

Notes from the Polar Night

ABSTRACT Drawing from *in situ* fieldwork in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, the northernmost settlement on Earth, these notes bring out the affective, ambient, and atmospheric power of extended darkness during the polar night, when the sun does not appear above the horizon for several months at a time. Each entry is composed of 113 words to reflect the number of days without light in Longyearbyen during the winter of my visit. Through a mixture of ethnographic observations, researched academic scholarship, and some endeavors of poetic worldmaking, these notes attempt to evoke the ineffable force of global warming by performing the sort of acutely observed and felt attentiveness to planetary being that is needed for our time. **KEYWORDS** Darkness; Affect; Atmosphere; Svalbard; Global warming

NORTHERNMOST

The northernmost settlement on the planet is a small town called Longyearbyen. It's on Spitsbergen, an island territory of Norway in the Arctic Svalbard archipelago. I visited in peak winter. The last official sunset over Longyearbyen that season fell on 26 October. The next time the sun rose it was 16 February, a hundred and thirteen days later. 113. That's over a third of the year without the sun emerging above the horizon. 24/7 in the dark. And in practice nobody up there saw the sun for at least another month after that. Because the mountains obstructed its view. Darkness is a product of obstructions. Curvatures, horizons, mountains, degrees, latitudes, axes, orbits, tilts.

WHEN IT SETTLES

Each of these notes goes 113 words into the dark, groping for the prime of that prolonged night's yawning shadow: a sum of sunless days divisible only by one and by itself. As obstructions produce darkness by occluding light, getting in the way can yield another way. Fabricating constraints can capacitate creation. In the Qur'an, sūrah 113 is called *Al-Falaq*, The Daybreak: "Say: 'I seek refuge in the Lord of daybreak / From the evil of that which He

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created / And from the evil of darkness when it settles.”¹ The settling of darkness in Longyearbyen may not be evil, but it is countable. Here, 113 will be the unit of its refuge.

Berlant and Stewart²

SOLVENT

Longyearbyen boasts Norway’s last coalmine, though where the boast falls depends. Either Norway’s forward-thinking, or Svalbard’s still clinging on. The truth is the old coalmining town is now a tourist town. Coal can’t keep it solvent, even if it keeps the lights on. Of course, burning coal is a solvent of its own: Longyearbyen isn’t just the northernmost settlement on the planet; it’s also the fastest heating. The coal in this sense made itself redundant. By raising temperatures, it drew more tourists, making coal no longer necessary to keep the town alive. Now it rains in February and people come to see and study coal’s calamitous effects. Global warming repurposed as good business.

Pezzullo³

SOMETHING HAD STRANGED

If it were less rugged, the town would border on cute. All the stuffed polar bears at the grocery, the reindeer mugs, the postcards of floating icebergs. The whole commercial center was like a dead mall still holding on to something; part bleak, part brave. Everyone just pushing ahead, neither oblivious nor noticing. Everyone looking the same, everyone standing out. You could see figures coming from far away, and then they were behind you and something had stranged. The library doubled as the cinema. The café had no tip jar. Lights illuminated a snowfield for schoolkids on recess under the stars while itinerants and locals made hay. Time passed in winters, not hours.

WHITE LARD

The guesthouse is an old miner’s lodge for the coalmine outside the center. Miners don’t stay there anymore. Now it’s backpackers and adventure-seekers in North Face. They’ve come for ice-caving, dog-sledding, snowmobiling, for tours. They speak English, Finnish, Japanese. In the shared kitchen where I’m boiling pasta, a Russian I’m vaguely frightened by opens a coffee tin and scoops a glob of some congealed white lard that he drops into my frying pan. It’s a kindness, and he smiles. The fat, I realize, comes from an animal that he

probably killed and dressed himself. As the fat melts, chunks of flesh and bone surface in the pan. He's proud and I can't refuse.

NEARNESS ECLIPSED

Behind an office window in town there's a large flat-screen TV that's perpetually kept on. You can stand outside and watch it map magnetic fields streaking the sky. Or you could just look around. Svalbard is the only place on Earth it's possible to see the aurora anytime, day or night. But it's always night, first and last. The perpetuity of it. And so much more of it than you think. Darkness operating space until nearness eclipsed distance. People move through it horizontally, down a road that has no name because sometimes what's right in front of you needs no naming. Still the fleeting lights give some recompense against the deep ongoing dark.

DARKEN IT

Kant once wrote about darkness, in his *Anthropology*, the place where he also wrote about affect, and about rhetoric: "The Greek motto 'skotison' (make it dark) is the decree of all mystics in order to lure treasure hunters of wisdom by means of an affected obscurity."⁴ He probably got *skotison* from Quintilian, who got it from Livy. Years later what *we* got was global warming, an obscurity too pervasive to be affected. Not one of us caused it, not one of us can see it. Yet together we compose it. Like the warming of the planet, the darkening of Svalbard isn't a rhetorical technique. Up there it's an all-too-real engulfment, obscurity made obscene.

