

Ice Cutter

by David Ackley

McMurdo Sound. Amundsen. Penguins huddled in a mass against ravening beasts of storms. So wild. So mean. So cold. Now we lead tours here on ice-cutting cruise ships like this, with pink-faced retirees clad in plump down. I picture them bouncing along the ice in a gale, like moon-walkers, like water balloons. They come to see the ice before it melts, when we'll all be afloat.

Truth is, I loved it when I was one of two girls wintering in a quonset of funny boys with big beards who let Alice and me pick and choose, and respected the choices, the favored ones. Burton Rapalla. Nick Newby. Another whose name has slipped away, he wept when I kicked him out of my bunk after a single night. It's another nice thing about ice science, if you care—and I do—the odds are so weighted in our favor, so few competitors. Then the advantage we, who spend all our days with their husbands, have over the wives, stuck at home or off working their own herds in another office or lab somewhere.

Even so that was only a side benefit to the inimical cold, which I loved even more. Every sensation. Yes bitter, of course bitter, no better flavor for some of us. Caving crunch of soles in the snow. Wind-blown snow peppering exposed skin. We followed ropes to the instrument shed, hanging on against the wind like climbers ascending the level ice. And on clear nights the sky! The stars splintered needles in the black. Billions so clear and near you could reach out and gather a mitten-full for a starball. In the deadly still.

It demeans it to bring these old babies here for a tippy-toe on the ice pack. But we do because if not someone else will, some know-nothing and care-less who'd let the poor dears wander off to freeze while saving their own worthless ass. It's at least a way of coming back between NSF grants. In the lounge I talk about sea ice, listening to the refrigerated version clink in their glasses. There he is, the journalist, at a back table with the youngest of the lot, a

model, tall and lean as a whippet, who travels with her own photographer. The journalist catches my eye, and drops one eyelid. His lashes, long and sooty as a girl's when he blinks. Seen? Imagined? Dreamt? Difficult sometimes to tease these apart. I was why he said he'd come on this trip, to pick my brain for an article in Slate on the melting ice shelf. Quick pickings I guess. Perhaps it was better in the old days when we were off by ourselves on the ice, taking our measurements, reading our gauges, compiling readings and charts of data, dropping buoys among the pancakes of sea ice, when we weren't so *relevant*. And you're offered the attention that you find you like, then begin to need. I'd rather not need. Now I see we'd done better keeping the secrets to ourselves, before so many became *interested*. I'm not sure that says anything favorable about me, how little I care about the fate of the race. But we're all going to go, by fire or ice, as Frost says. Has there ever been a poet more aptly named? He drips with it, the rime of his hair, his icicle brows, those rifled eyes, drawing their bead.

The journalist, moved on, though with the confines of the ship, it couldn't be far enough. I'd told him, to his not unintelligent questions, the bare facts and statistics of the changes real or projected, this much ice turning to so much water etc. Mean temperature rise, melt rate, matters readily accessible, but he needed a face to attach these to, the "female scientist." The "human element," necessary to turn mere recitation of facts and data into "a story."

As if the descent to hell weren't story enough.

So I told him these things, all the while with the feeling that it was far less than the story. Perhaps he didn't ask the right questions after all. One always knows more than one has occasion to say. Or can. They should send poets to register the nuances of white, the blue shadows, the toddling penguins, the ravaging orcas, coursing the edges of the shelf. And under the ice, the algae, true garden of the sea. Which feeds the plankton which feeds the krill which feeds the whales. It's not only ice that will be lost. Would poets register this, or care?

Lying beside our pool in San Antonio when I was twelve, overcooked and too slothful to move, I would imagine myself cold, picturing a vast acreage of ice, black skies scintillating with cold generated light, a vicious flaring of cold, your skin etched with cold, not this milky wet webbish clinging , until I could actually raise goose-bumps on my own skin. The landscape of my escape became what I aspired to: I will go *There*. This, before I had much idea of where *There* was. But it turned out my imaginings were not far off, that *There* was so much greater, exploded and grand and without edge or end. Once I talked to a Frenchman, a cool customer in most regards. He'd just come back from Saudi Arabia where he'd gone into what they call " The empty quarter," way out of the city, to sleep under the sky. He turned to me, his black eyes welling full, "J'aime le desert." To not fear the emptiness, and embrace it in ourselves, as Frost says is to "...have in me my own desert places." And to hold them close and dear.

The journalist and his model disappear for hours at a time, emerging for meals, she pink and glistening, he smirking and sated. Smirks all around, vicariously; the odd, sub rosa glance my way, for comparison. The men all understand each other, though a couple of them have individually sidled up at the bar, to make their case as reasonable, if admittedly lesser, substitutes. I look them in the eye, smile, take their drinks, smile, let them walk me to my cabin, and shut the steel door in their pleading faces. Make love to your fist, I told one. I'll take alone forever before admitting I have to settle.

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Weather is mood; climate is temperament. Snow blind, we feel our way, curtained from superfluity like Shackleton's crew cradled on a spit between water and stone. Or like my friend, embracing his desert places.

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I have the feeling he tells her things I told him, embellished and mythologized. Now I'm glad there's more I kept back.

Why was I back there where I had so yearned to escape to this cold? I'd made it as far as Toronto and was poor and happy enough. But my college had no funds and I'm a researcher who doesn't care enough about people to teach. And so I went back to San Antonio, because the University had the funds to support an entire lab devoted to our research, Because the ground we occupied contained the oil that ultimately accounted for these funds. Now we do the research to account for the heat which melts the ice, the heat, which along with the funds is a product of the oil in the ground the university occupies. I cannot quite account for how this circle from source to self is ultimately closed unless in irony.

We are trying now to unwind it, the way you might unwind a hopelessly entangled ball of string. To fortify us for the task, when the heat threatens to melt even the ice in the freezers, the ice we have cored from the Western Ice Shelf and Ross Island and from Mt. Erebus, my friend and colleague, Felder keeps a container of Frozen daiquiris in among the cores. When the heat weighs down in a sodden mass like wet sheets, we repair there. I imagine Felder now, envying me as I stand wind-whipped on the prow, looking over the gun-metal empty swells for the first glimpse of solid ice. The freezer is haven from a pitiless heat wave that threatens.....

Felder and I were friends of a sort having never slept together. I'd discouraged him with jokes and chaffing when he seemed to be leading up to it, and he took the digression with good graces for the most part. We'd drink together, and only once when he got a little pawy and I pushed him away, did he imply I was being snobbish. "I'm as good as you're going to get, you know." "There's always the convent," I said. I confess, I'd thought of including in the shots of the trip I'd show him, one of the journalist with his arm around me. It seemed a problem that before and after, the journalist treated me the same, seeking me out for answers to his questions, asking me to dine with he and the model, all quite friendly as if we'd known each other forever. Old pals. It's one thing to be dismissed, but to have your reality undermined... but that is the expertise of the journalist,

to dig tunnels under our pleasant acceptances, and blow them to smithereens, sappers of truth, setting off mines of fact. I think we should have left everyone alone instead of publicizing our useless warnings—what does it matter now, when everything comes too late? What have we done except undermine human belief in agency. Have you ever seen “A.I” ? The truest film. Too raking to watch a second time as all its horrors and sadness wash over you...

Yet I sometimes wish for just one other to share my own bitter reality. Him, it could have been, for a moment. That was what I was going to show him, I think, the beauty and despair of this awful landscape and what happens to those who disrespect it even by its casual, implicating destruction. If we can destroy it, as we apparently can, its destruction foretells our own; like passengers on an ice flow, carving out staterooms with blowtorches.

