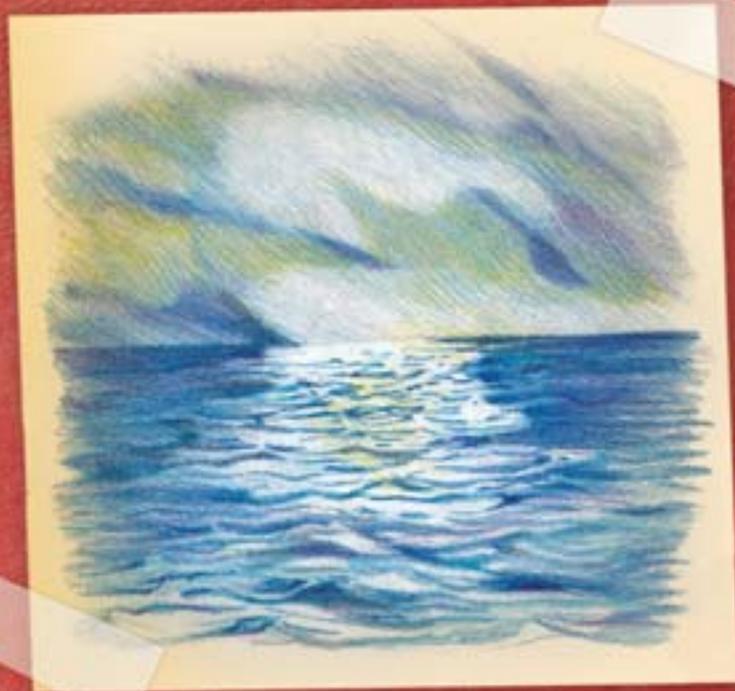


Antarctic Journal

Four Months at the Bottom of the World

by Jennifer Owings Dewey



Genre

A **journal** is a record of thoughts and events that are important to the writer. It is a kind of autobiography. Think about what is important to Jennifer Owings Dewey as you read her journal.



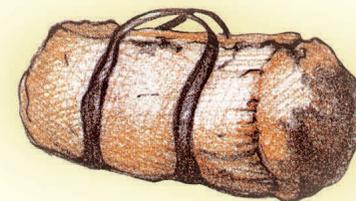
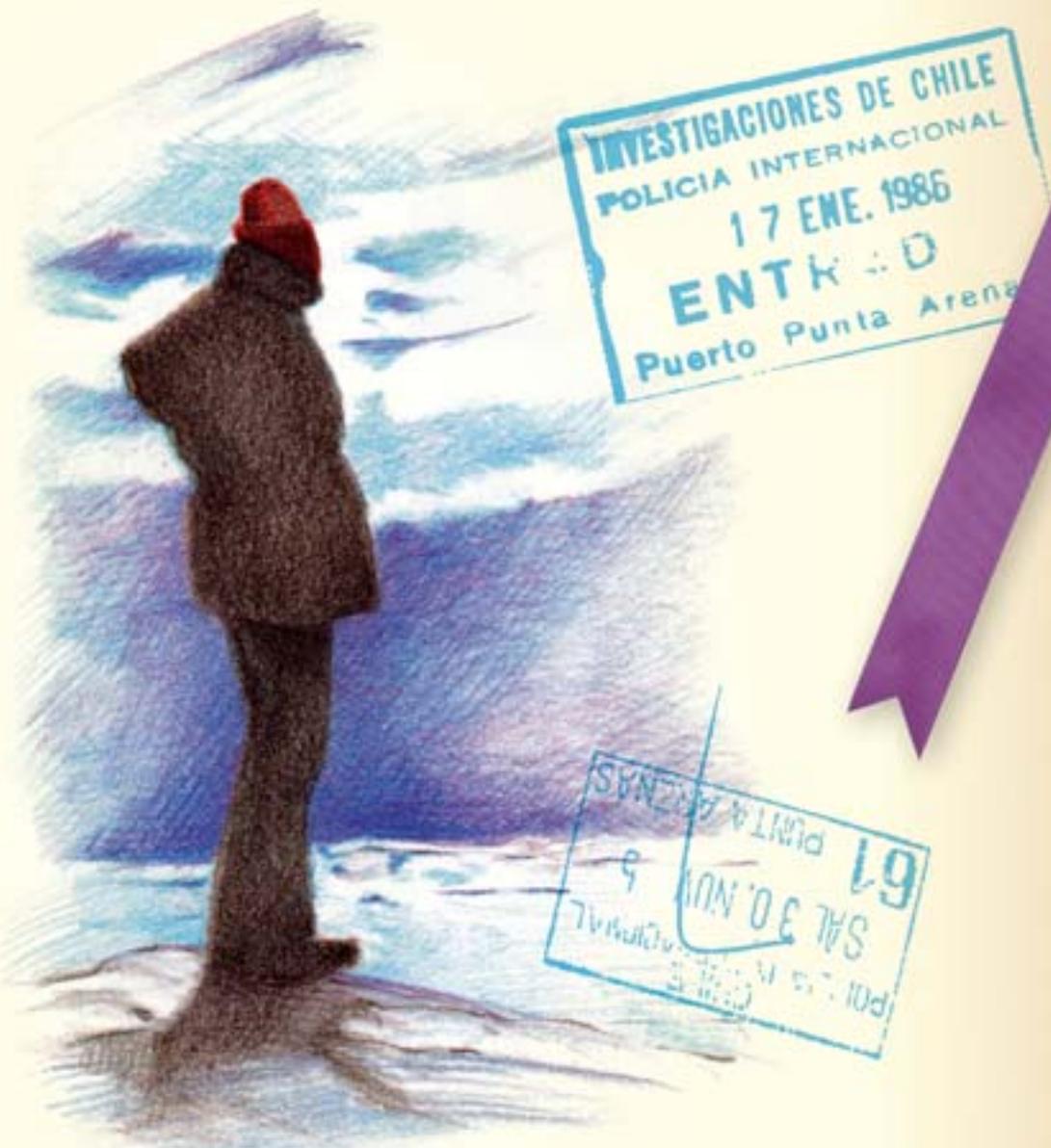
Question of the Week