BETTER TO STAMMER

The inadequacy of language always shores up obscurity as consolation. But sometimes obscurity itself is what one wants to make adequate to understanding. Or maybe understanding is beside the point. Whether winter brings darkness or darkness winter, in Longyearbyen the all-at-once of both captures the possible like a prison. I'm trying to say that the totalizing of the dark keeps a captivity akin to language: It mystifies. William James says mystical states manifest as states of knowledge. Their "noetic quality" escapes articulation while being vested with salience all the same.⁵ Prisoners of totalitarianism report something similar: "It is sometimes better to stammer from an excess of emotion than to speak in well-turned phrases."⁶

Miłosz

FINGER ON TOP

Being effectively on top of the planet, an outsized portion of all climate data is collected near Longyearbyen. Someone drove me to see the equipment: a silent, chain-linked farm of stubby metal sensors. In the distance the orange coalmine loomed like the castle in Kafka. The ice cores are taken elsewhere, out on the glacier. They're taken the way my son drinks a Slurpee, extracting ice by lifting a straw with a finger on top. Someone said that people don't listen to scientists because it's boring. Don't we have enough data already? Don't we already *know*? I thought of jilted lovers: What else can I do to prove how much I love you?

WORDS WITH THINGS

When affect theory became a thing, there weren't enough ways of languaging it. How to do words with things isn't something to write a book about. Most things just speak for themselves. Still, we've made a vocabulary to talk about the dying planet. Hyperobjects. Anthropocenes. "Climate change" has become a euphemism. Denial isn't just about not believing facts. Sometimes denial is about wanting to be the kind of person who has hope. To think of yourself a certain way. But hope can be oppressive without it being cynical to say so. Love may call us to the things of this world, but how will love call when only things are here to speak?

Austin; Harney and Moten⁷

INTIMATING A BODY

They made you buy the reflective vests. Bright, highlighter-yellow, zipper up the middle. Lightweight things that swished when you walked. The vests came overlarge, to fit over all the clothes it took just to go outside. Wool base-layers and thermals, coats and shells. The clothes weren't just for the cold but for the dark: so, reflective snap-bands too, the kind kids coil over wrists or ankles. *To make a body visible*. What you see are reflectors intimating a body. The hyperseparation of humans from nature may explain global warming, but separation is just what darkness in its everydayness requires: a means to unerase the contours that separate a body from the surrounding abyss.

FIRE AT THE END

In Longyearbyen there's a circle around town. Go beyond it and you're required to carry a gun. Polar bears on Svalbard outnumber the people.

Residents see them like city folk might see pigeons—if an alarm went off whenever one ventured inside the perimeter. The guns aren't much problem for the people. Bars collect them at the entrance like coat-checks at the opera. At the liquor store locals use a punch card by law, because darkness breeds drinking and drinking needs limits. But at the bar they're busy washing down the night with something clear then coming out all fire at the end. Come closing time, they hand out guns at the door.

SHADOWING WHAT

The husky yards are either outside town or inside something else. On Svalbard there's a lot less town than not-town. The outside is also a within, an around, an atmosphere. But the kennels looked like high-security prison yards: tall fences, capped with orange lights that smeared the snow and shelters below into long shadows. We passed a street sign warning about polar bears. *Gjelder Hele Svalbard* (Applies for all Svalbard), though it seemed to mark a beyond-which. Seeing shadows amid so much darkness felt like a gratuity, the way shadows disappear when they enter bigger shadows. I was trying to discern what was shadowing what. *Global Warming*, I thought, *Applies for all Earth*.

Anderson⁸

ONLY A REPORT

Ethnography isn't a method of becoming part of something else in order to understand it. It's the name for a convention that deceives us into supposing we could ever *not* be part of what we are trying to understand: the illusion that there is an outside vantage overcome by going inside. Really there's no observation without participation, no participating without observing. Sometimes "pick it up and shake it" is as scientific as it gets. But Mary Oliver had it right: attention without feeling is only a report.⁹ Best to go about thinking-feeling what escapes measurement. To poke a finger in the belly of the quantifiable. To get on hands and knees. Feel around.

Ingold¹⁰

DOWN WITH THE DRIP

It takes a shovel to get inside the cave. We'd hiked to the glacier over the snowy pitch of an unmooned mountain. Every few steps a foot ventured

forward would end with a leg plunged thigh-deep into the thick. When the woman from Mumbai pulled out a leg but left a boot, the guide used his rifle to fish it out. Then onward with the wits to try it again. Ice caves form from melting ice. They collect cold air and push out the warm. We climbed inside, down with the drip into the chill. It occurred to me I'd gone *inside* global warming. A report from the field: It's terrifically cold there.

