

# Not nothing, but everything

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**MONICA KIDD**

I AM FLYING TO ANTARCTICA. I HAVE SHED MY RESPONSIBILITIES AND THERE HAS been packing and studying and the writing of lectures. I have said my goodbyes, provided many reassurances.

In the neither here nor there that is the long hallway between Uber and the cabin of my aircraft, I am drawn to the heat of a pool-sized window and am ambushed by the skyline of my own city, already so far away. The ground crew is getting this Boeing going and I think about the bravely sniffling girl I left behind tucking her chin into her coat and stealing glances over her shoulder as she walked on small feet toward the double doors that would swallow her for the day.

*I'll be back before you know it*, I told her. We both understood this to be a lie.

Two men in Stetsons lean against a counter like a hitching post. People on phones revolt against waiting, barking orders to their office staff, voicing concerns about deployment. *I don't want to be stuck in Texas*, one broadcasts to those assembled at the gate. We watch a beautiful woman without identification charm her way onto the plane.

We board and taxi away, lifting over the prairies. I watch a slow reel of human settlement and ambition play out far below. I am bound for the smudge of white on the bottom of the map, splayed and flattened like the skin of some hot-blooded thing.

Travel makes animals of us all.



In the morning I am served cake before descending through a plush carpet of clouds. The sky turns *naranja*, *azul* over the ragged mountains of Santiago. They are black and look like waves. Tidy sepia suburbs are severed from their advance on the hills by the

guillotine of an arrow-straight highway. I feel nothing. There are fires in the fields.

We land. I inch through customs and out past mid-day traffic toward the hotel room I have booked for the day. I check in, close the curtains, turn off the fan. I slip between the sheets and wait. My mind meanders over my spent and aching body, hurling insults. I come to its defense: *these feet have walked you far, this back has snapped in two and stood upright again. Gentle now.* My thoughts begin to stumble. I am here. Everything is possible. Sleep will come.



I sit on a patio for lunch. A warm breeze blows. I walk barefoot over packed earth and dry grass as I wait for my fish soup. I inspect the tomatoes. There is something unholy in how fast we move from place to place, seeing so many moods of the planet in one day. I blush at travel in this time of the Anthropocene. But I am also fond of seeing something for myself, of spending a little time. I am fond of things that don't travel well.

My soup comes; the shrimp are buttery and taste of the sea.

Another flight then, another airport. I drink a beer, and then one more. A man drags three crates of oranges toward the café. A hot wind bothers the mesquite along the harbour.

By morning I'll be at *el fin del mundo*.



The airstrip at Ushuaia sits on a high plateau. The mountains seem too close as we touch down. They are jagged and brown from their midsections up. I have slept, briefly, listening to The Lumineers' cover of "Boots of Spanish Leather" on loop: *Oh, I got a letter on a lonesome day // It was from her ship a-sailing // Saying, I don't know*

*when I'll be coming back again // It depends on how I'm feeling.*

My luggage does not arrive. I am told it may arrive before the ship leaves tomorrow, then again maybe it will not. I am driven to the hotel where my room is not ready. I go to the restaurant and drink thick *café con leche* and eat resinous honey on black bread, looking out on the Beagle Channel. I spend the day dragging myself around, buying things I don't want. I think "dimple" but say "dumpling," forget how to say "bill" in Spanish. I walk to a place on the map called St. Christopher and find an abandoned ship.

Or this, on another trip, another year: I read the last of a pile of stale work documents on the plane to Punta Arenas, ignoring deep dissatisfaction from a knee that for hours has been twisted ever so slightly to the left to accommodate a telephoto lens. I steal glances across a row of passengers to look out the window at the tail end of the Andes. We will be picked up by the agent in a van full of crew who will be on the ship for months. I will be with them for three weeks, not even enough time for them to settle into their cabins. I find lunch and go for a run, stopping at the hull of *Yelcho*. It's been moved since I was here six years ago. Now Captain Pardo stands on the waterfront, forever pointing his golden finger toward Elephant Island.

