

THREE MOMENTS

— of an —

EXPLOSION

STORIES

*China Miéville*



DEL REY  
NEW YORK

above them all the dust clouds billow out *Your Way* in soft scudding font.

2. It's a fuck of a fine art, getting that pill into you so the ridiculous tachyon-buggered MDMA kicks in at just the right instant and takes you out of time. This is extreme squatting. The boisterous, love-filled crew jog through their overlapping stillness together and hustle toward the building. Three make it inside before they slip back into chronology. Theirs are big doses and they have hours—subjectively speaking—to explore the innards of the collapsing edifice as it hangs, slumping, its floors now pitched and interrupted mid-eradication, its corridors clogged with the dust of the hesitating explosion. The three explorers have bought climbing gear, and they haul themselves up the new random slopes inside the soon-to-be-rubble, racing to outrace their own metabolisms, to reach the top floor of the shrugging building before they come down and back into time. They make it. Two of them even make it down and out again. They console themselves over the loss of their companion by insisting to each other that it was deliberate, her last stumble, that she had been slowing on purpose, so the ecstasy would come out through her pores, allowing the explosion to rise up like applause and swallow her. It would hardly be an unprecedented choice for urban melancholics such as these.
3. You can't say, you can't tell yourself that it's the intruder's spirit doing any of this, that there's a lesson here. It's neither her nor any of the other people who've died in its rooms, in any of the one hundred and twenty-six years of the big hall's existence. It's not even the memories, wistful or otherwise, of the building. The city's pretty used to those by now. The gusts, the thick and choking wafts that fill the streets of the estate that's built in the space the warehouse once occupied, are the ghost of the explosion itself. It *wants* something. It's *sad*—you can tell in its angles, its slow coiling and unfolding. A vicar is called: book, candle, bell. The explosion, at last, lies down. As if, though—the two drug enthusiasts who got in and out of its last moment insist—out of pity, rather than because it must.

## POLYNIA

When cold masses first started to congeal above London, they did not show up on radar. By the time they started to, perhaps two hours later, hundreds of thousands of people were already out in the streets and gaping skyward. They shielded their eyes—it was cloudy but very bright. They looked up at glowing things the size of cathedrals, looming above the skyline.

They'd started as wisps, anomalies noticed only by dedicated weather-watchers. Slowly they'd grown, started to glint in the early-winter afternoon. They solidified, their sides becoming more faceted, more opaquely white. They started to shed shadows.

Social media went mad with theories. The things were dismissed as mirages, hoaxes, advertising gimmicks for a TV show. They were heralded as angels, abominated as an alien attack or a new superweapon.

The first appeared over City Hall. This was plausibly a strategic tar-

get, which increased the sense of panic, though Parliament was only a few miles away and would have seemed a more obvious choice. Others quickly thickened into visibility over Lewisham and Elephant and Castle and up my way.

Some stayed still. Others began to drift slowly, seemingly randomly, according to their own currents, not the winds.

All but military flights over the city were banned. The army and specialist police units came onto the streets. Jets went low overhead, and bristling helicopters rose suspiciously and seemed to sniff at the sides and undersides of the eddying things.

I was eleven—this was almost fifteen years ago. There was me, Robbie, Sal—she was big for her age and bossed the rest of us around a bit—and Ian, a nervous kid to whom I wasn't nice.

We were under Mass 2, as it was later dubbed. It rocked sedately from side to side over the skies of Neasden as I and my friends ran in urgent delight around the gawping north Londoners. We ran to keep up with it, following it toward Harlesden. It seemed to be the most excitable of the visitations, heading east and south like an unstable ship.

From every one of the masses sank microclimates. We were all wearing our thickest clothes in the air that poured off them. It was like a bitterly cold wind flowing straight down, gusting with wispy snow.

