



CYCLOPEDIA OF

PHOTOGRAPH | CAMILLE SEAMAN

AN EXPEDITION AROUND SVALBARD

REBECCA SOLNIT

ANCHOR CHAIN. The hideous, booming clatter that awoke me our first morning out was, I thought at first, the warning bell that announced we should all assemble on the foredeck and prepare to zip ourselves into survival suits, those bulky, lurid orange jumpsuits in which you could, they say, float and survive in an Arctic sea for up to six hours. Happily, it was just the anchor chain going out, meaning that we were at our first destination, and I did not yet have to try out that orange jumpsuit or those Arctic waters. The chains were huge beasts in the stern of the boat that rattled like the end of the world on their way up and their way down.

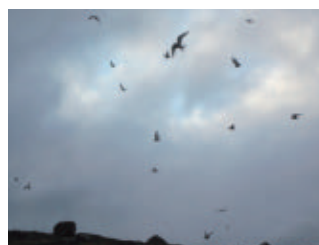
ANIMALS. There was no wait. Before we boarded the *Stockholm*, on the morning of the day of departure, a white arctic fox with a limp and a young gray fox cub came begging at the kitchen of the funky hostel-like hotel in Longyearbyen, the capital of Svalbard, the Arctic archipelago that legally belongs to Norway, but geographically belongs to the polar north. All the animals showed up earlier than expected, *all* being a term that encompasses the fox, the walrus, the seal, the reindeer, and the polar bear, those being all the beasts to be found onshore in this landscape that feels like creation on day two, not seven.

ANTLERS. (See also *Reindeer*.) A skull with antlers lay onshore by a rock at our first landing in Magdalenafjord, the antlers whipped back with the particular sweep that reindeer have and deer lack. The skull was bleached white but a bit damp-looking, not like the dry white bones of the desert, and it looked as though it had been intentionally placed, a focus for the foreground.



Farther up the rocks was the lower jaw of an arctic fox. Over the ridge was a school of seals basking. Around the bend were three polar bears (see *Nap* and *Polar Bear*). Later there were more antlers, and sometimes reindeer.

ARCTIC TERNS. Their Latin name is *Sterna paradisaea*; they are somehow birds of paradise, or were so named by Erich Pontoppidan, the Pietist Danish prelate and contemporary of Linnaeus who wrote



a cyclopedia-atlas of Norway in the eighteenth century. He could not have known that of all living things on earth, the arctic terns live in the most light and least darkness, but they work for it, flying sev-

enty thousand kilometers a year as they migrate from near the North Pole to near the South, and when they are not nesting they live almost constantly in flight, like albatrosses. Theirs is a paradise of endless light and endless labor, like angels' (though they cross the band of day and night during their migration, and the tracking devices set up to plot their migratory course did so by measuring light and darkness). Their scimitar-sharp wings, their fierce cries, their hummingbird hoverings, their swallowlike tails, their gull-like dives: all enchanting.

COLOR. When the sky is not blue, when moss and grass have not accumulated on the land (which is only 10 percent vegetated — 30 percent being rock, and 60 percent glaci-



ated), the world here is shades of gray verging toward brown, blue, and black, and it's white: ice, snow, glacier, cloud. It often looks as though it's in the process of becoming a black-and-white photograph of itself. And then come the tufts of moss like landscapes in miniature, various shades of vivid green and brown-green, here in this landscape where grass less than a foot high is the tallest plant around and only a few things flower. Indigo evening, water and sky. White morning. Gray world out the porthole. Black land with white

ice. Glowing gray nights. The water liquid pewter and iron, with gentle ripples rather than white-crested waves.

And the smeared red of a polar bear's meal.

ENGINE ROOM. The engine was made by Volvo half a century or so ago, and the engine room was warm and loud and



intricate, with steps and ladders and railings and dials and gears and pipes and pressure gauges and levers and a lot of nice pale pistachio-green paint. It hummed and vibrated, this force that kept us warm and mobile through the arctic seas,

that pushed the ship through fields of blue ice with thumps and crashes, that was attended by a kind man with earmuffs.

