

ANTARCTICA: LIFE ON THE ICE - LEAVING THE ICE - WILLIAM L. FOX

Leaving Antarctica is excruciating. As I sat knee to knee in the cargo plane leaving the Ice I looked around at the tears rolling down the cheeks of the men and women surrounding me. I cried too because the chance of returning was slim; I was leaving *forever*.

McMurdo, which has all the charm of a remote industrial town, does have several quirky, poetic details—the library, for one. Another is a poem engraved, one word per step, on a small wooden pedestrian bridge that spans some above-ground pipes. This was one of the first things that I was shown (by contributor Karen Joyce) when I arrived in McMurdo and as he leaves the ice, William L. Fox weaves his poetic tribute to the continent around this poem.

Bill has published ten nonfiction books about cognition and landscape, fourteen collections of poetry in three countries, and numerous essays in exhibition catalogs, photography monographs, and journals. He has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and been a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Institute and the Clark Art Institute. Fox has led treks in Nepal, taught both climbing and the writing of art criticism at the University of Nevada Reno, and worked in both the Antarctic and Canadian High Arctic. He is a fellow of both the Royal Geographical Society and the Explorer's Club.

Leaving the Ice  
William L. Fox

*McMurdo, Antarctica: January*

walking

It's eight o'clock at night and we're shivering, despite the sunlight glinting in a golden haze off the sea ice. The sun, elevated only a couple of hand widths above the horizon, is unable to warm us. Two weeks ago on New Year's Eve it was 51°F here, the warmest temperature ever recorded at McMurdo. Dozens of us sat out on a deck at midnight, faces tilted into the sun and watching as the low light burnished the glaciers in the Transantarctic Mountains into rivers of molten brass. We took off our boots and socks, rolled up our pant legs, and drank red wine. It could have been Malibu Beach, except for the thirty miles of frozen ocean separating us from the mountains on the coast opposite.

The height of summer has passed within a week, and this evening the windchill is far below zero. At this time of year there might be as many as five thousand people on a continent the size of the United States and Canada combined, and roughly twelve hundred of them are stationed in and work out of McMurdo, the southernmost port in the world. The "town" covers a hundred square acres, the largest station on the ice, but its metal-clad buildings on pylons and heavy equipment make it feel more like the backside of a mining operation in Alaska. When it's warm enough to allow a sense of smell, the odor of aircraft fuel hangs faintly everywhere. It gave the wine on New Year's, an Australian Shiraz, a bouquet akin to diesel.

across

The three of us working on the Bridge of Size get cold-soaked every half hour or so, and take turns going into Cray Laboratory or Building 155, the buildings at either end, to get warm. Cray is the central working facility for the American scientists working on the ice, which is to say almost anywhere in the Antarctic. The Antarctic is famously the coldest, windiest, highest, driest, most remote continent on Earth, and McMurdo's buildings are designed to cope with those superlatives. The doors into the lab are the kind you find on freezers in meat packing plants, but they are used here to keep out the cold. The lab walls are a foot thick, the atmosphere warm and humidified, and the building is heavily anchored on concrete footings underneath which snow is supposed to blow through, as opposed to accumulate in drifts. The design was worked out by an architectural firm in Hawaii. Crews spend weeks patiently chipping out the ice that builds up underneath the buildings.

Building 155 contains the cafeteria, barbershop, and local radio station, two Wells Fargo automatic teller machines and public computer terminals used for e-mailing people back home. It's insulated as heavily as the lab and its windowless dorm rooms are notoriously too warm at times. In a place where it gets so cold during the six-month night that hammers shatter and screwdrivers snap like twigs, it's difficult for a species that evolved in the temperate zones to get it right.

a

Melissa Iszard, her tongue poking out between her teeth as she concentrates, carefully letters the words of a poem in pencil on the front of each step of the wooden bridge that crosses the pipes running in between Cray and 155. Twenty-four-hour sunlight at this time of year means that people routinely work until midnight, and traffic between the two busiest buildings is brisk, even at this time of day. Or night. It doesn't really matter what you call it, the sun orbiting around the horizon at all hours.

poem

The bridge is nine feet high, twenty-five feet long, eleven steps up, eleven steps down. One word per tread. Risk Miller, who has a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art, but who works as an ironworker here, manages to put several of his many skills to use as he carves the words with an electric router. Our source of power is the power pole they plug the trucks into to keep the engine blocks from freezing.

When Melissa asked me for a poem to add to the bridge, I envisioned a trope for the strangers who create a community here every year. I wanted a text about the meeting and greeting and leavetaking that occur on the bridge that you would both read and walk upon as you engaged in those very acts.

