Cappelen Damm Agency *Autumn 2024*

I Read It In The Waves

Only by travelling the sea way can you truly understand the coast. For three years, Veronica Skotnes has sailed along the coast of Northern Norway, searching for people stories and nature experiences from the country's most remote and windswept region.

I Read It In The Waves depicts a journey by boat, as well as an inner journey. Veronica Skotnes travels through polar nights and under the midnight sun, on the calm sea and through storms. She's all by herself on the deck of an old sailing boat.

The book emphasises a beautiful and dwindling part of Norway's coastal culture, alongside the author's own reflections, experiences and challenges from sailing in the Arctic.

«*A fantastic travel report that strongly touches on the challenges of life and the present.*»
Dagbladet BOK, five/six stars

«*The travel depiction I Read It In The Waves is a tribute to the sea, and a declaration of love to all who live along our northernmost coast.*»
Friluftsliv

«*This is a book completely out of the ordinary. Poetic texts about the sea and the sea people in the eyes of the furthest north. Warm human encounters, with honest texts. Anyone who is interested in the coast and coastal culture should get this book.*»
Norsk Fyrforening

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Veronica Skotnes
b. 1998

Veronica Skotnes (b. 1998) took to the sea at seventeen, as crew on a schooner in the North Sea. Since then, wind and ocean currents have taken her north of the Arctic Circle, where she now steers her own ship. For the past three years, she has been sailing and living in a boat along the coast of Finnmark, in the very north of Norway. Skotnes has a bachelor's degree in Arctic Outdoor Activities.

Synopsis

I Read It In The Waves is a poetic travel journal which follows Veronica Skotnes, a young girl sailing alone on a sailboat in the Northernmost part of Norway, as she experiences the contrasting seasons of the Arctic, the vast nature and isolated societies. Her journey brings the reader to some of the smallest and most remote outer islands off the Norwegian Coast, some which are scarcely inhabited, and some which have fallen to the pressure of globalisation and financial distress. Veronica reflects on how past and current changes in the nature, environment and climate affect the people and the

animals living on the coast. The readers will get to know some of the stubborn and strong people who spend their lives living in this barren landscape, and understand the struggles that they are facing. The book touches on subjects such as loss of marine biodiversity, nature conservation and failed fishing regulations, but also the rich history of the islands and the coast. Throughout her journey, Veronica mourns the loss of the coastal culture while shedding light on current challenges affecting its remains. It is a story about centralisation and our understanding and relationship with nature, all packed into interesting reflections told from the deck of an old sailboat. In addition to text, Veronica has illustrated her voyage through detailed drawings which sometimes lean into the abstract, making it possible for the reader to create their own interpretations.

The voyage follows seven islands in Finnmark, the northernmost region in Norway. We first meet Veronica as she is riding an autumn gale at the Lopphav, on her way to find a sheltered harbour to spend the winter. She spends the winter in Akkarfjord, a village with 70 inhabitants on an island with no mainland connections. Here, we get a glimpse into Veronica's troubled relationship with her family, possibly explaining why she chose a life at sea: "It's not that I despise happy families. It is more of a realisation that I've given up the idea of finding happiness in mutual blood." One day, Veronica notices that the ropes holding her boat to the dock are no longer frozen. She can continue her journey.

Throughout the spring, we are taken on the long journey to Vardø, which was once a thriving fishing village. Here, among the ruins of the old fishing houses, we explore the history and politics that led Vardø to become almost abandoned. The story of the fleeting coastal societies follow as we visit Loppa Island, Rolvsøy Island, Ingøy Island and Gjesvær, who are all struggling with adapting in a new climate. The stories come to a harrowing conclusion as Veronica visits the completely abandoned village of Sandvikvær, possibly foreshadowing the faith of the remaining coastal villages. Throughout it all, Veronica grows the relationship with her boat, possibly reflecting on the relationship she has with herself.

"To think that it is November. My sailboat, my home, you - you, who have seen me grow, who have seen my lovers come and go, perhaps you were hoping some of them would stay, perhaps you were relieved when they left and it was just us, again, like it has always been just us. Now, I have to furl your sails, now, the winter is coming. Are you happy here, in the Arctic? Here, in these cold waters, by these cool coasts. Perhaps you'd rather sail in the tropics, where the trade winds blow evenly, where the sun shines every day. I will tell you, I do not know why I'm not choosing the hills coated in lush forest, or the green fields of the land or the soft mountains. I do not know why I am choosing this barren coast, where the cross cliffs and the dark reefs wish to see my demise, this coast, where not a single tree grows. But it is beautiful, this coast, surely, it is beautiful. I have never seen anything as stunning as where the ocean meets land by the highest latitudes, here, where the ice

breaks apart every single year, and where the spring forces itself forward, again and again, no matter how strictly the winter rules."

Sample translation

Veronica Skotnes

I Read It In The Waves

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AUTUMN

It is not true that the sea is faithless, for it has never promised anything; without claim, without obligation, free, pure, and genuine beats the mighty heart, the last sound one in an ailing word.

– Alexander Kielland tr. by John Kettelwell

We never owned the sea, nor did we own the wind, or the air, or the mountains. We didn't own the earth below us or the night sky above us. We didn't own the people around us, or the birds, or the kelp, or the cod in the ocean. We didn't even own life, for it was fleeting and never ours. My story begins and ends in the sea, just like every other life, like a drop in the ocean. Let my remains become oil, and in a million years they might call it a resource.

