In January of 1650, the celebrated French philosopher René Descartes caught a chill in Stockholm. Two weeks later he was dead. His last words were rumored to have been, “I’m cold.”

He had arrived at the court of Christina only months earlier, recruited to serve as a mentor to the young Swedish monarch who was flirting with Catholicism and had surrounded herself with men of letters from all over Europe. The inconceivably bloody and wasteful Thirty Years War was over and, although Christina’s father, Gustav Adolf, had lost his life on the battlefield, Sweden had gained from the conflict. The country was now seen as a Great Power; the Germans had been forced to pay compensation to dissolve the Swedish military forces; and, as part of the Swedish spoils, a good portion of Emperor Rudolf’s treasures in Prague had been loaded on to barges and towed north to Stockholm. Along with nails from Noah’s Ark and countless other curios amassed by the now deceased leader of the Holy Roman Empire, along with ivories and corals and scientific instruments, along with the remainders of his once-renowned menagerie (now reduced to a single lion) came 500 paintings, among them Titians and Tintorettos, and priceless manuscripts and ancient books that could now form the basis of the Royal Library in Stockholm. Christina, suffocating under the narrow Lutheran teachings that passed for intellectual life in Sweden, invited European scholars to come and catalogue her new library, teach her ancient languages (she was already fluent in French and German and read Latin), and generally be ornaments of learning in a land that had long been a cultural backwater. The political situation in France was unstable, and Christina promised riches and prestige. Philologists and philosophers, as well as ballet masters, musicians, and pastry cooks flocked to Sweden, drawn by her reputation as the “Pallas of the North,” and hopeful that there would be a place for them in Christina’s court.

Born in 1626, Christina had become queen at age six on the death of her father. During the twelve years of her minority, the Chancellor of the Realm, Axel Oxenstierna, guided the country through the last battles of the war and the final peace. Christina was a curious figure: a superb horsewoman, well versed in classical literature, able to converse on all subjects, but superfi-
cially clever rather than learned. She had the deep voice of man, a hunched shoulder from being dropped as a baby, and a disinclination to marry.

Christina was generous, impetuous, imperious, the equivalent in our day of a teen pop star with massive earning power whose insecurity is hidden by rebellious bravado, who can deny herself nothing. Christina conflated herself with Sweden; what came into the treasury through taxation and plunder was hers to spend. With one hand she showered attention on her favorites, with the other she withheld and punished. She first heard about Descartes through the French ambassador to Sweden, Pierre-Hector Chanut, the brother-in-law of Descartes’ French translator, Claude Clerselier. One of Christina’s pet projects (like many, soon abandoned) was the formation of a Swedish Academy to rival the Académie Française. No sooner than had she learned of Descartes than she decided he must attend her at her court and instruct her on the new empiricism he had so elegantly put forth in *Discourse on Method*, which held that nothing should be accepted as true without proof.

Descartes was flattered by the young queen’s invitation—he’d heard, like everyone, of her largesse and learning—but less certain that Stockholm would suit him. He was fifty-four and had been living for many years in a variety of out-of-the-way places, usually outside France. He knew he needed quiet and calm in which to think and write. He wrote to Chanut, trying put the queen off:

If you are really convinced that this incomparable Queen still wants to study my work, and she can take the time to do so, I shall be more than happy to be of service to her. But if it is only a question of curiosity that will not last, please make some kind of excuse for me, and spare me this journey.

Christina never took no for an answer and rarely thought through the consequences of her actions. She wanted to see this famous Descartes and she would. In August of 1649 she sent a militia headed by an admiral to capture the philosopher and to escort him back to Stockholm. Six weeks later, in September, a shaken Descartes arrived in Sweden, on a chill day that presaged the beginning of a Swedish winter colder than memory could recall. The Little Ice Age hung over Europe, and the winter of 1649–50 was one of the worst in history.