Melissa draws, Risk carves, and I talk to pedestrians as they cross the bridge—geologists and astrophysicists, heavy equipment operators and cooks, helicopter pilots, and visiting dignitaries. Most people who work here nod in appreciation of the poem, but a couple of visiting

military personnel mock the idea of poetry in the Antarctic. Everyone keeps walking, however, no matter how they feel about it. The top of the bridge is just high enough to catch the wind.

today

I've been here for almost three months, working as a visiting writer both in the Crary library and out in the field, and this is my last night in the Antarctic. I'm heartbroken to be flying out in two hours on a National Guard cargo plane to Christchurch. It does that to everyone, leaving here. I've never met anyone who has worked in the Antarctic who didn't want to go back. Unlike Melissa and Rick, who expect to return next season, I have no reason to suspect that I will be able to return. Visiting writers and artists are usually given only one trip per lifetime.

Just offshore a red-and-white U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker churns a circle in the sea ice, keeping open the channel it's made for the annual delivery of food and supplies that will soon arrive on a freighter. Across the sound the mountains stand fourteen-thousand-feet high. I've spent much of the last three months looking at them, either while out on the sea ice or from the top floor of the lab. Every time I'd take a break from writing on my laptop, I'd go prop my elbows on the deep window casements to stare out at the peaks and glaciers. Most mornings, when the air had warmed enough above the sea ice, a Fata Morgana would appear; impossible cliffs would flicker into existence for an hour or two, slowly changing shape as the thermal discontinuity between surface and air shifted slightly.

The Antarctic is like that, throwing up extravagant promises before you and then melting them away. The Bridge of Size is a pun on the Bridge of Sighs in Italy, and tonight both wind and emotion cut through me, singing a duet of loss, which is what the poem is about.

two

Melissa comes to the ice every austral summer to work, as do many of the town's hundreds of seasonal residents. There are no permanent settlers here, and no mammals live on the continent. The seals haul out only to sun themselves and to whelp their pups, and even penguins hop out of the water only to incubate their eggs. People will sometimes overwinter—Melissa has—but this year she's down just for the summer to work as one of the senior administrators at Crary. No one is allowed to spend more than eighteen continuous months here, a precaution based on the psychological experiences of early explorers.

During the other half of the year Melissa lives in a cabin on her property in Maine, a place she helped build by hand. When she comes to the ice, she brings fabric with which to drape the walls in the two-person dorm room that she shares with another woman, a carpenter who works in the Arctic during the summer. Books of poetry and cross-country skis are also part of her personal kit, the latter so she can glide out from Ross Island and onto the sea ice, inscribing a brief trace of her own on the landscape.

The ice—geologists here consider it a mineral, and when they drill or cut into it, the tools they use are those of hard-rock mining. The ice is on the sea, on the ground, in the air. In places it is almost three miles thick and has depressed the bedrock below sea level, making the Antarctic simultaneously the highest and the lowest continent. It reflects back more than eighty

percent of the light falling upon it, and bends the sun into improbable arcs and circles. You walk on it, drive across it, breathe it in.

strangers

Like most people who work on the ice, Melissa is anchored to two places. She looks forward to returning north next month, yet is already regretting it. In Maine there's an orchard that needs pruning, an arbor to be rebuilt, and trails around the boundary of her wooded acreage that need to be cleared of deadfall from this winter's storms. But within a week of returning to Maine, she'll be on the phone to Raytheon, the defense contractor that currently runs polar logistics for the National Science Foundation from its offices in Denver. She'll be looking for work for the next season on the ice, so she can resume work on her natural history of Hut Point Peninsula, this part of Ross Island.

Ice people say that you have to say goodbye to your family twice a year if you work in the Antarctic. You bid the folks at home farewell when you head south; then you have to say goodbye to everyone at McMurdo when you go north. It wears on you, but you adapt. Some support people have been commuting for two decades, spending a cumulative total of more than seven years on the ice. That makes them as close to residents as you can become here.

speak

Risk is a compactly built, affable fellow in his mid-thirties. He'll depart this year on the same schedule as Melissa, and along with a bunch of other people spend a few weeks decompressing on the coast of New Zealand. Afterwards, he'll take advantage of the round-the-world airfares that are among the perks of working on the ice. His end-of-season bonus will be large enough to keep him in Europe during spring before he has to show up for work in Alaska, where he drives a tour bus in Denali National Park during the northern summer.

