

# MUSIC IN THE DARK: SOUNDSCAPES IN CHRISTIANE RITTER'S *A WOMAN IN THE POLAR NIGHT*

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## Abstract

In *A Woman in the Polar Night* (*Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht*, 1938), Christiane Ritter, a well-to-do Austrian housewife, describes her experience as the first central European woman to overwinter on Svalbard (1934–35). Ritter's prose is extraordinary in its lyrical simplicity, and in German editions the text is interspersed with her paintings of the scenes that at first were so alien and changing, yet became so familiar and loved.

Although stationed on the north coast of Svalbard with minimal human contact and without any recourse to the music with which Ritter had been surrounded in Austria, *A Woman in the Polar Night* is a text that is full of references to sound, natural sounds that are heightened by the absence of human music. This article offers a multimodal reading of Ritter's depictions of the soundscapes of Svalbard in her memoir and shows how, 30 years before John Cage made the art world do it for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, Christiane Ritter spent 12 months listening to silence, and responding to it in words and paintings. In addition, the paper will also consider the silence of the text: what is not presented, but left to the reader's imagination.

**Keywords:** *Christiane Ritter; Sound; Music; Silence; Svalbard.*

## Introduction

Christiane Ritter's only published work, *A Woman in the Polar Night* (German title: *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht*), describes the year she spent on the northern coast of Svalbard with her husband Hermann and his hunting companion Karl Nicolaisen in 1934–35. The book was written in German and first published in that language by Deutscher Verlag (Berlin) in 1938. The English translation, by Jane Degras, was first published in 1954 in London by George & Allen Unwin. A second edition came out in 2010 (Greystone Books, out of print), and a third, by Pushkin Press, came out in 2019 (and is still in print). It has been translated into several European languages, including Norwegian and French, and the German version has never been out of print. The 2019 English edition describes itself on the front cover as 'the classic memoir of a year in the Arctic wilderness'.

Ritter (1897-2000) was a painter, and the German editions of her book contain illustrations based on the watercolours she produced during her year on Svalbard and afterwards.<sup>1</sup> These and more of Ritter's watercolours inspired by her year in the Arctic

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<sup>1</sup> The English editions do not have these, however, the introduction to the 2010 edition does contain some photos of the Ritters and the hut. These do not appear in the 2019 edition, which has small line illustrations of various animals and objects in the margins and at the beginning of each chapter. For an overview of the printing history of the book, see Ryall forthcoming. My thanks are due to Anka Ryall for sharing her work and thoughts with me prior to publication, as well as to Lilli Mittner, Hanne Hammer

are now housed in the Svalbard Museum in Longyearbyen, following their donation by her daughter Karen Ritter in 2018.<sup>2</sup> They can also be viewed on the archive [digitaltmuseum.no](http://digitaltmuseum.no).

One of the reasons for the enduring popularity of Ritter's book is the visuality of her prose descriptions: with a painter's eye she brings the Svalbard world to her readers. This, together with the images in the book, means that her work can be called multimodal: it combines the semiotic resources (modes) of text and image to create meaning. In addition, Ritter's vivid descriptions of her year on Svalbard bring in a further mode, that of sound. Like the language, which, as with most adult books today, is read privately rather than through aural performance, the sound and music in the book is silent, brought to life in the reader's imagination along with the landscapes and wildlife of Svalbard. Because of this silence, and of the predominance of the modes of text and image, it is easy for the reader – visiting Svalbard in their imagination – to fail to realize that 'the isle is full of noises' (as Caliban describes a very different island to his visitors in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act III, scene ii). My focus here will therefore be principally on the sounds described and evoked in Ritter's prose, together with reference to three of her watercolours that depict the scenes evoked in the text. This article is part multimodal analysis, and part personal reflection on a book that had a profound effect on me, not only as one who lives in the Arctic, but also as a musician.