Christina was disappointed in Descartes’ general demeanor, yet she still considered his presence at her court a triumph and the first weeks passed pleasantly enough. Then the queen suggested he take a trip around Sweden—to Lapland in the north, for instance—and get to know her country. Christina herself rarely left Stockholm, and never seems to have seen any-

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thing of the northern two-thirds of her country; her intention was more to get rid of a man who had begun to bore her a little. She was preoccupied at the time with governing and with the study of Greek, but also with more frivolous matters: she was planning a grand court ballet in honor of her twenty-third birthday in December. Descartes refused to travel around Sweden in the darkening days of late fall; he preferred to stay in bed much of the day, reading and thinking, with a crackling fire going. Instead, Christina proposed that he also take a part in the ballet. This he refused, but couldn’t refuse the task of writing a libretto for it.

He was not happy. Christina was not the “Pallas of the North,” nor were the intellectual circles in Stockholm much to his liking. Foppish French philosophers and philologists came and went, vying for Christina’s attention, disappointed eventually in the cleverness that hid a rather ordinary mind and contemptuous of the bland, cold country she ruled. Philosophy may have bored Christina, but she adored accumulation, whether it concerned bijoux, parchment manuscripts, or Greek nouns, and the study of philology satisfied her avarice for knowledge and her desire to display her learning.

As a means of deciphering the world, philology harkened back to the Renaissance, when searching for the occult correspondences between words was seen as scientific, and when learning as many ancient languages as possible was a scholar’s work (one of Christina’s philologists spoke and read eighteen tongues, another prided himself on knowing twenty-six, Eastern and Western). In the sixteenth-century it had been enough to collect—words, objects, ideas—and to look for meaning in the diversity of categories to which knowable things could be assigned. The making of “encyclopedias of the visible world,” as one contemporary writer describes them, continued into the mid-seventeenth century. Like Emperor Rudolf, who had collected everything possible, from ancient jawbones to beetles to objets d’art, the better to replicate in his palace museum the variety of the known world, most of the scholars at Christina’s court thought in terms of collecting knowledge, hoping in this way to get at the essence of creation.

Descartes’ empiricism heralded a new way of looking at the natural world, a rebuke to collecting and categorizing the random in search of wholeness and harmony. The four precepts for the pursuit of knowledge he described in Discourse on Method—

1. Accept nothing as true unless it is clearly recognized as such
2. Solve problems systematically by analyzing them part by part
3. Proceed from the simple to the more complex
4. Review everything thoroughly to make sure nothing has been omitted—

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laid the foundations of modern science. But at Christina’s Tre Kronor castle, where flattery, insincerity, and adherence to the study of ancient languages and lore were the rule, Descartes had few confidants and no equals.

Christina, seeing his discontent and hearing of his desire to leave Sweden, decided to make better use of her great philosopher. She sent instructions that he attend to her every morning at five a.m. and instruct her in empirical philosophy. The chamber in which they met was unheated, unlike his own warm chamber; the hour was atrocious for a man accustomed to lying abed all morning; he had to remove his cap because she was the queen; and worst of all, he doubted whether she understood a thing he said.

A few weeks before his death from pneumonia, he’d written a friend in Paris, “I think that men’s thoughts freeze here in winter, like the waters.”

II.

One of the philologists invited to Sweden by Christina was the young Johannes Schefferus of Strasburg, who’d arrived in 1648 to take up a professorship in Law and Rhetoric at the university in Uppsala. Although many foreigners left Sweden after Christina’s abdication in 1654 (or simply perished from the cold), Schefferus stayed to play a large role in Swedish culture; he came to be regarded as the father of Swedish literary history. But he is remembered mainly for his volume Lapponia, a compilation of information about the indigenous people of the north of Sweden, the Laplanders, or Sami, as they are called today.³

It was in 1671 that the Chancellor of the Realm, Magnus de la Gardie, regent to the son of Christina’s successor, Karl X Gustav, charged Schefferus with the task of writing a description of the inhabitants of Lapland. De la Gardie was concerned about the rumors that had plagued Sweden for decades, rumors spread mainly by Germany, which had often lost to Sweden on the battlefields during the Thirty Years War. Pamphlets full of spleen and insinuation held that it was only witchcraft performed by the notorious Lappish wizards in the North that had allowed Swedish victories.

