

Inner Snows

Anne-Sophie Subilia

Novel

French



A diary kept by one of the four members of an expedition along the Arctic shores, *Inner Snows* by Anne-Sophie Subilia plays on the sharp contrast between the vast wilderness of the tundra and the stressful, forced intimacy of communal living aboard the sixteen-metre yacht, *Artémis*. Whereas the natural environment inspires awe, the real power struggle develops between the members of this expedition as they are brutally forced to confront their weaknesses and secret fears.

"We rarely talk about ourselves. It's as if we'd made a pact to say as little as possible about our backgrounds. If we're here, it's purely for the landscape. It's illusory, of course, to set aside our personal lives."

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Excerpt translated by Ros Schwartz

Running

The gush of a torrent close to my temples
the wind roaring in my ears
I am alone
for a moment
I write fast and badly
my head's buzzing with the sound of a taut rope
I don't understand what it is
whether it's good or bad
lingering excitement, perhaps.
For now, I find no comfort here, the landscape feels
hostile.
I've been shutting it out since our arrival.
I'm going to go running whenever I can.
My companions understand that it's a need.
I have to let off steam, and when I come back,
I'm calmer.
That wasn't planned.

Now, it's become a habit.
When I run, I get back a sort of power.
It's probably a civilisation thing.
It was the second or third time we'd been dropped off
on land. We dispersed to answer the call of nature.
When we regrouped, we could immediately tell from one
another's faces who'd been able to relieve themselves
and who hadn't. I was among those who had. My smile
must have been annoying for those who still had a
stomach-ache.
I started running from the very beginning.
Partly because of the type of terrain.
This moss, I'm not used to it, it makes you want to race
off. Running tracks – there were none. No paths, of
course. Which is disturbing, actually.
I did a circuit around a lake before running uphill to
a cluster of rocks. I was cautious: an accident would
create problems. When I reached the summit, the
panorama opened out, with views over several valleys.
I became aware of the vastness, the miraculousness.

In the distance, at the bottom of the fjord, a grey glacier
ran down into the sea. I said *shit isn't it beautiful* just in
my head. I didn't know what else to think.

I have to stop. Writing takes time and we're short of
time.

Expelling

I meant that one reason I started running was to expel
an uneasiness which would otherwise have grown.
It's in my throat, which is beginning to tighten. This has
happened to me almost every day since the beginning
of our expedition. I don't have a temperature and I know
it's not a sore throat. Then the tightness spreads to
my chest and sometimes it even develops into a headache.
I don't suffer from seasickness, but I have this other
thing. It's as if everything is shrinking. First of all, I should
add that there's very little space on board. We often
bump into each other by accident and when we're sitting
in the mess, we wonder whether we've taken someone
else's place. We have no privacy except when we get
into our sarcophagus bunks. A partition gives us a sense
of separation between us.

N. says that for him, the only moment when he can truly
be with himself is at night. The rest of the time, we
have to put up with everyone else's presence. You have
to like that, otherwise you're screwed. So, running is
helpful. If I don't move, I might end up buried under
everyone else's stuff. We're living on top of one another
like in a space shuttle. Which is a paradox since we're
floating in this vastness.

At first, I couldn't hear my thoughts any more. My mind
was barraged by my more talkative companions.
C. has a shy, self-effacing nature. She's the one who talks
the least and takes up the least room. We're constantly
trying to find the collective balance. Sometimes the
landscape is of secondary importance. Life aboard takes
priority and we have to adjust our everyday existence
to ensure we progress.

Cabin 1

I'm writing very simply.
No strength to do better for now.
I've just been dropped off.
The others are staying on the boat.
Evening's coming, I won't write much, just the time to make an inventory.
This is a trapper's cabin painted olive green, on stilts, around 30 metres from the shore.
I'm scared they won't come back to fetch me.
It's strange to be thinking that.
The cabin will be my refuge, but I haven't seen much food here, except for a can of little German sausages and packet soups.
I am inside. There's a window that looks onto the fjord, a banquette, a bed base, a wooden table and basic items. The window panes are sturdy and recent. The wood-stove flue looks new.
It's comfortable and clean, but I'm distracted.
A big fisherman's jacket is hanging in the entrance. I want to describe it precisely, and to do so, I put it on: it comes down to my knees, it smells of camphor, which isn't unpleasant.
There's also a pair of dungarees, with the well-known company logo.
Pencils and matches. All the essentials.
I even think that this cabin must regularly be used by the indigenous people. It feels as if someone has just left.
I'm scared that no one will come back until next year. That they'll leave me. That they'll be happier without me. I know in my mind that they'd never dare. So why am I still afraid?
That's what I mean when I say that this voyage constantly brings us face to face with ourselves.
I watch from the window. The sea's still calm, but the light's beginning to fade. I want to check that the boat's still there and that there's activity on board. Which there is. They've even made a fire, I can see the smoke. I realise that my hand's cold and I'm finding it harder and harder to write.
They came to fetch me just before nightfall. The shapes

of the mountains had become darker than everything around.

