

3rd place (2022): Karen Phillips, Loess / Loss

We walk cautiously across a narrow fan of scree which leads to a wide, rock-strewn valley. Skeins of cloud mute the sun so that the snow-covered mountains reflect a hard white light. Recognition lights your face as you study the shape of the peaks around us and you murmur their names as gently as a prayer.

'You've been here before,' says our guide Rex who is a geology student from Otago University.

'A long time ago,' you say. You scoop up a handful of pebbles and let them trickle through your fingers.

'That's moraine, sir,' says Rex. 'Debris carried down by the glacier and left behind as it retreats.'

'It's loess,' you mutter when he leaves to help another of our group negotiate the uneven path.

I don't remind you that loess is ground up rock wind-blown from one area and deposited as mineral-rich dirt in another. You knew this in the days when geological terms were your second language and you wore crampons as if they were comfortable old slippers and carried a heavy pack as if it weighed no more than a flutter of silk. At night you cooked our single-pot meals on the wavering flame of a small primus with the flair of a chef in a five-star restaurant and later we'd tuck up in our sleeping bags beneath a sky glazed with stars while the air around us smelled of cold fresh snow.

The same air makes you cough and I'm relieved when we reach the milky water of the glacier lake. It's larger than it looks on the Te Papa Atawhai/Department of Conservation brochure.

'Everything's changed,' you say.

'It looks the same to me except that this lake wasn't here,' I say.

You point to a hollow between two peaks in front of us. 'The old pounamu track over the saddle's gone.'

He means a track between the west and east coasts formed by Maori explorers long ago. We walked it several times.

'That track wasn't through this valley,' I say, because nature flaunts erosion unashamedly and the mountain face you point to is scarred with fissures so deep that only a professional climber would attempt it.

'Yes, it was,' you say. 'It was in a direct line with the saddle behind us. Have a look.'

When I turn around I see that you're right and wonder how you got lost in the motel parking lot this morning.

Beside the lake bright-red life jackets strung along a wooden rail and two sun-yellow boats give hits of colour to a landscape painted in a neutral palette of browns, greys and creams. I pass you a life jacket, clip mine on and move towards the queue lining up for the boats, then I see that you're holding the lifejacket in front of you, unsure how the clips work.

'These new life jackets are a bit tricky,' Rex says as he helps you put the jacket on. He gives you the carefree grin of a fit young man and waits until everyone is fully seated. I'm grateful for his smile and his patience.

'I want a photo of you looking towards the bow,' I say.

'You've taken enough,' you tell me but I ignore you and press the shutter.

As we motor across the lake a loud boom echoes around the valley. A slab of ice falls from the glacier and columns of spray rise from the water.

'It's the second one today,' Rex says. 'It's possible that in thirty years there will be no glaciers left here at all.' His face contorts briefly so that he looks like a child trying not to cry. 'Within my lifetime.'

'That's hard to believe,' one of the other passengers says.

'It's what a recent glaciological survey told us,' Rex says. 'This is climate change in the flesh.'

Up close the glacier seems defeated. The surface is a mess of rubble, and folds of stained ice crease the glacier face so that it resembles the skin of an old person whose bones are shrinking beneath it. We motor carefully across the lake to where a small iceberg rests on the opaque water. Rex moves in close enough for us to lean out to touch the glass-clear crystals piled on each other like a litter of sleeping puppies. The boat rocks from side to side as people jostle their way to the stern so that Rex can take their photo with the iceberg in the background. By morning it will have melted into the lake, the images on our phones the only proof it existed at all.

The afternoon light is dull, a chilled wind blowing off the snow by the time Rex nudges the boat against the pontoon so we can disembark.

'Just one more photo,' I say when we're back on land. 'I promise this is the last one.'

'No more,' you say.

I take your arm and almost march you across a bleached trickle of glacier melt to a towering wall of grey rock on the other side. In your faded jacket you are a faint scribble on the blank page of rock behind you, a mark to be washed away by a cascade of snow like the cascade of tau or plaque or whatever scientists like to call the stuff that crashes through your brain. I grab the scarf from my bag. 'Here, tie this around your neck for some colour.'

'My lucky scarf,' you say with a smile as you tie it around your neck. 'Where did you find it?'

'Huh? This is the one I bought in Cromwell yesterday.' Then I remember how, during our climbing days when every muscle in my body burned with tiredness, I would fix my eyes on your bright red scarf, always ahead of me, always knowing where to go. Until that day.

There were three of us high above the tree line. We'd climbed there before but this time we encountered unexpected avalanche damage. Shortly after lunch a descending mist reduced visibility to a few metres and a small rock slide erased the crumpled animal track we were on.

'Somewhere around here there's a proper track that leads down to the valley,' you said. 'Wait here while I do a bit of recce.'

'You can't go on your own,' I said.

'I might need you to whistle me back if I can't find the turn-off,' you said.

You disappeared across the rock slide, leaving us in a silence that felt like a threat. When sloppy snow flurries signalled worse to come we picked our way across the slide, stopping every few steps to call, and blow our whistles. The only sounds we heard were our own echoes and the pinging noise made by small rocks dislodged by our feet so that they rolled down the mountain. Just on dark we found you slumped against a rocky outcrop not far from the track entrance. Your pack was gone and while we waited for the arrival of Land Search and Rescue I knew that I had lost something too. I could no longer face the mountains' indifference to those who climb them.

Fast forward through years of family and careers and other travels, until one evening when we watched a plea for New Zealanders to support the Covid-ravaged tourist industry by exploring their own country.

‘Where shall we go?’ I asked.

‘The mountains,’ you said – so quickly it was as if the words were waiting on your tongue. ‘I’d like to see the mountains again.’

Now you gaze at the banks of moraine on either side of the valley. They’re so high and uniform it’s hard to believe they’re the work of a dying glacier rather than a fleet of bulldozers. You look puzzled. ‘I thought these formations were loess but that’s not right. What are they called?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe they’re just piles of rocks,’ I say, my voice a shrug as if your forgetting is no big deal. ‘We can look it up when we get back to the motel.’

‘I’ll probably remember the name by then,’ you say.

A single letter separates loess from loss but both mean that something has moved from somewhere, so I nod because anything is possible. I slide my phone deep inside my bag where it will be secure, because it holds the memories that I now keep safe for you.

About Karen



Karen Phillips began writing in 2009 winning the Katherine Mansfield Novice Award and the Heartland competition that year. Her writing has been published in *Takahe*, *The Spin Off*, *Flash Frontier* and the *Fresh Ink* and *Breach of All Sighs* anthologies. *A Question of Blood and other stories* was published by Steele Roberts Aotearoa in 2017 and *Glass Houses and other stories* by The Cuba Press in 2020. She lives in Ahipara, on a hill overlooking the sea.