It was all frenetic, it's hard to say just what happened when. I remember running really fast past the clock on Station Road, where it meets Wendover Road and Avenue Road, barreling by a woman in a black jilbaab and knocking her shopping over so she shouted at me furiously and I yelled something like "Shut up you old cow!" to make my friends laugh even though I knew I was in the wrong. It seems strange to me now that I remember that, that I took a moment to answer her, that she was so angry with me, that she even noticed me, in the shadow of what was overhead.

"Look at that thing, man!" Robbie said. Army vehicles went past the Portuguese cafés and the Islamic bookshop.

We ran full pelt all the way to the West London Crematorium. As if

they'd have let a gang of raucous kids like us in to the grounds, normally, but they didn't care: everyone was pushing through the gates because the mass was right overhead. It rose above the gardens of remembrance. There must have been funerals going on that day, with hundreds of strangers in the garden, and that thing above.

People were trawling for information, watching the news on their phones, but by the time the government scientists announced the results of their tests (whatever they were and however they'd taken them) their conclusions were obvious to everyone. We all knew that what hung above London were icebergs.

Military pilots made heroic maneuvers through the cold vortexes around the masses. Their undersides and flanks were frost- and snow-furred ice. On top, invisible from London until we saw the footage from the planes, jutting toward the lowest cloud, they were almost snowless. They were like white glass, hills and hillocks of blocky facets.

The city heat met their cold. On day two a frozen stalactite like a giant icicle broke off Mass 4 and plummeted to the ground, destroying a car in Dagenham and starting a whole new panic. I texted with my crew. We agreed to meet right below Mass 2 again. It was as if we were goading it. We were eleven and death couldn't touch us.

The berg had stopped above the common of Wormwood Scrubs. A line of police officers surrounded the grass. "You ain't coming in," one said to us. The dirty parkland stretched behind him, overlooking London. Above it was the ice. We shivered in its shadow. I could hear the screams of London's feral parakeets freaking out in the trees.

We were debating how to slip past the cops but before an hour passed they took some instruction over their radios and did not so much usher us in as simply give up being guards. Mass 2 was on the move again. We went whooping after it.

After the fall of that first pillar people got nervous. There were instructions to stay indoors, as though it would be better to be crushed by a ruined house than by the ice itself. In fact the bergs were very solid. In

the first week of their existence, only three slabs of any size came down, causing damage but no fatalities.

They weren't the only chunks to break off: they were the only ones to fall.

I was at Brent Cross Shopping Center with my mum and dad and my sister the first time I saw one of the icebergs break. It was a few days after their appearance and we were shopping for a football kit I needed. We were in the car-park and I was looking at Mass 4, I think it was, hovering miles away above Ealing. My dad told me to hurry up, and as he turned we heard a cracking. A chunk of ice the size of a building broke off the northern edge of the berg.

I gasped and my dad let out a horrified noise as the block toppled sideways, spinning—and then stopped. It didn't fall—it drifted away horizontally. It bobbed, spinning, leaving a little wake of suspended ice. We looked at each other.

The breakaway drifted back, and coagulated again with the main mass, a day and a half later.

It was two days post-manifestation that the first official government survey team made icefall. Scientists, professional explorers, a few international observers, an escort of Royal Marine commandos. In the press release, they all wore cutting-edge arctic gear and determined expressions.

They went for Mass 3. It had a horizontal plateau breaking up the slopes of its topside, onto which a helicopter could lower them. By now, all the icebergs had been given their own names, usually based on their silhouettes. The *London Evening Standard* declared this the “ascent of the Saucepan.” They live-streamed the delivery online, soldiers in thermal clothes lowered on swaying cables onto the pristine blowing surface of the ice, to make base camp almost a mile over Battersea.

Over the next five days we all followed the team's terse dispatches, their tweets and photographs, footage from their cameras, as Mass 3 itself described a wobbling circuit above the city. People leaned shivering out of

their offices to look as it overflowed. “The Saucepan” was escorted by military helicopters. If you were at a high point in the city looking out at the icebergs, you could see Mass 3 was surrounded with the specks of aircraft.

