1

Pancakes

Wamuwi Mbao

We don't think of ice as wilderness. The wild is overgrown. Verdant. Warm. The Antarctic doesn't fit with this way of seeing things: its materiality appears glassy, closed off. The newspapers report that the amount of Southern Ocean that freezes over is shrinking. It's difficult to make this point stick. Ice disappearing from the Antarctic is not believable behaviour at all. We hold it at arm's length. If the ice is not where we are, it can remain in the abstract. We have a long history of holding the icy places at a distance: we imagine them as white places to be explored only by the intrepidly white. In older times, the great problem that had to be tackled was an abundance of ice. Ships playing the economies of their day (whaling, mostly, but also exploration) had to contend with vast fields of sea ice. The melting is a kind of reorganising of the world.

***

Scientists are trying to understand why the sea ice is breaking up at the rate that it is. They are trying to figure out what the melting ice will mean. The consequences are outside the frame for the time being (outside your frame: you use a different frame to the scientists). There are suggestions that, for a host of reasons, we need to submit the ice to surveillance, because the ice that is

going away won't be coming back. We have learned that there are different kinds of ice. Grease ice. Pancake ice. Ice pans. Scientists are constantly touching, poking, prodding at ice and hoisting it, placing it in tanks and exposing it to waves. The work of categorising ice, making its states and conditions knowable, making its movements readable, is taking place as you're reading this sentence. In this regard, scientists are taking their explanatory framework from the explorers of the past.

***

Animated conversation, indistinct chatter
"You can play the odds."
"How long have you been here?"
"It happened because of an atmospheric river."
"I'll be here until Sunday."
"They're just for the look—they're not prescription."
"Do you want ice with yours?" *laughter*
"We, the unwilling …"
"Do you know when this starts?"
"That's him over there."
"I had this dream last night …"
"Does Ice Speak?"
"Did you apply?"
"Ice creeps while you sleep."
"I can't read my writing."
"I read that a piece of ice the size of Pretoria broke off."

***

The sound of frozen water undoing itself is rhythmic. Drip. Lap. Clack. Squeak. Nails on a distant chalkboard. Roars and whistles and wails that plunge and pour forth. The sonic landscape gives way to sudden craters of silence. Researchers bury receptors in the ice, and these receptors produce evidence of the ongoing noise. They hope, so they say, to use this noise as evidence that things are

happening out there. Wild ice is very different to the domestic ice that clinks mutedly in your glass.

***

One brings a guitar. One wears a beard. One has a nervous laugh. Twenty-five past. They gather in the room that is shaped like a jar, and they chat amongst themselves as they wait to hear what they have been selected to do. Over four days, personalities thaw. Conversation lassoes itself to the weather, to writing, to the lives that have been left in other towns, other cities, shared or distant. There is a need for conviviality before what we do not know.

***

The shift wherein ice became, not an impediment to economic journeying, but an object whose wellbeing was a source of existential concern, reflects a late-stage worry about impending apocalypse.

In the morning, at breakfast one sits alone. Three share a joke. After the meal, three go forth, and two remain behind. Two sit by the fire. “It’s how we make sense of the world,” one says. One says, “Where is the link?” It will be a day of questions. It’s not warm enough, in the board room, outside the room, everywhere on the hillside. Too cold for a t-shirt, too hot for a sweater. The day is reserved for discussions about thermal relationships. What are we meant to do with this information? The abstractness encourages dissociation. Nobody asks what it smells like, all that ice. At tea-time, discussion clusters form. One returns to the board room. Three decamp, taking their conversation with them.

***

It rains and it rains, and the sky is grey. The road down from the mountain retreat is briefly blocked. Should we be worrying when there’s so much rain? Water is a commodity with its own agency, whatever form it chooses to take. We can’t contain it indefinitely.

Our extractive relationship to water threatens to be redrawn along undesirable lines. What will the future look like? Whose future? In the presentations, the Antarctic territories seem to figure as an unpopulated icescape. The icescape has been gradually encroached upon by meaning-infrastructures from places invested in securing the continuity of certain ways of living. For those who do not belong (or belong only peripherally) to the socialities that are beginning to crumble and fray at the edges under climate change, the changes are not good.

***

Ice seems to look the same everywhere. This makes it convenient for representing climate disaster in a very general way. You've seen the scenes before. Ice sheering off glacier cliffs and sliding into the sea. Lonely polar bears. That kind of thing. Don't pity the animals. More than 90% of all the animals that have ever lived are now extinct, MOST OF THEM UNREMEMBERED. There is, some feel, still time for knowledge to become practice. There is still a sense that this story is bigger than us, out of human scale.