

Sightlines



KATHLEEN JAMIE





Aurora

THERE'S NO SWELL to speak of, just little lapping waves, so landing is just a matter of running the Zodiacs up onto the stony beach, allowing us to jump ashore. Not jump exactly: we swing our legs over the sides of the inflatable, and drop down onto the land, ideally between waves. You don't want to get your feet wet, because they'd soon freeze.

All along the shoreline lie trinkets of white ice, nudged up by the tide. A shore of ice and bones – people still come hunting here; the top of the beach is strewn with the bleached, butchered skulls and spines of narwhal and seal. Where the beach ends and the vegetation begins, an outboard engine lies abandoned, rusting violently.

While the Zodiacs are being secured, Polly and I take off our lifejackets and dump them beside the abandoned engine. Polly – I won't give her real name – is from central Europe, and is my cabin mate. I'm fortunate in her, enjoy her company. She speaks always with a sad or wistful laugh in her voice, or maybe it's just her accent.

We're part of a group who've chosen to leave the ship and come ashore, to walk up onto a low rocky ridge, for

the sake of the view. Though ‘view’ is too benign a word for the vast, unnerving scale of this land, its clarity of light. I want to try to come to terms with where I am: a whole new world, a world with ice. We are in a bay; eastward, out on the open sea, icebergs are glowing a marshmallow pink in the morning sun. They’ve escaped the confines of the fjords and float free; the currents will bear them south toward their slow dissolution. Another iceberg, white and dazzling, guards the entrance to the bay where the ship is anchored.

Polly and I are both wearing old goose-down jackets – mine patched with gaffer tape – and hats, and gloves, and boots. When the party’s assembled we begin trudging inland over crisp plants quite new to me. I’ve long loved the word ‘tundra’, with its suggestion of far-off northern emptiness, and I guess these must be tundra plants, under my feet. The plants are in their autumn colours, russets and fawns and mustard yellow. They spill between the rocks, dwarf willow and dwarf birch, and maybe bearberry. Among the trees’ mazy horizontal branches grow lichens, and a kind of reed which curls at the end, like singed cat’s whiskers. It’s September. When we tread on the plants they release a dry herby smell into the crystalline air.

‘Feather for you,’ says Polly. Although I’d been looking down at the plants, it wasn’t until I saw Polly bend and pick one up that I realised there were feathers scattered all over them. Goose feathers, caught on the dry leaves and twigs, frittering in the terse breeze. Droppings, too. The geese must have been gathered here so very recently, maybe only yesterday – hundreds of them, ready for the

off. To my mind, geese only travel north, to some place beyond the horizon. But this is that place. From here, they go south. Involuntarily I look up and out to sea, where the icebergs shine, as if to catch sight of the last flight departing toward Iceland, toward Europe. But the sky is cold, blue and empty.

We cross the hummocky goose-plain, and begin the climb onto the ridge. There’s about a dozen of us, from Europe and North America, tourists, still strangers to each other, beginning to get to know each other through polite conversation, getting to know the world a little, if that’s what we’re doing, such is our privilege. We’ve been instructed to ‘stay behind the gun’. We have a guide, a young Danish biologist, who carries flares to scare them, and a rifle as last resort, in case of aggravated polar bears, but there are no polar bears. ‘Polar bears?’ one of the ship’s Russian crewmen had shaken his head. ‘Huh. They ate the last one years ago.’

With an outcrop of smooth bare rock to shelter us, we take off our rucksacks, set aside our cameras and the gun, crouch or sit down, out of the breeze. It’s a stern breeze, blowing from the land, insouciant now, but, like everything here, it carries a sense of enormous strength withheld. Once everyone is settled, the guide makes a suggestion: why don’t we keep silent, just for a few minutes, sit still and keep quiet, just listen?