Steinbeck, writing eighty years ago in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, said this of his time on a sea voyage as a journeyman naturalist: "[T]he great world dropped away very quickly. We lost the fear and fierceness and contagion of war and economic uncertainty. The matters of great importance we had left were not important. There must be an infective quality in these things. We had lost the virus, or it had been eaten by the antibodies of quiet."

On this, my fourth journey to Antarctica, the contagion is consumed in a great inflammatory storm, and I am left without a country, without a language.

“[T]o observe the tremendous minutiae of the sea,” wrote Steinbeck.

I will not speak of the universal. I will not be sentimental. I will say what I see before me. I will feel the aching loneliness.

The hotel sheets are crisp. Cars race the whole night up and down *21 de Mayo*.



In the morning we are picked up in vans and driven to the ship. We are given our kit: company innerwear, outerwear, thermal pants and shirt. Then there is the cabin reveal: the moment when we learn if we have a window, or are close to the tender pit, or will share a tiny room with another for weeks, shuffling around each other with dripping storm gear, or trying not to wake. This time I am bunking with an interpreter with razor-sharp wit who tolerates my early mornings and shares her chocolate and who will become a good friend. Then there is the passenger reveal, when we hand out jackets, giving again and again our opinions on this size or that, imagining what has brought each one to this elaborate journey, working across English, German, French, Spanish, Tagalog.

*Wait, while I tune my ear to your tongue.*

Then, the night sky: deeply black with the first hint of stars. There is an old whaler's saying that beyond forty degrees south is no law. But here, beyond fifty degrees, there is no god. Good riddance.

Still, it is north of where we are going, and the air is warm. The ship begins rocking gently on the swell. My bed is soft, and I can feel the rumbling of the engine like a cat purring. I am at sea again.

It's wrong to romanticize ships. As well as opening the mind, the heart, the horizon, they have also brought people to their deaths and spread hatred and disease and fast food around the globe.

But I can romanticize *this* ship.

I stumble when asked where I am from. There is the place I want to be, and the place I am, and the soul's journey between. I confuse people with my answer.

I put in earplugs and fall asleep, dreaming of people from my past.



Meals, meetings, time on deck showing people the birds. Giant petrels, sooty shearwaters, Wilson's storm petrels, the occasional prion.

A calm, sunny day with a swell that's small, but enough to send many to their cabins.

In the evening, after the work is done, I head out on deck to watch the sunset. S. is there. We puzzle over the paradox of bringing people to places we wish to keep wild. I console myself in how I have seen the light go on in people's faces. That light is everything: hope, wonder, love.

We say goodnight and go our separate ways. But after a time, night pulls me out of my cabin again. I slip outside in my pajamas and sandals, up onto the seventh deck, aft. The waxing moon is bright, the stars are ablaze. Orion, the Southern Triangle, the Southern Cross, all there atop the Milky Way. I feel a fist of love in my chest, for the night, the stars, the endless seas, the wildness I feel more at home in than the city. For my undomestication.

A black-browed albatross appears in the reflection of moonlight on the water, playing on the wind. It follows a long time in the dark.

Ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy, curator of birds at the American Museum of Natural History, upon seeing an albatross for the first time in 1912, wrote: "I now belong to a higher cult of mortals, for I have seen the Albatross."



The Falklands are in view by the time I go upstairs at six a.m., the sun lighting them from behind. We are on standby to land at eight-fifteen, and by nine the boats have been lowered to begin taking us to the concrete wharf of New Island where the caretakers tend several stone buildings and a fenced-off garden of monstrous kale.

We are driven to a colony of rockhopper penguins and black-browed albatross, found in abundance here. Twice the size of the northern fulmar I know, stalky and determined with their kohled eyebrows, they are fabulous to watch at sea, banking and soaring, landing at times as if by mistake, then scampering madly across the water to lift their heavy bodies into the air. On land, adults step gingerly around two-month-old chicks before running to throw themselves on the mercy of a thermal that will take them to sea. Strolling among the albatross and penguins are king cormorants, brown skua, striated caracara, and a solitary turkey vulture. A deep valley of birds leads from the tussock down to the crashing waves. Eventually it is time to go, and on the walk back to the ship there are upland geese, kelp geese, a Falklands thrush and a siskin. A stone wall overgrown with vine. Back on the ship we clean our pants and boots with a pressure washer and disinfectant to prevent us from becoming vectors in the spread of invasive species or disease. This was in the Before times. New threats give us even greater pause. COVID-19 for islanders. Bird flu emerging in Río Negro, a thousand kilometers to the north, and killing sea lions not much further away in Bío Bío.