Ritter's humility in her prose is evident. For her, Svalbard is not a land to be conquered, tamed, or overcome; it is to be lived in (the German 'erlebt' of the title could be more literally translated as 'experiences'), admired, and, especially as the year goes on, enjoyed. Hers is not the narrative of a typical middle-class 'deckchair explorer', as early cruise tourists to Svalbard have been called (Koltveit 2006; for a more nuanced parsing of the term see Spring 2020). Rather, Ritter fully immerses herself in the hunters' environment and shares with her readers her wonder at her surroundings and her astute awareness of her place in them. It is this wonder and humility that she captures in words and in image, and sound – including the sound of silence – plays an important role in the narrative, as an Austrian artist and housewife brought the stillness of Svalbard to her readers while Europe lurched into war.

### **The silence of the text**

Silence, both of humans and of the landscape, is unsurprisingly one of the two most frequently mentioned soundscapes in *A Woman in the Polar Night*. Table 1 shows the different categories of sounds used in the text, sounds that here I instead term soundscapes due to the visual nature of Ritter's prose and the landscape setting of

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Stien, and members of the FemArc network at UiT The Arctic University of Norway for their comments on the text.

<sup>2</sup> Evidence suggests that several of the watercolours could have been painted on Svalbard; the pigments are more limited, and the paper shows evidence of frugality and re-use. This, of course, could also have been the due to a limited availability of artistic supplies in Austria during the Second World War, or after the Ritters' house was destroyed by fire, so it is important not to place too much weight on the possibility that some of the watercolours were painted in situ. My thanks are due to Katja Eklund, curator at Svalbard Museum, for allowing me to view the watercolours, for uploading them to [digitaltmuseum.no](http://digitaltmuseum.no), and for generously sharing her expertise and knowledge.

Svalbard. These are listed together with the chapters in which they appear, and the total number of mentions of each soundscape in the book. Mentions of silence occur in all chapters that take place on Svalbard except that devoted to the house fox, ‘Mikk!’ (chapter 4), and the desperate hunt for meat as the Ritters’ food supplies run out in May (chapter 16). In these chapters the focus is on the animals of Svalbard, whose deaths are both the hunters’ purpose (fox and bear fur) and means of survival (meat to eat). In all of the other chapters, however, including chapter 17 that is dedicated to the noisy return of the birds and spring, silence and/or quiet plays its part.

Category	Total	Subcategory	Total	Chapters	Observations
Silence	53	Landscape / fauna	46	All except 1, 2, 4, 16, 18	Includes ‘quiet’, ‘calm’, ‘peace’, ‘mute’. Ch. 17 (birds) quiet in one passage
		Human silence	7	10, 13	
Humans and their noises	57	Humans	25	2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18	includes laughter, conversation, singing, hunters’ noises
		Gunshots	9		
		Inside the hut	14		
		Outside the hut	4		
		Skis/sleigh	5		
Boats	13	Ships/boats	10	2, 5, 18	Orchestra ch. 2 only
		Ship’s orchestra	3		
Fauna	27	Animals	10	3, 5, 8, 16, 17	seals, foxes, bears, insect, dogs. Ch. 17 devoted to birds
		Birds	17		
Sea	18	-	-	3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 17	
Ice	7	-	-	5, 8, 11, 12, 13, 16	
Weather	31	Storm	13	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	Ch. 9: different sounds of winds
		Wind	16		
		Rain/hail	2		

Table 1: Sound and silence in *A Woman in the Polar Night*

The silence of the island first hits Ritter in contrast to the noise of the boat, a symbol of the middle-class European life she has left behind:

How quiet it is here on the island; the beat of the ship’s engines is still in my ears. The waves break monotonously on the rocky strand, cold and indifferent.

Involuntarily, the thought comes into my mind: Here we can live; we can also die, just as it pleases us; nobody will stop us.' (30, chapter 3)<sup>3</sup>

This is the first reference to silence in the book, and it encapsulates the two themes that characterize Ritter's sonic experience: first, the juxtaposition of sound and silence, and second, the combination of silence, death, and freedom.