We read the reports of the team struggling up sides of ice, stared at the images they beamed down. Of course we were all caught up in the drama, and no one would deny how brave they were. Now, though, a few years on, so it's not like pissing in church any more to pass comment, it's fair to say that it was mostly the sort of thing you'd expect from any arctic adventure. Freezing winds, terrible ice, so on.

I suppose I'm saying that Mass 3, like all of them, is exactly what it looks like: an iceberg. No more, no less. Cold, austere, barren. Awesome, of course, because since when were icebergs not? But, and bear with me with this, except for the fact that it's levitating above London, it seems no more nor less awesome than its cousins in the sea.

There were, though, two exceptional images from that expedition. The first is the iconic shot of the team crossing an ice bridge between two forbidding white crags, with the slates and aerials of Wandsworth far below. The second is the selfie of Dr. Joanna Lund, taken close to the iceberg's summit.

Dr. Lund looks unhappily at the camera. She's slight, with squinting eyes circled in dark, her hat pulled down hard over her ears. Behind her is the pinnacle. You can just see the rest of the team at its base, looking up at the white blocks. There's the usual hard beauty of such landscapes. The city is not visible. The ice could be any ice. But there's a flat quality to the light and something in Lund's expression that makes the picture profoundly unsettling.

In the debriefing after the team's extraction, the government was keen to stress that they had, of course, considered the possibility that the icebergs might collide. If that was true, any protocols they had in place utterly failed.

On the morning of 17 June, the very day that last photo of Lund was

released—while, we were told, the team were attempting an ascent of that troublesome ice—Mass 6, nicknamed Big Bear, began rolling with unusual speed across the skies, north away from Croydon.

At first this caused no particular alarm. But as the hours passed and Mass 6 accelerated, and as Mass 3's own sedate trajectory altered, it became obvious that the two were on a collision course.

The helmetcam of Lund captures the catastrophe. The crew are bracing behind frozen slabs. Swinging into view below them with the yawing of Mass 3 are the tower blocks of Peckham. And looming abruptly out of the south comes a cliff of ice. Mass 6 moves fast.

Everyone in London heard the impact.

Considering the scale of the things, it wasn't much more than a glancing blow. The two ground together horribly, breaking off great chunks that spun into the sky. Mass 6 lurched to the east. Mass 3 pitched.

Lund staggered as her nook tilted. Her brace held, the steel cord did not snap, but the ice in which it was tethered crumbled. In seconds she slid down angles it had taken her hours to ascend. We saw the footage from her point of view. She careered down a chasm that now sloped hard and became a funnel.

I watched the file many times, though my parents told me not to. I'd slow it down, feeling sick and adrenalised as Lund descended. She'd been issued no parachute. I'd loop back to the start again and again, every time the ice released her into the air.

Mercifully, the camera gave out before she hit the ground.

We played games of London Iceberg. Robbie's great-aunt was in sheltered housing up toward Wembley, and we'd meet him there because at the back of the complex was a slope of rubbishy grass down toward the railway lines, that we could access by climbing a low fence near a neighboring garden.

Robbie's great-aunt would give us biscuits and ask us what we were all up to. Her house was untidy and full of papers and books. She was small and smiley and, I now think, shrewd and amused by us, though

her attention always seemed elsewhere, as if she was listening for something. Robbie was kind to her. It was strange to see him so gentle, Robbie with his boxer's face and megaphone voice. He'd been in a body cast as a small child, and had been making up for it since. He called his great-aunt Nantie and we never knew her real name.

"Those things," she said once, interrupting our awkward chat while we sat politely in her living room, standing up suddenly apropos of nothing and opening her front door so we could see that one of the bergs was indeed approaching. When she sat back down she said, "Life in a polynia, eh?" She smiled, watching our reaction to the word.

"That's a lake with ice all round it," Ian said. I blinked at him, angry that he knew that. He wouldn't look at me. Nantie laughed.

I looked it up myself when I got home. He was right. I scrolled through images of ice-holes and belugas.