My name is Veronica, and I live at sea, in an old sailboat, a boat that is older than me, and which has seen more of the world than what I have. It was built in 1982, the same year the Falklands War broke out, the year that the Alta Dam protests came to a stop, and sixteen years before I was born. I can only cite these historic events from that year, from 1982, because I was not there to tell you about them myself. I can only tell you about today. By the time I started living onboard, the sailboat had already crossed great seas, already sailed past the point where one horizon disappears and a new horizon begins, and already seen distant coasts and sun-warmed beaches on the other side of winter. It's a long way from wool socks to palm trees. Now the boat is in the ice-cold waters of Finnmark with me as captain. We could have sailed anywhere - To the atolls of the Pacific, following the trade winds around the equator or in the mangroves of the tropics. We could be sipping on fruity drinks without a single piece of clothing, waving at the sun every day. We could live a life completely unaware that there is a country, somewhere in the far north, where the winter is so dark that people

don’t see the sun for months, and where the air is so cold that the trees never grow. We didn’t have to live in this polar climate, where violent storms form as the cold air from sea ice meets the warmer ice-free sea. We didn’t have to live in our woolen layers or in our thick, double socks. I say we, but it is only me, and the boat, as if my solitude has created a new soul, as if the boat also longs for fruity drinks and sunscreen. But something unknown drove me to Finnmark, something I can’t explain, and the boat faithfully followed my course. In this way, we are accomplices in our cold situation, even if only one of us acknowledges this guilt. In this northernmost part of Europe, where even the sun leaves the land for some time, for a long time. The boat is my home, the hulls are my walls and the sea is my view. This is how I’ve lived for three winters, with the sea, the boat and the coast of Finnmark.

Now I’m going to visit the outermost points. I want to visit the parts of this barren land that catch the most wind, where the waves of the great ocean meets the land first, so that the rest of Europe can sit quietly and longingly paint a picture of the sea as if it is something graceful and merciful. There are many words that come to mind when I think of the sea, but mercy is not one of them.

There are people living on the outer coast. They are not many, but they are a few. On small islands, they cling to a small piece of rock as waves constantly crash over them. They live their lives out there, as I live mine, by the sea, but not by the sea depicted on postcards with red sunsets, parasols and lush beaches, postcards greasy with sunscreen fingers and hanging for sale at a stand with handmade jewelry made of shells and pebbles, no, not by that sea, but by this sea, the Arctic Sea. They live their lives with the black, cold and unpredictable Arctic Ocean. What grows in that salty soil? I have no goal with my journey, other than to search for people who might give me an answer as to why I find myself out here, along the icy seacoast.

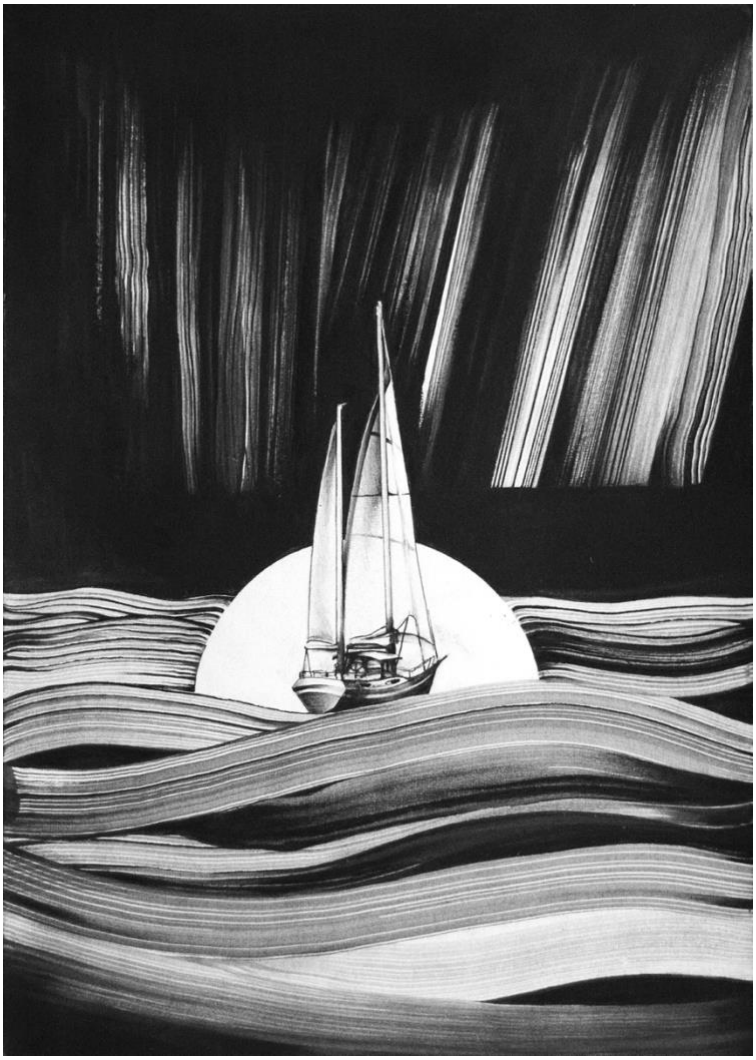
The boat has two masts, a steel hull and an anchor in which I’m willing to place all my trust. It has four large sails, sails I tack with winches, and which, with only wind and rope, can bring my little ship across any sea. Inside, the boat is clad in dark wood, the kind of wood that was popular in the 80’s, which glows with nostalgia and warmth. Inside, I can cook, I can rest, I can live my life. I replaced the typical navy-blue lounge cushions with a creamy white linen fabric, because I’ve never liked the combination of deep blue against dark brown. I thought the lighter cushions made the cabin more inviting. The galley is small enough for me to rest my body against the

wall when cooking in rough seas. The stoves are heated by denatured alcohol, which was very common in boats forty years ago. I sleep in the aft cabin. It's spacious, and when I'm lying in bed, on my back, I can look up at the sky through the hatch in the deck.

The sea knows no one. Uncommitted, the ocean current continues, like time, indifferent and free, carefree and unsuspecting, and uncommitted I ride its waves in the delusion that our friendship is mutual. I look, far out into the endless blue, and I don't feel loneliness in the way that I feel loneliness when I'm around people. Anyone who has made the acquaintance of the sea knows no loneliness, for the sea will always speak the language you have given it. The sea nods understandingly, because the soul of the sea is my own. This is how everyone finds themselves in the depths. The sea is furious when I'm furious, peaceful when I'm at peace, and threatening when I feel threatened. As an entity, we exist together, because when I mirror myself in the surface of the sea, I see only myself.