What does a person sacrifice to explore the unknown?

November 12th

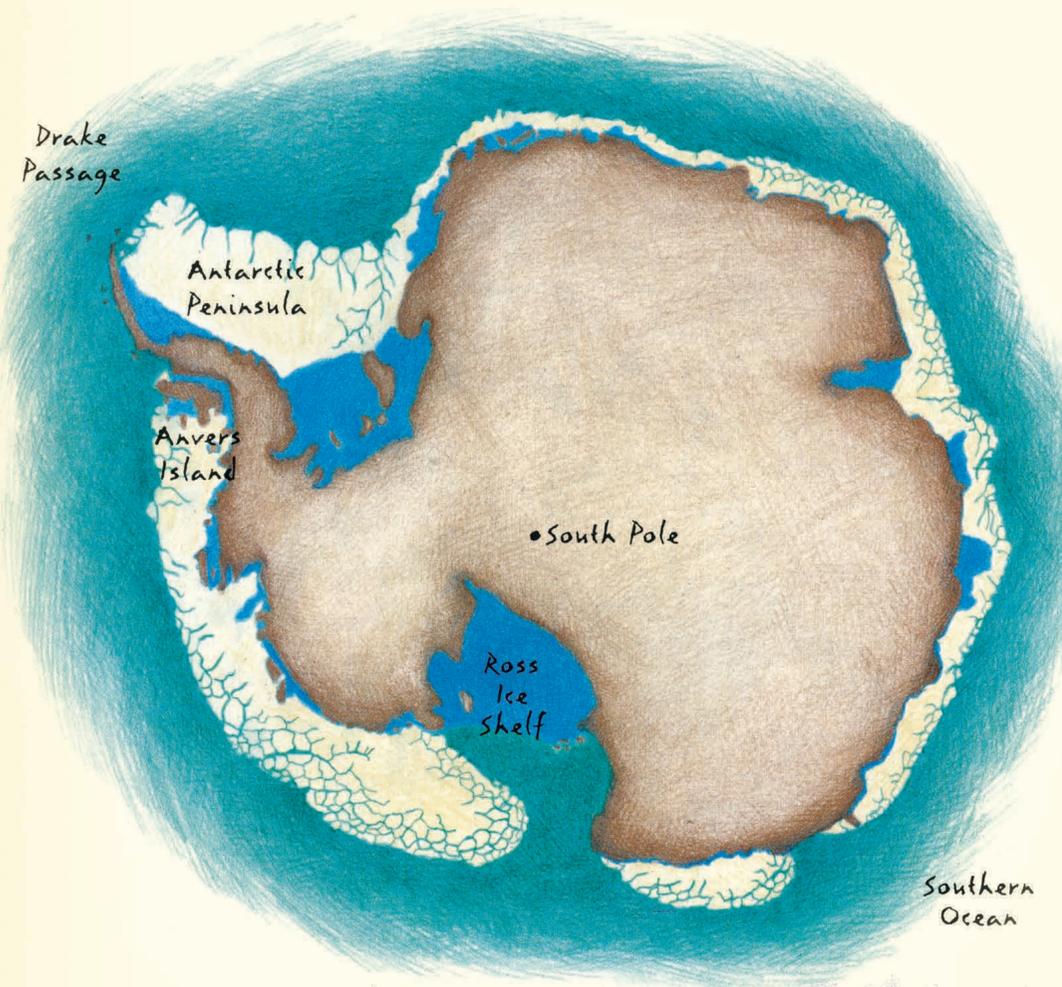
Depart from home in the early morning, to be gone four months to Antarctica, a part of the planet as remote as the moon in its own way.

