‘Scott Base, Scott Base, this is K001-Bravo, on 5400, over.’

Richard, sitting near the entrance to the tent, is speaking into the mic of the high-frequency radio. After a minute of static, as the radio waves bounce between the ice and the ionosphere on the way from Friis Hills to Ross Island and back, there’s a reply. ‘K001-Bravo, this is Scott Base.’

‘Yeah Scott Base, K001-Bravo, checking in for our evening sked, we have nine people out here and everything is perfect, over.’

I’m sitting on the other side of the entrance from Richard. Our tent, it is pointed out to me, is a bit of luxury—we’re ‘glamping in the Friis Hills,’ someone says. In one corner of the tent a diesel-fuelled heater keeps the air above freezing point. On top of the heater a large pot melts snow and heats the water to boiling for tea, soup, instant noodles, and Cliff’s hot Raro. At the same end of the tent are two Coleman stoves, each with two gas burners, and a collection of pots, pans and cooking equipment.

In the middle of the tent is the large trestle table, covered in cups and thermos flasks, maps and cameras, sunblock, and snacks—biscuits, crackers, peanuts and muesli bars. We sit on folding chairs around the edge of the tent, crowded amid boxes of gear that needs to be protected from the outside cold—the radio equipment, computers, electronic field gear, the food we don’t want frozen. It’s a tight fit, and there are a lot of excuse me’s as people move from one end of the tent to the other to get a hot drink, retrieve a notebook or pop outside to the loo.

But even here in the Polar Haven, heated by the stove
to a steady 7°C or so and with everything perfect, I’m still uncomfortable and on edge. I can feel the cold seeping up from the ground and into my legs. I’m used to being a highly competent human. Here I feel almost useless. I’m breathing badly. I’m cold. I’m slow. All day people have been offering to help me with things, carry something, offer me a hand, and I’m not used to it.

We had a few days of sunny, settled weather down at Scott Base. But here at our camp, in the mountains, it’s getting colder and the barometric pressure is dropping. Outside, the wind is blowing and the snow is getting heavier.

‘Friis Hills is about to bare its ugly teeth,’ says Warren.

‘979 we’re down to, now. It’s dropping through the floor,’ says Nick, looking at the barometer on his watch.

This tiny campsite has become my world. I love snow, but the fact that we are now cut off from Scott Base and McMurdo Station—what stands for civilisation around here—gives me a surge of claustrophobia. We really are stuck here.

Dinner is ‘Mexican pile’, made by Adam. A crumble of corn chips topped with a chilli meat and bean mixture and cheese. A kind of hearty nachos, heavy on the chilli. We follow dinner with some Glenlivet whisky served with ice chips cut from a chunk of the ice Cliff brought up from the Taylor Glacier. There are satellite photographs of Friis Hills on the table and everyone is talking about fieldwork logistics—the challenges of drilling in the permafrost and running seismic lines in the snow.

Every now and then there’s a break in the chatter and it’s quiet except for the gentle roar of the stove and the occasional flap of the tent in the wind. Everyone’s a bit slow because of the cold. Sitting still, heads bent, eyes down. Then someone pipes up with the often repeated, usually ironic, ‘She’s a harsh continent’, and conversation resumes.

‘Happy to be here, lucky to be here,’ someone says.
The guys are still planning the next day’s fieldwork, but I need to be on my own so I say my goodnights and head for my tent through the bright white of the blowing snow.

The surface beneath the snow is dusty and brown and every time I go into my tent I track in a bit of 14-million-year-old dirt mixed with fresh snow. Getting in and out of the tent, which has a flysheet over the top, is a mission. Because of the cold, I’m wearing my Extreme Cold Weather boots and I need to take them off before crawling inside. It’s a one-person tent, and inside is my three-layer sleeping bag—a down bag inside a synthetic bag inside a canvas bag—on top of my foam and sheepskin sleeping mats. Beside the bed, my clothes and books are spilling out of a large stuff bag. My pee bottle is in one corner of the tent and my drink bottle is in another (note to self: do not mix them up). I’m a messy traveller, and my tendency to fling things from one end of the tent to another is not good here, as the mixture of dust from outside and moisture from melting snow is making things mucky. I wasn’t expecting dirt in Antarctica.

