



EL DIARIO DEL FIN DEL MUNDO

A JOURNEY THAT WASN'T

The extraordinary events and unlikely phenomena to which sailors bear solitary witness are not easy to record. The narrative must be precise, or it runs the risk of being taken for a fabrication. For the maritime storyteller this would be unthinkable, as he and his story are inseparable. The truth, therefore, must be made believable. One way is to understate the story by weeding out exceptional details, however factual. Another option is to dress the truth in the costume of fiction by using those same details to elaborate the story. But on certain occasions, such as this one, none of these narrative mechanisms are sought.

Due to the effects of global warming, the Antarctic ice shelf is receding. In addition to widespread environmental damage, the seascape has changed to reveal previously uncharted islands with unusual ecosystems and mutations in the endemic fauna. Over the years, rumor of a singular white animal said to live in this region came to the attention of Pierre Huyghe. The account of an old Antarctic explorer described the creature as elusive and gave its location as the shores of an unnamed island near Marguerite Bay at the height of the Polar Antarctic Circle. Operating on the postulate that such a place should geographically exist, a small group of people embarked on a collective journey toward this southernmost land. Taking their hypothesis as a given and proceeding as if the journey had already been completed, they deduced a path that might lead them toward their quarry. Perhaps, they reasoned, desire itself might produce the island.

They seized an opportunity to navigate south on a world-renowned polar research vessel. Provisions included experimental equipment meant to facilitate contact with the creature, should they encounter it, and a portable radio transmitter to broadcast their movements from extraterritorial waters to the continents. On February 9, 2005, Jay Chung, Francesca Grassi, Pierre Huyghe, Q Takeki Maeda, Aleksandra Mir, Xavier Veilhan, Maryse Alberti, and ten crew members set sail from the Port of Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost point of Borges country. The name of the daily newspaper, *El Diario del*



Fin del Mundo, suggested that what lay southward would indeed be outside the world.

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As the boat approached Cape Horn, they began to hope that their sail south wouldn't prove too difficult for a group of people with little to no experience at open sea. Yet the Drake Passage announced itself like the hiss of some great decompression. Even for accomplished sailors, these waters rank among the world's most difficult navigational challenges. Winds and currents at these latitudes never encounter land, making their force particularly strong compared with those in contact with the continental shelf.

While the crew worked incredible shifts to keep the boat on course, those below deck succumbed to an uneasy slumber. As with the hibernation of space travel, the rhythm of life—and time itself—was suspended. Taken to prevent seasickness, the scopolamine pills they consumed contained a molecule that produced permanent twilight sleep. Equilibrium became a thing of the past—a time when movement, sense, light, sounds, and gravity all understood each other. There was no use in moving, no dialogue between brain and body. The only harmony was in the heads of those who slept, and even then, their minds were lost to obscure dreams.

Shortly after the boat crossed the Antarctic Convergence, a major zone of depression was rising in the south, on track to wallop the boat with winds reaching sixty knots. According to the Beaufort scale, the storm nearly qualified as a hurricane. This meteorological time bomb would explode in the darkness, invading the nightmares of

the sleepers below deck. The sea became an aquatic landscape of moving hills and plunging valleys. All around them, the edges of exceptional wave crests shattered into spray, and long streaks of white foam stretched in every direction. Violent gusts shredded the staysail, meant to ensure the boat's stability in rough weather. Ominously, one of two onboard motors abruptly ground to a halt.

An updated forecast from Chilean coastal authorities indicated that the worst was yet to come. Celine, the boat's captain, recommended they abandon their southward course and immediately head toward the nearest land, which lay westward. However, according to her calculations, any attempt to sail the boat in that direction would only push them back north. Instead, she explained, the best chance to reach the safety of land was to take the route of the storm itself.

Accepting this decision, they let the boat drift among the enormous waves, leaving its movement no longer in their hands. But were they really drifting? Drift implies movement without aim or purpose, while in this case their purpose was clear: Get to land before the full force of the storm got to them. After a day and night of purposeful drifting, they caught a glimpse of land. Their guide was somewhat familiar with the uncharted waters of this particular area of the Antarctic Peninsula, so the crew followed his recommendations to take shelter among the Pitt Islands. The radiophonic log, planned to include daily conversations and musical sessions, would have to wait. Under such conditions, contact with the BBC and Radio France was impossible.

