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Poems from the Arctic Circle

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Ice

Our ship has inched as close
as possible to the North Pole,
bumping and skirting broken-up
chunks of pack ice. Steady crunch
as we plow through. Fog blurs
the horizon. It's too bright—

ice and white sky unite.
No seabirds around, but once we clear
drifting ice—move back into open sea—
fulmars appear, following us.
Pack ice becomes a faint line
we leave behind. Snow flurries

as we head east to Nordaustlandet.
We'll sail through the night—eleven,
twelve hours—to our destination,
a high Arctic polar desert, different
from what we've seen thus far
on the west coast of this land

with the *cold edge*,¹ this archipelago
where less ice drifts than ten years ago,
the ice melting, shrinking faster
than scientists predicted. Waves
growing larger, more powerful,
crashing around, smashing more ice.

Permafrost proving not so permanent,
after all. Walruses, preferring to haul
out onto ice floes—safe refuges—
to give birth, breed and wean their young
facing ice catastrophes. Still,
let the artists paint epiphanies—

each Arctic species so palpably
impeccable, dependent on ice,
recapping the miraculous origin of life.

¹ literal meaning of Svalbard

In the Upwelling Zone

along the glacial front,
Black-legged kittiwakes,
Svalbard's most common gull,

feeding. Black guillemots
floating on the water,
wheeling through the air.

On platforms—stone pillars—
along the shoreline,
Brunnich's guillemots nesting.

All these seabirds gathered
on the sharp border between
two water masses of different

turbidations—temperature,
salinity, pressure, density—
brown waters and blue.

And I, sitting on a boulder
growing colder by the minute,
windblown, chilled to the bone.

And yet—as close to a creaking,
cracking, calving glacier as I
might ever get—as if

on a hearthrug before a lit
fire watching, listening,
inhaling—all senses engaged,

engrossed in this retreating stage.

DIANA WOODCOCK is an associate professor of English in Qatar at Virginia Commonwealth University's branch campus, where she teaches composition, creative writing, and environmental literature. She is the author of six chapbooks and two poetry collections, *Under the Spell of a Persian Nightingale* (Word Poetry Books, 2015) and *Swaying on the Elephant's Shoulders* (Little Red Tree Publishing, 2011), which was winner of the 2010 Vernice Quebodeaux International Women's Poetry Prize. Her third and fourth books, *Reverent Flora ~ The Arabian Desert's Botanical Bounty* (Little Red Tree Publishing) and *Tread Softly* (FutureCycle Press), are forthcoming. Prior to teaching in Qatar, she worked for nearly eight years in Tibet, Macau, and on the Thai/Cambodian border. Widely published in literary journals and anthologies (including *Best New Poets 2008*), she is a doctoral candidate in creative writing at Lancaster University.