De la Gardie gave Schefferus the job of pulling together a more realistic portrait of the Laplanders, specifically of their conversion to Christianity, which would refute claims that Lappish magic was responsible for Sweden’s prowess in warfare. The chancellor did not expect Schefferus to travel north to observe the indigenous people in situ, nor did the professor seem to have any inclination to leave his comfortable home in Uppsala for the wilds of Lapland. Instead the two of them rumbled through the private museums of several nobles for objects from Lapland: skis, sacred drums, cups carved from birch boles, spoons shaped from reindeer horn, embroidered tunics and bonnets, the boat-shaped sleds called pulkas. These collections, an
encyclopedia of the visible Lappish world, were the basis for Schefferus’s descriptions and drawings.

For historical background, Schefferus relied on Tacitus, the Roman historian who’d described the Germanic people, on the medieval Danish scholar, Saxo Grammaticus, on the Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson, and on Bishop Olaus Magnus’ *A Description of the Northern Peoples*, published in 1555. Olaus Magnus had been exiled from Sweden when the King of the time, Gustav Vasa, decided to eschew Catholicism for Lutheranism, in part to take over Church estates and valuables in order to fatten his war-depleted treasury. Olaus Magnus spent the rest of his life in exile in Rome, where he first completed an elaborate map, the *Carta Marina*. His book was begun in order to explicate the map, but grew to many volumes, which he had printed in Rome with charming wood-cut illustrations.

*A Description of the Northern Peoples* was a classic Renaissance treatise of lore and learning, wherein the author’s own first-hand observations mingled with readings from such classical authors as Pliny and conversations with fur-traders who knew something of Northern Scandinavia. Olaus Magnus moved easily through the most disparate information, treating in one chapter of bees, in another of the arts of war. His organization is based on association. A chapter on manure leads to one on harvesting and milling grain, then on to brewing and drunkenness, over to famous incidents where servants became too familiar with their sovereigns through drink. Although Olaus Magnus never traveled farther north than to a village just over the Arctic Circle, he writes familiarly of wizards and witches who live in the far north, as well as ordinary Laplanders. Some of his descriptions of these people who hunt and herd reindeer and get about with ease on boards attached to their feet are the first depictions in literature of the Sami. Olaus Magnus may well have seen them first-hand and, as in most of his writing, marvels more than judges. His frame of reference was encyclopedic, not ethnographic.

Schefferus drew on Olaus Magnus’ observations of the Laplanders, but he wrote with a different goal. Empiricism had not yet permeated deep into Swedish intellectual circles. Although Schefferus may well have taken a close look at the nomads who traveled to Uppsala’s winter market to sell dried river salmon, reindeer skins, and meat, or even requested one or two to return with him to his study so that he could draw illustrations of them for his book, Schefferus utilized the reports of others, who often had strong opinions on the Laplanders, to fill out his picture of their world.

Magnus de la Gardie had written to the Lutheran priests in the northern parishes and requested that they send back descriptions of the local Laplanders, their language and family life, their housing arrangements winter and summer, their habit of skiing, their hunting and herding of reindeer, their weddings and funerals, their church-going practices. Along
with a great deal of anthropology and natural history came descriptions of
the Laplanders’ sacrificial rites and shamanic ceremonies. The Chancellor
sent the letters on to Schefferus, who had the task of editing and rewrit-
ing their reports. *Lapponia* was published in Frankfurt am Main in 1673,
in Latin. It consisted of thirty-five chapters, with illustrations drawn by
Schefferus himself, on all aspects of Sami life. The volume proved wildly
popular. Translations quickly appeared in England, Germany, France, and
the Netherlands, sometimes in bowdlerized editions that turned the inten-
tion of *Lapponia* on its head. Schefferus had written the book to prove that
the Laplanders were Christians, not pagans, and could not have aided the
Swedes on the battlefields of Europe. But the sections on divination by
drums, on the worship of sacred idols, and other forms of pagan behavior
were excerpted in a way that gave the lie to the notion that paganism had
given way to Christianity.