Risk remains deeply unsure about what to do with his bipolar life. Unmarried, wandering, unsettled, he's an artist talented enough to have been offered a solo exhibition at one of the better galleries in the western United States, but he blew it off to come to the ice this year. Many artists would kill for an invitation to exhibit in that venue—but not someone bound for the Antarctic.

each

Uphill from us is a chain of hands about ten feet long that Risk cut out of some scrap steel last year. It forms what could perhaps be justified as a safety railing downhill from the carpentry shop. In theory it might prevent people from slipping on ice or mud into the path of the red pickups and vans, the yellow graders, and other equipment plying the road. The reality is that people here, like any other tribe living on the edge of the possible, will use whatever material they can find in order to make something that symbolizes who and where they are—part of the process of converting land into landscape, space into place.

Next to one of the pale green metal buildings in town is a twenty-foot-long orca made from scrap rebar. It stands on steel runners welded to its torso so it can be dragged on the snow. Orcas swim in the sound just offshore scouting for penguins and seals, and they are the emblematic top of the food chain here. The sculpture is as much a totem as anything else, and

many of us think it should be dragged back into the middle of town, which consists of a dirt square hosting the bus stop for the shuttles that ply the road between McMurdo and the nearby New Zealand base. A small sign identifies the square as Derelict Junction.

others

The wooden Bridge of Size is a sturdy assemblage of two-by-fours and other assorted sizes of lumber. Its purpose is to allow people passage over six thickly insulated pipes and conduits, part of the network that winds its way around town bearing water, power, sewage, and glycol. The latter, a chemical cousin of the antifreeze that flows in the blood of the Antarctic cod swimming offshore in McMurdo Sound's 29°F waters, heats the radiators in the buildings. In a sense, we're injecting a poem into the town's circulatory system.

Originally there was supposed to be another course of pipes stacked above the present one, and the bridge was built high enough to accommodate them. Its "size" is a reminder of how often things here don't fit as planned, although they work well enough. Much human presence in the Antarctic is like that: jury-rigged to accommodate available materials to circumstances.

Karen Joyce, the woman who runs Internet Services at Crary, has been adding embellishments to the bridge. She collects items from around McMurdo—small plastic dinosaurs, for example, and unusual rocks brought in from elsewhere on the continent—and glues them onto the wood. At first she just placed them on the railings, but people insisted on taking them, so she's taken to fixing them down permanently with increasingly stronger bonding agents. It's not that people are stealing her additions. Perhaps appropriating is the more accurate term—finding yet another context in which the items would be valued. People have also been donating new items to the bridge, including words on magnetic pieces shuffled into poems, and a metal cube by Risk that asks to be turned over, then displays the words "Thank you" on the other side.

tongue

Melissa has worked her way over the top of the bridge and is about to start on the far side, but she's beginning to shiver, even inside the huge parka that I've lent her. She nods and takes off for the galley in 155 to warm up. Risk keeps carving away, still on the first side; his task is the slower of the two. He stops to warm his hands from time to time. I stand and watch, keep talking to people as they pass over the bridge. The station manager comes out of 155 and casts a glance in our direction. I flinch. Carving up U.S. government property, much less with government-issue tools and without authorization, isn't considered a legitimate science project. People have been banned for life from the ice for lesser offenses. He turns and walks the other way.

climbing

The original Bridge of Sighs was built in Venice in 1600 and connected the palace of the Doge to the prison across a narrow canal. Its interior is so cramped you have to hunch down to make your way. Thomas Hood used the phrase in a poem written in 1875 about a young woman committing suicide, but it was Lord Byron who first applied it to the bridge in Venice. In his

poem he speculated upon the melancholy that prisoners might have felt as they crossed on their way to internment, seeing, perhaps for the last time, the lagoon and the freedom it represented.

In attaching keepsakes to the bridge, Karen and her cohorts were playing consciously off Byron's notion of loss. When you leave the ice it is a potential exile because you never know if you'll be hired to return. You might not pass the rigorous physical exam the next year, or your job could be eliminated. The most horrible fate that can be meted out by the authorities in the Antarctic is to banish you deliberately from the continent. It's a simple matter to do so—they just put you on a plane and won't rehire you. Even if you were rich enough to return as a tourist on one of the infrequent ships that manages to visit this far south, you'd be able to stay only for a few hours. You'd never again be able to cross-country ski across the frozen ocean, or be part of the McMurdo community.

