

# Travels in Terra Australis

By Masha Nordbye

*Were you ever out in the Great Alone,  
when the moon was awful clear,  
And the icy mountains hemmed you in  
with a silence you most could hear...*

*Robert W. Service*

Just before dawn, as I gazed up towards the heavens on a crystal-clear Antarctic night, my eyes came to rest upon the *Corona Australis*, a constellation that can only be seen in the southern celestial hemisphere. Its Latin name means “southern crown,” and it’s one of 48 constellations cataloged by Greek astronomer Ptolemy. While not a very bright one, the horseshoe-shaped *Corona Australis* is nonetheless distinctive due to its easily identifiable pattern of stars. It’s also associated with the myth of Dionysus. Later in life, this bacchanal god of wine and merrymaking undertook a somber and heartfelt journey to the underworld to rescue his mother from the land of the dead. Afterward, he tenderly placed a crown of stars in the sky as an everlasting tribute in her honor.

My own adventure to the ends of the earth began weeks earlier when I departed Ushuaia (the world’s southernmost city) on a 4000-mile voyage across Antarctic waters. When I set out there was only one confirmed case of coronavirus in all of South America; and with no Wi-Fi connection, I was looking forward to a reprieve from the recent and worrisome news. At this unassuming time, I never suspected that *Corona Australis* would take on such symbolism for Mother Earth’s frightful descent into oblivion.

I soon lost a fixed point in time and space within the endless white landscapes where I eagerly set out to trace the adventurous exploits of past explorers through this striking yet forbidding expanse. By the end of the trip, I would feel most akin to Sir Ernest Shackleton, known for his death-defying escape out of this seventh continent.

54° 16' 53"S    36° 30' 29"W

In 1675, while rounding Cape Horn at the tip of South America, Anthony de la Roché encountered a storm so ferocious that it blew his ship over 1200 miles southeast into unknown waters; he eventually found refuge at what is known today as South Georgia. Unwittingly, this English merchant made the first discovery of land south of the Antarctic Convergence—a natural boundary where warmer seas meet the cold, northward-flowing waters of the Southern Ocean. A century later, James Cook partially charted this 104-mile long crescent-shaped island and claimed the territory for the Kingdom of Great Britain, naming it the Isle of Georgia, in honor of King George III.

While looking out upon this rugged and inhospitable landscape, it's no wonder that Captain Cook remarked that the island was "doomed by Nature to perpetual frigidness, never to feel the warmth of the sun's rays; whose horrible and savage aspect I have not words to describe." And it was on this legendary land of ice and gloom, where Anglo-Irish adventurer Ernest Shackleton would mark the beginning, middle and end of his epic odysseys during the heroic age of Antarctic exploration.

"After the conquest of the South Pole...there remained but one great main object of Antarctic journeying—the crossing of the South Polar continent from sea to sea," the intrepid explorer envisioned. On December 5, 1914, the British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition set off from South Georgia aboard the *Endurance* with 28<sup>1</sup> men and 69 dogs to attempt the first crossing of the Antarctic landmass. But their hopes were quelled when, beginning on January 18 the following year, heavy pack ice began to engulf the wooden ship (only sixty miles from their planned landing spot) until they could proceed no further.

After surviving an Antarctic winter in complete darkness and ten months living in the ship's belly, nicknamed 'the Ritz,' the *Endurance* was finally crushed by severe pressure of the moving ice and sank on November 21, 1915. The men had no choice but to set up a new base, nicknamed Patience Camp, upon the thick northward-drifting floes for nearly five months more. On April 9, 1916, when open water was finally sighted, the decision was made to board three lifeboats that had been rescued from the *Endurance* and make way towards one of the nearest uninhabited islands. After five harrowing days at sea, the bleak and barren Elephant Island was reached; the men had not stood on solid ground for 497 days.

Realizing no chance of salvation, Shackleton decided to take the larger lifeboat, the twenty-two foot *James Caird* (named for one of the expedition's donors) with five other crew members to South Georgia—over 800 miles away— where several whaling stations were located. The rest of the men would try to survive on Elephant Island and wait for 'the Boss' to return with a rescue ship. Thus, the six men set off on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916, and sailed east for sixteen terrifying days through some of the most tempestuous waters on earth to find a needle in a haystack at coordinates: <sup>2</sup>54°16'53"S, 36°30'29"W. Due to the relentless bad weather, the navigator, Frank Worsley, took only four positional sightings on his sextant. To this day, their miraculous success is considered one of the greatest small boat journeys ever undertaken.

