

WONDROUS COLD



Ross Sea at the edge of the sea ice

by

Joan Myers

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Elephant Island



Gold Harbor, South Georgia



Stromness whaling station (abandoned), South Georgia

Why Antarctica? I've never liked cold weather. After a childhood in the alternately frigid and steamy Midwest, I happily moved to California and then to New Mexico, where I love the desert summers, and try to be somewhere else much of the winter. But when I was a child, I was surrounded by exploration books. My mother was an inveterate armchair traveler. Once the kids were grown, she sold the family house, moved to California, and began traveling. Her favorite adventure was a semi-circumnavigation of Antarctica in the 1970s. The many color photographs that she displayed eventually faded on the wall in her home, but they left me with a subliminal message that eventually proved stronger than my common sense.

I've heard that the world is divided into two kinds of people: those who would die rather than go to Antarctica, and a considerably smaller group that would kill to return. In traveling to McMurdo Station, I left much behind: my loving and supportive husband, Bernie, grown kids with a grandchild on the way, aging parents, my business, and friends who thought I was either lucky or crazy. I was not just leaving all I held dear. I was not only leaving the country. Sitting in the airport in Albuquerque, I felt I was leaving the *planet* behind.

The idea began in 2001 after a short cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula. I was determined to return. A year later I successfully applied for an Antarctic Artists' and Writers' Program Grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). In return for considerable logistic support, room and board for four months, and the loan of polar clothing, I promised NSF "a photographic overview of the ongoing human exploration and occupation of this, the most hostile continent on the planet." The long process of preparing began. I sorted camera gear, learned software, ordered new lenses, obtained hard-to-get permits for protected areas, went through a battery of medical exams from dental, blood work, EKG, treadmill tests, mammogram to a full physical. Somehow I passed — at 58 years old.

Standing at the geographic South Pole, I marveled at the human determination to build structures and work in this inhospitable place. I had a difficult time catching my breath at -40°F and 10,000 feet altitude. To be in Antarctica is to see our planet at its most elemental and unforgiving. Nobody has ever lived there permanently and found a way to survive its harsh climate and uncompromising terrain. It's a continent without an oral history. The *Wondrous Cold* book is the story — as told by my camera and through my journal — of my journey to a world as mysterious and amazing as an unknown planet in a distant galaxy.



Remains of observatory used by a German expedition to view the 1992 Transit of Venus, Moltke Harbor, South Georgia



Whale bones, South Georgia



*Remains of hut from 1901-03
Nordenskjöld Expedition, Paulet Island*



Trinity Island

In the early 20th century, whaling stations were replaced by large factory ships, which carried on board all the resources needed for harvesting and processing whales. This boat may have been used to transport fresh water from shore to a factory ship.