Our afternoon landing is called off due to strong currents. On deck, the boat rides high in the waves. We are surrounded by humpback whales and bow-riding Peale's dolphins. Sailing north around the end

of New Island, the sea looks like crumpled aluminum foil, wash raging up the cliffs.

I'm so tired I can barely think.



In the morning I give a lecture about the tubenoses—albatrosses and petrels.

Let's say that when it comes to the procellariidae—named for *procella*, Latin for “violent wind” — I am self-taught. Back in the day I studied auks in Labrador and Svalbard. Birds that can barely fly, existing on the knife-edge between air and sea, these tenacious birds so full of fury who dive a hundred metres or more following flashes of silver, and pop out of the sea glistening and alert and muscling on with survival.

But Antarctica, where the auk-like birds had given up flight altogether, represented a kind of inaccessible Eden. All that frozen wildness and abundance. When I eventually got there, I discovered the same civilizations as in the north, thousands of waddling birds, awkward and grumpy, growling to one other through the rich ammoniac cloud of guano. Heaven.

How surprised I was to learn it would not be the penguins that captivated me, but the albatrosses. I learned about how the shoulders of these flying machines locked in place to soar hundreds of kilometres at a time. How an individual wandering albatross—that archetypal creature whose murder had become the source of so much sorrow in Coleridge's “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”—had been tracked circumnavigating the Southern Ocean three times in a single year, a distance of 120,000 kilometres. How Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, saw in the wanderer a heavenly creature leading Ishmael away from all human trappings to follow Ahab into his madness:

... I saw a regal, feathery thing of unspot-

ted whiteness, and with a hooked, Roman bill sublime. At intervals, it arched forth its vast archangel wings, as if to embrace some holy ark. Wondrous flutterings and throbings shook it. Though bodily unharmed, it uttered cries, as some king's ghost in supernatural distress. Through its inexpressible, strange eyes, methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God. As Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself; the white thing was so white, its wings so wide, and in those forever exiled waters, I had lost the miserable warping memories of traditions and of towns.

Even Beaudelaire took a crack at them in a poem, calling the albatross "the prince of the clouds," comparing its awkwardness on land to that of poets, *la race toujours maudite par les puissants de la terre*, whose vast wings may hinder their walking about in regular society, but grant their ascendancy to "kings of the azure."

So while the black-browed are impressive procellarids, I am still waiting for a wanderer. I remain mesmerized by its improbable size. Its restlessness. Its command of the skies. All of these. But also the heart break in a wandering albatross who seems locked in a life of solitariness.

Heart break.

A ship will show you any trace of heart break you carry.

The night before I left, I had a dream. There had been a leak in my mother's basement. I picked up the phone to call a plumber. I had not finished dialing when a sound came on the line. I could hear alarms and the sound of breathing.

Hello?

A man's voice. *Hello*. A pause.

Dad?

The sound of my father gathering himself. My

father had been dead eighteen months.

*Hi, Honey.*

I don't know what to say. There are sirens. A hospital, maybe. His voice.

Where are you?

*Here.*

The morning I woke my youngest child to say goodbye, she sobbed so hard her nose bled.

The wandering albatross seems to me loneliness itself, sculpted into elegant, powerful flight.



We are blown out of our second attempt to land. We adjust the ship and try again. Finally we are able to get ashore.

White sand beaches, ocean churned peacock blue. Two long, sloping hills meeting in a saddle in the middle. A most unusual landscape. Penguin feathers caught in sand and the wind carving sharp sastrugi in the lee. Tangles of bull kelp and sea cabbage. Here and there a bill peeps out. Gentoos rush in from the water, glistening white.