I buried my hands inside my sleeves.
As for this matter of the cold, we'd sworn that we'd look out for each other and that if one of us spotted a chilblain, we should say so straight away.

Later, rub my fingers and toes with gaultheria.

Last night a chunk of ice hit the boat. I'm making a note of it because the further we go, the more ice there'll be. Luckily no damage was done, but we're going to have to take turns to keep watch. It's my turn. I didn't say anything about my fingers. Writing hurts, but it keeps me warm. And also because I've been thinking. If I had to describe the aurora borealis, I'd say that it's like flames in slow motion. The random dance of the lights reminds me of flames. It's strangely moving, I don't know why. Probably because it's out of the ordinary, fleeting, and there is no human action involved in producing it.

Ice sheet

We walk all morning and go over a pass to see further inland – that legendary white mass, one of the last on earth.

I recall what Diana said, the day after our arrival.
"You may see the ice sheet . . ."

I remember her plum-coloured lips, a beautiful face.
"Our frozen territories," she'd said, lifting up her cape to take out her suede-gloved hand which she'd placed on the map.

"And nunataks . . ." – rocky peaks.

I took an immediate liking to this woman who worked at the cultural centre.

I adopted her as our ambassador. She took a few steps back, leaving behind her scent of musk. A face from the very first hours.

A fleeting encounter.

T. takes bets on how long the ice cap has left.

He compares the white vestige to a wealthy old lady who's dying. The heirs are waiting for only one thing.

C. rebukes him. She puts on her serious baby face. She says that other ice ages will follow. Her mouth closes again in a pout. We wait for her to say something more, but she keeps quiet.

And then it's Sunday, she brings out six little balls of bread sprinkled with sugar that she's made for us. A tradition in her family.

Scale

Now that we're here, I laugh at us. It looks like the earth before the arrival of humans. S. is right, it's too big for anyone, it makes you want to build. The mountains here go on for ever, no matter how far I run. My companions tell me to be careful, but generally they're used to my running off.

Earth and Sea. After six days, I still can't get used to the scale. The vast expanse of sky is terrifying. I see snow and sea urchins superimposed. As soon as I feel the onset of vertigo, I mentally call out to Diana or I stare at N.'s ascending boot and count each of the little metal hooks gripping the brown shoelace. There are twenty-eight, fourteen on each boot.

Motivations

At the end of each day, we all bring our logbooks. I summarise our impressions on the little laptop we've brought with us. This task focuses me.

I like N.'s handwriting. Seismographic, tight. To condense it he uses tildes like in the 16th century and makes up symbols, for which I've produced a key.

Each of us is anxious to fathom what it is we're looking for, ultimately, through this expedition. But I have the sense that it's when we're asleep that we are the most articulate, the most humble. In any case, that's what I feel when I have the time to look at N.'s sleeping face and the flickering beneath his eyelids.

What the four of us have in common is architecture and landscaping.

These forty days should be useful to us. We find inspiration for later.

This will be even truer if we're commissioned to design the new Alpine city.

Sailing, I could do without.

I'd have preferred to stay put in an inhabited place and strike out from there. My companions persuaded me and reassured me. N., the most experienced sailor of all of us, thinks that coastal navigation teaches people to look at the shoreline from a dual perspective, from outside and from inside. Sometimes we embrace it, sometimes it embraces us. And besides, what more natural approach for an island?

We chose Z. as our captain, without knowing him, and he chose T., knowing him.

To think that when we arrive at the little town at the tip, whose name I've forgotten (New Thule?), it will only take a one-hour flight to get us back to our starting point.

Z. will put *Artémis* in storage for the winter. Or he'll sail to more clement seas, with or without T., he doesn't know yet.

I and the others will clamber into a little red plane with propellers whirring.