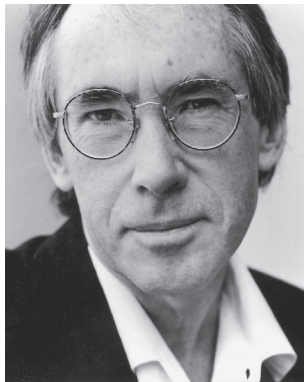


## Prologue

### Save the boot room

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Ian McEwan



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The commonplace view of the Earth from an airplane at 12 000 metres – a vista that would have astounded Goethe or Darwin – can be instructive when we contemplate the fate of our Earth. We see faintly, or imagine we can, the spherical curve of the horizon and, by extrapolation, sense how far we would have to travel to circumnavigate, and how tiny we are in relation to this beloved home suspended in sterile space. When we cross the Canadian Northern Territories en route to the American west coast, or the Norwegian littoral, or the interior of Brazil, we are heartened to see that such vast empty spaces still exist – two hours might pass, and not a single road or track in view. But also large and growing larger is the great rim of grime – as though detached from an unwashed bathtub – that hangs in the air as we head across the Alps into northern Italy, or the Thames Basin, or Mexico City, Los Angeles, Beijing – the list is long and growing. These giant concrete wounds laced with steel, those catheters of ceaseless traffic filing towards the horizon – the natural world can only shrink before them. The sheer pressure of our numbers, the abundance of our inventions, the blind forces of our desires and needs, appear unstoppable and are generating a heat – the hot breath of our civilization – whose effects we are beginning to comprehend only too clearly. The misanthropic traveller, gazing down from his wondrous – and wondrously dirty – machine, is bound to ask whether the Earth might not be better off without us.

How can we ever begin to restrain ourselves? We appear, at this distance, like a successful lichen, a ravaging bloom of algae, a mould enveloping a soft fruit. We know enough now to understand in precise terms what we are doing to the Earth and its atmosphere. We have a fairly good idea what needs to be done, or what we need to stop doing. But can we agree among ourselves on how to proceed? We are, after all, a clever but quarrelsome species – in our public discourses we can sound like a rookery in full throat. In our cleverness we are just beginning to understand that the Earth – considered as a total system of organisms, environments, climates and solar radiation, biological and physical processes reciprocally shaping each other through hundreds of millions of years – is perhaps as complex as the human brain; as yet we understand only a little about that brain, and only just a little more about the home in which it evolved. Despite our ignorance, reports from a disparate range of scientific disciplines are overwhelming in their convergence, and are telling us with certainty that we are making a mess of the Earth, that we are fouling our nest and have to act quickly, decisively and against our immediate inclinations. For we tend to be superstitious, hierarchical and self-interested, just when the moment requires us to be rational, even-handed and altruistic. We are shaped by our history and biology to frame our plans within the short term, within the scale of a single lifetime; in democracies, governments and electorates that collude in tight cycles of promise and gratification. And in undemocratic regimes, and under tyrannies, ruling elites have no will and no reason to behave honourably or altruistically.

The present moment demands of us that we address the well-being of unborn individuals we will never meet and who, contrary to the usual terms of human interaction, will not be returning the favour. Perhaps we should take heart from the fact that there have been times in the past when people have done precisely that – looked to the well-being of future generations. Consider those who built Europe’s great medieval cathedrals, or those who once thought to plant forests or lay out city parks.

To concentrate our minds, we have historical examples of civilizations that have collapsed through environmental degradation – the Sumerian, the Indus Valley, Easter Island. They feasted extravagantly on vital natural resources, and died. Those were test-tube cases, locally confined; when they failed, life continued elsewhere and new civilisations arose. Now, increasingly, we are one vast civilization, and we sense that it is the whole laboratory, the whole glorious human experiment, that is at risk. And what do we have on our side to avert that risk? Against all our deficits, we certainly possess a genetically inscribed talent for co-operation; we can take comfort from the memory of the Test Ban Treaty, drafted at a time of hostility and mutual suspicion between the Cold War super-powers. More recently, the discovery of ozone depletion in the upper atmosphere and world-wide agreement to ban CFC production should also serve as an example. Secondly, globalization, while it has unified economies, increased production and raised carbon dioxide levels, has also created global networks of expert opinion and citizens’ demands that are placing pressure on governments to take action.

