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For the Sake of the Sin

Norway's fugitive mountain woman

Blair Braverman



EVERYONE ON MALANGEN KNOWS THE STORY: IN MARCH 1733, Birte Olsdatter murdered her husband, the troll-man. Birte was a beautiful girl from the next fjord over, forced to marry Jens Olsen, who was twice her age and beat her. She escaped home to her family, but they insisted that she return to her husband, and sent her younger brother, Benjamin, to keep the peace. The abuse continued, until finally it was too much to take. One day, while Benjamin was out hunting, Birte killed Jens by bashing his head with an ax. Benjamin returned to find Birte covered in blood, sobbing. As he comforted her, she told him what she had done.

Together the siblings carried Jens's body down to the beach and loaded it into a rowboat. Benjamin rowed out into the middle of the fjord while Birte wept. They tied iron pots to Jens's ankles, then poured his body overboard, where it sank into the salt water and vanished. They cleaned the bloodstains from the farmhouse with moss, set the place on fire, and ran to their neighbors for help extinguishing the flames. Birte publicly mourned her husband's tragic death in the blaze.

Two months later, Jens's body washed ashore in the village. When Birte found out, she ran away into the nearby mountains, where she hid in a cave for three months. The local authority, the Master-Man, who was particularly bitter toward Birte because she had once refused to marry him, vowed to find her and bring her to justice; he caught her three months later, sneaking into her family's farm for food. Birte was jailed but escaped, hiding in her cave for the rest of the winter. During this time, a few sympathetic villagers brought her supplies, but she subsisted mostly on animals that she trapped herself and the few scant items she was able to steal. Come spring, she and Benjamin escaped over the Swedish border with a family of Sami reindeer-herders.

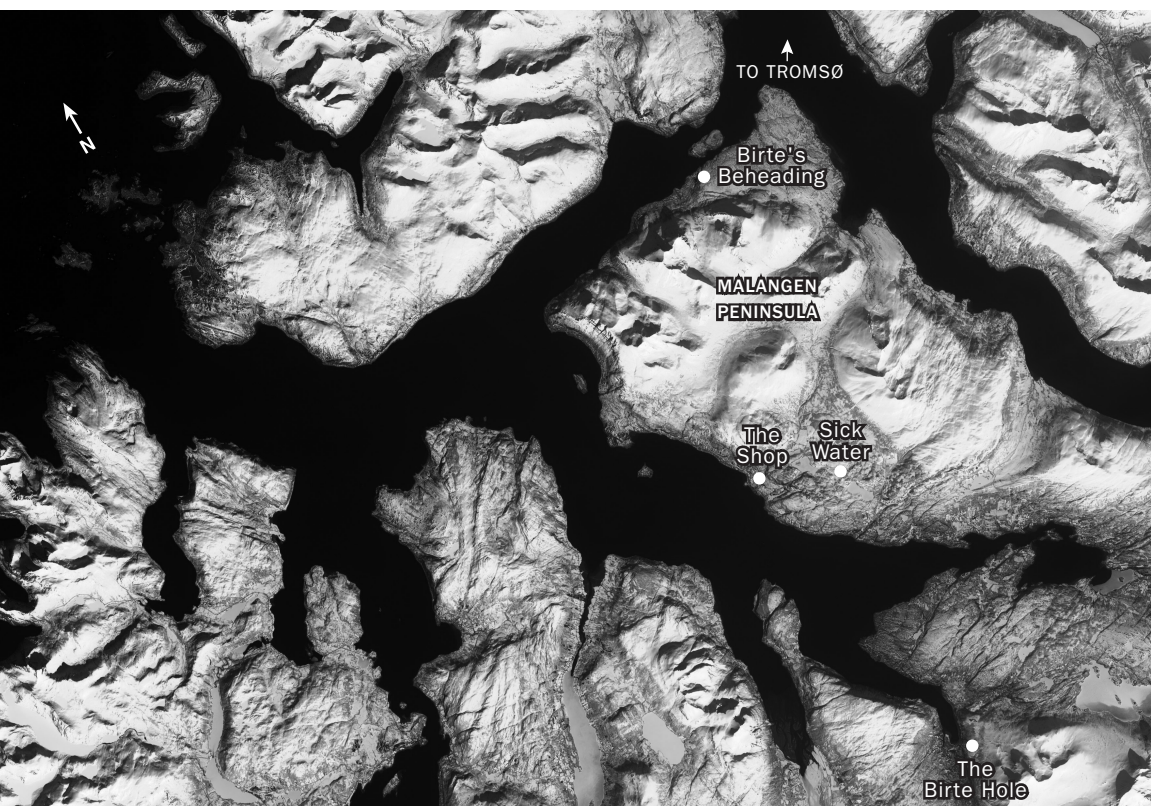
The Master-Man, now twice thwarted, was determined to catch the fugitives. He sent a team of six men to Sweden. The men found Birte and Benjamin living in a Sami encampment and brought them home in shackles for a public execution. Folks rowed from hours away to watch the proceedings.