EXPEDITION. Sets out to accomplish, discover, claim, explore, sets out with an agenda, sets out often in these regions in earlier times to fail, to get lost, to suffer frozen blisters, frostbite,



cannibalism, forms of poisoning and starvation, discord, blame, remorse, death, being frozen for decades until another exploratory party comes across the remains, undamaged by decay but sometimes snacked upon by bears, as was the case with the small Andree ballooning party, failed in 1897, discovered in 1930, one man in his grave and two who'd died in the tent represented by gnawed bones in disarray. The Andree party's photographs and journals survived intact, and some of their embroidered linens made it to a museum.

FAR. That first morning, there was out the porthole of my cabin a little blue iceberg. We were in Magdalenafjord, the bay at the end of the earth, the northwest corner of Svalbard in the high Arctic, more than a dozen degrees north of the Arctic Circle. Beyond it were stony gray hills with glaciers curving down the valleys in between most of them. The idea of being so far north was exciting enough, and then there were all those things I always wanted to see: icebergs, reindeer, polar bears, along with all the things I'm always happy to see: water, sky, spaciousness, landforms, light, scale. More than any place I've ever been, this one imposed a dependency: there was no way out except by this boat, and no way to communicate with the outside world except by this boat. Which was also an independency, from the rest of the world. At times the view went all the way to the horizon and no land was visible on either side of the boat, the sea was a delicate blue-gray and the sky was the same color, the sea smooth billowing ripples that did not break into waves, the sky smooth, and only seabirds coasting along the surface of the sea, coming close to kissing their own reflections.



FEAR. See *Polar Bears*.

FOOTING. Made difficult by the rubber boots worn for landings in the Zodiac and by the rule that you should step on stone, not on moss. Sometimes given a choice between one's own and



the mosses' survival, the moss loses. Sometimes it wins. In a Japanese garden, the irregularly placed stepping stones are meant to make you conscious of every step. The stones are irregular here but the scale varies, and you never break your

leg or fall down a mountain into an icy sea in a Japanese garden. Though maybe the gardens imply these things.

FRANKENSTEIN. The cold of the Arctic echoes the cold in the heart of the polar explorer Walton, who wants to press on though it may mean death for his men and himself, and the cold in the heart of Victor Frankenstein, who pressed on with his experiment and disavowed responsibility for the results. But what does deep cold mean in an era of melting, thawing, heating? If we register the temperature of emotions, what are the virtues of coolness and coldness?

GLACIERS. Pelle the glaciologist speaks to us of glaciers, and the colored lines of his graphs slope down, toward melt and runoff and diminishment and disappearance. The shape of modern gloom is a slant downward from left to right. And of modern despair the opposite slant, of rising temperatures, seas, carbon.



GRAVES. The dead were the main thing left behind by many expeditions and whaling parties, left in graves on which rocks are piled or wooden crosses erected, which have sometimes been raided for souvenirs, wooden tombstones, clothes, and even bones, says Lisa the guide disapprovingly. Sometimes it was the wood of coffins they were after in this place where wood is a valuable import (though a remarkable amount of barkless, sea-sanded timber seems to have washed up on these treeless shores). Some of the whalers were buried with pillows under their heads and a clump of their native soil. Hats and other pieces of clothing survived in the cold environment; in the museum in Longyearbyen are seventeenth-century wool hats, including some striped knitted ones.

GUIDE. I had gotten an e-mail from the Swedish photographer and Arctic historian Tyrone Martinsson several months earlier that began, "I am writing to you to propose for you to join an expedition tour to Svalbard in September. I have a project here that is getting together 12 artists and scientists on a ship for 7–10 days sailing around Svalbard in the Arctic." Who would say no to that? Not me. Most of the twelve seemed to be photographers, and masses of black boxes and laptops on which to download their images would clutter the ship's tabletops. Every landing involved people peeling off one by one to gaze into their instrument and ignore the rest of us, which is not at all according to guidelines. The guidelines for travel in this part of the world are mostly about polar bears, and about sticking close to the guide with the signal gun to frighten a bear off and the rifle with the massive bullets to shoot to kill if necessary.

