

Since nobody seems to know why the glaciers advance, nor why they eventually choose to retreat, we concede, based on evidence continually erased and retraced, to forming thoughts of glacial depth.

Imagine the slow sealing of a continent, all we recognize pressed between static sheets of ice, the landscape not destroyed even if dismantled, changed into something akin to representation. Glaciation conserves a moment in time, life thinly veiled by this pale glaze, an atmospheric patination—thought, desire, gaze. Faced with what time has annexed into, or as, image, recognition often falters. Meanings and ideas congeal, all too easily lost, and easier still to glaze over. And yet, what the gloss of history censors at surface also forces the eye to search the image anew, surveying those scratches and scours, traces and marks, which lead us to the lost, the absent, the obscured. Half-released from frail suspension, we begin to look in breadths rather than instances, in recurrences rather than origin points.

Does trace evidence suffice as defense against oblivion, or merely testify to it? Details, birds and allusions, escape the trap of the gaze. They lift out of frame. Populations return where they can, summer unfocuses thought, loosens it, lets it flit elsewhere. The world emerges again from under frost and gloss, as though waking, though always with the knowledge that another winter awaits. Some detail still persists, managing to overwhelm—if not in the actual image, then in the structures by which we come to know it. Science and history will both attest to this, though only through our persistence, a desire to stay with images, even as their origin remains unclear. We ask, what does a painting, a piece of history, reveal to us over time, especially when the image withholds as much as it reveals? Cooling trends, some experts say, as if the phrase could hold the slow violence it names.

“How leisurely we turn away from the disaster,” writes W. H. Auden in *Musée des Beaux-Arts*, remarking on Icarus’ frail leg sinking into the glimmering Aegean, noticeable precisely because the disaster is never quite present. Instead we see the sunshine, the sea, the busy people going about their daily lives. Auden’s asking us to look at what is, then is not—or, what is and is not at once. We compare the original thing and its reproduction, searching for differences that collapse into a radical sameness. There is something almost comic in this, in this rhetoric that flip-flops, that cannot decide between revelation and concealment. The mind begins to resemble the landscape it contemplates, glossing details, in order to rediscover others; the eye skids, skates, slips. It lets slide the past into the present and projects it forward, resisting the geological scales always undoing themselves.

At the edge of looking and seeing and losing sight, a kind of impossible threatens subjectivity. In repeated returns to the same paintings (day after day, light after light) vision itself becomes an exercise in duration, fraught with uncertainty, a glacial expiation. And yet, what recedes is also subject to revision: images appear differently, ceded to atmospheric weather. Perception drifts between fixation and disappearance, and the act of attention, stretched over time, begins to resemble the very processes—advance, retreat, concealment—it seeks to apprehend.

*Ice Age* names the condition under which representation itself operates, a continual advance and retreat of meaning, where disaster is neither fully visible nor entirely absent, but suspended in remainders, fossils and bones, images that stick with us. These are pictures of the glaciated rhythms that ordinarily carry life forward. What appears as remnant, relic, artifact is a duration held in abeyance, rendered image-like, proffered for returns, revisitations, recurrences.

And so the artwork, like reduplicated tales and times of being, is never simply stuck in place. It reconstitutes, each time under new conditions of visibility: meanings made to continentally drift in the slow weather of time. Impressions gradated and figures patinated register the quiet indifference of the world to such movements; suffering unfolds, disaster occurs, while elsewhere life continues, skaters glide, birds flit, continents shift. The extraordinary slips beneath the ordinary, just as catastrophe settles into the texture of the everyday. The string is pulled on the bird trap. Inside is a living rhythm dispersed by attention, an oscillation between events and their traces. What’s truly meaningful is perhaps never wholly present, but something that persists, softly, in intervals.