Overview of McMurdo Station with Observation Hill



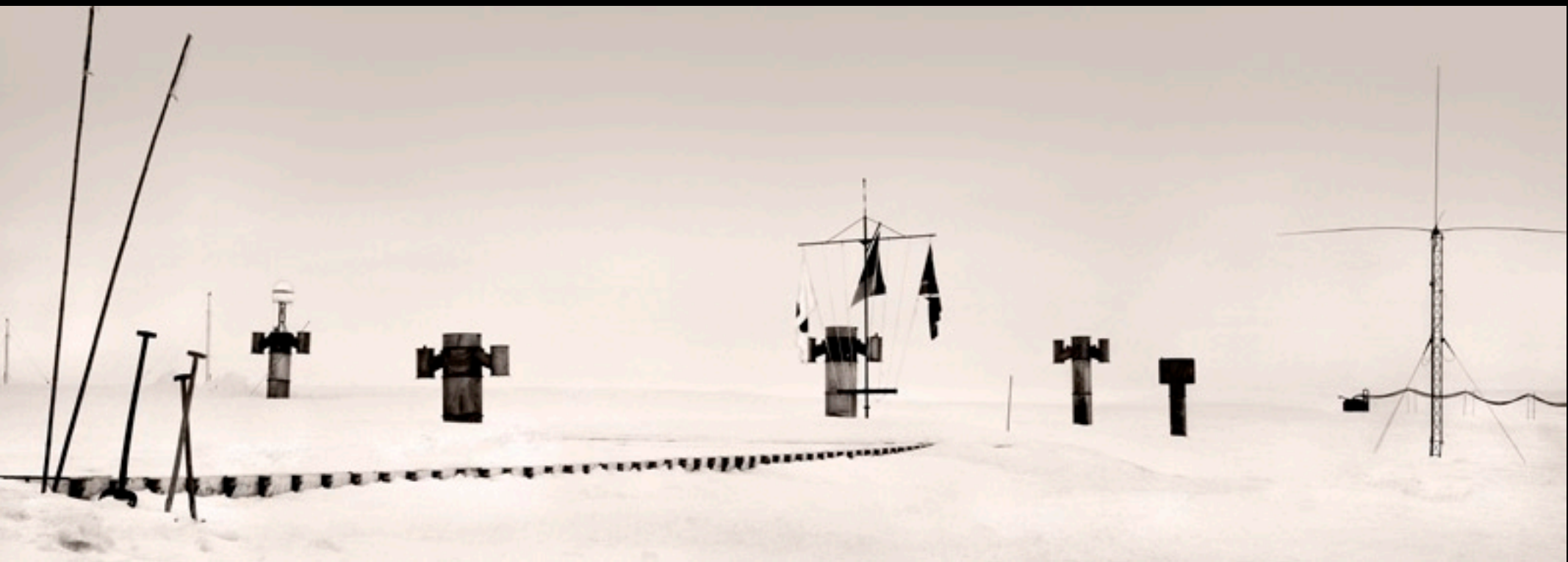
Communications antenna for McMurdo Station, Black Island McMurdo is a small speck on Ross Island, 50 miles away across the sea ice. Above it towers Mount Erebus.



South Pole Station dome



Ceiling light inside dome



Neumayer Station (German)

Now marked only by ventilator shafts, antennas, and several temporary buildings, Neumayer has slowly sunk 90 feet below the surface of the ice. Nine people winter-over here in two steel tubes, 26 feet in diameter and about 300 feet long, divided into living quarters, laboratories, kitchen, hospital, and power stations.



Neutron monitor

The Viper telescope records slight temperature fluctuations in the cosmic microwave background, allowing cosmologists to test their theories about the origin of the universe.



Halley Station



*Happy Camper School
Setting up tents*

An Alien Landscape

OCTOBER 8, MCMURDO STATION, -21° F, WIND CHILL -45° F

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY, but I made it!

At 6 a.m. we report without luggage to Christchurch's Antarctic air terminal and put on our cold-weather clothes (warm underwear, bib overalls, bunny boots, bear-paw mittens, and parka). We're dressed for the worst the Antarctic has to offer. Since it's nearly 80° F in Christchurch, we're ridiculously uncomfortable, but nobody complains. At least we're appropriately dressed when we arrive. (Since there's nowhere to land between here and McMurdo, our parkas and bunny boots are unlikely to save us in case of mechanical problems).

We proceed to the gate, present our passports, get boarding tags to hang around our necks, and hoist our bags onto the scales. The C-141 is an aging, clunky-looking plane, a staple of the military's movement of personnel and cargo all over the world since the late 1950s. We climb up a short flight of steep stairs and are fastened, one at a time, into webbed sling-like seats in two long facing rows. The women are loaded last, near the cockpit and the minimal bathroom. (The guys use a bucket in the back.) There are nearly 100 of us altogether along with tons of cargo in the rear.



Scott's hut, Cape Evans

There are no windows on the plane, so I can't see what's below us. I beg to get a few shots, so the pilot invites me into the cockpit as we begin flying over the Antarctic continent. The view is of another world – the tips of grim mountains draped with glaciers poking through a woolly white blanket. The ice goes on and on, as far as I can see. No roads, no structures or vegetation, nothing but an immense empty continent. It is alien, Other, beyond the known or imagined. How do I fit this landscape in a picture frame? It would be easier to photograph heaven or hell. They, at least, would have human inhabitants to provide scale.

After a five-and-a-half-hour flight, we land smoothly on an ice runway. The doors open, and light floods in. I put on my goggles and step out into more space and sky than I have ever seen. The ice crunches beneath my boots. Distant mountains are edged crisply in the brilliant sunlight. I breathe the cold and light into my whole body. I am surrounded by people but feel terribly alone.