Our chief guide was named Lisa Ström, and at first she seemed gentler than the Nordic Lisa I'd pictured, but gradually in conversation it emerged that she had tried to repeat Rasmussen's journey across the Northwest Passage by dog sled until the breaking up of the ice stopped her, and she was planning to be the guide, along with her younger brother, our other guide, on a two-month ski expedition to the South Pole in November. She was sturdy but not burly, curiously humble, and endlessly diligent, with chestnut hair and clear brown skin and a delightful voice and Swedish accent.

I eventually realized that her meticulous scouting before every landing was not because she was afraid of losing a passenger to a polar bear, but of having to shoot a polar bear to save a passenger.

GUNS. The bullets were about the length of my middle finger and somewhat thicker; they could stop an elephant, Lisa said. The rifles were stored in day-glo orange carrying cases.

ICEBERGS. The color blue that is cold, pure, fierce, and somehow the blue that you always wanted and had to come to the end of the world to get, the blue you can't have since these sapphires are too big to take and too prone to melt. It's odd seeing an iceberg after so many pictures of them for so long, and odder to make pictures and turn them back into something familiar and maybe safe after seeing these great chunks calved by glaciers actually afloat in an icy sea (see *Representation and Reality*). Their reflection doubles them, makes them into great faceted jewels that no one can wear and that won't last forever, and it only doubles their visible self, when beneath the reflection is so much more. As the wake of the boat makes them rock on the water you can see that the old adage "the tip of the iceberg" is accurate, and that far more of them lies underwater than above.



INFINITY. ETERNITY. MOJAVE. SORROW FJORD.

At a place named Sorrow Fjord there is a ledge up from the best beach for landing and then a plateau with a couple of wooden houses, the wood gray from time and weather, pulled down into splinters and matchsticks, and then beyond, a great expanse of nearly flat land paved solidly in stones, pink, orange, white, gray, brown, and there is a kind of ecstasy of looking from the tiny

detail of the rocks to the distance stretching away toward the sea and the horizon. There were reindeer droppings and small clusters of moss but no actual animals visible, not even birds, during the hour or two I was allowed to drift across this space whose footing reminded me of the pink quartz and other stones that cobble the area near the Nevada Test Site, and so I also strolled on that inland shore where I spent time twenty years ago and found myself as a writer and a traveler. The sun was out in Sorrow Fjord and it was almost warm.

JOURNEY. The pleasure of the boat chugging along and sometimes rocking and swaying when we were on open water, the sense of a continuity of movement and a continuity of landscape flowing by on one side, the other, or sometimes both, the minor wistfulness that not everything could be seen, not even the landscape on both sides of the boat, the constant measuring of comfort against going out on the deck for an unobstructed view, the mystery of what went by in the night when I was dreaming of home in the form of many strange landscapes representing my city with trees, with mounds, with familiar companions amid those non-existent places, the punctuation of the flow of time in a boat, the clashing boom of the anchor chain going down, the silent business of the crane dropping the Zodiac overboard with a guide inside it, the clambering down the ladder to be transported to another shore, the moment pausing on one of those Arctic shores when I recalled Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Ah, Palinurus, too trusting of the tranquil sea and sky / You will lie naked on an unknown shore." Though we approached ours in layers of down and wool and silk and synthetic fibers and rubber boots and insulated gloves.



LIGHT. This far north, the twenty-four-hour cycle of day and night we have farther south stretches out into the one day and night per year the poles have, as though they were located some place other than the



earth most of us have since our earliest days been told has 365 days a year. Says one source: "At 74° north, the midnight sun lasts 99 days and polar night 84 days. In Longyearbyen, midnight sun lasts from 20 April until 23 August, and polar night lasts from 26 October to 15 February." If the town of Longyearbyen has a 99-day day in summer and an 84-day night in winter, then it has 184 days a year, not 365, though two of those days are many times longer

than the twenty-four-hour cycle. I was there near the equinox, so that the days were getting shorter at a gallop, about seventeen minutes shorter each day. Over the course of ten days the amount of daylight got nearly three hours shorter. Through the course of September the day would have grown shorter by eight hours.

