**(Goes with Explorer’s Daughter)**

**Sightlines by Kathleen Jamie - extract: silence, icebergs and the aurora borealis**

**Seven years ago, with Findings, Kathleen Jamie broke the mould of nature writing. Here, in an extract from her new book, Sightlines, she recounts a journey through frozen seas, in search of the Northern Lights.**

There’s no swell to speak of, just little lapping waves, so landing is just a matter of running the Zodiacs up on to the stony beach, allowing us to jump ashore. Not jump exactly: we swing our legs over the sides of the inflatable, and drop down on to 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.

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, 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.

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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 ice cap. 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. 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 and move downhill, back toward the waiting boats. It’s a while before anyone speaks.

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 6,000 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.

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 40 years, but here it is: deep in a fjord in east Greenland at nightfall, at 71 degrees of latitude, undulating around the ship: saltwater, 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 faraway 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.

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. Once more the lights alter and breathe. Someone gasps, then laughs softly and the cameras click