We'd do our best to talk politely with Nantie as long as we could. When we ran out of anything to say we would go outside and wait until Robbie could get away too and then we would all run, slip through the barrier and slide down a scree of trash to a wire fence, only a few feet above the train lines themselves.

Sal was usually the first down. She would wait for us by the wire, finger-snarling her long hair into knots, and whistling impatiently through her teeth.

"You're like a fat bear!" she might shout at Ian as he picked his careful way behind me. He was not fat at all but she called everyone fat. She would make lumbering motions at him and Robbie and I would laugh and I would try to speed up, to come down and stand with her while Ian descended without looking at us.

It was the steepest slope we could find in our area, one that took real effort to get up and down. We felt like we were mimicking, honoring, what the explorers above us were doing. We would watch the trains that rushed below. I know I wasn't the only one, looking down, who imagined looking down from a lip of ice, at London.

Ian and I were most into the bergs, so he wanted to hang out with me. That was complicated. I wanted the company of someone who read all

the magazines and knew as much as I did, or almost, but I was also infuriated by his owl-eyed camaraderie. Sal used to look at me scornfully when he and I talked. There was always a wet spot on his cuff where he chewed.

Sometimes I'd go to his house. If I had some cool cards in my pack of Iceberg Updates, we'd compare collections, maybe swap a few.

Lund came down in the forecourt of a supermarket. The police got there as fast as they could, but of course locals uploaded their pictures of her body and of course we found them, and showed them to each other with a complex of emotions I cannot put into words.

I still have the image somewhere. The hollow feeling in my stomach was never mere ghoulishness. I got to know the faces of all the onlookers in that picture as well as I did the strange configuration of Lund's body. I think I was horrified, I think I did care.

I wanted to have saved her, and if none of my friends were watching, I would reach through the wire fence when trains went past, stretch out my hand into their gust and imagine that I did.

There were days of rain and we wondered if the water would erode the icebergs, bring them down in a cascade of slush. But the second wave of survey teams trudging on their surfaces reported that even the worst downpour only melted them for a centimeter or so. They would quickly freeze back into their pre-rain shapes. While the scientists investigated, a small, powerful cross-party group of MPs demanded that the government blow up the icebergs with incendiaries.

It was during these wet days that some commentators first suggested a connection between the appearance of the icebergs and the growth of coral across the facades of Brussels. It had been three years since the brain coral, pillar coral, and prongs of staghorn coral had first started to appear. Every week contractors removed the thick outcroppings and worm-waving extrusions on the European Parliament and its surrounds. They still do, cracking and scraping the bony stuff off and scrubbing down the surfaces. Every week it returns, leaving the buildings a fishless reef.

While that link was mooted, survey teams clambered the slopes of

Masses 1 and 4. They ascended the geometric pinnacles carefully, planting anchors and trudging up with spiked boots. They found nothing but more wind, and they came down again.

Flights resumed in the rest of the country. Heathrow and Gatwick and City stayed out of action but Stansted reopened. The BBC announced that it had commissioned a drama series set among investigators on Mass 2.

Sometimes when I met up with Ian, just the two of us, we'd shadow one or other of the masses. My favorite was 5. I called it the Ice Skull, claiming it looked like one. He liked 2, the smallest and lowest and most stalactite-bearded, which circulated mostly around our neck of the woods. We liked it when the bergs went over brownfield sites and wasteland: we would walk underneath them and kick old brick bits and garbage out of the way, looking for secrets in the ice's shadows.

We collected images, information, stories. It was these days that opened up the city to me, sent me down to New Cross, over to Silvertown, south and east and areas I'd never been before, wherever the icebergs went.

In Stepney a newsagent was taking every other publication out of his shop window and filling it with, of all things, copies of *New Scientist*. "I tell them," he kept shouting to someone inside. "I keep telling them." He waved a magazine at me jovially. "Look," he said.

On the cover were photographs from a southern mission years before I was born, icebergs rising from the water. Next to each of those images was one of a mass over London. The frozen slopes and slices and cracks were the same. The crags overhead were close to identical to those that had once floated in the Antarctic.