*Lapponia* is not only shorter than Olaus Magnus’ multi-volumed *A
Description of the Northern Peoples*, it is smaller in scope and more cogently
organized, the difference between an expansive, cataloguing, Renaissance
turn of mind and a more disciplined way of seeing things. Next to Olaus
Magnus, with his sheer delight in the world, Schefferus seems positively
dour. Yet Schefferus has the ability to sift and summarize, to arrange the
information that’s come to him from the clergymen and bailiffs up north.
From time to time, he marshals authorities on both sides of an issue and
comes down for one or the other. Whether or not Schefferus has read his
Descartes, the notion of questioning the truth, of weighing the evidence is
now a part of his rhetorical strategy.

Not that Schefferus is objective. The all-encompassing Catholic wonder
Olaus Magnus seems to have felt for everything in the north, including the
Laplanders and their reindeer, has been modified by a pinched Lutheranism.
Chapter Five, “Of the Laplanders in reference to the inclinations, temper
and habit, of their minds and bodies,” is a veritable laundry list of unpleas-
ant characteristics:

Besides their innate cowardice, they are strangely prone to suspicion
and jealousy, being conscious of their own weakness . . . they are also
revengeful. . . . The Laplanders besides are notorious cheats. . . . They
are also noted to be of a censorious and detracting humor, so as to make
it a chief ingredient of their familiar converse, to reproach and despise
others. . . . They are likewise exceedingly covetous . . . yet they are very
lazy withal. . . . Their last good quality is their immoderate lust . . . their
promiscuous and continual lying together in the same Hut, without any
difference of age, sex, or condition, seems to occasion this effect.
Schefferus gets into a tangle in the opening chapters when he tries to argue for the pacifism of the Laplanders. Is it admirable or does it simply proceed from their slothfulness?

They are beyond all imagination fearful and mean-spirited, being frightened at the very sight of a strange man, or ship; above all things dreading war; the reason of all this being the cold to which they are condemned, and the meanness of their diet, which cannot supply good blood and spirits; wherefore they are useless in war. . . .

He also is conflicted in presenting what he knows of their religion. Are they Christian or pagan? Schefferus—and the clergy of the northern parishes—would like to prove the spiritual diligence of the Laplanders. He describes weddings and baptisms, “Public Fairs” where the priests preach to the Lapps in Finnish. He emphasizes the respect the Lapps have for their Christian priests, how “they pay their Ministers so much honor and respect, saluting them at their first coming with bowing their head, giving them in token of Reverence the title of Herrai, i.e. Sir, conducting them upon their Rain-dears to their Cottages, adorned with birch bows covered with their furrs, and shewing all the civility they have.” But it is clear that the Lapps are still, often in secret, practicing their age-old pagan ceremonies involving animal sacrifice, worshipping gods and idols, and sooth-saying with the aid of magic totems like drums painted with symbols.

Schefferus’ motives in writing his book may have been political, but the world he described acted on the imaginations of readers further south, on the continent and in England, who began to use his imagery in their art and to dream of traveling to the north themselves. In spite of the fact that its author had never been to the places he described, *Lapponia* acted as a spur to future journeys to Scandinavia and in 1731 spawned a true travel book, *Voyage en Laponie*, by Jean-François Regnard, an urbane, insouciant young Frenchman who would have fit in very well at Christina’s fun-loving court.