Later, in Stanley, I join a nature walk. I learn about scurvy grass that tastes of tart green apples, and that sea cabbage tastes of spinach when boiled. Diddle-dee berries that can be boiled into jam. Balsam bog that looks like stones and can be used as antiseptic. And the calafate: if you taste its purple berries, you are bound to return. We end at Gypsy Cove where mines were laid in the beach by Argentinian invading forces to repel the British response. Zimbabweans, because of their tragic expertise, have been hired to help with the demining. The going is slow because the sand is constantly shifting. The penguins wander obliviously over the explosives.

I cut through town on my way back to the ship and pass windows with signs that read: *We do not want*

*any more flights in and out of Argentina. Comply with the International Aviation Convention. And, To the Argentine Nation and Its People: You Will Be Welcome In Our Country When You Drop Your Sovereignty Claim And Recognize our Right To Self Determination.* In the museum stands a symphonion from Leipzig looking much like a grandfather clock. Damaged by bombing during the war, it still plays beautifully when wound by the docent. In Christchurch Cathedral, the rafters look like ribs of a boat. The kneelers are hand-stitched: penguins, poppies, the Falklands Islands Defence Force An albatross.



The ship rolls at night. I shift in my bed. Six-plus metre seas, things starting to crash in the galley. Occasionally it's as though someone has tapped my bunk. This is the pounding of waves against the hull.

In the morning, prions, white-chinned petrels, great shearwater. Then, passing Shag Rocks, a precipice in the middle of hundreds of kilometres of open ocean, armies of whales: fin, sei, humpbacks, an orca. More than a hundred animals all rushing the surface, swimming in every direction. The water boiling with them.

Then a rainbow. And, moments afterwards, it's there. A wandering albatross.

I watch and watch and watch.



We sail into Grytviken at seven-thirty a.m. and walk—excluding detours around charging fur and camouflaged elephant seals—directly to the grave of Ernest Shackleton. Celebrated for a century for having brought every single one of his men home after his ship *Endurance* was crushed and lost in the ice, then the year of impossible treks that followed—man-

hauling across ice, setting off in lifeboats, leaving a contingent of men on Elephant Island before sailing blindly hundreds of kilometres for help in South Georgia, crossing the mountains on foot, trying three times with various teams of whalers to get back to rescue his remaining men, then ultimately returning a final time on the intrepid tug *Yelcho* to take them out alive, only to have them go home and mostly die in war—he returned a final time to Antarctica and died unceremoniously of a heart attack. His body travelled back to England, but his wife, knowing his heart had always been in the south, returned his remains returned to South Georgia for interment.

On his granite stone, a line from Robert Browning: *I hold that a man should strive to the uttermost for his life's set prize.* I snap a picture and wonder how many people have made a pilgrimage here, to this graveyard full of Norwegian whalers dead from typhus. I check the date on the stone. Today would have been his birthday.

Preparing to leave, I notice a small stone flush with the ground next to Shackleton's. Frank Wild, the officer left in charge at Elephant Island when the rescue team sailed for South Georgia. His headstone inscribed with, "Shackleton's Right Hand Man." A person could walk right over him without noticing.

We hike up Myviken, then into the whaler's church with its wooden pews and big beautiful windows spared all these winters. The bells first rang here on Christmas Eve, 1913. I pull on their ropes and make them sing. Then it's back down through the settlement with all its ghostly rusted boilers and engines. This place where a quarter million whales were hunted and rendered over six decades.

Three years from now, researchers will find *Endurance* lying in state in the Weddell Sea. I will be at work when footage of the nearly pristine vessel pings around the world. It will be like attending the funeral of a friend lost years ago. Wordless love and



grief for what rests in those unfathomable depths.

We use the sailor's grip getting on and off the boats. Hold me round the wrist, this bond not of love but promise: *I'm not safe until we both are.*



Today we are blown out of Gold Harbour and Cooper Bay. Instead, we sail to Drygalski Fjord. We find a light-mantled albatross and snow petrel. The wind racing down the mountains here is fierce. It put two hands on your chest and shoves. It blows the sunglasses right off A.'s face.

