



OK MOUNTAIN IN ICELAND WHERE THE GLACIER OKJÖKULL HAS DISAPPEARED
(PHOTO CREDIT JOSH OKUN)

Three
MOURNING ICE

*That white face is distant, and cold, unrelenting
in its forward grind to the sea,
stalwart even as it thins, crumbles, pulls back
into history and oblivion.*

...

*The sun itself finds nothing to love,
save soft rivulets of water its rays release
from eons of hard frozen luck.*

*But I tell you I do love this blue-white giant,
and grieve its leaving, even as I thrill to watch
thunderbolts of ice crash into azure seas.*

— Marybeth Holleman, “How to Grieve a Glacier”

ANOTHER UNCANNY THING ABOUT THE ANTHROPOCENE is that we mourn for the inanimate. Our centuries old concept of nature and geology as something opposed to culture has been challenged by our awareness that we are actually controlling the fate of the planet, and that we’re not doing a very good job of it. Deliberate, ethical mourning for disappearing glaciers and polar ice caps now seems appropriate.

It was not always so with ice. Consider July 16, 1879, when 33 men set sail from San Francisco on the U.S.S. Jeanette, a three-masted wooden ship fitted with engines and boilers. The Open Polar Sea theory at the time had shaped their plan to sail through the Bering Strait on a warm current of the Pacific Ocean. That current would, they hoped, provide a "thermometric gateway" through a rim of ice at the North Pole and into open seas at the top of the world. It would be the clear sailing promised by the yet to be discovered Northwest Passage.

Whatever else might be up there — ice or sea or land or a hole in the Earth — was the subject of fantastic stories. There might even be a civilization. In any case, the explorers would claim it for America and our manifest destiny to become a world power. What was there, it turned, was ice, a lot of ice. The stuff that had already forestalled many polar explorers and was the symbolic meaning back then of Arctic ice — an obstacle to EuroAmerican progress around the world.

The *Jeanette* didn't make it past the 72nd parallel before it was stuck in the ice. It remained stuck for two years. When ship and crew were finally freed by warming weather to sail again, the ice quickly captured them again. This time it kept the ship. The 33 men set out over the ice, 1,000 miles from the Arctic coast of Siberia, pulling provisions and gear in battered boats converted to sleds. "We are in for a time," said the captain. Only 13 survived, lost and confused in a strange land.

What transpired over those three years is one of the grand and terrible moral adventures of a captain and his men that we moderns like, especially when it offers detailed journals of hardships, dwindling provisions, tests of individual character and leadership, and the lessons of human hubris taken down a notch. Never again did a polar expedition have any intention of meeting open sea.

Today the *Jeanette* explorers, or spectral versions of them, could kick back in San Francisco until sometime around 2050 when projections indicate that global warming will entirely melt portions of the polar ice pack in summertime. They would have plenty of commercial and recreational company for their clear sailing.

In my lifetime the Arctic has lost more than a million square miles of sea ice. As part of a collective awareness of our part in this we are alarmed by a feedback loop. Things change on a warmer planet, these changes in turn warm the planet, which changes things even more. This warming loop has been running in the background for some time now. It's not a surprise anymore. We try to figure in the variables of clouds and the possibilities of geoengineering as we remain alarmed. We feel anticipatory grief over what might be our spiral toward unimaginable disaster, only this time it will be the disaster of no ice.

AT THE WESTERN EDGE of Iceland's central-highland plateau there is a low shield volcano known as Ok. It's not a terribly famous mountain in this part of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge where massive glaciers have pushed dolerite boulders down mountainsides. Ok's glacier, Okjökull, never drew much attention. At sixteen square kilometers, it was the smallest named glacier in Iceland at the end of the nineteenth century. It was three square kilometers by 1978, and by 2014 it was a small patch of slushy gray ice. It was declared "dead ice."

In the summer of 2019, about a hundred scientists, activists, dignitaries, farmers, journalists and children gathered at the summit of Ok to mourn a glacier. Film crews pointed cameras. There were eulogies.

Iceland's Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, told the small crowd, "The climate crisis is already here." The former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights was there, as was the secretary-general of Amnesty International who assured the mourners that the planet will be fine but we humans will be gone "if we do not change our current trajectory." A former Icelandic presidential candidate spoke in a shaking voice, "Some of the students who are here today are twenty years old. You may live to be a healthy ninety-year-old, and at that time you might have a favorite young person, a great-grandchild maybe, who is nearing the age you are now. When that person is a healthy ninety-year-old this event today will be in the order of direct memory from you to your grandchild in the future."

The group placed a memorial plaque with elegiac text. An Icelandic author who wrote the text hoped the plaque would enshrine a specific moment of urgency that would cohere for a reader two centuries from now. It might help that reader understand that we humanized climate change and expanded our experience of human grief in the Anthropocene.

Documentary filmmakers asked people who lived near Ok what they thought about the deceased glacier. Some shrugged and said that they were sad. Others were hearing its name for the first time. "It should not feel like just brushing something off your coat," a young girl said. "A good friend has left us." All things lost are not necessarily made good again.