The sky was cloudy, misty, and gray all but the last day I was in Svalbard, so that there were no shadows, no sun. The last day, the sun came out and the place looked unrecognizable in the crisp golden light.

NAP.

(1) Bear. One of the three polar bears the captain spotted on the far side of Magdalenafjord our first day was napping. The three of them seemed to be performing illustrations of their capacities for us. The first was walking with that long-legged ambling, shambling gait that seems so different from that of black and brown bears, just as their long streamlined profiles seem different from the rounded heads and jutting muzzles of grizzlies. As the bear walked alongside a hill of scree, its white that makes it invisible on the ice made it distinct on the gray slope. The second one was up higher, tearing at something it was feeding on with gestures of its long neck. The third was recumbent upon a bed of green moss, the moss that grows in domelike hummocks, its head and tail just slightly curled in, and it periodically rearranged itself or looked up at us. It was shocking to have so quickly penetrated to the realm of polar bear naps, and shocking to see the creature so vulnerable and yet so confident in its own habitat. If that was its proper habitat. A white bear on green tufts is not exactly camouflaged.

(2) Me. After a particularly grueling several months, it seemed both odd to be so comfortable in such a remote place and perfectly sensible to have come to the end of the world for the peace and quiet in which to nap. Which I did deeply and often, and at night I dreamed — of a forest that doesn't actually exist at the end of my childhood street, a house on the corner of a street near Baker Beach in my city that also doesn't exist, among other things, and then the childhood swimming pool piled higher than its deep end in wishing coins and debris thrown by neighbor children, and a visit with the infant son of an acquaintance in a house I have not actually been in for twenty or thirty years. It was intensely peaceful in this quiet place at the end of the world where I could only be reached by the radiotelephone that only my brothers had the number for.

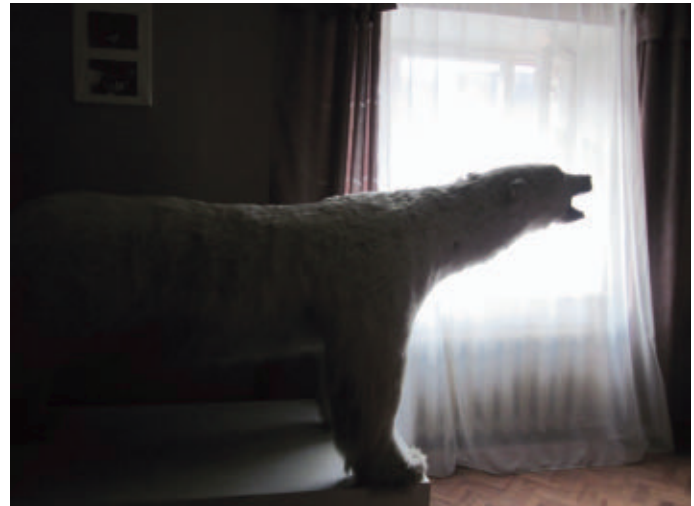
PLASTIC. On the beach beyond which is nothing but water and ice until the North Pole, in the form of bright blue barrels. On the beach by the pile of male walruses, in the form of a big yellow ring. On the beach near the reindeer, in the form



of tattered plastic sheeting that mixes with the seaweed. On the next beach before the dead bear, in the form of a Lux dishwashing liquid bottle, well abraded, and the one after that as marigold and green fishing rope and a blue-green stretch of net with scraps of clear plastic farther up. On every beach.

POLAR BEAR. (See also *Nap* [1]. And see *Reality and Representation*.) What does it mean to delete a photograph of an endangered species? And why is it that everything about polar bears looks familiar except the rather defeated-looking rump with the tail flattened into it?

