

RETURNING TO THE GLACIER

By Nicholas Crane Moore



art by Richard Hanus

Along its outermost edge, the glacier had a polished feel. I ran my hands across its frigid surface, caressing the grooves and contours like admiring a finely sculpted piece of marble. The ice was smooth to the touch, slippery with meltwater. It melted beneath my fingers.

To reach the glacier, I had traveled alone through the yellowing fall, threading mountain passes turning crimson in the chilly air. I looked for bears but did not see any in the meadows beside the highway. I did not yet know to scan the higher slopes, where they gorge on late season berries amid the tundra.

Hiking to the edge of the ice was not arduous. From the icefield high above—a perpetually frozen plateau, seven hundred square miles—the glacier hung into the canyon, terminating less than a mile from the Park Service parking lot.¹ I followed the main trail to a designated viewpoint then scrambled beyond it over dark talus scraped loose by the retreating glacier. Signs warned of danger from falling ice, but the temptation was too great. I had never touched a glacier before.

That was five years ago, nearly to the day. One week later, I met the woman who would become my wife—a lifelong Alaskan with wildness in her soul. CC helped me see the beauty in starkness and silence, the joy of adventures in cold and snow and ice. She opened my eyes to the presence of light in even the darkest hours.

Now I'm returning to the glacier, this time with my wife. As we leave Anchorage, I tell her I am anxious to see how much it has changed over the past five years—years that have brought transformation to my own life. Five years during which the world has pursued reducing carbon in the atmosphere without urgency, and one summer, Anchorage suffered the discomfort and confusion of 90-degree heat. I'm scared to see how little of the ice is left.

Small black signs begin to appear along the road as we approach the glacier, still miles away, displaying only four digits in white lettering: 1815, 1889, 1894. As I learned during my prior trip, they mark the glacier's approximate terminus in each of those years. By the time we arrive at the parking lot, the sign reads 1917.

CC and I do not head straight for the glacier—not yet. First, we are climbing to the icefield, whose edge, from the trailhead three thousand feet below, appears as a pale sliver against the purer blue of the sky. As the hike begins, we observe that the forest around us is saturated with color, radiant with life. Leafy alders, wet from overnight rains, shimmer in the sunlight. Ripening berries dangle like string lights from an unbroken tangle of green. My wife's enthusiasm for the features of this subarctic jungle—each wildflower, each flitting songbird—magnifies and enriches my own. We are lucky, so lucky, to be here on this glorious day, together.

We emerge from the trees after an hour or two to find that the glacier's terminus is far below. Now in an open landscape, we follow butterflies as they flit from flower to flower and

¹ National Park Service. "The Harding Icefield." Kenai Fjords National Park. Last modified July 1, 2023. Accessed October 2, 2024.

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watch a pair of small falcons, merlins, scour the tundra for prey. Their cries ring out across the mountainside and evaporate into silence. Then they are gone. Without the enclosure of foliage, we can fully appreciate the vastness of this land; no matter how high one climbs, there are still mountains above you.

Though it's the only one we can see, the glacier is just one of dozens of frozen tentacles unfurling from the vast ice field into the surrounding valleys, canyons, and, on the Pacific side, fjords and bays. This great bulk of ice, believed to have been formed more than twenty-three thousand years ago by the compression of snowfall upon snowfall, is continually shrinking and expanding with the seasons.² Like outlet rivers draining a massive lake, glaciers slide down the valleys, stretching away from the icefield. When their toe ends melt in the summer heat, they seem to retract—always in a state of flux.

We hike on, eventually crossing from the familiar tundra into a barren moonscape strewn with gray rocks of various dimensions—fragments of mountains born at the bottom of the ocean. We climb a final promontory and the icefield appears—a sheet of gleaming ice stretching to the horizon. Its sprawling immensity is interrupted only by the uppermost portions of mountains, otherwise submerged, which float like volcanic islands above a frozen sea. It is the kind of sight that leaves one grasping for the words to describe it. Ultimately, none can.

It is difficult to tell how far the glacier, whose upper length we now see flowing down from the icefield below us, has receded since my first visit. What is clear is that the naked earth on which we stand was recently clothed in ice. This melting, I remind myself, is not a recent phenomenon. For somewhere in the range of twenty thousand years, since the last glacial maximum of the Pleistocene, ice like this has generally been losing mass.³ What the land has surrendered in ice, it has largely acquired in meadow, forest, and tundra. Even now, we notice tiny plants invading this lunar surface, setting the first roots of the tundra to come. There are no endings in nature, these pioneers remind us. Only change, transition.