We have the sea, deceptively calm and blue and serene with icebergs, stretching away eastward under an ashy sky. Below in the bay our ship rides at anchor, looking overcomplicated among the smaller, white tufts of ice

which drift soundlessly around it. Though white, the ship looks dirty, too, the way sheep suddenly look dirty when it snows. Behind the ship, the far side of the bay rises to a low brown ridge similar to this, and beyond that ridge is arranged a row of white pinnacles – the tips of icebergs grounded in a hidden inlet. Westward rises a range of brown jagged mountains, and beyond the coastal range there are hints and gleams of something I thought at first was a band of low cloud, but it's ice, maybe the edge of the inland icecap. The air is extraordinarily clear.

That's what we see. What we listen to, though, is silence. Slowly we enter the most extraordinary silence, a radiant silence. It radiates from the mountains, and the ice and the sky, a mineral silence which presses powerfully on our bodies, coming from very far off. It's deep and quite frightening, and makes my mind seem clamorous as a goose. I want to quell my mind, but I think it would take years. I glance at the others. Some people are looking out at the distant land and sea; others have their heads bowed, as if in church.

A minute passes, maybe two, maybe five, just the breeze and this powering silence – then a raven flies over. I knew Polly likes birds, so glance to see if she's noticed it and she has; her head is tilted back and quietly she's raised her gloved hand to shield her eyes. The bird, utterly black and alone in the sky, is heading inland on steady wings. It, too, keeps quiet.

They used to navigate by raven, the Vikings, there being no stars visible at such high latitudes in summer. The old sagas say that the Viking settlers of Iceland took

ravens. Out of sight of land, wallowing at sea, they would release a raven and watch it climb the air until it was high enough to sight land. Where the raven headed, they followed in their open boats. Maybe ravens had brought them here, too, in their Greenlandic voyages, a thousand years ago. A thousand years. The blink of an eye.

Be quiet, I tell myself. Listen to the silence. I take my eye off the raven for a moment, and when I look back it's gone.

How long we sit there I don't know. I know only that I'd never heard anything like it, a silence that could dismiss a sound, as wind would dismiss a feather. Five minutes, ten, minutes in a lifetime.

Some people say you can never experience true silence, because you come to hear the high whine of your own nerves. That is to say, you hear the very nervous system which allows you to hear at all. Nerves because we are animals, not ice, not rock. Driven by cold and hunger. It's cold, our animal bodies say; best get moving. Keep warm, keep hunting. So, after maybe ten minutes, by some unspoken assent, a movement, a cough, our experience of deep silence is over, and life begins to whip us on our way. We all begin slowly to stand. Polly catches my eye, gives me the little smile and shrug which I already know are characteristic of her. We begin to move downhill, back toward the waiting boats. It's a while before anyone speaks.

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Now it's mid-afternoon and hardly silence, there's too much excitement. We're back on the ship, we're

underway and icebergs are coming. They appear ahead, one after the next, conveyed from a great manufactory, the distant Daugaard-Jensen glacier at the top of the fjord. A dozen of us, much the same dozen who had sat on the hill this morning, are leaning out over the ship's white metal bow as far as we dare, the photographers with their cameras, the birders with binoculars, shouting above the wind and engine drone. The wind is no joke; it would flay you alive, a katabatic wind, they say, which flows downhill off the icecap, and we're heading into it. You could go inside, of course, and view the ice through glass, but what's the point of that? You have to be out on deck, despite the cold, because of the cold, if you are to feel the white, deadening presence of the icebergs. Someone calls, 'They're so... organic!' But organic is just what they're not. Their shapes and forms are without purpose, adapted to no end. They are huge and utterly meaningless.

The icebergs come on down the fjord in a slow cavalcade, one by one, higher than the ship, closer and closer, and every time I think 'Surely, surely, this time, we're going to collide,' but always the ship turns aside gracefully, by just a few degrees, and the iceberg glides away to port or starboard. As they pass, they rear above like a building does, all sculpted and white, with fissures of deepest blue, but also they plunge on down underwater, in tilting levels of sapphire, down into the mile-deep waters, where they have their greater existence.