We saw seven polar bears, two in places where we couldn't land anyway, but off the boat we were at all times conscious of polar bears, imagining them, organizing all our movements around them. When we landed in the Zodiac, Oskar went ahead with his rifle unsheathed and the big red-tipped bullets ready to be slipped into the chamber, and everywhere we went we were supposed to walk behind our armed guards, to not branch out or venture forward first. So I began to scan all landscapes for bears, looking to see if this distant patch of snow might be a bear, if one



might be coming from behind that rise or across that distance. Safety on Svalbard is an exercise in populating the landscape with even more than the three thousand or so polar bears it is thought to contain.

Polar bear #4 on an iceberg on 9/11, his meal, a red side of seal, disrupting the harmony of colors. Like the icebergs something strange to see in actuality after so many images and imaginings that are only representations. And a horde of cameras pointing at her, turning her back into the familiar that is the photograph. This

one swims away with its seal in its mouth, a V wake behind it.

Polar bear #5 on a rocky little peninsula where we had intended to land on 9/12. Long low snaky neck from the knob of the backbone between the shoulders and the shambling long-legged gait, black nose, eyes, mouth on creamy ivory. It looked back at us, raising its head to taste the diesel smell on the air, or ours. Lisa tells us they can put radio collars on the females but the males' necks are thicker than their heads so the collars slip off.

Polar bear #6 on 9/13 on another rocky hillside above the German huts from WWII, where the last German soldiers surrendered in September of 1945. Spotted from the Zodiac, so we don't dock.

Polar bear #7 on the rocky path to a glacier, alongside the roaring brown stream that issued forth from it. Most of it had been eaten, so thoroughly its hide was smooth and white on the underside and its massive spine — attached to a dainty pelvis — was tossed away a few feet, separate. Its black nose was intact, its eyes closed, and it wore what seemed like almost a faint smile through which a few bloody fangs protruded. Lisa, our guide, said it was the first dead polar bear she'd seen in Svalbard's wildernesses. Perhaps it died and was then devoured by foxes or bears; perhaps a bear killed it. Farther on there were bear prints in the sand, the four toes distinct, the tracks either of this bear or of its killer or devourer or both.

Polar bear #8 stuffed, in the middle of the luggage carousel in Longyearbyen, as though laid siege to by baggage, as perhaps polar bears are. Though perhaps stuffed bears don't count, since they seem only slightly more real than polar-bear skins and photographs and t-shirts and mugs and the rest of the souvenirs depicting this archipelago's top predator.

REALITY AND REPRESENTATION. We see polar bears, photograph them, see icebergs, photograph them, and then I want to look at those things in my photographs. I have seen them so often in pictures and never before in actuality and now the actuality too readily turns into a representation.

On the fourth day we go out to see a group of walrus on the beach that obligingly flash their tusks and undulate and otherwise ignore us, but it has begun to snow and the wind is fierce and I'm underdressed (see *A Warm West*) and it's hard to care about anything but the snow blowing sideways and my icy fingers and cold feet and cooling back and chilly face. I return to the ship at the first chance and decide to read the 1937 compendium *The Arctic Whalers* by Basil Lubbock, put together at the last moment when the men who worked in the heyday of that industry were still alive or had been within memory of the author. Instead of being out in the fierce cold, I read accounts of those who had been out in it far longer at these latitudes, and enjoyed the stories

almost as much as I do at my home latitude of 37°41'N.

A Captain Ross, former commander of the *Isabella*, was lost for four years, surviving with his men by some desperate means near "Navy Board Inlet," and was rescued on August 26, 1833, when he and his three boats of men set off to signal a ship. "The leader of the three boats, a gaunt, grim, bearded man, 'dirty and dressed in the rags of wild beasts,' said, 'I am Captain Ross.'" The mate of the *Isabella* refused to believe him and told him Ross had been dead two years or more.