As our own ship approached the western side of South Georgia from the Falkland Islands, I made out King Haakon Bay through a light fog where the *James Caird* had found safe haven. But, unbelievably, the men's ordeal was not yet over for the Norwegian whaling station at Stromness was on the other side of the island. The men had no choice but to attempt a first ever twenty-two

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<sup>1</sup> When Shackleton advertised for his 1914 Antarctic expedition, there were more than 5000 applications, including a letter from "three sporty girls" who would "just love to don masculine attire;" they were refused. On 30 January 1937, Norwegian, Ingrid Christensen, became the first woman to set foot on the Antarctic mainland (and the first to fly over it). Later that year, when 1300 women applied to join a privately funded British Antarctic expedition, still not one was accepted. It took another ten years, before the American, Edith "Jackie" Ronne, was finally permitted as a working member of an Antarctic expedition; the Ronne Ice Shelf is named after her.

<sup>2</sup> Geographical coordinates are expressed by latitude and longitude. Latitude measures the angular distance of a place north and south of the equator, which is defined as 0 degrees; the North Pole is 90 degrees north, and the South Pole 90 degrees south. Longitude is the angular distance east or west of the 0-degree Prime Meridian at Greenwich, England. Both are broken into degrees, minutes, seconds and direction.

mile crossing on foot to the other side. With only 50 feet of rope, a carpenter's adze to serve as an ice ax and screws from the *James Caird* wedged as crampons into the bottom of their boots, Shackleton, along with Frank Worsley and second officer Tom Crean, set out early on May 18 to improvise an unknown route across supposedly impassable mountains and heavily crevassed glaciers. They hiked and climbed continuously for thirty-six hours before reaching the other side and hearing the 7am call-to-work steam whistle of the whaling factory in the distance below. When the men finally staggered into the station (where they had departed from 17 months earlier), Shackleton described their battered appearance as "a terrible trio of scarecrows, dark with exposure, wind and frostbite."

The next day, a whaling ship was dispatched to pick up the remaining men at the western camp they had called Peggotty, after the family in Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield*, who lived in a home made from a beached boat. Because of continual adverse ice conditions, it would take another three months before the Boss was able to rescue the remaining twenty-two men at Elephant Island. Astoundingly, every member of the expedition had survived. The ship's Australian photographer, Frank Hurley, after being stranded here for 127 days, summarized what had gotten the men through the onerous ordeal: "We learned to find fullness and contentment in a life, which had stripped us of all the distinctions, baubles and trappings of civilization." Sir Ernest Shackleton later wrote the bestseller *South*, recounting one of the most legendary survival sagas in the history of human exploration. Hurley also recorded the dramatic events in his vivid photographs and film footage; and his 1919 documentary feature, also titled *South*, was released in theaters to great acclaim.

At the now derelict whaling station at Stromness— in use from 1907 to 1932— I hiked an hour from the beach, past the numerous slumbering fur seals, and out to the still flowing waterfall where Shackleton and his men in a thick fog rappelled the final thirty feet to the ground. "We had flung down the adze from the top of the fall and also the logbook and cooker wrapped in one of our blouses. That was all, except our wet clothes, that we brought out of the Antarctic." At 3pm on May 20, 1916, when the unrecognizable leader had to identify who they were, the Norwegian station manager, imagining their utterly horrific journey of survival, is said to have turned away and wept.

We came to probe the Antarctic's mystery, to reduce this land in terms of science,  
but there is always the indefinable...which rivets our souls.

Sir Douglas Mawson

In rapture, I could not hide my own overflowing emotions when I got to celebrate my <sup>3</sup>birthday at nearby St Andrew's Bay, host to the island's largest king penguin rookery. About 150,000 breeding pairs were congregating on the 2-mile long gravel and black-sand beach in front of a specular glacier-filled backdrop. Recognized by their size (second only to the Emperor), king penguins also stand out with their brilliant golden-yellow plumage.

