

Fall 2012

## The Contours of Cold

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### Recommended Citation

Harris, Kate (2012) "The Contours of Cold," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 77 , Article 49.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss77/49>

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## THE CONTOURS OF COLD

1. *Storms*

I am an equation balancing heat loss with gain, and two legs on skis. In both cases the outcome is barely net positive. The darker shade of blizzard next to me is my expedition mate Riley, leaning blunt-faced and shivering into the wind. Snow riots and seethes over a land incoherent with ice. The sun, beaten and fugitive, beams with all the wattage of a firefly. Riley and I ski side by side and on different planets, each alone in a privacy of storm. Warmth is a hypothesis, a taunt, a rumor, a god we no longer believe in but still yearn for, banished as we are to this cold weld of ice to rock to sky.

Despite appearances, this is a chosen exile, a pilgrimage rather than a penance. I have long been partial to high latitudes and altitudes, regions of difficult beauty and prodigal light. For me going to the mountains is compulsive as breathing, arterial to existence as a pulse. All life abides by tropisms, the tug and heave of unseen physics: roots delve into dirt, shoots stalk the sun, and creatures like me muscle in the vague direction of cold and white. In this case north, to Norway, to the Hardangervidda, an alpine desert plateau whose very name, however incidental to English etymology, contains danger.

And for good reason. Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen won the ski race to the South Pole, but not before training on the Hardangervidda almost ended him. He and his brother attempted the first winter traverse of the plateau in 1896, but they were forced to abort after losing their food, their only map, and very nearly their fingers and toes in constant blizzards. An earlier Norwegian explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, also ski traversed the Hardangervidda as a warm-up for other polar expeditions, but he sensibly crossed it in April. By then weather conditions are far more clement, and in springtime in this age, the plateau is stitched with designated ski trails that safely guide weekend warriors from hut

to heated hut. Which begs the question why Riley and I are here, like Amundsen, in the cold dead dark of winter, when huts are locked and buried, routes are unflagged, and the plateau is a trackless desolation roamed only by wind, snow and reindeer. And now us.

We have come to the Hardangervidda for all the usual reasons, all glib, all genuine. Because it's here. Because we crave the kind of fun that is only really fun two weeks after the fact. Because we require contours more congruent with wild needs and reckless nerves than civilized life provides. Because we seek enrollment in the unleashed school of life.

Like Nansen, who more than a century ago sought relief from laboratory science in polar exploration, this trip is my antidote to academia. For two years I was a graduate student in geobiology at a top research university, the kind of place where truths only count once isolated in test tubes, preferably in triplicate. I went into science because I wanted to be an explorer, to live constantly in the open air, and I naively thought studying the natural world would lead me there. As a young man in the mid-1800s, Nansen chose to study zoology at university for similar reasons, but he ended up squinting through a microscope, charting the central nervous systems of jawless hagfish and other tiny marine organisms. A few centuries later, I found myself in the same situation, cooped indoors while mapping, in my case, the molecular fats of microbes. But after a few years of containment, when he was my age exactly, Nansen abandoned his promising career in science to satisfy a craving for wider horizons. He was pulled like a magnet to the poles, those silent and inhuman expanses, and desperate for adventure.

Just graduated from the world of test tubes and petri dishes myself, I am wild with longing for what is boundless and proximate to the stars. The Hardangervidda, so constellated with ice and rock, so many light years from the laboratory, seems as promising a place to seek it as any. There is nothing practical whatsoever about this expedition: we have no ambitions to make history, plant flags, claim territory, collect specimens, chart maps, win fame, or curry the favors of kings and queens. We are simply here to study the

contours of cold, and apprentice ourselves to wildness along the way. The goal is something like sublimation, ice loosed straight to sky.

## 2. *Launch*

All night the tent flutters like a flock of birds startled into flight. I dream I am lost in the midst of a vast migration. Skiing the next day, I long for feathers and miss wings like phantom limbs. Around us mountains welt the white skin of land, humped and glossy as blisters. After a week of whiteout blizzards, today the Hardangervidda is a paralysis of ice, so catatonic with cold even the wind has frozen in place. The only turbulent air moving across the land is me, a flight path still looking for its bird, to paraphrase the poet Don McKay.

Two ravens, furtive and keen-eyed, seem to be tracking us across the plateau. At first we confused the black beads on the snow for stones, but they pursued us like footprints, or rocks endowed with curiosity, mobility, and appetite. To these scavengers we are the cold desert's bloom and harvest: at each camp they feast on our spilled scraps of pasta and oatmeal, while we feast on the solace of other living, breathing creatures for company. To each their own hungers on the Hardangervidda.

