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Ice

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ICE

Now on the heavy water great pans of ice are coming, breaking and reforming, drifting with the slowed current: shaggy donuts of ice, ragged squares and oblongs, turning and pushing against each other, islands of ice among lakes of dark blue water. Crowded shoreward by the current, they brush the shore ice with a steady "shsss" as they catch and go by. And with each sheering contact a little of that freezing slush clings to the outer edge of the shore ice. The ice is building outward, ridged and whitened, thickening with each night of frost, with each wave of shallow water that washes it.

As I look intently into the shallows, I see that boulder ice, a soft, shapeless and gluey mass, is forming on some large, rounded stones not far below the surface; the river is freezing from the bottom also. Now and then a piece of that water-soaked ice dislodges and comes to the surface, bobbing in the moving current, turning over and over. It is dirty ice, grey and heavy with sand, small stones and debris.

Where it gathers speed in the rapids above, the sound of all this ice and water is loud, rough and vaguely menacing. As the cold gradually deepens and the sunlight departs in the days to come, the floating ice will become harder and thicker, and the sound of its movement in the water will change to a harsher grinding and crushing. Now in the slowed current before me it is mostly that steady and seething "shsss" that I hear, and underneath it a softer clinking as of many small glasses breaking against each other.

Standing here, watching the ice come down, I recall past years when I came to a channel much like this one, in mid-October with only an inch or two of snow on the gravel bars, to fish for salmon. I had with me a long pole with a steel hook at one end. Standing very still and quiet where the current slackened against the ice, I watched for the glowing red and pink forms of salmon on their way upriver in the last run of the season. Sometimes I would catch sight of one toward mid-channel, beyond reach of my pole; but often they would travel slowly along the edge of the ice, finning and resting, at times nearly motionless in the current. And carefully I would extend my gaff-hook along the ice edge behind the fish, and with a sudden,

strong sweep and jerk I struck the fish through its body and flung it ashore.

The big hook made a nasty gash in the side of the salmon, and fish blood soon stained the snow where I piled them, one by one. If the fish were a female heavy with eggs, the eggs would sometimes spill through the torn side of the fish, to lie pink and golden in the shallow snow with the glazed, mottled bodies of the freezing salmon.

There was something grand and barbaric in that essential, repeated act. To stand there in the snow and cold air toward the end of the year, with a long hook poised above the ice-filled river, was to feel oneself part of something so old that its origin was lost in the sundown of many winters; a feeling intensified, made rich by the smell of ice and cold fish-slime, by the steely color of the winter sky, by the white snow stained with the redness of the salmon: the color of death and the color of winter. And to all this would be added the strong black of the ravens that gathered each evening as I was leaving the river, to clean the snow of the spilled eggs and blood.

I caught the big fish one at a time, watching and walking quietly along the edge of the ice, hour after hour. In a few days I would have two or three hundred salmon heaped in scattered mounds in the thin, dry snow of the sandbar, to be packed home a few at a time, heavy and frozen.

I see no salmon now as I stand here by this ice-filled channel, searching its green, bouldery shallows and bluer depths for a telltale flash of crimson. It may be that there is not a good run this fall, that I am too early or too late, or that the fish have taken another way upriver.

The sound of the water and the ice before me is one sound, familiar over the years. But there are other sounds of the ice, among them the strange and eerie moaning that comes from under the new ice of a pond when it is walked on, as if some sad spirit in the depth of the pond were trying to speak. In midwinter, a large sheet of ice will split with a rippling crack when the temperature suddenly changes or the ice bed shifts underneath, the ripple traveling fast with a winnowing sound at the end. And there are those small, ticking sounds of the ice in the evening when the cold slides toward its deepest zero, as if a thousand hidden insects were chirping bitterly in chorus under the ice and snow. And, finally, the thundering crack and plunge of the shelf ice breaking off in the spring as the rising water wears away its

support: a sound that can be heard for miles, like the detonation of a heavy building.

The ice sings, groans, howls and whistles, as if it were alive. Years ago, when I was hunting for caribou in the Alaska Range, I heard the oldest lament of the ice. It was early October, and the slow freeze was coming down over the empty land and its many lakes. As I stood alone by the roadside one afternoon, there came to me on the nearly windless air, as if it were coming from the earth itself, a muted and forsaken moaning from the lakes and ponds. It was a sound out of prehistory, of something deeply wounded and abandoned, slowly giving up its life to the cold. There were fleeting ghost-fires on the tundra, white-maned shadows from the bands of caribou fleeing before something I could not see. Then, distant shots, gunfire; the sound of a truck rattling by on the frozen road.