The woman sitting next to me on the shuttle is headed for San Antonio, Texas. She has more luggage than I do.



For millions of years Antarctica, the fifth largest **continent**, has been in the grip of an ice age. It is the windiest, coldest, most **forbidding** region on Earth, and I am heading straight for it.

“Good-bye, America,” I whisper as the airplane **heaves** off the ground with a shuddering roar. “See you later.”



November 17th

We flew from Miami to Santiago, Chile. Early the next morning we boarded a plane bound for Punta Arenas, a town at the southern tip of Chile.

We landed and were driven to a hangarlike building, where we received our Antarctic clothing issue, on loan for the length of our stay, to be returned when we head back.

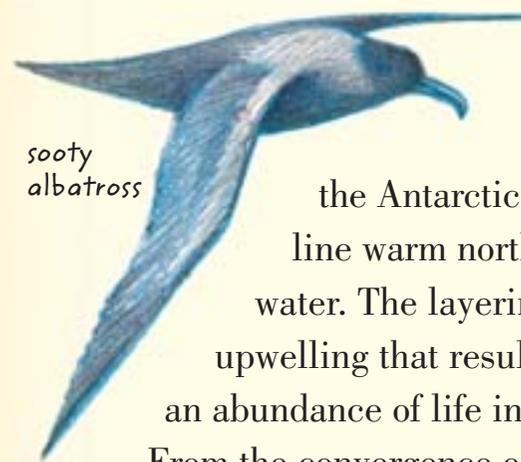
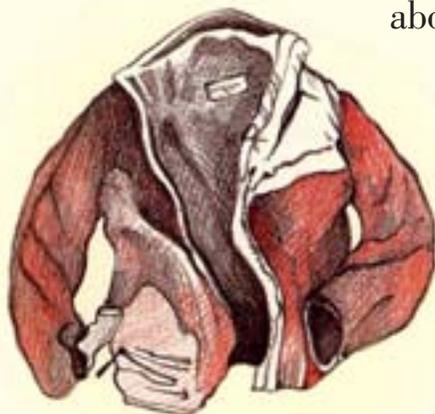
Our next stop was the pier where the *Polar Duke*, our ship, was tied up.

I was shown to my cabin—a space so tiny, I wished I were an elf. A desk and chair are bolted to the floor. The bedding is a well-padded sleeping bag.

We're off this morning. Clear skies, cool breeze, and no chop. The ship heaves and rolls like the smallish, sturdy seaworthy vessel it is.

I make a nest in one of the boats tied on deck, a cozy spot to spend hours drawing or just looking. I resist going below to sleep or eat. There is too much to take in—rolling seas, salt spray, broad-winged seabirds soaring inches above the wave tops.