**III.**

Travels have their burdens as well as their pleasures, but the exhaustions that accompany such exercise, far from being discouraging, only increase a traveler’s wanderlust. This passion, excited by difficulties, prompts us to go farther than we might have wished. Often one plans only to travel to Holland, but finds oneself, who knows how, at the end of the world. The same thing happened to me, Monsieur.
So begins Jean-François Regnard’s engaging tale of his travels in the north of Sweden, based on a journal he kept from July through September of 1681. It is the element of chance Regnard describes that makes his tale so appealing and contemporary. As he says, he set off for Holland with two friends and then heard that the Danish king was in residence in a castle over the border and decided to visit the court. Then Hamburg beckoned—only two or three days’ ride—and since one was so close and now knew members of the Court, why not see Copenhagen? It was summer and the evening light made travel pleasant, and a ship was leaving for Stockholm. There, the young king, Karl XI, son of Christina’s old suitor, had come into his majority and was said to be very welcoming. It wasn’t really so very far, Stockholm, just across the Baltic and up the coast a little ways. One can easily imagine Regnard as an earlier version of someone like Redmond O’Hanlon, the Oxford-based travel writer who seems occasionally to find himself in, say, the Congo or the Amazon Basin.

“A relentless demon drives me and makes me suffer. Who is this demon? The ardent love of travel,” he wrote, and, indeed, Regnard had had some surprising adventures before tackling Lapland. Born of a well-to-do family in Paris, he’d first traveled at age twenty to Italy and Constantinople; at twenty-three, in 1678, he made another trip to Italy and the Near East, rather more exciting. He and his good friend Fercourt, along with a young woman Regnard admired (and her husband) were all kidnapped off the coast of Italy by corsairs and taken to Algiers and sold as slaves. Initially Fercourt and Regnard were chained and shackled, forced to turn a huge millstone, but when it was made clear to their master that a healthy ransom could be extracted from the relatives of the captives, the two were given lighter tasks and granted the freedom to go to chapel on Sundays. The slave trade in Algiers, an outpost of the Ottoman Empire, was a lucrative source of income for the Barbary Coast pirates who roamed the Mediterranean and North Atlantic looking for loot and prisoners. It was a source of horror to Christendom. Priests and missionaries went to and from Algiers trying to free the Christian captives from their Muslim masters. Many slaves were never freed and died in captivity. Others, without hope of release, converted to Islam to make their lives easier.

For Fercourt and Regnard, two young men with ebullient spirits and wealthy, concerned families, captivity in Algiers was more a lark than anything—especially in the retelling safe at home when they both wrote accounts. After about a year, they were freed and returned to France. Two years later, they set off for Holland and then, (though it was not like having a Eurailpass and waking up to find oneself in Amsterdam, after having eaten a good Italian meal in Florence the night before), found themselves fêted in Stockholm. They met the young king, participated in the celebrations sur-
rounding the birth of his daughter, and drank an enormous amount. Karl XI gave Regnard a copy of the Latin edition of *Lapponia* and heartily urged a trip to north of Sweden where he, like Christina, had never found reason to venture himself. The three young men were soon on the way to Lapland.

At the time, the best way to go north in summer was by ship up the Gulf of Bothnia to Torne, an ancient market town on what is now the border of Sweden and Finland. Dozens of major rivers pour into the northern Gulf and one of them is the Torne, a major water route all the way up to the mountains that divide Sweden and Norway. Its source is a large lake called Tornetrask. By the end of July, Regnard and his companions were paddling upstream in a little Finnish boat. Heavy winds soon swamped their craft and they ended up walking along the riverbanks, having their first encounters with the mosquitoes so often found in the lands of the Midnight Sun. The weather was not pleasant (“what they call summer here would pass, in France, for a rather hard winter”) and by August 15th, there was a hard frost and snow on the approaching mountain ranges.