Scott's hut, Cape Evans



Chemistry bench, Scott's hut, Cape Evans



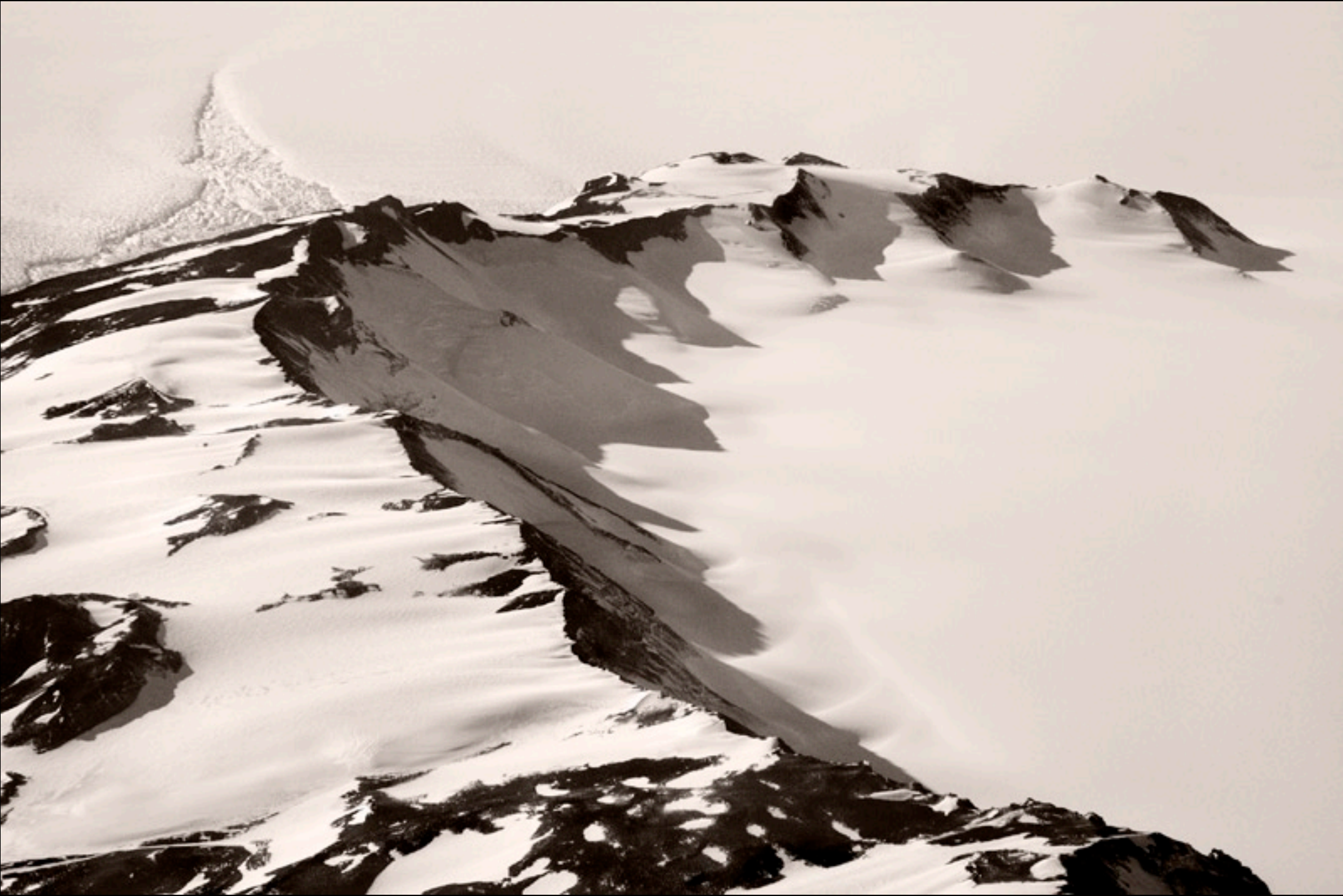
Inside Discovery hut, Hut Point



Esperanza Station (Argentina)