"Look, they melt!" he said. "First they melt and now, look, they come back."

Sometimes the gusts of cold below the ice were particularly bad, became brutal mini-winters, freezing the air into little storms. It had been a while since London had had proper cold, even in December and January. The local fashion for berg-coats started then, a vogue for the

lightweight, all-year warm clothes most of us still carry, that you can slip on and off if ice crosses your path above.

I had never seen real snow before, proper deep snow. One afternoon outside a shopping center by Dollis Hill, near a patch of dead trees, Ian and I found a pile of it bigger than either of us. It looked a bit wrong to me. Afterwards, I realized that it had been too angular to be a drift. It was a rare instance when a sizable chunk of iceberg matter had fallen straight down.

We messed around with it a bit but I was late and I left Ian there. When I got home he'd messaged me with a picture of a dirty, melting mound of slush. He'd kicked his way right into it. In the middle was a battered padded tube, a bit bigger than the core of a toilet roll. It was sealed and wrapped in black plastic.

THERE WAS STUFF IN THE MIDDLE OF IT FROM UP THERE, he had written.

SNOW LANDED ON RUBBISH FOOL, I wrote back.

Meanwhile, an unauthorized expedition uploaded footage onto the internet.

The man staring into the camera wears a woolly hat and a bandana over his mouth. Behind and way below him is a vista of night lights, of London in the dark. A microphone is clipped to his collar and his voice is clear despite the rushing wind.

"Right," he says. "So, this is, like, the fourth fucking time we've been up the Shard." Links to videos of the three previous expeditions on that huge building briefly appear. "But, you know, kudos on the 'increased security,' Mayor." There are sarcastic cheers out of shot.

The camera turns to show other figures clustered by the aerial tower of London's tallest building. The climbers wear a cobbled-together variety of colors and styles. They hoot and wave. The shot zooms down on the south London streets where you can just see pedestrians.

"Anyway," the first man says. "You've seen me before. I'm Infiltrax.

Or—" He pulls the bandana from his mouth to show a surprisingly soft face. He looks like a cool older brother, the kind who might buy beer for you. "OK, so I'm Ryan," he says. "I think this time man's going to go uncovered. It's time for the big one."

The camera pans up. Filling the night sky overhead, astonishingly close, is a jagged field of ice. It looms, and it's approaching. It's so low that the longest extrusions dangling from its underside reach down below the level of the Shard's tower point. On which, the camera briefly shows, two explorers wait.

"Come on, quick," says Ryan, out of shot, "we ain't got much time." An icicled ceiling closes over them, invoking ecstatic claustrophobia.

"We've been watching and waiting. This is the lowest of the lot. This is the one that's going to fuck up your architect's plans. And it's lower now than it's ever been and if we've got this right . . ."

It's never been quite clear what equipment the crew used: the camera doesn't show it, though there's been speculation about "grapple guns." What we know is that there's a sound of percussion, and shouting, and the footage cuts to that from a helmetcam, and for less than two seconds you can see someone dangling from high-tensile cable. With that literal cliff-hanger, the video pauses for several seconds, entirely dark. To open again on Ryan's face, filling the frame.

"Here we are," he says. He's holding the camera himself. It's daylight. He lets us see that behind him is an edge of ice, then air and cloud, then, almost a mile below, that London crawls.

The fashion for urban exploration had been declining. There had been a glut of handsomely photographed excursions into deserted hospitals and neglected storm drains. The ascent of Mass 5 was a new scale of feat for these infiltrators, and it rekindled the fascination. "Yeah, we know what they're doing," said some pixelated informant to the BBC, in a disguised voice, "but no clue how they got up there."

"Look, Battersea," says Ryan breathlessly, waving down at the roofless chimneys, bracing himself to climb a crevice below a companion's kicking boots. "London Eye. Is that Fuckingham Palace?"