Regnard records his first meeting with the Laplanders, describing them as having large heads and small bodies and flat faces, “a people not created like any other,” and more like monkeys than humans. They pressed on, through mosquitoes and weather, portaging around rapids, sailing, paddling, and often wading. Their goal was the North Cape, which they assumed was quite near the North Pole. When they came to Tornetrask they believed that they were in the Arctic, for the lake was already freezing, and thought they could glimpse the end of the world from a tall mountain (this would have been a geographic wonder, since the North Cape is hundreds of miles north of the lake, the North Pole many more).

At Tornetrask they inscribed a line about reaching the end of the world on a boulder and, on their return to the Lapp village of Jukkasjärvi lower down, Regnard wrote out an entire Latin verse proclaiming their feat and had it placed in the small church there.

> Gallia nos genuit; vidit nos Africa, Ganges
> Hausinus, Europamque oculis lustravimus omnem;
> Casibus et variis acti terraque marique
> Hic tandem stetimus, nobis ubi defuit orbis.

(Gaul has borne us, Africa has seen us, the Ganges
We have drunk. All of Europe have we viewed with our own eyes;
Driven by the varies of Fortune both on land and sea
Here at last we stand, where our world ends.)
Jukkasjärvi, just outside the modern town of Kiruna, is best known for the IceHotel, a structure that’s built every winter of snow and ice and melts every spring back into the Torne River. If you were to take a kilometer walk from your very cold room at the IceHotel down the road to the Jukkasjärvi church, which was built in 1603 and is one of the oldest Sami churches in the North, you would still find that Latin inscription on a piece of wood.

Regnard wrote an account of his two months in Lapland with an eye to publishing it on his return. He larded it with often verbatim borrowings from Schefferus, especially on the subject of Lapp customs and beliefs, about which he otherwise could have known little, speaking neither Swedish nor Sami. But he chose not to make it public, after all, most likely because he soon learned that Lapponia already had been translated into French and published in 1678. In any case, Regnard was at the start of his illustrious career as a playwright with the Italian theater and the Comédie Française, where his plays, Le Divorce, Le Joueur, and Le Legataire universel, were widely acclaimed during his lifetime for their witty dialogue and sparkling satire of contemporary mores. Voyage en Laponie did not come out in France during Regnard’s lifetime, but when his complete works were published in 1731 Voyage en Laponie was very popular, read as much for entertainment as for information.

By the time Regnard traveled to Lapland, Descartes’ notion of examining the truth of an observation had gained ground. While Olaus Magnus was content merely to catalogue an encyclopedia of the visible world based on previous writings and travelers’ tales, and while Johannes Schefferus compiled and sifted reports from Lutheran pastors, allowing their prejudices to stand intact, neither of them felt it important to test out their assertions by seeing a people and a place with their own eyes. Regnard, for all his stuffing of Schefferus into the nooks and crannies of his book, was an observer, and in his light-hearted way captured the vastness of the countryside and the physical feel of mosquitoes biting one’s face and water soaking one’s boots. Unlike Lapponia, Voyage en Laponie could be used as a guide book. Later travelers (those who read French—it was never translated) found Regnard’s descriptions of Lapland corresponded to what they themselves found en route up the Torne River to the mountains.

One observation, of course, never would have passed muster with the man who asserted Cogito ergo sum, and that was the boast that the trio stood on the shores of the Arctic Sea when they reached Tornetrask and that they could see the North Cape in the distance: We think we are at the end of the world. Therefore we are. Centuries later, we, who live in a world mapped to the last inch, where, thanks to Descartes, the good and evil fruits of scientific epistemology rule our lives, marvel that Regnard could have been content to look north from a mountaintop and proclaim what could
not be verified. *Here at last we stand, where our world ends,* they wrote on a stone at Tornetrask.

But the world that was ending at the close of the seventeenth century was the world of wonder.

IV.