The leviathan appetite of this land, in turn, has swallowed all silences but its own. For days, or weeks, possibly years, we ski in dead quiet in a dead straight line through a seemingly dead world—except for the ravens—while my mind flaps all over the place. I remember reading somewhere that birds expel all the air from their lungs and hollow bones with each exhalation, unlike humans, who always hold back a reserve. To test this, I breathe out with gusto, generating a blizzard of condensation around me. Riley, concerned, asks if I'm OK. I reassure him that I'm just striving for a life of total avian trust. This involves maximizing the potential of every oxygen molecule I breathe in, I explain, and having faith that more air will be there to inhale once I've used all mine up.

But though I breathe out and out and out until I'm blue in the face and Riley questions my sanity, I can't rid myself of a

reserve. A wisp of air, smoggy with doubt, clings to the tuck of my lungs, skulks in the bend of my bones. This is the biological blessing and curse that keeps me conscious but grounded. Light as a shadow, a reserve still hampers the unhesitating commitment that flight demands. I can feel its weight pressing down the wings I don't have.

There is hope, though. According to philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the verbs 'I want' and 'I fly' share the same Latin root: *volo*. "There is no way to investigate the psychology of will," he explains, "without going to the very root of imaginary flight." With fierce determination, then, perhaps I can learn how to exhale absolutely, commit totally, soar. This involves a willful override of cautions built into human physiology, but precedents have proven such things possible. Consider Nansen crossing Greenland.

Starting in 1751, eight expeditions tried and failed to traverse this wedge of ice the size of a small moon. All expeditions began on the west coast of Greenland, where an Inuit settlement made for a convenient launch – and an easy retreat. Nansen, against all orthodoxy and advice, opted to start on the desolate east coast and ski toward the populated west, reasoning that this way his men would have more incentive to reach the other side. Nansen was barely thirty at the time and therefore believed himself immortal. But call him crazy or canny, he knew how to harness the instinct for self-preservation. Turning back for his team was not an option: refuge was only reachable on the far side. No reserve.

Nansen soared by ski across Greenland and landed back in Norway a hero. Before the voyage he had reassured family and friends, in words that rang hollow even then, that he planned to return to the lab bench following his polar "holiday." Instead he began scheming his next expedition. The vision was characteristically preposterous: he would design and build a ship capable of surviving the crushing pressures of pack ice. Then he would freeze the vessel into the ice, drift east to west on Arctic ocean currents through the Northwest Passage, and tag the North Pole by ski along the way. The flow direction of the Arctic circumpolar current, I should say, was at this point just a hypothesis. Once again, no reserve.

In 1893, Nansen's dream ship, the *Fram*, which means

"forward" in Norwegian, sailed out of its harbor and into a fastness of ice. From here Nansen and his crew were more isolated than the first men on the moon who, as historian Roland Huntford points out, still maintained daily contact with earthbound friends nearly a quarter of a million miles away. But just a few thousand miles from home and the Fram was effectively extragalactic. Suspended between stars and ice, the vessel drifted through a near-total renunciation of warmth and light. It was a world of desolation, but also exultation. "Anything more wonderfully beautiful than the polar night does not exist," raved Nansen. "It is a light poem of all the finest and most delicate tones of the soul." The poem lasted three years. Nansen was ultimately forced to scrap the North Pole, but he set a farthest north record in the attempt, and meanwhile the Fram survived the Northwest Passage, proving that Arctic currents really do churn east to west.

Back on the plateau, daydreaming of the polar night, I imagine myself as a fixed coordinate in time with space streaming past me. What shall I see and learn, frozen as the Fram into the Hardangervidda, the world a glacier flowing by under the gravity of enchantment? So far I have seen slabs of turquoise ice, crevassed by dreams and uncertainties, in a land so frigidly beautiful it cracks the heart wide the way water expands when frozen. So far I have learned that, like Nansen, there is no going back to the laboratory, not ever, and going forward is not only about active movement, but about letting yourself drift. For what is drifting but another way to soar? On currents of ice and water and air, on wings of purest resolve, breathless on two skis across an infinity of white.

### 3. *Flight*

Hell is a synonym for ski boots. But so is heaven, and outside it's getting brighter. Riley and I rise early and shiver in the snow, coffee mugs in mittened hands, ready for the return of light. Eventually the apocalyptic absence of color dawns a hued and shining world, as though rubbed out of a magic lamp. If only all days began this way, with sleep seduced conscious by mountains, caffeine, and sun-

beams. No criminal act or cruel gesture, no war or human rights indignity, could possibly epilogue such a sunrise. The sublime, magnified like silence by a severe temperature inversion, and swilled down with strong coffee, could offer a viable path to world peace.

"Or a painful path," Riley suggests when I share my theory. "How are your feet doing?" Still there, unfortunately. Wearing these boots is like donning hairsocks, rasping skin and soul raw for the sake of atonement. Or for the sake of adventure, an equally humbling and holy pursuit in my personal cosmology. We're half-way across the Hardangervidda now, and the only direction is fram.