A few pages before came the account of the loss of the *Shannon* when, on April 26, 1832, at latitude 58°20'N, she ran into an iceberg during a gale. The ship fell apart under the crew and partially sank. The captain and those crew members who had not been washed overboard survived on salvaged provisions under a shelter rigged up from a sail. "A Shetlander suggested to the surgeon of the *Shannon* 'that he should bleed [his fellow crew member], that he might drink his own blood to quench his intolerable thirst.' The surgeon had his lancet in his pocket; he opened one of the man's veins and collected the blood in an old shoe. The man drank his own blood with delight." The surgeon then bled a dying man to offer him the same meal, but he died, and the shoeful of blood was offered around to the seventeen survivors, "and it had an astonishing effect in reviving them. One by one, Captain Davey and the 16 men were then bled in succession, the doctor even bled himself. Some mixed the blood with flour, others drank straight from the shoe, but one and all found themselves wonderfully refreshed." They were rescued by "two Danish brigs bound for Davis Straits with passengers," the *Hvalfisken* and the *Navigation*, the latter headed by a Captain Bang, six days and seven nights after the wreck.



I read these stories and ate a small fragrant fresh-baked cinnamon snail (see *Swedish Baking*) and some chocolate, along with a shot of Calvados and some tea in the warm saloon, looking out occasionally at the snow blowing sideways up here at the Seven Isles north of latitude 80 on September 12, 2011. Some of the castaways in these grim accounts sickened horribly from scurvy, and on page 319, “all of us that partook of the [polar bear] liver were seized with a dreadful headache. We were nearly all dead with it in a few days; the skin came off our bodies from the crown of the head to the sole of the feet. Around that time our provisions were further reduced to 1-1/2 lbs. of bread per week; we had only 20 cwts. of bread on board, and very little meat. What could we do? We were like walking ghosts.” Would it have been odder to read my biography of Karl Marx and his family or my book on mirror neurons or my Icelandic fairy tales than to read accounts of experiences so much more intense and arduous than mine in the same region?

The click of cameras was a constant whenever there were animals or something particularly spectacular, and the lineup of cameras on deck when we went by the prettiest scenery was inevitable. And on every walk, although we were supposed to stick close, the photographers would drop off one by one, lose themselves in the making of an image, and stretch our line out to a series of broken dots. The guides were too polite to herd us well. What will become of all those photographs? I took them too; it is a reflexive response to something exciting to look at, and sometimes to something not so exciting to look at but full of potential to mutate into a photograph worth looking at. There are problems with this, and pleasures too. Later my computer slide show of the best fifty or so images became a little window into a remote place for some of my friends, a way to show them what stark beauty, what otherworldliness, what power and fragility I had seen.

REINDEER. Antlers on a skull. Then droppings looking charmingly familiar in the unfamiliar landscape. Then tiny figures in the distance, enlarged through borrowed binoculars: definitely the shortlegged reindeer of Svalbard. Reindeer, made so engaging by all the images of Sami and Siberian nomads riding and herding them, by the great herds of caribou in northern Alaska, by something about their air of both meekness and ruggedness, by the lovely way their antlers sweep back like the antlers of that famous

Scythian brooch. The Mexican reindeer made out of brightly colored wool scraps with their antlers wound in colored yarn and colored tassels everywhere are evidence that their charm carries far, right down to the edge of the subtropical jungle



of Chiapas. *Reinos* said the receipt when I bought three more of them in Guanajuato, the *reinos* who watch over me, the household guardians. And who here evolved into short-legged solid furry creatures to conserve body heat, since they don't need to flee predators, the reindeer who Oskar tells me often starve or freeze to death and whose winter grazing only serves to eke out their fat stores a little longer. I keep accidentally calling them caribou; twenty years ago I learned that the two were essentially the same species when a friend repeated the Gwich'in activist Sarah James's comment that she didn't have much use for Christmas but she liked the song about the red-nosed caribou.



ROUND PORTHOLES. The ship had every charm the word *ship* could possibly convey. The *Stockholm* is from 1953, and I felt as though I'd stepped onto the picture of a ship as I would imagine it in its ideal form. It weighs 361 tons, is 40 meters long, and has round portholes and rigging and various decks and wooden boats for ornament and a Zodiac for landings and coils of thick blue rope in baskets and Swedish colors — dark blue and pale yellow — painted on the outside. Inside it has a saloon full of rich wood and comfortable furniture and a dining room studded with old colored engravings of animals from some zoological book and a map of an earlier Arctic sea journey that shows the landmasses radiating from the pole at the center, so that you see that continents don't really describe the organization of space up here. And small cabins with bunks and round portholes and a bridge in which they keep all the old brass instrumentation even though the captain and first mate seem to steer by electronic instruments instead.