The fjord water is choppy and grey, and between icebergs smaller morsels of ice bob along, now a rocking boat, now an angel's wings. These little pieces look like

Christmas decorations but when the ship hits one it bangs like an oil drum beaten with a stick. And there are the mountainsides, the fjord walls. I realise I have the scale completely wrong; the scale is vast. On either side of the fjord, mountains rise to pinnacles of 6000 feet. They look as lifeless as cathedral spires, but I know now there are plants on their lower slopes, leading fugitive lives – animals, too. Small glaciers, some shrivelled far uphill, leave trails of moraine and gravel reaching down to the water. There's a lull, the wind, the engine, and then another iceberg appears, approaching with the hauteur of a huge catwalk model.

The next iceberg offers to the ship a ramp as smooth and angled as a ski jump. Just slide right up here, little ship, it seems to say, but the invitation is declined. It passes astern. Then the next appears down the fjord – a preposterous cake, with ink-blue shadows. Then another, the size of a three-storey house, with walls knapped into smooth, hard facets, like flint. Under the water's surface they are a blue you could fall into, as you could have fallen forever into the silence of the morning. It's like some slow delirium, a fantasy you can't shake, but with an undertow of menace. Although we shout when they appear, it's different when they glide past; no one speaks then. The cameras click, but the icebergs give nothing, suggest nothing but a white nihilism.

After a while the wind and cold become unbearable, so I leave the others out on deck and make my way along the port side, shoving open the heavy sea door under the lifeboat, into the blessed, slightly food-and-diesel-smelling

warmth of the ship's interior. I shut the door; the wind stops. Then two flights of stairs take me up to the bridge. It's the same for all of us: we're like cats, always on the wrong side of every door, meeting each other always at the doors. Not everyone, the same dozen diehards: the huge German doctor with his huger camera, the Finnish birder, the Dutch photographer, Polly, myself. Desire to behold the icebergs, a fear we might miss something drives us out onto the deck, into the noise and scouring wind, until desire for a few moments' warmth drives us inside again.

On the bridge, a warm competent calm prevails. No one shouts there, certainly not the officers. Wide windows give panoramic views beyond the ship's mast and white prow of the fjord ahead, as the ship sails steadily on. It's a long fjord – the longest in the world – and we will keep sailing till nightfall. From here the icebergs ahead look like a jumbled barrier, as if there were no way through, but the radar shows otherwise. I like to look at the radar screen, and I like to watch the ship's captain and officers as they consult it.

The screen is the size of a small TV, and has shields around it the better to shut out any reflection or glare. On a black background, the fjord walls show as two green glowing lines, straight as the kerbs of a road; the icebergs are a rash of green dots between them. The officers move calmly between window and radar, radar and window, studying now one, now the other, checking one against the other, determining a course. In an alcove behind the bridge, screened at night by curtains, is the desk where the charts lie, with compasses and

pencils, under an angle-poise lamp; a digital readout gives the ship's latitudes and longitude, as transmitted by satellite. It's quiet on the bridge, like a public library, but for the constant faint reassuring drone of the heating or ventilation.

But it's no good being indoors. Once warm again you have to be out – but the instant you put your shoulder to the seadoor, and lift your foot over the high step, so you are again under the lifeboats on their derricks, the wind claims you, you've to walk head down onto the bow, where the wall offers some little protection. Polly has been in for a coffee, but she, too, is back out again. She has been to these latitudes many times, but she's still keen, though, still interested. She is standing on a little metal step set into the bow.

'Like a harpoonist!' she calls.

'What's to harpoon? Any narwhal?' We'd love to see narwhal.

'No narwhal!' she replies, giving her little laugh.

We see few animals. There have been little ringed seals hauled out on small icefloes. They have happy-go-lucky expressions, despite their austere world, and they dive as the ship nears. And earlier – the Finnish birder was hopping across the icy deck in excitement – two white gyrfalcons appeared right overhead, attacking one of the young kittiwakes which have been the ship's constant companions. The falcons were working together. One (you could see the sandy bars of its undersides) tried driving the gull up from below, as the other descended toward her – there was a twist and turn of wings and a lot of shouted

support – but the desperate gull was the more agile, and she managed to jink away into a lead of clear air, then fly up against the blue sky until she vanished, whereupon the falcons vanished, too. We look for birds and animals all the time, amongst the lifeless ice. I like the way the birds use the icebergs, how they perch on them, quite at ease, hitching a slow ride downstream. Glaucous gulls, a raven or two, another upright white gyrfalcon.

