

A 4 AM Encounter, and Everything That Came After

As a brave survivor of the polar wilderness, I know as well as every other returnee that there are two possible reactions when you tell people where you were last Christmas. You either get the raised-eyebrows-slack-jawed look (complete with envious interjections and fusillade of questions (“And did you see penguins?!/? Where’s mine?!?”)), or the knitted-eyebrows-pursed-lips one. In the latter, of course, behind the wrinkled brow of the nonplussed person before you, the cranial cogs are turning, classifying you as a complete nutjob.

Antarctica, indeed; what is it to most people, but an amorphous monochrome blob on a map, or a forgotten lump stabbed through the heart by the metal axis of a classroom globe? In a barren polar wasteland that belongs to no man, what could thirty-five people possibly *do* for ten days? Not much...if you discount the whole life-changing-experience bit.

Twelve hours before my own great epiphany, I was slumped over with my face buried in the squishy upholstery of a seatback. We had spent several days already at the southern tip of Argentina, returning now to the city of Ushuaia in preparation to board the Lyubov Orlova, our means to the end of the world. For no apparent reason whatsoever, I had developed flu symptoms earlier in the day as we wandered around the Tierra del Fuego National Park, getting more chilled and fatigued with every exploratory step. At this particular moment, I wanted nothing more than to wrap myself in as many fuzzy blankets as I could find and retire to the oblivion of sleep. Alas, it was not to be so, as we had customs to enter, a reception to attend, bags to move and unpack, and the rest of the lovely, exhausting tasks that one associates with the beginnings and ends of travel. After picking over a gently undulating dinner, I finally was able to slip away to the ship bowels to embrace my long-sought sleep. The time was 8 PM.

I woke abruptly hours and hours later, feeling refreshed; there was no sign of the fever that had plagued me the night before, and the only unpleasant feeling was perhaps the chill and the rhythmic rolling of the room that I was not yet accustomed to. My stomach, inundated with yesterday’s

Dramamine, rolled in discouraging tandem with the walls. I disappointedly recalled an account from dinner, where someone had crowed their success at sighting porpoising penguins following the ship, which I had missed. Sitting in the dark in that cold room, a notion suddenly occurred to me which brightened me up like an internal halogen light bulb. Impulsively, I scrambled out of bed. After searching fruitlessly for a camera and undoubtedly irritating my slumbering cabin mates, I snuck out of the room and lurked my way upstairs. Leaping groggily up the stairs two at a time, I found the door that lead to the deck, and the mysterious world waiting outside.

There are no words to describe “outside”. I’m going to try anyway.

In late December, the Southern Hemisphere is bathed in light for almost 24 straight hours a day; although it was certainly early morning and no one was to be found wandering the lonely halls of the ship, the sky was a pale white-gray, with tenuous fog gently encasing us. A thin pattering on my outer sweatshirt layer marked the presence of an icy rain, or maybe a wet sleet, which covered the deck and all exposed railings in a fine, glittering, transparent shield. I soundlessly shuffled my way toward the stern of the ship, where on future days I would gaze out into miles and miles of ocean, drinking up the waves of effortlessly soaring seabirds, squinting at the horizon through binoculars to detect what might be flying there. Now, looking out over what open water I could see, feeling trapped inside a crystal ball, I was smacked with a realization that I had entirely missed the day before.

There was no land, as far as the eye could see. Not the tiniest peak, the thinnest hazy form on the horizon, the barest hint of shore. You might be thinking at this moment that there are thousands of miles of other oceans out there, where there sure as heck isn’t a single speck of land to be spied on a map for miles and miles; what’s so special about this one?

The simple and nearly inexplicable answer is cerulean. Never, in my entire life, have I encountered water the exact shade of a crayon. A great omnipotent being might have colored in the whole ocean, tipped with alabaster foam from the ship’s propellers. Kindergarten children could look

upon this ocean and feel vindicated; all the teasing they get from older siblings, snarkily taunting, “Water isn’t *really* that color,” would finally be disproved. At that moment, I could just begin to appreciate the sheer size of this ocean, with its unfathomable hue, the cold rush of wind cutting across it, the sting of wet precipitation on my cheeks.

And floating on a current of air, overtaking the ship with only the slightest adjustment of colossal wings, perhaps just waking from its own restive sleep, was *the albatross*.

In my mind it is italicized, being *the first albatross* I had ever seen. I have long harbored a love for marine birds, and although initially devoted to penguins, I gradually became curious about albatrosses. Orville and Wilbur are at least mentioned in pop-culture, transporting the heroic Bianca and Bernard to exotic locales in Disney movies. But aside from those of us who adore both birds and the works of Walt, who honestly remembers that those two gooney birds have counterparts that really exist somewhere, circumnavigating the ocean with ease? Who would?

*The albatross* was elegant, white with dark wings. In my enthrallment I forgot to get a good look at the characters which could tell me what sort of albatross it was, namely the color of the back, markings around the eyes, shape and color of the tail. But I did see its softly pink bill, a characteristic belonging only to the two species of Great Albatrosses, with unmatched wingspans of thirteen feet. A single wing was bigger than me!

Time melted away as I watched the albatross seemingly hover just above the railing of the ship, minutely repositioning its wings. Eventually it seemed to get bored with the slow speed of our ship and progressed slowly forward towards the bow, where it would briefly disappear from view before circling back around to where I stood. I really have no inclination of how long I stood in ice falling from the sky like diamonds, the sky the color of smoke, watching this most magnificent creature soar circles around our tiny, insignificant boat. I don’t believe a single thought even coherently formed in my mind.

Eventually I made my way back down to my cabin, searching furiously now for my camera, possibly articulating unintelligibly all the while, hoping for some way to prove that I had seen *the albatross*, possibly the first one of the whole trip, and one of the biggest ones, at that! The pinnacle of birding on the Southern Ocean! The search was hopeless, however, and I hurried back to the deck, feeling apprehensive— what if the albatross should be gone?

I needn't have worried, as it was continuing its easy, roundabout track about the ship. I noticed at this point that there were other birds hanging around, too, some of them possibly albatrosses, but as I sit here in reverie, almost a year after the sighting, I only know for sure that *the albatross* was there; it is indelibly marked in my memory. I eventually got cold enough to break myself out of this slack-jawed awe, and realized that standing alone on a ship deck miles from any land with no one around is probably not the safest practice, especially around waters as cold as these. I traipsed, sopping, back to my cabin, and although I later tried to communicate the splendor of the thing I had seen to other members of my group, I am not sure if they ever really believed me. Worse, I never saw an albatross that close again. Even so, the fact that the record of *the albatross* exists only in my memory feels right, in some way, as though I were the only one meant to see it. For all I know, it might have been an apparition, and that in my flu-Dramamine affected state, the whole thing was all in my head.

In any case, the effect is the same. When I reminisce about Antarctica, recalling every amazing thing I saw from the continent to the Argentine port of Ushuaia, my brain inevitably returns to *the albatross*, and how I feel that someday, we shall meet again. Since current albatross populations are being besieged on all sides by human-related horrors like longline fishing and introduced predators, these mostly forgotten birds are on the verge of extinction. I know now that I could devote my life to saving such animals as these, with their arcing wings and effortless flight, letting the wind drive them where it may. This study abroad to me was an invitation, or perhaps a request for aid in a time of turmoil.

And when I finally do return...an old acquaintance might just be waiting.