

Math," McKibben wrote that the fossil-fuel industry is planning to extract and burn more than five times as much carbon as the scientific consensus deems safe. "We have met the enemy and they is Shell," he wrote, in a significant twist on that famous quote. (He presumably knows the original context of the quote, though his readers may not.) In his next move, he would target the enemy not just in word but deed: a campaign, centered on college campuses, to divest from fossil-fuel companies, modeled on the campaign to divest from apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. In a pivotal victory for the young movement, Stanford University announced plans in May to divest from coal companies.

McKibben chronicles the development of this strategy in his book *Oil and Honey*. As he tells it, his current role is "unlikely" because at heart he is a writer, happiest in his beloved Vermont, alternating between his desk and the woods. But his overwhelmingly keen awareness of the climate emergency has, he writes, forced him to become the reluctant leader of a nascent movement—constantly on the road, giving speeches, sitting on panels with members of Congress. It's too soon to say whether he will achieve his goals, but he deserves credit for helping to create a new, adversarial dynamic. If the enemy is us, only a small minority of people will ever join the fight.

What does it mean for McKibben to transform himself from a writer into an activist? As a dichotomy, it's somewhat misleading: McKibben's writing has always had an activist bent, and his current activism involves a great deal of writing, including this new book. As he recalls here of his first book, *The End of Nature*, "my initial theory (I was still in my twenties) was that people would read the book—and then change." But as that theory proved increasingly untenable, he was compelled to think hard and long about how words, in conjunction with actions, could produce the impact he sought.

His writing often falls these days into the genre of the exhortatory tweet ("Half a million emails is a lot. I don't know if we can do it. But we're sure as hell going to try"). He also exhorts himself ("Back to work. On message") or engages, to his chagrin, in some calculated posturing with political types: "they say something, we say something back, they push, we push.... It ran counter to every instinct of a writer, which is simply to say what's true." He is constantly communicating with a variety of constituencies, with specific intentions: to persuade, inspire or bluff, depending on his

interlocutor. On one of his whirlwind tours, he spends an afternoon with the poet Gary Snyder and writes, "For an afternoon—and it was the greatest present he could possibly have given me—I felt like a writer again, the thing I most wanted to be and at least for the moment really couldn't."

In this conception, being a writer means dwelling on the sounds and textures of words, not on their utility; meandering in the eternal, not obsessing over the latest news cycle in Washington; savoring complexity, not dividing the world into good and evil. It means the primacy of curiosity, of irreverence; really, it means allegiance to no cause. McKibben, as an activist, needs to privilege the instrumental over the poetic, rhetoric over subtlety. He aches for his old, less strictly activist role, but he is drawn to make this sacrifice—and one of the instrumental purposes of this book is to inspire its readers to make sacrifices of their own.

**C**uriosity, subtlety, nuance—these are casualties of the polarized debate about climate change. The acknowledgment of uncertainty becomes ammunition for the so-called climate skeptics. But Craig Childs, although deeply concerned about anthropogenic climate change, is refreshingly indifferent to ecotiquette. His book *Apocalyptic Planet* has an ingenious premise, just shy of being a gimmick: he visits a series of extreme climate locations, each of which represents a possible future for our planet, depending on how climate change and other forces evolve. He begins in the Mexican desert mid-drought, then ventures to the melting glaciers of Patagonia, the monoculture of an Iowa cornfield and so on. His ominous, lyrical chapter titles follow a pattern: "Deserts Consume," "Ice Collapses," "Mountains Move," "Seas Boil."

Childs is arguably the Ryszard Kapuscinski of environmental writing, with his daredevil adventures taking him to Arctic glaciers and treacherous rapids. He intersperses his personal narrative with history and reporting, and some of his observations might make an activist like McKibben bristle. He quotes Konrad Steffen, a prominent climate scientist with whom he travels to Greenland: "If we've done anything, we've stopped the next glacial period from happening by warming the earth." He reports, "We do not live in a particularly impressive period in history for watching sea levels rise." These statements may be valid, but they are not "on message." He also gives space to foils, such as his friend Angus, a former Jehovah's Wit-

ness who accompanies him through the "biotic death" of an Iowa cornfield and muses that perhaps the earth needs periodic mass extinctions to rest. (Childs takes this notion seriously and presents it to E.O. Wilson, who dismisses it.)

Above all, what sets him apart from other environmental writers is his curiosity. More than dread or hope, he seems to have a burning eagerness simply to find out what might happen: "I wondered if I could trade my own decades for a two-hundred-year life span just to see what page turns next for the earth." He craves intimate sensory experience of our "twitching, restive planet," submitting to dry desert heat, walking on barely dried lava, touching glaciers and hearing the explosive sounds of their collapse.

His descriptions of these experiences are evocative. In the desert: "I had sand in every part of me. My molars wouldn't touch." On watching melting ice: "Each teardrop shimmered for a moment and vibrated tenuously, then fell. This is how climate works, I thought. Forces push and pull, weather begins to switch back and forth, summer and winter turned upside down, and then the system jumps. The drip falls."

His humans are neither villains nor heroes. They play a relatively minor role in his account, as do other species. It's the earth that looms largest in Childs's consciousness, more agent than victim. As he realized after living through an earthquake, "Humans may have a big hand in carpeting the atmosphere with heat-trapping gases and dumping every toxin we can imagine into waterways, but when the earth decides to roll, it is no longer our game." He writes about the planet we inhabit with awestruck deference. Even while lamenting our losses, he wants to take them in up close. As Childs asks in this passage about his trip to Patagonia: "Saving the world? You can always hope. But to be alive in the last geologic moments of ice, wouldn't you come and put your hands against it?"

Perhaps all environmental writers lie on some continuum from activist to author, their books somewhere between pamphlets and poems. They dream of saving the world; they know that the likeliest outcome is failure. But they write anyway—to bear witness, to make sense of what is happening, to say what's true.

Back in Patagonia, Childs writes this of the last moments of ice: "As it tinkled and cracked in the sun, I snapped off a tab and crunched it in my mouth. It turned to water instantly, as if it had been waiting a hundred centuries for this moment." ■