Another iceberg, and another. Some people say you can smell icebergs, that they smell like cucumbers. You can smell icebergs and hear your own nervous system. I don't know. Although they pass slowly and very close, I smell nothing but colossal, witless indifference.



Eventually, in the early evening, in a bay safe from icebergs, the anchor goes rattling down. Tufts and bows of white ice drift around the ship. The fjord is wider here, less relentlessly spectacular; there is a different geology. Instead of jagged basalt mountains, we look out on smooth hills of ice-worn rock, with patches of snow.

The wind has dropped, the water is tranquil enough to hold the hills' reflections. Soon it will be dark, but in the last of the daylight we watch – the photographers are all out on deck, their lenses trained – a family of seven stolid musk oxen as they trundle slowly over the hillside. The animals are much the same rusty colour as the vegetation they graze. With downward-curved horns framing

their droopy faces, the males look like they're unhappily in drag. They all have a dusting of whitish guard hairs on their shoulders, like frost.

We eat and, as night falls, the waters of our anchorage change. I'm leaning over the side, puzzling about the sea 25 feet below. It's become a sluggish eerie green, and suddenly it reminds me of a horrible rubber sheet my mother used to produce, to complete our humiliation, if my sister or brother or I had a phase of bed-wetting. I haven't thought about that sheet for forty years, but here it is: deep in a fjord in east Greenland at nightfall, at 71 degrees of latitude, undulating around the ship: salt-water, slowly beginning to freeze.



Now it's after midnight, and dark. We have been to bed, lain in the dark in our cabins, but are up again, jackets and jerseys thrown over our pyjamas, boots, hats and gloves, and are again standing on the ship's foredeck, eight or ten of us, in twos or alone. Some lean on the rail, some stand in the middle of the deck. There is no electric light; the crew must have switched them off, so there is ship's equipment to negotiate in the darkness, winches and a mast. Although there is no wind now, it's deeply cold and we move with care, because the metal deck underfoot is glazed with ice. If we speak at all, it's in whispers.

The land is featureless now, and the water black, but the heavens are vivacious. We are standing with heads tilted back, marvelling.

Luminous green, teal green, the aurora borealis glows almost directly overhead. It intensifies against the starry night like breath on a mirror, and it moves. Across the whole sky from east to west, the green lights shift and alter. Now it's an emerald veil, now with a surge it remakes itself into a swizzle which reaches toward some far-away place in the east. We're like an audience – some gaze directly, others have again raised long-lensed cameras – standing in the deep cold, looking up, keeping silence, but it's not a show, it's more like watching fluidity of mind; an intellectualism, after the passivity of icebergs. Not the performance of a finished work but a redrafting and recalculating. In fact, because the aurora's green is exactly the same glowing green as the ship's radar screen, as the readout which gives the latitude and longitude, the aurora looks less like a natural phenomenon, more like a feat of technology.

Some people say you can hear the northern lights, that they whoosh or whistle. Silence, icebergs, musk oxen, and now the aurora borealis – the phenomena of the Arctic. This is why we've come here. This is why we are out on the freezing deck at midnight. The lights alter again. Low voices, the rapid clattering of cameras.

Polly comes up beside me and pokes me as best she can through all the layers of clothes. With head tilted back she whispers, 'They are changing without moving', which is true, and I fall to wondering if there are other ways of changing without moving. Growing older perhaps, as we are. Reforming one's attitudes, maybe.

Bright teal green. Once upon a time, whaling ships had come to these latitudes, with orders to return heavy with oil and baleen. Now the aurora alters into long trailing verticals, and it makes me think of baleen. Sifting. Sifting what? Stars, souls, particles. You could fancy the northern night were a great whale whose jaws our ship were entering.