I understand how Shackleton's comment about South Georgia's "stern peaks that dared the stars." I watch the light change and change until my throat feels hot and tears run down my cheeks. I watch until I can't take it anymore, too full of beauty. The world is so big here, and we are so small. Falling asleep that night I will listen again and again to Danny Michel's "Khlebnikov," preparing for what comes next: *The icebergs roll in the broken light // The humpback blows a kiss goodnight // With harpoon scars and lonely eyes // My heart breaks open wide.*

Out then into the Drake Passage. Seventeen-metre waves tonight that threaten to launch me from my bunk. I send a photo to my friend, a master mariner. *She's got it in her teeth*, he says.



I wake with some kind of deep sickness: seasickness, homesickness, maybe existential doubt. Why am I here? Who do I think I am? What does the world want from me? Nobody cares what your kids look like. Nobody cares what you do at home. They care about the next landing, the next lecture, the next meeting, the next meal, the next opportunity to do laundry,

the next call to action on the radio. Everything else is flooded by light and space and the ever-present now.

B. tells us Charles Darwin wasn't hired to be a ship's naturalist. Captain FitzRoy wanted him on the second voyage of the Beagle for his erudite company. Norwegian explorer Adolf Lindstrøm was sought after for expeditions because of his pancake recipe and because he made people laugh.

There is an art to passing time.

It's smooth sailing now. We've reached the ice, and the light falls rapturously on it. A. and I talk about how quickly all this fades on the plane ride home. How quickly one forgets it all. He tells me, *If you're going to panic, panic slowly.*



The ship has slowed, a sign to suit up and head out. No land visible anywhere. The cold air pierces and we leave almost no wake. A giant petrel does lazy loops behind us. A southern fulmar chances by. Prions flutter low and appear to dip their wings on waves.

Elephant Island appears through the fog. Bigger than I imagined, it is black, vertical, craggy.

Our approach is slow and layered. We are lashed by katabatic winds. Fog and snow create an eerie light on the headlands. And then we are here. There is a small beach between two cliffs, and back of that a mountain of crystal blue ice. A bust of Captain Pardo looks over the penguins.

The cold burns my fingers. The faces around me are purple, and I can only imagine mine is too. This is summer. Twenty-two men from *Endurance* arrived in April, at the onset of winter, and survived four months on penguins and seal carcasses Chas Green cooked over a smoky oil stove. It is said that just before help arrived, they had drawn straws for who would be killed for his meat. On board *Yelcho*, they ate until they

were sick and then ate again.

We leave, drunk on our birthrights of ease.

Today belonged to the Cape Petrels, a storm under their wings.



We wake this morning to first light over the Antarctic continent. The tidy orange buildings of Esperanza Base, Argentina's presentiment toward claiming a wedge of Antarctica should the Antarctic treaty expire and render the continent available for territorial claims. As it happens, today is Antarctica Day in Argentina, the day when the country celebrates continuous occupation since 1904. We land at the base, are met by the commander and led on tour past the remnants of a stone hut where three members of a Swedish expedition overwintered after their ship *Antarctic* sank. We see the wall of plaques listing the names of every inhabitant of the base since the 1950s, and the museum that houses the infant warmer where Emilio Palmas was placed after his mother laboured with him here, an attempt by the commander at the time to establish statehood through the birth of a citizen. There is the *Capilla de Francisca de Assisi*, patron saint of animals, ecologists and merchants, and the school that, as of next week, will house fourteen students. The base can support sixty people for the long winter months.

We are shown to the communal house, where the single people live; families live in private houses. There is a pool table, an industrial-strength foosball table, and a small bar, modestly stocked. Base staff sell t-shirts and postcards, and offer us biscuits and shot glasses of dark, sweet coffee. I stand outside on the road, keeping people an appropriate distance from penguins. The wind bites. I run in place, lift my knees, try to balance on the uneven ground on one foot. I watch a leopard seal beat a penguin to death and eat

it, skuas, kelp gulls and storm petrels swooping in to pick up the leavings.

Later, the wind drops. We stand on the slipway, where the tide has fallen five metres. Someone asks me why I'm smiling. I wasn't aware I was.