The execution was held on the rocky point of an island called Ryøya, clearly visible to boat traffic entering or leaving the fjord. A crowd gathered; the siblings wore white. Birte sang aloud in her last moments, her pure voice rising like a curl of smoke through the cold air, though she stopped abruptly

Residents of the idyllic community of Malangen, Norway, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle, still talk about the young woman who murdered her husband and escaped to the mountains. BLAIR BRAVERMAN

when her right hand was chopped off with an ax. Then the executioner chopped off their heads, in two strokes each; he was careful, for tradition demanded that if he missed three times, he too would be killed. As a final touch, Birte and Benjamin's heads were skewered on long poles at the edge of the fjord, left there to decay, so that anyone traveling by boat from Tromsø would see Birte's long blonde hair waving in the breeze. So the story's told.

IN SOME WAYS, NORWAY'S MALANGEN PENINSULA HASN'T CHANGED much since Birte's time. About 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle, it is home to tiny villages and lone farms, with such strong local dialects that certain road signs are spelled differently depending on which side of the road you're on. Sharp white mountains soften near the fjord, sloughing into



The Malangen Peninsula, captured in this satellite image, lies on an inlet off the Barents Sea in extreme northern Norway. Sick Water is the mountain lake, not far from where Birte hid out, where the author camped out by herself. NASA, WITH LABELS BY APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

low mounds like melted wax. On Ryøya, now called Musk Ox Island, an increasingly inbred herd of musk oxen now lives stranded, trapped between currents that churn into maelstrom when the tide changes; the next island over is called the Island of Rams because local farmers leave their rams on its rocky shore over the summer. Unless they need a ram, nobody visits the islands, so the fat rowboats along the shore are used mostly for cod fishing. Men clean their catch on the beach and drape the potent fish over long racks, where they hang to dry for months. The cods' heads are ground into fish meal and sent to Africa, and their flesh reconstituted with brine and eaten with bacon grease, a delicacy. Norway's wealth seems only now to be trickling down in the form of city tourists, who come to newly built cabins and a luxury retreat center to get away from city life and remember, for a few days, what Norway used to be.

It's a fine setting for a murder—part of the reason, perhaps, that Birte's story has lasted so long, told and retold on candlelit winter afternoons, or on bright summer nights with the midnight sun low and dim over the horizon. The story's been told in two novels, a local musical, and a 1993 TV miniseries that turned the core plot into a reindeer-herding love story. But it remains fresh enough that an elderly woman might produce, from a carved wooden box, a silver cup that once belonged to Birte's mother, or midsummer's night might find three men around a bonfire, their conversation shifting from Anders Breivik's recent massacre in Oslo to a vehement argument about whether Birte had a lover. Everyone has their favorite details, or perhaps some conviction—such as that Birte and her brother were romantically involved—that they're eager to share. But mainly, people find ways to tell Birte's story because they need her.

I first came to Malangen in 2006, when I was 18. I had just graduated from high school in California and moved to the Northland to attend the local folk school, a yearlong boarding school where students learned dogsledding and winter survival. That was the year I fell in love with the North—its light and darkness, its obscure dialects, its disregard for sentimentality, its incongruous warmth. I was in equal parts infatuated and terrified at all times.

When I wasn't shoveling snow or chopping meat in the dog yard, I wandered down to the village shop, which sold cheese, frozen pizza, wool socks, and other necessities. There, villagers gathered around a single table known as the Coffee Corner. The shopkeeper, a man in his late 50s named Arild, would set out a roll of expired chocolates from the shelf, or maybe a bag of tiny cinnamon rolls, and villagers sat there for hours, leaning back in

their chairs, drinking sour coffee out of plastic cups that grew soft in contact with the hot liquid. There was a tin on the table that said Coffee: 5 Kroner, but no one ever paid. Arild busied himself, unwrapping stacks of newspapers or straightening lottery tickets from last Saturday's gambling, and I'd hover by the candy rack to eavesdrop.