The exile is much more than geographical. Scientists who come to the Antarctic are here for their work; Ross Island could be Venezuela for all they care. But the support people come mostly because they want specifically and in the worst way to be on the ice. The guy who runs the mechanical shop is a former Fulbright Scholar specializing in Antarctic history. The woman who this season drives a grader along the main road in town—mockingly referred to as "Antarctic 1"—has skied to the South Pole. Ask a bus driver what he does, and you're likely to find out that he's climbed Mount Everest. Twice. On a per capita basis they are the most accomplished, curious, self-sufficient, and dependable people I've ever met. To be cast out from such a highly motivated community against your will is the worst divorce imaginable.

a

Melissa returns and now it's Risk's turn to take a break inside. He puts down the router and trots off, while she goes back to lettering. Melissa did her master's thesis in biology on alpine plants, and she's expert at locating the smallest scraps of life. As part of her research for the book about the natural history here, she monitors the growth of moss on the peninsula. I had told her that the scientists insisted that no moss grows this far south—farther north on the island, up near the Adelie penguin rookery at Cape Royds, yes, but not down here. Melissa smiled, shook her head, and one late November morning took me for a walk out past Scott's 1904 hut. After climbing up the nearby ridge, we found a thumbnail-sized piece of moss growing near a trickle of water flowing from a glacial remnant.

A month later we returned, when the snow cover had retreated from around McMurdo, and clumps of moss were visible almost anywhere there was flowing water, which during this unusually warm summer was all over the ridge. "Life wants to live," she reminded me.

bridge

Across tiny Winter Quarter's Bay, which is visible between the dorms on the other side of Derelict Junction, I can glimpse Scott's hut from his *Discovery* expedition. It's one of the oldest standing structures in the Antarctic, a protected historical site, and a testament to the changes in our relationship to the continent. Scott bought the Australian outback building before sailing from Hobart. It featured deep eaves all around, and was designed to shed heat, not collect and retain it—at the very least a dubious choice. It was bitterly cold inside, even during summer, and

still smells of the seal blubber burned in the stoves, soot from which coats the walls. It was so miserable that it was used mostly for storage; the explorers chose to live instead in the much more familiar and cozy berths aboard the ship.

Take a photograph from the far side of the hut and looking toward the dorms and Crary Lab—the construction punch list for which was just finished this year—and you capture the entire history of McMurdo in a single frame. To survive on the ice at the beginning of the twentieth century, human beings had very much to want to live. No glycol flowed through radiators to keep them warm. No hot showers awaited them after the long hours of taking observations in the wind. What kept them going was a sense of common purpose and community, feelings abetted by the presence of the ship, their link to England.

of

Now it's ten o'clock and Risk has worked his way over to the other side of the bridge, where Melissa has finished the lettering. I'm beginning to think that we won't get all the words carved before I have to walk uphill to catch my ride on the Terra Bus, a Canadian vehicle with tires as tall as I am that's made for traversing the roads plowed on the sea ice. I've made more friends here in three months than I have in the last ten years, and the thought of not working alongside them within sight of ice—sea ice, glacial ice, the ice shelf, icebergs—it's as if someone were stealing the light from me.

You're not officially allowed on the plane if you're drunk, and like many first timers I'm almost tempted to hit one of the three local bars hard and fast. Almost. It's a tactic that's been tried before. They put you on the plane anyway, or just sober you up until the flight the next day.

words

On the other side of town from Scott's Hut is Observation Hill, a steep 750-foot-high mound of volcanic rock that veers in color from red and orange through brown and black. Its summit is the most frequented hiking destination near town, one often sought by people within twenty-four hours of arriving, as they instinctively seek high ground from which to orient themselves. This was my favorite time of day to hike its abrupt switchbacks, pausing at the ledge halfway up where the early explorers took their meteorological readings. The rocks there offer shelter from the wind, and it's a place to collect your breath before continuing up the second and steeper half of the trail, which tends to collect more snow and ice. Slip on the lower half, and you might roll downhill a few yards; take a tumble up above and the consequences could be fatal.

At the summit stands the famous wooden cross commemorating Scott and his four companions who died with him when returning from their attempt to be the first to reach the South Pole. The Norwegian Amundsen, who adopted travel methods from the Arctic Inuit, had beaten them by a month and survived the trip in good shape. Scott and his men, in part through lack of planning, starved and froze to death only eleven miles from a food cache and less than ninety miles from "Ob Hill."