We stand side by side watching, as the green lights close themselves in, then instantly flare out again like a concertina, like people can do who're really skilled at shuffling cards. It's a movement which ought to whoosh, but there is deep silence. There's something in the lights I recognise – a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with their own arrangements.

But: 'Where is everyone else?' I whisper. Aside from those few on the deck, the shapes of a few more people can be seen looking out from the windows of the bridge. The bridge, warm and reassuring with its competent officers and glowing green instruments. Where is everyone? My cabin mate clamps her arms to the sides of her goose-down jacket, stands rigid, and whispers in reply, 'Perhaps they are asleep.' She smiles as though she'd looked into the human condition some time ago, but has since moved on.

Or perhaps it is the cold. The cold is no joke. Stealthy, penetrating, already prospecting our bones. Perhaps they decided against heeding the impassioned calls on the PA to come and see the northern lights in all their spectacle, because of the cold. Perhaps they lie, as Polly suggests, like alabaster knights on a tomb, down in their cabins,

changing without moving. Once more the lights alter and breathe. Someone gasps, then laughs softly and the cameras click.

Where, also, are the animals? The musk oxen and seals and gyrfalcons, and the kittiwake which escaped with its life – what do they do in the night, under the stars and the aurora? I like the aurora; there is something both elegant and driven in this green restlessness.



Once, I asked my friend John – half in jest – why we are so driven. By day John counsels drug addicts; by night he is a poet. He wrote back, half in jest: ‘You know, my job isn’t to provide answers, only more questions. Like: why are we not more driven? Consider: the atoms of you have been fizzing about for a bit less than five billion years, and for forty-odd of those years, they’ve been pretty well as self-aware as you. But soon enough they’ll go fizzing off again into the grasses and whatever, and they’ll never, ever know themselves as the sum of you again. That’s it. And you ask me why we’re driven? Why aren’t more folk driven? Whatever are they thinking about?’

I have no idea what folk are thinking about. Right now, I’m thinking if we could taste the green aurora, it would fizz on the tongue and taste like crème de menthe. Right now, Polly and I are playing at finding the Pole Star, by means of the Great Bear. Just for fun, we won’t have to navigate ourselves home like the old whalers by stars and sextants, or indeed by raven. We

find the Pole Star and, with mock solemnity, salute it. It would show us the road north. There is always farther north. We see two shooting stars, and a satellite journeying on.

Now we are shrill with cold. Once again the flickering and pulsing of our own minds, our own mutability, tell us that’s enough. Enough silence this morning, enough aurora now, thank you. Enough natural wonder, enthralling, mysterious and wild – we too are going to retire indoors.



Wakeful, Polly and I talk quietly in the dark. Curtains screen our bunks, so Polly is just a voice, a lilt and sad laugh. She’s telling me that, some years ago, when she was about the age I am now, she suddenly fell ill. As a consequence, she suffered a calling into question, an inner rearrangement which was frightening, but liberating. As she speaks, I picture these events as happening in restless green, like the aurora borealis, in the dark of the mind, as revealing of the hidden as the radar screen. Or maybe it’s like colliding with an iceberg, just as one is cruising along, in the middle of one’s life. These things happen. You can look down and down into a beguiling blue and not know where you are. Polly still works the land, as she did before these events, growing food in good rich soil. She calls herself ‘a peasant’. However, every year since that reassessment, she says, she has saved to make a journey such as this to the Arctic north, where there are no fruits and crops, only tundra and rock and ice.

‘What brings you?’ I ask.

‘The birds bring me!’ she laughs, and her accent makes its sound as though she travels in a chariot drawn by geese.

‘I’m sorry you’ve missed the geese...’ I say, and again comes that little laugh, out of the dark.

‘But now they are in my fields!’

‘And you?’ she asks.

‘Nothing like that,’ I say, meaning, ‘I have not been ill, not yet, or suffered a sudden calamity.’

‘What brings me? I don’t rightly know. But for thirty years I’ve been sitting on clifftops, looking at horizons. From Orkney, Shetland, St Kilda...?’

‘I know these places. And you wanted to know what was beyond?’

‘No. Actually, I never did. Not until very recently. Suddenly I wanted to change my map. Something had played itself out. Something was changing.’