Today I'm on the Lopphav, the one that's never calm, the one that always gives me anxiety. A troubled sea, that's how people know it. I'm on the Lopphav, sailing the western gale heading for Finnmark. How many seafarers have once stared down into these depths and dreamed of returning home to their green fjords? Perhaps the sea brought them there in the end. Here, on the Lopphav, the Arctic Ocean thunders towards land, washing over exposed shoals and causing upheaval, unrest, chaos and life. It smells of life, like life itself was created out here, and this life is as chaotic and as destructive as it is beautiful and graceful.

I have been to Troms. I have taken the boat to the shipyard for maintenance since there are no slipways in West Finnmark that lift sailboats, or stick boats, as they like to call them here. This is the realm of the sjark, a boat which has neither fin-keels nor masts. I have to sail to Troms once a year to hoist the boat ashore, because the saltwater fights everything that is man-made, and I can't only hope to postpone its destruction. I got out of Finnmark, I sailed out, but now I'm on a northeasterly course, headed back, because I still haven't let thoughts of the north go.



I sailed north three years ago, because life in the north is hard, but not as hard as it is in the south. In the south, life is easy, surely, but it is difficult, because struggle finds its way to us, and I'd rather fight with what is tangible, like the frost, like the snow, like the weather. I can fight with the storm and the wind, but the struggle also finds its way to those who don't struggle, and then comes the darkness, the real darkness. I have not yet turned my bow towards the Southern Cross, not yet, even though winter is approaching once again, and I dream of chasing after the sun, after the light, the light which is constantly moving away, away from us here in the north, the light which disappears somewhere in the sea, and then it gets dark, and a new winter is on its way. Soon the sun will fall into the sea, and she will not return again until the New Year. Soon I'll have to find a harbour where I can spend the winter, very soon, because the gales are coming now, and I have to find a harbor before they catch up with me. The sails are my lungs, because it is only at sea that I can breathe, and one day I may rust away in the salt, just like my boat, one day, but right now, in this moment, I have

the wind in my hair and I'm sailing across the Lopphav, towards Finnmark, again, pulled by the same longing that drew me there three years ago. Finnmark is the most sparsely populated part of the country, and one of the most sparsely populated areas in all of Europe. Perhaps it was this sparsity which brought me here, the allure of a land almost devoid of people.

I have to talk with them, the people who live alone out there, with the sea, with the wind, along the coast. The people who live isolated and alone on the islands in the harshest part of Norway. I have to talk with them to understand why they are there, perhaps in an attempt to understand myself, because I know that we suffer from the same cursed longing for the sea. Finnmark's outermost coastline consists of seven islands, from west to east. Loppa, Sørøya, Rolvsøya, Ingøy, Hjelmsøya, Magerøya and Vardø. Only the last two are connected to the mainland, while the rest are only accessible by boat, as they have always been. These seven islands were once powerful settlements of the north, at a time when the sea was the very thread of destiny for every human under the Norns. What do they look like today, these seven islands? Are they still around?

The seabirds often join me out here on the Lopphav. They come flying when the winds fill up the sails. I spot a fulmar as it passes the boat, like a small, white glimmer. It comes in on the port side, dives in front of the bow then bursts past me before pulling back and sailing towards me again. Then it passes by again, this time on the starboard side, flies behind the boat and disappears, and when I think it has left me, it bursts by once more, in an arc, and then it comes back and repeats the number. And it keeps going, in circles, playfully and effortlessly, often for hours, and after a while it will disappear again, without a sound, and it will fly out to the open sea and disappear. The fulmar cares little about the storms. While I'm struggling to keep my ropes and sails under control, the fulmar effortlessly slides in the wind, as if to remind me that the wind is harmless, as long as I play along with it. So I reef the sails, and the boat straightens up and the world becomes calm. When the fulmar joins me, it's like meeting an old friend, but I know that if I fall overboard, if I lay there in the cold water for too long, and if I am close to death, the fulmar will happily come and pluck out my eyes, even before I gasp for my last breath. Our friendship exists because I created it, but I still feel joy every time we reunite.

With the bow to the north, I have the Kvænangstinde in the stern. There, the mountains squeeze tightly onto the small bit of land they have at their disposal, and they push each other upwards, and upwards, as if they can't quite breathe and have to reach up, high into the sky to catch the air. There is snow on the highest peaks, but the shoreline is bare, as it often is in this particular season. In the bow I have Brynnilen, the islet that marks the border between Troms and Finnmark. Right inside the mainland of Brynnilen, there are two villages, one in Troms and one in Finnmark. One faces the sea in the north and the other the sea in the south. Only a short road separates the two, and the road is not connected to the rest of the mainland. Only one person lives in each of the settlements, one in Troms and one in Finnmark. This is how they are separated, and this is how they are connected, on either side of the county border, but disconnected from the rest of the world. In Troms lies Seglvik, and in Finnmark lies Andsnes.

I should have anchored in Andsnes, as many before me have anchored. People used to anchor in Andsnes to shop, to barter, to wait for better winds. I should have gone ashore, and I should have talked to those two people, the ones who live on opposite sides, and I should have listened to the stories they had to tell, stories about when Brynnilen was a trading post and an important hub for shipping and fishing, when there was a post office, a fish factory, a school and a quay there, and when people lived there. That was when families along the coast were trilingual, when coastal people were cosmopolitans. Without a mainland connection, they were connected to the sea. Andsnes was important because the main artery went to sea, and Andsnes is centrally located, between the counties of Troms and Finnmark, but today the boats simply pass by. Today I don't anchor there. Today, the Lopphav is in its usual state, and the winds are fierce. The only pier was taken by a winter storm almost ten years ago, and it has since never been rebuilt. When the coastal people turned their attention to the land, the coast was decentralized. So I sail past, past Brynnilen, Andsnes, Seglvik and the two people who I will not visit tonight, and as I continue towards Finnmark, I see that there's a light in a house on land, and I think that it must be nice to be in there, in the warmth, perhaps with a fire in the fireplace and food on the table, and I would like to be there, but I'm here, on the Lopphav, riding the gales.