I strip off everything except my thermals, socks, hat and neck gaiter and get as deep into my bags as I can. Despite the time—it’s after nine o’clock—and the falling snow, it’s light. The sun won’t set here for another three months and there’s a gentle orange glow inside my tent. It’s cosy, and I usually cherish alone time, but I’m having trouble breathing and I’m starting to panic.

On my own in the tent, without any chatter around me, I acknowledge to myself that I really don’t feel good. My head is buzzing. My chest feels tight and my heart is palpitating. I can’t breathe.

I don’t know if there is something physically wrong with me or if it’s anxiety. My father is dying. My fixed-term contract at the university is about to come to an end. I’ve been on the go—all work, no play—for two years solid and I think my body
has forgotten how to relax. To make it worse, my kids didn’t want me to leave home. I’ve been away a lot during the last two years—to academic conferences, and back and forth to see my father in the United States where he was having treatment, and once he moved back to New Zealand, to Christchurch—and at some level I feel selfish and bad for being away again.

What the fuck am I doing here?

I take stock. I’m alone in a small tent on an ice-free plateau in the Dry Valleys region of Antarctica. It’s –20°C and there’s a light snow falling, making a gentle pittering sound, like someone is throwing small handfuls of sand at my tent. Nearby in the Polar Haven tent, the geologists are gathered around the stove, chatting and having one last drink before bedtime.

The geologists are my friends—I trust them and like them—but I’m too ashamed to reveal how on edge I feel. I’m so privileged to be here. But I’m feeling trapped. There’s no warm ‘inside’ I can escape to. If I’m sick, there’s no chance of a medevac as the helicopters can’t fly in a blizzard.

Some people do lose it up here in the Dry Valleys; it’s the cold climate version of going troppo. The other night Tim told a story about a team camped in a nearby valley radioing in with a ‘send more Valium’ request. Instead of sending more Valium, they sent a helicopter to remove the afflicted young scientist. I have a small vial of Diazepam, a benzodiazepine similar to Valium, but in this unfamiliar situation I’m too anxious to take it. If my symptoms are not anxiety, if they’re something else, I worry that taking Diazepam in this cold, at this altitude, might have unintended consequences. It might be contraindicated, so I continue without it, in case it masks physical symptoms that will be needed to diagnose me. I’m aware that I’m being overdramatic but it doesn’t help how I feel.

I try some mindfulness techniques. I focus on the orange of the tent, the sound of the dry snow hitting the nylon, the feeling of the cold air on my face, and I become aware of my tiredness.
At home I sometimes lie awake at night and worry—panic, even—about climate change and what we're doing to the planet and the future world my children will grow up in. Tonight I try to focus on my breathing, using a technique taught to me by a respiratory physiotherapist. I try to think about how I'm going to get warm, whether my water is going to stay unfrozen, and whether I need to use my pee bottle before I go to sleep.

There's nothing more I can do. If I die tonight, then I die tonight. I think about the absurdity of this thought and the unlikeliness of it and I sleep.

The next day I let on to Tim that I've been feeling 'a bit breathless'. 'It could just be the excitement . . .' I suggest, and trail off, avoiding the word 'anxiety'. These guys are so great for inviting me. I don't want to be negative.