The juxtaposition of sound and silence is particularly intense in the aftermath of storms. Here, it is not only the weather that stills and is quiet, but the humans in it too, as they become aware of their role in the natural world, and the contrasts it throws at them:

Why have I been so shaken by the peacefulness of nature? Because it was preceded by the titanic storm? Do we really need the force of contrast to live intensively? It must be that. For a gentle song would not shake us if we had never heard a loud one. We human beings are only instruments over which the song of the world plays. We do not create ideas; we only carry them. (92, chapter 8)

These existential reflections are a far cry from the image of polar explorers in the popular imagination, which often focuses on the conquering of natural forces. Of course, as texts such as Captain Scott's diary have told before, explorers themselves are certainly capable of reflection and are not necessarily the generators of conquest myths (see for example Aarekol 2018). The hunters and trappers who overwintered on Svalbard at this time were quiet working-class survivors rather than conquering heroes; they subscribed to an entirely different kind of masculinity (Hauan 2007).<sup>4</sup> Whereas Ritter speaks to her readers (and paints), the men she overwinters with are silent in the face of their challenges, both their joy and their terror:

The lives of these hunters are a series of performances that are almost inhuman. But they speak only seldom of their experiences. They are not out for fame, these men. They live far from the tumult of the world. [...] They are intoxicated by the vital breath of untamed nature, through which the deity speaks to them. (154, chapter 13).

Ritter's respect for the silence of the hunters is clear in this quotation; by inference, it highlights her distaste for, or perhaps disappointment with, the shallow experience of the Arctic that the majority of the German boat's passengers settle for in chapter 2,

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<sup>3</sup> Page references are to the 2010 English edition (Ritter 2010 [1954]), which I have as an e-book. As there might be discrepancies between these and the newer edition, I also provide chapter numbers for quotations.

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 14, 'A Hunter Brings the Mail', gives a glimpse into the community of hunters and trappers with the visit from Hilmar Nøis (who built the cabin at Gråhuken) and his companion, an unnamed doctor. It should be noted that not all of the hunters and trappers were men: the hunter Wanny Woldstad first overwintered on Svalbard in 1932, and, despite Nøis's joke that 'whatever happens he too will keep a kitchen maid next year' (232, chapter 14), he had previously been joined by his first wife Elen Dorthea (see below), and would later overwinter with his second wife Helfrid.

when the boat puts Ritter down at King's Bay: 'they are not quite sure what to do here. It is raining, and they feel the cold. In flocks they troop back to ship; the lights in its warm lounge have a friendly look.' (23, chapter 2) Ritter does not troop back to the ship, and she does not follow the middle-class flock.

On the 16th October, the day that the sun sets for the 132-day polar night, Ritter gazes into a hellmouth that is remarkable for its silence:

It looks as though the jaws of hell had opened behind the shadowed mountain wall, outlining its massive bulk with a diabolic glare. These are scenes not made for human eyes. The drama of the polar world sinking slowly into shadow is played out in utter silence and remoteness. The scenes are changed by sorcery. (75, chapter 6)

The combination of silence and death is evident here. During the last rays of the sun described on these pages, Ritter combs the shoreline for ship's debris that could be useful in the coming months, and as she gathers the broken remains of shipwrecks she notes that 'every kind of souvenir of tragic happenings lies there on the foreshore' (73, chapter 6). Even the friendly fox, Mikkl, who accompanies her on her mission, brings overtones of his own doom: 'Mikkl is collecting for the winter; he has not yet grasped that here everything is designed for his death' (74, chapter 6). The fox, often noisy, is still as the quiet of the night descends: 'The sleeping, shining-white fox fits in wonderfully with the stillness of the night, which still remains magically bright. Mikkl is like a fragment of the mysterious Ice Age, lying hidden in the frozen, quiet brightness.' (74, chapter 6) It is at this time that he begins to be timid of the humans, prompting Ritter to ponder, 'perhaps they become clairvoyant, the animals, as the darkness grows, and then see the true face of men?' (ibid.)