We crave, contradictorily, both security and adventure, comfort and challenge. Thus the child toddles forth to investigate but wants to be able to retreat to her mother's knee. Lying in a rocking bed in a cozy little room while the Arctic goes by through a porthole might be the highest possible fulfilment of those two

desires in combination. When the rocking of the boat brought up the horizon, I could see the mountains in the distance across the water; when it rocked down or didn't rock at all, I mostly saw the sea and straits and fjords with birds passing. Once I looked up and porpoises were going by, a series of arcs in the water.

RUSSIAN RUINS. The population at the once-thriving mining town of Pyramiden is two in the winter and about a dozen in the summer, and though the hotel that looks like a Soviet barracks is technically still open, the door that said *STAFF ONLY* would shut when we visited, leaving behind empty corridors and a smell of boiling potatoes. The dingy creatures in the little museum were falling apart, and the teeth and claws of the polar bear had been stolen. There was a gap in the floor where the heating system was being worked on, and a handful of Russian souvenirs for sale: nesting dolls and Soviet badges. Next door was a building much like the hotel, except that it was fully populated by kittiwakes, which had built nests in the deep window frames, two or three messy nests per ledge, and they screamed like seabirds and sometimes cried like children. More of them perched atop the swing sets and slide in the small bereft playground nearby. Everything else was silent. The delicate blue of the former canteen and cultural center was intact, but inside it the big plants had been allowed to die, so that their leaves were translucent light brown against the light of the windows, and in the big kitchen paint was peeling everywhere and piling up on the floor. It must have once been the northernmost movie theater in the world, and across what the Russian guide called Red Square — a long greenish rectangle



planted with imported grass on imported soil — was the newer cultural center that, he told us, contained the northernmost grand piano in the world, though all the books had been stolen out of the library. In front of the center was a statue

of what our humorous guide called “a man I never met,” Vladimir Lenin, there to be frozen and snowed upon and ignored for the foreseeable future, except in summer when groups like ours came by and took pictures. And perpendicular to the newer center was the swimming pool, a half-size Olympic pool tiled in pastel colors with the lane dividers still stretched across a dusty expanse that had not seen water in many years.

SWEDISH BAKING. Sometimes what looked like rye bread was cake, sometimes what looked like fruit bread was rye with nuts, sometimes a great brown sourdough loaf was baked, sometimes the coffee cake put out on the round table in the saloon

was extraordinarily moist and delicate, particularly considering that it was made by thin tattooed young women named Hannah and Erica, sometimes one wished that there was not quite so abundant a choice of sweets and starches. Spiral cinnamon rolls, cookies of various kinds with nuts, another moist coffee cake topped with toasted almond slivers and cardamom, chocolate cake, raspberry pie with whipped cream. (See *Nap* [2] *Me.*)



UNDERWATER FORESTS WITH PINK LANTERNS. Sometimes when the Zodiac came into the shallows for a landing you could look down and see whole forests of ruffled seaweed, long pale sheets of it in rows, and branching seaweeds, a kind of lushness that did not exist on shore, though great slimy mounds of kelp did. I said to Lisa, the forests here are all underwater, right? She beamed in approval that I had recognized this obvious fact. And there were also various kinds of jellyfish, notably small ones like pink lanterns, like the ghosts of small cucumbers and sea urchins, like tiny zeppelins, floating by in the dark clear water, festively, so delicate, so enchanting, so unlike the massive warmblooded animals that are most celebrated here. There were urchin shells, tall spiraling seashells, occasional mussel shells on shore where the seabirds flew. These were also wildlife.