Bergsfjord is quiet, with good anchorage conditions and shielded from the west wind, so I sail there. I am tired and I am cold. I can look out and see Loppa, the island of Loppa that is, and one day I'll go there and talk to the people who live there, but not now, because it's too windy out there, and I'm looking for a sheltered anchorage. Loppa is no sheltered anchorage. I heave the sails as I pass Marholmen, because now I've come inland, and the wind has calmed. Marholmen is where Maren lived, according to one of the many stories that wander between the boats, the boats you occasionally meet in harbors by half-abandoned fishing villages. Maren lured in shipwrecked sailors, people who needed help, fishermen she was able to beckon into the Øksfjord quay. Then she killed them out there on the islet, stole what they had and threw them to the sea. It is said that one day Maren was discovered, put on trial and beheaded. Some claim that her head was placed on a pole on the islet, as a kind of warning to travellers that Finnmark is no exception to the law. There is still a pole on Marholmen today, but only the cormorants are resting on it. I've heard that seafarers can spot Maren on nights like this, when the sea is churning and the fog is thick, you can see her on the horizon. Her feet don't touch the ground, she floats over the land. She beckons to the sea, beckons you in, and she comes towards you, down from the islet, down to the shore, down towards the water, and then she comes closer, over the water, and then she's close, almost right next to you. It's nights like this when she comes for the sailors. I don't see Maren. Perhaps she shows solidarity when there are women at the helm. I can only see the colony of cormorants that has taken over the islet, and I start the engine to steer into Bergsfjord. In the fog everything is silent, and I feel a particular shame that I'm the one breaking the silence this evening.

It takes an hour to set the anchor. I'm tired, I'm hungry and drained of energy, I'm doing everything wrong, so it's slow going because I have to start all over again. I take a deep breath and there's a dull wind in my face, but soon I'll be able to light candles inside and drink hot chocolate and feel the warmth spread through my body until I'm even more tired, then I'll be able to sleep in my bed, soon. It's not warm, it's damp, but it's mine and I can sleep in it, and my body is now so tired that I might as well sleep on the shore. It's pleasant inside the boat. It's not gray and hard and cold like it is outside, there are warm colors from forty-year-old mahogany, and there are smooth surfaces that you can run your hands over and feel the cracks in the woodwork. It's cramped in a way that feels roomy, because it's not overwhelming and big inside like

it is outside, but it's organized and cozy. In there I can make hot food. I can cut up the onion I bought in Tromsø, heat it in the pan with some garlic, some mushrooms, and some dried reindeer meat that I bought the last time I was in Alta, and then the whole room smells of fried onions, and I don't have to smell the diesel fumes. When the engine is switched off, everything gets quiet, and as I take off my salt-stained clothes to wrap my body in warm wool, all I hear is a light gurgle from wavelets hitting the hull.

I thought there would be freedom in sailing, freedom in letting the wind and weather set your course. Open sea, free see. I thought that sailing and life at sea would be the ultimate freedom, but I forgot that the boat, the wind and the weather limit all opportunities to make your own choices. Is there really freedom in always sailing where the wind takes you, where the wind has decided you should go, without being able to choose for yourself, choose where to go, where to stay. Today the gale decided that I wasn't going to Andsnes, I was going to Bergsfjord. Either way, I found freedom in just that, in surrendering to the whims of the weather. Freedom from having to choose, freedom from having to make decisions. I discovered an apathetic state where I could swim in the currents that were right for me. Freedom in surrendering to something bigger, something that tells me what to do. Freedom from being in control. Perhaps defying the weather is as sinful as defying freedom itself. Freedom's judgment – Sartre believed that freedom was a curse, because humans cannot really have complete freedom. Besides, we must face the consequences of our own actions as if they were entirely ours. Then maybe being subject to the weather is a kind of freedom from the curse of freedom. Maybe. The final freedom. But now the heat has seeped into the woodwork, and it smells like good food. I'm tired and I fall asleep, rocking at the anchorage outside Bergsfjord.

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A solitary lighthouse stands steadfast against soot-black clouds in a great battle between nature and humanity. Saltwater slams hard against immovable cliffs, topples over sharp stones and chases the land masses before rolling back to the raging sea in vain and repeating the onslaught all over again. It's like the undertow is trying to take the land back into the sea. What is it that's making the sea so agitated today? On the horizon, just the outline of a sailboat struggles against the wind, while the waves at

the lighthouse wash ominously over a shipwreck that was probably once in the same situation. The sea fog colors the landscape in shades of gray, the air is filled with salt, and there is little indication that this battlefield will settle down. Along the horizon you might catch a glimpse of hope, a small streak of light trying to break through the darkness of the sky, but even the light has to give up when the sea readies itself for battle. Once again, the sea takes a deep breath before the masses of water once again mercilessly tackles the land, then –

"Please stand back."

I am sucked out of the landscape and find myself in a cold room at the National Gallery in Oslo. A security guard gives me a stern look and gestures for me to take a step back. My breath has created a small spot of dew on the glass between me and the painting, *Lighthouse on the Norwegian Coast*, by Peder Balke, depicting an unforgiving landscape inspired by the artist's own experiences of a stormy day at the easternmost point of the Finnmark coast in the 1800s. Right there, for a moment, I'm standing in the midst of harsh wind gusts while the weather on the Varangerfjord looms on the wall of the gallery. This is my very first encounter with Finnmark. I look at the lighthouse, at how it stands erect on the coast, high and unwavering against nature, and I think it's not surprising that the picture is by a man. There was no lighthouse at Vardø at the time Peder Balke traveled to Finnmark in 1832. The painting was originally titled *Vardø Lighthouse* but was subsequently changed due to its misrepresentation. He must have felt the need to set up this battle, to erect this structure that would stand tall and fight the waves alone, perhaps to show the undeniable power of nature, perhaps to emphasize man's resiliency.