In contrast to Else Christie Kielland's paintings of Svalbard from the 1930s, Ritter's watercolours have calmer compositions that substantiate silence. This image of the lone human and the fox in front of the moon and mountains (Figure 1) invites the viewer to contrast the white of the fox in one corner with that of the moon in the opposite. The limited palette, dominated, like the whole scene, by the grey of the land, is in contrast to the busy, colourful and industrial landscapes of Kielland's dynamic compositions (for a discussion of Svalbard's motivic place in art history, including a reproduction of one of Kielland's works, see Berg 2020). Ritter's expressive watercolour concentrates on the natural landscape, with human and animal figures, painted small in the Romantic tradition, as equals within it. Kielland's more abstract work, in contrast, focuses on the human industry and technology of the mine in Longyearbyen. While in Kielland's work the viewer could easily imagine the noise of the mining equipment, a familiar sound to many at that time, Ritter's viewers – like her readers – are presented with the silence of the landscape.



Figure 1: Christiane Ritter, untitled watercolour housed at Svalbard Museum. © Christiane Ritter. Photo: [DigitaltMuseum/Svalbard Museum](https://digitalmuseum.org/Svalbard-Museum). Please contact Stiftelsen Svalbard Museum to obtain permission to use the artwork.

Returning to Ritter's text, silence is present in more than just descriptions of it. What is as revealing as what she writes is what she does not write. While she is frank, both in words and in her painting (as we shall shortly see in Figure 2), about her own mental health problems during the polar night, it does not take up much space in the text. Nevertheless, mental health is a recurrent theme in the book. When Ritter's husband first introduces her to Karl, all three of them are in high spirits, and 'Karl (he admitted it to me much later) for a very special reason. He is quite sure that in the storms and the loneliness of the long night "the lady from central Europe" will go off her head' (33, chapter 2). This might strike the modern reader as cruel, ablist, and even sexist: the term 'lady' (in German, 'Dame', rather than the 'Frau' of the title) implies not only a female,

but a female of a certain class who, as we have observed from the tourists on the boat, might not be comfortable spending a year in a hunter's cabin. Yet it is clear from the context and Karl's 'merry blue eyes' (ibid.) that his comment is not made out of malice. Indeed, as Ritter nears Gråhuken, she encounters travellers who are, like her husband and Karl, fascinated by Spitsbergen, yet she is determined to remain immune:

'Spring is the most beautiful time there,' says a young Norwegian with a remote smile. 'An unforgettable time...'

'Yes, but I'm not going to let myself be caught by the island, like you've all been caught,' I say defiantly.

'Oh, you'll be caught, too,' the Norwegian says, softly but with conviction. (35, chapter 2)

And when the Englishman Mr Glen, who has lost everything he owns on Svalbard, accompanies them in the rowing boat to their hut, the contrast between Ritter and the men could not be starker, although Ritter holds her tongue and speaks silently only to her readers:

'Oh, how I'd like to stay with you,' he says. 'Spitsbergen is a wonderful country,' and with glowing eyes he stares into the mist.

It's a ghastly country, I think to myself. Nothing but water, fog, and rain. It bemuses people until they go out of their minds. (37, chapter 2)

Yet, as we shall see in the next section, the solitude of Ritter's first time alone in the hut affects her profoundly, such that her personal boundary between human and non-human is, temporarily, erased. This happens again and for a longer period during the full moon in December, in the depths of the polar night, and this time the men are on hand. At this time of danger, the text is silent about what would become of Ritter – of all of them – without each other:

I take it [the moonlight] particularly badly, and the hunters maintain that I am moonstruck. What I would like best of all is to stand all day on the shore, where in the water the rocking ice floes catch and break the light and throw it back at the moon. But the men are very strict with me. They do not let me out of their sight and often keep me under house arrest. And then I lie down in my little room, where the moonlight filters green through the small snowed-up window. Neither the walls of the hut nor the roof of snow can dispel my fancy that I am myself moonlight, gliding along the glittering spines and ridges of the mountains, through the white valleys...