The sun never sets. It lowers and rolls lazily along the northern horizon before rising again. I shiver with anticipation when we leave the calm waters of the Beagle Channel and enter Drake Passage.



sooty albatross

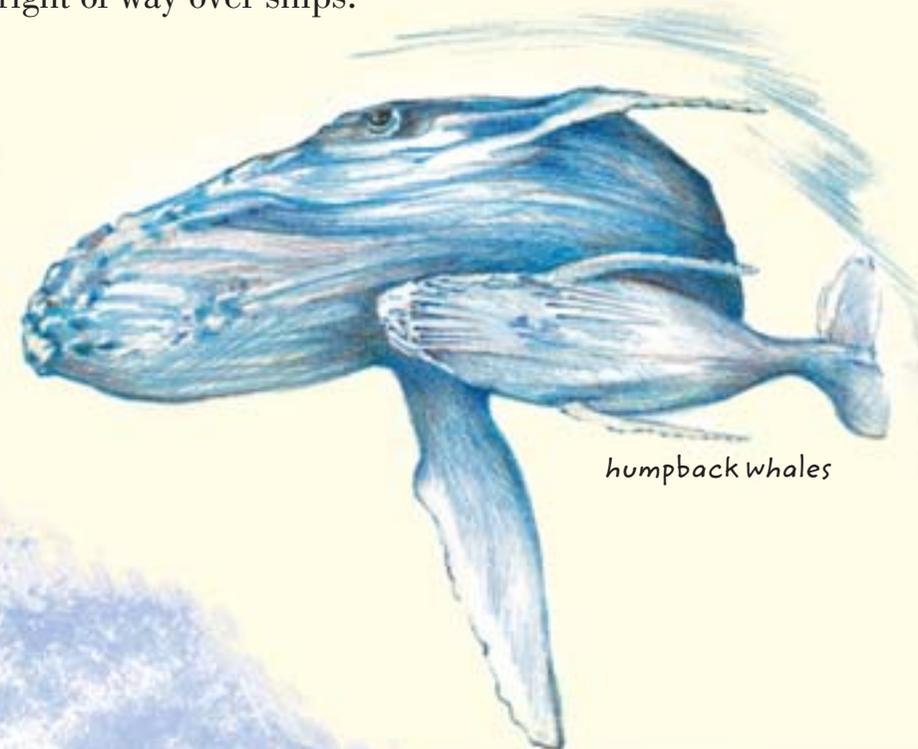
Two days pass and we cross the Antarctic **Convergence**. Along this invisible line warm northern water meets cold southern water. The layering of warm and cold, and the upwelling that results, creates ideal conditions for an abundance of life in the seas.

From the convergence on, we are *in* Antarctica.

A day later the ship's motor stops humming. From the bridge I look out over the bow. A group of whales breaks the surface of the sea, spy hopping, heads pointing straight up out of the water. They slap their flukes and roll playfully.

"Humpbacks," one of the crew says. "Whales have the right of way in these waters. We stop when we see them, turn the engines off, and let them pass before we start up again."

It's good to know an ocean exists where whales have the right of way over ships.



humpback whales

November 18th
Palmer Station



Dear T.,

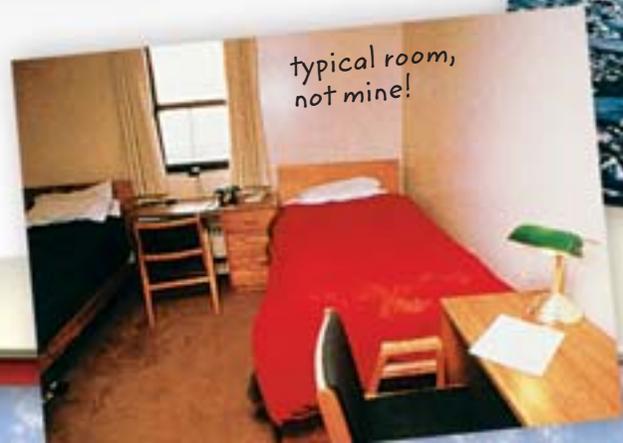
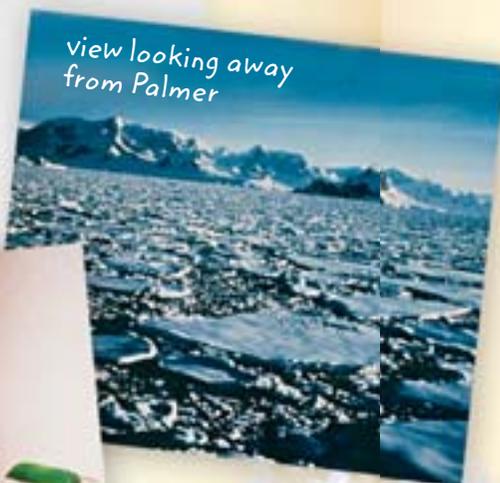
Palmer Station is a group of insulated metal buildings, housing fifty people comfortably. The station was built on Anvers Island. You don't know you're on an island because permanent ice fills the gap between Anvers and the mainland.