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By now it had become clear to the group that facts, not desires, would steer their voyage. Ecotourism represents reality as the ultimate attraction, but reality is not what it used to be; it has become relative. As always, it has to be invented. As geography toyed with their senses, chemical elements and natural phenomena would conduct their movements. Perhaps they would need to invent a chemical language or ingest a drug that would alter the real rather than its perception. Their journey would encounter islands and make them disappear, producing no-knowledge zones that would emerge wherever the capacity of language to seize reality would end. The elsewhere remains a story, and the rest is exoticism. If language fails to recount the experience, an equivalence, topologically identical to the occurrence, has to be invented.

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The boat moved cautiously into the labyrinth of ice and islands. Between the reduced visibility and the shifting seascape of crawlers and icebergs, it would be difficult to achieve anchorage. At one point, the onboard computer indicated that the boat had made contact with an island. If it was there at all, it must have been immaterial. Precise knowledge of one's GPS coordinates on an incomplete or erroneous map remains elusive.

Further along, as they entered a small bay with the hope of anchoring near a sheet of fast ice, they struck an underwater outcropping. The boat was immobilized, and the crew scattered into position. The Zodiac, an inflatable dinghy, was lowered into the water with a few people onboard, while everyone else looked on helplessly. Not one of them knew the first thing about sailing, including Francesca, great-granddaughter of Jameson Adams, second in command of Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1908 *Nimrod* expedition to the South Pole. Some traits, obviously, are not hereditary. Slowly, the boat's aluminum hull was maneuvered out of the rocks. The sound was tremendous, yet damage was minimal.

By early evening, the boat was successfully anchored amid a small chain of islets just north of the Pitt Islands. Despite the blizzard, Pierre, Maryse, Francesca, Xavier, Jay, and Q decided to venture toward their first landing. They put on the yellow extreme-weather gear, as Celine continually reminded them that a strong man would survive less than five minutes if he were to fall into the freezing seawater. They discovered that there was another world on this planet, where the cloudy sky produced a milky green light that reflected off an icy ground, uniformly illuminating the air around them as if the landscape were glowing in the dark. It was a landscape without matter, only light. There was neither luminous source nor shadow, only reflection and incidence.

Eventually the weather conditions improved, allowing them to continue sailing toward the Antarctic Polar Circle in search of the unnamed island. Meanwhile, the crew had discovered that the storm had damaged the boat's computer, resulting in partial loss of its memory of their trip. After a few miles, there was a collective sense of *déjà vu*. Had they passed this way before, or had "place" itself shifted locations? Perhaps it was a scopolamine hangover. It might also have been an accident, an improbable recurrence of cir-

cumstance: Strong winds could well have repositioned these familiar icebergs. Whatever the case, it seemed they were caught in a temporal loop, folding the time of their journey.

"I thought of a maze of mazes, of a sinuous, ever growing maze which would take in both past and future and would somehow involve the stars. . . . The Garden of Forking Paths is an enormous guessing game, or parable, in which the subject is time. . . . It is a picture, incomplete yet not false."

As the boat sailed on, the sun played games with the atmosphere, creating a halo of pale shades of pink and violet, like a circular rainbow. The skies ahead changed from dark gray to startling white, the falling snowflakes appeared almost black against their luminous backdrop. It was the aura of an iceblink, indicating a sea of pack ice directly in front of them.

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The pack ice was easy to sail through at first, but after a while they realized the lone functioning motor was having great difficulties pushing the boat through the thickening ice. Before they knew it, the boat had come to a complete standstill. For a long time everyone stood gazing at the surroundings. The ice was undulating at the same slow rhythm as the sea beneath. The boat tried in vain to make its way out or at least to crack the ice, but it was stuck. The RO desalinator was unable to operate due to the seawater main being blocked by the layer of ice, which meant the group had to begin rationing water. They had no idea how long the ice would keep them, so the time had come to save energy. The generators were switched off, and the gas stove at the center of the common room became the only source of heat onboard.

During the night the winds grew stronger, as did the grip of the frozen icescape. Locked in place, they could see for miles, but there was no apparent limit between ground and sky. Despite perfect visibility, the view in every direction revealed a horizontally and vertically identical desert. Mesmerized by the white seascape, they failed to recognize that landmarks in the far distance were gradually changing and moving past them. Crazy, abstract drawings appeared on the computer's GPS monitor, rendered by the boat's movements along with the ice. Without choice, the boat was drifting toward their intended path. Context had become their vessel, and the improbable circumstances placed their desires within reach.