There's a long climbing montage, as deliberate as anything in *Rocky*. When Ryan reappears, he has more stubble. He is not so boisterous. Breathing gear bobs around his neck.

"OK then," he says. You can see the ice blocks that distinguish the mass's peak. "You getting me? We have a bit of a theory, so to say. You seen the soldiers marching up and marching down again, right? But there's more than one way to climb things. OK so Jo's quicker'n the rest of us, she's gone on ahead, and . . ."

Two hundred meters above him, a figure in a red jacket hauls herself up. She's just below the top of the steep ice pile.

"Keep on her, man," Ryan says. "We're up in a minute. Right behind you, Jo!"

The woman looks both too close to and too far from us. She swings an ax. The footage is unstable. She climbs another few steps, around a cold crag, the camera veers for an instant, returns, and she is gone. She is nowhere.

"Jo? Jo? Jo?"

Ryan's eyes are wide.

"She's fucking *up*, man! I told you."

I stared at the screen.

"You got to take the right direction," Ryan says to the cameraperson. "Shall we? After you, bruv."

I texted Ian, again and again. WHAT DID YOU DO WITH THAT THING YOU FOUND? I said. IN THE SNOW. I texted him this because dangling from Ryan's rucksack was a distinctive tubular pack exactly like the one that Ian had kicked out of the ice.

Ryan climbs the ice blocks. You can hear him wheezing. You can see the undersides of his companion's boots. Then he looks up and he's alone, surrounded by clouds. Then the footage ends.

I got hold of Ian eventually. "I left it there," he said. "It was disgusting! It was all covered in dirt and it was in the rubbish!"

I made him come back to Dollis Hill and show me exactly where

he'd found it. He made a lot of noises about how I was being stupid but he was scared of me so he came.

There was no ice overhead. Every pile of rubbish we passed he paused and ostentatiously investigated.

I was looking at the signs on a newsagent's notice board, as if they might help. A young woman was saying to her baby, "Oh please stop, just *please* stop." In the distance, from the east, came a big thundering sound. It was ice shifting, one of the bergs changing. We knew how to tell that from the noise of a storm now.

"You're so stupid," I said.

"You *said*," he said. "You said it was nothing."

"Shut up. Leaving it, you're so stupid."

He said nothing. Pigeons wheeled. I looked slowly down and caught Ian's eye. We stared at each other for a minute and I saw something in his expression and I stepped toward him and he ran abruptly in the direction of the Tube station. I didn't even feel surprised. I went after him, shouting almost dutifully, but he was way ahead of me and he got into the underground before I got near.

Ian stayed off school for days. He shut down his social media accounts. When I went to his house his mum opened the door and stared at me with new dislike. "He isn't coming out," she said, before I could speak. She closed the door and said through it, "Don't come back or I'll tell your dad."

Who did I have to talk to about what was happening?

Someone found another padded tube and sold it to the *Daily Mirror*. A young woman handed one to Channel 4 News. "We should stress that there's no way to confirm this is indeed what the contents claim," the newsreader said.

It was reinforced cardboard, water-sealed in black plastic, wrapped in dense bubble-pack.

"It was sitting there in the middle of a pile of snow," said the woman on the TV. "Something about it didn't look right."



They showed the note it contained. It was handwritten in big script. Message 4, it read.

*This is Ryan. Were climbing by the brow. We had to leave John or Duro we call him.*

*He found old spikes and rope. Like there was another camp before. He said there was something in the ice shaft like something dark like an old animal froze in there bare years ago but we never saw it there was all cracking and stuff falling and when we reached him we couldnt see it. He stayed there just whispering.*

*If we look down we see you but refracted. Hope these dont hit no one. Well pack them in snow to be safe. There are birds or "birds" up here.*

*We have pictures in our cameras we cant drop. Ice here looks different.*

*Hello from here.*

It used to say "Hello from the redoubt." Someone had crossed out the word "redoubt" and, in a different hand, tried "ghostberg." Someone had crossed that out too.