"Remember that time Sverre lost his polar bear in Tromsø?" the man called Trond might say, thoughtfully, to the table at large. "Sverre, he was glad with the drink. He was taking a ship down from Svalbard with the baby ice bear in a cage, and he put the cage out on the dock—"

"He was selling it," another man interrupted. "And he went back on the ship to get his spirits flask. But the bear opened its cage and ran off down the street—"

"A cop started yelling at him to get the bear," Trond continued. "So he Sverre, he handed the cop his spirits flask, and asked him to just hold it—"

"—and left the cop there, with his thumb in the mouth of the flask!"

At which point everyone laughed uproariously and refilled their cups of coffee, then settled back into quiet.

"Wait," I said. I couldn't help it. "What happened to the bear?"

Six heads swiveled toward me. "I don't know, girl," Trond said. "That's the end of the story."

I learned quickly that the stories rarely ended on a conclusive note, at least not the way that I expected them to. They started and stopped on the terms that decades of retellings had choreographed them to start and stop. A century-old tale was as fresh as yesterday, and yesterday's news well-worn as myth: Often, stories set 200 years ago began with the words, "Remember that time—?" and people would nod, because, in a way, they did. In stories, as in place, time collapsed.

Which is why I might be forgiven for assuming, when I first heard about Birte Olsdatter, that she was my contemporary, or at least that her life had overlapped with those of the older storytellers, up here in rural Viking-land where I would not have been shocked to learn of beheadings seeping into the twentieth century. Few cues gave me historical context—or if they were there, I hardly noticed. It was only later that I recognized the real clue: Birte's tale had a rush of energy to it, an excitement. And something else: pride. If there was sorrow in the retelling, then the sorrow was a calculated accessory to the story itself. It was old, then—old enough that the grief and anger, along with the details, had long since been polished away.



The shop in Malangen. BLAIR BRAVERMAN

I collected the story, and so many others, like stones to pocket and take home. Come May, I packed my duffel for a college dorm room in Maine and returned to life in the States.

Last summer, five years after leaving, I went back to Norway. I intended to report on the annual reindeer migration out of Kautokeino. But when I got to the Northland, I learned that the reindeer, with whose herders I had made plans to collaborate, had left without me, and nobody else seemed concerned about the change of plans. “You could try to find them on the tundra,” another herder suggested, but he warned that the animals had a five-day head start, and hell if they were anywhere near a road. I reconsidered my options, and decided to pay a visit to my old school.

The county had recently built a tunnel to Malangen, making it easily accessible by road, and I caught a bus from Tromsø. I disembarked at the front door of the shop, hesitated, and climbed the steps to see how much had changed. The villagers were sitting at the table. “Is that you?” said Arild. “I suppose you’ve gotten so old that you’ll join us for coffee.” He pulled out an extra chair.

I was only going to stay the night—then two nights, a week, another week. I found places to sleep in the woods, at the folk school, in an empty barn, and eventually in a spare room above the shop itself. Two months passed quickly. In the mornings I hiked along the shore, in the afternoons I joined the coffee table, and in the in-between times I took odd jobs, rounding up



Locals know well the spot where Birte Olsdatter hid from the authorities. BLAIR BRAVERMAN

lost lambs or planting flowers in the graveyard for families who had moved away. Arild, who had once been a truck driver and rejoiced in long drives, invited me to join him on treks to pick up books in Storsteinnes or whale meat in Finland. He explained landmarks as we drove past.

One Sunday we were headed to the bank an hour away when Arild slowed his Volvo. “Yes, then,” he said. “It’s your turn to say what happened here.” I looked

around. The scenery had not changed; a broad green field sloped down to the edge of the fjord. A red barn stood in the field, and beside it a white farmhouse, where two kids were jumping on a trampoline.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Arild shook his head. “This,” he said, “this is where *she Birte* killed her husband the troll-man.” Troll-man meant *abuser*.