Once on the move I ignore my feet. They've got their job, which is to keep moving, and I've got mine, which is to be astonished, and most of the time we each mind our own business. Plus after so many stormbound days, this immensity of light and ice sets me soaring. I am uplifted without effort, as if on a thermal plume, or a gust of solar wind. The plateau is a rolling waste of white, mountains like rough seas flash frozen in liquid nitrogen, steaming and hissing with a brittle beauty. The sunlight icing the land tastes sour and taut as a lemon, a precise lively buzz on the tongue. Cold air fizzes in my lungs like champagne. With each exhalation I breathe nearly all of it out, if only to gulp in more.

Never is the inadequacy of English so exposed as when trying to fit "snow" to the gamut of shapes water assumes in its solid state. The texture of the plateau is protean and kinetic, morphing form within feet. Here snow rasps and grits, sand in all but substance. Here it bubbles and froths, a soap so caustic with cold it will scour your bones clean, if you're not careful. Now snow assumes the texture of fish scales, incense ash, porcelain, knife blades, slabs of fat, pockmarks, laugh or possibly frown lines wrinkled into skin over a lifetime, a bed of moss, peeling paint, eyelashes frozen mid-bat, a sidewalk riddled with cracks, and waves, vast bucking tireless waves, sloshing from here to the moon.

This riot of ice is flint to my kindling; I shine even as I shiver. Combustion, which is ignition without incineration, is after all a kind of internal engine, a motive force, capable of propelling flight. I remember reading about the Inuit practice of walking out frustration on the tundra. They would stride until their anger sputtered out, then plant a rock on the ground to mark how far the

flush of rage had propelled them. Instead of walking out rage, I decide to ski out rapture. How far will this exhilaration, this blazing, this wildness take me? From the Hardangervidda to the ends of the earth, tracing Amundsen's ski tracks to the South Pole. From the Hardangervidda to the Hardangervidda, over and over again, looping the planet in rapt and perpetual orbit. Or from the Hardangervidda to the paved streets of the nearest city.

Wildness, so I hear, is capable of surviving a context of concrete and neon, but staying wild in a tame place is tougher by far than traversing the Hardangervidda in mid-winter. Still, Buddhist philosopher Dogen contends that a mountain practices in every place. By such logic, wildness is neither here nor there, but an ungoverned state of wonder mazed somewhere in the mind. Mountains of the Hardangerviddan variety are simply the signposts that help locate it, the contours that draw the map. With enough practice in perception, then, even city streets can be seen as river valleys between peaks: skyscrapers as just another upsweep and coherence of minerals, people on sidewalks as cells of water streaming by. In turn, the kilter of the Hardangervidda's harsh enchantment is poised somewhere between extravagance and restraint, rapture and a kind of cold rage. Which means it aligns precisely with the axis of the planet, and the inclinations of we the people who populate it. I place a rock on my hat to mark the origin and end of all wildness, and keep skiing.

Late afternoon on the plateau is a time of tense negotiation between light and ice. The outcome, whether energy or element prevails, is an unwavering blaze of white. By the end of the day the scorching wonder of this world is almost unbearable. Our senses are enflamed, our nerves sting like something skinned, our eyes seep and freeze shut, our throats smolder from swallowing so much shine. This cold heaven or this burning hell: it all depends on the slant of light. Finally the sun cools behind the mountains. The world fades into a soothing absence of color and we are washed with relief. You can only absorb so much of the sublime, and Riley and I are saturated to our hollow bones. Time to pitch the tent, cook food, catch our breath. Time to take off my boots.

#### 4. Home

The far edge of the Hardangervidda is ahead. It looks exactly like the center of the plateau, and the side of the plateau we started from, and all spaces between: vast, undifferentiated, achingly white. The only clue we are on the verge comes from wild reindeer who call the Hardangervidda home. In winter the herds stick to the plateau's southern fringe, where by quirk of climate the snow piles thinner, making it easier for them to forage for lichen. Though we haven't seen so much as an antler yet, today we've found proof of the reindeer herd's proximity: a four-lane highway freshly paved in hoofprints.

The urge to follow this trail, the first we have encountered on the Hardangervidda, is primal and overwhelming. How simple to swerve the way of the herd, to pursue that track pummelled flat of any possibility of floundering, whether through deep snow or even deeper confusions. To join that caravan of fur and instinct, and run wild. At this point it wouldn't take much to tempt us astray. Riley and I are in no hurry to return to so-called civilization, with its ticking clocks and traffic jams. Lichen would probably taste better than the mush we've been eating on this expedition, though at least the ravens enjoy our scraps. Riley could even improvise us antlers from ski poles, because he's handy like that.