Imagine being surrounded by thousands upon thousands of king penguins, many of the adults standing nearly 3-feet tall, who waddle right over with immeasurable curiosity to size up a

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<sup>3</sup> And on my birthday in 2022, Shackleton's *Endurance* was located 10,000 feet underwater in the Weddell Sea, where it had sunk over a century earlier in 1915.

potential new mate. As I cautiously crouched between piles of pungent guano perhaps it was my bright-yellow jacket that attracted their interest to come close enough so we could regale each other eye-to-eye.

Besides the large colony of the regal king, the area is also home to the Macaroni, the world's most abundant penguin species, whose distinctive yellow-feathered crest fluffs out from atop their heads. And how, pray tell, did they get their name? Young men in mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century London, who wore extreme fashions and flashy feathers in their hats, were called 'Macaroni.' This is also the origin of the song sung during the Revolutionary War to poke fun at the poorly dressed Continental Army.

*Yankee Doodle went to town,  
Riding on a Pony,  
Stuck a feather in his cap,  
And called him Macaroni.*

### *Det Luktet Penger—The Smell of Money*

In 1904, the Norwegian explorer<sup>4</sup> Carl Anton Larsen established the first Antarctic whaling station at Grytviken, south of Stromness. Translated as 'Pot Bay,' the town was named after the old English *trypots*, large cauldrons found at the site that were used to boil the blubber of elephant seals as far back as 1790. At the height of the industry, seven whaling stations operated on the eastern side of South Georgia that extracted virtually every part of the animal. Blubber, meat and entrails were fed into huge pressure cookers to drive out the oil that was used for lighting, lubrication and even in the production of margarine, soap and cosmetics. By-products were made into fertilizer and fodder for farm animals, and bone to make women's corsets, skirt hoops and even umbrella ribs.

A strong cold wind blew outside as Grytviken Museum curator, Sarah Lurcock, led us on a tour around the historically preserved whaling station. Chunks of old whalebone littered the ground below the industrial orange-brown skyline of rusting metal tanks, blubber cookers and abandoned warehouses. Sarah explained that during the industry's heyday over one thousand people were employed on the island and three hundred at Grytviken. The factories mainly operated during southern summer months from October to March, and men toiled 24 hours a day in two twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, and often in temperatures well below zero.

The largest whale ever recorded in this southern region was at Grytviken—a blue whale that measured 110 feet long. Blue, fin, minke, southern right and humpback—all baleen whales (filter feeders)—along with sperm, the largest of the toothed whales, abounded in these waters. But eventually, with the development of petrochemicals, oil prices fell and plants were forced to shut down. A total of 175,250 whales had been processed through the stations of South Georgia between 1904 and Grytviken's closing in 1966. And during the seventy-five years that whaling

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<sup>4</sup> The Larsen ice shelf, extending along the east coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, is named for Carl Larsen, whose 1893 expedition was the first to spot this massive ice front; a year earlier he had discovered fossils on nearby Seymour Island, the first evidence of a prior warmer climate. The first substantiated landing on the Antarctic continent was not made until 1895.

stations and factory ships operated throughout the Antarctic, it's estimated that nearly 1.5 million whales were killed; the populations have still not recovered.

The last yet most memorable spot for me to visit was the white-picket fenced cemetery, filled mostly with graves of Norwegian whalers and one other exceptional character. Sir Ernest Shackleton embarked on his last Antarctic venture from London on September 17, 1921, aboard the *Quest* on a new expedition for scientific and mapping purposes; eight of the crew were old *Endurance* comrades. The ship anchored at Grytviken to resupply on January 4, 1922. Early the next morning, Shackleton suffered a fatal heart attack; he was only 47 years old. The last entry in his diary: "A wonderful evening. In the darkening twilight I saw a lone star hover, gem like above the bay."

As Shackleton's body was being shipped back to England a message arrived from his wife requesting that her husband be buried in South Georgia. Thus, on March 5, 1922, after a service in the Whaler's Church, the Boss was buried in Grytviken cemetery, facing the alluring south that had made him—*we all have our own White South*, he had wisely surmised. On the back of the granite headstone is carved his favorite quotation by the poet Robert Browning: 'I hold that a man should strive to the uttermost for his life's set prize.'

