

LESLEY HARRISON  
**MIDDLE ICE**

—from *The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas*,  
by Captain Francis L. McClintock. London: John Murray, 1859.

*salt ice – young ice – black ice – wind ice –  
sound ice – land ice – red ice – old ice –  
field ice – loose ice – water ice – clear ice –  
floe ice – plate ice – drift ice – middle ice –*

All birds are scarce  
the few retreating southward.

A raven was shot today two eagles  
at Bellot, a brace of willow grouse

our little auks the only birds remaining  
in twos and ones obscure, barely visible.

I was fortunate to shoot a snowy owl;  
the flesh is tender white, but tasteless.

Our harmonium is on the lower deck.  
The men enjoy its pleasing tones.

While Christian turns its handle,  
stellar crystals fall:

they have six points  
and in the sun or moonlight

glisten brilliantly;  
our masts and rigging

a lace crust, brittle as glass  
gorgeous, with no disruption.

And there, at the sudden run  
from glassy blue to mud

the white whales hide  
obscured, like lumps in milk.

and seams of coal  
and feldspar and zeolite  
and sandstones and bivalves

and fossil spruce  
and thin dry coral beds  
and garnets, rose and transparent

*a ship*  
*a brother in our trade*  
*a joy in these barren regions.*

Our magnetic observations have begun,  
 our ice house just large enough  
 to hold the declinometer.

Soon Hobson will leave us  
 for the Pole, advancing our depots,  
 charting our half knowledge of these vast

superficies of thin, young ice  
 and gusts of rain, and visible silence.  
 I do not envy him.

A white whale was shot yesterday :  
 a female of ordinary dimensions,  
 a fine cream colour,  
 her eyes extremely small;

the steaks of her flesh divide  
 like seal, though not as tender;  
 her orifices scarcely large enough  
 to admit a quill.

*a harbour filled with sunlight;  
 then a cloud passes  
 and the harbour is empty.*

and Mrs Olrik, at home  
 in her heated parlour,  
 her bright windows full of sun;

her scented cambric  
 her lilac, roses, mignonette  
 profusion of geranium.

We march at night, towards  
the dark of southern latitudes  
and take our meals by lamplight  
in silence, drunk with sleep.

Yesterday, the aurora loomed above us  
burning salt green, electrical

windless and flickering  
cloaking the horizon till dawn

then hovering, hoarse and silvery  
like low fog, freezing our instruments

our compasses now useless.  
Without them we are blind as kittens.

This island is covered in native marks  
one stone standing on another

the outer stones weathered pale,  
the newer stones bleached and flattened

by centuries of rough light.  
There is great doubt arriving at their meaning:

a monument, a fixed point;  
or pure weight—a thinking condensed

holding the earth and sky together,  
the hills of their eyes worn down

like old men, weathered into silence;  
a story no longer remote,  
this island, and the ocean outside.  
*the wind beating on the ground*

*the field, its sudden shaft of sunlight  
the wind, at sea in grass*

Cape Farewell—a long faint streak.  
Behind us, the horizon  
a silver thread, marking the limit

of this much deeper space.  
The nearness of more arctic waters  
gives a shine to its surface.

The Moravian settlement:  
a large, sombre looking house—dull red  
with yellow floors and wooden partitions

a belfry, a dozen native huts.  
Petersen pulled aside the membrane  
of some animal, which served to exclude the wind

but admitted light, even past midnight.  
The boys brought us handfuls of garnets.

*a bare head part exposed  
the smaller bones wind-dried,  
light as porcelain*

*the upturned palms  
dismantled like empty nests,  
the pearl of his eye protruding.*

Our sense of gloom has lifted:  
the men have ample occupation,  
disfigured as they are by the sun  
and bright cold winds.

They do not like alluding to the dead,  
their ordinary senses more suited  
to move with the weather, riding  
these anxious currents

or hauling through the Pentland Firth  
the hoarse screams of the pilot  
his dialect the shrill cry of sea birds,  
as if we were in Greenland itself –