

the end of the **WORLD**

THE END OF THE WORLD. I've been there.

It's called Dome C, an infinitesimal rise in the East Antarctic plateau atop 14,500 feet of ice. There is little else. What distinguishes the scene is just this synthesis of the huge with the simple. It is the most singular environment on Earth. Space and time dissolve. Land is reduced to a solitary mineral broader than Australia and higher than Mount Whitney. The cycle of days and those of seasons collapse into a single spiral. The energy budget is always negative; none during the dark season, reflected away during the light. There is no life. There is nothing to live on. When Dante imagined the innermost circle of hell as an inferno of ice, he had Dome C in mind. Here is the Earth's underworld.

The place is the sum of its losses and absences. There is no color, no movement, no sound. There are no mountains, valleys, rivers, shores; no forests, prairies, tide pools, corn and cotton fields; no hurricanes, no floods, no earthquakes, no fires. The only contrast is between an ice-massed land and an ice-saturated sky. Everything simplifies into its most primordial elements. Even snowflakes crumble into icy dust. Nothing holds; there is no center and no edge. There is no near or far; no east or west; no real here or there; no Other, and during a white-out, no self. Words, too, shrink and freeze, as language and ideas shrivel into monosyllables: ice, snow, dark, sky, blue, star, cloud, white, wind, moon, light, flake, cold.

Improbably, there are, from time to time, people at Dome C. They are an eccentric gaggle—"society" is too formal a term—for the Ice acts on that group as it does on everything else. They are as disaggregated as the Dome's snowflakes. Their condition yields a host of individual pathologies but especially prominent are an extreme anomie and a lassitude referred to, respectively, as the Big Eye

and the Long Eye. The Big Eye is insomnia. There is no way to reset one's biological clock and no society sufficient to impose an alternative chronometer. The Long Eye is aptly defined as a twelve-foot stare in a ten-foot room. Where there is no horizon, there is no means to judge distance and place, and the default setting is a kind of comatose gaze. At Dome C there is no dawn or midnight, no ecological order with which we must reconcile our behavior, no institutional arrangement with which we can recalibrate our thoughts and deeds. There is no one to organize, no one to obey, no one who needs to reconcile what he or she does with what anyone else does. When you rise, eat, work, and sleep is completely capricious, for where there is no contrast or context, there is no real choice.

So, too, the scene has its intellectual pathologies. The Ice is geography's ultimate quantum, a singularity uncluttered by anything save itself. Its crystals have the purity of triple-distilled water, its setting is as unblemished as a moon of Uranus. Clarity is close to absolute, and that clarity means almost nothing because it is about nothing. Yet if we follow the reductionist model of understanding, this is where our quest should lead. Here is the most elemental of all earthly environments, and upon it we should erect our models and narratives and analyses. Start with the isolated, the simple, and the pure. Build and compound into complexity.

That premise is nonsense, a literal *reductio ad absurdum*. Reductionism is good for extracting resources and for creating instruments, medicines, gadgets; but it does not—cannot—tell us how to use them or when or why. It cannot convey meaning because meaning requires contrast, connections, context. It cannot tell us what we need to know in order to write genuine history, even when that history involves nature. At Dome C there is no doubt that nature matters. There is nothing else. Here nature is immanent and immense and, by itself, meaningless.

At Dome C society works only because, ultimately, there is a lifeline to another world of LC-130 transports, fuel oil, food, and wooden-floored Jamesways. This is equally true for its community of inquirers. They can make sense of the place only by bringing with them learning acquired elsewhere, a lifeline of comparisons, stories, data, and ideas from beyond the horizon of the Ice. Even the motives that impel them to this place originate outside it. There are pushes but no pulls, for the Ice is profoundly repellent. It absorbs or reflects, it does not attract. One goes there in defiance of any natural order. No one, by choice, remains. Here is a nature distilled beyond essence to something close to geographic nihilism. Dome C, implacably passive, is finally nothing, and nothing, as the Ancients knew, comes from nothing. Especially at the end of the world.

AN EXAMINING LIFE

ALL THIS MAKES TANGIBLE what all of us already know, that our method builds on inherent complexity, by amassing context and contingency, not by reductionism. This makes our practice more art than science. It means that we won't produce the intellectual equivalent of simple tools and drugs, which is to say, easily packaged lessons-learned and historically based prescriptions. We have no gadgets, no technological fixes, to lay before administrators. It means that we

cannot begin with nature and add people, except as a narrative conceit, but must begin and end with humanity sited on the land.

At Dome C, there was one scholar among that atomized company who was making history. How I came to be there was the outcome of a peculiar dialectic. One part was study, the career path of a scholar. From it I learned that literature mattered, that history mattered, science mattered, ideas mattered; that a life of scholarship might be a life well spent. Yet, by itself, education was the sound of one hand clapping. What made a blade, however well honed, into scissors was a parallel career at the North Rim fighting fire, a life I began before I went to college. There, amid the giant ponderosas of the Rim, not the groves of Academe, I underwent my coming-of-age rituals. My life became a two-cycle engine, powered by the annual beating of mind and heart, the migration between library carrel and fire cache. They were two worlds; I did no scholarship on the Rim, and did nothing with fire on campus. It was not clear which side might prevail, but that choice remained hypothetical because for years I could find no permanent job in either.