There are people who look askance at me when they learn I went to medical school but lecture about birds on a passenger ship. Some assume I never finished my training. A man with a camera the size of a semi-automatic rifle asks me to guess how tall a particular glacier might be. I begin to say, "I wouldn't stake my life on it..." when he interrupts with, "But it's not worth much." Another, watching me sweep the snow from passengers' boots before entering the American hut at Stonington Island where Jackie Ronne would become the first woman to overwinter in Antarctica, asks, Did you ever think your career would be sweeping boots?

In these moments, I remember the words of Peter Matthiessen in *The Snow Leopard*, describing the dignity of a sherpa. "[T]he service is rendered for its own sake—it is the task, not the employer, that is served." I am no sherpa, but I admire this idea of working for the honour and reward of the work itself. I seek the company of those who have waited their whole lives to come here, people who are alive with naked joy.

T., who will have been on the ship for nine months when this trip is over, says this to me: *This work has taught me everything. About people, about myself. I am so grateful.*



A man blows past me with a long lens, presumably going to his cabin to get a shorter one. Must be whales,



and close. I go outside to port side where a humpback breaches three times. It's not even breakfast.

Our mammologist tells me whales might breach to alert others to predators, or to a good place for feeding. Or simply for play, for joy. Whale joy.

We arrive at Half Moon Island, where I had my first ever glimpse of Antarctica, two years ago. I make my way past a rotting water boat, up over a ridge to a beach where I watch a rookery of chinstraps busy themselves with preening and feeding. Fur seals emerge from the water as a giant petrel feeds on the spoils. It is one precarious, precious thing, this place.

A woman stops beside me, sighs. *It's so beautiful. There's just—nothing.*

My hand goes to my chest, fingers spread wide. A universal sign of a heart attack is this, the hand going to the pain. I place mine there because I fear it might float away into the sky.

It's not nothing. It's everything.

I was trained as an ecologist, to notice the small and large things that bind the individual to the ecosystem. To resist teleology and to side with data. But in these moments, ecology can be a kind of religion, too. This always searching for the great wholeness. This work is an endless stripping away. In the end I am surprised to learn how little I need.

At the end of my lecture on albatrosses, I always share a final poem.

“How to Construct an Albatross”

By Louise Greig

Begin by setting the instructions aside.

Instead tune the mind to flight.

Attach the huge, clunking wings

(treat like hangar doors)

—do this by lantern light; now heave them wide.

Next, place the heart inside—adjust to beating;

You may witness a sudden upwards surge  
as the chest swells—this will be fleeting—  
resist the urge to release;  
now, embed the eyes (still asleep—this matters)  
and fasten the beak; carry the slumbering bird  
to someplace steep, repeating the word wake,  
and—this is key—just as the heart  
(yours) begins to break  
and the slow whales blow—  
let go



As we sail through the Neumayer Channel later, I exhaust myself going from port to starboard and back again, taking in all the ice. It's hard to look at it. I don't want to think about how it could be the last time.

A passenger stops me and says it matters to her that people like me speak about caring for the planet. I hardly know what to say. The west Antarctic peninsula is the fastest-warming place on Earth. Less sea ice here means less krill recruitment, and the entire Antarctic ecosystem relies on krill. We burn barrels and barrels of diesel trying to impress upon people the perils of climate change.

To fill the gap of my awkwardness, I say I am suspicious—though this is not quite the right word for there is deep empathy, too—of people who decry travel in the name of reducing their carbon footprint. I say, perhaps self-servingly, that to care about something you first have to be with it. Some will sit in a room and never go anywhere in the name of enlightenment, but can this not lead to fatal disinterest in the world?

Bring it, I say. Let me sort through the filth and confusion and complicated beauty. Let me overhear things, stumble on things by accident. Let me be messy and contradictory as I try to do my best.

After my father died, I lingered in his room a long

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while. Knowing that when I left, a door to something more than his hospital room would close.

It is painful to come to know people and places and be changed by them, and then to let them go.

I may never lay eyes on any of this again. I look and

look, let it all pour in.

Maybe we are provided only a few glimpses of the holy, where time and self disappear.

In those places there is not nothing.

There is everything.