Almost ten years have passed since I first encountered the Finnmark coast through a canvas, several hundred kilometers south of the Arctic Circle. At the time, Finnmark was just a land north of the sun, a place I knew through the eyes of artists who painted their impressions, and through the words of writers and poets who generously shared their memories. It was a place where nature was merciless and the land was characterized by mysticism and superstition, where Finnmark itself was as legendary as its sagas. It was a place many people in the south barely knew about, and if they did, it was linked to prejudices and stereotypes, a place where the population is disadvantaged, where the people live nomadically and kept reindeer. The drunken, boisterous and talkative Finnmarkers, the common people who lived on social

security and welfare. This place was simply “up north,” where, in its vague indeterminacy, it was robbed of its unique identity and culture, as if no one really knew what was in the north. Back then, I had never seen the polar night’s luminous display of colors over the Lopphav, never felt the cool east wind of the Varangerfjord against my cheek nor heard the sound of Gjesværstappane’s hectic birdlife. I had never danced with the rhythmic swells of the Barents Sea or seen the midnight sun sweep over Finnkirka. The endless gray tones in Peder Balke’s paintings were something I interpreted as expressive representations and artistic freedom. It wasn’t until I stood at the far end of the Arctic Ocean and stared into the play of colors from a real autumn storm that I realized that contemporary criticism of Balke’s unrealistic use of color must have come from people who had never set foot north of the Arctic Circle - because I’ve never seen so many colors in a gray landscape. Light is abundant in the land of polar night.

I traveled north as early as I could. First in the direction of the Skotnes family farm in Lofoten. Maybe I found something there I could connect with, but there was still a long way to go, another swath of land before I got all the way to the Arctic Ocean’s border. I don’t know why I left. Maybe because I didn’t find the inspiration I was looking for in the city, or maybe to escape what seemed like an inevitable family curse, where so many of my closest relatives seemed to end up with a life of substance abuse and depression. At the time, I probably took it as inspiration, but maybe I thought, deep down, that if I went far enough away, far enough away from the life I knew, then I would be free from the unhappiness that followed me. I didn’t know then that I would find fragments of my family history among abandoned tufts and burnt down boathouses on the outermost part of the Finnmark coast, that even thousands of kilometers from my starting point I couldn’t escape my own past.

It’s been three years. Three years since I thought that destiny wouldn’t follow me over water. Three years since I assumed that if I keep moving across the sea, then I’d be safe, because according to folklore, you have to cross water if evil follows you. I moved into a sailboat because I had nothing to lose by doing so, because I was already in deep water, and I desperately needed something that could float. Now I’m soon expecting my third winter on board.

I hold my breath. I found a harbor for the winter, I thought, in the ocean of my dreams, the place I see before me when I close my eyes. On a lonely and windswept

island, in the country's deep north, I found a pier that could welcome me through a long winter. But autumn didn't want it that way, because autumn sent the first hurricane of the year in my direction, and it pulled at the pier, and it pulled at the boat, and it threw wood into the sea and tore apart ropes and cables. In the heat of the storm, it became clear that I wouldn't make it through the winter unscathed, because I know, and everyone knows, that this hurricane was only the first of many ravaging storms this year, and they will get bigger, and they will get more powerful. It is now the end of October, and I must move on, and I do not yet know where I am going, but I know that time is short, for now the sun is disappearing, and winter is coming, and the storms will not let me out. Now they're waiting in line, they're taking turns out there, and here I am sailing in the darkness with no direction and no port of call.

It's night, but it might as well be afternoon, or morning, because the sun barely appears now, just a few hours in the middle of the day. It's night, and in front of me, to the bow, there is nothing, all is black. Ahead there is only the sea, and in the darkness, I feel like the only person in the world. I know the way out is narrow, but I can't see the land, only the white rippling crests of the waves as they hit the reefs and rocks around me. The waves are my only indication that the land is there, because although I may not see it, I hear it. When the water crashes against the rocks, I hear it. I can't see the sea either, but I know it's high, because I occasionally feel weightless. Somewhere further up on deck a fender has come loose from its knot, and it's rolling around recklessly, back and forth, and I know it will end up in the sea, but I can't go up and save it, because then I might come loose too, and roll around recklessly, and end up in the sea. Sometimes I see hints of waves just as they pass the boat, but that's all I see. I think it must be fog, because I should have seen a lighthouse by now, somewhere on the port side, and anyway I ought to set my course to port soon, as soon as I am past the lee, since to the bow is nothing but open sea and I know that's now where I'm going, even though I have no port of call. There's an island (øya), to the south (sør), Sørøya, and there's a fjord there, and in that fjord a brand-new pier has just been built. I maintain four knots, because even if the wind is good, the waves push against the boat, so it has to climb up to reach the tops, and then it has to pull itself down to the depths on the other side. It's hard for a boat to climb against gravity. At this pace, I can expect to arrive at the new pier in a few hours, sometime early in the morning, just before the world wakes up, and then I can ask if I can stay there for

the winter, and maybe they'll say yes, and maybe then I can breathe again, and then I can invite them for coffee at my new home, in my new home for the winter, and I can get to know the people who live there, and I hope they're nice. I get splashed in the face by the waves, because the covering that was put up to protect me from the sea and wind was torn to pieces when the hurricane hit. I still haven't cleaned up the shreds, and like a ghost ship, they're hanging by loose threads all around me. Or maybe it's the rain I feel, the cold drops that make my cheeks numb. Is it raining now? Are they salty, these drops? It's not far to Sørøya, but in the darkness the night feels infinite.