Tim is attentive but unfazed and suggests it's 'cold asthma'. 'I get it sometimes,' he adds. The shock of the cold, dry air, combined with high altitude, can irritate the lungs and constrict the breathing passages, causing a form of asthma that can hit people who otherwise do not suffer from the condition. It's not that high here—1300 metres at our camp, 1700 metres at the highest point of the hills—but at this high latitude (77.45°S) the air pressure is even lower. I feel grateful to have a possible physical explanation for my breathlessness and reassured to know there is treatment if I need it. Tim has an asthma inhaler in the medicine chest, along with Valium, morphine, antibiotics and more. I'm relieved. I feel I can get on with my day now, but it does get me thinking about my father. I hope the doctors have fixed his medication so that he's free of pain and clearer in his head.

It's stopped snowing now, so while four of the geologists are setting up the seismic line, Adam takes the rest of us—Warren, Cliff, Christoph and me—for a walk. I ditch my ECW boots for Sorels, which are much more comfortable for walking.
Although the snow has disguised the landscape he’s so familiar with, Adam can see paths he’s made on previous visits and we walk east towards a spot where Cliff wants to look at an outcrop of basement rock. As we walk, Adam tells us about the geology, and his past trips here, and I’m happily distracted from my symptoms, whether they’re physical or psychosomatic.

Adam and his students have identified a sequence of Friis Hills glacial moraines interspersed with life-supporting water bodies—ponds, marshes and small lakes—created by glacial meltwaters. About 14 million years ago the climate changed: air temperatures became colder, rain stopped falling and the water became locked up in glacial ice—plants could no longer grow here. At least that’s what the geomorphologists believe.

From a high point—one of the hills that give Friis Hills its name—we have a view across the Taylor Glacier to the steep-sided Kukri Hills, a 2000-metre-high range that separates the Taylor from the Ferrar Glacier. Beyond the western edge of the hills, we can see across some 20 kilometres of ice that feeds both the Taylor and Ferrar Glaciers. Beyond that, are the 4000-metre-high peaks of the Royal Society Range. The sun is shining, the visibility seemingly endless. The view of the layered brown cliffs, distant mountain peaks, and the flat white glacier is . . . stupendous, jaw-dropping, awe-inspiring, cliché-inducing. Later that day I review some video footage of Cliff talking in front of the mountains and glaciers, and the light in the footage is so perfect and the sound of his voice so clear that it seems fake, as if recorded in front of a studio green screen.

As we continue our walk, Adam stops and points to some parallel indents on the ground, more than a metre apart, infilled by the new snow. I wonder if they’re a geological feature, but Adam says they’re marks left by a very heavy helicopter, the type of old military machine that used to fly around here in the decades after International Geophysical Year, which spanned the summer of 1957 and 1958 and saw bases built—
including Scott Base and McMurdo Station—and an expansion of Antarctic science and exploration. You often find old smoke canisters around here too, says Adam, used to indicate wind direction to helicopter pilots. Today, everything that goes into the field comes out of the field—there’d be no chance of crew throwing their stuff on the ground and leaving it—but there is still some rubbish and detritus left over from earlier days before the Antarctic Environmental Protocol was signed in 1991.

Around the corner is what Cliff has come to see, an unconformity where a yellow-brown conglomerate, deposited 420 million years ago by an ancient river system, sits directly on top of a 500-million-year-old granite. The conglomerate is part of the Beacon Supergroup, a thick layer of sediment that includes coals, fish fossils and tree fragments. Cliff films a clip—he talks about deep time, geological evidence, reading the rocks—then we stop for lunch. There’s a pile of dolerite boulders and we use them variously as seats, leaning posts, tables. I’ve brought a packet of crackers and a can of tuna, more than I want so I offer them around. I drink from my water bottle. I’m drinking a lot, but am relieved that I don’t need to pee yet. Not quite as easy for me as it is for the others.

As we walk back, the guys are discussing past experiences of Antarctic fieldwork. There are stories of frostnip, epic storms, gung-ho helicopter pilots flying in white-outs. But it’s a gorgeous day here now, the sun is shining and there is barely a breeze.