WALRUS. The first walrus was more wrinkled and pink and comic than I had imagined, with its eyes invisible and its whiskery lip rising and falling like a gigantic cyclopedian eyelid. A fanged eye. Its vast chest wrinkled and creased into chasms or crevasses of dry hide. Its tusks looking mildly dignified when its head is upright, and sometimes it scratched itself with its flipper and looked more agile and more like a cat or a dog. More walruses turning their heads in various directions so that their tusks looked like semaphore torches or runes, as though they were



sending us messages we were inadequate to receive. *Odobenus rosmarus*, toothwalker. In Norse: “the seahorse that walks with its teeth.” “For me the walrus is a prehistoric animal. I feel like I am traveling back in time when I see them — or even smell them,” says Lisa, and she tells us they can use their tusks to get up on the ice and their front flippers to walk on. They have lice, walrus lice, so they are always scratching themselves. Twelve hundred kilos is average for males; eight hundred for females. Pink wartlike growths stud the male neck and breast — maybe it’s attractive! The females have straighter teeth and they don’t have the big pink warted neck. Those with the biggest teeth get to lie in the middle of the group, the “warmest nicest spot and protected from predators. Tusks start to grow at age two — live up to forty,” Lisa continued. Their only predators are killer whales and polar bears — which pursue only the females on Svalbard. Their diet is mussels in the main, sometimes fish, sometimes swimming birds and seals. They routinely eat fifty to sixty kilos of mussels, four to six thousand individual creatures per day.

A WARM WEST. This is what Tyrone, the expedition leader, told me to bring, understating the degree of cold we would encounter, or underestimating the tolerance difference between a Swede and this Californian. I liked the instruction, though, since I am always wearing the West in some sense, even if he did mean vest. But this was the far north, and I wish I had brought

my faux-fur-lined vest I wore all through my months in Montana and Wyoming in winter and Iceland in summer. And not lost my insulated jacket in the Frankfurt airport.

WATER. Life was a slender slice of this landscape that was mostly stone and various forms of water, and even the life forms were mostly marine. There were seabirds and marine mammals and whatever swam in the depths, there was water in the form of ice,



of snow, of clouds, and of sea. The open water often looked dark and smooth, as though it were an oily substance different from the seawater I know back home that is often green and pockmarked with air bubbles. The calm water sometimes be-

came a looking glass in which everything doubled itself so that mountains pointed down as well as up, and islands and icebergs were symmetrical forms like Rorschach blots turned sideways, and on the most beautiful afternoon of all, the clouds were going down as deep into the sea as they climbed in the sky. The mirror sea was often gray, from pale gray to near black, and on days with waves it was blue.

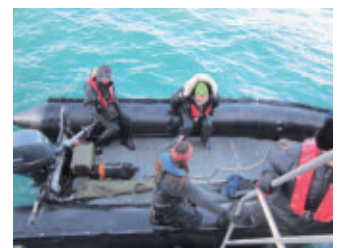
The fragility of this place was all tied up in water, or rather the cold that turns it from liquid to solid, or rather the lack of cold that causes the ice to collapse, the sea to stop freezing, and in another way it was the ice that was a true mirror, reflecting solar heat back into the sky while the dark water absorbed it and accelerated planetary warming. That was what I knew, but what I saw was clear ice, blue ice, white ice, dark water, waves, glaciers walking out to the sea, clouds, a few cold streams rushing down to that same sea.

Trapped

High in the weir
of a tree’s bare
branches
the half-moon flops
like a trapped herring
betrayed by the beautiful tide
that carried it here.
It struggles to work free
breathing harder
with every smack
of its bright body
against the shallows
and I can’t remember the last time
I was full
of light
either.

—Jean Monahan

ZODIAC. Black rubber raft used for stealing up on polar bears and for all landings, expertly captained by Lisa, clambered down onto with a ladder on the side of the boat, and heaved up onto the deck by a crane and pulley when not in use. Its name suggests another zodiac, an Arctic zodiac, a rubber ring as black as night in which the constellations are different and one is born under the sign of fox, of walrus, of ring seal, of whale, polar bear, reindeer, of pink jellyfish, quartz crystal, of spiral snail, of scurvy grass, of arctic poppy, and mosquito. 🐉



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