We learn the rules the first night: no travel alone, except to climb the glacier behind Palmer, flagged with poles to show the safest way up. We sign out when leaving, giving a departure hour and an estimated time of return. We are given walkie-talkies and check with "base" every hour. If we're half an hour off schedule, someone comes looking, unless a storm blows in. If it's too dangerous for anyone to come after us, we are expected to wait out the bad weather.

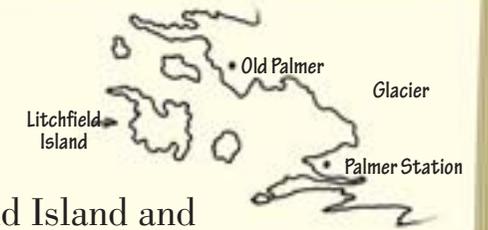
The sunscreen they pass out is "the only kind strong enough." We are ordered never to forget to use it.

Tomorrow we learn about the zodiacs, small rubber boats with outboard motors. I'm excited about what comes next, and sleepy.

Much love,
Mom



November 27th
Litchfield Island



In fair weather I go to Litchfield Island and spend the day, sometimes the night. Litchfield is three miles from Palmer by zodiac, a protected island visited by two or three people a year. Before going to Litchfield, I'm shown how to walk on open ground in Antarctica. An inch of moss takes one hundred years to grow. The careless scuff of a boot heel could rip out two hundred years of growth in seconds.



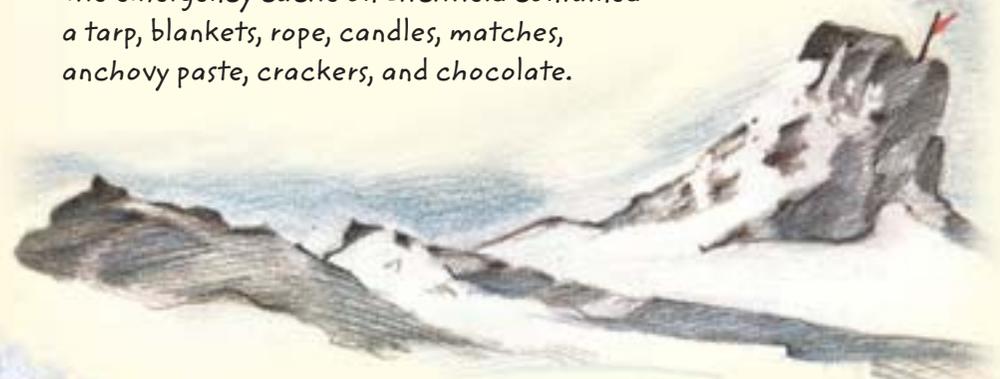
I pack my food and extra clothes in a waterproof sea bag. A daypack holds pencils, pens, and paper for drawing and writing. There is no fresh water on the island. I carry two one-gallon canteens.

Each island has an emergency cache of food and supplies, marked with a flag, available if a person gets stranded during a storm.

Alone after being dropped on the island, I hear birds call, the whine of the wind, the waves pounding gravel shores, and no human sounds except my breathing.