As we cruised past the southern end of South Georgia and the last of its jagged peaks, a flock of snow petrels followed us, soaring high amidst the streaming bands of cumulus clouds. While gazing out upon the azure-colored sky and steely-blue waters, I couldn't help but reflect upon the many unexplored realms of my own *terra incognita*. One does need solitude to come to know oneself, many a sage has written.

<sup>5</sup>*Have you ...  
Searched the Vastness for something you have lost?...  
Have you known the Great White Silence...  
Grown bigger in the bigness of the whole? ...*

*Let us probe the silent places  
Let us journey to a lonely land I know.  
There's a whisper on the night-wind, there's a star a gleam to guide us,  
And the Wild is calling, calling...let us go.*

Within this immeasurable expanse time loses its meaning; there's no longer a sense of past or future—only the transcendent present, which felt eternal. A seemingly perpetual nine hundred miles of the Scotia Sea now lay ahead until we reached the Antarctic Peninsula.

*The risks of exploring in these unknown and Icy Seas is so very great, that I can be bold to say,  
that no man will ever venture farther than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the South  
will never be explored.*

Captain James Cook, 1775

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<sup>5</sup>From *The Call of the Wild*, Robert W. Service, written in 1903.

In 1773, when Captain Cook crossed the Antarctic Circle for the first time in history aboard the *HMS Resolution*, the existence of a southern continent was still a mythic speculation. It was the ancient Greeks who first posited that there must be a landmass at the bottom of the earth to balance the northern continents. The north was called *Arktos*, the Greek word for "bear," named after the Great and Little Bear constellations visible only in the northern hemisphere. Thus, Greek philosophers simply surmised that a comparable *Antarktikos* was essential for earth's equilibrium.

Most descriptions of the Antarctic landmass begin with these superlatives: it is the coldest, windiest, highest and driest continent on earth. Larger than Europe, it contains about ninety percent of the world's freshwater ice; and, at its deepest, the ice layer is nearly 3 miles thick. Thousands of cubic miles of glacial ice break off the Antarctic coast each year, turning seas into iceberg alleys. Of the ten major ice shelves, <sup>6</sup>Ross is the largest, encompassing nearly 200,000 square miles at the southern end of the continent.

Right before I left home in Los Angeles, Argentina's Esperanza research station reported a record-high temperature of 64.9F degrees, warmer than it was in southern California. Observations from satellite missions monitoring both the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets reveal that the regions are losing ice six times faster than they were in the 1990's. The peninsula, at the northwestern end of Antarctica, where Esperanza is located, is among one of the fastest warming regions on the planet.

After another full night's journey, we rounded the tip of the peninsula. To my delight, at Portal Point, near the entrance to Charlotte Bay, my feet finally stood upon the frozen ground of the Antarctic continent. Adventurers were aptly drawn to this mysterious land's alluring magnetism, where ice and weather, not clocks and calendars, determined the rhythm of the day. Setting out to disprove Captain Cook's assertion that it was impossible to locate any lands farther south from where he had explored, Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen, the commander of an Imperial Russian naval expedition, took up the challenge; and, on January 28, 1820, became the first credited to have sighted the long sought-after *Terra Australis Incognita*—over two millennia after the ancient Greeks had first predicted its existence.

They're calling from the wilderness, the vast and God-like spaces,  
The stark and sullen solitudes that sentinel the Pole.

Robert W. Service

While gazing out from the icy-cold bluff, I tried to imagine the brutal inescapable conditions faced during the daring race to the South Pole. Shackleton was one of the first to attempt to reach it. During the *Nimrod* Expedition of 1907–1909, he and three companions were the first to cross the Ross Ice Shelf and then set a record farthest south, making it to within 112 miles of the pole. Other members of his group, including Sir Douglas Mawson, were the first to summit the volcano Mount Erebus and make the trek to the <sup>7</sup>South Magnetic Pole, which at that time was over land.

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<sup>6</sup>The ice shelf is named after Sir James Clark Ross, the British Royal Navy commander who discovered it in 1841.

<sup>7</sup>The South Magnetic Pole is constantly shifting due to changes in the Earth's magnetic field. Today, its current distance from the actual Geographic South Pole is approximately 1780 miles.