'Now Chrissie has got *rar*,' says Karl, shaking his head. '*Ishavet kaller*. You must be reasonable.' *Rar* is a strangeness that overcomes many who spend the winter in polar regions. *Ishavet kaller*, or 'the Arctic calls,' is what the Spitsbergen hunters say when one of their comrades, for mysterious reasons, throws himself into the sea. (171–172, chapter 10)

Of course, the reader knows that this is a memoir, and knows that Ritter, at least, returns to tell her tale and paint her pictures. We can only imagine – in the strangeness of our own minds and memories – what it might be like to feel so at one with the moon and the sea that we can simply merge ourselves with them. Perhaps this is what Captain Scott and his companions recognized when they let Oates walk to his death with his now famous words that every British child learns by heart: ‘I am going out now. I may be some time.’<sup>5</sup> Whereas Oates’s gesture is considered a heroic, selfless act to save his companions the trouble of dealing with his remains, in Ritter’s text, as in the watercolour shown in Figure 2, she portrays her *rar* as the housewife betraying her duties. In a role reversal it is the men who are painted as busily writing while Ritter lies on a bunk; in the text she tells us that they make her food rich in seal fat and cod liver oil, and cake with dried fruits, for it is after all nearly Christmas.



Figure 2: Christiane Ritter, untitled watercolour housed at Svalbard Museum. © Christiane Ritter. Photo: [DigitaltMuseum/Svalbard Museum](https://www.digitalmuseum.org/svalbard-museum/). Please contact Stiftelsen Svalbard Museum to obtain permission to use the artwork. A black and white copy of this painting is also featured in the German editions of the book, in chapter 10.

<sup>5</sup> At least when I was at school in the UK, in the 1990s, Captain Scott’s diary was an obligatory text on the national curriculum for English. Certainly, Oates’s last recorded words are a common phrase often used jokingly as a metaphor; they have found their way into the language almost like a proverb.

### **Soundscapes of the polar night**

There is no room in the hunter's cabin in Gråhuken for a gramophone or musical instruments; apart from Karl singing the occasional raunchy ditty or old folksong, music, which was abundant both in Vienna and on the German boat, has been left behind: 'around me a thousand people are waving and blowing their noses as the ship's orchestra plays a sentimental farewell song.' (23, chapter 2) Occasionally, however, direct mention of art music does appear in the text. Perhaps the most striking instance is when, in the face of her bewilderment at the light of the polar night, and the noise of the weather, Ritter appeals directly to her and her readers' (presumed) shared cultural backgrounds, including that of a concert hall performance of a symphony:

Bewildering beyond anything is the wild howling of the wind against the unmoving gleaming face of the frozen earth, and the musically gentle dance of the northern lights in the sky. I try to find similes to convey the bewildering strangeness of this experience. I think the contrasts in perception make the same impact on our feelings as would, for example, the playing of a noisy Berlioz symphony in a theatre where the stage is set in a scene of classic calm. Or if we saw a serenely smiling man commit murder, murder everything that comes within range of his smile. The polar night displays the world in a clash of rhythms that make us central Europeans dizzy. (164–165, chapter 10)

While the juxtaposition of Berlioz on the wrong stage with smiling murder is perhaps extreme, it nevertheless captures the striking contrasts that Ritter is attempting to capture in her words and in her painting. That she chooses European classical music to illustrate her perceived inability as a writer to find suitable similes for her readers is symptomatic not only of her humility and honesty, but also of her status, even here past the halfway point of the book, as a middle-class outsider to the hunters' environment writing for those even further outside. Musical sounds are Ritter's principle reference points for the noises she encounters on Svalbard, even when they are distorted by distance, weather, and, perhaps, by her own perception of them. To demonstrate this, I will offer a close reading of the soundscapes Ritter describes during her first period alone in the cabin (chapters 7 and 8), which coincides with the first of the winter's storms and its aftermath.

