

Between An Iceberg And A Hard Place

A polar bear gazes out at the Arctic Ocean from his perch on an iceberg. The warming of the Arctic has made life difficult for these northern bears, increasing distances they must swim between icebergs, and isolating them from their food supply.

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caption for photograph of a polar bear on an iceberg.

These warm stolen winter days I've been thinking a lot about Uncle Abe. They took him away from here, his home, in the last century; they carted him away like a prize antique piano someone had just inherited from an unknown relative, and couldn't wait to show it off, even though he can't play it. The racket the cargo plane made, and the smell of its exhaust, I can't get them out of my ears and nose.

Last I heard he was in Alaska, known as "Ambassador Abe." He's supposed to help reduce carbon emissions. As if that's *our* job! You see we are "charismatic megafauna," big telephotogenic animals who look good on PBS, thanks to viewers like you. People, I think, go to zoos to see animals like me, to have a good time with their kids, to nudge at something dormant in their primal imaginations, not to hear about gloom and doom scenarios. They sure don't go to look into the eyes of my captive cousins and friends.

It's been a year of loss. My little boy...died last year. He just was too weak to make it without enough seal blubber. Look how thin *I* am this season.

I hear Uncle Abe's gone a little nut wiggly, diving off a board over and over again. He was always a shy reserved bear, an introvert, a true solitary. I can't bear to think how he feels having all those human eyes upon him, doing the same stupid tricks for people taking a break from watching television. And let me tell you, he liked his space. Nothing for him to travel 60 miles a day, a real Polar Flaneur he was. 'Where ya 'off to today, Uncle Abe?' 'Oh, just a-loafin' here and there. See you for dinner.' And how he must miss the beautiful voices of our silence up here. In captivity, I imagine he feels, well, captive.

You see the ice floes are getting smaller and smaller, floating further and further apart. Just this year, Cousin Pearl floated over there, way out and deep into the water. If I squint I can make out a white furry ball; she looks like a small cloud of mist on the water. She's weak and sick now; she can't swim far enough for food like she needs to.

Water and ice, water and ice. Makes a big difference the shape of things, you know. Uncle Abe was a kind of wise. He told me once, when I was a small bear, that extinction is a longer process than we think. "Not to worry, little one," he'd say. Dad called him a "perverse optimist". Momma bear rolled her eyes, didn't say anything, and cuddled me to sleep on our favorite iceberg called "the Big Berg". That favorite Berg of ours is mostly water melt now...

Me? Oh, I do a lot of gazing into nothing much these non-winter days. Up here, we say the weather has gone bi-Polar. I try to go with the floe. But I am worried, very worried about where the floe will go, or not, and that soon one day I will be gone with the floe. I am Floe Bear, I like to joke. There's talk now of genetic breeding and artificial inseminations, to "save" us. (Chuckles)

Mind if we finish up for today? I'm feeling weak and hungry, an immigrant, almost an outcast, in my own home here in Canada. Who would've thought I'd be a stranger on my home ice? Now that's what I call really "losing the home ice advantage"!

Sometimes I think maybe I should just volunteer for capture, get re-trained...I don't have the eloquence or dexterity of that ape, the one who learned to act, smoke, and drink like a mannered European gentleman, the one who gave that learned report to the scientific community, remember? Though, maybe, I could learn to smoke a pipe. I have not been captured, not yet at least, so I don't know how well I'd do at learning to act like my captors. No doubt, I'd end up being used to sell something nobody needs to people who can't afford it.

Or, I could get some nature journalist—how about you?—to help me write my tell all auto-bear-ography. The things I have seen, since the Great Melt began... You know what the old song says: "Come gather 'round people, wherever you roam, and admit that the waters around you have grown."

It's the end of the day now, and I have to rest. I never thought I'd see the drip, drip, drip come to this. And all those cameras, promiscuously shooting at Uncle Abe; it makes me so sorry and sad to feel about. My fur gets a prickly itch. The Melt's for real. Next time, can you manage to bring some seal blubber, we're starving out here.

(Ambles away singing: "I wish I had a river to skate away on.")