But above all, we have our rationality, which finds its highest expression and formalization in good science. The adjective is important. We need accurate representations of the state of the Earth. The environmental movement used to let itself down by making dire predictions, ‘scientifically’ based, which over the past two or three decades have proved inaccurate. Of itself, this does not invalidate dire predictions now, but it makes the case for scepticism – one of the engines of good science. We need not only reliable data, but their expression in the rigorous use of statistics. Well-meaning intellectual movements, from communism to post-structuralism, have a poor history of absorbing inconvenient data or challenges to fundamental precepts. We should not ignore or suppress good indicators on the environment – though they have become extremely rare now. It is tempting for the layman to embrace with enthusiasm the latest bleak scenario merely because it fits the darkness of our mood, the prevailing cultural pessimism. The imagination, as Wallace Stevens once said, is always at the end of an era. But we should be asking, or expecting others to ask, for the provenance of the data, the assumptions fed into the computer model, the response of the peer review community, and so on. The public – laymen like myself – are going to have to absorb the fundamental precepts of the scientific method. Pessimism is intellectually delicious, even thrilling, but

the matter before us non-scientists is too serious for mere self-pleasuring. It would be self-defeating if the impetus that has built up in the world's democracies degenerated into a religion of gloomy faith (faith, ungrounded certainty, is no virtue). It was good science, not good intentions, that identified the ozone problem, and it led, fairly promptly, to good policy.

The wide view from the airplane suggests that whatever our environmental problems, they will have to be dealt with by international laws. No single nation is going to restrain its industries while its neighbours' are unfettered. Here too, an enlightened globalization might be of use. There has probably never before been a problem that was so wholly reliant for a solution on the apparently disparate fields of science and law. Of course, their common thread is, or should be, rationality. Good international law might need to use not our virtues, but our weaknesses (greed, self-interest) to leverage a cleaner environment; in this respect, the newly devised market in carbon trading is a good first move.

The climate change 'debate' was once hedged by uncertainties. Now the facts are stark. The record shrinking of the Arctic summer ice in 2007 is one cold fact that sets simpler questions before us: Are we at the beginning of an unprecedented era of international co-operation, or are we living in an Edwardian summer of reckless denial; is this the beginning, or the beginning of the end?

To find an answer to this question, I went with a group of artists and scientists in February 2005 to live on board a ship frozen into a fjord many miles north of Longyearbyen on the island of Spitsbergen, part of the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. We were a self-selected bunch, dedicated to understanding the effects of global warming on the remote poles, and on asking ourselves what we as artists might do. However, we reckoned without our nature – our all too human nature. I reflected on this journey in the following terms.

So, we have come to this ship in a frozen fjord to think about the ways we might communicate our concerns about climate change to a wider public; we will think about the heady demands of our respective art forms, we will consider the necessity of good science, and shall immerse ourselves in the stupendous responsibilities that flow from our stewardship of the planet, and the idealism and selflessness demanded of us as we subordinate our present needs to the welfare of unborn generations who will inherit the earth and thrive in it and love it – we hope – as we do. But first, we must remove our wet boots. Stepping out of minus 30 degrees, craving the warmth of the boat that is our home, we are obliged by our hosts to pause in a cramped and crowded space below the ship's wheel, and in near darkness, to try to bend over in our thick Arctic clothing to loosen our laces with numbed fingers. Then we must stand on a drenched cold floor in our socks and hang up our 'skidoo suits' – they resemble a toddler's splash suit – along with our helmets, and all the

while keep track of our gloves, and the liners of our gloves, and our frosted goggles and frozen-mouthed balaclavas that gape at us from the floor in astonishment; we must do this against a flow of our fellows coming out of the boat, intent on putting all these items on, for it is our collective fate, to be going in and out all day. Naturally, we do all this with good cheer.

The whole world's population is to the south of us, and up here we are our species' representatives, making in the wilderness a temporary society, a social microcosm in the vastness of the Arctic. We are the beneficiaries and victims of our nature (social primates, evolved through time like wind-sculpted rock), merry and venal, co-operative and selfish; and as it happens, in this pure air and sunlit beauty, we find ourselves in a state of near-constant euphoria. When did we ever hear such shouts of laughter at breakfast? We are all so immensely tolerable. We potter about during the day with our little projects like contented infants in a day-care nursery.