WINTER

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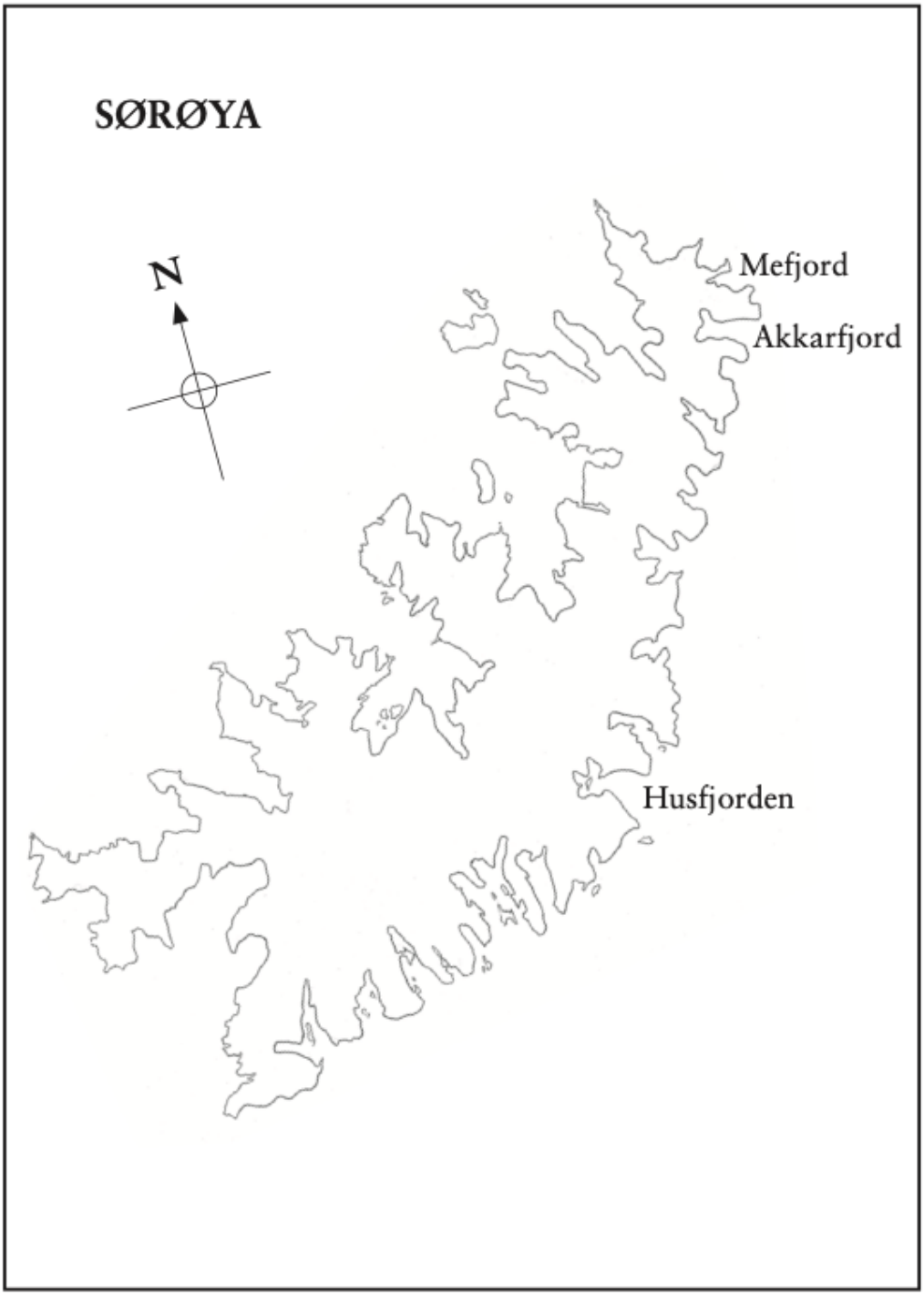
SØRØYA
N
Mefjord
Akkarfjord
Husfjorden

Sørøya

The sailboat, my only home in recent years, is in hibernation. For three years, almost three winters, my home has been the boat, the sea and the Finnmark coast. In the long, warm polar nights and the endless, cool summer nights, I have sought refuge among sharp mountains and small fishing villages. Yes, because it is the darkness that is warm. The polar night is candles, blazing bonfires and soup. The summer night, it's the breeze from the east, which stings your skin a little under light clothing, or it's cold baths in the sea or drinks on the edge of the pier. The outer coast is a brutalist's dream, so devoid of soft lines it is. Here, the rocky outcrops are sharp and steep, and they don't apologize to anyone for their daring design. Black cliffs rise so dark, so hard, but they hide a secret, for between the layers of the rocks you can find soft spots. You'll find small tufts of green grass, find dwarf birches clinging to a patch of earth, unripe buds that turn into cloudberries in the summer, and bird's nests that shelter gull chicks in the spring. You'll find people laughing, crying, loving, and mourning, and you'll find animals. They have found a way to exist out here, and suddenly the rocks are not dark and sharp, but beautiful and magnificent, and the rocky outcrops are exciting and full of secrets, with small openings you can crawl into to hide from the weather.

I can feel the darkness now. The sun has long since said goodbye, the polar night has begun, *the skábma*, the time when the sun does not exist, the dark season. Not everyone thinks that darkness is the right term for this time of year. There are some who call it light time. It's the hours in the morning when the sky is filled with muted pastels followed by a dramatic red horizon. The blazing starry sky of the northern lights mixes with the glittering moonlight in a bright white landscape. The glowing mareel effect flashes so beautifully when you sail through it, and it's the strings of light that the villagers put on the gutters of their house, if the hurricane hasn't come to collect them. In a way, the darkest part of winter is perceived as rich in light compared to the rest of the year. This is because light is clearest in the dark.

Thick icicles hold onto the hull tightly. The sails are bunched up and sealed with a layer of frost and ice, and the ropes, which usually swing freely with the wind, lie stiff and waiting to be released from the grip of winter. I have two shovels on board, one outside to dig my way in and one inside to dig my way out. I appreciate the snow. It's

like a good layer of insulation over the deck, keeping the temperature inside warmer and which embraces the hatches and parts of the boat that otherwise lose a lot of heat. The fact that I sometimes have to shovel my way out in the morning is just part of our collaboration. Beyond the fjord, the sea rushes on at its old pace, and has perhaps forgotten about those of us who are frozen in here. It is officially winter. I have found an arm of the fjord, the Akkar fjord, in the far north of Sørøya, a place where the boat can lie safely through a long period of darkness, where the pier is brand new and the people are fond of coffee. Despite its name, Sørøya is not particularly far south, but it will always be south of something else. The island is one of the seven outermost islands, the first of the seven I'm going to visit this year. It's the largest island in Finnmark, the fourth largest in the country, and at times feels more like a deserted mainland than an island. Sørøya has no mainland connection. A large mountain range separates the settlement in the south from the settlement in the north, and there are no roads connecting them. "Have you been to the south side?" she asked, the lady who had lived all her life in an old house in the far north of the island. "What was it like there? I've never been there, but I've heard it's nice. Have you been there with your boat?"