Walking the landscape, just looking and thinking, is a big part of what Adam does as a geomorphologist. ‘It takes me a week or two to actually start to see everything,’ he says. ‘The first two weeks, I’m blind, then all of a sudden I see things I’d walked right through before. It’s like all your distractions and thinking about other things disappears, and you start to really notice details and patterns, and sort of read the landscape.’

What sort of details, I ask?
'Say you’re walking along on a rocky, armoured surface and there are six rock types that make it up. Well, you walk a little bit and all of a sudden there aren’t six rock types, there are five. Normally you would never notice that but if you’re out there all the time and all you’re doing is looking at the ground as you walk, then looking up at the hills, then back at the ground, you’re going to notice and go “hey, that rock is missing”. Now that would not happen the first week, it probably wouldn’t happen the first couple of weeks. It takes a while to sort of forget the other distractions.’ Details like this can signify the end of one glacial deposit and the start of another.

This year the snow is obscuring the sorts of clues that Adam would normally see, but he’s still attentive and I envy him this focus on the landscape, on the here and now, his ability to be where he is. All the geologists seem to have this. They are intimately connected to the environment around them, the instruments they’re using, rather than being caught up in their own heads like I usually am. Maybe it’s my constant need to translate what I’m experiencing into words, to find or create a narrative, that stops me fully engaging with my surroundings. I’m constantly jumping from the world around me to my inner world, always aware that I might try and write my experience into something that non-scientists can read.

On our walk, Adam apologises to me when he swears. And when he clears his nose by holding one nostril and blowing out the other he says he hopes I don’t find it too disgusting here. But . . . it’s beautiful here! I think to myself. I blow my nose like that too, on occasion, if necessary, and for want of better adjectives my inner monologue and my journals are incredibly sweary. I am surprised at the degree to which he’s misinterpreted me, or that I’m misrepresenting myself. I’ve withdrawn into myself in the cold and become someone else.
While we’ve been walking, the rest of the team have been setting up a seismic line. The aim is to use this remote geophysical method to find the depth of the basement rocks that lie beneath the lake and glacial sediments. Results from the seismic line will be used to determine the best places to drill to get cores that contain many millions of years of deposits. The aim is to get a seismic line extending the full 5 kilometres across the Friis Hills basin.

As we get close to camp we can see Andrew the geophysicist huddling over his computer screen, sitting on the upturned equipment box. He has his ECW jacket draped over him and his computer, trying to darken the screen so he can see it in the bright sunlight.

Andrew usually has a couple of second-year undergraduates doing his seismic lines but this time he has Tim, Richard, Nick and Christoph. They’ve laid out a set of black and yellow cables extending from his seismometer across the valley floor, with a geophone placed every five metres. When a noise is made on the surface, some of the sound waves travel through the sediments and bounce back off any harder layer underneath. The geophones pick up the returning sound waves and relay the signal back to the seismometer and into Andrew’s laptop. While some seismic surveys use explosions to create the sound, this is a ‘hammer seismic’ survey and makes use of a sledgehammer, a metal plate, and some muscle.

We walk down the line to where Richard and Nick are waiting for Andrew to tell them to start. Once we’re close we need to stand still, so we don’t add any noise to the signal.

‘Quiet on the line,’ we hear Andrew’s voice through one of the VHF radios we use to communicate across short distances—anywhere you can get a direct line from one radio to the next.

‘On station,’ Richard replies.

‘Fire when ready,’ says Andrew.

Nick swings the sledgehammer onto a metal plate five
times—*tink!*—while Richard counts ‘one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand’ to time each swing.

Andrew has been watching the trace on his computer screen. ‘That looks good,’ we hear him say. ‘Move to next station’.

It’s heavy work swinging the hammer and Nick and Richard—both of them strong and lean and over six foot tall—take turns with it. For Andrew, it’s monotonous work, sitting, watching, and issuing instructions by radio.

‘Whack away,’ he continues.

