

Meltdown

Mary Reynolds Thompson

*Everything
Falls back to coldness*
—Wallace Stevens

“I don’t have a clue where we are.” My husband is pouring over a map of Torres del Paine in Chile’s National Park in the southernmost part of the Andes. “The glacier is supposed to be here.”

Above a jade-green lake topped with icebergs that sail by like ghost barges, we stand exhausted. My legs are aching, and my backpack weighs me down as if filled with rocks. For the last four hours I’ve been stumbling like a drunk as I fight the winds. They flow up from Antarctica through craggy mountain passes, fueled to a furious and chilling blast as they travel over miles of frictionless ice fields. In Patagonia, at the literal bottom of the world, staying upright takes almost as much energy as moving forward. Where is the damn glacier anyway?

As if hearing my silent plea, Bruce points to what looks like whispers of fog in the distance. “That’s it.”

Our map is just ten years old, but it’s already obsolete. In a moment of shock we realize that in the last decade the glaciers have receded not by inches but by miles.

Later that night, as we buy a new map at the *refugio* store, Bruce turns to me. “It’s not just this map that’s out of date,” he says. “It’s the map of our consciousness too.”

My husband and I were given the opportunity to see firsthand how quickly climate change is reshaping the Earth. In the process we felt lost, scared. As if, like Alice, we had fallen down the rabbit hole into a strange land. Sometimes human consciousness appears to be receding along with the glaciers. Our souls and psyches retreat from facing the enormous changes we humans are inflicting on the planet. At times, we too, appear to be moving backward.

We burn altogether too brightly. Lights blaze through the nights, obliterating the stars. Coal power plants, two new ones each week in China alone, fuel massive growth and production and belch black smoke into leaden skies. We drive hours to work each day, heat and cool our homes, fertilize our food with petroleum and then ship it thousands of miles across seas and continents. We move away from the seasonal rhythm of farm life into the twenty-four-hour city. And the world gets warmer.

The soul knows that there is a place for frozen still-



View toward Torres del Paine National Park, Chile.
Source: Wikipedia Commons.

ness, for the hush of falling snow. Some part of us longs to slow things down, remain cool, calm, to keep something back. Ice preserves and protects. Drilling into Antarctic ice, we discover geological time stretching back hundreds of thousands of years in pollen, particles, minerals. Freezing protects things in perpetuity. Ice protects us.

In her book *The Future of Ice*, Gretel Ehrlick reminds us that when the ice melts, so too, will disappear the polar bears, walruses, seabirds, sea lions and fish that make the Arctic their home. There will soon be no Walrus to accompany the Carpenter. No Snow Queen to bedazzle our children’s nighttime tales. The Inuit will lose their cold-climate companions and way of life. Kilimanjaro will lose its snows. In China, India and South America, glacial rivers will dry up, and people will go thirsty.

Year-around ice covers over ten-percent of the world’s land surface, reflecting heat from the sun back into the atmosphere. Blanketed in white, we remain comfortable, able to withstand the fiery energy of our local star. Before the seas fill with snow and glacial melt and rise to obliterate low-lying countries and communities; before the Greenland ice sheet dissolves and throws the Gulf Stream off course, creating havoc with the weather; before that blanket of white is removed and we find ourselves unprotected, we’re being asked to wake up.

I’m melting down too. My computer’s hard drive crashes. I juggle ten projects at once. I read of another suicide bombing or school shooting. A client tells me of the anger that exploded in her when sitting behind a driver that was moving too slowly. As I talk to her, I remember my own inner tirade at the woman in the parking lot of Whole Foods who kept talking on her cell phone when I wanted her spot. My feelings are enflamed. A woman in menopause, hot flashes spark my short fuse. And it’s not just me; the whole sped-up, fired-up, fueled-up world is having a hot flash. Give me ice.

Compressed into a narrow fiord, the Perito Merino glacier is a frozen river that creaks and groans as it inches forward, great slabs shearing off with a thunderous roar as they plunge into Lago Argentino. I listen to the timpani of crashing ice. Watch waves rise like bony

knuckles from the lake. One of the few glaciers in the world that is advancing—by about six feet a day—, Perito Merino in Argentina is as pushy and pugnacious as Glacier Grey, just the week before had been shy and retiring. I clamp on crampons and edge onto the ice behind our guides. Across sharp claws of icy crystal, through tunnels of toothpaste blue, I explore a strange and shifting world. When the tour ends, I am reluctant to leave. The poet Mary Oliver wrote, “I would like to be like the... compliant pond shutting its heavy door for the long winter.” I imagine being water behind a heavy door of ice. Silent. Solid. Safe.

We may soon realize that the gift of ancient sunlight cannot (and should not) go on forever. Everyday we pump up eighty-five million barrels of petroleum out of

the ground. This oil is a gift from the sun, stored a carbon in organic matter that sunk to the floor of the oceans hundred of millions of years ago. But in the process of fueling our modern civilization we have squandered our primeval inheritance. And in the process we have formed an atmospheric shroud around the Earth that resulted in global warming.

We need to preserve our energy. Burn a little less brightly. We need to embrace more enlightened ways to ward off the dark night and wrap ourselves in warmth. We need to slow down. Cool down. Learn from the glaciers that the Earth is shaped not just by free-running water or the fiery throat of the volcano but also from the slow, steady march of ice.



Perito Merino Glacier, Argentina. Source: Wikipedia Commons.



Grey Glacier, Patagonia. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

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