The autumn after Descartes arrived in Stockholm, Christina was finally crowned queen on a glorious October day before the cold had set in too firmly. It was the most extravagant coronation in the country’s history and began with a procession into Stockholm. Christina sat in an open carriage with seats of red velvet, embroidered with silver and gold, and drawn by six pure-white horses. Beside her walked sixty young noblemen wearing suits of yellow. In the procession were six camels and a team of reindeer from Lapland, more nobles, more carriages, all watched from the windows along the procession path by townsfolk who cheered.

After the crowning the festivities went on for weeks, late into November, with each noble family vying for the queen’s favor with fireworks displays and lavish dinners. Christina gave and attended masques and balls, feasts and jousts. She had an extravagant nature and thought nothing of depleting the treasury to put on a display that no one would ever forget. Her notion of governing mainly extended to racking up debt and then ordering her parliament to find new ways to raise money.

The Thirty Years War had almost pushed the Swedish state to insolvency and Christina’s spendthrift ways led only to more debt. Sweden, being so far north, during an era of great cold, could hardly feed its own people through farming, much less export food. There was silver in the mountains, but transport was difficult; the iron ore that would later make Sweden an industrial giant was of no use in the seventeenth century. The felling of the forests likewise remained in the future and, with the Baltic frozen for months of the year, Sweden could not compete in trade with the British and the Dutch. How then could the Swedish state raise money?

“Review everything thoroughly to make sure nothing has been omitted,” Descartes said in *Discourse on Method.* Buried in both *Lapponia* and *Voyage en Laponie,* among all the more exotic details of the nomadic lives of the Laplanders, the comparisons to monkeys, the strange tales of drums and shamanic trances, were some ordinary facts. About taxation, for instance. As if casually, Schefferus mentions that the winter markets are not only sites of trading among the Laplanders, but a place that merchants licensed to deal with the Laplanders come to buy furs, reindeer skins, and dried salmon from the rivers. In the early sixteenth century Gustav Vasa had figured out that these merchants should be taxed heavily by the Swedish
crown for the privilege of trading with the Laplanders. By the mid-1500s, all individuals in Sweden had to pay taxes to the Crown’s bailiffs. While the farmers protested, the Laplanders handed over the goods. As Regnard and Schefferus both noted, they were often taxed by three separate countries—Norway, Sweden, and Russia—up at the top of Scandinavia where the three countries came together and where the heart of Sápmi lay, the traditional pastures of the herds of reindeer. The Laplanders were taxed in reindeer skins and dried fish, but furs were especially valuable. In the seventeenth century, during the Little Ice Age, the value of furs went up sharply on the Continent. To the winter markets the Laplanders brought the skins of squirrels, blue foxes, martens, beavers, otters, white hares, even lynx and bear. The fur trade was one of the cornerstones of the Swedish economy. The Laplanders, despised, ridiculed, almost invisible, helped make possible Christina’s lavish lifestyle.

Think for a moment of the reindeer in her coronation procession. Reindeer live in the wild and are only semi-tame with care and training. To get the reindeer to Stockholm the Laplanders would have had to drive them many hundreds of miles from the mountains to the capitol. Some would have died en route, for reindeer are finicky eaters, preferring above all else lichen or reindeer moss. Only the reindeer are mentioned in descriptions of the procession, but they would have been accompanied by Laplanders in their native dress, perhaps the blue woollen tunics embroidered with red and yellow, or perhaps, because it was cool, in clothes made from the skins of rare white reindeer. Few watching the procession would have seen them as anything but exotic, not realizing that their industrious hunting, trapping, and trading contributed to the wealth of Sweden, the wealth that Christina was so eager to throw away on a crown she would keep for only four more years.

Soon after her glittering coronation in October of 1650, the twenty-three-year-old Christina began to meet secretly with Jesuit priests and to harbor dreams of living in the warm south, in Rome, in fact, near the Vatican, near the lush Italian countryside of her newly favorite painters. A plunderer at heart, she started arranging for many of her favorite paintings and statues, along with easily transportable silver plate and jewels, to leave the country to be kept for her in Rome, where she hoped to live as soon as she could persuade the Swedish Parliament to accept her abdication.