Razorback seal research camp



Aerial view of Minna Bluff



Mount Newall



Suess Glacier, Lake Hoare, Dry Valleys



Canada Glacier



Barne Glacier



*Chapel made of packing crates, Frei Station
(Chile), King George Island*



Polar Plunge

NOVEMBER 16, MCMURDO STATION, 16° F, WIND CHILL -2° F

SEVERAL FRIENDS CONVINCED ME to photograph their Polar Plunge. This isn't an NSF-sanctioned activity, but it's ignored rather than forbidden. To participate, you take off your clothes and completely submerge yourself in the below-freezing saltwater of McMurdo Sound. There are two kinds of people; those who are willing to do just about anything for a new experience and those who consider the possible consequences. My friends are younger than I and more open to new experiences. I keep thinking about cardiac arrest.

We walk out a short distance on the sea ice from McMurdo to a small unheated hut with a dive hole used occasionally by the Kiwis for fish research. The transitional sea ice is beginning to melt pools here and there, so we tread lightly and avoid thin areas. Inside the hut we enlarge the opening with an ice axe and use a long handled net to scoop out several inches of loose brash ice that covers the water in the hole.

Susan, our event's organizer, comes prepared with a bathing suit (claiming modesty) and socks. We attach a stout rope around her waist just in case she doesn't return. She hesitates only a moment on the edge of the hole and then jumps in. She surfaces gasping. After she's helped out, teeth chattering and hair covered in brash ice, she says she's surprised that the water's so salty. Lisa, less determined, comes next. A moment of panic sets in as she sits on the hole edge and realizes she's about to leap into 28°F water. We encourage her. Finally, she holds herself up by her arms over the hole until her arms give way and she falls into the water, emerging with a cry a second later. Both women have towels and warm clothes to put on. Everyone leaves satisfied, either by the spectacle or the experience, and ready for a drink at the Coffee House.





Palmer Station



British field station (abandoned), Detaille Island



*Dog remains from Shackleton's Ross Sea party,
Cape Evans*



Footprints



Asgard Range from Mount Newall



*Seen from Cape Crozier,
the B15 iceberg is 100 feet high by 120 miles long by 24 miles wide*



Adélie penguins, Beaufort Island



Researchers, Beaufort Island



Borchgrevink's hut, Cape Adare

*Borchgrevink's expedition was the first to winter-over on the Antarctic continent.
Living in a small wooden hut, they proved that humans could survive the dark, bitterly cold winter.*



Emperor penguins approaching their rookery, Drescher Inlet



*Chinstrap penguin at burned remains of an Argentine military base,
South Thule, South Sandwich Islands*



