

Polaris

by Katrina Dessavre

On the coldest day of the year, the weather man walks back from the measurement booth across a snowed-over plain, solid as cement and tinted with the pale yellow glow of the northern lights. He looks up and smiles. The movement cracks the thin layer of frost inside his nose and he feels the air as a sharp and painful cut. By the time he reaches his house, made of wooden planks that have survived a hundred such winters, it seeps through his double-gloved hands.

Propped up against the side is a boat he built from pieces of scrap metal, salvaged from the ship that brings supplies in the summer. The crew always looks at him with pity.

"How do you manage all on your own with not a soul around? Don't you get lonely?"

No, he says, but doesn't mention the pleasure of floating in his boat and watching the reflection unbroken in the sea, now frozen and indistinguishable from the coast. They are too young to know that he was once one of them, noticing time pass only with the oranges distributed once a week. He doesn't miss those days. Now he has stale bread and coffee but enjoys it under the stars. Still, if he looks at the horizon for too long, he feels it tilt and sway, like he used to for thirty years on ships breaking ice across the Arctic.

He returns to his desk, piled with outdated meteorological journals, an atlas of clouds, and a photograph of Yuri Gagarin, which he cut out of the newspaper article in 1968. He keeps it there to remind him of his first trips up north, when he thought of himself as a cosmonaut of the Arctic, a connoisseur of open spaces and harsh climates.

He closes his notebook, an old shipping log divided into columns now overrun with weather patterns, and checks the radio. The receiver still gives him static. It will take several days for the nearest station to pick up his data and relay it to Moscow: snowfall, heavy winds, and a record low of forty below zero.

