

Sample excerpts from 'Letters from Antarctica' 2005 / 2006

Friday 23 Dec

I thought I wouldn't be writing again until after Christmas, but each time I venture out I am compelled to write as soon as I return.

I journey up to the ski-way with Bloo. Bloo looks as if he has lived here for twenty years. A great red beard hangs to his chest and what skin shows on his face is as rugged and sunburnt as parched earth. The ski-way is a forty-minute Hagg drive in good conditions, climbing steadily towards the plateau. I hope we don't get bogged. I hope we don't hit a blizzard. Too warm or too cold – it's a fine line. The Casa planes from Davis Station land at the ski-way.

Conversation is raised a notch to penetrate ear muffs we wear in the Hagg. They muffle the engine clatter of heaving tracks across the ice. As we travel higher, the turquoise lakes of melting ice layered on ice give way to hard glacial surfaces, crystals and wind-blown ridges which sparkle in today's brilliant weather. The buildings and exposed brown rock are left behind, the steely ocean and the ice bergs. And when we stop, all that surrounds us is endless silence, so silent it is loud to our ears, broken every now and then by a wind that picks up and sweeps across the surface of the plateau; white running into the flat white horizon but glistening in more brilliant white. No smell, but sweet in its emptiness, I can smell what emptiness is. How strange that I come here to do an exhibition on the five senses only to discover the sixth sense is here. It is the absence of all senses.

Here is the physical world's manifestation of that empty place where we find our intuition when our brains are still - that is Antarctica.

Love Judy

29 Dec

Today I float on the surface of a giant white flying saucer. To stand on the plateau and look around is like standing in the centre of a flat white disc suspended in the clouds. The edges of the disc glow where the sun hits, and all around; above, below and joined at the edges, is sparkling white. No features, no noise, no life at all, not even an insect. About three quarters of the way to Wilkins where we are heading, the surface changes to blue ice. It is the most exquisite thing - a cool, gentle turquoise disappearing downwards in a translucent glow, the polished surface reflecting back at us and impossible to grip underfoot, the snow blown off by the winds; And the disc forever floating outwards. In places, lines of deeper turquoise snake a route across the ice - old crevasses refrozen over. To travel in this area we move between the canes of the cane line, set three

to five kilometres apart. At regular intervals one is way-marked on the GPS and the GPS points us in the direction of the next cane. But the area is not mapped.

Today we can see the canes as tiny dots in the distance. In a blizzard there is only the GPS. The journey to the runway is an eight hour drive across the plateau on a continual rise, so gentle we don't even know we are climbing. We journey like a gypsy caravan - Doug and Tricky and me in the support Hagg, Bloo driving the bulldozer behind, and trailing on a sledge the generator, incinerator toilet and shower van for the runway camp. After six hours of travelling, we reached the Antarctic Circle. A sign, made by Bloo, marks the spot. I skip across it several times. What a magical place.

Shortly before 10 pm, the small black dot of runway camp appears on the horizon. A series of shipping containers on sledges line up in a row, our camp for the night. Vonna, Shane, Mat, Leigh and Grant run out with open arms to meet us as the cloud lowers around us and the plateau disappears.

9 Jan

Hurry up and wait. This is how the morning often starts: Up early to see if the plans can go ahead and then standing by watching the weather. Today there is a low fog so plans are on hold until morning tea. The plan is to go to Shirley Island with Philippa, our penguin researcher, and help her count the chicks.

We get away after morning tea. The day is spent walking the whole island, going to each penguin colony in turn to count the penguin chicks and to count the chicks in the Skua nests. It is so good to spend the day walking with a pack. I spend a lot of time on boats and I miss my walking. It's a rocky island, very barren with just a few patches of moss, lots of penguins, skuas, storm petrels and seals. The ground is scattered with dead carcasses, either freeze dried with all their flesh, or skinned clean to the bone by the skuas. We have the dubious honour of watching a Skua devour a penguin chick. It stands, beak stretched aloft to the horizon, eyes fixed, the legs of the chick for many minutes hanging from the cavity of its beak, too small to take it in whole, and too big to manoeuvre its meal around.