In the underneaths you couldn't tell whether London was cold because of the icebergs, or if it was just cold again, really cold for the first time in a long time. On the 25 December, Mass 6 went low over the Serpentine Lido, while the Swimming Club were doing their traditional Christmas Day plunge. The downdraft flash-froze the water and a sixty-two-year-old man died. "He was doing what he loved," the club secretary told the news.

Gunships buzzed the berg. People massed on Parliament Hill again, to watch soldiers drop onto the lower slopes. It was like an invasion.

My dad took me to watch from the viewing platform at the top of Centre Point. It was nice of him—he wasn't that interested himself.

Honestly, I'd rather have been outside, in the streets, right underneath, but I was touched. The building authorities had set up some high-powered telescope so you could take it in turns to stare through the glass at tiny figures crawling up the mountain's side.

We heard they found the remains of Ryan's camp, but that the explorers themselves were gone. The soldiers went deep into cracks and caves—they released some beautiful shots from inside—but they found nothing.

Robbie's great-aunt died.

"That's why he ain't been around," Sal said. I hadn't noticed. "His family went away after. You know what happened?"

One night Mass 7 had sat for several hours above north London with the sheltered complex squarely below it, so the residents had turned up their heat and huddled in bed early. The next morning, when the iceberg had moved on and the sun had started to melt the frost on the grass, they found Nantie sitting on a bench in the shared gardens under a glaze of ice.

"She had like a scream of agony on her face," Sal said.

I told my mother Sal had said that and she was furious.

"That's absolute rubbish," she said. "You know I know Robbie's mum. Her aunt was very very peaceful. She must have just had a little snooze in the garden and just not woken up. I hope when it's my time I get something like that."

The front door had been open, she told me. I remembered how Nantie had got up suddenly to open it, that time, as if she had known an iceberg was coming.

Ian still wasn't at school. His parents must have got in trouble for that. I went back to his house. I texted ITS ME O COME ON IM OUTSIDE MAN. After a minute he opened the door. When I entered his mother looked at me suspiciously but did not kick me out.

"Come on then," he said.

We sat in his room and from behind some books on his shelf he pulled out the thick and battered cardboard tube.

He watched me stare at it. "No one's seen this," he said. "My mum ain't even seen this." He took the lid off its end and removed a letter. We unrolled it on the bed.

*Message 1. Dear London. I recognized the script from the news. What's the first thing we learn about icebergs? That we only see the tip. 1/10ths of every one is out of sight.*

*You have to know how to climb right. Then you can get up and look down. We can see you.*

*From here we can see all of all these bergs too.*

*Whats the point seeing up here if no one knows?*

*Were going to keep climbing. Wish us luck. Heres a present we scraped up.*

"What present?" I said. "What's scraped?"

"Wait," Ian said, and went down the stairs. He returned with a small plastic tub. It was full of ice.

"There was like a thermos in there," he said. His eyes were wide behind his glasses. "Like for tea? It was stuck in the tube. It was a bit cracked but when I opened it, it had this in it. And it was starting to melt but I scooped it out and put it in this and put it in the freezer."

The ice was a single mass of angles and shapes. I could see it had partially melted and refrozen from smaller pieces.

"What if your mum or dad finds it?" I said.

"I've shown them already. I said it was an experiment. They don't care." We eyed each other.

In the kitchen Ian filled a bowl with hot water and took the lid off the Tupperware and put it inside. The tub floated, bumping against the sides.

I tried not to show anything. I'm sure Ian felt the same breathless edginess I did. The ice started to melt immediately. It cracked and pinged.

There was another noise, a hiss as if someone had half-opened the top of a fizzy drink. It was air, frozen into the ice for however many years—thousands? millions?—being released. Now I know that's called the seltzer effect: you can hear it on arctic survey ships, from the few

shards of ice that still bob about, when they hit warmer currents. We listened to the hiss of old air from some bit of sky.

I put my arms around that bowl and pulled it close, stuck my head over it like I was sick and inhaling menthol fumes. I breathed in.