It was not until two years later when Norwegian Roald Amundsen and his men, wearing Inuit-style fur skins and using both skis and dog sleds for transportation, became the first in history to stand at the geographical South Pole on December 14, 1911. It was certainly an amazing feat of planning, persistence and survival to journey more than 2100 miles round trip to the Pole and back to their base, known as *Framheim*, situated at the southwestern edge of the Ross Ice Shelf. Amundsen left a letter in a small tent at the Pole for Robert F. Scott, his competitor who didn't arrive until nearly five weeks later. "Dear Captain Scott – As you probably are the first to reach this area after us, I will ask you to kindly forward this letter to King Haakon VII. If you can use any of the articles left in the tent please do not hesitate to do so. With kind regards, and a wish for your safe return. Yours truly, Roald Amundsen."

As the tragic story unfolds, the British attempt to the South Pole ended in heroic failure. After an agonizing journey, Scott, as leader of the *Terra Nova* Expedition, and four other men made it to the Pole on January 17, 1912, only to find Amundsen's letter. "The worst has happened," Scott wrote in his diary: "... Great God! This is an awful place...now for the run home and a desperate struggle. I wonder if we can do it." On the return trek, still several hundred miles away from their base at <sup>8</sup>Cape Evans, the group encountered a fierce blizzard and temperatures dropping to forty below zero. On March 19, with supplies dwindling, the three remaining men made a final camp, not knowing they were only 12 miles short of an earlier-placed food depot.

The last entry in Scott's diary was on March 29: "Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale..." In January 1913, before his ship *Terra Nova* left for home, a large wooden cross, made by the ship's carpenters, was erected as a memorial on Observation Hill, overlooking Hut Point at Cape Evans. It was inscribed with the names of the lost party along with the famous line from Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*: 'To strive, to seek, to find, but not to yield.'

Only eighteen years later on November 28, 1929, American Richard E. Byrd and three companions aboard the *Floyd Bennett* set out on the first plane flight over the South Pole, marking the beginning of the 'mechanical era' of discovery. With new advances in technology and communication, they completed the journey from their base 'Little America' on the Ross Ice Shelf and back in only 18 hours and 41 minutes. It had taken Amundsen 99 days. The Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration, which had begun in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by such spirited pioneers, had come to a meritorious end.

I paused to listen to the silence...Here were the imponderable processes  
and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it!  
That was what came out of the silence—a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord,  
the music of the spheres...

Richard E Byrd

From Charlotte Bay, we continued our journey through the Gerlache Strait and ventured onto Cuverville Island, flanked by 650-ft vertical cliffs and spiky blue icebergs. As a bright rainbow

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<sup>8</sup> *Framheim* was located about 400 miles from the British Cape Evans base at Ross Island, on the opposite side of the Ross Ice Shelf, and 60 miles nearer the Pole due to a different route taken by Amundsen.

arched over the gravelly beach, I beheld the spellbinding scene of the largest population of gentoo penguins on the Antarctic Peninsula. When sailors first laid eyes upon the strange black and white birds, they thought the creatures resembled the flightless Great Auk of the North Atlantic; so the Auk's scientific genus *Pinguinus* was used as a naming inspiration.

Later that day we climbed into inflatable zodiacs to explore the supernatural expanse of the 15-mile wide Wilhelmina Bay, nicknamed 'Whale-mina Bay,' as it's one of the best spots to observe these enormous residents who gather in large numbers to feed during summer months on the abundance of shrimplike krill. And, today, filled with many majestic humpbacks, we quickly sighted the forceful spouting from their two blowholes whenever they surfaced to breathe. While feeding, they slapped their huge fins and flukes on the water's surface, and even dove right under our zodiac, which felt like a mere rubber ducky hovering above their massive bodies. At times, some ventured so close that I could magically gaze into their most inquisitive eyes.

Within this moment of serene solitude, filled with such a mystic dance of nature, "I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe," wrote Admiral Byrd. "There must be purpose in the whole and that man was part of that whole and not an accidental offshoot. It was a feeling that transcended reason...The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the day and night."