The skuas set up nest next to the penguin colonies and patrol their rightful territory, wings stretched to their one metre span as they swoop low, or tucked firmly back as they stalk the colony, planning their next move. The penguins bark indignantly in response. At this time of year, the penguin chicks form crèches, huddling together in furry bundles while both parents hunt for food. There are still a few eggs around but it is probably too late for them to survive now. And the odd penguin still engages in nest-building activity, picking up a stone and placing it in its little pile.

Today we wear Doctor Mark's U.V. measuring patches on our hats. The weather is with us for most of the day. We can get around in just fleecy trousers, jackets and thermals and a wool shirt. But after lunch the wind starts to pick up and we are into our wind-proofs. We are dependent on the divers returning from Sparks Bay to pick us up, and I have a keen eye on the wind. If it gets over 15 knots, the boats can't travel. I don't relish a night sleeping on these sharp rocks eating only the chocolate from my survival pack. But the dive team return in time for a choppy ride home. Nicole arrives clad in two emersion suits, an extra large pulled on over a small. She looks much like a puffed round ball.

I fail with my U.V. measuring patch. My sun hat got replaced by my balaclava by midday and the U.V. patch ended up in my pack. It's hard to remember everything here.

15 Jan

I organise a trip to Browning Peninsula - quite a feat, needing four zodiacs and eight boat leaders. The rules!! Off we go into the gathering snow, wrapped in thermals, wool shirt, fleece jacket, immersion suit, fur lined sorrel boots, neck warmer, balaclava, hat, goggles, two pairs of gloves. I can't actually bend at the waist any more. And my cameras down my neck under the immersion suit, my pelican case at my feet, scratched and battered, our survival packs, radios, GPS. We stop off at Forbes island on the way, about forty-five minutes south of Casey, for Marty and John, the field training officers, to check and resupply the cache - a big metal box roped down into the rocks containing a ration pack, a polar pyramid tent and survival gear in case anyone gets stuck in the area. We loiter around leopard seals on the island but keep a wary distance. Then travel on to Petersen Island, another forty minutes south. There's an 'apple' there, a small round metal igloo that sleeps four. Here we sit and watch the penguins as the snow falls in huge soft flakes. Elephant seals burp and snort and grunt along the shore line and wallow in their murky puddles, wafting pungent aromas across the island. After our picnic we pile back in the boats to Browning Peninsula and climb the headland for our view of the Vanderford Glacier, rolling for miles out into the ocean; The Antarctic falling off into the sea. Still it snows in big soft flakes and the water ripples like mercury as the ice floats by. But I am toasty in my gear, and let the snow build around me as I sit and sink ever deeper into the landscape.

28 Jan

I stood out on the top deck and stared as they disappeared to a tiny red dot. The ship blew its whistle three times and I watched the flares go off from the helipad

outside the Red Shed and still couldn't believe I was standing on the Russian ship and they were there. As the ship pulled out it was like I had left them behind on a desert island and, as it got further away and they got smaller, the continent grew bigger around them and they didn't know how tiny and alone they looked there. I knew they were still on the helipad waving and I waved but I couldn't see them. And I knew that the buzz of the Red Shed bar hummed on, and that to be there would still feel like the world was there. But from here it looked so small on that huge white land, disappearing into the white. I left them behind. And I felt like I didn't know anyone on the ship. I stood there freezing to death, unable to move to go and put more clothes on. Leanne and Zoe came to be wind breaks for me.

The last day, they had paced me around the station limits - up to Penguin Pass, up Reeves Hill. They kept trying to think of things to keep me busy. And as dinner drew near the ache in my stomach worsened and I couldn't eat. They got out wine to try and make me drink but the night before we'd been up all night and I was too fragile to have more than half a glass of wine. At 7:30 pm they walked me down to the wharf, a trail of people through the cutting in the snow; the hagg followed and two utes. I couldn't keep the tears back. I still can't. We sang '*I love the flowers, I love the daffodils, I love the mountains, I love the rolling hills*', but it didn't work.

I feel so lost; the people I'm sure are very nice, but they all know the ship and each other well. It's snowing out here, but inside is so roasting and the smell of cigarette smoke pervades everything. I awake with rasping lungs as if I have smoked fifty cigarettes through the night. No-one else seems to notice it. I'm sure I will settle in a day or two, my lungs will adapt and I'll start to know where everything is and it will be fine. But now I am so lost.