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The northern lights may or may not make sound, but I believe they kept us awake. All that energy. In the morning, over breakfast, some people agree, but others scoff at this idea: they are eighty miles up – how can they keep you awake? They are just charged particles, trapped in the earth’s magnetic field. True, but aren’t we all?

We are tourists, on this trip, anyhow. Maybe also in the larger sense, John’s sense. Here today, fizzing away into the grasses and silence tomorrow.

I’m not necessarily comfortable with having a place, a vast new landscape, mediated by guides, but it’s how it is. I wouldn’t last five minutes alone here, in the cold and the ice.

Among the passengers are doctors, dentists and engineers: people, it would seem, of professional certainty. People like myself – and Polly, I suspect – who don’t quite know what we are. Who know only that we live short lives, that we float on the surface of a powerful silence, on the surface of a mile-deep fjord, with icebergs, that we’re driven by some sort of life force, flickering and green.

I float on the surface of knowledge, too. Of climate science, for example. The icecap is two miles deep. In 2003, a team who’d spent seven years drilling through the Greenland ice to fetch up core samples at last hit bedrock. The ice at bottom of the core is 20,000 years old. They were bringing the deep past out of its silence, waking it up to ask it about change. There are people who crawl about on glaciers, measuring speeds and surges, and the calving of icebergs. Together they bring worrisome news from the farthest remotes. I sail on the surface of understanding, a flicker here, a silence there.

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Abruptly, as though a door had slammed somewhere farther north, the weather changes. Cloud climbs low down the mountainsides and, suddenly, the following afternoon, it begins to snow and snow. Later the people of Ittoqqortoormiit – a small town of pitched roofed

houses, where the sled dogs howl – will say that this year had been strange: no spring and no autumn, just bang! the brief summer, then bang! winter again. Maybe the geese had heard this change coming, under their clamour, through that appalling silence, and they'd chosen that moment to go. And the gyrfalcons. Maybe, the birders suggest, we are seeing so many gyrfalcons because they're arriving from yet farther north. If the snow falls and then freezes, say the naturalists, the musk oxen will starve.

We can't see the fjord walls, only cloud. Very soon, the ship's decks and rails and superstructure are under snow, the vessel becomes a frail, white-rigged thing, despite its metal and modernity and ice-strengthened hull. Not for the first time, as I move about the ship, I think about the nineteenth-century sailors, the whalers and explorers, the stories that come down to us, about how they got beset in the Arctic dark. When the snow lands on the water, it doesn't melt away. Instead it coheres into soft patches, little discrete clumps, until the water all around looks like an animal's pelt, lifting in the swell, breathing.

Looking down at the snow-covered water, I feel a sudden strong urge to be away from here, to head south. 'Like a goose!' I say to Polly.

She plucks at my old down jacket. 'It's because you are a goose!'

They take the ship down the fjord by night, negotiating icebergs through dark and snow. Tricky sailing, I shouldn't wonder, but the two officers of the watch,

handsome if unsmiling, remain impassive as they work. Visibility is poor, but the aurora-green radar betrays the icebergs. The first officer leans over the radar, then moves back to the windows. I have no idea what he's thinking. From time to time he reaches overhead to a handle in the ceiling which controls a searchlight mounted outside on the deck above. As he turns the handle, a beam of light sweeps side to side beyond the ship's bows, picking out icebergs in the darkness ahead. As it moves through the dark, the searchlight beam glitters with falling snow.

After a long while watching from the bridge, I go outside, pushing through the doors and entering the sudden engine noise and cold. For once, I don't go to the front, but onto the aft-deck, where the Zodiacs are stowed under their winch. There is snow on the rails, snow underfoot. There is no sky, no stars, no aurora, only snow. The icebergs are much more sinister now. Each, in its weird majesty, slips alongside, lit white by the ship's lights, only to fall behind into darkness, into the ship's wake, reducing and reducing till it's nothing but a gleam, like the grin of the Cheshire Cat. I bear it as long as I can, then go back inside to the warm.