In the midst of such a cosmic moment, little did I realize that not only would I soon be jarred back into the world's chaos but also thrust upon an unsuspected perilous passage endured by many of these past explorers. The captain had just received the startling news that Argentina, due to the coronavirus, was about to close its borders. If we did not make it back to Ushuaia's harbor within the next several days, the ship would be stranded in Antarctic waters. Even though our maximum speed was 16 knots, this would not be a quick nor easy dash for the Drake Passage is one of the world's roughest waterways, owing to its deadly gales, towering waves and strong currents. The largest wave ever recorded was nearly eighty feet high, and the notorious Cape Horn Rollers awaited us, like the ensnaring Sirens of Greek mythology, at the other end.

In 1578 the English privateer Sir Francis Drake, after having passed through the Strait of Magellan, was unexpectedly blown by savage winds farther south into unknown waters (now known as the <sup>9</sup>Drake Passage) that implied there was an ocean below the South American continent. It wasn't until 1616 that Dutch explorer Willem Cornelius Schouten, with the goal to find a new route to the Pacific, rounded Cape Horn (at 56 degrees south latitude) at the tip of South America and named it after his birthplace, Hoorn. Over the next few centuries, even though sailing around Kapp Hoorn became one of the world's major shipping routes, it was still highly feared as 'the passage to doom.' Lying in watery graveyards are hundreds of ships that were brutally battered and lost during the many violent storms. There's an old maritime saying: 'Below 40 degrees south latitude, there is no law. Below 50 degrees, there is no God.'

And it was into these mythic waters that we forged ahead on the 700-mile journey from Wilhelmina Bay and north to Ushuaia, Argentina. Over the next several days we'd be in an area where the Atlantic, Pacific and Southern Seas converge, creating a roaring mix of winds and

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<sup>9</sup> It's also claimed that Spanish navigator Francisco de Hoces found it earlier in 1526; many Spanish maintain that the passage should be called the Mar de Hoces.



currents that meet no resistance from any landmass on the planet. The next morning, with cloudy skies and increasing winds the ship seemed to encounter Poseidon's wrath as giant waves surged up and crashed over the top of the upper decks. At one point, while trying to sit in the dining hall, the ship unexpectedly heaved so violently back and forth that chairs, dishes, food— everything that wasn't bolted down—all spilled and crashed over to the other side of the room. I began chewing on anti-sea sickness tablets like tootsie rolls, and went back to my berth and suctioned in as Spiderwoman. I could hear a neighbor playing Joe Turner's *Shake Rattle and Roll*.

Relegated to my topsy-turvy bed, my thoughts wandered back to Shackleton and his men during their courageous journey from Elephant Island in waters known as the *Furious Fifties*. Shackleton described the time when they encountered monstrous winds and waves, and were nearly capsized when "we felt our small boat lifted and flung forward like a cork in breaking surf". When they finally approached the coastline of South Georgia, the weather then developed into "one of the worst hurricanes any of us had ever experienced." With a superhuman will to survive, they had withstood the terrifying ordeal and landed a day later on the shores of the island. Now as I looked out my window upon these immense and roiling waves, all these Antarctic stories—no longer experienced from pages of a book—had become frightfully real.

It seemed like forever that we endured our own *Great Drake Shake* until the ship finally cruised safely into Ushuaia's harbor without much time to spare. Because we'd been in Antarctica for three weeks (and no one had fallen ill), the ship wasn't required to quarantine. Eight other vessels weren't so lucky—and later I learned that several had traveled up the eastern coast of South America in search of a harbor to let them in. From a pristine and untroubled landscape, I was suddenly tossed into a scary and drama-filled world of the early days of the Coronavirus afflicted unknown.

After several days I made it out of Ushuaia on one of the last flights to Buenos Aires before all internal air travel within the country was halted. The capital was under mandatory lockdown and the gendarmerie patrolled the streets. Here I was in an empty B&B with 20-foot ceilings and crystal chandeliers—decorated in Parisian style, alone with my 20 words of Spanish. At least it was much warmer here than Antarctica; and, heck, there was even an outdoor balcony. I looked out upon the landmark building across the street. It was the Palacio Barolo, built in 1923 and inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*— the Barolo's structure is divided into Heaven, Hell and Purgatory.