This is how I lived for fifteen years, at the end of which I belonged really to neither world. I was too much an intellectual to sit easily amid the gearheads and smoke eaters and adrenaline freaks in the fire community, and too much the smokechaser to reside within an Academy as bureaucratized as any federal agency and that exhausted endless energies calibrating the most minute emblems of status. Writing *Fire in America* started the process of reconciliation. But there was a danger that the book, like myself, might simply quicken the tempo without changing the seasonal rhythms that structured my life. Fortunately, something had intervened.

Doing the research behind the book had required a long winter's circuit around the country. I took to the road with a (very) used International Harvester pickup and a (not-quite-so-used) single-axle Timberline travel trailer, and a young bride, in the fall of 1977, the same year that our founders chartered the American Society for Environmental History. When the book came out, what might have been dismissed as garish eccentricity—what one critic expressed as “what will they think of next?”—found a place within legitimate scholarship. The book acquired what it most needed, a context. Then I trekked to Dome C, reviving themes I had cultivated in graduate school until I finally realized that that place was a negation of all themes; there was nowhere else to go. When I cycled back, *Fire in America* was in publication, and through no special talent or insight of my own, I had found a community of environmental historians. I could fuse my old dialectic into one examining life. I had returned from the end of the world and found a home.

BATON ROUGE

TODAY WE ARE GATHERED at a place utterly antithetical to Dome C. Southern Louisiana is rank with life, with people, with a palimpsest of social, cultural, and historical complexity. Dome C was a place of water, but singularly so, frozen into invariance. Baton Rouge is a place shaped in its geo-genetic fiber by water, but water dispersed into endless varieties—into thunderstorms, floods, hurricanes, the proximate Gulf, bayous, the dank air, and water in motion, defying attempts

to constrain it. It is not a setting simply parsed into monosyllables or reduced to laboratory instrumentalism or channeled by intellectual levees. Even the source of its notorious pollution, petrochemicals, derives ultimately from life, marinated through geologic time. An acre in Baton Rouge exceeds the entire information content of Antarctica.

The nature of scholarly disciplines is that they seek to reduce ambiguity and inscrutability, and there is good cause to rejoice in their various capacities to do just that. The literary among us might caution about the imitative fallacy, that confusion, for example, is not explained by confused texts but by texts that artfully convey a sense of confusion, that clarity does not come from Ice-like reductionism but from heightened context. Rather, the scenes that interest us beg for thick description and the capacity to dramatize, not merely declaim, for evocation is also explanation.

From both of the Two Cultures we are challenged. The sciences would have us simplify the world into data-collection. We would do in archives what they do in laboratories, and what cannot be codified would not exist. There is little range for history and scant recognition that ecology is a historical science, an odd omission for a group so intent on making Darwin a prophet of secularism and on invoking evolution's universality as an explanatory device. We would have to abolish the moral heart of humanity since it lies beyond the grasp of scientific method. The humanities would hammer us into the rigid taxonomy of modern historiography—combinations of its four ruling elements; race, gender, ethnicity, and class—like pre-Socratics arguing that every object is a compound of earth, water, air, and fire, or medieval physicians that every personality is an amalgam of but four humors; and they would deny whatever cannot be so codified, even if it be the natural world. This is a parody of the diversity proponents say they celebrate. This is reductionism with a humanities face.

Rather, genuine scholarship flows from the ability to empathize with and imagine experiences beyond our own compass, and for this community especially, from our faculty to imagine nature as an agent in that setting. We have the natural world to take us beyond ourselves and our texts. We need not be stuck in the infinite echo chambers of cultural constructivism, because the natural world provides a kind of ground-truthing to our remote-sensing of the past.

My own preference is to begin with natural phenomena and build into history, not begin with historiography and search out environmental topics that might contribute to this or that disciplinary taxonomy, to this thesis or that counterthesis, or to this revisionism and its nth-degree successor. But this is a matter of taste. What we all share is the need to devise means to give expression to our insights, which is why good writing goes beyond using the active voice and striking out adverbs. It means giving shape and story to the choices that transform data into drama. It means a poet's voice with a scholar's vision.

“THE POET’S, THE WRITER’S DUTY”

IN CONTEMPLATING AN END to the world amid the shadow of the atomic bomb, the Korean War, and the looming Cold War, William Faulkner famously declared

that it was “the poet’s, the writer’s duty” to convey “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about.” Today’s environmental problems seem as foreboding as any that in 1950 prompted warnings of imminent doom. That collapsing world now embraces not only the Bomb but slashed biotas, razed landscapes, pollution on a global and geologic scale, species hounded to extinction, more and more uninhabitable places. It is our task to write this story. The human heart in conflict with itself is our subject as well, and to it we add the conflicted heart in conflict with nature. For this we need science, we need the disciplinary humanities, we need pedagogy, but above all I believe we need a sensibility that allows us to show as well as tell.

I consider myself fortunate to have reconciled my two lives into one examining life. But I am not alone. Today, our assembled company refutes the charge that we can do nothing, that the past teaches us nothing, that the failures of science, technology, and humanistic scholarship can be solved only by more science, more technology, more humanism, each by itself. Rather, we need them all, in contrast, in conflict, in context, and given expression, for like Faulkner’s invocation to do more than simply chronicle the record of human folly, we can be a means to help our species endure and prevail. We can make history the search for a usable place as well as a usable past.

Most of us are doing just that, each in our own way. And that is why I believe that today, here, amid this tangled bank of scholars, we are long way from the end of the world.

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