Tim and Christoph—who, because of his toilet duties, is now generally referred to as ‘Scheisse Boy’—are laying out the next section of seismic line. I keep offering to help. I should at least be able to carry something from one place to another. I can’t really be any worse than a geology student, but I am. I feel kind of useless, I hope I’m not getting in people’s way. I’m actually starting to feel sorry for myself.

‘I think this will be a juicy little drilling target, this basin,’ says Tim, after assuring me they don’t need my help.

It’s too cold for me. I feel miserable. Cliff and I do some more filming and I get even colder just standing behind the camera. Eventually Cliff notices that I’m not okay and sends me back to the Polar Haven to warm up. Once he’s finished his to-camera he joins me. The problem, he thinks, is that I’m not eating enough to keep warm. It turns out my plan to starve out my imagined tummy bug was deranged. My tummy wasn’t upset; I was just nervous. Cliff passes me a cup of hot Raro and a handful of biscuits and tells me to get it down me. Some frozen lollies, and some cheese and salami later—fats and sugars—and I start feeling a bit better.

While dinner is cooking I finally work up the courage—necessity is a key part of it—to go to the open-air loo. I trudge past a yellow tent and down the path made by all our footsteps. The side of the loo facing the tents is a stack of dolerite slabs,
about chest high—if someone is sitting down, all you can see is the top of their head. The loo itself is a yellow plastic bucket filled with a large plastic bag and topped with a foam seat and a bucket lid. On top of the lid is a slab of rock, to ensure that nothing blows away. Next to the loo, a roll of paper and a bottle of hand sanitiser are wedged between two rocks. Next to all this are the white plastic pee barrels. Lots of them. The one in active use has a funnel on top. For the guys, it’s a simple matter of aiming into the funnel. If I was game at using the Shee-wee—the ‘female urination device’ I was issued with in Christchurch—I could stand and attempt the same, but I prefer to use a pee bottle in the privacy of my tent and come tip it in here when it’s full.

Anyway, I raise the black flag on a bamboo pole to indicate the loo is in use, take the rock off the seat, and pull down my over-trousers and thermals. I’m sitting there, pants down, looking at a pretty spectacular view but hoping that this will all be over quickly—it’s –20°C for fuck’s sake, and it feels very weird to be so exposed—when I hear footsteps and Tim’s voice. ‘Oh shit, sorry!’

He sounds mortified.

‘Didn’t you see the black flag?!’ I yell back at him. We had a system!

He walks back to camp. I hear him bust into the Polar Haven with a ‘Jesus fuckin’ Christ, I just walked in on Rebecca.’

When I get back to the tent, I’ve got to a place somewhere beyond embarrassment, a place where I have no ego. There are no barriers. One of the worst things that I could imagine has happened, and I feel relaxed. Whatever.

‘Tim fuckin’ Naish,’ I say as I enter the Polar Haven, newly confident now that I’ve dealt to my hunger. It goes without saying that I own him now, and he shuffles around the table and hands me a beer.

But people won’t let it alone, and soon the main topic of
conversation is Antarctic toilet experiences. There’s a story about a piece of wind-blown, poo-streaked toilet paper that a field trainer had to retrieve from high up a cliff. Another about Lake Chad, a small lake further down the Taylor Valley. People tend to think it was named after the country or a person, but it turns out it was named for a brand of toilet paper, after a team led by Australian geologist Griffith Taylor camped there in 1911 and all got the runs. Or so I’m told.

Tim and I are now the butt of a series of jokes. I don’t mind. These guys are fun and funny and I’m happy. I’ve spent the day walking in an Antarctic snowscape, in full sunshine, and talking about geology. There have been no emergency calls—my children seem to be surviving without me and my father hasn’t died. Perhaps I could relax just a little bit, let go and try to enjoy things while I am relatively free from my usual responsibilities.

I help make dinner of stir-fried chicken and vegetables with rice. Warren makes margaritas—Jose Cuervo Especial, Triple Sec and Rose’s lime juice—in an aluminium cooking pot.

