

## Chasing Ice

Susanna Knittel

The cameraman eases his viewers into the glacial wild of Iceland as we breathe to collect ourselves from severe storm news coverage. Suddenly we are in freezing water wading barefoot between chunks of floating ice with the photographer James Balog. He must capture this hunk of ice transfused with light, as an ocean wave is giving it a spectacular spraying.

This world-renowned *National Geographic* photographer is shaken into heroic, visionary action when he comes to realize what he is seeing: Iceland's Solheim Glacier is melting at an unprecedented pace; he has a hard time believing the melting's progression when he returns to the location six months after shooting the first panoramic pictures.

He embarks on a mission to set up cameras that will (through time-lapse photography) shoot images from dawn to dusk over the course of three years in Iceland, Greenland, and Alaska, delivering the finite testimony of the receding glaciers.

We follow him and his team of two as they build cameras that can withstand subzero temperatures, hurricane-strength winds, and snowstorms. They ready equipment, ice picks, drills, and ropes — the logistics are of extraordinary proportions.

And then we're with the three men as they mount cameras with solar cells in extreme, exposed locations after difficult climbs in stormy weather over snow mountain terrain. The elements interfere, snow buries boxes in which cameras are mounted, a fox chews line, falling rocks smash things. We become witness to the ultimate frustration: cameras not working; some tiny electronic detail malfunctioning.

Stronger apparatuses with different computers have to be constructed, messing with the most precious ingredient: time.

We meet the Balog family; his daughter speaks of her father's diamond-like determination. His wife and preschool-aged girl supply emotional support.

Then success, high five! Cameras are recording as envisioned in thirty locations in three countries.

Here is James roping himself down a gigantic slice of ice, camera in hand, knees in braces. His helper half his age gasps, a third of the way down — he can't continue descending. James, crampons on shoes, inches downward, a minuscule man in a breathtakingly beautiful blue icescape snaps pictures on his belly facing bottomless waters.

After that ordeal he hands himself over to the surgeon for another knee operation. His two assistants set up their orange tent facing iceberg terrain the size of all of Manhattan. They sit on white ice and wait, beat storms and beat cold, and do glacier watching. Day 15 passes, day 16, and

on day 17, James is on a routine cell call with them. He hears the cry: "It's happening — I will call you back."

We are witnessing ancient elaborate geology of massive proportion, an unforgettable "spectacle," as it breaks open, slides, crumbles, sinks, then rises like the sigh of a white giant, spewing powder with its last breath. A slow-motion uproar, an iceberg "calf" the size of Lower Manhattan. Yes, the size of Lower Manhattan. Now a colossus of black ice is rising and rolling on its side like a deeply aching whale, rumbling for the world to hear its dying.

This is the last picture my memory's eye reflects back to me before I drift into sleep. It is the first image upon waking, lodged in the connective tissue of my thorax like a massive moving sculpture, except — this is the future of our livable planet vanishing before my eyes.

Scientists are consulted in the film. How did they know what area would be breaking off in the very near future? These glaciers are alive! We see exquisite images of black holes in the ice, black from carbon and coal, like bug eyes, with historic air bubbles rising from deep within. In the community of somatic health professionals we know from working with the fluid system that water carries memory; it communicates through intuition. Could it be that the glaciers were nudging James during his extreme ice survey? Or did he just happen upon this other, monstrous calving scenario — the sudden breaking away of ice — prior to the one he planned with his assistants?

Is this an example of what Richard Tarnas spells out in his 2006 book *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* — nature, planets, and galaxies in concert with us humans, raising humanity's consciousness to be available to live in partnership for the sake of a new world order? What if the intelligence of these ancient glacier creatures had an interest in reaching the core of you and me?

I remember meeting Angaangaq, the Eskimo-Kalaallit shaman, at a conference on Monte Verità in the Italian part of Switzerland in 2007. He introduced himself as a cousin of our one human family. He reminded us that trees are growing again in his native Greenland, and with them, fire is returning — to melt the ice in the human heart.

All of this — magnificent mushroom ice sculptures, bold beauty in thick black and blue ice sheets layered over thirty thousand years, stars, white, sketched on black ice, a wonderland in harsh climate — is so utterly fragile and at the mercy of our ignorance. Our denial is its demise. Forever.

Can we shift our perceptual horizons and respond with fierce urgency, waking up to the interdependent world we live in?

*Susanna Knittel is an educator, performing artist, and writer living in Los Angeles. She spends the summers in Switzerland, stewarding her family's alpine land ([www.susannaknittel.com](http://www.susannaknittel.com)). The film discussed in this essay is Chasing Ice, a documentary by director Jeff Orlowski (2012).*