Chapter 7, as the title 'Alone in the hut' suggests, is devoted to the thirteen days when the hunters are away laying traps, and a storm hits that lasts for nine of those days. The chapter opens in the midst of the storm, and at once we are in a world of thunderous natural music: 'I am alone in the furious drumfire of a hurricane.' (113, chapter 7) Yet after the brief opening description of the storm and her worry for the men, Ritter takes us back to the relaxed sleepy morning when the hunters set off, their cheery insouciance at the weather, and Hermann's parting instructions on how to shoot a visiting polar bear. The silence following their departure does not last long, however, and by the afternoon the storm is near:

The wind rose rapidly. Beneath its shrill whistle I caught the deep, hollow undertones characteristic of the storm. [...] The entire country was in uproar. The snow was driving like a broad stream of water over the land and over the hut and in the clouds over the black sea. The swell was going out seaward. High above, the storm was booming like a deep, long-drawn organ note. (114, chapter 7)

Alone in the tumult, Ritter sets about the basic tasks of the day: lighting the stove, breakfast, coffee. But in the storm, with the uncooperative stove, the simplest tasks are difficult. Ritter does not directly mention at this point her worry for the men, or the fear and frustration she must have felt. Rather, she focuses on the practical that is nevertheless tinged with just enough of the grim reality ('it was cheerless in the hut', 'the hideous foxes swing gently', 'the diabolic scene' (114, chapter 7)) that she brings the reader into the hut, and into the danger, with her. Together, we focus on the familiar musical similes, the simple achievements that are feats in these conditions (lighting the stove, finding paraffin and lighting the lamp, sewing a simple curtain), and these stop us worrying about the future, or the men. It is precisely this simplicity and familiarity present in the text that makes Ritter's Arctic experience both tangible and audible to her readers.

It is therefore all the more powerful when, on the next page, we read what is probably the single most disturbing passage in the book: the tale of the unnamed Norwegian woman on Svalbard whose hunter-husband became separated from her for the whole winter by an ice floe. By the time he could return to her, months later, he found that a healthy baby had been born, but 'the long night and the fears she had endured had left the mother deranged in mind' (117, chapter 7).<sup>6</sup> With this and other fears, we listen with Ritter to the storm: 'Outside the storm and surf are pounding, and the sharp wind blows through the walls. And so it goes on for days, immutable, without a break, the fury of this insane music.' (122, chapter 7)

After the brutality of the storm's noises, the next chapter plays in a very different key. Instead of the hellfire of the storm, Ritter awakes to 'a vast, solemn stillness, to a never seen and unimaginable world of splendour and beauty' (127, chapter 8). Still alone, for the men have not yet returned, she faces the magnitude of nature. One of Ritter's watercolours has 'Kptl.8' written beneath it (see Figure 3), and its monochrome depiction of an eerily beautiful landscape devoid of colour and life is recognizably the same landscape we met in Figure 1, this time devoid of colour and life. In the text, Ritter reflects her solitude in the sounds and sight of the young eider ducks abandoned by their mother and left to the storm:

Where were the little birds during the frenzied storm that turned the coast into a solid block of ice? Did they find shelter from the elements, or did the elements halt their fury before their young lives? How do the wheels of the vast natural

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<sup>6</sup> This is probably a tale based on the experience of Hilmar Nøis's first wife, Elen Dorthea (sometimes spelt Ellen), who gave birth alone in 1922. My thanks again to Anka Ryall for pointing this out to me (private communication).

order engage, leaving to each his own? Infinitely peaceful is the sound of the birds' gentle 'go, go, go'; how calmly they come swimming in the radiant evening, approaching the unknown fearfulness of the winter night.

