Further reading: Ice

Ice is just cold, solid water, of course; essential for cocktails, and the survival of the planet. One-tenth of Earth's land surface is covered in it, and up to fifteen per cent of the ocean for part of the year; one quarter of the land has ice buried in it, year-round. This unique substance — volatile, ancient, quick, slow, frightening, beautiful, thunderous, silent, blue and green and white and crystalline — creates spaces at the reaches of the earth and of the imagination that we can't resist returning to. It invites simile. It slips out of our grasp. Columns, domes, walls, caverns, shelves, turrets, tunnels: the fabulous architectures thrown up by it. Who could live in such a building? Something beautiful and cool and inhuman; a Snow Queen (maybe my favourite fairytale), a Superman.

Tarjei Vesas' unsettling and lovely novel **The Ice Palace**, translated from the Norwegian by Elizabeth Rokkan, tells the story of an intense, half-understood bond between Siss and Unn, two schoolgirls. Full of longing and desire, 'full of the unknown', it is as dream-like and powerful as the frozen waterfall at its centre. Unn is lost, enchanted and disorientated by the chambers of this palace, by turns 'hostile', 'magnificent', echoing, roaring, silent, and far too cold.

Another short, strange novel of the 60s, Anna Kavan's **Ice** is more nightmare than dream. It is set in a world of nameless, ruined cities, freezing seas and dark forests, in which some 'obscure' disaster has precipitated an unstoppable environmental collapse. Communication is failing, the media can't be trusted, conflict is rife, and ice is everywhere closing in, destroying everything in its path. Somewhere between spy thriller and Cold War Kafka, there are overcoats, guns, paranoia, police states, sinister blue-eyed officials, labyrinthine buildings, trials and escapes, a white-haired girl that the narrator is senselessly pursuing… Scenes dissolve, overlap and reform. Fractured, hallucinatory, slippery, brutal, and utterly compelling.

Accounts of polar expeditions are typically preoccupied by the impossible task of describing the infinite forms and variety and overwhelming magnitude of the ice. If you're in search of the sublime, here's where to find it. Francis Spufford's first book, **I May Be Some Time**, traces the history of polar exploration and its place in the cultural imagination; the attempts by explorers such as Parry, Franklin, and ultimately Scott to capture their experience. The book moves towards a vivid, chilling recreation of that fateful expedition and those famous last words.

Joanna Kavenna's **The Ice Museum: In Search of the Lost Land of Thule** is another work of non-fiction that pursues the idea of a remote, half-imagined north. Kavenna writes brilliantly about bleak and inhospitable places, and about the dangerous ideologies that can be written on the seeming blank page of a lost northern land — Thule has a place in Nazi mythology as the home of the Aryan race. She meets the real people who are struggling at the edges of the ice: displaced Inuit in Greenland, and environmental scientists on Svalbard, who can measure it melting.

I couldn't leave Barry Lopez' seminal work of nature writing, **Arctic Dreams**, off this list. In exacting, luminous prose Lopez attends to the landscape of the Arctic, the animals that live there, the knowledge and languages and histories of the peoples that populate it; to the complex beauty of the ways that life and landscape co-exist, and the fragility of that compact. The magnificent chapter 'Ice and Light' is a study of the formation, appearance, and varieties of Arctic ice, its dangers and splendours. Written in the 1980s, this is a gorgeous yet austere, unsentimental book, and offers a prescient warning about human 'complacency' towards the Earth's remaining wilderness.

Painter to the King by Amy Sackville is published by Granta.