Over the next few days as surrounding countries began to close their own airports to transiting flights, I sat helplessly as one flight after another of mine was cancelled. Finally, after more nail-biting days, I was able to secure an escape on the last flight out through Panama to Los Angeles. Like past explorers in Antarctica, how many more trials would I have to attempt before I could arrive home?

At midnight, as I was preparing to leave the hotel for the airport, the building suddenly lost electricity and, with the elevator now dead, I had to lug my baggage down eight flights of stone steps in complete darkness. On the way to the airport the taxi was stopped at multiple police checkpoints to scrutinize our reason for being out on the road. And then to enter the airport I had to have my temperature taken by health officials in Hazmat suits standing guard outside. The

building was eerily empty and I was still a bit unnerved—for if my flight for some reason was cancelled after Passport Control, I would not be allowed back into Argentina, and thus stuck indefinitely in the transit lounge—like Tom Hanks in *The Terminal*.

I was so relieved to board the plane that it didn't matter that I was confronted with a Noah's Ark scene—from pairs of people suited up in white front-zippered jumpsuits, full face masks, blue rubber kitchen gloves and plastic swim goggles to oodles of screaming babies. The elderly couple next to me neurotically washed their hands with a giant bottle of hand sanitizer practically every three minutes during the seven-hour flight to Panama City. All I could smell was the citrus-scented alcohol as I watched the Comic-Con masked flight attendants bravely passing out drinks and pre-wrapped chicken tacos; at least they did not have to force a smile. After fifteen hours of flying, Los Angeles sparkled beneath me. And following all the effort of getting out of Argentina, I was ironically out of the airport here with not a single health check... and with no traffic on the freeway, I made it home to Hollywood in less than half an hour.

My Happy Feet made the transition from the immensity of a borderless Antarctica to sheltering-in-place at my wee abode in the northern hemisphere with the counterpart *Corona Borealis* now flickering overhead in the night sky. I made it through the 7-day quarantine and tested negative for the coronavirus. While embracing the survival spirit of Evita, I happily sang from my own balcony:

*Don't Cry for Me Quarantina*  
*The truth is I never left you*  
*All through my wild days*  
*My mad existence*  
*I kept my promise*  
*Now keep your Distance*

*...Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson *Ulysses*

As erstwhile Antarctic explorers in their wooden ships and feeble tents were once at the mercy of immense ice packs and unpredictable blizzards, we suddenly found ourselves today unexpectedly blindsided by an invisible virus, which stormed out of nowhere and forced us to hunker down to wait out an uncertain outcome. It was now our turn to be hurled into nature's uncharted territories, which has surely humbled us and disrupted our faith in the permanence of a status quo. In mythological tales only one thing is certain. After the maelstrom dissipates, a traveler never resurfaces from its dark depths as the same person who entered. That is what the storm is all about.

In a way, we've all been thrust upon the hero's journey, which begins with a separation from what used to be, then leads into an unknown landscape of uncertainty, and ultimately ends with a transformative re-emergence to a more meaningful notion of how to best live one's life. During one of his travails, Ulysses is forced to descend to Hades to seek advice (a symbol of death and rebirth) before eventually finding his way home a changed man. Dionysus (whose father was Zeus) had to first let go of his self-serving narcissism and embrace a newfound awareness of interconnectedness and compassion to rescue his mortal mother from the underworld—an awakening to consciousness he chose to immortalize with a corona of shining stars.

After having survived his own heroic journey down to the underbelly of the earth within the 'Great Alone' of Antarctica's savage intensity, Sir Ernest Shackleton, stripped to the core of his inner being, summed up his own transformational experience: "We had pierced the veneer of outside things. We had <sup>10</sup>suffered, starved, and triumphed, groveled down, yet grasped at glory, grown bigger in the bigness of the whole.' We had seen God in His splendours, heard the text that Nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man."

For our time, has it taken the catalyst of a shadowy virus to thrust us into our own global rite of passage—a much-needed wake-up call for all humanity? Despite its horrors, the corona pandemic might also offer a transformative shift towards more innovative horizons and possibilities that can reshape our views as a society and planet as a whole. Let us join the prescience of past heroic figures to summon the crucial call: *Come, my friends. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...*

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<sup>10</sup> Quoting lines from Robert W. Service's *The Call of the Wild*