I myself stand forlornly by the water's edge. The power of this worldwide peace takes hold of me, although my senses are unable to grasp it. And as though I were unsubstantial, no longer there, the infinite space penetrates through me and swells out, the surging of the sea passes through my being, and what was once a personal will dissolves like a small cloud against the inflexible cliffs. (128, chapter 8)

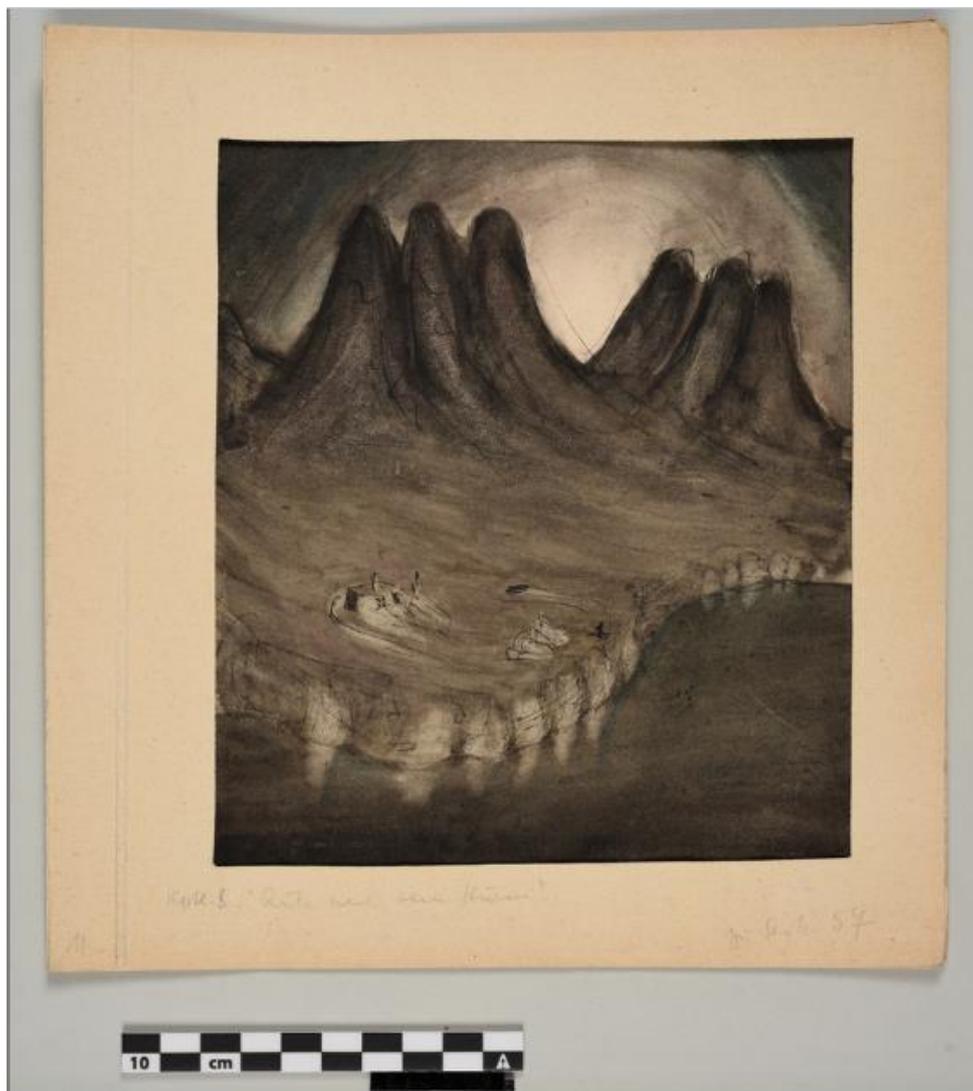


Figure 3: Christiane Ritter, 'Kptl.8 "Ruhe nach dem Sturm"' (Ch.8, 'Calm after the storm'). Watercolour housed at Svalbard Museum. © Christiane Ritter. Photo: [DigitalMuseum/Svalbard Museum](https://digitalmuseum.org/Svalbard-Museum). Please contact Stiftelsen Svalbard Museum to obtain permission to use the artwork.

