

Ice Matters: A Meditation on Snow

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Most speak of floods in the age of climate change, when the cooked and the roasted take precedence over the snowed in and the freezing, and the parliaments of lost islands shall be convened in the sea. Comparatively cruel fates should never be entertained, but the difference here is worth noting. Flooded islands lost to the rise of sea levels; submerged hopes done by the relentless pounding of storms and water; destroyed civilisations drowned by the supposed folly of the human species. These take a privileged if morbid position in the discussion on environmental catastrophe and climate change.

The more neglected aspect of modern discussion is the ice factor, and with that, its attendant literature. The chill produces its own mental states, a specific way of seeing. Away from the humidity and the heat, from the tropical sighs and the going-troppo sense of the heat lies another form of threat, beauty and appreciation. Call it ice, cold, the freeze.

History is replete with its minor and major ice ages, its cold snaps that do last beyond the minor calculations of a meteorologist. Cold, in short, [makes history](#), altering the course of wars and civilisations. The Little Ice Age (sometime between the 16th to 19th centuries) features as political weaponry and historical debate, a period that managed to fill diaries and scripts with concern and speculation about glacial doom or imminent redemption for the human species.

Predictions and assessments become matters of concern and conjecture. Martin Mlynchak of NASA's Langley Research Centre [suggested](#) last September that the sun's inactivity could lead to the lowering of temperatures of the thermosphere (a layering of the earth's atmosphere at some 300 miles above the surface). "High above the Earth's surface, near the edge of space, our atmosphere is losing heat energy. If current trends continue, it could soon set a Space Age record for cold." This led, [erroneously](#), to the suggestion that a "grim 'mini Ice Age'," would make its presence felt.

"The 'imminent mini ice age' myth," [writes](#) environmental scientist Dana Nuccitelli with tired resignation for the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, "rears its ugly head in the conservative media like clockwork every year or two."

From the solidity of ice, its image of hardened bodies, snow bitten parts and paralysis, comes that poetic, if overly sentimentalised spin-off: snow. Snow remains a source of poetic reflection, a linguistic and cultural house of richness. The Danish author, Peter Høeg, delved into the theme of snow as the backdrop to understanding a crime in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. Snow acts as the illustrative vehicle and device.

"I think more highly of snow and ice than love," reflects the protagonist, Smilla Jaspersen. "I have a good relationship with ice."

Ice is a measure of existence: it comes in the form of field ice, frazil ice, pancake and porridge. Inuit terms for snow become a matter of interest: qanik covers large flakes; apuhiniq frozen drifts. To understand snow and its forms is to understand life.

Today, in the southern Balkans, a captured miniature of the Ottoman Empire past, the scene is replete with soft colours on the horizon, a glazed blue reminiscent of porcelain and pale eyed beauties, as the light gradually fails. The distant blue itself has layers: tenderly soft to the eye to heavy dark; the paleness fades to solemn colours on the lower horizon. The sun has been banished, but its rays remain stubborn reminders, coming through to play and tease out the last light of the day.

The snow has been caking, posting its presence on window sills, pavements, cars. Dirt and mud has been blissfully hidden, ugliness brushed and layered like a model's makeup. Snow's softness belies an utter terror; its crystal dimension hiding the fundamentally dangerous nature of its accumulation. Cars must be dug out of the clutch of the freeze. Ditches are hidden, drains covered. Public transport has been affected; the passengers await for buses that may arrive, at some point. (The emphasis here is on some, rather than point.) Time assertions are an irrelevance here, in the land where Romani, Serb and Albanian meet, and the domain of the freeze takes precedence over all.

The snow that falls today suggests, paradoxically, comfort and warmth. Provided the body has a suitable layering of warmth for the body, the flakes, falling vertically, is at a stalemate. It does not steal warmth, but nor does the body necessarily win out against it. It cannot get through to the skin; it acts as a soft cover, falling and sliding off effortlessly. There is none of the savage biting that comes with a skin searing blizzard, nor a deep, bone chill that comes with the brittle inducing conditions of a shock freeze. This is snow on the slow kill, a seductive crystallising blanketing that seduces the walker into grand exhibitions of dancing ritual, of gallivanting in feathery ice and attempting to puncture layers of immaculate, cream coverage.

Animals must cope, and so they do. Sparrows gather together in strings of feathers and flesh across branches iced and weighed down by snow. Chaffinches seem to bleed their colours into the bare vegetation now carpeted by white. Stray cats seek shelter; dogs, the same. These snow levels do not necessarily kill in the same way as certain freezing conditions do, and can create layers of protection for the more enterprising. Nature, being nature, deals a blow to the rest, and the retreating cold reveals the bodies of those failing to find suitable shelter.

Humans must also cope. Rounds are made to homes isolated, their occupants caged - in Bujanovac, favours are done, though these are self-serving. Bills must still be paid, even in the midst of catastrophe, and men make their rounds to gather payment. (How helpful.) The elderly must not be forgotten as units of payment for the state craving its pennies - the utilities providers shall have their pound of flesh. For some, reserves are running out, and humanitarian assistance is sought. Snow kisses the young who play in it but condemns the aged who would prefer a warmer fate. The craving for spring is palpable.

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