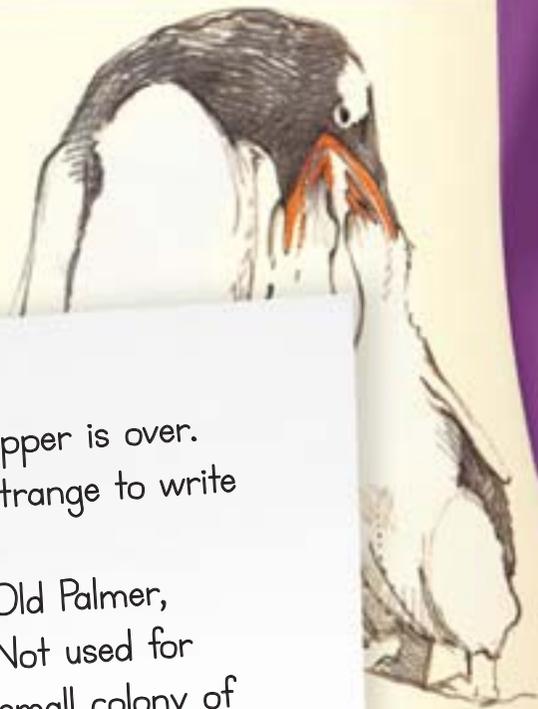
Twilight falls and I crawl into my tent, alert and unable to sleep for a long time, listening to the sounds of the Antarctic night.

The emergency cache on Litchfield contained a tarp, blankets, rope, candles, matches, anchovy paste, crackers, and chocolate.



December 15th
Visiting Old Palmer

gentoo parent
feeding chicks



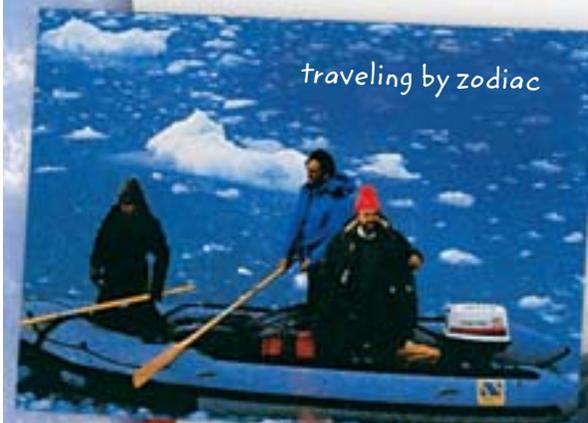
Dear B,

I am in a tiny office behind the kitchen. Supper is over. I came to find quiet time and write you. It's strange to write at night by the light of the sun.

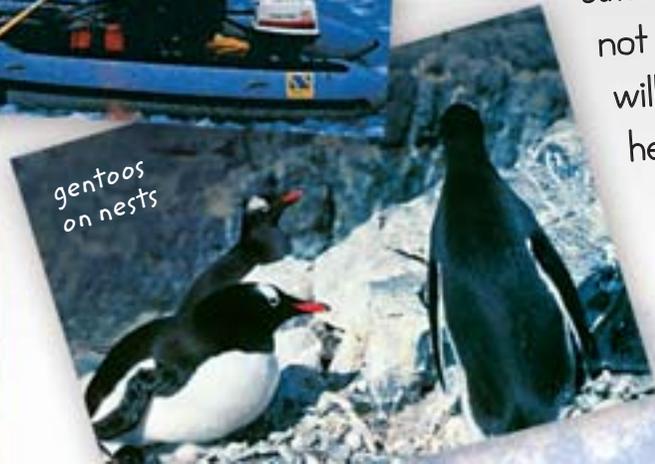
Today I went with a penguin scientist to Old Palmer, twenty minutes by zodiac from New Palmer. Not used for years, the base is empty of life except for a small colony of gentoo penguins. A few of the birds have built stone nests on top of abandoned oil drums and other debris left behind. The chicks have orange spots on their bills and are identical to the parents, only smaller. They sit half squashed under a parent's white belly, black-billed faces poking out, eyes blinking.