‘There’s a bit of Antarctic experience in this tent,’ says Richard as we eat. We count it up. Between the nine of us, are eight PhDs and 60 Antarctic seasons.

After dinner Cliff holds up a hinged wooden box—the words ‘Macinlay’s Rare Old Highland Malt Whisky’ is painted on the side and ‘British Antarctic Expedition 1907’ on one end—and asks everyone to pay attention. ‘If you don’t know the story,’ he says, ‘they found some whisky under Shackleton’s hut a few years ago and a few of the bottles were still in good condition. So they took them back to New Zealand, then they got a distillery in Scotland to recreate the whisky.’ Inside the box, the bottle rests on a bed of straw. ‘Apparently it’s not that great a whisky,’ he says, ‘but the story is good.’ This is Cliff’s second $200 bottle of Shackleton whisky. The first one, he tells us, he drank up on the Nansen Ice Shelf the previous season. Tim tried some a few weeks earlier with a colleague in Illinois.
I first tried the whisky, with my sister Rachel, at an Antarctic Heritage Trust tasting in Wellington back in 2011. We bought a bottle for Dad, but I think it’s still sitting in his cabinet.

Cliff unwraps the bottle, strips off the foil and pulls out the cork—plip! ‘Who’d like some?’ People drain the last of their margaritas then pass forward their cups—a brightly coloured jumble of plastic insulated mugs.

‘No sipping until we have the toast,’ says Tim. ‘Just hold on to it.’

The next few minutes are caught up in arguments over the best way to break cup-friendly pieces of ice off our diminishing chunk of Taylor Glacier ice—we have ‘a bit of an ice issue,’ says someone—but soon there’s a piece for everyone. We all lumber—in our heavy coats and over-trousers there’s no chance of swift movement—to our feet.

Cliff raises his cup and thanks the geology team for inviting us along. ‘Pleased to be here, lucky to be here, happy to be here, so yeah, cheers to that,’ he says.

Then Nick proposes a toast to the ‘old explorers’. Christoph says a big thank you for being taken on his first trip to Antarctica, and Cliff toasts his dad, whose birthday is the next day. There’s a big round of ‘Cheers’ and clumsy clunks as we try to touch plastic cups across the table.

It’s not as nice as the Glenlivet we were drinking the night before.

‘It’s pretty cool though,’ says Richard, ‘that we’re drinking the same thing that old Shackleton drank.’

‘I know! And out of the same mugs,’ adds someone.

The foolish banter continues—theories about the left-behind bottles of whisky morph into tales of Scott Base antics from previous Antarctic seasons—and with the mixture of relief at no longer feeling so cold, my newfound loss of ego, and the drinks I find myself laughing until I cry. I cover my face, wipe away tears, but the jokes and stories continue and my laughter
keeps coming. I feel like a second-year student on a geology field trip.

We’re all tired. Adam sings a few lines from a Johnny Cash song—*I hear the train a comin’ rollin’ round the bend / I ain’t seen the sunshine since I don’t know when*—then, after some silence, Richard starts quietly singing Rolf Harris’s *Two Little Boys*—a song I haven’t heard since I was a kid—and Tim joins in. Everyone has a mug in their hands. Heads bowed, gazing down into nothing. I slip out of the Polar Haven while I’m still feeling good and crawl into my little orange tent.

The sun is shining. I’m settled into my sleeping bag. I can hear the guys talking; they’re up on the ridge now, drinking whisky, looking at the mountains across the glacier. I’m kind of wishing I was up there with them but it was time for me to go to bed. The tension between not wanting to miss out on anything and knowing that I need time alone, time downloading my thoughts and impressions and feelings, is always there, on every trip I’m on.

I’m happy and sad at the same time. As soon as I’ve warmed up and started to feel comfortable here, I’m going to have to leave. As I listen to the chatter from the ridge above me, I think about how these scientists—whether they’re operating geophysical equipment, walking and interpreting the landscape, or just drinking whisky and looking at the view—seem good at living in the moment. At the same time, though, they’re dealing with deep geological time and working on problems with implications for the future of humanity. I wonder if their work gives them a sense of perspective that makes day-to-day living easier.

