

Selection from

Northern Latitudes: Prose Poems
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Moon/Snail/Sonata

—
Newfoundland

I hoisted my anchor and raised the canvas and sailed off to a broken-down North Atlantic town. There I fasted on the precision of solitude. For hours or years, hard to say which, I'd sit and gaze at barnacles, trying to find one that was legendary. Occasionally I'd stick a finger into an anemone's soft ciliated slit—a destitute mating.

When I landed, I was all flotsam. Maybe a little jetsam, too. Then one moonlit night I went down to the sea. The sand had been exposed by the tide, and I could hear a low crustaceal breathing above the tumult of the waves. I found myself walking among the barrows and sand collars of moon snails. I bent down and picked up one of the globular shells. The furrowed foot, sequined with sand, was twice the size of its thick ashen shell. In its slow writhing, it seemed like an archaic brain. Its scent was briny and seductive, like certain flesh.

The moon snail possesses a monolithic energy for shutting itself off. It will not leave home even to die. You can't see its secret parts, see all of it whole, while it's still alive. And so when I touched the snail's outstretched foot, it withdrew into its whorled sanctuary with a flush of hostile water. The operculum, a great brown eye, now stared me in the face: cheeky bastard, it seemed to say.

Here I was, a late Pleistocene trespasser in the demesne of a Triassic survivor. There was nothing for me to do but give back my moon snail to the cadence of the tides. So I put it softly down in the sand-edged foam, and it became a polished gem, a sapphire, the moment a wave rolled over its shell. See how nice I look (it seemed to say) without the benefit of your touch.

At daystart and under a sudden scudding of rip-toothed clouds, I raised my weather-lashed canvas again and set off to find another landfall. I was still flotsam, probably jetsam, too. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered now except the wind in my sails.

In the Westfjords of Iceland

This is the ultimate place, a narrow inlet gnarled like a sheep's gut and blue glacial battlements sawed off down to the sea, all of a bareness and purity that will never riot into flower. Blades of quicksilver surf chisel to grit a shingle gray with the brains of basalt. Avalanches hurl a slow music at each other and board with boulders the windows of the earth. Everything is stone and adamant except:

The flotsam bones of birds. Tangled in the maidenhair of moss or strung up in fisherman's twine. Frail cages flexed to grotesque angles, as finespun as spider's floss. A bleached, open beak resting on a shakedown of dulse. A head with salt-widened eyeholes. Wingbones—torn from whose body? Stray feathers shiver in the east wind, and then with the north wind dissolve. All that remains is the delicacy of dismemberment.

These bones are the toys of extinction, my dear. Touch them. In this boreal place, grant them your small momentary warmth. Spread your fingers along their pale brittle surfaces. Untie the twine. Deliver these lost armatures of being from their obscure destiny. For it is only through your grasp that they will rise up and speak to you:

“We are the mad ones who haunt your comfortable night. Across every known sea we have journeyed so that you might witness us stripped bare of all decoration. We come from Babi Yar and Treblinka, from Rwanda and the extremities of sleep. We lost our wings in El Salvador and East Timor. In Auschwitz, our lords and masters washed their faces with the skin of our skin. In the Gulags, they bottled our breath in the frozen earth. But we have escaped such geography, jettisoned so much, that we might reach this fastness in the western fjords. Let not our travels be futile, my dear.”

Woman on the Ice

Ilulissat, Greenland, 1912

At Arnatsiq's death feast there was much talk about distant time. Five baby girls and two baby boys I threw in the snow, the old woman observed. Two others, twins, I drowned.

White Men would call you a murderer, her eldest son said. Added another son: White Men know only how to be too many. Nowadays they seem to be sitting on every stone from Ilulissat to Qaqortoq.

The next morning her eldest son led her from the feasting house to the cliffs. The sun was bright, snow and ice glistened like a carpet of gemstones. It was a beautiful day to die.

Push! she exclaimed.

Eldest son pushed his mother over the cliff. Down she tumbled, onto an ice mountain many feet below. Every bone in her ancient body broke. Her stomach and bladder broke. Her nose vanished from her face.

But she did not die.

And it was such a good push, too, she lamented.

The ice held old Arnatsiq all through the night. The next night as well. It held her as a husband might hold her, so she stung it with her tongue: Why do you refuse to give me my death, good-for-nothing?

The ice did not seem to hear her. It floated out the fjord, into the open sea. It floated away from the mountain where great-assed Erdlaversissoq welcomes guests to the other world.

Her father and mother visited her. We're waiting for you, daughter, they said. Why will you not come?

Because this ice won't let me, she told them.

Well, the drum cannot be beaten for you much longer, they told her. Its skin will break, and you know what that means.

Yes, I know. Eternal cold.

Then the Northern Lights Children danced with their afterbirths across the sky, singing, Join us! Join us!

I wish I could, Arnatsiq sighed.

One evening she saw a dark shape moving near her. It was the size of an ice mountain, yet it didn't appear to be an ice mountain. Perhaps it was a *tupilaq*, all bone and gaping jaws, intent upon tormenting her even more.

Then she saw *Titanic* written on it in big letters. A White Man's word. Maybe the word meant: We are too many. Maybe the dark shape itself was the vessel in which White Men got rid of their too many. She did not know. Did not care. She just wanted her death.

All at once there was a great jolt. Old Arnatsiq's ice mountain flung her into the arms of the sea. She sank down, far down, and never breathed air again.

At last I am content, she said to herself.

Child

Once upon an outworn Irish island twenty womanless men lived next door to the jostling elements. These men hungered for vague female hands to wring them dry from the mizzling rain; hands that would likewise steady them against ox-shouldered blasts of wind. They hungered for spuds sweetly boiled and whole-wheat dough sweetly kneaded, but drank instead the eternal bitter pint. By day they stood by the island's fretwork shore and awaited the boat by which something womblike might be borne westward to them. By night each man was a ghost who haunted himself with this refrain: "Please, God, save me from decency."

At last a man called the Fiddler wearied of lowering bent pin with bridebait to snag mermaids from the sea. So he elected, against all odds, to mate. He possessed a piercing wind-and-nettle knowledge of the physical land. But he didn't choose the land, which had been sucked thin and dry, and trodden to destitution by the thoughtless dead. And he didn't choose the sea (though living amaranth it was, sometimes), since the sea was far too big for a thewy little man like him. Instead, he took as his mate his own dappled mare. It was only natural, the others said. For hadn't he already mounted her thousands of times to and from the bog, turf in her panniers, fire in his hearth?

Some months later a foal-child was delivered of the Fiddler's mare. She stood trembling in her birth scent; she had rich satiny skin and amber hair and the head of a queen. She was the loveliest thing the twenty men had ever seen. All as one they climbed onto her mythic body and lightly kicked her flanks, and off they started for the land of their extinction.