The following morning, they scrutinized the land that lay ahead and recognized features of the place they sought. Cautiously, a few adventurous people stepped onto the ice. Attached to one another by safety ropes, they made their way along the surface of an icy lunar landscape. They disappeared into the distance toward the snow-covered rock—perhaps a nunatak, lying in wait for global warming to melt the ice and transform its landmass into a real island. The afternoon passed, and lonesome yellow figures reappeared in the distance. It was indeed an unnamed island, but not the one they were searching for. No creature—or sign of one—was there to greet them. When they returned, everyone on board took up their instruments for the first time in days. Xylophones, flutes, guitars, and cymbals began their polyphony; slowly a musical track took shape as radio broadcasting began.



After four days stuck in the ice, they managed to break free. Just as the white aura of the iceblink had signaled the arrival of pack ice, a black zone in the sky above reflected open water in the seas ahead. No one on board was an astronomer, but come nightfall, it didn't take a specialist to notice the stars had changed. Where was Cassiopeia? Where was the Big Dipper?

As they reached the Polar Antarctic Circle, the AMSR-E sea-ice maps indicated that they would be able to sail no further. Confronted with this limit, they wondered whether the unnamed island they were seeking might actually be the boat, a place without place, a perfect heterotopy.

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They followed whales up the coast of the Antarctic Peninsula toward the Anagram Islands. Along the way, the boat reached another unnamed island, a slender tongue of land with two small bays on either side. A mountain of jagged rock and scattered boulders rose from its center. Unlike the two locations they had previously encountered, this place seemed to support life. With the feeling that they were getting closer, they hoisted equipment on deck for the encounter. Everyone took part in loading the Zodiac before they set off toward the snowy land to install the station. On the icy shore, gear bags and crates opened to reveal their cargo. Out came light and sound equipment, along with the experimental device. A great, inflatable structure slowly took shape, like some hybrid of a beached whale and an iceberg.

Once the station was in order, the team scattered as each member took up separate distractions. Xavier had built a menacing black kite that floated in the breeze. Jay and Francesca disappeared into the mountain with the VLF receiver to eavesdrop on sounds produced by the earth's magnetic field, while Aleksandra drew fragments of the scenery.

A machine had been specially designed to translate the island's shape into a complex sequence of sound and light, not unlike a luminous, musical variation of Morse code or the vocal and visual displays animals use to communicate information about their territories. Pierre called it Saint Francis of Assisi. Through music and lights, illuminating the mountainous shore with a pulsating radiance analogous to the surrounding topography, the unknown place became a language unfolding temporally.

As twilight gathered on the shore, they waited for the creature to appear. The landscape became a scene of expectation. Maryse and Pierre floated silently in the Zodiac just off shore. As darkness fell, Xavier and Francesca put on their headlamps. Powerful katabatic winds arrived without warning to shatter the calm. The equipment shuddered while Xavier and Francesca tackled the inflatable structure to prevent it from blowing away in the dark. Q was filming nearby, but soon he, too, jumped onto its belly and joined the chaotic struggle.

The main priority in these dangerous conditions was getting back to the boat as fast as possible. Strong winds were propelling icebergs and crawlers from open sea toward the bay, so it was imperative that everyone get moving before the channel was entirely blocked. They left in catastrophe, temporarily abandoning

the equipment along the shore. Through the blackness of night, the boat seemed unreachable. Icebergs checked the Zodiac's progress at every turn. A narrow beam of light from the boat's prow swept the bay to help them find a path to safety.

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Still, this was a place of immanence. The following morning they took a turn around the island's leeward side. Again, they set up the station on the shores of a small bay.

Crawlers drifted in the shallows, camouflaging obscure movements beneath the gentle waves. One form, different from the others, appeared to be traveling under its own volition. A few people watched the white shadow slowly emerge as it moved toward the shore. They couldn't believe their eyes as it rose out of the water and ventured onto one of the black rocks of the stony beach. The

dark landscape revealed the white creature's entire outline. It stood upright, perhaps a few feet tall. It blinked its round eyes, unaware that anyone had been searching for it all these weeks.

The hypothesis of their journey was verifying itself. The creature's existence left them wondering if they were witness to some sort of natural exception or the early sign of an animal mutation to come. The encounter unfolded in perfect stillness. The curious creature approached the station. It cautiously hopped in the soft snow around the large inflatable, gazed at the blinking light's luminous call, and extended its small neck to smell the loudspeakers. It stared at the alien structure as if to acknowledge that it had never seen such a thing before.

In 2041 the treaty that protects this continent will be revised. This was a journey in the prehistory of an Antarctic civilization to come. □

The Association of Freed Times is a temporal game.