*Adélie penguin eating emerald rockcod
(Trematomus bernacchii)*



Sea ice crack



Halley rookery



Skiing, Hut Point



Emperor penguins sliding



Iceberg, Crystal Sound



Penguin on its way to open water to feed



Beardmore Glacier



Ice towers



Crater rim



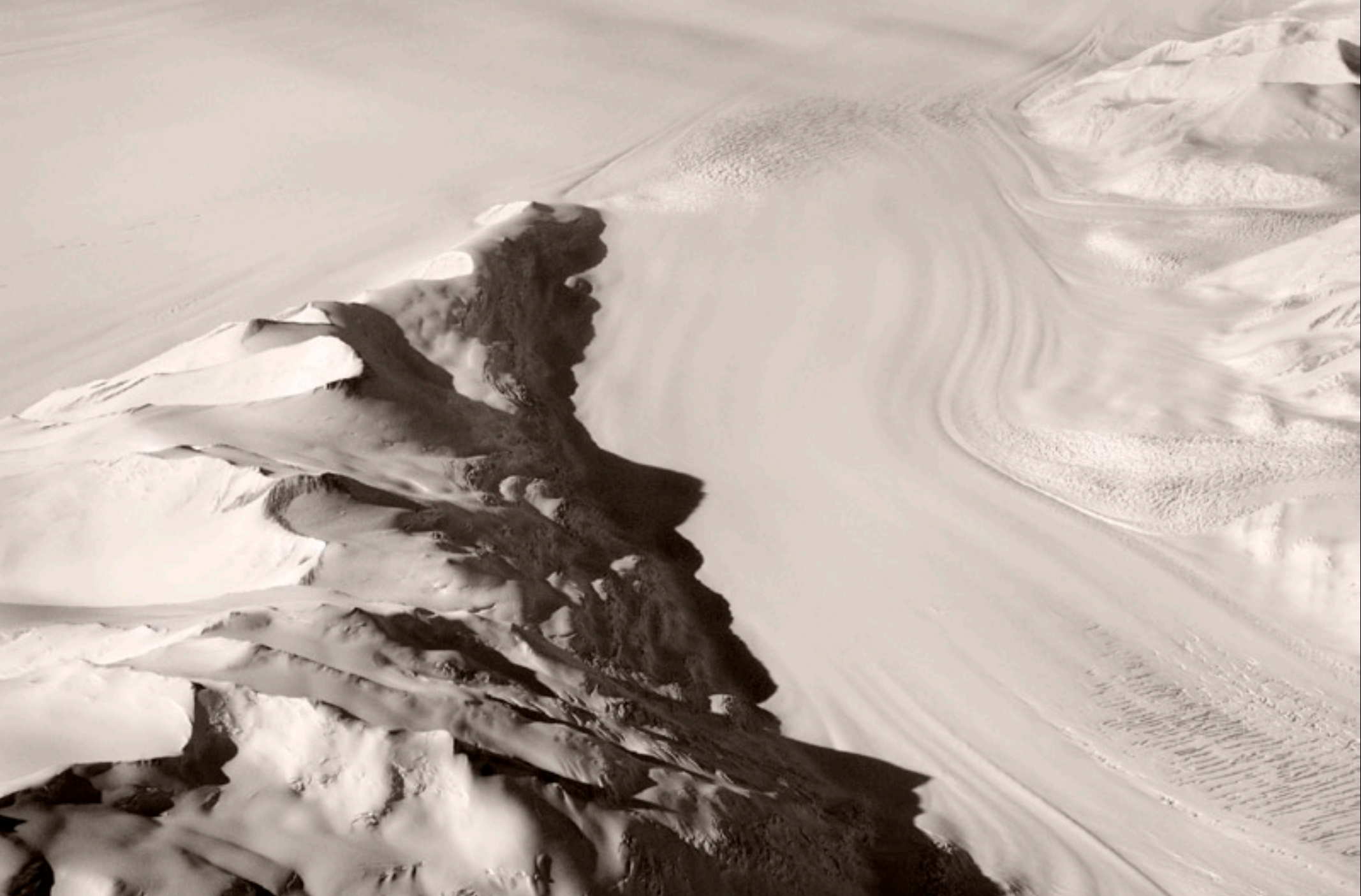
Mount Erebus steam clouds



Mount Erebus landscape of volcanic rock and ice towers



*Beacon Valley polygons.
In some areas of the Dry Valleys, like the Beacon Valley, precipitation has been negligible for at least the past 10 million years. This dryness, combined with the cracking of an ancient glacier lying beneath the soil, formed these dark polygons of soil, which range from 30 to 100 feet across.*



Transantarctic Mountains



Helipad, McMurdo



Blizzard, McMurdo



Inside the crevasse



Preparing the payload for launch



Inflating the balloon

Life at the South Pole

NOVEMBER 21, SOUTH POLE STATION, -38° F, WIND CHILL -59° F

BEING AT THE SOUTH POLE is like living in a space capsule or on another planet. It's disconcertingly unfamiliar. Outside the dome, the sun circles high in the sky and never sets on the spare, icy landscape. Inside, you are warm and well fed. Although you have satellite Internet communication for about 12 hours a day (depending on the position of the satellites), your world does not intersect with the outside. You are totally dependent on fuel and other imported necessities for survival. You are totally separate. Completely isolated.