“ICE WATCH,” OLAFUR ELIASSON, PARIS (2015)

THERE ARE HINTS OF A FUTURE before it arrives, including the perils of climate change. Olafur Eliasson, is a Danish-Icelandic artist who believes “art doesn’t stop where the real world starts.” Questions that occupy his work are relationships between data and cognition, thinking and feeling, and, with regard to climate change, are we more likely to act on knowledge or emotion. He regards the Anthropocene as “a time when nature doesn’t exist, it’s been humanized.”

His large-scale installations are “discussion places.” In an exchange with the art we can experience meeting points between natural and human, and recognition of coexistence, and a sense of process where nothing is fixed. “The Weather Project” dominated an expansive hall with representations of the sun and sky, and invited a fresh mediation on the weather, which has long shaped everyday conversation. Samuel Johnson once remarked that when two Englishmen talk about the weather “they are in haste to tell each other what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm.”

“My generation experienced a time of innocence,” says Eliasson, “but children now have never known a time without the challenge of climate change. I try to ask my children not what nature *looks* like; they know what everything *looks* like, the atrocities in Paris, in Syria, everywhere. But they don’t know what it *feels* like.”

“Ice Watch” was Eliasson’s placement of large blocks of Arctic ice in a public space in London, and again in a street in Paris. The ice was winched out of the the Nuup Kangerlua fjord in Greenland. It was carefully chosen as ice made of compressed snow fallen thousands of years ago and only recently broken off from a glacier. Thousands of blocks of ice that size breakaway every second.

In our contemporary ecological emergency, there’s a lot of data, but at this point we’re dumping ecological data on ourselves. It’s not helping. We don’t need to be doing that for one more minute. Olafur is putting pieces of ice there and saying, ‘Let’s try to start a conversation.’

— Timothy Morton, author of *Dark Ecology* and *Being Ecological*

“All the heads of states are in Paris to talk about the climate,” Eliasson said. “There is a lot of talk by the scientists, and a lot of data, but what does the ice really feel like?” His discussion space was blocks of ice arranged like a watch or a clock face to indicate the passing of time, and, in real time, observers could watch the ice melt. “A circle is like a compass. It leaves navigation to the people who are inside it. It is a mistake to think that the work of art is the circle of ice, it is the space it invents,” he explained.

When Eliasson unveiled his installation in London before a bemused audience he told them he hoped people would stop to touch and listen to the ice. “If you have a problem understanding the science and what politicians are talking about, put your hand out,” he said. “The blocks are like beings, they whisper to you. If you put your ear to them, you can hear the air bubbles. And that air is fresh and clean, it has half the CO₂ of the air outside. It is a little pop that has travelled fifteen thousand years to meet you and tell the story of climate change.”

Asked how long the installation would last, he replied, "Saturday, maybe Sunday. If the sun picks up and it gets warmer, it's going to be gone very fast."



MOONRISE OVER THE FROZEN BAY OF RIGOLET IN NUNATSIAVUT, LABRADOR

THE INUIT PEOPLE of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada, are firsthand mourners for ice. They are witnesses to human actions destabilizing conditions that sustain life. Their land is everything — family, kin, history, a place to experience blurred boundaries between human and non-human bodies. Melting sea ice that forms later and melts earlier has changed that. Diminished ice disrupts travel between communities and to cultural sites, and activities such as hunting and fishing. These disruptions are accompanied by grief, anger, sadness, frustration and despair. It's been called “solastagia,” a form of homesickness while still in place.

The Inuit live in world that stretches beyond the solely human. They have different ways of knowing and being, and sensuous experience with the more-than-human. Their mourning does not separate their bodies from those bodies, or from the land and their ice. They struggle to see a recognizable future as they physically experience the desolation of their home.

For us who are outside a land so dependent on its ice, the Inuit can represent a rather abstract definition of “ecological grief” as it has been established in

psychological and journalistic practice: “Grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.” Perhaps it’s better to let a few people of Nunatsiavut speak for themselves, as heard through the documentary *Lament for the Land*. The filmmaker recalled one Inuit woman, “She paused, she looked at me, and she began to cry.”

People are not who they are. They’re not comfortable and can’t do the same things. If something is taken away from you, you don’t have it. If a way of life is taken away because of circumstances you have no control over, you lose control over your life.

It’s hurting in a way. It’s hurting in a lot of ways. Because I kinda thinks I’m not going to show my grandkids the way we used to do it. It’s hurting me. It’s hurting me big time. And I just keep that to myself.

I think that the changes will have an impact maybe on mental health, because it’s a depressing feeling when you’re stuck. I mean for us to go off on the land is just a part of life. If you don’t have it, then that part of your life is gone.

The land is beautiful, beautiful land. It’s very healing, very calming, very soothing. You can sort of feel your ancestors out there. I love it.

We mourn over what we love. We hope it will somehow be cathartic.