A sunny day, thirty-two degrees, dangerously hot for the chicks. I've seen some keel over dead on days like this, their blubber-rich bodies unable to tolerate temperatures above freezing. A parent penguin suffering heat stroke will not abandon a nest. It will fall dead in a heap first.

traveling by zodiac



gentoos
on nests



young Adélie

orca



orca



We had a scary encounter on the way back from Old Palmer. A pair of orcas was in Arthur Harbor. They swam near the surface, sleek backs glistening.

These enormous predators sometimes take bites out of boats, mistaking a zodiac for a seal or a penguin. We slowed the engine and held back.

A small group of Adélies was porpoising in the water. In a quick stroke one orca grabbed a penguin in its huge mouth and whirled the helpless bird in the air. Teeth gripped penguin flesh, penguin wings flailed. The skin of the penguin flew away and landed with a plop on the sea. The bird was stripped of its hide as easily as we remove a sweater.

The second orca took a penguin before the pair surged out of the harbor, leaving a swirling wake behind.

We sped back to Palmer, aware that what we'd seen was a reminder that we are in a wilderness where a delicate balance exists between predator and prey.

I'm tired, although I have the BIG EYE. This is when we can't sleep because it's never dark. We get silly and wide-eyed, peculiar in our behavior, until a friend says, "Time for bed," and sees that we get there.

Love and hugs,
J.

December 20th
Palmer Station

I have learned that the largest animal on Earth, the hundred-ton blue whale, eats only one of the smallest animals on Earth: krill (*Euphausia supurba*). There are more krill in the seas than there are stars in the visible universe.

Krill is one link in a simple food chain. Penguins, seals, and whales eat krill. In turn the tiny shrimplike krill eat phytoplankton, one-celled plants that bloom in the sea in spring and summer.

My new friend, Carl, an oceanographer, said, "We ought to try eating krill since so many animals thrive on it."

In the bio lab we scooped krill into a jar.

We got a small fry pan, then melted butter and cooked up the krill.

Someone said, "Add garlic."

Somebody said, "How about pepper and salt?"

These were added. When the mixture looked ready, we ate it.

"Tastes like butter," one person said.

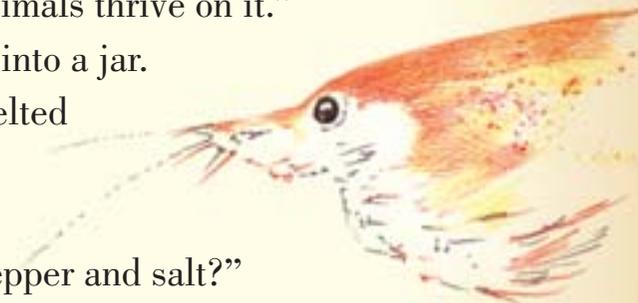
"More like garlic," another said.

"Tastes like butter *and* garlic," Carl said.

"Krill don't have their own taste," I concluded.



blue
whales



krill

December 21st
Palmer Station

A storm has raged for three days. A blast of wind smacked the main window with such force, we thought a bomb had gone off. The storm rose in intensity in minutes. Looking out the big window, we see a solid wall of sleet and blowing snow.

A friend and I checked the wind-speed monitor a few hours ago. It was clocking eighty knots. We decided to sneak outside and see what eighty-knot winds feel like. It's against the rules to leave the protection of the station in such high winds. Nobody saw us leave.

We were barely able to force the door open against the gale. Head down, face stung with driven sleet, I leaned with all my weight on the wind and did not fall over.

Fearing I'd be blown away, I pressed my mittened hands on the side of the building.

We crawled on hands and knees, lashed by pellets of frozen rain. In five minutes we were back inside.

Thinking of the penguins and their chicks on Litchfield, I can't help wondering how many will die of exposure to the cold and wet.



after the storm

*Christmas Eve, December 24th
Palmer Station*

It was three in the morning, bright outside, and I couldn't sleep. I crept downstairs, signed out, and took the flagged trail up the glacier.

Dressed in a watchman's cap, three layers under my parka, and Sorel boots, I climbed in a stillness broken only by the noise of snow crunching under my soles. Greenish-purple clouds covered the sky from edge to edge. The sea was the color of pewter.

