

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