Wind sweeps across the icefield, delivering repeated doses of midwinter on this late summer afternoon. We huddle in the shelter of an outcropping and devour sandwiches packed in anticipation of a more leisurely picnic. Apparently, the wind was unaware of our plans. We steal one last glimpse across the ice and head back down the trail. Despite our fatigue, we are propelled onward by the many sources of our sudden exhilaration: lingering awe at the icefield, the strong wind at our backs, the surreal magnitude of our surroundings, our sense of accomplishment, and thoughts of what the rest of our adventure will bring.

We ponder aloud what we might eat for dinner, savoring the thought of a well-earned meal in the town of Seward, where we plan to camp by the ocean and watch for sea otters, and

² National Park Service. "The Harding Icefield." Kenai Fjords National Park. Last modified July 1, 2023. Accessed October 2, 2024.
³ Jason P. Briner, Joseph P. Tulenko, and Nicolas E. Young, "Clues from Glacier Debris: Dating and Mapping Glacial Deposits Since the Last Ice Age in the Western Alaska Range," *Alaska Park Science* 20, 1 (2021): 10-19.



perhaps even humpbacks, cresting the blue swells of Resurrection Bay. But there is still one thing left to do. Finally reaching the bottom, we turn toward the toe of the glacier.

As we trudge along the trail, I prepare myself for the unease I expect to feel at the sight of a half decade's shrinking. It is not the melting itself, but the cause of its accelerating pace and the immense suffering it portends that disturbs me. This fear of a destabilizing climate is especially acute now that I am married to a woman I love, with whom I may someday raise a child. The thought of their suffering induces anxiety verging on panic. But it would be a mistake, an act of cowardice, to avoid the truth revealed by the vanishing ice. The melting glacier reflects more than just a warming atmosphere—it suggests other inevitable changes that seem beyond what I am prepared to handle. These, too, I am beginning to accept, as they are challenges we must all eventually confront.

A week ago, CC and I visited an elderly man, a family friend and neighbor, who recently lost his wife to cancer. The two of them were inseparable until the end, sharing a light-filled home on

a bluff overlooking the Kenai River. Now he lives there alone, trying to orient his life without its guiding star. As brutal as it is to imagine, CC and I acknowledge that his reality is something one of us will one day experience. Whenever we talk about this, we struggle to make sense of it. It is not that death is difficult to understand. What we find hard to accept is the realization that the more we invest in the act of living, and the more deeply we commit our hearts to others, the more pain we will eventually endure. There is no reconciling this cruel irony—no resolving its sobering implications. All we can do, we've concluded, is love one another as well as we can, and make the most of the time that we have.

When we reach the viewpoint, even my low expectations of the glacier's condition prove optimistic. The ice has retreated so far up the mountain, deep into the canyon it helped carve, that it is impossible to safely approach. I recall, with a jolt of distress, how easily I accessed it only five years ago. There would be no chance of touching the ice now. I try describing to CC, who is

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seeing the glacier for the first time, the extent of its deterioration. I find it difficult to express how jarring it is to see the change. But she does not need to have seen it before. She already understands.

The glacier tells us that all things will change. Even those that once seemed permanent—beloved forests, species, and entire ecosystems, like life itself, revealed to be fleeting. The immediacy of this knowledge is the added burden of my generation, and of those to come. In time, we will see the glaciers melt. We will watch the forests burn. And we will say goodbye to the people we cannot fathom living without. Under these circumstances, it seems to me that to love—a spouse, a parent, a friend, a community, a place, even the Earth itself—is an act of great courage, knowing the pain that awaits.

Standing at the glacier with my wife, I cannot help but wonder how I will find the strength to deal with all that I will eventually face. There are infinite grounds to be pessimistic, and the state of the world warrants deep concern. Yet all around me, there are people who have chosen neither to succumb nor turn away. I'm thinking of the climate activist seeking a better future for life on Earth, or the doctor treating patients with terminal cancer. The biologist studying the decline of Arctic whales. The parents preparing their children for an unjust world. The old man caring for his ill wife. In a troubling time, these are the people who show me the way—who chart a middle course between naivete and cynicism, between obliviousness and despair. They are people who march forward, despite their fear, into the coming storm. People, in other words, who show the courage to love.

CC and I do not linger for long beside the other visitors. We are tired from the hike, and the comforts of a meal and a campsite beckon. As we walk back to the parking lot, we see dark clouds drifting in from the east, grazing the peaks of the Kenai Mountains. It may rain in Seward, but we don't mind. We intend to make the most of the time we have. ☞