Near the top I heard a cracking sound, a slap magnified a million times in my ear. Another followed, then another. Echoes of sound, aftershocks, sizzled in the air. The sky began to glow with an eerie luminescence, as if someone in the heavens had switched on a neon light in place of the sun.

front of glacier



I felt myself dropping straight down. A crack had appeared under me, a crevasse in the glacier. Summer softening of the ice had thrown the pole settings off.

I'm alive because the crack was narrow. I fell to my shoulders, my boot soles too wide to fit through the bottom of the crack. I stared below into a blue-green hole cut with facets like a diamond.

After a few deep breaths, I began to scramble out. Terrified the crack would keep growing, I moved slowly. It was an hour before I was on firm ice.

The color of the sky shifted to blue-gray with streaks of yellow along the western horizon. To my horror, I saw a pattern of cracks zig-zagging, like fractured window glass, across the glacier surface.

I checked my watch. I'd been gone three hours. I don't know why, but I didn't want anyone rescuing me. I decided to crawl down the glacier on hands and knees.

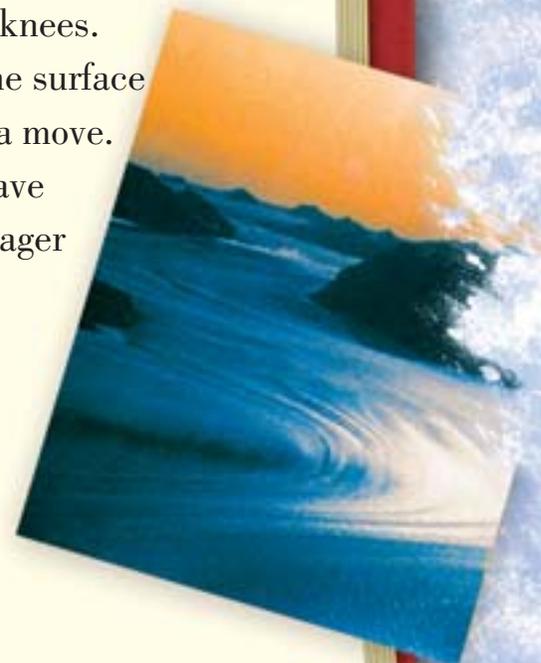
I felt my way inch by inch, rubbing the surface of the snow with my palms before making a move.

Back before the hour someone would have come looking for me, I told the station manager what happened. Trained in glaciology, he went up the glacier to reset the flags.

I have a new weariness tonight, born of having been frightened out of my wits while watching one of the most beautiful skies I'll ever see.



young tern



February 16th
On the *Polar Duke*

I am along on a trip of the *Polar Duke*, north of Palmer in Gerlache Strait. The crew and scientists trawl for krill using fine-mesh nets dropped off the stern.

Coming back we see **icebergs** drifting south out of the Weddell Sea. The bergs originate hundreds of miles away and ride ocean currents.

We sail close, but not too close, for beneath the waves is where the bulk of an iceberg is.



Weddell seal
under the ice

Seawater splashes up on iceberg shores shaped by years of wave action. Sunlight strikes gleaming ramparts that shine with rainbow colors. Erosion works at the ice, creating caves and hollows, coves, and inlets.

Penguins and seals hitch rides on icebergs. Gulls and other seabirds rest on high points.

One iceberg collides in slow motion with another. The smaller one topples, rolls, and heaves like a dying rhinoceros, emerald seawater mixed with spray drenching its surfaces.

I yearn to ride an iceberg like a penguin or a gull, touching its frozen sides, drifting slowly on the waves. I draw them, but I can't capture their splendor.

March 12th
Winging Home

penguin
egg



Before leaving, I collected (with permission) a sterile penguin egg that would never hatch. I made room for it in my suitcase by giving a lot of my clothes away.

The airline lost my bag in Miami. I told the airline people that I had to have it back, pleading, begging. "It has a penguin egg in it," I said. They glanced at each other and eyed me funny.

Fortunately for me, and them, they found the bag.

The egg reminds me of my trip to the place where penguins raise downy chicks, krill swarm in numbers greater than stars in the sky, whales have rights, and icebergs drift in graceful arcs across Southern Ocean swells. At home, I'll look out at the desert landscape and remember the Antarctic desert, the last great wilderness on Earth.