The cross quotes Scott, who was in turn quoting Tennyson's *Ulysses*: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." People trudge up the hill and touch the cross, metaphorically clasping hands

with that earlier generation—but there's a sense of irony in the gesture, too. When something goes wrong at McMurdo or in the field, ice people are likely to intone, with a less-than-straight face: "It's a harsh continent." It's a way of acknowledging not only the reality of the place, but the inevitable incompetence that we drag around behind us as we attempt to turn parts of an extreme land into a human landscape.

two

The view from the top of Ob Hill is a lesson in such extremities. When you arrive at the top your back is to McMurdo Sound, which stretches away to the north. To your right stand the Transantarctic Mountains, which for 1,370 miles separate the archipelago of West Antarctica from the barren ice plateau of East Antarctica. To your left is Mount Erebus, the southernmost active volcano in the world, and at thirteen thousand feet the most prominent vertical landmark for McMurdo residents. In front of you is the white *tabula rasa* of the Ross Ice Shelf, where Scott and his companions perished.

Mt. Erebus is, simply, mythical. A constant plume of ash and steam reminds us that it holds a live lava lake in its crater, one of perhaps only three in the world. If you're fortunate enough to climb the mountain in the company of the vulcanologists camped on its upper slopes, you can lean gingerly over the rim and observe the constant venting process. Peering into the crater through clouds of steam to glimpse the lake is to take the pulse of the planet.

lovers

If Erebus is the dominant vertical element from the top of "Ob" Hill, then the great unbroken flat expanse of the Ross Ice Shelf, which stretches out over the horizon in front of you, is the corresponding horizontal feature. Formed by the confluence of the glaciers that flow down through the Transantarctics from the plateau, its surface area is the size of France, and it's the single largest piece of ice on the planet. Pieces of it as large as Rhode Island have been breaking off during the last year; if the shelf were to melt, several American cities would find themselves treading water, an idea that seemed entirely within the realm of the possible on New Year's Eve, as we basked in midnight sun.

Turning in a circle, keeping one hand on the cross for balance on the icy crown of the hill, you gaze out over what seems to be the purest landscape you can imagine—a white page bordered by peaks, the air so clear that you can see individual ridges and gullies a hundred miles away. Even the industrial detritus of McMurdo is attractive in its own way, in the same way that the everyday clutter of a living room signals that it's home

I look up at Ob Hill from my station next to the bridge and stamp my feet on the ground, which produces no warming effect whatsoever. Two people are walking up the trail in their red government-issue parkas. Despite the wind and cold, they'll be sweating from the exertion. They'll find a nook in the rocks below the cross, and settle in to watch the icebreaker, its circular wake a slow wave of slurry in the dark waters.

parted

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We're not going to finish the poem before I have to leave, and Risk takes a break to say goodbye. The words he has carved into the front of the steps will see this scene repeated many times over the years. Melissa gives me back my parka, then walks with me uphill to the bus. She's on the verge of passing beyond shivers and into hypothermia, but stops long enough to give me a strong hug, then turns and runs downhill to the warm galley.

from

On the airplane we're strapped into the webbing on both sides of trash pallets headed to recycling in Christchurch. The ice runway flashes beneath us, the white page of an exam booklet left blank with our ignorance in the face of some obscure question. I'm lucky to have a small window nearby, and see the summit plume of Mount Erebus steaming straight up for a thousand feet before it drifts gently toward the South Pole, five hundred miles south. As we fly north the ice gives way to a blue-black sea patterned with tabular icebergs, the cleaved remains of glaciers.

We're all wearing, per Antarctic flight regulations, our Extreme Cold Weather parkas, the huge red down-stuffed garments so warm and commodious that, should you get into trouble in the field, you often can just settle into them as if they were a sleeping bag and wait for help. We're all warm enough to unzip the bulky jackets and use them to pad the webbing, creating one long continuous bed. I curl up next to Mary Miller, a science writer who's been producing live webcasts from the ice for the Exploratorium in San Francisco. We're both desolate.

one

Three hours later I suddenly wake up, knowing that something is very wrong. I look outside where it's unexpectedly dark and wonder what maelstrom it is that we're flying into, and if we'll have to turn around. Weather often forces flights from Christchurch to McMurdo to boomerang, and I suppose it could happen going in the opposite direction.

Then I realize: it's just night.

I haven't seen the sun go down in three months. I'd forgotten.

another

Eleven months later, while sitting at my desk in the West Texas town of Marfa, yet another temporary residence, I receive an e-mail from Melissa at McMurdo. It's snowing, she says, and the words of the poem are filled with snow. She thought I'd like to know, and I do.

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walking  
across  
a  
poem  
today  
two  
strangers  
speak  
each  
others  
tongue

climbing  
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