We drove on, toward the shallow end of the fjord, where the landscape smoothed out slightly and a thin snow scabbed the ground under trees. A few molting reindeer trotted calmly beside the road, and a forest rose to our left. Arild stopped again, this time by a wooden sign with words painted red and an arrow pointing uphill: the BIRTE CAVE. A thread of a trail wound up through the trees. Arild cleared his throat expectantly.

“This’s where she Birte hid in the mountains?” I asked. I’d begun to pick up a bit of a northern accent, with its slurred contractions and superfluous pronouns.

“You are correct,” said Arild.

A gravity in his voice gave me pause. I looked up the trail, toward where it vanished up the slope. Although the mountains dominated the landscape, few people lived in them. They were the literal backdrop to everyday life, casting shadows over the red houses clustered at the shore, flowing with clear streams that tasted sweet as a kiss in your cupped hands but made your fingers and teeth ache with cold. It was in the mountains that people had hidden

their livestock when the Nazis anchored their warships in the fjord; in the mountains, too, that the Sami had kept their sacrificial sites, and where cocky teenagers summited on wooden skis, and then telemark skis, and now with snowboards that split apart into skis. Bears lived in the mountains, as did wolverine. One might come upon the occasional cabin maintained for public use by the Norwegian Trekking Association. People used the mountains for travel and play, not for living—but still they were *possibility*, a collective backup plan for Northlanders who know well how vulnerable their strip of coastline can be.

So when Birte went to the mountains, I understood that she was acting on a collective fantasy—taking advantage of a communal backup plan, alone. As Marte Solum, a master's student at the University of Tromsø, described it, Birte was “a woman from the past with the modern ideal of female strength . . . the village's own feminist pioneer.” Not too shabby for an 18th-century young woman, at least not according to our 21st-century eyes. And although in her court records Birte never claimed that her husband had abused her—rather, that he had had an affair with the elderly maid, which was embarrassing—then that's a detail that time can surely swallow and forget.

Last summer, while checking my email from the ancient computer in the back room of the shop, I came across a *New York Times* article about Norway. I read,

Many Norwegians still like to think of themselves as the inheritors of a life of hardship and risk. But they live today in one of the gentlest, most protective countries on earth, and it is commonly agreed that the nanny state has replaced the state of nature as Norway's dominant reality Today the average Norwegian is a coddled creature whose folk memory, nevertheless, is a struggle against nature.

Fair enough—for urban, southern Norway. But folks on Malangen, and their neighbors, would lament that once again the Northland, in the tattered margins of Europe, slipped under the radar. Headline news in the *Northern Light*, Tromsø's newspaper, covers avalanches, bear hunts, mountain fatalities, lost reindeer, or, in a recent example, a \$1,000 fine issued to a Sami man who cursed a police officer with an ancient enchantment. (“Up here,” a neighbor told me, “there's more than one kind of darkness.”) Coddled? In some ways, maybe. But anyone who couldn't see their ongoing struggle against nature was, in local parlance, dumb as bread.

But if the article's blind spot grates, it's because it follows a long tradition of southerners misunderstanding, or looking askance at, their northern neighbors. It wasn't long ago, Arild told me, maybe 50 years or so, that rental ads in southern Norway would specify "No Northlanders." He said, "There was too great a risk that a northern roommate could come knocking on your door uninvited, wondering if you had an extra cup of coffee and some minutes to share it." Where Southlanders took pride in their restraint—they rarely made eye contact on the street, arrived exactly on time, spoke with eloquence and restraint, and adopted a precise dialect related to the more "educated" Danish—Northerners were loose, vulgar, and indelicate. They cursed, slurred their words, held an unsettling belief in witchcraft, joked frequently about sex ("keeping warm"), and gauged time loosely ("I'll meet you here Wednesday, after three cups of coffee," someone once told me by way of timing). The Northland wasn't just the Arctic: it was North of the Moral Circle.

But what Northlanders have, and maintain connections to, is wilderness—they have a heritage, a communion with nature, that the rest of the country is quickly losing yet still defines itself by. Even so, the cultures of wilderness and the larger society are blurring. One of the region's biggest events is the Northern Norway Wilderness Fair, held in Bardu each June. The fair, like most, is a maze of booths selling wares: reindeer-skin boots, fried seal meat, buttery potato bread, hand-carved knives, hunting rifles, discount Gore-Tex jackets, and woolen long underwear. There's a shooting contest, a kayak-throwing contest, a competition for the best carved wooden cup.