She was obsessed with notions of honor and early on seems to have conceived of abdication as a grand gesture that would fix her in her country’s memory more firmly than her reign would. Not only would it give her enormous cachet in the Catholic world, a chance to play politician on a greater stage, but it would free her from the incessant gossip of the court, far too aware of her attachment to Countess Ebba Sparre and other unsuitable men.
and women. She adored being queen and spending money on luxuries for herself and her favorites, but she found governing itself tedious and the pressure on her to marry and procreate a terrifying prospect. Once she had turned her main suitor, her cousin Karl IX Gustav, into the legally recognized heir apparent, she began making plans to leave Sweden for Rome.

Four years after Descartes’ death, she abandoned her throne and raced southwards with unseemly haste. “Free at last,” she reportedly said on reaching Denmark, where she cut off her hair and changed into men’s clothes. Over the years she became a figure of scorn throughout much of Europe, with her slipshod toilette, her gruff voice, and jokes that grew cruder every year. Although welcomed to Rome by the pope as a Catholic poster child, her bizarre behavior and the rumors that attended it caused her to be shunned by many of the intellectuals and men of the Church who had originally had grand hopes for her. With her shaved head covered by an array of strange wigs, her makeshift finances, and her proclivity for political meddling, she was often an embarrassment to the Vatican. It was often difficult for her to remember that she was no longer a queen. She hoped to become the ruler of Naples at one point and was crushed when France and Spain made peace and her services were no longer required. She held to her majestic view of herself, even when she was pawning her silver plate and jewels. She died in 1689, little mourned in Sweden, and hardly more so in Rome, though she had a magnificent funeral, attended by hundreds, in remembrance of her great public conversion to the Catholic Church. Her coffin was carried through the streets in a procession of nobility and ecclesiastics to St. Peter’s, where she was buried in a crypt of the basilica.

When Descartes died in Stockholm in February, 1650, Christina first planned a grand memorial to him. His tomb would be of marble; he would be laid to rest in Riddarholm Church with the former kings of Sweden. But like most things with Christina, her interest quickly shifted. Descartes, being Catholic, was temporarily interred in a graveyard for unbaptized children. There he remained for a number of years, until his remains were dug up and carried back to France, to rest in peace and glory.

NOTES:
1 According to Claude Clerselier, who sent a report of Descartes’ death back to France, the originator of the mind-body split managed to make a speech on his deathbed, proclaiming, “Ah, my soul, it has been a long time that you have been captive; now is the hour that you can escape your prison and leave the embrace of your body; it is necessary to suffer this disunion with joy and courage.” Other eye-witnesses testified that Descartes said nothing as he slipped away: he was in a coma.
2 R. J. W. Evans, _Rudolf II and His World_ (Thames and Hudson, 1997).
3 I use Laplander, Lapp, and Lappish when the time is the past, and Sami when the
context includes the present. Sami is the word this indigenous people have used for themselves for millennia; their word for the territory they have inhabited in northern Scandinavia is Sápmi, not Lapland.

4 In 1674, an edition appeared in England, its Latin phraseology changed into elegant, lively Restoration prose by a young scholar, Acton Cremer. Part of the reason that the English edition is more shapely than the Latin is that Acton Cremer simply cut out long quotations in Swedish (either because he found them inessential or, more likely, because he didn’t know Swedish); but Cremer was also writing in the age of Dryden, Bunyan, and Butler, which helps him find the sonority of sentences such as, “In the absence of the Sun, there are two twilights, one in the morning and the other in the evening, in which those poor remainders of days provide that the night should not be utterly destructive. And by how much the Sun is farther absent, the light of the Moon is clearer.”