And it is because we are gloriously imperfect, expelled from Eden, longing to return, that, on the second day, when you venture out into what I shall call the boot room, in your socks, in a hurry because your companions are waiting outside by the belching skidoos, ready to set off on yet another face-peeling punishment ride (oh God, seven more kilometres – when will it end?) across the cement-like floor of the fjord, you will find that someone has made off with your splash suit, or your helmet, or your boots, or your goggles, or all four. This person has his own stuff, but he has ruthlessly, or mistakenly, taken yours. In a moment's extravagance of self-pity, you might think all of history's narrative and all injustice is enacted here – this is how some people end up with three goats and nine hens while others have none. Why some live in palaces and others in cardboard boxes under bridges. The history books tell of little else – the filching of the neighbour's land, water, chattels or cattle, and, in reaction, war, revolutions, genocides.

Well, what are you going to do? Your impatient companions are stamping their feet on the ice. You might reflect that it is not evil that undoes the world, but small errors prompting tiny weaknesses – let's not call them dishonesty – gathering in rivulets, then cascades of consequences. In the golden age of yesterday, the boot room had finite resources, equally shared – these were the initial conditions, the paradise we are about to lose, the conditions before the Fall that we visitors are bound to re-enact. It could go something like this: the owner of size 43 boots left them last night in a remote corner he has already forgotten about. He comes out this morning, sees to hand another pair of 43s and puts them on. Half an hour later, their true owner comes out into the gloom of the boot room, cannot see his own boots, cannot see the 43s obscurely stowed, and empowered by a sense of victimhood, does exactly what you are doing now: reaching for the nearest 44s.

'Of Man's first disobedience', Milton blindly wrote, 'and the fruit of that forbidden tree ...' – now you yourself are about try that 'mortal taste' that 'brought death

into the world and all our woe, with loss of Eden ...'. Ten minutes later, the owner of those size 44 boots appears. He's a good man, a decent man, but he must now take what is not his own. With the eighth Commandment broken, the social contract is ruptured too. No one is behaving particularly badly, and certainly everybody is being, in the immediate circumstances, entirely rational, but by the third day, the boot room is a wasteland of broken dreams. Who could be wearing five splash suits when they weigh twenty pounds each? Who needs more than one helmet? And where are the grown-ups to advise us that our boot room needs a system? Where was God, or even Matron? Hobbes would say we need a Common Power in which we might stand in awe. As things are, this is Chaos, just as Haydn conceived it, and tomorrow morning it will make us miserable. Meanwhile, as Arctic night gathers tightly around Tempelfjord, inside the toasty warmth of our Ark, elevated by the Vin de Pays, we discuss our plans to save a planet many, many times larger than our boot room.

We must not be too hard on ourselves. If we were banished to another galaxy tomorrow, we would soon be fatally homesick for our brothers and sisters and all their flaws: somewhat co-operative, somewhat selfish, loving and cruel, inventive and destructive – and very funny. But we will not rescue the Earth from our own depredations until we understand ourselves a little more, even if we accept that we can never really change our natures. All boot rooms need good systems so that flawed creatures can use them well. Good science will serve us well with diagnosis and prediction, but only good rules will save the boot room. Leave nothing to idealism or outrage, nor especially to good art – we know in our hearts that the very best art is entirely and splendidly useless.

On our last morning, when all the packing has been done and the last coldly reluctant skidoo has been started up, and as the pure northern air is rent by the howls and stink of our machines, our tirelessly tolerant hosts (as forgiving as God has not yet learned to be) come down the gang plank and deposit on the ice a huge plastic sack with all the lost gear retrieved from every corner of the ship. A few of us gather around this treasure, and poke about in it, not ashamed or even faintly embarrassed, but innocently amazed. Here is our stuff! Where has it been hiding all this time?

We barely know ourselves, and our collective nature is still a source of wonder to us – why else write fiction, why else read it? We haven't stopped surprising ourselves yet, and the fate of our largest boot room still hangs in the balance.