

CHAPTER 6

On saying “awesome.” The fate of nature. Mixed feelings about the disabled person who “climbed” Mt. Everest. The fate of the exotic. On taking pictures of the Other. Our unseemly access to everything. Outer space, anyone? The transcendent significance of the Weather (Channel). A blasphemous aspiration.

Awesome

MY NOMINEE FOR the saddest *New York Times* op-ed piece ever written is called “Capturing the Light” by Alan Lightman, an MIT professor who is both a talented novelist and a working scientist, a latter-day C. P. Snow. He wrote to express his ambivalence about a recent achievement of his colleagues. It seems that, in their laboratory, they had somehow “succeeded in slowing light down to a crawl, and finally a dead stop.”

That’s what they did. They stopped light. Did you even know? How could you have missed that?

Now light had always been an absolute for the professor—like the “swift thought of God,” he said. Seeing God’s thought conquered was not a comfortable experience, of course, but as a scientist, he had to celebrate the achievement. At the same time, as a person, he felt a kind of grief—one less transcendent phenomenon in the cosmos.

But here’s the really sad part. In the required solution-to-the-problem paragraph at the end of his piece, Professor Lightman concluded that “the great challenge to us as a species of thinkers

and doers is to maintain our awe of nature while at the same time subduing and shaping it.”

Hello?

It’s up to us to *maintain* our awe of nature?

That can only mean that nature is no longer up to the job.

What are we supposed to do? Would a CD-ROM from Steven Spielberg help? Units on awe in the science curriculum? *More* I-max movies?

Once again the vernacular rises to the occasion, distilling a cultural condition into a dialectical package, an idiom that catches on because it accommodates the mediated mind so deftly. “Awesome,” the young folks say these days, as in “these are awesome french fries.” On the one hand, there’s the obvious devaluation of the very idea of awe, which originally shared connotations with its companion concept “awful,” even as it registered admiration on a par with reverence, but more intense, more immediate—above all, overwhelming.

Which is just what a conquered nature can’t do. Overwhelm.

On the other hand, oddly, the slang use of “awesome” is also an effort to retain something of the original meaning in a quasi-ironic sanctification of the everyday. It is as though the miracle of being retreated to the nooks and crannies of ordinary life to escape the onslaught of virtualization, hid itself in the mundane, where disclosures of the miraculous are still possible. After a lifetime’s experience with digitized wonders depicted so fabulously that the human imagination begins to feel like a vestigial organ, there is redemption to be found in a plate of fine french fries.