

Hiking to Siberia
by Lawrence Millman
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Review by David P. Miller

Although my experience with international travel has bloomed during the past decade, I've been sticking to the straight and narrow. With only one exception, my annual trips, accompanied by my wife, have been occasioned by professional summer conferences. So although I've met a lot of interesting people and negotiated restaurant menus in different languages - more or less - I've also spent a lot of time in convention centers. Nice ones, granted, not absolutely identical to each other. Lawrence Millman, on the other hand, declares in his bio that "if a place doesn't have a website, he'll immediately pack his bags and go there." For example, at least three times in *Hiking to Siberia*, he visits islands that aren't consistently included on modern maps. This makes his travel tales a whole lot more interesting than mine. Which is pretty faint praise for a collection that's as consistently entertaining and well-told as this one is.

These twenty-one tales take us from the Arctic to Borneo, Iceland to the godforsaken Mexican island of Clipperton ("The Worst Place in the World"). Their brevity - the title story, the longest, tops out at eight pages - and the ease with which Millman relates them sometimes belie the extraordinary lengths involves, in effort and risk as well as distance. On the one hand, we can laugh with him at his dilemma in Micronesia, consuming certain parts of a male fruit bat at dinner, in the perhaps mistaken belief that it was normal and expected ("A Feast on Fais"). On the other, his sudden plunge into Greenland's Angmagssalik Fjord threatens death from hypothermia, though he's saved by the application of a remarkably domestic home remedy ("Into Cold Water"). These are stories easy to read, easy to enjoy, but quite something else to have lived through. Throughout, Millman shows his genuine interest in and respect for the people he meets and cultures he negotiates, not to mention regard for the uncompromising landscapes he finds himself negotiating.

Being the sort of reader I am, I'm taken by encounters with unexpected details, sights and events only revealed while seeking something else. In "Hiking to Siberia," while Millman attempts to retrace Lillian Alling's semi-legendary journey from New York City to Siberia, he encounters "a moose skeleton wrapped up wire like a mummy" on the Yukon Telegraph Trail. While temporarily "Marooned" on the island of Mingulay in the Outer Hebrides, he finds "a crofter's cottage, now hardly more than a heap of rubble, and ... the remains of an old hand loom." Then again, Roseau, the capital of Dominica, features a public bathhouse in the middle of a cemetery. And Millman discovers a McDonald's wrapper deep in the for-

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est on Culebra, an island without a McDonald's.

My own favorite in this collection is probably "I, Sky Burster." The briefest entry, at three pages, it is barely a narrative, although not quite a prose poem. A conjunction of moments during an afternoon on Western Samoa, Millman struggles with adjectives in his notebook, answers the questions of local children about his torn-up papers, experiences the role of palagi or "sky burster," as Westerners are named, and later views a blue balloon, picked from his pocket, float across the sky and out to sea. Although there's clearly a larger story behind all this, we don't need anything greater to savor its uniqueness.

This beaten-path traveler has only one suggestion, and one criticism. The suggestion: I find myself wanting to know more, to learn more from Millman about the people, the situations, what happened before or after. It appears that this collection began life as magazine and newspaper pieces, but sometimes their brevity seems a little abrupt. And the criticism: bats aren't rodents (p. 70). They're chiropterans, the German Fledermaus notwithstanding. But that's hardly an occasion for a corrected edition.

DAVID P. MILLER began writing poetry at 52, in 2007. This leaves aside the political doggerel he composed in high school. His work has been seen in *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, and he has read at Stone Soup in Cambridge, MA. He was a member of the multidisciplinary Mobius Artists Group of Boston for 25 years. He is a librarian at Curry College, in Milton, MA, and is grateful for the Curry faculty creative writing group to which he belongs, for their support and encouragement.