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Magnetic North, Pyramiden, Svalbard

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Butler: Magnetic North

from *Magnetic North* *Pyramiden, Svalbard*

by

Jenna Butler



1.

Sasha is the lone figure on the wharf.

Momentarily, we are time-blinded, thinking Czarist Russia. He greets us in scarlet *cherkesska*, polar bear rifle angled along his back: Sasha, improbable tenant, unconvincing miner.

What they do in this town weeping its coal ichor into the sea: pick metal. Fourteen of them, vagabond pack headed by Sasha, tour guide, tender of low spirits. They come from Russia because there is no work; here, there is no work, but at least they can pick metal, pack it into scabbed old shipping containers for the resupply ships from Murmansk. And they are left alone to do as they will, *мужчины без дома*, these men without homes, without countries.



2.

Every building abandoned to gulls and gannets, a squalling, skirling mess. Stink of guano smother-weight, painting the tongue. Even the hospital has gone to birds, though Sasha explains that the plants have also taken over. Their wild, wastrel tendrils pushing through the outside vents, pressed like supplicant palms against the glass. Sasha himself has not fallen ill since leaving Russia a decade ago, but others have raided the hospital for tablets and syringes. Morphine for the bad days. Sasha turns his collar, refuses to enter. Says the air is poisoned with mercury from broken thermometers after the town was left. *Was left*. Like a child or a family, walked away from, abandoned. But here, the whole town left, more than a thousand in clots over years.

We turn our backs on the hospital with trepidation, uneasy at the dankly verdant windows behind us. Greening glass, leaves spreading their veins like suicide or palmistry.



3.

One room remains, half Russian teashop, half bordello. Napped crimson wallpaper and gilt mirrors resurrected from bird lime, parquet floor high-glossed with lemon polish. We drink Kubanskaya, all Sasha will touch; *original*, he explains. Kristall and Moscow-Petushki; we drink to times and places we do not understand, the bitter, amputated stories of these hardcast men.

They were meant to be miners. After the second war, Russia remembered Pyramiden, abandoned against the Nazis. Clapped men in ironclad contracts, sent them back across the ocean into the shankbones of the mines. But the boreholes bled themselves out in the forties; left to their own devices, rain and snow took the coal out to sea, topped the shafts with inky cesspools. So they pick metal, cuts on their hands rimmed with black, coal inching toward bone. Drink vodka in the evenings in the one room pushing back

against a settlement's decay, Russia boiling out of their blood as the coal works in. For six months during his first Svalbard winter, Sasha tells us, he did not leave the common room. It takes time, he says, to armor yourself against that much dark.

The one surviving telephone is an iron ramshorn, Cold War-era megalith on the way to the docks. It works in one direction only: outward, to Russia. Open channel in a hackneyed conversation, Pyramiden bleeding its story in annual runoff clear to the Arctic Circle.



JENNA BUTLER is the author of three critically acclaimed books of poetry, *Seldom Seen Road*, *Wells*, and *Aphelion*, and a collection of ecological essays, *A Profession of Hope: Farming on the Edge the of Grizzly Trail*. Her research into endangered environments has taken her from America's Deep South to Ireland's Ring of Kerry, and from Tenerife to the Arctic Circle, exploring the ways in which we navigate the landscapes we call home. A professor of creative writing and ecocriticism at Red Deer College, Butler lives with three resident moose and a den of coyotes on an off-grid organic farm in Alberta's North Country.

To see Butler's earlier publication in *The Goose* go to <http://www.alecc.ca/uploads/goose/TheGOOSE2012Winter10.pdf>

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