WE NEVER LEAVE

Raymond Williams needed structures of feeling because he needed a way to make sense of the historical present while carrying on within it.¹¹ This is so much harder than thinking outside the box from inside the box. The real trouble is thinking inside the box from inside it. Thinking the place you occupy. Astronauts talk about an "overview effect," which is really just a gobsmacked, phenomenal gasp at seeing the watery marble that all of us are born and extinguished upon. We never leave. There may be no better place than Svalbard to think the planet from on the planet. But *thinking* doesn't do it justice. There's no such thing as the world.

White; Woolf; Povinelli¹²

NO WAY BUT WAYS

In 2015 a midwinter avalanche buried ten houses in Longyearbyen. People died from a snowy darkness made material, smothered by the so much more of it. And then the others left to sort the wreckage in only more darkness. No morning light to come as solace, no new mood to give reprieve. It must have felt oppressive: morning without arrival as mourning without end. What's so daunting about the relentless night is the way it tunnels, how a portal with no entrance or exit becomes an atmosphere, how unseasonal snowmelt becomes an accident and not a consequence. No fault but faults. No way but ways. No world but worlds. No dark but darknesses.

KNEES IN IT

The musher whose wife is pregnant insists we should "bond" with the dogs before asking for their labor. He has strong words about the other dog yards in town. More than once: My dogs are my children. And he *is* down in the snow, knees in it, letting the huskies slather his face. There's talk about being the alpha. But the dogs are chained and still up on hind legs, as tall as

a grown man, maybe as heavy. Bonded, we're assigned our team and responsible for harnessing these panthers to their tuglines. Then on the snow, a smooth and undulating passage. Blue gleam forever as the clouds pull away from the moon.

KILLING FIRST

For the night we went to dinner, we had to order weeks in advance. Whale, seal, or reindeer. Supplies are limited and take killing first. I remember the place being done-up with fake portholes and barnacles, sea glass, fishing nets, portly wooden captains wearing white beards and skullcaps. Like something from Southern California. But it wasn't that way at all. The darkness was beginning to sink into me, or I into it, it didn't matter. The protein was local, the vegetables from somewhere far off. Everyone was warm and friendly and didn't mind chatting, mostly about how they got there and might get home after. *What kind of whale*, I wanted to know.

TO START OVER

The Global Seed Vault is famine's futures market. It's also in Longyearbyen. Any nation can store its seeds there, in sealed bags and labeled compartments, hidden underground behind thick concrete walls, safe from the ravages of natureculture. But even it's already been breached by melting permafrost. When I went it was being renovated, patrolled by armed guards watching under spotlights. The Vault is the sort of far-off place whose existence people hear rumored in post-apocalyptic stories, then risk their lives trying to reach. Any nation can take their seeds out, though only two ever have: Syria, to start over after war; and Denmark, to make craft IPA from a rare strain of hops.

A THING TO DO

Svalbard catches people in winter by giving them nothing to do except drink and make babies and then they're stuck here, says the guide after we've come down from the glacier. We're in the van again, clammy cheeks defrosting. He points out a building below the ridge that becomes a disco on weekends. "It goes all night." This is a joke and laughing is a thing to do. Along the road some squatty reindeer are eating something on the snow, or maybe under it, or maybe just the snow itself. Too dark to say. Maybe it's like the cave, I think, maybe we're mistaken to separate above and beneath from the thing itself.

EXPOSURE

When you take photos of the northern lights, you need a tripod to still the dark. I cut notches into the rim of a paper cup to hold my cell phone, then rigged it in the snow. "I cannot cause light," Annie Dillard writes, "the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam."¹³ After the exposure, the shutter closes with a trick, as if all the light had arrived at once, collected like dirt on a wet napkin. What happens is grainy light accumulates in waves and increments. That's what it's like seeing the aurora: to be exposed to a path, holding still something still happening.

AND HERE WE ARE

Always with the dark the problem of time. Always with time the problem of scarcity. Always with problems the problem of who gets to say. In the cave, time reverses space. The deeper in you go, the closer you get to the present. And then it ends, the way all stories end: "And here we are." When you come back you return through the past. What I mean is the happening of affect happens in the future anterior, the what will have been of a duration. But meaning has little to do with it. Intensity isn't right either. Most things just feel ordinary. The study of affect is a study of the intraordinary.

Macfarlane; Bergson¹⁴

EXCESS ON BOTH ENDS

And all the while the incessant dark. When you wake. When you walk. When you look out the window to gauge the weather. When you can't sleep and it's the middle of something. Darkness constant the way all existents arrive in the middle of something and leave before it's over. The excess on both ends. The precedents and proceedings. Too much world to go around. Too much of the dark it melts time, exposes the fallacy of its modulation by light. Out there, beyond Earth, it's mostly dark in a universe of absent light as dark matter. And us here trying to find the edge of the sphere when infinity has no middle.

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