I miss them heaps. Cath had a nose bleed she cried so much. Saz says she took a photo for me. Everything makes me want to cry. I try to send them an email but it has to be done in comms., and people just sit on a brown nylon couch with their computer on their lap but my battery doesn't work, so to plug in I have to stand with the computer on top of all the communications gear at shoulder height and try and type in amongst the rabble of equipment and wires with my arms stretched up. I can't even write.

I have moved into a room with Leanne and Jenny but they are well settled in the room with gear everywhere. I can't find a spot to call my own space. I can't unpack properly. I don't know where anything is. I don't know where to put it.

The ship is interesting. The two stewardesses bring out lunch and dinner to our little Formica tables in the tiny eating area. They have beaming round Russian faces and pink cheeks, their hair pulled up and their round buxom bodies pulled tight with aprons and bright, snug clothes, gold slip-on high heels on their feet. The walls are 1950's veneer panelling and the floors plastic parquet. On the walls are copper square rigger ships, mounted and framed on ply. An old piano sits

inside the door. The curtains are a shiny pink material lined with stiff nylon and half hanging off their runners. We get lots of soup with vegetables and unknown meats, and a bowl of sprouting garlic sits on the table. No-one knows what we are meant to do with this. The little kitchen is just off the dining area and, next to it, the lounge area where people spend much time lying on the floor watching films. There is also an old fridge in here with bottles of water and some yoghurt and cheese. To get to the plastic kettle for tea, it is necessary to walk in front of the movie screen, and the room is dark so I need to know where things are. I have a stash of nuts from Casey.

15 Feb

My last day in Antarctica. The resupply has gone smoothly and we leave tonight.

The sealer researchers go out once more to complete their task. Two people pull a bag via ropes on either side over the seal's head. Jen and Ian then climb on the seals back to hold it down while Leanne anaesthetises it and places on its gas mask. The satellite tracker is glued in place. This will be the first time Weddell seals have been tracked over winter for location and depth as they feed.

John organises a trip to Watts Hut and Ellis Rapids for myself and Peter and Zoe. It is the best place to spend my last day, out in the Vestfold Hills. We get the helicopter out there. The radio call-in for the helicopter is now joked to be 'November Bravo Sierra' – 'Not Before Smoko'. There is a lot of 'hurry up and wait' goes on with the helicopters.

The Vestfold rocks which cover the landscape are over a billion years old. Amongst the rocks are scatterings of tube worm fossils from an ancient ocean bed, bleached white and fine as porcelain. Bird bones also litter the ground. A strange sponge clusters around the lake. Thin ice hangs on the lake surface. The rocks are swirled and coloured and stretch for miles; no vegetation, just the rippling Vestfold Hills of large loose rocks on dry soil and great black stripes of dolorite woven through. I would not have blinked an eyelid had a dinosaur strode across the horizon.

9 pm. And so the barge piles high with Vasilian Golovnonians and people leaving Davis. The walk from the green Red Shed to the wharf, the hugs and tears and waves. And goodbye to John, - my last remaining person from V2 and Casey. I say goodbye to the elephant seals in their wallow who half-open one bloodshot eye. I look out and feel overwhelmed by emotion again. We return to the ship. Tomorrow we sail for Hobart – twelve more days at sea.

16 Feb

6 am. The whistle blows. The ship starts to pull away. I fling myself out of bed and throw my freezer suit on over my pyjamas, my sorrels over my bare feet. I tear down to the helipad, down the steel steps, along the side deck, ducking under the barges chained down to the mid platform, clambering over ropes, up again to the helipad. Forget my camera in my haste. Back again and out again. My heart is in my mouth as we pull away out to sea; the dark strip of land, the ice plateau behind, the soft low sun in milky clouds behind, the ice bergs all around. Some brave soul rushes to the wharf in that early morning to let off the flares. I cannot believe I will not set foot on this soil again. I stay until my fingers freeze beyond pain.

Thank you for letting me write each day to you. Perhaps there will be more stories to come from the journey home, but none so deeply a part of me as Antarctica.

17 Feb

There is a high chair in the corner of the bridge, brown velour on a wooden frame, swivelling on a metal circular stand. I sit a long time in this chair and watch the sea melt into the darker grey of the horizon. I see it through a large square window with eight black knobs around its edge which can be turned to heave the heavy metal up and support the glass from a metal rod in the ceiling. This window does not usually get opened, however, though the two at either end of the bridge do. As I sit, I listen to the music of the first mate and chief engineer as they natter on in Russian, their deep boyish voices interspersed with laughter and, in the background, the hum of the ship's engine and the whine of the bridge instruments. They lean against the balustrades and smoke as they chat. The big old metal heaters blast out warm air. One young lad wanders over to an open window and closes it and turns up the heater a notch. The fresh icy air at my back disappears and I am swathed in smoke and heat. But I like it up here. There is a rhythmic rocking to the horizon and the day stretches out before me to where the sun will set.