Boats anchored near Malangen. BLAIR BRAVERMAN

More than 10,000 people drive from hours away, packing their cars with eager passengers, pitching tents, and parking RVs in fields around the fairgrounds. Girls dress up, wearing silver eye shadow with their woolen sweaters; men stay stoic until they reach the hunting wing, where rising voices give away their excitement. But there's a kind of irony to the crowd's enthusiasm, as if they were watching themselves on a reality television show: At its heart, the fair is an elaborate packaging of everyday life, a celebration of the details of Northern existence. But it takes the language of the Southland—commerce, advertisements, pop music blaring over speakers—to keep those details from being taken for granted.

I KNEW THAT BIRTE'S SONG, WHICH SHE SANG EN ROUTE TO HER execution, had survived the centuries, but everyone I asked declined to sing it to me, citing tone-deafness.¹ So I didn't hear the song until several months ago, when I found a recording in an online archive of folk music. The song was not titled, as I had believed, "The Birte Song," but took its name from one of the lines: "For the Sake of the Sin I Must Suffer." Although I'd never been frightened by the story itself, the recording chilled me.

At first, I wasn't sure why I suddenly had goose bumps. The singer was an old man, unaccompanied, whose thin voice wavered along a chant-like melody; I would later learn that the tune was based on a hymn of the fifth commandment, *Thou Shalt Not Murder*. The melody felt slightly *off*, its silences held just a beat too long, with mouth-sounds of saliva and breath whispering between the words. But none of that was bad, *per se*. Rather, it lent the song an air of authenticity that transported me far from the small pressboard desk in the corner of my studio apartment. No, there was something about the words themselves. I hit replay and listened again:

In all my days of youth and pleasure
I never thought it would be so
That Jesus would so come to plague me
And this is how my life would go
But fastened are my heavy shackles

¹ Despite the fact that most of them were members of the local choir, which had recently performed, for its Beatles-themed summer concert, such classics as "Norwegian Wood," "Hey Knut," and "Got to Get You Into My Leif."

For the sake of the sin I'll suffer slow
Oh what must my Jesus think
Who sees and knows how all things go?

At night, when the others sleep
I am overwhelmed with tears
And now the clear day is coming
When tears will be my only food . . .
I wish I was so far from the North
That nobody would know of me
Or else buried so deep in the earth
And my soul was, my God, with thee.

The song continued for several verses in this vein, as Birte expressed her longing to be dead, to be gone, to be punished. I didn't believe it for a moment. Would a woman who hid for so long in the fierce mountains, and escaped even after her first capture, have sung of her desire for punishment? How could the songwriter even have thought that?

Music historian Ola Graff believes that the song does, indeed, date to Birte's lifetime. He suggests that a community member wrote it, and that Birte probably heard the words before she died, an idea I found upsetting. I was disturbed at the thought of someone putting words in Birte's mouth, the idea that control of her own voice was another loss she had to endure. And I wanted to defend Birte's violence, which was so often, in the retellings, secondary to her escape and gruesome execution—at least, I wanted to defend her right not to regret her violence. Nobody else could decide her sorrow. I was surprised at how indignant I became at the thought of it.

It was, I realized, because I envied Birte. I envied her defiance, her self-sufficiency, even the fact that she lived on Malangen. Murder aside—and that's a big aside—she was the kind of person I want to be. I doubt I'm alone; for a few centuries after her death, the name Birte fell out of favor, but in the past century, she's become a popular namesake for local girls. With time, murderer has become hero.

But perhaps I'm an easy fan, already enchanted with the idea of northern women. At 19, I wanted nothing more than to be one. The female teachers at the folk school braided their hair around their faces and moved with agile confidence as they repaired a motorboat or slaughtered a reindeer. I watched one grab a snarling husky by the skin of its neck and flip it onto its back, then

sit on its writhing chest, lean forward, and bite its ear hard, rumbling from her throat all the while. The dog went limp; the woman stood up, plucked a few hairs from her tongue, and rearranged her shawl.

Yeah. She was my hero, too.

IT WAS EARLY NOVEMBER, DURING MY YEAR AT THE FOLK SCHOOL, that I first tried to camp by myself. I wanted to stake my own place among these northern women. I packed my backpack, snapped on my skis and skins, and tromped uphill from the school to a mountain lake known as Sick Water, which, contrary to its name, was clear and full of fish. I brought with me a four-month-old husky puppy named Condoleeza, a shovel, a Primus stove, and lots of powdered hot chocolate. I wanted to prove to myself that I could spend a night alone in the wilderness, but planned to stay for two, just to make a point.