Yes, I've been there once with my boat, on the south side. I was threatened with a knife by a man who thought that women had no business at sea. I wasn't even going there, I was on my way somewhere else, but the weather changed suddenly and I docked there to wait for the storm to pass. It seemed so peaceful at night, the night I sailed into the settlement, as if the world was asleep, and maybe it was. I sailed into this village that looked so much like any other village, and I moored to the quay, the quay dedicated to visiting guests, just as the wind was really blowing.

Early that morning, just a few hours later, I woke up in a panic to a fist pounding against the hull. There are good acoustics in a steel hull, the sound carries well inside. Some people think that they have to bang hard for me to hear it, but they really don't have to. They only need to knock lightly, and then the sound travels through the whole boat like a guitar case, and it hits between the bulkheads which vibrates the wood. But this isn't a thump from a curious passer-by with an unfortunate sense of time, it's a fist. A hard fist. An angry fist. It's amazing how many emotions you can read from the sound of a knock. Half-awake I hoist myself out, because what else can I do? Half-awake I meet a man with thunder and lightning in his eyes. Have I moored

somewhere I shouldn't? Maybe I'm in someone else's spot? No, my boat is in the right place, it's in the exact spot where guest boats are supposed to moor. The man is a big angry guy, a sad character placed on this earth to make other people's lives miserable. They exist to remind us to appreciate the pleasant people in our lives. He demands to talk to the captain. That's me. No, he says, *little girl*, he means the captain, the owner of this boat. That's still me, but I know what he means. He wants to talk with a man. There's no one else on board, it's just me, I'm alone, and as soon as he realizes that a little girl is sailing the boat, this poor little man's world comes crashing down, and he bursts out:

"A woman shouldn't be at the helm!"

He waves a knife at me, but where this knife came from, I don't know, but he waves it at me and starts cutting the mooring lines that hold me to the jetty, the lines that are my only point of attachment to land. I go from half-awake to wide awake. It's like watching someone attack my very life, my home, my security, and inside me an anger wells up, an utterly primitive power, a rage that I've never felt before. If he had been smaller and I had been bigger, I would have thrown him into the sea. But I can't, all I can do is scream at the top of my voice, as loud and as shrill and as big as I can muster, with the most vulgar words I know, and as I scream at him, he takes a step back. Hysteria, he probably thinks. At the same moment, two fishermen from another boat come running, two people who have seen the spectacle. The man is chased off, but when I went to bed that night, I had fear and anxiety in my blood. Aggression had spread through me, it is contagious. What is the most reasonable thing for a woman to do? To stand up to a rash man like that, one who might come back at night, while I am asleep, or to throw myself into the sea? Who do I fear most between that man and the sea? I fear the sea. I stayed in the port. I didn't sleep. I still don't know what his purpose was in seeking me out, but he never came back. Maybe he went on to terrorize someone else, to remind them, too, to appreciate the good people in their lives. I don't mention this story to the lady on the north side of Sørøya, I just nod and say that it was nice to be there, on the south side. The landscape there is very beautiful.

In the aft cabin, I can see frost coming in through some of the bulkheads. It reminds me where I haven't insulated it well enough yet. It's not warm inside, but it's warmer than outside. The thermometer inside reads five degrees. Positive. That's good enough. The gentle sea around the hull makes the boat warmer, warmer than it would

be without the sea's help. There's not much else to do but wait. Only the clocks that show that time is passing, because outside the darkness is hanging over the landscape, and I can no longer distinguish night from day. It's not about not being cold, it's about accepting that you are freezing. A new winter storm is on its way. They come in turns, and now it's time.

The major hurricane has come and gone. There's always at least one major hurricane during the winter, but sometimes there are two, or three, and this first one came yesterday. Three times I had to go out at night to shovel the snow off the hatch, and three times I checked that the moorings were still secure. Once in the morning, I woke up to a gust of wind so strong that it sent all of yesterday's dishes flying across the cabin. That's my own fault. I should have realized that you can't safely put loose dishes on a kitchen counter in the middle of winter in Finnmark. Later, the gangway on the pier I'm on also came loose, and it got away and hasn't been found yet. I couldn't take part in the search this morning, because without the gangway I can't get from the pier to the shore, and the pier, which fortunately held on to its moorings throughout the night, is also covered in a thick layer of hard ice from the salt water that was thrown onto it, which froze immediately in the cold air. Leaving the boat today is an extreme sport I'm not interested in, so I stay on board, and I read books, and I try to sleep as long as I can, maybe all the way through the night.

Not all days are like this. Some days the northern light burns so brightly that you can hear the crackling of the sky, like a once-in-a-lifetime, multicolored bonfire in the polar night. Some days the moon shines, and then it glistens in small grains of snow over the mountains, and you can ski without a headlamp. Some days it's so cold that like the air itself glows, it becomes so crisp and clear that you can cut it with a knife. I spend a lot of time on board the boat, but sometimes I go out and ski. It's when my longing to see the big ocean grows too large inside my body, when it feels like my whole being is going to explode, that I go skiing. I can put on my skis right at the edge of the pier, and then I can walk, and I can walk over the mountain towards the outer side, the side of the island that faces out, and I can walk to Storsanden, where the Arctic Ocean slams right into the beach, and where I can breathe in the salty air that I know so well – and I stand there, until I notice that the longing has waned, then I can go back home, to the boat, which feels more like a cramped cabin right now, and I can stay there until the sea calls me back again.