Like the young ducks, Ritter survived the storm, and faces an unknown future without her more experienced companions. It is only in this ‘immense solitude’, and by her survival, that ‘for the first time I have a sense of the divine gift of companionship’ (128, chapter 8). And although Ritter does not mention them here, this reader cannot help but think of the young mother and newborn baby from the previous chapter, and the danger of mental illness that is all too palpable – a theme that will return again in the book, as we have seen.

Yet Ritter forces herself into action, and before long she, and her readers with her, see the funny side of the situation, for, viewed from a distance, it seems as if the snow has turned the cabin into ‘a large, artistically folded table napkin’ (130, chapter 8). She returns, and despite some serious setbacks in terms of food supplies, her mind is easy (‘perhaps I have acquired the fatalism of the men’, she muses (132, chapter 8)).

The next day, she experiences for the first time that sounds on Svalbard can carry over vast distances, and here the human music of the hunters setting out contrasts with the silence of the land:

The next day I am aroused suddenly from sleep. I can hear the scraping of rapid, long-drawn ski strokes out in the snow. Have the hunters already come home? I listen, but everything is quiet again. Nothing is stirring. [...] Suddenly I hear a strange loud ringing sound in the air. It is like the single peal of a bell, deep, full, and vibrating. As though spellbound, I stand then and strain my ears. Will the strange sound be repeated? But everything is quiet; only the wind and water roar. [...] This single strange note, metallically pure and clear as it was, had something frightening in it here, in this dead land. (132–133, 136–137, chapter 8)

It is indeed the sound of the men departing, but Ritter does not know it yet; she does not know (and why should she?) that on Svalbard it is possible to hear something that takes place a day’s ski ride away. She sets about baking and preparing a meal, and after a long day’s wait, with a shout of “‘Chrissie ahoy!’” (137, chapter 8) the men noisily return. Ritter’s world is once again full of human sounds, laughter, and companionship. ‘Ah, how sweet it sounds’ she exclaims silently to the reader as the men order her around (138, chapter 8).

It is clear from these two chapters that Ritter struggles to put into words and image her experience of the Svalbard soundscapes, and draws on similes that stem from her own European life experience which is also familiar to her readers. Her multimodal juxtapositions of the natural world and musical sounds only serve to accentuate the gulf of difference between them: Svalbard is unfamiliar and unattainable to anyone who has not lived there. Yet these references to the sounds of her old life – the middle-class central European life to which she intends to return – accentuate both the dangers of Ritter’s situation and the temporary nature of her stay on Svalbard, whether it is to end in death, mental illness, or a return to mainland Europe.

## Conclusion: Listening to silence

Ritter's prose and paintings present the reader and viewer with a small group of people who seek to be at one with the Arctic, to live within it, to survive with it. The essential humility of (wo)man facing nature – whether the small figures depicted in her watercolour landscapes or the powerlessness of humankind in the storm – is what makes her work so enduring, particularly in the light of war, global warming, big business, and all the threats that continue to face the Arctic today.

Long before John Cage and Simon and Garfunkel extorted the musical world to listen to silence for a short time (one in the concert hall for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the others in the pop charts), a Viennese painter and housewife had put into image and a richly sonorous prose what it was like to listen to silence for a year. Her experiences of sound and silence on Svalbard, weather human, animal, or of the weather, sea, or landscape, are for her as fulfilling as the art music that filled her life in Vienna:

[W]e talk about the aesthetic pleasures of Europe, which when we were there seemed so priceless to us – music, for example, that elevates the mind and lightens the heart and without which we could hardly live. Remarkably enough, the hunger for music is quite absent here. Our hearts are light, are minds are in a permanent state of elevation. Nature seems to contain everything that man needs for his equilibrium. (233, chapter 14)

Ultimately, however, for Ritter, to stand before and within the Arctic is to find oneself reflected there:

How varied are the experiences one lives through in the Arctic. One can murder and devour, calculate and measure, one can go out of one's mind from loneliness and terror, and one can certainly also go mad with enthusiasm for the all-too-overwhelming beauty. But it is also true that one will never experience in the Arctic anything that one has not oneself brought there. (139, chapter 8)

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