My living quarters in a temporary Jamesway are simple – a room about 6-by-8 feet with a couple of rough wood shelves, a metal wardrobe, a bed, and a light for reading. There's a large window, but I have to keep it covered with heavy Velcro fabric. The Jamesway's eight rooms share common overhead space, and light from an unshaded window would make the whole dorm too bright for those who sleep days. The white noise from a constantly running overhead fan also helps people sleep. ▶



Overview of South Pole Station



Plumber, working in the service tunnels at minus 60°F

A trip to the bathroom involves going through a double set of doors to an uninsulated, unheated passageway with snow on the floor and frost on the inside walls. It's only slightly warmer than the outside -42°F. You don't go in bare feet or sandals, and you don't linger. After a couple of turns you come to another pair of doors and the heated bath/shower room, one for men and one for women with laundry machines in between. All the water for our dorm must be trucked in, so you're allowed only two two-minute showers each week. Since everyone here wears overalls and boots all the time, nobody cares how you look. It's a bad-hair day every day.

Kathleen Reedy, a physiologist studying the affect of Antarctic conditions on the body, told me that we increase our oxygen consumption by 30 percent doing normal activity and by 20 percent at rest (basal metabolic rate). This change begins to occur within a couple of weeks of arrival. During this time, we increase our caloric intake by 40 percent (usually without gaining weight). Meanwhile our thyroid is so busy coping with the metabolic demands that it doesn't ▶



Hooker's sea lion, Campbell Island

produce enough hormones for the central nervous system. Short-term memory loss is common. I can attest to that. For several days after my arrival at McMurdo, I couldn't remember a single name. The same thing happened at the Pole, but that soon passed. The physiologists here are doing applied research on whether a thyroid additive might help.

Dr. Will Silva, the station doctor, has equipment to handle many emergencies but nothing like what's available in even a small American hospital. If you have a heart attack, you don't have a group of medical doctors and nurses swarming around you, hooking you up to complicated machines. The station's blood bank, all of us, is walking around the station. Since the match may not be perfect, however, a transfusion could be iffy. During the polar summer, a dentist flies in once a week from McMurdo; during the polar winter, Will has to do dentistry as well.

I ask him about the attraction of working under these conditions for modest compensation. "It's a great adventure," he says. "I can practice medicine as I always imagined and wanted it to be. There are no time clocks. I can visit patients and have time to listen to what they want to talk about. They have time to feel comfortable with me."

Yes, he admits, someone can die at the Pole because of the difficulty in reaching medical care. Indeed, a scientist died from breathing problems last July during the polar winter. Since his body could not be flown home for another four months, volunteers, with the family's permission, made a casket for him, chipped a grave into the ice in -102°F weather, and buried him near the Pole marker for 2000. A black flag marks the site.



Research hut (abandoned)



Polar Sea and crew



Sea ice channel with the Dry Valleys in the background



At liberty on the ice, Polar Sea crew



Cutting the channel



Walking along the channel



Adélie penguin diving from the sea ice edge



Snow castle with sleeping tents



Preparing for the morning's commute to the work site



Penguin remains



B15 iceberg from Cape Crozier



Neptune's Bellows



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Wondrous Cold the book available from www.joanmyers.com or www.amazon.com

Born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1944, Joan Myers has spent a lifetime learning and exploring. After earning a Master of Arts in musicology in 1967 from Stanford University, she was introduced to photography in the mid-1970s through a UCLA Extension course. It was enough to get her interest rooted, and she has continued to learn-by-doing for the last 30 years. Her other interests include classical music, dance, and the sciences. She reads widely, and although she finds artistic inspiration in attending concerts, as well as theater and dance performances, she states "I find hiking in the outdoors to be the greatest creative influence."

In addition to an impressive roster of solo exhibitions, her work is included in numerous important collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, Center for Creative Photography, George Eastman House, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the National Gallery of Art (Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.)

Joan worked on the Antarctica project between 2001 and 2005, which culminated in the book *Wondrous Cold: An Antarctic Journey* (2006, Smithsonian Books). An exhibit of the work opened in May 2006 at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., and will tour the country through 2010. The Smithsonian has previously traveled two other exhibitions of her work (see * below).

A project photographer who learns a great deal about her subjects, Joan has five other subject-oriented books: *Pie Town Woman: The Hard Life and Good Times of a New Mexico Homesteader* (2001); *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* (1999); *Whispered Silences: Japanese Americans and WWII** (1996); *Santiago: Saint of Two Worlds* (1991) [featured in *LensWork* #22]; and *Along the Santa Fe Trail** (1986).

Joan states that her "chief pleasures right now are my grandchildren." She makes her home in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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