But despite the appeal of mob mentality, we know this is not our path. Reindeer have their own lives to lead, we have ours, and each is inscrutable to the other. Besides, who can resist peering over an edge? As we ski off in search of it, not without the pang of those lost from the herd, I console myself by thinking that Nansen would approve us breaking our own trail. In a commencement speech to university students, he outlined the guiding principle of his life: "Let it be impressed upon the young never, when there is a choice, to do anything which can be done equally well or better by someone else. How many wasted lives would then be spared if each individual tried to find his own line."

By Nansen's geometry, a line is not straight and fixed but sinuous and ever-evolving, a path that unfurls by the dictates of fresh devotions. After the Fram expedition, for example, Nansen

veered into humanitarian work. Maybe he too recognized the potential for world peace in the sublime, and having absorbed so much of it during his Arctic sojourns, felt compelled to put it to good use. Whatever his impetus, Nansen devoted himself to diplomatic work on behalf of refugees from the first World War, and was eventually awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. If you read Nansen's line through the rugged lands of politics and the poles as a kind of runic script, it would translate to "no reserve."

Though Riley and I ski together, we carve our own lines across the Hardangervidda. Riley's is a smooth calligraphy, the signature of grace, intent, and competence. Mine is a messy scrawl of sudden whims, like the flits of a bird, and punctuated with snow angels I crash into creation. Somehow we end up in the same place, but from there to here, our singular journeys are scribed onto the plateau. What my line spells out is quite fortunately lost in translation.

Even better, the slate is wiped clean every night. Every morning dawns a different Hardangervidda, variations on a theme of ice, rock, and sky. Today the plateau is cracked wide and glinting as a geode. Ice comprises the ore, crystals forged under minimal temperatures of air and maximal pressures of light. After weeks in this same kiln, I am carbon crushed to coal, and coal crushed to diamond. This is what wilderness does to land and life: it exposes interiors, the world's and ours, and in the right light reveals each as rough and many-faceted gems.

Exactly how wilderness exerts this metamorphism is an enigma. Ask a scientist what wilderness is and they might define it—possibly with equations, certainly using a graph—as a number of hectares absent of human influence. Ask a politician and they might describe it as a national park converting tax dollars into paved hiking paths that tamely guide the masses through the bonafide wild. But ask a polar explorer or some other species of poet, like Don McKay, and they will muse that wilderness is "not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations."

What places like the Hardangervidda offer is proximity to the unimagined. Eloquent as a poem, evasive as a koan, wilderness

is a frontier beginning precisely where our most cherished certainties are perplexed. It is the school where intellect receives instruction in bewilderment. It is the paradox of beauty fanged with frost, ecstatic movement wincing with blisters. It is also a dwelling in wonder.

Occasionally in life I feel like a glacial erratic, deposited from a crush of ice into a land not my own. But on the Hardangervidda I am returned to the bedrock from which I was born. This is not to sentimentalize wilderness, or tame it into a place picketed and habitable. Neither does it mean I am kin to reindeer, and should have taken that path when I had the chance. But if home is a matter of inner soul settling out, like an oyster exuding its own abode, then my soaring aliveness here is a most authentic lodging. The desire to feel intensely alive, and therefore home, is a biological impulse that unlike my reserve I have no wish to override. So mountains magnetize nearly all my movements, as the poles did Nansen's, obliging me to live out geography as biography. With surrender, with joy.

Our journey, like the Hardangervidda, ends abruptly. We fall off the edge of the world. With a sudden plunge we find ourselves deep below treeline in a fiord bristling with pine and buzzing with snowmobiles. The plateau's mute roar of space is just a nostalgia on the far side of noise. While the ravens opt to stay high and join the reindeer, Riley and I ski to the nearest road, hitch a ride to town, and catch a bus back to civilization. My mangled feet testify to the severity of the distance we have traveled, over a hundred miles as the bird flies, many more as the mountains fold. Now with ski boots off for good, the effortless locomotion of the bus lacks the exhilaration of flight but offers its own and warmer bliss.

Yet even as I return to hot showers, food more solid than mush, and other perks of civilization, some true and rebel part of me keeps on skiing. Once unleashed, the only possible way is fram, in all its desolation and exultation. One foot in front of the other, step by step, the left studying the contours of cold, the right probing the full sweep of life's pain and possibility. And so I soar through storms of ice and light, a rock on my hat and feathers on my back. And so I drift through a poem the tone and duration

of the polar night, in the company of heroes and ravens. Across mountains and deserts, through suburbs and cities, I am turned inside out and in strangely familiar territory. Heaven or hell, it's hard to say, but wildness knows the place well and it has no borders.

Find your own line, urged Nansen, and now I understand why. It's the only way to get home.