Ultima Thule

By Linda Bierds

A little candlewax on the thumbnail, liquid
at first, slipping, then stalled to an ice-hood.
Another layer, another, and the child lies back,
his thumb a hummock, his small knuckle
buckled with cracks.

No snow yet, but
the last white meadows of switchwort and saxifrage
mimic it. Already the bears brush back
through the dwarf willows—Hubbart Point, Cape Henrietta Maria,
the bay’s deep arc flattening, lessening
as land extends through the fast-ice and the seam
of open leads stretches, withdraws.

They have come for the pack floes, for the slow
rafting. And repeat on their white faces, the boy thinks,
the low strokes of the borealis: violet mouths,
madder blue at the eyelids. Perhaps he will walk
to the shoreline—no shore, of course, just miles
of land-fast ice stretched over water, stretched out
to water, the line where each begins

a filament, a vapor. By then the bears will be
sailors, or, far to the north, stalled in their waxy sleep.
He yawns, looks down at his slipper, his floormat
of braided fleece. By then the lights
will be thicker, greens and magentas flashing, rolling in

at times like fog. To go where nothing lives.
He turns, settles. To extend a little breath
out over that ice—the white, cumbersome bodies
migrating in reverse with the others, dragging
between them a lifeline, plump and intricate,

like a net, like purse seiners dragging a cork net,
its great arc spiraling, tighter, tighter,
now green in those lights, now blue, now
pink as the boy’s ear,
where all night a line of cold
traces the rim, the lobe,
circles down, chills, and recedes.


Born in Delaware, Linda Bierds lived in Anchorage until she was seven. She attended both undergraduate and graduate school at the University of Washington, where she is a professor and director of the creative writing program. Her current residence is on Bainbridge Island, located in the Central Puget Sound Basin. She is the author of seven volumes of poetry and appears regularly in The New Yorker. She has won several major awards and grants including the Guggenheim and the “genius” grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

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