaintop was a bustling place. A gondola emptied onto a gravel plain, where photographers in red polo shirts rushed to shoot each disembarking party. Behind them, an ornate lodge served customizable $14 stir-fries, and a short trail led downhill to a Frisbee golf course. There were beribboned Hula-Hoops lying around for anyone who wanted to hula, and sometimes there was a bungee trampoline set up for the kids, and sometimes a bluegrass band, and sometimes croquet, and sometimes a woman with a boa constrictor in a plastic tub that she let people touch with one finger. Occasionally she'd let me wear the boa around my neck, for naturalist cred. I sat at a booth between the gondola and lodge with a painted sign that said "Ask a Naturalist!" People often took me up on the offer, but their questions were rarely nature-related. Did I happen to know the time? When was the last gondola down to the valley? If one went into the lodge, would one be obligated to buy food? I tried my best to be helpful. Three times a day I stood on my stool and announced a short nature hike—a "hike," I always called it, though the distance was half a mile round trip and took less than an hour, going at a "naturalist's pace." I could usually persuade three or

four good sports to venture out along the ridgeline, leaving the boa and bluegrass behind. I taught the differences between fir and pine, flax and phlox; I pointed out tiny alpine lupine and cinquefoil. We stopped at the decaying foundation of a min- er's shack from the 1880s silver boom, snapped pictures, and passed into a pine grove where the walkers crossed their arms in the chill and I'd reach under squirrel mounds to pull out handfuls of hidden snow. The trail ended in a clearing with views on either side of the ridge. I led everyone to the left side, which looked down into a valley.

It was green. “Look at this view,” I would say, as my boss had instructed me. “This is the same view that the silver miners saw 140 years ago. It’s the same view that the Ute Indians saw 1,000 years ago.” Then, lowering my voice: “And this land is pro- tected, so it’s the same view that people will see hundreds of years from now. When you look into this valley, you step outside your generation. You can see the past and the future at the same time.” It was a nice story. Even I thought it was nice. But it wasn’t true. I took people to the left side of the ridge because the right side told a different story. The land there was still protected, the valleys steep and uninhabited, with rocky cliffs and pine forests. But stretching from the far horizon, an orange shadow had begun to spread over the slopes. The pine bark beetle, a parasite brought to epidemic proportions due to a drought and climate change, had crossed the mountain West, leaving swathes of sick and dead lodgepole and ponderosa forest