I could smell nothingness. I felt light-headed, but that might have been because I was breathing so deep. I imagined that I could feel little boluses of cold air go down into my lungs.

"Give it to me," Ian said. I felt a spasm of that instinct for cruelty that sometimes made me a little bit giddy around him. I kept breathing and pushed him away as he tried to get closer.

The ice melted quickly. It didn't take long. I held him back, inhaling as hard and fast as I could while he muttered and whined and pleaded, until the bubbling sound stopped.

I raised my head from above cold clear water. I looked straight at Ian and willed myself not to show guilt.

He stared at me with an awful wounded look. He took the bowl from under me and I let him. Still watching me, he put the tub's curved plastic corner awkwardly to his lips and drank the water down.

We stared at each other. "You should hand in that letter," I said at last. "It isn't yours. They wrote it to everyone in London."

He just kept staring. I got up and left.

Soldiers kept going up the icebergs, and coming down again, and if any of them worked out how to get to the other bit of up, we never heard about it. If that's even a thing. If that's real. None of the unauthorized explorers ever came back. I stopped hanging out with Sal, and when Robbie returned he stopped hanging out with me.

By the time Ian came back to school, it was pretty easy for me to avoid him. Sometimes I might catch him staring at me across a classroom or the lunch hall. When that happened I'd sometimes say to myself in my own head something like, "I saw it first," thinking of the snow in which the tube had been packed. If he did take that letter to the authorities they never released it.

I used to expect to bump into him. I still live in the same area, and so did he for a long time, but London kept us apart. My mum did tell me once that he'd visited Nantie's old gardens, which she said was nice, to pay respects. I think he's been deployed now.

I thought I'd end up working at something to do with the icebergs, but my job's in import-export. I have to spend a fair bit of time in Europe. I've been through the Great Brussels Reef plenty of times. I have a little bottle-opener of the Belgian flag cut from a bit of its coral.

Even a dull business like mine has what you could call its own myths. When anything messes with supply chains all kinds of weird stories start coming out. The funny thing is how many end up turning out to have something to them. Quite often I see on the news some banalized version of a rumor I heard months before.

Right now, there's a slowdown on some electronic components from Japan. The whispers are that the workers are locked out because the factories are unusable, and that the factories are unusable because they've filled up with undergrowth from the rain forest.

I love the London bergs. They still circle, and they don't get in the way of business.

I have to assume the government did make it all the way up those troublesome blocks. I don't even exactly know why I wish I didn't think this, but I think there must be British soldiers watching me from the circling ice in that other bit of sky, from those slabby shapes. They're not blowing them up and they must have their reasons.

Ian joined the army, the new specialist iceberg unit. He might be one of those looking down now. He drank the water, I breathed the air.

Whatever the season, the masses kick out as much cold as they ever did. They shed ice dust constantly, and they make faint, feathery snow out of the air below them. You wake up sometimes and if they've gone low during the night they leave a snail-trail of thin ice and snow across London in the shape of their route. It might be warm summer, but you'll open the curtains onto iced windows. You'll come out of your house and there'll be a line of frost bisecting your street.

## THE CONDITION OF NEW DEATH

The first reported case of New Death occurred on 23 August 2017, in Georgetown, Guyana. At approximately 2:45 p.m., Jake Morris, a fifty-three-year-old librarian, entered his living room and found his wife, pharmacist Marie-Therese Morris, fifty-one, motionless and supine on the floor. "I opened the door onto the soles of her feet," he has said.

Mr. Morris testifies that he checked his wife's pulse and found her cold. His claim to have *gone to her side* to do so has been the source of much controversy in neothanatology, this action of course being impossible in the case of the New Dead. Mainstream opinion is that this is the inaccurate memory of a distraught man. A substantial minority insist that there are no grounds to assume such error, and that Ms. Morris must therefore be assumed to have been Old Dead at this point, and that her status changed seconds after discovery.

Mr. Morris went to the telephone in the northeastern corner of the