Going to the store in Akkarfjord can take several hours. Not because the weather is so bad that you have to fight your way through the wind, and not because the snow is so thick that you have to plough your way over high snowbanks. The shop is barely a hundred meters from the quay, but it can take several hours to buy a liter of milk, because there may be people in the shop, and you have to stop to talk to them, and there's a good chance you'll be invited over for waffles or coffee, and maybe you'll be invited to dinner, if you're lucky, and then you'll get home eight hours later, with a carton of warm milk.

Some days I take the ferry to Hammerfest, the big city with nine thousand permanent residents. Only on days when a storm isn't blowing because the ferry can't necessarily run in all types of weather. The city feels huge, like the biggest collection of people in the world. Seoul and Tokyo pale in comparison to how overwhelmingly large the center of Hammerfest appears when you travel from a small fjord with barely a hundred inhabitants. How alien and unreal such a large city feels, how lonely the city is. In Hammerfest, I can buy small parts for the boat, I can go to a café and borrow books from the library, and then I can take the ferry back to the fjord on Sørøya and spend a few days replacing broken boat parts and looking through new books. I don't always return the books on time, but then I can blame it on the fact that the weather has been too bad to travel by ferry, and the librarians are understanding.

In recent years, Akkarfjord has experienced what can only be described as a coastal miracle. A village without a mainland connection has witnessed population growth, a light trickle of people fleeing the hustle and bustle of city life. Akkarfjord is close enough to Hammerfest that it is possible to commute some days, when the weather is calm, plus there is enough data coverage for people with remote jobs to still feel connected to the outside world. New technology has given isolated coastal areas a completely new demographic. Where once there were only jobs for fishermen and fishmongers, the coast is now home to graphic designers, architects, artists and other creatives and people who can work online, without an office. Perhaps this is the hope for a district where people constantly move away.

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There have been some nice days, but they feel so lonely between their stormy friends. I could take my boat on a day trip, out of the fjord and back in again, just to greet the big sea and then flee back to land, but that's pointless for me. What am I going to achieve with just one day at sea? I don't have time to learn the language of the waves in just one day, I don't have time to see the colors in the wind or hear the echo of the ocean current. After a winter in port, I've lost the language and now I need to find it again, but I won't find it if I keep looking back to the pier. I can't find the silence, or the rhythm, or the calm in the swells. Silence is good at hiding from those who seek it in haste. I only find a calm rhythm after a few days, maybe a few weeks, after a long time without contact with the busy life on land, and it's always sudden. Suddenly the boat no longer rocks beneath me, and the movements of the waves are my movements, then I know, then I feel, that now everything else is meaningless, that the earth can just keep spinning. It's about simply existing in meaninglessness. It's about letting the sails carry me forward, about letting the world take its own course. I may have causes I want to fight for, I may have messages I want to shout out, but right now, in this moment, let me lie here, on the deck, and listen to the eider's peculiar call. Let me smell the change of weather in my nostrils, feel it on my body, as I feel every breeze on this desolate coast as if it were my own heart. Then I can greet the sea like an old friend, only then can I speak our language, only then can I meet it as someone familiar, someone I don't fear. Let me be part of the changes in the landscape, let me feel that I am part of those same changes. Those who know the sea, the mountain and the river learn not to fear them, but rather fear the rush, the stress and the chase. I only fear the sea if I resist it. That is why I don't sail against the wind unless I have to, and I don't try to conquer storms, mountains or river. Both the sea and the mountain have taken lives, but they don't destroy people from within like cities do. At least I don't think so, because I've never seen a stressed coastal fisherman.

When the big storms are upon us, the people from Akkarfjord come and ask if I'd rather sleep in their homes rathern than in my boat, because they see the ship tossing and turning in the waves, and they understand that it can be difficult to sleep in there. I often prefer to be in the boat when it's windy, because then I'm on board if anything happens, but sometimes I fall for the temptation of a warm room and a level bed, and then I can agree to go ashore for a few days, just until the wind has passed. It's good to sit inside a warm and stable house when it's storming outside, when the strong wind

is just a remark in an otherwise dry conversation, and not a struggle to save yourself and your home. But if I sit too long in the quiet house, without getting to know the storm, then I begin to fear it, because we fear the unknown, even when the unknown is in our nature.

Nature. What an unnatural concept. As if there is an alternative, as if there is something that is not nature. We talk about nature as if it's something separate from the everyday world we live in, as if nature isn't us, everything around us, our spirit and our cohabitation with everything else. What is nature if not everything? What is nature if it doesn't also include the grey gulls that nest on bus shelters in central Tromsø, the dandelion sprouts that force their way through concrete parking lots, or the black fungus that grows unnoticed in damp basements in apartment complexes?

We talk about what's out there as if it's not where we come from, as if it's not our home, and we prepare ourselves to shut it out as much as possible. Then we get angry when nature gets a little too close, a little too dense, because we believe in our great misunderstanding that we have managed to step out of it, and when the eagle takes our sheep, when the seagulls screech through quiet streets, or when the flood carries away bridges, then we curse the natural world, as if we are not the ones who have chosen to live precisely where the eagle and the seagull and the rivers are. We admire the warm summer sunsets over the sea but hate it when the salt spray makes a mess of the windows of our beachside homes. We fear nature, we fear when it gets too close, and we tell ourselves that we have to protect ourselves before we can visit nature. *Visit*. How distant do we have to be to fear the only place we belong? We put up fortresses to keep it out, but we don't understand that for every tree we cut down, it is we who become the tree, and when the avalanche comes down the mountainside and takes out the houses we've put up, we wonder if the tree that stood there before would've been stronger against the snow.

We shut nature out and expect it to adapt to us. Not create destruction, not send us major floods, landslides, droughts and storms, but we don't seem to get that the less we listen to nature, the louder it shouts back. We can't shut it out, because it demands to be heard, and then we get scared because it shouts so loud, but we cover our ears and don't hear that it's us it's calling out to.