We have a BBQ out on the helipad tonight in glorious sunshine, the table tennis table out, and have a game without losing the little ball overboard. Warm enough for just two or three layers. The nights are even getting dark these days.

18 Feb

A break in the day today - we have an engine room tour. The bowels of the ship are a roaring, rumbling mass of pipes and dials and fires inside big steel boxes, and bits of oily cardboard hung up by string with Russian instructions or information of some kind inked upon them. Our beaming chief engineer leads us through. My earplugs mean I didn't really know what anything is, except that it

runs for miles, belching out heat, twisting and curving up and down steel steps from bow to stern. This afternoon - a talk about Vostock, the Russian station.

As you can see, life is slow enough to fully absorb the details of the ship!! I am already beginning to feel a bit spun out at the thought of concrete, lots of people moving fast, cars, shops, money, people passing in the street without saying "hello", not knowing everyone, and, believe it or not, green. I don't want to see green. They say you can smell the green of Tasmania miles out to sea. I can't believe I will, on this ship, though!

It is expected that we will arrive early to Hobart - as early as 26 February perhaps! I feel quite nervous, arriving like Paddington Bear with all my bags, I'll stand on the wharf and look out at a strange territory. I was even nicknamed Paddington Bear at Casey due to my cardboard luggage labels, cut from old cardboard boxes and tied to my bags with string. How true those words feel now.

20 Feb

Sometimes I wonder how I will get through another week on the ship. I go around opening windows to let in some air, I live off peanut butter and chocolate as I can no longer face the slab of cold meat with a portion of cold pasta. Interaction is low; everyone just sleeps and suffocates and watches terrible films. But today there was some light relief. I found some people to interact with. Pete, Phil, Mat and I got out to the heli-hanger for a game of table tennis. We broke loose! Our game is played against the increased swaying of the ship as it rolls to the ocean's swell, chasing the ball uphill... and then it turns. We add obstacles to the table, rubber funnels and a wooden block - and decide that if we get the ball in the holes in these objects, it is plus 1,000 points, or plus infinity if we get it in the funnel, or minus infinity squared if we get it in our own side's funnel, or infinity to the power of infinity plus one if I hit it in.

And then to make it more difficult we add two onions. And then we play with two then four balls simultaneously..... Our pent up energy explodes. That's more like it! I'm having fun again!

21 Feb

I saw my first aurora last night. How beautiful it was. It grew like a wave in the night sky and swam across the stars, twisting and turning and flipping round on itself in a sudden leap from port to starboard. The silhouettes of the ship's radio masts bobbed in the foreground as I strained my neck backwards following its path. It was another case of freezer suit on over the pyjamas to rush out onto the deck. A full twenty minutes it danced in the sky, until the clouds enveloped it and it was gone.

So this afternoon, a slide show and talk from Dr Gary on auroras. My brain is

turning to porridge. It's just too hot on board to think, and too wild outside to stay out long. Six days to go....

26 Feb

11 am. There's land! There's land! There's no-one around to jump up and down with so I've come to tell you. It's so wonderful to see. This mountain shrouded in mist on the horizon. Land in mist - no such blurring of the horizon in Antarctica where the air is so dry and clear that what appears 2 km away is actually 20 km away. LAND AHOY!

1 pm. Kapitan has turned off the engines and we are drifting a few kilometres off the S.W. coast of Tasmania. We can't go into port until tomorrow. How frustrating. I have the cabin window open and a fly buzzes in. It makes me jump. The first flying insect I have seen since the end of November. It took a split second to actually register what it was, the noisy black thing that darted in at my face then spun round and out again so fast.

3 pm. Kapitan takes us for a slow cruise along the southern coast of Tasmania, past Federation Peak, the Western Arthurs and all my favourite mountains. We drift around Bruny Island over night and enter the Derwent River tomorrow.

No more judy@aurora, judy@casey, judy@vasiliy. I'm back.