The first night, at midnight, shaky and afraid to sleep—afraid to be vulnerable outside, alone—I crawled out of my snow cave, stuffed my backpack, whistled to Condyleeza, and skied home.

I was embarrassed and told the few classmates who inquired about the trip that everything had gone fine. But the failure hung over me. I felt that my yielding to fear betrayed that I was not, in fact, the kind of outdoorsy person I imagined myself to be.

In December, the Time of Darkness came. The Darkness was a period of 57 days when the sun never rose, the outside world lit only by campfires, headlamps, and pulsing green aurora. Time passed slowly, an endless dusk punctuated by sleep, so that even I forgot what we were waiting for.

It was nearly February, early afternoon, when the sun crept back over the southern mountains. I was in the dog yard, shoveling snow, and it took me by surprise; in an instant, the white landscape caught like a candle-wick and blazed up around me, brighter than anything I'd seen. I thought, If I can get through the winter all right, I can get through one night alone, too. I took Condyleeza, who was taller and had developed somewhat better control of her limbs, and returned to Sick Water.

In the evening I built a fire by the frozen lake and sat up late feeding it. And I surprised myself by thinking of Birte, alone as I was, in these same mountains. She'd been 20 when she escaped, just two years older than me. It was funny to think of her as *all right* out there, but I imagined she had been. In the wilderness, at least. It was people that were her problem.

Sitting there, I wasn't frightened at all. I knew that I had been before, but I couldn't even quite remember what it had felt like. Probably my new courage came from experiencing the Time of Darkness, that longest of all winter nights, but I smile to think that invoking Birte had something to do with it. I felt Norwegian, then. I felt tough.

But if I was particularly Norwegian in that moment, it was not my toughness but my use of Birte that aligned me with the locals. After all, people in the area had a long tradition of using her for their own purposes. The Master-Man used her to serve a warning, and the songwriter for a morality lesson. Even her execution served another's purpose: Her punishment was so severe because the northern courts were trying to prove their competence and stringency to their skeptical counterparts in the south.

But more than anything else, Northlanders need her, and use her, for wilderness. If that means swallowing facts, so be it.

Who knows? But the more I learned about her case, comparing historians' accounts, the more it seems that Birte never really lived in the mountains. She never hunted animals over the winter, never even set foot in the BIRTE CAVE. Most likely, she ran away to another village, or hid on her family's farm. But just as her story, in its time, served as a warning against sin, her story now takes her to the mountains because that's where any Northlander would go, or at least what they need to believe. Because in today's version of the story, Birte is the Northland itself: an underdog, as the North to the South; violent, in a land whose natural violence is a constant; dangerously beautiful and misunderstood, punished unfairly despite her ferocious competence; and taken, finally, to the wilderness—to prove her place there, surviving, looking down on the petty urbanites below. Locals are proud of Birte because they're proud of themselves.

Not long ago, I made it to the BIRTE CAVE. I brought two young girls with me, restless and solemn city children I'd met at the shop, and we followed the thin trail together. It had rained that week, and the ground was soft. The girls had not heard Birte's story before, so I told them as we walked, glossing over the execution to fill in details of my own—that Birte was an avid fisherwoman, that she liked to tuck a sprig of yarrow behind her ear. I looked for yarrow to show them, but it grew mostly by the shore.

The trail climbed steadily, passing the tree line. We stopped to drink from streams, and then to throw snowballs in a small snowfield. Blueberry plants covered the ground like moss, but the berries were still pink dots among the

leaves. Finally, we came to a mound of boulders, jutting up like a tower on the slope. Beneath the tower, a crack opened into the mountain.

We turned and looked at the fjord shining white below us, its beaches traced with green farmlands that rose into dark woods. There were boats on the water, ripples threading silently behind them, and the specks of seabirds coasting on the breeze. The sun was low over the northern horizon. It would not set that night.

“Oy,” the older girl said. Then—“It’s so much.” She didn’t need to explain.

BLAIR BRAVERMAN is an MFA candidate at the University of Iowa’s Nonfiction Writing Program. Her first book, tentatively titled *Welcome to the Goddamn Ice Cube*, is forthcoming from Ecco.

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