I wake the next morning happy and warm. I have no idea what time it is. The sun has been shining all night and my iPhone—my only means of telling the time—gave up in the cold. It went from 100 percent power to shutting off. I’m beginning to like it here.
The air inside the tent feels mild, but it’s deceptive—the water in my drink bottle is frozen, so ‘warm’ has become a relative thing. Planning is important here. It’s crucial to hold on to the warmth that you start the day with. If you go outside and get cold it’s very hard to get back that heat. I don’t think about how I feel—warm—but what I know—my water bottle is frozen—and I plan to conserve every bit of heat. So before I climb out of my sleeping bag I put on a woollen jersey and fleece jacket over my thermal top. I jump out of my bag and pull up my socks so there’s no skin gap between socks and thermals. I pee in the bottle then put on another jacket, my over-trousers and my boots and head for the Polar Haven.

Soon after breakfast some TV people arrive by helicopter wearing goggles and neck gaiters and with their fur-lined hoods pulled tight. Perhaps I have acclimatised. There are three of them, all lively and important. A producer, a camera operator, and a glamorous presenter whom I escort to my little orange tent—she’ll be sleeping here for the next few nights. She’s slimmer than me and vegetarian, and I wonder how she’ll cope in the cold. I find myself slightly envious that I’m leaving and she’s staying. Cliff and I help carry their stuff—there’s lot of it, their camera gear is much bigger than ours—from the landing spot to the campsite. Richard, Nick and Andrew are off doing their seismic line.

The helicopter is our ride back to Scott Base, but not just yet. Warren and Cliff climb on board and head back to Marble Point to refuel then Sean flies the chopper low to the ground, back and forth over the Friis Hills in a planned grid transect. Warren hangs out of the open door, his feet on the skids and body as far forward as he can while still sitting on the seat, taking photographs of the ground. He is wearing a harness, which is clipped into the back of the chopper, but Cliff’s providing back up, a pair of strong hands holding onto Warren’s harness as an extra point of safety.
Tim is playing host, showing the TV people around the camp and making them a cuppa. While we’re all sitting inside the Polar Haven, there’s a call on the VHF radio—Nick, who’s on the seismic line, needs the GPS receiver to plot their location. The one Tim has in his pocket. I offer to run it down to the line. It’s close in the tent and despite my newly attained sense of wellbeing it is a fragile wellness and I don’t feel like being around bubbly TV people and Antarctic newbies.

I deliver the GPS to Nick and head towards camp along a trail of footsteps in the snow. I don’t want to go back to camp just now so I stop, sit on a lump of dolerite deposited there by a glacier millions of years ago, and cry. I feel as if I’ve barely engaged with the fact that I’m here, camping in the mountains of Antarctica. I’m so happy to be here—lucky to be here—but when I get home my father will still be dying, I’ll have to re-apply for the job I’ve been doing for two years, I’ll have to compensate at home for being away for two weeks, and I won’t have time to sit on a rock and look at the world around me. It feels right to be crying. It feels like the only way I can respond to this landscape and how I’m feeling inside and what I’m heading home to.

I take a deep breath and manage, for the first time on this trip, to be fully here, alone. I’m looking out on a landscape that could almost be Mars. A landscape that tells a story of a warmer Antarctica, with lakes and rivers, and insects buzzing around the trees. Sun glistens on the snow. On the ground, coloured pebbles and rocks rise above the white surface. There used to be a thick layer of glacial moraine here, a pile of sand and dust and rocks and boulders more than 30 metres deep, but wind has blown almost all of it away. This is a deflation landscape, a landscape of loss.

There’s a distant crack of the sledgehammer on the metal plate. Then I hear the chopper coming back. It’s time to leave.