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## Migration

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## Migration

### Abstract

Non-fiction by Kelsea Habecker.

*Author's note: For five years I lived in the Arctic, on the northern slope of the globe. I lived a calendar of winter. I went north to be a teacher in a remote and isolated Inupiaq Eskimo village in northwestern Alaska, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean.*

### Keywords

Alaska, perspective, culture, snow



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June 3, 2011

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Non-fiction by Kelsea Habecker

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### Migration

When you travel to the Alaskan Arctic—a three hour flight from Anchorage—you see no imprint of civilization. No lights, no development. You pass over the Arctic Circle at 66 degrees latitude. Of course nothing delineates it except a gradual absence of trees, which can't grow above the Arctic Circle; there's not enough daylight, not enough heat.

To your right—East—is the snow covered tundra of northern Alaska, and beyond the tundra loom the icy peaks of the Brooks Range. To your left—West—is the Arctic Ocean, which is frozen—or should be—for nine months each year, and beyond that is the Russian Far East. On clear days, you can see Russia. That is, when the sky is clear and the ground is free of

snow, you can make out the fine line on the horizon that is the edge of Russia's land mass. In winter, when the waves freeze to bridge the two continents, it's all just one endless expanse of ice.

Notice what happens now: You'll lose all perspective. Without any of the familiar points of reference—trees, buildings—your mind suddenly can't even discern how low to the earth you're flying. What's your position? How can you tell?

You lose yourself in the hum of the propellers and the enormous chiseled silence beneath you. All you see are endless undulations and gradations of white.

The atmosphere becomes one continuous loop without boundaries, a circle of space holding you in.

Or setting you free.



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### *Unmoored*

The light looks exactly the same in morning as at 4'o'clock in the afternoon as at midnight. Our superimposed time structure feels very flimsy. And so night is arbitrary and sleep becomes a series of hallucinations. I rest, I wake, the light is the same; I rest and wake some more and it is the same. And then, somehow it is time to get up. Or maybe it is time to go back to sleep. Or maybe I slept through the day and it is night again. Perhaps I haven't slept at all.

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### *Cold That Burns*

Somedays when she is walking home from school on the coldest, windiest days, she will want to lie down with the chill, with the heaviness of the cold pressed up against her. Snow rises in the current like smoke and she is the only fire. She can't see the road, just a dim light ahead of her she hopes is home. Her goggles fog over. Really, she must sit. On this drift. Crawl inside this curl of sculpted snow. Only the wind exists. Only this cold that burns her up. Only this slowing body, this drowse. She drops to her knees, feels polished ice under them. Sleep is a great drift blowing over her. That window ahead glows. She is a dog, curling tightly in the snow.

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### *Try You*

“This is the heart. These are the eggs.”

Claudia, a wizened elder, sat at the tiny turquoise table in the preschool classroom in the village school, a resplendent silver salmon spread out on the table in front of her, pointing out to my students important parts in the fish. A half dozen dark heads hovered over as my four-year-old students leaned in for a closer look. She showed them how to remove the glimmering scales, how to slice the flesh with the curved blade of her *ulu*. Using a portable griddle, she showed them how to cook the fish, and then we all ate it dipped in seal oil, a thick, slightly sweet oil rendered from the blubber of seals. Earlier in the fall, when the weather was still good, another elder took us to the beach to show us how the line nets were used to catch fish.

I invited elders to come into my classroom to teach traditional customs and skills. Some of my students got these lessons at home, but some didn't. Either way, it was a selfish move: I wanted to learn these things myself.

Tillie came to teach us how to make dancing gloves. Shaped like mittens, these gloves have tiny bells sewn along the top edge, as if at the tip of each

finger. When they're worn for dancing traditional Inupiaq dances, the bells tinkle—a sound that is believed to welcome the animal spirits to return for the dance. We made our gloves out of felt and rickrack rather than fur. I wrote each students' name in magic marker on the back of each pair of gloves, and passed them out when other elders came in to teach us dancing.

For each dancing practice, I'd stack up most of the chairs and tables in one corner of the room and push the slide and play equipment back into another corner. One row of chairs was lined up against the back wall for the several elder men to sit on as they drummed for us. The large, flat drum bellies were taut with the skin of bearded seals. In between the songs they beat out, the men took breaks to splash water onto the drum bellies to keep them soft. They beat on them with rigid strips of baleen.

The girls and I bobbed in place and lilted our arms slowly back and forth, as if we were gently swirling water, in the women's style of dancing, while the boys stomped their feet, leaning slightly forward with their torsos as if they were about to push a heavy object. Sometimes when I didn't have the motions right, an elder would instruct me, guide my limbs through the move. "Try you," she'd say, and watch to make sure I had it right. We all chanted monotonously and gutturally. "A ya ya. A ya ya." Later, we'd perform our dance together at the school's Christmas program. I loved moving in unison with my students and the village elders, held by an ancient rhythm, singing in a language I didn't understand.

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### *How To Be Buried Alive*

One afternoon in December it will begin to snow. And it will keep snowing. You'll walk out your door and you'll greet a thick curtain of snow—snow thick as batter, snow whipped up all around you into stiff peaks like meringue but tall as trees. The snow is relentless, falls and won't be stopped. It gives up against anything it can. The days go blind with its billions of tiny gestures that fall like an erasure of anything but drift. The air thickens with it, draws in like a net.

You'll walk around in a bubble of white. Everything else is muffled. No sound beyond the soft, padding swish of each step, and sometimes you'll think that what you're actually hearing is the shifting, loosening motions of joints and muscles from within your own body, which has also filled with snow.

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### *Held*

When we're all in the gym dancing, it's like a fur pouch—like I'm held in the belly of something. The men hold their damp drums over their laps, taut hoops of skin they beat with the strip of baleen. The steady, rhythmic beat is a pulse beneath the guttural, throttling sound of their singing. The women are bending their knees, head upright, arms outstretched, surfing this pulse. Men pound their feet into the floor, thrusting their arms out or down, fighting back, pushing against. Someone calls like walrus, someone else invokes a harpoon.

And its as if the golden gym floor were the ice. As if the banners hanging from the ceiling to celebrate victorious basketball seasons were hides to celebrate victorious hunts. As if we didn't arrive to this village by plane but on foot, across the sea that used to be land. As if ten thousand years ago was yesterday. As if drugs and drink never arrived. As if time never warped or snagged or hung slack.

I don't have the movements right. Someone comes along beside me, shows me how to sway.



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### *As They Fell*

He hunched over a guitar. She hunched over a notebook. He pounded drums. She pounded verbs. He poured it into a song. She ladled stew into bowls, sometimes salmon, sometimes halibut or char. They put together puzzles on the living room floor. They put together their bodies on the living room floor, candles piled on the window sills. She made quilts. He made strides. He made mistakes. She made excuses. They watched the snow fall. He made cookies. She chiseled a poem. They had dinner guests, who lined up their boots in the hall. There were many conversations. You should have seen the pile of tea bags in the sink. You should have seen the mess. You should have seen the drifts of snow that built up on their windows before he'd head out with a broom. You should have seen the kids from the school, standing on drifts to peer into their windows. You should have seen them, jumping off the roof into the drifts. You should have heard their screams as they fell.

*Kelsea Habecker is a poet and writer. Her book of poetry, Hollow Out, was selected by US Poet Laureate Charles Simic for publication by New Rivers Press. She earned her MFA in Writing and Literature from Bennington College, and spent five years teaching in an Inupiaq Eskimo village in northern Alaska. When she's not living or teaching elsewhere, her home base is Anchorage, Alaska.*

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